



Redefining Race: Asian American Panethnicity and Shifting Ethnic Boundaries

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In 2012, the Pew Research Center issued a report that named Asian Americans as the “highest-income, best-educated, and fastest-growing racial group in the United States.” Despite this seemingly optimistic conclusion, over thirty Asian American advocacy groups challenged the findings. As many pointed out, the term “Asian American” itself is complicated. It currently denotes a wide range of ethnicities, national origins, and languages, and encompasses a number of significant economic and social disparities. In *Redefining Race*, sociologist Dina G. Okamoto traces the complex evolution of this racial designation to show how the use of “Asian American” as a panethnic label and identity has been a deliberate social achievement negotiated by members of this group themselves, rather than an organic and inevitable process. Drawing on original research and a series of interviews, Okamoto investigates how different Asian ethnic groups in the U.S. were able to create a collective identity in the wake of the Civil Rights movement in the 1960s. Okamoto argues that a variety of broad social forces created the conditions for this developing panethnic identity. Racial segregation, for example, shaped how Asian immigrants of different national origins were distributed in similar occupations and industries. This segregation of Asians within local labor markets produced a shared experience of racial discrimination, which encouraged Asian ethnic groups to develop shared interests and identities. By constructing a panethnic label and identity, ethnic group members took part in creating their own collective histories, and in the process challenged and redefined current notions of race. The emergence of a panethnic racial identity also depended, somewhat paradoxically, on different groups organizing along distinct ethnic lines in order to gain recognition and rights from the larger society. According to Okamoto, these ethnic organizations provided the foundation necessary to build solidarity within different Asian-origin communities. Leaders and community members who created inclusive narratives and advocated policies that benefited groups beyond their own were then able to move these discrete ethnic organizations toward a panethnic model. For example, a number of ethnic-specific organizations in San Francisco expanded their services and programs to include other ethnic group members after their original constituencies dwindled. A Laotian organization included refugees from different parts of Asia, a Japanese organization began to advocate for South Asian populations, and a Chinese organization opened its doors to Filipinos and Vietnamese. As Okamoto argues, the process of building ties between ethnic communities while also recognizing ethnic diversity is the hallmark of panethnicity. *Redefining Race* is a groundbreaking analysis of the processes through which group boundaries are drawn and contested. In mapping the genesis of a panethnic Asian American identity, Okamoto illustrates the ways in which concepts of race continue to shape how ethnic and immigrant groups view themselves and organize for representation in the public arena.

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