

Interrogating Cultures, Unsettling Identities

More than a decade after the release of a special issue on culture (Volume 12, Number 2, 1996), *Kasarinlan* revisits the complex and dynamic field of cultural studies. But this issue looks beyond earlier debates on Asian culture that, back then, were essentially built around dichotomies or polar opposites. This is because in recent years culture—Asian culture, in particular, has been widely problematized and contested, especially in light of fundamentalist tendencies and movements in the region and all over the world. Digital and nuclear advancements, transnational migration, and widespread political and social violence and destabilization are just few of the global developments of the twenty-first century that have profoundly reshaped the field.

The theme of the issue emphasizes the valuable place of identity, viewed as a social and conceptual construct than an immutable psychological entity. Identity occupies an important place in discourse where cultural ramifications abound; new sites and modes of social interaction often impact on conceptions and perceptions of identity.

True to the thrust of *Kasarinlan*, the articles in this issue also give credence to political economy. In discussions of culture and identity, the articles regard global trends as part of a political, neocolonial and imperialist project, implicitly or otherwise. Each article grounds particular social or ideological issues and the formation of identities within contentious historical or genealogical configurations.

In this volume the analysis of culture and identity is framed in a variety of contexts and persuasions. In “Imagining the Terrorist: Racialization of Asian Identities since 9/11,” Malreddy Pavan Kumar discusses the resurgence of race issues in light of the “global war on terror” from the discursive angle of anthropology and geography. The

author traces the developments of the two disciplines, arguing that their colonial and imperialist legacies, as found in contemporary discourses of “area studies,” “security studies,” and “terrorology” have contributed to the otherization of Asian identities associated with Islamic political dissent.

The commingling of history, politics and art is expressed in Patrick Flores’ “Colonial Posterities: Portraiture and the Face of the Modern.” The article reflects on the socially etched concepts of intimation and intimacy through an appraisal of portrait making in three Asian countries, Thailand, Indonesia and the Philippines. Flores extends the discourse of self-consciousness, modernity and post-colonial art history, and illustrates how representation, or “the aesthetic of appearance and appearing,” is a broadly political gesture.

Sumit Mandal, in his article “Indianness in Malaysia: Between Racialized Representations and the Cultural Politics of Popular Music” pursues the issue of race more concretely, looking at the emergence and reconfiguration of Indian identity via popular music. Mandal explains how dominant representations of Indian Malaysians downplay the dynamic, fluid relations among ethnic groups and ignore the complexities of Indianness. Meanwhile, popular music subverts state and institutional tendencies to simplify the racial discourse. As globalization further pushes Indian identities to the margins, Indian musicians in peninsular Malaysia challenge the prevalent discourse through the creative use of foreign music genres with distinct ethnic sounds. The re-appropriation of a specific symptom of globalization (the merging of foreign and indigenous music cultures) and its politics suggests that ethnic *identities*, rather than identity, are more permeable than commonly perceived.

The final article shifts the analysis of culture and identity from the context of race to migration. Akiko Watanabe’s “The Formation of Migrant Muslim Communities in Metro Manila” provides an anthropological study of the Filipino Muslims’ flight to Metro Manila. Watanabe identifies geographic and social patterns of community formation and the consequences of these movements on Muslim culture and identity in the nation’s capital. Her study of migrant community formation highlights the complexity of marriage and family ties, and the nuances of self-identification that are linked, in part, to a sense of imagined community shared with fellow Muslims from their places of origin.

The two other sections of the journal also provide interesting discussions foregrounding religion and how it animates the body politic. In the Proceedings Section entitled “Seeds of Violence or Buds of Peace?” Ursula King asks whether world faiths can serve as resources for peace education. In the Perspectives Section, *Kasarinlan* posed this question: “Why end fundamentalism?” Four scholars share their insights and arguments on the issue. Through these essays and articles, we hope to encourage readers to reflect on, or have a renewed appreciation of the broadening field of cultural studies. ❁