Advertising diversity: ad agencies and the creation of Asian American Consumers

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BOOK REVIEW


Like other contemporary media-literate consumers, readers of this journal, when thinking about advertising, may find themselves recalling the phenomenally successful US television series Mad Men. The show is a trope that appears more than once in Shalini Shankar’s Advertising Diversity. However rather than a world of upfront racism, office affairs, Cold War capitalism and snappy dressing, Shankar’s book conjures up a complex space that is subject to constant negotiation: the so-called Asian-American advertising industry in the US and the work it does to legitimize “ethnic” consumers and ad execs alike within the aggressively normative frame of corporate – for which one can read white – America.

Shankar’s book discusses the emergence and practices of niche advertising agencies that position themselves as experts in reaching growing consumer markets made up of Indian, Chinese, Japanese, Filipino, Korean, Vietnamese and other “Asian” groups within the US. It shows how advertising texts and producers work to transform these categories from “model minorities”, interpellated within appropriately “normal” US modes of socialization, to “model consumers”: people who shop American as well as live American. She shows how Asian-Americans’ “increasing visibility as upwardly mobile consumers does a good deal to explain why they can be considered normal” (209), that is, good minorities and good consumers.

Based on four years of in-depth fieldwork with agencies in various locations in the US, the book is concerned with how Asian-Americans are reimagined as consumers worthy of being marketed to, with how these types of advertising texts produce “assemblages of diversity” (193) and with Asian-American ad agencies themselves: how they carve out space within a corporate America that “has long been coded as a white place” (19), how they present themselves as “cultural and linguistic translators for a group that [is] already fluent in American consumer culture” (101), and how they negotiate the complex terrain of structurally racist corporate cultures.

The chapters are organized, appropriately, according to the process an ad takes from development to display (“The Pitch”, “Account Planning”, “Creative”, “Account Services”, “Production and Media” and “Audience Testing”). Using ideas drawn from scholars including Sara Ahmed, Robert Stam and Ella Shohat and Michel Foucault, she shows how this type of niche advertising “adds layers of legitimacy” to US Census Bureau categorizations about race while also “fuelling their everyday presence in media” (71), and how ideas about diversity are simplified within the advertising industry in a way that erases “complicated and problematic differences” while “naturalising select ideologies about race” (167). Shankar discusses how “talent” of various ethnicities is shoehorned into a largely white
advertising landscape to “embody the postracial work of overwriting ethnic and racial inequality … and further a normative whiteness” (248). Similarly, she says, Asian-American advertising executives can themselves act as “qualisigns” of diversity, in Nancy Munn’s terminology. Following Ahmed, she argues that diversity and multiculturalism “have become empty catch-all phrases in institutional and corporate contexts” (253).

The book is closely concerned with language, both with how it is used in adverts themselves (particularly those that appear in more than one language, or those that need to “scan” to speakers of more than one language) and with how it operates within the corporate space of the advertising industry. Shankar shows how “intercultural affect plays a role in racialisation” (174) with a number of close analyses of conversations that show the skill with which Asian-American advertising executives use language to acclimatize clients to a sanitized, acceptable version of difference, both the executives’ own and that of their projected minority consumers. Indeed, both intercultural affect and the deferential stances taken by executives are vital elements in ensuring that their creative work can be produced (189).

The book’s greatest strength is also a significant weakness. Shankar dwells in intricate detail on various minutiae of the world of Asian-American advertising, devoting pages to negotiations about what sort of free gift and promotional store display a certain client may require, and how the advertising executives in that case convince clients that spending more is worthwhile. She discusses at length a number of interactions and conversations between agencies and clients revolving around complexities of language, often initiated when a campaign makes sense in a minority language but not in English, or vice versa. This level of detail will, I am certain, be useful to other linguistic anthropologists or anthropologists of advertising; but it does make the book less interesting to scholars from other fields, who may find the primary arguments convincing but will have less use for the extreme specificity with which they are repeatedly made.

Nonetheless, Advertising Diversity is a valuable addition to this area of study. In an echo of Angela McRobbie’s work on politics and postfeminism, the book makes a powerful case for the way in which corporate uses of apparently progressive ideas like “diversity” and “multiculturalism” are in fact deeply retrogressive, normalizing various types and groups of people into a convenient, colourblind and postracial monoculture, an “ethnic ambiguity [that] is doing the work of making America seem diverse” (245).

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