Kung fu is back. Jackie Chan enlivens it on the big screen, Sammo Hung on the small. Children abandon soccer practice for their dojos, adults move from Jazzercise to Billy Blanks’s Tae-Bo. Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five took their names from the idioms of kung fu movies, while young emcees find philosophical lessons in them (from the Wu Tang Clan to the Jeet Kune Flow of the Arsonists’ Q-Unique). If Bollywood movies and culture provide “kitsch with a niche,” kung fu puts the tang in Wu Tang. As the U.S. government conducts its war against the planet mainly on the Asian continent, from the fifth Afghan war to the presence of special forces in the Philippines and in Indonesia, with its threats against the “Axis of Evil” from Asia’s far east (Korea) to its far west (Iraq and Iran), Asian artifacts emerge within U.S. society as the hallmark of the postmodern cool.

Kung fu, unlike Bollywood, has a different genealogy. It returns to the mainstream as part of the retro-1970s move among the urban hip. Those
who want to recall the days of *Saturday Night Fever* (dir. John Badham, 1977) also remember that Tony Manero’s (John Travolta) room in the movie hosted a poster of Bruce Lee, and Travolta himself showed us that he could wield the *nunchakus*. You can’t bring back the 1970s without Lee.

The fascination is such that in 2004, South Korean filmmaker Chul Shin is slated to release a $50 million movie billed as Lee’s “comeback film.” With computer graphics, *Dragon Warrior* will “star” a digital Bruce Lee.²

My interest in kung fu is, however, only partly in the phenomenon itself. I am interested in how an investigation of kung fu can help us move from a limited multicultural framework into an antiracist, polycultural one.³ Many scholars have complained in recent years about the limits of multiculturalism, about how it sees cultural zones as discrete and preformed communities (black, Asian, Latino, white), with the role of the multiculturalist being that to respect the border of these zones and ask that we tolerate their practices from afar. Philosopher Slavoj Žižek polemically calls this “racism with a distance,” since the benevolent multiculturalist treats “culture” as a homogeneous and ahistorical thing that can be appreciated, but that remains far outside the enclosed ambit of one’s own cultural box.⁴ To retain this distance and sense of a self-enclosed culture, is to pretend that our histories are not already overlapping, that the borders of each of our cultures are not porous.

This “racism with a distance” ignores our mulatto history, the long waves of linkage that tie people together in ways we tend to forget. Can we think of “Indian food” (that imputed essence of the Indian subcontinent), for example, without the tomato (that fruit first harvested among the Amerindians)? Are not the Maya, then, part of contemporary “Indian culture”? Is this desire for cultural discreteness part of the bourgeois nationalist (and bourgeois diasporic) nostalgia for authenticity?⁵ In search of our mulatto history, there is no end to the kinds of strange connections one can find. Of course, these links are only “strange” if we take for granted the preconceived boundaries between peoples, if we forget that the notion of *Africa* and *Asia*, for instance, is very modern and that people have created cross-fertilized histories for millennia without concern for modern geography. The linguistic ties across the Indian Ocean, for example, obviate any attempt to say that Gujarat and Tanzania are disconnected places: Swahili is the ultimate illustration
of our mulatto history, or what historian Robin Kelley so nicely called our “polycultural” history.  

Bloodlines, biologists now show us, are not pure, and those sociobiologists who persist in the search for a biologically determined idea of race miss the mark by far.  “So-called ‘mixed-race’ children are not the only ones with a claim to multiple heritage. All of us, and I mean ALL of us,” Kelley argues, “are the inheritors of European, African, Native American, and even Asian pasts, even if we can’t exactly trace our blood lines to all of these continents.” Embarrassed by biological racialism, many scholars turn to culture as the determinant for social formations (where communities constructed on biological terms now find the same boundaries intact, but as cultural ones). Of course centuries of racism have in reality produced racial communities, so that “race” is indeed a social fact today. But cultural formations are not as discrete as is often assumed, a revelation that gives rise to notions such as hybrid, which retains within it ideas of purity and origins (two things melded together). Rejecting the posture of racism with a distance, Kelley argues that our various nominated cultures “have never been easily identifiable, secure in their boundaries, or clear to all people who live in or outside our skin. We were multi-ethnic and polycultural from the get go.”

The theory of the polycultural does not mean that we reinvent humanism without ethnicity, but that we acknowledge that our notion of cultural community should not be built inside the high walls of parochialism and ethnonationalism. The framework of polyculturalism uncouples the notions of origins and authenticity from that of culture. Culture is a process (that may sometimes be seen as a thing), which has no identifiable origin, and therefore no cultural actor can, in good faith, claim proprietary interest in what is claimed to be his or her authentic culture. “All the culture to be had is culture in the making,” notes anthropologist Gerd Baumann. “All cultural differences are acts of differentiation, and all cultural identities are acts of cultural identification.” Multiculturalism tends toward a static view of history, with cultures already forged and with people enjoined to respect and tolerate each cultural world. Polyculturalism, on the other hand, offers a dynamic view of history, mainly because it argues for cultural complexity, and it suggests that our communities of the present are historically formed
and that these communities move between the dialectic of cultural presence and antiracism, between a demand for acknowledgment and for an obliteration of hierarchy. Bruce Lee’s polycultural world sets in motion an antiracist ethos that destabilizes the pretense of superiority put in place by white supremacy. Polyculturalism accepts the existence of differences in cultural practice, but it forbids us to see culture as static and antiracist critique as impossible.

1. Combat Multiracism!

Nineteen seventy-four was not just another year for us in Calcutta. The Railway Strike shook up the ensnared consensus amongst the elite, several of who would later support the authoritarian National Emergency (1975–1977). It was hot and humid, as it is each year. The short Maoist insurgency called Naxalism came and went like a whirlwind. The communist movement grew apace and would soon come to power in 1977, from whence it won six elections to continue in power to date. Globe Cinema Hall across from the New Market showed Enter the Dragon (dir. Robert Clouse, 1973).

There was something extraordinary about Bruce Lee. He was the “foreign” version of our own Amitabh Bachchan, “the Big B,” who that year gave us such classics as Benaam (dir. Narendra Bedi) and Roti Kapada aur Makaan (dir. Manoj Kumar), but who would in the next year star in the greatest spaghetti eastern of all time, Sholay (dir. Ramesh Sippy). As far as those foreign heroes came (and foreign simply refers to English-language films), my friends and I supped on James Bond with some satisfaction. Enter the Dragon, however, was something else. Bond thrilled us with his gadgets, but we did not take kindly to his easy victories against his adversaries who seemed to be either Asians or Eastern Europeans, representative figures for the communists from Poland to Vietnam. Bond was the agent of international corruption manifest in the British MI-5, while Lee stood his ground against corruption of all forms, including the representative of the worst of the Asian bourgeoisie, Mr. Han. With his bare fists and his nanchakus, Lee provided young people with the sense that we could be victorious, like the Vietnamese guerrillas, against the virulence of international capitalism. When we saw the movie in India, we did not as yet know that Bruce Lee was
already dead. I saw the movie several times, blown away by the beautiful acrobatics of this celluloid freedom fighter.

Born in San Francisco on 27 November 1940, the year of the dragon, Lee made his first film at the age of three months, entitled *Golden Gate Girl*. The child of Chinese opera stars (although his mother was a fourth German), Lee moved to Hong Kong in his childhood, where he starred in over twenty films before he returned to the United States as an undergraduate at the University of Washington in Seattle. In that city, Lee threw himself into the Asian American world, working in Chinatown as a busboy and as a teacher of his favorite art, kung fu in the sticking hands method. Lee left college to marry Linda Emery, a white American of Swedish-English ancestry, and they soon had a son, Brandon, and a daughter, Shannon. When asked about “racial barriers,” he told a Hong Kong journalist in 1972 that “I, Bruce Lee, am a man who never follows those fearful formulas. . . . So, no matter if your color is black or white, red or blue, I can still make friends with you without any barrier.”

Lee became one of the first martial arts sifu (masters) to train non-Asians, whites (like Chuck Norris and Roman Polanski) and blacks (like Kareem Abdul-Jabbar), and all manner of Asians. Lee’s antiracism was not matched by the world in which he lived, least of all by his wife’s family, who gave him grief prior to their 1964 marriage (held just after Lee excelled at the Long Beach international karate championship). Lee’s bravado took him to Hollywood in 1966, as Kato in *The Green Hornet*.

The star of Cantonese film tried to break into Hollywood, but he was frustrated by the racism of that world, so he returned to launch his adult career in Hong Kong in 1971. “The truth is,” he wrote in a Taiwanese newspaper in 1972, “I am a yellow-faced Chinese, I cannot possibly become an idol for Caucasians.” His four great films *Fists of Fury* (dir. Lo Wei, 1971), *The Chinese Connection* (dir. Lo Wei, 1971), *The Way of the Dragon* (dir. Bruce Lee, 1972), and *Enter the Dragon* came from the Hong Kong years. The movies brought Lee immense success, and after his premature death in 1973, he became a legend: his grave in Seattle is a shrine to which pilgrims travel from far and wide.

On 24 August 1973, Warner Brothers (in partnership with Raymond Chow of Golden Harvest) released *Enter the Dragon*. Within its first two
months in the United States, the film (made for $500,000) netted $3 million. Lee was already well known as Kato, but the success of the movie exceeded his own limited celebrity. The movie was shot in Hong Kong, that international emporium in which commercialism is “the sine qua non of [its cinema’s] existence.” The island constituted a crucial entrepôt for the international economy, but its cultural products had not yet made a dent in the world’s imagination. Lee’s success in the United States, then, cannot be credited only to the 1960s emergence of Hong Kong, but it must crucially be seen in light of the changed place of Asians in the United States as a result of U.S. immigration policy, the limited gains of the Asian American movement, and, due to the latter, the cheerless acceptance of multiculturalism.

Since the late eighteenth century, when the first Asians walked the lands of the Americas, the patriarchs of white America found their presence foul. Deemed nothing but laborers (“coolies”), these people came to be seen as fundamentally alien, rather than as assimilable migrants. Representations of these foreigners exaggerated certain attributes to render them not only strange, but also inferior. This partly changed in the 1960s, as social movements against racism, and state management of these movements, helped produce what we know today as multiculturalism. Lee was, in many ways, the product of liberal multiculturalism: U.S. television (The Green Hornet, 1966–1967) embraced him to play the Asian just as the state acknowledged the role of Asians in the creation of a cold war United States. The passage of the 1965 immigration act signaled a shift in U.S. racism from outright contempt for Asians (as evinced in the 1924 and 1952 immigration acts) to one of bemused admiration for their technical and professional capacity. In the throes of the cold war, and burdened by the lack of scientific personnel, the U.S. state and privileged social forces concertedly worked to welcome a new crop of Asians whose technical labor was to be their crucial passport to this New World. This is not to say that Asians found life easy or that the U.S. state became a paragon of generosity. Nevertheless, the opening afforded by the state’s needs allowed immigrant Asians to imagine ways of importing elements from their diverse Asian societies into their new homes.

The Asian American movement, in tandem with the civil rights and other minority rights movements, fought for this cultural wedge as well, especially,
not exclusively, in the classroom. Faced with a hostile school curriculum, minority groups struggled to incorporate themes from the margin, from those histories of nonwhite people hitherto excluded from the story of the United States. Early Asian American filmmaking turned to the documentary form and with a critical eye gave us such classics as *Save Chinatown* (1973), *The Filipino Immigrant* (1974), and *The Dragon Wore Tennis Shoes* (1975), along the grain, in many ways, of the ethic of Lee’s early 1970s cinema. The desire to confront the cultural injury of white supremacy with the salve of a plural heritage represents the very best of multiculturalism.

That the U.S. state adopted the liberal patina of multiculturalism to fend off an important challenge from the progressive and democratic forces is not reason enough to discount the power of cultural plurality. Nevertheless, Lee experienced multiculturalism in a very constrained manner, one that tended to see culture as discrete, with authentic and pure histories now grudgingly accorded mild dignity. In *The Green Hornet*, Lee’s Kato did nothing to challenge the legendary stereotypes of the alien “heathen Chinee” within the American White Republic. As Kato, Lee was welcome to be the mysterious clown—and always the crony. “Hollywood sure as heck hasn’t figured out how to represent the Chinese,” Canadian journalist Pierre Berton said to Lee, who replied, “You better believe it, man. I mean it’s always the pigtail and the bouncing around, chop-chop, you know, with the eyes slanted and all that.”

*The Green Hornet* closed in July 1967 with a special in which the Green Hornet and Kato teamed up with Batman and Robin. The script had the four heroes fight each other to a draw, then team up to defeat the villainous Colonel Gumm. Lee, nonplussed, “maintained an icy silence, but his eyes burned through the holes in the mask he wore.” With the cameras on, Lee menacingly stalked Burt Ward, who played Robin. Ward tried to plead that it was only a TV show, but Lee ignored him, and only when a noise offstage disturbed him, did he back off and exclaim, “Lucky it is a TV show.” Trapped by the shackles of a racist role, Lee nonetheless broke free whenever he could, with a quiet determination.

In 1971, Lee was touted to play Caine in the television show *Kung Fu* (then called *The Warrior*), but the studio rejected him as “too Chinese,” a rejection that sent Lee back to Hong Kong and history. *Kung Fu* became all that Lee rejected. Set in the nineteenth century, the show has Caine...
(half-Chinese, half-white) take on racism by his own individual, superhuman initiative; other Asians appear as passive and exotic. The half-white man, a left Chinese American periodical argued, is guided by “the feudal landlord philosophies of ancient China,” and even the portrayal of nineteenth-century China “is pictured as a place abstracted from time and place.” The Taiping and Boxer revolts have no room in what is essentially a very conservative view of China and social change.23 Lee would not have played Caine in this light. “It was hard as hell for Bruce to become an actor,” remembers Jim Kelly, the African American kung fu star of Enter the Dragon.

And the reason why was because he was Chinese. America did not want a Chinese hero, and that’s why he left for Hong Kong. He was down and out. He was hurt financially. He told me that he tried to stick it out, but he couldn’t get the work he wanted. So he said, “Hey, I’m gone.” My understanding, from talking to Bruce, was that the Kung Fu series was written for him, and Bruce wanted to do that. But the bottom line was that the networks did not want to project a Chinese guy as the main hero. But Bruce explained to me that he believed that all things happened for a reason. Even though he was very upset about it, he felt that everything would work out. He wasn’t going to be denied. I have so much respect for Bruce, because I understand what he went through just by being black in America. He was able to find a way to get around all those problems. He stuck in there, and wouldn’t give up. He knew my struggle, and I knew his.24

They knew each other’s fights. From 1968 until the late 1970s, the terrain of left political struggle in the United States was replete with organizations, and many of the most energetic ones formed themselves cognizant of the problem of racism. In 1967, Stokely Carmichael and Charles Hamilton’s manifesto Black Power argued that coalitions could only be built if each party within the compact is empowered (“before a group can enter an open society, it must first close ranks”).25 Oppressed groups should form their own organizations to hold discussions impossible to hold before the eyes of all people, and they should forge the strength for mutual respect in broad coalitions.26 While some activists in the late 1960s took positions such as
that the most oppressed must lead the movement, most of those among the
oppressed created organizations under the banner of the “Third World” as
a prelude to the united front. The Black Panther Party, formed in 1967, led
the way, but right on their heels came the Young Lords Organization (a
gang from 1956, rectified by Cha Cha Jimenez in 1967), the Brown Berets
(a Chicano formation of 1968), the American Indian Movement (formed in
Minneapolis in 1968), the Red Guard Party (of Chinese Americans in San
Francisco, in 1969) and the I Wor Kuen (from New York’s Chinatown in
1969). Poor white folk formed the Patriot Party as well as Rising Up Angry
(an offshoot of the Hank Williams chapter of Students for a Democratic
Society [SDS] and Join ERAP Project). Bernardine Dohrn, within SDS in
1968, expressed the view that “the best thing that we can do for ourselves, as
well as for the Panthers and the revolutionary black liberation struggle is to
build a fucking white revolutionary movement.” Against the liberalism of
support came the revolutionary instinct of self-interest politics, here in the
guise of the Weather Underground. Four women of the SDS sounded the
clarion call for an autonomous womens’ organization when they wrote in
mid-1967, “We find that women are in a colonial relationship to men and
we recognize ourselves as part of the Third World.”

The logic of self-determination as the preliminary stage for a united front
platform, to some extent, explains the proliferation of left groups constituted
around nationality. But each of these organizations worked closely with oth-
ers in a piecemeal coalition. The Young Lords worked in close concert with I
Wor Kuen, and in 1971, the central committee member Juan Gonzalez trav-
eled to San Francisco’s Chinatown to meet with Asian revolutionaries and
others. When Amerindian radicals took Alcatraz in 1970, a detachment of
Japanese American radicals unfurled a huge banner, “Japanese Amer-
icans Support Native Americans,” painted signs reading, “This is Indian
Property” and “Red Power,” as well as brought them food. The Palestine
Liberation Organization (PLO) offered their solidarity with Amerindians,
Stokely Carmichael offered the keynote statement at the Arab Student Con-
vention in 1968, the Black Panthers took up the cause of the forty-one
Iranian students set for deportation from the United States because of anti-
shah activities, and the Wei Min made common cause with the liberation
urges of the Ethiopian Students Union of Northern California: a vibrant
world of internationalism through nationality, of particular universalism. These movements acknowledged the strategic importance of unity, but they knew that unity could not be forged without space for the efflorescence of oppressed cultures as well as the development of leadership within the different “nations.” In late 1969, Amy Uyematsu at UCLA wrote, “Yellow power and black power must be two independently-powerful, joint forces within the Third World revolution to free all exploited and oppressed people of color.” “Independently-powerful” and yet “joint forces”: the movement allowed these two impulses to grow in a dialectical relationship, without allowing one to gain priority over the other. When DeAnna Lee asked Bobby Seale in 1970 if he had a message for Asians, he said that “I see the Asian people playing a very significant part in solving the problems of their own community in coalition, unity and alliance with Black people because the problems are basically the same as they are for Brown, Red and poor White Americans—the basic problem of poverty and oppression that we are all subjected to.” The problems are the same, but the political organizations must work independently, and jointly, to create a united front in practice.

The complexity of segregated neighborhoods meant that the idea of nation could not sustain itself at each turn. Asians along the West Coast of the United States lived among blacks, so that when the Black Panther Party was formed, Asians gravitated to it (in much the same way as Asians of another generation worked within the civil rights ambit). Yuri Kochiyama had already made contact with Malcolm X, but in the late 1960s, several Asians joined the Panthers, such as Richard Aoki (made immortal by Bobby Seale as “a Japanese radical cat,” who “had guns for a motherfucker”), the Chinese Jamaican filmmaker Lee Lew-Lee, and Guy Kurose of Seattle. Aoki, raised in the Topaz concentration camp and then in West Oakland with Huey P. Newton and Seale, was a charter member of the Panthers and its field marshall, who went underground into the Asian American Political Alliance at UC Berkeley. Three decades later, Aoki said, “If you are a person of color there’s no other way for you to go except to be part of the Black liberation struggle. It doesn’t mean submerge your own political identity or your whatever, but the job that has to be done in front, you got to be there. And I was there. What can I say.” The welcome by black radicals was not
always so clear. Moritsuga “Mo” Nishida was raised in Los Angeles, joined a
gang (the Constituents from the westside on Crenshaw), and moved into the
orbit of black radicalism. But he was not welcomed: “We ain’t Black so we get
this, especially from non-California bred Blacks who don’t understand the
Asian oppression and struggle, so to them, if you’re not Black then you’re
White. So we getting all kind of bullshit like that.” If some Asian men
found it hard to make the connections, “some sisters were really politicized,”
and they interacted with the Panthers in Oakland.  

According to Alex Hing, these Asian women made the Panthers aware
of the disaffected Asians in San Francisco’s Chinatown, many of who as-
sembled at a pool hall owned by a cooperative called Leway (or Legitimate
Ways). The Panthers visited the rebellious Chinese American youth at
Leway and worked alongside some of them to create a radical nucleus that
would, in 1969, emerge as the Red Guard. In Los Angeles, similar devel-
opments among lumpen Asian youth led to the creation of two formations,
the Yellow Brotherhood and Asian Hardcore, while in New York City the
I Wor Kuen emerged as a Maoist outfit of Chinatown. Radical Chinese
youth named 1969 “the Year of the People Off the Pigs,” a salute to the
style of the Panthers and against the oppression within Chinatown. Always
restricted to not more than a few hundred youths, the Red Guard tried to
develop some programs to reach out to the community in a manner simi-
lar to the Panthers. The Guard attempted to make commercial street fairs
into community fairs; they tried to dethrone the dominance of the Kuom-
intang (KMT) and the local Chinese bourgeoisie; they created a Breakfast
for Children program (when this did not work, they began to feed elders
in Portsmouth Square Park); they fought against the oppressive police; and
they worked hard to undercut the racism of teachers and tourists. Their
presence constituted a left pole in Chinatown as they fought to maintain
a tuberculosis center and a Buddhist temple; as they set up a legal clinic
(African Legal Services); and as they distributed propaganda on behalf of the
Cultural Revolution in China, against the Vietnam War, and in favor of
the Black Panthers. The Red Guard, unlike many of the campus-based
groups, “was born out of the poverty and repression of the ghetto,” which
enabled them to make connections with the other antipoverty, anticapitalist
organizations who struggled amongst the working class and working poor in their communities.\textsuperscript{15}

The milieu of the Red Guard, the Brown Berets, and the Black Panthers was one of an enchanted solidarity against capitalism. Since the economic system was prone to crisis, Alex Hing of the Guard told Asian students at UCLA in 1970 that Asians must prepare for its eventualty. Since Asians formed only a small population in the United States, and since “most Asians don’t know the front end from the back end of a gun,” an alliance with the oppressed working class seemed the only avenue for the “survival of Asians.”\textsuperscript{46} If ethnicity was not sufficient in tactical terms for survival, in strategic terms to bind around ethnicity would make it hard to be critical of “Uncle Charleys” like Dr. S. I. Hayakawa (president of San Francisco State University) and of the KMT. Jack Wong of Chinatown said that Hayakawa’s obdurate stand against the students of color during the 1968 strike was “just another instance of a yellow man being used by the whites.”\textsuperscript{47} A critique of the Asian right from within the Asian community facilitated Panther David Hilliard’s comment that “we can run Hayakawa not only off this campus, but we can run him back to imperialistic Japan. Because the man ain’t got no motherfucking power. He’s a bootlicker.” Not only could Hilliard make this statement thanks to the opening afforded by the Red Guard’s critique of Hayakawa, but also thanks to his own use of Kim Il Sung’s call to combat imperialism and the “ideological degeneration” among the oppressed peoples.\textsuperscript{48} The Guard produced a space for the left to undertake a clear distinction between an antiracist nationalism and one that protected the right from any criticism on the grounds of national assertion. But, as many people have said in retrospect, the Guard failed to create a mass base, mainly perhaps due to the tendency to see itself as an army, but also because of the tendency amongst the Chinese Americans to withdraw from engagement with the state (in New York and in San Francisco, the Asian left had to deal with the military formations of the police as well as those of the Asian bourgeoisie, such as the Flying Dragons and the White Shadows).\textsuperscript{49}

The bravado about being an army came only partly from the Panthers; it also derived from the widespread sense of wonder that the Vietnamese forces, in 1968, could penetrate the defenses of the U.S. army during the
famous Tet offensive. With Tet, young Asian Americans ceased to feel the burden of a stereotypical submissiveness, and many of them adopted the symbols of Asian resistance to imperialism to refashion themselves, some of which would be found in the Cultural Revolution (the Mao jackets, the Red Book, the slogans). The U.S. army’s attempt, after Tet, to retake control over the war led to a genuine moral failure (in Ben Tre, a U.S. major provided the famous line, “It was necessary to destroy the city in order to save it”).

As a result, many young people turned to the struggles within that omnibus category the Third World to find the agent of revolutionary struggle (Cuba, Vietnam, Algeria), and they drew on that category to create the tentative united front for their own struggles at home. In 1970, the U.S. People’s Anti-Imperialist Delegation traveled to North Korea and Vietnam under the leadership of Eldridge Cleaver (minister of information of the Black Panther Party). Two Asians made up the ten delegates, Pat Sumi, a member of the Movement for a Democratic Military, and Alex Hing, of the Red Guard. Writing of their experiences in Asia, Sumi and Hing noted that the struggle in the United States had to be moved from being antiwar to anti-imperialist, from one that wanted to “bring the troops home” to one that opened “up the resources of Amerika to the rest of the world.”

Two years later, Bruce Lee would give us the perfect allegory both of Asian American radicalism and of the Vietnam War, The Way of the Dragon (also called Return of the Dragon). Here Lee (as Tang Lung, or China Dragon) works at a Chinese restaurant (the ultimate stereotype of skillful servility), but in the back alley he trains the waiters in martial arts to repulse the thugs whose harassment has hurt business. The godfather of the thugs hires a few heavies to deal with Tang, a Korean hapkido expert (Wong In Sik) and two U.S. karate champions (Bob Wall and Chuck Norris, now Walker, Texas Ranger). Lee dispatches both Wall and In Sik, representatives, perhaps, of the ordinary U.S. soldier and of the South Korean army. With Norris, named Colt (45, perhaps?), Lee takes his time, but as he demolishes him, the fight, set in the Coliseum in Rome, becomes a battle between Chinese civilization and Western civilization, between the paper tiger of U.S. imperialism and the rising tide of the Red East. Lee, in the context of the Red Guard and the Northern Vietnamese army, appeared on the screen to young Asian
Americans as “the brother who showed [America that] Asian people can kick some ass.”

2. The Third World Legacy

When Lee planned *The Way of the Dragon*, he told his mother, “Mom, I’m an Oriental person, therefore, I have to defeat all the whites in the film.”

As Lee conceptualized the movie in 1971, the United States dropped eight hundred thousand tons of bombs on Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam. He had to kick Colt’s ass in the Coliseum; he had to show some solidarity with the army in black pajamas. In Bombay, in June 1972, a group of Dalits (oppressed castes) formed the Dalit Panthers in another act of solidarity (named in honor of the Black Panthers, to celebrate the ethic of the panther, which, as they argued, fights without retreat). The Dalit Panther manifesto offers an immense sense of political comradeship:

Due to the hideous plot of American imperialism, the Third Dalit World, that is, oppressed nations, and Dalit people are suffering. Even in America, a handful of reactionary whites are exploiting blacks. To meet the force of reaction and remove this exploitation, the Black Panther movement grew. From the Black Panthers, Black Power emerged. The fire of the struggles has thrown out sparks into the country. We claim a close relationship with this struggle. We have before our eyes the examples of Vietnam, Cambodia, Africa and the like.

When representatives of the Black Panther Party (David Hilliard and Elbert Howard) met the representatives of the National Liberation Front (NLF) of Vietnam in Montreal, Canada, the Vietnamese said, “He Black Panther, we Yellow Panther!” and the Panthers replied, “Yeah, you’re Yellow Panthers, we’re Black Panthers. All power to the people!” That Ho Chi Minh once hung out in Garveyite halls in Harlem should perhaps be part of this story, as should the Maoist inflections in both NLF and Black Panther politics.

In 1965, Ho Chi Minh and the black radical Robert F. Williams spent an evening together at which they “swapped Harlem stories; Ho recounted his visits to Harlem in the 1920s as a merchant seaman and claimed that he had heard Marcus Garvey speak there and had been so inspired that
he ‘emptied his pockets’ into the collection plate.” The story could very well be about the conversations between Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana and Stokely Carmichael or any other black radical who visited the Ghanaian leader, who had also spent a formative period of his life in Harlem and Philadelphia.

To appreciate the vitality of the idea of Third World solidarity, we will need a detour into its modern history. The radical visions that emerged in the twentieth century enabled the sense of enchanted comradeship in the 1960s and 1970s, a legacy for our own times. Talk of Ho Chi Minh and Robert Williams leads me toward Lenin’s famous articles from the early 1900s that exalted the Asian rebellions—this in light of Japan’s defeat of the Russians in the 1904 war: “There can be no doubt that the age-old plunder of India by the British, and the contemporary struggle of all these ‘advanced’ Europeans against Persian and Indian democracy, will steel millions, tens of millions of proletarians in Asia to wage a struggle against their oppressors which will be just as victorious as that of the Japanese. The class conscious European worker now has comrades in Asia, and their number will grow by leaps and bounds.”

The internationalism of the world communist movement produced several institutions to build solidarity across the world, from such germinal events as the First Congress of the Peoples of the East in Baku (1920), the Indian School at Tashkent, which became the Institute of the Study of the East (1921) and then the University of the Toilers of the East, the League against Imperialism (1924), the Conference of the Oppressed People in Brussels (1927), and then into the 1940s, the various peace and youth festivals.

Intellectuals of the Afro-Asian world found immense political, moral, and intellectual resources in the traditions of Marxism and communism, something wonderfully catalogued in recent years. The depth of this connection is forgotten or minimized by the example of George Padmore’s resignation from the U.S. Communist Party (CPUSA) or else Aimé Césaire’s celebrated letter to Maurice Thorez to leave the Communist Party of France. Césaire wrote in that letter, “What I want is that Marxism and Communism be harnessed into the service of colored people, and not colored people into the service of Marxism and Communism.” A falseness clings to this statement because Marxism and communism both emerged from the labors of “colored people”—whether as the materials for Marx’s analysis of the world system, or
at the debates in the Comintern between Roy and Lenin, or else in the developments of communisms outside Europe, whose heritage continues to this day. But what those who quote from Césaire fail to reveal, is that in the very same letter he wrote, “There exists a Chinese communism. Though I have no firsthand acquaintance with it, I am strongly prejudiced in its favor. And I expect it not to sink into the monstrous errors that have disfigured European communism.”

Indeed, as Robin Kelley and Betsy Esch remind us, Chinese communism played a major role in the imagination of U.S. black radicalism in the 1960s. “Black Maoism” was enabled by the strong antiracist position taken by Mao’s China: as the communists took power over China, the party abolished the idea of “race,” suspended anthropology departments (which had a propensity toward a racist form of physical anthropology), and proscribed them until 1952. In 1963, at the urging of his guest Robert Williams, Mao offered a strong statement in favor of the black liberation movement to call on “the workers, peasants, revolutionary intellectuals, enlightened elements of the bourgeoisie, and other enlightened personages of all colours in the world, white, black, yellow, brown, etc., to unite to oppose the racial discrimination practiced by U.S. imperialism and to support the American Negroes in their struggle against racial discrimination.” The Chinese communist position reveals for us the centrality of political engagement over cultural history, since the Taiwanese government at this time adopted a more racialized notion of the people. In March 1957, for instance, the Taiwan government approved the formal establishment of the Yellow Emperor religion, a sect with grave racial undertones.

During the onrush of anticolonial national liberation (which began with India and Pakistan in 1947), African and Asian leaders spoke in glowing terms of their need to cooperate. In late 1946, Nehru wrote to six East African leaders in solidarity with their struggles (“the voice of India will always be raised in the cause of African freedom”), and he suggested, “African students should come to the universities and technical institutes of India.” Indeed, Nehru was instrumental in putting Indian resources at the service of African independence, whether economic or political. In the 1940s and 1950s, Nehru regularly spoke at historically black colleges in the United States, where his type of suit was in vogue (only when Nkrumah came to these
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...colleges wearing the same suit was its name changed from the Nehru jacket to the Nkrumah jacket). With the communists in power from 1949 onward, the new Chinese republic attempted to solidify its relationship with Africa. “The Soviet Union is to Africans, particularly black Africans,” Wallerstein noted in the early 1960s, “simply another part of the Western world. It is China, not the USSR that fascinates. China is not a white nation. It is more militant than the USSR on colonial questions. It is a poorer country, and its efforts at economic development are more relevant to Africa’s problems, the Africans think. Above all, China has been a colony of the West, or at least a semi-colony.”66 From 1959 on, the PRC began to offer technical assistance and cooperative market arrangements to a number of African nations (as well as military training to those who still fought colonial powers). Guinea was the first country to create close economic ties with the PRC through interest-free loans and the transfer of rice techniques.67 The African reaction to Chinese communism is best captured in president Julius Nyerere’s 1965 speech to welcome Zhou En-Lai to Dar es Salaam. After praising the Long March, Nyerere noted that both China and Africa were on a joint long march, “a new revolutionary battle—the fight against poverty and economic backwardness.” But the war was not only economic, because, said Nyerere, Tanzania had to defend itself against neocolonialism and carefully take assistance from others, for “neither our principles, our country, nor our freedom to determine our future are for sale.”68 China was well aware of this, for when Zhou and president Mobido Keita of Mali signed the “Eight Principles” of aid in 1964, point 4 specifically stated that “the purpose of the Chinese government’s foreign aid is not to make the recipient countries dependent on China but to help them embark on the road to self-reliance and independent economic development step by step.”69 Assistance from India or China came only because, as Nkrumah made clear during his 1958 trip to India, in India the struggle for independence was longer and the people were able to prepare themselves for it. In Ghana “the change was comparatively sudden” and “we had to start from scratch to manage our own affairs.”70 And besides, places like India and Tanzania used their place as part of the Third World strategically to garner resources from the other two worlds (which often included China). The Chinese helped the Tanzanians build the Tanzam railroad, but the United States assisted the Tanzanians in building...
the Dar es Salaam–Tunduma road. As president Nyerere put it, Tanzania wanted to “compare the advantages of different offers before turning any of them down.”71

The links between Asia and Africa in the middle of the previous century came on the terrain of a sort of anticolonial solidarity. In 1955, twenty-nine African and Asian nations gathered together in the small Indonesian town of Bandung to celebrate that heritage.72 Flushed with success from the ongoing anticolonial movement, a community of leaders behind who stood masses of people came together with a loose agenda, but with considerable self-confidence. President Sukarno of Indonesia noted that the participants were united “by a common detestation of colonialism in whatever form it appears. We are united by a common detestation of racialism.” Furthermore, Sukarno pointedly noted that unity at Bandung was not one of “race” or religion, since “conflict comes not from variety of skins, nor from variety of religion, but from variety of desires.” Therefore the anticolonial heritage and suspicion of neocolonialism formed the principle ethic for unity.73 Bandung left an impressive mark on peoples of Africa and Asia, despite the impossibility for such a platform to mean much in the intense suspicion of the cold war era. Ideological differences between countries (“variety of desires”) and the arrangements made by nations with the superpowers, prevented any combined action, except occasionally at the United Nations (for crucial anticolonial votes, on world disarmament as a moral force, for aid to newly free countries, and decisively, through agencies to ameliorate or check the multinational corporations).74

At Bandung, Nehru remembered the centrality of the Middle Passage to any project to craft solidarity across the tide of color.

There is nothing more terrible, there is nothing more horrible than the infinite tragedy of Africa in the past few hundred years. When I think of it, everything else pales into insignificance; that infinite tragedy of Africa ever since the days when millions of them were carried away in galleys as slaves to America and elsewhere, the way they were treated, the way they were taken away, 50% dying in the galleys. We have to bear that burden, all of us. We did not do it ourselves, but the world has to bear it. We talk
about this country and that little country in Africa or outside, but let us remember this Infinite Tragedy.\textsuperscript{75}

Nehru’s contribution continued the anticolonial relationship of Indian nationalism with the U.S. black left, one that was wiped out by the U.S. state in the 1950s.\textsuperscript{76} At Bandung, U.S. black representatives failed to grasp the depth of struggle as they perversely defended the U.S. record on civil rights and attacked China’s communism. Congressman Adam Clayton Powell Jr. and Max Yergan seemed out of touch with the spirit of Bandung,\textsuperscript{77} where even arch anticommunists among the Asians (such as Sir John Kotelawla of Ceylon) held their tongues as Zhou En-Lai took a conciliatory posture. Richard Wright, at Bandung, was not taken with Powell, but he, too, seemed to miss the point when he claimed that Sukarno was “appealing to race and religion” or when he wondered how Zhou felt “amidst the ground swell of racial and religious feeling.”\textsuperscript{78} The failure of the State Department African Americans was to be radically revised by the time the Vietnam War pushed the black liberation struggle closer to radicals in Asia (and in turn, creating the space for U.S. Asians to become more radical). This is the heritage of Third World solidarity.

3. Kickin’ Knowledge

They say, karate means empty hands,
So it’s perfect for the poor man.
—dead prez, “Psychology,” 2000

In late 1974, \textit{The Man with the Golden Gun} (dir. Guy Hamilton) tore through the world’s cinema halls, making $13 million, despite its rather slipshod production and strained plot. Set in Asia, the film pits British agent James Bond against international scoundrel Scaramanga in a battle of titans. In the midst of the movie, Bond is imprisoned at a Bangkok kung fu school, where he takes on all the students and teachers by himself. Bond makes his escape with a furloughed Texan policeman (J. W. Pepper), who yells at the martial arts aficionados trying to catch Bond: “Now if you pointy-heads would get out of them p-jamas, you wouldn’t be late for work.”
Ian Fleming’s 1965 book of the same name (with a similar plot) is not set in Asia but in the Caribbean. Bond in 1965 was to take on the Cuban Revolution, while Bond in 1974 was to be imperialism’s adversary against Vietnam. Perhaps this what the lawman meant by “pointy-heads,” a reference to the hats worn by the Vietnamese peasantry. In the early 1970s, every “Oriental” was a “gook,” a Vietnamese guerrilla to be distrusted and reviled. Even those Asian Americans who volunteered to fight in Vietnam felt the hard edge of U.S. racism. At basic training, an instructor pointed to Raymond Imayama and said, “This is what the Viet Cong looks like, with slanted eyes. This is what a gook looks like, and they all dress in black.” “Japs are the next lowest thing to niggers,” one fellow U.S. army man said to Mike Miyatomo, an indication of what it must have meant to be an Asian or African American, both pushed to the front lines in the war against the Vietnamese.

Steve Sanders, one of the founders of the Black Karate Federation (BKF, 1968) and a co-star in Enter the Dragon, learned his art as a marine at Okinawa before being shipped off to Southeast Asia. He says,

I didn’t enjoy being over there. Anybody who says he did is either a nut who enjoys seeing people killed or a liar. I really don’t know why I was there in the first place. I didn’t hate the North Vietnamese or the VCs. They looked the same as the South Vietnamese who we were supposed to be helping. How can you like one and hate the other? As far as I’m concerned, those people just want to be left alone to do their own thing.

Sanders was not alone in this view, for in 1966, three army privates associated with the Communist Party refused to ship out to Vietnam. James Johnson (African American), Dennis Mora (Puerto Rican), and David Samas (Lithuanian-Italian), in a joint statement, noted that “Negroes and Puerto Ricans are being drafted and end up in the worst of the fighting out of proportion to their numbers in the population; and we have first hand knowledge that these are the ones who have been deprived of decent education and jobs at home.” Furthermore, “we were told that you couldn’t tell [the Vietnamese] apart—they looked like any other skinny peasant,” but “the VietCong obviously had the moral and physical support of most of the peasantry who were fighting for their independence.” The Fort Hood Three represent those troops who felt, in their skin, the horror of the war.
Bruce Lee’s movies hit the screens just as the United States ceased its aerial bombardment of Vietnam (between 1964 and 1972, fifteen million tons of explosives fell on Vietnam, more than twice what was expended during World War II in all sectors). While Lee made his mark on television, Martin Luther King Jr. stood before a congregation at Riverside Church in New York on 4 April 1967 to break his silence about Vietnam.83 “We were taking the black young men who had been crippled by our society and sending them eight thousand miles away to guarantee liberties in Southeast Asia which they had not found in southwest Georgia and East Harlem,” he said. “If America’s soul becomes totally poisoned, part of the autopsy must read Vietnam. It can never be saved so long as it destroys the deepest hopes of men the world over.”84 To speak out against the Vietnam War, to kick it against international corruption—this was what it took to be a worthy nonwhite icon. And Bruce Lee did it without guns, with bare feet and fists, dressed in the black outfits associated with the North Vietnamese army. For U.S. radicals, the Vietnamese became a symbol of barefoot resistance. Early issues of the farmworkers’ newspaper El malcriado called President Johnson the “Texas grower” and the Vietnamese “farm workers,” to make the transcontinental links that would give the Mexican workers hope.85 Frustrated by her contemporary social movements in 1968, Marilyn Webb of DC Women’s Liberation applauded the “Vietnamese woman [who] has literally won her equality with a weapon in her hand and through the sheer strength of her arms.”86 The Vietnamese seemed like the only force capable of being brave before nuclear imperialism. As the Man, imperialism appeared untouchable to millions of youth across the planet. How could the bare feet of the world trounce B-52s, Agent Orange, fleets of destroyers, nuclear bombs, the military-industrial powerhouse of the United States of America? Each time a people made the attempt, from the Congo to Chile, the CIA’s technological sophistication cut short their efforts. The cultural symbol of the CIA was James Bond, that overarmed agent of U.S.-U.K. imperialism, and he had to answer Lee’s Enter the Dragon with The Man with the Golden Gun.

Apart from napalm, the United States used its arsenal of finance capital to undermine the sovereignty of the nations of the Third World. From 1965 to 1973, aggregate manufacturing profitability in the advanced industrial
countries began to decline, a phenomenon assisted by the oil shocks during this period. One of the strategies for recovery conceived by the managers of the Group of Seven nations was to export the crisis, to conduct the structural adjustment of the newly independent nations, and to subsume all the economies of the world under the dollar–Wall Street regime. Robert McNamara, fresh from his post sending B-2 bombers to Vietnam, was seconded to the World Bank, where he provided vast funds to bolster newly authoritarian regimes such as those in Indonesia, Brazil, and the Philippines. The debt of the entire Third World increased from $100 billion in 1970 to $1.3 trillion in 1990. Whatever limited sovereignty the newly independent nations (and their import-substitution strategy) produced was usurped by multinational firms (who enjoyed the corporate welfare of the International Monetary Fund [IMF]) and by the parasitic bourgeoisie who ruled the new nations. From 1962 to 1974, the register of revolutions held only one entry, South Yemen, but “in 1974 the dam had burst.” In the next six years, revolutionary movements took power in at least fourteen states, from the overthrow of Haile Selassie in Ethiopia to the victory of the New Jewel Movement in Grenada and the Sandinista National Liberation Front in Nicaragua, all in 1979. The dollar wars against the currencies of the poor increased the sense of powerlessness. Big capital wrenched the reins of history from artisans and peasants, and most of them saw technology as the enemy rather than as the puppet of financiers and plutocrats.

Bruce Lee arrived at this juncture, on the screen, to ward off the evil of iron and steel with his bare hands. Kung fu outfits emerged across the globe, from Calcutta to California, as the art’s iconic power restored hope amongst millions of oppressed youth. Without “Q” to give them the gadgets of James Bond, the oppressed sought out the force within to give them physical strength. Ample evidence suggests that this is the case with all kinds of oppressed populations.

The persistence of artistry around corporeal warfare among people of color in particular and the working class in general might be explained in part by the mechanized domination of Euro-America. Boxing and wrestling continue within Europe and the United States, but in both those locations it was quickly commodified, and it became the preserve of minority peoples
(whether Italian Americans, in an earlier period, or African Americans and Latinos later). To the casual observer, the world of martial or corporeal arts appears entirely masculine, a space with no room for women within it. Lee, indeed, was consistent in his attitude that “women fighters? They are all right, but they are no match for the men who are physiologically stronger, except for a few vulnerable points. My advice is that if they have to fight, hit the man at his vital points and then run. Women are more likely to achieve their objectives through feminine wiles and persuasion.” One can imagine what Pauline Short thought of these words. Called the “mother of American karate,” Short opened her first karate school in Portland, Oregon, in 1965; it catered entirely to women. Or one can sense the fury of Ruby Lozano, the Filipina, who won one of the twelve awards for outstanding filipinos overseas from the government of the Philippines in 1974 for her karate prowess. And what about the fiery reaction from Graciela Casillas, born in Bellflower, California, in 1956 and karate champion by the late 1970s? And, finally, what of Judith Brown’s suggestion that women should live in all-female celibate communes and practice karate, a weapon in the arsenal of a strong, liberated woman?

What appealed to many young people, men and women, was the “simplicity, directness and nonclassical instruction” of kung fu. “Ninety percent of Oriental self-defense is baloney,” Lee said, “it’s organized despair.” Kung fu, in Lee’s vision, revoked the habit of hierarchy that swept up most institutions. Frustrated with what his student Leo Fong called “chop suey masters” who created an art for recompense, Lee eagerly developed his kung fu (in the Wing Chung style, which he called Jeet Kune Do) against the style of his fellow teachers who “are lazy. They have big fat guts. They talk about ch‘i power and things they can do, but don’t believe in.” Instead, Lee used weights and drank high-protein weight-gain drinks (blended with ginseng, royal jelly, and vitamins). His virtuoso approach to perfection (and culture) came across in his delicate fierceness on the screen. If the sifu rejected the authority that came with his (or her) position, and instead fought for authority based on skill, then this itself constituted a rejection of the hierarchy of tradition. Lee did not claim his power from his inherited kung fu lineage (his teacher Yip Man was master of the sticking hands method of Wing Chung), but he wanted others to bow to his street-fighting prowess. When asked if
he was a black belt, Lee was forthright: “I don’t have any belt whatsoever. That is just a certificate. Unless you can really do it—that is, defend yourself successfully in a fight—that belt doesn’t mean anything. I think it might be useful to hold your pants up, but that’s about it.” Anyone with dedicated tutelage can be a master, can be a sifu.

The notion that anyone could do it was powerful, and it became the basis for the turn of many working-class youth to the martial arts. In the ghettos of the United States, dojos and kung fu schools opened to eager students. The plot of Jim Kelly’s Black Belt Jones (1974) revolves around one such school located on prime real estate in an area of south central Los Angeles ready to be gentrified. Intelligent legwork from the black martial arts experts undercuts the Mafia and the city machine to save the school for the future of black youth. Cliff Stewart’s dojo at 10223 South Western Avenue in Los Angeles in the late 1960s was not unlike the dojo in Black Belt Jones. Stewart, a founder of the BKF, set up the dojo for “the kids in our neighborhood. Most of them couldn’t afford to travel to dojos in other parts of the city,” and nor could they afford the accoutrements for most sports (except hoops). Karate requires no fancy equipment, just a small space, bare feet, and naked hands. The youth in the ghetto took refuge, said Steve Sanders, in “pills and pot for a long time. Some were stealing to keep up their habits. So I made a deal with them. I told them if they kept away from drugs, they could come to my classes and train for nothing.” Many came. Kung fu gives oppressed young people an immense sense of personal worth and the skills for collective struggle. Kung fu, Lee pointed out in his sociology of the art, “serves to cultivate the mind, to promote health, and to provide a most efficient means of self-protection against any attacks.” It “develops confidence, humility, coordination, adaptability and respect toward others.” Words like respect and confidence jump out at me immediately, for one hears the former from working-class youth and the latter from their hardworking but beleaguered teachers. These youth live within a calculus of respect and disrespect, wanting the former, but alert to challenge the latter. Their teachers want them confident. Kung fu allows for both, and don’t the kids know it. They are there on the weekends, for no “credit.” And they fight not just for anything, but also for righteousness.
4. Black Belts

I wanted to be Jim Kelly. Sure I wanted to be Bruce Lee too, but I wasn’t Chinese and that seemed like an obstacle that I wouldn’t be overcoming anytime soon. I promptly began growing my hair into an Afro. “Man, you come right outta some comic book” became my catch phrase. And once Halloween rolled around, I slipped into yellow pajamas, penciled in some sideburns, and I hit the trick-or-treat trail decked out as my main man. —David Walker, “Jim Kelly and Me,” 1998

In 1974, as Enter the Dragon came to us in Calcutta, a song broke through the tedium offered by Musical Bandbox, a Sunday afternoon program on All-India Radio. It was a rather trite song: “Everybody was kung fu fighting, hunh. Those cats were fast as lightning, hunh. In fact, it was a little bit frightening, but they fought with expert timing.” Nothing to it, really. But Biddu, an exemplary Indian who lived in England and had produced Tina Charles’s Disco Fever and Nazia Hasan’s Disco Dewanee, wrote the song, hence its appearance on Indian radio. The song, I learned later, was sung by Carl Douglas, an African American whose entire career was forged around the gimmick of kung fu music (such as Dance the Kung Fu and Shanghai D). It belongs in my memory bank alongside an atrocious song for Muhammad Ali with that infectious line from the master, “Float like a butterfly, sting like a bee.” Tripping on Carl Douglas and Biddu, we read the papers for news of the impending fight between Ali and George Foreman in Zaire, the famous “Rumble in the Jungle” in the autumn of that year. “From slave ship to championship,” the promoters declaimed. “We were taken from Africa as slaves and now we’re coming back as champions”; Ali was only thirty-two, a year younger than Lee. And Ali was as politically incensed about racism and imperialism as Lee was. Lee was trained to hate white supremacy in the hovels of Hong Kong, where the police interrupted the youth’s attempts to fashion a culture. Ali’s life in the U.S. South prepared him as the pugilist of the Black Power movement. It was Ali, after all, who denounced the U.S. imperialist engagement in Southeast Asia with the memorable line, “No Vietcong ever called me nigger.” Although Bruce Lee was also a boxing champ in Hong Kong (and the 1958 Crown Colony Cha-Cha Champion), he spent much of the 1960s watching films of Ali boxing. “An orthodox boxer, Ali led with his left hand. Since Lee was experimenting with a right
lead stance he set up a mirror so that he could watch Ali’s movements and practice them the appropriate way. In an instance of classic cross-fertilization, the great boxer Sugar Ray Leonard told an interviewer in 1982, “One of the guys who influenced me wasn’t a boxer. I always loved the catlike reflexes and the artistry of Bruce Lee and I wanted to do in boxing what he was able to do in karate. I started watching his movies before he became really popular in Enter the Dragon and I patterned myself after a lot of his ways.”

In 1985, an all-black outfit produced The Last Dragon, a reflection on kung fu in the hood. Sho’Nuff, the “Shogun of Harlem,” is out to gain total control of that beloved center of black American life. The noble Leroy Green, known as Bruce Leroy, thwarts his bid for domination. The Bruce of the hood, Leroy uses his inner strength to vanquish his enemy even when he seems threatened with destruction (as in a fight in an abandoned warehouse). Bruce Leroy’s fight and this classic of black martial arts films were not unknown on the streets of Harlem. In the 1970s, for instance, Fred Hamilton organized All-Dojo Karate championships at places like the Manhattan Center (34th and 8th) or at the Fordham University gymnasium (Bronx), where, for a few dollars, entire families could sit and watch the black belts demonstrate their rough poetry in motion. Fifteen years earlier, staff sergeant George Harris was a judo champion for the air force not only against other Americans, but also, and decisively, against Japanese judo champions. He was perhaps the first African American martial arts champion and progenitor of Jesse Glover, the 1970s judo champion. By the early 1970s, most young African Americans knew of the deeds of the BKF (and its founders, Steve Sanders, Jerry Smith, Clif Steward, and Don Williams). In 1971, jujitsu artist Moses Powell was the first African American to perform at the United Nations and became a featured performer in Aaron Banks’ Oriental World of Self-Defense from 1973 on. From Detroit, Michigan, Howard Jackson took the world of kung fu by storm, being the first African American to be ranked number one in the sport’s history in 1973 (the year he won the Battle of Atlanta). Tayari Casel, a student of Jimmie Jones of Chicago, meanwhile, experimented with kupiganangumi, a “rhythmic and acrobatic martial art developed by African slaves and their descendants and ch’ang ch’uan,” as he won the 1976 Battle of Atlanta. Then there were Lee’s protégés Greg
Baines and Kareem Abdul Jabbar (whose fight scene with Lee in the 1978 release of *The Game of Death* is unforgettable) as well as Jim Kelly.

Born in Paris, Kentucky, in 1946, Kelly came to kung fu through karate, and by the 1970s, Kelly had cemented his place among the top rank of martial artists at Ed Parker’s famous tournaments (where Lee first did an exhibition in 1964). Kelly’s skills impressed Lee when they worked together on *Enter the Dragon*. The soul that Kelly put into his *ch’i* (life force) impressed Lee, who let the African American martial artist choreograph his own fights (this, unlike others, in Lee’s estimation, made martial arts entirely mechanical if they were not supervised). The thing about “soul” was central to Kelly, whose mix of pleasure and skill enthused young aficionados in his day, as Michael Jordan has done to young people in our time. Consider the famous act of bluster from Kelly (as Williams) in *Enter the Dragon*. When Han asks Williams about his fear of defeat, he responds, “I don’t waste my time. When it comes, I won’t even notice. I’ll be too busy lookin’ good.” You can imagine entire sections of the theater breaking into spontaneous applause.

The bare-fisted bravado was not just used for martial arts tournaments, but, mainly, to smash unjust power lords in the films. When a white supremacist organization plans to poison African Americans through the water supply, Kelly is onto them (*Three the Hard Way* [dir. Gordon Parks, 1974]). As Black Belt Jones, Kelly takes on the Mob and the corrupt city government (*Black Belt Jones* [dir. Robert Clouse, 1974]) and a corrupt wing of the U.S. military (*Hot Potato* [dir. Oscar Williams, 1976]). In *Black Samurai* (dir. Al Adamson, 1977), Kelly is Bond (*Goldfinger* [dir. Guy Hamilton, 1964])—as he infiltrates a secret island getaway of a crime syndicate to rescue his girlfriend. This is the world of *Cotton Comes to Harlem* (for which Ossie Davis made his directorial debut, 1970); *Shaft* (dir. Gordon Parks, 1971); *Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song* (directed by the incomparable Melvin Van Peebles 1971), whose son Mario gave us *New Jack City* twenty years later); *Superfly* (dir. Sig Shore, 1972); *Coffy* (dir. Jack Hill, 1973); and *Foxy Brown* (dir. Jack Hill, 1974). Lots of heavy films, for a heavy time.

Kelly’s films, framed both by kung fu and black cinema, could not succumb to Lee’s unreconstructed sexism. In *Enter the Dragon*, Lee brought in Angela Mao Ying to play his sister, who is a brave and noble fighter. When a gang corners her, she kills herself in a suicide, an act that stands at odds
with the bravery displayed by her characters in *Hap Ki Do* (dir. Wong Fung, 1970) and *Lady Whirlwind* (dir. Huang Feng, 1971). Kelly could not reduce the role of the women who acted across from him, mainly because the new black cinema was peppered with strong, if contradictory, female characters played by Pam Grier and Tamara Dobson. Cedric Robinson argues that the 1970s black cinema took the image of the communist feminist Angela Davis and reduced it to the ultrasexual body of Pam Grier. Grier was not so one-dimensional, however, for her roles transformed the image of the black woman from that of the servile mammy (as with Hattie McDaniel in the 1939 *Gone with the Wind* [dir. Victor Fleming]) and the tragically lifeless (as with Lena Horne in the 1943 *Stormy Weather* [dir. Andrew Stone]) to the tough and streetwise Cleopatra Jones and Foxy Brown. But, yes, Robinson is right that the black woman was, in Grier especially, the epitome of uncontrolled sexuality (“she’s Black and she’s stacked,” as in *Coffy*), this despite the storyline about the rebellious ghetto. The world of black kung fu did not go along the grain of Shaft and Coffy. Tamara Dobson in *Cleopatra Jones* (dir. Jack Starrett, 1973) acts as a secret agent who can kick ass and look good while at it. Cleo does not flail around or resort to a gun, but she reserves her energy to trounce her enemy with kung fu skill. Or take *Black Belt Jones*. Gloria Hendry, who plays Sidney, is a sifu in her own right. When Jones (Kelly) gets a message that the bad guys are on the move, he gets ready to leave Sidney to do the dishes as he goes off to do combat. Sidney, incensed by his sexism, borrows his gun and “does” the dishes with a round of well-aimed fire. This is the film of black liberation, and Kelly was all over it.

5. Jeet Kune Flow

What are the implications of the world of polycultural kung fu? Color-blind capitalists wish to make a profit off its appeal, often by the opportunistic combination of ethnic niche markets (when Jackie Chan and Chris Tucker appear together in the 1998 *Rush Hour*, or else when Sammo Hung and Arsenio Hall did time in CBS’s *Martial Law*, or else with the ultracommodified Tae-Bo of Billy Blanks). Primordialists (and “perfectionists”) argue that the artistry originates in either Africa or Asia. “It was Africa and not Asia that first gave martial arts to the world,” wrote Kilindi Iyi, “and those same
African roots are deeply embedded in the martial arts of India and China.\footnote{112} Iyi looks at ancient murals from Beni Hasan, Egypt, to make his claim, but he could equally make the point that the similarities between capoeira Angola and kung fu can be traced to those enslaved Africans who created the Brazilian art in the 1500s, nurtured it in the senzalas (slave houses), and developed it into a symbolic as well as a physical response to the atrocity of a racist slavery. The language of capoeira, indeed, is replete with Bantu words, and the movements of capoeira resemble the southern Angolan dance of n’golo (zebra dance).\footnote{113} If Iyi looks to Africa for the origins of martial arts, others do the same with Asia. Most histories of kung fu tell the story of Bodhidharma, an itinerant Buddhist monk, who introduced the monks of the Shaolin Temple in China to the martial arts of his homeland, southern India. Bodhidharma may be the son of the king of Kancheepuram in the region of today’s Tamil Nadu (as some Japanese manuscripts claim), and it is said that he imported the arts of kalarippayattu to China from Kerala, in the southwest of India.\footnote{114} Bodhidharma’s Hseih mai lun [Treatise on the blood lineages of true dharma] lays out a philosophy of the ch’i, and how it must be kept active to ensure that monks do not sleep during meditation.\footnote{115} The desire to seek origins in what might be complex cultural diffusion or else independent creation is certainly not of much help. However, we might say that martial arts traditions such as kung fu developed in a manifold world that involved, in some complex way, kalarippayattu of Kerala, capoeira Angola of Brazil, and the various martial arts of Africa. Kung fu is not far from Africa or from the favelas of Brazil.\footnote{116} Iyi, Wayne Chandler, and Graham Irwin make the mistake of finding racial links when we are more tempted to avoid that complex soup of “descent”—whatever that may mean. They argue, for instance, that Buddha, the man whose tradition produces kung fu, was of African “descent.”\footnote{117} The school of the Kamau Ryu System of Self-Defense claims that Bodhidharma was “black with tightly curled knots of hair and elongated ear lobes which are traditional African traits.”\footnote{118} The incessant interest in origins bespeaks a notion of culture as an inheritance transmitted across time without mutation, an inheritance that is the property of certain people. There are numerous reasons to claim origins and to mark oneself as authentic if one belongs to an oppressed minority. For example, minority groups mobilize the notion of an origin to make resource claims, to show, for instance, that despite the
denigration of the power elite, the minority can lay claim to civilization. Furthermore, to demarcate themselves from the repressive stereotypes, the oppressed frequently turn to their “roots” to suggest to their children the worthiness of their lineage, despite racism’s cruelty. These are important social explanations for the way we use both origins and authenticity (to protect our traditional forms from appropriation by the power elite). As defensive tactics these make sense, but as a strategy for freedom they are inappropriate. W. E. B. Du Bois, in a prosaic moment in 1919, wrote of the “blood of yellow and white hordes” who “diluted the ancient black blood of India, but her eldest Buddha sits back, with kinky hair.” Du Bois’s gesture toward Buddha was not necessarily a claim to the racial or epidermal lineage of Buddha, but it was a signal toward some form of solidarity across the Indian Ocean and between Asians and Africans in diaspora. In his 1928 novel Dark Princess, the Indian Kautilya seals her bond with the African American Matthew through a ruby that is “by legend a drop of Buddha’s blood”; in time, their child, “Incarnate Son of the Buddha,” will rule over a kingdom fated to overthrow British rule. Matthew, for Du Bois, was a symbol of anti-imperialist solidarity, and the claim to Buddha indicated a search for the cultural roots of solidarity without going too deeply into that mysterious world of biology.

In our own day, Q-Unique of the Arsonists came at kung fu from the lens of hip hop. Bruce Lee should be remembered as the first to teach non-Asians Martial Arts and to be the first big Asian actor [and] that right there is enough to tell me that you should be able to believe in yourself to be able to climb the highest mountain. Or just go against whatever is thrown your way. You should be able to look at adversity in its face and believe in yourself to get what you want. And that’s what Bruce Lee ultimately taught me: What I do with my MCing skills is sort of like what he did with his Martial Arts. You study everybody’s techniques and you strip away what you don’t find necessary and use what is necessary and you modify it. You give it your own twist. He used Jeet Kune Do. Mine is Jeet Kune Flow.

There are no massive implications to be drawn from all this, except to say that the polycultural view of the world exists in the gut instincts of many
people such as Q-Unique. Scholars are under some obligation to raise this instinct to philosophy, to use this instinct to criticize the diversity model of multiculturalism and replace it with the antiracist one of polyculturalism. Culture cannot be bounded and people cannot be asked to respect “culture” as if it were a thing without history and complexity. Social interaction and struggle produce cultural worlds, and these are in constant, fraught, formation. Our cultures are linked in more ways than we could catalogue, and it is from these linkages that we hope our politics will be energized. The Third World may be in distress where the will of the national liberation movements has put the tendency to anti-imperialism in crisis, and the Third World within the United States where the dynamic of the color-blind and of the desire to make small, individual gains over social transformation has overrun society. Nevertheless, the struggle is on, both in places like Kerala and Vietnam, but also within the United States, as the Black Radical Congress greets the Asian Left Forum, the Forum of Indian Leftists, and the League of Filipino Students (among others), and as all of them join together in the dynamic against corporations, perhaps someday to become an anti-imperialist dynamic. History is made in struggle, and our enchanted memory of the past perhaps helps our fights over social justice today and makes it possible to move into a fresh tomorrow. To remember Bruce Lee as I do, staring at a poster of him circa 1974, is not to wane into nostalgia for the past. My Bruce is alive, alongside all the other contemporary icons of polycultural strife.

Notes

This essay, in a shorter form, is the last chapter of my book, Everybody Was Kung Fu Fighting: Afro-Asian Connections and the Myth of Cultural Purity (Boston: Beacon, 2001). One Love to Elisabeth Armstrong and Robin Kelley, for giving me most of my ideas; Nikhil Singh, Andrew Jones, and Tisha Hooks, for making me write them down; Koushik Banerjea, Adisa Banjoko, Dan Dawson, Sharmila Desai, and Jeff Chang, for helping me understand the roots of kung fu; Junot Díaz, Grace Lee Boggs, and Scott Kurashige for enchanted critical words; Leyla Mei for inviting me to give this paper as a talk at the CUNY Graduate Center’s history department; and Sujani Reddy, Linta Varghese, and Siva Vaidyanathan for taking the time to come and engage with these ideas.
4 Slavoj Žižek, The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Center of Political Ontology (London: Verso, 1999), 216.
8 Kelley, “People in Me.”
10 Kelley, “People in Me.”
14 Ackbar Abbas, Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 21.
16 Prashad, Karma of Brown Folk.
18 This is demonstrated in several of the essays in Avery F. Gordon and Christopher Newfield, eds., Mapping Multiculturalism (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).
19 Lee was very aware of this, as in his 1966 letter to William Dozier, executive producer of the series (reproduced in Little, Words of the Dragon, 76–77).
20 Bruce Thomas, *Bruce Lee: Fighting Spirit* (Berkeley, Calif.: Frog, 1994), 143. This is a frequent theme in Lee’s interviews, as in his 1966 statement to *The Washington Post* on *The Green Hornet*. “It sounded like typical houseboy stuff,” he told the Post, and he told his producer that “if you sign me up with all that pigtail and hopping around jazz, forget it.” Little, *Words of the Dragon*, 60. In 1970, Lee announced that “it’s about time we had an Oriental hero. Never mind some guy bouncing around the country in a pigtail or something. I have to be a real human being. No cook. No laundryman.” Little, *Words of the Dragon*, 98. This is not to say that cooks and laundrymen are not “real human beings,” but that the stereotype itself effaced the real cooks and real laundrymen.

21 Thomas, *Bruce Lee*, 78–79.

22 Sheng-Mei Ma’s analysis of Bruce Lee and kung fu is similar to mine, but we differ on several crucial points, notably on our interpretation of *Kung Fu*, and on the emphasis I place on the anti-imperialism of the Lee films. See Stokely Carmichael and Charles V. Hamilton, *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation* (New York: Random House, 1967), 44.


26 Ibid., 77–81.


32 There is a PLO statement in *West River Times, East River Echo*, August 1975, 2; Stokely Carmichael’s speech of 31 August 1968 is available in the Social Protest Project, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley; at the Bancroft, as well, there is a collection of Black Panther telegrams to the Iranian consulate, flyers for a 16 July 1970 rally in support of
the “Iranian 41,” and a statement from the Black Panther Party; finally, “Ethiopian Students Speak Out,” Wei Min, September 1974, 8.


34 “Bobby (DeAnna Lee Interviews Bobby Scale in San Francisco County Jail),” Gidra, June–July 1970, 14.


39 Alex Hing interviewed by Fred Ho and Steve Yip,” in Ho et al., Legacy to Liberation, 284.

40 Alex Hing acknowledged (to Fred Ho, in Legacy to Liberation, 290, and in the interview with me) that “women were the backup and did most of the work,” but at the same time they did not get leadership positions until the Red Guard merged with I Wor Kuen in 1971, when most of the leadership was female. In 1970, Frances Beale of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee wrote that although the black militant man rejected white cultural values, “when it comes to women he seems to take his guidelines from the pages of Ladies Home Journal.” Qtd. in Echols, Daring to Be Bad, 107. There is much to what Beale says of the Red Guards and of other nationalist formations, but it should also be pointed out that the Red Guards and the I Wor Kuen worked with the contradictions of sexism, unlike other groups, which tried to deny the role of feminism within the struggle. For an introduction, see Miya Iwataki, “The Asian Women’s Movement: A Retrospective,” East Wind 2, no. 1 (spring/summer 1983): 35–41.

41 The membership of the Red Guard Party was not restricted to Chinese Americans, as illustrated by the presence of Japanese Americans such as Stan Kadani and Neil Gotanda.

42 The Hardcore, according to Mo Nishida “openly identified ourselves with the Panthers.” Ho et al., Legacy to Liberation, 301.

43 The Asian American Community Action Research Program is well covered by Marge Taniwaki, and its polycultural heritage may be seen in the Chicano antipoverty movement (of Corky González and others) alongside the veterans of the internment camps from the 1940s. “Yellow Peril to Yellow Power: Asian Activism in the Rocky Mountain Region,” in Ho et al., Legacy to Liberation, 65–73.

44 Most of my information comes from the Red Guard Community News (available at the UCLA library), 1969 onward, and an interview with Alex Hing as well as Steve Louie.

49 The frustration with quietism traversed the political and class spectrum, as in the 1972 words of W. K. Wong (advisor to the Six Companies in San Francisco’s Chinatown) that “if you’re politically strong, like the blacks or the Mexicans, you can go up and demand this and that. Chinatown has never really demanded anything because, up to now, there just aren’t enough of us with political muscles.” Qtd. in Victor G. and Brett de Bary Nee, Longtime Californ’: A Documentary Study of an American Chinatown (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1980), 247. This is not to minimize the role of the Chinese American left, documented by Him Mark Lai, “To Bring Forth a New China, To Build a Better America: The Chinese Marxist Left in America to the 1960s,” in Chinese America: History and Perspectives (San Francisco: Chinese Historical Society, 1992), 3–82.
51 Junot Díaz deserves all credit for this formulation.
52 Van Troy Pang, “To Commemorate My Grandfather,” in Leong, Moving the Image, 44. When Alex Hing was asked many years later what he thought of Bruce Lee, he had this to offer: “When he was alive, I was very critical of him because he played Kato. Being an ultra-leftist, I felt, ‘Oh here’s Bruce Lee playing the servile role and fighting for this white guy. We’ve got to get off of that.’ It wasn’t till he passed away until I began to appreciate his contributions. He played a major role in having a more positive view of Asians out there. To be that good of a martial artist, you’ve got to put in a lot of work. Maybe it’s easier to say let’s break out of that and do something easier! If we had a home-grown Jet Li from the U.S., we’d all be flocking. We wouldn’t put that down.” Martin Wong, “Red Star in America,” Giant Robot, no. 10 (spring 1998), 81. Of course, Lee was homegrown, at least if we reassess the idea of home in this century.
53 Thomas, Bruce Lee, 146.
54 David Hillard and Lewis Cole, This Side of Glory (Boston: Little, Brown, 1993), 247.
55 Timothy B. Tyson, Radio Free Dixie: Robert F. Williams and the Roots of Black Power (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 295; Mary Kochiyama, “Robert Williams,” Asian American Political Alliance Newspaper 2, no. 1 (November 1969): 2. Ho’s early journalism for La correspondance internationale is on antiblack racism in the United States of America, such as “Lynching” (no. 59, 1924) and “Ku Klux Klan” (no. 74, 1924). These pieces formed part of a pamphlet that Ho published in Moscow on the question of African American oppression. They are collected in Ho Chi Minh on Revolution, ed. Bernard Fall (New York: Signet, 1967).
51–58. There is a Japanese biography of Robert Williams by Yoriko Nakajima, written in the late 1960s.


60 Aimé Césaire, *Letter to Maurice Thorez* (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1957), 12. Down the page, Césaire writes, “But it would also interest me, and still more so, to see the African brand of communism blossom forth and flourish. In all likelihood, it would offer us variants—useful, valuable, original variants, and the wisdom in us that is our age-old heritage would, I am certain, shade or complete a good many of the doctrine’s points.”


63 Christian Joachim, “Flowers, Fruit, and Incense Only: Elite versus Popular in Taiwan’s Religion of the Yellow Emperor,” *Modern China* 16, no. 1 (January 1990): 3–38. In 1976, one of the teachers of the sect introduced martial arts, but his was not to be the barefoot arts of the people, since he founded his art on the ecstasy of *qigong*. Lee would have found this distasteful, but so did the racist leader of the sect, Wang Hansheng, who ordered the Martial Way disbanded. Joachim, “Flowers,” 17–18.


69 Hutchison, *China’s African Revolution*, 50.


72 From Asia: Afghanistan, Burma, Cambodia, Ceylon, China, India, Indonesia, Iran, Iraq, Japan, Jordan, Laos, Lebanon, Nepal, Pakistan, the Philippines, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Thailand, Turkey, North Vietnam, South Vietnam, and Yemen. From Africa: Egypt, Ethiopia, the Gold Coast, Liberia, Libya, and Sudan.

73 “Speech by President Soekarno at the Opening of the Asian-African Conference, April 18, 1955,” in *The Asian-African Conference: Bandung, Indonesia, April 1955*, ed. G. M. Kahin (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1956), 43. On neocolonialism, Sukarno said that “colonialism has also its modern dress, in the form of economic control, intellectual control, actual physical control by a small but alien community within the nation. It is a skilful and determined enemy, and it appears in many guises. It does not give up its loot easily.” “Speech by President Soekarno,” 44.


80 Ibid., 46.


83 In 1965, during the Watts rebellion, minister John Shabazz compared the Vietnam War with Watts as he went after King for his ambivalence on both counts. He argued against the “black man being an Asiatic, fighting an Asiatic war.” Gerald Horne, *Fire This Time: The Watts Uprising and the 1960s* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1999), 144.


86 Echols, *Daring to Be Bad*, 54.


Little, Words of the Dragon, 136, 88–90.


Little, Words of the Dragon, 70.

Bruce Lee, The Tao of Gung Fu (Boston: Charles E. Tuttle, 1997), 166; Thomas, Bruce Lee, 64.

Lee, The Tao, 176–177.

Qtd. in Shirota, “I’m Not a Militant.”

Qtd. in ibid.


Little, Words of the Dragon, 120.

George Plimpton says that the line comes from Ali’s friend Bundini in his Shadow Box (New York: Berkeley, 1977).


Thomas, Bruce Lee, 97.

Ibid., 278.

Flyers for such tournaments are collected at the Schomburg Research Center in Black Culture.


Thomas, Bruce Lee, 276.


Donald Bougle misses all this when he writes, in passing, of the “stolid and wooden Jim Kelly.” Bougle, Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films (New York: Continuum, 1989), 245.

While Yvonne Tasker makes several good points in her section on black action films, she misses the contradictions in the films with her suggestion that Gloria Hendry’s role as Sidney has “a certain novelty value.” Tasker, *Spectacular Bodies: Gender, Genre, and the Action Cinema* (London: Comedia/Routledge, 1993), 21–26.

Nadya Labi, “Tae-Bo or Not Tae-Bo?” *Time*, 15 March 1999, 77. What is forgotten now is that Billy Blanks was a leading karateka. In November 1980, he won silver (open weight) and bronze (80 kg division) medals in Spain at the fifth World Union of Karate Organizations championships.


J. Lowell Lewis, *Ring of Liberation: Deceptive Discourse in Brazilian Capoeira* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992). Capoeira also resembles other American self-defense forms, such as the Cuban *mani*, the Venezuelan *broma*, and the Martiniquean *ladjì*.


Another story often left out of the mix is that of *kali*, the martial arts traditions of the Filipinos. Legend has it that the art came to the archipelago in the late thirteenth century from Borneo. The artists’ sword was called the *kali*, but there is also a suggestion that this itself came from Bengal, where the goddess Kali carries a sword in her hand. In numerous African languages, the word *kali* refers to fierceness.


