

INTO THE STACKS

Richard Wright, Bandung, and the Poetics of the Third World

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“Do you think that whenever I’m talking to someone I’m conscious of whether or not he is ‘white’ or ‘colored’? ... 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.... I don’t feel inferior to whites, and I don’t hate them either,” Sitor Situmorang, a preeminent Indonesian poet and essayist, told African American writer Richard Wright at an April 1955 social gathering in Wright’s honor. Growing more agitated, Situmorang raised his voice and continued, “We are against colonialism, but we are not against whites. We struggled for racial equality, not for the belief in another superrace, a colored superrace.”¹

Wright was in Indonesia to observe the Bandung Conference, the first major postcolonial summit in which delegates from twenty-nine Asian and African states articulated a post-imperial world order outside the frame of the Cold War. Wright chronicled his experiences at Bandung and his travels through Indonesia before and after the conference in his 1956 *The Color Curtain*. For Wright, Bandung made it clear that racial solidarities between Asians and Africans (and African Americans) were the essential building blocks with which decolonizing states and peoples would create a more just world. “I am an American Negro; as such I’ve had the burden of race consciousness,” he writes about his decision to travel to Indonesia for the conference. “So have these people.”²

The Color Curtain has become an urtext for many scholars whose understanding of the “Bandung spirit” is grounded in what one historian calls the “unity of Asian, African, and Latin American peoples on the common experience of colonialism and race.”³ But Sitor Situmorang’s confrontation with Wright complicates the racial dimensions of these formulations in ways that resonate beyond the particularities of Bandung itself, and speak to the broader challenges and opportunities of writing histories of the Third World—and Americans’ engagements with that newly conceptualized region of the world.⁴ These themes take center stage in *Indonesian Notebook: A Sourcebook on Richard Wright and the Bandung Conference* (2016), a remarkable reader edited by Brian Russell Roberts and Keith Foulcher

¹Beb Vuyk, “A Weekend with Richard Wright,” in *Indonesian Notebook: A Sourcebook on Richard Wright and the Bandung Conference*, eds. Brian Russell Roberts and Keith Foulcher (Durham, NC, 2016), 201, 202.

²Richard Wright, *The Color Curtain: A Report on the Bandung Conference* (1956) reprinted in *Black Power: Three Books from Exile* (New York, 2008), 440, 438.

³Augusto Espiritu, “‘To Carry Water on Both Shoulders’: Carlos P. Romulo, American Empire and the Meanings of Bandung,” *Radical History Review* 95 (2006): 173–90. See also Vijay Prasad, *The Darker Races: A People’s History of the Third World* (New York, 2007), 31–50; and Robert J. C. Young, “Postcolonialism: From Bandung to the Tricontinental,” *Historein* 5 (2005): 11–21.

⁴The origins of the “Third World” as a descriptor and a political project are often ascribed to Alfred Sauvy’s “Trois mondes, une planète” in the *L’Observateur* (August 14, 1952), but more broadly it represented a concern with North–South issues of non-alignment and economic development after high imperialism outside the post-1945 Cold War East–West struggle. On the fraught history of the concept itself, see Carl E. Pletsch, “The Three Worlds, or the Division of Social Scientific Labor, circa 1950–1975,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 23, no. 4 (October 1981): 565–90; and Marcin Wojciech Solarz, “‘Third World’: The 60th Anniversary of a Concept that Changed History,” *Third World Quarterly* 33, no. 9 (2012): 1561–73.

that brings together for the first time accounts by Indonesian intellectuals of their encounters with Wright and his work. More than a traditional collection of translated documents, it offers a compelling method for seeing how interstitial histories might recast our understanding of the Third World and the relationship of the United States to it. As U.S. historians increasingly turn their attention to recovering the long-ignored ties between Americans and newly independent states and peoples after 1945, the approach that drives Russell's and Foulcher's *Indonesian Notebook* is especially instructive.

Serious work in American history on U.S. and Third World relations is relatively new and has largely moved in two directions. One cluster of scholarship emerged from self-styled "new Cold War historians" seeking to move beyond a history of U.S. diplomacy after 1945 that marginalized the place of non-Western states and revolutionary movements in the Soviet–American Cold War rivalry. Odd Arne Westad set this new line of analysis in motion in his prize-winning *Global Cold War* (2005). Exploring the rise of the non-aligned movement, the challenges posed by the Cuban and Vietnamese revolutions, and the rise of militant Islam in Afghanistan, he argued that the Third World became the key terrain of the Cold War.⁵ More recently other scholars have traced the entanglements between American diplomats and Third World political elites during the 1960s and 1970s, focusing for instance on the challenges to American liberal international order posed by the Algerian National Liberation Front, the Palestinian Liberation Organization, the anti-apartheid movement, and China's Third World diplomacy.⁶

At the same time, historians working in an "America and the world" framework have examined localized and personalized dimensions of Third World cultural politics. Here Judy Wu's *Radicals on the Road* (2013) stands among the foundational texts, tracing how the travels of African American, Asian American, Chicana, and feminist activists to China, North Korea, and Vietnam shaped their transnational sensibilities as antiwar activists.⁷ This growing literature has directed particular attention to the engagement of black internationalists with the Third World, for example astutely exploring the place of anticolonialism in Black Panther politics and the real and imagined solidarities between American civil rights leaders and Indian nationalists.⁸ Together, these streams of scholarship reveal how, far more so than historians have previously acknowledged, the very notion of a Third World became imbricated in both in the realm of U.S. high politics and at the level of everyday American experience after 1945.

But just as critically, the Third World also had a contested poetics through which a variety of actors imagined a new postcolonial world. Richard Wright and Sitor Situmorang helped to

⁵Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times* (Cambridge, UK, 2005). See also Matthew Connelly, "Taking Off the Cold War Lens: Visions of North-South Conflict during the Algerian War for Independence," *American History Review* 105, no. 3 (June 2000): 739–69.

⁶See, for instance, Jeffrey James Byrne, *Mecca of Revolution: Algeria, Decolonization and the Third World Order* (New York, 2016); Gregg A. Brazinsky, *Winning the Third World: Sino-American Rivalry During the Cold War* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2017); Paul Thomas Chamberlin, *The Global Offensive: The United States, the Palestine Liberation Organization, and the Making of the Post-Cold War Order* (New York, 2012); Ryan Irwin, *Gordian Knot: Apartheid and the Unmaking of the Liberal World Order* (New York, 2012); and Jason C. Parker, *Hearts, Mind, Voices: US Cold War Public Diplomacy and the Formation of the Third World* (New York, 2016).

⁷Judy Tzu-Chun Wu, *Radicals on the Road: Internationalism, Orientalism, and Feminism during the Vietnam Era* (Ithaca, NY, 2013). See also Penny von Eschen, *Race Against Empire: Black Americans and Anticolonialism, 1937–1957* (Ithaca, NY, 1997).

⁸See, for instance, Sohail Daulatzai, *Black Star, Crescent Moon: The Muslim International and Black Freedom beyond America* (Minneapolis, 2012); H. Timothy Lovelace, Jr., "William Worthy's Passport: Travel Restriction and the Cold War Struggle for Civil and Human Rights," *Journal of American History* 103, no. 1 (June 2016): 107–31; Sean L. Malloy, *Out of Oakland: Black Panther Internationalism during the Cold War* (Ithaca, NY, 2017); Nico Slate, *Colored Cosmopolitanism: The Shared Struggle for Freedom in the United States and India* (Cambridge, MA, 2011); and Cynthia B. Young, *Soul Power: Cultural, Radicalism, and the Making of the U.S. Third World Left* (Durham, NC, 2006).

bring that imaginary into being. *Indonesian Notebook* sheds light on how fluid and contingent the dialogue of Third Worldism could be, and draws attention to the presence of difference as well as solidarity between Bandung's attendees. The kind of supple interpretative work Roberts and Foulcher do operates from the bottom up. They slowly build on top of Situmorang's disagreement with Wright, noticing what other scholars might either dismiss or not see at all. Readers come, for instance, to understand through a fellow Indonesian intellectual who reported on Situmorang's remarks that his tone would have been a surprise: "Raising one's voice in such a way to convey harsh truths to a guest is highly unusual in Indonesia. One hardly ever contradicts a guest, and certainly never does so discourteously." And yet, she continued, "Richard Wright was totally unmoved. I don't think he realized what had happened."⁹

This sense of being lost in translation hinted at a wider unease between Wright and his Indonesian hosts over the meanings of the postcolonial moment. Roberts and Foulcher locate these discomforts in an accumulation of small but telling grievances. Wright insisted that he saw bare-breasted Indonesian women walking along the roadside as he made his way around the archipelago. His Indonesian interlocutors thought this unlikely in Muslim Java, derisively suggesting that Wright was instead recalling a scene from an earlier trip to Africa, which he had recounted in his 1954 Gold Coast travelogue *Black Power*.

Wright also proved a poor observer of inter-Asian relations. In his eyes, the Japanese were a "colored race" who were potentially salutary participants in Asian African solidarity. Wright's hosts were shocked by what they termed his "naïveté." They shared the widely held view in Indonesia that the Japanese occupation during World War II had been unremittingly harsh, calling the Japanese "bloodsuckers and oppressors of the worst kind," who had made only illusory wartime promises of pan-Asian racial solidarities. Indeed, the fact that the leading Japanese delegate to Bandung had been a major player in the recent Japanese occupation of the archipelago struck the Indonesians as a particular affront.¹⁰

Even more generally, the Indonesia Wright saw was not the one his interlocutors knew. His insistence on a shared racial grammar, they believed, was misguided. As Motchar Lubis, the novelist and newspaper editor who served as one of Wright's hosts, later wrote:

I am afraid while [Wright] was here in Indonesia he had been looking through "coloured-glasses," and he had sought behind every attitude he met colour and racial feelings.... The majority of the people with whom Mr. Wright had come into contact in Indonesia ... are the least racial and colour conscious ... [and] are all amazed ... [that] Mr. Wright quotes them saying things which they never had said, or to which they did not put meaning as accepted by Mr. Wright.¹¹

Whether the Indonesian intellectuals Wright met truly paid no attention to race, or whether they claimed color blindness for their own rhetorical and political purposes, remains an open question. Other ambiguities highlighted by Russell and Foulcher center on Wright's possible complicity in the Cold War politics of the U.S. government, since the Congress for Cultural Freedom (CFF) helped to organize and fund his trip to Indonesia. Whom he met there was not merely by chance. The CFF made available a particular slice of the Indonesian elite—moderate cosmopolitans it had been courting since independence. More radical Indonesian thinkers were not on Wright's itinerary. Both Wright and his hosts recognized that the CFF was not entirely an innocent third party, assuming it had connections to the U.S. Department of State. But neither was aware that the CFF operated as a front for the CIA.¹²

⁹Vuyk, "A Weekend with Richard Wright," 202.

¹⁰Roberts and Foulcher, *Indonesian Notebook*, 12, 168, 202, 78.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 146.

¹²*Ibid.*, 17–18.

In different hands, unraveling these entanglements could be a prelude to offering a simple scorecard, tallying when Wright was wrong and the Indonesians were right, or to tarring both parties as dupes of American state propaganda. Instead Russell and Foulcher include these details to show readers the historical forces that brought these actors together in the first place. Russell and Foulcher are especially keen to highlight convergences between the Bandung attendees. For them what is more striking is that both sides were speaking a common language that had almost nothing to do with the Cold War. The *Notebook's* translations of a variety of Indonesian-language essays produced during and after Wright's visit make clear the common reliance on a transnational vocabulary. Modernism, humanism, imperialism, existentialism, phenomenology—these and other keywords littered the conversations between Wright and his Indonesian hosts, showing how far imaginations stretched past more singular racial frameworks. Admittedly their discussions could at times reinscribe the hegemonic relations of power Bandung was intended to transcend. Wright and his work were familiar to his Indonesian interlocutors, while their own writings were almost entirely unknown to Wright. Moreover, their disagreements could be sharp. Still in the moment they were engaged in a common project—a kind of intersectionality *avant la lettre*—to map the contours of the postcolonial world.

In U.S. histories, the meanings of the term the Third World is often rendered as stable. Non-American actors, too, sometimes remain only a spectral presence. By insisting that Indonesian intellectuals and Wright co-produced a different kind of Bandung spirit, *Indonesian Notebook* instead underscores the contingencies of what one historian rightly calls “the complex and uneven geographies of the postcolonial cold war world.”¹³ In doing so it can help us begin to reimagine the politics, and the poetics, of the Third World.

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¹³Antoinette Burton, “The Solidarities of Bandung: Toward a Critical History of 21st-Century History,” in *Making a World after Empire: The Bandung Moment and Its Political Afterlives*, ed. Christopher Lee (Athens, OH, 2010), 353.