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## REVIEW ESSAY

## Under imperialism “Black lives don’t matter.” Ho Chi Minh, *The Black Race*, and Black liberation

**The Black Race by Ho Chi Minh and selected works on systemic racism**, compiled and introduced by Dai Trang Nguyen, edited by Luis Silva, Toronto, Canada, New Vietnam Publishing, 2021, 105 pp., \$24.95 (softcover), ISBN 978-1-989944-01-1

Ho Chi Minh, the father of modern Vietnam, was deeply interested in the lives of Black people and their struggles for equality. He was one of the first Asian communist leaders to explore the issues facing Black communities and promote their freedom movement. *The Black Race by Ho Chi Minh and Selected Works on Systemic Racism* is the first English language publication dedicated to this overlooked aspect of Ho’s legacy. Compiled and introduced by Dr. Dai Trang Nguyen, and edited by Luis Silva, this anthology collates Ho’s major writings on Black peoples struggling under capitalism, imperialism, and colonialism. It offers an illuminating insight into a man often portrayed as a Vietnamese nationalist and patriot. Ho regarded the “Black race” as “the most oppressed and most exploited of the human family.”<sup>1</sup> His writings on the subject were didactic, polemical, evocative, and biting satirical. Ho sought to highlight the inhumanity of anti-Black oppression, expose the hypocrisy of Euro-American civilization, and mobilize communists for the struggle for Black liberation. His writings resonate with the concerns of movements like Black Lives Matter today, and as such, Nguyen’s anthology could not be timelier.

The anthology’s first section covers the years from 1922 to 1924 and includes four of Ho’s articles written in Paris and the Soviet Union. These are drawn from the four-volume English language edition of Ho’s *Selected Works*, which is now out of print. Before presenting these articles, Nguyen offers a brief, useful introduction, containing information on Ho’s activities prior to 1922. Unlike many of his compatriots, Ho was well traveled, and had several firsthand encounters with Black people. After leaving French Indochina to explore the world in 1911, he visited the ports of several of France’s African colonies, where he witnessed French colonialists terrorize Blacks with impunity.<sup>2</sup>

In 1912 Ho traveled to the United States. Little is known about his activities there, and Nguyen’s anthology provides no new information in this regard. Ho claimed to have lived as a worker in Boston and New York City. In New York, he frequented the Black district of Harlem, where he witnessed the poverty of Black communities and the racial segregation of U.S. society. It was in Harlem that Ho attended Black activist meetings held by the Universal Negro Improvement Trust, an organization that had been established by the Jamaican Black nationalist Marcus Garvey in 1914.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Ho 2021, 9.

<sup>2</sup>Nguyen 2021, xv.

<sup>3</sup>Nguyen 2021, xv.



**Figure 1.** Ho Chi Minh, as a delegate to the French Communist Party Congress in Marseilles, 1921. Source: Agence de presse Meurisse, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons. [https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/4/43/Nguyen\\_A%C3%AFn\\_Nu%C3%A4%27C\\_%28Ho-Chi-Minh%29%2C\\_d%C3%A9%C3%A9gu%C3%A9\\_indochinois%2C\\_Congr%C3%A8s\\_communiste\\_de\\_Marseille%2C\\_1921%2C\\_Meurisse%2C\\_BNF\\_Gallica.jpg](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/4/43/Nguyen_A%C3%AFn_Nu%C3%A4%27C_%28Ho-Chi-Minh%29%2C_d%C3%A9%C3%A9gu%C3%A9_indochinois%2C_Congr%C3%A8s_communiste_de_Marseille%2C_1921%2C_Meurisse%2C_BNF_Gallica.jpg).

In 1922, while campaigning for Vietnam's independence struggle in France, Ho published what may have been his first article on anti-Black racism, in the French communist anti-colonial newspaper *Le Paria*, which Ho himself established. In this article, "About Siki," Ho examined the career of Louis Mbarick Fall – known as Battling Siki – a Senegalese boxer who had moved to France at the age of fifteen. Siki had recently defeated the White French boxer Georges Carpentier in Paris to become world middleweight champion. Ho insisted that Siki's victory over Carpentier was no loss for France, since Siki was also a Frenchman. He then criticized the racist double standards in the news coverage of the respective boxers. Pundits attributed Carpentier's victories to his skill and intelligence, but when Siki beat him, the same pundits blamed Siki's allegedly dirty tactics, and refused to acknowledge Siki's victory. Ho was disgusted by this unequal treatment<sup>4</sup> (Figure 1).

In 1924, while studying communism in the Soviet Union, Ho published several articles on Black peoples in the Comintern newspaper *Inprekorr*. Ho wrote these in French to enlighten his White French comrades. Nguyen's anthology includes three of these articles.

In "Lynching," Ho referenced U.S. local newspaper reports and NAACP documents to explore this "little-known aspect of American civilization."<sup>5</sup> Ho warned that lynching was spreading across the U.S., and he provided a brutally realistic description of the act. Ho argued that "economic jealousy," rather than racism, was the primary motivation of lynching. Either Black people in an area were wealthier than Whites, or Black workers opposed their exploitation.<sup>6</sup> He also recognized that Blacks were not the only lynching victims. If Whites tried to defend them, mobs sometimes attacked and lynched them, too.<sup>7</sup>

In "The Ku Klux Klan," Ho examined the origins, attributes, and future of this White supremacist organization. It was essential, he argued, to situate the Klan's rise within the context of the American Civil War (1861–1865) and the social upheaval it represented. "After big social upheavals," he explained, "the public mind is naturally unsettled. It becomes avid for new stimuli and [is] inclined to mysticism." As such, after the Civil War, Ho wrote that Whites were "irresistibly attracted" to "the KKK with its strange garb, its bizarre rituals, its mysteries and its secrecy." Southern agriculture, "deprived of its Black labor – was short of hands," and "former landlords were exposed to ruin." Under these conditions, the Klan's Anti-Black racism benefitted capitalism. "The agrarian and slaveholding

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<sup>4</sup>Ho 2021, 24.

<sup>5</sup>Ho 2021, 9.

<sup>6</sup>Ho 2021, 11.

<sup>7</sup>Ho 2021, 14–15.

bourgeoisie saw in the Klan a useful agent, almost a savior,” Ho explained, and that is why they supported its reign of murder and terror.<sup>8</sup>

In “Civilization that Kills,” Ho referenced anti-Black racism in the U.S. as a touchstone to examine the subjugation of Africans in European colonies.<sup>9</sup> He recognized that every sector of the European power elite participated in the colonial oppression of African peoples. Christian authorities blessed it, kings, queens, and parliaments legally sanctioned it, and slavers and colonial administrators enforced it.<sup>10</sup> Ho described, in graphic detail, the various atrocities that European colonizers themselves recorded, emphasizing that these were “typical cases,” not exceptions. Ho included not only crimes committed by individual psychopaths, but also the “collective crimes” for which “the whole system” of colonialism was accountable.<sup>11</sup> “These mass-murders,” Ho argued, “were set forward as political principles. It was a policy of extermination.”<sup>12</sup> In the face of massacres, disease, forced labor, and slavery, Africans did not stand a chance. In conclusion, Ho highlighted the capitalist basis of colonialism, observing that the colonizers were enriching themselves in proportion as they depopulated exploited zones.<sup>13</sup>

The second section of Nguyen’s anthology contains Ho’s main work on Black peoples, *The Black Race*, a collection of thirteen essays written in 1925. The original French manuscript has been lost, though Russian and Vietnamese translations appeared in 1928 and 2011, respectively.<sup>14</sup> The anthology’s main strength is to bring this forgotten work to an English language audience, as *The Black Race* is a significant landmark in Ho’s intellectual development and the history of Marxist analyses of Black peoples. Prior to its publication, there had been few studies dedicated to analyzing Black oppression from a Marxist perspective, and hardly any such studies from an Asian communist leader.

Several of these essays discuss African Americans. One of them, “Lynching,” recycled much of the material contained in Ho’s 1924 article of the same name. Others contained new information. In “Jim Crow,” Ho analyzed this racist slogan and system, which painted the average African American as “the Black beast, the fiendish specter.”<sup>15</sup> Utilizing data from the 1922 Chicago Commission on Race Relations, Ho demonstrated the economic, cultural, social, and political inequalities of this policy.

In “Modern Slavery,” Ho characterized sharecropping in the deep South as a form of modern slavery, arguing that the system exploited African Americans as intensely as European serfs had been exploited in the Middle Ages.<sup>16</sup> He pointed out that the U.S. government was instrumental in enforcing the sharecropping system, and that as a result “many American millionaires ... gained their fortunes from the cruel exploitation of Black slave labor.”<sup>17</sup>

In “American Justice,” Ho exposed the fraudulence of U.S. legal equality, showing how racist law enforcers arrested and brutalized African Americans at will, simply for suspecting them,<sup>18</sup> while in “The Wager,” he highlighted the suffering of African American children, particularly their lack of education, since there were few public schools for Black children, and many of the existing ones were open for only a few months a year. Deploying a

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<sup>8</sup>Ho 2021, 17.

<sup>9</sup>Ho 2021, 1.

<sup>10</sup>Ho 2021, 1–3. Ho did not accuse all Christians of endorsing colonialism.

<sup>11</sup>Ho 2021, 4.

<sup>12</sup>Ho 2021, 5.

<sup>13</sup>Ho 2021, 6.

<sup>14</sup>Nguyen 2021, xvi, xxii.

<sup>15</sup>Ho 2021, 53.

<sup>16</sup>Ho 2021, 57.

<sup>17</sup>Ho 2021, 58.

<sup>18</sup>Ho 2021, 65.

Marxist analysis, Ho argued that White elites consciously limited Black education to “supply White merchants with an army of cheap child labor.”<sup>19</sup>

In both “The Wager” and “Never-Ending Exploitation,” Ho also recognized that life was “even more miserable for Black women.”<sup>20</sup> Drawing upon statistics from the 1922 United States’ Women’s Bureau, he demonstrated that women’s exploitation by capitalism was more intense, since they typically worked longer hours for less pay, were assigned the most burdensome tasks, and were treated more harshly than men. These factors illustrated how U.S. capitalism continued “the never-ending exploitation of the Blacks.”<sup>21</sup> The brutalities committed against African American women illustrated the fraudulency of “the ‘greatest democracy in the world.’”<sup>22</sup> Ho also connected the oppression of African American women to the oppression of African women in European colonies. Like their U.S. counterparts, Black women in European colonies suffered “even more than the men under the capitalist oppression of the ‘civilized’ Whites.”<sup>23</sup>

The remaining essays in *The Black Race* examine Black Africans suffering under imperialism and colonialism. In his essay “In the Name of Christ,” Ho showed how Christian authorities justified and profited from Western Europe’s imperial conquest of Africa and Black slavery. “The cross became a terrifying sign of bloodshed and suffering” in all the lands conquered by imperialism.<sup>24</sup>

In “Liberty to Rob and Massacre,” Ho argued that African oppression had not declined over the centuries. On the contrary, “the cruel horrors of slavery have worsened a thousand-fold under colonization today.”<sup>25</sup> He argued that Africa was in the hands of a few imperialist monopolies, which drained its resources whilst terrorizing the natives.<sup>26</sup> Ho also highlighted the huge revenues of the Black slave-trade, to show “just how profitable the trafficking of ‘human flesh’ can be.” Although the slave-trade had ended, Ho argued that slavery persisted “in new forms” of unprecedented brutality. In the past, slave-traders risked their lives trying to capture Africans and paid for vessels to carry captive slaves. In 1925, however, colonial administrators had no need to pay for capture or transport, because they had enslaved the entire colonial population. Africans toiled under inhumane conditions to extract resources from their own lands and hand them over to Whites. Ho pointed out that this new system of slavery was more profitable than the old because the modern slaves were not only compelled to perform hard labor; they also had to “feed themselves and pay their imperialist masters [taxes] just for the right to live.”<sup>27</sup>

In “The Two-Legged Beast of Burden,” Ho argued that colonizers would do anything to maximize their imperialist plunder of Africa, even if this entailed genocide.<sup>28</sup> Profit, he argued, determined everything.<sup>29</sup> In a revealing passage, Ho suggested that colonialists valued animals over those they exploited:

<sup>19</sup>Ho 2021, 69.

<sup>20</sup>Ho 2021, 70.

<sup>21</sup>Ho 2021, 73

<sup>22</sup>Ho 2021, 70

<sup>23</sup>Ho 2021, 71.

<sup>24</sup>Ho 2021, 29.

<sup>25</sup>Ho 2021, 37.

<sup>26</sup>Ho 2021, 37–41.

<sup>27</sup>Ho 2021, 33.

<sup>28</sup>In his words, “The stench of terror and death soon follows the infinite convoy of Black captives, now working as beasts of burden. The incessant Black streams go out in all directions, across the vast deserts of Africa.” Ho 2021, 44.

<sup>29</sup>“All it takes,” he wrote, “is for one company to discover a good plot of land somewhere. Then one fine day, the inhabitants are told that their land no longer belongs to them, but rather to the company.” Ho 2021, 45.

It might be tempting to ask: Why are the colonists not using camels to carry their cargo? It is because camels are too costly for the White money-grabbers; meanwhile Black lives don't matter at all. It is not necessary to pay for their labor.<sup>30</sup>

His point was that Black oppression was based upon a capitalist economic imperative, not an ideological one. White colonizers forced Africans to carry their cargo not because they were Black, but because this produced the highest *profit*. In other words, capitalism was the primary cause underlying the subjugation of Africans, not racist ideology.

Ho reiterated this point in "Outside the Law," in which he analyzed the legal restrictions preventing Black South Africans from leaving their locality. These restrictions sought to "prevent White exploiters from losing an army of cheap labor."<sup>31</sup> Ho compared the situation of Africans to colonized Asians, showing that both groups suffered inhuman living conditions. "Even animals," he wrote, could freely roam the streets of European colonies, but Africans and Vietnamese could not. Ho concluded with a quote from René Maran, a Black writer with French citizenship, whose book *Batouala* won the prestigious Prix Goncourt prize for French literature in 1921: "Civilization, civilization, pride of the Europeans and charnel-house of innocents ... You build your kingdom on corpses ..."<sup>32</sup>

In "Cannon Fodder," Ho pointed out that African troops had played a crucial role in the First World War, when the imperial powers used them quite literally as cannon fodder. Highlighting the inseparable link between anti-African and anti-Asian racism, he noted that "France forced millions of slaves from the Black, Yellow, and other races to fight in European battles." The only difference between this condition and slavery was that "instead of carrying chains around their neck, they carried a rifle slung over the shoulder." As Ho emphasized, however, "their circumstances were worse than before, for they were not sent to the plantation fields but to the slaughterhouse." Africans and Asians died on Europe's battlefields to save the lives of French imperialists. "Never before, even during the worse years of slavery, did the world bear witness to such high rates of mortality."<sup>33</sup>

Ho recognized that the imperial powers recruited Africans for the war in the same manner that they used to recruit slaves: by capturing them. He pointed to the fact that military commanders branded their colonial recruits with chemical markings, just as fifteenth-century colonial administrators had branded slaves with iron. "Now we see all that progress thanks to the 'civilization' of the capitalists in just five centuries!" There was, however, an important difference: the new recruitment method was more brutal. Ho pointed out that those who refused to "volunteer" were shot.<sup>34</sup>

In his essay "In the Slaughterhouse," Ho painted a vivid picture of what it must have felt like for these Black fighters to have been torn from their homelands and thrown onto the frontlines of one of the most vicious conflicts in human history.<sup>35</sup> Although, according to Ho, Black soldiers died in the war to maintain their own subjugation, "the imperialist war taught them one good lesson: how to fight with armed weapons." More Blacks now understood "that if they had to sacrifice their own lives, they would rather die for their own cause than for that of others."<sup>36</sup> He wrote that communists in colonies such as China, Morocco, and Syria were trying to enlighten the masses about this truth. They were also striving to highlight the common interests of the colonial and metropolitan working classes. Both

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<sup>30</sup>Ho 2021, 43.

<sup>31</sup>Ho 2021, 61.

<sup>32</sup>Ho 2021, 62.

<sup>33</sup>Ho 2021, 34.

<sup>34</sup>Ho 2021, 34.

<sup>35</sup>Ho 2021, 77.

<sup>36</sup>Ho 2021, 75.

had the same enemies – imperialism and capitalism – something that Black and Asian people in the colonial and metropolitan countries were realizing.<sup>37</sup>

Ho returned to the theme of Black self-emancipation in “The Struggle to be Free,” the final essay in *The Black Race*. Here he rejected the racist portrayal of Africans as sub-humans who were unable to appreciate the ideal of freedom. He pointed to the 1654 slave rebellion in Brazil, when slaves escaped into the jungle and “formed an association of free settlements that resembled the ancient Spartan Republic,” as well as various Black insurrections in North Africa, the Haitian Revolution, and slave uprisings in the southern U.S. These examples refuted the notion that Blacks passively accepted their subjugation.<sup>38</sup> In recognition of their heroism, Ho argued that Blacks often waged their liberation struggles despite knowing their low chances of success. In his view, Blacks knew that their struggles would succeed only if the international working class stood up to form a united front with them against imperialism and colonialism.<sup>39</sup>

The third section of Nguyen’s anthology covers the years 1963 to 1966. Drawing upon a single-volume edition of Ho’s *Selected Works*, it contains three articles connecting the African American liberation struggle to Vietnam’s military struggle against U.S. imperialism. Written in Vietnamese, these articles originally appeared in *Nhân Dân* (*The People*), the official newspaper of the Communist Party of Vietnam.

On August 28 1963, African Americans led the famous “March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom,” which became a historical landmark in the U.S. Civil Rights movement. On the same day Ho’s article on “The Second Revolution in America” appeared in *Nhân Dân*. “For over a hundred years,” he observed, “Black Americans have been persistent in the struggle for equality and freedom, opposing racial injustice.”<sup>40</sup> Commenting on the recent wave of African American uprisings, Ho followed the *New York Times* in describing the movement as “the second revolution in America.” He wrote that that the Vietnamese people supported the “just” struggle of their “Black brothers in America.”<sup>41</sup>

Ho’s “Black brothers” returned the favor. Various African American activists and organizations mobilized against the Vietnam War, with the groundwork laid by Black socialists.<sup>42</sup> As early as 1950, W. E. B. Du Bois identified Ho as Vietnam’s “real leader”<sup>43</sup> while in 1954 Paul Robeson described Ho as “the modern-day Toussaint Louverture, leading his people to freedom.”<sup>44</sup>

On July 2 1964, the U.S. Congress passed the Civil Rights Act prohibiting racial discrimination. Ho’s article “In Support of the Struggle of the Americans” appeared on July 28. He connected the struggle for equal rights in the U.S. to the progress made in Fidel Castro’s Cuba, as well to African countries that had overcome colonialism. These global developments strengthened the U.S. Civil Rights movement, a movement which, after decades of domestic struggle, forced U.S. leaders to change their laws. At the same time, Ho rejected the notion that the Civil Rights Act established racial equality:

This was only a deceptive swindle that was propagated by America’s ruling class. Indeed, the ink on the Civil Rights Act had barely been dry when American fascists attacked Blacks in

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<sup>37</sup>Ho 2021, 79.

<sup>38</sup>Ho 2021, 81.

<sup>39</sup>Ho 2021, 82. To this day, the extent to which *The Black Race* influenced communists remains a mystery, and Nguyen’s anthology provides little background information on it. Nevertheless, it is significant that this work explored a topic that many Western and Asian communists ignored. It is a testament to Ho’s profound concern for Black peoples.

<sup>40</sup>Ho 2021, 87.

<sup>41</sup>Ho 2021, 88.

<sup>42</sup>Lucks 2014.

<sup>43</sup>Young 2001, 19.

<sup>44</sup>Cited in Lucks 2014, 9–10.



the United States ... [African Americans remained] ... as oppressed as the slaves were, neither equal nor free.<sup>45</sup>

Ho linked the African American struggle for racial justice with Vietnam's independence struggle. Although the Johnson Administration claimed to be in Vietnam to help protect South Vietnam, the U.S.'s real intention, Ho argued, was to turn South Vietnamese "into 'yellow American' slaves." As such, "though we do have different colors of skin, the Yellow Vietnamese and Black Americans are battling a common enemy – the cruelty of American imperialism."<sup>46</sup>

Ho reemphasized this solidarity in "The Second Front Against American Imperialism." Ho described Vietnam as "the first front against American imperialism" while the second front was within the U.S., where twenty million African Americans fought for freedom and equality.<sup>47</sup> Ho pointed out that African American soldiers were dying at higher rates in Vietnam than Whites, indicating that they were bearing the brunt of U.S. imperialism. He argued that North Vietnam's war against the U.S. invasion was "more profound" for African Americans, for they understood that they shared a common enemy – U.S. imperialism. African Americans also realized that to be free, they could not rely solely upon peaceful, constitutional, reformist methods. They had to "confront armed force with armed force" like the Vietnamese had done.<sup>48</sup> The most important thing, Ho concluded, was that African Americans had "connected their struggle against 'racial discrimination' with the struggle against the war of invasion in Vietnam."<sup>49</sup>

During the war, Ho's writings on anti-Black racism were significant for several Black Power activists and organizations. In 1967, Stokely Carmichael visited Hanoi as a guest of honor, where he and Ho had lunch together and discussed their respective struggles. Carmichael told Ho that he admired his 1924 article "Lynching," and that African Americans knew of his anti-imperialist activism and time in Harlem. Because of this, they felt a "responsibility" to aid Ho's efforts in Vietnam. This news impressed Ho, who in turn shared stories about his time in the U.S. Ho said that Vietnamese troops were taught not to kill African American soldiers, if possible. Carmichael was inspired by their meeting. He described Ho as a "great man" who "clarified many things" for him, and who showed "a real appreciation" for the African American struggle.<sup>50</sup>

Similar views found expression in publications of the Black Panther Party (BPP), a Black Power political organization espousing Marxism-Leninism. Throughout the war, the BPP published articles extolling Ho's ideas and North Vietnam's socialist achievements. Following Ho's death in 1969, *The Black Panther* newspaper republished his 1924 article "Lynching" alongside several solidarity statements commemorating his accomplishments.<sup>51</sup> The BPP's collective statement praised Ho as a representative of the people, freedom, and socialism, values that the Black Panther Party had "witnessed in the proletarian internationalism practiced by the Vietnamese peoples." According to the BPP, "Brother Ho Chi Minh" sought to "bring to the world and his people an end to the murderous, stormy winds of capitalism's fascist, aggressive imperialism."<sup>52</sup> Black Panther activists were emboldened in their anti-war campaigns by the solidarity extended to the Black Liberation cause, by Ho Chi Minh and the Communist Party of Vietnam.

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<sup>45</sup>Ho 2021, 91.

<sup>46</sup>Ho 2021, 92.

<sup>47</sup>Ho 2021, 95.

<sup>48</sup>Ho 2021, 95–96.

<sup>49</sup>Ho 2021, 96.

<sup>50</sup>Carmichael and Thelwell 2005, 601.

<sup>51</sup>Southard 2020.

<sup>52</sup>Black Panther Party 1969, 16. Nguyen's anthology contains a photo of this newspaper issue. See Ho 2021, 15.



Nguyen's anthology provides a timely insight into an overlooked dimension of Ho Chi Minh's legacy. While it offers little contextual or background information, and although it does not illuminate some of the lesser-known details of Ho's engagement with Black peoples (such as his time in the U.S.), Ho's texts speak for themselves. Above all, they showcase his passionate concern for Black liberation.

Nguyen is right in arguing that Ho's writings on anti-Black racism "remain relevant today."<sup>53</sup> Ho's statement that under imperialism "Black lives don't matter"<sup>54</sup> was prophetic, anticipating the rise of Black Lives Matter and its critique of imperialism almost a century later. His writings remind Asian and Black communities to support each other in their ongoing struggles against racism.

## Disclosure statement


No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Notes on contributor

*Joe Pateman* is a postdoctoral research assistant in Politics at the University of Nottingham, UK. Joe's primary research interests are Marxism-Leninism, Democratic Theory, and Black Studies. He is the co-author, with John Pateman, of *Public Libraries and Marxism* (Routledge, 2021).

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<sup>53</sup>Nguyen 2021, xvi.

<sup>54</sup>Ho 2021, 43.