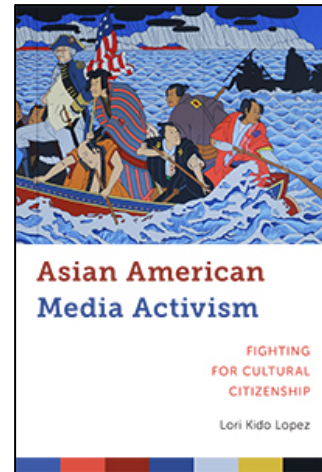


Lori Kido Lopez, **Asian American Media Activism: Fighting for Cultural Citizenship**, New York, NY: New York University Press, 2016, 272 pp., \$27.00 (paperback).

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Representation in the media is a struggle that unfolds between two moving targets: a protean media landscape that permeates our lives ever more deeply, and groups of consumers whose composition and circumstances are also in flux. The burden is especially difficult for minorities fighting to not be stereotyped in film, television, and the like, as discourse about their identities confines not only the depictions they seek to improve, but also their attempts to do so. In her book, **Asian American Media Activism: Fighting for Cultural Citizenship**, Lori Kido Lopez examines the arc of Asian American efforts over the last several decades to navigate this process, with special attention to the rise of YouTube as a catalyst for new activist strategies. Lopez situates the search for representation not as a goal in and of itself, but rather as a “route toward restructuring and reordering society in such a way that minority groups can move in their own ways toward claiming these kinds of cultural rights” (p. 12). The idea that media can be a primary site for this kind of self-actualization is not a new one (see for example, Burgess, Foth, & Klæbe, 2006; Ong, 1996; Rosaldo, 1994), but here, the author raises critical questions that attend to the unique significations of Asian American identity and its engagement with the rise of “Web 2.0” media production. Drawing on her own experiences among activist groups and describing a broad range of media properties, she evaluates an ongoing shift in definitions of what “cultural citizenship” entails, and how to achieve it.

Underlying Lopez’s approach to the topic is the notion that cultural citizenship is an inherent, yet often underemphasized, aspect of full inclusion in a society. To be considered a citizen requires not only legal rights and protections, but also visibility as equals in the discourse produced by and circulated in a society. She also calls attention to the fact that “the term ‘Asian American’ has always served to exclude many of its members” (p. 22), given the privileging of a few groups from the tremendous diversity of cultures and histories that can be categorized as “Asian.” As Spivak (1993) warned, the centralized use of this umbrella term fell into the trap of an essentialism that did not lead to more nuanced politics of equality—but now that media production has become more democratized, Lopez provides several examples of more successful activist attempts to produce Asian American identities (plural). The term *activism* also receives some attention, defined as “intentional participation in a political act designed to remedy a social injustice” (p. 24). From the perspective of this book, the act of creating media can simultaneously be an act of contestation, if the producer situates themselves in opposition to discourses that would otherwise narrow and flatten the meanings of what they are trying to create.

The book can be roughly divided into two halves that explore assimilationist and integrationist approaches. Chapters 1 through 3 deal with, respectively, the longstanding efforts of groups like the Media

Action Network for Asian Americans (MANAA) fighting for equal representation, the crossover from activism to broader *advocacy* (which is situated “at the level of discursive impact” (p. 223; i.e., working within the system to voice general concerns), and the changing market for Asian American media. While Lopez recounts several successful examples of traditional activist strategies for combating prejudice in the media, from boycotts to letter-writing campaigns, she also raises the question of whether this approach can effect true change:

If the problem with racism is that racialized bodies are categorized as inferior, then by calling for more positive imagery we seem merely to be saying that we want to reverse that equation and put racialized bodies in a superior position. This, of course, would do nothing to alter racist ideologies and structures . . . in many ways we are simply reifying the dominant culture. (p. 57)

The point here is not that tried-and-true methods that flex the realities of the system against itself are totally ineffective; chapter 3’s focus on economics points out that the recognition of Asian Americans as an audience of consumers gives them increasing power the more media are driven by advertising. If advocacy continually fails to achieve lasting results, then the fact that producers want to entice these viewers ought to lead to more positive representation, under threat of a possible boycott. But ultimately such motivations do not challenge a view that Asian Americans are somehow different (yet simultaneously identical to each other), to be politically and economically dealt with rather than socially respected and seen as fully realized individuals.

Chapters 4 and 5, by contrast, provide an outlook that accounts for the realities of the “new media” landscape and the people involved in it. Following the tradition of the film festival as a *potentially* independent circuit between producer and consumer, and proposals to create alternate structures of consumption from media figures such as Justin Lin and Jeff Yang, Lopez presents YouTube as a reasonably successful platform for Asian Americans seeking to work outside the system. She uses the concept of the “subaltern counterpublic” (p. 149; see also Palczewski, 2001) to describe a system that leverages the ever-blurrier lines between participation in and consumption of media culture, in order to amplify Asian American voices, primarily for Asian American audiences. The strength of this counterpublic extends beyond itself, too; Lopez discusses the importance of affective labor in fan communities, notably Racebending.com, for recentering the mainstream conversation about representation. It is through these actions that media activists can take a more integrationist approach, retaining nuanced identities even as they are folded into a wider media landscape that seeks to reduce and categorize them. The caveat of reclaiming this agency, Lopez suggests, is that participants must carefully consider how to position themselves relative to other forms of reification within the community, and other marginalized groups, to avoid the trap of “using racism . . . to end racism” (pp. 196–197).

With such an extensive scope, there are necessarily some important aspects of the situation that aren’t explored as thoroughly as others: gender and queerness, media that are primarily informational rather than artistic, the specific circumstances of different Asian American subgroups in different areas of the country, etc. The omission of Instagram, with its importance for visual semiotics and its “influencers,” is a curious one (though perhaps it hadn’t yet reached its peak of popularity when the book was written);

and while Lopez focuses on the mechanical affordances of platforms like Twitter and YouTube, their connective affordances (Papacharissi, 2015) are arguably more relevant here. Granted, the specific cases Lopez presents are only meant to support a larger thesis about how media activism can move away from assimilation. Yet even the alternatives presented here must contend with the limitations of platforms like YouTube, raising the question: What would truly liberationist Asian American media look like? Studies like those gathered in Ratto and Boler's (2014) collection on "DIY citizenship," as well as those in the queer punk/queercore tradition (e.g., Nault, 2017), may shed some light on an approach to media production that intentionally abjures the mainstream. Perhaps integration is a necessary step on the path toward these other forms of creating cultural citizenship, rather than the endpoint. In the meantime, if media producers must operate within the hegemonic system to gain capital, it is reassuring to see the dynamic, reflexive processes under the surface that Lopez is exposing here.

Overall, the book presents a wide-ranging overview of how Asian American media activism, in connection with and opposition to other forms of media activism, has evolved over the last few decades. Lori Kido Lopez situates the successes and shortcomings of different activist strategies within a critique of assimilation that can be extended to other subgroups, making this a valuable addition to the literature for any critical scholar of media history, diasporic communities, and/or Asian American studies. By giving attention to the discursive structures and ideologies that underlie media production, consumption, and representation, she ensures that as the landscape changes—as it already has, as it surely will continue to—her analysis of how would-be cultural citizens might manage it will remain applicable for the future.

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