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Jim Logan

The Long Struggle

The past couple of years have been particularly difficult for Asian Americans. The murder of eight people — six of them Asian women — by a white man in the Atlanta area in March of 2021 was the bloody underline on anti-Asian racism that has spiked during the pandemic.

But Diane Fujino, a professor of Asian American Studies at UC Santa Barbara, notes this racism is nothing new — the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 and the incarceration of Japanese Americans in World War II are merely the most visible manifestations of physical and structural racism Asians have faced since their arrival to this country.

Asian American activism, however, is “conspicuously invisible,” as Fujino writes in “Contemporary Asian American Activism: Building Movements for Liberation” (University of Washington Press, 2022), a collection of essays.

“Our book works to focus attention on the variety of Asian American activism happening at this time,” said Fujino, who co-edited the collection with Robyn Magalit Rodriguez of UC Davis, a UCSB alumna. “We work to center organizing knowledge on the question of how we create change. The book includes writings by long-term organizers and activist-scholars who are thinking deeply about the question of how we build and sustain movements for liberation, beyond coordinating events or media hyped moments.”

(A virtual launch for the book — featuring Fujino, Rodriguez and activists Javaid Tariq and Alex T. Tom — will be held Thursday, Feb. 17, from 4 to 5:30 p.m. PT. To register, click here.)

As Fujino notes, the invisibility of Asian American activism stems largely from the trope of the model minority, the notion that Asian Americans have found success solely through education and hard work.

“Not only does the model minority trope cause harm to Asian Americans by obscuring social problems in our community — problems of poverty, racism, domestic violence — it also propels the logic that we don’t need grassroots social movements,” she said. “That instead, we can gain *individual* achievement through education and hard work, rather than promoting the need for collective struggle and collective health and wealth for all communities, especially the most structurally vulnerable among us.”

Fujino said that it’s important to understand that the model minority myth was popularized in 1966, the year Stokely Carmichael and Willie Ricks created “Black Power” as a rallying cry and the Black Panther Party was formed. In that context, she said, the trope works to contain Black radicalism, which focused on Black liberation and countering racism.

That Black radicalism, she added, while focused on Black liberation and countering anti-Blackness, was also influenced by Third World decolonization, especially the war in Vietnam, as well as the anti-colonial struggles in Africa, Asia and Latin America.

“This is the twin context in which the Asian American Movement of the late 1960s and 1970s emerges — Black Power and Third World decolonization — and that earlier movement continues to shape the politics of current Asian American activism, or at least of those organizations and struggles narrated in our book.

“There is a long and rich history of Asian American activism,” Fujino continued. “This book makes an intervention that counters the model minority image and logic, and shows Asian Americans as resisters and organizers, working for Asian American liberation and in deep solidarity with other communities.”

“Contemporary Asian American Activism” emerged from a conference on the subject held at UCSB in January 2019.

About UC Santa Barbara

The University of California, Santa Barbara is a leading research institution that also provides a comprehensive liberal arts learning experience. Our academic community of faculty, students, and staff is characterized by a culture of interdisciplinary collaboration that is responsive to the needs of our multicultural and global society. All of this takes place within a living and learning environment like no other, as we draw inspiration from the beauty and resources of our extraordinary location at the edge of the Pacific Ocean.