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Transnational Circuits of Asian Religio-Philosophy: Reception and Racialization in the US

Special Forum Introduction

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The transnational circulation of Asian thought in the US bears an expansive and varied history and this special forum analyzes how different modes of cultural production circulate elements of Asian religio-philosophy and how "America" becomes transnationalized in the context of that circulation. Ranging from aesthetic representation to religious practice, from nationalism to countercultural movements, from racial essentialism to transracial solidarity, the influence of Asian religions and philosophies cannot be captured in a single image of identity or cultural form. There are important distinctions to be made, for example, between the influence of Hindu, Gandhian nonviolence on the Civil Rights Movement and the uptake of far-right, ethnonationalist Hindutva philosophies in forming some Indian American diasporic identities in the US.[1] Accordingly, this special forum explores the ambivalent and plural circulation of Asian thought and the understudied histories of the multiple receptions of Asian religio-philosophy in the US in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

The essays and interviews collected here examine yoga both as a body-disciplining practice detached from its South Asian history and as a conduit for negotiating hierarchies of gender and race (Black, "Yoga's Material Power"); how the revolutionary dimension of Black American musical practices in the Civil Rights era surfaces when the liberatory potential of Vendata spiritualism is traced across national borders (Kidambi, "Universal Consciousness"); and how musical artists might develop the capacity to connect individual biographies to collective histories (Rangaswamy and Du, "Sounding Relationality"). As such, this special forum does not promote a single vision

of Asian religio-philosophy but rather traces multiple histories of transnational circulation that have brought Asian religio-philosophies to the US. We are using the term "religio-philosophy" to challenge the critical and everyday tendency to reduce these entanglements to a single dimension of Asian religion or Asian philosophy. We recognize that the reception of Asian religio-philosophy, itself multiple, is tied to multiple cultural and political perspectives, multiple epistemologies, and multiple conceptions of Americanness. In tracing this multiplicity, it is imperative to ask: What does thinking about Asian religio-philosophy in terms of plural receptions afford us in this historical moment? The contributions in this special forum expand on this question by exploring how Asian religio-philosophy has circulated transnationally and how that circulation can mediate Americanness and difference.

Taken as a whole, these contributions challenge and extend previous approaches to transnational and transracial encounters. One such approach implicitly frames transmission and exchange in terms of cultural essentialism. An example of this can be found in Gita Mehta's book *Karma Cola: Marketing the Mystic East* (1979). Written in the vein of New Journalism, *Karma Cola* presents a series of wry, sometimes caustic vignettes that portray and respond to various features of the guru movement of the 1960s and 1970s. While describing the 1978 Bombay Indo-Jazz Yatra, for instance, Mehta sets up an opposition between what she calls "dialing" and "dialogue" in order to paint the event as a scene of cultural commodification. Even though she uses this opposition to critique the idea of "successful" cross-cultural exchange, her critique at times falls back on essentialist characterizations. She writes, somewhat satirically: "The art of dialing has replaced the art of dialogue. When the person on the other end of the receiver doesn't understand the conversation, then drop the hard part, beam out the essence, and describe the resulting homogeneity as successful correspondence and cultural exchange."[2] For Mehta, dialing seems to name a form of transracial contact that ignores difference, while dialogue implies a state of mutual understanding, but one in which interlocutors maintain the authenticity of their respective racial or cultural positions. Thus, Mehta's critique of what she perceives to be the deracination of culture depends on a racialized core or "essence" of culture in India.[3] However, rather than thinking of the Indo-Jazz Yatra as a failed experiment in cultural exchange, what if we were to think of it as a site of reception, regardless of whether we characterize it as "dialing," "dialogue," or something else?

In contrast to Mehta's approach, which falls back on cultural essentialism, T. Carlis Roberts analyzes crossracial exchanges while consciously attempting to avoid falling into the "multicultural traps" of "conflating race and culture or posing sounds as synecdoches for groups of people."[4] Roberts augments an academic, musicological approach by taking reception into consideration; he forwards what he calls an Afro Asian critical theory, which attends to the "interracial promise" of musical collaborations,[5] and he posits the term "Afro Asian" as a mode of reception by highlighting the listeners of interracial musical collaborations. Roberts proposes that, even when cultural producers appear, as Mehta might say, to be dialing instead of dialoguing, we

focus not on the antagonistic character of crossracial exchange but on the productive possibilities revealed when listeners themselves hear or receive "non-essentialist representations" from a musical work.[6] Thus, when his Afro Asian critical framework locates the "potential for interracial dialogue" in reception and listening rather than in artistic intent,[7] Roberts reads reception against the grain.

Even though we are not adopting Roberts's specific Afro Asian critical theory as such, his focus on reception does counterpoint Mehta's dialing-dialogue binary, in which essentialism risks maintaining an East-West binary. Though several of the contributions also address cross-cultural musical collaborations, we open the question of reception up to multiple cultural forms, including literature and yogic practice, and their attendant, usually interdisciplinary fields. (Indeed, we are also interested in taking academic fields themselves as sites of reception.) Thus, we place this special forum somewhere in between and also beyond Mehta's and Roberts's approaches. We address the interrelatedness of issues of commodification, appropriation, and transracial solidarity by examining how reception and racialization are entangled in transnational cultural exchange and therefore must be thought together.

We would also like to situate this special forum by following Ika Willis's observation that focusing on reception expands the possible objects of study.[8] Since the 1980s, reception theory has widened to cover areas like media studies and cultural studies,[9] though when it comes to religion and philosophy, the term "reception" is still largely reserved for classical and biblical studies.[10] As a way of drawing out some of the term's potential for religious and philosophical studies, this special forum extends reception theory into the study of Asian religio-philosophy, both at the level of text or cultural artifact and at the level of religious or cultural practice. The contributions of this special forum examine several such cultural productions and activities: literature, textile engineering, music videography, activist practices, and experimental music, all in the context of Asian religio-philosophy. Willis contends that "thinking about reception entails thinking about [...] the people, processes and institutions involved in the production, transmission, distribution and circulation of messages and texts" and also about the circumstantial and structural variables that facilitate or hinder these processes.[11] Given the fact that reception by definition involves movement from one context to another, studying the circulation of Asian thought might benefit from a transnational rubric. Such a study might also benefit from thinking about reception to understand the material conditions (e.g., political circumstances that enable or hinder cultural transmission, immigration laws that regulate transnational movement, or modes of production that facilitate the circulation of specific cultural goods) under which cultural producers, audiences, and critics engage religio-philosophies. For us, in taking reception as a vantage point, the determination of success or failure—dialogue or dialing—as a value judgment is not our primary concern when examining an encounter or transmission and its causes. The key question is what may or may not follow as a result: How does a process of transmission sustain, transform, or disrupt a received text, concept, or practice?

We are also thinking of the term "religio-philosophy" broadly as a way to gloss how, in Asian thought, religion and philosophy—to use the Western intellectual tradition's conventional categories—are interconnected. We use the term religo-philosophy in the sense of James D. Sellman, for whom it "refer[s] to the historical intellectual traditions of Daoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism in an attempt to 'bracket' the Western, especially Euro-American and Christian, distinction between religion versus philosophy, and reason versus faith."[12] After outlining both Chinese and Western perspectives on the status of Confucianism as a religion or philosophy, Yong Chen concludes that the label of religion cannot wholly encompass the history of Confucian traditions: "The validity and utility of any definition of religion should only be recognized with respect to the fact that it is no more than a conceptual instrument, decidedly ambiguous, provisionally applicable, and constantly revisable."[13] The parallel statement for philosophy follows. If religion is not total, then neither is philosophy.

With regard to Hinduism, Andrew J. Nicholson identifies two dominant and competing historical perspectives. One deems Hinduism an "eternal religion," while the other views Hinduism's religiosity as the relatively recent unification of multiple ancient strands of philosophy, a unification brought about by the imperialist influence of British intellectualism.[14] Nicholson goes on to uncover a separate, prior unification of Hindu philosophies grounded in India's own intellectual history. Regardless, religion and philosophy both continue to name different phases and iterations of Hinduism's development, and for this reason, we understand Hinduism as religio-philosophical as well.

The contributions in this special forum engage with Asian religio-philosophical traditions and practices—specifically Buddhism, Hinduism, and yoga—in ways that the separation of religion and philosophy cannot adequately account for. In using the term religio-philosophy, it is not our intention to resolve taxonomic debates about whether any given religion is also a philosophy, or vice versa. Rather, we are interested in how the US has received Asian religions and/or philosophies as one, the other, or both at different times.

Many scholars have already considered the multifaceted, at times even contradictory history of Asian religio-philosophical reception in relation to transnationalism, political economy, and ideas of the nation-state. Within US scholarship, some understand the union of transnationalism and Asian culture as a radical departure from global capitalism and neoliberalism. For example, Elliott H. Powell extends Roberts's claims about the reception of counterhegemonic gestures by locating "alternative epistemologies and possibilities" in "Black and South Asian relationalities through and as sound."[15] Similarly, Yuan Shu, writing in a transnational American studies context, has proposed a reinvented Confucianism as an "indigenous epistemology," per Walter Mignolo, capable of serving "as an alternative to neoliberal capitalism."[16] We agree with Shu that an alternative epistemology does not necessarily entail "a return to an original point" but rather a reimagining; at the same time, we want to stress Shu's

point that epistemologies like Confucianism have frequently been bent toward neoliberal capitalist purposes by East and Southeast Asian governments.[17] To the degree that any attempt at devising an alternative epistemology is possible, such an endeavor must coincide with an effort to disentangle that epistemology from nationalism and commodification. In the case of Asian religio-philosophies, one must also recognize that clear-cut alternativity does not consistently characterize their historical relationships to Western thought. To take but two examples, consider the arguments of J. J. Clarke and Alfred Hornung. Clarke argues that Chinese thought and Indian thought sometimes provided integral sources of inspiration for various European thinkers during the Enlightenment and the Romantic period, respectively.[18] Returning us to transnational American studies, Hornung has traced not only how Ezra Pound used Confucianism as a yardstick against which to measure the Founding Fathers but also how the Founding Fathers' own "reception of Confucius's ideas and the Chinese tradition" impacted their—and the nation's—political philosophy.[19]

Conversely, a variety of other scholars and thinkers have argued that Asian religio-philosophy's offer of an alternative to global capitalism is an illusory guise. The common culprit according to many such arguments is commodification through psychologization and spiritualization. According to Jeremy Carrette and Richard King, capitalist psychological discourses privatize spirituality and Asian religio-philosophy by giving consumers "the illusion of unrestrained freedom" as "an apparent cure for the isolation created by a materialistic, competitive and individualised social system," thereby setting the stage for a "*corporate-led* takeover of the cultural space carved out in popular culture by terms such as 'spirituality' and 'religion.'"[20] Citing Carrette and King, Elliot Cohen suggests that what the "mindfulness industry" sells is not true "peace of mind" but "rather the idea and ideal of peace of mind."[21] Slavoj Žižek makes comparable claims; he considers Western Buddhism a complacent escape from feeling troubled by capitalism, not an escape from capitalism itself.[22] In these critiques, spirituality is both the object and a mode of commodification. Thus, religion, philosophy, and spirituality become entangled in "multidirectional flows of people, ideas, and goods,"[23] sometimes as counterculture, sometimes as neoliberal hegemony. It is this ambivalent nature of reception that our special form explores through its contributions.

The three articles and two artist interviews that follow reflect this multiplicity of receptions by investigating the impact of Asian religio-philosophy in the US through different fields with varying scholarly and artistic commitments. The three articles span material culture studies, visual media studies, literary criticism, and historical analysis. In these articles, each author identifies some form of political resistance or liberation in their object of analysis, often with specific attention to race or gender. The interviews, in turn, offer personal yet critical perspectives on diasporic experiences and interracial solidarity, with a focus on musical practice.

In "Yoga's Material Power: Yoga Pants in Twenty First–Century Imaginaries," Shameem Black continues the work she began in her book *Flexible India: Yoga's Cultural*

and Political Tensions (2023) by examining the material legacy of yoga pants as an object that shapes the reception of yoga in the US, with subsequent ramifications for South Asian subjects.[24] Through a feminist materialist-historical lens, Black analyzes the contradictory forces between yoga as a signifier of the transcendence of materiality and yoga pants as a commodified symbol for ideal, implicitly white body types for women, both considered in the context of US capitalist and textile economies. Through attention to material agency, she introduces her concept of "surfacing," a dialectic between flatness and depth that emphasizes the underlying historical, subjective, or bodily layers that an ostensibly flat surface simultaneously implies and obscures. Black's article then turns to mom fiction and Hip Hop, thereby highlighting the role of different popular cultures in the receptions of Asian religio-philosophic practice. With a particularly insightful analysis of the music video for Janelle Monáe's song "Yoga" (2015), featuring Jidenna, Black points to the convergence of Asian religio-philosophy and Black American cultural forms of resistance. In these ways, Black's article demonstrates how capitalism and various forms of culture (like literature and music) can mobilize Asian religio-philosophy toward reshaping gendered and racial consciousness in the US.

In the second article, "American Self, Asian Other: Strategies of De-othering and Transnational Peacemaking in Allen Ginsberg's 1960s Long Poems and Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Fifth Book of Peace*," Jonas Faust similarly considers the role of Asian religio-philosophy in altering American racial consciousness. Faust analyzes two Cold War-era American authors, one white and one Asian, who deploy Buddhist philosophical notions of interdependence in their work toward what he calls "de-othering." De-othering, for Faust, describes a set of strategies that seek to undo rhetorics of difference toward transnational peacemaking. He traces how Allen Ginsberg, in the poems "Wichita Vortex Sutra" and "Iron Horse" (both 1966), counteracts the US government's rhetorical dehumanization of the Vietnamese during the Vietnam War. To describe how authors de-other, Faust distinguishes Ginsberg's "top-down" approach—moving from intellectual critique to practical ethics—from Maxine Hong Kingston's "bottom-up" approach—moving from immediate, subjective perspectives of self and other to a more generalized understanding of human ethics. Kingston, drawing from the teachings of Vietnamese Thiền (Zen) Buddhist monk Thích Nhất Hạnh in *The Fifth Book of Peace* (2003), writes about creating social situations (such as veterans' writing workshops) in which the rhetoric of de-othering can be activated.

While Faust discusses reception through the lens of literary practice, Amirtha Kidambi, in her article "Universal Consciousness: Black Music, Hindu Thought, and Decolonizing the Spirit," discusses reception through the lens of musical practice. Kidambi's article offers an interesting point of comparison with Black's analysis of twenty-first century Hip Hop by focusing on 1960s experimental jazz. With a particular emphasis on the impact of Swami Satchidananda's religious teachings on the musical and spiritual development of Alice Coltrane, who later took the name Swamini Turiyasangitananda, Kidambi traces the history of Black liberation music's reception

and incorporation of Hindu Neo-Vedanta philosophy. As an accomplished musician herself, Kidambi offers a unique combination of historical argumentation and personal artistic reflection, situating her own musical practice within the lineage of the musical history she chronicles. In her introduction, she outlines a "decolonial and transcultural analysis," analyzing some Black American artists' cultural hybridity and movement toward Asian religions in the context of the decolonial turn in Africa in the mid-twentieth century. She extends this "decolonial" analysis to her own situation as a South Asian American artist navigating the constraints of a Western classical musical paradigm, naming both South Asian and Black American music as parts of her artistic ancestry.

Kidambi was generous enough to contribute both her scholarly work and an interview for this special forum. In our conversation with her, which we have titled "Activism through Diasporic Musical Practice," we explore how Asian religio-philosophy informs both Kidambi's musical practice and her activism, which she considers inextricably linked. She speaks about how she personally receives Asian religio-philosophy in her own practice by recontextualizing imperialism and antiimperialism within a Hindu cosmological structure. She also reflects on how she has been received as an Asian American subject by institutions and audiences, describing how universities and record labels have positioned her according to a reductive, racialized, and sometimes commodified conception of what it means to engage with Carnatic music. This double movement—receiving and being received—productively expands this special forum's approach to reception; it is not only texts and cultural productions that are received but often also the producing subjects themselves.

Finally, in "Sounding Relationality," our conversation with saxophonist, composer, and improviser Aakash Mittal, we discuss how Mittal's musical projects in different parts of the world—Colorado, Kolkata, Jinghong City—have guided his understanding of various Asian religio-philosophical practices. Like Kidambi, Mittal is influenced by a combination of training in European classical music, Black American music, and South Asian music. Through his description of his background and upbringing, Mittal directs our attention to how one's circumstances and surroundings may either ease or impede reception and transmission. Awareness of the familial and structural factors involved here helps Mittal move away from reception as an individual, passive process toward reception as a relational, constructive practice. Mittal also positions musical practice as a type of access to spirituality, contrasting this access with more codified engagements with religio-philosophy, such as institutionalized or inherited religion. By emphasizing rather than abstracting modes of relation with ideas, people, and environments, Mittal's spirituality, which is personal but not privatized, stands apart from the commodificatory spirituality described by Carrette and King.

All five contributions focus on different modes of cultural production as reception. In doing so, each contribution also activates a chain of reception: cultural producers receive elements of Asian religio-philosophy, audiences receive the resulting

cultural forms, and then readers and scholars receive Asian religio-philosophy through analysis. Thus, readers of this journal also receive Asian religio-philosophy and some of its various incarnations in an analytical mode. The authors and audiences of this special forum, we would argue, are thus participants in reception. If we fail to understand academic reading itself as a mode of reception, we risk valorizing academic reading over lay or popular reading,[25] which would thereby close the loop of reception and institute a telos that ends at scholarly analysis. Instead, we would like to keep that loop open, reinserting the work presented here into a longer chain of receptive acts. Eero Laine and Michelle Liu Carriger have argued that, even though the act of reading academic journals and texts "is how we become interpellated into a field of study," the academy's neoliberal emphasis on production over consumption means that professional evaluation often overlooks the role that reading plays in research and publication.[26] By situating this special forum as part of a chain of reception, we would like to suggest that reception offers a metacritical way to foreground that role and potentially to challenge the neoliberal structures that obscure reading in the first place.

Thus, rather than making academic scholarship the end of reception, we are interested in using reception to rethink the aims of academic scholarship on Asian religio-philosophy. Earlier, we deployed Yuan Shu's and Alfred Hornung's writings to showcase different viewpoints on Asian religio-philosophy's transnational circulation, either as an alternative epistemology or as a constituent element of Western political hegemony. To reiterate, we do not see their analyses as opposed but rather as goal-posts for further scholarly inquiry into Asian religio-philosophy from a transnational American perspective. As such, we would like to invite scholars to further examine simultaneously, as our contributors have done, the uneven histories of Asian religio-philosophy's global flows and the future possibilities of transformative reception. We encourage attention to the contradictory ties of Asian thought to the structure of the nation-state and projects of liberation, imperialist histories and interracial coalitions, the development of neoliberalism, and the emergent unfolding of countercultural resistances. In doing so, we spotlight the dynamism of Asian thought as a way of reading Asian religio-philosophy and its receptions against the grain.

Notes

[1] See Rebecca de Souza, "Hindutva and Ethnonationalism in the Indian American Diaspora," in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Communication*, ed. Matthew Powers (Oxford University Press, 2022), https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228613.013.1254. Priyanka Charan has also pointed to the complex ways in which Hindu ethnonationalism has been challenged in the United States. See Priyanka Charan, "Negotiating the Nation: Diaspora

Contestations in the USA About Hindu Nationalism in India," *Journal of Research in Humanities and Social Science* 10, no. 3 (2022): 1–11.

[2] Gita Mehta, *Karma Cola: Marketing the Mystic East* (Vintage, 1991), 118.

[3] Mehta, *Karma Cola*, 117.

[4] T. Carlis Roberts, *Resounding Afro Asia: Interracial Music and the Politics of Collaboration* (Oxford University Press, 2016), 157.

[5] Roberts, *Resounding Afro Asia*, 157.

[6] Roberts, *Resounding Afro Asia*, 157.

[7] Roberts, *Resounding Afro Asia*, 165.

[8] Ika Willis, *Reception* (Routledge, 2018), 2.

[9] Janice Radway, "What's the Matter with Reception Study? Some Thoughts on the Disciplinary Origins, Conceptual Constraints, and Persistent Viability of a Paradigm," in *New Directions in American Reception Study*, ed. Philip Goldstein and James L. Machor (Oxford University Press, 2008), 327. See also James L. Machor and Philip Goldstein, eds., *Reception Study: From Literary Theory to Cultural Studies* (Routledge, 2001); additional chapters in Philip Goldstein and James L. Machor, eds., *New Directions in American Reception Study* (Oxford University Press, 2008); and Willis, *Reception*.

[10] Urs App explicitly characterizes Western engagement with Eastern religion as reception, and though he does not develop a full theory of reception, his use of the term crucially indexes Orientalist misinterpretations of Asian culture; see Urs App, *The Birth of Orientalism* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), xvi, 11, 101, and 187.

[11] Willis, *Reception*, 5.

[12] James D. Sellman, "Zhu Xi and Daoism: Investigation of Inner-Meditative Alchemy in Zhu Xi's Theory and Method for the Attainment of Sagehood," in *Dao Companion to Zhu Xi's Philosophy*, ed. Kai-chiu Ng and Yong Huang (Springer, 2020), 650.

[13] Yong Chen, "Confucianism as a Religion," in *The Oxford Handbook of Confucianism*, ed. Jennifer Oldstone-Moore (Oxford University Press, 2023), 533.

[14] Andrew J. Nicholson, *Unifying Hinduism: Philosophy and Identity in Indian Intellectual History* (Columbia University Press, 2010), 1–2.

[15] Elliott H. Powell, *Sounds from the Other Side: Afro-South Asian Collaborations in Black Popular Music* (University of Minnesota Press, 2020), 4.

[16] Yuan Shu, "Transnationalism, Planetary Consciousness, and American Studies," in *American Studies as Transnational Practice: Turning toward the Transpacific*, ed. Yuan Shu and Donald E. Pease (Dartmouth College Press, 2015), 85.

[17] Shu, "Transnationalism, Planetary Consciousness, and American Studies," 95, 92.

[18] The idea here is that elements of Asian thought already exist within Western thought and therefore cannot always be thought of as fully alternative. Furthermore, to highlight the contradictory history of Asian religio-philosophical reception, these sources of inspiration have included both valorizations and denigrations of Asian thought and Asian subjects. For more, see J. J. Clarke, *Oriental Enlightenment: The Encounter Between Asian and Western Thought* (Routledge, 1997).

[19] Alfred Hornung, "Confucius and America: The Moral Constitution of Statecraft," in *The Routledge Companion to Transnational American Studies*, ed. Nina Morgan et al. (Routledge, 2019), 154.

[20] Jeremy Carrette and Richard King, *Selling Spirituality: The Silent Takeover of Religion* (Routledge, 2005), 27–28.

[21] Elliot Cohen, *The Psychologisation of Eastern Spiritual Traditions: Colonisation, Translation and Commodification* (Routledge, 2022), 84–85.

[22] Slavoj Žižek, *Event* (Penguin, 2014), 65–66.

[23] Shelley Fisher Fishkin, "Crossroads of Cultures: The Transnational Turn in American Studies—Presidential Address to the American Studies Association, November 12, 2004," *American Quarterly* 57, no. 1 (2005): 22.

[24] Shameem Black, *Flexible India: Yoga's Cultural and Political Tensions* (Columbia University Press, 2023).

[25] Ika Willis gathers several critiques of this valorization. See Willis, *Reception*, 89–92.

[26] Eero Laine and Michelle Liu Carriger, "The Labor of Academic Journals: Or, Is Anyone Going to Read This?" *Reception: Texts, Readers, Audiences, History* 15 (2023): 60–61, https://doi.org/10.5325/reception.15.1.0059

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