

[Archives of Afro-Asia: Excavating the Cultural Politics of the Early Decolonisation Era \(Johannesburg, October 1-2\)](#)

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Call for Papers

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Wits University, Johannesburg, South Africa

1-2 October 2019

The Bandung Conference of 1955 is commonly described as a pivotal moment in international politics, as both a critical space of political articulation of the “Third World” and as a prelude to the Non-Alignment Movement of the 1960s. In the last decades, and especially since the conference’s fiftieth anniversary in 2005, scholars from the humanities and social sciences have been investigating the range of narratives, competing projects, personal aspirations and trajectories that flowed to, through and from Bandung and its afterlives. This body of scholarship has revealed the intricate historical and cultural texture that made up the “Bandung moment” and the following period of high Afro-Asia solidarity.

While an earlier historical literature on the era of Afro-Asian solidarity has tended to primarily focus on interstate diplomacy and international cooperation, in the last decade scholars have been working in re-thinking and opening up the field in creative and productive directions. As the cultural and literary turns prompted a pluralisation of research agendas and methodologies in historical scholarship more broadly, scholars of Afro-Asian encounters have been moving away from perspectives that reify the nation-state as the locus of historical narration, to focus instead on cultural and discursive production and circulation as deeply constitutive of the politics of decolonisation and Afro-Asian solidarity. This includes promising research on the “cultural Cold War” and a rising interest in modes of writing and

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representation that cut across – and complicate – the cultural and racial boundaries and political formations of the decolonising world. Likewise, scholars have been increasingly aware of the “archive” not as a reservoir of information to be mined, but as a political and dynamic space to be critically engaged, questioned and subverted. As the epistemic authority of colonial archive is challenged, we are invited to recover the silences, absences and exclusions it has produced, from the colonial period to the present. A particularly exciting avenue of research requires a critical engagement with marginalised institutional spaces – such as underexplored public and private archives in the Global South – but also with other registers and practices of archive making, beyond conventional textual and documental forms.

In order to grasp the heterogeneous nature and non-linear dynamics shaping the Afro-Asian movement, especially in view of the relative dearth – but increasing number – of studies that examine the everyday performance of Afro-Asian solidarity, the proposed workshop intends to excavate the material, textual, affective, and performative dimensions of Afro-Asia in the early decolonisation era. We are interested in mapping out the imaginative geographies and political formations produced and inhabited by Afro-Asian writers, activists, and intellectuals; in taking account of the pragmatics of transnational interactions and dialogue; and in exploring the multiple archives and registers of the Afro-Asian movement. By bringing together scholars from different backgrounds as well as Afro-Asian artists and intellectuals, our goal is to tease out the situated and experienced meanings of Afro-Asianism and to reflect critically and originally on our research practices, epistemologies and modalities of historical narration.

Proposed Programme (1-2 October 2019)

The workshop will be organised around the following major themes:

Archives of Afro-Asia I: Exploring Historical, Cultural and Material Registers

Colonial and national archives are, by and large, textual universes. While the inherently hierarchical and exclusionary practices of collection, indexing and organisation of knowledge in the archive have already been subject of academic scrutiny and critique, relatively less work has been done in exploring the ways in which textuality itself – and the presumed authority of the written record – produces particular forms of epistemic erasure, silences and invisibility. A political and intellectual project of critically interrogating colonial knowledge and its forms of

historical narration, hence, needs to open up the archival canon and explore those historical registers that are able to displace the epistemic authority of the state and of the individual author. Here, we invite a deeper and serious engagement with orality and performance, visual cultures, music and the senses. We are also interested in interdisciplinary research building on the edges of history, archaeology, and cultural studies, and exploring objects, commodities and non-human actors.

Under this major theme we will welcome papers addressing the following issues:

- **Beyond Textual Register:** we encourage papers interrogating historical sources and archival registers that cannot be captured, limited and subsumed to textual forms. We are especially interested in studies exploring the critical possibilities associated with integrating records of orality, musicality, visual cultures, performance and the senses in our understandings of the early decolonisation era.
- **Beyond Colonial Temporality:** colonialism is still the most relevant mark in the periodisation of conventional versions of AfroAsian histories. We invite papers exploring the creative and critical potential of marginalising “the colonial era” in face of a growing preoccupation with pre-colonial pasts and decolonial futures. We are interested in innovative approaches to the “pre-colonial register” as well as in studies of Afro-Asian imaginations of the future. We also welcome papers exploring the ways in which AfroAsian actors mobilised notions of the pre-colonial and various forms of “futurology” in the early decolonisation era.
- **Beyond Territorial Locations:** colonial archives are territorially bounded institutions, in both material and epistemic terms. They reside in buildings, cities, and nations. Their practices of organisation of knowledge are shaped by the territoriality of the state itself. Yet, AfroAsia is not only a trans-regional territorial space, but also a fluid de-territorialised arena marked by circulations, by land, air and sea travel. We welcome papers invested in displacing territorial imaginations to explore instead other domains of human experience.
- **Beyond the Human:** modern colonialism was a deeply anthropocentric affair, as it produced not only the dehumanisation of Europe’s racial “other”, but also the marginalisation of non-human actors through processes of capitalist

extraction and environmental degradation. We invite papers that interrogate the process by which the boundaries of humanity were being re-negotiated during the early decolonisation era, as well as papers exploring the agency or role of non-human actors in the Afro-Asian moment, from plants and animals to objects.

Archives of Afro-Asia II: Print Cultures of the Early Decolonisation Era

A dynamic literature already exists on the print cultures and circuits of textual circulation running across the Indian Ocean, especially in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The transnational and highly mobile lives of texts - from novels and newspapers to private journals - have served as a fertile starting point to interdisciplinary research focusing on the history and politics of Indian Ocean transnationalism, colonial cultures, and cross-cultural practices of reading, writing, publishing and translating. We draw on this rich literature but are interested in interrogating the changes and continuities, connections and specificities, brought about by the early decolonisation era. To be sure, this was a moment of textual proliferation, as postcolonial states and the various non-governmental organisations making the Afro-Asian movement in various ways funded, commissioned or engaged in writing, publishing, and distributing textual material. But can we then speak of an Afro-Asian print culture? And, if so, what were the political sensibilities and imaginations it entailed, the political projects it advanced? How were these publications read? How did they influence and interact with the existing print cultures and publics in Africa, Asia and elsewhere?

Under this major theme we will welcome papers addressing the following questions:

- **Complicating Authorship:** the modern category of authorship is inherently predicated in an exclusionary process that has historically tended to limit the conditions of textual ownership and authority to the male, bourgeois, and European self. The major texts of the decolonising era only partially challenged this state of affairs. We are interested in expanding the “canon” of AfroAsian authorship to include texts, discourses and forms of representations speaking to inner experiences of Afro-Asian otherness, and uttered from marginalised positions. We welcome papers exploring voices of Afro-Asian feminists, workers, queer subjects, or other position capable of displacing the centrality of postcolonial political and intellectual elites.

- **Pluralising Textual Forms:** the AfroAsian publishing world was necessarily diverse, including statements, resolutions, and other texts produced at conferences, symposia and gatherings of activists and intellectuals, as well as a number of periodicals and books involving fictional and non-fictional writing. In addition to these published and highly visible materials, many of which sponsored by Afro-Asian states and organisations themselves, a range of other texts – such as diaries, letters, religious texts and other forms of self-writing – went unpublished or circulated outside the main distribution networks of the early decolonising world. We invite papers dealing with such personal or marginalised archives of Afro-Asia.
- **Epistemic Creativity and Disobedience:** AfroAsianism has more frequently been studied as an eminently political project. We know relatively less about how intellectuals, thinkers and researchers of the decolonising world engaged academic discourse and the labour of theory. As intellectual, social, and student movements demand the decolonisation of the University and of the disciplines in our current moment, we invite papers interrogating the practices of epistemic creativity and disobedience undertaken by Afro-Asian actors in the decolonisation era.
- **The Social and Material Lives of Texts:** books, periodicals, newspapers, and texts in general are material objects and commodities in their own right: they emerge from the convergence of cultural, political and economic forces. We welcome contributions interested in following the material lives of texts and exploring their historical role as concretised expressions of relations of textual and cultural production. We are interested in papers that interrogate the notion of AfroAsian print culture and readerships, especially looking at the circulation and consumption of printed texts across transnational and local scales.

Please submit proposals containing title, institutional affiliation and an abstract of no more than **300 words** to the organisers Caio Simões de Araújo (caio.simodesdearaujo@wits.ac.za) and Luca Raimondi (luca.raimondi@wits.ac.za) by **1 July 2019**. Notifications of acceptance will be sent out by **10 July 2019**.

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