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# Global histories: A student journal

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## Scope and purpose

In response to the increasing interest in the 'global' as a field of inquiry, a perspective, and an approach, *Global Histories: A Student Journal* aims to offer a platform for debate, discussion, and intellectual exchange for a new generation of scholars with diverse research interests. Global history can provide an opportunity to move beyond disciplinary boundaries and methodological centrisms, both in time and space. As students of global history at Freie Universität Berlin and Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, our interest lies not in prescribing what global history is and what it is not, but to encourage collaboration, cooperation, and discourse among students seeking to explore new intellectual frontiers.

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# Dear readers,

With the start of a new academic year at German universities, we are excited to present our latest edition of *Global Histories*. As global historians, we cannot be indifferent towards the latest outbursts of international military conflicts worldwide, and we do not stand with any violence that takes innocent lives. Advocating for a more just and peaceful world, our current issue acknowledges and salutes the legacy of those who have fought against systems of oppression, about whom the reader can learn in the following pages.

Our first issue of the ninth volume of *Global Histories* is themed on postcolonial activism and colonial reflections. Leon Julius Biela's methodology opens our issue with a thoughtful reflection on the use of "region" as a defining term in the practice of global history and the related problems of such use. Loïc Folton's research on the Oxbridge rowing culture follows by employing a rich collection of primary sources to explore how rowing competitions manifested within the British colonial hierarchy, and provided a site for South-Asian students to integrate in terms of race and body politics. In contrast to the previous discussion on masculinity and sports, Quincy Mackay focuses on women's role as caretakers and humanitarian work in the colonial context. Representing the colonial organisation *Équipes médico-sociales itinérantes*, the French women in Algeria actively engaged with the local populations through medical aid and social contacts during the Algerian War of Independence. Ananya Agustin Malhotra then provides an opposite perspective of French colonial history by revealing the growing transnational anticolonial consciousness among the left-wing student groups in post-WWI Paris with an extensive study of the lives and works of the Martinican surrealist René Ménil and Vietnamese phenomenologist Tran Duc Thao. Echoing Ananya's discussion on transnational anticolonial movements, Edward Yuan shows us a close-up examination of the Bandung Conference and its grassroots networks of Afro-Asians' decolonisation attempts. Despite the failure of the Bandung project, the Bandung Spirit has been a revolutionary concept preoccupied with redemptive violence, and its legacy is still relevant in today's decolonisation projects. Closing our issue are the two book reviews written by Clara Leeder and Lennart Vincent Schmidt. Clara evaluates the history of the Silk Road in Medieval Armenia, while Lennart provides his commentary on the ever-changing Indian–Bangladeshi borderland.

Additionally, our Global Histories team is proud to have successfully continued the Global History Student Conference. From June 30 to July 2, 2023, over 30 students travelled worldwide to Berlin to present their fruitful research projects and exchange insights about global history. We managed to host our first-ever student salon, a safe space for students to share their learning and research challenges in relation to gender, racial, and social class inclusion and diversity. Over the conference weekend, we were delighted to see students connecting and forming a supportive young historian community. We wish all the success to our conference participants and authors who contributed to this issue, and to our readers, we hope you enjoy reading our latest issue.

With best regards,

Phoebe Ka Laam Ng

Editor-in-chief

## Acknowledgements

We would like to acknowledge the interest and work of all students who submitted an article, essay, or review during the last call for papers. We are incredibly grateful to the authors published in this issue for their fruitful contributions and efforts in revision. These authors include Leon Julius Biela, Loïc Folton, Quincy Mackay, Ananya Agustin Malhotra, Edward Yuan, Clara Leeder, and Lennart Vincent Schmidt. Their work throughout the months was intensive, and it paid off in their excellent contributions to this issue. We are also grateful for their patience with our delays, as it was particularly challenging for us to put together this issue while also working hard in organising the Global History Student Conference!

In addition, we would like to extend our immense gratitude to the students on the *Global Histories* journal team and students in our Global History MA program, particularly those who devoted extensive time and effort to reviewing and editing the published pieces. These members include Janina Abts, Baillie Bell, Cecilia Burgos Cuevas, Miguel Cadórniga Martínez, Hannah Jane Casey, Seth Crosland, Ruby Guyot, Kieran Isaacs, Lukas Jung, Zaza Jung, Zoë Klos, Evan Liddle, Anna Nesterova, Oliver Ryan, and Sarah Wulbrecht. The attention and dedication these members provided towards the pieces they worked on during the arrival of another semester ensured this issue's high quality. We once again thank Cecilia Burgos Cuevas for her incredible work in the layout and design of our journal, delivering another visually appealing issue.

Finally, we are grateful for the continued support and assistance for this project by the Freie Universität Berlin, particularly the Global History faculty, chaired by Prof. Dr. Sebastian Conrad, and the Online Journal Systems team at CeDiS.

# I.

# Methodologies

# Re-thinking the “Region” in (Global) History

By

Leon Julius Biela

## Abstract

*While historians frequently use the term “region”, little thought is given to what “regions” are. This methodological essay explores the concepts of the “region” used in current historical scholarship and especially in global history, discussing their problems and potential. Drawing on ideas from spatial theory and human geography, the essay considers how an analytically viable conceptualization of the “region” would look. Overall, the essay contends that working out theoretically informed spatial concepts is essential for (global) history, and argues that a more reflective use of the “region” will open up new perspectives for (global) historical research.*

## About the author

Leon Julius Biela is a M.A. student of Comparative Modern History at the University of Freiburg. His research interests include the history of imperialism, internationalism, and international politics and their respective entanglements in the “long” twentieth century

## Introduction

In his introductory volume on global history, Sebastian Conrad argued that global history, as well as any approach that analyzes global processes at the macro-level, runs the risk of becoming too abstract and detached from realities on the ground. Therefore, for him, global history "remains unsatisfactory unless it is anchored in regional studies and their research results."[1] For him, developing "regional" expertise or drawing on 'regional' research is essential to remain aware of "local" and "regional" specificities and to tie the analyses of abstract processes to micro-level contexts. Conrad also noted that many studies by global historians already develop their research interests proceeding from a "local" or "regional" context.[2]

(Global) historians would probably agree that a history of flows, connections, and transfers takes place somewhere and thus, necessitate spatial units, ideally ones that are not just discursively constructed container-spaces like the "state" of national histories. For Conrad, as for many other global historians, especially those working with "transregional" approaches, the "region" seems to be a good way of anchoring connections and flows in space without having to resort to the nation-state.[3] Even studies less concerned with finding spatial concepts for analyzing cross-border or global processes use the term "region" surprisingly often.[4]

Closer scrutiny, however, reveals a wide and diverse range of sometimes contradictory understandings of the term "region", which are seldomly informed by spatial theory. Often, what exactly is referred to by the term "region" remains vague. Conrad, too, never explained in his introductory volume what he meant by the "region". Nonetheless, the "region" remains a spatial signifier and is thus connected to at least implicit understandings of space. For a historical analysis that is aware of the importance of space, it is thus necessary to reflect more thoroughly on the term "region". Thus, it is crucial to ask: What is the "region" and how can it be fruitfully used in historical analysis? Other disciplines like sociology and especially human geography have explored the nature of the "region", yet these works have neither been broadly received by historians nor has the historical discipline itself thoroughly discussed its understanding of the "region".

Therefore, this essay will reflect on what constitutes a "region" and how to use it in (global) history by drawing on concepts from other disciplines and suggesting how to think differently about "regions" in historical research. The essay will start with discussing some of the most prevalent understandings of the "region" in current historical scholarship and the key problems of this current use. I argue that despite these problems, the "region" still has potential uses for historical research. Thus, we should not abandon, but re-think it.

## The current use of “region” and its Problems

In its everyday use, the word “region” is often associated with the idea of clearly definable spaces characterized by a more or less homogeneous population or natural environment.[5] This essentialist conception of the “region” has long been present in historical scholarship, and to some extent, still is.[6] That is not to say that the “region” should never be used for historical analysis. However, in order to pave the way for the use of the “region” as a methodologically thought-out and flexible spatial concept, it is first necessary to discuss the current usage of the term in historical scholarship and to identify its most central problems.

### 1. The diversity of conceptions of the “region”

It is striking how many different conceptions of the “region” exist among historians, and how much the spaces labelled as “regions” differ in size and nature. In general, there are two main understandings of the “region”. On the one side, historians like Martina Steber understand “regions” as “medium-sized spatial units”,[7] whose size lies between towns and cities on the one hand, and the nation-state on the other.[8] Examples for this could be territories as different as the Palatinate in Germany, Provence in France, or Khuzestan in Iran. The interdisciplinary journal *Regional Studies* also defines its subject as “subnational”.[9] This understanding is especially prominent in German historical research, in which “regional” history is often equated with *Landesgeschichte*, i.e. the history of federal states or former administrative units. While these approaches have been criticized for their tendency to treat these units as essentialized spaces, past and present political borders are still influential for German regional history.[10] More generally, the understanding of “regions” as sub-national units still takes the nation-state as its spatial point of reference, with all its problematic methodological implications.

On the other side, many historians understand “regions” in the sense of “world regions”, that is, as spatial units comprising multiple states (or parts of multiple states). For instance, Austrian global historian Andrea Komlosy described “world regions” as supranational spaces formed by shared historical interactions and experiences, or common cultural characteristics like similar languages.[11] Unfortunately, hers and similar approaches to the definition of “world regions” remain somewhat vague and without elaborate theoretical or methodological foundations.[12]

Besides these two broad and general concepts of the “region”, various other, more specific approaches to the “region” have been used in historical research. One example for this is the concept of “historical meso-regions”, which seeks to provide a heuristic tool for identifying cross-national and cross-cultural spatial units with shared historical and cultural characteristics over time. According to Stefan Troebst, for example, “historical meso-regions” include the “Black Sea World”, the “Levant”, or “East-Central Europe”.[13] However, since these “regions” are discursively constructed inventions with their own complex histories, their use as heuristic tools can be criticized. Still, the concept’s emphasis on the potential

independence of “regions” from states and nations, as well as the understanding of “regions” as “clusters of structural characteristics over longer periods,”[14] are both intriguing ideas.

Other approaches have focused on the natural environment instead of cultural characteristics to define “regions”. They focus either on landscapes that provide a shared and distinct habitat for communities across political borders, such as mountain ranges, or on rivers, seas, and oceans that connect various communities along their shores. Many of these approaches are inspired by the works of the French *Annales* school.[15] *Annales*-historian Lucien Febvre defined “natural regions” as “simply collections of possibilities for society which makes use of them but is not determined by them.”[16] Studies focused on the connecting quality of bodies of water have burgeoned in the last decades. However, these approaches have been criticized for their often one-sided focus on the natural space, their underestimation of disconnecting forces, and their frequent lack of spatial-theoretical foundations.[17]

This has only been a very brief and selective overview of the various understandings of the “region” relevant to (global) history.[18] It shows that historians do not share a common understanding of the “region”. Thus, the exact meaning of the term “region” in historical studies is often unclear. Especially the use of the term “region” in various contexts without defining it can be confusing for readers and deprives the “region” of analytical value. For instance, Domenic Sachsenmaier wrote in an essay on the methodological implications of critiques of Eurocentrism for global history on one page about both “world regions” like the “Islamic World” or “East Asia”, and “regions within India”.[19] This makes it quite unclear what kind of spaces he is referring to when he later mentions “the effects of globalizing sugar trade on regional markets.”[20] Similarly, Matthias van Rossum, in his article on “regional” price differences in the global slave trade, used “regions” as the central spatial unit in his study (and words like “region” or “regional” over 150 times). However, he never explained just what a region is to him and refers to spaces and territories as different as the Western Indian Ocean, the Bay of Bengal, Timor or Makassar as “regions”.[21]

## 2. “Region” as a fallback term

Perhaps it is precisely this terminological vagueness of the “region” that makes the term attractive. In political-diplomatic negotiations, the term “region” is used whenever it is preferred not to be spatially-territorially specific.[22] The same may be true in historical writing. Especially when a spatial entity is referred to incidentally, in passing, historians frequently resort to the term “region”, which, due to its mundane nature, makes it possible to avoid the complex and laborious introduction of a thought-out spatial unit. This, again, deprives the “region” of any real meaning. When, for example, Craig Lockard in his textbook on global history referred to spaces as different as Egypt, the Sahara, Southeast India, the coasts of Sri Lanka, or the Middle East as “regions”, it seems that “region” is just a convenient “spatial word” used for all kinds of spaces which are not a nation-state or another clearly defined territory.[23] Consequently, in sentences like “Arab slave trading badly disrupted some East African regions,” “region” seems to mean nothing in particular.[24] The “region” serves as a fallback term in a different way when “world regions” are

concerned. Often, the existence of spatial entities is presupposed –like by Mariola Espinosa, who argued for the decentering of the global history of public health and thus advocated a focus on “Latin America”– and these entities are conveniently named “regions”, making them appear somehow natural.[25] This kind of usage of the term “region”, in turn, results in statements like “regions other than the United States, especially Latin America”.[26]

## 3. Return to essentialist understandings of space

This poses the danger that the essentialist container-space returns by way of the “region”.[27] Susanne Rau, for example, warned that the insights generated by the spatial turn have not fully taken hold in the historical discipline. She saw the “region” as one example of spatial constructs that are frequently “examined all too reductively or only with a view to their territorial components.”[28] The danger of essentializing space arises in particular when the concept of the “region” is not critically questioned, but instead clear territorial delimitations are posited, which in turn rely heavily on existing territorial political-administrative constructs. Inconsiderate uses of the “region” carry the risk of reviving, albeit often unintentionally, outdated essentialist notions of space, and perpetuating nations, states, and countries as territorial paradigms.[29]

In this context, “world regions”, as based on the “areas” of *Area Studies*, seem particularly problematic. Many authors have analyzed how *Area Studies*, now institutionally intertwined with global history, was established in the early Cold War, when the United States government needed in-depth expertise on foreign countries for geopolitical and strategic-operative purposes.[30] These “areas” encompassed multiple nation-states or other polities deemed to be culturally and historically similar. In this way, they are often nothing more than container-spaces that foster a homogenizing, orientalizing, and essentializing view of the people located in them. Many of these “regions” are moreover remnants of European imperialist discourses, as the rich body of scholarship on the imperial genesis of such “world regions” as Latin America, the Middle East, or Southeast Asia has shown.[31]

## 4. Perpetuating mental maps

In the case of the “areas”, it becomes very clear that the inconsiderate use of such spatial entities in current research tends to reproduce imperialist mental maps. Conventionally used concepts of “regions” are thus never “innocent”. At worst, they shape present spatial discourses and lead to the perpetuation of orientalist imaginations.[32] The discursive production of “regions” is almost always linked to power relations and imaginations of identity and alterity. This is particularly evident in the case of those “regions” constructed by European imperialists. Here, “regions” were a useful tool to order imperial knowledge for homogenizing and othering societies outside of the imperial metropoles. Mental Maps structured in “regions” thus helped to facilitate ideas of “civilizational hierarchies” and ultimately to construct “European” or “Western” identities by dissociation. In light of this, writing about formerly colonized territories and societies in general terms as “regions

earlier marginalized as colonies"[33] or "non-Western regions"[34] might not be the ideal choice of words.

Power relations and imaginations are, however, not only relevant for these "world regions" but for all "regions" conventionally taken as given entities. For example, John Straussberger, showed how ideas of "regional federations" were used by exiled politicians in western Africa after decolonization.[35] Interestingly, Straussberger never questioned the "regional" discourse as such but adopted the "regional framework" for his analysis. On a sub-national level, politicians or other actors can use the notion of a "region" for their own agendas, for example, to gain more autonomy from a central authority or to make the political ordering of spaces appear "natural". It is the task of historians to analyze the formation of these "regions", not to reproduce them in their own analyses by uncritically using the territorial delimitations produced by past "regional" discourse.

It is important to note here that Eurocentric power relations are important for the conceptual history of the term "region", too. Of course, not all spatial concepts that could be described as a "region" actually use the term "region", especially if they originated outside of or preceded the European concept of the nation-state and its claim to be the primary ordering category of space.[36] As pointed out above, however, current understandings of the "region" use more often than not the nation-state as a spatial point of reference, regardless whether the "region" is defined as a part of or as a group of states. The conceptual history of the term "region" is thus also a history of the Eurocentric reordering of spatial knowledge in relation to the nation-state. This essay seeks to raise awareness of this issue and argues for an understanding of the region that is independent from the nation-state and thus more suited to cast off the Eurocentric implications of the "region".

## Why using "region" as a spatial concept should not be abandoned

In light of these significant problems accompanying the current use of the "region" in historical scholarship, it would seem reasonable to abandon the use of "regions" in (global) history altogether. However, the various understandings of the "region" have also given rise to many intriguing and potentially fruitful ideas. In the following, I will offer some reasons why a complete abandonment of the "region" is neither feasible nor sensible.

The use of "region" to refer to spatial units, both in everyday language and in academic research, corresponds to the human need to order and categorize knowledge.[37] Since it is neither possible nor sensible to do universal history, there must be specializations and subdivisions within the historical discipline. As discussed above, the emergence and institutionalization of these subfields is, however, in many cases connected to power structures. History department chairs, research projects, conferences, introductory lectures, textbooks, and many other areas of institutionalized production and dissemination of historical knowledge are organized according to spatial units such as "regions", embedded within Eurocentric frameworks of power and knowledge, thus often implicitly reproducing notions of essentialized container-spaces and Eurocentric orderings of spatial

knowledge. Still, to make historical research work, it is inevitable to divide the overall space into specific parts, and the "region" can be a way to do just that.

Moreover, the "region" is an element of social, cultural, and political discourse and thus necessarily shapes the ways in which individuals and communities, of the past and present understand, imagine, and interact with the world and the space that surrounds them. We encounter and use the term in everyday and scholarly language, it is present in administrative structures, in fiction writing, and in travel advertisements. Often, however, it is highly political and used as a space of reference for political agendas seeking to promote a "regional" identity.[38] All of this makes it necessary not to ignore the "region" but to analyze the power structures behind the emergence of "regional" discourses and to ask how these discursive formations can be distinguished from analytically useful spatial concepts.

Overall, it is therefore necessary to use concepts of spatial units in historical research to do justice to space as an integral element of historical processes. Any historical investigation must simultaneously locate its subject in some spatial framework and deal with the spatial imaginations of historical actors. This requires a thoughtful approach to concepts of space and spatial units. Since most conventional spatial units can be problematized and critiqued in the same way as "regions", there is no reason why the "region" should not become an analytically meaningful spatial concept, especially since the term already exists and is widely used. However, an analytically meaningful and fruitful use of the term requires a concept of the "region" grounded in methodological and theoretical considerations, thus overcoming the shortcomings of the understandings of the "region" currently in use in historical research.

## Re-thinking the "region"

In the following section, I do not intend to provide an elaborate conceptualization of the "region", but rather to propose a way of thinking about "regions" in a way that incorporates various insights from the approaches described above, as well as ideas from other disciplines, particularly human geography. Ideally, the following discussion of the "region" can provoke new ideas about how we might use the "region" in (global) history.

### 1. The "region" as a spatial concept of analysis

Following the relational concept of space developed by spatial sociology, space is understood here as the arrangement of individuals and their actions, whose relations are formed through interactions. The various types of actions and interactions form layered nets of relations, thus constituting a complex relationality. In these nets, interactions lead to the transfer and collectivization of modes of action and thus to processes of spatial ordering, which are expressed in the continuous intersubjective institutionalization and deinstitutionalization of these modes of action.[39] This perspective on space owes much to thinkers like Henri Lefebvre, who emphasised the socially constructed nature of space, and

Bruno Latour, whose Actor-Network-Theory (ANT) argued for a sociological network formed the relations within and between actors and their interactions.[40]

Most concepts of "regions", including essentialist ones, share the idea that the "region" is characterized by the specific cultural characteristics of its population and thus represents an aggregation of cultural phenomena. This quality of a "region" is also part of concepts based on relational understandings of space from human geography and historical approaches inspired by it, albeit with a different twist. Here, the "region" is commonly understood as a spatial structure that manifests itself as a densification or cluster within the relationality of space.[41] Thus, on the one hand, "regions" describe the spread of a specific manifestation of an institutionalized mode of action in relational space or of a specific set thereof.[42] On the other hand, they can refer to a cluster of relations, i.e. interactions.[43] In his work on the spatial dimension of knowledge production, Latour uses the term "centers of calculation" to describe centers in social networks, which accumulate knowledge about the network in circular movements and thereby define the network's relations.[44] Building on top of the ANT, Christoph Antweiler noted: "A region thus could be determined as an accumulation of actors [or rather their institutionalized actions] or as higher densities of relations, that is, as a relational cluster."[45] However, these two analytical perspectives are interdependent, as a clustering of interactions in the network often produces a clustering of modes of action.

In such an understanding, which focuses on clusters in relational space, a "region" has no clear boundaries. These are only constructed through interpretation, that is the selection of the specific types of interactions and institutionalized modes of action that make up the cluster and the definition of what counts as a cluster. Moreover, building on the ANT's insight that any structures are fundamentally unstable, Varró and Lagendijk argued that these clusters are by nature in continuous processes of formation and dissolution.[46]

Moreover, a "region" can never stand alone, but must always be defined as part of or in relation to some other spatial entity. If a densification or cluster in a particular spatial network is described as a "region", it is necessary to specify which larger part of the network this cluster is a "region". In other words, there are clusters within the entirety of relational space that form its "regions", which, in turn, comprise some smaller clusters that form their "regions", and so on. Moreover, the respective "regions" are also vertically entangled with each other since they are clusters in a continuous relational space and not separate entities.[47] From an ANT perspective, the "region" cannot be understood apart from the network of relations but is to be defined as "an interactive effect of humans and non-human materials" within this network.[48] In such a relational understanding of "regions", their size is not a constitutive element of the concept, which is why it can include several of the concepts outlined above.[49]

A "region" can also be specified functionally with reference to specific institutionalized modes of actions or interactions relevant to the analysis.[50] Thus, a "region" in the net of economic relations needs not be congruent with a "region" defined

by the spread of a particular cultural phenomenon, such as a language. Individuals and groups can thus be located in multiple analytical "regions", depending on the type of action or interaction on which the identification of the cluster is based. From an ANT perspective, not only interactions between humans are relevant here, but also interactions with non-human "actants", which are part of the regional cluster's relations.

Spatial sociologist Martina Löw has argued that actions and interactions taking place in one geographic location can belong to different, territorially overlapping "regions" within a spatial network.[51] Thus, although the concept of the "region" developed here is decidedly not based on a physical-natural understanding of space, it should not be seen as completely detached from physical space. First of all, the interactions and actions which constitute space and "region" take place not only in certain locations within the relational space, but also in geographically determinable places.[52] Thus, the "region" acquires a geographical component, though this should not be understood as rigidly territorial, but rather in a permanent process of transformation. At the same time, it is crucial to be aware of how this geographic dimension can shape the interactions and actions which constitute the "region". Examples of this are interaction-limiting mountain ranges, interaction-promoting rivers and seas, or specific interactions and institutionalizations generated by the presence of natural resources such as coal deposits.[53] Conversely, a "region" defined by the spread of certain economic or cultural practices can have an impact on its environment, for example, through the usage of a specific kind of water management system, and thus create a geographical-natural "region".

## 2. The "region" in discourse

It is, however, not enough to think about "regions" exclusively as spatial concepts of analysis, but also as elements of discourse. The idea of a "region" or of a "regional" affiliation can influence historical processes regardless of whether this "regional" discourse is connected to a "region" as a spatial concept of analysis. In discourse, a "region" is in most cases collectively imagined and discursively constructed as a human community which is defined by certain shared characteristics and which can be assigned to a certain, relatively clearly delimited territory.[54] Moreover, to create a notion of belonging, the demarcation and construction of an "inside" and an "outside" of the "region" becomes the defining element of the "region" as a discursive formation.[55] Possible political uses of this kind of "regional" discourse have been mentioned above. Nonetheless, demarcations of a discursively constructed "region" remain generally weaker than in the case of concepts such as the nation-state. Moreover, the "region" as a discursive construction allows individuals and communities to identify simultaneously with several, functionally differentiated (but still discursively constructed) "regions". An individual may feel a sense of belonging to multiple different "regions" such as a cultural "region", economic "region", or political-administrative "region".[56] Lastly, a discursively constructed "region" has the tendency to dynamically reinforce itself as it is attributed more and more distinct characteristics, and "regional identity" thus becomes increasingly powerful.

## 3. The "institutionalizing region"

It is useful to distinguish between these two understandings of the region: The "region" as spatial concept of analysis (i.e. clusters identified by the researcher for hermeneutic purposes) and those "regions" imagined and discursively constructed by the historical actors themselves. By emphasizing the difference between these two understandings, the historicity, discursive construction, and imaginary nature of the latter become clearer and can be made subject of historical analysis.[57] Nonetheless, it can be even more fruitful to bring the two understandings together, as for example, the concept of "institutionalizing regions", pioneered by human geographer Anssi Paasi.

Paasi argued that, on closer inspection, the "region" as a spatial concept of analysis and "regional discourse" are hardly independent of each other, but enter into a complex reciprocal relationship and mutually influence each other. He has termed this process "institutionalization", a concept that has been revisited by a number of scholars from various disciplines. According to Prasenjit Duara, this process of institutionalization can take two forms. Firstly, the contingent emergence of several "regions" in relational space, largely overlapping in both relational and geographical space, can lead to the subsequent discursive construction of an imagined "region". This can be the case when this process of spatial reordering and the subsequent intensification of action and interaction in one part of relational space is felt by the affected communities in their lifeworld and thus leads to "regional" discourse. Secondly, the imagined "region" created in discourse can spill over into relational space as individuals and communities act and interact according to this imagined "region". The "region" as discourse formation thus has a structuring effect on relational space. Duara therefore distinguished "between the relatively unplanned or evolutionary emergence of an area of interaction and interdependence as a 'region', and the more active, often ideologically driven, political process of creating a 'region'."[58] In many cases, however, the process of "institutionalization" will be complex and include elements of both forms. Regardless of its specific configuration, the process of "institutionalization" means that the "regions" of relational space and the discursively constructed "region" adapt to each other, thus causing their mutual consolidation.[59]

Drawing on sociological perspectives concerned with the "production" of space, this process of institutionalization and its two elements are deeply connected to power relations. Pursuing questions such as how ideas of "regions" emerge in discourse, who promotes these ideas and why, what forces are behind the formation of an analytic "region", how social space is reordered by an institutionalizing "region", and what processes of inclusion and exclusion are involved are instructive ways of analyzing the workings and historical diffusion of power structures.[60]

## 4. The "region" in (global) history

Thinking about the "region" in relational space, "regional" discourse, and the institutionalization of "regions" can be fruitful for global history. The "region" can provide a

spatial concept to locate global phenomena and connections, and to study their impact on processes of spatial ordering. Jürgen Osterhammel argued that global history needs to think about "regions" since historical actions over long distances take place rather between "smaller" spatial units than nation-states. Thus, he defines "regions" in global history as "spaces of interaction, constituted by their density of traffic and migration, communication and trade."[61]

If the "region" is understood as a cluster of institutionalized modes of (inter)action or of a set thereof, it can be used as a framework to study the (global) interactions between these clusters and to analyze how these interactions between region-clusters change these clusters by introducing new modes of (inter)actions or by changing configurations of a specific cluster, leading to its consolidation or dissolution. In other words, global historians might ask how specific clusters change over time as a result of shifts in larger networks of relational space or their specific interconnections with other clusters. Consider, for example, a largely institutionalized coastal "region" with an agrarian hinterland and some coastal towns, integrated in a region-cluster of cultural, economic, and political interactions. When rising global demand for a particular commodity leads to the intensification of interactions of these coastal towns with communities outside of the region, this will restructure interactions and thus space within this region, thus causing its dissolution. This is just one way in which thinking of "regions" as spatial concepts of analysis can provide a framework for closely analyzing and spatially locating the effects of global or inter-regional processes or for modeling the spatial reordering caused by these processes.

The analysis of connections between "regions" should, however, not presuppose these "regions". Global historians should always ask whether the "regions" they identify have really existed before the interaction they are interested in had emerged. In many cases, "regions" are not only entangled in global interconnections with other "regions", but they are the "result" of those interconnections. For example, global historians might not only ask how the emerging transatlantic trade has affected the (economic) regions of the Atlantic coasts but also how the emerging trade has produced these (economic) regions. In the case of Matthias van Rossum's above-mentioned article on "regional" differences in slave-prices in the Western Indian Ocean,[62] this would mean not just presupposing the existence of "regions" with different respective functions, but rather to ask how the emergence of the slave trade created these "regions" in an interdependent process. It cannot be the task of global history to ask "how did the transmission of material culture and useful knowledge across regions of the world affect the economic and cultural developments in any one of these regions,"[63] without asking how "regions" are made and unmade by such transmissions.

Global processes and interactions, and thus the expertise of global historians, are not only important in respect to "regions" as spatial concepts of analysis. "Regional" discourse, too, can be influenced by the experience of global interactions or by global trends, which can encourage the emphasis of "regional" discourse vis-à-vis other spatial imaginaries such as the nation or provoke it as defensive reaction to the experience of globalization.

Moreover, processes of institutionalization are not understandable without paying attention to inter-regional and global factors since both “regions” in relational space and “regional” discourse are always connected to these factors.

An additional advantage of the “region” as a spatial concept of analysis is that this concept makes it necessary to select a specific kind of (inter)action which forms the region-cluster. This gives global history studies interested in networks or interactions of a specific kind the possibility to operate with the spatial concept “region” without assuming that a “region” relevant for one kind of (inter)action is necessarily also significant for various other kinds of (inter)action. For example, when Terje Tvedt analyzed the connection between industrialization and certain water-management systems in “regions” around the globe, it is a crucial distinction, whether the water-management systems in a certain, presupposed “region” are analyzed or whether the region is defined by the spread of a specific system.[64] A very similar thought is aptly expressed by Fa-ti Fan with reference to the global history of science:

> What may be meaningfully defined as a region depends on what a scholar aims to study. There isn’t one ‘East Asia’ ready to be discovered. There are only multiple regions superimposed on each other. The region of a vernacular tradition of science, technology, or medicine is likely different from that of an elite written tradition.[65]

Not trying to find a specific (inter)action of interest in a presumed “region”, but to seek the “regions” within the network of specific (inter)actions effectively prevents unintentional thinking with essentialized spaces. This does not mean, however, that a “region” in a specific network of (inter)actions is only relevant to this network. On the contrary, the specific (inter)actions in one “region” can affect other (inter)actions and thus lead to the accumulation of functional regions mentioned above. In the example of the slave trade in the Western Indian Ocean, this means asking whether the regions of the slave trade network have led to intensification, densification, or re-arrangement of other kinds of (inter)actions and thus were the starting point for the accumulation of clusters, “regional” discourse, and ultimately processes of regional institutionalization or just added a layer to preexisting institutionalized regions.

The research questions associated with “regions” and their relationship to global processes and interconnections are many and varied. “Regions” might be a useful spatial framework for analyzing and explaining processes of spatial (re)ordering, territorialization, and de-territorialization in a globally interconnected world. Moreover, re-thinking the “region” in the way outlined here is also a way to address the problems of the current use of the “region” pointed out above:

1. “Regions” as spatial concepts of analysis cannot be understood as a specific spatial scale.[66] Spaces of very different size and nature can be understood as “regions” without creating confusion, since the use of the “region” as a spatial concept of analysis always makes it necessary to define which kind of (larger) network of (inter)actions the “region” is part of.

2. By explicitly conceptualizing the “region”, the use of the “region” as fallback term almost ruled out, while the term can still be flexibly used.

3. Similarly, operating with essentialized container-spaces, or spatial units taken from (historical) discourse is likely to be avoided. This also makes it possible to emphasis a person’s or community’s affiliation to multiple “regions” and thus to include these multiple affiliations and “regional” overlaps in the analysis.

4. The “region” as spatial concept of analysis also avoids Eurocentric spatial categories and provides a spatial framework that is globally applicable. This makes it even more attractive to global history. Moreover, the notion of “institutionalizing regions” as a fusion of both the “region” as spatial concept of analysis and the examination of “regional” discourse, always includes a critical perspective on discourse and power relations.

## Concluding Suggestions

The preceding thoughts on how the “region” might be conceptualized for historical research have shown that a methodologically and theoretically informed concept of the “region” can be rather abstract and complex. Its implementation in actual research will undoubtedly be challenging. For example, a lack of sources may mean that large parts of (inter)actions cannot be captured, making it difficult to identify “region”-forming clusters. For this reason, I would like to end this essay with a few brief observations drawn from the preceding sections that could be first steps on the path to a more analytically valuable use of the “region” in (global) historical research.

First of all, inconsiderate and vague use of the term “region” should be avoided, as this opens the door to ambiguous and implicitly essentialist understandings of space. Instead, it should always be explicitly stated which concept of the “region” is being referred to, and in what functional and relational-spatial relations the referred “region” stands. This considerate dealing with the “region” is especially important since our ideas of specific regions are always shaped by past and present spatial discourse. Consequently, more research on the discursive formation of “regions”, how these discursive formations shape our and past understandings of space, i.e. mental maps, and the power relations involved in the emergence of “regions” would be of great use.

On a more general level, an awareness of the complexity of the structures of relational space should always stand at the beginning of any spatially bounded investigation, so that in the best case, based on a theoretically grounded concept, an analytically meaningful space of investigation can be found for one’s own research interest, thus eliminating the risk of falling back on historically conditioned or essentialist spatial constructs.[67] In research praxis, this could mean that the identification of any given “region” is preceded by an initial study of the sources, thus offering an additional safeguard against working from the outset with seemingly given spatial entities. The organization of

history as an academic discipline will continue to be based on historically contingent spatial units. This does not mean, however, that historians must simply accept these constructed spaces. They can use them as starting points for finding their own "regions" of analytical interest. This may require teamwork and make necessary the pooling of expertise, such as language skills. Overcoming the discipline's widespread skepticism of teamwork can thus be a first step toward new concepts of space.[68] This teamwork must also bridge over disciplinary divides. As the previous thoughts have shown, re-thinking the region for the purpose of (global) history works best if insights on the nature of space and possible conceptualization of the "region" from other disciplines are not only taken into account, but put in active dialogue with the research interests of (global) history. In this way, the "region" can become a useful instrument for productively deal with space in historical research.

## Notes

[1] Sebastian Conrad, *Globalgeschichte: Eine Einführung* (München: C.H. Beck, 2013), 91. Here translated by Leon Julius Biela.

[2] Conrad, *Globalgeschichte*, 91-92.

[3] On "transregional" approaches, see Matthias Middell, "Transregional Studies. A New Approach to Global Processes," in T*he Routledge Handbook of Transregional Studies*, ed. Matthias Middell (Abingdon: Routledge 2019), 1-16; Matthias Middell, "Are Transregional Studies the Future of Area Studies?," in *Area Studies at the Crossroads. Knowledge Production after the Mobility Turn*, eds. Katja Mielke and Anna-Katharina Hornidge (New York: Palgrave, 2017), 289-308.

[4] On the "region" in human geography, see Krisztina Varró and Arnoud Lagendijk, "Conceptualizing the Region – In What Sense Relational?," *Regional Studies* 47, no. 1 (2013): 18-28; John Agnew, "Evolution of the regional concept," in *Handbook on the Geographies of Regions and Territories, eds. Anssi Paasi, John Harrison and Martin Jones* (Chaltenham: Edward Elgar, 2018), 23-33.

[5] Antoine Sylvain Bailly, "The Region. A Basic Concept for Understanding Local Areas and Global Systems," *Cybergeo* 42 (1998): 2.

[6] Middell, "Are Transregional Studies," 301; Antje Schlottmann, "Rekonstruktion alltäglicher Raumkonstruktionen. Eine Schnittstelle von Sozialgeographie und Geschichtswissenschaft?," in *Ortsgespräche. Raum und Kommunikation im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert*, eds. Alexander Geppert, Uffa Jensen and Jörn Weinhold (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2005), 130; Farish Noor, *The Discursive Construction of Southeast Asia in 19th Century Colonial-Capitalist Discourse* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2014), 16.

[7] Martina Steber, "Region," European History Online, published February 16, 2022, accessed February 16, 2023, http://www.ieg-ego.eu/steberm-2012-en.

[8] Marcus Gräser, "Die Bedeutung der 'Region' in der Globalgeschichte," *Geschichte und Region/ Storia e regione* 30, no. 1 (2021): 239.

[9] "Aims and Scope," Regional Studies, accessed February 16, 2023, https://www.tandfonline.com/action/journalInformation?show=aimsScope&journalCode=cres20.

[10] For a critical review of the German "regional" tradition of historiography, see Johannes Paulmann, "Regionen und Welten. Arenen und Akteure regionaler Weltbeziehungen seit dem 19. Jahrhundert," *Historische Zeitschrift* 296 (2013): 661-664.

[11] Andrea Komlosy, *Globalgeschichte. Methoden und Theorien* (Vienna: Böhlau, 2011), 168-173.

[12] On "world regions", see also Birgit Schäbler, "Das Studium der Weltregionen (Area Studies) zwischen Fachdisziplinen und der Öffnung zum Globalen," in *Area Studies und die Welt*, ed. Birgit Schäbler (Wien: Mandelbaum, 2007), 12; Christian Büschges, "Global History and the History of World Regions. An Inventory of German-Language Research," *Comparativ* 29, no. 2 (2019): 7-19

[13] Stefan Troebst, "'Historical Meso-Region': A Concept in Cultural Studies and Historiography," European History Online, published March 6, 2023, accessed February 16, 2023, http://www.ieg-ego.eu/troebsts-2010-en; Komlosy, *Globalgeschichte*, 173-175.

[14] Troebst, "Historical Meso-Region."

[15] Most notably is the work by Fernand Braudel, see his *La méditerranée et le monde méditerranéen à l'époque de Philippe II* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1949).

[16] Lucien Febvre, *A Geographical Introduction into history*, trans. G. Mountford and J.H. Paxton (London: Kegal Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., 1925), 171–172.

[17] Conrad, *Globalgeschichte*, 209, 211.

[18] Gräser, "Die Bedeutung," 238.

[19] Dominic Sachsenmaier, "Global history and critiques of western perspectives," *Comparative Education* 42, no. 3 (2006): 458.

[20] Sachsenmaier, "Global history," 462.

[21] Matthias van Rossum, "Towards a global perspective on early modern slave trade: prices of the enslaved in the Indian Ocean, Indonesian Archipelago and Atlantic World," *Journal of Global History* 17, no. 1 (2022): 43, 47, 52.

[22] Paul Kohlenberg and Nadine Godehardt, "Introduction," in *The Multidimensionality of Regions in World Politics*, eds. Paul Kohlenberg and Nadine Godehardt (Abingdon: Routledge, 2021), 5-6.

[23] Craig Lockard, *Societies, Networks, and Transitions: A Global History* (Boston: Cengage, 2021), 61, 62, 446, 818.

[24] Lockard, *Societies*, 405.

[25] Mariola Espinoza, "Globalizing the History of Disease, Medicine, and Public Health in Latin America," *Isis* 104, no. 4 (2013): 798-806.

[26] Paul Kramer, "Power and Connection: Imperial Histories of the United States in the World," *The American Historical Review* 116, no. 5 (2011): 1358.

[27] Anssi Paasi, "From Bounded Spaces to Relational Social Constructs. Conceptualisation of the Region in Geography," in *The Multidimensionality of Regions in World Politics*, eds. Paul Kohlenberg and Nadine Godehardt (Abingdon: Routledge, 2021), 19.

[28] Susanne Rau, *History, Space, and Place*, trans. Michael Taylor (London: Routledge, 2019), 3.

[29] Otto Dann, "Die Region als Gegenstand der Geschichtswissenschaft," *Archiv für Sozialgeschichte* 23 (1983): 655-656.

[30] Katja Mielke and Anna-Katharina Hornidge, "Introduction. Knowledge Production, Area Studies and

the Mobility Turn," in *Area Studies at the Crossroads. Knowledge Production after the Mobility Turn,* eds. Katja Mielke and Anna-Katharina Hornidge (New York: Palgrave, 2017), 3-26.

[31] See James Renton, "Changing Languages of Empire and the Orient: Britain and the Invention of the Middle East, 1917–1918," *The Historical Journal* 50, no. 3 (2007): 645–667; Noor, *The Discursive Construction*, 13-16. See also Martin Lewis and Kären Wigen, *The Myth of Continents. A Critique of Metageography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

[32] Frithjof Benjamin Schenk, "Mental Maps," European History Online, published August 7, 2013, accessed February 16, 2023, http://www.ieg-ego.eu/schenkf-2013-en; Noor, *The Discursive Construction*, 206; Paasi, "From Bounded Spaces," 15-16.

[33] Maxine Berg, "Global history: approaches and new directions," in *Writing the History of the Global. Challenges for the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Maxine Berg (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 3.

[34] Dominic Sachsenmaier, *Global Perspectives on Global History. Theories and Approaches in a Connected World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 50.

[35] John Straussberger, "Entangled political histories of twentieth-century West Africa: The case of Guinean exile networks," *Journal of Global History* 17, no. 3 (2022): 477-495.

[36] For example, on the Qing Empire's understanding of provinces, see Jürgen Osterhammel, *Die Verwandlung der Welt. Eine Geschichte des 19. Jahrhunderts* (München: C.H. Beck, 2010), 150-154.

[37] Paasi, "From Bounded Spaces," 25.

[38] Anssi Paasi, "The Region, Identity, and Power," *Procedia Social and Behavioral Sciences* 14 (2011): 9-16.

[39] Martina Löw, *Raumsoziologie* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 2001), 130-151. See also Eric Vanhaute, "Global and Regional Comparisons. The Great Divergence Debate and Europe," in *The Routledge Handbook of Transregional Studies*, ed. Matthias Middell (Abingdon: Routledge 2019), 192-193; Varró and Lagendijk, "Conzeptualizing the Region," 19-21; Paasi, "From Bounded Spaces," 20.

[40] Henri Lefebvre, *La production de l'espace* (Paris: Anthropos, 1974); Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social. An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

[41] See Christoph Antweiler, "Area Studies @ Southeast Asia. Alternative Areas versus Alternatives to Areas," in *Area Studies at the Crossroads. Knowledge Production after the Mobility Turn*, eds. Katja Mielke and Anna-Katharina Hornidge (New York: Palgrave, 2017), 71; Gräser, "Die Bedeutung," 239.

[42] Or, in the words of Eric Vanhaute, "Within given region, people share clusters of traits or connections that are different from those that they have with people beyond that region." See Vanhaute, "Global and Regional," 198.

[43] Anssi Paasi, "The Institutionalization of Regions: A Theoretical Framework for Understanding the Emergence of Regions and the Constitution of Regional Identity," *Fennia* 164, no. 1 (1986): 108.

[44] Bruno Latour, *Science in Action. How to Follow Scientists and Engineers through Society* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987).

[45] Antweiler, "Area Studies," 76.

[46] Varró and Lagendijk, "Conzeptualizing the Region," 23-24.

[47] Peter Schmitt-Egner, "The Concept of 'Region': Theoretical and Methodological Notes on its Reconstruction," *Journal of European Integration* 24, no. 3 (2002): 184-186.

[48] Varró and Lagendijk, "Conzeptualizing the Region," 23.

[49] Paasi, "The Institutionalization," 121; Paasi, "From Bounded Spaces," 19.

[50] Antweiler, "Area Studies," 67; Vanhaute, "Global and Regional," 197-198; Paasi, "The Institutionalization," 116.

[51] Martina Löw, "Vor Ort – im Raum. Ein Kommentar," *Zeitsprünge* 9, no. 3-4 (2005): 445-449.

[52] Schmitt-Egner, "The Concept," 181.

[53] Komlosy, *Globalgeschichte*, 168-169; Löw, *Raumsoziologie*, 131.

[54] Steber, "Region."

[55] Schmitt-Egner, "The Concept," 181; Paasi, "The Region," 12.

[56] Anssi Paasi, "The resurgence of the 'region' and 'regional identity': Theoretical perspectives and empirical observations on the regional dynamics in Europe," *Review of International Studies* 35, no. 1 (2009): 141.

[57] For a similar argument, see Schlottmann, "Rekonstruktionen," 132.

[58] Prasenjit Duara, "Asia Redux: Conceptualizing a Region for Our Times," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 69, no. 4 (2010): 963-983.

[59] Paasi, "The Institutionalization," 121.

[60] Paasi, "The Region."

[61] Osterhammel, *Die Verwandlung*, 156

[62] Van Rossum, "Towards."

[63] Berg, "Global History," 9.

[64] Terje Tvedt, "Why England and not China and India? Water systems and the history of the Industrial Revolution," *Journal of Global History* 5 (2010): 29-50.

[65] Fa-ti Fan, "The Global Turn in the History of Science," *East Asian Science, Technology and Society: An International Journal* 6 (2012): 256.

[66] For example, Richard Drayton and David Motadel, "Discussion: the futures of global history," *Journal of Global History* 13 (2018): 13.

[67] Vanhaute, "Global and Regional," 201.

[68] For a similar point, see Margrit Pernau and Helge Jordheim, "Global history meets area studies. Ein Werkstattbericht," H-Soz-Kult, published November 14, 2017, accessed February 16, 2023, www.hsozkult.de/debate/id/diskussionen-4229.

# II.

# Research Articles

# Rowing as a Site of Cross-Cultural Encounters: South-Asian Students at Oxbridge, 1870s-1940s

By

Loïc Folton

## Abstract

*This article focuses on the social and imperial history of South-Asian students competing in rowing at Oxford and Cambridge from the 1870s to the 1940s. I argue that rowing was a site of colonial encounters and student integration between white, British and racialised, South-Asian men through normative discourses based on such social criteria as race, gender and class. This inquiry aims to embed Oxbridge and their students further within the British Empire. I first suggest a historiographical account of rowing through the lens of social and Empire history since the 1980s. I then analyse Oxbridge visual and material culture on rowing as early as the 1870s. I finally study rowing-related, bodily encounters, focusing on students at Balliol College, Oxford between 1889 and 1949. By cross-referencing a diversity of sources, such as student periodicals, minutes books and photographs, I wish to comprehend rowing at the level of individuals in the very making of the British Empire.*

## About the author

Loïc Folton is a MA research student in Transnational History at École Normale Supérieure, Paris (ENS-PSL). He is currently a research student at the University of Cambridge. His work focuses on South-Asian students who attended Oxford and Cambridge between the 1870s and the late 1940s.

## Introduction

> *No Chinese has ever steered either the Oxford or Cambridge boats, although they have adorned both Universities as students. Japs are also known at our great English Universities, but I never remember any of them steering a boat on Cam or Isis. Indian coxswains and oarsmen are common enough.*[1]

On 30 April 1904, a journalist for *The Evening News*, a daily Sydney-based newspaper, reported on the possibility for Cornell University's rowing team to compete in the Henley Royal Regatta in England that same year. Amongst the coxswains "anxious to steer the eight" from that university, he mentioned student Sas-ke-Sze, a name which reminded them that "Yale had a Chinese coxswain of a sort in the early 'eighties'."[2] Along the same lines, he underlined that some foreign nationalities were more represented than others as rowers and coxswains at Oxford and Cambridge. While taking a pro-Empire and state-centred stance, he sided with "our great English Universities," whose populations included students defined by non-English nationalities. He further stated that access to university rowing followed a regional dividing line: East-Asian students as opposed to South-Asian students, who were apparently known for rowing in and steering Oxbridge[3] boats. What can the joint study of rowing and South-Asian students at Oxbridge reveal about cross-cultural encounters at the heart of Empire?

To answer the question, we must conflate two historical fields that have remained impervious to each other since the 1980s — the history of rowing and the history of South-Asian students in the metropole. The partition can be accounted for by the fact that these two fields have been invested by sociologically different groups of historians. On the one hand, memoirs and biographies of rowers, and historical accounts of rowing clubs have been gathered with little epistemological reflection since the 1930s.[4] From the 1980s, however, rowing has also been studied by white, British historians who have abided by a materialist historiography with a focus on social class. In particular, the amateurism-versus-professionalism debates that took place in Great Britain in the 19th century have been extensively analysed.[5] While Eric Dalladay and Neil Wigglesworth depicted a binary opposition between two homogeneous social groups — the elites *vis-à-vis* the bottom of the social ladder —,[6] Win Hayes later showed that these debates were rather spaces where two distinct approaches of rowing were negotiated, which involved a diversity of actors and groups with their own agendas and strategies.[7] This social, methodological-nationalist history of rowing has also included women,[8] most recently through a prosopographical approach by Lisa Taylor.[9] On the other hand, scholarship from the 1980s has sought to remedy what has been perceived as the deliberate exclusion of minorities from "British" history.[10] As scholars began to draw narratives for specific ethnic groups, Kusoom Vadgama, Rozina Visram and Michael Fisher played a key role in opening up the field of study relating to South-Asian migrants in the metropole.[11] Following Michael Fisher who argued that "counterflows to colonialism"[12] were not consequences of British rule but existed alongside it, some historians have further challenged the binary tendencies of historiography by giving voice to those who had been denied one. Amongst them, Antoinette Burton, Shompa Lahiri

and Sumita Mukherjee have accounted for South-Asian students.[13] In this subfield, only a few analyses have focused on sport.

The disconnect between these two fields of research has hindered the historicisation of rowing as a white, imperial and colonial regime in the metropole as from the late 19th century. In fact, "[issues] surrounding 'race', racism and ethnicity remain largely unexplored"[14] in the scholarly literature on rowing, thus leaving aside what critical race theory could bring to the study of bodily interactions in an imperial context. And yet, South-Asian students "were intwined closely in the fabric of British schools, universities, and society and politics at large."[15] As such, they took part in sports that worked as class-based and gendered social regimes within metropolitan, centuries-old institutions like public schools and Oxbridge. As colonial students that "were more often than not mobile—literally, on the move,"[16] they were faced with anxieties, concerns and controls, at a time when student flows between Great Britain and South Asia were subjected to imperial framing.[17]

I argue that Oxbridge rowing was a site of colonial encounters and student integration between white and racialised men, through normative and performative discourses based on such social criteria as race, gender and class. In other words, it was an institution in and through which South-Asian individuals were racialised, that is, categorised and objectified as racially different, if not inferior, by white students.[18] As such, rowing as an elite, masculine and white regime could re-enact and redefine the contours of colonial difference at the very heart of Empire. The article, however, does not include London, which has held most scholarly attention when it comes to the South-Asian student diaspora and their politicisation.[19] Envisaging Oxbridge rowing as a colonial regime provides an opportunity to "focus on bodies as a means of accessing the colonial encounters in world history,"[20] while it answers Frederick Cooper's call to go beyond the opposition between the coloniser and the colonised as socially effective categories.[21]

To support my argument, I wish to provide a comprehensive account of Oxbridge rowing as a site of cross-cultural encounters. Most of the examples I use throughout the article were gathered from a database I made of South-Asian students who were admitted to Balliol College, Oxford between 1877 and 1948. First, I show how available scholarly literature can be used to sketch a social and imperial history of Oxbridge rowing. I also tackle the issue of Oxbridge material and visual culture around rowing and South-Asian students as early as the 1870s. To do so, I study how British, white coaches and students orientalised and racialised their South-Asian counterparts, be it in clubs' minutes books or student journals which acted as normative and performative discourses.[22] Then, I illustrate how sport and crew photographs served to perform a college *esprit de corps* while also re-enacting a male-only, class-based *entre-soi*. These rituals were part of the habitus that students shared as male college members. The photographs I scrutinise relate to South-Asian students at Balliol College, Oxford.[23] Last, I address how colonial and metropolitan teenagerhood and early-adulthood conditioned South-Asian individuals' access to Oxbridge rowing as members of the imperial elite.

## Historiography: Towards an Imperial History of Oxbridge Rowing

Rather descriptive than analytical until the mid-1980s, publications related to rowing often were pro-colonial depictions of a so-called unifying, imperial modernity. In 1957 journalist and writer Hylton Cleaver said of the Empire Games that "the Government and peoples of these islands owe thanks" as they were, "without question, of untold value in cementing the friendship between the Mother Country, the Dominions and Colonies."[24] In actual fact, however, colonial rowers were not invited to these events: the numerous lists and rankings he compiled indicate that crews represented only the predominantly British dominions and the metropole; and the Games were held exclusively in these territories between 1930 and 1958. Rowing at the level of Empire thus seems to have been a matter of white men, or even more so of Oxbridge-trained imperialists.

In fact, rowing proved to be a tool at the service of the so-called civilising mission. Charles Hose, a governor resident in Sarawak, Borneo who studied at Jesus College, Cambridge in the early 1880s, wanted to "bring *Pax Britannica* to Baram" valley through "an annual race between the war canoes of all the villages" to replicate "a sort of local Henley" royal regatta. Rowing, he thought, was a means of uplifting "tribes" in territories under British control.[25] Although it is hard to tell whether this civilising rhetoric was as sincere as it appears, historian James Mangan noted that Oxbridge-trained administrators used such sports as rowing to influence educational and recreational practices and habits at the level of Empire.[26] Oxbridge material culture explicitly linked rowing and Empire in India as well. In 1890, Somerville College bought a rowing boat "in commemoration of Indian students" then in residence, namely Cornelia Sorabji (1889–1894) and Princesses Bamba (1890–1895) and Catherine (1890–1894) Duleep Singh. It was accordingly named "the 'Urmila,' the Sanskrit name for the sacred Lotus Flower" which typically referred to India. The college may have intended to honour these students with a British-Indian boat to embody the intercultural character of the College: on each blade, the name was "inscribed…in English and in Gujerati characters."[27] Using these students' presence as a pretext, Oxbridge colleges could symbolically reassert India's belonging to Empire at its very heart through rowing boats.

Some historians have shown the links between Empire and rowing in academic contexts, with an emphasis on how rowing contributed to the making of a national and imperial ethos from the 1850s — one of service to "God, country, and good."[28] James Mangan studied the ideological transformations that British public schools underwent from the mid-19th century onward. In these fee-paying schools that were public as opposed to private tutoring in the domestic sphere, athleticism, he argued, served to inculcate "physical and moral courage, loyalty and co-operation, the capacity to act fairly and take defeat well, the ability to both command and obey."[29] Pain and brutality were key in the process.[30] It differentiated boys on grounds of virtue, manliness and character — a tryptic that aristocratic and upper-class families saw as essential for national and imperial leadership.[31] James Mangan did not specify, however, what roles rowing in particular played

within this athleticism ideology. Paul Deslandes studied the place of rowing in the same period at Oxbridge in more depth.[32] During this period, students mainly came from public schools.[33] As social rituals that provided entertainment and served to perform “the sexual, social, and cultural power of men,”[34] boat races were central to undergraduate culture in both universities. Oxbridge rowing, he argued, also had a racial and imperial dimension: “British prowess in rowing” could equate to “prowess in formulating imperial policy and administering colonial possessions,” and white rowers were “exemplars of British national and racial greatness.”[35] Beyond considerations of class, gender, sexuality and nationality, it seems that rowing served to inculcate racial hierarchies that were required for future Oxbridge-trained administrators. Having said this, I argue that the author failed to show how rowing partook in shaping racial identities. While he did analyse the making of South-Asian students as a social group within Oxbridge — one that accounted for up to three percent of the global student population between 1870 and 1920[36] —, he did not include these students in his study of rowing.

And yet, although colonial and South-Asian students in particular often were “merely names on the registers of their universities,”[37] they also have left traces of their rowing practices at Oxbridge. Their presence was signified in the rowing-related material culture. The latter included blade-shaped trophies that crews won during competitions, and which displayed the names of the rowers, the coxswain and the coach, as well as a list of the other boats’ colleges that were “bumped.” In 1933, such a trophy was awarded to Balliol College Boat Club’s best crew, the coxswain of whom was Devadaya Devakul, a student from Siam.[38] Furthermore, sports were considered as core components of higher education by college authorities at Oxbridge, and as such some colleges mentioned them in admissions registers. To do so, those in charge of updating the admissions registers over the years indicated the sports that students practiced. Balliol College’s admissions records, for instance, often updated and reissued, systematically listed the sports each student was involved in. Rowing, it appears, was the sport South-Asian students participated in the most between 1889 and 1949.[39] While about half of the ninety-seven South-Asian students practiced at least one sport during their studies at Balliol College, nine of them were rowers or coxswains over that period. Sports like rowing at Oxbridge colleges, insofar as they were recorded, sometimes systematically, were institutional priorities.

## Oxbridge Rowing and the “Orientalisation” of South-Asian Others

However, while Oxbridge material culture on rowing acknowledged the very presence of colonial students from South Asia, they were nowhere to be found in student periodicals related to rowing. The one exception I have found so far is a caricature and an article published in *The Moslem in Cambridge* in 1870. Prophesying over the arrival of non-white, non-Christian students “twenty short years”[40] ahead, this three-issue journal (1870–1871) was used to denounce national, racial, religious and gender diversity as a threat to the British character of Cambridge.[41] The first issue portrayed a cosmopolitan Cambridge crew that would win a fictional interuniversity regatta against an Oxford team despite their

blatant incompetence.[42] As international universities, the author anonymously argued, Oxbridge were supposedly to lose their vitality by 1890 owing to foreign and colonial students. However, the first Indian student to attend one of the two universities did so in Oxford in 1871, after the three issues were out. In other words, the journal does not so much tell us about bodily contacts as about the prejudice some British students had over their fantasised, South-Asian counterparts.

**Figure 1.** H.S., "The University Boat, 1890," *The Moslem in Cambridge*, November 1870, 5, St John's College Library, Cambridge. Reproduced by permission of the Master and Fellows of St John's College, Cambridge.

The depicted characters can barely row, if at all. No. 1 (from the right, i.e., the front of the boat), "Whiski-Toddi (The Great War Eagle) (Lake Hurron)," is holding a tomahawk and just standing; no. 3, "Nicolas Drinkoritch (Wallachia)," is canoeing, literally rowing backwards. The other racialised characters struggle to row too, like no. 7, "Brahmin Verrypoor (Delhi),"[43] whose name essentialised the character as an Indian miserable mystic. Likewise, the white characters, portrayed through national clichés, are not shown rowing: no. 5, "Jonathan Gawky (New York City)," long and thin as if to show his protestant faith, is smoking a cigar and is sitting cross-legged; no. 4, "Hans Beerymann (Heidelberg)" is said to have "absolutely refused to confine himself to four gallons of beer per diem."[44] For these two characters, then, rowing is a leisure activity. The caricature thereby reasserted what Oxbridge rowing should be: a modern sport, that is, collective, competitive and serious, rather than individual, entertaining and disorganised — white and British rather than multiracial and plurinational.

To further the idea that rowing was an essentially modern and therefore British sport, the author depicted the crew and the boat itself to link foreignness and the "Orient" with the past and tradition. The British athlete is set in opposition to white and racialised foreigners, as none of them are wearing sportswear but stereotypical clothing on religious and national bases. In technical terms, too, the boat is quite unlike the boats that were typically used at that time: it is made of wood and looks very heavy, and boats made of planks nailed together may not have existed anymore by 1870,[45] especially not in the wealthy rowing clubs of Oxbridge. The exotic aesthetics of the boat, with animals depicted on the stern and bow, also contributes to its old-fashioned, or even archaic look.

Reasserting the white and British character of Oxbridge rowing thus relied on the dualism between modernity and tradition — practices and discourses that "orientalised" the "Orient"[46] through virtual students as a way of remedying some British students' anxieties.

In contrast to other foreign students, what was specific about the "orientalisation" of South-Asian students through rowing was the lens through which they were perceived. In this perspective, the comments that the coaches recorded in the boat clubs' minutes books tell us about an orientalist "episteme,"[47] the frameworks and patterns of thought that conditioned how they were perceived and categorised. One way to orientalise South-Asian students was to associate them with a so-called innate violence that interfered with rowing performance. On the occasion of the 1902 Torpids,[48] the coach of Balliol College Boat Club at Oxford commented on a crew that, he thought, had "proved a great disappointment this year." He clearly attributed the boat's defeat to Bhojrajji Bhagvatsinhjee Jareja, heir apparent to Gondal State and student at Balliol College from 1901 to 1903: "instead of imitating the good example" of "A. K. Graham at stroke and F. S. Kelly at 6," the rest of the crew took Bhojrajji "as a model and became infected with his 'oriental violence'."[49] As he failed to restrain what the coach attributed to an inherent violence, he supposedly contaminated the whole crew, which in turn prevented them from following a distinctive rule of rowing — the synchronicity of rowers. His so-called "Oriental" descent was to blame for disrupting rowing as a team sport. The orientalisation that the coach subjected the student to is even more striking that Bojarjii attended Eton public school before Balliol College. It reveals that coaches could orientalise South-Asian students, and even those who had been involved in white imperial elites in the metropole early in their lives.

While rowing was a site of orientalisation of South-Asian students, even of those who were arguably more "anglicised" due to their previous education, it also served to define, if not essentialise them racially speaking. For instance, Abdul Ali Khan, a student from Peshawar who attended Balliol College from 1946 to 1949, was described by his coach in the words of warrior virility and homoerotism. The coach emphasised his so-called perseverance, in a discourse akin to that of the military. About a race that took place on 3 December 1947, he wrote that "[Abdul] has [...] the 'hooded and merciless' eyes of a Pathan; considering which advantages he ought to have worked very much harder during training."[50] This shows the prevalence of a colonial imaginary that clearly used such categories as "Pathans," which was one of the "martial races," a colonial classification based on ethnicity and caste that the British government established after the Sepoys rebellion (1857) to discriminate between peoples who were considered innately made for warfare and those who were not.[51] By essentialising him through a colonial and imperial rhetoric that relied on gender, ethnic and racial clichés, the coach also reinforced hierarchies that he thought there should be between them — a mature coach *vis-à-vis* a younger rower, a white officer *vis-à-vis* a soldier of "martial race." At the same time, the hierarchies he asserted had a homoerotic quality: Abdul, he wrote, had "a massive and beautifully muscled body."[52] The very racialisation that the coach subjected the student to thus proved to fuel his admiration or even exaltation for the male body.

While Oxbridge rowing as a white field of discourse could serve to re-enact colonial otherness, coaches' comments were not always limited to essentialising South-Asian students. Devadaya Devakul, who attended Balliol College, Oxford from 1932, was believed to have the capacities to progress as a coxswain: he was described as "a promising Siamese, with very good hands and boat sense. He must learn how to use his voice, and develop confidence. If he does this he may cox the 'varsity in time."[53] Nationality-based identification did not determine his actual skills as a coxswain once and for all. Usually, comments about self-confidence were made about crews in general and not about specific individuals. When commenting on the crew Ali Abdul Khan was a member of in 1947, the coach noted that "their lack of confidence in others turned out to be a lack of confidence in themselves."[54] Designating a particular student as lacking confidence meant that coaches could, as in Devadaya Devakul's case, envisage rowing as a means to overcome so-called limits that they attributed to a student of South-Asian national descent, and to develop individual abilities. In other words, I may argue, it actualised what Ronald Inden referred to as a "contradictory mixture of societalism…and individualism"[55] that surrounded individuals from India and South Asia at large. While Oxbridge rowing provided a frame in which South-Asian students were reduced to social groups as if they were not individuals, it also reasserted a liberal idea of individuals through the idea that only individual efforts could pay off. In this perspective, the coach may have claimed that rowing provided South-Asian students with a solution for becoming proper individuals, and thereby to set themselves free from the only form of identification they were supposedly capable of — so-called indigenous community belongings.

Through rowing, South-Asian students thus were specifically orientalised, that is, perceived and described as "hybrid imperial subjects":[56] while conveying a multi-faceted, colonial imaginary despite themselves, they were entwined in a metropolitan, homosocial university environment that essentialised them. In other words, Oxbridge rowing was a site of re-enactment of colonial discourses on South-Asian students. But beyond textual evidence, what can rowing-related photographs tell us of bodily encounters between British and South-Asian men?

## Crew Photographs: Performing College *Esprit de Corps*

Rowing as an Oxbridge sport was made up of a set of rituals, like crew photographs that would be taken after the main races of the academic year had taken place. Both Oxford and Cambridge have organised these rowing events as long-awaited milestones of the year. As early as 1827, Cambridge hosted a yearly rowing competition, which in 1887 turned into two separate regattas: Lent Bumps and May Bumps, held at the turn of March and mid-June respectively.[57] Their Oxford counterparts were (and remain to this day) the Torpids and Eights Week, around the same time of year.[58] These were bumping races where boats, starting one at a time, were supposed to catch up with those ahead. Paul Deslandes showed that these yearly races were one "arena" where "gender conflicts were enacted" at the turn of the 20th century.[59] South-Asian students, as members of colleges and rowing crews,

also took part in these events and were photographed accordingly. Therefore, I argue, crew photographs served to perform a college *esprit de corps* which included South-Asian students.

To start with, I wish to set aside the idea that crew photographs mirrored or re-enacted a racial hierarchy within Oxbridge colleges as imperial terrains. The main reason why this argument is unconvincing is because it would mean giving too much prominence to how we feel, and thus failing to go beyond what photographs as historical sources call for, that is, a more empirical approach. The 1934 Torpids crew, the coxswain of whom was Devadaya Devakul from Balliol College, provides a telling example of how the use of photographs can confuse historical thinking. As in typical crew photographs, the eight rowers are arranged following the shape of an upside pyramid while the coxswain is sitting cross-legged on the ground, between the legs of the stroke. Devadaya is sitting on a small piece of cardboard, folding his legs in his arms as would a child.

**Figure 2.** Crew photograph of the First Torpid, 1934, Archive Photograph Albums, Balliol College Archives, Oxford, ref. PHOT 36.56A. Reproduced by kind permission of the copyright holders and the Master and Fellows of Balliol College.

At first sight, we may get the feeling that the photograph oozes domination due to Devadaya's posture. In this perspective, the fact that he is framed by a white student above him could give the broader impression that he is belittled by the cohort of older-looking, white rowers that he had just coxed. But then, it would be only a small step from asserting that crew photographs acted as embedded captures of South-Asian bodies. However, to

conclude the argument at this stage would be misleading, as it fails to consider that, in the coach's words, Devadaya "must…develop confidence."[60] His posture, in other words, seems more to reflect a personality trait and his subsequent physical attitude within the crew, than to uncover a racialising scenographic apparatus. Cross-referencing the first-hand materials thus allows for a more nuanced and incarnated picture of the student's rowing experience, rather than confining it to racial and bodily domination.

Other crew photographs including South-Asian coxswains further suggest that their positions within the scenography were determined by their roles within crews rather than by their racial identities. Batuk Prabhashanker Pattani, who attended Downing College, Cambridge from 1905, was photographed with the crew he coxed, sitting cross-legged on a carpet.[61] Likewise, Fatehsing Sayajirao Gaekwar, Prince of Baroda and a Balliol student between 1901 and 1902, coxed a crew on the occasion of the 1902 Torpids and so sat on a carpet at the tip of the inverted pyramid, as most white coxswains would do.

**Figure 3.** Crew photograph of the First Torpid, 1902, Archive Photograph Albums, Balliol College Archives, Oxford, ref. PHOT 31.08A. Reproduced by kind permission of the copyright holders and the Master and Fellows of Balliol College.

The crew he was part of, as the photograph shows, also included a South-Asian rower, Bhojrajji Jareja, the same student who was described in the words of "oriental violence" by their coach. Interestingly, with his hands held behind his back and his legs straight, his presence is akin to that of a stereotypical British gentleman. Bhojrajji seems to perform a British persona through a rowing-related ritual. While the coach orientalised him through the topos of an infectious disease which supposedly caused the crew to fail, the student performed class belonging through a tradition attached to a typically British sport.

As opposed to minutes books, crew photographs depicting South-Asian students as coxswains *and* rowers thus did not serve to exclude or inferiorise on grounds of racial hierarchies. Both students conversely appear to integrate into the crew as a community of male student rowers, and to abide by the habitus that is attached to it. At the same time, crew photographs acted as spaces where South-Asian students reasserted their social positions, and moments when they could capture and record their kinship with white, male Oxbridge elites.

While race as a social parameter is not sufficient to understand the significance of crew photographs, and sometimes misleading if considered alone, it becomes more revealing when considered within a more comprehensive range of normative criteria along with class, gender and age. To further historicise rowing and the photographic tradition that is attached to it, I wish to show that college sport photographs in general were class traditions and homosocial rituals that included South-Asian students. Cricket, I argue, served to perpetuate a college *entre-soi* through intergenerational sociabilities, as "Past and Present" photographs revealed. They displayed then current and former students who gathered for cricket sessions at Balliol College almost every year. Photographs including South-Asian students as past and present members of the college were taken in 1898, 1900 and 1913.[62]

**Figure 4.** "Cricket, Past & Present," photograph, 1900, Archive Photograph Albums, Balliol College Archives, Oxford, ref. PHOT 22.08A. Reproduced by kind permission of the copyright holders and the Master and Fellows of Balliol College.

These photographs reveal more relaxed settings than those which prevailed in team photographs over the period studied in this article. For instance, the 1900 "Past and Present" meeting appears playful and slightly entertaining, as some players' postures

suggest. In particular, the postures of Frederick John De Saram, a student from Ceylon who practiced rowing, rugby and cricket throughout his Balliol years from 1894 to 1902, and of a British student of the same generation (i.e., in the centre, front row), clearly show that the occasion consisted not only in playing cricket but also in spending time idly. The dress code also proves to be more indulgent than usual, with men who are not uniformly dressed, and some who are not dressed in sportswear at all. It means that not everyone had gathered to play but to enjoy being together as former and current members of the college. These elements reveal that leisurely days accounted for moments and spaces where young and older students re-enacted the college's *entre-soi* through sports. Sport photographs captured a "form of comradeship" between different generations of students "of equal class and professional status,"[63] thus perpetuating a college-based sense of belonging during and after their student years.

While sport photographs as college traditions served to foster intergenerational *esprit de corps*, they did not imply the erasure of difference for South-Asian students. Quite the contrary, on the 1913 "Past and Present" photograph, Hardit Singh Malik, from Punjab, signified his Hindu faith by wearing a turban.[64] Students could assert their religious beliefs in other sports, too. Santockh Singh, who came from Punjab to study at Balliol College, likewise expressed his Hindu faith by posing with a turban in hockey and tennis team photographs, in 1924 and 1925 respectively.[65] These examples illustrate the "ethos and cosmopolitan nature of the college,"[66] and reveal that photographs as social scenes within the college provided South-Asian students with spaces where they could express and assert their difference.

Insofar as photographs of sport club members mirrored ritualised apparatuses, they captured and so re-enacted social dynamics in a homosocial and intergenerational *entre-soi*. Precisely, rowing as a college activity and tradition was a core component of the masculine sport culture that British public schools fostered in the imperial elite, which raises the issue of rowing to legitimise or even whiten individuals from a sociological point of view.

## Metropolitan Teenagerhood: Granting Access to Oxbridge Rowing

Rowing was not only a university sport, but it was also often a sport that British and colonial pupils in metropolitan public schools practiced, along with other sports. As such, the experiences of South-Asian individuals at Oxbridge must be envisaged in a more comprehensive way, one that situates rowing within their trajectories as colonial pupils *and* students. I wish to show how metropolitan teenagerhood and/or early-adulthood conditioned access to Oxbridge rowing, and to imperial male culture in general.

The database I gathered on Balliol College, Oxford shows that out of the nine South-Asian students who rowed between 1889 and 1949, seven were pupils in metropolitan public schools beforehand. The secondary schools they attended ranged from Harrow and Rugby to Eton College and Rockville School in Edinburgh — four of the most renowned and expensive schools in the United Kingdom at the turn of the 20th century. Most of them, it

appears, did not discover rowing in Oxbridge but as part of their secondary education in the metropole. As for the two other students who did row at Balliol College but did not attend a metropolitan school, they were pupils in British-inspired schools and universities in South Asia. John Frederick De Saram, who was admitted to Balliol College in 1894, first attended the Royal College in Colombo, a secondary-education school that was founded on the model of Eton College; it may also have been the first so-called "royal" college outside the British Isles in 1881.[67] Abdul Ali Khan, at Balliol College between 1946 and 1949, started higher education at the Islamia College, Peshawar. This university was a result of the Aligarh Movement, which reformer Sir Syed Ahmed Khan initiated at the end of the 19th century to push for a cultural, social and intellectual regeneration of Islam through western-based education.[68] As in British public schools and universities, sports there were at the core of academic training.[69] Therefore, so-called British sports were an integral component of secondary and higher education at the level of Empire.

South-Asian pupils and students reused their sport experiences, be it in South Asia or in the metropole, to get access to Oxbridge. In the letters of character that were required for admissions to Oxbridge colleges, sports in general, and rowing in particular were mentioned as proof of academic excellence and versatility. In the letters that were written in favour of Avinash Chander Chopra to Downing College, Cambridge in the early 1930s, one by Naud Lal Puri from the Central Bank of India stated that "Mr. Chopra has had a brilliant career in his school and is a good all-round sportsman. He is a good oarsman and excellent tennis player for his age. He belongs to a very well-known and highly respectable family of the Punjab."[70] A report card was also provided by the Rector of St. Xavier's College, Kolkata, his former higher-education institution.[71] Academic results, athletic commitments and family background thus were equally emphasised when it came to applications — taking part in so-called typically British sports was expected, if not required, for admission to Oxbridge. As such, South-Asian individuals could use rowing as an argument to try and be granted access to higher education in the metropole.

If most South-Asian students rowing at Oxbridge were educated in British-inspired schools and universities at the level of Empire, then it seems clear that their access to rowing depended on the networks and sociabilities they were entwined in as teenagers and young adults. In other words, teenagerhood and early-adulthood were moments when South-Asian individuals could secure access to rowing as a class-based, male-only regime. This statement could apply to British students as well. However, as I have showed, rowing remained a white regime, that is, one of the arenas where South-Asian students were racialised, despite their early entanglement in white imperial elites. The very re-enactment of colonial discourses about South-Asian students who learnt rowing in such academic contexts as metropolitan schools and universities and British-inspired ones in South Asia, shows the limits they were confronted with when it came to advancing in the world of Oxbridge rowing. While South-Asian pupils and students could fit into white gentleman milieus, and choose to adopt their habitus, they could not for all that become sociologically whitened through it.

## Conclusion

Rowing as a site of cross-cultural encounters was one arena where colonial discourse around South-Asian students was re-enacted at Oxford and Cambridge. As early as the 1870s, rowing was one of the tools that white British individuals used to orientalise colonial and indeed South-Asian students. Rowing was in this manner at the service of discourses that white students and coaches used to signify their anxieties about Oxbridge as a white, masculine, Christian and British institution. With this study of students' and coaches' attitudes in such cross-cultural, academic contexts as Oxbridge from the late 19th century onward, I have also provided a nuanced picture of South-Asian students' integration through rowing. Oxbridge rowing was not only a site of racial reactions, essentialisations and discriminations, but also a place where South-Asian students could reassert their positions within Oxbridge as a social space.

The examples that I have drawn from the database on Balliol College, Oxford reveal that rowing remained a class-based regime above all, even when white and racialised students were in the same crews. Not so much race as class seemed to determine the very access to Oxbridge rowing. It was part of a class habitus, one that was not instituted in and through higher education but from secondary education onward. Oxbridge rowing thus was a space where British and South-Asian students could meet as a class-based social group. It did not mean, however, that the contours of colonial difference between them would weaken or even disappear. Quite the contrary, Oxbridge rowing proved to be a site of constant orientalisation and racialisation of South-Asian others in the heart of Empire, from the 1870s to the 1940s.

To suggest further research on the imperial history of Oxbridge rowing that I have undertaken in this article, I would like to sketch a prosopography of two "Cambridge-returned,"[72] namely Jatindra Mohan Sengupta and Biren Mookerjee. In the mid-1920s, they both left Kolkata to attend Cambridge where they became friends. But rowing at Cambridge did not grant them access to urban rowing clubs in South Asia, as they were denied access to Calcutta Rowing Club which was "strictly racialist, that is, for whites only."[73] This club was founded as early as the 1870s, and was displaced several times until the late 1920s, when it was established along the artificial Dhakuria lake, Kolkata along with three other clubs. One of them was the Lake Club, Jatindra and Biren's "own club for Indians" which they founded in 1932. Bengalis accounted for most of its members, and "ladies…began rowing [there] in 1934."[74] Rowing, it appears, was used as an activist, if not anti-imperialist, tool. To grasp the political character of rowing at the level of Empire, a prosopography of Oxbridge-returned may prove to be a fertile area for historical research. It paves the way for analysing how they proactively (re)shaped urban geography of "colonial clubbability"[75] in South Asia.

# Notes

[1] "Rowing," *The Evening News*, April 30, 1904, 5, http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article113908954.

[2] *Ibid*.

[3] Oxbridge as a portmanteau of Oxford and Cambridge is relevant insofar as it referred to a common form of higher education in the two universities. Moreover, the ways in which British undergraduates perceived nation and Empire proved rather consistent across the universities. See Robert D. Anderson, *Universities and Elites in Britain since 1800* (Cambridge: Macmillan, 1992), 49.

[4] Freddie Brittain, *Oar, Scull and Rudder* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1930); Robert F. Herrick, *Red Top, Reminiscences of Harvard Rowing* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1939).

[5] Martin Johnes, "Great Britain," in *Routledge Companion to Sports History*, eds. Donna Pope and John Nauright (London: Routledge, 2010), 451.

[6] Eric Halladay, *Rowing in England: A Social History. The Amateur Debate* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990); Neil Wigglesworth, *The Social History of English Rowing* (London: Routledge, 1992).

[7] Win Hayes, "The Victorian Paradox. Sport for the Wealthy to Sport for the Masses: A Conflict of Class and Ideals," in *Paradoxe(s) victorien(s) / Victorian Paradox(es)*, ed. William Findlay (Tours: Presses Universitaires François-Rabelais, 2005), 141–156.

[8] Christopher Dodd, ed., "Rowing," in *Sport in Britain: A Social History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 276–307.

[9] Lisa Taylor, "The Women's Amateur Rowing Association 1923–1963: A Prosopographical Approach," *Sport in History* 38, no. 3 (2018): 307–330, https://doi.org/10.1080/17460263.2018.1488153.

[10] Peter Fryer, *Staying Power: The History of Black People in Britain* (London: Pluto Press, 1988), xi.

[11] Kusoom Vadgama, *India in Britain: The Indian Contribution to the British Way of Life* (London: Robert Royce, 1984); Rozina Visram, *Ayahs, Lascars and Princes: Indians in Britain, 1700-1947* (London: Pluto Press, 1986); Rozina Visram, *Asians in Britain: 400 Years of History* (London: Pluto Press, 2002); Michael Fischer, *Counterflows to Colonialism: Indian Travellers and Settlers in Britain, 1600–1857* (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2004).

[12] Fischer, *Counterflows to Colonialism*.

[13] Antoinette Burton, *At the Heart of Empire: Indians and the Colonial Encounter in Late-Victorian Britain* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); Shompa Lahiri, *Indians in Britain: Anglo-Indian Encounters, Race and Identities, 1880–1930* (London: Frank Cass, 2000); Sumita Mukherjee, *Nationalism, Education, and Migrant Identities: The England-Returned* (London: Routledge, 2010).

[14] Jayne Caudwell, "'Easy, Oar!': Rowing Reflections," *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health* 3, no. 2 (2011): 126, https://doi.org/10.1080/2159676X.2011.572179.

[15] Sumita Mukherjee, "Mobility, Race and the Politicisation of Indian Students in Britain before the Second World War," *History of Education* 51, no. 4 (February 2022): 565, https://doi.org/10.1080/0046760X.2021.2010815.

[16] Tony Ballantyne and Antoinette Burton, eds., *World Histories from Below: Disruption and Dissent, 1750 to the Present* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 5.

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# Caring for Algeria(ns): Care work, the EMSI, and colonisation in the Algerian War of Independence as told by woman care workers (1954-1962)

By

Quincy Mackay

## Abstract

*This essay explores the role of a little-studied institution, the* Équipes médico-sociales itinérantes *(Mobile Medico-Social Teams, EMSI), in the Algerian War of Independence (1954-1962). Run by the French army in their programme of* pacification*, the EMSI sent French and France-aligned women into rural villages across the Algerian territory, with the aim of making closer contact with these rural populations through medical aid and social engagement. Their aims were steeped in the colonial, proselytising language of the civilising mission, while the women carrying out the work in the field had their own nuanced and diverse motivations for engaging in this humanitarian work. Drawing on these women's own voices, this study examines the EMSI from the bottom up, giving a new perspective on care work and humanitarian engagement in colonial contexts.*

## About the author

Quincy Mackay received his BA from the University of Melbourne in 2018 and is currently completing his MA thesis at the Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin on this topic. His research interests are focused on the legacies and traces of colonialism in Europe and their impact on humanitarian work, identity, politics, and culture.

## Introduction: Care Work between Compassion and Colonisation

This essay explores the role played by France-aligned female care workers in the Algerian War of Independence. Looking at a small and little-studied care work organisation, the *Équipes médico-sociales itinérantes* (Mobile Medico-Social Teams, EMSI), I use a collection of autobiographies, personal accounts, photographs, and other ego documents to build a bottom-up perspective on these teams. Working in the French army's programme of *pacification*, the teams were sent into rural Algerian villages, referred to with the Arabic term *bled*, where their mission was to make contact with Muslim Algerian women. On the one hand, the EMSI women were motivated by compassion, wanting to build peace and to aid those hardest hit by the war. On the other hand, they were working with a French colonial army that was the source of that very hardship. This seemingly contradictory role, between compassion and colonisation, makes the EMSI a potent institution to build a more nuanced and critical approach to assessing humanitarian work in late-colonial contexts where motivations and allegiances are highly contested. By focusing on the perspectives of the women carrying out the work on the ground as opposed to the well-documented army position, this essay presents a novel interpretation of care work in this colonial context. It highlights the way individuals position their work in a wider narrative, the relationships that can be built with caring power, and how this work can dismantle or reproduce the more abstract, macro concepts of identity, development, and empire on a micro level.

The EMSI consisted of a diverse group of young women. They came from across the French empire, including metropolitan France, Algeria, and the wider Maghreb region. This reflects the wide and complex range of identities present in Algeria, with different degrees of "Frenchness" and "Algerianness" being performed.[1] Dressed in white blouses and wearing blue, white, and red pins, they embodied a host of colonial tropes, including earlier missionary work, narratives of development, hygiene and modernisation, and an essentialist view of care work as a women's activity. In both the propaganda-like promotion of the EMSI's work, and the EMSI women's own accounts, they are separated from other humanitarian work, colonising programmes, and army engagements undertaken during the war. This suggests that women were seen as uniquely able to build bridges between Christians and Muslims. The French army constructed this division as scuppering their vision of an *Algérie française* that they were violently trying to build under the threat of a looming independence.[2] I question to what extent this is true, suggesting that the EMSI's unique factor was rhetorical, and, thanks to the bottom-up perspective I have been able to build, that the teams' personal relationships with the people they were caring for built direct, human relationships that differ from the abstractions and categories used in the top-down perspective. This was key in the way EMSI women presented their work as just, even righteous, despite being part of a larger colonial programme that was in many ways the primary source of the suffering of the people they were caring for. Though they did not have as wide a picture of their work and context that we enjoy as historians, I show that there is a sense of this context throughout the reflections that these women provided on their work.

This article has five main sections. First, I lay out my methodology, including the archival sources I have used. Second, I sketch out the army's programme of *pacification* and the historical background of the EMSI's work. I then analyse the sources I've collected through three lenses. Gender is the main lens, playing a key role in how the EMSI women understood their work, the army's aims with the EMSI, and as a means to critically engage with this history. Development is also a key narrative in the EMSI's work, drawing on many colonial arguments of a civilising mission. Finally, I also focus on the human relationships that the EMSI members built with the people they were caring for, and how this influenced their work and reflections.

## Sources and Voices

This study has been enabled by archival visits to the Centre de *documentation historique sur l'Algérie* (CDHA) and *Archives nationales d'outre-mer* (ANOM) in Aix-en-Provence. Here, I was able to collect several personal accounts from former members of the EMSI, augmenting the already published accounts in the form of autobiographies and journal articles to create a new body of primary source material with which to study the EMSI.

As historian Ryme Seferdjeli has noted, very little is known about the women who joined the EMSI, making it difficult to "pin down their true motivations."[3] This stems from several structural and practical barriers to researching the EMSI. The underrepresentation of women in historical archives, the obscuring effect of married and maiden names, and the common practice of only referring to women by their given names all hindered my research. The well-established practice of writing histories "against the grain" helps overcome this, as I remain aware of the "biography of the archive."[4] The CDHA is an archive founded to preserve the history and memory of *Algérie française*, and their extensive and unique holdings include the private papers of several EMSI members. While not entirely unproblematic in its overt political mission, this collection in many ways enabled the bottom-up perspective I take here. Diaries, letters, official documentation, journals, and photographs from half a dozen former EMSI members give a vivid insight into the minds of the women who made up the EMSI.

From these records I compiled a list of known EMSI members, including when and where they were active. This enabled more targeted research in the larger ANOM. The EMSI's ad-hoc development story meant that documents relevant to the EMSI and their personnel were spread between different departmental dossiers, making searching for members by name a manual but fruitful process that uncovered the official records of several of these women. I also gained a top-down perspective, with the army's handbooks and directives on the EMSI's goals and missions clearly stating their intentions for the organisation, as well as letters showing debates between officials. Through this double-sided work between the two archives, I was able to put together a series of snapshots of the EMSI women. It is made up of vignettes, stories, and photographs that present a view of the day-to-day work of the EMSI, each a unique perspective located in a personal context, yet

still useful in a wider and comparative way. It also gave a picture of the professional environment in which the EMSI were working.[5]

This quotidian perspective on the EMSI, bottom-up in the sense that it is built out of the voices of "small" actors, is a useful point of comparison to the top-down history of how the army deployed care work in the Algerian War of Independence. It is of course not representative of the EMSI as a whole. It is a patchwork of different accounts that made it into these records by chance as much as anything else. Themes and common ground can be drawn out of this patchwork, but so can discrepancies. Similarly, these accounts cannot be removed from their context, as the narratives told by small actors are just as couched in constructed understandings of the world as those told by the big ones.[6] Therefore, it does not make sense to try and build an "EMSI perspective" to be placed in equal opposition to the army's top-down position. Any attempt to present such a comparison as balanced would be disingenuous, as the patchwork of EMSI voices lacks the homogeneity of the more coordinated official positions.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, in this colonial context archives are skewed towards white men and France-aligned people. This is a product of the archival practices of the era, but also of my own position as a historian working in European institutions. My linguistic, cultural, and spatial limits mean that source material in Arabic or in Algerian archives are not easily accessible to me, which excludes those voices from my research. This is particularly important to remember when trying to assess the effectiveness of the EMSI's work in terms of their reception, which is only visible to me through the obviously biased lens of the EMSI members' own reflections on this, and not the voices of the women they were caring for.

## "Pacifying" Algerians

Algeria has long held a potent place in the French imagination of its position in the world. Something of a borderlands between north and south, occident and orient, self and other, Algeria was at once the jewel in France's imperial crown, and an insurmountable expanse that hypnotised with its just-out-of-reach otherness. Occupying the other coast of the Mediterranean, Algeria was oriental in the very sense meant by Edward Said. It was the other side of a dichotomy that simultaneously helps differentiate France from the Maghreb and the orient, but in doing so relies on Algeria for part of its own identity. "The two geographical entities thus support and to an extent reflect each other."[7] Not disregarding or setting aside the authentic country and people that make up Algeria, Said's study of orientalism seeks to understand how places like Algeria were imagined in Europe by Europeans and the essential role that played in domestic European politics. For example, Algeria's influence on French politics was so outsized that the events triggered the Fourth French Republic's collapse and the Fifth's founding. In this light, Said's orientalism is a valuable lens to understand the work of the EMSI.

Indeed, this imagination of Algeria used by the EMSI and Europeans in general is best described as a French construction. The borders of Africa's second largest country were drawn by French conquerors, encircling Mediterranean orchards, snow-capped mountains, rocky gorges and valleys, marshy planes, and the "empty" expanse of the Sahara desert.[8] The term "Algerian" itself does not neatly define a single identity, with Muslim, Berber, Arab, Ottoman, Jewish, Christian, Roman, Maghrebi, Pan-African, Spanish, Italian, French and indeed many other identities playing substantial roles across the Algerian territory and across time.[9] This fact is particularly important when describing the group of people the EMSI were trying to reach. Described in the sources simply as *femmes musulmanes* [Muslim women], this reduces a vast diversity of women from the Maghreb into one identity group, constructing all non-French Algerians as Muslims. I therefore use this original French label to indicate that it is a historical term used to describe a group that only comes together by virtue of having been "targeted" by the EMSI, and not a categorisation I seek to recreate myself.

Officially made a part of France proper in 1848, Algeria was the only French colony ruled as a *département*, in theory like any other in metropolitan France, but in practice with stark differences. Administratively, Algerian territory was divided between three major types of region. The "full-function" communes [*communes de plein exercise*] were areas where European settlers were dominant and were governed by a European mayor and council, elected by Europeans, mirroring metropolitan districts quite closely. Mixed communes [*communes mixtes*] where the population was predominantly Muslim were governed by an appointed European administrator who would work with the Muslim structures of governance.[10] The southern territories [*territoires du sud*] of the Sahara were administered by the military.[11] This produced a contradictory style of governance across Algeria, where the French government was at once carrying out a programme of assimilation, "transforming Algerians into equal citizens," and a colonising mission of subjugation, "keeping them down as disempowered subjects."[12] This contradiction remained at the heart of the French government's challenges in Algeria, with a small, racist, yet powerful elite made up of settlers known as *colons* or *pieds-noirs* pushing back against any attempts to grant Muslim Algerians more power; and a majority Muslim population with ever-growing international sympathy demanding the same rights as their metropolitan compatriots. Typical of these kinds of colonial contexts, the French authorities felt themselves stuck between granting Muslim Algerians rights as part of justifying their presence there and retaining some kind of hierarchy of citizens.[13]

It was in this constellation that the EMSI were active. They began as a trial in the army's programme of *pacification*.[14] Over at least a century, French colonial administrators developed *pacification* techniques to manage, control, and win over populations. It comprised counterinsurgency, resettlement, surveillance, education, and humanitarian engagement, amongst other techniques, all carried out to "make contact" with the colonised population, transforming a militarily conquered territory into a sustainably administered one.[15] In the words of Gallieni, one of the original architects of *pacification* in

Vietnam, "After destruction, one must construct."[16] During the Algerian War of Independence, *pacification* aimed at undermining the strongholds of the FLN, and swaying the Algerian population towards France. It therefore was a two-sided challenge. On the one hand, the French army wanted to engage the FLN's forces, particularly targeting guerrilla fighters in rural areas and their networks in local communities, and was prepared to use the necessary force and violence. On the other hand, they did not want to entirely alienate those communities from the French side, extending a supposedly superior French way of life in the form of education, security, housing, and care to these populations once they had been "liberated" from the "rebels."[17] *Pacification* was the carrot to the army's stick, and both were to be engaged to neutralise the FLN.

This motivated the army's interest in "making contact" with women, seen to be one of the biggest blind spots of this male-dominated institution. Women were also increasingly an asset to the FLN, who were able to exploit the army's macho culture, using women as both effective agents and markers of a perceived level of civilisation to the French.[18] In March 1957, Raoul Salan, commander-in-chief of the French forces in Algeria, launched a pilot mission under the direction of Madame Maugé, a well-connected figure in French military circles.[19] Operating in Orléansville district, the pilot mission took Maugé, Jacqueline Defretiere and Yvette Estel, into the *douars* of the district, working with existing military medical programmes.[20] Finding that despite ongoing challenges, the military was better able to build trust and carry out its work with the assistance of these women, Salan decided to expand this model across Algeria, thus creating the EMSI.

## Women Working in a Man's World

Having a semi-military, semi-civil status, the women in the EMSI sat precisely at the crux of the army's idea of *pacification*. From the army's perspective, they were a unique instrument, touted to be a solution to their difficulties with *pacification*. They were drawn from different milieus including metropolitan France, *pied-noir* communities, and other Algerian population groups, the remainder summarily labelled as "Muslim" in the French records.[21] The women that made up the EMSI all had their own motivations for engaging in this humanitarian mission, and their own perspectives on the work they were doing and the EMSI's goals. Many saw their work as an effort to change the situation in Algeria for the better, and often had critical views of the army as an institution. Their perspectives and histories are therefore indispensable in understanding not only the EMSI, but also the humanitarian aspects of *pacification* and other care work undertaken in Algeria. Their work is deeply ambiguous, at once part of a colonial fight aimed at maintaining French power in Algeria, and yet driven by compassion for Algeria's population. The women desired a better future for them and peace between French and Algerian societies.

At first, several existing programmes were used by the army to set up the EMSI. The Specialised Administrative Sections (*Sections administratives spécialisées*, SAS) were created in 1955 to administer rural communities classified as having a majority Muslim population. They provided basic government services, as well as social, medical, and

educational services.[22] They were comprised of a European leadership and several employees from both European and Muslim origins, the latter known as *Moghaznis*. Most relevant here are the *attachées féminines*. Each SAS would generally employ one of these "female assistants" to work in the social departments. Besides secretaries, these would often be the only women employed by the SAS, and the only personnel formally employed in the "social" or "educational" sector, with most posts being in administration.[23] The SAS also ran the Free Medical Aid (*Aide médicale gratuite*, AMG), a programme that saw each SAS either have its own doctor or receive regular visits from one.[24] The EMSI pilot mission was formed out of these SAS *attachées* and worked closely with several SASs and their AMGs in the district of Orléansville.[25]

Having delivered positive results, Salan quickly expanded the EMSIs across all of Algeria. He made use of two other existing organisations: the Female Army Personnel (*Personnel féminine de l'armée de terre*, PFAT), and the Auxiliary Rural Medico-Social Assistants (*Adjointes sanitaires et sociales rurales auxiliaires*, ASSRA). The PFAT was an existing designation for women engaged across the French army who were sent by and who reported to the Ministry of Defence in Paris. The ASSRAs were formally created around the same time as the EMSI's expansion in October 1957, and were initially intended to work throughout the SAS, the AMG, and the education department. However, they eventually ended up working almost exclusively in the EMSI.[26] The personnel of the EMSI were therefore drawn from several different pools, leaving the organisation in a middle ground between civil and military institutions.

The reception to the EMSI amongst French military departments was mixed. The army's Fifth Bureau, charged with psychological action and responsible for the coordination of *pacification*, viewed the EMSI positively, eventually seeing it as the centrepiece of its contact strategy with women. Other more traditional figures in the army were wary about the Fifth Bureau's growing scope and power and were sceptical of these teams of women and their work.[27] The initial creation and expansion of the EMSI was therefore an ad-hoc process, with authorities drawing on the existing tools and programmes available to them to realise their orders.

This led to a lack of leadership in the EMSI, particularly in its administration. The Fifth Bureau would assign a team of two to three women to the regional army units, leaving their deployment to particular locations, their transport, and their direct command to the respective local army commanders.[28] These commanders were often negligent in this aspect, failing to give the EMSI the orders, supervision, and even transport they needed.[29] Moreover, this led to substantial delays and complications with their pay, with responsibility being handed from department to department as ASSRAs went unpaid and were left unsure of their exact position in the chain of command.[30] The *Assemblée nationale*'s finance commission's war budget rapporteur, Jean-Paul Palewski, spoke with several ASSRAs during his inspections in Algeria in April 1958, and forwarded several letters from them complaining about the administrative chaos to his superiors. In these letters, ASSRAs write

of lacking resources, of having to pay out of their own pocket for the material they need to do their work, and of major delays in payment of their salaries. Underlining their enthusiasm behind the goals of the EMSI, there is a tone of exasperation in these letters that their work is not receiving the support it needs and that their complaints are not heard. Palewski argued firmly for the importance of the EMSI's work and that they should be afforded more funds to keep their work running well. He maintained that it was essential to keep relations between EMSI members and their superiors amicable to avoid further such letters being written or ASSRAs resigning.[31] This intervention enabled the expansion of the budget assigned for the EMSI.[32]

It is telling that these letters from ASSRAs went unanswered until they were taken up by a male member of parliament on an inspection trip from Paris. This shows one of the difficulties faced by the EMSI women. They were expected to form a major part of the programme of *pacification*, being hailed by the Fifth Bureau as a centrepiece of its contact strategy, and at times the only part directly addressed at women.[33] Yet they were not given the level of administrative infrastructure or organisational tools needed to properly manage and execute their mission. In short, they were not taken as seriously as comparable missions undertaken by men, reflecting once again the gendered environment that the EMSI members were working in. The army leadership, looking down on it as "unimportant women's work," was more than happy to leave caring work to women but was not willing to give it the support, leadership, and coordination needed to succeed.

This discrepancy must have been particularly frustrating for many of the EMSI members, as both the leadership of the Fifth Bureau and others engaged in pacification strategies hailed the EMSI almost universally as highly effective in reaching and "pacifying" the female Muslim population of Algeria. Arlette Ocamica, one of Maugé successors as head of the EMSI, remembered what her commanding officer told her and her teammates as they departed their posting in Jumelles, Djurdjura: "Mesdemoiselles, you must return quickly, your work is more effective than that of three battalions. Since your arrival, women have been greeting us with a smile."[34] Indeed, many EMSI members recognised these relationships they were able to build with the *femmes musulmanes*, seeing their caring "feminine" touch as a distinctive approach that they were bringing to the army's missions. They viewed this approach as a valuable contribution to ending the war and building peace. Here, we can turn to a longer history of gender in care work, which has long been presented as a woman's job.

## Women's Roles as Carers

The figure of the carer takes the form of many female roles: mother, wife, nanny, teacher, nurse. Yet no human being can go without care. Feminist historians Bernice Fisher and Joan Tronto call it a "species activity that includes everything we do to maintain, continue and repair our 'world' so that we can live in it as well as possible."[35] Why is this essential activity so closely associated with only one gender?

Often defined in opposition to the rational and detached male, the female side of the gender dichotomy is categorised as emotional and compassionate. This association is "by nature", presented as something inherent to women *a priori*; a born skill, not an acquired one. This argument developed in bourgeois circles in Europe in around the mid-nineteenth century, holding that women are naturally suited to compassionate roles like rearing children, education, household activities, and caring for the ill and the aged. This posited "natural connection" was used to confine women to the household as the primary location of these activities.[36] Compassion is a domestic emotion that, in this view, should be kept in the safety of the home.

As bourgeois women's agency grew, the public roles they were able to take on still mirrored those in the home: nurses, teachers, carers, and so on. In this so-called "cult of domesticity," the normative ideal woman was an extension of the traditional gendered division of labour and domestic roles out of the home and into the public sphere.[37] Often, even much of the political activism that women participated in as agents was in movements associated with compassion, such as the nineteenth-century abolitionist movements against slavery or prostitution.[38] Here, as Clare Midgley has argued, women were able to deploy their association with emotions and compassion to make sentimental arguments with greater authenticity than a supposedly rational male, drawing on it rather than seeking to change it.[39] Moreover, their perceived secondary position in the gender dichotomy and subjugated role in the Western household made empathising with other marginalised groups a "natural" step. These effects combined to "justify women's presence in the philanthropic world."[40]

This phenomenon gains another layer in conflict spaces. Organisations like the Red Cross promoted the engagement of women in caring roles in military contexts from at least the late nineteenth century, often recommending the division of personnel along gender lines with men tackling jobs like transport and managing buildings, and women being responsible for caring, nursing, housekeeping, and catering.[41] Moreover, these women were never quite brought up to proper military ranks like their male counterparts, retaining an amateur status and receiving at best cursory nursing training if they had not already had similar experience or training. They never progressed beyond "trained amateurs", despite almost universally being praised for their intrepid, dynamic, and thinking-on-their-feet work attitude. This image of the effective female carer was also deployed to promote female engagement in humanitarian work, and to soften or temper the "real" work of the military, becoming a "feminine counterpart to battle-scarred masculinity. Intuitive, compassionate and selfless, the … nurse appeared to operate in a neutral realm that was the reverse of the political or military exigency."[42]

This field of engagement for women and the associated influence that they gain through that engagement in civil society is what Annemieke van Drenth and Francisca de Haan call "caring power".[43] They outline the history of the archetypical compassionate woman worker: a strong, principled carer who can put their compassion and domestic skills to good use in caring for the less fortunate. Van Drenth and de Haan tell these histories not

to confine women to these kinds of roles, but to underline the way women were able to find a niche of power in a male-dominated society, an aim I share in this essay. This rise of caring power is intrinsically linked with the rise of the women's movement in the late nineteenth century. By finding an extra-domestic role in care work, they formed a collective sense of gender identity.

This collective identity may have also galvanised the constructed connection between compassion and femininity, as these women carved out a place in a masculine society by leveraging the restrictive roles that patriarchal structures ascribed to them. However, feminist scholars of care work underline that this ascription is not *natural*, but merely *historical*: a longstanding gendering of care work as a female practice that presents itself as a given, but which in fact needs disentangling.[44]

This becomes clearer when we look at more EMSI members' reflections on how they were able to use their "femininity" to reach the *femmes musulmanes*. Reflecting on the opening of a women's circle in her first village of engagement, Ginette Thévenin-Copin, an ASSRA originally from northern France, was pleased with the way the women took up the programme and participated in the festivities:

> As for me, I am satisfied and happy, I have proved that by helping and supporting all these women, it is possible to enable them to take a step forward, in their own interest, so that their lives are less difficult, more bearable. I have shown that they are ready and willing to do this. It is their future that they hold in their hands. I am just passing through, to show them the way.[45]

Christiane Métras, a second-generation European settler, presents a similar point of view in a report on her work in 1961-62 in the EMSI. She lists the villages she had been visiting on her rounds and how the work there had been progressing. Throughout the report, her yardstick is the rapport she built with the local women, writing positively of cases where "the women welcome us kindly," or "they are happy, enterprising and interested in everything which is new." However, for the most part, she expresses regret that in many places "there remains a lot of work to be done." Generally, the *femmes musulmanes* are presented as having taken the first steps towards a better relationship with the EMSI, and "the future" that the EMSI is to bring to them. Still, Métras identifies a lingering hesitancy, observing that "the women … hardly leave their homes."[46] Despite or indeed because of these difficulties, Métras reaffirms the importance of building these relationships between women in the EMSI's work:

> It is up to us to understand and direct their aspirations. It is now more than ever that we must guide them, assist them. It is partly upon what we have achieved that the Algeria of tomorrow will be built. It is up to us to build well.[47]

There is a certain pride in these reflections. These women see their work in breaking down the gender divides of a perceived traditional Algerian society, and so making opportunities for *femmes musulmanes*. They see their identity as women as the key with which they can build these relationships, extending a warm "feminine" hand. The EMSI women believe that the *femmes musulmanes* find this hand easier to trust than the army's.

For many of the Muslim women they worked with, the EMSI were the only European women they encountered, with most of the *douars* only seeing a masculine military presence. There is also an implicit judgement of Muslim Algerian society as being too restrictive on the rights of women.

Looking at the ways the women of the EMSI were deployed, and their reflections on where they were able to be effective, the caring power of the EMSI becomes clear. Women had become a "category of sociological importance" in the army's perception of Algerian society.[48] Not only were Muslim women perceived as the key to bringing Algerian society onto the French side, but French and French-Algerian women were seen as indispensable in grasping that key. Their compassionate nature, it was assumed, disposed women with unique capacities to connect with Muslim Algerian women in a way men were unable to. Compared to the rough approach of a military battalion, a single EMSI of two or three women could "win over" entire villages.[49] Moreover, just as van Drenth and de Haan showed for Fry and Butler around a century beforehand, the EMSI women were able to carve out a niche of power for themselves in this caring work, by building a collective gender identity based on a transformative femininity that might be able to bridge the divisions and conflicts forged by war by replacing it with care.[50]

Yet it is important not to simply see the EMSI's perceived "feminine touch" as a silver bullet, able to bridge the rhetorical divide between the army's groupings of Algerians. Their work was also successful because they did not only see the work as a means to an end, viewing *femmes musulmanes* as a homogenous category, as the Fifth Bureau would have them do. On the contrary, the EMSI women found success in "reaching" these women precisely because of their position "on the ground", building relationships between individuals rather than seeing Algeria in reductive groupings.

## A French Future

There is also a narrative of development in these reflections, and here it is useful to compare these EMSI members' views with those of the army. In the directives setting out the aims and missions foreseen for the EMSI, Colonel Jean Gardes, head of the Fifth Bureau, sees this developmental project of opening a modern future to *femmes musulmanes* as the key mission of the EMSI.

> In time, the EMSI must establish contact with the feminine milieu it works with by demonstrating to them in concrete terms the modern future offered to them by France. To do this, it plays a medico-social role within the framework of the AMG. The medico-social aspect of EMSI should be seen as a means to an end, that is, basic education for women. The principal pit-fall to be avoided is to allow the EMSI to become absorbed by its medico-social work without moving on to its true task.[51]

Gardes was typical of many military leaders in this period, taking broad, ideologically driven views of the conflict they were in and designing their strategies in very expansive terms that did not shy away from transformative projects like the EMSI. This is typical of the self-image that the French army cultivated in this period, seeing itself as a semi-

autonomous force separated from the constraints of politics, run by rugged *colonels* who amounted to the “sole revolutionary force [in France] capable of menacing the established order.”[52] Gardes alludes to being able to modernise all women in Algeria, held back only by a lack of resources. This kind of developmental mission is part of a longer tradition of colonising missions that sought to transform the colonised society into a more modern, more civilised one, often termed the *mission civilatrice* in the francophone context.

The EMSI members themselves received their most direct exposure to these goals during their month-long internship. Exactly when this was undertaken varied, but generally it was after they had settled in at their post, returning to Algiers or another urban centre to complete their month-long crash-course at one of the larger, often overrun hospitals. Thévenin-Copin, for example, went to the infamous Mustapha Hospital in Algiers. Several ASSRAs came together for this month of training, and most write of a convivial atmosphere between the women, grateful to be amongst peers after having spent some time in the quieter but harsher rural deployment zones.[53]

There is a rich collection of photos of these internships taken by several EMSI members that show the group dynamic in this period of training. Francine Bernard, an ASSRA stemming from the metropole, shows the amicable, festive atmosphere amongst the EMSI trainees in her photographic album, with ASSRAs in EMSI-branded tracksuits preparing meals together, eating as a group at long tables, and taking their lessons together in large classrooms.[54] There were also more ceremonial occasions, such as the raising of the French flag, the giving out of uniforms, and posing for group portraits.[55] They also organised a performance, where the “folklore” of France and Algeria was presented through traditional dances, all under the banner of *Algérie française*, underlining the mission of bringing the two posited cultures of Algeria together.[56]

Instead of the Fifth Bureau’s directives being handed out to EMSI members (there were fears these might end up in the hands of the FLN), ASSRAs received theoretical training in their internship. This went through the goals of *pacification* and the aim of modernising *femmes musulmanes*, as well as teachings on French perceptions of Muslim customs, sociology, and laws, a history of (French) Algeria, of the War of Independence, and of “rebellion” in Algeria (read: the FLN).[57]

Alongside this theoretical training, ASSRAs also received more hands-on training in the hospitals. They would assist in several different departments, generally focusing on emergency, surgery, and the maternity ward. Thévenin-Copin spent a record-breaking night in maternity, with twelve births in one night, and wrote of gaining a great appreciation for the “wonder of birth” in that busy period.[58] But most striking to her was her time in the emergency ward, where the consequences of the war came rolling in with relentless brutality, dramatically showing the indiscriminate way that the conflict could shatter someone’s life without rhyme or reason. Shocked by the way that one could become accustomed to even these horrors in this environment, she expresses her discontent with the war again.

> There are times when you feel a sense of revolt at all these atrocities, these innocent victims blindly struck down by fate, who would like to understand why good fortune has abandoned them today. But the most dramatic thing about this unbearable present is that we get used to everything, even the horror.[59]

Once trained up, the ASSRAs went their separate ways. They were generally sad to be separated from their peers, and apprehensive of the tougher working environment that awaited them. Once they returned to their post, often a long journey by train or car, often with a military convoy, their "real work" began.

## Making Contact

Generally working with a military doctor, the EMSI's initial work in the field would be as assistants. Coming essentially into a war zone in the immediate aftermath of sometimes serious fighting, the EMSI would initially have their work cut out for them, finding communities in disarray, resembling ghost-towns or having seen substantial destruction. Their work would at first be commanded quite directly by the military, addressing the wounded. Only with time would they widen their work, through the connections they were to build in this initial stage, into more general healthcare provision and education, and then further out into other social areas. In these early stages, soldiers were working closely with the EMSI in villages not considered completely "pacified' and therefore being judged as still susceptible to attacks. Having arrived in a new *douar*, contact would be made with the men of the village, a ritual that Thévenin-Copin describes as "essential … a sign of respect to their elders."[60] After these formalities, they explained that the team was there to provide medical aid, which was, so Thévenin-Copin, generally gratefully received as a welcome measure, with children sent off to fetch the women who needed and wanted aid.

Photographs also give a glimpse into the day-to-day work in the EMSI and the kind of contact they made with Muslim Algerian women. Amongst Christiane Métras' archives are several images of the people she worked with, which she annotated with detailed descriptions. Throughout, these images show a friendly atmosphere between the EMSI women and the *femmes musulmanes*: they are aiding, teaching, and spending time with.[61] Other ASSRAs' photos of their time in the field with the EMSI show similar scenes of fraternisation between EMSI women and Algerian women. They are seen working together in sewing classes, dressed in European style clothes; seen posing in groups in front of *mechtas* and other rural buildings; giving out medical care from their jeeps; and learning French in classrooms adorned with images of European housewives going about their domestic duties.[62]

Life in these villages is presented as simple, tough, but honest, and the EMSI women that visit them as being happy to be aiding their lives. It is difficult to glean the true thoughts of the Muslim Algerians presented in these photographs. Captions allude to a friendly welcome and gratitude for the work of the EMSI, but there is a staged quality to many of the pictures, as though they are capturing a stilted moment, hiding much of the nuance that must have existed between the groups here.

Similar scenes are presented in a film produced by the Cinematographic service of the French army in Algeria (SCA), entitled *Reviens vite, Toubiba* [Come back soon, *Toubiba*].[63] The SCA was managed in Algeria during the war by the Fifth Bureau, making this film another example of the propaganda the Fifth Bureau wanted to tell with the EMSI.[64] This piece of propaganda outlines the EMSI's work, showing first how French soldiers move into rural areas to "destroy the rebel bands that haunt the *djebel*," "liberating" the population from the "cruel dictatorship of the FLN," before showing the EMSI preparing their teams, making their way into the newly "secured" villages, and providing medical care to a seemingly gracious population. Having gained the trust of the EMSIs, the villagers are shown gathering as soon as they see the EMSI's vans arriving for their next visit, and bid them adieu with a *reviens vite, Toubiba*. Rich in pathos and highlighting its points with dramatic music accompanying the army, and triumphant music accompanying the EMSI, the film presents them as bringing "beauty and generosity, the true image of France."[66] Again, the film purports to show a new, blossoming relationship between the "two communities" of Algeria, but excludes the voices of the people receiving the EMSI's care, with the narration only alluding to their gratitude, and the courage and hardworking attitude of the EMSI women.

Throughout, these rich sources give us a feel for the texture of life in these villages. But we must remember that they are, knowingly or not, instruments of propaganda that present an idealised, pro-European view of the field in which the EMSI were working. It is important to separate these accounts, deaf to the thoughts of the *femmes musulmanes*, from the substantial evidence that suggests that the EMSI struggled in many of their goals that go beyond medical assistance and the provision of care. Seferdjeli has shown that army reports identified a myriad of shortcomings in the EMSI that prevented them achieving the developmental goals set for them by the Fifth Bureau. They were underfunded, lacked personnel, and struggled to coordinate their work with the local military authorities, who often overlooked their work or even showed disdain for the work of women. Military figures often blamed the EMSI members themselves for these shortcomings, complaining that they lacked moral fortitude or did not grasp the scale of their mission. Moreover, Seferdjeli finds no evidence of lasting change in the outlook or way of life of the EMSI's targets.[67] The EMSI were as much a tool of propaganda as they were a tool of *pacification*, and it was important that they appeared popular for this to be effective. Films were made, journalists flown in to write reports and books, but even ASSRAs themselves (knowingly or not) participated in this construction of the EMSI's image through things like the EMSI's song and logo.[68]

## Conclusion

What have I been able to draw out of the records of EMSI women's perspectives? First, the EMSI were working in a man's world, navigating the patriarchal world of the French army. While the relationships that ASSRAs had with their male co-workers and superiors varied, and many of these were warm and professional, there was an acute gender divide in this workplace simmering below the surface that reared its head at times. It showed itself in the

poor management of the EMSI, the lack of coordination, poor pay, and dismissive attitude of many of those tasked with working with the EMSI. Yet despite this sometimes-chaotic leadership of the EMSI, those who did see it as an effective tool for pacification spoke of it highly and even placed great, sometimes unreasonable expectations on the EMSI. Moreover, this dynamic created the niche where ASSRAs were able to carve out their caring power as something distinct to the masculine operations of the army.

As carers, the EMSI members were to some extent able to build amicable relationships with the women they were working with. While they likely failed to realise the more expansive developmental aims that the Fifth Bureau foresaw for their work, and while their presentations of their work are a limited and lopsided account destined to show their work in a positive light, we can observe a caring power that EMSI members were able to build. Their relationship with the femmes musulmanes was materially different to the army's, built on direct relationships with individuals rather than generalised, top-down categorisations and essentialised identity attributions. It also helped that they did not entirely take on the directives to treat care only as a means to an end. Without suggesting that they were able to do this because of inherent "feminine" traits, ASSRAs caring power stemmed at least in part from their use of their gender as something unique in this masculine space, though it likely also stemmed from the practical reason that they were providing useful services and supplies to these rural communities.

In this light, the EMSI provide us with a rich case study that shows many of the nuances and contradictions in people's motivations to engage in colonial care work, to try and "do good", and how they are entangled in bigger colonial projects. This underlines the ambiguity to care work in colonial contexts more generally and should encourage us to keep some of these structures in mind when studying humanitarian work in colonial contexts.

## Notes

[1] Cf. Raphaëlle Branche, "'Au temps de la France': Indentités collectives et situation coloniale en Algérie," *Vingtième siècle. Revue d'histoire* 117, no. 1 (Janvier-mars 2013): 199-213.

[2] *Algérie française*, meaning "French Algeria", was a potent dog whistle that indicated commitment to the French colonial project for many hard-line European settlers. See Branche, "Au temps," 199-200.

[3] Ryme Seferdjeli, "The French army and Muslim women during the Algerian war (1954–62)," *Hawwa* 3, no. 1 (2005): 52.

[4] Ann Laura Stoler, *Along the archival grain: Epistemic anxieties and colonial common sense* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2009), 47; Nicholas Dirks, "Colonial histories and native informants: Biography of an archive," in *Orientalism and the postcolonial predicament: Perspectives on South Asia*, eds. Carol Breckenridge and Peter van der Veer (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993).

[5] Secondary literature on the EMSI includes Neil MacMaster, *Burning the veil: The Algerian war and*

*the 'emancipation' of Algerian women* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009); Diane Sambron, *Femmes musulmanes: Guerre d'Algérie 1954-1962* (Paris: Éditions Autrement, 2007); Seferdjeli, "The French army"; Ryme Seferdjeli, "French 'reforms' and Muslim women's emancipation during the Algerian War," *Journal of North African Studies* 9, no. 4 (2004).

[6] Cf. James R. Barrett, *History from the bottom up and inside out: Ethnicity, race, and identity in working-class history* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 35; Joan Scott, "The evidence of experience," Critical Inquiry 17, no. 4 (1991): 777.

[7] Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin Books, 2003), 5.

[8] Cf. Martin Evans and John Phillips, *Algeria: Anger of the dispossessed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), xiii.

[9] Cf. Isabelle Grangaud and M'hamed Oualdi, "Tout est-il colonial dans le Maghreb? Ce que les travaux des historiens modernistes peuvent apporter," *L'Année du Maghreb* 10, no. 1 (2014): 3.

[10] Alistair Horne, *A savage war of peace: Algeria 1954-1962* (London: Macmillan, 1977), 33.

[11] Jacques Frémeaux, *Intervention et humanisme: Le style des armées françaises en Afrique au XIXème siècle* (Paris: Economica, 2006), 113.

[12] Evans and Phillips, *Algeria*, 27.

[13] Yves Courrière, *La guerre d'Algérie*, vol. 3: L'Heure des colonels (Paris: Fayard, 1970), 24.

[14] I use italics to indicate that this is a French term. Though its meaning is semantically identical to the English "pacification", I continue to use the French term from the sources, as it describes a programme that did anything but pacify.

[15] Cf. Joseph-Simon Gallieni, *Trois colonnes au Tonkin (1894-1895)* (Paris: Librairie Militaire R. Chapelot, 1899).

[16] "*Après avoir détruit, il faut construire*," here translated by Quincy Mackay. Original as cited in Courrière, *La guerre d'Algérie*, 3, 31.

[17] Cf. Jacques Frémeaux, *La France et l'Algérie en guerre: 1830-1870, 1954-1962* (Armées and Paris: Commission Française d'Histoire Militaire, Institut de Stratégie Comparée, and Economia, 2002), 204.

[18] Cf. Sambron, *Femmes musulmanes*, 121. For a discussion on how the rights of women were used as an argument for the French presence in Algeria, see MacMaster, *Burning the veil*, 86-102.

[19] It was not possible to definitively determine Maugé's given name. Referred to variously as "Pat" and "Alice" in different sources, I have decided to use "Madame Maugé," as most of the primary and secondary literature does.

[20] *Douar* is an Arabic term meaning rural village.

[21] MacMaster, *Burning the veil*, 247.

[22] Grégor Mathias, *Les sections administratives spécialisées en Algérie: Entre idéal et réalité* (1955-1962) (Paris: L'Hartmattan, 1998), 10-12.

[23] Cf. "État Nominatif des personnels en fonction au 31 décembre 1959 dans le département d'Orléansville," 31 December 1959, ref. 4 SAS 1, Préfecture d'Orléansville: Affaires algériennes, Archives nationales d'outre-mer (ANOM).

[24] Mathias, *Les sections*.

[25] "Gestion des EMSI," in A*ction sur les milieux féminins*, 10 December 1959, ref. GGA 3R 558, Instruction pour la pacification en Algérie No. 4250/EMI/3/OPE, ANOM, 21-23.

[26] *Action sur les milieux féminins*, ANOM. While most of the ASSRAs worked in the EMSI, and most of the EMSI members were ASSRAs, it is not correct to use the term "ASSRA" interchangeably with "EMSI member", which I use to highlight that the term "EMSI" refers to a team, not an individual.

[27] Cf. MacMaster, *Burning the veil*, 96.

[28] Seferdjeli, "The French army," 47.

[29] Seferdjeli, "The French army," 65.

[30] MacMaster, *Burning the veil*, 97.

[31] "Lettres des ASSRAs polycopiées," 2 May 1959 and 26 April 1959, ref. GGA 3R 558, Dossier PALEWSKI, ANOM.

[32] "Fiche No. 3176/EMI/5/ACT/EMSI," 2 June 1959, ref. GGA 3R 558, Dossier PALEWSKI, ANOM.

[33] While other programmes that employed women to pacify Muslim Algerian women existed, the EMSI were the only one directly coordinated by the army, with others being "public or private initiatives". See *Action sur les milieux féminins*, ANOM, 1; cf. Seferdjeli, "The French army," 46.

[34] "*Mesdemoiselles, il faut revenir très vite, votre travail est plus efficace que celui de trois compagnies, depuis votre arrivée les femmes nous disent bonjour en souriant*," here translated by Quincy Mackay. See Arlette Ocamica, "Témoignage d'Arlette Ocamica, responsable EMSI de Grande Kabylie, puis d'Algérie," *Le Combattant*, no. 249 (2002): 60.

[35] Berenice Fisher and Joan Tronto, "Towards a feminist theory of caring," in *Circles of care: Work and identity in women's lives*, eds. Emily K. Abel and Margaret K. Nelson (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), 40.

[36] Cf. Eileen Yeo, "Constructing and contesting motherhood, 1750-1950," *Hecate* 31, no. 2 (2005); Annemieke van Drenth and Francisca de Haan, T*he rise of caring power: Elizabeth Fry and Josephine Butler in Britain and the Netherlands* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1999), 16.

[37] Deborah Simonton, *A history of European women's work: 1700 to the present* (London: Routledge, 1998), 87.

[38] Dolores Martín-Moruno, "A female genealogy of humanitarian action: Compassion as a practice in the work of Josephine Butler, Florence Nightingale and Sarah Monod," *Medicine, Conflict and Survival* 36, no. 1 (2020): 20.

[39] Clare Midgley, *Women against slavery: The British campaigns, 1780-1870* (London: Routledge, 1992), 94.

[40] Martín-Moruno, "A female genealogy," 21.

[41] Cf. Rebecca D. Gill, *Calculating compassion: Humanity and relief in war, Britain 1870-1914* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), 186.

[42] Gill, *Calculating compassion*, 188.

[43] Van Drenth and de Haan, *The rise*.

[44] Van Drenth and de Haan, *The rise*; Martín-Moruno, "A female genealogy," 21.

[45] "*Quand à moi, je suis satisfaite et heureuse, j'ai prouvé qu'en aidant et en épaulant toutes ces femmes, il est possible de leur permettre de faire un pas en avant, ceci dans leur intérêt personnel, pour que leurs vies soient moins difficile, plus supportable. J'ai ainsi démontré qu'elles sont prêtes, et qu'elles souhaitent le faire. C'est leur avenir qu'elles tiennent entre leurs mains. Moi je ne suis que de passage, pour leur indiquer la route*," here translated by Quincy Mackay. See Ginette Thévenin-Copin, *Plaidoyer pour la paix* (Montpellier: Mémoire de Notre Temps, 2001), 88.

[46] "*Les femmes nous accueillent gentiment*"; "*elles sont gaies, entreprenantes et se passionnent pour tout ce qui est nouveau*"; "*il y a là encore un bon travail à faire*"; "*avenir*"; "*Les femmes … ne sortent que difficilement de chez elles*," here translated by Quincy Mackay. See "Rapport d'action EMSI," 1961-1962, ref. 190 ARC 02, 91-92, Fonds Métras, Centre de documentation historique sur l'Algérie (CDHA).

[47] "*À nous de comprendre et de diriger leurs aspirations. C'est maintenant plus que jamais que nous devons les guider, les seconder. C'est en partie dans ce que nous aurons fait que l'Algérie de demain sera construite. À nous de bâtir bien*," here translated by Quincy Mackay. See "Rapport d'action EMSI," CDHA.

[48] Van Drenth and de Haan, *The rise*, 166.

[49] "*Une EMSI vaut un bataillon*" in original. See Georgette Brethes, "Action au profit des femmes," in *L'Action sociale de l'Armée en faveur des Musulmans, 1830-2006*, ed. Maurice Faivre (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2007), 45.

[50] Cf. van Drenth and de Haan, *The rise*, 167.

[51] *Action sur les milieux féminins*, ANOM, 1.

[52] "*…la seule force révolutionnaire capable de menacer l'ordre établi*," here translated by Quincy Mackay. See Raoul Girardet, "Pouvoir civil et militaire dans la France contemporaine," *Revue française de science politique* 10, no. 1 (1960). Quoted in Denis Leroux, "Promouvoir une armée révolutionnaire pendant la guerre d'Algérie: Le centre d'instruction pacification et contre-guérilla d'Arzew (1957-1959)," *Vingtième siècle. Revue d'histoire* 120 (2013).

[53] Thévenin-Copin, *Plaidoyer*, 65.

[54] Two photographs titled "La Convivialité des repas partagés," 1959-1960, ref. 1000 ARC 49, Album photographique, Archives Corne-Bernard, CDHA.

[55] Photographs titled "Levée des colours" and "3 groupes de stagiaires", 1959-1960, ref. 1000 ARC 49, Album photographique, Archives Corne-Bernard, CDHA.

[56] Photographs titled "Toujours disponibles les EMSI sont aussi artistes: Folklore de France," "Folklore d'Algérie" and "Katchatourian à l'honneur: La danse du feu," 1959-1960, ref. 1000 ARC 49, Album photographique, Archives Corne-Bernard, CDHA.

[57] Christiane Fournier, *Les EMSI: Des filles comme ça!* (Paris: Arthème Fayard, 1959), 184-185.

[58] Thévenin-Copin, *Plaidoyer*, 64.

[59] "*…il arrive que l'on éprouve un sentiment de révolte devant toutes ces atrocités, ces victimes innocentes que le destin frappe aveuglément, qui voudraient bien comprendre, pourquoi la chance les a abandonnées aujourd'hui. Mais le plus dramatique face à cet insupportable présent, c'est que l'on s'habitue à tout, même à l'horreur*," here translated by Quincy Mackay. See Thévenin-Copin, *Plaidoyer,* 64.

[60] "*Primordial .. une signe de respect à leur égard d'anciens*," here translated by Quincy Mackay. See Thévenin-Copin, *Plaidoyer*, 79-80.

[61] "Photographies de l'activité de Christiane Métras au sein des EMSI," 1959-1960, ref. 190 ARC 03, Fonds Métras, CDHA.

[62] Photographs titled "Cours de tricot donné par une ASSRA," "Visite dans une famille à qui elles faisaient de l'aide médicale" and "EMSI, Mme Durand et Monique Baudinier dans un véhicule pour faire de l'AMG," 1959-1961, ref. 1000 ARC 51, Photographies d'EMSI, Archives Durand, CDHA. A *mechta* is a small rural building or hamlet.

[63] Service cinematographique de l'armée françiase en (SCA), "Reviens vite, Toubiba," filmed January 1, 1957, ref. SCA 129,: video, https://imagesdefense.gouv.fr/fr/reviens-vite-toubiba.html#. *Toubiba* is Arabic for "female doctor," and was the nickname given to the ASSRAs by the people they cared for.

[64] Irchene Abdelghani, "Service Cinématographique des Armées et la guerre de libération nationale: Idéologie d'une représentation," *Revue EL-BAHITH en des Sciences Humaine et Sciences Sociales* 12, no. 2 (2021): 534.

[65] "*Détruire les bandes qui hantent le djebel … la population est libérée de la commissaire politique du FLN*," here translated by Quincy Mackay. *Djebel* is an Arabic term for the mountainous countryside. See SCA, "Reviens vite, Toubiba," 01:09, 01:30.

[66] "*De la beauté et de la générosité, image réel de la France*," here translated by Quincy Mackay. See SCA, "Reviens vite, Toubiba," 12:10.

[67] Seferdjeli, "The French army," 64-67.

[68] Cf. MacMaster, *Burning the veil*, 248.

# A “Child of our Empire”? Epistemic Rupture and Anticolonial Consciousness in Interwar Paris

By

Ananya Agustin Malhotra

## Abstract

*This article argues that a growing number of students from French colonial contexts in Paris following World War I sought to reckon with colonialism as a phenomenon requiring epistemic revolution. Reading surveillance reports and personal papers alongside periodicals and newspapers, this work of global intellectual history situates anticolonial student groups, intellectuals, and activists like the Martinican surrealist René Ménil (1907-2004) and Vietnamese phenomenologist Tran Duc Thao (1917-93) in a transnational context. It situates developments in anticolonial thought within histories of French colonial education, a growing transnational anticolonial consciousness, and the new artistic and philosophical traditions of surrealism and phenomenology in the 1920s and 30s. First, I outline the colonial motivations of Third Republic education to cultivate an Antillean and Indochinese elite through admission to and scholarships for France's* grandes écoles. *Secondly, I show the connections between the "epistemological rupture" in intellectual and artistic disciplines following World War I, including the developments of surrealism and phenomenology, and the growing transnational consciousness amongst left-wing anticolonial groups in Paris. In doing so, I argue that anticolonial student groups in the late 1920s began articulating the necessity for intellectual and cultural emancipation as a precursor for political decolonisation, often turning to transnational sources. I conclude by looking closely at the anticolonial writings of Tran Duc Thao in* Les Temps Modernes *and the anticolonial student-run journal* Légitime Défense *(1932), which Ménil co-founded, as a product of these intersections.*

## About the author

Ananya Agustin Malhotra recently received an MPhil in History (Modern European History, 1850-2000) with distinction from the University of Oxford. Her BA is from Princeton University, and her research interests lie in global intellectual history, anticolonial political thought, and the history of international order.

## Introduction: Decolonisation as an epistemic problem

In the wake of the First World War, during which around 750,000 African, Caribbean, and Asian migrant workers and soldiers were recruited to the metropole, large groups of secondary and university students from the French empire began to arrive in Paris through scholarships established by the French minister of the colonies between 1920 and 1930. Though the French empire had long seen colonial education as core to its colonial project, the post-WWI years saw the French government increase admission for colonial students to universities in France, including to its *grandes écoles* (elite specialised universities with highly selective admission). As a new discourse of nationalism erupted on the international scene in the wake of World War I and threatened to disperse through "the capital of men without a country," more than ever, French colonial officials sought to forge a cadre of colonial elites loyal to uphold French rule in their home colonies.[1]

Yet, this wave of students, arriving in Paris at a moment of political ferment, was part of a broader process of transnational intellectual exchange which generated new ideas about the nature of systemic colonialism, drawing from a range of intellectual inspirations, including the *avant garde* philosophies popular amongst European intellectuals. Instead of internalising the educational imperative to uphold French rule, many Vietnamese, Caribbean, and West African students forged a panoply of anticolonial student activist organisations. This article shows how anticolonial students increasingly argued that new epistemic tools were necessary to combat the deeply rooted emotional and cultural consequences of colonial education on their psyches. In the ferment of *avant garde* "epistemological rupture" in Europe after the trauma of World War I,[2] a growing number of anticolonial thinkers and student organisations from diverse colonial contexts recognised that the first step towards decolonisation necessitated confronting the cultural and psychological aspects of French colonial rule, exemplified in the universalist French colonial education. They sought new intellectual resources with which to confront these psycho-social legacies, and looked, in part, to the new philosophies and political movements taking shape in European metropoles. Many anticolonial student groups found the traditions of surrealism, phenomenology, and Marxism, which were exploding in popularity in Europe after World War I, especially useful. Working within these traditions allowed them to confront colonialism as an epistemic problem.

Frantz Fanon (1925-1961), a Martinican psychologist and philosopher, is traditionally credited with first articulating the role of culture and psycho-social formation in colonialism. In 1952, Fanon outlined the connection between epistemology and decolonisation in *Black Skin, White Masks*.[3] Fanon's insights into culture, epistemology, and decolonisation were likely informed by important but understudied influences in anticolonial thought during the interwar and wartime periods, led by anticolonial student groups. This article attends to these key intellectual precedents, which critically probed the relationship between epistemology, culture, and colonialism to endeavour towards a more complete intellectual history of decolonisation.[4]

The article traces this story through two students: the Martinican philosopher René Ménil (1907-2004), who would later help establish *Tropiques* (1941-45), the Martinican wartime periodical of anticolonial surrealist art and literature, and the Vietnamese philosopher and activist Tran Duc Thao (1917-93), who would pen in *Les Temps Modernes*' storied pages a phenomenology of colonised existence which foreshadowed Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth*.[5] Ménil, who studied in Paris in the early 1930s, co-founded the Martinican anticolonial surrealist publication *Légitime Défense* as a student, and Thao, one of the first Vietnamese students at the prestigious *École Normale Supérieure*, published a pathbreaking thesis on Edmund Husserl and was arrested for his leadership in anticolonial student circles.

Both Thao and Ménil remain underappreciated figures in the intellectual history of decolonisation. Seldom have scholars placed their work in historical perspective within the political context of interwar and wartime transcontinental anticolonial organising. These thinkers are usually studied individually insofar as their work relates to their regional historiographies, French literature, or French republicanism and citizenship.[6] Though Ménil's role in the anticolonial student group *Légitime Défense* has been well-studied, connections between Thao's background as an anticolonial activist and his political anticolonial thought have remained unexplored thus far. As for Thao, scholars have begun to comment on the importance of his intellectual contributions to the history of phenomenology but have neglected his anticolonial ideas and political activity.[7] Imprisoned for his activism as President of the General Vietnamese Delegation in France, Thao led *Les Temps Modernes*' first theoretical discussion of liberation strategies from colonialism and cemented its approach to anticolonialism squarely in phenomenology.[8] This article reads their work together as part of a broader anticolonial intellectual and political tradition for the first time.[9] By reading French police records alongside the archives of anticolonial political thought and student activism, this article shows that anticolonial intellectual history cannot be divorced from the social histories of student activism. Both thinkers were part of an intellectual history of anticolonial political thought, which saw colonialism as a totalising phenomenon requiring epistemic revolt.

Thao and Menil, in some ways, came from divergent colonial contexts. Broadly speaking, Antilleans and Vietnamese held very different experiences and stances towards French colonialism, and their political programmes departed strikingly from one another. Antilleans, as residents of the *vieilles colonies*, had significant privileges over residents in Indochinese territories, composed of Cambodia, Laos, and the three provinces of Viet-Nam: Tonkin (*Bac-Ky*), Annam (*Trung-Ky*), and Cochinchina (*Nam Ky*). The *indigénat* legal code did not apply to Martinicans, who were considered full-fledged French citizens rather than subjects of France.[10] French republican principles were largely popular amongst twentieth-century Martinicans, educated in schools about "our ancestors, the Gauls."[11] By contrast, in the 1920s and 30s, the anticolonial sentiment was widespread among the Vietnamese peasantry, who comprised 90 percent of the population, as well as amongst the industrial working class and urban professional classes.[12] Despite these differences, I consider the

work of students from differing colonial educational contexts in conjunction to see how anticolonial activists resisted colonial structures through demands for intellectual and cultural emancipation. I trace the roots of contingent and varied processes of political decolonisation from their intellectual and cultural stages in this period of "world-historical opening".[13] These anticolonial actors sought to make decolonisation thinkable, whether in a federated structure or as an act of existential revolution.

In their epistemological worldmaking endeavours, these budding anticolonial intellectuals engaged with the *avant garde* cultural movements gaining popularity in academic and artistic spheres they traversed, among them Marxism, surrealism, and phenomenology. As described by its founder, André Breton, surrealism constituted "pure psychic automatism by which one expresses…the real functioning of thought." With its emphasis on dreams, subconscious desires, intuition, and poetry, surrealism presented tools for Ménil and his fellow Martinican students in the anticolonial group *Légitime Défense*, established in 1932 to liberate the mind against the reigning colonial epistemologies of European Enlightenment rationalism.[14] In particular, surrealism, which the group "accept[ed] without reserve", provided for the *Légitime Défense* group a form of epistemological rupture and an artistic ethic with which to grapple with their dual identity –as Black Caribbean students, and yet as highly privileged members of the colonial bourgeoisie.[15] Although globally, surrealism was understood by artists and writers from around the colonised world as a dialectic which lent itself inherently to reinvention and transformation, in Europe, it connoted a more limited discourse, restricted to Breton's Parisian group.[16]

In addition to surrealism, both Ménil and Thao were also deeply influenced by the academic philosophy, a 1930s export from German philosophers like Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger. These philosophers shaped the sensibilities of some of Thao and Ménil's key teachers, including Henri Bergson, Gaston Bachelard, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Phenomenology prioritised the exploration of structures of experience, feeling, and consciousness over the traditional neo-Kantian rationalism of French philosophical academia. Phenomenology thus proved useful for confronting the legacies of colonial education.[17] The emphasis was on personal experience, especially that of colonised subjects: Thao argued that Marxism required a phenomenological revision to contribute towards human emancipation, rooting "economic liberation" in human experience as the "essential condition of human freedom."[18] In this way, Thao extended Marxist analysis beyond its orthodox theoretical framings by grounding it in the experiences and "life-world" (*Lebenswelt*) of colonised people.[19] For Thao, the Marxist revolution required the uprooting of related forms of oppression, especially colonialism, which he described as that "particularly perfected form of capitalism."[20]

Thao, Ménil, and other anticolonial students critiqued and transformed European dialectics of surrealism, phenomenology, and Marxism and applied them in ways their architects never envisioned. These thinkers, educated in the colonial metropole, drew from these traditions, amongst others, to imagine new solidarities –ontologically and

geographically– from within the limited political imaginaries offered to them. In the interwar and wartime years, Thao, Ménil, and their contemporaries confronted colonisation as a "cultural as well as…psychological and ontological" problem.[21] Reading French police records alongside the archives of anticolonial political thought and student activism, I show that student organisations from diverse colonial contexts drew attention to the necessity for transnational intellectual emancipation as a precondition for political emancipation. These student groups forged a transnational consciousness tied to their identities as colonial students through what Brent Hayes Edwards calls the "archive" of "discourses of internationalisms" in journalism, criticism, manifestoes, correspondences and surveillance reports.[22] The interwar period, I argue, oversaw two intertwined developments: a nascent "epistemological rupture" in the intellectual life of the metropole and the germination of a stronger transnational anticolonial consciousness.

## The cultivation of a colonial elite

In 1932, within the pages of the inaugural issue of *Légitime Défense* (*LD*), the young philosophy student René Ménil reflected on what he identified as the French colonial educational system's impact on Martinican students. Proclaiming the intellectual and political agenda of his compatriots in *LD*, influenced by surrealism and Marxism to advance anticolonial liberation, Ménil wrote that in Martinican schools, Antillean students' "own genius [are] mechanically denied," as they are "nourished" on "books written in other countries for other readers."[23] As a result, they are forced to "renounce [their] race, body, [their] particular and fundamental passions, and [their] specific ideas about love and death," and dwell "in an unreal domain determined by abstract ideas and the ideals of another people."[24] Ménil was not just critiquing the state of Martinican literature; he levied a powerful epistemological critique: that colonial education in Martinique inflicted the "ideals of another people" –namely, French republican ideology– on Martinicans, and that new traditions were necessary to disrupt the intellectual legacies of French colonial education. Although surrealism and phenomenology were identified as originating in Europe, Ménil and his compatriots in *LD* believed they could be transformed and applied to new anticolonial ends.[25] The writers of *LD* declared in their manifesto, "We accept equally and without reserve surrealism, to which – in 1932 – we link our future." They sought to liberate their consciousness from the intellectual and cultural legacies of French colonialism, writing, "our dreams allow us to see clearly into the life which has been imposed upon us for too long."[26]

*LD*, in form and content, responded to the colonial project of Third Republic education, which saw schooling as a vital tool for perpetuating France's universalising colonialism. France's Jules Ferry laws in 1881 and 1882 promised "free, secular education" for all within metropolitan France and the colonies in order "to civilise [the weak] and to raise [them] up to its own levels."[27] Colonial education, per Prime Minister Ferry, was not a "luxury" but constituted the "foremost duty" of the coloniser.[28] This heavily standardised assimilationist educational agenda maintained that colonies were integral parts of a France

whose society and population ought to be made "in France's image".[29] This universalist mission sought to make the colony the "intellectual extension of France," requiring secondary schools around the colonies to participate in metropolitan concours or standardised tests.[30] This homogenising effort was especially acute in Antillean primary and secondary education, where students were taught in school that they were French, erasing Creole culture, language, and identity.[31]

In both the metropole and colonies, Third Republic education emphasised the "democratic ideals of the Republic" and Kantian, nineteenth-century scientific positivism.[32] According to this positivist tradition, science would provide the foundations for the laws of reality and the indefatigable human quest for progress. Phenomenology and surrealism responded as parallel developments in philosophy and aesthetics to the stifling and positivistic environment of French republican higher education. Gaston Bachelard's notion of the need for an "epistemological rupture", elaborated in *Le Nouvel Esprit Scientifique* in 1934 to reflect fragmented subjectivities in the wake of the First World War, was especially influential and said to have been "read by every individual in the Surrealist group."[33] This "epistemological rupture" resonated with anticolonial thinkers, who fused surrealist idioms and phenomenological concepts to reflect colonised experiences and probed the possibilities of epistemic decolonisation. Colonial students of philosophy, Ménil and Thao among them, would come of age in this intellectual context at the elite Parisian secondary institutions of Lycées Louis-le-Grand and Henri IV, which prepared students for admission to the prestigious *grandes écoles*.

In the late 1920s, in response to growing nationalist sentiment in its Southeast Asian colonies, French officials began advocating to expand colonial education to higher education in the metropole itself, encouraging scholarships for colonial students to study in the metropole to inculcate "French" values over other influences.[34] As early as 1927, Colonial Minister Jean Fabry wrote that it would be beneficial for students from around the empire to "come to study in our schools" to "assimilate our mentality, our customs" and "feel the usefulness for their country of relying on a great European Nation" before returning the colonies to uphold French rule.[35] By the late 1920s, offering admission at the *grandes écoles* to a select few exceptional students from the colonies had become official policy.

In 1929, the Governor General of Indochina wrote to the Minister of the Colonies that ignoring increased demands by Indochinese students for admission would have "serious consequences from the political point of view" as it would "discourage" Indochinese youth who "sought to elevate themselves" and would result in "distanc[ing] them from French culture."[36] The Minister conceded in 1933 to the requests to admit more Indochinese students to *grandes écoles* like the École Normale Supérieure (ENS), on the condition that it was toward the cultivation of an "indigenous elite…like in Siam and the British or Dutch Indies" in the service of the "economic development of our overseas empire."[37] This "generosity" was thus highly strategic: French authorities maintained that it was imperative to proceed with caution in empowering "natives", clarifying that education in

such universities was “above all a question of giving our colonies the native architects necessary to their economic development” and not about endowing them with French nationality *ipso facto* and the rights of French citizens.[38] Entrance into military schools was excluded, for fear of the “serious disadvantages” of France’s colonial rule if colonial students could form a French-trained and armed cadre of officers capable of carrying out an armed revolt for self-governance.[39]

Admission to the *grandes écoles* was thus explicitly part of a colonial project to cultivate a colonial elite loyal to continued French rule. Importantly, such scholarships to study in Paris were not equitably distributed amongst colonies. As the monthly organ of the *Ligue de la Défense de la Race Nègre* (League of the Defence of the Black Race, or LDRN), *The Black Race*, pointed out in September 1927, the “situation of Black students [was] the most lamentable in Paris,” as Antillean students were given preferential treatment over students from West and French Equatorial Africa, and students from French Indochina were similarly granted “exceptional position of favour.”[40]

It is in this context that Tran Duc Thao was permitted to arrive in France in October 1936 for two years of study at Lycée Louis-le-Grand, the prestigious preparatory school which fed into the ENS, where the Martinican anticolonial poet Aimé Césaire had graduated just one year earlier.[41] After an additional year at Lycée Henri IV, he placed third in the entrance examination to ENS in July 1939.[42] A brilliant but unassuming student, Thao reportedly “abhor[red] publicity” and lived humbly – continuing, as French authorities noted, to eat and dress “in the manner of his ancestors.”[43] At ENS, Thao experienced the simultaneous consolidation of Vichy rule in collaboration with the Nazi Third Reich and the acceleration of Vietnamese nationalism in France, twin processes which emboldened him to take several leadership positions in Vietnamese anticolonial groups. In 1940, Thao attracted the attention of the Parisian police for his anticolonial activity as secretary for an anticolonial student organisation, the Association of Annamites of France.[44] Simultaneously, at ENS, Thao studied German and immersed himself in the contemporary philosophical currents of the phenomenological “generation of 1933” characterised by the influence of Husserl and Merleau-Ponty.[45]

Acutely aware that they had been brought to France to be cultivated as part of a powerful bourgeoisie, Thao and Ménil knew it was the hope of the French government that they would return to their colonies and prevent elite colonial intellectuals from joining forces with the proletariat in anticolonial revolution. This claim was echoed by a broad range of anticolonial groups. The anticolonial publication *Le Cri des Nègres* declared in 1935 that Black, Arab and Vietnamese students educated in *grandes écoles* were “educated in the capitalist sense” with an aim to make them “docile servants” and “automatons” whose mission was to “defend and blindly serve the capitalist regime” or else be deemed “ungrateful”.[46] Black students, in particular, the paper argued, needed to understand the “distortion” to which “capitalist instruction drags them,” as under capitalism, they would “bastardise [themselves] up until the total annihilation of their personality.”[47] Several key anticolonial student groups thus recognised the impact of colonial education on their

psyche and their relationship to capitalist ideology. *Le Cri des Nègres*' shrewd analysis of the overlapping role of capitalism and colonial domination was explicitly intended to foster relations of transnational anticolonial solidarity across cultures. More broadly, this period saw the explicit connection between education and capitalist ideology emerge, as anticolonial groups increasingly levied critiques of bourgeois education as juxtaposed to the anticolonial struggles of labouring masses in their homelands.

Colonial French authorities took a special interest in monitoring high-achieving students from the colonies who appeared vulnerable to anticolonial or "anti-French" sentiment.[48] French police began to monitor Thao's movements following his winning entrance exam to ENS. In Thao's surveillance folder, French police filed a clipped article from *Le Journal* about Thao's admission to ENS.[49] The article's last line declared, "This brilliant result, won by a…child of our Empire, is it not striking proof of the colonising genius of our country, and of the effort she makes to transfer her culture to her adopted sons?"[50]

This characterisation of Thao as "a child of our Empire" powerfully exemplifies the paternalistic logic of French colonial education. The French educational system was imagined as a mechanism to uplift colonial students worldwide and educate them in the nationalist ideologies of French superiority and mould them in the service of its empire. The French newspaper did not consider Thao's success a product of his own capabilities; rather, his success is attributed solely to the "colonising genius" of France and its efforts to transpose its culture to its "adopted sons". Linking Thao's success to broader colonial educational efforts, another journalist covering Thao's acceptance noted:

> The French are happy to see that their yellow and black brothers assimilate to their culture to the point of beating the best of them at their own game. Isn't it wonderful that young people of another race, belonging to a civilisation so different from ours, manage to expound brilliantly on what constitutes the heart of our culture?[51]

The supposed "universality" of French culture and the perceived innate force of its internal logic to assimilate the most varied constituents of the French empire is credited for colonial students' academic success. And yet, this success did little to dissuade French authorities of the importance of keeping a close watch on Thao and other such successful colonial students.

## Anticolonial Student Movements

By the time Thao and Ménil arrived in Paris, new Vietnamese, Caribbean, and West African anticolonial student groups had formed and issued clarion calls for international and class solidarity amongst colonial students in Paris. These new organisations provided an infrastructure for anticolonial intellectual trends to circulate. Ménil, for example, was highly influenced by groups and publications like Martinicans Paulette and Jane Nardal's l'*Étudiant noir and Revue du monde noir*, and was likely familiar with the West African Tiemoko Garan Kouyate's League of the Defense of the Black Race (LDRN), which had

defined imperatives for cultural emancipation to effect intellectual and cultural decolonisation.[52] The LDRN had founded a "Group of Black Students of the League" in 1929 to create a transnational black student movement devoted to the "intellectual emancipation of our race."[53] According to the LDRN, Black students and young intellectuals ought to rely only on themselves and the "solicitude of [their] elders" through transnational cooperation to achieve the "liberation of their minds" and the "liberation of their countries," which the LDRN believed were inextricably linked.

Similarly, both Thao and Ménil were likely influenced by Vietnamese student groups who echoed the LDRN in forging anticolonial student protests linking education, class, and cultural emancipation against the elite French colonial project. Following the 1930 Yen Bai Massacre, during which a Vietnamese revolt was met with violent French repression, several Vietnamese students protested at the Cité Universitaire, the foreign students' residences. Linking their status as students to the political freedom at home in Vietnam, on 20 February 1930, following the establishment of the Vietnamese Communist Party, the students declared:

> We affirm our revolutionary solidarity with their brothers in struggle, condemn the policy of plunder and oppression of French imperialism, and salute the Communist Party of Indochina, the only organisation capable of leading the Indo-Chinese workers and peasants to liberation.[54]

Foreshadowing Thao, who argued that Vietnamese students and intellectuals were indebted to their proletarian compatriots and not to the benevolence of French education, the AGEI declared that the "Annamites who suffer and labour in the rice fields under the burning sun, on the scaffold, under bombardment, in jails, will see how you reward their work" and "ruin their fortune and their hope."[55] Thus, the AGEI, at first a nominally apolitical group, had been radicalised by 1930 following the Yen Bai massacre.[56] They cited repression against students in Indochina and the founding of the assimilationist Maison Indochinoise as their impetus to "modify, if not totally transform, the ideological basis of our association."[57] Their manifesto reads as a pointed critique of the dualistic worlds of coloniser and colonised, which Thao would later raise in the pages of *Les Temps Modernes*.

As a student-activist himself who attracted the attention of the Parisian police for his activity in anti-French Indochinese circles as secretary for the Association of Annamites of France,[58] Thao was likely influenced not only by Husserl and Marx but also by Vietnamese anticolonial student co-organisers. The AGEI declared politics the "condensation of all social activities, resulting from two increasingly complex component forces, those of the oppressed and those of the oppressors."[59] Describing French limits to secondary education in Indochina as an "intellectual blockade", they critiqued the colonial dynamic that Thao would later raise in his analysis of colonial education and class solidarity. In an early articulation of pan-Asian intellectual transfer, the AGEI wrote that after the Japanese victory over Russia in 1905, their "ancestors, feeling stifled in their own country, crossed borders illegally to study in Japan, China, and Siam," a "movement of clandestine emigration" which alarmed the French government, who concluded that it was "preferable that these young Indochinese students submit to the influence of French culture instead."[60]

Because of this, they wrote that in 1908, the "door of Marseille was thus half-opened to us, or more precisely, our elders, at the price of a thousand sacrifices, forced the door open for our generation."[61] Drawing out a preliminary anti-capitalist historical analysis of colonial education, the AGEI worked to create a nascent anticolonial consciousness which looked transnationally for intellectual inspiration.

Recalling Ménil's critique of Martinican literature, accusations of intellectual collaborationist sentiment stemming from French colonial education were central to AGEI's critique of colonial education. The AGEI identified the creation of the assimilationist and loyalist "Maison des Indochinois" as a reincarnation of the "old intellectual blockade, reborn in 1930" whose leaders "actively work[ed] to push them imperceptibly but surely down the path of collaborationist betrayal."[62] In the aftermath of Yen Bai, nationalist animosity towards any suspicion of collaborationism or loyalty to France was high. Following the surveillance of these tracts, the AGEI was dissolved by decree in June 1930.[63] Consequently, several members of the AGEI joined the Mutual Association of Indochinese, while those who were "openly communist" joined the Indochinese Section of the Federal Union of Students.[64] The Vietnamese section of the Federal Union of Students published a journal called The New Students, which contained a "colonial supplement" carrying articles against French colonisation — for example, criticising the "French teaching methods in Indo-China."[65] This focus on French teaching methods and class critique would be taken up in earnest by Thao in the phenomenology of the colonial dispossessed he laid out in *Les Temps Modernes* after the war.

In a 1946 issue of *Les Temps Modernes*, Thao outlined a phenomenology of colonised existence, theorising that the French and the Vietnamese live in different worlds of possibilities. He wrote that the "Annamite lives in a world where he projects the possibilities of an independent Vietnam, free to industrialise, to create the number of schools it would have wanted, to send all its students to all the universities of Europe and America."[66] In contrast, the Frenchman is "taught in school that Indochina is French" and that it would be "contradictory that anything which was part of French domain could have an independent existence: that is unthinkable."[67] Thus, Thao argued that French colonial education limited the phenomenological life-worlds of the coloniser and the colonised from imagining the unthinkable – liberation for France's colonies. Thao argued that Vietnamese and French life-worlds held incompatible conceptions of the "possible" and incommensurate "horizons". The French could not comprehend Vietnamese independence since Vietnam only existed as part of the French community. For the French, Vietnam's independent existence was "unthinkable". Thus, for the Vietnamese, any liberal federalist form of belonging to France was unacceptable; the only solution was a violent revolution. As such, Thao incorporated a phenomenological emphasis on lived experience and the life-world of the colonised into a theory of class solidarity and anticolonial revolution with existential stakes. In doing so, Thao extended both phenomenological and Marxist analysis beyond its orthodox theoretical framings by grounding it in the lived experiences of colonised peoples.

## Légitime Défense

The growing transnational anticolonial student consciousness based in epistemic critique is equally reflected in the pages of *Légitime Défense* (*LD*), a Sorbonne-based publication of anticolonial surrealist and Marxist revolt published by Ménil and a group of Martinican students in 1932. Taking after their colleagues in *La Revue du Monde Noir* (1930), *LD* was part of a growing body of student movements in Paris amongst the Martinican *bourgeoisie de couleur* (bourgeoisie of colour).[68] Through its emphasis on surrealist and Marxist dialectics and African-American literature, *LD* drew attention to the necessity of epistemological rupture for anticolonial revolt. They took their name from a pamphlet published by Breton in 1927, which detailed his theory of surrealist change, linking language, writing, and emancipation through social revolution.[69]

*LD* presented the first instance of surrealism being invoked as an epistemic rupture in an anticolonial context by Caribbean students. Though *LD* would later be dismissed by many, including Aimé Césaire, for being too "limited" in its frameworks of Marxism and surrealism and failing to achieve new literary forms itself,[70] *LD* constitutes an early historical example of Martinican students wrestling with the problem of colonialism as a totalising phenomenon, conceptualising it as requiring epistemological revolution, grounded in materialist historical analysis. The young authors of *LD* sought diverse methods to reckon with the historical, material, and epistemological factors that conspired to send them to Europe as children of the Martinican bourgeoisie. The political possibilities the young members of *LD* entertained were conditioned by the political and historical moment they lived under, coming of age at the "height of the colonial project."[71] In straining against the epistemic possibilities presented to them, their work contained themes of strident class solidarity and anticolonialism well before their time. As Ménil later reflected, their project was "more Fanonist than Senghorian or even Césairist," surpassing the Negritude generation to prefigure the work of its critics, Frantz Fanon and Edouard Glissant.[72] *LD*, an early product of the twin developments of epistemic rupture and transnational anticolonial consciousness, combined a critique of capitalism with the colonial ideologies of French education, looking to surrealism as a potential intellectual avenue to liberate Martinican consciousness.

*LD* drew attention to colonial education's impact on the bourgeois Martinican psyche. The authors linked longstanding colonial conditions to the need for cultural, literary, and epistemological revolt. Moreover, like its descendants in the wartime Martinican surrealist journal *Tropiques* (1941-45), the writers of *LD* looked to raise the ontological stakes of Martinican literature to what they believed was a more genuine expression of lived experience, something absent from the body of Martinican literature they accused of imitating and reproducing European thought. Finally, consistent with *Tropiques*' later goals, the writers of *LD* articulated an incipient theory of poesis as worldmaking, in which creating poetry could open up new political possibilities in the imagination and combat the effects of French colonial education. *LD*'s intellectual descendants in the writers of *Tropiques*

declared themselves committed to the necessary task of "creat[ing]" a new "world" in contradistinction to the existing one of colonial Vichy oppression, selecting surrealism as their path.[73] Following their predecessors in *LD*, they understood poetry as a worldmaking surrealist speech act[74] to join the ideal and material and intervene on concrete and ideational planes.

As Michael Joseph points out, Antillean socialist thought had long held "systematic anti-imperial critiques grounded in anti-capitalism," both in Paris and the Antilles.[75] Following this tradition, *LD*'s authors offered an analysis of the colonial roots of education and class structures of the Martinican bourgeoisie, to which most authors belonged. Surrealism, which the group "accept[ed] without reserve", provided the *LD* group with a form of epistemological rupture and an artistic ethic to grapple with their dual identity –as Black Caribbean students and as highly privileged members of the colonial bourgeoisie.[76] *LD* member Jules-Marcel Monnerot, the son of Jules Monnerot, a founder of Martinican communism, identified the group as "children of the coloured bourgeoisie raised in the cult of fraud…who, after high school, go to France," and "conform to the customs and character of the majority of their fellow European students."[77] Surrealism served not only as an aesthetic form of rebellion but also as a way to liberate their minds from the "hideous face" of the *bourgeoisie de couleur*, which, in Monnerot's words, "leaned over my cradle…as soon as I learned to read and write."[78] The focus on reading and writing paralleled Ménil's analysis of Martinican literature, which linked intellectual activities intimately to a sense of self, possibility, and imagination. Ménil and Monnerot were responding here to the "seamless inheritance of nineteenth-century French exoticism" reflected in the poetry of non-white Antillean poets in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, in which the dominant conception of value was determined by the extent to which the "poet's race could not be guessed from reading the text."[79]

*LD* writers displayed early and acute attention to historical class structures, analysing how the Martinican "hereditary white plutocracy… makes human objects of the black proletariat" in an "inexorable" colonial sugar and rum economy.[80] Linking economic structures and aspirational bourgeois politics to race, education, and culture, they illustrated the necessity to link epistemic revolution to political praxis. In a biting critique of those "children of the *bourgeois de couleur*" to whom *LD* is addressed, Monnerot writes that their desire to "assimilate" confers a "tragic character to their slightest move."[81] Through an analysis of the colonial and capitalist structures of race and class, he writes that these students "obtain whiteness" in their endeavours for the "guarantee of a French university education," while "in the countryside, *des noirs* continue to cut cane and do not yet think to off the heads of those who repeatedly betray them."[82] *LD* thus modelled the politics of intracolonial class solidarity, which figured prominently in the anticolonialism of Vietnamese student activists.

Beyond surrealism, *LD*'s authors cited two important sources of inspiration outside of France for their epistemological rupture: African and Oceanic art and the "poems, stories, and jazz" of the Harlem Renaissance.[83] They included a translated chapter of the Jamaican-

American writer Claude McKay's *Banjo*, first published in the U.S. in 1929, which became, in its French translation, a "manifesto for black cultural radicalism."[84] Alluding to their transnational anticolonial ambitions, the *LD* writers wrote that they were "indifferent towards the conditions of time and space which, defining [them] in 1932 as Antillean," thus established their "initial field of action" without in any way confining them.[85] For example, *LD* member Étienne Léro provided political commentary on the Scottsboro trials, expressing a sophisticated critique of American anti-Black racism, an issue followed closely by Black anticolonial groups like LDRN.[86]

To counteract the education which left Caribbean students "filled to bursting with white morality, white culture, white education and white prejudices,"[87] Ménil called for a literature and artistic creation which explored instead the "feelings of the cane cutter before the ruthless factory, the feeling of Black solitude throughout the world" and "revolt against the injustices he especially suffers in his country."[88] These topics, Ménil maintained, would "move black, yellow, and white people as the poems of Black Americans touch the whole world."[89] Here, Ménil called for a creative expression specific to place and rooted in lived experience while fostering broader transnational solidarity, pointing to the examples of Harlem Renaissance writers like Langston Hughes and Claude McKay.

Finally, *LD* writers created a nascent theory of poesis as worldmaking, creating an intellectual and political opening for epistemological decolonisation.[90] Ménil categorised literature which "moves towards the world", "expresses fundamental needs", and "seeks to transform existence" as "useful literature", as opposed to literature "chained to logical and utilitarian thought."[91] In Jules Monnerot's view, poetry was a part of worldmaking as a communal project in that the "dialectical progress of surrealism" could join language to the "very matter of representation" to "engineer the passage of the word into the world."[92] Like Thao's phenomenology of colonial education, which linked the act of intellectual and cultural emancipation to the political project of decolonisation, *LD*'s worldmaking ushered in a new intellectual and cultural anticolonial political thought which would manifest in political action after World War II.

## Conclusion

Transnational anticolonial student activism in the 1920s and 1930s identified colonial education's universalising *mission civilatrice* and associated French colonial project to create a French-educated colonial elite to uphold colonial rule as its primary target. In tracts, manifestos, and publications, students from Vietnam, West Africa, and Martinique argued that intellectual and cultural emancipation would be necessary to combat the legacies of French colonial education and its universalist civilising mission. In conjunction with new academic and aesthetic movements like surrealism and phenomenology focused on epistemological rupture, anticolonial students in LDRN, AGEI, and *Légitime Défense* progressively made sophisticated demands concerning the economic and cultural role of education in colonial oppression. They argued that the intellectual, cultural and psychological impacts of French colonial practices demanded corresponding efforts at

intellectual and cultural emancipation -and drew attention to the need for transnational collaboration in this effort. Whether looking for inspiration from Black diasporic writers like Claude McKay and Langston Hughes, historically Black colleges in the United States, or the histories of pan-Asian collaboration, anticolonial student groups sought new tools to combat the epistemic legacies of colonial education, often looking across oceans to do so. French imperial education presented a totalising infrastructure constructed to prevent colonised people from accessing senses of "place" divorced from the world that colonialism had made. Embedded in colonial orderings of time and place was the notion that France would teach its colonies how and what it meant to be modern, developed, and civilised. Across cultural contexts, anticolonial students worldwide sought to imagine the unthinkable as the first step in decolonisation.

## Notes

[1] Roger Nash Baldwin, quoted in Michael Goebel, *Anti-Imperial Metropolis: Interwar Paris and the Seeds of Third World Nationalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 3.

[2] Gavin Parkinson, *Surrealism, Art, and Modern Science: Relativity, Quantum Mechanics, Epistemology* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008), 59.

[3] See Frantz Fanon, "The So-Called Dependency Complex of Colonized Peoples," *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Markmann (London: Pluto, 1967), 83-108.

[4] Cyrus Schayegh and Yoav Di-Capua, "Why Decolonization?," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 52, no. 1 (February 2020): 138.

[5] Matthew Renault, "Fanon and Tran Duc Thao: The Making of French Anticolonialism," *Nottingham French Studies* 54, no. 1 (March 2015): 107–118.

[6] Some important exceptions within the literature on Ménil include: Brent Hayes Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003); Franklin Rosemont and Robin D. G. Kelley, eds., *Black, Brown, & Beige: Surrealist Writings from Africa and the Diaspora* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2009); T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting, *Negritude Women* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002); Krzysztof Fijakowski, ed., *Refusal of the Shadow: Surrealism and the Caribbean*, trans. Michael Richardson (London: Verso, 1996).

[7] Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora;* Jérôme Melançon, "Trân Duc Thao," in *The Routledge Handbook of Phenomenology and Phenomenological Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 2021); Tim Herrick, "'A Book Which Is No Longer Discussed Today': Tran Duc Thao, Jacques Derrida, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty," J*ournal of the History of Ideas* 66, no. 1 (2005): 113–131.

[8] Howard Davies, *Sartre and 'Les Temps Modernes'* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 19.

[9] Independent studies of Thao and Ménil can be found, inter alia, in: Jocelyn Benoist and Michel Espagne, eds., *L'itinéraire de Tran Duc Thao: Phénoménologie et Transfert Culturel* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2013); Jeremy F. Lane, "'Marvellous' Ellington: René Ménil, Jazz, Surrealism, and Creole Identity in Wartime Martinique," in *Jazz and Machine-Age Imperialism: Music, "Race," and Intellectuals in France, 1918-1945* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2013), 155-179.

[10] Eric Jennings, *Escape from Vichy: The Refugee Exodus to the French Caribbean* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018), 131.

[11] Kristen Stromberg Childers, *Seeking Imperialism's Embrace: National Identity, Decolonization, and Assimilation in the French Caribbean* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 5, 16.

[12] Kevin Ruane, *War and Revolution in Vietnam, 1930-75* (London: UCL, 1998), 3.

[13] A "world-historical" moment is one that is globally significant. See Gary Wilder, *Freedom Time: Negritude, Decolonization, and the Future of the World* (Duke University Press, 2015), 1–2.

[14] André Breton, *Manifestes Du Surréalisme* (Paris: Gallimard, 1972), 37.

[15] "Avertissement," *Légitime Défense*, facsimile with preface by René Ménil (Paris, 1932; fac. Paris: Jean-Michel Place, 1979), 1. Unless otherwise stated, citations hereafter refer to the original page numbers from the 1932 publication.

[16] Stephanie d'Alessandro and Matthew Gale, eds., *Surrealism Beyond Borders* (New York: Yale University Press, 2021).

[17] Ethan Kleinberg, *Generation Existential: Heidegger's Philosophy in France, 1927–1961* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005), 5.

[18] Tran Duc Thao, "Questions sur Communisme," *Confluences* 8, no. 18-20 (1947): 277.

[19] Thao, "Questions sur Communisme," 277.

[20] Tran Duc Thao, "Sur l'Indochine," *Les Temps Modernes*, no. 5 (February 1946): 897.

[21] Schayegh and Di-Capua, "Why Decolonization?," 138.

[22] Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora*, 7

[23] René Ménil, "Généralités Sur 'l'écrivain' de Couleur Antillais," *Légitime Défense*, no. 1 (1932): 7.

[24] Ménil, "Généralités," 7.

[25] For similar examples, see Omnia El Shakry, *The Arabic Freud: Psychoanalysis and Islam in Modern Egypt* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017); Yoav Di-Capua, *No Exit: Arab Existentialism, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Decolonization* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018).

[26] "Avertissement," 1.

[27] Quoted in Jane Hiddleston, *Decolonising the Intellectual: Politics, Culture, and Humanism at the End of the French Empire* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2014), 4.

[28] Trinh Van Thao, "L'idéologie de l'école en Indochine (1890-1938)," *Revue Tiers Monde* 34, no. 133 (March 1993): 173.

[29] Raymond Betts, *Assimilation and Association in French Colonial Theory, 1890-1914* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961), 8.

[30] Van Thao, "L'idéologie," 174.

[31] Sarah Moon McDermott Thompson, "Creole Citizens of France: The Trans-Atlantic Politics of Antillean Education and the Creole Movement since 1945," (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 2012), 31-32.

[32] Stefanos Geroulanos, *An Atheism That Is Not Humanist Emerges in French Thought* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010), 42.

[33] Parkinson, *Surrealism, Art, and Modern Science*, 59.

[34] David Marr, *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial, 1920-1945* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1981), 35.

[35] Quoted in Goebel, *Anti-Imperial Metropolis*, 119.

[36] "Le Gouverneur Général de l'Indochine, à Monsieur le Ministre des Colonies," 15 July 1929, ref. III SLOTFOM 118, Archives Nationale d'Outre-Mer (ANOM).

[37] "Note au ministre 77 sur l'admission des indigènes de nos colonies dans les Grandes Ecoles," 22 September 1933, ref. III SLOTFOM 118, ANOM.

[38] "Note au ministre 77."

[39] "Note au ministre 77."

[40] "Pour nos étudiants," *La Race Nègre*, no. 3 (3 September 1927). Racist hierarchies and status within the French empire likely contributed to the inequalities faced by West African students as opposed to Antillean or Indochinese students.

[41] "M. Tran Duc Thao: Agrégé en Philosophie," *L'Écho Annamite*, 23 September, 1943, 2.

[42] "M. Tran Duc Thao," 2.

[43] "Un succès pour la jeunesse de l'Empire: un tonkinois est reçu troisième à Normale lettres – Le Beau Palmarès de M. Tran Duc Thao," *L'Intransigeant*, 23 July, 1939, 1.

[44] *Annamite* refers to a resident of *Annam*, the French colonial name for the central province of Vietnam. "A.S. of Tran-Duc-Thao, in relation to the Vietnamese Delegation," 22 December 1949, ref. 1 W 765 30311, Archives de la Préfecture de Police, Paris (APP).

[45] Kleinberg, *Generation Existential*, 8.

[46] S. Ceron, "Pour server à l'Education des Travailleurs Nègres," *Le cri des nègres*, no. 19 (August 1935).

[47] Ceron, "Pour server à l'Education."

[48] "Note de l'Agent Désiré," 25 May 1929, ref. III SLOTFOM 3, ANOM.

[49] "Un jeune Tonkinois reçu troisième à Normale supérieure," 23 July 1939, ref. III SLOTFOM 124, ANOM.

[50] "Un jeune Tonkinois," ANOM.

[51] "Un succès pour la jeunesse de l'Empire: un tonkinois est reçu troisième à Normale lettres – Le Beau Palmarès de M. Tran Duc Thao," *L'Intransigeant*, 23 July, 1939, 1.

[52] Sharpley-Whiting, *Negritude Women*, 38-79; Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora*, 119-186; Imaobong Umoren, *Race Women Internationalists: Activist-Intellectuals and Global Freedom Struggles* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2017), 15-22.

[53] "Cher Compatriote," 4 March 1929, ref. III SLOTFOM 24, ANOM; "Circulaire de La Ligue de Défense de la Race Nègre en langue anglaise," 24 June 1929, ref. III SLOTFOM 24, ANOM.

[54] “Une manifestation de solidarité des étudiants indochinois en France,” *l’Humanité*, 22 February 1930, ref. III SLOTFOM 3, ANOM.

[55] “Copie du manifeste affiché au Restaurant de la Cité Universitaire,” 9 April 1930, ref. F/7/13410, Archives Nationales (AN).

[56] “Note sur l’action revolutionnaire aux colonies,” 4 June 1931, ref. F/7/13412, AN.

[57] “Manifeste de l’Association Generale des Étudiants Indochinois,” 12 March 1930, ref. F/7/13410, AN.

[58] “A.S. of Tran-Duc-Thao.”

[59] “A.S. of Tran-Duc-Thao.”

[60] “A.S. of Tran-Duc-Thao.”

[61] “A.S. of Tran-Duc-Thao.”

[62] “A.S. of Tran-Duc-Thao.”

[63] Note, 8 July 1930, ref. F/7/13410, AN.

[64] “Note sur l’action.”

[65] “A/S. de l’Union Fédérale des Etudiants (section indochinoise),” 13 February 1930, ref. F/7/13410, AN.

[66] Thao, ‘Sur l’Indochine,” 882.

[67] IThao, “Sur l’Indochine,” 883.

[68] Sharpley-Whiting, *Negritude Women*, 21.

[69] Gerard Aching, “In Legitimate Defense,” *Nka Journal of Contemporary African Art* 2021, no. 49 (November 2021): 192.

[70] Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora*, 195; René Ménil, Daniel Maximin, and Christiane Goldman, “Dialogue with René Ménil,” trans. Rebecca Krasner, *The CLR James Journal* 26, no. 1 (2020): 41.

[71] Yarimar Bonilla, *Non-Sovereign Futures: French Caribbean Politics in the Wake of Disenchantment* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 20.

[72] René Ménil, “Préface,” *Légitime Défense*, 2.

[73] Aristide Maugée, “Poésie et Obscurité,” *Tropiques* no. 2 (July 1941): 10.

[74] This aligned with Breton’s first articulation of surrealist poetry as a method of social liberation in his 1926 pamphlet which inspired *LD*’s name; see André Breton, *Légitime Défense* (Paris: Éditions surréalistes, 1926).

[75] Michael Joseph, “Beyond the Nation: Anticolonialism in the British and French Caribbean after the First World War (1919-1939),” (D.Phil. diss., University of Oxford, 2019), 205-206.

[76] “Avertissement,” 1.

[77] Rolande Bosphore, *Militants et militantismes communistes à la Martinique, 1920-1971:*

*identification, forme et implication* (Matoury: Ibis Rouge Éditions 2015), 17; Jules-Marcel Monnerot, "Note touchant la bourgeoisie de couleur française," *Légitime Défense,* no. 1 (1932): 4.

[78] Monnerot, "Note," 3.

[79] Jeannie Suk, *Postcolonial Paradoxes in French Caribbean Writing: Césaire, Glissant, Condé* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2001), 24

[80] Monnerot, "Note," 3.

[81] Monnerot, "Note," 4.

[82] Monnerot, "Note," 4.

[83] Ménil, "Généralités," 9.

[84] Sarah Dunstan, *Race, Rights and Reform: Black Activism in the French Empire and the United States from World War I to the Cold War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 87; Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora,* 187-240.

[85] "Avertissement," 1.

[86] Étienne Léro, "Civilisation," L*égitime Défense*, no. 1 (1932): 9; see also *Le Cri des Nègres*, no. 1 (August 1931) and no. 8-9 (March-April 1932).

[87] Étienne Léro, "Misère d'une poésie," *Légitime Défense*, no. 1 (1932): 10.

[88] Ménil, "Généralités," 8.

[89] Ménil, "Généralités," 8.

[90] "Avertissement," 1.

[91] Ménil, "Généralités," 8.

[92] Ménil, "Généralités," 8.

# “Blood is the Symbol of Afro-Asia”: Afro-Asian Imaginings of Past, Present, and Future Violence during the Bandung Era

By

Edward Yuan

## Abstract

*Scholars often point to the Bandung Conference as a major event in the history of decolonization. However, this perspective relies on an interstate and developmentalist reading of anticolonialism that ultimately failed with the debt crises of the 1980s, the emergence of neoliberalism, and the death of the Bandung project. This paper offers a shift in focus by exploring the grassroot networks of Afro-Asian decolonization in the Bandung era and their preoccupation with redemptive violence in order to offer a more revolutionary imagining of the Bandung Spirit and to highlight its continued relevance rather than its eventual demise.*

## About the author

Edward Yuan holds a BA in History from the University of British Columbia. He is particularly interested in economic and cultural histories of colonialism, decolonization, and neocolonialism. Currently, he is working on a comparative study of global deindustrialization toward the end of the 20th century, with a specific focus on Northeast China following market reforms. With this project, he hopes to shed light on the global implications of the neoliberal turn and challenge nativist narratives of the offshoring of manufacturing and resource extraction in North America.

## Bandung, 1955

As 29 of the world's poorer and more racially marginalized nations gathered for the Bandung Conference in 1955, writers, revolutionaries, and statesmen hailed the beginning of a new Southern world imbued with the spirit of the mountainous Indonesian city, Bandung.[1] Driven by the revolutionary, anticolonial, and Third-Worldist hope called the Bandung Spirit that swept through Africa and Asia, decolonizing states convened numerous conferences in the 1950s and 1960s.[2] Yet by the 1980s, a combination of infighting, debt crises, and repression ended the liberation networks that propagated the Bandung Spirit. This raises the questions: What was the Bandung Spirit? Whose imaginings of it are remembered? And is it still worth remembering in a post-Bandung world? In the Bandung Era, non-state Afro-Asian networks of writers, poets, and revolutionaries conceptualized the Bandung Spirit as an ethos animated by both the colonial violence of the past as well as the redemptive potential of future anticolonial violence. These networks first used chronopolitics—the politics of time—to narrativize common histories of colonial violence and futures of anticolonial violence.

The purpose of this narrativization was to unite Afro-Asia as an imagined community in the absence of convincing cultural, geographic, or political similarities. While some colonized writers condemned revolutionary violence, others saw it as a way to reclaim their future and humanity. This grassroots conception of the Bandung Spirit, focusing on the centrality of violence in colonial history and anti-colonial struggle, stands in contrast to the moderate and developmentalist elite narratives of Bandung, and demonstrates that the Afro-Asian movement took on a life outside of state monopolization. However, scholars have criticized the Bandung paradigm's binarization of colonizer and colonized as an oversimplification of the reality of decolonization, where decolonizing states could reproduce colonial violence.[3] Despite its historical shortcomings, the Bandung Spirit retains its relevance today as a radical hope for a future free from colonial oppression, made possible only by the redemptive and violent struggles of colonized people against their colonizers.

Until recently, scholarship about the Bandung Era has failed to account for the transnational, people-centered networks that created the Bandung Spirit. Early scholarship, including the work of George McTurnan Kahin, focused on the Bandung Conference's Cold War implications and the emerging Bandung world as a geopolitical bloc, with interchangeable names like the Third World, Global South, or Afro-Asia.[4] Later, as debt crises destroyed decolonizing states and ushered in the contemporary neoliberal and neocolonial system, new histories interpreted the ephemeral nature of the Bandung Spirit as indicative of its lack of grassroots support.[5] Jeffrey Byrne argued that Third-Worldism was a framework monopolized by hypocritical political elites, while Robert Vitalis stated that the Bandung Conference did not launch a popular movement of any kind.[6] Other authors like Samir Amin and Vijay Prashad affirm the Bandung Spirit by examining it through a grand economistic lens,contrary to how it was perceived by Afro-Asian thinkers at the

time.[7] In 2018, the Afro-Asian Networks Research Collective's manifesto called on scholars on the Bandung moment to focus on “the highly mobile activists, writers, scientists, and artists of the Afro-Asian moment,” opposing the state-centered political lenses offered by early scholarship. This project answers this call by centering transnational networks of decolonization and their theories on (anti-)colonial violence. [8] will discuss the centrality of violence in the Bandung Spirit, as conceived by Richard Wright in *The Color Curtain* and the Afro-Asian Writers’ Bureau (AAWB). These perspectives embody how non-state actors created and participated in networks that agitated for a vision of a new world, one which acknowledged the violence in the colonial world order and its necessity in anti-colonial struggles. This paper will first analyze how global personalities as well as decolonizing and colonial states created the space of Afro-Asia which ignored political boundaries and created a solidarity between the myriad figures travelling between the conferences of that time. Then, I will seek to explain why Afro-Asia held such an appeal as an imagined community by focusing on its shared histories of, struggles against, and even desires for violence. Finally, I will argue that Afro-Asianism’s demise is attributable to the persistence of colonial patterns of violence that prioritized “development” and its implicit colonial assumptions despite a more comprehensive future vision from Afro-Asian writers.

## Creating Afro-Asia

The transnational Afro-Asian context behind Bandung brought together writers such as Richard Wright and the AAWB to perform and create two manifestations of the Bandung Spirit. These were different in their context of creation but united by a preoccupation with colonial violence. Wright was born in Mississippi and lived in Arkansas and Tennessee before moving North to pursue his career in writing. These formative experiences under Jim Crow informed Wright’s perspective on racism in the African-American context.[9] The Black America he grew up in was violent and could be seen as a form of colonization. Some poets of the AAWB did precisely that by incorporating African diasporas into their ideas of the colonized world.[10] Nevertheless, Wright never thought of himself as a colonized subject and instead thought of his participation with Afro-Asia as the tying together of different African-American and colonized experiences of racial discrimination.[11] Thus, when Wright went to Bandung in 1955, he sought to better understand these people he perceived as radically different, yet shaped by the same racist structures.[12] His account of the Bandung Conference, *The Color Curtain*, was published in 1956 and was informed by interviews, state speeches, and meetings organized by the local Konfrontasi study group.[13] That being said, Wright was far from a hunted dissident and his trip was funded by the Congress for Cultural Freedom (CCF), an anti-communist organization of writers, artists, and intellectuals that was covertly backed by the CIA.[14] Previously, he had even acted as an informer to the American consulate on the Gold Coast’s anticolonial movement under Kwame Nkrumah.[15] This demonstrated Wright’s willingness to work with the very American government institutions he criticized, providing that it was mutually beneficial. As the author of the definitive account of the Bandung Conference in America, Wright has been examined as an exceptional personality (such as in *Richard Wright in Context*) and the

subject of much scholarly discussion.[16] He is regarded as a key figure in the emerging networks of Third World writers and intellectuals.[17] Yet, few scholars have focused on what Wright observed at Bandung.[18] Some authors have deemed his work as fear-mongering Orientalism, or suggest it was obscured by accounts that perpetuate half-truths about Bandung. However, Wright's observations on violence at Bandung account for an integral part of the Afro-Asian movement's founding myth and should continue to be considered within the context of his own goals.[19]

Afro-Asian writers, including Faiz Ahmad Faiz, Ousmane Sembene, and Mao Dun, formed the AAWB in 1957 following the Bandung Conference. During the 1958 Afro-Asian Writers' Conference in Tashkent, the AAWB announced its mission to create a new world literature that does not privilege the Euro-American tradition.[20] Through this statement, the AAWB communicated that the cultural work of decolonization was intertwined with the political and economic, and constructing Afro-Asian connections based on equality should be prioritized over hierarchical relationships with the former colonial metropole. With this ethos, the unified AAWB published their only poetry anthology, *Afro-Asian Poems*, from Colombo in 1962, adding to their political publication, *The Call*, and literary journal, *Lotus*.[21]

The transnational spaces of the AAWB, ranging from Bandung to Cairo, Tashkent, Colombo, and Beijing, illustrate how wide the Afro-Asian movement's scope was.[22] Like Wright's backing from the American government through the CCF, the AAWB's publications were also funded by states at Bandung as diverse as Nasserist Egypt, Ceylon (still a formal colony before 1972), Indonesia under Sukarno, Maoist China, and India along with the Soviet Union, which was motivated by both by geopolitical maneuvering to overthrow status-quo powers as well as a real ideological alliance with decolonial activists interested in the alternative modernity promised by Marxism.[23] Nevertheless, the AAWB was not beholden to its backer states whom they often criticized. Instead, they were primarily interested in using states to advance their work of revolutionary decolonization. Thus, Wright and the AAWB, brought together by new Afro-Asian connections enabled by state funding and the era's conferences, were not just pawns in the cultural Cold War but represented a popular Afro-Asian movement. As a wide-ranging cultural vehicle of the Third World project, the AAWB offers a representative example of the grassroots manifestation of the Bandung Spirit.

The creation of Afro-Asia during the Bandung Era first involved narrativizing shared histories to shape their arguments for the anticolonial future. Scholarship on Afrodiasporic worldmaking and chronopolitics stress how the dislocation of slavery forced Afrodiasporic thinkers to reimagine the past to create new identities. Sun Ra's identification with Ancient Egypt or the Black Hebrew Israelites with Judaism are a few examples.[24] The efforts of Afro-Asian states and poets to create an Afro-Asian world fulfill a similar purpose.[25] While the fantastical worldmaking that followed Bandung often pseudo-historically projected religious, national, and colonized communities back in time before such modern identities

were constructed, the creation of Afro-Asia was defined by the tangible historical reality of colonization.[26] Wright notes that the Bandung Conference brought together delegates that had "nothing [in common] but what their past relationship with the Western World had made them feel." The feeling that colonialism engendered was solidarity.[27] In the Pakistani poet Kassim Ahmad's poem, "To the Forgotten Heroes of This Land," featured in *Afro-Asian Poems*, Ahmad invokes mythological figures from different Asian cultures to swear a pact against colonialism.[28] By narrativizing the heroes of different historical traditions into the idea of Asia, Ahmad argues for the restoration of past Pan-Asian unity in future anticolonial struggles. Other poems like, "I Am A Negro" and "The Black Eagle Awakes" use the history of the Black Atlantic to project Pan-African solidarity back in time.[29] While there is often a division between the "Afro-" and "Asian" in *Afro-Asian Poems*, this division is regarded as an opportunity for cooperation, as proven by poems that bridge that perceived gap through the project of decolonization. The Chinese poet Han Beiping exoticizes Africa in his poem "Drums at Night" by using drumbeats to emphasize Africa's "foreignness", while simultaneously expressing solidarity with the drum that "beat(s) for freedom and independence."[30] Finally, the inclusion of poets from the Soviet Union's Asian minorities like Mirza Tursun-Zade, and his poem "My Sister, Africa!" are also notable. Tursun-Zade's poems further disintegrate political borders and compartmentalized histories to create an Afro-Asia future by recognizing Central and Northern Asia, often treated as an annex of European Russia, as independent subjectivities with histories of racialization and colonization akin to the rest of Afro-Asia.[31] Nevertheless, an Afro-Asian world united by a history of colonialism was not constructed for its own sake but simply set the stage for a more powerful theme: revolutionary Afro-Asia united by blood.

## Significance of Racial Shame and Violence

In the anticolonial worldmaking undertaken by the Bandung Spirit, violence plays a central role in its chronopolitics. The violence of the past produced the oppression that forms the unjust violence of the present, which then created conditions for retributive anticolonial violence with the promise of a just peace. Wright mentions that some American journalists, speaking of the Bandung Conference's alleged anti-white bias, "seemed to have forgotten that Asian and African countries had watched in helpless silence while white powers had gathered and disposed of the destinies of Asian and African peoples."[32] While the era's conferences were not concerned with the topic of racial exclusivity, there was a reciprocal logic in how the violence of the division of the world under colonialism produced the conditions for anticolonial organizing.[33] Besides the colonial violence obvious in invasions, arrests, and killings, Wright also identified the violence in Malay language booklets for Dutch colonists and their families that only teach interrogating questions and threatening commands.[34]

All of this colonial infrastructure, whether carceral or linguistic, is meant to dehumanize the colonized, and created what Wright called "racial shame".[35] To illustrate what he meant by racial shame, Wright recalled a fellow African-American journalist who

straightened her hair and chemically lightened her skin in secret.[36] She not only felt like she had to negate and conceal her Blackness, a marker of being one of the colonized, she had to deny it ever existed in the first place. Wright mentions how he observed similar feelings of inferiority stemming from racialization among Indonesians: “Because I feel inferior. I can't help it. It is hard to be in contact with the white Western world and not feel like that. [. . .] And that is why I feel that I'm colored.”[37] In other words, racial shame was the structural psychological violence that simply being a colonized subject entailed; an experience that was shared by Afro-Asians.

The AAWB repeats this psychological conceptualization of colonial violence but also ties it to the exploitative violence of racial capitalism. Poems like Mazisi Kunene’s “Pass! Pass!” address how the dislocation of African people during the transatlantic slave trade uprooted communities and that as estranged, enslaved peoples in a foreign land, salvation could only come with “time’s anger, which alone accumulates the hurts of man.”[38] Colonialism’s violent dislocation through economic changes, conquest, and kidnapping destroyed pre-modern solidarities within cultural communities, extended family networks, and pre-colonial hierarchies. At the same time, it opened up the space for other colonized peoples to unite around their new shared temporal sense of loss. This theme is present in the poem “The Forced Worker”, by Antonio Jacinto, which uses the Angolan plantation economy to analogize the violent commodification of colonized peoples.[39] Coffee that is “roasted, ground, tortured, black, black like the forced worker” is only harvested with the super-exploitation of colonial labor, beatings of protestors, and subtler forms of violence like forced forgetting of trauma through alcoholism.[40] Jacinto illustrates the omnipresent nature of colonial violence in the context of racial capitalism and does not limit dehumanization to those who experienced chattel slavery. By reducing colonized people to a commodity like a coffee bean, colonialism’s racial capitalism is shown to be similarly dehumanizing and violent. Colonialism commodified and dislocated all colonized peoples. Accordingly, Afro-Asia was not united by geography, culture, or political systems, but rather by violence accumulated over centuries of colonial exploitation.

## “Blood is our weapon, Blood is our might”: The Necessity of Violence

The focus on the ubiquity of violence by the people and poets of Afro-Asia marks the radical departure of the Afro-Asian movement away from the hesitant attitude of the Bandung states towards violent anticolonialism. The Final Communique from Bandung preached neutrality and ignored, or was non-combative towards, the potential for neocolonial aggression.[41] Yet, just two years before the Bandung Conference, the Iranian Prime Minister, Mohammed Mossadegh, was overthrown in a British and American-backed coup, and power was given to the Pro-West and Westernizing Shah.[42] The 1953 Iranian coup was a repudiation of all that decolonization stood for. Even then, Iran under the Shah was invited to Bandung and the coup received little to no criticism aside from a few veiled remarks.[43] Wright does not even mention Mossadegh or notice the Iranian delegation anywhere in his book.

Interstate conceptions of Bandung in the 50s and 60s used the language of peaceful neutrality but often meant self-interested passivity.

In contrast to the appeasement politics during the Bandung Conference, the AAWB's reaction to neocolonial violence in the 1961 coup against President Lumumba provides a contrasting example of how Afro-Asian writers conceived of Bandung as an active space of solidarity and anti-colonial violence. Patrice Lumumba was the first president of the Republic of the Congo who, crushing American, British, and Belgian hopes of becoming neocolonial powers in the Congo, took a nationalistic and non-aligned path after independence in 1960.[44] In response to this, Lumumba was overthrown and assassinated in 1961 in a Western-backed coup and replaced by his former chief-of-staff, Mobutu, handpicked by the CIA to lead the Congo on a path more friendly to the West.[45] Despite only being president of the Republic of the Congo for a few months, Lumumba embodied the idealism, non-alignment, and pacifism of the early Afro-Asian movement, and his death heralded a sea-change in Afro-Asianism.[46] Lumumba publicly committed to non-alignment (with the US or the Soviet Union), denounced communism, and was democratically elected under the colonial regime. In other words, he did not cross any of the professed red lines of the ostensibly decolonizing empires. His assassination proved to Afro-Asia that colonial violence could only be answered with violence and that peaceful decolonization with the consent of the metropole was a fantasy.[47]

Accordingly, in the weeks and months following the assassination, Afro-Asian activists made their feelings towards the assassins of Lumumba known, not only in conference halls or editors' rooms, but also in the streets. In New Delhi, thousands marched in the streets with signs saying "Love Live Martyr Lumumba!".[48] In Cairo, students attempted to storm the Belgian embassy.[49] In Beijing, Jakarta, as well as in the Afro-Asian diaspora in Harlem, similar demonstrations were held.[50] Furthermore, unlike the absence of discussions of the coup against Mossadegh by the decolonizing states at the Bandung Conference, Lumumba was a central figure of discussion by the AAWB in *Afro-Asian Poems*.[51] Besides republishing two poems that Lumumba wrote before his assassination, most countries contributed at least one poem eulogizing him.[52] The Urdu poet Sahir Ludhivani and the Punjabi poet Amrita Pritam both wrote poems dedicated to Lumumba. The Sudanese poet A.M. Kahir called on Afro-Asia to avenge Lumumba, and Lukman Njoto wrote that Afro-Asia would continue Lumumba's revolution in "Scarlet Red".[53] Njoto's murder in the American-backed 1965 Indonesian Mass Killings and coup further proves the ubiquity of (neo-)colonial violence. "The blood you tried to dam with a martyr's grave, Has flooded the whole wide world," Ludhivani writes. The significance of Lumumba's assassination was that the Bandung states were now faced with an Afro-Asian populace and culture that largely rejected compromise with their former colonial masters, instead, whether they wanted to or not, Afro-Asia was locked in a violent struggle to the death with colonialism and neocolonialism.[54]

The recognition that violence was inevitably intertwined with anti-colonial agitation was a prominent undercurrent back in 1955, even if the Bandung states were generally non-confrontational. Six years before Lumumba's assassination, Wright noticed ordinary

peoples' embrace of anticolonial violence during the Bandung conference. Throughout the conference, Wright mentions benefitting from discrimination in reverse because of his race, and claims that there was a "powerful substratum of racial emotion" directed against white people at Bandung.[55] In response, he simultaneously distanced himself from the latent anti-colonial violence but also weaponized white fears to blackmail racist institutions globally. While it may seem like Wright was echoing white racial preconceptions of a violent and savage Orient, his description of anticolonial rage was a threat against white America when considering his complicated relationship with the CCF.[56] Ultimately, Wright was a reformist who rejected the racist status quo as well as radical revolutions, hence he cooperated with the CCF and wrote *The Color Curtain* as a call for America to cooperate with the new Third World. The West were ignorant that they had created the conditions for anticolonial violence in the colonized world and, unless they could assuage it by acknowledging the harm of colonialism and aiding their former victims, Afro-Asia would unleash that violence through Communism and revolutionary anti-colonialism.[57] Thus, his diagnosis of colonized psychology's rage was a way to blackmail white American society to tear down Jim Crow in America and lend a helping hand to Afro-Asia.[58] This was a result that would benefit both sides of the color curtain since Wright saw colonial underdevelopment as producing a "cult of action". As he writes, "If the past is shameful, and the future uncertain, then the present, no matter what its content, must be made dramatically meaningful."[59] Thus, to Wright, anticolonial violence was ultimately avoidable by the West while also harmful to the South because it was a weapon without a purpose and a hope without a future.

Yet, through the AAWB's perception of violence as necessary for decolonization, Wright's violent "cult of action" was given direction, no longer a present spasm but rather the path towards a just future. This is first seen in the structure of *Afro-Asian Poems*. Vietnamese poets, including Ho Chi Minh, contribute the most poems of any country even though most of the work is republished material.[60] Naturally, these poems focused on the ongoing war in Vietnam and were written from the perspective of guerillas and soldiers fighting against American imperialism.[61] The rest of AAWB's poets were generally theorists rather than practitioners of violence, so they proved the necessity and viability of violence through the works of their Vietnamese comrades locked in the violent liberation struggle. "It is our blood that exploiters squeeze, it is our blood that brings us freedom [. . .] Blood is our weapon, Blood is our might, Blood is the symbol of Afro-Asia," writes Ariyawansa Pathiraja, summarizing the reciprocal relationship between past and future violence and its centrality to the Afro-Asian hope of decolonization.[62]

When considering how the AAWB saw violence as necessary for decolonization in contrast to Wright's view of it as an avoidable result of colonial violence, Frantz Fanon's conceptualization of violence is deeply intertwined with the Bandung Spirit. However, his famous works like *Black Skin, White Masks* and *The Wretched of the Earth* were not translated or popularized until the mid to late 60s.[63] Fanon's basic argument that colonialism "is violence in its natural state, and it will only yield when confronted with greater violence" echoes the AAWB's conceptualization of the necessity of anticolonial

violence.[64] Fanon's description of reclaiming one's lost humanity by violence against the ones who had taken it also explains the perceived necessity of redemptive violence that Wright and the AAWB described.[65] While Wright was likely unaware of Fanon's work in 1955, Fanon had direct contact with some of the poets in the anthology having given notable speeches at the All-Africa Peoples' Conferences.[66] Accordingly, Fanon's influence shows that he was vocalizing a common experience among colonized subjects and that his ideas were circulated the Afro-Asian world, proving the existence of Afro-Asia as influenced by and influencing prominent theorists on anti-colonialism.

## Betrayls anf Failures of Decolonization

The capability for and right to redemptive violence by all victims of colonialism as conceived by the Afro-Asian Writers' Bureau also challenges the hegemonic post-independence discourse of developmentalism. Developmentalism can be broadly defined as the idea that postcolonial countries needed to urgently catch up with the metropole through the modernization of institutions and the industrialization of the economy.[67] The Afro-Asian states generally subscribed to ideas and metrics of development inherited from their former colonizers and the Final Communique of Bandung called for increased investment, aid, and trade with the colonial metropole.[68] State delegates at Bandung were generally from the elite of colonial society – colonized intellectuals, in Fanon's words. Thus, their conception of future development was rooted in the same structures that produced them.[69] The presidents, economists, and new elites of decolonizing states mostly did not see underdevelopment as a reciprocal relationship with the development of the colonial core. Rather, it was conceived of as a lower stage in the linear path of modernization that any country could achieve with the proper aid and resources. Some poems reflect this belief, as in Nigerian poet Elizabeth Emma Brown's "Looking from the Plain", who writes from the perspective of on top of a great dam: "side by side, watching fresh waters, wash clear all the sufferings of the past."[70] For Brown, her history of colonial violence could be washed away with the development's promises, as symbolized by the dam. In contrast, Vyjayanthi Rao demonstrates in her work on dams, museums, and relocated villages in India, that this post-independence modernization narrative mirrors colonial ideas of linear progress based on conquering nature, uplifting "backwards communities", and single-minded economic developmentalism.[71] The peasantry, indigenous communities, women, and other groups are again victimized by this hegemonic model of post-coloniality that reproduces colonial violence.[72]

Aware of this injustice, Afro-Asian writers used the space and language legitimized by interstate conceptualizations of Bandung to advocate for the peasantry's right to violently resist marginalization. As the vast majority of the world's population until very recently, smallholding farmers or peasants formed the major support base for anticolonial revolutions as diverse as the Maoist Revolution in China and the Free Officers Movement in Egypt.[73] However, the peasantry was often ignored by the resulting post-colonial states as a relic of the past to be integrated into markets, cities, and nations by post-independence narratives;

a perspective that was common among developmentalist Global South thinkers and repeated by Wright.[74] Yet, in “The Death of a Peasant” by Wispi Agam, Agam illustrates the violence of the peasant’s hunger and dispossession before a violent call to action against all forms of oppression.[75]

While Agam could be writing about how the colonial economy treated the peasantry, *Afro-Asian Poems*’ publication after Indonesian independence, and Agam’s condemnation of “those in power”, show that he was attacking all forms of colonial violence, including those perpetuated by the ostensibly post-colonial state.[76] Agam’s call to continue turning the wheels of history with land and blood to finally reach peace further demonstrates the AAWB’s frequently combative attitude towards post-colonial political elites. Another poem by A. M. Khair, “To an Arab Peasant”, calls on the marginalized to take control of their fate and regain their humanity through violence because “the axe will not wait.”[77] Though abstract notions of violence can appeal to political elites, Khair’s vivid description of a peasant picking up an axe reflects the unharnessed, spontaneous, and grassroots need for anticolonial violence not conducive to monopolization. Yet, Agam and Khair use the space and language created by Bandung to attack the reproduction of colonial violence. The AAWB and the publication of Afro-Asian Poems were funded by the Bandung states whose rhetoric of opposing colonialism can be repurposed against the colonial violence produced by those same states.

While justifying victims’ rights to violent resistance may seem simple in colonizer/colonized or modernity/peasantry dichotomies, this binarization also reveals flaws in the Bandung Spirit. In theory, the AAWB’s embrace of violence, Fanon’s division of humanity into two species, and Wright’s belief that the colonized world needed to wholeheartedly unite behind national symbols were described as fascistic by contemporaries.[78] Some of the Bandung Spirit’s results reflect this. Indian and Arab communities were violently expelled by anticolonial revolutions in East Africa because they were seen as petite-bourgeoisie compradors.[79] Wright’s observation that the desire for anticolonial violence in Indonesia was often directed at Chinese-Indonesians, also perceived as compradors, grimly precedes the anti-Chinese violence of the 1965 mass killings which were started by a neocolonial coup.[80] Furthermore, the Bandung Conference’s Final Communique affirmed Indonesia’s claim over all of the Dutch East Indies including West Irian, populated by indigenous Papuans, as an act of decolonization.[81] West Irian Nationalism was supported by the Dutch in their neocolonial aim to contain Indonesia, but also by many indigenous Papuans who saw the Indonesian state as an intruder similar to the Dutch.[82] Simple colonizer/colonized dichotomies do not hold up under scrutiny and conceal the complexities of colonial history. Consequently, the Bandung Spirit’s binarization of colonization and its dehumanization of an amorphous colonizer sometimes was repurposed for discriminatory, expansionist, and anti-indigenous purposes.

The Bandung Spirit as it existed in history was a vision created by and for the victimized who rarely had the power to carry out its promise of redemptive violence. The AAWB likely would have claimed that the Bandung Spirit withered precisely because it failed

to unleash Afro-Asia's pent-up rage for anticolonial ends. Fanon said as much about proponents for peaceful resistance in Algeria in 1957 when he rejected the First Conference of Independent African States' call for non-violence and instead argued for anti-colonial struggle by any means necessary, including violence, as part of a worldwide struggle without compromise.[83]

The Bandung Spirit's decline also forces us to look at the violence after its fallout – structural adjustment policies, the unequal ecological crisis, and the continued underdevelopment of the Third World – rather than simply condemn the violent resistance to these oppressive structures.[84] When the powerless clamor for blood, is it genuinely a violent vision of an irrational millenarian future as apologists for colonialism claim, eager to point out decolonization's mistakes, or is it a hope and a threat that the powerless are capable of reacting violently when dehumanized and oppressed? In "Song of the Curse", the Korean poet Paik In Joon starts by graphically and even sadistically writing about torturing American imperialists, but the poem later reveals that he intends to torture the Yankees not "with swords or fists, but with the pen."[85] Paik's dream of conflict and torture is not his idealized future, but rather an analogization and refutation of the oppressive power structures limiting the colonizer's capacity to reciprocate violence. As a hope for the victimized, the Bandung Spirit retains its power if its emphasis on violence is seen as a threat that the colonized are human too, and thus capable of fighting back if victimized.

## The Death of Bandung and the Future of (Anti-)Colonial Violence

While Wright passed away in 1960 at the peak of the Afro-Asian movement started at Bandung, the AAWB died a slow death from two interrelated crises that also spelled the end of the Bandung project. First, the Sino-Soviet split bitterly divided communist opinion within the Afro-Asian movement.[86] As relations between the two states soured, the Bureau divided into Soviet-aligned and Chinese-aligned splinter groups in 1966, each more interested in defending its chosen camp than advancing international revolution.[87] Second, neo-colonial coups and the Latin American and African debt crises of the 1980s enabled the neo-liberalization of society and states in the Global South.[88] These new governments, unlike their developmentalist predecessors, were borne out of anti-colonial revolution and no longer interested in the rhetoric of anti-colonialism. In cases such as Ghana, Indonesia, or Chile, revolutionary Afro-Asian groups were snuffed out by state repression and outright massacres.[89] In other cases, such as in China, South Africa, and India, the same groups were slowly suffocated by an emerging neoliberal world system that was hostile to any sense of international solidarity.[90]

Ultimately, the result of the Bandung Project illustrated the inadequacy of halfway measures and compromised developmentalism in a world where hegemonic neocolonial systems have the power to subsume dissenting states and popular movements. The Bandung Conference arguably set the stage for its own destruction when its final resolution invited capital from their former colonizing powers to invest in their countries.[91] The defeat of Bandung also coincided with a loss of sovereignty in a variety of fields. For example, many

African countries lost their food sovereignty in the 1980s and were forced to export cash crops while dependent on Western imports for basic food needs, creating precarity that endangers food-insecure populations and gives foreign powers more leverage.[92] Since the cultural process of recolonization is intertwined with the political and economic, only a comprehensive rejection of the totality can lead to another real chance at decolonization. Any future anti-colonial movement must be clear in its intention not to recreate the colonial world order in a more geographically equal economic or cultural arrangement, but rather the destruction of it altogether.

Despite the failure of Bandung in its moderate interstate form, the centrality of violence in Afro-Asian thinkers' radical and alternative imagination of the Bandung Spirit has escaped scholarly attention until recently. Through Richard Wright and the AAWB, this paper has demonstrated how writers who participated in Bandung's networks of decolonization created a shared Afro-Asian future through anticolonial worldmaking. The purpose of this Afro-Asian world was to unite the alienated victims of colonialism through the promise of a future redeemed with blood. This violence was rationalized by the idea that colonial violence could only be resolved through anticolonial violence and its redemptive potential. Moreover, the AAWB's critique of post-independence developmentalism as reproducing colonial violence also clashes with the hegemonic postcolonial narrative of modernization, a narrative that eventually led to the downfall of the Bandung project in the 20th century. Yet, despite claims to the contrary, the Bandung Spirit was not monopolized by political elites and was truly a transnational people's movement, where hopes for the redemptive potential of anticolonial violence were exchanged between figures like Frantz Fanon, Richard Wright, and the countless forgotten poets of Afro-Asia.

## Notes

[1] The conference's official name was the Asian-African Conference, but Afro-Asian Conference was also commonly used. This paper will use the conference's most popular and evocative name: the Bandung Conference

[2] Su Lin Lewis and Carolien Stolte, "Other Bandungs: Afro-Asian Internationalisms in the Early Cold War," *Journal of World History* 30, no. 1 (2019): 5.

[3] Swan Quito, "Blinded by Bandung?: Illumining West Papua, Senegal, and the Black Pacific," *Radical History Review* 131, no. 1 (2018): 63-64.

[4] George McTurnan Kahin, *The Asian-African Conference: Bandung, Indonesia, April 1955* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1956), 36-37.

[5] Matthieu Rey, "'Fighting Colonialism' versus 'Non-Alignment': Two Arab Points of View on the Bandung Conference," in T*he Non-Aligned Movement and the Cold War*, eds. Natasa Miskovic and Harald Fischer-Tinéand Nada Boskovska (London: Routledge, 2014), 173-174; Richard Wright, *The Color Curtain: A Report on the Bandung Conference* (New York: The World Publishing Company, 1956), 146.

[6] Jeffery J. Byrne, "Beyond Continents, Colours, and the Cold War: Yugoslavia, Algeria, and the Struggle for Non-Alignment," *The International History Review* 37, no. 5 (2015): 913; Robert Vitalis, "The Midnight Ride of Kwame Nkrumah and Other Fables of Bandung (Ban-doong)," *Humanity: An International Journal of Human Rights, Humanitarianism, and Development* 4, no. 2 (2013): 277.

[7] Vijay Prashad, *The Darker Nations: A People's History of the Third World* (New York: The New Press, 2007), 44-45; Samir Amin, *Samir Amin: Pioneer of the Rise of the South*, ed. Hans Günter Brauch (New York: Springer Publishing, 2012), 72.

[8] Afro-Asian Networks Research Collective, "Manifesto: Networks of Decolonization in Asia and Africa," *Radical History Review* 131, no. 1 (2018): 178.

[9] Thadious M. Davis, "Richard Wright's Triangulated South: Formation as Prelude and Preface," in *Richard Wright in Context*, ed. Michael Nowlin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 12-13.

[10] George A. Williams, "The Black Eagle Awakens," in *Afro-Asian Poems: Anthology*, eds. Edward Al-Kharrat and Nihad Salem, vol. 1, pt. 2 (Colombo: Afro-Asian Writers' Bureau, 1962), 41-42.

[11] Wright, *The Color Curtain*, 114.

[12] Brian Russell Roberts, "Bandung and Third-World Liberation," in *Richard Wright in Context*, ed. Michael Nowlin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 166-167.

[13] *Studieclub Konfrontasi* was an Indonesian study group founded in 1954 with ideological leanings that were nationalist but also pro-Western. See Brian Russell Roberts and Keith Foulcher, *Indonesian Notebook: A Sourcebook on Richard Wright and the Bandung Conference* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 8, 13.

[14] William E. Dow, "Paris and Ailly," in *Richard Wright in Context*, ed. Michael Nowlin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 53.

[15] Bill V. Mullen, *Afro Orientalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 66.

[16] Davis, "Richard Wright's," 11.

[17] Roberts and Foulcher, I*ndonesian Notebook*, 19-20.

[18] Mullen, *Afro Orientalism*, 58-59.

[19] Roberts and Foulcher, *Indonesian Notebook*, 4.

[20] Pieter Vanhove, "'A World to Win': China, the Afro-Asian Writers' Bureau, and the Reinvention of World Literature," *Critical Asian Studies* 51, no. 2 (2019): 152.

[21] Edward Al-Kharrat and Nihad Salem, eds., *Afro-Asian Poems: Anthology*, vol. 1, pt. 1 (Colombo: Afro-Asian Writers' Bureau, 1962), viii.

[22] Vanhove, "A World to Win," 144-145, 151, 156.

[23] Hala Halim, "Lotus, the Afro-Asian Nexus, and Global South Comparatism," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East* 32, no. 3 (2012): 570-571.

[24] Tobias C. Van Veen, "Afrofuturism and the Chronopolitics of Alien Nation," in *Afrofuturism 2.0: The Rise of Astro-Blackness* (Blue Ridge Summit: Lexington Books, 2015), 77-80.

[25] Van Veen, "Afrofuturism," 80-82.

[26] Kahin, *The Asian-African Conference*, 48; Wright, *The Color Curtain*, 12-13.

[27] Wright, *The Color Curtain*, 12.

[28] Kassim Ahmad, "A Pact: To The Forgotten Heroes of This Land," in *Afro-Asian Poems: Anthology,* eds. Edward Al-Kharrat and Nihad Salem, vol. 1, pt. 1 (Colombo: Afro-Asian Writers' Bureau, 1962), 111.

[29] Ahmad, "A Pact," 112-113; Williams, "The Black Eagle," 41-45.

[30] Han Beiping, "Drums at Night," in *Afro-Asian Poems: Anthology,* eds. Edward Al-Kharrat and Nihad Salem, vol. 1, pt. 1 (Colombo: Afro-Asian Writers' Bureau, 1962), 45-49.

[31] Afro-Asian Networks Research Collective, "Manifesto," 178-179.

[32] Wright, *The Color Curtain*, 83.

[33] Byrne, "Beyond Continents," 920-921.

[34] Wright, *The Color Curtain*, 179-180.

[35] Wright, *The Color Curtain*, 174-177.

[36] Wright, *The Color Curtain*, 185-187.

[37] Wright, *The Color Curtain*, 65, 190-192.

[38] Mazisi Kunene, "Pass! Pass!," in *Afro-Asian Poems: Anthology*, eds. Edward Al-Kharrat and Nihad Salem, vol. 1, pt. 1 (Colombo: Afro-Asian Writers' Bureau, 1962), 126-127.

[39] Antonio Jacinto, "The Forced Workers," in *Afro-Asian Poems: Anthology*, eds. Edward Al-Kharrat and Nihad Salem, vol. 1, pt. 2 (Colombo: Afro-Asian Writers' Bureau, 1962), 7-8.

[40] Jacinto, "The Forced Workers," 7-8.

[41] Kahin, *The Asian-African Conference*, 73-74.

[42] Siavash Saffari, "Jalal Al-e Ahmad's Gharbzadegi and the Spirit of Bandung: A Decolonial Reimagination of Development in Mid-Twentieth Century Iran," *Asia Review* 12, no. 1 (2022): 140-141, 146.

[43] Kahin, *The Asian-African Conference*, 71.

[44] Emmanuel Gerard and Bruce Kuklick, *Death in the Congo: Murdering Patrice Lumumba* (London: Harvard University Press, 2015), 21-27.

[45] Gerard and Kuklick, *Death in the Congo*, 114; Vanhove, "A World to Win," 155-156.

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[67] Amin, *Samir Amin*, 38

[68] Kahin, *The Asian-African Conference*, 76-77.

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[79] Vitalis, "The Midnight Ride," 278-279.

[80] Wright, *The Color Curtain*, 39, 58-59, 79.

[81] Kahin, *The Asian-African Conference*, 82.

[82] Quito, "Blinded by Bandung?," 63-64.

[83] Zeilig, *Frantz Fanon*, 115-117.

[84] Prashad, *The Darker Nations*, 108; Amin, *Samir Amin*, 73-74.

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[89] Prashad, *The Darker Nations*, 147-148, 154-155.

[90] Prashad, *The Darker Nations*, 215-217.

[91] Kahin, *The Asian-African Conference*, 76-78.

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# III.

# Book Review

# Everyday Cosmopolitanisms: Living the Silk Road in Medieval Armenia. By Kate Franklin. N.p.: University of California Press, 2021. Pp. 204. ISBN: 9780520380929.

Reviewed by

Clara Leeder

## About the Reviewer

Clara Leeder has graduated from the BA program History and Political Science at Free University Berlin and is currently enrolled in the MA Global History at Free University Berlin and Humboldt University of Berlin. Since her study abroad at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, she has been working on modern Chinese history, colonial history and the history of empires. Her passion lies in uncovering interregional connections and analyzing power relations.

Kate Franklin's 2021 monograph discusses medieval Armenia from the 11th to the 13th century as a means to illustrate people's experiences of the Silk Road on different scales. In it, she shows how residents of Armenia's Kassagh Valley were cosmopolitans in their everyday lives and she traces to what extent its inhabitants considered themselves part of global lines of connections on these trade routes. Additionally, she further inquires about the origin and impact of Silk Road narratives from the Middle Ages to the Early Modern Period.

The Silk Road as a historical term is often debated in global history and is especially important for experts and the general public in an age of globalisation: Valerie Hansen, for example, wrote that the Silk Road transformed cultures in the east and west and transported not only goods, but also ideas, art and technologies.[1] How intertwined was the world in the early Middle Ages? And did people back then see and understand their impact on a global scale? The Caucasus lies at the crossroads of Europe and Asia, and it is a large area along which we find caravanserais, bazaars and artefacts from the Silk Road that show how diverse the people were who passed through it. It is not an outer frontier of Europe but rather its own regional centre within history, where empires competed over its rule and memorable conflicts took place. Yet mentions of it in current global historical research of the Middle Ages are still rare. If the Caucasus is already underrepresented, then there is almost nothing to learn of Armenia in the main literature on the Silk Road. Armenians' role as traders and hosts along the Silk Road is almost forgotten.

Kate Franklin has a background in archaeology, anthropology, and history and teaches at Birkbeck University of London. Her book concludes a ten-year-long archaeological research project, during which she undertook excavations in Armenia. Each chapter of the monograph describes the Silk Road at a different scale: the historical position of the region and the prevailing narratives about the Caucasus, the analysis of literary sources concerning Armenia such as travelogues, as well as more tangible descriptions of material experiences in everyday life. As a theoretical framework, Franklin introduces the term "spacetimes", which are imagined worlds built and shared by people along the Silk Road. These spacetimes, Franklin argues, expanded and connected communities much as objects or religious ideas do. She quotes Nancy Munn, whose work defined "spacetimes" as spaces that were created by the interaction of people and were maintained via memory and practices.[2] Kate Franklin further employs the terms "cosmopolitanism(s)", "globality", "worldmaking", and "material experiences", which open up a broad field of research themes in her book.

In the first chapter, Franklin sets out to describe Armenia in its historical and geographical context. The region of which Armenia is part was located in a network of routes and trade routes travelled by merchants, explorers, and armies. But in Franklin's perspective, stories of conquests and the reshaping of borders are only one possible type of narrative about the region. Instead, she uses a different historical scale to inquire about people's everyday lives or their travels. In the second chapter, Franklin undertook an analysis of literary spacetimes that created imaginary worlds which still prevail today in the

romanticised image of the Silk Road. Metaphors, motifs, allegories, eyewitness accounts, and wonderful tales are integral parts of contemporary travel accounts. Assigning great importance to these, Franklin did not analyze sources based on their historical accuracy, but on the imaginary of the world that emerged from them. The concept of everyday spacetimes concerns not only protagonists of classic, well-known travelogues, but also encompasses their hosts or even antagonists. The third part of the book, spanning chapters three and four, introduces material culture that portrayed imaginary worlds in Armenia. A wide and diverse range of sources such as the locations of monuments, inscriptions on buildings, and even the remains of pottery, show how people experienced landscapes and illustrate the everyday and political worlds of the Kassagh Valley. From this, Franklin creates maps showing significant locations. The fourth part, consisting of chapters five and six, analyzes specific objects and the structures of caravanserais as a proof of hospitality and as a starting point for understanding the networks and microcosms within travel inns. This is an opportunity for delving deeper into people's material lives and for understanding food, objects, and the situations that surrounded them.

The book at its core proclaims that the Kassagh Valley of Armenia represented more than a subordinate, local site within the global Silk Road.[83] The term cosmopolitanism should no longer only be used to describe “western, male protagonists of travelogues,”[4] but also for the local population; people who lived on the Silk Road, who showed hospitality, and thus made possible the creation of spacetimes, transcending traditions and cultures. The chapters analyzing relevant travelogues and texts were easiest to understand but the chapters reaching into the everyday experiential worlds of the Silk Road really surprised me. This part of the text is very vivid and lets readers feel the ambiance of the region and the Silk Road. The author brings together different disciplines, such as archaeology, history, anthropology and literary analysis – producing a more holistic approach and an engaging analysis.

Given the limited research literature on the region, the work’s bibliography provides an excellent overview of previous materials and helps us understand different identities within the Caucasus. Franklin has collected a large amount of sources on Armenia and made them available to a wider audience – this effort alone should be appreciated. She has also developed new materials and prepared them for further research. She has created her own maps, analyzed the distribution of artefacts and inscriptions. Overall, perhaps this constitutes a new approach to the region. Especially in the field of medieval Caucasian history, her work, especially the creation of sources, lays the foundation for further studies. Her descriptive analysis contains many of her own sensory impressions during her travels in Armenia, and she has connected the memories and lives of present-day inhabitants of the valley with their predecessors during the mediaeval period. She has described streets and smells today that echo possible past impressions travellers could have had, and gives very personal, up-close insights into her subject. By embedding her own impressions and travels within the discussion of historical worldmaking she has enhanced the historical study and analysis of events in her chosen region. While it was hard to understand the meaning of the

term "spacetimes" initially, it really tied together the different parts of the book. In my opinion, it provides more of a possibility to experience the region than a streamlined analysis of documents alone.

Franklin's work promotes a new perspective on the Silk Road: not merely as an east-west highway or as a historical actor that moves others, but rather as a collection of zones of interaction and influence. Franklin has further demonstrated the potential that an analysis of local perspectives and research on everyday encounters holds in helping us to understand historical connections, developments, and globality: "Hospitality and the sharing of meals were everyday encounters that actually produced the conditions of possibility for global cultures at local scales."[5] By tracing people's environments and spacetimes, parallels between the premodern "cosmopolitanism" of the Silk Road and the "cosmopolitanization" in the modern globalised world become visible. She not only shows how Armenians could be seen as cosmopolitans but also generally enhances our view on the horizons individuals in the Middle Ages had when imagining the world around them and their position in it.

## Notes

[1] Valerie Hansen, *The Silk Road: A New History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

[2] Nancy D. Munn, *The Fame of Gawa: A Symbolic Study of Value Transformation in a Massim* (Papua New Guinea) Society (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).

[3] Kate Franklin, *Everyday Cosmopolitanisms: Living the Silk Road in Medieval Armenia* (n.p.: University of California Press, 2021), 63.

[4] Franklin, *Everyday Cosmopolitanisms*, 12.

[5] Franklin, Everyday Cosmopolitanisms, 113.

# Jungle Passports: Fences, Mobility, and Citizenship at the Northeast India-Bangladesh Border. By Malini Sur. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2021. Pp. 248. ISBN: 9780812252798.

REVIEWED BY

LENNART VINCENT SCHMIDT

## ABOUT THE REVIEWER

Lennart V. Schmidt is a second-year Master's student from the joint Global History program at Free University and Humboldt Universität Berlin. He is interested in development and infrastructural studies with a focus on hydro dams, public discourses, transformation processes, and environmental history in South Asia and the world.

*Jungle Passports* is a compelling work on the communities that live in the ever-changing landscape of the Indian–Bangladeshi borderland. The unique geography of this borderland, with its appearing and disappearing islands, rivers that change their course, and the dense jungle forest, contradicts the idea of a sealed border. This contradiction inspired the author Malini Sur to use the landscape and its inhabitants as an archive, to understand the dynamics and societal transformation that the militarization of the border has caused. Her work is wrapped around the idea of a "Jungle Passport" — a neologism invented by Sur — to grapple with the mobility of different communities in an (officially) highly controlled border.

Malini Sur is a socio-cultural anthropologist by training, with a PhD in Anthropology from the University of Amsterdam. She has held positions at the University of Toronto and the National University of Singapore. Currently, she is an Associate Professor at the Institute for Culture and Society at Western Sydney University. Her research is focused on borders, mobility, climate, cities, and citizenship. Besides scholarly articles, Sur produces documentary films. Her first film, *Life Cycle*, focuses on city dwellers' mobility in Kolkata. A second documentary on the Parramatta River, Australia, is on the way.

*Jungle Passports* is clearly an anthropological work. However, its methodology has much to offer for non-anthropologists as well. The idea of land as an archive, combined with traditional archival sources, can be interesting for historians. This is particularly pertinent because of a process over recent decades, during which approaches like global history, environmental history, and oral history have softened the demarcation lines of traditional archives. Sur challenges the traditional archive by using the landscape and its inhabitants, through "ethnographic and historical fieldwork,"[1] as an archive. This approach would allow historians to investigate spaces that have been previously avoided due to the scarcity of traditional archival sources.

In the first chapter, "The Rowmari-Tura Road," this interdisciplinary approach is most visible. Sur uses a historical lens and traditional archival material to contextualize her ethnographic study of the area by focusing on the importance of infrastructure — roads in particular — like the Rowmari-Tura road, to understand the region's dynamics and history. Looking at rice cultivation, its effects on the local culture, and the question of property via land securitization through the state, the second chapter also focuses primarily on the land. The third chapter deals with cattle smugglers living from inter-border trade, leading to a *fang-fung* culture among the smugglers. *Fang-fung* describes the risky male-dominated inter-border trade culture structured by "duplicity and dependency".[2] The chapter also explores the political and social networks surrounding and enabling cattle smuggling. The central theme of the fourth chapter is the "Jungle Passport", a term invented by Sur to describe the methods used by female members of the Garo (a local ethnic group) to cross the Indian-Bangladeshi border back and forth without official documents. The Garo women pass the border through negotiations with border security, and are part of the communities who inhabit the borderland while producing and reproducing the border according to their interests, Sur argues. Fear, loss, and their embedment in infrastructure through the

construction of India's new border fence in the region are discussed in the fifth chapter. The fence has drastic consequences for the communities living from inter-border trade, the families separated by the border, and the elephants who lose their natural habitat.

The book's last chapter moves from the jungle and the borderland to the courtrooms of Assam, where the Indian state processes the claims of the predominantly Muslim refugees from Bangladesh. Sur argues that their chances of obtaining Indian citizenship have decreased significantly since the Hindu nationalist government — accused of systematic discrimination against Muslim communities — came to power in 2014. This chapter is particularly interesting given its ambition, and approach to analyzing the political center of India from its margins. Throughout the book, there is a general search for reciprocal influences between communities, infrastructure, and the environment. However, the variety of topics covered in the six chapters makes it difficult for the author to formulate a concrete argument or tie the chapters together in the conclusion.

The large amount of primary sources and ethnographic material — collected over several years and a significant strength of the book — allows the reader to dive into the world of different communities living in the borderland area and understand the influences human-made infrastructure and environmental changes have had on these communities. This density of information, and wide range of topics and themes compressed into 172 pages, also leads to a shortage of theory-building and methodological discussions. Although briefly touching on theory on the second page, the book avoids a solid section on theory-building, and the reader has to find bits and pieces dispersed over the whole book. A section on theory and methodology to theorize the rich evidence — which Sur has so neatly collected over the years — has the potential to become a theoretical framework for further research. For instance, the ideas on human-made borders, negotiations between the state and its citizens, human-environment relations, and the state as a producer of "illegals" and citizens could be used — if thoroughly theorized — as a theoretical framework for other research projects. The scarcity of theoretical reflection also leads to some flaws in her argumentation. For instance, when she tries to connect infrastructural studies, based on the idea of networks, and India's newly built border fence, which contradicts the creation of a network.[13] Some elaboration here would have helped to clarify the argument she is trying to make.

Throughout her work, Sur applies and combines a multitude of approaches. When she tries to understand economic dynamics in the borderland through the Hindu Businessman Gosh, a politician, local businessman, and a broker for cattle smuggling,[4] Sur uses ethnographic interviews combined with microhistory. Another central methodology of her book is "history from below", with her focus on the history of Christian Garo women, a group that is not yet part of the extensive feminist Bangladeshi historiography.[5] Interestingly, *Jungle Passports* is difficult to categorize in one field due to the multitude of topics and methods covered in the book. It contributes to borderland studies in South Asia, a growing field since David S. Gellner's edited volume *Borderland Lives in Northern South Asia*, published in 2013.[6] In addition, Sur's work is part of a new approach to this field

which focuses on mobility in the borderland.[7] However, parts of the book, like the first and the sixth chapter, align more with infrastructural studies in South Asia; for instance, works like *The Promise of Infrastructure or Hydraulic City*.[8]

There is no overarching conclusion at the end of the book. However, this absence allows the reader to draw their own conclusion and focus on the nuances of each chapter instead of compressing them into one conclusion. Sur's work suggests looking to the margins, the borders — widely perceived as no man's land — and the dynamics and mobility in spaces sealed and controlled in the government's narrative. She also invites us to think critically about a national historiography produced from the margins, with the ambition to understand larger processes in India's political landscape. Her research on the Indian-Bangladeshi borderland may reveal more about India's political situation and history than focusing on the much-studied regions of the Hindi Heartland, Bengal, or Jammu and Kashmir. In this regard, *Jungle Passports* contributes not only to the understudied historiography of the Indian Northeast but also to national historiography by trying to understand the state from its margins.

## Notes

[1] Malini Sur, *Jungle Passports: Fences, Mobility, and Citizenship at the Northeast India-Bangladesh Border* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2021), 2.

[2] Sur, *Jungle Passports*, 69.

[3] Sur, *Jungle Passports*, 9, 122.

[4] Sur, *Jungle Passports*, 74.

[5] Sur, *Jungle Passports*, 110.

[6] David N. Gellner, ed., *Borderland Lives in Northern South Asia* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013).

[7] Farhana Ibrahim and Tanuja Kothiyal, eds., S*outh Asian Borderlands: Mobility, History, Affect* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

[8] Nikhil Anand, Akhil Gupta, and Hannah Appel, eds., *The Promise of Infrastructure* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018); Nikhil Anand, *Hydraulic City: Water and the Infrastructures of Citizenship in Mumbai* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017).