

***Beyond the City and the Bridge: East Asian Immigration in a New Jersey Suburb*****Noriko Matsumoto****New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2018****190 pages****ISBN: 081358888X****DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.14713/njs.v5i1.175>**

From sociology to history, political science to geography, existing literature on Asian and Asian American experiences continue to privilege urban spaces as well as communities along the West Coast. Noriko Matsumoto's *Beyond the City and the Bridge: East Asian Immigration in a New Jersey Suburb* is an important interdisciplinary intervention encouraging readers to shift the discussion from the "usual" Asian outposts of Los Angeles and San Francisco to the Garden State.

Matsumoto focuses on the everyday lives and experiences of Chinese, Japanese, and Korean Americans in Fort Lee, New Jersey, a suburb with one of the largest populations of East Asians on the Eastern Seaboard. Fort Lee's neighbor, Palisades Park – another suburb with the largest concentration of Koreans in the state – is also included in this study.

Matsumoto is interested in the "everyday practices of social actors and how these are negotiated within the transformation" of Fort Lee, which turned from a predominantly white to a heavily non-white community in the 1980s and 1990s.

Unlike the famed Asian "ethnoburbs" of Los Angeles' San Gabriel Valley – to which Matsumoto compares Fort Lee throughout the book – "overt hostility and confrontation have been less apparent" in this part of northern New Jersey. Nevertheless, white residents resistant of the suburb's growing Asian population claimed they were alienated because of cultural and linguistic barriers. White critics believed "their" town was being overrun by foreigners – a common sentiment heard in diversifying suburbs across the United States. As Matsumoto notes, "The term *alienation* – used frequently among white residents in reference to the Korean

presence – connotes a psychological fear characterized by a sense of displacement and estrangement from the familiar.”

Matsumoto tackles this notion of white “alienation” in further depth in chapter 4 where she focuses on the “politics of aesthetics,” particularly on matters of “ethnic signage.” Similar to what occurred in the “ethnoburbs” of Los Angeles, San Francisco, and San Jose, in Fort Lee and in other communities of Bergen County, white critics complained about the proliferation of East Asian signage in the 1990s. They claimed Asians did not conform to the suburban landscape. According to a white resident, the “non-Korean population ‘doesn’t feel comfortable walking in’ stores or businesses” that did not don English wording.

Despite some white resistance, Fort Lee did not institute a language or signage code. It was not until 2008 when Fort Lee adopted an ordinance attempting to tackle controversial business aesthetics. The town implemented a “beautification” plan encouraging “one unified, homogenous approach” to Fort Lee’s streetscape. The ordinance included parameters on the size and style of signage, but did not include language requirements. Instead, the town’s Sign/Façade Review Committee could make “language recommendations” with 50 percent of the sign or awning written in English. Fort Lee officials claimed these recommendations were made as matters of safety for first responders (i.e. firefighters, police officers).

Town leaders hoped the “beautification” plan would curb the conspicuous nature of Asian storefronts. According to the mayor, Mark Sokolich, Asian-owned businesses were “very busy with multiple signs” and thus transgressed the aesthetic norms of middle-class suburbia. Counterintuitively, there was minimal uproar within the Asian community about these design rules. Matsumoto claims “Korean American leaders endorsed and supported attempts at town

beautification” despite municipal actions that could be read as nativist or racist controls towards ethnic signage.

Ultimately, at the heart of *Beyond the City and the Bridge* are broader themes of negotiation and assimilation. East Asian suburbanites constantly grappled with their position as people of color, immigrants, and “foreigners” in a space long-reserved for middle-class white Americans. Matsumoto argues “that the concept of assimilation – and that of ethnic retention – should be considered processual.” Furthermore, “assimilation and ethnic retention signify a social ‘practice’ – routine actions produced and reproduced in everyday life by social actors.” Matsumoto illustrates this point by examining how native- and foreign-born East Asians in Fort Lee got involved in ethnic organizations as a means of preserving their respective heritages. At the same time, Chinese, Japanese, and Korean residents – particularly second-generation Asian Americans – were pressured to emulate the cultural mores of “mainstream” America. While this is a longstanding challenge among immigrants and their U.S.-born children, expectations to assimilate are greater in the quintessentially American landscape of suburbia.

*Beyond the City and the Bridge* is a timely, well-researched, and necessary study on Asian American experiences east of California. This is recommended for scholars and students interested in sociology, immigration, Asian American studies, urban/suburban studies, and New Jersey history.

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