

correspondents at large

The Afro-Asian Analogy

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IF THE SPATE OF RECENT PUBLICATIONS ON TRANSNATIONAL AFRO-ASIAN CONNECTIONS IS ANY INDICATION, WE MAY HAVE FINALLY ARRIVED at a welcome third stage of ethnic studies, one long postponed by a standoff between a multiracial model limited by a national horizon and a diasporic model that lacked a historical ground for conducting cross-racial analysis.¹ The neo-Bandung allegiance of this Afro-Asianism—most prominent in the work of Vijay Prashad and Bill Mullen—explicitly aligns itself against the postnationalist ethos of hybridity theory and in favor of a toughened anti-imperial stance.² There is much to admire about this critical turn; its increasing influence is surely a sign of our worsening times, reflected in the difference between the postsocialist euphoria of the 1990s—which projected the radicalization of democracy through the articulation of class with race, gender, and sexuality—and the return of empire and its banalization of democratic rhetoric after 9/11. Despite this Afro-Asianist project's more open recognition of the relevance of Asian embourgeoisement to its own desire for a renewed resistance politics, however, it is not yet clear whether the retrieval of Third Worldist genealogies accomplishes something more than a nostalgic response to the rise of Asian capitalism on a world scale and to the thinning claim of Asian American intellectuals to any representative function. And yet, to fulfill the originary promise of ethnic studies, which emerged out of the articulation between anti-imperialist and anti-racist struggle in the late 1960s, this is what it must and should do.

At the least, the coalitional imperative of today's variant of Afro-Asianism is making ever more explicit the degree to which the Asian as a racial concept requires comparative thinking. The Asian American, which is surely the premier example of a racial concept of the Asian, has always been a comparative identity. For the most part, however, this has indicated not its intellectual advantages but its historical insecurity, which perhaps helps explain the political romanticism of Asian American intellectuals. Although there is no agreement that Asian Americans are a race, or even a coherent racial

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formation—given the contested sense, historical limitations, and potentially constitutive exclusions of Asian American panethnicity—it is by now common to describe the Asian American as the product of an official, state-managed racialization or the racial expression of varied social contradiction. Racial, racialized, but lacking the certainty of a racial formation, the Asian American's attenuated relation to racial conceptualization can be seen in the extent to which critical focus on the Asian American is so often couched in terms of “needing to move beyond race as a matter of black and white.” The Asian American is more easily evoked as a third term to trouble binary habits of racial classification and analysis than to illustrate the genuine multiplicity of racial logics and racisms.

This is true even of the most justifiably influential example of a comparative thesis of Asian American racialization: Claire Jean Kim's account of black and Asian racialization according to a “field of racial positions” or “racial triangulation.” Kim succinctly distinguishes a logic of Asian American racialization based on “civic ostracism” (that constructs Asians as outsiders) from a logic of black racialization based on “relative devalorization” (that constructs blacks as inferior). Despite the qualitative distinction Kim draws between the two racializing logics, she describes Asian ostracism as deriving from a white-supremacist ideology that had already been put in place by the contradictions of a slave republic. Evoking Barbara Fields—rather perversely, since Fields argues vehemently against the notion that race is capable of “taking on a life of its own” (101)—Kim writes, “If the racial categories of black and white were historically constructed, as Barbara Fields argues, to reconcile the institution of slavery with the democratic ideals of freedom and equality, the third category of ‘Mongolian,’ ‘Asiatic,’ or ‘Oriental’ was constructed to reconcile another labor system with the ideal of a pristine white polity” (43–44). The concep-

tualization of Asian ostracism as a second-order racism has certain consequences for the account given of Asian American politics, which Kim also describes as more prone than African American politics to be ideologically mystified. “If the black struggle for advancement has historically rested on appeals to racial equality,” Kim writes, “the Asian American struggle has at times rested on appeals to be considered white (and to be granted the myriad privileges bundled with whiteness)” (47). This characterization of the assimilationist tendency of Asian American politics is undermotivated by the theory of racial triangulation, since it is not clear why the subjects of exclusion should be more likely than the subjects of inferiority to substitute a desire for whiteness for their real desires. We might observe, though, that the reification of whiteness Kim attributes to a mistaken Asian American politics inheres in her account of the original agency of Asian American racialization, which is an inherited white supremacy constituted in relation to black slavery.

In general, the foundational status of antiblackness in conceptualizations of racism obstructs Asian Americanist endeavors to elaborate the nonderivative nature of Asian racialization. The prospect holds out more than just the institutional rewards of securing the field's intellectual standing. It may help us come to a better understanding of how late-twentieth-century articulations of political liberalism and white supremacy came to differ from those of the late nineteenth century, a question which critical race theory has insufficiently tackled. The story of Asian American racialization, which is unfinished business of the twentieth century, affords a fascinating test case of the differences between the “colorblind” liberal formalism of the post-civil-rights era and the overt discriminations of jim crow. Like others who believe that racialization is driven by the historical agency of a racism that is foundationally antiblack, Kim emphasizes the merely cosmetic differences

between the pre-1965 and post-1965 eras. Arguing that racial triangulation continues to function in the present day through a disguised cultural coding allows Kim to underplay the significant social advancement of Asian Americans since 1965 and to emphasize their continued racialization through their cultural othering. The cost, however, is the dematerialization of the terms of Asian American racialization relative to the terms of black racialization, an unevenness that invites the question of whether Asian American mobility really confirms the persistent symbolic power of white privilege or whether it represents the detachment of whiteness's symbolic power from material power. Only by also taking into account the comparative material effects of Asian American and black racialization is it possible to assess the descriptive value and normative import of the question that has worried the Asian American critic since the very inception of Asian American studies: "Must Asian Americans still attempt to be white in order to get ahead?" (Kim 67).

In another pioneering effort at black-Asian comparative racialization in the United States—less often cited perhaps because of its challenge to the outsider rhetoric of Asian American studies—Susan Koshy proposes that Asian Americans may in fact present a case of a racially excluded group "morphing" into an assimilable ethnicity over the course of the twentieth century. To make her argument, Koshy relies on the kind of racial-hierarchy approach that Kim's bidimensional model of racial triangulation seeks to supersede. Nevertheless, Koshy's emphasis on economic stratification brings into sharper focus the (often conflictual) class relations between Asian Americans and African Americans, exposing the limits of the notion of parallel minoritization at the heart of coalition politics. On first appearance, Kim's racial-triangulation thesis seems to correct precisely for the problem of racial parallelism, but, as I have tried to show, her argument's essentialization of the racism

that drives a diversity of racializing effects is itself inescapably hierarchizing, consigning anti-Asian racism to an idealist status and Asian American politics equally to an assimilationist trajectory. Both Koshy's skeptical reading of coalition politics and Kim's structuralist explanation for its historical difficulties suggest the limitations placed on Asian American politics when Asian racialization is attributed to a white supremacy that is by temporal and conceptual priority antiblack.

Long ago, in his seminal 1971 study of Chinese exclusionism, Alexander Saxton had drawn from the analogical conceptualization of anti-Asianism its richest historical potential and still ran up against its limits. Anti-Chineseness, Saxton argued, was a language of double meaning. As a proxy for antiblackness, it presaged and enabled the end of Reconstruction; its broader significance was the national relegitimation of a white supremacy that had in the course of the Civil War been discredited by Southern secessionism. In the postbellum period, anti-Chineseness expressed an ideological content that sprang from the local class relations of West Coast labor, but its rhetorical form was derived from elsewhere. Theorized brilliantly as a rhetorical form rather than an immanent national psychology, racism in Saxton's narrative could be shown to travel spatially, cathect different historical contents, and perform effective ideological work. Nevertheless, its inherently binary structure still relegated anti-Chineseness—and Asiatic racial form—to a substitutive position: in Saxton's words, the Chinese were placed in the "mental compartment which in the East had been reserved for blacks" (260).

Gary Okihiro, an oft-cited progenitor of today's strain of Afro-Asianism, acknowledges in his 1994 essay entitled "Is Yellow Black or White?" that what at the synchronic level can be posited as an analogy between the experiences of Asian and black exploitation involved at the diachronic level a strategy

of labor substitution. In analogy's association with substitution lies the potential for Afro-Asian antipathy as well as unity. Okihiro's own brief for Afro-Asian solidarity makes explicit his self-conscious decision to emphasize historical moments of unity—in truth, more of them cases of black recognition of interracial kinship than the other way around—because of his own autobiographical formation by the antiwar movement and the black freedom struggles of the 1960s. An anecdote about the distance between his coming-of-age moment and his Asian American college students', however, reveals something of the contemporary pedagogical context to which his Afro-Asianist project is addressed: "During fall semester 1990, I asked my Asian American students with whom they felt a closer kinship: African or European Americans? They almost universally expressed affinity with whites. And I recalled how in 1944, amid strident anti-Japanese wartime propaganda and concentration camps for Japanese Americans, the *Negro Digest* conducted a poll for Japanese Americans. To the question, 'Should negroes discriminate against Japanese?' 66 percent in the North and West and 53 percent in the South answered 'No'" (60). Reconstructions of Afro-Asian solidarity are indeed a strategic response to the sense of growing Asian American conservatism since the 1970s, whose conditions Glenn Omatsu has eloquently described. So too, perhaps, has the resistance rhetoric of Asian American studies been a reaction to the frustrations of the analogical status of Asiatic racial form.

A brief postscript: two extraordinary recent studies in Afro-Asian comparative racialization have arisen to challenge Asian American analogical dependency, one through a theoretically self-reflexive history of racialized labor forms and the other through close literary reading. In *Coolies and Cane*, Moon-Ho Jung undoes the temporal assumptions of the coolie's belatedness by showing the coolie figure to have been constitutive of

the slavery debate in the antebellum era. The first feminist analysis to give Asian American cultural nationalism its due, Daniel Y. Kim's *Writing Manhood in Black and Yellow* founds the aesthetic value of Asian American cultural-nationalist writing on its imitative structure—one that, in its resemblance to black signifying, discloses the universally mimetic nature of all ethnic vernacular traditions. The new standard for scholarship set by Jung and Kim suggests that, despite the appearance of a widening divergence between historical and literary approaches in our post-cultural-studies era, it is the allied recognition of the historical force of aesthetic form and the formal mediation of social relations that is likely to generate new insight into the specificity, significance, and possible existence of Asian American racial formation.³

NOTES

1. For a partial bibliography of this literature on transnational black-Asian cultural crossings, political affinities, and historical overlap, see Prashad; Jones and Singh; Mullen; and Raphael-Hernandez and Steen.

2. The first Afro-Asian conference, also known as the Bandung conference, was a meeting of twenty-nine African and Asian states, most of them newly independent, which took place on 18–24 April 1955, in Bandung, Indonesia. The conference's stated aims were to promote Afro-Asian economic and cultural cooperation and to oppose colonialism or neocolonialism by the United States and the Soviet Union. One genealogy of the "Third World" dates the emergence of the concept to this conference and to a statement made there by the Chinese prime minister, Zhou Enlai, who described nonalignment as a "third way" out of the world's bipolar division by the superpowers of the cold war.

3. For a recent statement on a renewed encounter between historicism and formalism, see Levine.

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