CEAS Lecture Series
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“Epistemology of the Violets, or Do Black Lives Still Matter for Asian Studies?”

In *Development Drowned and Reborn*, Clyde Woods proposes the imagining of new worlds—worlds “more egalitarian and democratic,” and more committed to “sustainability” and “social, cultural, and economic justice”—by way of an epistemology of the blues. The blues are that musical form born in the freedom found in the wake of American slavery. They are characterized by the expressive deviations of the blue note and the transformation of memories of the sounds of the plantation (field hollers, wailings, and so on) into something more mellifluous. Woods contends that, with a bit of synesthesia, the modes of listening and sounding out afforded by the blues might help us make better sense of the world and give us a sense of how a better world might be.

This talk is interested in the formation of what we might call an epistemology of the violets, or that way of seeing and being in the world at the intersection of the blues and the reds, with “red” here serving as a chromatic stand in for the epistemological and sensorial insights embedded in Japanese creative works. To date, Afro-Japanese scholarship has been framed primarily by concepts such as representation and reception. While informative in their own way, such frameworks prime us to think about transferences from one culture (“blues”) to another (“reds”). Addressing collaborations such as the artwork produced by Pharrell Williams and Murakami Takashi, this talk provides general heuristics for those interested in the study of the epistemological possibilities of purple, or a way of seeing and creating possible worlds that is neither red nor blue—neither African American nor Japanese—but both red and blue, the emergence upon their coalescence. Given the possibility of this new way of seeing the world, I argue that black lives matter to Asian Studies unconditionally. What might an Asian Studies that cultivates black epistemologies unconditionally look like?