

Asian American liberation theology: Searching for an Asian radical tradition

Gidra March 2020 Issue on Asian Americans and Blackness in America

I've lived in the US for about ten years now, on and off. Most of them were the Obama years. There was this veneer of progress, of possibility, of Black faces in high places, as Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor put it. I lived in New York City during the time of Occupy Wall Street and Black Lives Matter, the police killing of Eric Garner, of Akai Gurley, and the conviction of officer Peter Liang. Yet the most I did was attend a handful of protests; I wasn't interested in political work then. While I appreciated the moral argument of BLM, I didn't truly understand that our collective liberation is tied up in each other's. Beyond sweeping impressions of slavery and genocide, I hardly knew the deep history of racism, settler colonialism, and resistance in the US. All I knew was that each time I went to a protest, I was disappointed to see the small number of Asian-looking faces in the crowd. I could more easily imagine Asians complaining about the inconvenience caused by protests, or about lazy Black people who turn to crime instead of books, or about taxpayer money being wasted on policing protests.

I left the US not long before Trump was elected, and came back two years later. Coming back irritated the hell out of me. I remembered reading all about the tears and lamentations of white liberals the night of that election, and I became angry at how everything was back to "normal" in 2018. No white person actually moved to Canada like some said they would if Trump were elected. No white person actually tore down the border wall that is being built like some threatened to. The settler colonial state, white supremacy, and empire are still very much intact. So much so that Trump's re-election this year seems much more likely than his election did.

Revolution is in the air. The last decade started with the Arab Spring, which inspired Occupy, which inspired Hong Kong's Umbrella Movement. We've seen the Movement for Black Lives and the MeToo movement (both started by Black women), the Dakota Access Pipeline protests at Standing Rock, the Yellow Vests movement in France (also started by a Black woman), to name a few. We rounded off the decade with climate strikes worldwide, and popular uprisings in Hawai'i, Hong Kong, Puerto Rico, and Sudan. It's hard not to draw parallels between the current political ferment and the radicalism of the 1960s. Of course, things are different now than they were then, but it's safe to say that now as then, the people are discontent.

I used to spend a lot of time with petit-bourgeois Asians. High-achieving, well-educated, financially-secure, hard-working, upwardly mobile Asians. Model minorities who had no interest in disrupting the status quo, in overthrowing capitalism, or in abolition or reparations or decolonization. Maybe having a little more representation in Hollywood and Harvard, sure, or maybe getting a few more people of color or sexual minorities in the Forbes 500 list. Coming back to the US, I needed to know: is there an alternative to this? Asian American identity was a radical political intervention when it first came into being, around the time of the Third World Liberation Front strikes in 1968. Those days, writer Jeff Chang described, "Asian American" was a fight you were picking with the world. While we mustn't look to the past with nostalgia, we can learn from it, and learn from it we must. The past inspires the present to act in a way that will inspire the future. I was looking for a weapon, a means of joining the fight that has been

going on for over five hundred years. Does Asian American identity still have any revolutionary potential left?

Reviving Asian American liberation theology

So I was excited to hear that *Gidra* is making a comeback. Described as a revolutionary newspaper-magazine, it gave voice to a nascent Asian American political identity, running from 1969 to 1974, and a handful of times after. At around the same time, Black liberation theology and Latin American theology turned the Christian world upside down: here were theologies that disavowed whiteness and capitalism, and instead allied with Black Power in the US and communism in Latin America. The core principle of any theology of liberation is that it theologizes from the viewpoint of the oppressed, understanding God to be squarely on the side of the oppressed and against the oppressor, and revealing Godself through the unfolding of historical events and suffering communities. It was a revolutionary theology. After much searching, I learned that there also was an Asian American theology of liberation. Though short lived, as it were, Asian American liberation theology drew inspiration from Black theology, Asian American activism, and Third World anti-imperialism. Here, I thought, was a history that could be weaponized.

Unlike *Roots: An Asian American Reader*, the reader that was published by UCLA Press in a rush to get reading material out to Asian Americans in 1971, the handful of writings and conference proceedings on Asian American (or sometimes “Amerasian”) theologies of liberation, compiled by Methodist bishop Roy Sano, were never published. They were produced out of what was then the Pacific and Asian American Center for Theology and Strategies (PACTS), put together like an old-fashioned reader, resembling more of a zine, and now live in twenty boxes in the Graduate Theological Union archives in Berkeley. I found these listed in the archival inventory online, and managed to digitize parts of it, making them freely available online. I needed to know: is it possible to revive this Asian American theology of liberation, which offered solidarity with the Black liberation struggle, critiquing the US empire, capitalism, racial domination, and white feminism? The library near where I was located at the time happened to have a copy of one of Sano’s readers. I had never done archival work before, so it was quite an experience to hold a piece of nearly forgotten history in my hands. I cautiously flipped through the yellowed pages of the photocopy bound with a plastic ring binder, afraid to damage the pages of such a rare document.

Since then, I’ve worked to bring Asian American liberation theology into the present day, to mixed success. I’ve had to consider what had taken place since the late 70s, when PACTS seemed to shift its focus, though it remained in operation until 2002. Asian American demographics shifted. While Asian American liberation theology faded as quickly as it arrived, other liberation theologies became domesticated through their acceptance into the academy, even as more sophisticated critiques advanced from areas such as postcolonial theory, Native American studies, queer theory, and of course, the Black radical tradition. Nonetheless, still other Asian theologies of liberation were later articulated from the perspective of the Dalits in India, whose Dalit Panthers were inspired by the Black Panthers, and Palestine, whose struggles have been recently linked to those of the Movement for Black Lives. More recently, migration and

deportation have become key sites of struggle from the perspective of Third World liberation. All these things must orient the way in which we envision any kind of Asian liberation today.



Searching for an Asian radical tradition

In *Black Marxism*, Cedric Robinson weaves together a historical Black radical tradition through the lens of the African diaspora, the Atlantic slave trade, various Black resistances, and the works of W.E.B. Du Bois, C.L.R. James, and Richard Wright. At the heart of the text is Chapter 7, “The Nature of the Black Radical Tradition,” which frustrates leftists a whole lot. After recounting a history of the Black movement, Robinson seeks to understand its “ideological, philosophical, and epistemological natures.” The question ‘What is the metaphysical nature of the Black radical tradition?’ might seem strange to a historical materialist or Marxist, but it is entirely natural to a liberation theologian. From a theological perspective, the metaphysical is at least as important as the physical. Robinson points to a violence “turned inward” — a jihad, or dharma, if you will — the “renunciation of actual being for historical being” and the “preservation of the ontological totality granted by a metaphysical system.” This revolutionary consciousness that Robinson saw proceeding from the Black historical experience was a collective consciousness informed by historical struggles for liberation, grounded in African tradition. Here, notably, Robinson invokes Nat Turner who read the Bible and, following an encounter with the Spirit, led what Robinson considered the only sustained slave rebellion in US history.

As I learned about the Black radical tradition, I wondered: What might it look like to piece together an Asian radical tradition, and what would be its relation to liberation theologies?

While its intellectual and historical debt to the Black radical tradition will be evident at certain junctures, such as in the victories of the civil rights movement and the persistent challenges to antiblack racism, any Asian radical tradition must be able to stand on its own two feet. Otherwise, we would only be draining others by trying to join and co-opt their movements, rather than being able to lend power as we build it. In seeking touchstones for an Asian American theology of liberation, I learned not only of the solidarity work of Yuri Kochiyama and Grace Lee Boggs, but also the many labor strikes carried out by Asian garment workers and farmers, ever since the first Filipino sailors deserted the Spanish colonizers they arrived with on Native American soil. Particularly inspiring is the story of Chinese indentured laborer Bu Tak, or José Bu, who became a celebrated Cuban freedom fighter in the 1860s, and was known for charging into battle ferociously waving a machete and shouting in Spanish, “For Cuba! Spanish go to hell!” In fact, the Black Panthers sought to learn all they could from Maoism, which at the time offered a strategy for resisting the white devil, or the ghost man *gwai lou*. And all this not to mention the deep histories of anticolonial resistance and struggle within Asia itself.

The idea of the “Asian” is as broad and fraught as is the “African.” Asian history is marked, not by the Middle Passage, but by a torturous history of colonization, imperialism, and orientalism. Of course, these two histories are deeply intertwined, as Lisa Lowe explicates in the *Intimacies of Four Continents*, which connects the histories of empire, slavery, and settler colonialism. Nonetheless, we find in Asian history a highly complex tradition, drawing from numerous ancient civilizations, of which Western imperialism is only recent history. The revolutionaries of time immemorial have always understood that oppression is without borders — though it may make very good use of borders — and must be resisted everywhere it manifests itself. I would argue that Afro-Asian solidarity is a *feature* of the Black radical tradition, even before the first Bandung conference in 1955. Du Bois had offered “every sympathy with the Untouchables of India,” in a letter to Ambedkar, who first wrote to Du Bois about the similarities of the position of Dalits with the “Negroes in America.” Martin Luther King’s nonviolent strategies were famously inspired by those of Gandhi, despite Gandhi’s own antiblack racism as we know from his time in South Africa. And in more recent times, we have the solidarity between Palestinians and Black lives and Indigenous people, Hong Kong’s Umbrella Movement in 2014 chanting “Hands up, don’t shoot” which began at protests for Michael Brown, and the explicitly anti-police nature of Hong Kong’s pro-democracy protests in 2019. Such internationalism is not a new thing. It is only often forgotten, or perhaps too much to hold altogether at once. But if we are to seek an Asian radical tradition, one that is properly nuanced and held up against capitalism, antiblackness, settler colonialism, and heteropatriarchy, this is what is required of us. We must hold these things together, and articulate an Asian radical tradition on its own terms. This would be a crucial step in laying the foundation for a renewed Asian American theology of liberation.

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LAMBEDKAR
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21-21-24
Dear Prof. Dubois, *Air Mail*

Although I have not met you personally, I know you by name as every one does who is working in the case of securing liberty to the oppressed people. I belong to the Untouchables of India and perhaps you might have heard my name. I have been a student of the Negro problem and have read your writings throughout. There is so much similarity between the position of the Untouchables in India and of the position of the Negroes in America that the study of the latter is not only natural but necessary.

I was very much interested to read that the Negroes of America have filed a petition to the U.N.O. The Untouchables of India are also thinking of following suit. Will you be so good as to secure for me two or three copies of this representation by the Negroes and send them to my address. I need hardly say how very grateful I shall be for your troubles in this behalf.

Yours sincerely
B.R. Ambedkar

To

Prof. Dubois,
University of Atlanta,
Georgia, U.S.A.

The invitation of the cross to social death

But liberation does not come easy. "Power concedes nothing without a demand," Frederick Douglass tells us. Any Christian, too, knows this. Black theologian James Cone understood the contradictions inherent in "the conspicuous absence of the lynching tree in American theological discourse and preaching," as the crucifixion was "clearly a first-century lynching." Of course, the parallels were already clear from Billie Holiday's 1937 song Strange Fruit. And if it wasn't clear enough, even the U.N. Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent drew an analogy between police killings of Black people in the US in 2016 and "the past racial terror of lynching," just as the Thirteenth Amendment in the US constitution makes plain the connection between mass incarceration and slavery. But all my years attending majority white or "multiethnic" churches in the US, this connection had never been made, and only became obvious after reading Cone.

The Cross of Jesus is a fixture of evangelical theology, and Christianity at large. The call of Christ requires a dying to self. Take up your cross and follow me, he said. Or, in the words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German pastor imprisoned and eventually killed for his resistance to Nazi rule, “when Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die.” At the same time, Afropessimist scholar Frank Wilderson charges that “if we are to be honest with ourselves, we must admit that the ‘Negro’ has been inviting whites, as well as civil society’s junior partners, to the dance of social death for hundreds of years, but few have wanted to learn the steps.” It must be then, that the call of Christ to come and die must in fact include the invitation to join the dance of social death. The resonance between these two invitations is striking. Asians in the US are most certainly civil society’s junior partners: we can either be for Black lives or Black death, there is no third option in this country. So even as we build an Asian radical tradition, we must live a revolutionary praxis that requires us to die many deaths. How hard is it for us to die the kind of social death that is the foundation of antiblack society, yet all the time in churches we hear preaching about dying to self?

What even does Asian social death look like? Does it mean prison abolition? Does it mean returning Native land? Does it mean trading our antiblackness and honorary whiteness for nothingness? Does it mean becoming willing to allow our bodies to “magnetize bullets” the way that Black bodies do? Perhaps it is all these things and more. We must certainly also be about the liberation of Asians in the US and Asians everywhere: so many Asians are hidden in poverty, in community colleges, in houselessness, in prison and in detention, at risk of deportation and travel bans. The Coronavirus pandemic has revealed not only our interconnectedness on a global scale, but also the deep-seated racism and xenophobia under the pretense of fear and safety. There is no way that the liberation of all will come at no personal cost.

So we must be careful of what we wish for. Jesus said whoever the Son sets free is free indeed. But Saidiya Hartman insists that “a Black revolution makes everyone freer than they actually want to be.” How rightfully damning. Do we dare to live in the dreams of the oppressed? Would we truly welcome capitalism’s destruction, patriarchy’s dismantling, and settler decolonization? What if workers actually owned the means of production, or women the means of reproduction? What if we were really as free as the Son sets free? -