BOOK REVIEW


The discursive turn from “yellow peril” to “model minority” has been neither perfectly linear nor fully realized. Nor has the current dominant positioning of Asian Americans as model minorities quelled problematic perceptions and representations of those racialized as Asian American. Numerous scholars have noted that while model minority discourse is not as explicitly ignominious as its “yellow peril” predecessor, it is nonetheless rooted in divisive and limiting stereotypes that support and legitimate unjust social and political dynamics (Nakayama 1988; Taylor and Stern 1997; Taylor, Landreth, and Bang 2005). The model minority is hardworking, upwardly mobile, business and technosavvy, and eager and able to assimilate into dominant white US culture. Rather than challenge cultural hegemony, model minorities serve as emblems of the dominant cultural system’s professed values of equal opportunity and meritocracy. While the narrow framing of model minority proffers Asian Americans the ability to be perceived as less foreign and dangerous, under the consumption focus of late capitalism legitimate citizenship demands more – it requires that Asian Americans not only prove their worth as minorities, but also as consumers.

It is here that Shalini Shankar focuses her attention in Advertising Diversity: Ad Agencies and the Creation of Asian American Consumers. Utilizing over four years of ethnographic data collection within Asian American and general market advertising agencies in Los Angeles, San Francisco, and New York, Shankar illustrates with vivid detail the ways in which advertisers and advertisements commodify (non)material racial, ethnic, and cultural signifiers to transform Asian Americans from model minorities to model consumers. She situates her analysis firmly in critical studies, namely critical race theory, critical ethnic studies, Asian-American Studies, and media studies. In many respects, Shankar’s scope and focus coincide with the scholarly work of Arlene Dávila (2001) and Jason Chambers (2008), who respectively critically analyze the relationship between the advertising industry and Latinos and African Americans.

Shankar puts forth the concept of the assemblage as her primary analytic tool, writing, “Deleuze and Guattari describe the assemblage as a ‘field of multiple maneuvers,’ as temporally achieved and open to transformation as it endures and circulates” (11). Throughout the book, Shankar employs the concept of the assemblage to interrogate the development and production of Asian American advertisements by deftly maneuvering in and between macro, meso, and micro levels of analysis. Cleverly, Shankar maps out the book to mimic the traditional stages of the advertising process. The introductory chapter, “The Pitch,” details the overall aims and objectives of the manuscript as well as introduces and explains her theoretical framework and related key concepts. In addition to describing and justifying her chosen methodological approach (i.e. the assemblage), Shankar also expounds on the challenges presented by the vast historical and cultural heterogeneity found within the Asian-American racial category, and discusses the role of neoliberal capitalism, biopolitics, and white supremacy in shaping the contours of racial and ethnic formations in the United States. Additionally, considerable amount of space is devoted to detailing the modes and means of data collection along with their associated limitations.

Chapter 1 attempts to mirror the account planning phase of the advertising process. Much like account planners assembling consumer insights gleaned from pertinent market research to chart a guiding directive for ensuing creative, Shankar attempts to extract key insights by historicizing representations of Asian Americans. Through a chronology of multicultural marketing, Shankar highlights key moments when communities of color were specifically targeted by advertisers and
explicates the emergence of the Asian-American advertising industry as a scion of Latino and African-American advertising. While Shankar’s attempt is admirable, the vast and varied histories of populations that compose the Asian-American racial category are not (cannot be) adequately reviewed in the course of a chapter. That said, Shankar does a superb job of linking the social construction of the Asian-American racial category with broader systems and institutions, such as global capitalism and the US Census.

Chapter 2 investigates the pursuit to develop advertising creative that effectively represents and speaks to Asian-American audiences. Here Shankar’s main points of focus are the ways in which visual and linguistic features of culture are deployed to successfully transmute general market advertising messages for Asian Americans, a practice deemed in-culture and in-language “transcreation” by industry insiders. Shankar summarizes the “transcreation” process thusly:

In-culture creative generates indexical icons that convey aspects of the Asian American experience that extend beyond iconic signs of Asia in the American imagination…. The linguistic materiality of in-language copy contributes substantially to this process, through the form of sound, its interaction with visuals, and the poetics of words combined with the creative affect of an ad’s tonality. All of these elements, including the process of vetting and negotiating in-culture concepts, in-language copy, and English back-translations with clients contribute to ethnoracial assemblages of diversity. (146)

While providing ample illustration of “transcreation,” Shankar bypasses the opportunity to fully consider power dynamics that result from identity politics within Asian-American ad agencies. For instance, Shankar notes that “… specific discussions about gender and the significance of certain choices suggested that Asian American ad executives imagined their audience to be far more patriarchal and steeped in hierarchies of gender than was reflected in their own agency” (107). Given that creative work is typically dominated by males within general market agencies, it would be insightful to further explicate how the presence of a less patriarchal agency culture, especially in the creative arena, impacts interpersonal relationships and overall agency function.

Chapter 3 shifts the focus to account services, wherein Shankar investigates the myriad ways that Asian-American advertising executives “sell it in.” On a micro scale, this involves convincing a given client of the merits of approving an offered creative concept. However, at the macro level, Asian-American advertising executives must also consistently reassure current and potential clients of the value connected to the field of Asian-American advertising altogether. Shankar proposes several methods utilized by account executives to “sell it in,” most notably expertise and affect. She provides the following explanation:

Expertise is demonstrated through the process of enregisterment, that is, how multiracial advertising executives develop a specialized lexicon and use other linguistic features to create a vision of ethnic and racial difference on which they construct knowledge about difference. Performance of affect and stance are integral to how ad executives negotiate what Asian American means among themselves, to clients, and to others in this industry. (36)

Shankar employs a thick description technique to highlight the ways which the embodiment of ethnoracial expertise can serve and hinder the agency agenda. This thick description also underscores the nuanced manner in which agency executives navigate moments of intercultural affect within agencies and between agencies and their clients.

The areas of production and media are covered in Chapter 4. Here issues related to representation through casting and the evolving efficacy of media channels is taken up. With respect to representation, Shankar provides a comprehensive critique of the normative role of whiteness in the advertising industry as a whole, then attempts to narrow her scope to discern how Asian-American ad agencies attempt to maneuver within this paradigm. While Shankar provides a considerably cogent discussion of the former, additional space could have been devoted to further exploring the latter. For example, in what ways do Asian American ad agencies oppose and propagate colorism? Shankar’s discussion of the changing media landscape in this chapter is both thorough and insightful. She uses rich descriptions and narratives to expose how public relations, digital platforms, and
location-based advertising tactics are being used to build brand awareness among Asian ethnic groups, give urban areas additional markers of ethnic identity and language, “and create a shift in racialization that makes Asian Americans a more naturalized part of the landscape through consumption” (249).

The book concludes with Shankar grappling with the current and future ramifications of how ethnoracial diversity is constructed. She poignantly reflects on the varying ways in which diversity is “articulated and operationalized” (252), ultimately rendering the conclusion that “general and multicultural market ad executives define and manipulate diversity to index their own agendas and concerns” (255). In a gesture of optimism, Shankar closes with a brief discussion of Gap’s “Make Love” outdoor print ad campaign. In the ad, a white film-maker is shown embracing a Sikh actor/model with accompanying text that simply states, make love. After the ad was defaced with racist graffiti, several antiracist activists circulated pictures of the ad through their blogs and social media platforms. In an action of antiracist solidarity, Gap firmly stood by its decision to cast diverse talent for the ad. Shankar highlights this instance as a possible peek into the co-constituted future of advertising diversity. A future wherein the whitewashed version of diversity presented by general market advertising is challenged by “a range of representational choices that engage more substantively with visible and audible elements of culture and linguistic variations … making minorities part of normal without necessarily erasing difference” (268). It is a fitting ending to an illuminating journey.

The combination of Shankar’s critical lens and outsider perspective commingle to produce an originative piece of work. Advertising Diversity offers even the most seasoned consumption and marketing scholars a compelling (but all too rare) look inside the world of Asian-American advertising, where culture and consumption converge to create “model consumers.”

**References**


Kevin D. Thomas

*Stan Richards School of Advertising & Public Relations, African and African Diaspora Studies Department, and Center for Women and Gender Studies, The University of Texas at Austin, Austin, TX, USA*

kevin.thomas@utexas.edu

© 2015 Kevin D. Thomas

http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10253866.2015.1116770