A long march toward unity
Afro-Asian Collaborations

By Manan Desai

Afro Asia
Revolutionary Political and Cultural Connections Between African Americans and Asian Americans
edited by Bill Mullen and Fred Ho

AT A MOMENT when the national media are abuzz with predictions of a new era of post-racial politics, Fred Ho and Bill Mullen's anthology on the intersections of African and Asian Americans remind us of the complex ways that race has shaped and continues to shape our lives in this country. Afro Asia compiles a diverse set of essays that illuminate a repressed tradition, spanning the early 19th century onwards, of "creative political and cultural resistance grounded in Afro-Asian collaboration and connectivity." (15)

These remarkable collaborations have ranged from shared political struggles against racism and imperialism (Cuba, Korea, China and of course, inside the United States) to cultural partnerships in music, martial arts, film and literature.

Yet bearing an academic footnote or two, these stories have largely escaped our popular histories. How many know that Ho Chi Minh spoke in valiant terms of the Black struggle during the 1967 Detroit rebellion? That Mao had issued statements in solidarity with the Civil Rights movement? Or of the powerful collaboration between the Black Panthers and Richard Aoki? Or Malcolm X and Yuriko Kodama?

Ho and Mullen's collection serves not only as a repository of these important Afro-Asian intersections, it charts out renewed possibilities of solidarity between oppressed nationalities in the United States, without resort to fanciful notions of a "post-racial" world where racial identity is exhausted of all meaning and history. Bill Mullen is Director of American Studies at Purdue and a contributor to AFC; Fred Ho is an activist, writer, and jazz musician.

Threaded through this collection is a broader argument about the social history of race, complicating the simplistic Black-white lens that dominates racial discourse in American society. A central claim made by several of the contributors of this collection is that the distinct forms of racialization experienced by Asian and African Americans have led to a sort of invisibility of the former and hypercritical visibility of the latter. As Ho writes, "In U.S. society, an individual is either white, black, or foreign. American racism has lumped its Latino, Asian, and even native American groups into 'other'" (23). This classification has created critical blind spots, which it comes to the way that racism is perceived to affect Asian Americans.

Spoken word artist Thien-bao Thuc Phi explains that "we, and non-Asians, fail to identify Asian Americans as people of color, or fail to understand the specific ways in which we have and still do suffer from racism... (It is entirely possible that one can be considered by most people in this country to be a progressive or radical without knowing or mentioning a thing about Asian American history or issues.)" (296-7)

The Meaning of "Afro Asia"

What constitutes Afro Asia, then? Ho and Mullen define the tradition as "a strategic intersection for thinking through an internationalist, global paradigm," creating "an anti-imperialist, insurgent identity... no longer majority white in orientation." (2-3)

In that sense, the tradition of Afro-Asian collaboration exemplifies what Vijay Prashad terms "the polycultural." A deliberate echo of multiculturalism, polyculturalism stresses antiracism as grounds for shared struggle, whereas multiculturalism posits a false diversity, ultimately managing and maintaining difference through cultural essentialisms.

Polyculturalism in short challenges, whereas multiculturalism accommodates. Indeed, Ho and Mullen argue that along with the decline of the New Left, the majority of anti-racist polycultural movements of the 1960s and 1970s, which at their best envisioned an "anti-imperialist Third World unity," had soon thereafter been either repressed or co-opted by the state. Excoriated by the contradictions of local and global capitalism, a narrow nationalism and archaic economic protectionism has taken their place.

The authors write, "Between Africans and Asians in the United States, divisions are accentuated through competition over resources and positioning vis-à-vis the institution funding streams in vastly dissimilar terrains ranging from colleges and universities to inner-city ghettos." (7-8)

In the face of this socially constructed division, the contributors of Afro Asia attempt to recuperate a repressed radical tradition, exploring the shared struggles, connections and borrowings between Black and Asian people in the United States, while also addressing some of the real complexities and contradictions faced by both.

From Bandung to Black Liberation

The specter of Mao looms large over the political histories in Afro-Asian. Mullen and Ho include both Mao's brief statements supporting African-American political struggles, the first issued in August 1963 and the second in April 1968, less than two weeks after the assassination of Martin Luther King. At the request of Robert F. Williams — the Black radical and founder of the Revolutionary Action Movement (RAM), who had been spending time in China as an exile — Mao expressed on paper his resolute support and analysis of the Civil Rights movement: "Only by overthrowing the reactionary rule of the U.S. monarchical classes and destroying the colonialist and imperialist system can the black people in the United States win complete emancipation." (5)

In the ambitious follow-up essay "Black Like Mao," Betty Esch and Robin D.G. Kelley contextualize the impact of Mao as a revolutionary symbol, and Marxism as a political ideology, on African-American radical politics between the 50s and mid-70s, roughly the period between the Chinese Revolution and Mao's death.

Aware of the contradictions within Communist China, Kelley and Esch nevertheless point out the symbolic value that China had on Black radicals from Du Bois to Williams, from Harold Cruse to Amiri Baraka: "China offered black radicals a 'colored' or Third World Marxist model that enabled them to challenge a white Western..."
vision of class struggle—a model that they shaped and unshaped to suit their own cultural and political realities" (100).

He adds that the East Coast Asian-American movement was also affected by the Chinese revolution and Mosaic. The emergence of China from its semi-colonial status to a "nonwhite" socialist state in 1949. He explains, presented an anomaly to "Eurocentric Marxist formulations" and offered an alternative model of socialism to the increasingly "social-imperialist" Soviet Russia.

Eck, Kelley and others have pointed out that during the period after World War II, when a wave of colonized African and Asian nations had gained their independence, many African-American activists, intellectual, and cultural workers looked towards these Third World nationalist movements as a way of thinking about "internal colonialization" in the United States. Robert F. Williams' RAM developed a theory of "Bandung Humanism" or "Revolutionary Black Internationalism," echoing the Three Worlds theory, which, in its myriad forms, he then-recently decolonized nations against Western Imperialism (of both Capitalist and State Socialist varieties) as the key construction of its time.

Richard Wright, writing in the Bandung Conference of 1955, similarly expressed this triangulation, collapsing the distinction between capitalist America and Soviet Russia, and positioning African Americans as part of the "colored" nations in opposition. Mullen and Ho earlier write that "Bandung informs and haunts any and all efforts to theorize Afro Asia. It is both the watershed and high-water mark of black Atlantic affiliation and the unfinished and imperfect dream of a road still being pursued and proved by the authors in this book." (2)

One of the limitations of Afro Asia is that, because of its enormous breadth in terms of contributions, the collaborations within "Afro Asia" (within Bandung's "imperfect dream," or the influence of Mosaic) are not rigorously analyzed. For one, what were the consequences of Black and African-American radicals adopting Mosaic? Did subjugated communities within these Third World nations forge connections with oppressed nationalities in the United States? While a great number of inspirational narratives are uncovered in Afro Asia, subsequent scholarship must expand on this groundbreaking anthology by finding the collaborations that did exist within these collaborations.

Almost all African-Americans, and some Japanese Canadians, were interned in isolated camps during World War II.

Labor; do address these contradictions by providing historically grounded accounts that explain the roots and consequences of these divisive racial identifications.

Yahn's essay, "Chinese Freedom Fighters in Cuba," narrates the history of Asian coolie laborers (largely from China and colonial India) who were brought to Cuba to replace the less "economic feasible" African slaves, as well as to divide laborers racially in order to ouster the chances of another Haiti. In racist and unintended consequences, Cuban laborers fought against imperialist power in three early Cuban wars for independence.

Similarly Ho's previously published essay, "Nobody Knows the Trouble I've Seen," looks at the different histories of industrialization which effectively divided communities, when there were possibilities of unification.

Ho draws attention to the way Asian Americans have seen their "oppression codified in law" over the years, first through the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, and later Japanese internment during World War II. And while the post-Reconstruction period saw the proletarianization of African-American workers, who joined (not without enormous hardships, along the way) the ranks of trade unions, Chinese and Asian Americans were "effectively denied proletarianization," largely due to a hostile white labor movement. (25)

Collaboration in Afro Asian Arts

Mullen and Ho dedicate a great number of pages to the long history of cross-cultural collaborations between African Americans and Asian Americans in the arts. Essays by Ishmael Reed and Cheryl Hisawiaad trace the tight web of writers of color who were involved in producing the foundational 1974 Asian-American issue of Yardbird Reader (of which Reed was a part) and the East Coast-based feminist women of color press Kitchen Table.

Given Ho's unique position as a jazz musician, whose own Afro Asian Music Ensemble uniquely attempts to forge "a