



Jonathan H. X. Lee and Kathleen Nadeau, eds., *Asian American Identities and Practices: Folkloric Expressions in Everyday Life*

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LEE AND NADEAU's volume is an engaging anthology of essays from a group of scholars whose work focuses on Asian America. The editors' decision to focus on folklore is an excellent one, as folklore highlights individuals' negotiation of ethnic identity through the dynamic and meaning-making process of informal cultural expression. As Lee and Nadeau note in their introduction, the folklore of Asian America is profoundly understudied and, as a result, this important window into the lively negotiation of cultural identities has not received the scholarly attention it deserves (ix). This volume is a small step in the direction of this much-needed corrective.

Folklore is animated by the dialectic tension that exists between the individual and tradition. Nowhere is this tension more apparent than in multi-generational minority communities that are engaged in the cultural balancing act that characterizes life in Asian America: on the one hand, people eagerly embrace the diverse cultural flows in which their everyday life is embedded and, on the other hand, they must work to develop a sense of self that celebrates their own distinct cultural heritage. Consequently, the study of folklore among the diverse groups that make up the complex landscape of Asian America is bound to be fruitful.

The volume opens with a short introduction by the editors that lays the foundation for the ensuing case studies. Unfortunately, the introduction is jumbled, as the editors are not particularly grounded in contemporary folklore theory, relying instead on older definitions of the field, and missing important work that could have provided sounder footing.

Each of the fifteen articles that make up the anthology provides an interesting glimpse into the folklore, folklife, and popular culture practices in various Asian American communities. Most focus on a single community with chapters on Chinese America (literary folktales; material culture; the veneration of Guangong), Japanese America (origami and hip-hop; mortuary rituals), Korean America (adoptees; shamanism and Christianity), Filipino America (performance), Igorot America (folk dance), Cambodian America (hip-hop culture), Vietnamese America (religious practices; love and folk beliefs), and Burmese America (domestic Buddhist practice).

One of the most intriguing essays in the anthology by Mark Leo and editor Lee explores the complex nature of the relationship between Filipino American groups, focusing on the appropriation of Igorot dance traditions by Filipino American groups whose background is not related to the indigenous populations of the Philippines. The use of the Igorot traditions as emblematic of all Filipino culture highlights the tensions that exist across Filipino American groups that, to outsiders, may appear to be a single one.

Other successful chapters focus either on individuals engaged in a refiguration of a tradition, such as Brett Esaki's ethnography of the Japanese American origami artist, Linda Mihara, or on sites of practice that are emblematic of the long and fraught history of Asian communities in America, such as editor Lee's fascinating historical tour of sites related to the veneration of the Chinese God of War in California. Additional essays either focus on clearly delimited groups, such as Cathy Schlund-Vials study of Cambodian American rap and hip-hop, or on specific places such as Winston Kyan's exploration of domestic Buddhist practice and the Dhammananda monastery in California's East Bay. Although several of the articles are able to address folkloric practice in broad Asian American groups, such as Dawn Lee Tu's exploration of culture nights on college campuses, the majority of the essays that attempt a unified vision of Asian America are immediately confronted by the impossibility of that task, given the wide range of the groups (and their diverse traditions) that could be labeled "Asian American."

I do have a few criticisms of this volume. The first is an inconsistent approach to folklore and folkloristics. Indeed, several of the essays, such as the opening essay on Asian American standup comedians, confuses popular culture with folklore—while all folklore is part of popular culture, the inverse is not always true. Because of the at times overly broad notions of folklore with which the authors and editors operate, it is never quite clear how the domain of study has been conceived. Yet folklore can be defined in a straightforward fashion: traditional expressive forms circulating on and across social networks. The term tradition(al) can, in turn, be defined as a will to persistence among group members—if the group wants something to persist, then it is part of their tradition. From there, one can develop clear boundaries as to what constitutes folklore. My second criticism is the leveling tendency of the term "Asian America(n)" that exists in contradistinction to the specific identity making processes of the many groups that are covered by this vague term. Folklore is an important marker of belonging—folkloric practices, which always create meaning for the tradition participants, can be both inclusive and exclusive in nature. In the context of Asian American studies, it is crucial to explore the lively use of these types of expressive forms by members of these groups and how they influence conceptions of group boundaries.

The anthology will be of interest to those who are interested in the informal cultural processes that shape (and reshape) the concepts of what it means to belong in the many groups that self identify as Asian American. Similarly, it provides worthwhile ideas for future studies centered on the traditional expressive forms found throughout Asian America. One of the clear lessons of the anthology is how difficult it is to do ethnography in the diverse communities of Asian America. The anthology should find a place on reading lists for courses in American Studies, Asian American Studies, Folklore, and Anthropology. The volume is handsomely presented and, apart from a few unusual gaffes in production (there is no biography for Christine Hong, for instance), it is a welcome addition to Asian American Folklore Studies.

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