

INTRODUCTION

DO BLACK LIVES MATTER FOR ASIAN STUDIES?

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Who Is the Asianist?—an Asia Shorts edited volume—is both a call from and response to the movement for Black lives that demands a reckoning with race and a deep acknowledgement of the humanity and value of Black life. This reckoning by our field is now urgent, if not belated. The reverberations of the unconscionable 2020 Minneapolis police murder of George Floyd—yet another state-sanctioned murder of a Black person in the United States—were felt across the country and around the globe, in the streets and in the academy. University departments released statements in support of BLM and detailed their commitments to challenging institutional racism. Academic disciplines responded to this global movement by acknowledging and seeking to learn more about racism and by interrogating their practices. Critical geographer and prison abolitionist Ruth Wilson Gilmore defines racism as “the state-sanctioned and/or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death.”²¹ But do Black lives matter for Asian Studies?

Black scholars in Asian Studies have insisted upon the field’s obligation to undertake a serious consideration of our hiring practices and curricular content, and of race’s entanglements with the historical roots of the discipline. This field was among those called upon, from within its ranks and by the general pause across the academy, to self-reflect, to consider how scholars in this area of knowledge both practice and contend with anti-Blackness. This volume amplifies the call to take

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on this form of work while it is also its result. We feature scholarship that emerges from critical self-reflection by Asian Studies scholars who are interrogating their field, its colonial roots, its hiring practices, its politics of representation, and its areas of legitimated focus and silence.

We disseminated a call for papers that approached the questions of positionality, race, Blackness, and the movement for Black lives by Asianists. The response was overwhelming. We are heartened to be able to curate a collection that includes self-reflections on various Asianists' experiences in the academy, multilingual and transregional scholarship on race and Blackness, and studies on the effects of BLM movements across Asia. The contributions in this volume theorize race, consider the discipline's gatekeeping practices that circumscribe ideas about who an Asianist *is*, discuss the experiences of Black scholars in Asian Studies, and center the study of Blackness and Black people in Asia.

The contributors to this volume provide intersected African and Asian diasporic perspectives on Asian Studies. They speak, directly and otherwise, not only to this work as a coherent, increasingly established body of knowledge within Asian Studies (even as there is a continued need for institutional support for such scholarship, including through hiring, curricular design, mentorship, and the other approaches indicated above). These perspectives that are attuned to diasporic intersections in Asian Studies also illustrate the collaborative possibilities between scholars of African and Asian descent who, along with other ethnically and racially minoritized scholars and white collaborators, advocate on behalf of marginalized scholars and areas of research within Asian Studies. Placing race at the center of analysis calls into question Asian Studies "itself" as a field of academic knowledge production. In the two sections that follow, we highlight themes that emerge when we center race, concluding with a synopsis of the contents of our volume that, as a whole, urges Asian Studies scholars to address this question: Do Black lives matter for Asian Studies?

Toward Unfragmented Epistemologies, or Do Black Lives Matter for Asian Studies?

This volume of essays is, among other things, a record of the transformative reverberations of the Black Lives Matter movement as they undulate throughout Asia. It is also an invitation to consider the transformations these reverberations might occasion for Asian Studies. In other words, this volume asks: Do Black lives matter to and for both Asia and Asian Studies? And if they do matter, in what way does the constitutive importance of Black life for Asia and Asian Studies make itself manifest?

Black Lives Matter, Laurie Collier Hillstrom writes, is a movement that began as a moment, namely the moment in which social justice activist-organizers

Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi created and shared the hashtag “#BlackLivesMatter” on social media.² The immediate inspiration for the hashtag’s creation was Alicia Garza’s 2013 Facebook post entitled, “Love Letter to Black Folks.” Prompted by the announcement of the acquittal of George Zimmerman in the fatal shooting of Trayvon Martin, Garza wrote, “We don’t deserve to be killed with impunity. We need to love ourselves and fight for a world where Black lives matter. . . . We matter. Our lives matter.”³ Cullors shared Garza’s love letter on social media alongside the hashtag “#BlackLivesMatter.” In the wake of the death of Michael Brown at the hands of the Ferguson Police Department, and the subsequent Ferguson protests of 2014, #BlackLivesMatter became a digital rallying cry for the activist work of Garza, Cullors, Tometi, and members of what would ultimately become the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, a decentralized, global network of activists “whose mission is to eradicate white supremacy and build local power to intervene in violence inflicted on Black communities by the state and vigilantes.”⁴

The emergence of BLM is informed by a sentiment—namely, the sentiment that Black life is a beautiful, constitutive expression of our shared humanity and thus is just as deserving of protection from undue legal and extralegal modes of eradication as any other expression of humanity—with a deep intellectual and political history. In *The Making of Black Lives Matter*, philosopher Christopher J. Lebron writes that the political ethos of BLM amalgamates four tributaries of Black intellectual and activist history: the tactic of “shameful publicity” practiced by Frederick Douglass and Ida B. Wells; the “countercolonization of the white imagination” proffered by Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston; the “unconditional self-possession” embodied in the protests of Anna Julia Cooper and Audre Lorde; and what Lebron calls the “unfragmented compassion” of James Baldwin and Martin Luther King, Jr.⁵

For the purpose of this volume (read: the purpose of articulating how Black lives matter to and for Asian Studies), BLM’s promotion of unfragmented compassion is particularly revelatory. Unfragmented compassion refers to a commitment to empathetic relationships defined by reciprocity and mutual regard. This commitment is coupled with a refusal to cede one’s rightful claim to self-respect and the pursuit of the good life. Such compassion is “unfragmented” insofar as it is extended to both the self and the other: unfragmented compassion entails good faith attempts to understand the humanity of one’s interlocutor alongside a non-negotiable vision of one’s own existential value. To the degree that the political ethos and tactics of the Black Lives Matter movement are informed by the civil rights movement—think here, for example, of the “Freedom Ride” to Ferguson, Missouri, organized by BLM in 2014 to protest police brutality—BLM political action often features the revivification of the unfragmented compassion of King,

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Baldwin, and other intellectual leaders of the civil rights era. To be sure, there is no one-to-one correspondence between the imaginative and actual infrastructures of BLM and the civil rights movement: BLM's founding by Black queer women, its decentralized leadership structures, and its digital activism are all examples of the transformations ushered in with the changing of the guard from the civil rights movement to the BLM generation. There is a way in which, however, these shifts speak to a continuity between the movements: BLM represents the emergence of a movement better equipped to make good on the former's promise of expanding, rather than fracturing, epistemologies.

This is one reason why Black lives matter to Asian Studies: Black Lives Matter serves as a model and reminder of Asian Studies' need for what we might call unfragmented epistemologies. We are quickly approaching a grim anniversary: it has been almost two decades since Andrew Jones and Nikhil Pal Singh assessed Asian Studies as "characterized by a studied failure to consider the question of race in the constitution of . . . modernities . . . throughout Asia."⁶ There has been relatively little reckoning with this state of affairs in the intervening years. This continuing "studied failure" is not a coincidence. Rather, it is an organic by-product of the historical formation of area studies in the American academy, in which the study of race is sequestered into ethnic studies; area studies functions as the equivalent of an intellectual safe haven for those who other their objects of study by other means. In turn, this historical formation emerges as a present in which, to borrow comparative literary scholar Shu-mei Shih's articulation, Asian Studies rarely investigates its racial unconscious or the "open secret"—"that there is a dearth of African American or other non-Asian minority scholars in Asian studies"—underwritten by the unspoken racial logic through which Asian Studies organizes itself.⁷

Shih writes that the emergence of a new Asian Studies, one which speaks consciously to the question of race in the constitution of modernities throughout Asia, requires a response to the "ethical demand" of recognizing "interlocking racial formation[s]."⁸ Such recognition would mean seeing race as an intellectual issue that Asian Studies "need[s] to bring over here and set . . . in active confrontation and dialogue, that is, in a relation" with the epistemological concerns typically privileged by the field.⁹ To say that Black lives matter for Asian Studies is not to ask Asian Studies to do Black Studies any favors. Instead, the creation of a relationship between Black Studies and Asian Studies provides—as the essays in this volume attest—the field of Asian Studies with an opportunity to make whole its fragmented epistemology, and in so doing, to come closer to the fulfillment of the promise of its intellectual endeavor.

Centering Race in Asian Studies

How shall we interrogate the politics of identity in Asian Studies? This volume features work by Asianists who analyze the gatekeeping practices and presumptions that scholars hold about who studies what, how, where, and why. The scholars who have taken on this task, at least in these pages, include those who are minoritized and who have experienced marginalization and gatekeeping. We hope to expand an awareness of these dynamics by calling upon the broader membership of Asian Studies—particularly those who act as gatekeepers due to their prominence in the field or their backgrounds that make their position as “Asianists” seemingly self-explanatory—to undergo a similar self-assessment. What does it mean to curtail our understanding of “Who is an Asianist?” based on the presumption that the scholar is either white or else shares the background of the places and people whom they study? How are we to be accountable to scholars—such as the Latina and Iranian South Asianists in our first chapter, or the Black Asianists across several of these contributions—for erecting roadblocks, challenging, and otherwise not mentoring those whom we consider “outside” the realm of Asian Studies?

Whereas the scholars in this issue discuss their individual experiences as “unlikely” Asianists who work outside of their expected interests or presumed expertise, we connect these experiences as patterns of racism that structure area studies. It is our hope that this volume speaks not only to scholars whose experiences parallel those of our authors; we intend for this Asia Shorts publication to make Asianists—write large and *especially* including those who have not considered these dynamics—pause and take stock of the politics that shape the production and dissemination of knowledge about Asia, particularly within US universities. Part of this process begins with an engagement with this volume. The more necessary task, however, is to *center race* and extend this knowledge to the practices that shape the field, including hiring and promotion, mentorship, as well as research and publishing on Asia.

The chapters in this volume include cutting-edge research by a new generation of scholars who are informed by national and global events, including the inequalities that have led to the rise of the movement for Black lives and a recognition of global anti-Blackness. Among them are researchers who have engaged ethnic studies in their pursuit of knowledge about Asia and who incorporate Black Studies scholarship, for instance, along with, in some cases, their own experiences as people racialized as Black in the US in their study of Asia. A more accurate analysis of the world emerges from centering race as a globally and historically relevant phenomenon, one that intersects with culture, religion, ethnicity, caste, and other markers of difference and community. Additionally, considering the positionality of the Black Asianist, for instance, complicates taken-for-granted assumptions within the field by the presentation of new questions and

different approaches to inquiry. Stated in the obverse, the refusal of Asianists to center or even consider race in researching “the other,” the “elsewhere” of Asia, the politics of knowledge production, and the overall understanding of how racialized concepts of difference have shaped life is an inadequate approach to the study of Asia or, indeed, any part of the world.

This volume is one small response to the urgent call to center race and analyze the development of racial difference within Asian Studies alongside the field’s strong emphasis on culture, language, religion, and history. This includes attention to figures and concepts of Blackness, darkness, and difference within the archives; various languages and literatures; and the scholarship on slaveries, colonialism, and domination across the Indian Ocean and Pacific worlds. The contributors present ambitious, theoretical, and urgent knowledge that emerges from a sustained engagement with ethnic studies, theories of race, and attention to Blackness and African-descended people. They highlight what a deeply local study of people and places provides, especially when they are analyzed through a transregional and *longue-durée* perspective.

An Asian Studies reckoning with race will require that we provide undergraduate and graduate training in theories of race; courses on the development of the global concepts of race, including its social constructivism and very real consequences; and an analysis of political economy that takes race *and* class, or racial capitalism, into account. It includes a careful delineation of how structures of inequality may be informed by, for instance, caste and race, as distinct yet intertwined historical human formations. What would it mean, therefore, to require coursework in ethnic studies and its subfields by our graduate students as they embark on their studies of Asia? And how would teaching this volume shape the universe of ideas and research pathways for students pursuing Asian Studies? The production of knowledge by scholars trained in interdisciplinary fields, including those published here, reveals how the geographic and foundational parameters that once informed various disciplines can be undisciplined to greater effect. Imagine the research questions and methods that emerge, for example, when Asian Studies scholars read closely the work emerging from trans-Pacific Asian Studies that centers diaspora, militarism, and migration *along with* theories of race, gender, and sexuality developed in Asian American studies? This volume has selected chapters that reflect our support of deeply interdisciplinary studies of Asia and its diasporas.

In addition to illustrating the importance of an engagement with Black Studies and areas including trans-Pacific, Asian diaspora, Asian American, and Amerasian studies within Asian Studies, we highlight the analytically rich and politically imperative work that continues to develop out of several emergent, increasingly established and overlapping fields. The editors of this volume have

contributed scholarship to these areas, including our research on African diasporic music and literature in Japan, Black and South Asian relations in the US, and Blackness across the Pacific.¹⁰ Scholars in these areas explore the sociocultural, political, economic, and other relationships between African and Asian diasporas and include the growing subfields of Black Internationalism, the Black Pacific, and Afro-Asian Studies.

The term “Afro-Asia” has been mobilized to service a range of intellectual and ideological projects. Political scientists and activists have explored this conceptual space as one inhabited by peoples who share common experiences with Western colonialism as well as the postcolonial effort to contend with its legacies.¹¹ Other scholars have traced how Western colonialism created global encounters of African and Asian diasporic peoples through the movement of imperial labor.¹² These include Chinese and Indian indentured servants who supplanted the newly freed African labor in the Caribbean and other regions in the mid-nineteenth century. Later, several newly independent African and Asian nations met during the Bandung Conference of 1955 to chart a collective path forward in the face of continued Euro-American dominance of international politics and economics. In the United States, Nation of Islam leader Elijah Muhammad invoked the figure of “the Asiatic Black man” as allied with Asian peoples, such as the Japanese during World War II, in the struggle by people of color against Western oppression. These politics have since been invoked by figures like heavyweight boxing champion Muhammad Ali, who identified himself using this term in his famous refusal to be drafted to fight the Vietcong, with whom he said he had no quarrel.¹³ More recently, they have been called upon by figures in popular music. The Wu-Tang Clan, Rakim, Nas, and other hip-hop artists who are drawn to the Afrocentric theology of the Five Percent Nation of Islam sometimes lyrically self-identify, as Ali did, as the revolutionary figure of the Asiatic Black man.

In addition to the long histories of interpersonal interaction between the two groups, African and Asian people today indeed exercise their racial imaginings of each other in the spaces of global popular culture. Scholars of Asia have described the popular cultural traffic between the African and the Asian by explicitly invoking the concept of Afro-Asia.¹⁴ Other works, though not analytically centered on the concept, nevertheless engage exchanges across African and Asian diasporas.¹⁵ Recent scholarship on transnational sonic dialogues describes the rooting of African diasporic musical genres, including hip-hop and reggae in Asia, the Pacific, and the United States.¹⁶ Several chapters in this volume also rest squarely within Afro-Asian Studies, in light of their focus on questions of representation in mass media and social media. They reflect how some Asianists engage race, Blackness, and diaspora. For instance, whereas Muhammad Ali’s proclamation of himself as an Asiatic Black man embodied an African American embrace of

the radical possibilities of Afro-Asian affinity, in this case with the Vietnamese, Ngyuen and Nguyen's chapter in this volume on BLM social media activism in Vietnam reciprocates that gaze, offering rare insight into the imagination of Blackness in the country. (We show, too, how Afro-Asia overlaps with the Black Pacific—discussed in our final article by Lundry—illustrating how both subfields have spoken to issues like the Vietnam War that have been important to Asian Studies.)¹⁷

Afro-Asia is also a rubric for considering other recent developments in international economics, politics, and society. This includes China's increasing status as a neoliberal rival to the Western world through the country's capital investments in Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean; the presence of continental Africans in China such as in Guangzhou; the national debates surrounding the identities of multiracial Black and Japanese tennis player Naomi Osaka and Miss Universe Japan 2015, Ariana Miyamoto; and similar debates surrounding Black and Chinese talent show contestants Lou Jing and Winnie Zhong Feifei in China.¹⁸ The essays by Kimberly Hassel and Guangtian Ha, while in many ways reflecting different intellectual projects, each provide an important sociohistorical context for understanding Blackness in Japan and China respectively.

Black Internationalism has been another framing of Black-Asian encounters that further speak to the possibilities of Asian Studies as a more fully race-cognizant and global enterprise. It reflects an African diasporic (and often specifically African American) gaze toward the possibility of anticolonial or postcolonial kinship with the peoples of the non-Western world, including Asia. In this and other ways, Black Internationalism overlaps with Afro-Asian, Black Pacific, and Indian Oceanic studies. Political scientist Robert Vitalis compellingly argues that the field of International Relations was based in a profound presumption of, and an effort to institutionally validate and sustain, Western dominance over people of color around the world.¹⁹ He describes Black Internationalism as an academic movement significantly centered on the Howard School, a contingent of Howard University scholars including Alaine Locke, E. Franklin Frazier, Ralph Bunche, Eric Williams, and Merze Tate. This "counternetwork" within International Relations sought to shift the field from its Euro-American center toward an African American scholarly engagement with social movements in America and around the world that were seeking Black political, economic, cultural, and other forms of self-determination. "Du Bois and his heirs in the Howard school would begin to insist that history, not biology, explained hierarchy, specifically the history of colonial and mercantile capitalist expansion and the transatlantic slave trade that secured Western people's dominance and African, Asian, and Caribbean people's subordination."²⁰

Black Internationalism indeed intersects with Asia in significant ways; two brief examples might suffice. In the past, China and Japan held positions of great

respect and admiration in the minds of many African American scholars and activists. W. E. B. Du Bois, for instance, was a staunch supporter of the countries' rising place in the world as bulwarks against Euro-American tyranny, such as after Japan's defeat of Russia in 1905.²¹ Historian Marc Gallicchio charts this African American interest in the racial dimensions of world affairs as predating the Civil War. He describes the increasing view among many Black Americans that the racism of the American empire increasingly created the possibility of solidarity between African Americans and the world's "dark-skinned people." "What might be called 'black internationalism' was unusual in that it reached beyond the world's Black Belt to embrace nonwhite peoples everywhere as allies in the cause of liberation," writes Gallicchio.²²

As a second example, humanities scholar Selina Lai-Henderson explores conversations across Chinese and African American literary worlds, centering on the reception to Langston Hughes's visit to China in the 1930s. She argues for Hughes's importance in stimulating later generations of exchanges between African American and Chinese writers. Lai-Henderson further explores how Hughes himself used his poetic writings on China, a country he viewed as inevitably becoming "a major player in the worldwide proletarian revolution," to provide himself with a way of thinking through and ameliorating through communism the traumas of his racialized existence in the United States.²³ This particular work stands in interesting dialogue with, for example, Felicity Stone-Richards's chapter in this volume. Much like Lai-Henderson, Stone-Richards explores the literary dialogue between African America and East Asia, even as the relationship is inverted (and more explicitly gendered) given Stone-Richards's focus on women Japanese writers' engagements with the work of African American women authors.

The chapters that speak to issues commonly articulated within Afro-Asian studies and Black Internationalism are clearly represented in this volume. However, we also present a chapter on the Movement for Black Lives in West Papua, a Pacific province of Indonesia, raising the question of how far Asian Studies journeys into the Pacific. Chris Lundry's chapter, "We Have a Lot of Names like George Floyd," explains the resonance of the Black Lives Matter movement for those West Papuans in the Pacific who identify as Black and who are struggling for self-determination in the face of Indonesian rule. We end this volume with Lundry's research not as a closing to our broader inquiry but as a geographic, political, and racial opening, extending the geographic boundaries of Asian Studies and Afro-Asia into the Black Pacific. Like Afro-Asian Studies, yet newly emerging, the Black Pacific is an intellectual, relational, and theoretical area of study that pulls together scholars of politics, region, culture, race, and society. Indonesia's extension into the Pacific recalls the vast expanse of Japanese imperialism across Oceania, where its effects upon places like Guam, Okinawa, and the Marshall Islands are still felt. A

politically attuned Asian Studies that analyzes race, imperialism, and colonialism across regions makes the Black Pacific directly relevant to scholars of Japan, Korea, Okinawa, as well as Vietnam, whose refugees have found temporary homes in many Pacific Islands. Asian Studies analyses of diaspora consider the migration of various Asian groups to plantations across Oceania, including the Hakka Chinese in French-controlled Tahiti and, in the case of Hawai'i's plantation economy, the arrival of laborers from China, Japan, Korea, and the Philippines in the nineteenth and twentieth century. More recently, the economic insertion of capital by Japan in the 1990s, and now China into Pacific societies, including the purchasing of land and businesses in Hawai'i, similarly extends the regional and analytical reach that Asian Studies scholars may achieve.

Centering a theoretical analysis of race and racial theories as they develop in locally specific ways means that we do not intend to impose US racial formations upon the globe. At the same time, the US empire has exported its racial ideologies alongside its economic, cultural, and military might to influence the world, primarily through its military but also through popular culture including soundwaves, news outlets, television, and film. Notions of Blackness, including racist conceptions of criminalized masculinity, for example, circulate internationally and stick to various bodies, including Black Pacific Islanders like West Papuans. At the same time, scholars in this volume have conducted deep dives into linguistic and historical archives from across Asia to reveal how various Asian societies conceptualized difference in phenotypic ways, thereby constructing hierarchies based on their own concepts of racialized difference that intersected with caste, region, class, and color.

A call for and response to the need for a racial reckoning in Asian Studies motivated by the movement for Black lives and the relentless onslaught of fatal racial violence faced by members of the African diaspora by no means begins in the twenty-first century. The establishment of area studies, including Asian Studies, as colonial fields rooted in disciplines like anthropology, history, and religion has long required an engagement with race and a confrontation with racism. By this, we refer both to the politics of race within the field as well as the production of knowledge by its scholars. We feature a range of contributions that articulate these vexed issues in several ways. First, we encourage a reckoning with race in how we view who an appropriate Asianist is—we may take for granted our white students' interests in Asia; we also can comprehend why, for instance, a South Asian scholar may want to study the 1947 Partition of the subcontinent. But how committed are we to nonwhite and non-Asian scholars who wish to embark on a career in Asian Studies? How does our questioning of their interests and expertise reflect gatekeeping that shuts the door on these areas of study in ways that not only mimic colonial actions but also deepen *racist* experiences within the academy? Who are

we hiring, in what areas, and for what compensation? The reflection pieces in this volume uncover the racial politics of gatekeeping and mentorship that can make or break careers.

Second, the belated and thus-far inadequate contending with who the Asianist *is* goes hand in hand with the need to center race *analytically* as a locally emergent, globally dynamic, and historically produced phenomenon in the study of Asia, alongside other significant and overlapping categories of caste, religion, and ethnicity. This, we insist, requires a greater intellectual engagement with theories in Black Studies, Asian Diaspora Studies, and other ethnic studies. It calls for an emphasis on the freedom—even perhaps the necessity—of asserting a *political impetus* behind our work as scholars.

Race already is and has always been central to Asian Studies. This refers to the whiteness of Asian Studies and area studies more broadly. The colonial disciplines, like anthropology, that it draws from, the tiered and unequal racial and gendered patterns in hiring tenure-track versus teaching-track language instructors—these all reveal the material effects of racism upon the production of knowledge and knowledge producers. We hope this introductory essay illustrates one way of engaging with race intellectually as we also express our political desires to critique imperialism, move toward decolonization, and acknowledge anti-Black racism in Asia and in Asian Studies. Motivated by a similar impetus, our volume includes chapters that analyze anti-Black racism in Japan, Vietnam, and West Papua; interrogate the centrality of anti-Muslim racism to notions of race; and provide insight into the meanings of Blackness and darkness in early Asian texts. These are among the ways in which this volume becomes most compelling in its attempts to grapple with Asian Studies today: when it evokes a politics that might propel the study of people, places, and languages in the service of comprehending, and therefore addressing, inequalities across the globe.

Overview

Our volume offers ten chapters representing the vast and deep scholarly interest in positionality, race, and Blackness in Asian Studies. We begin with a pair of essays that address the collection's eponymous concern—*who* is the Asianist? In theory, the answer to this question is infinite: insofar as the moniker “Asianist” is one earned by way of the accrual of credentials and intellectual capital, there is, in theory, no predetermined restriction on who might become an Asianist (or who the Asianist might become). In practice, however, the answer to this question has been much more finite: insofar as the accrual of credentials and capital (intellectual or otherwise) cannot be divorced from the way racial logics police access to the institutions and resources required to earn the moniker “Asianist,” a limited set of racial and ethnic identities have come to define what it means

to embody—to “look the part”—of the Asianist. The first pair of essays question how this limitation cuts both ways, undercutting the plentiful potential of both Asianists and Asian Studies.

In the opening essay, “Who Is a South Asianist? A Conversation on Positionality,” anthropologists Hoda Bandeh-Ahmadi and Isabel Huacuja Alonso provide a compelling discussion about their experiences as nonwhite, non-South Asian scholars of South Asia. Long-term collaborators, they reflect upon the troubling experiences they confronted during their training, including other scholars’ reactions to their positionalities (Iranian American and Mexican American, respectively). Structured as a conversation in response to four questions, the authors address what motivates their focus on South Asia; how their identities and backgrounds shape their research; barriers they have faced as “non-South Asian but minoritized scholar[s] in South Asian Studies”; and what their experiences say about who can and should be a scholar of South Asia. Through parallel experiences that reflect a troubling state of the field resulting from gatekeeping, assumptions about the link between a scholar’s ethnic and racial background and their area of study, and the importance of mentors, this honest dialogue provides much for Asian Studies scholars to reflect upon with regard to our approach to the question of research, identity, and authority. While anthropology has come some distance in addressing the “insider” and “outsider” dynamics of “native” and white scholars, anthropologists have not yet contended with or cultivated nonwhite, non-Asian Asianists more broadly. Bandeh-Ahmadi and Huacuja Alonso outline the very questions this volume seeks to address. They center the effects of positionality by highlighting not so much its impact on the quality of research but rather the productive ways non-South Asian and nonwhite scholars trouble the fields’ assumptions about “Who Is the (South) Asianist?”

Carolyn T. Brown’s “A Different Way of Seeing: Reflections of a Black Asianist” is many things: it is a history of a career of service to the field of Asian Studies; it is a love letter to an academic field that at times refuses to love you back; and it is an auto-theoretical exploration of how Brown’s lived experiences informed her writing of *Reading Lu Xun through Carl Jung* (Cambria Press, 2018). Much like the career of Brown herself—which begins with a PhD in literature and culminates in directorships of the Area Studies Collections and John W. Kluge Center of the Library of Congress—Brown collects the various strands of thought pursued in “A Different Way of Seeing” and reconfigures them into something with a collective force beyond that of any individual skein. Namely, she argues that “originality in the choice of subject matter” is a definitive characteristic of many Black Asianists. This originality is not the product of happenstance; it is an upshot of their attunement to the significance of putatively anomalous existences. Nor is this originality irrelevant; rather, it—when not attenuated by yesteryear visions of the

way Asian Studies “should be”—facilitates the re-envisioning and expansion of the scope of the field. Taking her own scholarship as a case study in which she reads Lu Xun alongside the likes of Carl Jung and W. E. B. Du Bois, Brown considers how a more inclusive Asian Studies enables the field to see its objects of study in heretofore unforeseen ways.

Taken together, the next two chapters encourage Asian Studies scholars to think with race as a category on par with space, time, and society, as well as class. This commitment is central to ethnic studies but is a move that, according to contributor Guangtian Ha, “has barely caught on in Asian Studies for which the potentially transformative theoretical innovations of ethnic studies are at times reduced to studies of marginalized ‘ethnic minorities’ in postcolonial and postsocialist regimes.” Ha and, in another essay, coauthors Soham Patel and M. Bilal Nasir provide two chapters that turn our attention to deeply historicized and transregional questions of Blackness and race.

Ha’s piece, “From Baghdād to Baghpūr: Sailors and Slaves in Global Asia,” encourages Asian Studies scholars to focus on transregional inter-Asian connections that “can contribute to a broadened understanding of global blackness that at once encompasses and transcends trans-Atlantic slavery.” His multilingual research into Persian and Chinese texts and images from the fourth and seventh centuries reveal references to slavery and depictions of Blackness, such as the Chinese term “kunlun,” that contribute to underexamined areas in both Asian Studies as well as Black Studies. Ha, a religious studies professor, considers “(1) the intellectual contribution and the political work Asian Studies may be capable of in addressing the entrenched racial bias that structures the field itself (white people studying non-whites, Black people studying themselves, and Asians finding anti-Black racism a matter not directly relevant to their existence and scholarly pursuit), and (2) the under-theorization of race as it pertains specifically to blackness in transregional Asian Studies.” This fascinating chapter, which spotlights Black sailors and slaves, expands our understanding of slavery beyond the Middle Passage and West Africa, offering a broadened analysis of Blackness in Asia “without displacing or belittling the unique brutality of European colonialism and trans-Atlantic slavery.” Blackness throughout this intertextual and transregional study refers to several things, including references to darkness and enslaved status, as well as to members of the African diaspora. In this way, Ha brings together matters of interest and concern that connect Asian Studies to ethnic studies.

The coauthored chapter by Patel and Nasir, “The Asianist is Muslim: Thinking through Anti-Muslim Racism with the Muslim Left,” picks up on this same cross-field theme, linking the concerns and strengths of Islamic studies to Asian American studies in their analysis of the central role “the Muslim” has historically played in the development of race. That is, they argue that “the Asianist

is Muslim.” They draw on Edward Said’s theorization of Orientalism to “address the limitations of Asian Studies regarding the question and representation of Muslims and Islam.” Through a sweeping and theoretically acute account of the development and deployment of the Muslim, Patel (trained in American studies) and Nasir (an anthropologist) denounce the erasure of Muslims from both the categories of the Asian and the Asian American. Rather, they offer to Asian Studies a “reflection upon European Orientalist discourse as a way to return to the centrality of Muslims and Islam in bridging Asian and Asian American histories and politics.” At the center of their contribution is how the figure of the Muslim unsettles not only diaspora studies but also area studies. Like Ha, they call for a transregional—a global, in fact—and historicized study of categories and processes including the Muslim, race, and slavery that we urge Asian Studies to engage more deeply. Patel and Nasir argue that “anti-Muslim racism and global Muslim politics can bring about a *critical* Asian Studies that connects region, broadly conceived, and its diasporas in solidarity with the Global South and its ongoing political struggles against imperial racism, empire, and the violent conditions brought on by coloniality.” Their chapter’s charting of the centrality of Muslims to modern racial formation ends with a clarion call to acknowledge radical Muslim politics and Muslim decoloniality.

Jeremy Tai’s “Racial Capitalism and the National Question in the Early People’s Republic of China” explores the comparative politics entailed in both the PRC and the West’s “instrumentalization” of the ideologies of socialist ethnicity and racial capitalism. Socialist ethnicity for the PRC denotes the multicultural project of Han and non-Han belonging within a cohesive nation, while in the West it is represented as justifying the surveillance, incarceration, and genocidal disappearances of ethnic others within the body of the nation. If capitalism for many Westerners naturalizes assumptions about merit in an equitable pursuit of profit, *racial* capitalism for the PRC foregrounds how this pursuit has actually entailed a profound Western exploitation of peoples of color around the world. Tai astutely argues, however, that it is important for scholars of China to interrogate these sharply drawn distinctions in which both China and the West have been invested and through which each defines itself and the other. Acknowledging this divide is important because of how it echoes and compounds *academic* divides between area studies (such as the international political study of “the Chinese nation”) on the one hand, and studies of ethnicity and race on the other. In his chapter, Tai explores the archives on Chinese socialism for how racial capitalism might not be considered as “just so” denoting of Western exploitation in contrast to the PRC’s project of socialist ethnicity, but rather for its disclosures of the actual, ideological labor through which the PRC mobilized race to carve out the clear, moral, economical, and geopolitical domain of the People’s Republic of China.

“Science without Borders? The Contested Science of ‘Race Mixing’ Circa World War II in Japan, East Asia and the West” by Kristin Roebuck similarly addresses the imaginary of race in the construction of Asian national identities. An historian, Roebuck interrogates scholarly characterizations of the global scientific thinking about race in the postwar era as defined by its recession, one facilitated by a Western scientific establishment invested in liberal notions of progress beyond the eugenicist, genocidal horrors of World War II. Roebuck asserts that these claims about a supposedly global scientific rejection of race—stress on the global—are, among other failings, provincially Western, often made without regard to scientific knowledge production in non-Western regions such as Asia. Focusing on the Japanese instance, Roebuck explores a shift in the Japanese scientific community’s rhetorical embrace of Japanese and Asian race mixing before the war, one that served the goals of empire by arguing for the robustness of mixed-race people born from Japanese colonial encounters to a vision of race mixing as posing an existential threat to the purity of a defeated nation. Roebuck traces this ideological shift as expressed in the careers of several Japanese scholars. This chapter represents an important point of reference for scholars conducting research on mixed-race identities in East Asia past and present.

In “Toward an Afro-Japanese and Afro-Ainu Feminist Practice: Reading Fujimoto Kazuko and Chikappu Mieko,” Felicity Stone-Richards situates her scholarship as a contribution to “a practice that is coming to be defined in the academic world as Afro-Japanese exchange.” If a foundational premise of Afro-Japanese studies is that the interdependencies of Black Studies and Japanese studies has been overlooked and understudied by previous generations of Asianists, then Stone-Richards (alongside other contributors to this volume, including Kristin Roebuck and Kimberly Hassel) provides a sense of the potential avenues available for future generations of Afro-Japanese scholars. Stone-Richards, a political scientist, does this by advancing a heretofore understudied facet of Afro-Japanese politico-philosophical exchange. This chapter addresses how the art and thought of Black women such as Alice Walker and Toni Cade Bambara have informed the cultural practices of Japanese thinkers, with a focus on translator Fujimoto Kazuko and Ainu activist and clothwork artist Chikappu Mieko. In her analysis of the transcultural bridge the act of quilt-making forms between Chikappu and Black American culture, Stone-Richards notes that the quilt “has the dual purpose of enveloping a loved one and transmitting cultural history through the images, materials, and methods of sewing.” Stone-Richards’s scholarship itself has a quilt-like quality, as its methods weave together histories and artists who are otherwise regarded as cut from different (academic) cloths.

As a “born-digital” movement with an aversion to hierarchical organization and a commitment (in the words of Garza’s love letter) to “a *world* [our emphasis]

where Black lives matter,” it should come as no surprise that the transformative potential of BLM has traversed both Asia and Asian Studies at the speed of the Internet. The final three essays in this collection—Hassel’s “Black Japanese Storytelling as Praxis,” Nguyen and Nguyen’s “From Black Brother to Black Lives Matter,” and Lundry’s “We Have a Lot of Names Like George Floyd”—take up the travel of BLM to Asia and consider the methodological experimentation required of Asian Studies in order to do justice to the study of this transnational, transmedia movement. In the wake of the March 2020 killing of George Floyd, protests by the Black Lives Matter movement erupted not only across the nation but also internationally, including in Asian countries like Japan. Ethnic majority Japanese, African Americans living in Japan, and mixed-race Black Japanese individuals were among those who organized and attended protests. These developments raise the question of the Japanese histories and politics of race and ethnicity through which the BLM movement came to be locally inflected, especially as centered on the imagination of racial Blackness, Black Japanese peoples, and other mixed-race identities in Japan.

Kimberly Hassel’s essay, “Black Japanese Storytelling as Praxis: Anti-Racist Digital Activism and Black Lives Matter in Japan,” explores Black Japanese people’s lived experiences of the friction between Blackness and Japaneseness as two identities around which fictions of absolute difference and incommensurability have been woven. Although fictions, their status as social reality significantly evidence themselves in the ideological investments many Japanese (as well as Black, white, and other peoples) have had in notions of Black Japaneseness as an improbable conjunction of exemplary difference. In her essay, Hassel historicizes Blackness in the Japanese context, including the ways it was reflected in mainstream media commentary during the 2020 BLM protests, and traces the early development and current moment of social media activism in Japan. Principally by drawing on interviews with Black Japanese interlocutors and by analyzing their digital activism, but also through a brief but compelling reckoning with her own positionality as a mixed-race ethnographer of Dominican descent, Hassel reflects insightfully on the possibilities for change in majority Japanese attitudes towards Black, Black Japanese, and other mixed-race peoples that these activists labor to bring into being.

In “From Black Brother to Black Lives Matter: Perception of Blackness in Viet Nam,” Phuong Nguyen (an urban ethnographer) and Trang Nguyen (a cybersecurity engineer) consider the creation and reception of media spaces in Viet Nam inspired by BLM. Nguyen and Nguyen interviewed the members of three prominent youth activist groups stationed in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City: Viet Activism, Viets for Change, and Black Lives Matter Hanoi. The coauthors also collected some 898 comments left on the Black Lives Matter Hanoi Facebook

page and identified thematic tropes across the comments by way of “web scraping techniques.” When viewed through this methodological lens, the digital life of BLM in Viet Nam takes on a bifurcated, asymmetrical shape. Members of organizations such as Black Lives Matter Hanoi see BLM as a two-fold opportunity to “raise awareness and educate Vietnamese youths on the issues of systemic racism and police brutality,” issues which begin abroad but—in the eyes of BLM Hanoi—have reverberating significance for contemporary Vietnamese life. Such affinity, however, is met with “a tsunami of negative responses,” with some commenters arguing “that anti-Black racism has nothing to do with Vietnamese.” In this regard, the response to BLM in Viet Nam is not unlike the response to BLM in the United States, and so Nguyen and Nguyen gesture toward the need for a transnational, unified approach to the study of anti-Blackness.

Addressing many of the questions raised by Nguyen and Nguyen, Chris Lundry shifts our attention to West Papua and PLM—Papuan Lives Matter, a movement inspired by BLM. Pace the arguments posed by the detractors of BLM Hanoi, the concerns of BLM are straightforwardly germane to West Papuans, for “West Papuans share many of the same grievances expressed by African Americans through BLM,” including a history of slavery and its afterlife and violence at the hands of the police. Given the affinities in the activist grammars of BLM and PLM—in tandem with the contemporary turn toward richer transnational approaches in Asian Studies scholarship—one might assume that Asian Studies would have much to teach us about the intersecting histories of these two movements. As Lundry (citing Indonesian anthropologist Veronika Kusumaryati) notes, however, “the place of Black Melanesians in Asian Studies is still ambiguous, as they are not considered to be proper ‘Asians.’” Thus, PLM has yet to receive the scholarly attention it merits. Lundry’s corrective—which considers the dialogue about race in Indonesia opened by PLM with an eye toward how PLM is just as interested in the creation of Papuan futures as it is in Papuan pasts and presents—returns the volume to the idea with which it begins. Reminiscent of Carolyn Brown, Lundry, a Southeast Asianist, sees in PLM a provocation “for those of us who study Asia to more deeply interrogate how race and racism fit into our work and acknowledge the marginalized minorities who are frequently overlooked.”

Conclusion

The essays in this volume are part of long histories of interdiasporic engagement between the African and the Asian, between race and other modes of societal organization. The diversity of those encounters indexes a complex set of cartographies and temporalities through which Asia and Asian Studies emerge as dynamic and interpenetrated, and in which race is recognized for having been, and for remaining, undeniably critical. The movement for Black lives has

impressed upon us that these cartographies and temporalities must be more fully and globally explored for the empirical, theoretical, methodological, pedagogical, restorative, and other possibilities they hold.

Weaving through the epistemologies of an Asian Studies fragmented by its circumventions of race have been, among other elements, the liminal epistemologies of Afro-Asian Studies, Black Internationalism, and studies of the Black Pacific. Emerging over the course of decades, born of the relationships—realized and aspirational—between subaltern scholars, artists, and activists across continents and diasporas, these epistemologies must be recognized as more than supplementary to, or excesses within, the body of Asian Studies as a predominantly white discipline. They suggest the possibility of a discipline in which they, institutionalized, do not so much bind the fissures running through “Asian Studies” now rendered as a happily inclusive domain of academic knowledge production. Rather, these epistemologies might become more fully acknowledged but still dynamic vectors of inquiry within Asian Studies, a field whose integrity, in every sense of the term, critically depends on the kinds of explicit engagement with race they evidence. And yet, although these epistemologies significantly inform the essays in *Who is the Asianist?*, their authors gesture, each in their own way given their diverse perspectives and training, toward still newer intellectual imaginaries in their reflections on how Black lives matter to Asian Studies.

Notes

¹ Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Golden Gulag*, 247.

² Laurie Collier Hillstrom, *Black Lives Matter: From a Moment to a Movement*.

³ See Carly Jennings, “The Love Note that Launched a Movement,” *ASA Footnotes* 48, no. 4 (2020), 15–16, https://www.asanet.org/sites/default/files/attach/footnotes/footnotes_july-august_2020.pdf.

⁴ “About Black Lives Matter,” <https://blacklivesmatter.com/about>, accessed May 5, 2022.

⁵ Christopher Lebron, *The Making of Black Lives Matter: A Brief History of an Idea*.

⁶ Andrew Jones and Nikhil Pal Singh, “Guest Editors Introduction,” *positions: east asia cultures critique* 11, no. 1 (2003), 1–9.

⁷ Shu-mei Shih, “Racializing Area Studies, Defetishizing China,” *positions: asia critique* 27, no. 1 (2019), 45.

⁸ Shih, “Racializing Area Studies,” 58.

⁹ Shih, “Racializing Area Studies,” 57.

¹⁰ Will Bridges, *Playing in the Shadows*; Marvin Sterling, *Babylon East*; Nitasha Sharma, *Hip Hop Desis*; Nitasha Sharma, *Hawai‘i Is My Haven*.

¹¹ Vijay Prashad, *Everybody Was Kung-Fu Fighting*.

¹² Lisa Lowe, *The Intimacies of Four Continents*.

¹³ Nathaniel Deutsch, "'The Asiatic Black Man': An African American Orientalism?" *Journal of Asian American Studies* 4, no. 3 (2001): 193–208.

¹⁴ Crystal S. Anderson, *Beyond the Chinese Connection: Contemporary Afro-Asian Cultural Production*; Thorsten Botz-Bornstein, *The Cool-Kawaii: Afro-Japanese Aesthetics and New World Modernity*; Tamara Roberts, *Resounding Afro Asia: Interracial Music and the Politics of Collaboration*; Marvin Sterling, *Babylon East*.

¹⁵ E. Taylor Atkins, *Blue Nippon*; Ian Condry, *Hip-Hop Japan: Rap and the Paths of Cultural Globalization*; Warren A. Stanislaus, "From Cool Japan to Cold Japan: Grime Cyborgs in Black Britain," in *Japan Forum* (February 9, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.1080/09555803.2022.2033300>.

¹⁶ Marvin Sterling, *Babylon East*; Nitasha Tamar Sharma, *Hip Hop Desis*; Brent Clough, "Oceanic Reggae." In *Global Reggae*, edited by Carolyn Cooper (Kingston: University of the West Press, 2012), 265–283; and G. Solis, "The Black Pacific: Music and Racialization in Papua New Guinea and Australia." *Critical Sociology* 41, no. 2 (2015), 297–312.

¹⁷ See Douglas Allen, "Antiwar Asian Scholars and the Vietnam/Indochina War." *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars* 21, nos. 2–4 (1989): 112–135.

¹⁸ Among several scholars who have written on the experiences of people of both East Asian and African ancestry are Michael C. Thornton, "Black, Japanese, and American: An Asian American Identity," *The Sum of Our Parts: Mixed-Heritage Asian Americans* 231 (2001): 93; Mitzi Uehara Carter, "Mixed Race Okinawans and Their Obscure In-Betweenness," *Journal of Intercultural Studies* 35, no. 6 (2014): 646–661; Ping Su, Yuejian Lin, and Mingying Zhou, "Identity Negotiation and Segregated Integration of African-Chinese Mixed-Race Children in Guangzhou, China," *Journal of Contemporary China* 31, no. 134 (2022): 186–201; and Ji-Hyun Ahn, "Rearticulating Black Mixed-Race in the Era of Globalization: Hines Ward and the Struggle for Koreanness in Contemporary South Korean Media," *Cultural Studies* 28, no. 3 (2014): 391–417.

¹⁹ Robert Vitalis, *White World Order, Black Power Politics*.

²⁰ Robert Vitalis, *White World Order, Black Power Politics*, 21.

²¹ Gerald Horne, *Race War: White Supremacy and the Japanese Attack on the British Empire*; Nahum Dimitri Chandler, "A Persistent Parallax: On the Writings of W. E. Burghardt Du Bois on Japan and China, 1936–1937," *CR: The New Centennial Review* 12, no. 1 (2012): 291–316.

²² Marc S. Gallicchio, *The African American Encounter with Japan and China: Black Internationalism in Asia, 1895–1945*, 11.

²³ Selina Lai-Henderson, "Color Around the Globe: Langston Hughes and Black Internationalism in China." *MELUS* 45, no. 2 (2020): 88–107.

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