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Review Of "Asian Diasporas: Cultures, Identities, Representations" Edited By R.B.H. Goh And S. Wong

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Asian Diasporas: Cultures, Identities, Representations. Edited by ROBBIE B. H. GOH and SHAWN WONG. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2004. vi, 208 pp. \$45.00 (cloth); \$22.95 (paper).

The title of this collection of essays, *Asian Diasporas: Cultures, Identities, Representations*, promises a plurality of viewpoints. Aiming to expand and interrogate our

notion of “diaspora” from diverse geographic sites, the volume incorporates essays across disciplines, including literary criticism, film studies, anthropology, and cultural studies. Based on papers originally collected for the Asian Diasporas and Cultures conference held at the National University of Singapore in 2001, the comparative analytical framework of this book makes an important contribution to studies of Asian diasporas outside the United States, specifically focusing on diasporic populations in Southeast Asia, Australia, Canada, and Britain. As Robbie Goh notes in his introduction, “[a] study of Asian diasporic cultures cannot entirely ignore America, of course, but the condition of Asian communities in the U.S. will then form only one part of a global diasporic picture, rather than the exclusive or main focus that it constitutes in many of the studies of ‘Asian American cultures’” (p. 9). Yet while Goh and Shawn Wong seek to develop a more fluid notion of “diaspora,” the volume remains surprisingly narrow in its geographical definition of “Asia.” The collection focuses on Chinese and Indian diasporic populations, lacking essays on more recent Asian diasporas such as the Hmong or older migratory populations such as the Japanese in South America.

The essays primarily engage theories of hybridity and multiculturalism. Homi Bhabha’s work in postcolonial studies provides a singular analytical framework for many essays in this volume: several authors contest and affirm Bhabha’s contributions to theories of hybridity and difference. Yet, one of the pitfalls of Bhabha’s work, the absence of a critical study of race, also marks this collection of essays. Asian diasporas are sites of hybrid cultural and political identities, but diasporas are also, importantly, productive sites of racial difference. In this context, the volume’s contribution to critical studies of multiculturalism must be strengthened. While many of the essays briefly note that multiculturalism is the primary organizing narrative of racial difference in the United States, Canada, Australia, and Britain, the distinct history of racial formation in each of these geographic sites is largely elided. Instead, Ryan Bishop and John Phillips argue in “Diasporic Communities and Identity Politics” that Asian diasporas are formed under “the insignia of the military” (p. 162)—the symbolic violence of military conflict—thereby eclipsing distinct histories of colonial (and racial) difference that give rise to divergent narratives of hybridity in diaspora.

The strength of *Asian Diasporas* lies in its comparative geographical and methodological framework. Goh’s essay “Diaspora and Violence: Cultural/Spatial Production, Abjection, and Exchange” provides a provocative synthesis of the physical and psychic architecture of Chinatowns in London, Birmingham, Vancouver, Chicago, and Melbourne in order to foreground the multicultural politics that attempt to contain Chinatown as a tourist destination, while also drawing attention to the racial violence that limns its spatial borders. Likewise, Wenche Ommundsen’s ethnographic study of Chinese immigrants in Australia explores cultural citizenship across class, generation, and geographical origin. Situating her ethnography within the longer historical context of anti-Asian immigration policies in Australia, Ommundsen begins to outline notions of “Chineseness” in diaspora. Many of the strongest essays in this collection are literary readings of diasporic writers, including Bharati Mukherjee, Rohinton Mistry, Shirley Geok-lin Lim, and Russell Leong. Walter S. H. Lim’s essay on Leong’s short stories, *Phoenix Eyes*, importantly examines the impact of sexuality on formations of diasporic Asian identity; yet when Lim argues that *Phoenix Eyes* cannot “finally transcend the *Orientalist* inflection of the East as an inchoate cultural space that supports thriving deviant sexualities” (p. 159), his work denies the analytical import of queer diasporic reading practices.

One of the major challenges that the volume faces is in reconciling two divergent political viewpoints: what Jeffrey Partridge calls the rift between “claiming America” and “claiming diaspora” (p. 132). In his essay on Shirley Geok-lin Lim’s novel, *Joss and Gold*, Partridge assumes that there is a dichotomy between Asian American and diasporic analytical frameworks, which leads him to argue for the autonomy of Lim’s female protagonist, who claims neither one nor the other. Indeed, when the protagonist chooses to leave Malaysia for Singapore rather than the United States, Partridge asserts that Lim succeeds in deferring the hegemony of an “Asian American” narrative of diaspora. While Partridge’s reading of the novel remains incomplete, his essay highlights the dominance of U.S.-centered frameworks of diaspora, which, as the editors of this volume argue, often eclipse the multivalent histories of globalization that characterize narratives of Asian migration. Emphasizing this productive debate—among the categories of Asia, Asian America, and diaspora—would enable the authors in this collection to broaden not only the geographical map of Asian diasporas but also the intellectual domain of diaspora studies.

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