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The Collectivity of Life: Spaces of Social Mobility and the Individualism Myth

Joel Wendland

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The Collectivity of Life is a study of autobiographical writing and oral histories situated in the late twentieth century United States. The central thesis is that by studying how the authors of these narratives articulate space in their stories, we can uncover a recurring critique of meritocratic individualism and reconstruct a counter-mythology that locates social mobility in collectivist experiences. Fourteen autobiographical works are studied, including those of Malcolm X, Audre Lorde, Barack Obama, and numerous other from multiple ethnic and several regions of the U.S., ranging from 1964 through 2008. More than 40 oral histories housed in archives in several regions of the country help to establish the book's goal. By using a concept of space, this book shifts the focus of personal narrative from the internal resources of the individual to networks of support and collective efforts in the formation of their identities and the basis of their life accomplishments.

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