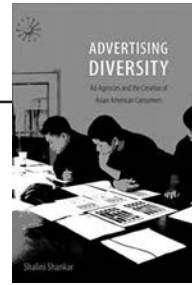


## BOOK REVIEW

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Shalini Shankar, *Advertising Diversity: Ad Agencies and the Creation of Asian American Consumers*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2015. 314 pp.

Shalini Shankar's first book, *Desi Land: Teen Culture, Class, and Success in Silicon Valley* (2008), dove into the lives of Northern California Silicon Valley South Asian teen culture at the turn of the century, exploring how South Asian youth, cognizant of mainstream model minority discourses and ethnic community norms, utilized a variety of cultural, linguistic, material, and consumptive practices to define themselves. In her second book, *Advertising Diversity: Ad Agencies and the Creation of Asian American Consumers* (2015), Shankar returns to questions of race, representation, and consumption through an in-depth account of the very processes that produce the advertisement—a mundane, pervasive, and often actively avoided visual presence of our lives. Shankar's study brings us into the world of advertising—where “aspirational imagery” is created—to focus on the creation of racial and ethnic representation within the American advertising industry. Navigating through general market advertising and the niche subfield of multicultural advertising, Shankar turns her critical eye to the industry's day-to-day work, foregrounding the processes that go into mass-mediated ideas of ethnoracial identity, gender, sexuality, nationality, and citizenship. In doing so, she interrogates how race and ethnicity are operationalized into “diversity” for corporate America. Shankar posits a conundrum that guides her research: if ad executives, clients, and media outlets do not want to be “racist,” how do they still make ads that are publicly called out as racist and “what would need to happen in corporate America to bring an antiracist agenda to the forefront” (7)?

To answer this question, she undertakes an ethnography of media production that allows her to not only examine representations but “also

linkages between these and the identities of the advertising executives involved in their creation" (27). She deconstructs the idea of normal—one where subjective notions are rendered acceptable for all—and advances a process called "racial naturalization" to understand how Asian Americans are now positioned as model consumers (7). Shankar's fieldwork included a seven-month stint (four continuous months) at Asian Ads (pseudonym), with additional interviews and observations, meetings, and creative conversations at various Asian American agencies. She complements this Asian American-specific fieldwork with interviews, limited participant observation, and attendance at industry events for general market advertising. Taken together, Shankar argues this selection of commercial media production and representation provides a "window into intersections of race, capitalism, and the products of its labor in the 21st century US" (9).

The book is structured to mirror the standard advertising process—moving through the pitch, account planning, and creative development of ads to account services, production, and, finally, audience testing. The book performs the advertising process for the reader, opening each chapter with a vignette concerning the particular process under discussion. By doing so, Shankar familiarizes the reader with the type of labor that advertising agencies engage in before adeptly interrogating such processes.

In the introductory chapter, "The Pitch," Shankar offers her overarching theoretical framework, building on Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) notion of "assemblage" to contextualize multiple ideologies; investigate modes of production and circulation; and consider the linguistic, visual, material, affective, and sensory aspects of advertising development and production. Drawing on both Foucault (1987) and Grewal (2005), "biopolitics" is a recurring concept advanced to situate advertising's penchant for classifying and organizing. These processes of classifying and organizing also make diasporas legible as consumer cultures and shape the very ways the US Census creates its categories. Arguing that "diversity" serves as a qualisign that operates in tandem with capitalist endeavors, she focuses on the work of capitalist businesses—not the movement of capital itself—to understand how producing racial and ethnic meanings creates or reinforces a racialized capitalism.

Chapter 1 is titled "Account Planning," which is ad-speak for gathering relevant market data. Shankar skillfully lays out the terrain of Asian American representation within the history of advertising, retracing and examining advertising's involvement in naturalizing meanings of race for

Asian Americans through “manufacturing and circulating representations that align with geopolitical events and economic trends” (39). Spanning the 19th century to the present day, this chapter discusses how knowledge about Asian Americans was constructed during particular points in time via advertising, especially as Asian immigration spurred demographic shifts that impacted the US Census. Multicultural advertising—small and independent firms targeting African American, Asian American, and Latino consumers—began to appear in the post-1960s era. Shankar asserts that the emergence of Asian American advertising followed the lead of Latino advertising and deployed similar in-culture and in-language techniques, referring to the use of ethnically specific elements and non-American English elements in advertisements respectively.

This chapter is filled with historical information, but the gem is its attention to Asian Americans’ problematic relationship to the US Census, wherein a biopolitics of enumeration fuels the capitalistic enterprise of market research, presenting clients with a growing consumer group. Even though the work of Asian American advertising agencies challenge the norms of whiteness within corporate America, Shankar argues these agencies “shape ethnoracial assemblages by molding the Census Bureau category of Asian American to their financial goals of increasing business and expanding their agencies” (71). Moreover, such agencies began the work of framing themselves as experts as they discursively created “designated market areas,” which required their specialized knowledge. Although the advertising industry as a whole was hindered by the financial crisis from 2008 to 2011, she comments that Asian American ad executives contributed to a “biopolitical narrative” of “Asian American economic resilience” (83). By the end of the chapter, Shankar tracks the process of racial naturalization, illustrating how Asian American representation in advertising evolved from “yellow peril” to “forever foreigner” to “model minority” to its current iteration as, she contends, “model consumers.” This eventually leads us to the next chapter where these model consumers now need to be tapped.

Chapter 2 brings readers into the realm of “creative,” where ideas are generated and copy is produced according to premises about ethnoracial diversity. Shankar claims diversity acts as a qualisign that indexes ethnicity, revealing how profit motives lead to various linguistic and visual commodifications that brand Asian Americans under new norms. The chapter broadly overviews advertising terms like “branding” and “consumer

culture” in order to highlight creative affect and transcreation—a term she heard used in several Asian American agencies that describes the act of taking into account in-culture and in-language signs with translation and creative/brand creation. The chapter briefly explains the goal of creative divisions and various general market approaches that situate themselves as “normal” while “culture” and “language” are “other.” The majority of the chapter attends to an Asian American market approach to branding and diversity, interspersing her analysis of in-culture and in-language transcreation with excerpts of conversations among creatives. Shankar argues that in-culture transcreation relies on indexical icons of culture—spatially contingent visuals which signal a presence—that fulfill audience expectations of Asia. However, in-culture transcreation also serves as a qualisign of diversity for clients and peers and thus positions the Asian American agency as a cultural and linguistic translator in the general ad industry. Whereas in-culture transcreation relies on visual identifiers of culture, in-language transcreation requires the use of non-American English as its way to target the Asian American consumer and, thus, relies on an intertextuality among visual forms, language choice, and narrative structure worthy of a commercial. In addition, language text (also known as copy) is held to the legal standards of truth-in-advertising and cannot deceive or mislead the consumer. Given that transcreation involves both translation and creation, language—in its audio and textual form in advertisements—is central to the process of creating advertisements that speak to the targeted multicultural audience, clients, and fellow ad industry peers. Yet, transcreation poses the challenge of the lack of equivalency between the English language and other languages. Here, Shankar highlights transcreation’s difficult relationship with tonality, humor, poetics, sounds, accents, and language translations by leading the reader through rich examples of discussions and brainstorming sessions during creative meetings, whose goals were to make the story meet the brand and to communicate to the audience that the ad was “written directly for them” (129).

As creative plans are developed, they still have to be sold to secure an account and here is where Shankar elucidates “Account Services” (Chapter 3) through the concept of intercultural affect. Having and displaying ethnoraical expertise is central to securing an account that supposedly requires multicultural advertising. Thus, Shankar argues, ethnoraical expertise is constructed through the use of specialized terminology for multicultural advertising, like in-culture, in-language, and transcreation

and in controlling of US Census data “in ways that naturalize statistics into racial and ethnic categories” (152). Intercultural spaces are “zones of value formation and contestation” (151) where “expertise is negotiated, both in the creative work and in the embodied presentation of expertise by multicultural ad executives” (173). Shankar asserts that intercultural affect is vital for racialized capitalism’s success, making multicultural advertising legible to clients—that is, making non-white linguistic and cultural difference accessible in white corporate environments. Intercultural affect problematically builds rapport with clients by both embodying diversity when expected and avoiding difficult and awkward conversations about ethnoracial identity in service of the client.

In Chapter 4, the awkwardness and difficult conversations come to the fore as “Production and Media” issues are taken up. Here, creative visions are executed in casting and direction while being constantly impeded by ad executives, clients, production directors, and others involved in the production process. Combining Deleuze and Guattari’s (1987) and Marcus and Saka’s (2005) notions of assemblages, Shankar explores the production of assemblages of diversity by multicultural agencies and its circulation in different media and for ad executives’ intended audiences. Shankar takes us inside production to observe casting issues and media placement. In addressing one of the few places where discussion about race and ethnicity occurs, Shankar reveals the issues in casting for diversity and explains the different approaches toward casting between general ad agencies and Asian American ad agencies. According to Shankar, casting decisions are primarily determined by “how ad executives issue casting calls and how clients direct them to create audience identification” (212). As a result, general marketing advertising indexes difference through casting talent in ways that do not disrupt normative whiteness or reinforce post-racial ethnic ambiguity, whereas Asian American ad agencies might veer towards ethnic specificity. Media placement, public relations, and place-based advertising reveal the circulation of “assemblages of diversity” to particular locations and for specific audiences. Yet, these assemblages of diversity come with their own difficulties of measuring and quantifying consumers, highlighting once again the biopolitics of enumeration as part of the larger racial capitalist enterprise.

The concluding chapter, “Audience Testing,” returns to the theoretical terms applied to multicultural advertising’s production of diversity. Importantly, Shankar reveals less frequently heard perspectives on

defining and representing diversity as it is articulated and operationalized in corporate America. She argues that these “contests of diversity” between general markets and multicultural markets are evolving, indicating how Asian American ad agencies have created legitimacy in producing diversity as a commodity form. As a result, general market advertising, which has previously ignored the multicultural market, became more interested in “cross-cultural advertising” as a way to reach an audience of second generation Asian Americans and Latinos. More importantly, Shankar concludes with how racial naturalization via advertising has created a new normal with selective inclusions and exclusions, resulting in reframing Asian American consumers and Asian Americans broadly and creating possible spaces for a more vocal anti-racist politics.

The major strength of this book is its revelation of (predominantly white) corporate America’s culture as it comes into contact with Asian American advertising agencies, whose members both reify and challenge the advertising industry’s norms of representation. Chapters 2 and 3 are the strongest chapters, interspersing rich examples and excerpts with analyses that demonstrate Shankar’s adeptness as an ethnographer and cultural critic as well as the complexity, tensions, and breakthroughs that often occur in unforeseen ways in this media industry of advertising. Thus, this book is a valuable and innovative contribution to the burgeoning field of media ethnography and particularly useful to those interested in conducting fieldwork in media industries. It is here, in the backrooms and boardrooms of corporate America, where Shankar’s work shines as she illuminates the internal dynamics of racial naturalization and its circulation. Chapters 1 and 4 suffer from less explicit ethnographic excerpts but provide a wide scope of history and corporate context from historical texts, interviews, and fieldwork and is valuable for readers who are unfamiliar with the history of Asian Americans in media. Shankar’s explorations and elucidations of the discussions, debates, and contestations over casting and the production of representations are illuminating. This is an important and innovative book for scholars interested in Asian American studies, communication, media studies, media industries, cultural studies, and visual culture. ■

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