

# Theorizing the Black Pacific: Race and Afro-Asian Connectivities from Past to Present

A Faculty Research Seminar, 2024-25  
Ruodi Duan & Guangtian Ha

## Principal Questions

Our aim in this seminar is to address the following questions:

- How did European colonialism and its afterlives alter or amplify indigenous Asian-Pacific ideas about race, Blackness, and anti-Blackness?
- How have Pacific Islander histories, cultures, and mobilities mediated modern notions of racial difference and Black identities?
- What forms of anti-racist thought and praxis might be generated by an expansive interrogation of racial ideologies within and across the Pacific?
- What are the alternative genealogies of race, racism, and racialization that predate Euro-American imperialism and articulate with it in complex ways as we enter the era of colonial expansion and global capitalism?

## Description of the Seminar

The ocean is a paradox. Its depth, immensity, and devastating natural disasters reflect the physicality of its boundaries. But as a political concept and a unit of spatial imagination, it is wholly a human, and primarily European, construction.

As much as the Afro-Atlantic, the world(s) of the Pacific Ocean have birthed powerful ideas of race and difference: race as imposed hierarchy, as a compelling device of global imagination, and as the basis of social mobilization. We are interested in exploring the possibilities of the “Black Pacific” as an analytical and geographic category, one inspired by the Afro-Atlantic, to interrogate contested formations of race, ethnicity, and gender across national, regional, and continental framings. Whether drawing on theorizations of “comparative racialization” or echoing more recent calls to excavate indigenous genealogies of Blackness, we consider it intellectually enriching and politically promising to examine the ways in which alternative modes of inquiry and new forms of antiracist solidarity can emerge out of rigorous research on the Pacific as a global maritime space.

Throughout the twentieth century, African American intellectuals, activists, and military personnel have been indispensable to circum-Pacific and trans-Pacific productions and articulations of race. This modern story of the Black Pacific as a medium of resistance is grounded in an earlier tale of European racial partition of the Pacific. The overthrow of European colonial exploitation and its structural production of hierarchical racialization often turns oppressive comprador regimes on their heads and generates enduring forces of resistance that create new worlds and novel forms of existence as much as they demolish old ones. In this seminar, we aim to restore these alternative global histories to movements of antiracism and Black liberation in contemporary Euro-America.

However, our interest also extends beyond the twentieth century. We consider it essential to place the Black Pacific in the *longue durée* where varied processes of racialization in Afro-Asia created their own varieties of anti-Blackness long before the onset of European colonialism. To speak of premodern Afro-Asia is to draw attention to the intricate imbrications of numerous ideas of race whose provenance and circulation defied the geographic boundaries of “Afro-Asia” – from the Jewish mythologies on the curse of Ham, to the Arab lore on Ethiopian kings, to the Chinese fascination with East African and Southeast Asian slaves. These early notions of race traveled across the Pacific, following well-trodden nautical pathways that later became the earliest conduits for European colonial venture.

Therefore, while the promises and pitfalls of Afro-Asian connectivities have re-emerged as a deeply relevant question in this contemporary moment, our conceptualization of the Black Pacific includes but is not synonymous with “Afro-Asia.” Too often, the Pacific is employed as a nominal placeholder for Asia, obscuring the histories of Pacific Islanders who have played outsized roles in molding Western constructions of racial difference. We recognize that rather than the “negative space between Asia and the United States or the hole in a doughnut,” the Pacific Ocean itself has engendered abiding myths of race, Blackness, and cultures of resistance (Okiihiro 2006). A recentering of these stories expands our geographic, political, and historical imaginations of racial hierarchy and racial justice, in both origins and ends. It will also help us explore a wider vision where histories of the Pacific Islanders are to be examined in relation to the enduring political struggles of indigenous communities in maritime Asia.

## Sample Readings

1. Man, Simeon. *Soldiering through Empire: Race and the Making of the Decolonizing Pacific*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2018.
2. Jung, Moon-Ho. *Menace to Empire: Anticolonial Solidarities and the Transpacific Origins of the U.S. Security State*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2022.
3. Swan, Quito. *Pacifica Black: Oceania, Anti-Colonialism, and the African World*. New York: New York University Press, 2022.
4. Warren, Joyce Pualani. “Reading Bodies, Writing Blackness: Anti-/Blackness and Nineteenth-Century Kanaka Maoli Literary Nationalism,” *American Indian Culture and Research Journal*, vol. 43, no. 2 (2019): pp. 49- 72.

5. Lowe, Lisa. *The Intimacies of Four Continents*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2015.
6. Sharma, Nitasha Tamar. *Hawai'i Is My Haven: Race and Indigeneity in the Black Pacific*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2021.
7. Shilliam, Robbie. *The Black Pacific: Anti-Colonial Struggles and Oceanic Connections*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2015.
8. Segal, Ronald. *Islam's Black Slaves: The Other Black Diaspora*. New York: Macmillan, 2001.
9. Burton, Antoinette M. *Brown over Black: Race and the Politics of Postcolonial Citation*. Gurgaon: Three Essays Collective, 2012.
10. Reid, Anthony, ed. *Slavery, Bondage and Dependency in Southeast Asia*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1983.