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2012

Immigration and Belonging: Nation, Class, and Membership in New Migration Policies

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Recommended Citation

Park, Edward J. W and John S. W Park. 2012. Message From The Editors: Immigration and Belonging: Nation, Class, and Membership in New Migration Policies." *AAPI Nexus: Policy, Practice and Community*: 2012, Vol. 10, No. 1, pp. v-xi. <https://www.aapinexus.org/2012/04/18/message-from-the-editors-immigration-and-belonging-nation-class-and-membership-in-new-migration-policies/>

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Message from the Editors

Immigration and Belonging

Nation, Class, and Membership in New Migration Policies

Edward J.W. Park and John S.W. Park

We are pleased to present this collection of essays. They tie together some of the most important overlaps between immigration studies and Asian American Studies, and they present collectively a compelling portrait of how Asian American communities have continued to change as a result of on-going migration trends. These essays remind us that new Asian migrants have enlarged and complicated the very definition of the term, “Asian American,” and they tell important stories about how class, immigration status, and settlement patterns have altered the communities and regions that have been so central to Asian American Studies scholars. In addition, the essays in this volume indicate the growing importance of Asian American topics and approaches within several academic disciplines and fields, including labor economics, qualitative sociology, studies of migration and acculturation, and discourses of globalization. These authors have a great deal to say about how skilled people in general can move across the world, how some can move back and forth across international boundaries with relative ease, even as poorer migrants try to survive economically in our major cities and search through difficult options in their attempts to settle in the United States. We begin this volume first by thanking all of the contributors for showing us their amazing work, and we thank the staff of the *AAPI Nexus* for giving us this rare opportunity to collaborate with such fine scholars and activists.

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In the global and transnational age in which we live, many advanced industrialized nation-states have encouraged the immigration of affluent and skilled persons, while limiting the admission of unskilled, poorer immigrants. The United States was one of

the first nations to favor highly skilled immigrants in its public law after World War II, through rules like the Immigration Act of 1952 and the Immigration Act of 1965; that second rule transformed the United States, demographically and in every other way, and it allowed for an unprecedented number of Asian immigrants to settle in this country. Even the most highly skilled Asian immigrants faced severe racial discrimination and downward economic mobility, but overall and over many decades, Asian Americans as a group did skew upwards, whether in terms of their household income, or at the rates at which they and their children received higher education. Many worked, and continue to work, in core sectors of the American economy, in the medical field, in engineering and professional occupations, and as key participants in the information technology boom. Put more directly, many American hospitals, universities, and high technology firms would not function as they do now without Asian immigrants or their highly educated children.

In light of this fact, Asian nations that had once sent so many emigrants to the United States have tried to do to the Americans what the Americans once did to them: China, South Korea, India, and Vietnam, for example, have all implemented policies that encourage both reverse and return migration, in attempts to draw highly skilled workers and their money back “home.” Most of the academic attention on these policies has emphasized government efforts to entice highly skilled professionals and wealthy investors, but these measures have impacted a much wider array of migrants, including English teachers, university students, unskilled workers, and even retirees on pensions. Asian Americans often have American university degrees, work experiences based here, and assets denominated in American dollars; Asian governments have coveted all of these resources, and so getting these Asian Americans “back” has become a central pre-occupation for policy makers in Asia.

This has resulted in complex, trans-Pacific migration patterns. Second generation Korean Americans with Ph.D.s and Asian Indian engineers with lawful permanent residency in the United States now have options: South Korea and India both want them, and so they can contemplate working and living in Asia, and thus joining many other persons in similar circumstances. Together, they are forming what are essentially Asian American com-

munities outside of the United States. Two papers in this volume deal with this pattern. Wei Li and Wan Yu confirm how everything economic in the communist People's Republic of China has been done very large, including capitalism. According to their findings, the Party and the government have embraced Chinese American returnees through several inter-related policies, and many Chinese universities and firms have provided them with handsome salaries and incredible jobs that match or exceed anything they might be offered in the United States. Given these policies, many Chinese American academics have "returned" to China where their opportunities appear wide open.

Jane Yamashiro's paper shows how Japan and South Korea have also stimulated the "return" of Japanese Americans and Korean Americans respectively. Her work shows that although these policies seek economic growth and development, it's not just about the money. The Japanese government has focused on low-wage workers of Japanese descent, in light of Japan's aging and shrinking work force, while the Korean government has encouraged highly skilled workers and wealthy investors to help that country climb the global economic ladder. In both cases, the ideal migrant has been someone who has shared their national heritage. Yamashiro's work suggests that although the United States may have changed policies in order to draw the highly skilled, Asian countries have also been worried in recent years about how *any* migration might alter their national character and complexion. Japan and Korea want useful migrants, but both prefer a certain kind.

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Back here in the United States, Asian American and Pacific Islander communities have continued to grow, and they have grown more complex. All of the nation's top ten metropolitan areas have experienced significant increases in AAPI populations in the past two decades, and they have developed profound variations in the number and size of community-based organizations that serve the AAPI population. Outside of New York, Los Angeles, and San Francisco, community-based organizations have had difficulty keeping up with population growth and demands for direct services; even in New York, Los Angeles, and San Francisco, newer immigrant groups from Asia have challenged Asian American

pan-ethnic models of organizing, and ethnic specific organizations have struggled to provide vital services. These challenges have been made more pressing during this long period of devolution and recession, when the federal and state governments have tried to partner with community groups even as they've eviscerated their own budgets for those purposes. Law enforcement has been the only area of the federal budget that has experienced steady, stable growth; almost everything else has been cut. Immigrants and the organizations serving them have suffered disproportionately.

Two articles in this volume deal with these trends. Erwin de Leon's essay deals with community-based Asian American organizations in the Washington D.C. metropolitan region, including portions of northern Virginia and Maryland, an area where the AAPI population has been growing rapidly. In that region, AAPI communities are attempting to expand their service area and service populations, and to form new community-based organizations that are pan-ethnic and multiracial. These community organizations are seeking to broaden political support by building coalitions with other groups, and then to use those coalitions to construct new regional and national networks. While these efforts have been somewhat successful, especially in civil rights advocacy, these coalitions are still fragile, and they've relied on a handful of extremely dedicated activists. De Leon's piece represents an important resource that signals what lies ahead, as these organizations, coalitions, and networks must still address huge gaps in major policy and service areas, including health care, poverty, worker's rights, community development, and housing, and all in this period of economic contraction and recession.

Sudarat Musikawong and Chanchanit Martorell's piece is based in Los Angeles, where the composition of Asian American communities seems to change every five to ten years. Thai migrants have been settling there for over three decades, but their migration has been shaped differently, and under circumstances that have often drawn national attention. Cases of human smuggling and involuntary servitude—including the Thai sweatshop case in El Monte—have triggered criminal convictions based on the 13th Amendment. Musikawong and Martorell review such cases, but the heart of their essay is about the Thai Community Development Center, an ethnic-specific community-based organization

in Thai Town, in Hollywood, where both authors have worked for many years. There, they have helped Thai migrants settle in the United States, as they and their staff have coordinated services through sometimes impossible tangles of federal law. More importantly, Musikawong and Martorell argue that although coalitions and pan-ethnic Asian American efforts may be important, ethnic-specific organizations like the Thai CDC deserve recognition and support, as they have fulfilled and will continue to fulfill a critical role for the new Asian immigrant communities in which they've been embedded. Their work speaks to the constant need to revisit Asian American pan-ethnic strategies and institutions, as Asian immigrant communities continue to arrive from varied places, under varied circumstances, and transform entire regions.

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Community-based organizations have been vital to Asian Americans, but many new immigrants live and work without much institutional support. Poorer immigrants are often too busy earning a living to look beyond their present realities. In Anna Kim's study of the low-wage labor market in Koreatown, for instance, one of her informants told her that although rich people might be fine with waiting for a paycheck to clear, he needed cash, right now, and he didn't want the federal or state government to take anything out of his wages. Things like health care, retirement savings, social security—these were less compelling than tending to the bare necessities of life. This overwhelming sentiment tied together nearly all of the informants in Anna Kim's excellent ethnographic study of the low-wage labor market in the one region that would surely collapse without low-wage immigrant laborers. Although a few of her Korean and Latino informants cared that they found "legitimate work" in the formal economy, legal residents and undocumented immigrants both moved back and forth, between formal and informal labor, false documents and no documents, "regular" paychecks and money "under the table." Kim's study suggests that for the very poor, activists should focus on policies to defend the dignity of all laborers, by providing living wages for everyone and by protecting against egregious forms of abuse—all of this for all workers, irrespective of status or ethnicity.

In Tracy Buenavista's work, the line between young people who are out of status and those who aren't is blurry. Two of her

informants knew each other, however, although both were out of status, neither knew that about the other. On a college campus like Cal State Northridge, where Professor Buenavista conducted much of her work, it *is* nearly impossible to tell who is or isn't undocumented. And yet it makes all the difference: for the young people who are out of status, finishing a college degree often seems an insurmountable challenge, and whatever (shrinking) financial aid might be available to their peers just isn't available for them. They see other possibilities instead, military recruiters everywhere, on campus and on-line. In her carefully conducted and historically grounded ethnographic study, Buenavista shows how many undocumented Asian immigrant youth have an uncanny familiarity with rules like the Military Accessions Vital to the National Interest Program, or the military service opportunities within the proposed federal Development, Relief and Education for Alien Minors Act. These young people believe that the United States military is one of the only American institutions that want them, lobby for them, and recruit them. Buenavista implores us to consider the imperial legacies of these patterns and to imagine alternatives to the militarization of American citizenship.

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Altogether, the contributors in this special volume offer so much to such a wide range of scholars and activists. Demographers and geographers will be intrigued by patterns of return migration, and law and policy scholars will be amazed at the implications of the data provided in Li and Yu's paper—the sheer scale of people “circulating” in highly-skilled categories is impressive, and so are the state policies responsible for all of that movement. Immigration scholars who've studied how race and nationality inflect immigration law and policy will find Yamashiro's piece especially illuminating. Many Asian Americanists have advocated for a turn toward community studies, to return to the “roots” of our field, and de Leon, Musikawong, and Martorell provide clearer portraits of what that might look like, whether we are reading their work as activists, practitioners, scholars, or in some combination of these roles. Finally, the essays by Kim and by Buenavista remind us of how excellent scholarly ethnographies can humanize our understanding of our “subjects,” and how their stories should and will continue to shape the progressive consciousness of our field. All

of these essays represent excellent work, and we believe that they are some of the best contributions to Asian American and migration studies.

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JOHN S.W. PARK is an Associate Professor of Asian American Studies at UC Santa Barbara and the Associate Director for the UC Center for New Racial Studies. He is the author of *Elusive Citizenship: Immigration, Asian Americans, and the Paradox of Civil Rights*, and he has also written articles on race, immigration law, and Asian American history. From 2007 to 2011, John served as an Associate Dean in the College of Letters and Science at UC Santa Barbara. John would like to thank his colleagues at UCSB, Diane Fujino, Howard Winant, and Melvin Oliver, for their support.