

6-2003

Review of Contemporary Asian American Communities, Edited by Linda Vo and Rick Bonus

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Recommended Citation

Lai, J. S. (2003). Contemporary Asian American Communities: Intersections and Divergences (review). *Journal of Asian American Studies*, 6(1), 104–106. <http://doi.org/10.1353/jaas.2003.0029>

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Contemporary Asian American Communities: Intersections and Divergences.
Edited by Linda Vo and Rick Bonus. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2002.

Many compilations have been published on Asian Pacific Americans over the past several years, but none have really challenged existing theoretical assumptions about the “everyday spaces” in contemporary Asian Pacific American communities until now. In *Contemporary Asian American Communities: Intersections and Divergences*, co-edited by Linda Trinh Vo and Rick Bonus, an array of scholars are challenging established scholarly notions about a wide range of topics including the meanings of community, sexual and multi-racial identities, professional and political networks, and new modes of cultural production for Asian Pacific Americans.

Contemporary Asian Pacific American communities cannot be viewed as merely geographically bounded sites. Vo and Bonus assert this thesis in the first part of the collection, “Communities in Transition: Spaces and Practices,” by stating: “We...propose a less territory-centered orientation of community sites, a more unstable or fluid definition of the nature and scope of communities...that goes beyond the dualisms dictated by traditional scholarship” (6). This theoretical perspective is refreshing since ethnic enclaves are traditionally viewed through an ecological lens where Asian immigrants reside among informal ethnic networks and markets in reaction to external hostilities. In Tarry Hum’s chapter, “Asian and Latino Immigration and the Revitalization of Sunset Park, Brooklyn,” Hum argues that Sunset Park consists of “multiple publics” of Caribbean, Latin American, and Asian immigrants that are undergoing constant racial and ethnic reformation due to the global economy and post-1965 immigration settlement patterns. As a result, the perspective of ethnic enclaves as temporary, transitory sites that give way to ethnic succession and assimilation is no longer accurate in understanding the present and future trajectories of such community sites. Along with challenging theoretical notions of community, part one also challenges the assumptions of ethnic and sexual identity formation among immigrants as a static process of linear assimilation.

Ethnic and sexual identity formation for Asian Americans embodies multi-level processes, each differently influenced by various intersections and divergences. Two articles that expound this thesis are Russell Jeung’s article, “Southeast Asians in the House: Multiple Levels of Identity” and Eric Wat’s article, “Gay Asian Men in Los Angeles Before the 1980s.” Jeung makes the argument that ethnic identification with one’s ethnic group over time can result in a heightened ethnic identity, not necessarily a decline as some have argued. In his

case study of Southeast Asian immigrant youth in Oakland, California, Jeung illustrates how the formation of ethnic identity consists of multiple stages rather than eventual assimilation. During the last stage of identity formation, Jeung found that Southeast Asian youth identity and subculture took on a pan-ethnic characteristic or a “racialized ethnicity” in reaction to discrimination from competing minority groups, which ultimately transcended ethnic differences. In regard to sexual identity formation, the Wat chapter expands on his previous work on homosexual Asian American men in Los Angeles and the cultural and racial paradoxes that they often encounter in gay public spaces. Wat provides a glimpse into a hidden sector of the Asian American community — which has been neglected in Asian American Studies — where sexuality, gender, and race converge in distinct and interesting ways that are both alienating and uplifting for them. This paradox uniquely defines their experiences as distinct from that of other homosexual males.

The five articles contained in the second part of this volume, “Communities in Transformation: Identities and Generations,” build on contemporary transformations and developments of the Asian American identity, including challenges to its coherency. The article “Pacific Islander Americans and Asian American Identity” by Debbie Hippolite Wright and Paul Spickard critiques the perspective held by many Asian American scholars, myself included, that a pan-Asian political identity is developing. According to Wright and Spickard, Pacific Islanders have increasingly become disenchanted in being associated with the “Asian American” category. Instead, Pacific Islanders are beginning to form their own pan-ethnic identity among themselves, a reaction to being lumped with Asians, with whom they share little in common in regard to culture and socio-economic background. Such a finding is a significant critique of the “power in numbers” strategy espoused by Asian Pacific American organizations and leaders who are trying to influence future policies and resource allocations in the racial state.

The ability to construct political and ethnic identities illustrates the agency of Asian Americans in shaping and reshaping how they are viewed both within and outside of their communities. Rebecca Chiyoko King’s article, “Eligible to be Japanese American: Multiraciality in Basketball Leagues and Beauty Pageants,” sheds light on how some Japanese American communities are employing strategies adapted to local context to redefine ethnic identity. King argues that a “transracial ethnic strategy” is used by Japanese American organizations to determine who can qualify and participate in their activities in order to incorporate those of mixed Japanese American descent. It is an intriguing way of looking at the

processes that determine the continuation and meanings of Japanese American identity. As King notes from her field research, who and what is defined as Japanese American is dependent on both geographic location and local context.

The volume's third and final part, "Communities of Alternatives: Representations and Politics," examines the situational differences within the Asian American community by looking at the intersections of gender, sexuality, race, and class. The four articles constituting this section focus on the different intersections and meanings of these categories for Asian Americans, and on how they impact Asian Americans in the area of political activism within larger social, economic, and political institutions and organizations. For example, Edward Park shows in his article, "Asian Pacific Americans and Urban Politics," that the traditional Black-White liberal model that defined the political ascendancy of Black Power in cities such as Los Angeles and Philadelphia is not appropriate in the multi-racial contexts of contemporary cities. The inability of both Black and White liberal political leaders to incorporate new immigrants, such as Korean Americans, into their existing coalitions illustrate the future challenges that Asian Americans face within multi-racial political coalitions.

Overall, *Contemporary Asian American Communities* will provoke new insight and stimulate interesting discussion among those in Asian American Studies about the dynamic changes occurring within the contemporary Asian American community and the methods by which such changes are addressed.

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***A Postmodern Psychology of Asian Americans: Creating Knowledge of a Racial Minority (Alternatives in Psychology).* By Laura Uba.** New York: State University of New York Press, 2002.

Laura Uba's *A Postmodern Psychology of Asian Americans: Creating Knowledge of a Racial Minority* uses a deconstructionist, postmodernist viewpoint to challenge traditional views of both Asian American psychology and modernist, empirical psychology in general. Traditional models and theories, research techniques, concepts, assumptions, and terminology are all reviewed within the text, asking the reader to question many of the basic tenets long held in the aforementioned disciplines. Yet the audience for this book extends to many other academic fields in which the study of ethnicity and minority American populations figures.