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# COMPARISON AND COALITION IN THE AGE OF BLACK LIVES MATTER

Grace Kyungwon Hong

Ironically, or perhaps fittingly, I began writing this on November 9, the day after the troubling election night that proved to be a testament to the resilience of white racist fear and entitlement, as well as a shift (in the United States, one that happened much earlier in other places in the world) from the reigning governmentality of neoliberal multiculturalism to neoliberal authoritarianism. In this context, the question that animates this forum—that is, why Black Lives Matter is relevant to Asian American studies and vice versa—is all the more pressing because it seems clear to me that this election result is a backlash against the very real successes of the Black Lives Matter movement.

By that movement, I mean not only the social-media-based activism that sprang up in support of and in the aftermath of the mass protests in Ferguson, Missouri, following the police killing of Michael Brown, but the Movement for Black Lives, a coalition of more than fifty organizations. Indeed, “Black Lives Matter” can be used as shorthand to gesture to the resurgent energies of a number of coalitional movements led by and for black people. One example is the Moral Mondays movement in North Carolina, and the Historic Thousands on Jones Street coalition that preceded it, which mobilized a vibrant coalition around an interconnected set of issues, including voting rights, environmentalism, reproductive justice, labor rights, and public education, to name just a few.<sup>1</sup> The concerted efforts at voter suppression in that state, enabled by the Supreme Court’s 2013 repeal of the Voting Rights Act and by racial gerrymandering that was so severe that a federal panel of judges ruled it unconstitutional, is not simply evidence of the regressive forces that contributed to the outcome of the

presidential election, but a panicked response to the undeniable impact and power of such movements.<sup>2</sup>

As a matter of fact, Black Lives Matter must be contextualized within an even larger landscape of contemporary antiracist, anticolonial, and coalitional activism that has transformed our communities. I speak of not only the decades of prison abolitionist organizing against state violence that is the backdrop of Black Lives Matter,<sup>3</sup> but also the vibrant movements built by undocumented immigrants and the resolute claims to Indigenous sovereignty and challenges to development and environmental degradation led by Idle No More and the water protectors who mobilized against the Dakota Access Pipeline at Standing Rock. At a moment when the casualization of whole industries and the general turn toward service economies is supposed to make labor impossible to organize, we've witnessed renewed energy in union activism in such disparate sectors as fast food, domestic work, and college athletics.<sup>4</sup>

My point is that we can read the backlash politics made manifest in the election results as a symptom of the *success* of antiracist, anticolonial movements, rather than evidence of their failure. These movements have succeeded in undermining the bedrock structures of white racism and settler colonialism of the United States and in so doing have created spaces for new possibilities and opportunities. I also want to emphasize the coalitional and intersectional nature of these movements that led to their successes and that is all the more important now. All of these movements bring together a variety of interests and constituencies. They cross racial and national boundaries as they also highlight the ways in which racial groups are internally heterogeneous. Led by women, queers, and transgender and genderqueer people, they insist that these issues, from police violence to environmental devastation, are inherently issues of gender and sexuality. Asian American activists and organizations have been important, if not necessarily the most visible, contributors to many of these struggles.

In this context, how is Asian American studies relevant to this age of Black Lives Matter and vice versa? This raises a broader question of the role of scholarship and pedagogy for social movements. As this is a meditation on Black Lives Matter published in an academic journal with a largely academic audience, I am not dismissing the importance of Asian American activists and organizations outside of the academy but specifically asking about the role of those of us who make at least some of our political interventions within the context of the university. Despite what many would claim, there are many overlaps between the political interventions that Asian American have made inside and outside of the academy.

In my view, what distinguishes both Asian American organizing and scholarship is our long and sustained commitment to a coalitional and relational analytic and practice, a tradition that is newly critical and urgent in our time. In the scholarship, this commitment has ranged the gamut from those who have celebrated solidarity built on commonality and proximity,<sup>5</sup> to those who have described the uneven and codependent relationship between Asian and black racialization and consequent investment of Asian Americans in antiblack institutions.<sup>6</sup> An important avenue of inquiry centers this relationality as the basis for an alternative notion of liberation: Edlie Wong has demonstrated the ways in which, while Asian American and black histories of racialization are not commensurate, that Asian American racialization reveals the still-incomplete project of black emancipation.<sup>7</sup> In Asian American studies, much of the intellectual and political interest in as well as the methodological critique of liberal political modernity that enabled the latter, more relational analyses must be credited to Lisa Lowe's foundational work of Asian American cultural analysis, *Immigrant Acts*, in particular its groundbreaking observation that Asian American racial formation must be characterized as not an essentialist basis for identity but as a radical *displacement* from the cultural and political institutions of the nation-state.<sup>8</sup>

These conversations address exactly the question inherent in the topic of this forum: what is the responsibility of Asian American political formations in the context of white supremacy and settler colonialism? Some, as I noted, have responded by highlighting the subjugation of Asian Americans in this regime and offering that commonality as the basis for solidarity. But such bases for solidarity run the risk of conflating incommensurable histories of racialization and colonization, and in so doing, suggesting that the benefits and protections that accrue to Asian Americans as a result of anti-blackness and settler colonialism can be undermined if individual or even groups of Asian Americans can exhibit properly radical solidarity politics. At the same time, refusing any possibility of coalition or relational analysis based on the idea of black or Native exceptionalism risks replicating the totalizing narratives of liberal political modernity that are in fact where such logics of exceptionalism originate. Lowe has recently offered a way of thinking about "intimacies of four continents" in the histories of African enslavement, settler colonialism and Indigenous genocide, and racialized indentured labor that provide the material and epistemological foundation for European enlightenment thought that focuses on the *incommensurability* of these histories, a "thinking about" that paradoxically leads to the "politics of our *lack* of knowledge."<sup>9</sup>

My own contribution to this conversation has been to highlight some of the earliest and most consequential formulations of a relational analytic of race and coalition, that is, those that have come from what has been termed women of color or third world feminism. Many of these insights were forged by black feminists, who, in arguing for what Kimberlé Crenshaw termed an “intersectional” approach, both implicitly and explicitly displaced a black exceptionalism while at the same time maintaining the relevance of the specificities of a black racialized history, and in so doing, provided an analytic for comparison and coalition.<sup>10</sup> In other words, black *feminists* such as Audre Lorde, Frances Beal, and Barbara Smith, as well as organizations such as the Third World Women’s Alliance and the Combahee River Collective, have provided for us a way of thinking about blackness that highlights its expansiveness as its exceptionality.

Fortunately for us, a current generation of Asian Americanist scholars has taken up the work of theorizing race relationally, comparatively, and intersectionally. These scholars critically interrogate the ways in which Asian American/Asian diasporic people are positioned to benefit from anti-blackness but also suggest ways to undermine this kind of relational structure that does not rely on a grammar of proximity and commonality. Ashvin Kini’s lyrical and elegant examination of Afro-Caribbean writer Earl Lovelace’s novel *Salt* centers Indian laborers in Trinidad as the *beneficiaries* of contract relations and possessors of private property as a means of facilitating black dispossession. As Kini convincingly demonstrates, through these juxtapositions, Lovelace’s novel is thus able to represent the ways in which the dispossessive violence of the contract and the differential systems of enslavement and indenture and “free” and “unfree” labor persist despite every marker of so-called “progress,” from the abolishment of formal chattel slavery to the nominal independence of the postcolonial nation-state, as well as how such violence becomes disavowed by the celebratory rhetoric of state multiculturalism.<sup>11</sup> In this context, Kini underscores identifies temporal devices, in particular, the connection or juxtaposition of events across generations, as representational strategies that interrupt the temporality of normative reproductivity at the heart of postcolonial nationalisms.

While Kini’s scholarship imagines possibilities out of the incommensurate but linked histories of Asian indenture and African enslavement in the Caribbean, Wendsor Yamashita highlights Asian American complicity with settler colonialism by attending to the ways in which Japanese Americans have been incorporated into neoliberal modes of governance through the connected, but different processes of colonial and racialized state violence. Mobilizing a prison abolitionist analytic to reframe

Japanese American history, Yamashita focuses on the Owens Valley where the Manzanar internment camp preservation committee has created lasting coalitions with members of the Paiute tribe in their effort to stop the proposed development of a solar farm by the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power.<sup>12</sup> Yamashita observes that Japanese American narratives about the Manzanar pilgrimage that situate the racialized state violence of internment as a thing of the past replicate the logics of settler colonialism. In contrast to such narratives, she traces the ways in which members of the Manzanar pilgrimage committee and other Japanese American community members renarrated the history of internment against a logic of U.S. exceptionalist narratives of progress and heteropatriarchal generational continuity in order to create substantive and lasting bases for coalition with the Paiute tribe.

Our present moment, in which imperialist state violence persists in distinctly racialized and gendered modes, demands unexpected, imaginative, and vital new ways of understanding and articulating coalition and solidarity. The work of these emergent scholars, alongside that of countless thinkers, activists, and organizers, shows that this demand is more than being met.

## Notes

I thank Jodi Kim and Erica Edwards for their incisive and generous comments to an earlier version that improved this piece immeasurably. All mistakes of fact or omission are my own.

1. See <https://www.thenation.com/article/how-moral-mondays-fusion-coalition-taking-north-carolina-back/>.
2. See <http://www.newsobserver.com/news/politics-government/state-politics/article117843388.html>.
3. See <http://criticalresistance.org/about/not-so-common-language/>.
4. See <http://fightfor15.org/>; <https://www.domesticworkers.org/home>; <http://www.collegeathletespa.org/>.
5. See, for example, Vijay Prashad, *Everybody Was Kung-Fu Fighting: Afro-Asian Connections and the Myth of Cultural Purity* (New York: Beacon, 2002); see also Fred Ho and Bill Mullen, eds., *Afro-Asia: Radical Politics and Connections between African Americans and Asian Americans* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2008).
6. See Helen Jun, "Black Surplus in the Pacific Century," in *Race for Citizenship: Black Orientalism and Asian Uplift from Pre-emancipation to Neoliberal America* (New York: New York University Press, 2011), 99-122. The complicity of Asian Americans with anti-blackness has been the subject of an immense and vibrant debate outside of the academy as well. See, for example, Nicole Zhao, "Asian Police and the Complicity of Asian Americans in

- Anti-Blackness," <https://nickleformythoughts.wordpress.com/2016/07/07/asian-police-and-asian-americans-complicity-in-anti-blackness/>; Kat Yang Stevens, "Complicating Our Complicity," (<http://www.katyangstevens.com/complicatingourcomplicity/>).
7. Edlie Wong, *Racial Reconstruction: Black Inclusion, Chinese Exclusion, and the Fictions of Citizenship* (New York: New York University Press, 2015).
  8. Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1996).
  9. Lisa Lowe, *The Intimacies of Four Continents* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2015), 39.
  10. See Grace Kyungwon Hong and Roderick A. Ferguson, "Introduction," in *Strange Affinities: The Gender and Racial Politics of Comparative Racialization* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2011), 1-24. .See also Grace Kyungwon Hong, "Introduction: Neoliberal Disavowal and the Politics of the Impossible," in *Death beyond Disavowal: The Impossible Politics of Difference* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 1-34.
  11. Ashvin Kini, "Temporality and Difference in Earl Lovelace's *Salt*" (paper, American Studies Association, Toronto, November 2015).
  12. Wendsor Yamashita, "The Colonial and the Carceral: Building Relationships between Japanese Americans and Indigenous Groups in the Owens Valley," *Amerasia Journal* 42, no. 1 (2016): 121-38.