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Ethnic Studies Inside Out

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Ethnic Studies Inside Out

Vijay Prashad (bio)

Ethnic studies is in its good times. The funding situation is bleak, and the institutional support tepid. But, we've got the ideas. In the past few years I've read books, articles, and dissertations on such exciting themes

as the collaboration between California's Chicano and Filipino workforce, the writings of Jewish Americans on Native America, the travels of Langston Hughes in Soviet Central Asia, the Black cowboys on the Rio Grande, and Yuri Kochiyama's life betwixt race and class.¹ This work comes out of a number of institutional locations, from English Departments to International Studies Programs. And, it is written in different registers, from straightforward historical accounts to close textual readings. Even the approaches to these topics are manifold: some are interested in the personalities of historical and political figures, while others are drawn to the way that racial identification functions and is contested. Even though Ethnic Studies does not have a well-articulated theoretical charter (and a consequent set of methods); this work seems to come out of a horizon of interests and questions. None of this work is invested in the frozen tundra of identity, although it does not disavow the importance of racialization and of racial oppression. Indeed, that is what makes it all the more interesting, for it is unified by its interest in how people articulate and negotiate difference at the same time as it is drawn to a world beyond the framework of difference.

[End Page 157]

Programs that since the 1980s had turned inward now promote conversations across ethnicity and racial identification. Asian American Studies moved south of the U.S. border to engage Latin American populations, and particularly the lives of Asians in Latin America and the Caribbean. That journey went further and deeper, into the connections between Asian Americans and African Americans. These interests opened up new ways to understand Asians in the U.S., now not so much as a discrete and isolated population that toils in the shadows of white supremacy, but also as a people who developed deep cultural ties with Latinos and Blacks in the era of segregation. This is not marginal work, but indeed has had a substantial impact on the way we understand the development of Asian American cultural history. Along this grain, there is now an invitation to investigate the linkages between Asian Americans and Arab Americans. Because the question of cross-identity investigation is now commonplace, the invitation is *empirical* rather than

theoretical. We do not require any major correction of our theoretical course to pursue the linkage between Asian Americans and Arab Americans, or indeed between Asian Americans and any other population group (Native Americans come to mind, for instance, as they interacted with the Chinese workers who built the railroads in the West, or Filipinos who entered the social world of Louisiana).

This essay will reproduce the logic of our field, tracing how we moved from our studies of one discrete cultural group (Asian Americans) toward our current condition, where there is a tendency to look at identity in a relational way. It will, in addition, attempt to offer a theory of what we are currently doing, to rehearse the idea of the polycultural.² We are operating with a theory that we have not yet made explicit; in other words, there is a productive theory underlying the work underway, and the task now is to articulate it. This is a contingent statement on what many of us have produced, and it is written with the hope that we can have a theoretical discussion about the terrific new empirical paths being hewed.

I. Cultural Grievances

Ethnic Studies, as a discipline, emerged in the early years of the post-Civil Rights era. Certainly, the purveyors of Ethnic Studies and the students who demanded that it enter their curriculum in the late 1960s drew from the **[End Page 158]** work and ideas of generations of scholars that preceded them. In 1926, Dr. Carter G. Woodson began a Black History Week (which was extended to a month in 1976). Woodson chose the second week of February, which held the birthdays of both Frederick...



ETHNIC STUDIES INSIDE OUT

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