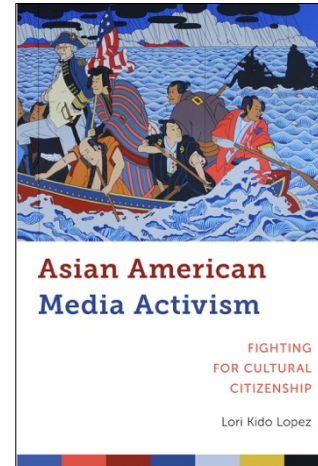


Lori Kido Lopez, **Asian American Media Activism: Fighting for Cultural Citizenship**, New York, NY: New York University Press, 2016, 246 pp., \$27.00 (paperback), \$89.00 (hardcover).

Reviewed by
 Laura Simpson Reeves
 The University of Queensland, Australia

Identity politics and social inclusion are currently front and center of both academic and popular debate. Globalization and mass migration have raised the importance of cultural citizenship, a key aspect of identity and inclusion, particularly in the United States. How minority groups are represented within mainstream society is of key importance to this debate. ***Asian American Media Activism: Fighting for Cultural Citizenship*** draws on three years of ethnographic research with media organizations and individuals involved in activism alongside textual and historical analysis, adding value to this discussion. Lori Kido Lopez claims the text examines “how Asian American media consumers and producers deploy specific understandings of citizenship as a directive for shaping representation in mainstream entertainment media” (p. 5). This claim is fully realized throughout the book, albeit from a media activism viewpoint. The inclusion of audiences—and not just producers—in understanding cultural citizenship is pivotal to Lopez’s argument and is a strength of the book.



The majority of the research stems from Lopez’s time with the Media Action Network for Asian Americans (MANAA) between 2008 and 2011, although she does also draw on interviews with other organizations, archival research, and attendance at various events. The introduction (pp. 27–31) includes a frank and open discussion about the challenges of ethnographic research and the impact her close involvement with MANAA had on both the project and her own identity. This is seen throughout the book, where Lopez has largely written from an activist—albeit evidence-based—perspective.

The main body of the text is divided into five chapters that are structured around how different sites of media activism understand cultural citizenship. Chapter 1 looks at the history of Asian American media activism, starting with protests by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) as early as 1915. These protests have predominantly been focused on how non-White characters, including Asian characters, are represented in theater, film, and television and encourage the use of tactics such as contacting the creators, encouraging boycotts, convincing advertisers to pull sponsorship, and threatening legal action. Lopez acknowledges that “the history of Asian American media activism is a piecemeal endeavor at best,” with many organizations heavily reliant on volunteers and “were simply too small or informal to sustain themselves beyond a few years” (p. 47). Much of the chapter therefore focuses on the work of MANAA, which was formed in the early 1990s in response to negative media representations emerging around the 50th anniversary of the bombing of Pearl Harbor. According to this analysis, MANAA have been particularly successful in campaigning against Asian stereotypes. However, as Lopez points out, “in deciding what images are acceptable . . . a very particular definition of cultural citizenship is at work—to be seen as fully American, Asian Americans must portray themselves as ‘just like everyone else’” (p. 60).

Chapter 2 examines media policy in the United States and how it has been used to shape the way in which the Asian American community is represented, recognizing the role that policy can play in the experiences of cultural citizenship. In particular, Lopez demonstrates the power of the citizen-consumer in influencing policy change—not just for governmental or regulatory policy but also policies of privately owned media corporations. The chapter outlines the history of film censorship and related legal cases in the United States, followed by an in-depth description of how the Asian Pacific American Media Coalition (APAMC) worked to develop memoranda of understanding with four major TV networks to increase minority representation. Nonetheless, Asian American story lines on U.S. televisions remain limited, although the recent success of shows such as *Fresh Off the Boat* indicates that this might be changing.

The role of advertising and market-based representations of Asian Americans forms the basis of chapter 3, expanding the definition of who counts as a media activist. As Lopez points out, “advertising is often the target of criticism rather than a site for potential contributions to social justice” (p. 9). While the first two chapters discuss media activism driven by ethical imperatives, this chapter recognizes the power of commerce to enact social change. As Lopez mentions, media activism organizations have long recognized the power of money in their strategies; calls for boycotts, for instance, were aimed to financially hurt media organizations, producers, and distributors. Lopez carefully examines the relationship between citizenship and consumerism, arguing that advertisers assumed that this fast-growing group was not a viable market. However, the shift from images of poverty-stricken Asian migrants to wealthy, global consumers has arguably had one of the biggest effects on how this minority group is viewed. Asian American advertising agencies, according to Lopez, “can be positioned as activist . . . through the work they do to create images” (p. 128). By avoiding stereotypes and creating authentic story lines, Lopez makes a convincing argument for advertisers as activists, leading the reader to rethink how we view the advertising industry.

Lopez then explores in chapters 4 and 5 the rise of online media in providing broader representation of Asian Americans as well as continuing to broaden who should be considered media activists. The focus of chapter 4 is popular Asian American YouTube celebrities, such as Michelle Phan, Ryan Higa, Clara C., and Freddie Wong. Lopez states that Asian Americans have been “recording images of their lives as a political act that asserted their cultural citizenship” since the 1970s, implying that Asian Americans are doing nothing new activism-wise, albeit taking advantage of the new media available to them (p. 139). However, the interactive nature of online media platforms means that these celebrities develop ongoing and (superficially) “close” relationships with their fan base, particularly among Asian American youth, creating new spaces for identity creation and negotiation not previously available. Lopez’s analysis here is an important contribution to the politics of representation and identity among Asian American youth.

The final chapter focuses more closely on examining online activism, particularly the role of “hashtag activism” on Twitter in furthering Asian American representation. While the use of social media tools like Twitter is not specific to Asian American activism, it has been effectively used as a rallying point and a way to shift the conversation around Asian American representation in the media. Lopez particularly examines the online conversations that happened around #HowIMetYourRacism, #NotYourAsianSidekick, and #CancelColbert. While the chapter does touch on issues around access and the participatory nature of social media, the focus is on the effects (and effectiveness) of the three campaigns listed above. Lopez argues that Twitter hashtags may “simply lead to a form of guided conversation” rather than specifically be

designed as a form of media activism (p. 188). They can, however, reveal the way in which “the media is connected to cultural citizenship” (p. 197) and highlight the ways in which responses can both unite and fracture Asian American communities.

Lopez concludes the book by reiterating that there are different understandings of cultural citizenship, each of which may motivate a different expression of media activism. Yet she remains hopeful, finishing with a call-to-arms in which media activism can “continue to make an impact in the fight for justice and equality” (p. 222). While the text has understandably focused on media activism in the United States, it would be interesting to examine whether the trends identified in this book are also evident in other multicultural societies. Nonetheless, media activism scholars will particularly find the text useful, as will those who are interested in social movements and media studies more broadly. It is a brilliant and welcome addition to the field of media and cultural studies.