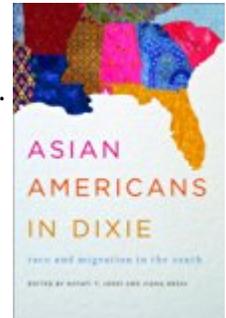


Khyati Y. Joshi, Jigna Desai, eds.. *Asian Americans in Dixie: Race and Migration in the South*. Asian American Experience Series. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2013. 320 pp. \$30.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-252-07938-2.



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The anthology *Asian Americans in Dixie: Race and Immigration in the South*, edited by Khyati Y. Joshi and Jigna Desai, is the work of a multidisciplinary group of scholars, whose combined efforts challenge received narratives about both the US South and Asian America. The volume includes abstract theoretical essays about Asian American racialization and about the South as a transnational space deeply connected to global history, and it balances these with data-driven historical and sociocultural studies of nationally identified Asian American groups in specific historic moments and geographic locations. Together, the introduction and ten chapters, grouped in three topical sections, work to disrupt narratives of southern isolation and exceptionalism, of the southern (and US) racial landscape imagined as a black-white binary, and of Asian America imagined as a largely California-centered paradigm. As the volume editors argue in the introduction, the various essays take as a starting place that the South “is a space of transnationalism, contact, intimacy, and presence rather than isolationism and absence”

(p. 6). The anthology represents an important contribution to scholarship across the fields of American studies, southern studies, critical race theory, and migration and transnational studies.

I was hesitant to write this review because I am not a scholar of Asian America, but the parallels in the volume for those of us looking at Latino experiences in the South are useful and multiple. Asian Americans and Latinos have had overlapping experiences of struggle with cultural and legal strictures framed in black and white in the US racial landscape, and of the resulting social place as the perpetual foreigner. This volume’s regional focus on the US South does not set the South apart as exceptional, but it does set the dynamics for Asian Americans in the black-white binary into sharp relief. As Leslie Bow asks in her contribution to the volume, “Where did the Asian sit on the segregated bus?” (p. 55). Such questions challenge traditional narratives of the South and open new pathways for exploring the complexity and interrelatedness of the US South with global history and the interconnectedness of US racial con-

structions more generally. As the volume editors explain in the introduction, “While usually considered in isolation from each other, it is abundantly apparent that Asian and Latino histories of migration, labor, racial ideologies, and state management are conjoined” and that “racial ideologies often compare and contrast the groups, pitting them against each other and assigning values of desirability and belonging” (p. 12).

In the introduction, “Discrepancies in Dixie: Asian Americans and the South,” Desai and Joshi set the tone for the volume by indicating the centrality of immigration, transnationalism, and race to studies of the South. Situating the South as a “global geopolitical space” and southern history in relation to capitalism, colonialism, and nationalism, the editors argue that the US South is deeply connected with the Caribbean, Latin America, and the Atlantic world. In a sweeping reach across multiple histories, the introduction deconstructs a series of narratives that together help to produce the imagining of the South as isolated and parochial. They set the trope of Christian normativity in the South against the presence of Native American traditions, Caribbean and African animism, French Catholicism, and Hindu and Islam practiced by South Asian sailors and traders. They draw parallels between Asian and Latino (and especially Mexican) relations to US history. They trace a series of court cases in which a person’s “whiteness” was affirmed or denied, and they look especially at James Loewen’s analysis in *The Mississippi Chinese: Between Black and White* (1971) of the Chinese transformation over several decades from “ambiguously colored (1920s) to White (1960s)” (p. 17). The editors point to US immigration history following the 1965 end of national quotas, after which both Asian American and Latino populations began to increase dramatically. The emergence of the narrative positioning Asian Americans as a “model minority” is also addressed with the argument that such narratives

deny experiences of racism and differences of class relations among Asian Americans (p. 20).

The first section, “Disrupting Race and Place,” includes three chapters that work together to counter established narratives about Asian Americans and the South, offering alternative views of Asian American racialization in the South. Parts of chapter 1, “Selling the East in the American South: Bengali Muslim Peddlers in New Orleans and Beyond, 1880-1920,” have been excerpted from Vivek Bald’s book *Bengali Harlem and the Lost Histories of South Asian America* (2013). The chapter offers a historic view of Bengali Muslims who found their way from New York to southern port cities (Savannah, Charleston, and New Orleans) during the decades of anti-Asian xenophobia in the West and Jim Crow in the South. Amid the emergence of an Orientalist fashion among US consumers, in contradiction to simultaneous anti-Asian xenophobia, these peddlers “succeeded in quietly carrying on their business” as they provided goods to match the desire (p. 47). In some cases, the Bengali peddlers assimilated into working-class African American communities. Chapter 2, “Racial Interstitialities and the Anxieties of the ‘Partially Colored’: Representations of Asians under Jim Crow,” is a reprint of Leslie Bow’s 2007 article in the *Journal of Asian American Studies*.^[1] Bow offers a theoretical framework for thinking about Asian American racialization in the South as “an intermediate space between white normativity and black abjection,” urging us to wonder what that might look like (p. 57). Indeed, several authors in the volume reference this and other work in which Bow presents “racial interstitiality” as a position from which to analyze the dynamics of Asian American racialization. The aim of chapter 3, “Racism without Recognition: Toward a Model of Asian American Racialization,” by Amy Brandzel and Desai, is most clearly stated in the final pages, where the authors write that “narratives of a postracial and transnational South further advance American nationalism and empire” and that whiteness and other “forms of racializa-

tion are produced by tacit norms, values, and expectations” (pp. 97-98). They make their argument through the chapter in reference to their past research about the ambiguous and contradictory racialization of the Korean American Virginia Tech shooter who killed thirty-two people on that campus in 2007.

Each of the four chapters in section 2, “Community Formation and Profiles,” uses detailed evidence to demonstrate Asian American heterogeneity and to continue the volume’s focus on disrupting notions of the South as a black-white space. Chapter 4, “Segregations, Exclusion, and the Chinese Communities in Georgia: 1880s-1940,” by Daniel Bronstein, provides a historic perspective of differential outcomes for Chinese communities in three Georgia cities (Atlanta, Augusta, and Savannah) during the era of federal Chinese Exclusion laws and local emergence of Jim Crow regimes designed specifically to control African Americans. Bronstein’s historic perspective is followed by “Moving out of the Margins and into the Mainstream: The Demographics of Asian Americans in the New South,” a sociological review of contemporary Asian American demographic characteristics in the South, authored by Arthur Sakamoto, ChangHwan Kim, and Isao Takei. The data analyzed demonstrate a wide diversity of national identifications, new settlement patterns away from Hawaii and California, and increasing levels of class inequality among Asian Americans. In chapter 6, “Natives of Ghost Country: The Vietnamese in Houston and Their Construction of a Postwar Community,” Roy Vu discusses how the Vietnamese in Houston have responded to racialization and marginalization and established their presence in that city. Chapter 7, “Standing Up and Speaking Out: Hindu Americans and Christian Normativity in Metro Atlanta,” by Joshi, traces the growing activism of the Atlanta Hindu community as it has moved from a “politics of recognition” to a “politics of plurality,” through which Atlanta

Hindus are demanding engagement on their own terms.

The chapters of the third section, “Performing Race, Region, and Nation,” all begin from Bow’s interstitiality framework, adding close analyses of narratives contained in literature, film, onstage performance, newspapers, and archival documents to examine Asian American racialization, race relations, and national belonging in the South. In chapter 8, “Southern Eruptions in Asian American Narratives,” Jennifer Ho looks at how, as “outsiders who are within,” the “foreigners” featured in Susan Choi’s novel *The Foreign Student* (1998), Mira Nair’s film *Mississippi Masala* (1992), and Paisley Rekdal’s essay “Traveling to Opal” (2000) embody “transnational histories of war, colonialism, and immigration” that meet in the South (p. 236). Chapter 9, “A Tennessean in an Unlikely Package: The Stand-Up Comedy of Henry Cho,” by Jasmine Kar Tang, asks us to consider Asian Americans in the South not as an anomaly or aberration but rather as something unexpected. Pointing to the unexpected pairing of comedian Cho’s “foreign” body and recognizably domestic southern accent, the analysis of his comedy routine demonstrates how he manages his audience’s expectations, complicating essentialized notions of Asian America and of the US South. Chapter 10, “Like We Lost Our Citizenship: Vietnamese Americans, African Americans, and Hurricane Katrina,” presents a comparison of 1975 and 2005 representations of Vietnamese in New Orleans, contrasting tensions with African Americans in 1975 with post-Katrina Afro-Asian solidarity in the shared experience of state neglect. Marguerite Nguyen’s analysis in chapter 10 builds on the racial interstitiality frame, asking us to think about race and racializations historically and globally in terms that “link the local or nation-based model to a long historical lens and transnational scale” (p. 271).

An index at the end of volume allows an examination of individual topics across the varied

contributions to the anthology. There is some unevenness in the quality of writing among the chapters, and in some chapters overly dense writing obscures the importance of the message. There is also unevenness in the style for bibliographic references. Some chapters include a bibliography following the notes; most do not.

But the value of the work as a whole supersedes any shortcomings. Individually, the chapters are suited to both undergraduate introductory classes and to more advanced, theoretically oriented classes. The strongest contributions are those taking up specific cases that illustrate racialization as it happens, and the overlapping complexities of race with class, gender and sexuality, national belonging, and “foreignness.” Such framings help to make the more abstract issue of US racializations and “in-betweenness” both accessible to readers new to this literature and still richly informative for more advanced students and scholars.

Note

[1]. Leslie Bow, “Racial Interstitialities and the Anxieties of the ‘Partially Colored’: Representations of Asians under Jim Crow,” *Journal of Asian American Studies* 10, no. 1 (February 2007): 1-30.

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