Guest Editors’ Introduction

In an autobiographical account of his journey to the Far East in 1933, the African American poet Langston Hughes relates the following anecdote:

I reached the international city of Shanghai in July, with the sun beating down on the Bund, the harbor full of Chinese junks, foreign liners and warships from all over the world. It was hot as blazes. I didn’t know a soul in the city. But hardly had I climbed into a rickshaw than I saw riding in another along the Bund a Negro who looked exactly like a Harlemite. I stood up in my rickshaw and yelled, “Hey, man!”

He stood up in his rickshaw and yelled, “What ya sayin’?” We passed each other in the crowded street and I never saw him again.¹

Our pleasure in such an “unlikely” story rests on the assumption that both Hughes and the Harlemite are somehow out of place here, that their fleeting encounter is no more than an accident or an anomaly, assimilable neither
to our conventional notions of Chinese cultural life in Shanghai nor our standard narratives of African American intellectual, artistic, and political history. Yet what emerges from Hughes’s full account of his journey, is a series of clues that helps us to unravel a tangled web of trans-Pacific cultural transaction and political collaboration that might shed new light on both. In Shanghai, Hughes immediately found himself welcomed into a large and vibrant community of African American jazz musicians and entertainers who had made the passage in order to play the cabarets of the “neon-lighted Dragon city of the East”—a city whose people, Hughes remarks, were “much like colored folks at home” in terms of both their temperament and their subjection to colonial color lines. He dined with Madame Sun Yat-sen, met with one of the most outstanding Chinese writers and social critics of the twentieth century, Lu Xun, and was feted by and featured in the leading modernist literary journal of the day, *Les contemporains* [*Xiandai*]. Expelled from Japan weeks later because of his leftist sympathies and outspoken opposition to Japanese imperialism in China, Hughes went on to write anticolonial poetry on East Asian themes, such as his celebrated 1937 piece “Roar China!”:

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Break the chains of the East,
    Little coolie boy! Break the chains of the East,
    Red Generals!
Break the chains of the East,
    Child Slaves in the factories!
Smash the iron gates of the Concessions!
Smash the pious doors of the missionary houses!
Smash the revolving doors of the Jim Crow Y.M.C.A.’s
Crush the enemies of land and bread and freedom!
Stand up and roar, China!
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The poem’s animating rhetoric of anticolonial and antiracist solidarity across the Pacific may have provided an especially ironic satisfaction for Hughes, for he had once complained that the prospects of black writers in the United States were shadowed by publishers who considered their writing “exotic, in a class with Chinese or East Indian features.”

Hughes’s anecdote is not so much an anomaly, then, but a cipher for a multitude of unsung and unlikely Afro-Asian connections, a cipher that, in its very indeterminacy, alerts us to the existence of unknown and as yet unsounded historical depths. With this special issue of *positions*, we ask not only how we might begin the task of charting the history of the Black Pacific traversed by Langston Hughes in the interwar years, but also, as Françoise Vergès suggests in her commentary on the Indian Ocean as a creolized space of Afro-Asian encounter, how we might begin sketching a “new cartography of possibilities” that can break out of the enclosures of neocolonial color lines and the insularity of ethnonationalist identity politics.

Such insularity has long been reinforced by our own practices of knowledge production. The gaps in the historical record that render Hughes’s Shanghai encounter so tantalizingly illegible to us today are not born, but actively produced by the departmentalization of historical and theoretical work along national and supraregional lines. Stories such as those excavated by Brent Edwards in his essay “The Shadow of Shadows,” in which a young Ho Chi Minh develops new anticolonial tactics of textual production in tandem with the Senegalese activist Lamine Senghor while sojourning in Jazz Age Paris, exist in a sort of no-man’s-land between typically Eurocentric discussions of cosmopolitanism and the exigencies and exclusions of nationalist historiography.

This no-man’s-land has been reinforced and enlarged by area studies programs in the United States. Indeed, the elision of the particular sorts of Afro-Asian conjunctions this issue seeks to bring to visibility has been acute in Asian studies. With very few exceptions, the field has been characterized by a studied failure to consider the question of race in the constitution of colonial modernities in China, Japan, Korea, and elsewhere throughout Asia. But the question of “race,” as William Schaefer reveals in his essay on modernist writing in the multiply colonized metropolis of interwar Shanghai and its strategic displacement of the savage other (African or Polynesian or Miao) to the margins of Chineseness, has been there from the very beginning—despite various claims in recent decades of an Asian exception to the racial inheritances of the colonial order.

Indeed, while this issue is largely devoted to a genealogical investigation of the Afro-Asian interactions in the first half of the twentieth century, the
global proliferation of African American music and popular culture in the post–World War II period—as well as the very physical presence of U.S. military bases and black servicemen throughout Asia (and particularly in Korea, Vietnam, and Japan)—have only expanded the scope and complexity of the Afro-Asian encounter in the Pacific Rim. All too often, as John G. Russell has pointed out in an important essay previously published in positions, the consumption of a fetishized blackness in Asia recapitulates an imported racist iconography, effecting a “colonization of the Black Other by proxy” that, in this instance, works to secure claims for the singularity of Japanese identity.6

Asian exceptionalism of this sort, be it founded on strategically appropriated discourses of the savage other, newly recuperated cultural essentialisms, or export-driven neoliberalism, also have to do with the contemporary disavowal of the “underdeveloped world” (and of continental Africa in particular) in Asian cultural imaginaries, when narratives of “miraculous” national development (subsidized in part by the U.S. military presence in the region) submerge and subsume memories of Maoism and Bandung internationalism. Even when scholars have examined colonial history in Asia, as Yukiko Koshiro points out in her revelatory look at the history of U.S.-Japan diplomatic relations through a “dark” lens, they have privileged Asian interactions with Euro-Americans and thus rendered wide bands of the historical spectrum virtually invisible. Who knew that the crew of the “black ships” of Admiral Perry, which forced Japan “open” to imperial trade, performed “Ethiopian” minstrel tunes in blackface for their Japanese hosts? That before white major leaguers had ever arrived in Tokyo for an exhibition game, a “Negro league” team from Philadelphia had already upstaged them? How might these heretofore unglimpsed historical specters reshape our sense of the cultural history of the Pacific Rim? What sorts of shadows do they cast on the Asian economic miracle?

Surprisingly, prevailing interdisciplinary approaches to transnational cultural studies have also largely failed to redress this particular form of color blindness. In recent years, the relation of marginalized postcolonial intellectuals to the metropole has been exhaustively explored. Too often, however, this long overdue attention to the cosmopolitanism of Third World cultural production has remained tied to a metropolitan historicism, which has
neglected the wide-ranging social and political relations between margin and margin. Ironically, as Vijay Prashad notes, the intellectual habits of U.S. multiculturalism, in which ethnoracial groups are imagined as “discrete and preformed communities,” have contributed to this state of affairs, occluding from view a cultural and political terrain shaped in the creative encounters of racialized peoples from the semicolonial periphery of Shanghai, to the older metropoles of Paris, London, and New York to the brave new worlds of urban Los Angeles, Calcutta, and Tokyo.

If area studies overlooks the ways in which the global circulation of European and U.S. racist imaginaries proved central to the construction and mediation of imperial national identities in both China and Japan, U.S.-style cultural pluralism underestimates the significance of tranethnic and transnational solidarities of African and Asian peoples, as Daniel Widener demonstrates in his detailed “regional” history of Japanese and black migrants in interwar Los Angeles. Rejecting the conventional U.S. sociological wisdom that weighs the intranational fortunes of blacks and immigrants in terms of an abstract contrast between those bedeviled by “race” and those blessed with “ethnicity”—Widener instead shows how in response to different but common racial exclusions, blacks and Asians in California forged insurgent, if fragile, communities of meaning in a “dialectic of international questions and local communities.”

As this and many other essays gathered here suggest, the African American province has been a uniquely powerful and privileged locale for the generation of planetary visions of transracial solidarity, one nurtured in part in the crucible of Black Pacific disseminations of African American popular culture in Asian markets, as well as by the impact of Asian cultural productions (and particularly cinema) on the African American imaginary. Vijay Prashad’s account of the anti-imperialist iconography of Bruce Lee (as refracted through the avowed Maoism of both the Black Panthers in the United States and the Naxalite insurgency on the Indian subcontinent) sketches a circuit of what might eventually be a more adequate genealogy of so-called Third Worldism as the form of cosmopolitical desire arrayed both within and against the twin pillars of the modern world system: Euro-American racialization and capitalist globalization.
These genealogies, as several contributors suggest, take us on an inevitable detour through Marxism, and in doing so they begin to supplement and recast modernity’s official counterculture and mode of adversarial internationalism. For this reason, we explicitly concern ourselves in this issue not only with the vagaries of Afro-Asian interaction on the level of popular cultural production, but also with an equally important, if neglected history of political collaboration and internationalist striving. The bitter fallout from the dissolution of the Second International in the wake of World War I, and the founding of the Third International after the Russian Revolution of 1917, not only established social democracy as a European conceit, but resulted, as Bill Mullen shows, in the accrual of a racial cast to bolshevism itself (which some notable European socialists denigrated along lines similar to Marx’s infamous notion of “oriental despotism”). As if to justify a rising panic about race and revolution, the first decade of the Third International witnessed a remarkable series of dialogues around the “Eastern Question” and the “Negro Question,” culminating in the Baku congress of 1922, in which black and Asian intellectual activists such as M. N. Roy and Claude McKay became key interlocutors of Soviet communism in debates over the relationship of national and colonial questions to world revolution.

The unreconstructed Eurocentrism that lingers both within “Western Marxism,” and “in the tracks of historical materialism” (to use two of historian Perry Anderson’s apposite titles), has prevented a full historical inventory of these dialogues, or what Samir Amin has tellingly called Marxism’s “Afro-Asian vocation.” At the very least, we lack an adequate historical account of decolonial Marxism as a body of imaginative utopian thinking and radical theory and practice, which developed in the Afro-Asian conjunctures at Baku and Bandung and in 1968. It may be that what Mullen terms the “Afro-Asian International,” imagined as a romance between an Indian princess and a black labor activist by W. E. B. Du Bois in his 1928 novel *Dark Princess*, is one of the determinate forms of Marxist theorizing in the twentieth century.

Even while in the process of renouncing his formal affiliations with international communism a little more than a decade later, another African American radical, Richard Wright, like Hughes before him, found himself captivated by the Bolshevik experiment in Soviet central Asia, less for its
model of revolutionary unanimity than as a manifestation of the difficult and tenuous project of translating national and racial difference in the interests of wider social progress. “It was not the economics of communism, nor the great power of trade unions, nor the excitement of underground politics that claimed me,” Wright wrote. “My attention was caught by the similarity of experiences of workers in other lands, by the possibility of uniting scattered, but kindred peoples.”

Wright went into exile from an increasingly repressive U.S. state apparatus at the onset of the cold war—despite his own avowed anti-Stalinism. His enduring commitment to what Amin calls an “internationalism of peoples,” led to his reemergence in post–World War II Paris at the center of the swirling anticolonial projects of African and Caribbean radicals, and to his travels to the 1955 conference at Bandung, Indonesia, which he rendered in his famous Afro-Asian montage, *The Color Curtain* (1956).

“There was something extra-political, extra-social, almost extra-human about” Bandung, Wright wrote. And while his text characteristically foregrounds the fractures of nationality, religion, and ideology that troubled the conference proceedings, it never loses sight of the salience of the conference as a gathering of the “humanity” that had been defined by its “extra-human” differences—in other words, by the shared experience of a racist and colonialist history premised on repeated denials of a unitary theory or allegory of the human. It is undoubtedly the case that the interlocutory communism of the Baku/Bandung era was unable to negotiate the impasse of modernization—the need to “catch up” (coded in Euro-American and nationalist terms) and the expansive hopes for popular democracy unleashed by decolonization. Yet in Wright’s movements from the “Black Belt” of Mississippi to the South Side of Chicago to Paris and Jakarta, we can once again discern what Edwards calls in his contribution to this volume a “secret history of agitation,” as well as a “striving to articulate an alternative universality” against the existing racial limitations of modern imperialisms, nationalisms, and humanisms.

In foregrounding these forgotten instances of Afro-Asian traffic in the realm of politics, economics, and culture, then, this special issue sets out to map an alternative global circuit to the well-heeled transnational flows that have structured the way in which we have come to imagine the world system, while at the same time initiating a recovery of a variety of internationalist
and Third Worldist positions for our critical work. Within this mostly unacknowledged history, we hear the echo of the old call for a “new humanism,” one that gestures beyond both the truncated universalisms of Euro-American modernity and the differentialist fallacies and meager enclosures of nationalist identity politics that have so ineffectively challenged it.

At its most audacious, the “Afro-Asian Century” is a provocation to imagine new political subjects and a challenge to the disenchanted politics of our present—global “civilization” and its nationalist discontents. Inspired by Du Bois’s Dark Princess, the notion of romance may finally be an approximation of the kind of reenchantment we seek. For even as romance brings certain dangers, including violent jealousies, as well as phantasms of penetration and prophylaxis so closely associated with racism, it also suggests the possibility of constructing an identity of passions rather than essences. The genius of the “age of Europe” (and the “American Century” that followed on it) was to inter racism within the cold logic of its social philosophical machinery and then to deem the visible (and vital) manifestations of racial difference irrational, subjective, romantic, and dangerous. This is why color-blind universalism remains inadequate to the project of deracializing the world. It’s simply not enough to be against race. We won’t abolish racial coding and its legacies of alienation and abjection without conjuring with old essences in some new ways—without engaging in some recoding of our own. The legacy of the “Afro-Asian Century” might finally be this idea: that the recombinant political and affective potentialities of racial significations and identifications, and not the pallid, unilateral declarations of a world beyond race, hold some of the tools of our emancipation.

Andrew F. Jones and Nikhil Pal Singh, Guest Editors

Notes

2 Ibid., 250.
3 For a contemporary Chinese account of Hughes and his visit, see Wu Shi, “Xiushi zai Zhongguo” [Hughes in China], Wenzue [Literature], no. 1/2 (August 1933): 254–258.
5 Hughes, I Wonder As I Wander, 4.
12 Wright, Color Curtain, 14.