

Transnationalizing Asian American Studies: Two Perspectives

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Christian Collet and Pei-Te Lien, eds. *The Transnational Politics of Asian Americans*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2009. 252 pp. \$74.50 cloth, \$29.95 paper.

Setsu Shigematsu and Keith L. Camacho, eds. *Militarized Currents: Toward a Decolonized Future in Asia and the Pacific*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2010. 408 pp. \$82.50 cloth, \$27.50 paper.

It has been nearly a generation since scholars called for more transnational work in Asian American Studies, and these two books demonstrate the range of approaches and interpretations that have followed. They respond both to intellectual shifts and to social changes. The Asian American Movement of the 1960s, as historian Arif Dirlik has noted, “embedded the problems of Asian America in US soil.” However, while all the scholars involved in these two volumes owe—and acknowledge—their debts to that critical nationalist gesture, they all struggle with the realization that much has changed in the intervening decades. New migration patterns and class formations, changing US foreign relations in the wake of the Cold War, rapidly growing Asian economies, globalizing cultural practices, and a shakeup in academic knowledge production have generated new questions, and collectively these two volumes offer more than twenty new answers.

The Transnational Politics of Asian Americans confronts two puzzles about the political participation of Asian migrants and their descendants. An older scholarly literature in the social sciences measured the relatively low naturalization, voting, and party affiliation rates of Asian Americans and concluded that their deep engagement with the politics of home countries was precluding full participation in the US political process. Eager to solve what they identified as a “problem,” scholars then pondered its causes and predicted its demise would follow as second-generation Asian Americans moved into the civic mainstream. Yet, as several of the

essays in *The Transnational Politics of Asian Americans* make clear, an intellectual frame of belonging and assimilation asks the wrong questions and thus comes to flawed conclusions. Participation in the political affairs of the “home country” (a concept that itself comes under frequent scrutiny here) has often deepened and facilitated Asian Americans’ sense of themselves as political actors in a transnational space that includes—but is not limited to—the United States.

As Hiroko Furuya and Christian Collet show, Vietnamese migrants who came to the US after 1975 were not the jet-setting, remittance-sending, cell-phoning migrants that many associate with contemporary transnationalism. They were exiles and refugees starkly divided from the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. Their public efforts to keep Vietnamese politics on the American agenda responded to local concerns in ethnic enclaves but also prompted a broader engagement with US politics. Augusto Espiritu contributes the book’s strongest essay, a historical account of the anti-martial law activities of radical Filipino Americans in the 1970s. Espiritu’s sources dissolve the false division between a first generation preoccupied with the homeland and a second that thinks only of finding its place in the American mosaic. Migrants who opposed the regime of Ferdinand Marcos knew that US support was crucial to his survival, and they also knew that they had privileges of free speech available only outside the Philippines, so they poured their energies into US-based social movements. Their children saw no distinction between the domestic and the foreign; they considered their “involvement in long-distance nationalism” a “vital necessity for the advancement of their own struggles for racial and ethnic equality” (39), and they defended it, even from cadres of the Communist Party of the Philippines who dismissed Filipino Americans’ efforts to confront American racism and US foreign policy.

The Transnational Politics of Asian Americans grapples with a second puzzle, aptly captured in the title of an essay by Christian Collet and Ikumi Koakutsu, “Does Transnational Living Preclude Pan-Ethnic Thinking?” Leaders of the Asian American Movement argued that shared histories of racialization, exclusion, and discrimination in the United States had generated pan-ethnic social realities that could serve as the foundation of a unified pan-ethnic political coalition. However, does deep engagement with home country politics—which is often the work of recent migrants and is often an explicitly nationalistic project—impede the formation of alliances grounded in the American experience? Here the evidence is more mixed. Sangay Mishra contrasts the efforts of Indian American elites to carve out a space for themselves in the politics of US-Indian relations with the undertakings of South Asian Americans who organized against racial discrimination in the wake of the September 11 attacks. While it is clear his sympathies lie with a pan-ethnic people of color critique, his findings demonstrate the persistent power of nationalism in transnational politics. The survey data gathered by Collet and Koakutsu largely confirms what we already know—that “Asian American” is a diverse, complicated, and rapidly changing category, and that “while pan-ethnicity remains a popular

option for most, it is just that—one of many options one can use to describe oneself” (184).

Overall, *The Transnational Politics of Asian Americans* is a valuable addition to the ways we think about political participation, identity formation, and the nation–state itself during a time of rapid transition. A rich variety of evidence undergirds the authors’ claims: ethnographic fieldwork, survey data, and archival records. It is to the editors’ credit that they gather a wide range of approaches and link historians and cultural studies scholars with those in the social sciences. Collet and Lien have compiled an invaluable guide to the rapidly changing politics of our contemporary moment. The essays could have traced more systematically the broad sweeping historical changes of the last three decades. I put down the volume knowing more about Asian Americans’ voting habits, but wanting to hear more about the Voting Rights Act of 1964 and the redistricting fights that accompanied the vicious anti–immigrant politics of the 1990s. I knew more about the legacies of America’s Immigration Act of 1965, but read only fleetingly about Overseas Citizenship of India policies, the legal terms of Vietnam’s Doi Moi restructuring, or efforts based in Beijing to mobilize the Chinese diaspora. Moreover, I wanted to read a fuller analysis of the recent transformations of global political economy that go by the name of neoliberalism. With neoliberalism came new migration streams (less the product of immigration laws than of changing labor markets), new political structures in sending countries, and remittances, remittances, remittances. A more vigorously transnational approach would help understand how sending countries’ decisions matter—and how social, economic, and geopolitical forces are remaking Asian societies as well as the United States. Very few of the authors engage systematically with Asian source material or the politics of Asian states. Although there are exceptions—particularly Hiromi Monobe’s perceptive essay on Nisei internationalism in interwar Hawai’i—the essays here focus on Asian Americans and transnationalize by looking outward from the United States. That leads the book as a whole to ask American questions and come up with American answers.

The essays collected in *Militarized Currents: Toward a Decolonized Future in Asia and the Pacific* highlight the importance of what Don Nakanishi called “critical transnational studies” as central to the authors’ collective effort to “forge a collaboration that examines how militarization has constituted a structuring force that connects the histories of the Japanese and US empires across the regions of Asia and the Pacific Islands” (xv). In their Introduction, Setsu Shigematsu and Keith L. Camacho explain that they chose the metaphor of “currents” to draw attention to the Pacific Ocean as a site of analysis and to convey the swirl and motion of transnational politics. One might add another meaning—that of electric current—to convey the energy and power that run through this exciting new collection.

Militarized Currents proceeds from a shared aim of “centering the Pacific” (xxxii). In the vast new literature that seeks to transnationalize our understanding of Asia and the United States, the Pacific has figured primarily as a metaphor for

movement, crossing, and exchange. Yet, it was—and is—also a peopled place and a subjugated landscape; its multiple histories are crucial chapters in the histories of exploitation and decolonization. Understanding militarism in the Pacific requires an analysis of empire—a word that is largely absent from *The Transnational Politics of Asian Americans*. It also requires the study of the historical layering of empires—Japanese and most notably American—that did so much in the twentieth century to structure militarism’s “currents” in Asia and the Pacific. All the essays in *Militarized Currents* are concerned with militarism—defined here broadly as a set of power relations and a way of life. The authors understand militaries not only as destructive institutions but constructive forces that generate new identities, social relations, and political structures. Colonized subjects have been crucial participants in that process. Foreign affairs have prompted the US military to remake the social landscape of twentieth-century Guam; but, as Keith Camacho and Laurel A. Monnig show, cultural practices have also embedded militarism within Chamorro culture. Likewise, in a study based on oral history interviews of US Navy families in San Diego, Theresa Cenidoza Suarez traces the investments of both men and women in what she terms “militarized Filipino masculinity.”

The authors’ scholarly commitments add up to an ambitious intellectual battle against invisibility: of empire in studies of the United States; of Asian Americans in contemporary US politics; and of the Pacific and its peoples within the subfields of Asian American Studies and Asia-Pacific Rim area studies. Teresia K. Teaiwa reprints an essay on the Bikini Islands that entwines a history of American beachgoing with a suppressed history of Pacific destruction. Vernadette Vicuña Gonzalez follows tourists through military sites in Corregidor and Bataan and argues that narratives of the shared masculine sacrifice of Americans and Filipinos have obscured landscapes of war memory that might divide the two nations. Katharine H.S. Moon explores why memories of the exploitation of World War II-era Korean “comfort women” have galvanized Korean (and international) politics while the ongoing exploitation of militarized sexual labor in South Korea remains politically invisible.

These struggles against obscurity, effacement, and invisibility are uphill battles. In a trenchant essay on the persistent appeal of militarism in contemporary Guam, Michael Lujan Bevacqua explores the island’s “banal ambiguity,” which has obscured its centrality for generations. Many of the collection’s authors are concerned with what Bevacqua calls the “spectrally indistinct,” those histories and memories of racialized and gendered violence that repeatedly flutter through, but consistently elude, global political consciousness: ghosts, as he puts it, “that do not haunt” (33). Yet, sometimes the marginal places erased from the mental maps of nation-states are in fact productive sites for a politics of resistance and decolonization. Wesley Iwao Ueunten offers a gripping account of a 1970 uprising against the US military in Okinawa, and situates that within Okinawa’s ongoing invisibility in both the United States and Japan.

Militarized Currents offers a different vision of politics and a different kind of transnationalism than *The Transnational Politics of Asian Americans*. Is it also a different Asian American Studies? Is it Asian American Studies at all? A generation ago, a collection of articles on US and Japanese foreign relations in the Asia Pacific would have fit uneasily on a bookshelf of Asian American Studies. Moreover, many of the volume's authors would have explicitly rejected being included under that rubric. However, the field must include these questions and these answers. It should be required reading for anyone interested in the intertwined histories and cultures of the United States, Asia, and the Pacific.

In her 1995 essay "Denationalization Reconsidered," Sau-ling Wong expressed her concern that new studies of diaspora and transnationalism could prompt studies and political efforts that "would leave America's racialized power structure intact." Only by taking these two volumes together can scholars appreciate the need to confront power structures that span national boundaries by crossing our own national, disciplinary, and imaginary borders. That will require a critical approach that understands politics broadly and brings diverse forms of academic inquiry to bear. It demands a truly transnational Asian American Studies that reads deeply in the scholarly literatures of other nation-states. Reading these two volumes conveys the possibilities of that project, and reminds us what is at stake.