

Our Voices, Our Histories: Asian American and Pacific Islander Women

Reviewed by Paulette M. Coulter

Our Voices, Our Histories: Asian American and Pacific Islander Women, by Shirley Hune and Gail M. Nomura, editors. NYU Press, 2020. 520 pages. Paperback, \$35.00; Kindle, \$19.95.

Every now and then, I come across a book about which I can say, "This is really good!" That was my response upon completing a read of Shirley Hune and Gail M. Nomura's 2020 *Our Voices, Our Histories: Asian American and Pacific Islander Women*. In 2003 Hune and Nomura edited and published *Asian/Pacific Islander American Women: A Historical Anthology*. *Our Voices, Our Histories* is not an updated version of the earlier text; although it contains chapters by five authors from that text, it is an entirely new volume of eight parts, comprising 26 chapters based on new research that uses a variety of methods: documentary evidence, participant observation, case studies, interviews, and surveys. Because of this quantity not all chapters are reviewed in detail. All page numbers refer to pages in *Our Voices, Our Histories* by Hune and Nomura unless otherwise indicated.

Both Hune and Nomura introduce the text, Nomura on "Voices" and Hune on "Histories." Nomura states that the editors' intention is to "foreground the agency, power, and resilience of Asian American and Pacific Islander women and their capacity to enact change and transform their lives and communities within local, transnational, and global contexts" (1). In so doing, she directs attention to the issues of the diverse histories of these women, including "intersections of race, gender, class, sexuality, indigeneity, [and] ethnicity," among others (ibid). Nomura also provides working and legal definitions of "Asian American" and "Pacific Islander" (1-3). On the other hand, Hune explains the organization of the text and its themes: women's agency, resistance and resilience in the face of challenges, and development of new identities (12); applying the dimensions of globalism, exclusion, and gender in the research (8-10); and using historical methods of print and archived materials as well as new media such as film, video, and self-created digital sources in the narration of stories and histories (12).

Justifying its title, the book is divided into eight sections or "parts" based on historical time periods from early Western contact with Asia and the Pacific to the near-present and contains chapters on and by Asian American women from China, Japan, Korea, the Republic of the Philippines, South Asia, Southeast Asia, and Taiwan, as well as Pacific Islanders from Guam, Hawaii, Tonga, and Samoa.ⁱ

In Part I "Early Era: Indigenous and Global Roots," chapter 1 "Malamalama: Reconnecting as Native Hawaiian Women through Cultural History," Davianna Pomaika'i McGregor discusses the traditional roles of women in Hawaii throughout

history. After an initial focus on the 'Ohana effort to stop the bombing of Kaho'olawe, used as a training ground for the United States (U.S.) military from 1940 to 1990, McGregor turns her attention to preservation of Hawaiian culture, language, and the roles of women in those efforts. In particular, she explores contemporary challenges "Native Hawaiian women face" by examining traditional cultural roles, how these roles changed in the process of Americanization and statehood, and how Native Hawaiians can perpetuate their beliefs and customary practices despite these challenges (20ff), always emphasizing the roles of women.

In chapter 2 Erika Lee discusses "Global Roots and Gendered Routes: Early Asian American Women's History" of migration, and in chapter 3, "Two Sisters, Two Stories: Transnational Lives of Ume Tsuda and Yona Abiko," Masako Iino presents the story of the founding and funding of what is now Tsuda University in Japan.

In Part II, with its emphasis on "New Intersections of Race, Gender, Generation, Communities," chapter 5, written by Phonshia Nie, provided for this reader entirely new information in "Stretching the Boundaries of Christian Respectability, Race, and Gender during Jim Crow: Chinese American Women and the Southern Baptist Church." Jim Crow laws in my mind heretofore have been linked primarily to Blacks in America, and while I was aware of the Chinese immigrants in the West and Southwest relative to the building of the railroads, I was not aware of Chinese in the South. I thank Nie for stretching the boundaries of my knowledge.

Chapters 4 and 6, by Dawn Bohulano Mabalon and Mana Hayakawa, respectively, present women's community building and family support practices in pre-1965 California and the way San Francisco nightclub "all-Chinese revue[s]," since they contained non-Chinese Asians, complicated both racial and gender stereotypes during the 1930s through the 1960s

Part III also contains three chapters: they focus on "New Cultural Formations, New Selves." Chapter 7, by Christine R. Yano, concentrates on language and speech performance of Japanese American girls as a means of this transformation. Chapter 8, on mixed-race identity formation of Asian-American women over the life course, is written by Cathy J. Tashiro, and in chapter 9, M. Luafata Simanu-Klutz discusses the relationship between ancestral ethics and identity among Samoan women in the American diaspora. American culture not only differs from Samoan but is "anathema to Samoan notions of power, wealth, and worship" and to Samoan understanding of "universal values and principles" and their interpretation (155).

Chapter 7 is one of two chapters in *Our Voices, Our Histories* for which the topic is primarily language, in this case, *language as performance*. Yano states that Japanese Americans in Hawai'i in the 1950s and 1960s bestowed the comment, "She speaks well" on "other nonwhite women who stood apart linguistically as a model for emulation" (125). The comment, made by women, refers to noticeable use of Standard English and assumes that most nonwhites in Hawai'i at that time did not speak English well. The comment is also gendered: "women, more than men, should speak to a higher standard of English as evidence of their citizenship" and assimilation (ibid.). Thus, women are both the evaluators and the evaluated. And the evaluation extends to more than everyday speech because until 1960, nonhaole children who wished, or whose

parents wished for them, to attend the English Standard schools had to pass a spoken English test for entry (127). These schools were set up "in 1924 by petition to the territorial government from a handful of haole mothers who did not want their offspring commingling with children of other races," in other words, a form of racial segregation (126). This racism became even more prevalent during World War II.

Yano presents two case studies that demonstrate the societal rewards of speaking well. One is the Cherry Blossom Festival Queen Pageant that began in 1953 (129); the other is Pan American Airlines' development of a Nisei stewardess program in 1955 for around-the-world flights. While Japanese was a requirement for the job, so was "high-functioning English"; of the first seven stewardesses, five were from Hawai'i (133). They were also some of the earliest nonwhite stewardesses in the airline business (135). For the pageant, because it was run by the Honolulu Japanese Junior Chamber of Commerce, "the women onstage thus proved the male organizers' worth" (129) and established a standard for "wives of certain performative stature" (130). The winner, and all contenders, had to be a good speaker in order to represent her community well in public (*ibid.*) because she "carried the mantle of the Japanese American community upon [her] shoulders" (132). Yang concludes that both of these groups of young women served "as a central proving ground in postwar Hawai'i for citizenship, economic status, and identity" (138), primarily on the basis of speaking well!

In Part IV "Wartimes and Aftermath," chapter 10 is written by Alice Yang. She emphasizes the mobilization of Japanese American women seeking redress and healing from "Memories of Mass Incarceration." She focuses on the second (Nisei) of three generations of women who were active in seeking redress for their imprisonment, using "interviews with activists, government testimony, and women's voices drawn from secondary literature and memoirs" (173). In actively seeking redress, these Japanese American women struggled with patriarchy and racism that generally did not allow women to be active in public spheres; yet they organized among themselves and, given impetus from the women's, civil rights, and antiwar movements, testified before the Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians. In 1981 the Commission concluded that the imprisonment of the Japanese in America during World War II was, as quoted by Yang, "a 'grave injustice' caused by 'race prejudice, war hysteria and a failure of political leadership'" (173). Even that may be an understatement.

In chapter 11 in Part IV, Y en L e Espiritu examines the "Refugee Lifemaking Practices" of Southeast Asian women from Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam. Most research on these refugees focuses on men and their military experiences and suffering. Espiritu, using "existing oral histories and interviews," focuses instead on women's "desire-based" (rather than "damage-centered") efforts "in wartime, in the refugee camps, and in resettlement" (189). Although these experiences were difficult, they also provided opportunities for women to loosen the bonds of patriarchy in their traditional cultures and to assert their own agency. Chapter 12, by Linda Trinh V o, has one of the most tantalizing (in this reviewer's opinion) titles in the book: "'Defiant Daughters': The Resilience and Resistance of 1.5-Generation Vietnamese American Women." This chapter is a case study of six such women in Southern California with

whom the author has worked and on whom she focuses, "based on their visibility as public figures and for their accomplishments in their fields" (205). She uses both primary interviews and secondary research of archival material and finds that even now the traces of war in Vietnam "continue to create a survivalist mentality and ideological divisions within Vietnamese American families and communities" with which women must cope in their daily lives.

The topic of Part V is "Globalization, Work, Family, Community, Activism" in the period of 1950-2016. In particular, in chapter 15 Maria W. L. Chee analyzes "Women's Agency and Cost in Migration: Taiwanese American Transnational Families" among those who bring their children to the U.S. for educational opportunity. What happens when one parent moves to the U.S. with the children while the other remains in Taiwan to work and support the rest of the family? Chee "conducted two surveys in Southern California from 1999 to 2000 and thirty-five semistructured interviews with women from 1999 to 2001" to gather data and find answers (254). The women ranged in age from the forties to the sixties and were generally educated and non-working class (*ibid.*). Of these Taiwanese immigrants, "most came for their children's education," to have access either to special education or to improved chances of entrance to U. S. universities, with 60% coming "for status attainment or social class reproduction" (256), a transnational application of a concept forwarded by Pierre Bourdieu (cited in Chee 254; 266, note 1). The decision to migrate was sometimes made by the husband (42.8% of cases), sometimes by the couple (22.8%), and least frequently by the wife alone (14.3%) (258). In some cases the transnational situation improved the marriages (20%) while other marriages ended in divorce, in part supported by the gender inequality inherent in Taiwan's legal system (264). Chee concludes that her data support Bourdieu's theory in that numbers of children were successful in attaining a good education (265), thus accomplishing social class reproduction.

Part V also contains three labor-related chapters: chapter 13, "Precarious Labor: Asian Immigrant Women, 1970s-2010s" by Krittiya Kantachote and Rhacel Salazar Parreñas; chapter 14, "The Backbone of New York City's Chinatown: Chinese Women and the Garment Industry, 1950-2009" by Margaret M. Chin; and chapter 16, "'Revolutionary Care' as Activism: Filipina Nurses and Care Workers in Chicago, 1965-2016" by Joy Sales.

Part VI focuses on "Spaces of Political Struggles." Sharleen Santos-Bamba and Anne Perez Hattori discuss "The Mother's Tongue: Language, Women, and the Chamorros of Guam" in chapter 17. Judy Tzu-Chun Wu examines Patsy Takemoto Mink's political career and legislative activism, with an emphasis on her role in the passage and maintenance of Title IX in chapter 18; Trinity A. Ordonia discusses work with activist groups in "Opening the Path to Marriage Equality: Asian American Lesbians Reach Out to Their Families and Communities" in chapter 19. Finally, Monisha Das Gupta and Soniya Munshi analyze "Turning Points: South Asian Feminist Responses to Gender-Based Violence and Immigration Enforcement" in chapter 20.

Santos-Bamba and Perez Hattori explore the effects of language policies enforced on Guam under Spanish, Japanese, and U.S. colonialism and the traditional and current role of women in maintaining the language and culture of the Chamorros

of Guam. They examine “the intricate mix of economic, political, and social issues that have informed which language would, indeed, be the mother’s tongue and highlight [. . .] Chamorro women’s activism in that struggle” (288). Like many indigenous languages, the Chamorro language may be on the verge of extinction, according to Dr. Laura Torres Souder (287). Traditionally and historically, men and women have shared power, and “Chamorros defined identity through membership in clans determined by maternal lineage,” giving mothers a dominant role in language acquisition and use (289). Under American dominance, with its “English only” policy, from 1920 to 1945 Chamorros spoke Chamorro at home and in church and English “for academic and professional endeavors” (293). After the war, however, mothers “championed English acquisition,” not foreseeing the effect this might have on their children or on their native language (294). From 1966 to 1985, after the creation of the Chamorro Language Commission in 1964 (297), a third generation has “attended school [. . .] when both English and Chamorro were recognized as official languages” (295). Nevertheless, and despite recognition of its cultural value, the authors acknowledge that use of the Chamorro language has not increased but rather declined (300).

Locating Asian American adoptees in America, wearing the hijab in public places, and “Navigating the Hyphen: Tongan-American Women in Academia” (examined in Discussion below) are the topics of chapters 21 through 23. Each chapter addresses one or more aspects of the title of “Part VII: New Diasporas, Diverse Lives, and Evolving Identities.” Asian American adoptees are unique among diasporas in that, as the cases Kimberly D. McKee discusses in chapter 21 indicate, adoptees who feel out of place in their white adoptive families may be unable to find their Korean families and, when they do, feel out of place in Korean society because they know neither the language nor the culture. Further, many become aware of their dilemma, before Web 2.0 media, through first-person accounts in text and film created by other Korean adoptees (357-58). McKee concentrates on the memoirs of Jane Jeong Trenka and films by Deann Borshay Liem to investigate the process and consequences of adoption practices in the period after the Korean War. She concludes that the disruptive voices of women have exposed and must expose the irregularities of those processes, irregularities great enough to elicit an apology to adoptees from President Kim Dae Jung in 1998 “for the nation’s adoption practices and includes adoptees as ‘overseas Koreans’” (369). McKee also concludes that “[a]doption complicates ideas of the Asian American experience,” for “Asian American” is not a homogeneous category (ibid.).

In chapter 22, “‘Let Them Attack Me for Wearing the Hijab’: Islam and Identity in the Lives of Bangladeshi American Women” Nazli Kibria uses her experience of participant/observation in Bangladeshi community and family events and oral history data she collected through interviews with 72 Bangladeshi Americans (male and female) from 2001 to 2007. Here she focuses on four women and the formation of their Muslim identity amid the political tensions of post-9/11 America. One of the women wears the hijab in America to declare her religious identity and to provide a religious example for her children (379); a second woman also expressed that her association with her religion has increased along with her feeling of dislocation in America, and

she wants something more certain for her children (380). A third woman's personal crisis with depression helped her learn more about Islam "as a complete way of life" (382). This woman found that establishing a social network of people who share her commitment to Islam, whether Bangladeshi or not, freed her from the restrictions imposed by her family and gave her a sense of personal agency (381-82). The fourth woman views her Muslim identity in political more than religious terms, though religion is not absent from her view. Her college education enhanced this point of view (383-84).

The final three chapters, in "Part VIII: Gender, Cultural Change, Intergenerational Dynamics," focus primarily on linkages and belongings of particular groups of women: Korean American daughters and their parents (by Barbara W. Kim and Grace J. Yoo), professional Hmong women operating within their professions and their patriarchal families (by Chia Yougee Vang), and the sharing of "Stories and Visions across Generations: Khmer American Women." Of these, the last, chapter 26, reports on a project in which stories and visions are being shared digitally through a project developed by Shirley Suet-Ling Tang, Kim Soun Ty, and Linda Thiem of the University of Massachusetts Boston. Information on this project is provided in the Discussion below.

Hune and Nomura conclude the book with a short section titled "Reflections," reflections on the book's intent--to re-envision Asian American and Pacific Islander women's histories and to make their voices of "new scholarship more available to a wider audience" (457) as well as revelations of the authors' personal journeys. The book also contains acknowledgments, information on the contributors, and an index. Notes are included with individual chapters and provide an array of resources for additional research. The book is available in hardcover and paperback from the publisher and in hardcover, paperback, and e-book at Amazon.com, where prices are slightly lower. For reasons of both speed and cost, I chose the e-book; for one thing, I wanted to read the relevant chapters of the speakers included in the Zoom book-launching webinar on 27 October 2020, and I knew the hardcover copy would not arrive in the mail in time. The e-book is a bit disappointing in that section headings within chapters appear to be truncated, often only a single word, like "The," which is not specific, and I hope this is not the case in the other formats; the presence of even these headings does, however, signal possible shifts in focus and meaning.

Discussion

In terms of methodology, the authors in *Our Voices, Our Histories* employ a variety. Authors Yano, Chin, Ordon, Kibria, and Yang used participant observation in their research. Tashiro and Chee performed surveys as a method of data collection for chapters 8 and 15, and many authors either use or produce case studies. Many also use interviews and oral histories or memoirs, and, as chapter notes indicate, *all* authors did documentary research to gather and analyze data.

Like any anthology, *Our Voices, Our Histories* may be uneven, though apart from the headings in the e-book, the editing of the book is good and has worked on

evenness of readability and depth of investigation. The most serious need I observe in the book is the need for *more*: more research and more publication, please. For example, chapter 23, by Tongan Americans Halaevalu F. Ofahengaue Vakalahi and Ofa Ku'ulei Lanimekealoha Hafoka, deals with a population of two, the authors themselves. They acknowledge "their extremely small population size, academic and political underrepresentation, and historically aggregated data and exclusion as participants and researchers in major studies" (390). They add, however, that "there are about a dozen known Tongan-Americans who hold the doctor of philosophy (Ph. D.) degree" and that 50% of them are women (391). These authors provide a mere glimpse of the possibilities of studies of this population, among them a study of the "[r]acism, sexism, prejudice, discrimination, microaggression, gender-based pay inequity, and presumptions of incompetence [that] are common experiences of women of color in academia" (397), an environment predominantly white and male. More research is needed.

More research is also needed on and by the women of Micronesia, Melanesia, and Polynesia, in fact, all the women of Oceania. Another area asking for development is the application and testing of social science theory/theories. Chee (chapter 15) provides a good example of application of theory. Her research not only supports "Bourdieu's concept of social class reproduction in France" (264) but also "challenge[s] the assumption of Blood and Wolfe's resource theory" and "Traeger and Young's assertion that wives have limited influence on a family's migration decision" (265). Blood and Wolfe had suggested that because women have less earning power they also have less power in the household (*ibid.*). The joint decision-making of sixteen of the Taiwanese couples and the independent choices of five of the women, or more than half of the cases, indicate otherwise (258). Chee's use of statistics also enhanced understanding of her data.

One significant area for further study is the application of U.S. local, state, and federal law relative to immigrants' daily lives. The primarily historical chapters in the book discuss immigration law at various lengths, especially the Chinese Exclusion Act. Chapter 20, "Turning Points: South Asian Feminist Responses to Gender-Based Violence and Immigration," by Monisha Das Gupta and Soniya Munshi, however, concentrates on a real problem in some women's lives: domestic violence. Applying the requirements of immigration law to these situations may have unintended consequences of great magnitude; the solution may be greater than the problem, at least in New York State, for, "[s]ince 2012, the federal government has required New York State to share arrestee fingerprints collected by local police with immigration enforcement" (338). In the most extreme case, the arrestee might then be deported, repatriated. What happens to the woman and the family's children if they are left without the financial support of the primary breadwinner? More research needs to be done to examine this and similar cases.

A final area requiring development is the study and use of film, video, and digital media. Ordoná has noted the influence of the film on challenging "the marginalization of gay and lesbian people" (323), and McKee has examined the use of film (as well as texts) to promote adoptions (359) and to assist adoptees in understanding their

personal situations (364, 366-68). Finally, Shirley Suet-Ling Tang, Kim Soun Ty, and Linda Thiem have added a new dimension to documenting and sharing “a wide range of personal, family, and community histories” through the use of “interdisciplinary and bilingual/bicultural methods of inquiry, expression, and coproduction through oral history, digital storytelling, performance poetry, autohistoria, public exhibition, thematic narrative analysis, and reflection-action praxis within structured Asian American studies environments” (441) among the Khmer and Cambodian refugee and immigrant populations in Lynn, Revere, and Lowell, Massachusetts. Tang has been working on these projects since the 1990s (440). The promotion of intergenerational communication is a worthy goal, as is each of these projects individually. In addition to completing their many projects themselves, however, recording and sharing their methods and results with other such populations is also desirable. This final chapter of *Our Voices, Our Histories* is a starting point.

Who, then, is the intended audience of *Our Voices, Our Histories*? Clearly, the book can be used as a central text in Women and Gender Studies programs, as the 2003 *Asian/Pacific Islander American Women: A Historical Anthology* has been used. *Our Voices, Our Histories* may also be used in any of the social sciences for both its content and methodologies, or by anyone who wants to hear of positive things accomplished by women despite daily challenges, and also by anyone who likes a really good book!

Notes

¹ The words *Samoa*, *Malamalama* in all their variations should contain a long vowel mark (macron) over the first *a* and above the *o* in *Pomaika'i*. The author surname *Yên* should have an accent aigu (right-slanting) as well as the circumflex above but not next to the *ê*.

Works Cited

- Blood, Robert O., Jr. and Donald M. Wolfe. *Husband and Wife: The Dynamics of Married Living*, Free Press, 1960.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*. Translated by Richard Nice, Harvard UP, 1984.
- Hune, Shirley, and Gail M. Nomura, editors. *Asian/Pacific Islander American Women: A Historical Anthology*. NYU P, 2003.
- Kuleana*. Directed by Brian Kohne. Hawaii Cinema, 2017.
- Traeger, Lilian. “Family Strategies and the Migration of Women: Migrants in Dagupan City, Philippines.” *International Migration Review*, vol. 18, no. 4, 1984, 1264-77.
- Young, Kate, “The Creation of a Relative Surplus Population: A Case Study from Mexico.” *Women and Development: The Sexual Division of Labor in Rural Societies*, edited by Lourdes Beneria, Praeger, 1982, 149-77.