

EMISFÉRICA

Nguyen, Mimi Thi and Thuy Linh Nguyen Tu, eds. *Alien Encounters: Popular Culture in Asian America*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2007. 365 pages. \$84.95 unjacketed cloth, \$23.95 paper.

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With this collection of essays, editors Mimi Thi Nguyen and Thuy Linh Nguyen Tu break new ground in the fields of Asian American studies and cultural studies. *Alien Encounters* focuses exclusively on post-1965 culture, thus circumventing the usual overrepresentation of Chinese and Japanese Americans that generally results from scholars' attention to earlier streams of Asian immigration. As Nguyen and Tu explain in their thoughtful introduction, the contributors to *Alien Encounters* eschew cultural studies' normative investment in locating mass culture's hegemonic and/or resistant potential, instead analyzing "how Asian Americans have chosen to engage the idiom of the popular" (3). Much of the collection draws inspiration from Kandice Chuh's recent book *Imagine Otherwise: On Asian Americanist Critique*, in which Chuh reorients "Asian American" from a (domestic) identificatory label describing an essentialized group of people to a (transnational) term that signals a set of tactics formulated in response to U.S. abjection of Asia as national Other. This new orientation of Asian American studies has begun to take hold in the field, and its possibilities are nowhere more apparent than in the range of domestic and transnational sites made available to *Alien Encounters*.

Nguyen and Tu begin their introduction with the first of several confessions of fandom that populate the pages of *Alien Encounters*, signaling from the opening pages that this collective of scholars refuses to disavow the pleasurable aspects of popular culture. The first confession concerns the complex affections that the editors have long harbored toward *The Goonies* (1985), in particular toward the stereotypically geeky Asian immigrant character Data (played by Jonathan Ke Quan) who participates in the film's victorious gang of juvenile outcasts. The editors' love for Data—and the pleasure in popular culture confessed and analyzed throughout the book—manifests the "threat and promise" that coexist in the many alien encounters staged in American science fiction (209). While Nguyen and Tu foreground the ambivalent "threat and promise" of popular culture for Asian Americans through the titling of *Alien Encounters*, it is their book's subtitle that performs the more meaningful inversion. Whereas most book-length treatments of the intersection between Asian Americans and popular culture have dealt with mainstream (and usually racist) representations of *Oriental*s (to borrow the most famous of these monograph's titles, Robert Lee's *Oriental: Asian Americans in Popular Culture*), this latest volume reverses the focus and instead promises analyses of *Popular Culture in Asian America*, thus turning to studies of how Asian Americans have inserted *themselves* into popular culture as producers and (no less crucially) as consumers. (Important to note, however, that the "America" in the title is a misnomer that grows out

of a certain solipsism in Asian American studies: in other words, “America” should actually read “United States,” since no other nation in the Americas comes under consideration here.)

The four parts into which Nguyen and Tu divide *Alien Encounters* unpersuasively segment the essays, but reading across this tenuous arrangement reveals several salient categories that serve as throughlines in the book. Many contributors concern themselves with rendering visible effaced Asian American contributions to popular culture, ranging from Asian American jazz musicians and rappers to the immigrant labor underpinning America’s omnipresent Chinese takeout restaurants and even the so-called “rice rocket” culture of import car enthusiasts studied with particular brilliance by Robyn Magalit Rodriguez and Vernadette Vicuña Gonzalez. Other *Alien Encounters* essayists argue that Asian Americans have produced pop culture texts that critique U.S. hegemony: pulp fiction novels showcasing spectacles of U.S. global violence; the mainstream movie *The Guru* (2002); visual artists like Nikki S. Lee; diasporic Vietnamese videotexts of community-based variety shows; and antiracist parodies of the Internet’s claims to colorblinded mobility. Finally, a fair number of the book’s contributors demonstrate a sincere interest in consumptive practices and their essays showcase the ambivalent agency of Asian American consumers of popular culture, ranging from the televisual audience to a Chinese American chef’s East-West “fusion” cooking show to South Asian American women’s reception of the U.S.-based “Indo-Chic” trend. These three strands of critique fittingly converge in Nguyen’s exemplary contribution to the collection, “Bruce Lee I Love You,” which primarily concerns fan-cum-internet-star JJ Chinois. This fine essay is one of the few in the collection to engage embodied performance (albeit in its mediated remains on the internet and in videotexts) and, conversely, one of several that would have greatly benefited from the addition of illustrations. As it stands, illustrated reproductions and documentation of actual performances remain woefully marginal to the otherwise important project of *Alien Encounters*. Even so, Nguyen and Tu have assembled a radically contemporary array of case studies as a springboard to enlarge cultural studies’ understanding of popular culture, both as consumptive and productive practice.