

## The End of Empires: African Americans and India

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Vijay Prashad

Gerald Horne is a powerhouse. He has authored close to 20 books, many of them setting the terms for debates on various issues (from the Hollywood blacklist to the Watts Uprising, from labour movements in the Caribbean to liberation struggles in Africa, from the African slave trade to the life of Shirley Graham Du Bois). Little seems to escape his pen. If you add his frequent commentaries on world affairs (mainly published in *Political Affairs*), you have a historian who not only finds the time to create a massive analytical corpus about the past but a citizen of the world who wants to turn that knowledge upon our contemporary period, to help us shape our understanding of the present based on the contradictions bequeathed us by the past. The output is breathtaking; but so is the charge.

In the past several years, Horne has turned his sights to a different problem. For the past twenty years, contemporary inter-ethnic struggles in the United States seem to be on the rise. Coalitions of the past fragment for all kinds of reasons, as African-Americans and Jewish-Americans or African-Americans and Latinos no longer seem to see eye to eye. That, at least, is what is alleged. Horne disagrees with the way the problem is framed: as if entire communities go after each other, and as if this animosity is timeless, and so rooted in the cultural DNA of each community. To counter this kind of narrative, Horne disappeared into the archives. He returned with a series of books, each very important to this task. Perhaps the most extraordinary is his work *Black and Brown: African Americans and the Mexican Revolution, 1910–1920* (1), which showed the long economic, social and political connections between African-Americans and Mexico, as well as between African-Americans and Mexican-Americans. No reading of this book will leave you with the facile framework of enduring Black-Brown hostility. Instead you get a sense of how African-Americans looked to the Mexican Revolution of 1911 as a haven against racism, how many prominent African-Americans decamped for Mexico and how this link (including the threats of military conflict) produced a

tradition of Black-Brown solidarity that had an impact on the Civil Rights struggle (this is not as developed in the book, but it is implied; it is, on the other hand, the central theme in much work being done now that links the cases of *Mendez v. Westminster* (1946) to *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), or that ties in the struggles between Chicanos and Black radicals in the 1960s, such as Laura Pulido's book, *Black, Brown, Yellow and Left* (2)).

The other major inter-ethnic fissure that is often talked about is between African-Americans and Asian-Americans. The idea of the 'model minority' proposes that Asians in the United States are a model for other minority groups, especially African-Americans (the thesis goes back to the 1960s, but it was revived most recently by Dinesh D'Souza in his *The End of Racism*, 1995 (3)). The long history of interactions between Africans and Asians, African-Americans and Asia, Asian-Americans and African-Americans is elided in this sort of argument. This might not have been the motivation for Horne's several new studies, but his work has certainly helped disrupt the ahistorical divisions promoted by 'model minority' sociology. They are also valuable for the riposte they provide against the idea of inevitable inter-ethnic strife between Asians and Africans – the memory of these interactions is a powerful subjective force in these times.

Horne devoured archives from India to Japan, from Hawaii to Boston. A series of crucial books emerged from these studies, including *Race War: White Supremacy and the Japanese Attack on the British Empire* (4), *The White Pacific: U. S. Imperialism and Black Slavery in the South Seas after the Civil War* (5), and now this book under review, *The End of Empires*. Each of these books is valuable simply for the immense archival labors put into them: Horne has opened a continent of research for scholars who are interested in each of these zones. Few would have thought to use the archives in New Delhi or in Hong Kong to help illuminate the worlds of African-Americans. The parochialism of so much of United States ethnic studies is here deeply shown up: the planetary experiences of African-Americans, who travelled as missionaries, as soldiers, as diplomats, as musicians, are now recovered at the centre of African-American history. The characters in these books are rich; one wonders now what they brought back with them, what they did to the black community in Chicago and Detroit, in small towns in the United States 'black belt' and elsewhere. No longer the view of these towns as insular, because they would also have welcomed back people who had enlarged their sense of the world through their travels. Perhaps it is this working-class cosmopolitanism that allowed the black community in the United States South to draw in the Gandhian ideas that the leadership developed without complaint. They were ready for the world to be alongside them in their struggle.

More than the political purpose or the guidebook to the archive, Horne provides, particularly in the book under review, a sustained attempt to model how to do the kind of 'encompassed comparisons' (as Charles Tilly put it) between peoples who live both in separate parts of the world and who run into each other in the world. The book is about African-Americans and Indians: African-Americans who go to India, Indian-Americans who encounter African-Americans in the United States, and in the abstract linkages between African-Americans and Indians. Chance encounters are not the purpose here. What we have is the objective basis of solidarity, well laid out in the opening chapters, and then the subjective moments of political connections that are not happenstance but part of the dynamic of anti-racist and anti-colonial solidarity in the era from the late 19th century to the 1950s.

Horne opens as if to take us to prehistory, but he quickly finds his balance in the 19th century. It was in this central period of world history that the fortunes of Africans in the United States were conjoined to those Indian peasants who toiled in the cotton fields. The 'world' cotton market, which was actually an imperialist oligarchy that had disarticulated local economies into a market for its purposes, linked the destinies of the enslaved and then freed workers of the United States South to those of the bonded and unbonded workers of the fertile plains of British India. King Cotton built the bridge, the objective link that could show people on both its ends that they were common sufferers and strugglers of the same system. Their linkages that would follow did not come from any kind of wishful thinking, but from a profound recognition of the similarity between colonial domination in India and the slavery-Jim Crow regime in the South (and in parts of the rest of the United States).

Once Horne establishes that this is not a book that celebrates the solidarity of post-facto fancy, but it is about the creation of internationalism in the best sense of the term, the rest of the narrative makes sense. It is clear why we must look at the Ahmediyya Muslims who migrated to Detroit from Punjab, or of the Ghadar Party that was formed in San Francisco with a full awareness of the link between colonialism and racism, or indeed of the intellectual-political work of such people as W. E. B. Du Bois and of Lala Lajpat Rai. Horne draws on a number of books that have already opened up this continent of interactions (Sudarshan Kapur's *Raising Up a Prophet* (6), the work of Vivek Bald, my own research, and others). The secondary work on Afro-Asian traffic in the inter-war period is now quite solid, and it provides Horne with a good foundation, and he makes good use of it. His own archival work is very important, particularly when he introduces us to new figures, whose lives will need to be explored in greater depth, and when he introduces us to new possibilities for research.

Much of the previous work has been uneven (the Thurmans have been written about, but not Max Yergan's trip to India, nor that of Mary Church Terrell or Benjamin Mays). Missionaries are written about, but not soldiers. Horne's work here is singular: the chapter on African-American troops in India during the Second World War is exemplary (Horne's *Race War*, already alerted us to his methodological focus on these African American troops). One wishes they were longer. The story of Private Herman Perry is a gem, and I would like to see it expanded. Of course the material is sparse: he appears only as a fragment. But I wonder if he had any contact with the Indian National Army, which defected to the side of the Japanese, or if he was in touch with the proto-nationalists among the Nagas. The story is elaborated by Brendan Koerner in *Now the Hell Will Start: One Soldier's Flight from the Greatest Manhunt of World War II* (7), but it is too sensational. There are more prosaic questions about political affiliation and of the affective connections made between this Washington D. C. African-American and the Nagas of Assam.

50 years ago Martin Luther King Jr. travelled to India. While there he was overwhelmed by the love with which he was received. 'We received a most enthusiastic reception and the most generous hospitality imaginable. Almost every door was open', he wrote when he returned. 'We were looked upon as brothers with the colour of our skin as an asset. The strongest bond of fraternity was the common cause of minority and colonial peoples in America, Africa and Asia struggling to throw off racialism and imperialism.' Horne quotes this to evoke that ethos, the feeling of internationalism that came out of a century of objective links and subjective connections. Horne's super book shows us what was, with the hope that if the objective basis exists this kind of solidarity might be reaffirmed. It is a powerful historical and political vision.

## Notes

1. Gerald Horne, *Black and Brown: African Americans and the Mexican Revolution, 1910–1920* (New York, NY, 2005). [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Laura Pulido, *Black, Brown, Yellow and Left: Radical Activism in Los Angeles* (Los Angeles, CA, 2006). [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Dinesh D'Souza, *The End of Racism: Principles for a Multi-Racial Society* (New York, NY, 1995). [Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Gerald Horne, *Race War: White Supremacy and the Japanese Attack on the British Empire* (New York, NY, 2004). [Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Gerald Horne, *The White Pacific: U. S. Imperialism and Black Slavery in the South Seas after the Civil War* (Honolulu, HI, 2007). [Back to \(5\)](#)
6. Sudarshan Kapur, *Raising Up a Prophet* (London, 1992). [Back to \(6\)](#)
7. Brendan Koerner, *Now the Hell Will Start: One Soldier's Flight from the Greatest Manhunt of World War II* (London, 2008). [Back to \(7\)](#)

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