

Introduction

In February of 2018, the Chinese national broadcaster, CCTV, televised the annual Spring Gala concert. One segment of the show would go on to make unprecedented waves in the Euro-American media, which rarely, if ever, mentions one of the largest televised events in the world. The BBC described the segment as follows:

The controversial sketch was part of the four-hour CCTV New Year Gala—also known as the Spring Festival Gala. . . . By some estimates, the show is the most watched entertainment program on earth. The skit begins with a routine by a group of African dancers in “tribal” attire and people dressed up as zebras, giraffes, lions and antelopes. This is followed by a comedy skit where a young black woman asks a Chinese man to pose as her husband when meeting her mother. While the young woman is played by a black actor, her mother appears to be an Asian actor in black-face make-up, donning a traditional outfit complete with huge fake buttocks. She walks on stage carrying a fruit plate on her head and is accompanied by what is thought to be . . . a black actor in a monkey suit, carrying a basket on his back.¹

To contextualize this description, it is useful to understand that the Spring Gala concert is watched, actively or passively, in almost every Chinese home, forming a kind of backdrop to one of the most important national holidays in China, the Spring Festival. In the days following the broadcast, excerpts from the Gala concert are replayed on television, accompanying extended family gatherings that play out over days of family visits and shared meals, with few Chinese actively paying attention to the rebroadcasts. This was certainly the case in my in-laws’ home near Wuhan, where the casual holiday atmosphere had stretched out over a number of days—a lull between the travel arrangements that bookend the festival period. Like large festivals that entail family gatherings in the rest of the world, the Spring Festival sets in motion annual mass migrations across and beyond the Chinese nation-state. These movements form a counterpoint to the mass-media calibration of national and nationalist affect that the Spring Gala concert

undertakes through mass-mediated spectacle. For many outside viewers, the content of this media event might appear to have the character of an ethno-racial pantomime. At times, it has produced various portrayals and stereotypes of ethnic minorities that have been debated as offensive within China. For this reason, the Spring Gala event is consistently received ambiguously, but seldom generates an uproar around its portrayals of black African people. One reason is that black Africans are not official “ethnic minorities” (*shaoshu minzu*) in China, and are almost never featured in the event’s proceedings.

In this sense, the February 2018 broadcast should have stood out for its inclusion of Africa and Africans, an inclusion that also should have prompted epistemic questions around whether the inclusion of Africans suggested shifts in China’s own ethno-racial epistemologies of alterity and territory. For instance: Are Africans now Chinese ethnic minorities? How would such a framing reorder China’s spatialization on the one hand, and Han ethno-nationalism on the other? These are some questions that could have been posed within and beyond China. However, these pertinent inquiries were occluded by another: Why was the Chinese state broadcaster CCTV engaging in such obvious racism? This question and its entailed criticisms emerged from two theaters—western media audiences and cosmopolitan, middle- and upper-class liberal Chinese viewers. In the latter case, commentary was often voiced in English—“this is racism”—or mediated through the Chinese gloss, *zhongzuqishi*.²

Both groups identified two elements of the show as most troubling: first, the donning of blackface on the part of a Chinese actress playing the mother of a black actress; and second, the co-presence of animals in the scene, particularly the part played by a monkey, who appeared to be a henchman or familiar of the mother in blackface. The former was denounced not only as racist, but fundamentally unnecessary given that a Chinese-speaking black actress could have played the mother’s part. The representation of the monkey drew criticism for depicting Africans’ closeness to nature, seemingly evoking an older bio-racial trope of racial colonialism (Opondo 2015). The accusations thus turned on treating the acts of donning blackface and juxtaposing black bodies with animals as racist in themselves, rather than asking what kinds of Chinese subjectivities and receptions were being transfigured in doing so. Racist acts not only made racists out of their perpetrators, but additionally attributed agency to black skin as the catalyst for racism. This idea, that the existence of black persons in volatile settings causes racism to happen, has been trenchantly critiqued by Karen and Barbara Fields (2012).

[blackness + animality] + Chinese blackface = racism. The speed of these associations elides important questions: Can Chinese actors enact equivalent racisms compared to their white counterparts elsewhere? Are Chinese subjects able to equally inhabit whiteness to the degree that they are able to reenact Euro-American racio-colonial violence? The blanket ascription of racism on the part of the western media and its presumed audience seemed to reveal a familiar sleight of hand

playing out beneath the trapdoors of a far-from-decolonized global modernity, albeit in an out-of-the-way place.

This book begins its investigation within the educational encounter between Africa and China with an ethnographic analysis of African and Chinese students' language- and race-mediated interactions in the universities within Beijing's higher education district, Haidian. What I will show, however, is that these interactions have ramifications far beyond this bounded space-time. By the time of publication, readers will have experienced a global epidemic that unfolded in a counterpoint of volatile political assertions and social reorderings—these were demonstrated to be both intersectional and transnational. The mediations of race and language, and indeed the status of personhood, have not only been shown to be interconnected concerns in a political landscape that extends well beyond monolingual settler-colonial states. The very language of universalism and relativism, with its archetypes of rational personhood, have been compromised (D. Li 2019; Jobson 2020). Writing from the precipice of a political and intellectual crisis in the social sciences, my own intervention is an ethnographically situated one. I focus on the intersectional relationship between whiteness's vectors of English, cosmopolitanism, and unmarkedness in the shadow of "third world historicity." I will demonstrate how this relationship mediates the interactions between African educational migrants and Chinese actors, and will argue that this mediation is enabled through a semiotic nexus I term the *Angloscene*. In undertaking this task, I depict how seemingly familiar colonial tropes become reconstituted in novel but ultimately limiting ways in Sino-African encounters. As such, *Angloscene* affords an opportunity to reapproach the analytics of intersectionality and postcolonial translation from a context once expected to have cathartically invoked "the Third World [starting over] a new history of man" (Fanon 1963, 238). The arguments I make throughout the course of the following chapters address two primary concerns. The first is an analysis of how current Sino-African encounters contest or recontextualize, perpetuate or fetishize the persistence of Anglocentrism, cosmopolitanism, and whiteness as historically imbricated manifestations of western hegemony.³ The second is a demonstration of the ways in which an ethnographic study of encounters in actual micro-interactions can restage the stakes of postcolonial translation by revealing the interactional emergence of ideological concerns with power, historical stratification, and their relationship to discourse that have plagued various genealogies of postcolonial, deconstructionist, and critical race theorists.⁴ Thus, this manuscript grounds its methodological approach in the study of interactions—considered as dialectically contingent on, and constitutive of, the historical and material conditions of their contextualization. What follows undertakes a critical semiotics of postcolonial translation at an important breakdown point of both western liberal postracialism and its identitarian radical antagonists—the Afro-Chinese encounter.

FROM HAIDIAN TO JOHANNESBURG AND BACK

Wudaokou, a university neighborhood in Haidian district, is a place many Chinese students in Beijing refer to as “the center of the universe.” Beginning around 2010, the nightclubs, restaurants, and coffee shops saw an increasing presence of African students exploring Wudaokou’s cosmopolitan possibilities. To many of them, China’s significant soft power investments in their respective countries seemed like the fulfillment of dreams of educational mobility—where an education in China emerged as an alternative horizon to the exclusions of the Euro-American academy—an exclusion that (for many African students) persistently favored an elite class of “globalization people.” China, they were told, was the future—the new center of an alternative globalization. Many believed it until they had to start tutoring English to their Chinese classmates and the children of middle- and upper-class Beijingers who themselves aspired to either attend, or send their children to, Oxbridge and the Ivy Leagues.

In 2008, before beginning my graduate studies in the United States and China, I was working as a part-time English as a Second Language (ESL) lecturer, teaching a course called English for Medical Purposes at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, South Africa. This was my home city, and the home city of a few of my future informants in Beijing as well. My class consisted of a group of doctors and medical students from Senegal, Rwanda, Angola, and Mozambique, as well as one each from Pakistan and Cuba. A number of universities in South Africa still offer bridging courses like these as a way of bringing qualified professionals into the state medical infrastructure. On a Friday in June of that year, Peter, one of my students from Senegal, was forced to withdraw from my course after being attacked and severely injured during his commute through the city. He was followed after taking a taxi to campus and then stabbed by a group of South African assailants who heard his foreign accent while negotiating a taxi fare. This was at the tail end of one of the first waves of xenophobic violence in the 2000s—a still-persistent political tension in South Africa. At the time, a number of opportunities to study in China had emerged for increasing numbers of educated African students in search of better learning and professional opportunities. Taking a few Confucius Institute (CI) Chinese courses in their universities facilitated academically talented African students’ relatively easy passage into Chinese university programs. This option was increasingly on the minds of many (non-South African) students like Peter. I left Johannesburg in 2009, but met him and other classmates for a coffee at one of Wits University’s cafeterias, and asked how he was doing. “I am okay. I think I will go to China for study soon,” he said. Guessing my next question, he continued: “It will be really difficult, but . . .”

Peter didn’t need to complete his sentence, not with so many non-South African Africans being killed on the streets of Johannesburg with little consequence. Almost anywhere would have been better for an “other-African” educational

migrant in South Africa. Indeed, talented but neglected students like Peter—if they survived an ordeal such as his—were increasingly becoming disillusioned by a stifling world order. One that offered remarkably few opportunities to a continent with a growing population of talented and resourceful young people who find themselves crushed between selective global austerities and short-sighted local gatekeeping.

Five years after this encounter, I found myself beginning an ethnographic project on the streets of northwestern Beijing, in pursuit of a graduate degree in anthropology. Making friends with and moving among the massive range of African students enrolled in seventeen of Haidian's universities, I encountered many older graduate students like Peter: educational migrants attempting to study in China for as long as possible while waiting out a variety of “difficult situations” in their home countries. While many were longing for a better tomorrow, some had learned that the memorization of one particular phrase became necessary in order to account for their presence in the Chinese capital—especially in conversations with working-class Chinese, who could often be simultaneously discriminatory toward and jealous of African students attending “their” universities. This phrase was *disanshijie datuanjie*: “third-world solidarity.” When strategically used in the right context, it could even evoke a grudging smile from the most xenophobic street vendor: *Bang ni de disan xiongdi ba!* (“Please help your third-world brother!”)

Third world and third worldism mean different things in Euro-American and Afro-Chinese contexts. I know this, because my own use of this term in American and European academic conversations, workshops, and conferences encountered significant obstacles, a result of significant historical biases in US, British, and European higher education. After my return from China, it became immediately apparent that most of my Euro-American colleagues had internalized “third world” as a derogatory word. Most of them remain ignorant of the term's origin first in Maoist China, and then later in the Global South, following the 1954 Bandung conference. The fact of a shared history of third worldism in China and much of the Global South (Frazier 2014; Okihiro 2016)—a constellation of meanings that is not derogatory, but politically empowering—is fundamentally ignored in American and European intellectual audiences to whom many Global South students must address themselves. Outside of ethnic or Africana studies, the Euro-American social sciences rarely teach that the third world—as a conceptual category—was initially invoked as a horizontal call to political unity among decolonizing nations, before it became appropriated as a vertical and derogatory term for underdevelopment in area studies and the development-oriented social sciences. This shift from horizontal to vertical meanings of third worldness owes much to the writing and institutional labor of American intellectuals like Walter Rostow, Melville Herskovits, and Wilbur Schramm, all of whom devoted their careers to producing conceptual alternatives in development, area, and communication studies that



FIGURE 1. *Revolutionary Friendship Is as Deep as the Ocean*, Stefan Landsberger Collection, International Institute of Social History (IISH), Amsterdam.

could counter the appeal of communism in China and other newly decolonizing countries in Africa, Asia, and Latin America.⁵ My use of “third world” in the account that follows recognizes this older, horizontal genealogy of third worldism and attempts to contextualize its reemergence as aspirational history and social fact in contemporary Sino-African encounters (Ke-Schutte 2019). In doing so, I will argue that the reemergence of third-worldist awareness, made explicit in the invocation of *disanshijie datuanjie* (“third-world solidarity”), is symptomatic of the persistence of another horizon of value that chimerically compromises the cultivation of decolonized personhood: the Angloscene.

Here, some key questions emerge: Is a return to the revolutionary forever of Afro-Asian internationalism a more acceptable reality than negotiating a world typified by a naturalized anti-blackness—a racial-capitalist infrastructure mediated through the politically correct prose of a persistent, global Anglocentrism? Are many of Beijing’s African students projecting utopian pasts onto histories that never came to fruition? Or at least, histories that are so remote from the lives of eighteen-year-old Kenyan, Angolan, or Zimbabwean Africans as to be considered medievalist futurism: a kind of Pan-Africanist Star Wars. Consider the following image, posted on the dorm room wall of Fidel Mapfumo, a Zimbabwean exchange student in Beijing.

This particular poster was pasted on the wall next to his bunk bed in his university residence. I found out, through the course of my fieldwork, that it had, in fact,

been given to him (after being downloaded from *chinese posters.net*) by an older roommate (Ke-Schutte 2019). The characters on the image read *Geming youyi shen ru hai* (“Revolutionary friendship is as deep as the ocean”). It was designed by well-known propaganda artist Guo Hongwo, and depicts a variety of African travelers—men and women—who have presumably come to China, posing with Chinese workers in front of Chinese-made modern farm equipment. When I asked a nineteen-year-old Fidel about the image, he noted: “[It] reminds me of the good old days.” The frequent sharing of such media objects suggests a pragmatic awareness of a history that should or would have been. As sign vehicles, such media objects appear to tap into a contemporary “structure of feeling” (Williams 1965) that might be interpretable as a signpost to more explicit reimaginings of third-world solidarities that once may have animated Afro-Asian relationships—where these relationships were based on actual historical alignments to an anti-colonial proletarianization of the non-western world.

How do African and Chinese subjects’ historically inspired invocations of anti-imperialism, as well as aspirations to unmarked cosmopolitan modernity, come to compromise the very voicing of history and aspiration as horizons in the fashioning of emancipatory postsocialist and postcolonial personhood? Why do the unmarked aspirations and historical invocations of postcolonial subjects in China constantly seem to fail? Or, alternatively, how do such aspirations and invocations generate contradictory results for the very persons attempting to enact their own emancipatory self-definition? In trying to understand these initial compromises and contradictions, I encountered a “point of breakdown” or “friction” at the edge of a substantial social problem: a counterintuitive contradiction where “social facts” emerge (Durkheim [1897] 1979; Tsing 2005). In my case, this problem emerged as a constitutive relationship between a neutral language and an unmarked cosmopolitanism—where the celebration of English’s linguistic neutrality and cosmopolitanism’s racial unmarkedness became the contradictory conditions of possibility for articulating both histories of third-world solidarity, as well as the precarious future of a genuinely postcolonial personhood as emergent in Sino-African educational encounters. A familiar compromising logic underpins this articulation: after all, isn’t English just a language, and whiteness just a race?

Initially, the obstacle to exploring this social problem appeared to be one that had been defined, at considerable length, by generations of critical race theorists and anti-colonial thinkers in an array of disciplinary contexts: The forces of global twenty-first-century racial capitalism, Euro-American cultural hegemony, and transnational intersectional oppression had clearly persisted, despite the purported victories of cultural relativism, global anti-racism, and liberalism as internalized, transnational political values since the end of the Second World War. In fact, these “irrational” forces appear to have been integrated into the very political economies of value that sustain the infrastructures of “rational” actors.⁶ In light of such contradictions, it remains surprising how often Euro-American intellectuals

who are concerned with decolonization frequently fail to discuss the broader intellectual theaters from which global anti-imperialist arguments once emerged.

As a former graduate student and educator in the American higher-education context, I witnessed and was frequently surprised by a pervasive Eurocentric commonsense in teaching the relevance of Marxist and leftist intellectual genealogies in the American social sciences. This was surprisingly widespread among many instructors and students in top research universities: what was frequently being taught as “*the Marxist Perspective*” owed its prominence to the Frankfurt school’s coincidental relocation to California. As a student initially trained in the Global South, I was outraged by an omission of facts.

The fact of third worldism’s southern global front threatening an encompassment of US and European postwar hegemony. The facts of Asian, African, and Latin American Marxisms emerging as the primary conceptual modes through which to bring about postwar global decolonization, which still seems un compelling among many professors and students alike. Rather, funny PowerPoint slides of Theodor Adorno enjoying the California sunshine and the tragedy of Walter Benjamin’s suicide while fleeing Nazi Germany in an attempt to join him are preferred. These narratives keep smart, aspiring educational elites captivated as they are able to relate to the whimsically tragic cycle of such intellectual protagonists: clever, privileged men engaged in brave, intellectual pursuits, caught in traumatic historical misfortune. At the time of writing, none of the graduate or undergraduate students I encountered were presented with any information about the theoretical imperatives of third worldism, the Bandung Conference, the various Pan-African congresses, or the nonalignment movement that created a political urgency for engaging socialist thought beyond Europe. Nor did they know about the shift in global political polarities that these events represented, which contributed significantly to the establishment of Marxism as a methodological perspective in American social sciences training.

The stratifying contours of biopolitics, empire, multitudes, expulsions, cruel optimism, cultural capital, and intersectionality as key terms, which many contemporary Euro-American intellectuals have gone to great pains to delineate in their contemporary writings, were already entailed in the writings and thoughts of many non-European thinkers: early Chinese Marxist-feminist He Zhen (or He-Yin Zhen); pragmatist sociologist and innovator of critical race theory, W. E. B. Du Bois; political thinker and statesman, Mao Zedong; as well as revolutionary and decolonial theorist, Frantz Fanon.⁷ All revealed the empirical dimensions of what these keywords would later depict. Fundamentally developing their own respective genealogies, they made their political and intellectual projects intelligible through their transnationally aligned yet contextually particular recastings of Karl Marx’s ideas in relation to the colonial and decolonizing worlds they were writing in. How did these genealogies become so compromised in the elite intellectual theaters of the Global North?

Indeed, compromise has a long history in third-world revolutionary thought. Here, we can define compromise in the sense of making a participatory presence at the cost of truncated citation or distorted translation, like signing an unequal contract, or making an unfair deal, whether the signing subject is aware of the structural mechanism that engenders the compromise or not—Audre Lord’s ([1984] 2007) master’s tools and Lauren Berlant’s (2011) cruel optimism are two profound examples of compromise in this abstract sense. At a political scale, one is able to discern these dynamics of compromise in Afro-Chinese histories of nonalignment. Scaling back its explicit support for Pan-Africanist initiatives, China’s deals with Nixon and the United States shifted the dynamics of the Cold War (Segal 1992). In South Africa, Nelson Mandela and the African National Congress’s (ANC) relatively moderate demands guaranteed ascendancy over other, more politically radical movements. This followed from political sanctions that were imposed on the apartheid government when the South African Defense Force’s disruption of Pan-Africanist and other socialist movements in the Global South became unnecessary to NATO states (Onslow 2009). This came at the tail end of decades of assassinations and political subterfuge that all but obliterated the legacies of Nkrumah, Senghor, Sékou Touré, Machel, and Hani, to name a few.

The sequential western media coverage of the Tiananmen protests in 1989 and Mandela’s release from prison in 1990—after the fall of the Berlin Wall—rhetorically bolstered America and the liberal west’s claims to world leadership and its contingent moral authority to guide the world into a Star Trek-esque united federation: a postnational order at the dawn of a new millennium (Evans 2016). A transnational supply chain of compartmentalized labor, unchecked extraction, and free-flowing capital would support of a horizon of aspiration and consumption that promised unconstrained and unmarked cosmopolitan mobility for the right kind of global citizen (Ke-Schutte 2019). As Arjun Appadurai has suggested, we can understand this ideological shift at end of the Cold War as the awakening of a global *imaginaire*—what he terms a “constructed landscape of collective aspirations” (1996, 31). This was certainly the romantic narration within the educated Anglospheres of the Global North. However, as some have noted, many “out-of-the-way” places did not, and still do not, experience the process of globalization and the formations of its ideal personhoods in this way at all. As Achille Mbembe has demonstrated in his work, Africa and Africans become frequent political conscripts for maintaining the indispensable nightmarish underbelly of this *imaginaire* (Mbembe 2001, 2003).

In Afro-Chinese encounters, I suggest that the relationship between globalization’s utopian *imaginaire* and its dystopian underbelly is very much still relevant, yet has been rendered significantly more elusive with the rise of a simultaneously neo- and (il)liberal China (Vukovich 2019). The countervailing social forces of China’s aspirationally liberal and ambitiously nationalist “middle classes” are

contributing significant labor to the transformation and maintenance of this global “work of the imagination” (Appadurai 1996).

Aligning with an urgent need for intellectual decolonization in anthropological genealogies (Allen and Jobson 2016, Jobson 2020), I will argue that contemporary educational encounters between Chinese and Africans reveal contradictions in the construction of such global *imaginaires*: that their landscape of collective cosmopolitan aspiration not only fails subjects who are disproportionately stratified in the hills and valleys of “modernity,” but that the very act of aspiration toward these *imaginaires* generates the ideological gravity that stratifies the aspirational subject in relation to it. Additionally, I will show that the rhetorical unmarkedness of the “work of the imagination” ultimately masks-while-recruiting its racio-linguistic and intersectional horizon: a white space-time with English subtitles that ideologically and discursively stratifies all non-heteronormative, non-white subjects in ultimately unequal ways, even within a non-western encounter.

ENGLISH AND WHITENESS

The ethnography that follows will show that the experience and recruitment of English and whiteness in interactions among African students and their Chinese interlocutors is not one of discreet subtypes of language and race. Instead, English and whiteness are mutually entailed in a larger ideological process that compels recourse to a simultaneously third worldist and cosmopolitan double-consciousness. What pragmatist sociologist and early critical race theorist W. E. B. Du Bois (1903, 1–9) once termed “double consciousness” can certainly be understood as reflective of the ways in which marginal subjects—within the broad social context of white monopoly capitalism and colonialism—have a greater interactional burden than less-marginal members of a society. Du Bois’s argument not only persists within the protracted global moment, but becomes equally visible within smaller-scale interactions in out-of-the-way places—both in terms of the limited range of participant roles that black subjects are able to adopt (no matter where they go), as well as the degree to which they must always adopt more than one of these limited roles in every interaction. As demonstrated in the subsequent chapters, this experience is acutely traumatic for the majority of African students in Beijing, as blackness—in the racio-political sense—is not an initially foregrounded vector of identity in the way it is for black Americans who must negotiate the Anglo-centric vagaries of white settler-colonial space-time in order to merely become intelligible public persons. In what follows, the interactions between, and reflections of, most black African students in Beijing revealed contours and experiences of transnational racialization in ways that are uncannily reminiscent of what Du Bois once called the Color Line: a historically and mass-mediated political horizon of value that (still) functions as a commensurator of global racial capital. Most of my informants, though coming from different national and linguistic backgrounds, shared

a coming-to-awareness of their blackness mostly as a result of the continental racializations (Africa = black people) they were recruited into when coming from their home countries into an “African” student community in Beijing, engendering a kind of Pan-Africanism by default—though some may have described it as more of a hostage situation. Among black African students I interviewed, the vast majority of whom described their experiences of racialization, most perceived the often ugly manifestations of the Color Line as a trade-off toward becoming educational migrants in pursuit of cosmopolitan futures—a horizon that, like the Color Line, demarcates a point separating earth and sky, but which can neither be mapped nor reached.

What I present is an ethnographic study of language and education reception in the context of African and Chinese mass mobilities—thus, an inquiry into the imbricated politics of language and education discourse from the perspectives of those receiving and translating these in a transnational setting. The material that follows demonstrates the strengths of long-term ethnographic participant observation undertaken from a South-South perspective. Building on seven years of ethnographic and historical engagement among African students and their Chinese interlocutors, as a South African researcher, student, and classmate in the Chinese university system, I was able to gain insights that might be counterintuitive to both my Euro-American and Chinese colleagues. Following the movements of informants between Africa, China, and the United States, I came to see a contrapuntal relationship between the experiences of African university students traveling to China and the cosmopolitan aspirations of their Chinese peers and teachers. This relationship between expectation and experience became visible in ways that would have been impossible when following the imperatives of conventional proposal-based, object-centered, or single sited ethnography. Through supplementing this approach with archival work conducted on four continents, I was also able to explore how an ethnographic counterpoint of mobility entails both a “third-world” history of global class consciousness and decolonization down to the present, as well as a postsocialist, postcolonial embrace of “cosmopolitan desire” informing contemporary educational aspirations in urban China and the African diaspora (Chakrabarty 2005; Snow 1989; Rofel 2007; Okihiro 2016; P. Liu 2015). My arguments emerge out of this dialectic of encounter and its historical-material conditions. It is also for this reason that I will frequently refer to the experiences of African students more broadly. While every African student in Beijing comes from a country with its distinct history of sovereignty, many or most are compelled to identify with the subject position of being an African student, as continental scale exchanges are the political terms of engagement underpinning their educational endeavors. It is not surprising, then, that some kind of explicit Pan-Africanism or less formal inter-African climate of association emerges among students from a continent whose destinies have at least as much in common as they do apart.

My intuition at the outset of the research was that Sino-African encounters presented an opportunity to recontextualize translation outside of its usual “west-and-its-others” ethnographic space-time—given the contrapuntal mobilities and historicities converging through these African and Chinese educational endeavors. This certainly proved to be the case, but in simultaneously contradictory and constraining ways. In mapping these contradictions and constraints, I provide a detailed analysis of the productive tensions emerging between them: The persistence of English as a discursive unit of ideological commensuration in Sino-South encounters since the Bandung Asia-Africa conference in 1954. The prominence of whiteness and English language-ness as a kind of ideological gravity animating African and Chinese cosmopolitan aspirations. The crises of personhood and value generated by the participation in a Chinese social setting where signs of English and whiteness become the only available forms of cultural capital to actors who have been historical others to these discourses. And the precarious and costly translations that African and Chinese educational migrants must undertake in their affective commitments to mass mobility: a state emerging in response to physically, racially, and linguistically constrained encounters with a “globalism” that promises precisely the opposite. Toward uncovering such contradictions, I drew on analyses of informants’ interactions—with each other and their environment. In distilling such analyses, I relied methodologically on anthropological theories of meta-pragmatics and aesthetics; language and mediation; and mobility and cosmopolitan aspiration. However, neither the analysis nor the writing could have been possible without a protracted period of participation and observation that enabled an awareness of the citation, circulation, and invocation of media discourse as key components of Afro-Chinese interactions.

IS ENGLISH REALLY NEITHER HERE NOR THERE?

At the time of my research, there were around ten thousand African students in Beijing pursuing Chinese higher education, many of them hedging their bets between China as the future superpower and China as a detour to the fulfillment of a deferred cosmopolitan aspiration. This moment, for many, perhaps begins with the conclusion of the first Forum on China–Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) meeting between China and various African nations in 2010, as well as a series of other key agreements following this event (Li et al. 2012). In these agreements, China guaranteed African governments educational access and development in exchange for natural resources. As my African student informants arrived in Beijing, however, they came to discover that many of their Chinese classmates not only placed their faith in foreign Euro-American institutions, but that Chinese students were, in fact, able to attend Oxbridge and the Ivy Leagues in vast numbers. At this realization, many continue to wonder as one frustrated informant did: “Why do I have to *come here*, while the Chinese can *go there*?”

For African and Chinese students in China, “coming here,” “going there,” and “going far” are possibilities that an ability to speak English either facilitates or fore-closes. If we are to understand English as a means of interdiscursive and interpersonal teleportation, some questions arise: What makes English—ideologically and discursively—more than “a language”? What allows English to transcend its proposition as merely an arbitrary *lingua franca*? What makes it *the* means to affect destination, arrival, and an unmarked horizon of aspiration? Why can some travel further than others? Why, even when English fails them, are so many African and Chinese students still compelled to commit to it?

To be sure, my ideological engagement with language and race emerges out of Silversteinian linguistic anthropology—a genealogy that, as with the work of W. E. B. Du Bois, extends and politically contextualizes the project of pragmatist semiotics. From this perspective, no language exists in a vacuum nor has a materiality that is innocent of its destructive political potential in its cultural context. Sticks and stones can break your bones and words can certainly kill you—particularly in the juridical sense. The case with English, in this light, should be of particular concern to the analyst of ideology, intersectionality, and inequality. First, the space-time that English encompasses at this point in history is considerable, given the technological means that have allowed for its amplified mediation, including nuclear imperialism, the internet, Anglo-medicalization, and American information technology and software monopolies. Second, English has also existed in Africa and China—since the end of World War II—as *the language* in relation to which all other languages are measured and standardized. As such, English is a volatile vehicle for its Chinese and African occupants, indexing a curious contradiction between imperialist nightmares and liberal dreams: a theme poignantly explored in the extremely popular Chinese film *American Dreams in China* (dir. Peter Chan). In the American academy—among my graduate school peers, professors, and students at top-tier universities—English is, of course, *just a language*. But international students—struggling frantically to keep up with the popular culture references and shibboleths of their American peers—must maintain the performative pretense of English’s “arbitrariness,” lest they are admonished: “Subaltern, please shut up!”

These concerns also arise in contemporary Beijing, where most African students attend classes in English, with many also teaching English to their Ivy League-aspiring Chinese classmates after hours. Within this skewed political economy of language, African subjects find themselves having to undertake double translational labor. They must help Chinese students to translate their Chinese dreams into Ivy League aspirations, and yet must simultaneously find a way to translate future African subjects of Chinese education into an aspirational horizon that is as yet unintelligible. Upon witnessing these dynamics, two related questions emerged during the early phases of my research: First, why is the ideal African subject of a Chinese education such an elusive enigma? Second, why must

African students help their Chinese peers become ideal subjects of an English, cosmopolitan education when African students themselves are still marginalized by this very “global” English educational complex? Later, I came to realize that there was, in fact, no enigmatic ideal subject of Sino-African education, nor did African students have any choice but to help their Chinese classmates. This was because the promise of an equal encounter in the absence of white colonial bodies was always compromised by ideological and pragmatic conditions that stratified Chinese and African subjects in relation to a spectral horizon of whiteness, English, and cosmopolitan mobility.

This tension between a folk semiotics of arbitrariness and sociopolitical realities of stratification suggests that interactions for differently situated actors are indeed less open-ended for some than they are for others. This was apparent to sociologist Erving Goffman (1983) and later theorists of interaction. This principle is further demonstrated in the ways that the only imaginable future for the marginalized modern and decolonizing subject is still only thinkable in relation to an unmarked aspiration that defaults toward whiteness as encompassing horizon of value—despite the “porosity and enmeshment of interactions” or the “collisions of actants” (Lempert 2016; Latour 2005). Interactions, I will demonstrate, neither allow for the unfinalizability of personhood to be equally inhabited by all subjects of an interaction (Agha 2007b; Butler 1997), nor are the imbricated processes of language enregisterment and “performative” stratification of race, gender, sexuality, and class tenable as purely arbitrary propositions.⁸ A revised interactionist perspective demonstrates that power is not simply a function of who has it. Rather, it reveals under what conditions power becomes available or recruitable to differentially stratified subjects, often regardless of their volition—as a robust, methodological extension of the process Louis Althusser (1971) once dubbed “interpellation.”

Demonstrating such interactional dynamics is methodologically complex. It entails a reckoning with the complexities of spatiotemporal and historical imbrications in the empirically delineable real time of micro-interactions. On the one hand, this necessitates a postcolonial revision of ethnographies of language and interaction where history does not simply emerge in the interactional here-and-now (Spivak [1988] 2010). On the other, such a methodological revision must also situate interactional insights within dialectical materialist arguments that contextualize contemporary Sino-African encounters within a transnational history of third-world solidarity and nonalignment (Chakrabarty 2005; Okihiro 2016; D. Li 2019). The stakes of such a historical-interactionist recasting are important since third worldism and nonalignment were originary transnational aspirations to a genuinely global, socialist internationalism between decolonizing nations in the wake of overt European colonial and subsequent neocolonial projects. These historical moments of transnationalism were ultimately sabotaged and subsumed by the postwar *nation-state* as proxy for developmentalism and later post-Cold War neoliberalism: a succession of connected events and associations that

ultimately led to the nation-state's failure to commensurate equity among imperialist, colonial, and decolonizing nations that were never equal (Chakrabarty 2005).

PROBLEMS WITH "MORE COMPLEXITY"

"How can we not know that in the names Machel and Neto, Sankara and Nujoma, there is already, by the historic force of ideological proclivity, the name Lumumba inscribed in the very utterance of those other names?" asks Grant Farred in his recent essay, "Not the Moment After, but the Moment Of" (2009, 583).⁹ Here, Farred explicitly draws on Fanon's commentary on the dialectical nature of both history and anti-imperialist revolution: "For no one knows the name of the next Lumumba. There is in Africa a certain tendency represented by certain men. It is this tendency, dangerous for imperialism, which is at issue" (Fanon 1964, 191). In his meditation on a socialist internationalist history that connects Patrice Lumumba's Congolese revolution to "the long ten days" of Lenin and Trotsky's October Revolution, Farred points to the ways in which historical and material conditions constitute and are constituted by the still-revolutionary present: "[T]he power of the revolution, as much as or more than anything, occupied the twentieth century and ours, if only to a less obvious degree, even if the socialist experiment did not survive for one hundred years" (2009, 582). There is an obvious reference to the wordplay of several historians (Hobsbawm 1962, 1975, 1987; Braudel 1972; Arrighi 1994), where "long" or "short" as adjectives satirically challenge their ontological-time-indexing nouns. In doing so, Farred follows a number of influential dialectical materialists in attempting to disrupt linear, event-based histories that would otherwise ontologize time as isolated from social historical experience. Farred, like many critical theorists writing in this tradition, draws attention to the asymmetrical scale of history-making and its constant, politically precarious maintenance in the historicizing present.

In alignment with Farred's argument, I propose that a critical analysis of interactions methodologically enriches a traditional historicist approach to excavating the postcolonial historical present. This is because historicizing the present is ultimately contingent on interactional events connecting here-and-now interactions across time: where such interactional events not only emerge as historical and history-entailing space-times in themselves. Such interactional events are also contrapuntally discursive events; that is, they mutually entail related events that occur both in parallel and across time. Consider the metaphor of a scene in a play that has its own space-time, but also must cite simultaneous, future, or past scenes in the same play, as well as the material realms the audience occupies beyond the theatrical event. In a similar way, interactions—though seemingly fleeting—become socially and politically portable through the same dramaturgical entailments of language and meta-linguistic technologies (see Agha 2007a; Goffman 1959). As with the theatrical scene, the traceability and memorable character of a

sociopolitical scene of interaction arises from its speech-based dimension that coordinates and weaves together adjacent or nonlinear interactional events. The further portability of such scenes is additionally contingent on their mass-mediation via their intersubjective transmission both trans-temporally (by actors communicating with or through one another across history) and contrapuntally (among subjects in the present). This is explicitly demonstrated in the fact of your reading this account in this book.

Such a revision of interactionism as method requires an attentiveness to the recruitment of history into emergent, intersubjective ideological constructions like those animating African-Chinese interactions in contemporary Beijing. There are certain objects of critique that the traditional resources of critical theory—the physical archive in its most literal understanding—find challenging to analyze: living discourse in, of, and through social interactions being an important case. To be sure, traditional historical discourse objects are themselves usually formed through the very archival modalities—Weberian, Rankean, and so on—that treat them as vital and originary.¹⁰ Often, such historical objects are presented as relativistic or “more complex” accounts of ideological phenomena. Modernization theory, which—in China-Africa studies at least—still looms large, is one such counter-history that relies on semantic relativism in its treatment of historical objects in order to undermine postcolonial critiques. Its masterwork—an ur-text and meta-narrative of modernity theory’s Cold War-era “take off” developmentalism—is Walter Rostow’s canonical *The Stages of Economic Growth: A Non-Communist Manifesto* (1960). The afterlives of this meta-text—where colonialism is an event isolated in historical space-time, and hermetically sealed off from an economically pragmatic, developmentalist present—are as much a feature in key texts of China-Africa studies (Brautigam 2009; French 2014) as they are in contemporary treatments of English’s “arbitrary” presence in East Asia, on the part of a number of “global English” scholars (Pennycook 2007; Pan 2015).

In *Global Englishes and Transcultural Flows* (2007), Alastair Pennycook voices what has become a somewhat canonic position on the globalization of English: “[English] cannot be usefully understood in modernist states-centric models of imperialism or world Englishes, or in terms of traditional, segregationist models of language. Thus, while drawing on the useful pluralization strategy of world Englishes, I prefer to locate these Englishes within a *more complex* vision of globalization” (5).¹¹

The “more complex” globalization that so much of this kind of work proposes is seemingly bored with narratives of colonialism that would suggest a continuity of capitalist-imperialism from the rise of industrial colonial empires through to Cold War geopolitics. This boredom, however, has a notable and beneficial impact on the thriving global ESL industry. Like many stakeholders invested in this “more complex” narrative of the globalization of English, Pennycook aims to “understand the role of English both critically—in terms of new forms of power,

control and destruction—and in its complexity—in terms of new forms of resistance, change, appropriation and identity” (5). Without acknowledging the deficit between power and resistance, many like Pennycook propose that “*we* need to move beyond arguments about homogeneity or heterogeneity, or imperialism and nation states, and instead focus on trans-local and transcultural flows” (5–6).¹²

The interactions, histories, and contextualizations described in this book all challenge two assumptions that are latent in the global Englishes as well as the developmentalist positions. The first is the assumption of a scholarly *we* that is equally situated so as to give up on passé projects of decolonization so *we* can focus on what is “more complex” in the circulation of English. The second is the assumption that “new forms of power, control and destruction” as well as “new forms of resistance, change, appropriation, and identity” are somehow antithetical to theories of decolonization, and are even intelligible beyond them.

In the first instance, non-western (and often non-white) scholars are frequently and unproblematically included—by default—within the ambit of this scholarly “*we*.” Here, the double translational burden of their work—particularly in disciplines like anthropology, literary studies, and sociolinguistics—is once again being erased. Bilingual, non-western critics inevitably find themselves trying to account for the local in a situated disciplinary poetics that is everything but, while having to account for the far-from-decolonized global they almost certainly encounter daily. In the second instance, global Englishes and western developmentalist advocates relegate decolonization to a “past event” within a historical epistemology that would treat space and time as linear, flat, ultimately arbitrary semiotic formations that obstruct a common-sense “present” where “real change” can be enacted. From this understanding of history (for the privileged analyst of global English), linguistic “globalization”—captured by concepts like “superdiversity” (Vertovec 2007) and “linguistic superdiversity” (Jacquemet 2005; Blommaert 2010; Arnaut et al. 2016)—can be represented in endless, ultimately equally tenable modes. Modes within which the differential of power and resistance is erased, and subaltern subjects are burdened with agency that they do not have. From this relativistic treatment of English’s still historicizing present, Anglo-imperialism is dismissed in what is naïvely imagined to be a provincialization of colonial legacies through invoking “more complex” engagements—as if decolonization were a simpler analytical matter. And yet, the only intellectual provincialization achieved by such a move is the marginalization of colonial and postcolonial language critiques—sustaining the analytically neutral proposition that English has become unmoored from its colonial and imperial history.

In the globalization of English, an important debate precedes Pennycook’s: that between Chinua Achebe (1965) and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o (1986). Achebe’s “The African Writer and the English Language” was published first as a highly influential essay that was (at the time) very optimistic about the possibilities of tooling a colonial language toward creative expression on the part of decolonizing writers,

so as to produce works of art in the English language that could be African—a reasonable expectation in a climate of decolonizing African nations seeking equal participation in a world of interacting nations. Here, Achebe notes: “Those of us who have inherited the English language may not be in a position to appreciate the value of the inheritance. Or we may go on resenting it, because it came as part of a package deal that included many other items of doubtful value, especially the atrocities of racial arrogance and prejudice which may yet set the world on fire. But let us not, in rejecting the evil, throw out the good with it” (1965, 28).

A retrospective reading of Achebe’s position may prompt the impatient reader to brand him a shameless Uncle Tom for speaking of “the good” of colonialism. This would be reductive, since the good that Achebe appeared to be referring to was not in fact colonialism, but the observation of an affordance for (at the time) a strategic assimilation in the wake of several African revolutions and new sovereignties: “So my answer to the question, ‘Can an African ever learn English well enough to be able to use it effectively in creative writing?’ is certainly, ‘Yes.’ If on the other hand you ask, ‘Can he ever learn to use it like a native speaker?’ I should say, ‘I hope not.’ It is neither necessary nor desirable for him to be able to do so. The price a world language must be prepared to pay is submission to many different kinds of use” (29).

In his observation of the waning white or European body as inhabitant of the English language, Achebe was not alone in his optimism in 1965, as both African nationalism and African socialism were still on the ascent across Africa. There was a wave of decolonization sweeping the continent and several potential allies in the non-western world were positively disposed toward emerging African states. Dynamic leaders like Kwame Nkrumah and Ahmed Sékou Touré emerged as prominent voices advocating a Pan-Africanism that aimed to demonstrate productive dialogue between socialist and democratic reform. In the hubris of decolonization, the third world—in an optimistic coming-of-age that was announced at the Bandung Conference in 1955—seemed set not only to provincialize Europe but to set an example for it. This hubris was short-lived. After a string of coups and economic expropriations in Africa and Latin America, dreams of third-world solidarity and Pan-Africanism seemed to give way to nightmares in which African futures lived-on only in rusted infrastructures that evoked optimistic pasts. The context from which Ngũgĩ would later challenge Achebe was one in which English was no longer an appropriable register through which to facilitate an unburdened, third-world cosmopolitanism among diverse intellectuals who could engage on an equal footing. The picture had changed drastically after 1976. In the space-time of NATO’s ascendancy, and following the end of the Chinese Cultural Revolution with the death of Mao Zedong, Ngũgĩ argued that English (and other languages of colonization) had come to compromise—rather than liberate—the African writing subject: “How did we as African writers come to be so feeble toward the claims of our languages on us and so aggressive in our claims on other languages,

particularly the languages of colonization? In my view, language was the most important vehicle through which that power fascinated and held the soul prisoner. Language was the means of the spiritual subjugation” (Ngũgĩ [1986] 1994, 286).

For Ngũgĩ, there is nothing arbitrary in the capacity of languages to stratify, liberate, or inveigle their speakers, nor are languages equally situated to do so. To be sure, this position is also supported by a number of linguistic anthropologists. Context matters, and in this regard the contexts in which Ngũgĩ and Achebe posited their respective dystopian and utopian arguments differed fundamentally. These two thinkers have been type-cast as standing on opposite sides of a debate about language and decolonization despite the fact that their arguments in these canonic documents are separated by more than twenty years. A dialectic emerges between them that draws attention to the third and perhaps most encompassing assumption informing Pennycook’s argument: the scale of the global as an analytic of commensuration.

Both Ngũgĩ and Achebe remind us that decolonization continues to obstruct the outlook of globalization as an all-commensurating horizon of postmodern personhood—that decolonization still mediates similarly dialectical “global” futures (Mazzarella 2004; Ferguson 1999; Piot 2010). To be sure, Achebe and Ngũgĩ are making very different arguments about the possibilities of languages of command being recruited to projects of decolonization. Decolonization—historical and present—persistently troubles the possibilities of jumping scale to the global—while for Pennycook a “more complex” globalization of English retrospectively occludes the colonial. These arguments are far from equivalent. They reveal that arguments for globalization or decolonization—and indeed arguments of any kind—depend on commensurating scale.

This understanding resonates to some degree with linguistic anthropologists Summerson Carr and Michael Lempert’s (2016) recent discussion of the “pragmatics of scale” as an indispensable concern in virtually all linguistically mediated social interaction. Scaling, as a special kind of commensurative semiosis, is defined as a broad social practice that can be studied across an array of contexts where subjects must make the scale of *something*—always in spatial and temporal terms—intelligible to *someone*, in some way. Obvious examples include doctors explaining diseases to nonmedical personnel through shared analogies; scientists explaining ontological observations to laypeople through mutually available metaphors; or religious ritual specialists conveying complex precepts using accessible parables or poetic juxtapositions. Many forms of scaling, however, do not emerge in an open-ended sense, but rather in dialectical interactions where the play of structure and moment-to-moment maintenance elides neither “structuralist” nor “dialectical” concerns in the way Lempert himself describes (Carr and Lempert 2016). Drawing on postcolonial theory and an older pragmatist semiotics—particularly in relation to the ideas of Frantz Fanon and Erving Goffman—it is this less open-ended kind of interaction I will be concerned with. Here, I will

argue that the interplay between structure and agency, as well as the moment-to-moment of interactions and their histories, are not simply bypassed through the naïve postmodern accusation of structuralism. Rather, I propose that considerations of structure should be taken as fragile and precarious, yet indispensable propositions—particularly when they are voiced by our informants—and as such should be understood as entailing significant social labor and the recruitment of an array of stratified subject positions to maintain. Once we adopt such a stance, many of the analytical archetypes for discussing various permutations of political stratification can be productively synthesized: “*homo sacer*,” “the precariat,” “the object,” and “the subaltern” among them (Agamben 1998; Standing 2011; Butler 1990; Spivak [1988] 2010).

SPACE-TIME(S) OF MY RESEARCH

In many ways the scholarly biases in contemporary anthropology—a far-from-decolonized discipline—mirror these political dynamics of ordering and marginalization observed among African and Chinese informants in Beijing: assumptions of equality that ultimately stratify, and assumptions of historical linearity that convert colonialism into a series of *passé* events that become obstacles to new possibilities of personhood—possibilities that are ultimately deferred in all too familiar ways. The ethnographic texture of these dynamics, as presented here, emerged out of a number of methodological phases during the last eight years, in the development, implementation, and recasting of this project. My preliminary research in archives in the United Kingdom, South Africa, China, and the United States was important in contextualizing contemporary encounters in Beijing, which became my primary research site. During shorter phases of fieldwork, I was either conducting follow-up interviews in China, or pursuing archival research in Southern Africa and the United Kingdom (during summers and in transit between China and the United States). The bulk of my research, however, was conducted as a student in Beijing. In this capacity, I took classes, attended social gatherings, and lived in the same conditions and neighborhoods as most of my informants during my time in China—sometimes on- and sometimes off-campus as was the case for many African and Chinese students I attended classes and social events with. This participant observation was supplemented by archival and historical work that I undertook at a few research centers in Beijing during my fieldwork.

Beijing, my primary field site, remains an important educational metropole from the perspective of both Chinese and African learners, although for different reasons. For African students, the process of arriving in Beijing is heavily mediated through Confucius Institutes (CIs), which have a strong presence on the African continent through their support within African educational systems—from elementary school through university and vocational schools. In this regard,

CIs not only provide Chinese-language education but often play an important brokering role in facilitating students' passage into Chinese universities both through scholarships and the establishment of interuniversity networks between Chinese and African institutions. The Chinese government ministry that oversees CIs throughout the world—the Hanban (or Guojia Hanyu Guoji Tuiguang Lingdao Xiaozu Bangongshi)—is also located in Beijing. For Chinese students from all over China, Beijing becomes an educational center by virtue of the fact that the city has the highest concentration of top-tier Chinese institutions. Even within Beijing, governmental and educational administration are spatially concentrated, with government districts located within the city's inner two rings, and an entire educational district, Haidian, mostly within its fourth ring.

For these reasons, Haidian is the nexus of both Chinese and African educational cosmopolitanism in China, and the place where I lived and sourced the majority of my informants during my research in the Chinese capital. While being enrolled as a Chinese philosophy student at one university, I was able to align myself to what the majority of my African and Chinese classmates and informants spent their days doing—participating in reading groups, engaging in sporting activities, hanging out, and sitting in on classes across more than seventeen major campuses and research institutes in and beyond Haidian. Given the close proximity of campuses, students from all over Africa were able to form considerably large communities of common interest groups. These were fairly diverse, ranging from Pan-Africanist to national, linguistic, and tribalist alignments. A variety of social and political activities facilitated much of the interaction among these sometimes overlapping, sometimes discreet communities of African students. Given the concentrated region within which my informants were living and learning, as well as their concerns with anonymity, I have provided pseudonyms for them and their affiliated universities, but have kept the national origin of students and their chosen gender designations consistent. The pseudonyms were usually created with the informant or were chosen to mirror—in the case of Marx Moji and Mao Mapfumo—actual given middle names that indexed intertwined political histories and kinship alignments. Given the sheer volume of subjects that had socialist middle names or nicknames, there is no risk of revealing their identities as they appear here. In some cases, there were place names, organizations, and actual dates of interviews and focus groups that may have placed an informant at risk—since I would be a rather conspicuous foreigner on CCTV footage in coffee shops and other locations. I changed these accordingly. Furthermore, making a connection between a person or organization mentioned and actual informants and institutions will be unlikely, given the number of informants I spoke to (more than one hundred), formally and informally, over a period of seven years, and the number of student-driven initiatives afoot in Beijing.

While all the universities in Haidian are Chinese-language universities, the dominant language among African students, as well as the primary language

used between Africans and their Chinese peers and teachers, was English. This was also recognized by the Chinese institutions, all of whom offered classes in English while requiring students to pass a Chinese proficiency test by the end of their studies. Most African students only took English classes and their compulsory Chinese lessons; exceptions included either highly talented Chinese-language learners or long-term visitors in China. This situation and the escalating numbers of international students in Chinese universities have created a greater demand for English-language classes, a demand that places many Chinese-educated faculty at a disadvantage, as they have to teach their field in a foreign language within their own country. This is an obstacle that also negatively impacts African and other international students who complain about receiving an “economy class education,” without its emancipatory association. There is a historical context that lends some nuance to this widespread complaint. Many within the foreign student community are acutely aware that the Haidian district universities have played host to African and other international students since the days of Maoist China—precisely as a gesture of socialist emancipation through third-world, internationalist, and communist solidarity. This followed the Maoist centralization of Chinese education, focusing their educational development initiatives—and their subsequent regulation—in one district: Haidian.

During my research, I came to be recruited to various spheres of social interaction through identities I could adopt in relation to different informants. As an Afrikaner South African, I had to learn to perform—when necessary—a species of cosmopolitan “English” subjecthood, which varies depending on my audience but is nonetheless facilitated by an expectation that I can carry off this performance in an American or European setting. In Beijing, and within this diverse milieu of Chinese, African, and South African students, I found myself enlisted in a wider range of roles depending on my interactions with various Chinese and African actors in Beijing. For most Chinese students, I passed as a generic white (American) exchange student from a US university. For other Africans, I was a white South African of a certain kind: a recognizable category to African students from most of the continent. And for South African students, I was a random Afrikaner in Beijing. This latter category, in particular, puzzled elite, black South African students, many of whom held stereotypes of Afrikaners as fairly prosaic, barely literate, country bumpkins—in short, the antithesis of themselves and the emerging cosmopolitan class in South Africa.

To most of them, an Afrikaner—especially one interested in the lives of African students—seemed somewhat out of place and worthy of initial suspicion. In overcoming this obstacle, I was fortunate that I had already known a handful of Zimbabwean informants who had attended university in South Africa before coming to China via Confucius Institutes in their home country. Following my later university enrollment, which I undertook as part of my fieldwork, I attended classes and shared meals with these students, since—initially—the black South

African community in Beijing was difficult to forge relationships with. Through my Zimbabwean informants and classmates' more obvious openness to Pan-African conversations, I came to know increasing numbers of African and Chinese students while taking classes in a few different universities in Haidian district where the random auditing of classes across campuses is a fairly common activity among both international and Chinese students. Through these more encompassing interactions, I came to observe a political economy of cosmopolitan aspiration where African students were coming to Chinese universities and teaching English as means of survival, while Chinese students were frantically acquiring English skills to try and study in educational destinations in the United States and Britain. It was this observation that prompted me to consider the relationship between language, race, and mobility in a far from equal relationship between Chinese and African interlocutors—both operating in an interactional space-time that continues to valorize a cosmopolitan aesthetics of Anglocentric, unmarked whiteness.

ROADMAP

Having laid out the implications of the arguments and engagements that will make up the body of the manuscript, I will briefly sketch a roadmap of the content chapters, which are arranged into two parts.

Part I explores personhood as a fundamental discursive battleground in Sino-African postsocialist and postcolonial translations. Chapter 1 defines what I mean by the Angloscene and outlines its pragmatic dimensions. I do so by demonstrating stratification and conditions of value that imbricate language and education reception among contemporary African students visiting Beijing. In this chapter, I reveal some of the constraints that African students experience in their pursuit of an unmarked cosmopolitanism in contemporary Beijing. In support, I provide a detailed analysis of important contours of these constraints: the persistence of English as the unit of commensuration in Sino-South encounters where signs of English and whiteness become the only available forms of cultural capital for actors who have been historical others to this semiotic field. In showing how language is not disarticulable from its surrounding *indexicalities* (M. Silverstein 1976) and material historical conditions (Marx 1972)—like the signs of race and cosmopolitan mobility—I hope to draw attention to the limits of cosmopolitan aspiration, when its units of commensuration, like “neutral” English, become compromised by the ideological vectors of whiteness and stratified mobility. Drawing on the ideas of the Russian formalist thinker, Mikhail Bakhtin, I propose an analytic through which to interpret an articulated relationship between English and its indexically associated signs of race and mobility. I term this the Angloscene. Doing so, I suggest, draws attention to the regime of evaluation or arbitration within which Sino-African postcolonial “translation” unfolds.

Analyzing the gendered and sexual relationships between, and among, men and women in Chinese and African student communities, chapters 2 and 3 reveal the ways in which the Angloscene is sustained “performatively.” How the discursive silencing of subalterns, the micro-political contradictions of identity politics, and compromised units of translation—what Audre Lorde ([1984] 2007) referred to as “the master’s tools”—persist as marginalizing concerns in contemporary Beijing, and also how they persist precisely through a cruel optimism toward the emancipatory horizons of the Angloscene (Berlant 2011). Making use of analytical and methodological approaches in postcolonial Marxist and black feminist theory as well as linguistic anthropology, these chapters reveal, respectively, how this stratification through aspiration can be simultaneously understood as racially intersectional (Crenshaw 1991, 1989) and linguistically enregistered (Agha 2005). As such, Afro-Chinese educational encounters reflect not only a productive confluence of these critical and semiotic analytics, but also an important recontextualization of their respective arguments beyond the bounded national-linguistic settings within which these processes are conventionally identified.

In part II, I explore the contradictory compromises that the pursuit of a Sino-African postcolonial personhood entails. In chapter 4, my concern is with the Angloscene as a zone of translation and site for the alienating calibration of the affective fields of sensual social life—the *translation* of (an)aesthetic orders of social stratification (Buck-Morss 1992). Here Sino-African aspirational mobilities represent one such affective field. I will suggest how the tension between fashioning unprecedented futures and imagining utopian pasts—entailed in the intersubjective maintenance of the Angloscene—remains unresolved at the level of sensual, intersocial, and nonconscious domains of encounter. Exploring the recruitment of “nature” tropes and their associated compromised personhoods in the mediation of racialized and racializing alterities in Afro-Chinese encounters, I give an account of dangerous mediation and translational attunement. As opposed to the “culture,” “habitus,” or “milieu” within which intersubjective, durable formations of practice are grounded and given meaning, my aim is to account for the *in-translation* aspects of personhood and their simultaneously sensual and semiotic building blocks—and then how such translational affordances are extracted for the construction of compromised futurities.

As a counterpoint, chapter 5 meditates on the indispensable pragmatics of translation that are intelligible and referable discursive phenomena in the world as well as political and cultural realities to African and Chinese actors that are unavoidably imbricated in a mutually transformative encounter. To this end, I explore the indispensability of translation as social practice not only in the particular instance of Afro-Chinese interactions, but in the broader context of non-western encounters beyond the settler-colonial encounter. Demonstrating a pragmatics of postcolonial translation, I analyze the reflexive, intersubjective mediation of Southern African and Chinese culture concepts, *Ubuntu* and *guanxi* as my pri-

mary example for discussing potential avenues for negotiated Afro-Chinese identities even in a context where the conditions for the making of personhood may initially appear compromised.

Laying out what I call the liberal-racism complex, chapter 6 concludes with a number of key concerns: Within what regime of evaluation or arbitration does a Sino-African translation unfold? What are the mechanisms through which the cultural capital of English persists as not only the common denominator of all other global languages but the standard measure of cultural value regulating Chinese and African interactions? How is the arbitrariness of English or whiteness tenable, when both signs not only become primary mediators between people who have been constituted as their historical others (non-white, non-English-speakers), but also in a context where their hegemonic influence is assumed to be absent—as black or Chinese subjects of a Chinese education? Grappling with these, I undertake a novel form of conclusion—an anticipatory theoretical engagement with current and adjacent literatures around critical race perspectives and their relationship to postcolonial theory and anthropology, exploring their respective limits and impasses in the contexts of Afro-Chinese encounters and beyond. As opposed to an occluded recapitulation of the introduction, this chapter represents a novel theorization of translation as ethnographic metaphor, synthesizing a path between pragmatist semiotics and the deconstructive dialectics of postcolonial theory.