Shalini Shankar’s fascinating ethnography is based upon participant observation and interviews she conducted at Asian American advertising agencies in San Francisco, Los Angeles, and New York City, where she also carried out research at “general market agencies” (p. 9) that do not specifically target Asian American audiences. She deftly explores the quotidian work involved in the development and production of race and ethnicity in American advertising and how these processes impact those involved in their creation. The book comprises an introduction, four content chapters, and a conclusion followed by two helpful appendices that provide the reader with notes on transcription and demographic information on Asian American populations. Each chapter opens with a vivid ethnographic vignette that provides the reader with a glimpse into a different stage of the advertising production process.

Chapter One, “Account Planning,” provides historical context for the emergence of the prevailing contemporary paradox Shankar observed in her research, whereby “in an era when race is being downplayed in the name of racial equality, multicultural advertising emphasizes race more than ever in the name of profitability” (p. 41). Tracing representations of Asian Americans in U.S. advertising from the late nineteenth century to the present, Shankar very effectively demonstrates that while the emergence of advertising targeted at Asian American consumers may be new, their public cultural presence and contributions to U.S. life more generally dates back centuries. Shankar argues that changing social mores related to significant migration-related U.S. demographic changes in the 1960s, the civil rights movement, and women’s increased participation in advertising all paved the way for multicultural marketing as it exists today. Yet, as Shankar discusses in this chapter, a complex set of forces inform contemporary representations of Asian Americans in advertising, including Census Bureau data, careful consideration of religious or other specific imagery, and the need to convincingly appeal to a wide audience. In so doing, advertising targeted toward (and often produced by) Asian Americans helps to create particular truths about specific ethno-racial groups as part of a process that Shankar, following the advertising executives with whom she worked, terms “transcreation” (p. 88).

Chapter Two, “Creative,” explores the process that “creatives”—the industry term for advertising executives who generate the conceptual elements underlying advertisements—engage in as they attempt to attract particular Asian American consumers through the use of language, symbolism, and other in-group imagery. To successfully do this, creatives at Asian American advertising agencies must possess an extraordinary skill set that includes a “meta-level understanding of both general market brand identity and cultural and linguistic signs that will resonate with Asian American consumers” (p. 101). Ethnographic accounts presented in this chapter detail the ways in which Asian American creatives attempt to homogenize significant differences in class, gender, sexuality, and other identity variables in ways that can (and often do) reinforce patriarchal gender norms that creatives eschew in their own lives. They do so while simultaneously attempting to determine the best lexical and visual means to convey cultural authenticity even as they collapse the significant regional, class, linguistic, and other important differences between individuals from particular Asian American groups while still resonating with the intended audience.
Chapter Three, “Account Services,” explores how Asian American advertising executives develop specialized language to discuss and negotiate the sometimes-unspoken notions of ethnic and racial difference prevailing among corporate clients and dominant U.S. culture more generally. Shankar uses the concept of intercultural affect to explore the means by which the racialized advertising production process demands that Asian American creatives act as embodied experts on “diversity,” a term used in the industry (as in academia) to gloss non-whiteness. Hence their jobs require them to “do the double work of making the labor of this advertising easily describable and legible to clients and also make nonwhite linguistic and cultural difference accessible in white corporate environments” (p. 155).

Chapter Four, “Production and Media,” describes the complex “politics of production” (p. 192) involved in casting performers for advertisements and decision-making about the best means to circulate particular representations among specific audiences. This chapter is perhaps the book’s most ethnographically rich, as it contains numerous fascinating discussions of the everyday negotiations Asian American advertising executives engage in as they attempt to create culturally sensitive print advertisements or commercials that will encourage the target audience to purchase the advertised products. This ethnographic depth provides nuanced substantiation for Shankar’s astute point that “casting is one of the few activities in corporate America where blunt discussions about race and ethnicity occur” (p. 202). Shankar’s analysis reveals a great deal about the cultural and linguistic construction of ethnicity and race in the United States through her careful attention to the sometimes-fraught discussions that take place between, as well as among, Asian American advertising executives and their clients regarding the ever-present potential to offend audience members through their representations.

The book has numerous strengths that derive, first and foremost, from Shankar’s long-term engagement with the everyday production of Asian American advertising. Workplace ethnographies are difficult to conduct due to issues related to access, rapport, and potentially negative ramifications following publication due to the possibility for sharing proprietary or otherwise “secret” knowledge. Shankar masterfully demonstrates her skills in this genre through nuanced and multisited analysis. She provides a fascinating discussion of the coded language used by both advertising executives and, to some extent, the general public, to discuss ethnoracial identity, particularly in her analysis of transcreation which “calls for an intimate understanding of what mainstream means and how seemingly objective terms like normal are code for ‘white’ and ‘English’ as opposed to ‘Asian’ and ‘non-English’” (p. 101). Theoretically innovative discussion flows seamlessly throughout the book yet is particularly strong in the conclusion with respect to how cultural constructions of ethno-racial diversity emerge in advertising via assemblages of Census data, corporate desires to maximize profits, advertising executives creative work, and the media forms used to distribute these representations.

As with all books, some weaknesses permeate the otherwise significant analytical and theoretical strengths presented throughout the text. Chapter One’s discussion of Asian American history and U.S. advertising feels somewhat superficial and scattered in comparison to the rest of the book’s highly organized argumentative flow. This is understandable given the topic’s scope and the spatial constraints of academic publishing, but this section could have been dramatically enriched by the inclusion of detailed endnotes referring interested readers to scholarly works on Asian American history, particularly those pertaining to specific cultural groups. Some readers may be troubled by Shankar’s use of the blanket term “Asian American,” which she readily acknowledges as a culturally constructed category. Individuals from countries throughout the continent of Asia share few linguistic, cultural, or other affinities, and accordingly the book could have benefited from more critical discussion of the author’s decision to cast such a broad ethnographic net.

This book will be of great interest to anthropologists as well as scholars and students from a wide variety of fields that engage with popular culture as well as the study of ethnicity and race, and it could be successfully used in a number of advanced undergraduate courses on related topics. Overall, Shankar does a masterful job at demonstrating the nuances of media production in a multicultural society and her latest contribution to the field should be widely read.