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BOOK REVIEW

Picture bride, war bride: the role of marriage in shaping Japanese America

By Sonia C. Gomez. New York University Press, 2024. 200 pages. Hardcover, $35.00 USD, ISBN: 9781479803071. Ebook, $35.00, ISBN: 9781479803095.

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Sonia C. Gomez's *Picture Bride, War Bride* examines the role of marriage (and by extension domesticity) as a state-sanctioned institution that facilitated the Japanese immigrants' entry and acceptance into the United States in the early and mid-20th century. Despite its primary title, the book is not a history of Japanese brides. Rather, by factoring in the brides' experiences, it demonstrates the interplay of race and gender in migration. As its introductory chapter observes, early Japanese American history is limited to the male settlers and the limits placed on their migration (4). Yet, while the 1908 Gentleman's Agreement restricted the entry of Japanese migrants into the United States, it made an exception for the so-called "picture brides," or the Japanese women who were summoned as brides of Japanese immigrants already in the country. Then, after World War II, Japanese women were again given an exception, albeit this time they entered the US as "war brides," or the wives of American servicemen returning from Asia. As the book effectively demonstrates, marriage is an essential element in Japanese American history.

Summary: a gendered approach to Japanese American history

Chapter 1 focuses on the pre-World War II picture brides and how their entry and presence in the United States influenced the racial discourse. On the one hand, American idealization of the family and domesticity welcomed them as integral to the creation of migrant communities. Their presence ensured that Japanese men did not go after White women, thus preserving the purity of the White family. On the other hand, picture brides were expected to be nothing more than wives - at home, and outside the workforce. As the chapter emphasizes, their life in the US was contingent on the women's marriage to Japanese men regardless of their motivations for migration.

Chapter 2 highlights the importance of marriage by putting the spotlight on unmarried *issei* (first-generation Japanese migrants), many of whom were queer or from burakumin families. Without a family in America, these Japanese men were pushed to the margins of society. For example, during World War II, the War Relocation Authority (WRA) organized the incarcerated Japanese Americans by family units, consequently isolating the bachelors. Isolated and without children born on American soil, their connection to the US was tenuous, and thus questions of loyalty imposed on them a heavier burden.

Chapter 3 moves the narrative to postwar US-occupied Japan, centering on cross-racial encounters and intimacies. It shows that racial discrimination against African-Americans also existed in Japan. Interestingly, however, Afro-Asia solidarity prevented Black writers from blaming Japanese people for any discrimination they experienced and instead levied all responsibilities on White Americans. By 1947, the criticisms over American discriminatory policies that hindered American servicemen from

taking their Japanese wives with them to the US led to the Alien Brides Act. Such American legislation allowing Japanese women's entry into the postwar US, the chapter argues, was contingent on their marriage to American military men.

The fate of these women is further discussed in chapters 4 and 5. In Chapter 4, their role as "bridges between the US and Japan" is explored. The so-called bride schools sought to prepare them for life in the US. In the bride schools, they were trained in American-style home-making and fashion, while simultaneously encouraged to retain the "quaint" aspects of their Japanese culture. Their marriage was to be the "intimate manifestation of the US-Japan alliance" (90) as "the intimate bonds they had forged with American men had geopolitical implications" (91).

Lastly, Chapter 5 examines how the Japanese wives organized themselves. It takes as an example, the Cosmo Club, established in 1952, which aimed "to educate Japanese women on all things American and provide a safe space for the women to socialize in their native tongue with fellow countrymen and women" (112). It is worth noting that the Japanese wives of Black Americans were "not fully accepted" in Japanese American organizations, nor were they accommodated in Black communities. The story of one such woman, Setsuko, who was prohibited from entering a Black-segregated movie theater, was welcomed at a Mexican theater and bingo parlor, and then scolded by her mother-in-law for cavorting with non-Blacks, not only complicates the Black/White binary but also reveals the racially fragmented American society. Moreover, placing the postwar war brides within a historical context, the chapter explains the generational divides in Japanese America. In particular, the well-established *issei* and *nisei* (second-generation) communities that had experienced wartime incarceration, displacement, and discrimination distanced themselves from the newly arrived war brides.

Review: narratives of immigrants in the margins

Picture Bride, War Bride is a welcome addition to the slowly growing body of works on Japanese women's transnational history. Almost a decade has passed since Mire Koikari's (2015) examination of militarized domesticity and transnationalism in *Cold War Encounters in US-Occupied Okinawa*. Younger scholars have recently turned to women in Japanese territories. For example, Ayuko Takeda (2023) discussed Japanese Okinawan women's experiences and handicrafts in POW camps in the Mariana Islands after American troops defeated the Japanese military. As Takeda's work suggests, such examinations must necessarily also consider non-Japanese women in the area. Such work was undertaken by Eri Kitada (2023) in her study on Filipina wives of Japanese settlers and their mixed-race children in American-occupied Philippines in the early twentieth century. Located on the western side of the Pacific Ocean, these historical works reveal the overlapping nature of US and Japanese imperialism to map out and make sense of the transnational/trans-imperial lives of women.

Notwithstanding its contribution to the study of Japanese diaspora, empire, and transnationalism, *Picture Bride, War Bride* is a work on Japanese American history. Eiichiro Azuma distinguished between Asian studies in America and Asian American studies to explain the structure undergirding scholarship in American academia (Azuma 2019, 7–8). Japanese studies is a section of Asian studies that concerns itself with Japan. Like other fields in area studies, it zooms into Japan; its scholars invest in learning the Japanese language, accessing Japanese source materials, and becoming experts in "Japan." Japanese American history, meanwhile, belongs to Asian American studies and is concerned with the history of the US as an immigrant nation. As a field that developed from movements calling for redress for the incarceration and displacement that Japanese Americans experienced during World War II, Japanese American history concerns itself with racial discourses and their impact on civil rights. Gomez's work, centering on gender and racial discourses in the United States, sits firmly on the latter. In fact, the only chapter that was solely situated in Japan barely tackled racial-gendered dynamics outside of US occupation and used American source materials. Through this discussion, I mean not to diminish *Picture Bride, War Bride's* relevance; my purpose,

rather, is to locate it. The book's main theoretical contribution of elucidating the role of marriage and complicating the racial discourse through a gendered lens remains invaluable, especially in light of recent events in the US.

Along with the theory, the individual stories of the Japanese immigrants which Gomez gathered from various sources are the strength of the book. Alas, however, they are also its weakness. Vividly told, the anecdotes effectively flesh out the racial and gendered issues that immigrants face; however, in many instances, the reader is left to speculate how the anecdotes support the argument that Gomez seems to be making. For example, Chapter 5 opens with Etsuko, a Japanese mother who killed her child and then attempted to commit suicide. While Etsuko's story presents to the readers a social problem, it is only tangentially related to the chapter's focus: the organization of Japanese women. If Etsuko's tragedy was meant to highlight the limits of the Japanese women's communities, then it would have helped readers if that connection were articulated at the start and then elaborated in the chapter.

Another example is that of Kiyoe Tamura Yamahata, the picture bride of Japanese immigrant Nobutaro Yamahata, who provided fraudulent information to the US immigration officials and then eventually abused Kiyoe in his drunkenness. Kiyoe's anecdote was meant to demonstrate "just how far immigration officials were willing to go to locate and prosecute Japanese prostitutes" (28) as "Kiyoe was taken to be a prostitute simply because of her relationship to a bad man" (29). However, the bulk of the two-page narrative was mostly on Kiyoe's neighbors' concern for her plight and the kindness of those around her. Among these kind strangers were a nameless constable (arguably an agent of the State, much like the immigration officials whom Gomez criticizes) and a missionary woman who was known for "rescuing Chinese and Japanese women from prostitution, abuse, and indentured servitude" (28). Indeed, when taken on its own, Kiyoe's anecdote shows more the victimization of Japanese women by Japanese men and the beneficence of individual agents of the State and the Church in protecting them from their immigrant husbands. Or taken in another way, the story reveals the State and the Church's "polite racism" (Fujitani 2011) targeting immigrant Japanese men whose entry in the United States had been restricted by the 1908 Gentleman's Agreement.

Slight confusion aside, the anecdotes nevertheless powerfully take the readers into the lives of ordinary Japanese immigrants. The case of Kazayuki Araki, an 84-year-old resident of the All American Nursing Home who jumped out of his 2nd-floor window in 1971, for example, established from the onset the social issue tackled in Chapter 2. Araki came to the US in 1909 when he was only 22 years old. In America, he took on various jobs, moved around different states, and stayed unmarried. He had no family in the US, was not a citizen, and had no children who were citizens. "[H]e was alone in a rapidly-changing city and unable to return to Japan" (59). When taken together with the stories of several other *issei* bachelors, many of whom spiraled into alcohol abuse later in life and were aided by a nursing facility and/or Japanese American Service Community, Araki's case presents a very human aspect of how it was to live in the margins of an immigrant country.

The amount and the diversity of the stories as well as the vividness of Gomez's narrations make the book worth reading. Herself a grandchild of a Japanese war bride, Gomez testifies to the reality of America's racial and gendered immigrant history. To her, the book tells the story of her grandparents and the many others like them. *Picture Bride, War Bride* tells the story of the many Americans with complex racial and immigrant heritage.

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