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Indonesian Notebook: A Sourcebook on Richard Wright and the Bandung Conference

BRIAN RUSSELL ROBERTS and KEITH FOULCHER, eds.
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The Color Curtain, The Colored Glasses

In Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's 2013 novel *Americanah*, the protagonist, a strong-willed young woman named Ifemelu, leaves military-ruled Nigeria for the United States, where she is forced to grapple with what it means to be black for the first time. "I came from a country where race was not an issue," Ifemelu reflects. "I did not think of myself as black and I only became black when I came to America." She later achieves academic success and is recognized for her thought-provoking blog about race in America. In this space she announces: "Dear Non-American Black, when you make the choice to come to America, you become black. Stop arguing. Stop saying I'm Jamaican or I'm Ghanaian. America doesn't care."

This fictional figure's observation in the digital world of the 2000s echoes a number of Indonesian cultural elites' reaction to an encounter with the renowned African American writer Richard Wright in 1955. Author of the critically acclaimed novels *Black Boy* and *Native Son*, Wright traveled to Indonesia to attend the Afro-Asian Conference held in Bandung as a freelance reporter. During his three-week stay in Indonesia he exchanged ideas with a small group of the archipelago's leading intellectuals, the majority of whom were liberal minded with a cosmopolitan outlook. An important part of this cross-cultural dialogue took place at a mountain retreat north of Jakarta, where Wright and his Indonesian hosts had in-depth discussions over a weekend stay. Yet instead of being drawn to Wright by a shared sense of embitterment caused by white domination of people of color, the Indonesian literati felt bitterly misunderstood. They felt that instead of opening his

eyes to the vibrant social landscape of the newborn republic of Indonesia, Wright held a vision that was confined to an overseas projection of America's internal racial politics. Lubis Mochtar, a journalist and novelist who was the leader of the group, expressed his disapproval: "It is wrong that this 'racial business' has become a way of life in Asia. Color or racial problems are just not our problems" (p. 10).

Another significant figure in the circle, the Dutch-Indonesian writer Beb Vuyk, recalled the furious protests by the poet, essayist, and novelist Sitor Situmorang: "I do not feel inferior to whites. I was born a 'native,' and I've lived with racial discrimination. But we are free now. I'm no longer a 'native' but an Indonesian" (p. 199). In 1956 Wright published his Indonesian travelogue, *The Color Curtain: A Report on the Bandung Conference*, which became a prominent firsthand account of the Afro-Asian Conference. But the modern Indonesian writers and intellectuals Wright interacted with were gravely disappointed. Mochtar lamented:

I am afraid while [Wright] was here in Indonesia he had been looking through 'colored glasses' and had sought behind every attitude he met color and racial feelings. The majority of the people with whom Mr. Wright had come into contact in Indonesia belong to the new generation in Indonesia, and are the best racial and color conscious of the various groups in Indonesia. They are all amazed to read Mr. Wright's notebook in which Mr. Wright quotes them saying things which they never had said, or to which they did not put meaning as accepted by Mr. Wright. (p. 146)

The disagreements between Wright and his Indonesian interlocutors as well as the discrepancies between their recollections lie at the center of *Indonesian Notebook: A Sourcebook on Richard Wright and the Bandung Conference*. The book is the fruit of transnational and interdisciplinary collaboration between Brian Russell Roberts, a scholar of African-American literature based at Brigham Young University, and Keith Foulcher, an expert in modern Indonesian literature and culture at the University of Sydney. While in the English-language world Wright's own account had been the sole source surrounding his visit to Indonesia, the two editors excavate, organize, translate, and contextualize records in Bahasa Indonesia and Dutch, aiming not to reconstruct a monolithic narrative but to instead offer their readers a "rich polyvocality of narratives regarding Wright's interactions with modern Indonesia and the Bandung Conference" (p. 26). The introduction and conclusion of the book reveal the origins of their collaboration and situate it among several interrelated fields: comparative literature, postcolonial studies, global history, African-American studies, Southeast Asian studies, and Cold War history. The main body of the book is divided into three parts that respectively discuss the background, experience, and aftereffects of Wright's visit to Indonesia. Each part contains five to seven primary sources that were assiduously collected, carefully selected, and meticulously translated by the two editors. Accompanying every primary source are extensive and insightful essay-length analyses.

As 2015 marked the 60th anniversary of the first large-scale political congregation among the newly independent countries, there has been increasing scholarly attention on the broader impact

of Bandung on the global South. The scholarly approach varies from that of diplomatic history represented by Tan See Seng and Amitav Acharya's edited volume *Bandung Revisited* (2008), to cultural history epitomized by Shimazu Naoko's theorization of "Diplomacy as Theatre" (2011); from Vijay Prashad's globalized narratives in *The Darker Nations* (2007), to region-specific research on local political and social dynamics in the volume edited by Christopher J. Lee, *Making a World after Empire* (2010). The transnational turn and the coming of the digital age in the humanities have facilitated ongoing collaborative research projects such as the theoretically grounded "Bandung Humanisms" workshops co-organized by Columbia University, UCLA, and Nanyang Technological University in Singapore, as well as the visually vibrant online publication *Afro-Asian Visions* (<https://medium.com/afro-asian-visions/about>). The book under review is an important and unique contribution to this growing body of scholarship. It is important because it challenges the romanticization of Bandung by showing complex connections within the global South. Through highlighting the gaps and contradictions in a constellation of written records, the editors examine the heterogeneities of the Afro-Asian world and investigate the fragility endemic to a cultural project and geopolitical movement that was multilingual and multifaceted.

Roberts and Foulcher have made a somewhat unusual decision, at least from my disciplinary perspective as a historian, to deliver their findings in the form of a sourcebook. The reprinting and translation of original documents serve the editors' goal of presenting "multiple and sometimes conflicting and competing perspectives" (p. 26). The masterfully compiled primary sources and the well-crafted secondary sources open up a space for dialogue between the editors and their readers. This particular approach reflects the editors' sense of moral responsibility as scholars in the age of "alternative facts" to "acknowledge multiple perspectives and narratives while still evincing a dedication to drawing circumspectly from the available historical evidence" (Roberts and Foulcher 2017, 107). Technically, this format increases the utility of the book within academic circles—it lays a foundation for future research and can be used for undergraduate-level teaching. However, this approach inevitably makes the book fragmented. As a historian who probably has a biased preference for smooth narratives, notwithstanding my appreciation for the editors' deliberate choices and elaborate interpretations of the primary sources, I cannot help but imagine the materials the editors spent years collecting being used in another way. The editors could have consolidated their findings into one coherent monograph on the immensely interesting and intriguing story of Wright's sojourn in Indonesia. As many historic works have shown, streamlined storytelling is well equipped to demonstrate simultaneous and conflicting perspectives. This alternative would appeal to an educated general readership beyond academia. While the editors' attention to detail is marvelous, a reader may begin to experience fatigue or become inundated by too many particulars. Moreover, for a non-specialist reader, more contextualization of the political and cultural milieu of mid-twentieth-century Indonesia would be helpful.

The editors successfully destabilize previous knowledge about Wright's interactions with

modern Indonesia and, more broadly, the idealized conceptualization of Afro-Asian commonality throughout the book. But their analyses of the larger Cold War environment and US cultural diplomacy in Southeast Asia, which are critical to our understanding of the discord between Wright and his Indonesian interlocutors, seem to be less thorough. The editors make observations on potential CIA involvement in orchestrating Wright's visit to foster pro-Western sentiment among the educated elites in Indonesia. Many among the Indonesian intellectual circle that welcomed Wright were universal humanists, whose openness to Western influence increasingly antagonized LEKRA (Lembaga Kebudajaan Rakjat, or Institute for the People's Culture), a literary and social movement associated with the Indonesian Communist Party, and attracted the participation of the foremost prominent Indonesian writer Pramoedya Ananta Toer. The divergence between the two literary groups against the broader background of Indonesia's wavering between the US-led capitalist bloc and Soviet-led socialist bloc helps explain Pramoedya's bewildering silence when Wright—whom Pramoedya greatly admired—visited. On the other hand, despite their supposedly shared non-white identities, Wright and the universal humanists failed to forge a mutual understanding. Vuyk confessed her distrust of Wright, as she felt he was American first and Negro second. Despite Wright's self-imposed exile from his home country, Vuyk found his ties to the Afro-Asian world frail compared to his American cultural upbringing (pp. 147–148). The universal humanists perceived Wright's application of color labels to Indonesians as an imposition of American definitions onto the Afro-Asian world. Moreover, while Wright evidently delivered a lecture to the universal humanists that was later published in *White Man, Listen!* he does not mention Indonesia at all in this book (p. 111), though “the tragic, Westernized elites” in the dedication appear to reference his earlier Indonesian audience. When put together, all these moments before, during, and after Wright's visit constitute a story about the irony of US cultural intervention in a newly independent country and raise interesting questions about intellectuals' agency during the Cold War. However, Roberts and Foulcher's decision to present these moments by intermixing primary and secondary sources makes it difficult to connect their brilliant observations.

That being said, the book is rigorously researched and beautifully composed. Through vivid retelling of the “little histories” of brief encounters within a small elite circle in the span of three weeks, Roberts and Foulcher successfully construct a framework of “planetary history” by complicating the cultural traffic in the global South. Any future work on Wright's *The Color Curtain* can hardly go without reference to the “colored glasses” through which he viewed Indonesia, as recovered and reexamined by the two editors.

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