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Afro-Asian Panel

Afro-Asian Solidarity through Revolution

African and Asian Americans share a rich history of mutual support and oppression at the hands of Whites in the United States. Both groups have also identified with oppressed people outside of the United States and their social movements. As W.E.B. DuBois wrote in his novel *Dark Princess*, “Pan-Africa belongs logically with Pan-Asia” (20). African and Asian Americans have historically found solidarity through supporting and embracing political and social revolutions that were vilified by the United States.

The similarities between African and Asian Americans trace back to the nineteenth century. Similar to the mid-Atlantic slave trade, Asians (Chinese and Indian) were forcibly bound and shipped to the Caribbean in order to work on sugar plantations. These Asians were often captured, coerced or tricked by their own countrymen just as African slaves were. This trans-Pacific trade of human beings was known as the “coolie” system (Ho and Mullen 35). Coolies were given the status of indentured servants with eight-year contracts, but they had no way to enforce their contracts. The plantation masters disregarded their contracts and effectively made the living condition of coolies indistinguishable from that of the “official” slaves working on the same plantation. Even if the contract was upheld, most coolies died before the contract was officially over (Ho and Mullen 45). This history

of oppression is important to understand because it sets the catalyst for Afro-Asian revolutionary support.

Although they were both in bondage in the Caribbean, both African and Asian laborers were able to fight for their liberation, particularly in Cuba. Cuban rebels, who were at war with the Spanish empire, promised freedom to any coolie or slave who would fight for their cause (Ho and Mullen 31). This brought together a united front amongst Asians, Africans, and the impoverished working class of Cuba. Coolies (especially Chinese) and slaves embraced the revolution, which was vilified by Europe and the United States, as a legitimate outlet for liberation (Ho and Mullen 30). The rebellion in Cuba is an excellent example of Afro-Asian solidarity because both groups fought together in order to achieve the mutual goal of liberation. It is not a coincidence that they united under a revolutionary cause; however, this unity is not confined to the nineteenth century.

The Afro-Asian relationship was very similar beyond the turn of the century. African Americans often sympathized with Asian nations that were oppressed by the United States and various European nations. Examples of this are the sympathetic responses of African Americans towards the Filipinos during the Spanish American War and their admiration of Indian and Japanese revolutions. African Americans felt that the United States was trampling on yet another oppressed group of people (Ho and Mullen 62). The response of African Americans to these foreign movements signifies that they began to think about oppression internationally rather than just domestically. These feelings of shared oppression certainly resonated with African American scholars at the time, such as W.E.B

DuBois who was a prominent intellectual during his time. DuBois was an admirer of imperialist Japan and communist China; he even met with China's communist leader Mao Zedong. It is significant that he admired those two political movements seeing as they were frowned upon by the United States.

Expressing a fascination with Asian culture in *Dark Princess, A Romance*, DuBois tells the story of an African American man named Matthew who meets an Indian princess named Kautilya. Eventually they come together with other "colored" peoples of the world (Arabs, East Asians, Africans, ect.) and plan a revolution. The conglomerate of races that DuBois created shows that he valued Afro-Asian solidarity on an international scale. Through this collaboration, Kautilya tells Matthew that African Americans play a major part on the world scale and are a major part of an international revolution: "you American Negroes are not a mere amorphous handful. You are a nation!" (16). This is important to Matthew because he deeply wants to liberate his own people. His sentiment is an attempt by DuBois to emphasize the importance of African Americans on a world scale. Matthew believes that the African American community is on the front lines in the battle for battle for racial equality, and thus is fighting in solidarity with other oppressed races of the world:

'Here in Virginia you are at the edge of a black world. The black belt of the Congo, the Nile, and the Ganges reaches up by way of Guiana, Haiti, and Jamaica, like a red arrow, up into the heart of white America. Thus I see a

mighty synthesis: you can work in Africa and Asia right here in America if you work in the Black Belt.' (286)

This statement from Matthew illustrates his (and DuBois') belief that African Americans are equal to the other races in terms of the struggle against White oppression. Eventually the revolutionary council sets a plan in motion that ultimately aims to start an African American revolution in the United States. It ultimately fails, but Matthew and Kautilya live happily ever after, which is another way in which DuBois illustrates Afro-Asian solidarity.

Bill Mullen's "DuBois, Dark Princess, and the Afro-Asian International" provides literary criticism of *Dark Princess* and explains the nature of African American and Asian relations in an international sense. Mullen maintains that DuBois was interested in an international revolution that would end the subjugation of the "darker races" around the world. DuBois saw the nationalist movement in India and the imperialist ambitions of Japan as examples of that international revolution. The parallels that he drew between African Americans and Asians are apparent in *Dark Princess* when his African American protagonist joins a council of various Asiatic representatives in order to organize an international movement. According to Mullen, DuBois draws connections between these representatives to show the kinship that they have due to their shared oppression. One can see from Mullen's article that DuBois often tried to assert that the culture of African Americans and Asians were essentially the same due to their shared experiences of oppression at the hands of various European nations and the United States. In order

to alleviate that oppression, he believed in cooperation amongst oppressed peoples; thus he supported an international racial revolution.

Still, the revolutionary relationship between African and Asian Americans continued well into the twentieth century and tended to center around more domestic issues. Daryl J. Maeda's article "Black Panthers, Red Guards, and Chinamen" offers a more modern connection between African and Asian Americans and deals with their cultural relationship in the United States during the sixties and seventies. According to Maeda, the political and social climates in sixties made it easier for African and Asian Americans to find cultural connections because they were wrought with change. There were a host of organizations that took advantage of these changes. The Red Guard Party, a militant organization formed by Asian Americans in San Francisco, was almost an exact replica of the more famous Black Panther Party, an African American militant organization. Both groups were concerned with helping their local and cultural communities, and both were considered radical by the United States government. Maeda writes that the Black Panther Party and other Afro-centric organizations like it drew inspiration from the communist movement in China. These groups incorporated various Maoist teachings into their ideologies because they felt that the oppression that they experienced at home was akin to the oppression that Asians were experiencing internationally. In Maeda's article, one can see how African Americans and Asian Americans continued to support similar revolutionary movements. Even popular civil rights figures showed Afro-Asian solidarity through revolutionary support.

Major African American civil rights leaders also voiced their empathy for Asians in an international sense through their opposition to the Vietnam War. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. criticized the War in Vietnam and the culture of the United States as a whole in a 1967 sermon:

There's something strangely inconsistent about a nation and a press that will praise you when you say, 'Be non-violent toward Jim Clark', but will curse and damn you when you say, 'Be non-violent toward little brown Vietnamese children.' There's something wrong with that press! (King)

Dr. King's use of the phrase "Brown Vietnamese children" is evidence that he felt that the plight of the African American and Asian were the same. Malcolm X was equally upset about the Vietnam War when he objected to African American men being sent "to fight the Yellow man for the White man." (E. Kim 224). Mohammed Ali even refused to go obey the draft in. He justified his position in 1966 by saying:

Why should they ask me to put on a uniform and go ten thousand miles from home and drop bombs and bullets on brown people in Vietnam while so-called Negro people in Louisville are treated like dogs and denied simple human rights? (Zirin 147)

That statement was just another example of the empathy one oppressed group had for another. African Americans understood the plight of the Vietnamese people and

spoke out against racist policies against Asians because they felt that they experienced similar oppression. Fred Hampton even said “Yellow power to Yellow people, Black power to Black people” in a speech in Chicago. All of these civil rights leaders held views about the Vietnam War and revolutions in general that were considered unpatriotic at the time because they supported the oppressed rather than the oppressor.

The Afro-Asian solidarity also manifests itself when African and Asian Americans share cultural identities. Jungwon Kim’s magazine article in *A. Magazine* gives the reader some background information on a shared Afro-Asian cultural experience by giving various specific examples of that phenomenon. One of Kim’s most interesting examples pertains to the Afro-centric organization known as the Nation of Islam. One of the Nation of Islam’s beliefs is that Africans are the “original Asiatics”, and that brown, red and yellow races descended from them. Another example that Kim provides is of a woman named Yuri Kochiyama. Kochiyama is a famous civil rights activist who was a very prominent figure in the Black Power movement of the sixties. Although she is involved in Asian American issues, her inspiration comes from the African American movements of the sixties, and she continues to fight for the rights of African Americans today. The aforementioned examples from Kim’s magazine article clearly show that African and Asian Americans embrace each other’s cultures in revolutionary and ‘radical’ ways.

It is important for both African and Asian Americans to remember that they have a very similar history in terms of oppression at the hands of Europe and the United States. This relationship must continue to be explored because, presently,

the popular notion is that African and Asian Americans are vastly different. The apparent differences only serve to cause conflict between the two communities, and both groups should refuse to subscribe to them. The revolutionary spirit must endure because both groups will otherwise remain stagnant in their fight for equality. Their shared revolutionary fervor helped both groups realize some of their mutual goals in the past, such as liberation in Cuba, and it will continue to help them in the future.

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