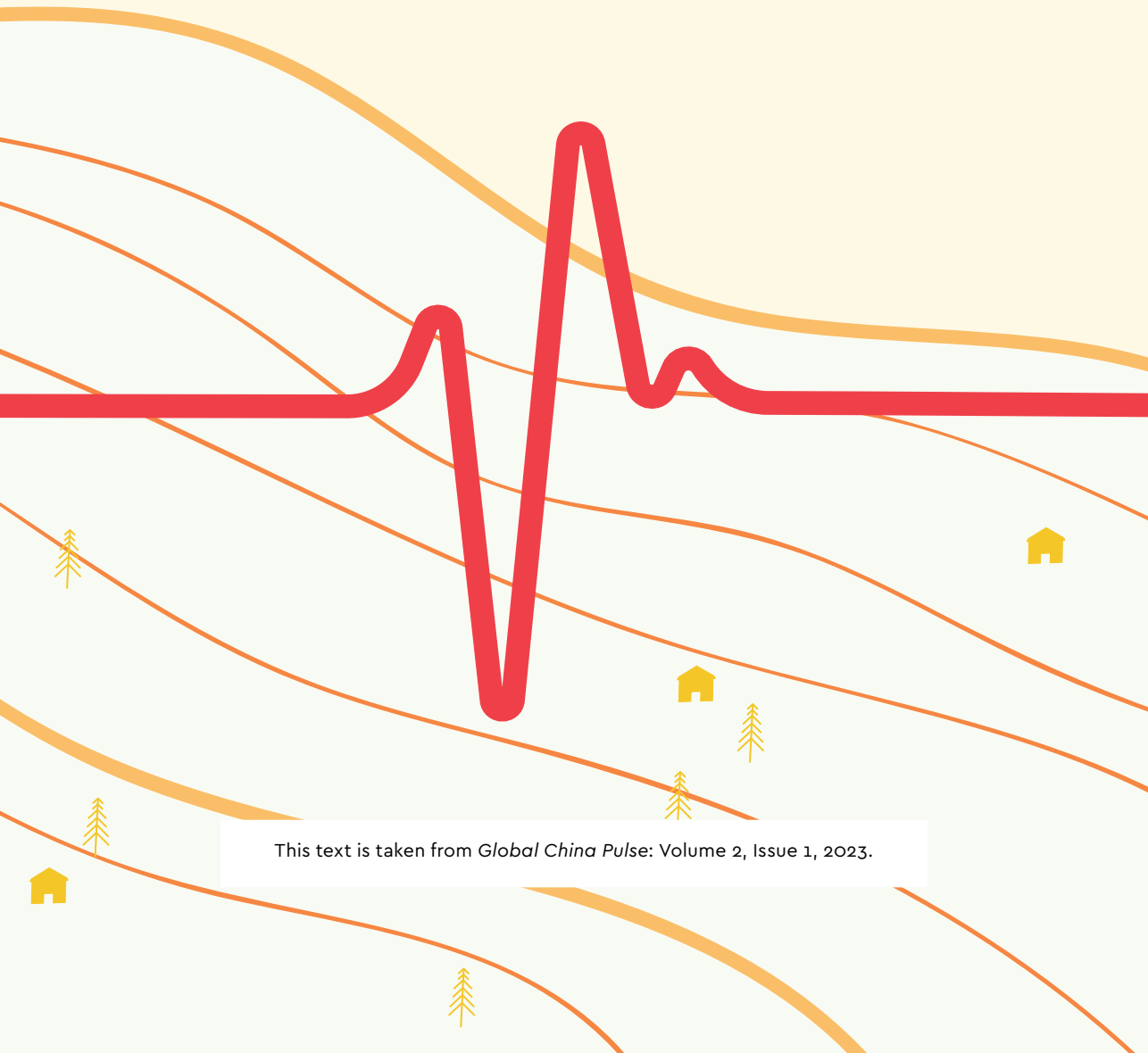


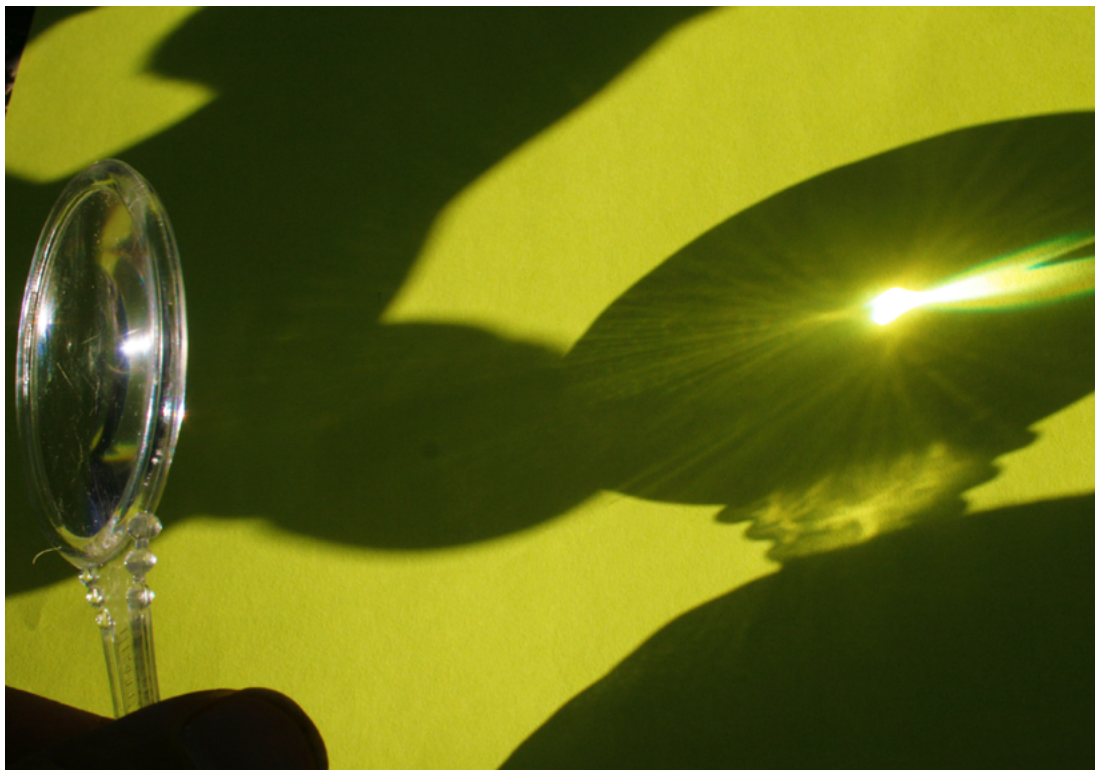
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### Lenses and Reflections

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# Towards a Diasporically Grounded Global-China Analytic

Jordan LYNTON COX

The past decade has seen a swell of economic, political, and social commentary throughout academia and the media on the impact of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Much of this discourse reifies and reduplicates existing geopolitical biases by describing the BRI as *either* an ideal model of South–South cooperation heralding mutual exchange and peace *or* a ‘debt trap’ intended to further the People’s Republic of China’s plan for economic and ideological supremacy at the expense of the Global South (Cheng 2016; Hu 2019; Liu and Dunford 2016; Rolland 2017). Moreover, these critiques often take on a distinctly moral component, recasting the BRI as facilitating partnerships across the Global South or the imminent demise of world democracy (DeHart 2012). Yet, as many of the pieces in this forum illuminate, the view from the ground (as evidenced by ethnographic research conducted throughout the Global South and beyond) often reveals a more nuanced impact, with benefits and drawbacks to local communities within the Global South.

Why is this? Is there something inherently misguided in how we frame the BRI that leads to a disjuncture between the literature and what occurs on the ground? In part, yes. Like my colleagues, I would argue that grounded ethnographic research must be central to any analysis of the BRI. However, I also believe that part of the problem stems from a state-based ahistorical framing of Chinese geopolitics that suffers from acute recency and geographic bias that overlooks broader histories of migration and connection in the very regions to which the People’s Republic of China (PRC) has expanded. This bias stems partly from disciplinary traditions and research praxis.

Critical China and Sinophone scholars have long criticised Eurocentric and Orientalist disciplinary frameworks for centring the state and capitalism as the main frames for analysis—a practice that, in turn, obscures historically marginalised communities (Ang 2001; Lionnet and Shih 2005; Ong 1999; Shih 2010). Alternatively, these scholars have advocated the use of feminist, indigenous, postcolonial, ethnic, and Sinophone studies, which are often attentive to mobilities, instability, disjuncture, hybridity, placemaking, and exchanges that exist on the periphery of the state. These forms of thinking encourage the researcher to delve into the literature and the archives from a critical perspective, reading the ‘silences’ that exist because of the displacement of peoples throughout the Americas, Africa, and Asia who, for critical periods in history, were viewed as chattel (Lionnet and Shih 2005; Lowe 2015; Trouillot 1995).

Through these lenses, the BRI becomes not solely a contemporary political issue related to the PRC but also an extension of centuries of complex ideological and relational epochs that existed within and outside as well as before and after the formation of the PRC. In this essay, I discuss four works—Monica DeHart’s *Transpacific Developments: The Politics of Multiple Chinas in Central America* (2021), Melissa Macauley’s *Distant Shores: Colonial Encounters on China’s Maritime Frontier* (2021), Françoise Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih’s edited volume *Minor Transnationalism* (2005), and Lisa Lowe’s *Intimacies of Four Continents* (2015)—that are exemplars of this form of analysis and suggest that similar approaches could bring much-needed depth to analysis of the BRI.

A layered, grounded, and historically attentive perspective has been germinal to the development of my research on Chinese infrastructure within the Caribbean (specifically Jamaica). Anthropologists and historians have long recognised the importance of the Caribbean as a site through which Western states’ power has been cemented through colonial and neocolonial projects, as well as the trauma those projects have caused to the nations and people within these regions, leaving them seemingly forever connected (Khan 2001; Mintz 1965; Said 1978; Trouillot 1995). This history—from the horrors of colonialism and slavery to modern-day neoliberalism from the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank—has burdened countries within Latin America and the Caribbean with staggering debt, fractured economies, and scepticism about foreign aid (and the contingencies embedded within it). It would be easy to read local reticence to PRC-funded development as an extension of this trauma and a weariness of interventionism. However, to read PRC investment as a reiteration of British imperialism or even American neoliberalism would ignore a much more prescient tie between China and Latin America and the Caribbean—especially that of indenture.

In *The Intimacies of Four Continents*, Lisa Lowe (2015) maps out the historical ties forged between Europe, Africa, Asia, and the Americas (including Latin America and the Caribbean) as a product of colonialism, trade, and liberal ideology. While Lowe’s usage of the term ‘intimacy’ to describe these linkages may conjure the idea of a romantic relationship, the intimacies she describes are the dynamically interwoven realities of enslaved and indentured peoples of African and Asian descent within a colonial regime that spanned the Americas, the laws, ideologies, systems, and processes that produced this system, and the fraught concepts of liberalism that sustained it (Lowe 2015). In her analysis, Lowe places the transatlantic slave trade and Asian indenture in conversation, outlining how the colonial system structured Asian labour as (contingently) ‘free’ in contrast (and by extension in conflict) with African labour as enslaved.

Jamaica epitomises this dynamic. After the abolition of slavery in British territories, Jamaican governor Charles Darling requested funds to purchase Chinese labour to undermine the demands of formerly enslaved Africans (Votes of Assembly 1858–59). While Darling’s request for government funds was denied, his broader plans to use Asian indentured labourers to undermine Black labour rights succeeded (Votes of Assembly 1858–59: 21 June 1858). White planters were granted permission to privately

purchase labour, leading to the migration of almost 18,000 indentured labourers from China into British territories in the Caribbean (Look Lai 2005). However, Jamaica's colonial 'intimacies' with China began even before this. Former Jamaican governor James Bruce (the eighth Earl of Elgin) played a critical role in drafting the Treaty of Tianjin, which placed several ports in southern China under British control—areas that later became key sites of departure for Asian indentured labour to the Caribbean. These connections were what Darling evoked in his requests for Chinese labour in Jamaica on 26 May 1858 (Votes of Assembly 1858–59). Despite the way Jamaica's complex colonial mechanisms subjugated both Black and Chinese peoples, the narrative remained that Chinese labourers replaced Black labourers. This dynamic (which British racial hierarchies further solidified) fostered deep animosity towards and distrust of the Jamaican Chinese community, leading (in part) to anti-Chinese riots that decimated Chinese businesses throughout the twentieth century—in particular, in 1918, 1938, and 1965 (Lind 1958).

As Lowe (2015) poignantly notes, these intimacies are not limited to history but linger within our social structures, re-emerging as latent boundaries and connections that become apparent when Black and Asian people encounter the state through the police or engage in historically white spaces and occupations. Critical Asian American scholars Jodi Melamed (2015) and Claire Kim (1999, 2000) have made similar arguments, outlining the impacts of racial capitalism and racial triangulation in reproducing conflict between Asian and African Americans in the United States (as evidenced by the 'LA Riots' and African American–Korean conflicts in New York City). In Jamaica, these conflicts re-emerge at the modern sites of intersection, engendered by the expansion of the PRC in Latin America and the Caribbean. Whether it was the displacement of Jamaican women market vendors by PRC infrastructure projects (Loop Jamaica 2019), the impact on fish vendors of a prospective transshipment hub near a harbour (All Angles 2014), or the use of skilled Chinese construction workers rather than Black Jamaican labour (Fieldwork notes, 2018), many of the conflicts I observed in my research were articulated through the lens of replacement—in particular, the fear that Chinese companies and people would 'take over' and displace Black Jamaicans. These concerns not only reflect a general wariness of neoliberalism but also mirror the dynamic established by the British.

However, it is not only a complex view of history that is necessary to present a more theoretically grounded analysis of the BRI but also a fundamentally more complex evaluation of China and the broader Chinese diaspora that the BRI impacts. In *Transpacific Developments: The Politics of Multiple Chinas in Central America* (2021), Monica DeHart proposes the usage of a transpacific analytic to examine PRC expansion within Central America. Through it, she pulls together the work of interdisciplinary Asian scholars like Arif Dirlik (1996), Matt Matsuda (2012), and Janet Hoskins and Viet Thanh Nguyen (2017) on the transpacific as a site of historical and cultural exchange with the theory of assemblages to produce a theoretical lens that recognises how the

complex intimacies that Lowe recounts have shaped Sino–Central American relations in the present. As such, DeHart’s lens includes the multiple concepts and iterations of China that have circulated through Central America at different points. While she touches on the significance of Taiwan in Central America, her analysis expands to include various migrations that occurred before the formation of the PRC, as well as local understandings of ‘Chinese-ness’ that emerged from a variety of intimacies between Central American nations and ‘China’ broadly conceived. DeHart (2021) does not set up the transpacific analytic to be specifically political or even to criticise the legitimacy of the One China Policy. Instead, the purpose of this framework is to capture diverse forms of relationality that impact present Sino–Central American relationships, including the BRI.

Similarly, in their edited volume *Minor Transnationalism* (2005), Françoise Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih advocate a framework of ‘minor transnationalism’ to centre the movement of a range of minority populations, revealing the complex ways peoples and cultures circulate through and in spite of dominant states. Such frameworks attend to the various migrations that exist outside the purview of the state, such as the transpacific Chaozhouese kin networks that Melissa Macauley describes in her book *Distant Shores* (2021), or the impact of Hongkongese migrants and Free Zone workers in my work in Jamaica.

Such frames highlight the relationships between various actors that have historically been central to our narratives of transnationalism, globalisation, and development, and yet whose impacts silently reverberate and increasingly come to the surface because of the reach of the BRI. By incorporating literature that pushes us to consider the transpacific (DeHart 2021), to trace trans-local kin networks outside the state (Macauley 2021) and interwoven migrations throughout the ‘periphery’ (Lionnet and Shih 2005), as well as the relational and political intimacies that form from these migrations (Lowe 2015), our work can become more capacious and better reflect the nuanced histories across the BRI. ●