

LOTUS NOTES

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“*Lotus Notes*” began in 2014 as a monthly series of texts for the online platform *Mada Masr*. It traces a partial biography of a forgotten Afro-Asian trilingual literary quarterly from a bygone, bipolar world and its interrupted historical networks. Riddled with chance encounters and missing links, the fragmented form of the series simultaneously charts a contemporary biography of research. Written from outside the archives of *Lotus* with little access to its chronological evolution, “*Lotus Notes*” draws out an improbable story that may otherwise not have been told. It brings into memory signs of a time that has been obscured by a post-Cold War, neoliberal order.

“Periodical diplomacy,” as Michael Vazquez has called it, was at its height in the 1960s, when “an array of state-sponsored international magazines fought pitched battles—against imperialism or communism and/or their own governments—across the entire length of the first, second, and third worlds.”¹ Often founded independently by non-communist leftist intellectuals, many of these journals—such as London-based *Encounter*, *Paris Review*, Kampala-based *Transition*, Bombay-based *Quest*, and Beirut-based *Hiwar*—were in fact funded

¹ Michael C. Vazquez, “The Periodical Cold War: Tales from the Bidoun Library,” (lecture, Sackler Centre of Arts Education, London, August 13, 2011).

covertly by an anticommunist advocacy group called the Congress for Cultural Freedom. In 1966, *The New York Times* revealed that the Congress was a front organization established and bankrolled by the United States’ espionage arm, the Central Intelligence Agency.

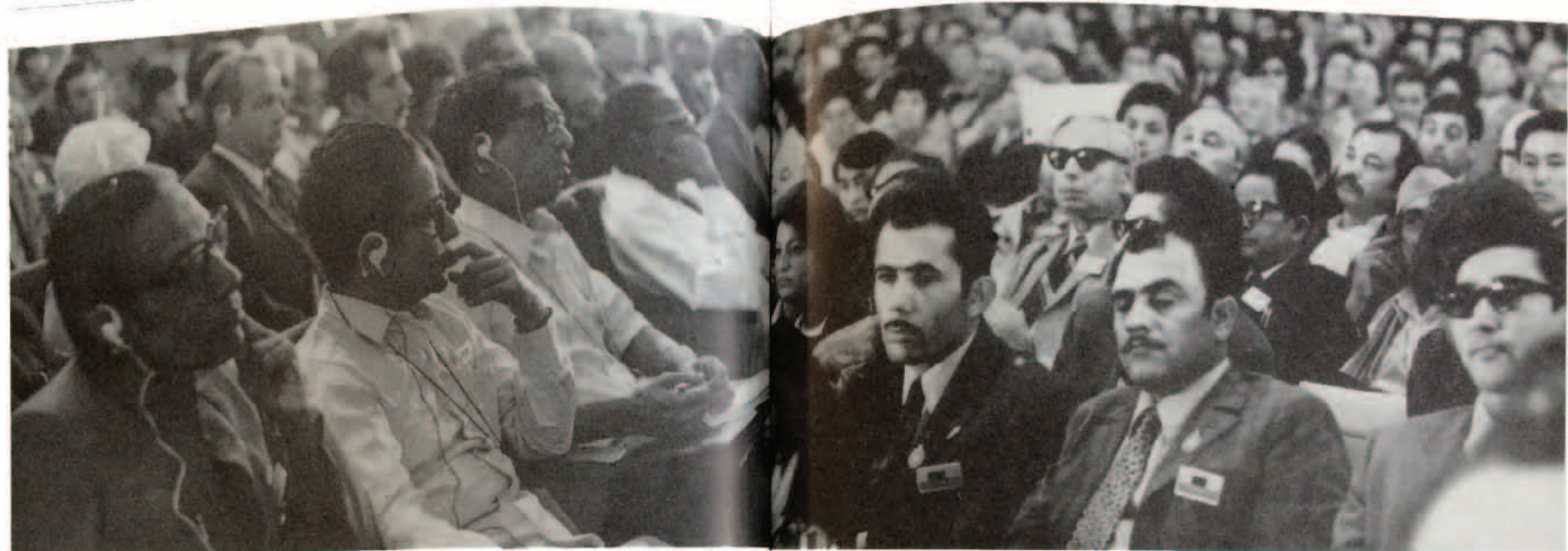
The scandal, which exposed the ideological implications of American cultural imperialism, sent ripples across the literary world—editors resigned, magazines folded. In the wake of this news, and carrying out the recommendations of a counteractive directive,² the first issue of *Afro-Asian Writings* appeared in March 1968 in Arabic and English, followed a few months later by the French edition. Published by the Afro-Asian Writers’ Association, sponsored by the Soviet Union, printed in the German Democratic Republic,³ and housed initially in Egypt and eventually by the Palestinian Liberation Organization, the journal would acquire the name *Lotus*.

In recent years, interest in this literary landscape has been growing, and more copies of *Lotus* have been found in second-hand bookstores in Cairo, Beirut, and Tunis, as well as in reference libraries in Berlin, London, and New York, whose catalogs had them listed all along.

This project in *ARTMargins* carries the same title as the earlier series in *Mada Masr*, but deals with the magazine differently: through its very material content. It isolates visual and textual elements from scanned pages of *Lotus* and juxtaposes them to construct evidence of a concealed cultural infrastructure and an uneven political trajectory. Each set of images explores a movement across languages of production and territories of translation and comes together with the writing to offset a revivalist impulse that celebrates *Lotus* on its own terms.

NOTE Copyright permission for the elements from the pages of *Lotus* used in “*Lotus Notes*” was granted by Mohamed Salmawy, Secretary General of the Writers Union of Africa, Asia, and Latin America and member of the committee for the revival of the Afro-Asian Writers’ Association. The author thanks Annett Busch, Jenifer Evans, and Rosette Francis for the various ways in which they helped make this project happen.

- ² The directive, titled “On the Counter-Action to the Imperialist and Neo-Colonialist Infiltration in the Cultural Field,” was formulated at the third conference of the Afro-Asian Writers’ Association, which was held in Beirut in 1967. It appears in the closing pages of the inaugural issue of *Afro-Asian Writings* and makes mention of the Congress for Cultural Freedom and its disguised imperialist activities.
- ³ The first issue of the journal was printed in Cairo. By 1971, the English and French editions were printed in the GDR, whereas the Arabic edition continued to be printed locally.



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« LOTUS » ist a Quarterly published
in English, French and Arabic.

Lotus was, if anything, an operation in translation, on a supranational scale. Not only did texts move across English, Arabic, and French in each issue of the quarterly, but over the course of its history, essays, stories, plays, and poems made their way into these three languages from the multitongued literatures of more than seventy African and Asian countries.

COVER

Painting of the "Little Red Flower" Lacquer of Fedoskino (near Moscow) by Lipitsky which portrays the well-known Soviet folk tale. The maiden picked the magic flower and put it in her bosom.

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Annual subscription \$ 8.--
(Eight Dollars)

THE AFRO-ASIAN PERSONALITY

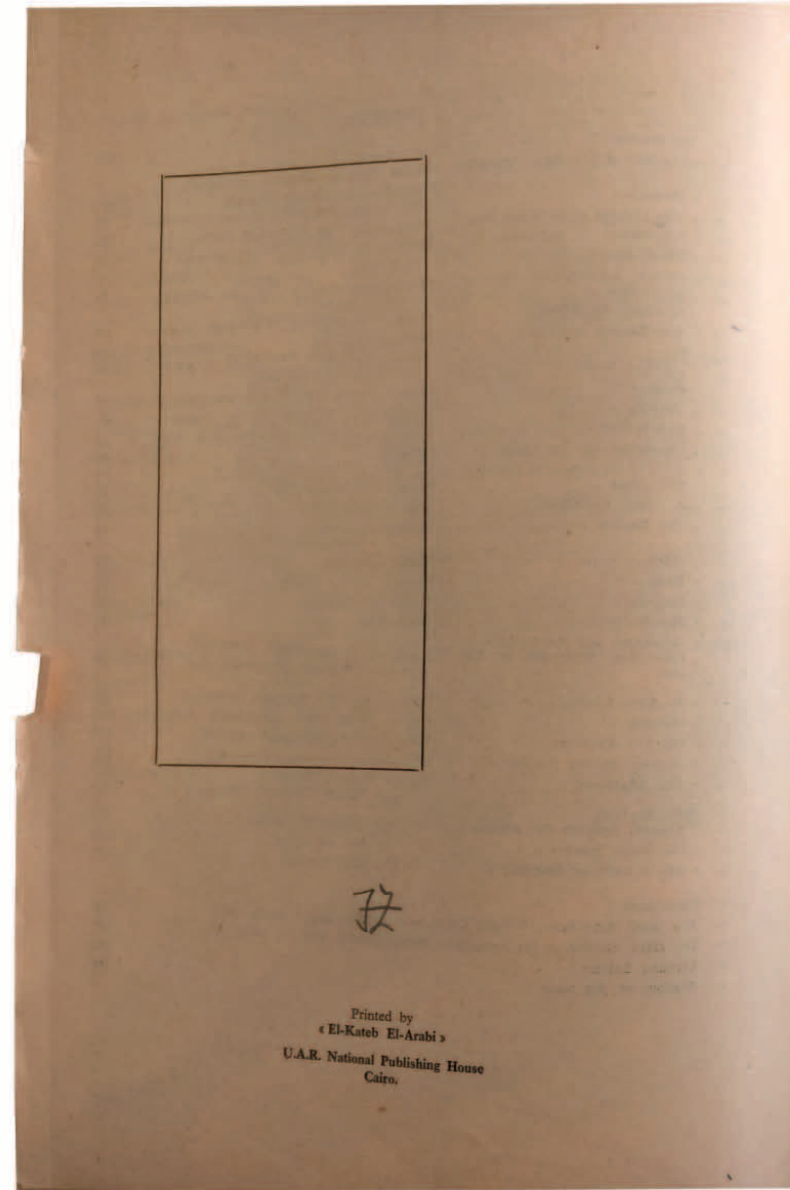
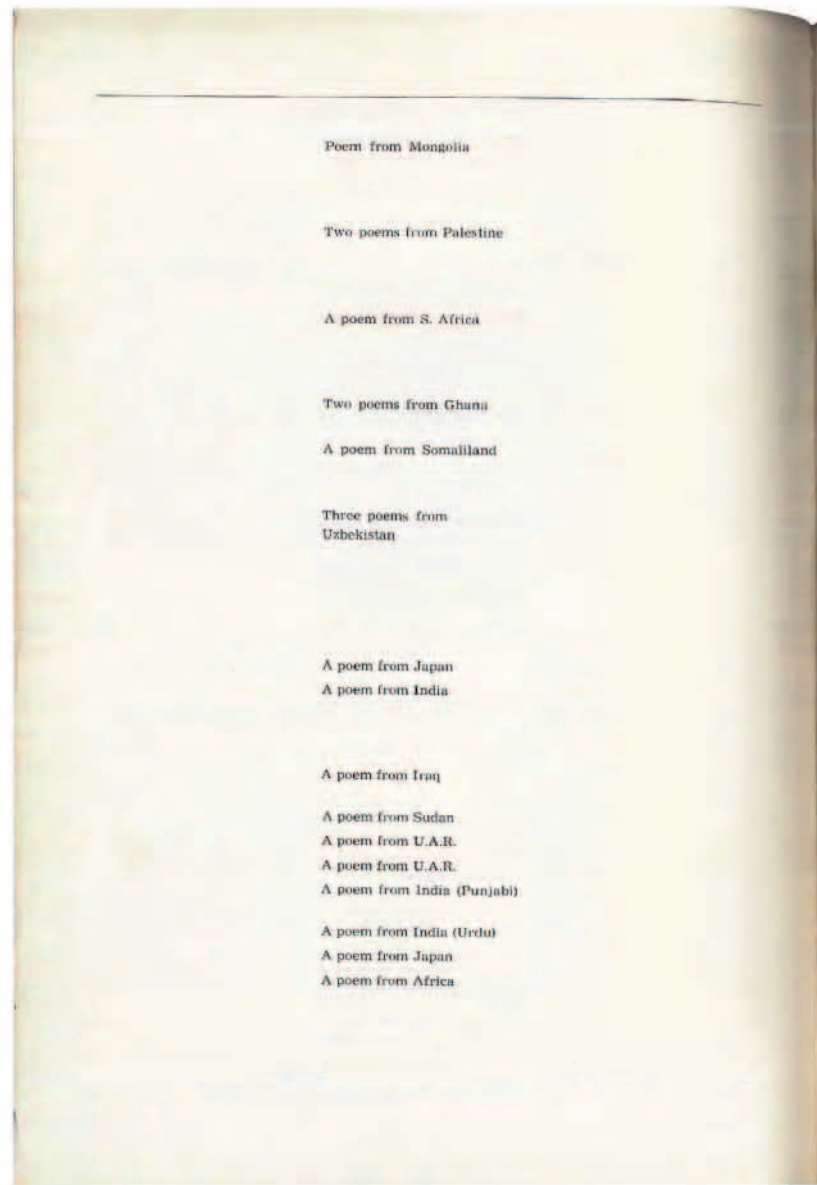


In a review of the fourth conference of the Afro-Asian Writers' Association, held in New Delhi in November 1970, the literary critic R. K. Kaushik reported:

But this toy sputnik which was fired with so much fanfare to spotlight the Red Star on the Indian horizon failed to go into a viable orbit and came down like a damp squib, raising more stink than shock waves.¹

The crux of his account is this: the "babel of rabid anti-U.S., anti-Israel hysteria" and "blatant anti-West propaganda" bogged down a literary conference with "extra-literary issues." Save for the inaugural address, delivered by the chairman of the Indian organizational committee, Suniti Kumar Chatterjee, who cautioned against transforming the event into "a mere political forum," the speeches made by the other leaders of the conference—V. K. Krishna Menon, Mulk Raj Anand, Sajjad Zaheer, Kamil Yashen, and Youssef El-Sebai—peddled a Kremlin-sponsored agenda. Besides endless platitudes of resistance against neo-imperialism and easy celebrations of the inherent greatness of the shared Afro-Asian condition, not much was said. A few of the delegates staged a walkout, and many others, feeling humiliated for being treated like "morons," simply stopped attending. For Kaushik, Chatterjee's was "a lone cry in the wilderness." His words gestured to the limitations of espousing ideological positions that risked reducing the relationship between the two continents to nothing but geography.

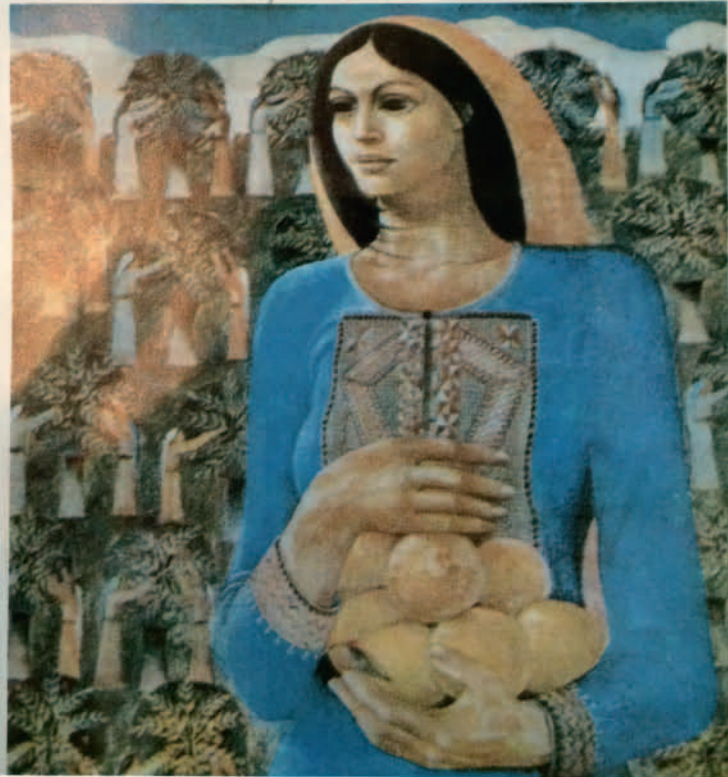
¹ R. K. Kaushik, "Tin Hawks and Clay Gods," *Mahfil* 8, no. 2/3 (Summer/Fall 1972): 237–45.



After the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982, the editorial offices of *Lotus* shut down for a while. The Palestinian Liberation Organization was bombed out of Beirut that summer and its headquarters moved over to Tunis. Faiz Ahmed Faiz was granted safe passage through Damascus, via Tripoli and Homs. He went to London, then stayed in Moscow working on *Lotus*, before returning eventually to Lahore. He died two years later, but carried on as editor-in-chief posthumously for the single issue that came out in 1985. The PLO continued to house the Afro-Asian Writers' Association until the Soviet Union collapsed and funding dissipated. But it took a bit of time for the editorial structure to reconstitute itself, and during that transition the colophon ceased to carry a postal code or cable address. Where were submissions being mailed? Eventually, a location emerged: Villa 94 in Manar 3 on Route X in Tunis. But between 1983 and 1984, *Lotus* appeared only when it did, as if out of nowhere.

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In 1986, while the position of editor-in-chief was still vacant, the graphic identity of *Lotus* changed. The following year, Ziad Abdel Fattah, the head of the Palestinian news agency WAFA, was promoted from his role as first deputy. In an interview published in an Arabic magazine in Paris on the occasion of his appointment, Fattah recounted the history and significance of the Afro-Asian Writers' Association and declared plans to extend the trilingual quarterly to a fourth language—Russian. Was delusion at play? Or were there real aspirations in the air? Both, maybe. In 1991, the Soviet Union would break up and the PLO would lose its base in Tunis; but two years prior to that, the editorial staff reprinted Fattah's interview in what was (most likely) the last issue of *Lotus*.