

Yen Le Espiritu (2004) "Asian American Panethnicity: Contemporary National and Transnational Possibilities (Chapter 11)

Main Point: Espiritu explains the difference between ethnicity and panethnicity. He then chronicles and explains how the pan-Asian identity arose and its transformations during the later 1960 to early 1970s, why it became harder for Asians to maintain their panethnicity during the post-1965 immigration period, and the importance/benefits of cross-group affiliation. Espiritu provides a transnational, non "America-centric", approach to the study of Asian Americans, and argues that the development of their panethnicity was due to more than population changes and events in the United States.

Central Concepts and Issues:

- Upon arriving to the United States immigrants of Asian countries distinguished themselves by the districts, not even countries. Before the 1960s Asians in the United States practiced disidentification, distancing one's group from another as to not be mistaken for a member and avoid the blame for its presumed misdeeds (Example: Chinese distancing themselves from Japanese after Pearl Harbor). Despite their efforts Asian immigrants were lumped into one category in order to regulate and limit immigration. Because there is power in numbers the Asian American population eventually begin to transcend inter-Asian ethnic divisions and ally themselves with other "Third World" minorities. They found it necessary and advantageous.
- The post-1965 immigration surge brought in many Indians, Koreans, Vietnamese, Taiwanese, Cambodians, Laotians and Hmong, and they found the term Asian American very problematic. Before the surge the Asian American population was composed mostly of Japanese, Chinese, and Filipino. The new Asian American demographics complicated the previous pan-Asian alignments. Distinctions began to be made generation, class, and education level among other things. The previous statement, combined with the want to acknowledge bi- and multiracial backgrounds is making the pan-Asian identity fragile.
- Though the pan-Asian identity is fragile, the number of Asian interethnic marriages has surpassed the number of interracial marriages. Some products of those marriages identify as bi- and multiracial. Groups such as HIF, a national multiracial Asian American organization, suggest that multiracial Asians and pan-Asian identities not be mutually exclusive. Others believe that splitting the pan-Asian identity would cause a loss to gains in civil rights, education, and electoral arenas.

Key Quotes:

Though powerful, pan-Asianism is not unproblematic: it can mask salient divisions, subsume nondominant groups, and create marginalities, all of which threatens the

legitimacy and effectiveness of pan-Asianism and bolsters the racist discourses and practices that construct Asians as homogeneous.” (87)

“Non-Asians had little understanding or appreciation of these distinctions.... Outsiders accorded to people from Asia certain common characteristics and traits that were essentially supranational.” (88)

“... The exclusion acts and quotas limiting Asian immigration to the United States relied on racialist constructions of Asians as homogeneous.” (88)

“As dealings with government bureaucracies increased, political organization along a pan-Asian line became necessary, not only because numbers confer power but also because the pan-Asian category in the institutionally relevant category in the political and legal system.” (89)

“... The category Asian American must confront the contradictions and instabilities within the imposed solidarity, brought about by the group’s internal class, ethnic, and racial stratifications” (90)

“... “Asian American panethnicity is a socially constructed identity that emerged in large part from the violence of racism and imperialism to contest and disrupt these structures of inequality and domination... it encompasses not only cultural differences but also social, political, and economic inequalities.” (91)

Questions:

Would providing a checkbox that allowed multi-ethnic identification really stop people from lumping Asians, and in turn Latinos, African Americans, and other races, in one category?

If pan-ethnic groups dissolved, and everyone were truly seen as different multiracial individuals not related to another ethnic group, do you think it would have a negative affect on affirmative action or something like our college admissions system?