
Introduction

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From henna tattoo kits available at your local mall to “faux Asian” fashions, house wares, and fusion cuisine; from the new visibility of Asian film, music, video games, and anime to current stylistic blending of hip hop, martial arts motifs, and “Japanese kitsch style,” Asian influences have thoroughly saturated the U.S. cultural landscape to become part of the vernacular of popular culture. Paradoxically, this current visibility of global “Asianness” renders the cultural presence of Asian Americans in mainstream American culture conceptually problematic: simultaneously hypervisible and out of sight. In the midst of a boom in both Asian American population numbers and cultural productions, Asian Americans continue to occupy a precarious position in the popular American imagination, lodged in that hazy symbolic space that blends the seemingly opposite impulses of global proximity with the exotic. How do we address the Asian American presence within our hyperglobalized mainstream culture? How can we theorize Asian American popular culture while acknowledging its traditions, accounting for innovations and creative fusions while also maintaining its distinctions?

Born from political activism, cultural isolation, and historical erasure, Asian American studies has developed along two parallel streams that largely dominate contemporary work in the field. While one approach explores Asian American representations as “others” in mainstream U.S. media culture, another tradition focuses on Asian American-produced media, literature, and cultural practices within Asian American communities. This collection marks a turning point in Asian American studies by introducing readers to innovative contemporary work that challenges

received definitions of the field by reconceptualizing the popular. Through a consideration of cross-cultural influences and global cultural trends, the essays here thrive at the interdisciplinary intersection of Asian American studies with media, literature, sociology, film, performance, and cultural studies. Together, they offer a new, inclusive approach that brings the maturing field of Asian American studies into productive dialogue with both new and well-established disciplines.

Traditional models for Asian American studies have been wary of acknowledging and readmitting the complexity of their own immigrant roots and the uncontrollable multiplicity of the populations the field purports to represent. Recent developments in global immigration flows, accelerated cross-cultural mixing, and local changes within Asian American cultural production outside and (increasingly) within mainstream popular culture have left these approaches ill-equipped to account for and theorize current popular culture. Concurrently, popular culture scholarship has lagged behind the general trend toward ethnic, economic, and geographical diversity in the study of Asian Americans. Popular culture studies often seems mired in an out-of-date vision of Asian America as solely Chinese or Japanese American, male, straight, and middle class. Further, contemporary developments in other fields such as media and cultural studies, as well as a new scholarly emphasis on globalization, have brought previously distinct fields of inquiry into a new proximity as scholars have begun considering Asian American cultural production and representation within the joint contexts of U.S. mainstream culture and global cultural trends.

Popular culture is an enduring interest in Asian American studies. Widely acknowledged as one of the first collections of Asian American literature, *The Big Aiiieeee!* edited by Jeffery Paul Chan, Frank Chin, Lawson Fusao Inada, and Shawn Wong introduced and influenced Asian American theory for years to come and came out swinging against the image of the passive and eternally foreign Asian in America. Yet their anthology has also come under fire for neglecting non-Japanese and Chinese Asian Americans as well as its introduction's macho, heterosexist rhetoric. However, its emphasis on overturning stereotypes with examples of outspoken and resolutely American writers still echoes through contemporary criticism. Books such as Russell Leong's anthology *Moving the Image* (1991), Amy Ling and Shirley Lim's anthology *Reading the Literatures of Asian Americans* (1992), and King-Kok Cheug's *Articulate Silences* (1993) have continued to shed light on neglected work by Asian Americans. Even more

recently, writers such as Lisa Lowe, David Eng, Peter Feng, Josephine Lee, and David Palumbo-Liu have begun to expand the boundaries of what constitutes Asian American cultural production.¹ Lowe and Palumbo-Liu cross generic boundaries to read city streets and academic canons, while Eng, Feng, and Lee move to establish how Asian Americans revise and re-orient queer theory, dramatic performance, and film theory. It is in the spirit of these authors that we began to collect the diverse voices of this anthology.

The other main strain of Asian American popular cultural scholarship focuses on representations of Asian Americans in popular society. Traditionally, the primary focus was on roles and representations in film and television. Studies include such well-known works as the documentary *Slaying the Dragon* (1991) and Darrell Hamamoto's *Monitored Peril: Asian Americans and Television* (1994). Just as gender studies began to move away from image-based analysis to explore representations of women in a more fluid context, Asian American cultural analysis has turned to a dynamic understanding of racial representations. In the past few years Robert Lee's *Orientalists* (1999) has done much to historicize the depiction of Asians and broaden the scope of analysis to newspapers, popular songs, and other cultural discourses. In addition, Dorinne Kondo's *About Face* (1997) offers new directions in scholarship by emphasizing the interrelation between culture, race, and performance and the multifaceted nature of Asian American culture. These last two writers, like the authors collected here, focus on the uneven exchange between popular and Asian American culture.

Taken together, the essays in this volume engage not only with the broadening of the traditional definitions of "what counts" as Asian American studies but shift critical emphasis from the celebrated margins into the mainstream. They eschew the familiar representation-based models that emphasize victimization and alienation in favor of a multifaceted approach that highlights the intricacies and internal tensions in contemporary Asian Pacific American cultures. To this end, the volume facilitates an expansion of the field from film and video to the arena of global communications, the Internet, youth and immigrant subcultures, and alternative modes of culture that have yet to be fully addressed in any book-length collection.

The category "Asian American" has grown to encompass over fifteen different ethnic and national backgrounds from sixth-generation Chinese Americans to Hmong refugees to Pacific Islanders. The latest census

figures estimate that over 12 million Asians and Asian Americans live in the United States. Hence the term Asian American is a group identity in flux, a fluid and changing identity that initially served as a political rallying point but now recognizes multiple histories and contexts and seeks to interrogate ethnic categorizations. This volume presents a broad vision of Asian America that includes often neglected groups such as South Asians, multiracial Asians, and teenagers. It also examines the contrary nature of established racial and ethnic categories so as to open up the discussion of what constitutes Asian American popular culture.

Far from presenting a comprehensive picture, we view this collection as only the beginning, a first step. Instead of attempting to account for each group, interest, and form of cultural practice, or seeking to present a self-contained “record” of Asian American popular culture today, we offer this collection as an introduction to new work and a call for more. Thus, we conceptualize Asian American cultural presence in a trans-Asian and dynamic context. Specifically we argue for the centrality of popular, mainstream culture in understanding the particular complexity of Asian American identity in a contemporary, increasingly global environment that often feels inflected with “Asianness.”

Divided into three key thematic parts, the opening set of articles in the collection examines the transnational flows of culture inside and outside national and international boundaries, whereas the second section focuses on how political, social, and global economies influence and direct cultural history. The last section specifically addresses the marketing and consumer patterns of popular culture as a way to engage and challenge how we produce and understand racial identities. However, the essays also speak to each other across categories and their grouping into these particular sections is more suggestive than indicative. Other categorical groupings are just as likely—gathering the essays by genre or ethnicity, for example. The fluidity of themes, concerns, and foci further emphasizes the fundamental links the essays share, and as the editors of this volume we hope readers will explore these connections and devise their own pathways of conceptualizing and categorizing Asian American popular culture.

In sum, the collection presents Asian American media and popular studies as cultural studies, a collection of divergent approaches that considers the current constructions of culture as processes of symbolic and political significance.

Globalization and Local Identities

While few scholars and critics still maintain the trope of authenticity and cultural insularity, preferring models of dynamic and constant cultural exchange, fewer still would deny that contemporary forces known jointly as “globalization” have accelerated such exchanges to a near-frenzied pace. As Aihwa Ong has argued, global communication systems, media technologies, increased leisure and labor mobility, and the finely coordinated commercialization of transnational product and media flows have together facilitated the emergence of “global trends.”² Indeed, theorists such as Lisa Lowe and David Palumbo-Liu have outlined the ways in which Asian American identity has been transformed by the increasingly porous boundaries between America and Asia. While concerns over Western imperialism (and Americanization, in particular) of mass culture continue to draw significant scholarly attention, fewer academic works have addressed the equally powerful phenomena of “counterflows” and the pervasive popularity of Asian accents and influences within popular culture, particularly in the United States.

The increased commercialization of Asian culture, dance, and music—particularly among the young and trendy—fuels new international formations and is the subject of Sunaina Maira’s “Trance-Formations: Orientalism and Cosmopolitanism in Youth Culture.” Maira delves into the influence of South Asian iconography on rave culture and its implications for traditional conceptions of both Orientalism and the opposition of the global and local. The process by which a local cultural product becomes a part of the global marketplace is also the subject of the following two essays by Kieu Linh Caroline Valverde and Jigna Desai. However, as both authors demonstrate, it has very different implications for immigrants, diasporic communities, and their relationship to a “homeland.” Valverde’s “Making Transnational Vietnamese Music: Sounds of Home and Resistance” documents the two-way influence of Vietnamese and *Viet-Kieu* music and the political implications of the movement of music between Vietnam and America. In “Planet Bollywood: Indian Cinema Abroad,” Desai chronicles the ways in which second- and third-generation South Asians consume and rework images of diasporic Indian identity through Indian cinema. As these essays demonstrate, old categories that demarcate local from international, immigrant from native, and “original” from fusion hardly suffice to describe this current global climate.

The article “Model Minorities Can Cook: Fusion Cuisine in Asian America” interrogates the category of “global fusion.” As Anita Mannur looks at the consumer-friendly marketing of Asian culture through food, she finds far-reaching and disturbing implications for liberal multicultural rhetoric. In “PAPPY’S HOUSE: ‘Pop’ Culture and the Revaluation of a Filipino American ‘Sixty-Cents’ in Guam,” Vicente M. Diaz brings historical global flows into a personal focus as he takes up the term “Pappy” to reveal a legacy of colonization and imperialism in Guam, the Philippines, and the American South.

Cultural Legacy and Memories

Despite the insistence in popular culture on the new and cutting edge, it remains inextricably linked to history. While mass-produced culture invites us to share in a world devoid of the weight of history, the authors in this collection make clear that history, whether national, cultural, or familial, always informs and shapes both the production and reception of popular culture. However, history does not exist as some unchanging and essential reality. Indeed, history both dictates and is dictated to by cultural formations. The project of recovering history that runs throughout the articles does not simply midwife a fully formed past. Instead, like Foucault’s genealogies of history, these authors reshape Asian American history while simultaneously revising contemporary conceptions of Asian America.

In the first two essays of Part II, Victor Bascara and Christine So explicitly address historiography and the practice of remembering a shared past. Bascara’s “‘Within Each Crack/A Story’: The Political Economy of Queering Filipino American Pasts,” borrows from queer theory to envision a Filipino American history that values, without valorizing, the early bachelor communities of Filipino male laborers. Through a reading of Asian American poetry, literature, and film, Bascara asks whether reading familiar histories through a new lens can revive the critical subjectivities and agencies of those near-silent men. In her essay, “A Woman Is Nothing: Valuing the Modern Chinese Woman’s Epic Journey to the West,” Christine So also turns to literature to examine the recent explosion in transnational Chinese women’s historical fiction. As she analyses the narratives and global popularity of such works, So argues that history functions as another character in these novels, helping the reader negotiate a global capitalist present. With Hye Seung Chung’s “Between Yellowphilia and Yellowpho-

bia: Ethnic Stardom and the (Dis)Orientalized Romantic Couple in *Daughter of Shanghai* and *King of Chinatown*,” we turn from literature to 1930s Hollywood cinema and to some of the earliest examples of Asian American stars. By placing the films and star personae of Anna May Wong and the Korean American actor Philip Ahn in historical context, Chung accounts for both their surprisingly sympathetic and active portrayals and for the cross-textual readings by the film’s Asian American audiences.

Local audiences’ readings of their own representation in the American mainstream media culture is at the center of Morris Young’s essay “Whose Paradise? Hawai’i, Desire, and the Global-Local Tensions of Popular Culture.” Through the controversy over the use of “pidgin” English in the television series “The Byrds of Paradise,” Young implicates popular culture in the negotiation and struggle over local identities as he traces the development and expression of a distinctly Hawaiian sensibility. Rebecca Chiyoko King-O’Riain takes up a different struggle over local cultural identity in “Miss Cherry Blossom Meets Mainstream America.” By tracing the controversies that periodically arise within and over Japanese American beauty pageants, King illustrates how changing notions of idealized beauty reflect the shifting and elusive nature of Asian American identity. Through this reexamination King also demonstrates how neglected cultural forms can revise our view of history as a simple progression from oppression to liberation.

The second section concludes with the recovery of repressed histories both personal and political. In “How to Rehabilitate a Mulatto: The Iconography of Tiger Woods,” Hiram Perez investigates the erasure of history in the marketing of the “Cablinasian” Tiger Woods. By reinserting Woods into America’s fraught racial history, he reanimates the symbolic and political meaning of Woods as an American icon.

Ethnicity and Identification

In the previous section, the authors examined the cultural economics of history and addressed how the constructed nature of history influences personal and public perceptions of beauty, sports, and even family genealogies. As these essays suggest, race and its cultural meanings remain at the core of globalizing media flows and their local receptions.

Race, as we all know, is a social construct, a mass fantasy in which we all participate, yet it persists as a constant material force as well as a visceral

and lived reality. This section focuses on the means by which this “reality” is enacted, enforced, and debated through the varied reception and consumption of race and ethnicity. As a field of study, spectatorship has been slow to enter the mainstream of ethnic studies. While gender studies has embraced the concept, particularly in relation to cross-dressing and drag, acceptance by race theorists has been stymied by both practical and political considerations. As Elaine Kim has argued, the emphasis on reception comes at a time when race has finally been recognized as a material force in the lives of racial minorities and an emphasis on performance threatens progressive political moments deeply rooted in identity. Indeed, the search for authenticity as well as an authoritative voice to challenge the racial construction of Asians as a wedge group or “model minority” in American society has long been a motivating force in the creation of Asian American studies (see *The Big Aiiieeeee!* eds. Chin et al.). However, just as essentialist ideas of Asian American racial identity are being dismantled (see Josephine Lee’s *Performing Race and Ethnicity*, and Kandice Chuh’s *Imagine Otherwise: On Asian Americanist Critique*) so too are calls for singular notions of a seamless and authentic cultural expression of that identity.³ Rather than reading cultural representation for their positive or negative (authentic or inauthentic) portrayals, the authors in this section emphasize the ways in which these representations function to reiterate, challenge, transform, and/or create cultural norms.

The essays in this last section tackle an array of concerns including cross-racial identification, the invention of an “alternative” Asian American identity, debates about Asian American authenticity, and challenges to the “model minority myth.” In “Bruce Lee in the Ghetto Connection: Kung Fu Theater and African Americans Reinventing Culture at the Margins,” Amy Ongiri reevaluates the popularity of Asian culture and martial arts in seventies black urban culture, offering new insights into this historically media-savvy but untapped consumer market. Along the way, she challenges traditional understandings of the cinematic “black-Asian connection” and its implications for contemporary media culture. The cyber-citizenship created by and for Asian Americans is the subject of Lisa Nakamura’s essay “Alllookslike? Mediating Visual Cultures of Race on the Web.” In it, Nakamura reviews and theorizes the extent to which Asians can articulate their identities in the newly created transnational and performative space of the Internet.

LeiLani Nishime’s “Guilty Pleasures: Keanu Reeves, Superman, and Racial Outing” builds on the earlier discussion by examining how multira-

cial Asians reshape theories of racial classification. In her readings of Keanu Reeves and the television drama “Smallville,” Nishime explores how the pleasures of “outing” race in cases where it is not apparent illuminates understandings of multiraciality and the stakes of identity for their consuming spectator.

The relationship between knowing and seeing the visual aspect of race informs the production of knowledge about race and culture in the previous chapters. Jane Park also examines performance and identity, but this time through music. In her essay “Cibo Matto’s *Stereotype A*: Articulating Asian American Hip Pop,” Park traces the marketing and critical reception of the group Cibo Matto as an Asian novelty act in the U.S. hip hop music scene, contrasting it with the band’s own visual, textual, and tonal self-representations. The essay reveals popular reception as itself a cultural struggle through Park’s analysis of Cibo Matto’s stylistic engagement with the stereotypes of Asian American women.

The cultural construction of a model minority through a manufactured sound is also addressed in Shilpa Davé’s “Apu’s Brown Voice: Cultural Inflection and South Asian Accents,” where she maps out how ethnic accents produce racial and class hierarchies within the South Asian American and Asian American communities. Focusing on the character and performance of Apu from *The Simpsons* Davé introduces the practice of “brown voice” to elaborate on how vocal representations re-create additional stereotypes.

In the concluding essay, “Secret Asian Man: Angry Asians and the Politics of Cultural Visibility,” Tasha G. Oren reevaluates Asian Americans’ presence as both actors in and consumers of mainstream media in the shadow of the “model minority” myth. As Oren reads media portrayals of angry Asians against public expressions of rage, she revises familiar stereotypes with an appraisal of how anger is a mobilizing cultural force that fosters social and political awareness and alliances.

The essays collected in *Asian American Popular Culture* address a new phase in Asian American studies of media and popular culture by defying the long-standing practice that has kept thematic concentrations on the local, global, mainstream, and historical at a discreet, politically charged distance. It broadens the scope of inquiry by emphasizing the diversity and interaction within and across ethnic, cultural, and national categories. As all the essays in this final section argue, to recognize the fluidity of race in its cultural and popular incarnations is to recognize its political nature. By situating cultural practices in time, geography, and genre, the authors bring together the dynamic indeterminacy and the solidity of

“real politics” to this current moment in our cultural life. As this collection is also an invitation to further research, we look forward to the next one.

NOTES

1. Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* (Durham: Duke UP, 1997); David Eng, *Racial Castration: Managing Masculinity in Asian America* (Durham: Duke UP, 2001); Peter Feng, *Identities in Motion: Asian American Film and Video* (Durham: Duke UP, 2003); Josephine Lee, *Performing Race and Ethnicity* (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1997); and David Palimbu-Liu, *Asian/Americans: Historical Crossings in a Racial Frontier* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1999).

2. Aihwa Ong, *Flexible Citizenship: The Cultural Logics of Transnationality* (Durham: Duke UP, 1999).

3. Kandice Chuh, *Imagine Otherwise: On Asian American Critiques* (Durham: Duke UP, 2003).