Shilpa Davé, Leilani Nishime, and Tasha Oren (eds.),
Global Asian American Popular Cultures

New York: New York University Press, 2016

Nelly Mok

Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/inmedia/1842>

DOI: 10.4000/inmedia.1842

ISSN: 2259-4728

Publisher

Center for Research on the English-Speaking World (CREW)

Printed version

Date of publication: 15 December 2019

Electronic reference

Nelly Mok, "Shilpa Davé, Leilani Nishime, and Tasha Oren (eds.), *Global Asian American Popular Cultures*", *InMedia* [Online], 7.2. | 2019, Online since , connection on 26 January 2021. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/inmedia/1842> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/inmedia.1842>

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REFERENCES

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- 1 *Global Asian American Popular Cultures* expands the discussion initiated in the editors' first volume, *East Main Street: Asian American Popular Culture*, published a decade earlier. Exploring an impressively wide range of media forms and privileging a stimulating interdisciplinary critical approach, the twenty-two essays collected here thoughtfully address questions that remain pivotal to Asian American cultural studies: "How do we engage with culture? How do Asian Americans continue to influence the popular, and what are the limits and distinctions between mainstream and the margins?" (2)
- 2 The book strives to answer these questions throughout four balanced sections: "Stars and Celebrities", "Making Community", "Wading in the Mainstream", and "Migration and Transnational Popular Culture". Such evasive titles are obviously meant not to reduce the theoretical and thematic scope covered by the necessarily overlapping analyses featured here and to encourage a non-linear, dynamic critical reading. If indeed the volume does move, quite unsurprisingly, from an individual/star-centered approach to Asian Americans' negotiations of (self-)imposed representational scripts in U.S. cultural life to a broader, community-oriented one and the ultimate claim of the hybrid(ized), transnational origins of Asian American popular culture(s), its loose partitioning does not so much map a rhetorical trajectory than sketch permeable subforums. With each section heading, the editors signal their wish not to subsume the

essays to one focus while complying with the (quite artificial) academic convention of book-length essay construction. More than ever, the critical approach to Asian American popular culture-s should be intersectional, dialogical, and *plural*, as is implied in the title shift from the editors' first volume to the one under review.

- 3 The first section, entitled "Stars and Celebrities", debunks the common belief that Asian American stars have been absent in the U.S. media landscape. It explores the rise to stardom by historical and contemporary, mainstream and underground Asian American celebrity icons in various cultural fields. As the chapters in this section delve into the socio-cultural and economic factors that account for the popular and/or critical as well as commercial successes of Hollywood film stars Bruce Lee and James Shigeta, boxing champion Manny Pacquiao, *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* best-selling author Amy Chua, YouTube/*Amazing Race* star Kevin Wu, aka KevJumba, and controversial street artist David Choe, they shed light on the "cultural role" (3) assumed by the individual. The star/celebrity's "exceptional" status and hyper-/visibility in U.S. cultural life, as is observed in this section, is necessarily determined by his/her ideological positioning and potential for communal and/or national representativeness, which is to be validated by commercial success. Julia H. Lee's article "Model Maternity: Amy Chua and Asian American Motherhood" and Wendy Sung's essay "David Choe's 'KOREANS GONE BAD': The L.A. Riots, Comparative Racialization, and Branding a Politics of Deviance" provide particularly insightful analyses of Asian American celebrities' complex and deeply ambivalent relationships with white dominant representations of Asian men and women in the age of "neoliberal multiculturalism" (62), an age when the commodification of identity, especially its racial and ethnic components, underlies any cultural production. Focusing on Amy Chua's fame following the publication of her memoir *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* in 2011, Lee interrogates the author's problematic contribution to the construction of Chinese American racial identity through her representation of Chinese American motherhood as she claims the advantages of Chinese-style parenting, commonly deemed as extreme, over-controlling, over Western education. Lee argues that even as Chua champions Chinese American motherhood, she actually perpetuates the historical socio-cultural and political erasure of Chinese and Asian subjects who fail to follow the model minority script for want of the very privileges that Chua enjoys as a Yale law professor, the wife of fellow professor and writer Jed Rubenfeld, and an attractive, well-groomed woman to boot. Conversely, Sung's analysis of Korean American and Koreatown native street artist David Choe's 2010 self-titled book of selected artwork, which opens on his teenage account of his decisive experience of the 1992 Los Angeles riots, puts forward an opposed assimilative trajectory, one that is not "vertical" like Chua's but which "implies a horizontal [cross-racial] affinity", as Sung puts it, drawing from Vijay Prashad (96). Sung contends that Choe subverts what she calls the "sa-i-gu subject", "a Korean post-riot identity based on victimhood, loss, and the mourning of capital and imaginary dreams" (95), by subscribing to his own "politics of deviancy" mainly built on criminality, cross-racial rebellion (albeit one that evinces ambivalent feelings towards Black and Latino communities), and hypermasculinity. Choe's deviancy thus indexes his rejection of the "racial politic [sic] of respectability and white sympathy" (94) which Amy Chua advocates. When read alongside each other, Lee's and Sung's essays bring to light the two opposite ends of what sociologist Claire Jean Kim describes as "racial triangulation", namely "the way that Asian Americans have been caught in a rhetorical middle within America's dominant racial hierarchy, seen as

simultaneously worthwhile and industrious as well as inassimilable, perpetually foreign, and unsuitable for the melting pot in America” (95). Still, however divergent Chua’s and Choe’s negotiations of assimilation into U.S. socio-cultural life may be, one can but note that their fames are inescapably indebted to strategic racialization: if, as Lee observes, Chua capitalizes on the model minority construct imposed on Asian Americans, promoting a market-driven approach to Asian American identity, Choe capitalizes on his showy dismissal of such a construct through his “‘KOREANS GONE BAD’ trope” (100), thereby meeting the demands of “street art’s anti-brand-driven culture”, as Sung observes, drawing on Sarah Banet-Weiser’s reflections on the genre’s commodification of “authenticity” wherein artistic legitimacy is equated with performed marginality (98). Although Sung qualifies her statement about Choe’s market-driven aesthetics of identity, reading his work as “an interesting case in which his utility of these associations collides with the differential politics of racialization” (99), Lee’s reading of Chua’s memoir as “an expression of agency that trades upon racial and gender codes/discourses as much as it is captive to them” (71) ironically formulates the inescapable split inherent in the constructions of Asian Americans’ celebrity personae.

- 4 In the second section, pragmatically entitled “Making Community”, the volume moves from an individual-centered approach to a community-oriented reading of Asian Americans’ relationships with their dominant representations, which are structured by “racial triangulation”, as is pointed out in the first section. If the analyses featured here understand “community” primarily as the result of common national and ethnic identity formations, they ascribe to it a more global significance, envisaging it as a transnational/transcultural site for resisting and reimagining racial constructs through the media of Khmerican rap music, the Pakistani radio programming in Houston, TX, the Vietnamese American graphic novel as a space for an alternative narrative of racial and ethnic identities, and the digital, especially one of its main cultural outputs that is food blogging and its creative socio-cultural and political use in interactive community-building online museum exhibitions. As the authors in this section spell out the many responses of Asian Americans to the trauma of war, rupture, and racism, their contrasted survival strategies in the U.S. and the ways they negotiate mainstream expectations of “authenticity”, they highlight the potential for cultural identification, appropriation, cross-pollination and relationality of the productions under scrutiny. Konrad Ng’s essay “Online Asian American Popular Culture, Digitization, and Museums” stands out as a particularly significant contribution to the book’s discussion on global Asian American popular culture(s) since it formulates the essential connection—or rather, identification—between race and digital technology, drawing on Wendy Hui Kyong Chun’s thesis of “digital racial formation” that urges to consider “race as technology” (140). Focusing on online exhibitions launched in 2013 and 2014 by the Smithsonian Institution’s Asian Pacific American Center (APAC), for which Ng worked as director from 2011 to 2015, the author highlights the ethic and creative roles of museum digitization in the national understanding and re-imagining of the issues of race and more specifically, of Asian American identity. Among the three case studies discussed, the #WikiAPA and #LifeAPA online initiatives on Wikipedia, Flickr, and Instagram for the 2014 Asian Pacific American Heritage Month exemplify the Smithsonian APAC’s innovative “curatorial notion of digitizing commemorations”, based on “the idea that active knowledge about Asian Americans is derived from online sources (...) and how Asian Americans see platforms of online popular culture as

legitimate sources for the Asian American experience” (146). Ng dismisses the narrow understanding of digital technology as a mere tool to optimize collections management and broaden public access to museums, considering it rather as an empowering medium for Asian Americans’ (self-)expressions and representations and as the source of a necessarily participatory—therefore democratic—forum for both cultural producers and consumers on the issues of race, citizenship and national identity. As evinced by the APAC’s online exhibitions Ng examines, “the popular digital meaning making of Asian America is the meaning making of national identity” (142). Because such cultural outputs provide interactive, inter-subjective spaces in which Asian Americans can indeed be represented “in unfamiliar terms” (142), beyond the either-forever-alien-or-model-minority dichotomy to which they have been confined throughout national history, they offer necessary alternate, complicated, and multidimensional experiences of the American self. Interestingly, Ng’s premise that “convergence culture”—Henry Jenkins’s term to refer to “the digital age’s increased interactivity and repositioning of cultural producers, consumers, and industries” (139)—holds the potential for a global, transnational re-conceiving of race and identity, fruitfully echoes Vincent Pham and Kent A. Ono’s focus on the empowering function of “media convergence” in the first section of the book. Pham and Ono offer a fascinating analysis of YouTube Chinese American teenage star Kevin Wu aka KevJumba’s use of “media convergence” or “the ease of migration across media platforms and on- and offline contexts” (77)—from YouTube into mainstream broadcast TV and back, in KevJumba’s case—to reconcile his reality TV show persona with his preexisting YouTube persona. In controlling the “media convergence” around his persona, Kevin Wu “elucidates the dangers and difficulty of mainstream media representation as it attempts to fit him into well-worn tropes.” (84-85). If Ng’s interest in community-built digital cultural significance differs from Pham and Ono’s individual-centered focus, both essays bring to light one of the most forceful arguments of the book: thinking of “race as technology” invites to a dialogic reading and an interactive, participatory, and “convergent” (re)conceptualization of identity and national belonging.

- 5 The third section further attests to the resilience of the racial categories that have affected Asian Americans’ representations ever since the first waves of Asian immigration to the U.S. at the end of the nineteenth century and the resulting emergence of Yellow Peril fears, which materialized into a string of anti-Chinese/anti-Asian laws in U.S. history. The essays garnered here probe the generic delineations of the media forms they focus on, examining Hollywood-produced tourist films and more particularly Elvis Presley’s Hawaiian movies in the late 1950s and early 1960s, the post-9/11 representation of Asian female immigrants in the sci-fi TV series *Battlestar Galactica*, indie rock band Born in Chinese and the L.A.-based multidisciplinary art organization Tuesday Night Project as sites for the expression of an Asian Pacific American (APA) consciousness, as well as onstage and/or onscreen competition shows through spelling bee competitions and cooking competition TV shows like *Iron Chef*, which have been dominated by South Asians and East Asians respectively. The authors in this section analyze Asian American communities’ vexed and fraught contributions to U.S. cultural life, a delicate process for “wading in the mainstream” bears the risk of drowning as much as it holds out hope for keeping afloat. Although the essays collected here investigate a wide array of media forms, they commonly argue that cultural productions necessarily go through the process of cultural marketing and (racial) branding. While the first section of the book introduced this premise by focusing on

Asian American individual negotiations of such neoliberal constraints, this section develops it by examining collective cultural productions created by and/or featuring Asians that invariably walk a tightrope between performing dominant national narratives of assimilation and appropriating them, inscribing their differences and particularities within them. The three editors' contributions conveniently map this section's main line of thought. In "Post-9/11 Global Migration in *Battlestar Galactica*", Leilani Nishime examines the gendered and racialized representations of Asian American women in the science-fiction cable television series *Battlestar Galactica* (2004-2009) through the contrasted developments and narrative trajectories of its two Asian female characters, Tory Foster, played by South Asian Canadian actress Rekha Sharma, and Athena, embodied by Korean Canadian actress Grace Park. Nishime's reading points out the continuing confinement of Asian women to (techno)Orientalist stereotypes—interestingly reminiscent of the Dragon Lady-Lotus Blossom/China Doll dyad identified by critics like Elaine H. Kim and Renee E. Tajima in the 1980sⁱ—in a post-9/11 context that has inevitably revived Yellow Peril fears and "racialized [Asian] bodies within the U.S. borders" (202) by accentuating Americans' dominant conflation of Asians with the reductive depictions of either the deceptive, sexually deviant "forever alien" whose terroristic purposes are only latent or the self-sacrificing model immigrant desperate for assimilation, as is exemplified respectively by the characters of Tory Foster and Athena. Although the characters evolve along "competing domestic paradigms of race and national identity" (198), their scripted journeys ultimately equate cultural citizenship and national belonging with an assimilative pattern built on "heterosexual domesticity that renounces all transnational attachments" (9) by either punishing or rewarding the characters' non-/conformity to "strictly delineated traditional gender roles" (205). Shilpa Davé's essay "Winning the Bee: South Asians, Spelling Bee Competitions, and American Racial Branding" and Tasha Oren's paper "The Blood Sport of Cooking: On Asian American Chefs and Television" eventually trace brighter perspectives, locating viable ways out of the racializing paradigms imposed on Asian Americans' trajectories in their complicated, personal relationships with the generic boundaries of the media forms in which they are (over)represented, particularly that of competition shows. Davé probes the socio-cultural, economic and commercial factors underlying the evolution of the corporate-sponsored South Asian Spelling Bee, as well as that of other independent Indian and Indian American spelling bee contests—actually pre-professional bees preparing for the National Bee—as opposed to and in relation to the Scripps National Spelling Bee. The author puts forward the ways the South Asian community has tailored the format and brand of the National Bee along its immigrant aspirations, community interests, and cultural values, which are mostly informed by the belief in the collective foundation of educational and entrepreneurial/individual yet always family/community-oriented success. Similarly, albeit in a different Asian American-dominated niche of popular culture, that of the cooking competition TV shows, Oren brings to light how Asian American overrepresentation in unscripted competition formats has significantly contributed to making space for representational difference in such venues of popular culture beyond the narrative constraints of the model minority construct, most notably by "refigur[ing] cuisine into a personality spectacle" (249), and "us[ing] the theoretically unscripted nature of the [cooking competition] medium to constitute positions and personalities that run counter to prefigured types" (258). Although Oren acknowledges the structural role of media convergence in a global understanding of racial formations

and their historical and contemporary constructions—a claim which the first and second sections of the book make clear—she accounts for her “television-centered analysis” (245), arguing that mapping the evolution of “particular types of representations” “within a given medium and genre” is paramount to appreciating their creative, even subversive, dynamism (249). As she traces the generic evolution of the cooking competition format throughout food TV history, Oren offers a compelling insight into the “global genesis” (252) of the pivotal popular food competition TV show *Iron Chef*, an originally Japanese show aired on a local cable station in 1996, then first aired on American TV in 1999, which stands out as the product of “the then-nascent European task-and-elimination format of reality TV”, “the Japanese single-ingredient-cooking stadium and judging-panel formula” (255), and the necessary cultural and behavioral adjustments to an American audience. Highlighting the transcultural fabric of this cultural product—and thereby hinting at the next and last section’s main argument—Oren demonstrates how it allows the emergence of a “new narrative approach to cooking” (255), which invites to read culinary difference and style as identity.

- 6 The fourth and final section makes salient the fundamentally hybrid(ized) nature of Asian American popular culture(s) and the constant circulation of cultural objects and narratives across borders, hence laying bare the intrinsic fluidity and dynamism of culture. The essays collected here examine the transnational flows which underlie the ongoing formation of Asian American popular culture(s) and how they (re)structure the latter’s negotiations with the issues of race, labor, trade, consumption, and authenticity in a global context. The chapters focus on Bollywood terror—9/11-related—films, (South Korean) Hallyu cultural production through the K-pop phenomenon, the symbolical function of the smell of curry as a highly-charged ideological trope shaping popular (mis)representations of Indian immigrant workers in the information and technology sectors of the U.S., the nascent global popularity of cosmetic contact lenses among Asian and Asian American young women, video game fashion and its strategic—benevolent-sounding yet market-driven—distancing from the unethical reality of Asian sweatshops, and finally, the role of queer *balikbayans*—overseas Filipino workers temporarily or definitively returning to their native country—and the political, cultural and ontological potential of their “failed returns” (349) in Filipino American cinematic and literary (re)definitions of Filipino/a cultural and national subjectivities. Madhavi Mallapragada’s essay “Curry as Code: Food, Race, and Technology” and the chapter by Christopher B. Patterson, “Making Whales out of Peacocks: Virtual Fashion and Asian Female Factory Hands”, offer particularly thought-provoking contributions to the book’s reflection on Asian American (mis)representations in popular imaginary as both explore the question of the visibility/invisibility of the Asian body when exposed to equally racializing hostile discourses or blatant denial. Both essays perceptively point to the contradiction inherent in popular discourses about information technology, which claim the sector’s socio-cultural neutrality due to its intrinsic scientific objectivity (265), and more generally, the proneness of the virtual world to a solidarity economy based on a community-oriented mindset (322), while actually masking xenophobic or neocolonial attitudes towards Asian workers. Patterson’s reading of the “logic of distance”, observed by Thuy Linh Tu’s work in the fashion industry, and exacerbated by virtual fashion as “[a] [self-proclaimed] alternative to exploitative factory work” (323), offers an interesting counterpoint to Mallapragada’s analysis of the sociological and ideological implications of popular discourses on “Indian” curry

smell in the IT workplace. Virtual fashion, Patterson notes, is based on a seemingly benevolent, egalitarian “free-to-play/pay-to-dress freemium system” where gamers’ right to play for free is cleverly indexed to their purchase of avatar-enhancing virtual clothing items; it is thus home to a logic that “removes mental images of Asian sweatshops [most often located in Bangladesh, China, and Indonesia] from the products themselves” (322-323), thereby erasing, invisibilizing the (worn-down) Asian (female) bodies of factory workers from the process of clothing manufacturing. Conversely, in the IT workplace, the “Indian” (male) body is rendered ubiquitous, conspicuously alien by the smell of curry, often described as and reduced to an offensive, invading/infesting bodily odor across online spaces devoted to the U.S. IT and software industry. Unwanted proximity substitutes for neoliberal-induced strategic distancing in this reversed logic which makes the “virtual” immigrant worker visible, while at the same time pinpointing the South Indian community as a foul-smelling, hence undesirable/inassimilable minority, and contributing, as is worth noting, to its erasure from “multicultural” America. In privileging a stimulating dynamic, border-crossing reading of Asian American popular culture(s), this section provides the book with a fitting conclusion as it clarifies the intricately wrought social, cultural, political, economic, and ethic connections and contradictions at stake in the ongoing reflection on what makes (popular) culture “global” in today’s media world.

- 7 *Global Asian American Popular Cultures* vibrantly brings to the fore the transnational nature of global and American cultures, which digital technologies and the global market have significantly reshaped and keep repositioning across and beyond mainstream culture. In historicizing, interrogating and subsequently deconstructing the immigrant-native/citizen dichotomy through which Asian American presence and representations are still being read, the essays collected in the volume partake in the long-standing project of Asian American cultural critique in most incisive and refreshing ways. As the authors gathered here probe Asian American cultural icons and productions’ complex, deeply ambivalent relationships with the process of racialization that inevitably affects minority American cultural expressions and practices, they further expose the myth of post-racial America. This ambitious volume unquestionably constitutes a major contribution to the ongoing discussion of the concepts of race, ethnicity, culture and belonging in Asian American cultural studies.

ENDNOTES

- i. See Elaine H. Kim, *Asian Americans: An Introduction to the Writings and Their Social Context* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1982); Renee E. Tajima, “Lotus Blossoms Don’t Bleed: Images of Asian Women” in *Making Waves: An Anthology of Writings By and About Asian American Women*, ed. Asian Women United of California (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989), 308-317.

AUTHORS

NELLY MOK

Université Paul-Valéry Montpellier 3