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**MAKING THE “AMERICAN” SUBJECT: ETHNICITY, GENDER, CULTURE AND THE
POLITICS OF CITIZENSHIP IN THE LIVES OF SECOND-GENERATION LAOTIAN GIRLS**

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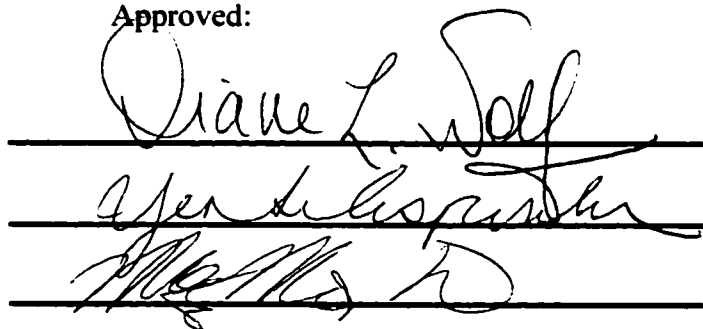
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**Making the “American” Subject: Ethnicity, Gender, Culture and the Politics of
Citizenship in the Lives of Second-Generation Laotian Girls**

Abstract

This case-study uses ethnographic methods to analyze the politics and the modes of incorporation for second-generation Laotian girls involved in a youth initiative undertaken by the Asian Pacific Environmental Network in the San Francisco Bay Area. My research addresses the question: “What do the adaptation experiences of the children of immigrants tell us about the meanings of belonging and citizenship in multiethnic, multiracial societies?” I argue that the experiences, practices, and social and political identities of second-generation Laotian girls demonstrate the diverse ways in which people associate, claim their rights, and build community, and highlight challenges to the liberal political concept of citizenship in the U.S. By focusing on different contexts – the family, civil society institutions, and the nation – this case study uncovers the ways in which the life experiences of teenage daughters of immigrants are shaped by the intersecting relations of power in and between these profoundly connected contexts. Looking from the micro-level of everyday interactions, this research uses ethnographic analysis to examine second-generation Laotians’ negotiations of dominant constructions of the nation and otherness within primary and secondary relationships, specifying ways in which power hierarchies based on race, class, gender and generation shape belonging in multiple groups – the family, civil society institutions, and the nation. Thus, this study

demonstrates the need for a more inclusive concept of citizenship in multiracial societies.

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Introduction

This is a story about the process of becoming “American” among the children of immigrants. But it is not a story framed in the dominant paradigm of assimilation and incorporation. It is a story that casts immigration as a generative site for American national identity (Lowe 1996, Shohat 1998). In other words, this story does not just tell us about the children of immigrants; it also addresses what the experience of adaptation tells us about the United States, particularly about the formation of social and political identities in contemporary United States, and the meanings of belonging and citizenship in multiethnic, multi-racial societies early in the twenty-first century. As Lisa Lowe (1996:9) has observed, “Asian immigrants and Asian Americans have not only been ‘subject to’ immigration exclusion and restriction but have also been ‘subjects of’ the immigration process and are agents of political change, cultural expression, and social transformation.” In other words, second generation immigrants are the point of departure for a critique of dominant constructions of national identity. Their experiences prompt us to consider how the descendants of new immigrants will acquire full citizenship in the nation.

As I write this introduction, many people of Arab or South Asian descent have had their civil rights curtailed or have been suffering harassment, beatings and even death in the U.S. in the aftermath of the tragic events on September 11, 2001. These reactions have underscored what this story is about – community, belonging, and citizenship. What does it mean to think about the politics of belonging in multiracial and multicultural societies such as the United States? Where is ‘home’ located? In the family? In civil society institutions? In the nation? Can ‘home’ be located in more than one group? Those

of us who are immigrants find ourselves reflecting on these questions at some stage in our lives. But it is also something that is thrust upon those of us who are born here and whose families have lived here for several generations but are still perceived as perpetual foreigners because of the ideological workings of the nation. Yet these issues have not appeared as central concerns in social theory and research (Keith and Cross 1993; Mac an Ghail 1999).

Questions of belonging and full citizenship are entwined with politics in the widest sense of the term. Deep-seated fears about changes in U.S. society and culture have led to a political backlash in California and the nation at large. Political initiatives in California, such as Proposition 187¹, Proposition 209 and Proposition 227, signal extensive retrenchment of social and civil rights of new immigrants and their children (Cornelius 1995). While non-academics have raised these issues to signal threats to a putatively unified national identity, academics have mainly focused on tangible and empirical issues, such as the costs and benefits of immigration, and the socioeconomic integration of immigrants. But as Massey (1995:632) states, what the public, and particularly the white public, really wants to know is “whether or not the new immigrants will assimilate into the Euro-American society of the United States, and how that society and culture might change as a result of this incorporation.” In my study I turn this question on its head. Rather, the question which threads the themes of the dissertation together and which motivated this study is: if juridico-political citizenship in a nation is not adequate in guaranteeing universal equal rights and full citizenship, how can we expand the notion of citizenship to acknowledge the diverse ways in which people

¹ Proposition 187, which denied medical care and public education to illegal immigrants and their children, has since been deemed unconstitutional by the courts.

associate, claim their rights, and build community? More generally this study investigates the challenge that immigration, and specifically the new second-generation, poses to the liberal notion of citizenship.

Specifically, this dissertation analyzes the experiences, practices and identities of second-generation Laotian girls and young women involved in a youth initiative undertaken by an Asian American environmental justice organization in the San Francisco Bay Area. In the context of the United States, the category Laotian applies to those who identify as ethnic Lao, Mien, Hmong, Khmu, Thaidam and Lue. The study addresses the following questions: What do the narratives and practices of second-generation Laotian women reveal about their social identities and adaptation experiences? How does struggle over neighborhood quality of life issues shape political identities and practices? How do everyday life experiences of racializing processes in the U.S. affect inter-group relations? What do the social and political identities of second-generation Laotians imply about the location(s) of ‘home’ for this group? How do the practices and identities of second-generation Laotian girls challenge current conceptualizations of citizenship in the United States?

Based on the findings in this study I argue for a multi-layered (Yuval-Davis 1997) notion of ***cultural citizenship*** not simply vis-à-vis the nation state, but also in relation to civil society institutions and the family. Such a concept of citizenship recognizes differences based on race, gender, class, generation, sexuality and so on rather than denying them and, thereby, allows for the possibility of emotional belonging and citizenship in a variety of collectivities. Cultural citizenship is achieved through ***critical assimilation*** – that is a set of practices in the cultural and political realm that challenge,

accommodate or transform power relations within the family, civil society and the nation. The enactment of a multi-layered cultural citizenship draws attention to contemporary social justice organizations as a mode of incorporation into American society. Such organizations do not emphasize adaptation, cultural conformity and identificational assimilation; rather they foster critical assimilation as a route to claiming cultural citizenship for those excluded heretofore.

New Immigration: Trends and Issues

Demographic changes in late twentieth century United States indicate that immigration is once again transforming America. One in five Americans, or more than 55 million people, are first- and second- generation immigrants (Rumbaut and Portes 2001b:7). But immigration is transforming the nation in particular ways. Indeed, as the U.S. Census Bureau releases data from the 2000 census, newspaper headlines in the San Francisco Bay Area have drawn attention to the racial and ethnic shifts that are taking place in the region and the state.² These headlines point to the national origins of the immigrant population, which are increasingly diverse.

A combination of historical relationships between the U.S. and sending countries, especially military, political, economic and cultural involvement and intervention in major sending countries (Portes and Rumbaut 1996), together with the passage of the Hart-Celler Act in 1965 (Massey 1995) has resulted in unprecedented growth in new immigration over the last forty years. From the annual average of 374,000 in the late 1960s, legal immigration has soared to an annual in-flow of 785,000 during 1990-1997, a

² For example headlines such as "We're all minorities now," (West County Times, March 30, 2001), "New Asian diversity by the Bay" (West County Times, August 15, 2001) and "Suburban Melting Pots" (West County Times, April 23, 2001) illustrate the increased racial and ethnic diversity particularly in metropolitan areas of California.

figure that excludes the several million persons admitted through the amnesty program as well as all undocumented immigrants (Waldinger and Lee 2001:37). Of the post-1960 immigrants, the majority has come from Latin America and the Caribbean, with Mexico alone accounting for 28 percent of the total. Another 29 percent have come from Asia and the Middle East (Rumbaut, Foner and Gold 1999:1259).

Just as past immigrants, today's immigrants are more likely to live in metropolitan areas. The foreign-born are concentrated in key urban regions of Miami, Los Angeles, New York, San Francisco and Chicago (Waldinger and Lee 2000:41). And of the immigrants who came during the late 1980s, more than 80 percent reside in only six states, in order of share: California, New York, Florida, Texas, New Jersey and Illinois (Portes and Rumbaut 1996). Places of settlement are initially more dispersed for refugees whose original destinations in the United States are usually determined by government officials and sponsoring agencies; secondary migration, however, tends to bring about greater ethnic concentration, as exemplified by the Vietnamese in Orange County, California (Portes and Rumbaut, 1996) and the Hmong in the Central Valley area of California.

A startling fact in current immigration trends is that more than 44 percent of today's foreign-born population arrived after 1980, with that number reaching 50 percent among those of non-European origin (Zhou 2001:300). Consequently the "new second generation" is an overwhelmingly youthful population, consisting mostly of children and adolescents (Zhou 2001:273). In fact immigrant children and U.S.-born children of immigrants are the fastest growing segment of the country's total population of children under 18 years of age. By 1997, they accounted for one out of every five American

children (Portes and Rumbaut 2001: 19). Following Portes and Rumbaut (2001:23), in this study, the second-generation is defined as children of foreign-born parents who are either born in the United States or born abroad and brought to the United States before adolescence.

A primary focus of the contemporary immigration research agenda on the new second-generation is on adaptation outcomes; and in particular, understanding differences in adaptation outcomes between different ethnic groups. Given the sheer numbers and concentration in a few metropolitan regions, immigration scholars are concerned with “whether this new ethnic mosaic reinvigorates the nation or catalyzes a quantum leap in its social problems depends on the forms of social and economic adaptation experienced by this still young population” (Portes and Rumbaut 2001:xvii). In general, this scholarship is focused on the success or failure of integration into dominant American society. Successful adaptation and the ability to participate fully in American society are seen in terms of socioeconomic mobility.

However, the new second-generation is also the site of ethnogenesis, where cultural and ethnic reconstruction is occurring, and the consequent reshaping of what it means to be an ‘American’ is taking place. The rise in nativism in the U.S. during the 1990s is an acknowledgement of this social process. Anti-immigrant hysteria in the past decade is not simply a concern with economic and social implications of large numbers of immigrants; such sentiments also express concern among the general public around symbolic and cultural issues, especially those related to language, loyalty and national identity (Rumbaut 1994:752). Concerns about assimilation are often directed at immigrants from Latin America and Asia and center around the perceived tendency of

people of color to place ethnicity above individuality, and thus thwart the process of assimilation (see for example, Arthur Schlesinger 1992, Peter Brimelow 1995). New immigrants, and particularly immigrants of color, have stirred up ideological questions around “American” identity: “who are we?” and “who belongs to the “American “family?” (Shohat 1998). Contemporary racial and ethnic transformations in the United States are changing the “sociocultural world created by prior European immigrants and their descendants,” (Massey 1995:632), and in the process these newcomers have ruptured the “imagined community” (Anderson 1991) of America as a unitary and fixed national identity (Shohat 1998).

New Immigration: Challenges to the Assimilation Paradigm

Assimilation continues to be the master paradigm both in the popular imagination and in sociological writing on immigration. For example, on the cover of the Fall 1993 special issue of TIME magazine is a computer generated image of a woman said to represent “a symbol of the future, multiethnic face of America” according to James R. Gaines, TIME Managing Editor (TIME 1993:2). This cyber image, which is 15 percent Anglo-Saxon, 17.5 percent Middle Eastern, 17.5 percent African, 7.5 percent Asian, 35 percent Southern European and 7.5 percent Hispanic (2), is said to dramatize the “melting pot” notion of the United States. Hsu (1996:47) observes that no explanation is given for the percentages used by TIME, and the face still looks remarkably white. However, in the eyes of the TIME editors (1993:3) the face illustrates not only America’s future physiognomy, but also its unparalleled diversity in “peoples, cultures, languages and attitudes that make up the great national pool”.

This issue of TIME is subtitled “The New Face of America. How Immigrants Are Shaping the World’s First Multicultural Society.” The words and images ask us to appreciate the diversity and our “universal humanity which supposedly binds us all” (Hsu 1996:47). But the overall message is unmistakably one of assimilation. A “true” American will display a commitment to the political values “embodied in such seminal documents as the *Federalist* papers and the Constitution,” “respect for the rule of law” freedom to succeed or fail, “the English language,” and they will share “a cultural idiom that ranges from Bugs Bunny to baseball’s seventh-inning stretch” (TIME 1993:7). In other words, as Hsu (1996:48) writes, America is seen as the “Promised Land wherein hard work and loyalty to ‘vital’ cultural tenets are rewarded.” And I would add that adherence to these values is the only path to full citizenship.

The prospects and pace of assimilation among new immigrants and their children is also at the top of the immigration agenda among sociologists. These concerns have come into focus because sociologists believe that previous theories of adaptation are not applicable to the new second-generation. Recent immigrants to the U.S. from Latin America, Asia and the Caribbean face very different political, economic and socio-cultural contexts compared to European immigrants in the early twentieth century (Portes and Zhou 1993; Massey 1995). Thus, historical models of straight-line assimilation which assume that with each succeeding generation ethnic groups become culturally similar to the mainstream American and more economically successful cannot be applied to the new immigrants (Massey 1995) or their children (Gans 1992).

New theories describing the experiences of adaptation among the second generation have stressed the changing contexts of reception and emphasized the multiple

and contradictory nature of this process (Gans 1992; Portes and Zhou 1993). In particular, the segmented assimilation model, which has been further elaborated by Portes and Rumbaut (1996; 2001), Zhou (1997b), and Rumbaut (1995; 1997a), predicts that some immigrant youth achieve socioeconomic success by adopting white middle class values or while retaining strong ethnic group membership and cultural patterns, and others adopt values and behavior of American subcultures, with limited socioeconomic mobility. Much of the current research on the adaptation outcomes of immigrant youth takes a macro approach and centers on opportunity structures in society, ethnic attachments, and the presence of material and cultural resources in an immigrant community (Rumbaut and Portes 2001; Portes 1996; Rumbaut and Cornelius 1995; Walker-Moffat 1995; Bankston III and Zhou 1996; Zhou and Bankston 1998; Rumbaut and Ima 1988).

Some recent case studies (Kibria 1993; Wolf 1997; Espiritu and Wolf 2001; Fernandez-Kelly and Curran 2001; Stepick et. al. 2001) have demonstrated that the adaptation outcomes for the children of immigrants are much more complex and contradictory than that predicted by the influential segmented assimilation model (Portes and Zhou 1993). Similarly, the central claims of my study are at odds with this model, which would position Laotians at the bottom of the ethnic hierarchy, and categorize them as assimilated into the underclass linked with poverty. The multiple permutations and contradictions in the adaptation experiences of the new second-generation suggest a need to reconsider our theoretical frameworks and methodological approaches. The sociological literature on the second generation has ignored racialization processes in the U.S. and the symbolic construction of “American” national identity as white, which has

served to exclude certain groups from full citizenship. As Waldinger (2001:12) asserts, the scholarly literature on assimilation has yet to conceptualize the mechanisms whereby dominant groups might exclude immigrants and perpetuate the disadvantages that they experience. And I would add this literature does not examine how newcomers might struggle and challenge those exclusions and, in the process, potentially create a more inclusive understanding of who belongs to the nation. In other words, it ignores the possibility that immigrant youth, and youth of color, can be agents of political change and social transformation.

Contemporary sociological literature on immigration also embodies several problematic theoretical assumptions. First, the “original” and “American” cultures are depicted as fixed, hermetically sealed and always in opposition, rather than conceiving of culture as a social process, continuously being constructed and reconstructed. Second, the focus on assimilation and shifts in ethnic identity presents a bi-polar choice with the ultimate goal of identificational assimilation with “America.” Such a trajectory posits an opposition between ethnicity and individuality, whereas this study takes the position that individuals associate in diverse ways and bear the mark of diverse identities, from the particular to the universal. Methodologically, much of this scholarship has examined macro factors of modes of incorporation and contexts of reception to understand the adaptation outcomes among the new second-generation. While some recent case studies have considered the ways in which power hierarchies in secondary social relations shape primary social relations, my case study demonstrates that within the collective context of a social justice organization, it is possible to understand how the micro and the macro inhere in each other.

My study is situated in the contemporary debates in racial and ethnic studies, feminist theory and cultural studies that seek to address the following: the role of race, ethnicity, gender and class, as multiple and intersecting relations of power, in shaping social and political relations, and concepts of citizenship. The theoretical tools derived from this body of critical scholarship enables me to contribute to a rethinking of the concept of assimilation and citizenship in the United States. Methodologically, this ethnographic study aims to capture the interconnectedness between primary and secondary social relations and the linkages between individual and collective identities. My study illustrates how Laotian adolescents experience and negotiate these interconnections and linkages, thus enriching our understanding of the barriers and opportunities they encounter in cultural, structural and institutional contexts.

My research will also contribute to the sparse literature on teenage daughters of Laotian immigrants. While some research exists on the Hmong in the U.S., there is a dearth of research on Laotians in general. Moreover, the available research tends to aggregate Laotians with other Southeast Asians, and often focuses on mental health issues, not on the politics and modes of incorporation. Finally, Waldinger (2001:5) has noted that, aside from an occasional monograph, research on immigrant communities in San Francisco, a region with almost as many immigrants as Miami, though of entirely different origins, has been almost negligible. This case study on second-generation Laotians will contribute to filling that knowledge gap on immigrant communities in San Francisco-Bay Area.

Chapter Summaries

In Chapter One I draw from four streams of literature – racial and ethnic studies, feminist theory, critical race theory and cultural studies – to lay out a theoretical framework for the analysis of the experiences, practices and identities of second-generation Laotian girls and young women involved in a youth initiative undertaken by the Asian Pacific Environmental Network (APEN) in the San Francisco Bay Area. I seek to move towards a re-thinking of the dominant paradigm of assimilation in scholarship on the new second generation and suggest the notion of critical assimilation as a route to claiming full citizenship for those excluded heretofore. The goal is to develop theoretical tools that enable researchers to analyze both the politics of incorporation as well as the modes of incorporation in the adaptation trajectories of the children of immigrants.

Chapter Two sets the context for this case study on second-generation Laotian girls and young women. I describe the social and economic transformations, the history of Laotian migration to the US, and vital statistics for the Laotian community in West Contra Costa County, California, the site for this case study. I next trace APEN's origins in the environmental justice movement in the United States, and describe its work in the Laotian community in West Contra Costa County. Specifically, I delineate in detail APEN's youth initiative for Laotian teenage girls, Asian Youth Advocates (AYA), and its goals, objectives and program activities. I also critically analyze the inter-ethnic power relations that occur within community-based initiatives. I end this chapter with a reflection on the difficulties, and rewards, of doing research within social change organizations and with youth.

Chapter Three examines the ways in which the content of Laotian ethnicity and culture is being reconstructed in specific gendered and local class and race contexts. Through an analysis of the narratives and social practices of second generation Laotian girls I demonstrate the interconnectedness of primary and secondary social relations. These interrelations can lead to ambivalent outcomes as Laotian adolescents adopt both oppositional and non-oppositional positions to specific relations of power. In the process new gendered subjects are being created. I also demonstrate the specific role that APEN plays in transforming cultural norms and creating new cultural identities, arguing that culture is central to the enterprise of social change organizations.

Chapters Four and Five focus on the politics of race. Chapter Four depicts three organizing efforts, the multilingual emergency warning phone system campaign, the school counselor campaign and electoral work around Proposition 227. In this chapter I analyze the material conditions and “connecting ideology” (Espiritu et. al. 2000:132) that mobilizes Laotians, as well as the contents of APEN’s political strategies to understand how it constructs specific ethnic and racial identities. I argue that the political identity of second generation Laotians is constructed through material social relations and is therefore unstable and contextually specific. Rather than imposing an Asian American racial solidarity on a community that thinks of itself as refugees, immigrants, poor and low-wage workers, APEN is creating a politicized Laotian identity, which has connections to other communities of color in West Contra Costa County in specific issues and contexts. This chapter demonstrates the ways in which social rights are racialized in the U.S. and discusses the implications of this finding.

In Chapter Five I analyze how particularistic self-understandings around race create the possibilities and limitations to APEN's goal of engendering critical racial subjectivities. Specifically I analyze the prospects for cross-racial and cross ethnic alliances. I argue that the varied racial projects that have established the color-line and ordered the nation around the black-white axis, created the model-minority thesis, and led to the conceptualization of pan-Asian American racial solidarity have contradictory effects on engendering collective self-understandings around race. Present-day racial politics both creates cleavages in cross-race and cross-ethnic solidarity, and consolidates these alliances at other times.

Chapter Six addresses the notion of belonging in both its emotional and identificatory senses. I argue that the multi-dimensional activities that second-generation Laotians engage in at AYA serve to demarcate APEN as 'home' in both its senses. From placement and visibility in APEN, second-generation Laotians assert cultural difference and seek to claim a place in the nation. However, the creation of a collective Laotian identity through the institutional context of APEN can become bounded and, therefore, impose limits on APEN's political vision, creativity and efforts at critical assimilation.

In Chapter Seven I conclude that second-generation Laotian girls negotiate the discourse of the nation and otherness in everyday interactions within primary and secondary relationships. Thus it is necessary to take into account identity formation and acquisition at the individual and collective levels to understand the possibilities for changing notions of belonging and citizenship in the U.S. This case study demonstrates that second-generation Laotian girls manifest multiple loyalties and identities, from the particular to the universal, rather than cultural conformity and identificational

assimilation. They are asserting diverse ways of associating and different ways of participating in social life. Given these realities in multiethnic and multiracial societies, I draw from Yuval-Davis (1997) to argue that we need a multi-tiered concept of citizenship to account for the possibility of belonging in the family, civil society institutions and the nation. I suggest a reformulation of Turner's (1993) definition of substantive citizenship that might lead us to a notion of cultural citizenship.

Chapter One

Rethinking Assimilation: A Framework for Citizenship and Belonging in Contemporary Multiethnic/Multiracial Societies

This case study of the adaptive trajectories of second generation Laotian girls contributes significantly to our understanding not only of the adaptation outcomes of children of immigrants living in poor, inner-city neighborhoods, largely populated by other American minorities, but also to contemporary concerns over citizenship and national identity. It is evident that diverse sociological theories have developed to explain the potential of different immigrant groups to assimilate. But they have focused on the narrow concerns of socio-economic integration, and therefore cannot capture the complexities in the adaptation experiences of the children of immigrants.

This dissertation brings to light the *politics of incorporation* in addition to the modes of incorporation. Given the ethnic and racial make-up of new immigrants and their descendants, what is the best way to understand the politics of incorporation in order to grasp the possibilities of belonging and subjecthood in the nation that is the United States? How can we comprehend the ways in which contemporary immigration is changing the social meanings of race and ethnicity, of American identity, and of citizenship?

One approach to the study of adaptation experiences among the descendants of immigrants that has the potential for a more complex and nuanced understanding is to not see the second generation only in terms of the end point of assimilation. The second generation also serves as a point of departure to examine issues of belonging and citizenship within a framework that envisions culture, structure, power, and agency as

intimately linked. In this study I suggest that we visualize a two-way microscopic gaze. Rather than assessing the assimilative and adaptation potential of the second generation in terms of a set of givens, an understanding of “race,” “ethnicity,” “nation,” “gender,” and “class” as socially constructed can reveal the multidirectionality of change in which not only immigrants but the nation itself is transformed (Shohat 1998:44). As socially constructed categories they are flexible and subject to change through negotiation and contestation, albeit within particular structures of power.

Reformulating the study of the children of immigrants within an interdisciplinary framework allows us, as Waters (1999) suggests, to ask new questions and to see old problems in new ways. Second generation immigrants are not passive objects of structural determinations, but actively construct their own social lives, and the lives of those around them. Such a re-framing demonstrates the need to look at theories of citizenship in new ways. This is particularly salient at a time when the concept of “identity” transforms its meaning within a globalizing context of shifting affiliations across borders of space and culture.

Research Concerns

It is crucial to conceptualize the adaptation process for the children of immigrants as mediated by race, class, gender, ethnicity, generation and sexuality. But how are we to concretely understand the linkages and inscriptions of these intersecting structures of power. My interest in this dissertation is to illustrate the interconnectedness of primary and secondary social relations; as well as the linkages between individual and collective identities and practices. In general, my aim is to examine the ways in which the micro and the macro inhere in each other. In order to understand the interacting effects of these

different levels, and capture more fully the dynamics and complexity in the adaptation process it is necessary to conduct qualitative studies on the children of new immigrants. Quantitative studies provide us with useful trends and aggregate impressions; however, qualitative approaches enable us to analyze the narratives and social practices of the second-generation within wider economic, political and cultural contexts

This study analyzes several questions and processes centered on the junction of structures, actors and cultural and political practices. First, I document the social practices and identities of second-generation Laotian women who are participating in an ethnic-specific community organization. Both popular and academic writing on the children of immigrants views the second generation as caught between two cultures. In particular Asian women's lives are seen to be primarily determined by cultural practices and ideologies transported from parents' cultures of origin. Such representations do not remain in the discursive field but also bear on their positions in education, welfare, the criminal justice system, immigration and employment. Moreover, such representations deny Asian women agency and subjectivity. Rather than conceiving of culture as hermetically sealed and static, the present study examines the dynamics of cultural reconstruction within the material context of the United States. Specifically, I analyze cultural practices and actions that are governed by particularistic self- understandings (Brubaker and Cooper 2000:6) and the multiple subjectivities of second generation Laotian girls and young women, produced through generation, gender, class, ethnicity and race.

Second, I analyze the role of contemporary social justice organizations, specifically those that acknowledge the intersectionality and simultaneity of processes of

racialization, gender subordination and class exploitation which shape daily experiences of marginal groups. For teenage Laotian girls the context of an ethnic-specific community organization provides the space to build collective self-understandings (Brubaker and Cooper 2000: 7) of social practices as well as larger political issues that are important in immigrant Laotian communities. I analyze the strategies, practices and uncertain outcomes that arise from such struggles to change social relations, transform cultural understandings and create new cultural and political practices.

Third, I examine the kinds of strategic alliances that are formed across race, gender and generational boundaries when power relations are recognized as interlinked both horizontally and vertically with other subordinate racial groups, as well as vertically with the dominant majority (Hune 1995). I also discuss the ways in which the social geography of race shapes the experience of racial politics in contemporary United States, and in turn how these experiences structure the prospects for inter-racial and intra-racial alliances.

Fourth, I explore where ‘home’ and belonging are located for second-generation Laotian girls if racialized, classed and gendered identities structure their experience. What are the discursive representations of Laotians in the U.S. and how do these affect their everyday interactions? What strategies do they adopt in order to resist, accommodate or transform such discursive representations and create belonging? And, how do contemporary social justice organizations facilitate both an emotional and an identificatory sense of belonging for marginal groups? In examining these questions I aim to understand the ways in which community and ‘home’ are constructed at the individual and collective levels for the children of immigrants.

In addressing these four research areas related to the politics of incorporation, I concur with other scholars (Mohanty 1991b; Lowe 1996; Espiritu 1997) that political contestation and struggle must be waged over the topography of discursive categories as well as be grounded in the relations of domination that structure material life, especially the daily life struggles of the most marginalized groups. In other words social justice movements need to go beyond the struggle for civil and political rights and embrace broader issues of economic, social and cultural rights (Hune 1995).

These research concerns are explored through the specific context of a youth leadership building and community-organizing program for high-school age Laotian girls established by the Asian Pacific Environmental Network (APEN). APEN represents a new breed of community organizations that link environmental justice to issues of social equality, economic development, and community empowerment. These concerns are addressed through popular education, leadership development and community organizing. Thus, APEN provides a unique opportunity to investigate a mode of incorporation into the American polity for second-generation immigrants. Scholars and activists working to empower immigrant women in the U.S. through popular education (Benmayor et. al 1992; Shah 1996) recognize the possibilities of challenging what Ong (1996) identifies as complex relations of power linked to the state, institutions and social groups that define the criteria for belonging.

Those working with immigrant women assume that disempowered communities need forms of knowledge to negotiate and change the inequities that keep them disadvantaged. At first glance this assumption can appear to connote a paternalistic/maternalistic sense of *giving* people power. However, a more in-depth

examination suggests that activists in some contemporary social justice organizations are seeking to help marginal groups *understand* their power and the power relations they confront. These efforts have combined critical literacy, leadership development and skills building to create individual and collective capacities for change, enabling immigrant women to exercise full citizenship.

This induction into American society is not an uncritical emphasis on adaptation but a conscious and deliberate attempt to foster what I call ***critical assimilation***. Critical assimilation represents a set of practices in the cultural and political realm that challenge, accommodate or transform power relations in the family, civil society and the nation; in the process individuals, as members of multiple groups, build community and create belonging in multiple ‘homes’. The particular location of teenage Laotian girls in APEN’s youth program allows for a complex and nuanced view of their short-term adaptation experiences and long-term prospects for cultivating a sense of belonging and exercising full citizenship in multiple collectivities.

Sociological Approaches to Immigration

The dominant paradigm in historical and sociological studies of immigrants in the United States has been framed within the language of assimilation, adaptation and acculturation. Developed to explain generational change among European immigrants, the classical assimilation model predicts that over generations there will be a reduction of cultural heterogeneity and convergence in patterns of language, religion, thinking, feeling and behavior. This process is seen as an inexorable linear progression, with diverse immigrant groups becoming more similar to the “core society” and culture and melding

as nonethnic, or “Americans,” through structural assimilation (Gordon 1964; see also Thomas and Znaniecki, 1927; Warner and Srole 1945; Park 1950).

In the last four decades, the experiences of new immigrant groups and their descendants have induced a re-evaluation and, in some cases, a revival of the classical assimilation paradigm (Zhou 1997b). For example Alba and Nee (1997) issue a fervent defense of the classical assimilation paradigm based on their review of factors shaping socioeconomic mobility and spatial residential patterns of some new immigrant groups. In other contemporary studies of immigrants and their children assimilation is still the “master concept” (Portes and Rumbaut 2001:45), but scholars argue that assimilation is not inevitable or linear for immigrants and subsequent generations. The changing racial and ethnic characteristics of new immigrants, the altered structure of opportunities and the recognition that a core culture does not exist, but American culture varies by locale and social class, as well as the presence of ethnic resilience and continual reconstruction of ethnic social relations, institutions and cultural practices rather than forced Americanization campaigns all point to the inadequacies of the classical assimilation paradigm. New theories describing the experiences of adaptation among the second generation have stressed the changing contexts of reception and emphasize the multiple, uneven, and segmented nature of this process (Gans 1992; Portes and Zhou 1993).

In particular, Portes and Zhou (1993) have developed the highly influential segmented assimilation model to capture the unevenness in the process of becoming American among the contemporary second generation. This model, which has been further elaborated by Portes and Rumbaut (1996; 2001), Zhou (1997b), Rumbaut (1995;

1997a) and Rumbaut and Portes (2001), predicts three possible acculturative and economic adaptation outcomes:

- a) Increasing acculturation and parallel integration into white middle class. For these children of immigrants ethnicity will be symbolic (Gans 1992), identifying with their ancestry on occasion and when convenient (Portes and Rumbaut (2001:45);
- b) A downward decline into permanent poverty, an “adversarial stance” toward the dominant white society and an adoption of values and norms of the inner city. For these descendants of immigrants ethnicity will neither be symbolic or a fount of advancement (Portes and Rumbaut 2001:45), and may lead to reactive ethnicity;
- c) rapid economic advancement with deliberate preservation of immigrant community’s values and tight solidarity among immigrants who come with strong ethnic networks, access to capital, and fewer ties to minorities in the US. For these second-generation immigrants, ethnic resilience will be a source of strength (Portes and Rumbaut 2001:45), providing access to job opportunities while reinforcing parental authority and values.

In the segmented assimilation model, the path of assimilation the second-generation will travel along is contingent on a combination of individual and structural factors, as well as immigrant culture and predisposed group characteristics. The specific modes of incorporation (Portes and Rumbaut 1996)¹ that immigrants are subjected to can facilitate, alter or prevent the deployment of individual human capital that immigrant parents possess. The combination of these initial factors determines the socio-economic status of immigrant families and the character of the communities that they are able to

¹ Portes and Rumbaut (1996) coined this term to refer to the government policies toward specific immigrant groups; public attitudes - receptivity, indifference or rejection - toward them; and presence and

create. In turn these bear on the character of inter-generational relationships as parents and children try and navigate multiple cultural frames (Portes and Rumbaut 1996, 2001:53-54; Portes and Zhou 1993)

However, assimilation and acculturation are not just voluntary processes determined by cultural traits and behavioral patterns, together with the available moral and material resources from families and communities. These processes are also profoundly shaped by the “contexts of reception” (Portes and Rumbaut 1996; 2001). Since the majority of new immigrants are non-white they are more likely to encounter racism and prejudice that still pervades American society. This may be a barrier to occupational mobility and social acceptance. In addition immigrant children’s perceptions of discrimination in American society impact their ethnic identities and self-esteem, their aspirations and their patterns of school behavior (Portes and Rumbaut 2001).

Second, settlement patterns of new immigrants indicates that it is an urban phenomenon (Waldinger and Lee 2001) and one that is shaped by class status. Thus the presence of other communities of color are more important in shaping immigrants’ adaptation than contact with whites or a core American culture. The close proximity to native born minorities leads dominant society to identify similar conditions for both immigrants and native poor, and exposes the second generation to an “adversarial subculture” and deviant lifestyles (Portes and Zhou 1993).²

characteristics of pre-existing co-ethnic networks and community.

² A number of scholars have documented the ways in which social and economic marginalization in inner-city neighborhoods translates into a rejection of schools, low academic achievement and defiance of authority among second generation immigrant children (Matute-Bianchi 1991; Stepick 1992; Fernandez-Kelly and Schauffler 1996; and Waters 1999b).

Third, deindustrialization in the U.S. since the 1960s has created an economic structure in which new immigrants, who enter the labor market in the labor-intensive manufacturing and personal services sectors, have fewer opportunities for upward social mobility.³ Moreover, the bifurcated labor market and accompanying increase in social inequality may affect the educational goals and achievements of the second generation (Portes and Rumbaut 2001:56-59).

The ability of the second-generation to surmount difficult contexts of reception, create protective barriers against the “oppositional culture”⁴ of some inner-city youth and compensate for low human capital in immigrant communities is determined by the existence and availability of social capital embedded in co-ethnic networks (Portes and Rumbaut 2001:64-65; Zhou and Bankston 1998; Zhou 2000). Dense co-ethnic networks are facilitated by favorable modes of incorporation, especially government policies that have provided resettlement assistance to certain immigrant groups.

The above brief discussion of recent theoretical developments regarding new immigrant groups and their children introduces the debates, which partially direct the research presented here. As Min Zhou (2001:274) has asserted “the central intellectual question vis-à-vis the second-generation is how to account for ethnic differences in assimilation and adaptation.” Such differences cannot be reduced to human capital or economic factors, but must be understood within specific social and economic contexts which differentially structure the adaptation trajectories of the children of immigrants. But it is important to remember that the segmented assimilation model is just that, a

³ Zhou (1997b) marshals considerable empirical evidence to show the ways in which the contexts of reception in these three areas have changed for contemporary immigrants.

⁴ Min Zhou (1997a:69) defines “oppositional culture” as resentment toward middle-class America, rebellion against all forms of authority and rejection of goals of achievement and upward mobility.

model, and should not be applied mechanistically. As several recent case studies (see for example Kibria 1993; Wolf 1997; Espiritu and Wolf 2001; Fernandez-Kelly and Curran 2001; Stepick et. al. 2001) underscore, the complexity of contemporary American society ensure that there will be multiple permutations in the adaptations outcomes for the new second generation than those predicted by the segmented assimilation model.

Socioeconomic indicators and ethnic identity shifts predict structural assimilation and direction of acculturation, but they do not reveal the “*process and meaning of* assimilation for those who live and experience it” (Espiritu and Wolf 2001:182-183; emphasis in the original). The process of adaptation is fraught with contradictions and movements in all directions, prompting a critical rethinking of the concept of assimilation in and of itself (Espiritu and Wolf 2001:183). This dissertation draws from four streams of literature –racial and ethnic studies, feminist theory, critical race theory and cultural studies – to contribute to such a rethinking.

Race Matters⁵: Immigration, Citizenship and Racial Formation

As I noted above, assimilation continues to be the master concept in recent theorizing on new immigrants and their descendants. The trenchant American belief in fairness, in socioeconomic mobility for all irrespective of race, ethnicity or nationality is closely linked to another enduring American myth, that of abundant opportunity (Wong 1999).⁶ The influential segmented assimilation model (Portes and Zhou 1993) does recognize the multiracial and class contexts in which assimilation takes place. It also

⁵ I borrow this phrase from Cornel West, *Race Matters*, 1993.

⁶ For example, immigration and ethnicity scholar Richard Alba speculates that based on the adaptation experiences and marriage patterns of Chinese and Japanese Americans, the meaning of white may be expanded to include Asians (ASA panel entitled “Reconstructing Race in the New Millennium, August 20, 2001). Howard Winant’s rejoinder to Alba underscores the ease with which race and ethnicity are conflated; the experience of these two ethnic groups has not altered the fundamental identity of mainstream America (“Reconstructing Race for the New Millennium” panel at ASA, August 20, 2001, Anaheim).

acknowledges the existence of racial discrimination against specific immigrant groups but this is primarily seen in terms of intentional individual prejudice or nativism. To ask questions about educational attainment and ethnic identity changes, still begs the question of the potential for symbolic belonging in the nation. Will new immigrants be accepted into the nation and on what terms? Recent sociological theorizing on immigration assumes that the American nation is a neutral or benign context (Hsu 1996:54). The segmented assimilation model ignores the racialization processes in the U.S., which for immigrants and refugees begin in homeland and refugee camps that still define normative expectations in terms of ideal white middle-class America, and which slots new immigrants along the black-white spectrum (Ong 1996) with all its ideological and structural ramifications.

In other words, the sociological literature on immigrants and their children does not theorize the “nation” or the construction of immigration and national laws. As Lisa Lowe (1996:2) argues:

Citizens inhabit the political space of the nation; a space that is, at once, juridically legislated, territorially situated, and culturally embodied. Although the law is perhaps the discourse that most literally governs citizenship, U.S. national culture – the collectively forged images, histories, and narratives that place, displace, and replace individuals in relation to the national polity – powerfully shapes who the citizenry is, where they dwell, what they remember, and what they forget.

The ostensibly *abstract* discourses of U.S. citizenship and individual rights are in fact structured in terms of racial, ethnic, class, sexual and gender hierarchies (King 2000; Perea 1998; Lowe 1996; Mohanty 1991; Collins 2001; Pateman 1988; Ong 1996). Many scholars have noted the ways in which “race” in particular has been a constitutive

element in the early formation of American national identity (Collins 2001, King 2000; Ngai 1999; Higham 1974, cited in Sanchez 1997).

I find it useful to draw on Omi and Winant's notion of "racial formation." They define it as the "the socio-historical process by which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed, and destroyed" (1994: 55), the shifting construction of racial meanings formed in the dialectic between state categorization and social challenges to those categorizations. Specifically, their definition draws attention to race as both social structural and cultural representation. Omi and Winant distinguish between "racial" and "racist," noting that racial projects include those everyday experiences and social structures that are racially coded. Some contemporary examples of the racial parameters of the U.S. state include debates and laws on welfare, affirmative action and immigration/immigrants. Omi and Winant argue that racial projects are not inherently racist but they perform the ideological work necessary to making connections between social structure and representation.

Through an analysis of U.S. state policies and laws, Omi and Winant contend that "the state from its very inception has been concerned with the politics of race" (81). Contemporary racial formations bear the footprints of the historical debates and decisions taken by the racial state that have come to define "American" identity as white and ordered the nation around the black-white axis.⁷

With respect to Asian immigrants and Asian Americans, discourses of new scientific racism and eugenics in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries have

⁷ Ngai's (1999) analysis of the Immigration Act of 1924 suggests that immigration law and policy remapped the racial and ethnic boundaries of the United States in the 1920s. She concludes that "the Immigration Act of 1924 contributed to the racialization of immigrant groups around notions of whiteness, permanent foreignness, and illegality" (92).

intersected with an orientalist⁸ discourse that defined Asians as culturally and racially “other,” as a “yellow peril,” and as the “foreigner-within,” even when born in the United States and the descendants of generations born here (Lowe 1996:4-6). These discourses have been the ideological underpinnings of the series of legal exclusions, disenfranchisements and restricted enfranchisements of Asian immigrants, and have resulted in the enduring images of the nation ordered around the black-white axis. In this bi-polar racial order, Asian immigrants and Asian Americans have been either positioned as “near blacks” (as in aliens ineligible for citizenship but seen as cheap exploitable labor), or “near-whites” (as in model minority). In the latter case, while Asian Americans and Asian immigrants are praised for their successes, they are also subjected to white racism and white resentment and violence for being “too successful” (Espiritu 1997:109-110), as exemplified in the debates around over-representation of Asian Americans in the University of California.

Asian Americans, and Latinos, continue to be racialized.⁹ Sanchez (1997) notes that both these groups have become the terrain over which discussions of race, equality and the meaning of citizenship in contemporary America are taking place, indicating the on-going reconfiguration of Latinos and Asians as racial formations in the U.S.¹⁰

⁸ Lisa Lowe (1996) defines U.S. orientalism as the institutional, scholarly and ideological representations of Asian, and of Asians in the United States, as the external and foreign other who define America and Americanness.

⁹ Sanchez (1997) argues that, while Latinos and Asians have been in the U.S., and have been central to nation-building processes at least since the nineteenth century, the recent focus on these groups assumes them to be new immigrants, arriving since the 1960s.

¹⁰ Some examples include the 1996 campaign finance scandal prompted by the so-called Asian connection (Wang 2000), and the U.S. government spy case against scientist Wen Ho Lee that erupted in 2000 and which ultimately was proven to be unfounded. Another example of similar racialization processes in American society is the ways in which Latinos are constantly cast as “newcomers” and “foreigners,” (Sanchez 1997:1018). George Sanchez argues that such racialization processes can explain the invisibility of Latinos as both victims and victimizers during the 1992 Los Angeles riots in both popular and academic accounts. Latinos have been ignored in these accounts “because it disturbs strongly held beliefs in notions of community, belonging, and race in this country,” (Sanchez, 1997:1018).

The racialization of Asians is intimately bound up with constructions of the American nation and the putative threat to a unified, dominant group identity. Although there is not a forced Americanization program in place currently, minority communities with immigrant histories, such as Asians and Latinos, face persistent threats to conform without any formal government program telling them that they must “Americanize.”¹¹ Racialized nativism continues in late twentieth century and appears in three distinct forms: the fear of linguistic differences and the promotion of English Only; the fear that multiculturalism and affirmative action policies will encourage ethnic retention; and the fear of a drain on public resources such as welfare, education and health care by both illegal and legal immigrants (Sanchez 1997: 1020),¹² as expressed in California’s Proposition 187 in 1994. Such anti-immigrant hysteria is an expression of national anxieties around American national identity; focused on the possibility that the unified, fixed dominant identity built around whiteness will be ruptured (Shohat 1998:44).

The historical experiences of Asian immigrants and Asian Americans, as well as other racial/ethnic groups in the US (see for example Collins 2001; Almaguer 1994) illustrates what Collins (2001) has observed as a fundamental paradox of U.S. national identity – namely, how the promise of individual rights guaranteed to all individuals, regardless of race, national origin, former conditions of servitude and color, contrasts with the reality of differential group treatment received by the individual due to her/his race, gender and class Collins (2001). In this racialized nation-state new immigrant

¹¹ The blue-ribbon Commission on Immigration Reform in 1997 embraced the need to encourage “Americanization” of immigrants (U.S. Commission on Immigration Reform, *Becoming an American: Immigration and Immigrant Policy* vi (1997).

¹² Scholars have noted that the rise in nativism represents a profound sense of the decline of the American nation. And this has been accompanied by a parallel process of fundamental restructuring of the U.S. economy, rapid deindustrialization, the rise of service and high tech economy, and the worldwide movement of capital (Sanchez 1997:1021).

groups and their descendants can gain citizenship through naturalization or birthright but continue to be treated as second-class citizens, and continue to be located at the cultural, racial, and political boundaries of the nation (Lowe 1996:162).

Thus struggles for social justice must also address the paradox of U.S. national identity. It requires finding a way to “to reconfigure the long-standing relations among race, ethnicity and US national identity” (Collins 2001:26). The rise in nativism, together with the racialization processes that mark new immigrants and their descendants as second-class citizens or aliens, and therefore inassimilable, suggests that new immigrants and their children, even those with legal status cannot easily perceive a sense of belonging, of ‘home’ in the nation that is United States. In this study I examine the prospects for second generation Laotian girls to become full citizens and analyze the ways in which they address the paradox of U.S. national identity. In particular I examine challenges to culturalist constructions of Asian immigrants and Asian Americans as foreigners and/or as the model minority, as well as efforts to contest the black-white binary model of United States, which belies the complexity and diversity of social and ethnic relations in late twentieth century United States.

Culture

Nations are “imagined communities” (Anderson 1991) as I have argued above, and national identity is a cultural construction within specific power relations and discourses. However, the segmented assimilation model depicts the “original” and “American” cultures as static, fixed, hermetically sealed, impermeable and always in opposition. Ethnicity is understood in terms of one’s ethnic origins and heritage, and the distinctive cultural practices associated with such origins (Portes and Zhou 1993; Zhou

and Bankston 1994, 1998). Such a position implies those ethnic attachments and cultural understandings and practices are either retained or lost in the case of assimilation. As Zhou (2001) has stated, the principal concern in sociological research on new immigrants and their children is to examine the possibilities of integration into dominant American society. And, becoming American is synonymous with the principles of freedom, progress, and individualism (Ong 1996, 739).¹³

The segmented assimilation model has brought into sharp relief the interaction between structural and socio-cultural factors in the adaptation process but I contend that culture is viewed in immutable, structural terms.¹⁴ Zhou's (1997b) elaboration of the mechanisms by which immigrant culture, and its attendant ethnic networks, ties and resources, influences adaptation outcomes reinforces culture as a determining factor in the segmented assimilation concept. For example, explanations of second generation Chinese-Americans' (Zhou 2000) and Vietnamese-Americans' (Zhou and Bankston 1998) educational achievement and subsequent potential for occupational mobility assign culture and social capital in immigrants communities a central role in enabling children to circumvent an "oppositional stance."¹⁵

Reconstruction is a more accurate description of ethnic institutions (Hein 1995), ethnic social relations and cultural practices under the rubric of enduring but distinct ethnic categories. Fernandez-Kelly and Curran (2001:129) assert that it is the modes of

¹³ Ong (1995, 350) argues that dominant assessments, in the West, of Chinese women fleeing China and coming to the West, assume that they are leaving behind an oppressive society and entering the point of full emancipation. Indeed, many Asian American discussions also portray immigration to the United States in terms of a "loss of the 'original' culture in exchange for the new 'American' culture" (Lowe 1996, 62).

¹⁴ Sewell (1992:3) distinguishes the different understandings of culture in sociology and anthropology. I contend that in the segmented assimilation model culture is inadvertently viewed in the anthropological sense of structure.

¹⁵ Such studies play into the model minority thesis in which such narrow criteria for success affirm America as the land of opportunity and a meritocratic society (Osajima 2000).

incorporation and contexts of reception that determine the kinds of adjustments that first- and second-generation immigrants must make in a new society. Thus it is important to make a critical distinction between social processes and assets of various kinds (Fernandez-Kelly and Curran 2001). In the present study, culture is conceptualized as a process in which there is no separation between culture and structure. Such a concept of culture does not invoke a fixed array of customs, values and traditions, leaving scholars to simply describe the effects of culture on assimilation outcomes. Instead culture is seen as processual and constantly shifting as it acts and interacts with those forces that shape it.

Thus, culture does not exist outside of history, but is historically specific. Culture is not only inherited but also actively constructed out of everyday processes of inclusion and exclusion (Ong 1996: 741). Nagel (1994:162) argues that culture is not a shopping cart that we inherit already loaded, but rather, we select from the shelves of past and present to fill the cart in ways that provide content and meaning to our ethnic identities. Crucial in this metaphor of filling up the shopping cart is the role of human agency. For individuals, social meanings are produced, appropriated, disrupted and contested through social interaction inside and outside ethnic communities (Nagel 1994; Barot et. al. 1999). Groups are actively and continually involved in the construction and reconstruction of cultural symbols, activities, practices and histories (Nagel 1994:162). At the same time, while “cultural specificities remain important...they are construed as fluid modalities, as shifting boundaries that mediate structures and relations of power” (Brah, 1993:443). In other words the construction and reconstruction of culture empowers people as actors, but people do not invent and re-invent themselves at will. They respond to the material

conditions, the prevalent discourses and power relations that shape the opportunities and constraints in a historically specific time and place (Barot et. al. 1999).

The process of cultural construction also serves to build community when groups define the boundaries of collective identity, establish membership criteria, generate a shared symbolic vocabulary, and define a common purpose (Nagel 1994:163). Within the context of migration to the U.S., such community building is important for ethnic groups that have been historically antagonistic but need to form pan-ethnic organizations where common interests and common histories necessitate the construction of a shared culture (Nagel 1994; Espiritu 1992). For example, within the contexts of the United States, the category Laotian is constituted by the sub-ethnic groups Lao, Mien, Hmong, Khmu, Lue and Thaidam.

However, racial and ethnic groups are not homogenous; class, gender, generation, dialect, region, immigration and so on divide them. Their boundaries are not fixed, nor is their membership uncontested. Like nations, they are imagined communities made and changed in struggle (Bulmer and Solomos 1999:5). The importance of dense co-ethnic networks in the segmented assimilation model (Portes and Zhou 1993) assumes a unified community. In reality there exists contention, stratification and segmentation in immigrant institutions (Kibria 1993). For some second-generation immigrants co-ethnic networks may provide resources to resist assimilation, for others it may be a source of oppression. There are divisions between genders and generation; women and youth may seek greater acculturation in the hope of gaining more egalitarian roles (Ong 1996) and freedom from age seniority. Ethnic self-identity does not give us direct clues to whether a particular ethnic community serves as “home” and creates a sense of belonging. Thus

people choose and assert cultural practices and identities; they are not solely representations of linear assimilative processes or reactive positions. I am concerned with the meanings of ethnic identity to individuals and groups, about the forces that shape and influence the contents of that ethnicity, and about the purposes these ethnic meanings serve in collective contexts.

At the same time, conceiving of culture in terms of the principle of relationality (Shohat and Stam 1994:48-49; Lowe 1996:68) enables us to examine the role that racialized immigrant groups play in the “making and unmaking of culture (Lowe 1996:68). Viewing culture as fluid, permeable and linked creates opportunities for cultural interaction, critique and fusion. In this relational view it is possible to challenge a particular cultural practice, such as asymmetrical gender expectations, from a feminist perspective without maligning a whole cultural group (Brah 1996:92). Or, for example, teenage Laotian girls can challenge dominant representations of them and potentially transform relations of power without rejecting all of dominant “American” culture. Second generation immigrants can occupy oppositional or non-oppositional subject positions as they negotiate, contest and collude with cultural forms and practices in different contexts and situations.

Engendering Critical Identities: Race, gender, class, and nation

Acknowledging the possibility of occupying oppositional and non-oppositional subject positions in different contexts suggests a conception of identity that is fluid, unstable and situational. This is in contrast to the assumption found in much of the sociological literature on the new second generation that identity is stable, unified and singular. For example, the Children of Immigrants Longitudinal Study measures shifts in

ethnic self-identity over time, and discusses the factors that affect ethnic identity choices (Portes and Rumbaut 2001:154-160). But such a quantitative study cannot consider the possibility that there are a range of ethnic identity choices in different social contexts at a particular point in time, or how and why people choose between these choices.

To view acculturation in terms of shifts in ethnic identity is to see ethnicity as bounded or rooted in a place. In this view, identity is always bi-polar – that is gravitates either toward the pole of nativism or the pole of assimilation. By limiting the enquiry into ethnic identity to self-labeling, the struggles embodied in identity formation, or the meanings of particular ethnic self-identification, are not revealed in quantitative research as recent ethnographies indicate (Stepick et al 2001; Espiritu and Wolf 2001; Fernandez-Kelly and Curran 2001). Ethnic self-identification does not allow for the possibility of multiple identities and contradictory subject positions. Espiritu and Wolf (2001) found that acculturation, specifically ethnic identification and English languages use, among Filipino Americans is a dynamic and complex phenomenon. And the burgeoning literature on transnational migrants (see for example Basch, Glick Schiller and Szanton Blanc 1994; Smith and Guarnizo 1998) has pointed to immigrants maintaining multiple national identities and multiple geographical locations of “home.”

As recent scholarship in feminist theory, critical race theory and cultural studies teaches us, categories such as “race,” “ethnicity,” “nation,” “gender” cannot be defined in terms of inherent, natural characteristics, in a transhistorical and unitary way. This body of scholarship (Moraga 1994; Alarcon 1990; Lorde 1983; Mohanty 1991; bell hooks 1984; Smith 1990; Collins 1990; Butler 1992; Scott 1990; Crenshaw 1995) has challenged the notion of a stable or unified subject, and questioned essentialised social

categories. These theorists emphasize the conditional and situational character of people's identities, as well as the intersection of gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, class and other axes of difference which structure people's images of themselves and their material lives (see also Hall 1997).

In particular, I draw from feminists of color and post-colonial feminists who posit an embodied notion of subjectivity (Moya 1997; Alarcon 1990; Sandoval 1991; Alexander and Mohanty 1997). Subjectivity is viewed as multiple, dynamic and continuously produced in the course of social relations that are themselves changing and at times contradictory. They insist that subjects are constituted only in their situatedness in multiple and intersecting axes of racial, class, gender and other relations of domination (Alarcon 1990; Sandoval 1991). Thus, at each moment any given identity may take a range of meanings and encompass a range of experiences.

Reconciling identities in this way allows us to acknowledge multiple relations of domination, the simultaneity of oppressions, and make theoretical connections between different kinds of oppressions, and, in some situations and historical circumstances, identify one oppression as primary (Moya 1997). The present study's focus on second generation Laotian girls and women illuminates intersectionality by acknowledging the interacting webs of ethnic, race, gender, class and other systems of stratification. This allows us to examine how fluid and multiple social identities shape cultural and political practices, and to understand the dynamic and contradictory effects of the multiple subjectivities of teenage Laotian girls.

Re-imagining Politics

In the process of deconstructing social categories, we also need to take up the reconstructive challenge and call for a collective imagining of alternative visions of community. If gender never operates alone but is constitutive of race, class, sexuality, nationality, and other differences to form heterogeneous identities, the question that arises for scholars working on collective action relates to the forms of political practice that are possible if personal and collective identities are being constantly renegotiated and transformed in relation to shifting contexts.

Moya (1997) suggests a “Realist Theory of Chicana Identity” linking social location, experience, epistemic privilege and cultural identity. In this embodied, yet non-essential idea of identity, which is not bodiless, genderless, raceless or sexless, experience is seen as a vehicle through which we gain access to knowledge of the world. This knowledge is not a priori linked to social location but is “a link that is historically variable and mediated through experience” and cultural identity (Moya 1997).

The different social facts of a woman’s existence are relevant for the experiences she will have, and these experiences will inform her understanding of the world and her political positions (Moya 1997:144-145). But there is no self-evident equation between social location, knowledge and identity. One does not become a feminist just because one is female. The experience of oppression or marginalization does not automatically lead to an understanding of systems of domination. Our experiences must be interpreted and alternative possibilities constructed within a collective context to enables us to “challenge dominant conceptions of what is ‘right’, ‘true’, and ‘beautiful’ and participate in mobilization for change” (Moya 1997:140-141). In the case of second-generation Laotian

girls and young women, their encounter with multiple marginalizations – along gender, generation, class and race – does not magically transform them into social activists. It is within collective contexts that the political process of translating their socially constructed identity into political affiliations occurs.

A notion of multiple subjectivities also raises questions about the politics of identity versus the politics of affiliation and alliance. Feminists of color have acknowledged both the necessity of identity politics for communities of color, as well as its dangers (see hooks 1990; Lowe 1996; Reagon 1983). Lowe (1996), while acknowledging the need for a politics of identity “to make visible the erased and evacuated histories in realist and naturalist modes,” argues that Asian American identity politics unwittingly buys into racializing discourses that constructs Asians as a homogenous group. In so doing such politics accepts the “terms of the dominant logic that organizes the heterogeneous picture of racial and ethnic diversity into a binary schema of “the one” and “the other” (71).¹⁶ Drawing from feminist theorizing on identity, Lowe stresses “heterogeneity, hybridity, and multiplicity” (60), in terms of class, gender, national and intergenerational differences to create the potential for alliances with other groups in society based on political commitments and agendas rather than on a specific identities (72-75; see also Brah 1996:93; Mohanty 1991).

For Lowe, acknowledging difference among Asian Americans does not preclude the strategic deployment of Asian American identity, invoking Spivak’s (1987) notion of strategic essentialism. Indeed, Diana Fuss (1989, 32) has argued that we do not throw

¹⁶ See also Bernice Johnson Reagon (1983), who discusses the limits of identity politics, particularly the totalizing notions of difference and the identification of exclusive spaces as ‘homes’ in contemporary oppositional movements. In the British context, Stuart Hall (1997) argues that the category Black is a historical, political and cultural category; it does not represent an essential Black subject.

away essentialism prematurely but examine the motives of those who are deploying it. While there is always the risk that a “temporary” intervention will become entrenched into a reactionary form of essentialism, Fuss argues that the “risk” is worth taking. The determining factor in deciding essentialism’s strategic value is dependent on who practices it, how it is deployed, with what effects (32), and I would add, to what purpose.

In the present study, an examination of the issues around which second generation Laotian women organize and the alliances they form suggests a desire to reaffirm their Laotian identity, strengthen community and mediate with American institutions for resources and inclusion. As Crenshaw (1995:375) asserts “at this point in history, a strong case can be made that that most critical resistance strategy for disempowered groups is to occupy and defend a politics of social location rather than vacate and destroy it.” At the same time their experiences are structured by intersecting gender, generation, class and race relations, which can lead to temporary alliances formed on the basis of common contexts of struggle rather than a common identity.

Conceptualizing Second Generation Girls, and their Social and Political Identities

To present and analyze the lives of second generation Laotian girls while situating them in multiple relations of domination I utilize the notions of agency and differential power. The popular conception of youth in the U.S. has a Jekyll and Hyde duality to it. They are caught in ambivalent and contradictory discourses that, on the one hand, construct youth as the symbols of the future, representing hope and optimism. At the same time, young people are perceived in negative terms, as threats to the existing social order (Giroux 1998:25). Peter Kelly (2000) argues that in a time of profound social, economic and cultural change, popular, political and theoretical discourses primarily

construct youth as “at-risk.” This trend has been particularly prevalent in the U.S. in the 1990s. Moreover, once youth behaviors, dispositions and interactions are so identified, various programs can be implemented by schools, police, health services, and the juvenile justice system, and so on to increase surveillance, regulation and intervention in the lives of young people.¹⁷ Youth are rarely seen as active decision-makers and problem solvers, as assets and as subjects with social and political rights. The sites in which youth are able to assert agency and voice are generally marginal spaces in society, such as underground magazines, alternative music and computer hacker clubs (Giroux 1998:24).

Second-generation Laotian girls are further subjected to discourses on women of color and on communities of color in general. Previously, many studies of communities of color in the United States have situated them as passive victims of those with political and economic resources in vertical power relations (Hune 1995:32), and studies of women of color and Third World women have cast this group as victims of particular socio-cultural systems and patriarchy (Mohanty 1991b; Puar 1996; Brah 1992). However, I do not advocate swinging the pendulum in the other direction and seeing all action and inaction as resistance. This is especially important in this dissertation on teenage Laotian girls. Bhavnani et. al. remind us that while the term “youth” is often perceived as an “idyllic homogenous space of pre-adult possibility,” “youth” is an extremely difficult time for many young women (1998:575-578). By presenting and analyzing second generation Laotian girls’ oppositional and non-oppositional positions and social practices within intersecting relations of power I hope to convey a nuanced understanding of the possibilities for this group to actively shape their world.

¹⁷ Indeed, community activists believe that a war on youth, particularly youth of color, has been waged since the later 1980s, culminating in the Gang violence and Juvenile Crime Prevention Act approved by

Sewell (1992: 20) has argued that to be an agent implies the capacity to “exert some degree of control over the social relations in which one is enmeshed, which in turn implies the ability to transform those social relations to some degree.” While all human beings are endowed with a capacity to act creatively, individuals are not simply “free” to act. Agency is conditioned by structures laden with differences in power. Sewell (1992:21) elaborates:

Occupancy of different social positions – as defined, for example, by gender, wealth, social prestige, class, ethnicity, occupation, generation, sexual preference, or education – gives people knowledge of different schemas and access to different kinds and amounts of resources and hence different possibilities for transformative action.

Equally important, agency varies in both kind and extent (Sewell 1992:20). Agency does not necessarily imply activity; “agency can involve passivity, accommodation, and withdrawal as much as defiance and resistance” (Wolf 1992:24).

Sewell’s conception of agency is intimately linked with his reconceptualization of structures, which delineates the relationship between structural change, agency and power. Structures are not reified, stable categories but “sets of mutually sustaining [virtual] schemas and [actual] resources that empower and constrain social action and that tend to be reproduced by that social action” (19). But their reproduction is never guaranteed because there are multiple and intersecting schemas in social life which both endow actors with variable qualities and quantities of resources, and enable them to interpret these resources in more than one way. Individual or collective agency is derived from the ability to apply schemas in new contexts, or through actor’s control of an array of resources which are interpreted or mobilized in terms of schemas other than those that

California voters in 2000.

produced the resources (Sewell 1992: 20). For example, an alternative mode of incorporation such as an organization like APEN, while established to mobilize the Laotian community in the struggle for social justice issues like environmental racism, may also come to provide the material and moral resources to second generation Laotians to avoid “oppositional cultures” (Zhou 1997a), in a community without dense co-ethnic networks.

Sewell’s reconceptualization of structures demonstrates that contexts of reception are not constant and determinate in the lives of immigrants. At the same time the implied human agency calls for a more complex understanding of power than that assumed in the social movement literature. A Foucauldian (1982) notion of relational power challenges static, linear and often unidirectional conceptions of power and domination, which construct binaries such as oppressor/oppressed (Mohanty 1991:13). Conceptualizing power as relational, rather than possessed by an individual or group, prods us to think about powerful in relation to whom. It moves us away from looking at power as an either/or binary division, which relegate second generation girls and women powerless. Asian immigrant women, generally, do not have access to power and representation in modern pluralist societies (Lowe 1996:162).

A relational notion of power also shifts the terrain of politics, from a focus on abstract political identities or a singular narrative of emancipation (Lowe 1996: 58), to institutions and spaces such as the law, workplaces, schooling, community organizations, family, sexual life, churches, and popular culture. A shift to micropolitics allows scholars to recognize negotiation, resistance and accommodation enacted by second generation

Laotian girls in everyday relations of domination experienced in non-state institutions and spaces.

For example, as a result of their grasp of English and the ability to mediate American institutions, in part gained through leadership development at APEN, second-generation Laotian girls and young women do have power in specific arenas relative to their parents. Although I analyze how the social facts of gender, generation, class and race structure marginality and exclusion in the everyday lives of second generation Laotian girls, I also focus on the ways in which their “constrained agency” (Bhavnani et. al. 1998: 575) affects, to some extent, reshapes these social relations.

Chapter Two

Setting and Methodology

West Contra Costa County- Socio-Economic transformations.

The vista from the El Cerrito hills across Richmond to the San Francisco Bay and Mount Tamalpais beyond it belies West Contra Costa County's deeply ingrained industrial character. From this vantage point in El Cerrito, the only clue is the shipping port as well as the Chevron refinery and the oil storage tanks on the ridge behind it, painted brown so as to blend in with the surrounding landscape. The Chevron installations rise above Richmond's "gritty" Iron Triangle neighborhood, flanked by the railroad tracks that gave it its name. The Chevron oil refinery has been Richmond's most visible landmark for a century and continues to play a significant role in the city's economic landscape.¹

The city of Richmond's (West Contra Costa County's principal city) industrial history over the past century is intimately tied to growth and change in the Bay Area economy as a whole.² Early in the century Richmond had a heavy industrial base with companies representing chemical, automobile assembly and food processing sectors. During World War II the Kaiser Richmond shipyards represented one of the biggest wartime shipbuilding operations, ushering in large-scale in-migration of workers. At the war's end the shipyards closed and, together with plant closures in other older industries due to deindustrialization, led to a concomitant decline in population. New

¹ Chevron is Richmond's largest tax contributor and biggest employer. More than 3000 people work at its refinery and technology center, with almost 20 percent of those people being West County residents (Metinko, 2001). It is also one of the major polluters in the San Francisco Bay Area, according to Karras et. al. (2000).

manufacturing, chemical processing and research facilities, petroleum refining and waste disposal, and warehousing operations moved into vacated shipyard structures, together with nurseries, metal recycling plants and equipment yards. These industries have remained, and since the late 1980s, Richmond has sought to attract biotechnology, other high technology, light industrial firms and retail chains to its new business parks and commercial development areas (Richmond Planning Department). Today there are over 350 industrial sites in West Contra Costa County, several of which have made the Environmental Protection Agency's Superfund list of the most toxic and polluted site in the nation that need to be cleaned up.

Global economic restructuring has led to a restructuring of labor market opportunities, and is central to understanding the contexts of reception in which new immigrants have been inserted. Waldinger and Lee (2001:66) identify three economic trends for the San Francisco Bay Area. First, the area is increasingly dependent on its service sectors, particularly business services. Second, the economy is characterized by a new manufacturing base in which deindustrialization in traditional "smokestack" durable goods is offset by the growth in high-technology manufacturing in computers, electronics, instruments and defense. Third, these changes have produced a unique economic structure in San Francisco; high levels of manufacturing employment persist yet the labor force has shifted to a pattern in which highly skilled and educated workers outnumber their less-skilled cohorts.

The shift away from basic manufacturing towards high-technology, non-durable industries and petrochemical processing has meant substantial job losses and significant

² See Dick Walker and The Bay Area Study group (1990) for a review of the political economy of the Bay Area since the 1950s.

changes in the kinds of employment and working conditions available (Teitz and Shapira 1989). Richmond's reputation as a prime industrial zone in the first half century has not been regained. Deindustrialization and global economic restructuring hollowed out Richmond by the 1950s, leaving behind Black workers and grim economic conditions (Walker and The Bay Area Study Group, 1990). New immigrants from Asia and Latin America, who often come with low skill levels and education, have joined these workers. While the expanding high-tech industry in the 1990s has provided jobs for new highly educated immigrants, Southeast Asians (and Central Americans), groups with the lowest human capital, are not participating in the overall gains that have occurred over the last decade. In fact, during the 1990s, while the rest of the Bay Area experienced an economic boom and consequently a tight labor market, especially in the high-technology sector, Richmond's jobless rate was much greater than the unemployment rate in the Eastern part of the San Francisco Bay Area. Richmond residents faced double-digit unemployment rates from 1992 to 1995, at a time when the East Bay was well under a ten percent rate. From 1991 through 1996, the average unemployment rate in Richmond was at least 85 percent higher than that experienced in the East Bay overall (Avalos 2001).

Waldinger (2001:3) notes that there are still plenty of jobs for new immigrants arriving with low skill levels and little education. But, relatively speaking, there are fewer such positions than in the past and the number is continually decreasing, and at the same time, competition for jobs and wages is increasing. Like other leading immigrant destinations, the San Francisco Bay Area economic structure has shifted to jobs requiring higher skills and education. Waldinger (2001) predicts that while this shift does not prevent newcomers from entering the labor market, it may well make it harder for them-

or their children- to follow the path of earlier immigrants and their offspring and achieve socio-economic assimilation.

Paralleling these economic transformations has been a socio-demographic transformation in West Contra Costa County. Richmond's overall population has ebbed and flowed since the 1960s, shaped by deindustrialization, immigration, and the construction of new homes which were relatively affordable compared to the rest of the Bay Area. Immigration, in particular, has brought with it two dramatic racial and ethnic changes since the 1980s.

Whole neighborhoods and shopping strips have been transformed from once mainly African American to Latino and Spanish speaking. In 1980, persons of Hispanic origin constituted 10.3 percent of the city's population. This increased to 14.5 percent in 1990 and the latest U.S. census indicates that in 2000 Latinos made up 27 percent of the population. At the same time, the Asian and Pacific Islander population increased from 4.9 percent in 1980 to 11 percent in 1990, and to 13 percent in 2000. The African American population has decreased from 48 percent in 1980 to 44 percent in 1990 and 36 percent in 2000. The White population has decreased from 36 percent in 1980, to 31 percent in 1990 and down to 21 percent in 2000 (Richmond Planning Department; U.S. Census 1990, 2000; Voderbrueggen 2001).³ These demographic changes are also reflected in local schools which are becoming more diverse, as indicated in the numbers and percentages of English Learners⁴ in Richmond and other West Contra Costa County schools (California Department of Education).

³ A comparison of U.S. census figures for 1980, 1990 and 2000 reveal that these demographic trends in Richmond are mirrored at county and state-wide levels. The state as a whole experienced tremendous growth in the Latino and Asian communities.

⁴ English Learners (EL) students (formerly known as Limited English Proficient or LEP) are those students

Such socio-demographic transformations have often sparked interracial tension and gang violence between different racial groups. It has also created challenges for community activists, church and civic leaders to create community and coalitions between groups with such different racial and immigration histories and limited English facility, especially among the first generation of immigrants (Chang 2001b; Lochner 2001). This is the socio-economic context in which Laotians, one of the most recent refugee populations in the United States, have been inserted in West Contra Costa County.

History of Laotians - migration to the U.S.

Laos is a small, landlocked country located between Vietnam and Thailand. It is ethnically, linguistically and culturally diverse, comprising of over sixty ethnic groups (Chan 1994: 3), including valley-dwelling ethnic Lao, and hill tribes such as Mien, Hmong, Khmu, Lahu and Thaidam. In the United States, the term Laotian refers to all of these groups, despite their cultural differences and past adversarial relations.

The migration of Laotians to the United States is intimately linked to U.S. foreign policy and the deep entanglement of Laotians in the Vietnam War. In the late 1950s and early 1960s the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) recruited clans from Hmong, Lao, Mien, and Khmu and other smaller ethnic groups as part of an irregular force to resist the Pathet Lao (Communist) forces and support the Royal Lao Army (Tayanin and Vang 1992, Dao 1992, Crystal and Saepharn 1992). From 1961 to 1973, thousands of Hmong, Khmu and Mien were involved directly or indirectly in the CIA financed and equipped secret war in Laos. Young men were recruited to join Hmong General Vang

whose primary language is other than English and who have been determined to lack clearly defined English language skills necessary to succeed in the school's regular instructional program.

Pao's army to fight the Pathet Lao, prevent North Vietnam troops and military supplies from reaching South Vietnam, and help rescue U.S. pilots whose planes were shot down on bombing raids over northern Laos and North Vietnam. Other Mien and Hmong households were recruited to grow poppies and produce opium for sale as part of a CIA plan to support their anticommunist activities. Thousands more Hmong, Khmu and Mien farmers and their families fled their highland villages to escape the heavy bombings and extreme violence of the secret war. These villagers lived in jungles or in temporary villages built by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), and depended on the Royal Lao government and USAID for food and essential implements (Dao 1992; Crystal and Saepharn 1992; Smith and Tarallo 1993: 95).

The sudden collapse of the U.S. supported regime in South Vietnam, followed by Communist takeovers in Cambodia and Laos triggered a massive outflow of refugees. In 1975, the Vietnamese-allied Communist Pathet Lao assumed control and established the Lao People's Democratic Republic, signaling an exodus of Hmong, Mien, a sizeable population of ethnic Lao as well as other smaller tribes who supported the United States and the Royal Lao Army. Additional numbers of ethnic Lao fled Laos when, in 1977, the Pathet Lao sent those who had been part of the old government, even at lower ranks, to "re-education" camps in northern Laos (Waters 1990). In all, the U.S. secret war in Laos pushed more than 400,000 Lao, Hmong, Khmu, Mien and other smaller ethnic groups, or ten percent of the population in Laos, to seek refuge across the border in Thailand (Dao 1992; Yang 2001: 165).

The escape route for the surviving soldiers, elderly, women and children, already saddled by their belongings, was a long and strenuous trek over mountains and through

the jungle. Crossing the perilous Mekong River, usually under the cover of darkness, was a frightening and an unforgettable experience. Many individuals and sometimes entire families were injured, overcome by illness and exhaustion, drowned, or killed by Pathet Lao soldiers in the bid to flee communist rule (Crystal and Saepharn 1992). Those who survived often spent years of temporary asylum in refugee camps along Thailand's northeastern border while awaiting acceptance as legal refugees in countries such as the U.S., France, Australia, and Canada (Moore-Howard 1989:75). The United States government assumed responsibility for this consequence of the Vietnam War and greatly expanded the domestic refugee program, which allowed many Laotian refugees to come to the U.S. (Rumbaut 2000).⁵

The U.S. Department of State delegated the process of resettlement of Laotians to numerous voluntary agencies, such as the American Council for Nationalities Services, International Rescue Committee, United States Catholic Conference or World Relief Resettlement Agency. Close relatives also sponsored some Laotians (Trueba et. al. 1990, Knoll 1982, 147-148). While Laotians waited in the refugee camps no special orientation, educational courses or job-skills training were designed to meet the needs of these Laotian refugees (Crystal and Saepharn 1992; Knoll 1982, 245). Yet as Crystal and Saepharn (375) point out:

No people so traditional, so lacking in educational background or economically relevant skills, from so geographically and cognitively remote a homeland had ever been brought *en masse* as refugees to the United States (emphasis in original).

Given the numbers, background and conditions of the Laotian refugees, United

⁵ Trueba et. al (1990:xxiii-xxiv) describe the interview process and some of the circumstances which refugees endured while decisions were made about resettlement.

States officials and the voluntary agencies had three primary goals in their efforts to resettle Laotians: (1) dispersal; (2) economic self-sufficiency; and (3) medical attention for those suffering from acute diseases (Trueba et. al. 1990). By scattering the refugees, it was hoped that no particular geographic area would be overburdened, and it would minimize any potential conflicts with members of the host community.

The goal of economic self-sufficiency was to prevent long-term welfare dependency. The majority of Laotians coming to the United States, eight out of ten, were laborers, farmers or other manual workers (Chang 2001a). Thus they possessed few skills that were transferable or even readily adaptable to employment in the United States. And while the ethnic Lao lived in urban centers, the majority of Mien, Hmong, Khmuu and other ethnic groups were from rural, highland Laos, and therefore they have had little exposure to life in an urban industrial country. For those refugees unable to obtain jobs immediately, vocational training programs and English-as-a-Second-Language instruction were established. A final goal of the resettlement policy was to diagnose and treat some the acute diseases that Laotian refugees were experiencing (Trueba et. al 1990).

While the government's policy was to disperse refugees around the country, many Laotians have relocated after arriving in the U.S. to be close to family and friends. Trueba et. al. (1990:39-40) note that inconsistencies in the interpretation and implementation of resettlement policies by the myriad of voluntary agencies involved in aiding the resettlement of Laotians, resulted in resentment and competition among refugees. Many Laotians responded by participating in secondary migrations, bringing them to areas of highly developed services and unification with family and friends. Secondary migration

among Laotians is consistent with Waldinger's (2001:2) observation that immigration is "a network driven phenomenon," with newcomers attracted to places where family, friends and community members can provide resources to get started in a new country.

Laotians in West Contra Costa County- Vital Statistics

The 2000 census enumerated 384,516 Laotians (including 186,310 Hmong) living in the United States, a 37 percent increase over the 1990 census figures. Immigration records indicate that the numbers of Laotian refugees coming to the United States in the late 1990s may have come to an end. From a peak of 7,315 in 1992, the numbers of Laotian refugees had ground to zero in 1998 (Chang 2001a). However, Laotians, like other Southeast Asian groups, are a young population compared to other Asian American groups and the U.S. population in general. Correspondingly, fertility levels are high and will contribute to rapid natural increase in the Laotian population (Rumbaut 2000:187).

Patterns of settlement reveal that California continues to be the favored state, with 33 percent of Lao and 39 percent of Hmong living in this state (U.S. Census 2000). The 2000 census indicates that 136,799 (including 71,741 Hmong) Laotians reside in California, of which 4,206 live in the northern California county of Contra Costa. This is a 25 percent increase over the 1990 census figures. Nearly 30 percent of Contra Costa's Laotian community lives in two square-mile area in San Pablo and Richmond, part of West Contra Costa County and the location of the APEN's Laotian Organizing Project. This area is also the focal point of Laotian-run markets, shops, and restaurants (Chang 2001b). Richmond and San Pablo, together with West and East Oakland and San Francisco's Tenderloin area, represent poverty-stricken and marginal housing areas in which Laotian refugees were placed and continue to make their home (Walker and The

Bay Area Study Group, 1990; Crystal and Saepharn 1992).

Laotians, along with other Southeast Asians, have the highest rates of poverty and welfare dependency among other Asian American groups and the U.S. population in general (Rumbaut 2000:188). This is not surprising given that Laotians have made a leap from village life and agricultural self-sufficiency to a complex market economy with thousands of occupational roles that require competency in both the English language and vocational skills. In addition, many Laotian adults who grew up during the war never experienced the self-sufficiency of village life, but instead survived on air-drops of food and essential implements by USAID or rations provided in refugee camps (Dao 1992; Crystal and Saepharn 1992). In Contra Costa County, almost 60 percent of Laotians are dependent on welfare (Contra Costa County Social Services),⁶ and Laotian parents have the lowest education compared with other groups of Asian immigrant parents (Rumbaut 1994). Nationally, over 50 percent of Laotians live in linguistically isolated households (1990 U.S. census), meaning that no-one over the age of 14 in that household speaks English only or very well (Rumbaut 1995:248). This effectively cuts these families from most major forms of mass communication, and has serious implications for whether this community understands the way institutions in U.S. society works.

The history of war, emotional trauma and hardship, together with these socio-economic realities partially shape the quality of life and adaptation experiences of Laotians in Contra Costa County. The consequences of the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (or welfare reform), lack of access to adequate

⁶ Smith and Tarallo (1993) also found in their study of Sacramento new immigrants and refugees, two-thirds of Mien male heads of households in their sample unemployed and dependent on food stamps, Medi-Cal, general assistance, AFDC (Aid to Families with Dependent Children) assistance, and SSI (Supplemental security income) in order to survive.

and regular health care, job opportunities, and inter-racial tension further exacerbate the quality of life, as does the environmental pollution prevalent in West Contra Costa County. Laotian adults are often exposed to dangerous amounts of lead, pesticides and other chemicals at work. Many Laotians continue a tradition of community gardening around their homes in areas where soil contamination from local industry can pose additional serious health risks. A high percentage of Laotian families supplement their diets with fish from the San Francisco Bay, increasing their risk of exposure to toxic chemicals (APEN Newsletter, 1997).

For second generation Laotians, an additional set of factors and experiences shape their lives in Contra Costa County. Almost all my informants mentioned that their brothers and males cousins were in gangs. In 1996, 208 Laotian⁷ youth, were in the California Youth Authority institutions. This figure represents 16.6 percent of the total Asian commitments and contract cases with the California Youth Authority (CYA) for that year, second to the number of Vietnamese youth commitments. The actual number of Laotian youth in CYA facilities has remained fairly stable over the years but in 2000, Laotian 13 to 18 year olds represented 25.4 percent of all Asian youth commitments and contracts, outstripping Vietnamese youth in CYA facilities (California Youth Authority Information Systems Bureau).⁸ Media reports in West Contra Costa County continue to document the presence of Asian gangs, made up of teenage boys and young men in the

⁷ The category Laotian includes Lao, Mien and Hmong youth, though Hmong wards are more common (Personal communication with California Youth Authority Information Systems Bureau, March 6, 2002). However, a review of newspaper reports on Richmond and San Pablo indicate that there are Asian gangs operating in West Contra Costa County and from the names of those standing trial it can be inferred that they are young Mien men (see for example Fulbright, 2001). A 1993 study by Waters and Cohen also found that in 1991 Mien youth were being committed to the CYA at a higher rate than not only other Asian groups but also of all groups in California.

⁸ Ima (1995) notes that between 1988 and 1992 the number of Asian refugee youths with delinquency records increased approximately 500 percent and refugee gang membership rose five fold. And Southeast

cities of Richmond and San Pablo (see Bulwa 1999; Giordani 1999).⁹ The prevalence of gang involvement among Laotian male youth may be due to the inability of parents to provide critical support structures needed during adolescence. Early studies on Southeast Asian refugee youth suggested that while parental authority was weak among Laotian youth, peer group influence was strong (Rumbaut and Ima 1988; Peters 1988, cited in Hein 1995). But Walker-Moffat (1995:111) suggests that “perhaps their gang affiliations are a reaction to the realization that school replaces their cultural identity with a new minority identity that has limited their opportunity in a racist environment.”

In addition, a study by the Center for Reproductive Health Research and Policy, University of California at San Francisco, using data collected from 1989 to 1998, revealed that Laotian teenagers had the highest teenage pregnancy rate in California of any racial-ethnic group at almost 19 percent, and the highest number of teen births at nine percent (1990 California Birth Records). Scholars such as Males (1996) have explained teenage pregnancy as a result of poverty, but in the Laotian community parenthood conveys status and thus teenage motherhood continues to be an accepted practice.

In addition, 16.2 percent, or 990 of English Learners in the West Contra Costa Unified School District were Laotians in 1995. In 2000 this number dropped dramatically in percentage terms to 9.3 percent but still represented 810 students. At Richmond High School in 1995, where the majority of youth informants in this study go to school, Laotian students constituted 19.7 percent (145 students) of all English Learners. While this percentage dropped to 12 percent in 2000 for Richmond High School, it still

Asians have highest rate of gang-related homicide among all ethnic groups.

⁹ The lure of gangs for young Laotian boys is poignantly illustrated in “Caught Up,” a play about a boy involved in gang activities and unable to get out, written by Laotian youth from San Pablo and Richmond while at Byron Boys Ranch in 1999, a California Youth Authority facility.

represented 104 students, second only to Spanish speaking students (California Department of Education). Rumbaut (1995:50) notes that EL students represent the closest approximation to the number of most recently arrived immigrant children. Data on English Learners provide an indication of the group size and location of newcomers and the degree of hardship that students in a particular language group may be experiencing.

At the same time Asian Americans and Whites continually outscore African American and Latinos in general achievement tests in West Contra Costa County schools (Shire 2001).¹⁰ At Richmond High School, over 70 percent of Asian students are Laotians. Data from the California Department of Education indicates that at Richmond High, a greater proportion of students categorized as Asian complete all courses required for entrance to the University of California and California State Universities than any other racial-ethnic group, except Filipino students. In June 1998, the majority of 30 or so students on the California Scholarship Fund roll were Mien, inferred from their last names.

Such data on gang involvement, teenage pregnancy rates, large numbers of English Learners, yet high achievement at school among some Laotians paint a complicated picture of the adaptation experiences of young Laotians in West Contra Costa County.

Research site: Asian Pacific Environmental Network

¹⁰ The West Contra Costa Unified School District averted near financial bankruptcy in the late 1980s with a multimillion dollar state loan. The financial burdens from this period have impacted district schools in terms of deterioration of existing facilities and a lack of investment in new facilities, and persistently low student achievements (Shire 2001).

This is the context within which the Asian Pacific Environmental Network (APEN) established a leadership development project for young Laotian women, within broader efforts to mobilize the Laotian community in Contra Costa County. APEN itself has roots in the environmental justice movement and the First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit that was held in October 1991.¹¹ While communities of color in the U.S. had been organizing around issues of toxic waste siting, public health, or land and water rights for years, the publication of a United Church of Christ report, “Toxic Wastes and Race in the United States,” in 1987 popularized the notion of “environmental racism” and “environmental justice.” The report and the subsequent 1991 Summit provided a new language for activists in communities of color to understand their work and regional environmental justice networks were created in the late 1980s and early 1990s (Chang and Hwang, 2000).

The Summit propelled the reconceptualization of environmentalism in the United States and referred to the environment as “where we live, where we work, where we play, where we learn” (Cole and Foster 2001: 16).¹² Thus, in its goals (fighting for health, homes and community), strategies (direct action) and political orientation (linking environmental problems to broader social justice issues), the Environmental Justice Movement offers a broader perspective on environmental activism than the more

¹¹ This event, which brought together more than 300 delegates and 400 observers and supporters from environmental, civil rights and community groups for three days in Washington D.C., provided opportunities for participants to make conceptual linkages between ostensibly different struggles, imagine alliances not imagined before, and identify common themes of racism and economic exploitation of people and land (Cole and Foster 2001:32).

¹² See Cole and Foster (2001: Chapter One) for a detailed history of the Environmental Justice Movement in the United States. Rather than a single event or date marking the beginnings of the movement, Cole and Foster apply the metaphor of a river fed by many tributaries to argue that the Environmental Justice Movement has roots in several other social movements of the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s.

traditional environmental groups (Cole and Foster 2001:33).¹³

The Asian American activists present at the Summit, the majority of whom were from the San Francisco Bay Area realized “that if its about race, economics and environmental exposure...what a powerful context that could be to build an Asian American face as a part of a broader social justice movement,” especially in light of the fact that few Asian Pacific American organizations describe themselves as working within an environmental justice framework (APEN Executive Director Elaine, Interview 10/21/98). Back in California, they continued to meet and strategize, and eventually a core group of four became the founding members of the Asian Pacific Environmental Network in 1993. APEN is part of the Environmental Justice Movement in the US, which links grassroots activism concerning environmental protection to issues of economic development, racial and social equality, and community empowerment. This political orientation is summarized in the organization’s mission statement:

All people have the right to a clean and healthy environment in which their communities can live, work, learn, play and thrive. Towards that vision, the Asian Pacific Environmental Network was founded in 1993 to unify, empower, and strengthen the capacities of our diverse Asian and Pacific Islander communities to build a broad movement for environmental, social and economic justice (APEN 5th Anniversary Celebration Program).

Thus APEN presents a radical perspective on integration and incorporation into American society. The specific political values that shape its work in the Laotian community include: 1) the belief that whatever the citizenship status of new immigrants and their children, they have social and political rights; 2) the importance of participating in the democratic political process; 3) the political value of direct collective action; and 4)

¹³ See Appendix I, the Principles of Environmental Justice, ratified at the First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit in Washington D.C., in October 1991.

common struggle with other communities of color. These values and ideologies shape APEN's political practices in ways which depart from both those in mainstream U.S. society and those in the Laotian community. In the following chapters I analyze both the creative potential and sometimes uncertain effects of this radical political orientation.

The Laotian Organizing Project

One of the central philosophical elements of the Environmental Justice Movement is the concept of self-determination, which has been translated into the credo "We speak for ourselves" (Cole and Foster 2001:27). In their attempt to build an Asian American face to the Environmental Justice Movement, the founding members and staff of APEN have sought to stay true to this principle and do "base building work" (Elaine, Interview 10/21/98), or build community organizations from the bottom up, in communities that have very few formalized structures for creating social change.

Through a combination of needs assessment, analysis of demographic data on race, economics and environmental impact, as well as conducting interviews with existing leaders in various communities, APEN found three Asian and Pacific Islander communities in the San Francisco Bay Area with very little capacity for creating social change, and isolated from other groups as well as the broader environmental justice movement (Elaine, Interview 10/21/98). This process led them to the Laotian community in West Contra Costa County and the creation of the Laotian Organizing Project (LOP) in 1995. As noted earlier, this community is not only linguistically isolated, but also disproportionately prone to environmental toxins emitted from the 350 industrial plants in West Contra Costa. The Laotian community is also invisible, in that it has no representation on local government structures. APEN's goal for LOP is to build a

community-based membership organization that will work with other organizations in similar communities and create an Asian Pacific American face in the environmental justice.

When I was in the field, principal staff at APEN and LOP constituted second- and third- generation Asian American women community activists from outside the Laotian community. Elaine describes herself as the product of the '60s and the '70s, during which time she developed an Asian American consciousness within the ethnic movement, and a feminist perspective. She has worked as a community organizer in various Asian American communities on the West Coast and the East Coast, as well as a director of an Asian American civil rights organization. Elaine had been one of the approximately 25-30 Asian American participants at the First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit in October 1991. On her return to California she became one of the four founding members and first Executive Director of APEN (Elaine, Interview 10/21/98).

Other key people who work or have worked with LOP and its various programs are all young Asian American women activists under 30 years of age. Ming has a background in education and experience working with older Asian immigrant women (Ming, Interview 10/12/98). Emiko was involved in bringing a race/class/gender analysis to environmental issues on college campuses as a director of a national student organization. Emiko had also attended the October 1991 Summit and had represented the youth voice on the drafting committee for the Principles of Environmental Justice at the meeting (Emiko, Interview 9/22/98). Jennifer, the Youth Program Coordinator when I was in the field, has a background in education in urban schools (Jennifer, Interview

10/9/98).

APEN also employs young, “one-and-a-half” generation ¹⁴ (Rumbaut 1997b) Laotian women, who are still in college or have recently graduated, as counselors. APEN staff view these “1.5” generation Laotian women as role models for the teenage girls as well as potential staff for the Laotian Organizing Project. In addition there is a male Laotian community organizer who was instrumental in the resettlement process of Laotians in West Contra Costa County throughout the 1980s. His main role is to work with and organize Laotian adults and elders.

What does it mean for new Asian immigrants and refugees, such as Laotians, to participate in an organization in which key staff positions are filled by second- and third-generation East Asian American women? APEN’s creativity, as well as the tensions and limitations in its work, call for an analysis of the power relations that occur within community-based initiatives. In particular, an analysis blind to inter-ethnic power relations provides an incomplete picture of power and resistance in marginalized communities.

How do Laotians react to an organization that espouses membership-based democratic political structures that are open to all segments of the Laotian community, rather than hierarchical structures that promote elite leadership? Does LOP, an organization whose impetus came from outside the community, have legitimacy in the Laotian community? When asked about this, Emiko acknowledged that APEN brought a value and the language of organizing to the Laotian community, but stressed that the absence of an organization that can pull the various ethnic groups together was identified

¹⁴ Ruben Rumbaut (1997b:496) coined the term “one-and-a-half” or “1.5” generation to refer to foreign-born youths that immigrated to the U.S. before age 12.

by community members. These community members were most likely not those with privilege and status, nor those that held a deferential view of authority (Hein 1995:100).

However, three years after its inception, APEN staff felt that the broader Laotian community lacked a sense of ownership of LOP, its vision and its work (Emiko, Interview 9/22/98), though this is not true of many of the teenage Laotian girls participating in the youth program. In general, APEN has had difficulties in organizing Laotian adults. I wondered if this was a sign of quiet resistance to APEN's goals and values among elders and adults in the community. Emiko was quick to point out that APEN had received "a truly positive reaction from the community" about the work it was doing in the Laotian community. She commented that she had never heard anyone say anything like "you know you really should not be doing this," or "you're not here to do.. you're not doing the right thing." According to Emiko adults in the community tell staff:

I really believe in what you are doing. It's really important and we pray for you," you know. Like a good thing that you're doing. I have three jobs and I can't [chuckle]... You know I can't always come on Sundays. I can't, you know I have these set of limitations. I will do, like whenever you need something ask me and I probably will be able to do that.

Indeed, many adults in the community are not in a position where they can be part of on-going discussions and on-going work to build the Laotian Organizing Project. There a very real structural limitations to their participation such as low levels of English literacy, little understanding of American cultures and working several jobs to sustain their families. But it may be more than just structural limitations or feeling disempowered in a new culture and society. It may be related to their experiences of the way politics was conducted in Laos under authoritarian and then Communist governments. Hein argues that experiences under authoritarian and then Communist governments, as well as the

negative connotations associated with the very term politics act as further disincentives to political participation.¹⁵

Openly negative reactions to APEN's work in the Laotian community have come from some elders and leaders who felt their authority would be undermined by an organization whose impetus came from outside the Laotian community, and which was trying to bring the various factions and ethnic groups together despite their past adversarial relations.¹⁶ Within the Laotian community in Contra Costa County there are a lot of informal community organizations, representing Lao, Mien, Khmu, Hmong and Thaidam groups. MacDonald (1997 136-137) notes that since village councils, the traditional form of political organization made up of community leaders, has no legal authority in the United States, most Iu-Mien communities in the U.S. have adopted a new type of community-based non-profit political organization known as mutual assistance association (MAA). Their function is to help the community adjust to American life, preserving its own culture, language and customs, and forming a link between the community, government and voluntary agencies providing assistance to refugees. While MAAs cut across clan and lineage structures (MacDonald (1997: 137) they are still ethnic specific.

From her perspective from within the Laotian community Lily, a one-and-a-half generation Laotian woman who had worked as a counselor with the APEN youth project in the summers of 1995 and 1996, noted that these organizations want to distinguish

¹⁵ Though Hein (1995:104) does cite instances of grassroots activism around the country related to issues of inadequate social-welfare services, rent increases and segregated school facilities (also see Ellen Somekawa 1995).

¹⁶ APEN's executive director, Elaine, and the male Laotian organizer who had worked in the community previously and now worked with the Laotian Organizing Project, were personally threatened in 1995. Attempts were also made to mar the reputation of the Laotian organizer who APEN considered key to their work in the Laotian community (Elaine, Interview 10/21/98 and Ming, Interview 10/12/98).

themselves in terms of which ethnic group they represent, such as Lowland Lao, Mien and so on. This has led to “confrontations over turf, rather than working together,” according to Lily. Of the Laotian political leaders in Contra Costa County during the mid-1990s, Ming observed that their position and status is often based on their “privilege from the home country and they have language privilege and they have class privilege,” according to Ming. With this privilege they have been able to access grants and other resettlement monies and hold on to their status and power.¹⁷

Ming’s comments are ironic, especially in light of Espiritu and Ong’s (1994) findings that established second- and third-generation East Asian Americans have benefited more than newly arrived immigrants because they know how to access financial resources from private and public funding agencies, they participate in advocacy and social service coalitions, they have the ability to negotiate with elected officials and public agencies for social and civil rights, and they have had opportunities for higher education opened up by affirmative action programs. In other words, the “U.S. political and funding systems reward articulate, credentialed and politically sophisticated individuals (Espiritu and Ong 1994: 309). Due to their class privilege, Chinese and Japanese Americans have been most able to assume leadership positions in pan-Asian organizations (Espiritu and Ong 1994: 309), and in ethnic-specific organizations that are often initiated by East Asian American activists, as LOP’s case demonstrates.

The dominance of East Asian Americans in key staff positions at LOP has not

¹⁷ In part this is a holdover from the leadership structures in Laos. Hein (1995:100-101) cites a study of political views among Laotian refugees which indicates that many Lao have a “deferential view of authority figures.” In contrast to participatory democracy in the United States, political decision-making in Laos was the province of elites rather than citizens. Hein notes that since the Lao have a hierarchical conception of the family, their views of citizens’ relationship to government are similarly organized through the lens of kinship, in which government rules over the people.

gone un-noticed by emerging young community activists in the Laotian community either. These critics point to the power dynamics that can arise as a result of the privileged background of some of the staff members, their lack of life experience as members of a refugee community in the U.S., and their inability to incorporate parents and families of the youth into the Laotian Organizing Project. Until 1999 only the one male Laotian organizer was a permanent staff member at LOP. One activist commented that because this organizer is male and represents the community to non-Laotians, “he is already in the old structure.” She pointed out that while this may be revolutionary “to the outside community” (having a Laotian in an Asian Pacific American community organization and representing Laotians to the wider community) it is not “within the community” because elder males have traditionally held leadership positions.

At the same time these critics acknowledge that there are not many Laotians who are ready and willing to take on under-paid jobs as community organizers. While one of the young Laotian summer counselors returned to LOP as a permanent staff member to work with the youth program for two years, in general LOP has failed to retain other one-and-half generation counselors. And, the majority of the teenage Laotian girls who have graduated from the youth program are now attending college and/or working in other jobs. Given the high rates of poverty and welfare dependency in the Laotian community, young Laotians are expected to help support their families and, therefore, seek higher paying jobs than those that LOP can offer.

Several APEN staff also discussed the dilemmas and difficulties of having leadership emerge indigenously from the Laotian community and having Laotians take on key organizing roles in LOP. Emiko openly shared her own concerns and discomfort

about working in the Laotian community while not being from the community. She was especially concerned about putting the youth in the position of cultural translators, just as their teachers do, because she did not speak the Laotian languages and did not know the culture intimately. Emiko observed that “the further removed you are from that (the Laotian community) then the harder it is to kind of move in that world, and be most effective” (Emiko, Interview 9/22/98). But in the real world of community organizing, these dilemmas have to be balanced by the need to achieve political goals and operate successfully in the U.S. political and funding systems which require skilled and politically sophisticated individuals. Even so, I argue that, despite inter-ethnic power differentials, the Laotian Organizing Project offers a broader segment of the Laotian population opportunities to actively participate in making decisions that shape their lives, as we will see in Chapters Three and Four. As Emiko observed of the Laotian community,

this community is like so many other immigrant and refugee communities that really they don't feel like they have rights. And don't really feel like they have the right to challenge some of the inequities that their community is living with (Emiko, Interview 9/22/98).

Thus APEN sees its role as “building the possibility in people’s minds. That you have the right to do this, and you have the right to demand a better life for the community and for your children” (Emiko, Interview 9/22/98). While this may be seen as a paternalistic/maternalistic desire to teach new immigrants their rights, I demonstrate in Chapter Four that APEN staff aim to cultivate a desire to participate in the political process, as well as help broad segments of the Laotian community to understand their power and to develop the skills to use that power. APEN’s long-term hope is that LOP

will eventually devolve from APEN, with its own staff and membership board, but remain connected to APEN through Laotian representatives on APEN's board. However, we cannot predict if and when Laotians will occupy key leadership positions within LOP and devolve from APEN.

Asian Youth Advocates (AYA)

Since 1995 a major thrust of LOP's work has been a leadership development program for teenage Laotian girls which aims to develop a political consciousness about environmental justice and community issues. At the same time, LOP addresses issues pertinent to adolescents, such as self-esteem and identity. Staff does not describe LOP as a women's organization even though it has chosen to prioritize girls and young women for its youth program. The issues affecting this group cannot be addressed in isolation from the issues affecting the rest of the Laotian community. For example, the statistics from California Youth Authority suggests that young Laotian men are very much at risk. The activities of those involved in gangs directly impact young Laotian women in a number of ways: for example, when their parents decide to move to another city or state in order to curtail their son's gang involvement; or when Laotian girls and young women become accidental victims of crossfire between opposing gangs, which happened to one of the youth in APEN just as I was entering the field.

The focus on girls and young women in LOP's early work arose out of Elaine's and Ming's involvement in a sister organization that addresses reproductive rights and reproductive health issues in Asian and Pacific Islander communities in the U.S. There is growing evidence of the direct correlation between age of exposure to environmental toxins and the incidence of certain kinds of cancers in women. As Elaine noted:

in the beginning part of it was understanding the particular impact of environmental exposure on women. And realizing very quickly that it was very important for us to work with young women. That it was too late by the time women went to the emergency room and they were in the terminal stage of a cancer. That we really needed to do more education and training at a much younger age.

For Laotian girls and women, reproductive rights and reproductive health in general is not just a legislative issue; it is linked to the environmental health of the community they live in, as well as having access to adequate and timely health care. APEN staff educates the girls about these links between reproductive health and environmental health, and views the girls as the main conduit for disseminating information to members of their families and community.

There were other concrete reasons to work with teenage Laotian girls. APEN attributes the high teenage pregnancy rates in the Laotian community to poverty and a lack of support for young Laotian women. While motherhood confers high status for Laotian women, and parents still encourage girls to marry and have children at a young age, APEN staff adopt a middle-class, liberal ethos. They believe that the high number of teen births among Laotian girls places enormous emotional, financial and educational burdens on them and prevents them from leading stable and productive adult lives. APEN provides a safe place to talk about reproductive health and protective behavior, and creates a culture which emphasizes the importance of postponing motherhood. Finally, Laotian girls complain of gender discrimination from parents, and a sense of schizophrenia as they navigate different cultures at home, at school, and among peers. Through discussions and activities, APEN facilitates the development of a positive cultural identity that draws on the strengths of both Laotian and American culture.

The creation of a youth program for teenage Laotian girls is also linked to two organizational factors. First, most of the staff at APEN are themselves young Asian American women. They believe that they can create the kind of close relationships necessary to build a successful organization more easily with young Laotian women than with young Laotian men. Second, APEN received initial funding from the California Wellness Foundation, which had prioritized projects working with teenage girls. Subsequently, it received a multi-year grant from the Ms. Foundation for Women's Healthy Girls/Healthy Women Collaborative Fund. These grants enabled staff to design and implement a youth program within LOP that addressed the following question "how do these girls become the agent of change in their communities rather than the people who suffer the most" as a result of gender, race, class and generational hierarchies of power (Ming, Interview 10/12/98)?

In stating this political perspective, Ming and other APEN staff display both a feminist and maternalistic impulse. They view Laotian girls as the most marginalized sector in the community, and one that has no representation since leadership is traditionally vested in elderly Laotian males. APEN envisions that the cultivation of leadership skills and a process of politicization among the young women will change the current leadership landscape of the community. Jennifer explained APEN's broad long-term goal of "nurturing a new generation of leaders, of girl leaders" in the following terms:

That ten years from now the community is going to look really different because there's gonna be 40 plus or whatever of these girls that you know have this experience. And that concretely we want some of them to be staff here and leading organizing efforts in the community. But across the board, when they are having families, and as members of the community, that there's been some

value instilled in them through this experience of... And it is important I think to connect it to the community and that it is worth you know trying to make change here.

APEN staff value in and of itself women's leadership and girls leadership and having a space for girls that APEN brings to the community. At the same time, they recognize that working with girls "is a subversive way to get into the community" because girls have the least power in the community and are not taken seriously, according to Ming. "So you are not a threat. You are not going to upset the established power structure." Thus working with teenage Laotian girls is seen as both filling a need for that age group and gender, and as an instrumentalist tactic of reaching the Laotian community through a bi-cultural generation growing up in America to fulfill APEN's goal of doing base-building work in the Laotian community and creating an Asian Pacific American face in the environmental justice movement.

APEN's political orientation, goals and strategies call attention to inter-ethnic power differentials in the community-based organizations, but also suggest an expanded analytic focus on the feminist ethos that staff bring to young Laotian women. The case of AYA illustrates the ways in which APEN nurtures the leadership of teenage Laotian girls within the context of achieving social justice for the whole community, rather than promoting narrow individualistic women's rights. In the following chapters I discuss how, to what extent, and with what effect APEN has been able to shape the social and political identities of second-generation Laotian girls.

AYA – recruitment, activities, strategies

Helms Junior High has been selected as the target school from which to recruit Laotian girls the summer before they enter high school because it is the middle school

which most of the Laotian children who live in Richmond, or the adjoining city of San Pablo, attend (Jennifer, Interview 10/9/98). APEN staff has secured an informal agreement with the principal at Helms Junior High that allows them to present the program to all the Laotian girls in the 7th grade. Fliers are posted at the school, which promote the summer program as offering the following: work with other exciting Laotian girls; develop leadership skills; organize a campaign; learn about your health, your community, and your environment; build a community; take field trips; and get paid. In early June, AYA staff and one or two youth members visit Helms Junior High to present the summer program and meet with the girls.

Those interested in the program are asked to fill out an application form which asks the girls to explain their interest in the program, what they think of their community and environment, what they would do to change it, and to describe the experiences they have had at school, work, church or in other settings that will help them in the program. They are given a consent form and information packet for their parents. After reviewing the applications and interviewing potential recruits, ten to twelve girls are selected to join the program each summer (Jennifer, Interview 10/9/98). Executive director, Elaine suggested that the Asian Youth Advocates is unlike other youth programs. She described it this way:

We were not talking about creating a summer experience for young people you know. But we were really talking about a four-year program, a four-year experience that would be really at its core about building the community. (Elaine, Interview 10/21/98).

Thus selection of girls is based on interest and willingness to make a four-year commitment to help build the Laotian Organizing Project and work for social change in the community.

The youth project began in the summer of 1995 with a group of twelve Laotian girls aged 13 and 14.¹⁸ In the summer of 1996 a second group of nine girls joined the program, in 1997 a third group of eleven girls enrolled, and in the summer of 1998 a fourth group of ten girls was recruited. During the summer the girls go through an intensive six-week program, meeting four hours a day, four days a week, and are paid a stipend for their summer participation. The curriculum for the first summer session for each new group has remained fairly constant and covers reproductive health, sexuality and sexual orientation, body image and cultural identity, gender roles, team building exercises and an introduction to the principles of environmental justice. In the second and subsequent summers the curriculum for each group varies but includes a stronger emphasis on environmental justice issues, as well as elements of Asian American history, Laotian history and building organizing skills among the girls. The summer sessions end with a graduation event. Besides being a time for celebration, it serves as an avenue to educate the community about what the youth have learned. The graduation also provides an opportunity to put a spotlight on the girls for a brief time and underscore that they too are important members of the community.

Each group continues to meet several times a month during the school year, under the leadership of young Asian American and Laotian women counselors, for peer counseling as well as for specific projects. During the school year, youth are given various opportunities to participate in trainings for things such as popular theater, and to go to conferences, workshops and exchanges with other youth groups. A final element in

¹⁸ Elaine describes these youth and subsequent recruits as neither the “whiz kids” who had access to resources and support structures, nor as youth involved drugs, gangs and dropping out of school who would have programs to help them. The Laotian girls who joined the program were “on the edge of all that” and therefore “there would be nothing for them”(Elaine, Interview 10/21/98).

APEN's approach to leadership development and cultivating active participation in the program is an emphasis on learning through reflection. After each activity, meeting or action the staff conduct an evaluation with the youth. Moreover, the program as a whole is evaluated at the end of the summer session every year.

In the summer of 1998, Group 1 (then aged 16 to 17 years) girls were given the opportunity to shift their role in the program from a youth participant to a paid staff member for approximately two months. Each Group 1 youth became a Lead Youth Intern (LYI) and worked as a counselor with the younger cohorts or as an organizer for the first ever Environmental Health Festival in the city of Richmond, sponsored by APEN that summer. The three youth organizing the Festival took on responsibilities for developing media coverage, garnering donations, arranging food booths and securing the participation of other community, city and county environmental and health programs. The goals of the festival were to celebrate the work of groups in Contra Costa County that address environmental and health issues, to educate members of the Asian Pacific Islander, Latino, African American and white communities on these issues, as well as make them aware of the available resources (Lon, Group One member, Interview 12/7/98).

The three who worked as counselors were paired with adult staff and were responsible for planning and implementing the summer curriculum of education, training, games and field trips. To ensure the youth would be able to perform their tasks and responsibilities in each of these areas, they were trained before and during the summer program, and were provided with on-going support.

APEN staff has sought to create an integrated youth program that addresses the

multiple goals of leadership development, community organizing as well as issues of adolescence. Elaine, APEN's executive director describes this fine balancing as the "agony and the ecstasy of APEN's work" (Interview 10/21/98). The first three years have primarily focused on the building of capacity among the youth so that they can become active in decisions that affect their lives. This has involved providing information and creating learning around issues such as reproductive health, environmental justice, and gender and strengthening cultural identity. It has also included building self-confidence in the girls and developing leadership skills such as public speaking, writing press releases, using popular theater, facilitating meetings, organizing events, registering voters, and organizing around specific electoral campaigns. An important component has also been emotional support and peer counseling for the youth. While I was in the field the retention rate for the first group was 50 percent. For the second group, it was 50 percent until the girls in that group reached the end of their third year when it dropped to 40 percent. Retention rates for the third and fourth groups were approximately 80 percent. These high rates attest to the intensity of staff-youth interactions as well peer support relationships, which I discuss further in Chapter Five.

While this phase of the youth program was more individually focused and concentrated on building capacity and learning about the community, it was conducted in isolation from the community. In September 1998, with four cohorts of teenage girls in the program, APEN staff decided to shift from what they called "youth programming" to "youth organizing" (Elaine, Interview 10/21/98). The goal was to not just build the Laotian Organizing Project by recruiting and developing youth as leaders, but also to utilize the leadership of those in the youth program to do actual base-building work in the

community. While in the early years young people were seen as one strand in a matrix of diverse leadership, they were now seen as “the” leadership of the Laotian Organizing Project. This shift in strategy came about from the realization among staff that no other group in the Laotian community was in a position to build LOP. As Emiko explains:

we will have to do this with the people we work with the most, which is the youth, the young women and teenage girls who we have been working with and ... have really been directing most of our resources into. And that waiting for another group to step up or something is not going to happen as a first step.

As I noted earlier, APEN has had difficulties in organizing adult Laotians. At the same time the shift represents recognition that young people already play an important role as the link between their parents and grandparents on one hand and the wider American society on the other hand. As the first English-speaking generation in the community they have a powerful position and “so we’re just sort of recognizing that and trying to build on that, to take advantage of that in a way,” noted Emiko. The adults in the Laotian community, who have been involved in APEN’s work thus far, will take on more of an advisory role and contribute to discussions on “who they are and what the organization should be in the long term” stated Emiko.

APEN’s decision to shift to youth organizing reflects a desire to harness the energy of the youth to help build LOP as an organization that can eventually form part of an Asian American face in the environmental justice movement in the U.S. In making this explicit change in strategy APEN directly challenges the gender and generational hierarchies within immigrant Laotian families. But APEN is also signaling that youth, as a group in U.S. society, and particularly youth of color, are important and have a voice and can be involved in making positive changes in their lives and community. In contrast to trends in the 1990s, which constructed youth as “at-risk” (Kelly 2000) APEN, in

contextualizing youth issues within the broader economic, social and cultural issues facing the Laotian community, viewed young people as having a key role in defining and constructing their future. France (1998) argues that for young people to participate actively and have a sense of responsibility for their community they must believe that they have social rights and that they are not excluded from making change by certain adults. APEN's shift in strategy made youth the core of the Laotian Organizing Project and positioned them as subjects with a stake in their community. APEN hopes that these youth will make a commitment to LOP even after they graduate from the program, and work as staff or volunteers, and at the very least become members of LOP (Jennifer, Interview 10/9/98).

The implementation of this strategy has had consequences on both the type of program activities the girls will primarily participate in, as well as on expectations for each youth. Staff decided to focus school year and summer program activities on training for community organizing as well as conducting actual campaigns and organizing activities around specific issues. Jennifer described how she envisioned the focus and tenor of meetings during the school year would change once the shift was fully implemented:

So some of when we would meet would be to have trainings or whatever. And then some of it would be either like together deciding on like recruitment goals for our campaign. Like where are we gonna find those people and how are we gonna get them, and maybe pledging how many people they are going to recruit to a certain event or something like that. And role-playing how to do that... And then next time we meet would be few weeks later,...like debriefing how that's going and so that kind of thing. Or like we have a big action and that's where everybody goes to and there's just like a quick [preparatory] meeting right before where everyone is briefed on what they are doing and ... then we go. Or doing some petitioning, everyone comes and learns about the petition. And early on too we want people involved in the issue, in finalizing our issue, which one is it going to be, and why, and do they think they can get excited about it? Do they

think others can get excited about it? That kind of stuff. (Jennifer, Interview 10/9/98).

Thus, primary program activities would no longer be aimed at building capacity in individual girls, instead they would revolve around doing actual community organizing and building the capacity of collective youth by helping them understand power and power relations, and by developing skills to use their power effectively. Staff also planned to maintain the peer support groups for the girls during the school year in order to retain “what’s working” (Interview with Emiko, 9/22/98). Peer support group meetings provided space to address any minor or major crises the youth may be experiencing, as well as maintain connections with the program and group cohesion in each of the cohorts.

But this shift in program focus also altered the expectations for each youth. Previously all girls were expected to develop at the same rate, and move into leadership positions and assume leadership responsibilities at the same rate. Now there would be a tiered system where those interested in taking extensive leadership would become core leaders, with high levels of time commitments to the organization. There would be another tier who would become deeply involved in campaign activities of a short term duration, and the remaining youth would be expected to remain committed to the goals of the program and, at minimum attend trainings and peer support meetings, participate in campaign related activities in a peripheral way. Emiko expressed concern that this shift in program focus to youth as organizers might jeopardize the peer support aspect of the program that staff have worked to create to help the girls deal with both minor and major crises in their lives. This, together with the perceived tediousness of doing organizing, might lead to higher dropout rates from the program than experienced in the first three

years if staff are not able to finely balance both aspects of the program.

Method

This study is based on ethnographic research that I conducted at the APEN youth program during a two-year span from September 1997 to August 1999. My entry into the field was facilitated by Ming, a personal friend and associate director with APEN in 1996. In informal conversations with Ming in the autumn of 1996, she described to me the youth component of the Laotian Organizing Project and suggested the possibility of doing research there while at the same time helping APEN document this new initiative.

Early in my academic career I had envisioned doing action research and saw Ming's suggestion as a way to fulfil this commitment in a small way. I was very concerned that my participant observation should involve making some kind of positive contribution to the organizational objectives of APEN and the youth program. I followed up with a letter of introduction to APEN's Executive Director, Elaine and the rest of the staff, in which I outlined both my grassroots activist background and broad research interest areas. I laid out my political credentials and activist work not in an instrumental move to ensure access to the site, but as an expression of my genuine excitement with the strategies APEN was employing in the youth project. At the same time I was aware that Ming had certain expectations from researchers doing research with community organizations.¹⁹

My letter expressed both a sincere interest in the program and a willingness to work with staff in ways that would benefit the program as well as allow me to fulfil my research goals. This letter was subsequently discussed at an APEN staff meeting, where it

¹⁹ Ming had participated in discussions sponsored by the Berkeley Women of Color Resource Center in 1992 on bringing together academic scholars and community organizers to work on projects that were of

was agreed that I would have access to the APEN youth program as well as help the staff document the program. I was relieved because I had heard that several other graduate students from University of California, Berkeley had been denied access to APEN for research purposes. I immediately followed the staff's affirmative decision with a letter of understanding, which outlined my role at the youth program and briefly described the components of my research methodology, and projected start date.

When I entered the field in September 1997, one of my first tasks was to acquire informed consent from all involved in the study. All the staff and all of the girls consented in writing to be part of my research study. Since the youth were not adults, I also sought written consent from their parents by sending a letter to them in Lao and English and offering to discuss my project with an interpreter. All the parents of the girls consented to their daughter's participation in the study.

Activities in which I participated and/or observed included all program activities and events for a period of eleven months, September 1997 to August 1998. This included all games, projects, discussions, trainings and field trips, protests, media events, end of summer graduations, a workshop for Asian and Pacific Islander youth in the San Francisco Bay Area, APEN's 5th Anniversary celebration, and visits from foundation staff that the youth were involved in during the school year and the summer program. Meetings included event planning meetings, staff meetings, planning committee meetings, which involved staff and youth representatives from each cohort, as well as regular meetings with the youth. I also participated in a retreat in April 1998 on the San Francisco Peninsula for one day, and a three-day retreat in Marin County for all youth and youth program staff at the beginning of the summer 1998 program. At this retreat I

mutual benefit.

administered a survey which consisted of questions about racial/ethnic identity (self-identified), family demographics, immigration history, the social problems they identify and/or encounter, and reasons for joining the APEN youth program.

From September 1998 I participated and/or observed all meetings and activities related to the organizing focus of the youth program during the school year and the six-week summer program in 1999. I did not participate in/observe the peer counseling session during this time. My role as documentor of the program allowed me to take full notes openly and collect any materials produced for activities and events. These were then typed up into field notes within a few days. In addition, in the tradition of ethnography, my presence as a researcher at these events and activities involved countless interactions and observations that gave me a sense of the important issues facing the young women in their everyday lives, allowed me to build relationships with the youth and staff, observe how the girls interpret, react and/or respond to the material presented to them, or to the situations they find themselves in.

My experiences as a participant-observer enabled me to develop themes and questions for formal interviews. Participant observation for 15 months also helped me gain the confidence of the youth and staff, all of whom agreed to being interviewed. Although many youth wanted me to use their real names, the promise to conceal their true identities helped dissolve any lingering hesitation or shyness among some of them. I chose to assign all youth and staff pseudonyms, giving them Laotian or English names to correspond with their real names. I conducted forty-two intensive, semi-structured interviews with all youth members in the four different cohorts (total 31, and ranging from 13 to 17 years of age), and eleven adult staff who were working or had worked with

the youth program. Interviews with the youth were conducted either in pairs or individually, staff were interviewed individually. In addition I facilitated four focus groups, one with each of the different cohort of youth in the program. All of the interviews and focus groups were recorded and transcribed.

During the summer of 1998, and the subsequent year, I often had opportunity to drive small groups of youth to activities or drop them home after meetings or interviews. Informal conversations during these times provided me with knowledge about family life and relationships, school, their interests in music, as well as opportunities to note the environments they lived in. I typed up notes on these conversations from memory. I also had informal conversations with one dean and five teachers at Richmond High School, as well as four social workers and one community organizer working with Laotian youth in Richmond and San Pablo. I took handwritten notes during these conversations and then typed them as field notes soon after. These conversations with adults working with Laotians in the community gave me a sense of the social/psychological and school related issues that Laotian youth were experiencing.

Finally, an on-going aspect of the study was archival research of written material produced by APEN for the youth project, cultural products produced by the girls, reports by other relevant organizations, as well as print and other media reports on the Laotian community.

Research with social change organizations and with youth - reflections

Feminist work has always considered experience to be a central feature of the conceptualization of scholarship as well as relations in the field, and in this regard this study is no exception. As other researchers have noted, as a participant-observer I

experienced a great deal of anxiety over being an “insider/outsider/both/neither” (Wolf 1996a:15). My role as documentor of the youth program was confined within specific parameters and could not be expanded unless I was willing and able to take on more of a staff role. In other words I remained primarily a researcher. However, in practice, my role became ambiguous. During program activities and events both staff and youth invited me to do “check-ins”²⁰, evaluate the meetings, participate in ice-breaker games, exercises, in peer counseling sessions, and other activities. Almost immediately I developed a good rapport with the youth program staff and came to identify with them and the goals of the program. Moreover I had access to all meetings, including staff meetings, and events organized by the youth program staff.

Just as other researchers have noted, (see Wolf 1996b), as a participant-observer, I was constantly struggling to balance the fine line between insider and outsider. I found that, while from an academic perspective the optimal position was on neither extreme of this divide (Burawoy 1991), I was constantly frustrated at not having a “useful” role in meetings and activities, and at not knowing whether the youth perceived me as one of the staff or an outsider. When I mentioned this frustration to Jennifer, the Youth Program Coordinator, she pointed out that they, the staff, did not think my role “odd.” In fact she was glad that someone was overseeing the documentation of the youth program.

Even so, on occasions I felt as an outsider who often appeared in “insider” spaces. I found myself constantly evaluating whether or not I was present in a space where I did not belong, especially in the case of adult staff meetings during summer 1998. These

²⁰ “Check-in” constituted a time at the beginning of each meeting when we would say a few words about our emotional and physical well-being, how the day had gone, or respond to a light-hearted question posed by the meeting facilitator. This activity was used to focus everyone’s attention on the agenda at hand, and on the people attending.

meetings sometimes became quite emotional as staff, particularly new staff, discussed the challenges of working with each other and with the LYIs in the fast-paced, intense environment of the summer program. Furthermore, I experienced frequent moments of loneliness and exclusion when staff and youth were engrossed in an activity in which I could not participate or contribute to in any way. In addition, there were a couple of times when I was not invited to events organized by other APEN staff, which nevertheless involved the AYA youth members and would have been an opportune moment to observe them. These moments were frustrating and illustrate that, as a participant-observer, we are constantly negotiating our positions as insiders and outsiders.

However, for me even more emotionally strenuous was my sense of outsidership vis-à-vis the youth in the program. When I first entered the field I had a profound sense of social distance from the youth. The most striking was their use of standard English mingled with Black English. I had great difficulty in understanding what they were saying, and worried if I would ever be able to communicate with them. For a South Asian in her late thirties, with a middle-class up-bringing and education in standard British and American English, their clothing styles, music, American high school culture, as well as use of Black English were markers of my distance and outsidership from this group of second generation youth. I had no desire to become an adolescent, which in any case would have been disingenuous. My identity as a South Asian did not aid in developing rapport with the youth. As I came to understand later, the youth defined Asian in specific ways that did not include South Asians. Nor did they assume me to be an Asian American, like most of the staff working at APEN. Thus I was also perceived as an outsider on racial/ethnic grounds.

My three month old son “broke some ice” during my first foray into the field. He helped to establish my status as a parent, a valued position in the Laotian community. I took him to the very first meeting with the youth despite my nervousness. I was concerned about how my own participation would be restricted by his needs, but also because we met in a classroom at Richmond High School, which, together with its environs, had a propensity for gang violence according to media reports. During a short break in the meeting, several youth came to “coo” over him. I did not take him to subsequent meetings but did take both my children to holiday parties and end of summer graduations. Even so many of the girls frequently asked about them.

Difficulties in reducing the social distance were exacerbated because my relationship with the youth was being formed solely within the context of APEN organized events and meetings. There were no spontaneous opportunities to interact with them outside of these occasions, and my own family constraints prevented me from organizing social outings with them. However, participation in meetings, activities and peer counseling sessions allowed me to reveal some of my social background, particularly my experiences of growing up as a one-and-a-half generation Asian immigrant in the United Kingdom. As I got to know my teenage informants, I came to identify with them in their struggles around issues of intergenerational conflict and ethnic identity. Over time they identified me as a non-official adult with several roles, as an older sister/researcher/friend/counselor. These multiple roles allowed me to be flexible and not align myself with the adult staff even though I spent quite a bit of time with staff in my role as documentor. As a graduate student at U.C. Davis, I gained some status as a role model in the eyes of those who were high-achieving students with aspirations to go

to college.

In addition to developing a sympathetic and supportive role with the youth, I sought to develop trust and rapport by showing appreciation for their willingness to participate in my study in a number of ways over the two years. In March 1998, I invited all the youth and staff to a screening of "Kelly Loves Tony," a docudrama about a seventeen-year old Mien girl and her boyfriend being shown at the San Francisco International Asian American Film Festival. Eleven youth and staff accepted my invitation, which involved a trip to the Kabuki Theater in San Francisco. Food was a common feature at most meetings and provided another avenue to express my appreciation. At the end of the summer session in 1998, I organized a luncheon with take-out Chinese food and refreshments. During my time in the field I had made two trips to the United Kingdom. On both occasions I brought back English chocolates and toffees for the youth and staff, which they genuinely adored. As my final gesture of appreciation for the time and access that all my informants had given me over the two years I presented each of them with a small photo clip. A favored past time with many youth was having professional photos taken and sharing them with each other.

It was not until the summer of 1998, when I attended the three-day retreat and thereafter spent four afternoons a week, for six weeks with the youth attending the summer program that my relationship with many of the youth was really strengthened. I developed genuinely open and affectionate relationships with half the youth. And, I finally felt like one of the group when Group 3 invited three of the APEN staff and me to see a horror movie and have dinner at a local restaurant afterwards in August 1998. I was doubly touched at the end of this evening when Group 3 presented gifts to the three staff

members and me. At the summer 1999 graduation, Group 3 again expressed their feelings and strength of relationship with me when they thanked me, along with the other youth program staff, for being a “cool friend.” But this feeling of insidership was not achieved with all the youth. While I had a good rapport with many of the other youth, there were at least five or six youth, mostly in Group 2, who distrusted me, as I was to find out in December 1998. These youth thought that I was there to evaluate them or test them in some way.

I believe the quality of my relationships with the youth was related to the kinds of bonds each cohort had developed while participating in the program. In an informal conversation, Ming noted that Group 1 had bonded strongly with the counselors and were fairly cohesive as a group. This was partly due to the fact that the ratio of counselors to youth in the first year of the program was very high, and consequently Group 1 had received a lot of attention and time from APEN staff. At least three of the staff members were around beyond the summer of 1995.

My relations with Group 1 could be described as a peer relationship. However, Group 2 had not bonded with each other or the staff. This was partly due to the fact that staff/youth ratios were not very high in the second year of the program, and the staff who worked directly with Group 2 during their first summer did not stay on. Resources in general were in short supply when Group 2 joined, and they never had a consistent relationship with one or two staff members. My rapport with most, although not all members of Group 2 were the weakest. Group 3 had become a very cohesive group and strongly bonded with each other during the first summer. They had a strong relationship with one of the Laotian counselors who had stayed on past the summer of 1997 to work

as a permanent staff person. My relations with this group were very open and affectionate.

Group 4 was the newest group when I was in the field, and consequently their relationship with each other and with staff were still in formation. I had an easy rapport with almost all of them although I would not describe it as a close relationship. In other words, the rapport I was able to develop with each youth was influenced by my own positionality and personality, but also shaped by their personalities and the type of relationships the youth formed with each other and with the staff. The latter was conditioned by changing organizational capacity - resources, support structures and activities - in the program, which meant that each group experienced the program in a different way.

Despite the constant discomfort emerging from the balancing act between participant and observer, becoming a part of the APEN youth program (even if my position was marginal and temporary) brought with it a rich and deep understanding of APEN, the youth program, its staff and youth participants, and practices. And I am somewhat comforted by Gain of Group 2, and several other youth, who believed that through this study others will learn about second generation Laotian women, the experiences of growing up in Richmond and of being involved in APEN. In addition, Elaine, APEN's Executive Director, thanked me for spending two years with the youth. She believed that the relationships that the youth had formed with concerned adults were important for their self-esteem and well-being.

Another issue that arose in this study was the particular experience of interviewing adolescents. From participant observations it was clear that open-ended self-

reflective questions would not elicit the youth's experiences and self-perceptions as social and political actors. Part of the issue was that the youth did not have much time for self-reflection and introspection. I also believed that they would see my requests as too much like work, and therefore not "fun." Consequently I decided to take the approach in interviews, and in my research generally, of asking the youth to become my teacher and help me understand their lives and involvement in APEN. While I exhibited some degree of knowledge about the Laotian community, at the same time, I adopted an attitude of willingness to learn. I conveyed to them that I sincerely wanted to understand the meanings of their experience, to walk in their shoes, to feel the things as they felt them, and to explain things as they explained them. The actual interviews and focus groups covered specific conceptual themes, posed through a variety of questions and scenarios.

While the interviews were semi-structured, I wanted to make it a fun and mutually enjoyable experience. All except three interviews were conducted at fast food burger restaurants in Richmond. Of the remaining three, one was conducted at a local library and the other two at a doughnut bakery cum café. While these were public settings, which had the potential to be noisy and crowded, they provided a relaxed atmosphere away from home, school or APEN, but which the youth were used to frequenting. I bought everyone food and refreshments before the start of interviews. The pre-interview time allowed for informal chatting of happenings that day, my children, or browsing through jewelry catalogues or photos. Focus groups were conducted either at the APEN office or at a local church. Again, I provided pizza and other refreshments since these interviews lasted several hours. In closing the interviews I gave my informants an opportunity to ask questions of me. Seventeen of the youth took up the opportunity and asked questions that

ranged from the length of my research and paper and how the interviews were going, to my children, and to whether I would come back after my research was completed. One youth took the opportunity to ask what I thought of APEN since I had been there for almost two years and who I was most close to at APEN. I attempted to answer both these questions in a sincere manner but without passing judgements or creating hierarchies. Though I controlled the interviews, at moments they were like conversations in which I revealed aspects of my life too.

Power relations are inherent in any social research (Wolf 1996a). Above I have discussed the power hierarchies emerging out of different positionalities and the ways that I tried to reduce them during the research process. However, as several scholars note (Davis et. al, 2000:210; Fine and Sandstrom 1988) children and youth have the power to control and contain social research. Our informants are final gatekeepers to their social worlds. They have the ability to withhold access to their world and decide when to let us in. As I mentioned above, there were five or six youth who were distrustful of me and unclear about my role at APEN. I did not facilitate any activities like other staff, nor did I offer support and advice unless asked, unlike the staff. Moreover, my presence there was temporary. Even though they had agreed to participate in the study, it appeared that they did not think it worth investing the time and energy to build a relationship with me. My attempts to develop rapport with them became increasingly awkward and sometimes pushed me to withdraw from them. I note these moments not to claim powerlessness or that such resistance subverts hierarchies of power (Wolf 1996a:22). I discuss them to contrast with other youth who eagerly participated in the study and consequently allowed me to gain a deeper understanding of their lives. As Julia of Group 4 said: “I feel special

because nobody ever did this [write about them] you know.” And Alison expressed surprise that “somebody actually wants to know what we have to say.” Rarely did they have an adult listen to them as attentively or take their answers seriously as the APEN staff or I did.

In this study I have taken the position that my informants, both youth and adult staff have knowledge of their own lives and involvements. Still, using the words of APEN youth participants and staff in the process of writing, interpreting and representing feels like an impropriety. Before leaving the field I was not able to share my “preliminary” findings with the youth or the staff as I had hoped to do so in a dialogic spirit because of time and logistical factors. I have had two informal conversations with staff about my ideas and have worked to incorporate their comments in the dissertation. I am certain that this document will not completely satisfy all of my informants, or for that matter all of the many other readers, but I present it as “situated knowledge” (Haraway 1991), shaped by my own life experiences, and academic and political interests. I treat the words of the Laotian teenagers/APEN staff as neither representative of second-generation Laotian girls/Asian American activists or representative of themselves; rather I use their words as representations of my own understanding and interpretation of these specific women’s lives and work in a particular social justice organization.

A primary reason for choosing to do research at APEN’s youth program is that it is a productive site to explore identity based on politics rather than the politics on identity (Angela Davis in Lowe 1997:318). As I discuss in the following chapters, while the youth program represents an ethnic specific organization, politics is based around issues arising from the prevalent material conditions and the intersecting systems of gender, generation,

race, class and immigration. While the particular events and people are unique to this organization and program at a particular historical moment, I want to stress that the questions and concerns raised by the data speak beyond this case study. My goal is to shed some explanatory light on racial and ethnic identity processes in multiracial/multiethnic societies, and the ways they simultaneously shape and are shaped by the critical and organized efforts of resistance on part of the most marginalized. As originator of this study, I also have a broader goal of understanding the contributions, struggles and needs of the daughters of Asian immigrants living in the United States; and to convey this to the academic community and to the larger society.

Chapter Three

Family, Culture, Gender:

Narratives of Ethnic Reconstruction and Meaning among Second-Generation Laotian Women

It's a cold, crisp but sunny Tuesday afternoon in February. As I walk in almost everyone looks and smiles or says "hi." The front room of this small house in Richmond, which serves as LOP's offices, is packed today. Twenty-one of the youth members are here, waiting for the Whole Group Training on campaign options to start. Bryanna and Huk are sitting close to the radio, tapping their feet to Eminem rapping "My Name Is..." Once the song ends Bryanna turns the dial from 93.2 FM to 95.7 FM, the station that plays Alternative and R&B music. Two youth are sitting on the floor in the middle of the room, sharing *thumsom*, a green papaya salad. Other youth are sitting on the chairs placed in a circle, munching on Nacho cheese, burgers, burritos, and sipping on soda.

A lot of the girls are dressed in black today, black flared trousers, black tops and black jackets. Others sport blue or white flared jeans, short T-shirts or shirts that hug the body, platform shoes or sneakers. This '70s retro style transports me back to my own dress preferences as a teenager. But in the 1990s, the girls are wearing muted colors, which often bear the logos of Tommy Hilfiger, The Gap, BeBe, Nautica, or The Old Navy. Bryanna wears an oversized orange rain jacket, nylon pants that bunch up around her ankles, and sneakers. Others resemble the style of the majority of their peers in the urban city, blue jeans, long T-shirts and sneakers or high-tops.

Their conversations revolve around boys, school and clothes. To my by now trained ear I can pick up both Black English and standard English, with a smattering of Mien and Lao words that I don't understand (Field notes, February 23, 1999).

Gabriela: ...most of us who grew up here we have both ways of thinking you know. Both techniques of doing that you know. It's a choice whether we should approach this way or that. That's what I'm trying to say. So it's kinda hard to really identify as a Laotian or you know... (Focus Group, August 12, 1999).

Based on the narratives of ethnic reconstruction and meaning among second-generation Laotian girls and young women, this chapter argues that culture is central to the enterprise of nurturing critical assimilation. The nature of primary social relations, and the cultural practices and ethnic social relations that shape those primary ties, are

imbued with the power hierarchies found in secondary social relations. Contemporary social justice organizations can provide a social space for second-generation Laotian girls to navigate the multiple and overlapping, competing and/or conflicting discourses of gender, generation, race, ethnicity and sexuality. However, the interconnectedness of primary and secondary social relations often leads to ambivalent and sometimes conflictual outcomes. As purveyors of specific ideologies and agendas, contemporary social justice organizations can also shape the ways in which second-generation Laotian girls challenge, transform, and even celebrate cultural norms within the ethnic community as well as those in dominant society. Through these processes new gendered subjects are created and the meaning of the category Laotian is transformed by the experiences that teenage Laotian girls have in specific local, state, national and class contexts in the U.S. But ethnic reconstruction does not only involve transformations in ethnic social relations, institutions and cultural practices; it also challenges dominant narratives in the United States which equate ethnic identity with a foreign national identity.

Most media portrayals characterize second generation Laotians as experiencing turmoil and involved in fervent battles over dual identities, loyalties and feelings of belonging. A San Francisco Examiner article on Mien girls is titled “Mien girls straddle two worlds,” with a sub-title of “New Journal charts teen life for Laotian immigrants caught between streets and tradition,” (Chao, 1999). In a review of the documentary film *Kelly Loves Tony*, a young Mien couple, San Francisco Chronicle’s John Carman describes Kelly as “gripping American culture with a desperate hold, while the Iu Mien tribal culture of Laos pulls at her ankles” (1998: E1). A series in the Sacramento Bee on

the Hmong ended with a feature on a sixteen year old girl titled “Hmong teen builds future in two conflicting worlds” (Magagnini 2000c).

This theme of conflict and two separate cultures is a recurring one especially in reference to Asian women.¹ Ong (1995) notes that the dominant culture assumes Chinese women fleeing China and coming to the West are leaving behind an oppressive society and entering the point of full emancipation. And, throwing off the shackles of culture and becoming American is synonymous with the principles of freedom, progress, and individuals, (Ong 1996, 739). Similarly, Puar (1996) argues that popular representations of second-generation Sikh women in Britain are framed from the perspective of the dominant white gaze which focuses on cultural practices and assumes a reified concept of culture. This allows the dominant white gaze to perceive Asianness as more patriarchal and the West as offering all kinds of freedoms.

Media representations locate second-generation Laotians as trapped between the mutually exclusive and opposing poles of Laotian/American, where American represents white middle-class culture as the norm (Frankenberg 1993). These representations are substantiated by theories of adaptation and assimilation, which also place the second generation within an either/or framework. Recent perspectives on the adaptation experiences of the new second generation, reviewed in Chapter One, have emphasized the partial or segmented nature of acculturation (Gans 1992, Portes and Zhou 1993, Portes and Rumbaut 1996; 2001, Zhou 1997b, Rumbaut 1995; 1997, and Rumbaut and Portes 2001). Given the dire statistics on Laotians and their children, the segmented assimilation model (Portes and Zhou, 1993) would assign them a path of downward

¹ Puar (1996) makes an important point, that the focus on cultural conflict among the children of immigrants ignores the fact that generational conflict exists in all cultures.

decline into permanent poverty and an “adversarial stance” toward the dominant white society. While immigration theorists recognize multiple sectors of American culture, Laotian culture is still seen as pre-given, fixed and hermetically sealed, and both cultures are perceived to be mutually exclusive.

In research with second-generation South Asian youth in Southall, London, social anthropologist Gerd Baumann (1996:2) critiques the simplification of the “between-two-worlds” trope of identity and asks why they cannot “be seen to reach across two cultures.” My epigraphs, an excerpt from my field notes and a quotation from a second generation Laotian young woman, suggest that as second-generation Laotian girls navigate different cultures and “socio-ideological points of view” (Ong 1995:357) they experience conflict **and** are involved in creating syncretic identities. The forces of assimilation, even for those immigrants who have entered the bottom of the ethnic hierarchy, do not just come from underprivileged sections of society. Indeed during the two years that I spent in the field, it was evident that the actions, behaviors, values, dress, speech, interests and food preferences of my informants exhibited multiple influences.

Second generation Laotian youth are not secluded from the wider U.S. society. They participate in the youth consumer culture, they read teenage girls’ and women’s magazines such as “Teen,” “Essense,” “Cosmopolitan,” “YM,” and “17.” They express an interest in expensive cars.² My informants participate in school homecoming events, and look forward to senior school prom nights. At the end of my first year in the field, the oldest girls who were graduating from high school that year proudly passed around photos of themselves and their dates dressed in white gowns and tuxedos. At the same

² For example, when Group 4, who were recruited in the summer of 1998, created a skit to present at the end of summer graduation event, the main characters were named “Mercedes,” “Lexus,” “Camery,” and

time, my informants are bright, smart girls with a developing self-confidence, and often express high aspirations. Several are involved in organizing around issues in school and the community, in addition to their participation in APEN. Finally, all like “kicking it with the family.”³

These second generation Laotian girls defy easy ethnic labels and categorization. The stories of my informants express muddled, contradictory and on-going negotiations around identity and culture that cannot be contained in the essentialized term “Laotian women.” In this study, culture is seen as processual and constantly shifting within mediating structures, prevalent discourses, and relations of power in a historically specific time and place (Brah 1993; Ong 1996; Nagel 1994).

Conceptualizing culture as processual and constructed rehabilitates the role of human agency. I agree with Puar (1996) who argues that constructing second generation women’s identities in terms of cultural conflict and in either/or frameworks renders the children of immigrants without voice, space and autonomy in terms of class, religion, culture and history. Rarely are second generation women portrayed as active agents or as negotiators of their cultural values within specific social contexts and relations of power. Yet, as the narratives below will demonstrate, individuals exert agency and show a range of responses to specific cultural and political contexts, and make decisions about how to position themselves in various situations. I emphasize second-generation Laotian women’s agency and role in challenging gender norms, redefining gendered ethnicity, and reconstructing Laotian culture.

“Benz.”

³ By “kicking it with the family” my informants mean spending time with the family.

This chapter examines the social practices of second generation Laotian girls governed by particularistic self-understandings (Brubaker and Cooper 2000:17) and shaped by multiple subjectivities produced through generation, gender, class, ethnicity, race and sexuality. Analyzing the personal narratives and actions of this group allows us to discern whether they occupy oppositional or non-oppositional positions as they negotiate, contest and collude with cultural forms and practices. In this chapter I am concerned with the meanings of ethnic identity to individuals, and the forces that shape and influence the contents of that ethnicity. In Chapters Four and Five I will examine the purposes that these ethnic meanings serve in collective contexts. I address these questions of ethnic reconstruction by examining the arenas of family relationships, sexuality, and political leadership and power. I begin with a discussion of general patterns of ethnic identification among my informants.

Patterns of Ethnic Identification: “I’m Lao.”

The ethnic categories that my informants selected for themselves reveal a desire to challenge the tendency in dominant discourses to lump all Asian ethnic groups into the racialized category ‘Asian’. But they also reflect struggles to articulate an identity that is ethnic without being perceived as foreign and un-American. In the context of U.S. racial discourse and dynamics of racial labeling, all Asian ethnic groups are automatically categorized at ‘Oriental’ or ‘Asian’ (Kibria 1997:531). Concurrently, certain Asian immigrant groups such as the Chinese, Filipino and Vietnamese are more visible in popular discourse and are included in aspects of American history taught in California schools. With little knowledge about the history of Laotians, peers and the media often mistake them as members of one of these groups.

My informants draw on what Nazli Kibria (2000a:84-85) calls ethno-national identities to challenge assumption of sameness, of the racialized assumption of “homogenized Asianness.” All my informants felt positively about their ethnic identities. When asked how they would self-identify if I met them at a party, they all chose to label themselves as Lao, Mien, Khmuu or Laotian without hesitation, a finding confirmed by Portes and Rumbaut (2001:160).⁴ It must be noted that these particular ethnic categories were chosen at a particular moment in the lives of my informants.

The reasons for insisting on a national identity became clearer as many of my informants spoke of being mistaken for being Filipino, Chinese or Vietnamese. For Sarah it is important that the media make an effort to distinguish Laotians from other Asian ethnic groups and learn how Laotian culture is different:

Sarah: I think he (a newspaper reporter) should write about like our culture and that there are different Laotians. It's not one culture and then they need to start labeling, label like Laotian people instead of thinking that we are...

Gabriela: Chinese.

Sarah: Chinese whatever right. And that there's different culture, and we speak different and that I don't know. You need to realize that there's different Asian people.

Gain also expressed frustration when her peers do not distinguish Laotians from other Asian groups. She rebuked her African American peers at school and in the community for adopting dominant assumptions of racial sameness:

I mean I be like “oh if you guys don't like us calling you Kenyans or whatever, then don't call us no Chinese or Filipino whatever. Cause it's a lot of us from Asia but it's like different things.” ... And after that like “you want me to call you all Somalians, do you?” I know Africa is heck of big...I was like it's just like Asia is made up of a lot of different countries.

⁴ There was one exception whom I discuss later in this section.

In the face of being mistaken for being Chinese, or Filipino or Vietnamese, my informants affirm ethnic identities that emphasize ethnic distinctiveness and national boundaries. The strong desire to maintain ethnic distinctiveness was also conveyed in other conversations that I had with my informants. When I asked what they like about being Laotian, the teenagers in my study, twenty-three of whom were born in the U.S. and all of whom have grown up in the U.S., mentioned being unique, different, having pride and having two cultures and languages. This is how Maya expressed it:

I think it feels good to like have your own culture. But when you think of like, well not say like other cultures you know, like they just like speak English or whatever, and it seems like they just do the basic stuff. But you usually have your own language, and like do your own like traditional stuff and it's really like different.

When I asked them what they specifically liked about Laotian culture, my informants pointed to its symbolic markers, such as food, ceremonies and celebrations, family, clothes, dances and language. These outward manifestations may or may not be engaged in with gusto. In fact most girls had worn the traditional clothing for women within their tribal group once in their lives only, though those who identified as ethnic Lao had worn the traditional Lao dress for women to temple, parties and during the annual Lao New Year celebrations. Many expressed dislike for traditional ceremonies that required animal sacrifice. On the other hand, most of my informants cook and eat Laotian food at home, though a few of the younger girls noted that parents sometimes cooked 'American' food such as spaghetti for them. In addition, despite the desire to maintain the Lao, Mien, Hmong or Khmuu languages, my informants admitted that while they understood [one of these] languages they only spoke it with grandparents, parents and at church or temple. Daily interactions with siblings, Laotian peers and sometimes

even with parents were conducted in English. Even so, their ethnicity is concrete, tangible and part of their everyday lives. They are enmeshed in social ties and surrounded by ethnic networks that reinforce the 'original' culture on a daily basis.⁵

Moreover, activities that are part of AYA also serve to reinforce a Laotian identity and to uphold the symbolic markers of this identity. Some examples include discussions on culture and identity, and the Oral History Project that Group 2 conducted in the summer of 1998. As I observed Group 2 during that summer it was clear that they were foremost interested in the symbolic markers of Laotian tribal groups, such as music and dance, language, religion, folktales, clothing, naming systems and food. Some youth also wanted to learn more about facets of gender ideology, such as arranged marriages, the practice of bride price, and male dominance within family and community. Others were curious about the history of Laotians in Laos, in the refugee camps and the migration to America.

This desire to maintain ethnic distinctiveness extends to the coming third generation. Some informants were resolute in wanting to pass down the languages, cultural values, and the history of where Laotian people came from to their children, because as Maya said "if they (their children) don't spend time with their culture or whatever, and their kids come out, it will be like straight." These cultural markers enable my informants to demarcate the boundaries of ethnic membership and ethnic authenticity, and locate themselves away from "the mainstream or the norm, constructs [them] as 'different' and thus potentially far more interesting and unique than others," (Kibria 2000a:90-91).

⁵ (cf. Espiritu's, 1994, findings on the children of professional Filipino immigrants).

My informants desire to maintain ethnic distinctiveness points to a positive attitude towards the Laotian culture of their parents and grandparents. This is in contrast to previous studies (MacDonald 1997) in which young Mien believed that their parents' language and culture are old-fashioned and backward. All of my informants came from poor or low-income families, lived in urban multi-racial neighborhoods and attended inner-city schools, factors that would discourage a strong ethnic identity, according to Waters (1999b). But Waters (1999b) argues that regardless of social class, parents who are involved in ethnic voluntary organizations or in their church instill a strong sense of ethnic identity in their children. These social networks were present among the parents of my informants and may explain their strong ethnic identification. At least six of my informants were Christian and members of a Mien church in Richmond. They actively participated in church-related youth activities and their parents were regular attendees at church. One parent worked for Lao Family Community Development, Inc., a voluntary organization, and several parents were friends with a male Laotian staff person at APEN, who is respected in the Laotian community. Many of my informants were related and/or their parents were friends so that, even if they were not involved in church or voluntary organizations, their interactions served to expand their social networks and provide social contacts for their children.

However, identifying specific cultural markers as the contents of Laotian ethnicity serves to inadvertently stabilize and reify culture. Espiritu (1994:253) argues that when the second-generation identify symbolic markers as elements of ethnic culture, such as food, languages, ceremonies, dances, music and history, they perceive "ethnic" culture to be that of the "original" culture rather than that that has been created in their encounter

with U.S. society. Espiritu attributes this perspective to the influence of dominant society, which also views ethnicity as an import. My informants viewed Laotian culture in the US as transplanted from the “original” culture. Yet their actions and narratives indicate Laotian culture is being transformed and reconstructed in specific ways at this particular historical moment in the US.

One example is the alternative names that some of my informants chose for themselves. In my concern to maintain confidentiality I asked all of my informants at the beginning of interviews to select another name for themselves that I could use in my study. Many left it to me to select a name, a few were not concerned about confidentiality and wanted me to use their real names, and some gave me alternatives. Of this latter group, with the exception of one, all had Laotian names. Yet all chose Euro-American names like Tracy, Sally, Allison, Stacey and Gabriela as alternatives for me to use. This indicates an underlying consciousness of the fact that in many encounters, my informants are assumed to be “foreign,” “not American,” where “American” is equated with “white” unless otherwise specified (Lipsitz 1998:1). Lee (1999:5) argues that it is in the realm of popular culture where struggles over who is or who can be a “real American” occur, and “where the categories, representations, distinctions and markers of race are defined.” As girls and young women, my informants are at a stage in life when popular culture is influential in shaping social practices and a sense of self. Their selection of Euro-American names was an attempt to “disidentify” with “foreignness,” to “deflect” this assumption of outsidership (Kibria 2000a:87).⁶

⁶ Other Asian Americans also equate “American” and “white.” In Lee’s (1996) study on Asian American high-school students, her Korean informants stated that Korean parents instructed their children to socialize only with Koreans and “Americans,” defined as white people. Tuan (1998) also found that for third and fourth generation Chinese and Japanese Americans “American” was synonymous with “white.”

One informant appeared to be cognizant of the construction and reconstruction of Laotian culture within the context of the US. In my epigraph I quote Gabriela who refused to label herself with a particular ethnic identity and resisted my ethnographic inquiry around issues of identity and culture. Gabriela is a second generation Christian Mien who migrated to the US at the age of six. She is an energetic and vocal young woman who reflects on and writes about social, cultural and political issues affecting the Laotian community as well as youth in general. She was an active member of AYA until the summer of 1999 when she graduated from the program, as well as a writer and editor for a youth magazine. She was also involved in her church community.

I expected Gabriela to easily self-identify in terms of the hybridized ethnic label Mien American, as she had done in the journal “Quietly Torn” to which she contributed. But to my surprise, Gabriela refused to identify the contours of Mien American ethnicity when I asked her what she thought made her feel Laotian. She immediately challenged my presumption: “I mean like I could be Laotian and I could be like black deep inside you know. [Squeals of laughter from the rest of Group 1]. It’s like a spiritual thing...” Her peers in Group 1 were laughing at the seeming incongruity of being Laotian and being black, though as I will show in Chapter Four, this is not as incongruous for second-generation Laotian growing up in inner-city multiracial neighborhoods. Both her peers and I did not understand the depth of Gabriela’s unease with categorizing herself. But when I asked if she was able to self-identify as Laotian-American⁷, her response indicated the extensive influence of dominant society’s notion that ethnicity is an import and pertains to a fixed array of customs, values and traditions:

⁷ As I noted in Chapter Two, the category Laotian is itself constructed within the context of the US and comprises the ethnic groups originating in Laos – Lao, mien, Khmu, Hmong, Lue and Thaidam.

BS: What about Laotian-American?

Gabriela: Yeah.

BS: Is it easier to identify as that?

Gabriela: Yeah but thing is that there's an American part behind it you see. See if I'm Laotian, [clears her throat] see I just wanna be labeled Laotian. But if I'm an American I just wanna be an American. But for us to obtain both cultures, that's the conflict that I'm dealing with right now. And how do I do that but yet know who I am.

Gabriela makes a distinction between Laotian and American culture, conceptualizing each as discrete, hermetically sealed and in opposition. At one point in our focus group discussion, she described her family as “leaning more towards the western world than we are toward our ancient world.” In the Mien community, Gabriela says that her family is regarded as “white-washed,” because they have converted to Christianity. In these contexts the “western world” is associated with freedom, progress, individualism, Christianity and white middle-class America, while the “ancient world” is the backward unchanging culture originating in Laos.

Gabriela's struggle over selecting an ethnic identification stems from dominant society's expectations for her to be authentically Mien, and identify as such rather than as an American. Both these perspectives view ethnicity and culture in “ethnically absolute” terms (Gilroy 1987:13), thus putting Gabriela in an “ethnic bind,” (Kibria 2000a:86). Kibria defines the ethnic bind as “the multiple and conflicting pressures surrounding the cultivation of ethnic membership for racial minorities,” (93). Gabriela's difficulties with choosing a label for herself also reflects a struggle among the second generation to maintain ethnic distinctiveness while seeking an ethnic label that does not convey “an extension of the ‘original’ culture nor a facsimile of mainstream ‘American’ culture,” (Espiritu 1994:264).

Gabriela's narrative suggests that labels alone do not illuminate the intricate negotiations involved in the process of identity formation. Static labels, such as those ascertained in the Children of Immigrants Longitudinal Study (Portes and Rumbaut 2001: 154-160), cannot indicate the nature of the identity being evoked, the particular cultural ideals or norms of behavior that have varying meanings even for those identifying with the same label, or the complexity of decisions that second-generation adolescents make on a daily basis. As Avatar Brah (1993:443) argues "cultural specificities remain important but they are construed as fluid modalities, as shifting boundaries that mediate structures and relations of power." In the rest of the chapter I examine the family as a site of ethnic identity formation as well as a source of tension and conflict. I analyze the different socio-ideological points of view that this group of second-generation Laotians are exposed to in specific arenas, the role of AYA in providing a space for second-generation Laotian girls to navigate the multiple and overlapping discourses on gender, generation, ethnicity and sexuality, and the extent of agency my informants are able to exert in contesting or colluding with these discourses.

The Family: "I like the family gatherings"

Family relationships are an important arena of analysis since all my informants are adolescents. Generational conflict is common during adolescents and as Puar (1996) notes, such tensions exist in many cultures. However, despite the presence of such conflict, the family remains important as a site to affirm ethnic identity and strengthen ethnic relations. When I asked how they would describe their family relationships, almost all my informants described their families as close or fairly close. When I asked whom they spend their free time with, many of my informants said they hang out with cousins

and other relatives during the weekends. Then, when they were asked “what do you like about Laotian culture?” the following response from 15 years old Tsiet echoes what a third of my informants liked about Laotian culture: “When we kick it with the family.” In other words spending time with the family was a valued part of Laotian culture.

This theme of family being important arose again and again in a variety of discussions. At one session on environmental justice during Group 4’s first summer, a Lead Youth Intern from Group 1 asked these newest recruits what was important to them in their environment. They shouted family and relatives as the people with whom they like to spend time. At another session early in my field research, gang members accidentally shot one of the APEN youth while looking for her brother. After this incident, an APEN staff member facilitated a discussion to help the girls deal with their feelings. At the end of the session she asked if they were thinking any good thoughts. Again family and sisters came up.

Getting together with extended family members, cooking together and speaking in Lao or Mien, and learning from elders about values and ways of life were key elements of Laotian culture that my informants valued. These patterns of social life, which revolve around the extended family and lineage, are found in other Mien communities in the U.S. (MacDonald 1997). Mien social worker MOUNG SAETERN (1998) notes that the Laotian community continues to value collective social activities and traditional practices that allow them to construct community in the US, demonstrating Nagel’s (1994) shopping cart analogy. Collective social relations and strong community links shield Laotians against the assimilative and alienating demands of US society.

As with Filipino children of immigrants (Wolf 1997; Espiritu 2001) and second-generation Vietnamese (Kibria 1993: Ch. 6), for second generation Laotians the “family” plays a central role in their lives and gives meaning to their ethnic identity.⁸ The hierarchical family system and the protection it confers appears to be important as opposed to ideas of complete independence and individualism.⁹ Vasquez and de las Fuentes (1999) also report that the most resilient factor common to all communities of color is the identification with family and community. As Avatar Brah (1992) notes in the case of South Asian women in Britain, when women acknowledge the importance of family life they do not, however, necessarily accept as legitimate the hierarchical organization of the household or the exercise of male power. Parental attempts to restrict their autonomy, mobility and expressive individualism may introduce stress and challenges in second-generation young women’s lives. But families can also provide strength and resources for adolescent girls of color who experience the challenges of uncertainties, conflicting expectations and rejection based on color, culture, language and class.

In the next section, I discuss the arenas in which second-generation Laotian girls experience family conflict. I explain the oppositional and non-oppositional positions that second-generation Laotian young women adopt in terms of the gender, race and class

⁸ Rumbaut (1994:770) reports that in a 1992 survey of 5000 teenage children of immigrants all Indochinese groups scored higher than Mexican respondents on familism, the deeply ingrained sense of obligation and orientation to family.

⁹ In the case of second-generation South Asian women in East London, U.K., Bhopal (1999) also reports a preference for family life, and values of respect, obedience, filial duty and parental obligations. Families form part of these women’s self-definition, and living alone, being independent and not submitting to an arranged marriage is perceived as “what the white women do” (129). But Bhopal explains the preference of family life in terms of the presence of dense kinship networks and the connected issues of gossip and maintaining family honor, rather than racism in dominant society.

subordination they experience as well as discuss attempts to assert some control over their lives.

Family relationships

Parent-child conflict centered around gender ideals is a recurring theme in studies of the second generation (see Wolf 1997; Espiritu 1994, 2001; Smith Hefner 1999, Butler 1999, Valenzuela 1999, Waters 1996; Rumbaut and Ima 1988; Matute-Bianchi 1991; Gibson 1995). But several of these studies indicate that daughters are more likely to experience such intergenerational conflicts than are sons. In fact Espiritu (2001: 428) observes that studies on young women of various ethnic groups and across space and time report strict parental control on the activities and movements of young women as the primary source of intergenerational conflict. For second-generation Laotians, conflicts stem from communication problems, parental expectations, and strict parental control, especially of young women.

One of the main themes that surfaced repeatedly in focus group discussions and interviewees' discussion of family relationships was alienation from parents. Although a few informants had good and open communication with some members of their family, overwhelmingly they talked about alienation as a result of not being able to communicate with their parents, parents comparing the lives of their children to their own adolescent lives in Laos, and parents not being able to grasp the pressures and demands of living and going to school in urban, multicultural, poor neighborhoods. Lon, a 17 year old, complained that her parents thought that going to school was much easier than the life they had had in Laos:

... they (parents) always talk about like in "back in Thailand I used to do this, I used to do that, you don't have to that stuff," you know and all that stuff. And

then I think they kind of resent us that we don't have to go through all that kind of stuff. But then like you know going to school is just as hard as you know like working in the field, cause there's so many pressures you know out there and stuff like that. They don't realize it.

Gain, a confident 16-year-old, appeared exasperated as she talked about her parents wanting her to work hard and do well at school, and then come home and cook, clean and take care of her siblings.¹⁰ Many youth reported that they could not relate when parents tried to motivate them by describing how they would get up at the crack of dawn to go and work in the fields all day. From the perspective of my informants, these stories reflected a lack of understanding among parents about "what we are going through," as Pham complained.

In one sense this generational strain is familiar and an inevitable part of adolescent lives. However, within immigrant families it acquires a particular resonance. Laotian parents, who are experiencing poverty and marginality along the axes of race, class and gender in relation to the larger society, also fear losing their children. Most Laotian parents believe that academic advancement will lead to economic success, according to my informants. However, many parents also feel that US institutions such as schools, media and other informal settings expose their children to dominant American ideals of individualism, freedom, independence and the fulfillment of personal desires; traits that run counter to parental expectations of filial respect and authority.

The desire for autonomy and individuality may well lead to educational achievement and economic success, but as Smith-Hefner (1999) notes in relation to the Khmer community in the Boston area, Laotian parents fear that this path will distance them from their families and communities. In the US parents find it increasingly difficult

to control and discipline their children. In this new context, corporal punishment is not tolerated, and parents' opinions and decisions become irrelevant if a teacher, or Child Protective Services, or a judge decides that a child's rights are violated (Tayanin and Vang 1992; Smith and Tarallo 1993:111). By recounting specific stories from their youth, my informants' parents are attempting to shame them for their perceived unwillingness to work hard. These stories serve to obligate their children and ensure the young women's continued loyalty, interdependence, and cooperation with their families while submerging individual desires.

Espiritu (2001:428) observes that "although immigrant families have always been preoccupied with passing on their native culture, language, and traditions to both male and female children, it is daughters who have the primary burden of protecting and preserving the family." Women are not only seen as vital in maintaining symbolic group boundaries; they are also seen as central in the ideological reproduction of the collectivity and transmission of culture (Anthias and Yuval-Davis, 1989). As the bearers and conveyors of culture, the norms that regulate women's behaviors become a means of determining and defining group status and boundaries (Espiritu 2001). As findings from this study show, the stakes for keeping cultural boundaries impermeable are much higher for Laotian girls than boys. This is not to say that immigrant parents do not have expectations of their sons; rather, these expectations do not revolve around learning household responsibilities, exercising appropriate dress, behavior, attitude norms and in-group marriage practices.¹¹

¹⁰ Julian (1998) reports similar expectation imposed among Hmong girls in Australia.

¹¹ According to my informants, parent conflicts with their sons centered on involvement in gang activities, school performance and learning traditional ceremonies.

I came across the following list of assumptions about the specific and separate roles of girls and boys in Laotian families in the AYA archives. It was compiled by Group 3 in the summer of 1997, their first summer in the program, after discussing their earliest memories of realizing that they were being treated differently from boys in their family.

What Girls Should Be	What Boys Should Be
Weak, Whine	Strong, Don't Cry
Can't Fight	Fight,
Expected to cook for the whole family	Boys don't need to cook
Sit properly (don't slouch, cross legs)	Can sit anyway they want
Be polite	Are tough, big ego
Don't goof off	Can play all day
Good/angels	Can mess up
Sit and cheer, can't play sports	Play sports
Not expected to understand	Know all roles
If you don't do these things nobody will love you, housekeepers	Don't need to clean
Not supposed to have fun, girls shouldn't go out (can get raped, pregnant), can't hang around boys	Can go out, get away with everything
Have to take care of kids and drop out	Get a job, support a family, make money
Come home early	Come home late
Can't date until older	Guys could sleep around
Listen to men	Boss girls around
Can't drink or smoke	Could drink and smoke
Expected to do good in school	
Have to dress like a girl	

In order to understand the dynamics of gender expectations and roles in Laotian families, I explored these themes further in interviews and focus groups with all my informants.

Reproductive Work: "I have more responsibilities than my older brother just because I am a girl."

In an attempt to understand the contents of Laotian ethnic identity beyond the more obvious symbolic markers of culture, I asked my informants about child-rearing practices and gender socialization in Laotian families. Blia from Group 1 immediately moaned "don't get me started." Fourteen year-old Bryanna complained:

I kinda hate it 'cause I'm the only girl there, and my brothers, they get to go play outside until like late. And I'm like the one who has to clean like, "Because you're a girl, you have to cook, you have to clean! Go do the laundry!" ... On Sundays they (her parents) take me to the Laundromat and I have to do the laundry alone. So it's like eight people (referring to the number of people in her family)...

My informants stated that by the time Laotian girls are eight or ten they are expected to cook, clean, take care of younger siblings and sew in preparation for their adult roles as wives and mothers. And Gain's comment, cited earlier, indicate that her parents expect her to work hard and do well at school, then come home and assume all her responsibilities for the care and sustenance of her siblings.

Teenage Laotian girls particularly resented what they perceived as gender inequity within the family: the fact that their brothers had far more freedom, flexibility and favored status than they did. Sarah, of Group 1, noted that when her brother is ill she is expected to miss school and stay at home to look after him. But when she is sick, her parents tell her to take medicine and go to school. All the girls, from the youngest to the oldest, complained about the ways in which their brothers were favored by parents, that brothers are lazy, and that parents appear indifferent towards them as girls. MacDonald (1997:116) found that the Mien in Portland, Oregon practiced similar gender ideals. Boys

were given more freedom and educational support, while girls were encouraged to drop out of school and all had to assume childcare duties at an early age.

Dress, Behaviors, Attitude Norms: “I’m not hoochie”

Second generation Laotian girls are also expected to maintain cultural boundaries through appropriate dress codes and behavior norms as I learnt during a skit about “good” girls and “bad” girls, performed by some of my informants at the Summer 1998 AYA retreat.

In the first scene, two mothers are chatting about their daughters and expressing satisfaction that their daughters are “good.” They take pride in the fact that their daughters listen to them, work hard, can cook and are doing well at school. In the next scene one of the daughters walks past the two mothers and goes out. As she leaves home she is wearing baggy pants and a jacket, but as soon as she is out of her mother’s sight she peels these clothes off to show off the tight shorts and tank top she is wearing underneath. When she comes back home, again “properly” attired, her mother tells her to ask her older sister to start cooking. As the daughter goes up to the sister’s room she smells cigarette smoke coming from inside. She frantically waves her arms to waft the smoke away in case her mother gets a whiff of it. In this skit, Laotian girls are shown to navigate two sets of cultural norms, that of their parents and families, and that of their peers. They fulfill their parents’ expectations by living dual lives. Ballard (1994:31) interprets this strategy as “code-switching” by “skilled cultural navigators.”

During a break, after the culture session was over, some of the APEN youth were discussing this skit. I overheard Tracy, who played the daughter who wears seductive

clothing underneath baggy pants and a jacket, telling another youth “I’m not hoochie.”¹² Tracy was attempting to distance herself from the role she had just played, one of a “bad” Laotian girl who is promiscuous and flaunts her sexuality, and was asserting her identity as a “good” Laotian girl. But Tracy’s everyday dress preferences and her four-year relationship with a Mien man several years her senior which began when she was twelve years old, indicate that she herself is negotiating an ambiguous rather than a dichotomous cultural terrain.

These narratives suggest that even when Laotian parents are unable to monitor and control the behaviors of their daughters, their disapproval acts as a powerful sanction and shapes the social practices of second-generation Laotian young women (See Espiritu 2001; also Wolf 1997). My informants often complained that these cultural expectations are enforced much more vigorously on girls than on boys, resulting in additional responsibility for care of the family, but also restricting the movement of teenage Laotian girls (see also Afshar 1994).

Blia, a graduating senior and a gifted artist, said that she argues with her parents about how late she can stay out, which college to go to and about the senior trip to Hawaii.¹³ Her parents did not want her to go to Hawaii because “they said that I don’t need to go and I need to stay home.” Blia had been admitted to UC Santa Cruz to major in graphics and art but her parents wanted her to stay at home and go to the local community college. She eventually succumbed to this pressure. Of the other informants who were pursuing higher education while I was in the field all but one chose to go to a

¹² “Hoochie” refers to someone who is sexually promiscuous.

¹³ Based on informal conversations among my informants, it appears that high school seniors at Richmond High often plan and attempt to fundraise for a trip to Hawaii, Mexico or Disneyland as a way to celebrate their graduation at the end of the school year.

college that was close enough to home and which allowed them to stay at home (see also Wolf 1997).

Second generation Laotian young women are very aware of the educational and career opportunities in the U.S. Most of my informants acknowledged that their parents supported their desire for acquiring an education and expected them to participate in the workforce. Even though these public arenas embody different cultural constructions of femininity and sexuality than those in immigrant families (Maira 1998:222), expectations of “good” Laotian womanhood remain because they are linked to the preservation of cultural boundaries. Some parents ensure that their daughters maintain an unsullied reputation and interdependence with the family by controlling their interactions and movement. In addition, given the high degree of poverty and welfare dependency in the Laotian community, these parental pressures to stay at home and attend local colleges also reflect an economic decision (cf. Wolf 1997:467).

My informants understand that gender ideologies practiced within their families are linked to the preservation of ethnic identity. Gabriela, told me quite bluntly that she is “not up to the Mien standard, like being the perfect, ideal Mien girl,” because she doesn’t cook and clean every night, and nor does she listen to her mom all the time but does what she wants if its important to her. Cooking and cleaning and listening to one’s parents are part of a “good” Laotian daughter code. When my informants resisted parental expectations and gave preference to fulfilling personal desires they are often reprimanded that they will not find a husband because they have not learned the skills to be a good wife and daughter-in-law. Pham states that when she refuses her mother’s exhortations to cook and help with household chores, her mother tells her “oh watch when you get older,

no one will marry you because you can't cook." These parental derogations are meant to obligate second generation Laotian women to fulfill their responsibilities but as my informants' comments demonstrate, they do not always work.

Characterizing young Laotian women's choices as "untraditional," or "non-ethnic," parents were attempting to regulate their daughter's choices and resistance by "by linking them to cultural ignorance or betrayal" (Espiritu 2001:433). The assumptions here, on the part of parents, are both of a heterosexual ideology and ethnic purity, that Laotian daughters will marry Laotian men. And, since women bear the burden of the physical and ideological reproduction of the collectivity (Anthias and Yuval-Davis 1989), Laotian women are expected to dedicate themselves to the family and community through their labor and transmission of cultural traditions. I also discovered the ways in which my informants resisted these expectations and the gender inequities they experienced. My informants react to this burden by asserting their independence and individualism. Pham retorted: "I don't care." Maya stated that she "can live by [herself] for the rest of [her] life," with Alison following with "I don't need no man." As Seng insisted, Laotian parents should "accept their girls for who they are and not push them into something else." Yet this bravado and rebellious streak is not translated into day-to-day negotiations with parents.

Parent-child Communication: "Why you talking back to me?"

In a context where Laotians and their children are exposed to a range of ideological discourses on gender, control of women is one of primary means of maintaining ethnic boundaries and a distinct Laotian culture. But this strategy is not without emotional costs for second generation Laotian young women. In interviews and

focus group discussions my informant's face conveyed stress and extreme frustration from being in this strange position of betwixt and between multiple expectations. And they found it difficult to resolve conflicts arising from competing sets of values.

Schools, media, peers and informal settings, such as the APEN youth program, expose Laotian children to the American ideal of independence and self-assertion. Yet, in a discussion on Laotian culture at the summer 1998 AYA retreat Gabriela, a self-confident seventeen year-old, noted: "I can't make eye contact with my mom because it's a sign of disrespect. It's like challenging her." In interviews other informants described how parents interpreted the expression of opinion as "talking back" rather than a need to communicate. Blia talked about how her parents take the expression of feelings and opinions as a challenge to their authority:

I don't really talk to them about how I express my feelings because at home we don't do that. But then if I did then, I mean if I did express my feelings and opinions and I looked at them, they will have like a face on like 'what you say that for?'

Lon, a peer of Blia and Gabriela in Group 1, preferred not to get into a big argument over it but "just leave it the way it is."

MacDonald (1997) notes that in 'traditional' Mien families, children would never make their own decisions; rather the household leader, usually elder males, would make decisions for the family and its individual members. In this hierarchical order, older males are accorded respect and authority while young women and girls are expected to abide by their decisions. Moreover in Iu-Mien culture, family and ancestral relationships are emphasized while individual independence is not recognized (MacDonald 1997). Within the context of the US, maintaining hierarchical parent-child relationships confers power and influence to parents in the private sphere, but lines of authority are upset when

in other arenas roles are reversed and parents rely on their children, who gain English proficiency and cultural knowledge of American institutions faster.¹⁴ Thus parents are unwilling to negotiate and may simply command.

Communication may also be hindered by a lack of understanding of the ways in which American institutions function. The majority of Laotians have rural backgrounds and few have received a formal education. Thus Trueba et. al. (1990) found that second generation Hmong youth expressed confusion and ambivalence because at home they cannot talk about school activities, because parents do not understand them. And at school they cannot talk about their cultural traditions because non-Laotians would not understand them. Bouakhay, a psychological counselor who works in the West Contra Costa County Unified School District with Laotian youth who have been referred to her by probation officers and Child Protective Services, believes that the “biggest issue is parenting,” and feels that parents find it hard to connect with their children.

In addition, communication is also hampered when parents themselves are dealing with the trauma of war and escape as well as marginalization and subordination in the US. Paeng, a community activist who works with Laotian at-risk youth in Richmond and San Pablo, noted that in some of the families that she visits, parents often are diagnosed with post-traumatic stress syndrome, are addicted to drugs and gambling, and are totally aloof. Moreover, parents are often working long hours and odd shifts, creating little opportunity for parent-child communication.

The quotes above indicate that parent-child relationships among my informants are fraught with tension, the inability to communicate, nor connect with each other's

¹⁴ Kibria (1993: 149-1151) also reports a waning of parental authority in the context of the United States and the transformation of intergenerational relationships among Vietnamese immigrants and their children.

worlds. This generational strain is not unique to the Laotian community but I was surprised to hear the oldest girls who had been involved in AYA for four years to describe their relations with their parents in this manner. The staff at APEN place great emphasis on learning good communications skills and resolving conflicts immediately through group discussions and peer counseling sessions in an effort to build a strong group identity among the girls. And the specific goal of the youth program is also to cultivate a new generation of young women leaders in the Laotian community. Thus the girls are encouraged and expected to participate actively and express their opinions all the time. When asked if they think APEN is teaching them to be “outspoken, loud and rebellious,” this is how Seng, an active and ambitious seventeen year-old, responded:

No! No! (Emphasizes it and raises her voice slightly). I mean we just stand up for what we believe in you know. It means you know all my life, from elementary school through junior high school I’ve been really, really quiet. Even when I didn’t understand a problem I wouldn’t ask the teacher who taught me. I never asked them or anything. And then, after I joined APEN, I was still shy the first year and stuff. But after a little while like you know I started to like sit up you know...like asking questions and stuff because that was the only way that I was gonna you know get through it, school and stuff so. And also because that was the only way that I could be heard at our school.

Like Seng, the majority of my informants felt that APEN teaches them to be visible and to demand what is due to them. However, Seng also talks about how silence makes her invisible and perpetuates a culture of oppression, which she attempts to overcome. But it is noteworthy that she only mentions one social context, that of school. In the school environment, she is able to use the communication skills and growing self-confidence acquired through her participation in the youth program to navigate her way through school. She also takes leadership positions such as starting a club to address racism and prejudice amongst the students at Richmond High. Yet these skills and confidence cannot crossover to the private sphere of parent-child relationships. My

informants are resigned to the fact that in the context of the home culture and hierarchical parent-child relationships, which place Laotian girls at the bottom of the hierarchy, they will not be able to have their opinions heard or fulfil personal desires. Second generation Laotians feel obliged to abide by patterns of respect and authority in Laotian families.

My informant's methods for dealing with different styles of communication can be interpreted as another instance of "code-switching" by "skilled cultural navigators" (Ballard 1994: 31). But code switching does not come easily or without emotional costs. Rather than confronting parents, my informants deal with the situation by going into their room and ignoring everyone, or working outside the home or getting involved in projects and campaigns at APEN. Like the second-generation Vietnamese in Kibria's (1993:152-153) study, Laotian teenagers are often left feeling that parents do not care about them or their needs.

Dating, Marriage and Sexual Practice: "I don't wanna marry a Mien person"

While second generation Laotian young women are unable to challenge hierarchical relationships within the Laotian family system, they struggle to contest and negotiate parental expectations in other arenas of their lives. They rebel against patriarchal gender relations and assert dating and marriage preferences to gain control over their own social lives. Laotian parents, however, attempt to exert some control over their daughter's marriage preferences as one of several ways to maintain ethnic/racial boundaries¹⁵ and cultural difference in the face of strong assimilative demands in the U.S. (Espiritu 2001: 432).¹⁶ All my informants said that their parents would prefer them to

¹⁵ Trueba et. al. (1990:69) report that the clan linkages resulting from marriage are still very important in Hmong life.

¹⁶ However, I do not wish to suggest that immigrant communities are the only ones in which parents police these arenas. Espiritu (2001:432) notes that feminists have long documented the construction, containment

marry someone from the Laotian community. And the young women understand their expected role in keeping cultural boundaries through in-group marriage for as sixteen year-old Cuo of Group 2 said: “if I was to like marry a white person then I would be oooohh a traitor, or whatever you know.” In Portland, Oregon, when a young Mien woman married a white man, a community leader told her that she would lose face and be treated badly (MacDonald 1997:123). And two of my informants who had African American boyfriends reported parental disapproval.

However, second generation Laotian young women have adopted the ideology of romantic love and American ideals of freedom, choice and individualism. Thirteen year-old Lisa explained: “If you fall in love with somebody beyond your race you know, you can’t help yourself. And then in a way I don’t think we have to please our parents because it’s our choice you know.” Lisa and some of the other Mien girls did not believe in the tradition of consulting the “marriage” book¹⁷ that would indicate if two people were suited for each other or not. Yen thought that practice was “spooky because if you love somebody you love somebody.”

The dating preferences and actual dating patterns of my informants indicate that many have deviated from parental expectations and refuse to be responsible for keeping cultural boundaries. At a one-day gathering of Asian Pacific Islander youth groups in the Bay Area, there was a session on mixed-race and mixed-ethnicity dating and marriage. About nine of the 14 and 15 year-old APEN youth were attending the gathering with one of the staff and myself. During the session the youth were asked to participate in an exercise that would demonstrate their views on the topic under discussion. The facilitator

and exploitation of women’s sexuality in various societies.

¹⁷ The “marriage” book that my informants referred to is the “Book of Days,” which indicates whether or

read out statements and the youth had to move the pre-designated parts of the room to indicate whether they agreed or disagreed with the statement or were neutral. All the APEN girls indicated that not only were they attracted to and had dated people outside their own ethnicity and race, but all except two would also consider marrying outside their race and ethnicity.

Of the girls that I knew who had boyfriends during the time that I was in the field, eight were dating Laotians, three or four were dating African Americans, one was dating an Asian male of different ethnicity, and one had dated a mixed race white/Latino man. During focus group discussions, almost two-thirds of my informants stated adamantly that they would not marry a Mien or Laotian person. Fifteen year old Gain was emphatic that she “don’t wanna marry a Mien dude,” because of:

... all the thing about the reputation and stuff, I don’t know. It’s like if you do something wrong they’ll like talk bad about you behind your back and stuff. I don’t want that. I mean I’d rather have, go on with my life you know.

Gain’s comment highlights the ways in which gossip is used to monitor ethnic authenticity of Laotian girls. Even the youngest members of APEN, in Group 4, echoed this displeasure with gossip within the community and their refusal to fulfil these expectations:

Bindi: But Yen why do you think you would not marry a Mien person?
 Yen: Um. Don’t want to (raised voice). I mean just like Lisa said like if you marry a Mien person and something goes wrong, if you burnt the rice or something then they go tell their friends.
 Lisa: I know. “Oh that’s a bad daughter.”
 Bryanna: Especially the mother (who would say that she is a bad daughter).

not the marriage will be harmonious, based on the birthdates of the couple (Moore-Howard 1989, 48).

Burning the rice, to my informants, was a metaphor for a daughter who did not pass the test of authenticity and therefore would not be accepted by in-laws. When I asked if they would consider marrying a Laotian person who had grown up in the U.S. and therefore may not have the same expectations as their parents, they rejected that possibility. They reminded me that they would still have to look after the husband's parents and perform "traditional" roles during ceremonies. Thus rather than conform to parental expectations and fulfill the role of maintaining ethnic boundaries, my informants preferred not to be subjected to patriarchal gender relations. They hoped that through inter-ethnic and inter-racial dating and marriage they would acquire autonomy and freedom to pursue their desires.

Teenage pregnancy: "You have to commit to that baby 24-7"

However, the oppositional and non-oppositional subject positions my informants have adopted in relation to the discourse and practice of teenage pregnancy suggest that their autonomy and freedom to pursue their desires is constrained within the specific gender, race and class relations of power they experience. A recent study by the University of California, San Francisco, which recorded teenage pregnancy rates from 1989 to 1998 in the state of California, reported Laotian teenagers have the highest rate at almost 19 percent.¹⁸ This is well above the state average of 11.83 percent. Moreover, 60 percent of the Laotian teenage mothers were married (Center for Reproductive Health Research and Policy, University of California, San Francisco, 2001). The study was also reported in a newspaper article, ominously titled "Asian teen mothers a quiet state crisis" (Kim, 2001). This headline reflects national anxieties around the complex relationship

¹⁸ The study also found that "other" Asians, which include Malaysians, Indonesians, and others, had an almost equally high rate of 18.39 percent. African American teenage girls had a rate of 18.24 percent,

between teen motherhood and poverty, minority status and welfare. The argument promoted is that the availability of welfare allows young women to drop out of school and quit jobs to have babies. Teens become pregnant to get welfare and stay on welfare because it is the easy way out. And raising children on welfare turns them into school dropouts and unproductive members of society (Piven and Cloward 1997; Horowitz 1995).

Many scholars have countered the public debate that links the prevalence of teenage pregnancy to the availability of welfare by arguing that the issue is poverty, not welfare (Horowitz 1995; Males 1996). Horowitz (1995:232) asserts that “teen motherhood is embedded in the problems arising from the destruction of the inner-city community and its institutions and the lack of reasonably well-paying jobs in the cities and the nation as a whole.” In this context, teenage pregnancy does not appear irresponsible but makes sense in an environment that offers few opportunities. Dietrich (1998) found that Chicana adolescents who become pregnant are seeking a more conventional, domestic route to achieving some semblance of self-determination and adulthood. Teenage motherhood is seen as a means of attaining love, dignity and social prestige in a world that offers them limited means for achieving these goals.

In contrast to these opposing national discourses on teenage pregnancy and welfare, Laotian families uphold the intrinsic value of children and large families. Mien social worker Moung Saetern (1998) writes that in the United States, many Iu Mien parents enforce the cultural practice of marriage and having children at a young age. MacDonald (1997) confirms this trend among the Mien in Portland, Oregon. In Iu Mien culture having a child during adolescence is recognized as normal practice if the teenage

Latinos had 15 percent and White teenagers were at the state average of 11.98 percent.

girl is already married or engaged. In a situation where the young woman is pregnant but not married, a hasty marriage is agreed, or arrangements for the girl to move in with her boyfriend and her family are made to save face for the girl's family, according to my informants. Moore-Howard (1989) reports that abortion is disapproved of and the Mien express ambivalent attitudes towards family planning. I argue that in the context of the U.S., these practices represent another attempt to control young women's sexuality and enforce women's role as the keepers of culture and ethnic boundaries. Having a daughter marry at young age is a sign that she has been "properly" trained, confirming her authentic status.

However, according to MacDonald (1997), younger community leaders understand the consequences of large families and dependency on welfare. They believe that if young women and men can not avail themselves of the educational opportunities in the U.S., the long-term economic success of the community and the individual will be threatened. But despite changing marriage and family ideals among the young community leaders, traditional courtship and fertility patterns continue among the Mien in Oregon (MacDonald 1997).¹⁹

APEN staff concurs with scholars who argue that teenage pregnancy is related to poverty and lack of support rather than the availability of welfare. But they adopt a middle-class liberal ethos when they suggest that teenage motherhood undermines a young woman's economic situation and educational opportunities and, therefore,

¹⁹ MacDonald (1997) cites studies conducted in 1986-1987 by the Oregon Department of Human Resources that indicate 42% of mien mothers were under age 20, a rate nearly four times that of all Oregon mothers. A local Mien leader in Portland estimated that about 50% of high school age Mien girls get pregnant in the U.S. before finishing high school. In a study by Hutchinson and McNall (1994, cited in Dunnigan et. al. 1997), half of a Hmong female cohort studied in St Paul, Minnesota, were married and had at least one child before the end of their senior year. Among ethnic Lao, DeVoe (1997) notes that some parents

prevents her from leading a stable and productive adult life. Thus, together with a broader agenda of improving the environmental and economic health of the community Laotians live in, APEN believes that information on reproductive health and protective behavior will enable second-generation Laotians to make healthy choices.

Each year AYA works in partnership with Asian Pacific Islanders for Reproductive Health (APIRH) to introduce the newly recruited group of thirteen and fourteen year olds to women's reproductive cycle, male and female reproductive organs, as well in-depth discussions of contraception and visits to local Planned Parenthood and other clinics during their first summer in the program.

This emphasis on sex education, prevention of pregnancy, and safe sex is continued in subsequent years. At the summer 1998 retreat Jane, an APIRH staff working with AYA that summer, facilitated a review session on contraceptives.²⁰ The 31 youth were split up into groups, given a specific contraceptive, with an information sheet on it, and asked to devise a commercial on the benefits and hazards related to the contraceptive. After the skits, Jane reviewed the different types of contraceptives available, how to use each of them, and the benefits and problems associated with each. Though some youth were embarrassed to talk about contraception, a safe space was created that allowed the girls to ask questions about where they can get condoms from, the purpose of spermicide, and the side effects of abortion.

The message of making healthy choices is carried through in discussions of teen sex, role plays on peer pressure and teenage pregnancy, with the youth developing their

encourage daughters to take advantage of educational opportunities in the U.S., thus delaying marriage and child birth.

²⁰ At that session Jane also handed out a folder that included information female and male reproductive systems, pelvic exams, the menstrual cycle, contraceptive options, a report on HIV/AIDS and a pamphlet

own solutions to given scenarios. For example in Group 4's graduation skit on teen pregnancy, peer pressure and trust, the final scene three different options are presented to the audience: abortion, adoption and keeping the baby. Mercedes, a Laotian high school girl, has had unprotected sex with her boyfriend, Benz. In the final scene she cries out: what should I do? There are so many options. Then she freezes and the speaker narrates the following:

Mercedes has a big decision to make. Decision-making is hard in life, but Mercedes went to the clinic to find out all her options. The skit was also about the importance of friends supporting and trusting each other and about needing education on reproductive health.

Laotian teen women have one of the highest teen birth rates. 1 out of 4 sexually active teens will get an STD by age of 21. Half of all HIV infections occur in individuals under the age of 25.

Through learning good decision-making skills, reproductive health, and the importance of supporting and trusting each other we can all strive in lowering these statistics (Excerpt from Group 4 Graduation Skit, July 1998)].

Through the presentation of statistics and other information in the first summer of each new cohort AYA and APIRH staff aim to create an awareness of the issues facing teenage Laotian girls as well as give them tools to make healthy choices. All of this information is presented in terms of choice, resisting peer pressure and reproductive health. In subsequent years, there is a subtle but strong undercurrent pushing the youth to stay in school, do well and go to college or get a job. In other words, APEN staff encourages the youth to set future-oriented life goals, and in so doing they directly challenge traditional fertility patterns and gender ideologies in the Laotian community.

Moreover, I argue that APEN's position on teenage motherhood, while opposing conservative discourses that link teenage pregnancy to welfare, nevertheless represent support of the view that women on welfare, who cannot support their families, are not

on sexually transmitted diseases. On the inside front cover two cards displayed the addresses and phone

considered full citizens. Ruth Horowitz (1995:241) argues that a model of citizenship in which citizenship is linked solely to an individual's relationship to the market place is congruous with a commitment to mandatory work requirements and implies that people have a duty, regardless of their situation, to provide for themselves and their dependents in the market place. Those who receive welfare to remain at home to care for their children are greatly stigmatized and excluded from full citizenship. Furthermore, for APEN citizenship implies active participation in the political process. Early motherhood would detract the second-generation Laotian girls from becoming leaders and active shapers of their community's future, and prevent APEN from reaching its goal of changing the leadership landscape of the Laotian community.

What are the outcomes of APEN's attempts to transform cultural understandings and create new cultural practices within the collective context of AYA? While engagement or marrying young were not challenged by my informants, almost all of them indicated that did not support having children in their teens. Out of my sample of 31 youth, I knew of five who had had children or were pregnant before age 17. Of these five, I was most surprised by the three who had become pregnant during the school-year 1999-2000, which would have been their final year at APEN. I had already completed my research by then and heard about their pregnancies from other informants I encountered at the local mall. I discuss the choices these three made below.

When asked how they would advise a close teenage friend who was thinking about having a baby, most of my informants adopted a pragmatic position. Seventeen year-old Gabriela would support her if it was an informed, not an emotional, decision:

numbers of free clinics and other resources for teenagers.

I would give her a book that APEN has given me with all those valuable health information. You know before she goes in and you know treats her self I'd give her all those stuff you know. Tell her what her options are and then think. You know after that if she decides to go through with it you know, 'hey go for it' you know but it's at your own risk you know.

Sixteen year-old Blia, of Group 1, said that she would tell her friend not to have a baby because "it destroys your whole life," and the full time responsibility of caring for the baby will mean "then you can't go out, you can't go to the prom."

A variety of factors contributed to the pragmatic position that the majority of my informants took: their families' experiences of poverty and continuous economic struggle, their knowledge of cousins and friends who are unable to enjoy teenage pursuits and are stressed out, as well awareness of opportunities for women in the United States.²¹ However, seventeen year-old Seng of Group 1 adopted a strong moral stance against teen pregnancy:

Well, I say NO! (Emphasis, no hesitation). I say "oh my gosh!" cause I have all these relatives and all these friends, they got pregnant, all when they're too young and all that stuff, and they like all have to carry the baby to school and stuff. I think that's like the biggest embarrassment that you get, you know pregnant, that you know young and stuff. It seems that you don't have any values or any morals and stuff. Cause I have like three cousins that they got pregnant before they like entered high school and stuff. And like that's a shame and stuff.

Seng's comment indicates that she has adopted the moral rhetoric embodied in the public debates on welfare and teenage pregnancy. Whether my informants regard teenage pregnancy as deviant and amoral or oppose it on more pragmatic grounds, their positions are in contradistinction to trends in the Laotian community. I explored this anomaly with

²¹ Smith-Hefner (1999) also found that some Khmer young women in Boston have delayed marriage in order to pursue education and career opportunities. At the same time, many of those who dropped out of school to marry and have children are returning to school to get their degrees so that they can support their

Chittraphone, an AYA staff person. Chittraphone, who is Laotian and who had graduated from college in June 1997, observes that the youth in AYA:

have very, a strong like opinion of you know just being a teen mom... That's the thing that really stands out for me. Like even though these girls, they love children but at the same time they know they are not ready. I mean practically like all of them know you know that "this is not where I wanna go." Whereas I talk to other teens where they think like it's not that bad. Especially if they have a boyfriend.

Chittraphone believed that through the discussions on teenage sex, peer pressure and consequences related to teenage pregnancy, second generation Laotian young women have their opinions affirmed and validated by AYA staff. She observed that AYA staff not only emphasize "being healthy, having a healthy life," but also helps the youth "be on track in terms of where they want [to go], in terms of achieving."

The youth that join and stay in APEN are partly self-selected, in the sense that they are interested in what the program has to offer and view it as a good opportunity. And, in part APEN staff select them for their interest and commitment to community issues. Almost all of my informants stated in interviews that they would like to go to college and get a job. Of my informants who wanted to delay marriage and had ambitions to go to college, all said that their parents supported them, at least emotionally even if they did not have the financial means. Towards this end, the activities and experiences that the girls partake in through the youth program provides a source of cultural capital²²

families. Anecdotal evidence from my informants suggests that among Laotian teenage mothers, those who can find relatives to care for their child are also returning to school.

²² In her study of US-Mexican youth, Valenzuela (1999) found that students who had positive attitudes towards school possessed great social capital than those who lacked a well-defined and effective achievement orientation. Valenzuela defines social capital as "social ties that connect students together, as well as levels of resources (for example academic skills and knowledge) that characterize their friendship groups (116). For my informants AYA provides a social milieu where friendship bonds as well as their individual commitments to academic achievement can be strengthened. And AYA staff act as "authentic carers" (Valenzuela 1999:157) that provide help and support.

and APEN, LOP and AYA staff exude a form of authority that nurtures middle class values.

Thus I was very surprised to learn that three of my informants had become pregnant during the school-year 1999-2001. All of them were performing very well at school, had aspirations to go to college, and two were very active members of AYA. And all of them had mentioned practical reasons for not becoming teenage mothers. Tsiet said she would dissuade her friend from having a baby by pointing out practical concerns:

I think she should like get everything first. Like get an education, get a career, ahead of herself so that when the baby comes it seem like, I don't know a better place for the baby instead of like just living with parents or something.

Perhaps the disjunction between their words and actions suggests that they told me, a non-official adult attached to APEN, what they thought they should say. If this is indeed the case, then their strategy demonstrates that youth have the power to control social research and provide selective access to their worlds. However, I believe that the choices and actions of these three teenagers demonstrate the structural powerlessness that the children of immigrants and other youth of color experience in deprived inner-city neighborhoods.

AYA staff's discussion of choice, resisting peer pressure and reproductive health in terms of individual actions and behaviors becomes meaningless without the enabling conditions through which they can be realized. Despite their performance at school and participation in AYA, the gender, race and class subordination these second generation Laotian young women experience leave some of them with few options for attaining social prestige, as well as love and dignity. It appears that AYA staff cannot help the young women acquire enough cultural capital, and the power to manipulate the social

worlds outside of the local community and move more actively to overcome race and class subordination. Nor can staff influence cultural practices in the Laotian community. Having a child increases their status, at least in that community. The outcome of this choice may however, reinforce their marginal positions within the Laotian community and the wider society.

The life choices of these three young women also indicates that a variety of Laotian femininities are being constructed in the US (see also Julian 1998). One young woman has moved out of state to live with her African American boyfriend and his family, and is working. The other two, who have stayed close to their families, are working and continuing with their education at the local community college, while parents and grandparents help take care of the child. Their actions challenge the logic of linear development of progress and change (Mohanty 1992:87). Their practices and actions are governed by particularistic self-understandings which are anchored in complex and multiple relations of power. The multiple subjectivities produced through gender, class, ethnicity and race give rise to discontinuous and often fragmented experiences, and therefore ambivalent outcomes.

Above I have discussed the processes and uncertain outcomes as second-generation Laotian girls negotiate primary social relationships in the arenas of inter-generational relations, gender expectations, dating and marriage practices, and teenage motherhood. In the next section I discuss the impact on primary social relations when second-generation Laotian girls become community organizers and take up leadership positions.

Gender, Power and Political Leadership

In Laos, leadership and community politics is a male domain (Julian 1998), and this practice had continued in the US until recently. Referring to political organization among the Mien in the US, MacDonald (1997:136) reports that village councils, which were the traditional form of political organization among the Mien in Laos, have been reproduced and public leadership and authority is vested in elderly males. In addition, Moungh Saetern (1998), speaking of the Mien community in Oakland, California, states that the community leaders elect a “mayor” who represents the whole Iu Mien community in different cities where Iu Mien reside. The criteria for mayoral candidacy include being well known and respected by everyone in the community, as well as being male.

More recently younger bi-cultural, bi-lingual leaders are also involved in community governance structures and “changing leadership criteria for modern male leaders have gradually allowed a few women leaders to expand their roles to become public leaders” (MacDonald 1997:150). Women leaders, like younger male leaders, combine traditional skills and roles with good English, American education and professional positions in social service agencies, schools and medical clinics. These women, with increasing cultural capital and knowledge of American institutions, have begun to speak up more frequently in public Mien community meetings, have become board members of the Iu-Mien Association of Oregon, and have become vocal advocates for their community in neighborhood associations, law enforcement and at social service conferences.

Other Laotian communities are also witnessing an emergence of a few women public leaders. In the Hmong community in Sacramento, a Hmong woman established the Hmong Women's Heritage Association to help Hmong women in troubled marital relationships, and to help Hmong elders bridge the generation gap (Magagnini 2000b). In West Contra Costa County I came across three young Khmu women who were working as advocates for Laotian youth with schools, law enforcement agencies and other community organizations.

Asian Youth Advocates is also contributing to this gradual expansion of opportunities for Laotian women to become public leaders. Over the four years that the girls are expected to remain involved in the youth program, they get a variety of opportunities to develop community organizing and leadership skills around critical issues that directly affect them. While I was in the field my informants participated in a campaign against Proposition 227, and worked with elderly Laotians and staff to campaign for a multilingual emergency warning system. The most recent example of teenage Laotian girls taking leadership and organizing around an issue that affects all young people at Richmond High School – that of the lack of sufficient support and guidance for students at Richmond High, 95% of whom are students of color. I discuss my informants' community activism in more detail in Chapter Four.

The public speaking, group communication and organizing skills and that my informants learn at AYA gives some of them confidence to run for leadership positions at school. Seng, of Group 1, had been junior class president and senior class president at Richmond High school. In her junior year she took the initiative to start All Colors Together in One Nation, a student club dedicated to addressing the racial tension at

Richmond High. Through her efforts Seng projected a sense of belonging to the school and its community. For her leadership roles at school and her community work through APEN, Seng won React teen magazine's Take Action award in 1997 and was featured in Time (December 1997) magazine's section "Time for Families: Kids Who Care." Seventeen year-old Rachel, also of Group 1, was senior class vice-president at Middle College, and 15 year old Cept of Group 2 was junior class treasurer at Richmond High. Seventeen year-old Gabriela was dubbed "The Earth Angel" by Teen People magazine this year and selected as one of "20 teens who will change the world" (cited in Chao 1999b), for her work on environmental justice issues through APEN.

When my informants take leadership positions, engage in community activism and act as representatives of the Laotian community they are directly challenging the traditional position of girls and young Laotian women. What might seem like straightforward "Americanization" is in fact a case of young Laotian women responding to their situations in the U.S. and in the process, changing Laotian gender ideology. When the youth program is presented to them, second generation Laotian girls eagerly embrace the opportunity even if it means that doing so challenges the position and expectations of girls and young women in the Laotian community. Some of my informants strongly defend a girls-only program to male friends who characterize it as sexist because only girls can join.

Involvement in the APEN youth program enables them to contribute to the expansion of public space for young Laotian women and join the small number of Laotian women in the U.S. who are taking public roles. And, as my informants get involved in local community issues they are sought after by journalists, and recognized as

leaders and representatives of the Laotian community. I witnessed a striking example of this at a community event to celebrate the victory on the pilot teacher advisory program and the multilingual emergency warning system in August 2000. Elderly Laotians, girls in AYA and their friends, some parents and staff were in attendance as well as assorted other guests, including one of Contra Costa County's Board of Supervisors. This Supervisor was going to present an award to LOP for its work on the multilingual emergency warning system. He was sitting at the front of the room and as soon as he noticed that fourteen year-old Bryanna, of Group 4, was present he came all the way to the back to greet her. He shook her hand firmly and asked her how she was. Bryanna replied "fine," shyly. Later, when I commented to Bryanna how impressive it was that he had recognized her and had come up to say hello, she shrugged it off and noted that she had met him a few times. Bryanna had been active in both the recent campaigns at LOP and had participated in meetings with this Supervisor either as a translator for elderly Laotians or as a representative of Laotian youth in AYA.

But one wonders about the reaction from the community since working with young women challenges gender and generational hierarchies in immigrant Laotian families. When asked about this, all the staff noted that there has not been a vocal disapproval or backlash from the community as one would expect. Emiko commented that there hasn't been a backlash because APEN does not promote a "women's agenda" but "a human rights, community driven agenda, and a social justice agenda." And Elaine, the executive director, stated that initially young Laotian women were seen as "one element of this matrix, this leadership from the diverse strands of the community, and young people being one of those strands."

Second generation Laotian young women are nurtured as leaders in the context of benefiting the whole community. What is stressed is the notion that they are working collectively for social change that will benefit the Laotian community and other poor communities in West Contra Costa County, a topic I take up in Chapter Four. APEN endows second generation Laotian women with cultural capital, enhances their status and provides them with the tools to better negotiate American society on behalf of all Laotians. In this sense, APEN also emphasizes second generation Laotian girls' interdependence and commitment to Laotian families and community, but the meaning of these relationships have been transformed from one that characterizes ambivalent agency to one that represents significant agency.

However, a girls-only program, the level of support for individual youth, the nurturing of self-confidence and skills, staying "on track," and the opportunities for public leadership all convey implicit messages of independence, women's rights, and the importance of fulfilling individual aspirations for education and work. In addition, as I discussed in Chapter Two, APEN has an agenda of changing the current leadership landscape of the community.

Perhaps the real reason there has not been a backlash is because until recently the youth program was "almost incognito" as Chit, a Khmu youth program counselor at APEN, described it, and elders in the community did not pay attention to it. Moreover, when I asked my informants whether their parents approved of their participation in the youth program, most of them said that they did because it kept them off the streets.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have shown that second generation Laotian youth are not empty vessels waiting to be filled with a deposit of ethnicity from a specific source. An examination of the processes of identity construction among second generation Laotian girls and young women highlights the complex nature of this experience. As they navigate different cultural worlds and socio-ideological points of view (Ong 1995:357) they experience both conflict and are involved in creating syncretic identities.

The construction of community, kinship and identity is fluid and rooted in everyday practices of exclusion and inclusion (Ong 1996:741) experienced in the interconnections between primary and secondary social relations. For second generation children of immigrants, social meanings on gender, generation and ethnicity are produced, appropriated, disrupted and contested through social interactions inside and outside ethnic communities (Nagel 1994). However, as Barot et. al. (1999:10) state “people do not simply invent and re-invent themselves at will.” Rather than free-floating identities that are always in flux, the contents and meanings of Laotian identity, and Laotian cultural practices, are created in relation to the material conditions, the prevalent discourses and power relations that shape the opportunities and constraints in a historically specific time and place.

In the Laotian community, as in other new immigrant communities (see Kibria 1993; Wolf 1997; Espiritu 2001), the acts of immigration and settlement produce seismic crises in family, intergenerational and gender politics. Avtar Brah (1993) reminds us that ethnicities are always sites of contestation over patriarchal, class and other inscriptions of power. Popular and widespread images of second generation immigrants caught in two

worlds is thus a sign of the power relations undergirding cultural hierarchies rather than of cultural conflict per se (Brah 1996:41).

In the context of the US, Laotian immigrants reaffirm their self-worth and ensure national integrity through the regulation of young women's bodies. Because policing women's bodies is one of the main means of maintaining ethnic boundaries and cultural difference, second generation Laotians face numerous restrictions on their autonomy, mobility and personal decision-making. For young Laotian women, traversing multiple cultural worlds can be constraining and difficult. But this betwixt-and-between position also enables them "to read domination differently and to remake their agency" (Ong 1995:363). They draw on different discourses, such as the ideology of romantic love, freedom, choice, opportunities for education, and equal rights, to resist family control in the arenas of dating and marriage preferences, to negotiate the multiple pressures of teenage motherhood, and actively contest Laotian gender and generational relations in the public arena. In these ways, second generation Laotian young women are not "naturally passive" but exercise their agency and construct resistance within specific social contexts (Puar 1996:129).

While my informants express a strong desire to maintain ethnic distinctiveness and identify in nationalistic terms, this does not represent a reactive ethnicity. Second generation Laotian girls and young women remain anchored in the Laotian community in the US. Despite American middle-class aspirations and desire for gender equality, the race and class subordination they and their parents experience in dominant society keeps them rooted in Laotian collective social practices and in the Laotian community. However, like second-generation youth elsewhere (Ballard 1994), my informants are

acutely aware they are different from both their parents and from the surrounding minority and dominant cultures. Within collective contexts these particularistic self-understandings can be affirmed as a reconstructed ethnic identity without being perceived as foreign or un-American. Moreover, the ideologies and world views conveyed by contemporary social justice organizations such as APEN influence the ways in which Laotian teenagers navigate multiple cultural worlds they are exposed to, and negotiate, contest or celebrate cultural practices within ethnic communities and dominant society. Thus culture is central to the enterprise of nurturing critical assimilation, with concomitant implications for creating collective self-understandings (Brubaker and Cooper 2000: 16) in the fight for social rights and inter-group relations, which I discuss in Chapters Four and Five, and for redefining dominant ideas of what it means to be an American, which I explore in Chapter Six.

Chapter Four

The Politics of Race I: Political Identity and the Struggle for Social Rights

My idea of a perfect school is a school that has money, has all available school materials, can afford to go to field trips where students can learn with a “hands-on” experience, a school that has very good, intelligent, fun and humorous faculty, a school that has counselors who guide students to their goals and to the right direction; a school with clean bathrooms, no graffiti; and a school with students who do not discriminate, no bad attitude, and students who are just there to learn and have fun (Cuo, Group 2, Journal entry, 7/2/99).

The needs and interests of young Laotians and the larger community are derived from their identities as second-generation Laotians, as youth growing up in the inner city, as elderly Laotians, as new Asian Pacific Americans who came as refugees, and as people of color in the US; not from the mere fact of being Laotian. Viewing Laotians solely through the lens of ethnic identity misses the lived realities and material conditions they face. Together with anti-immigrant and anti-Asian racism, Laotians also experience racialization through the structural “neighborhood race effects” (Espiritu et. al 2000) of under-funded and resource-deprived schools, environmental pollution, and low-wage jobs that Laotians share with their African American, Latino and even poor white neighbors. In this chapter I argue that the political identity of second generation Laotians is constructed through contextually specific material social relations and is therefore unstable. The lived experiences of Asian Pacific Americans today confound the ways we have been taught to think about race, and suggest a need to re-think the prospects for a Pan-Asian ethnic identity. The lived experiences of Laotians in Contra Costa County also point to the ways in which social rights are racialized, with concomitant implications for the notion of citizenship.

As part of the environmental justice movement in the US, APEN foregrounds race at a time when dominant discourse attempts to erase it. At the same time APEN has attempted to avoid the pitfalls of essentialism by linking concern around environmental protection to issues of economic development, social equality, and community empowerment. The environment is “where we live, where we work, where we play, where we learn” (Cole and Foster 2001: 16). Contemporary social justice organizations like APEN acknowledge the intersectionality and simultaneity of processes of racialization, class exploitation and subordination based on gender, age and other axes. Conceiving of identity in terms of multiple subjectivities, whether consciously or not, allows APEN to mobilize the Laotian community around its multiple needs in their specific location in West Contra Costa County, as well as emphasize connections with other communities of color within common contexts of struggle.

One way to understand how groups organize and the political ties they form is to examine the material conditions confronting them. In this chapter I focus on the following questions: first, how have APEN activists created new identities and new institutions to challenge forms of racism and racialization that Laotian teenage girls confront in their everyday lives? Specifically, I discuss three organizing efforts, that of the multilingual emergency warning system, the counselor campaign and electoral work around Proposition 227. These issues are only some of the major issues facing the Laotian community given their history as recent refugees, their class position, the neighborhood demographics and the socio-economic milieu they live in.¹ I discuss APEN’s creativity, as well as the tensions and limitations of their organizing strategies.

Second, what kind of political subjects are being created through participation in APEN's youth program? I analyze the contents of APEN's political strategies to understand how it constructs specific ethnic and racial identities. Third, what are the implications of APEN's strategies on the politics of identity and the rapidly changing racial realities in the United States?

Race, Immigration and Citizenship: The Environmental Justice Angle

A vivid and immediate example of what environmental justice means to the Laotian community in West Contra Costa County occurred in the early afternoon on March 25, 1999 when a fireball erupted at a Chevron² refinery in Contra Costa County. This incident highlighted issues of environmental justice, race, as well as citizenship in a new immigrant community.

Nearly all the studies that have investigated the distribution of environmental hazards during the 1980s and 1990s have found race and income to be significant factors. Where it has been possible to assess the relative importance of race and income, race has tended to be the better predictor of the location of environmental hazards (Mohai and Bryant 1992). Among these studies, the most famous and influential is the study sponsored by the United Church of Christ's Commission on Racial Justice in 1987 (Mohai and Bryant 1992).³ It was the first national study to examine the distribution of commercial hazardous waste facilities and abandoned hazardous waste sites by race and

¹ In 1996, before I entered the field, several of the Group 1 youth were involved in protesting and lobbying against the so-called welfare reform bill. This bill directly affects the almost 60 percent of Laotians who rely on welfare benefits for their survival.

² Karras et. al. (2000) found the Chevron oil refinery plant in Richmond to be one of the major polluters in the San Francisco Bay Area.

³ The United Church of Christ Commission for Racial Justice study was entitled "Toxic Wastes and Race in the United States: A National Report on the Racial and Socioeconomic Characteristics of Communities with Hazardous Waste.

income. The report found that race, not income, was the single most important factor determining where environmental hazardous facilities were sited.

As noted in Chapter Two, over 350 industrial facilities are located in the greater Richmond area. And according to a 1989 report by Belliveau et. al., at least 210 different hazardous chemicals are stored and/or released into the Richmond environment. Each year, these industries generate 800,000 pounds of toxic air contaminants, nearly 18,000 pounds of toxic pollutants in waste water, and about 179,000 tons of hazardous waste (Field notes, Toxic Tour by Group 3, 7/7/98).⁴ Moreover, consistent with studies cited above that document the disproportionate impact of environmental hazards, 76 percent of Richmond's population is comprised of low-income African Americans, Latinos and a growing population Asian Pacific Islanders, including Laotians.

The Laotian community in West Contra Costa County faces toxic exposure from multiple sources. Laotian families consume fish from San Francisco Bay to supplement their diets. Local health officials warn that fish from this source is contaminated with PCBs, mercury, dioxins, and pesticides and recommend in-take of fish from the Bay of no more than twice a month. But efforts to notify the West County population are ineffective since few Laotians are literate in their own language or in English (Kong, with Chiang 2001:13).

Another source of contamination unique to the Laotian community is that from soil where they grow vegetables and herbs. West County is the site of many old industries that released toxins into the soil. For example Drew Scrap Metals, a metal dumping

⁴ The worst chemical spill in the history of Contra Costa County occurred on July 26, 1993 at the General Chemical plant in Richmond. An accident during unloading of sulfur trioxide (oleum) resulted in a huge toxic cloud. The cloud, resembling a mushroom, spread over 10 miles, affecting communities in Richmond (Kong, with Chiang 2001:17).

company, disposed old car batteries and other car parts in a mixed industrial and residential neighborhood of North Richmond until 1976. Heavy metals such as lead and cadmium have leached into the soil. A few Laotian families lived in a house adjacent to Drew Scrap Metals, and practiced communal gardening to supplement their diets with vegetables and herbs. The families were completely unaware of the dangers until a public health nurse concerned about the level of lead in their children discovered where their food was grown. The primary source was the contaminated soil, and the lead-based paint chips from the house. Although there were warning signs at the facility they were only in English and Spanish. Drew Scrap Metals and the house have since been placed on the Environmental Protection Agency's Superfund cleanup list and the Laotian families were relocated (Field notes, Toxic Tour by Group 3, 7/7/98).

As a new immigrant community, Laotians are not only impacted by the environmental and economic issues of West Contra Costa County, but are further marginalized as a result of linguistic and cultural isolation, and lack of access to information, services, and decision-makers (Kong, with Chiang, 2001:7). Nationally, over 50 percent of Laotians live in linguistically isolated households (1990 U.S. census), meaning that no-one over the age of 14 in that household speaks English only, or very well (Rumbaut 1995:248). In addition, Laotians have over 62 dialects (Kong, with Chiang, 2001:13), further complicating efforts by state agencies and social service providers to reach all the residents of Contra Costa County.

The March 25, 1999 accident occurred when Chevron's hydrocracking unit developed a leak and released hydrogen sulfide and sulfur dioxide into the air.⁵ The

⁵ This explosion was followed by two more leaks in June and July of that year (Kong, with Chiang, 2001:4).

explosion sent a fireball and thick clouds of smoke hundreds of feet into the air (Squatriglia 1999; Ferris 1999). This incident exposed major inadequacies in the County's warning system, which is supposed to inform residents of "shelter-in-place"⁶ procedures. The severity of the accident demanded that each household receive a warning by an automatic phone-alert system operated by the Contra Costa County Health Services Department. Yet, many households never received a call. Those that did were called several hours after the explosion, and after residents had already been exposed. One of my informants, Gabriela, recounted that Chevron called over to their home at midnight, several hours after the incident, to inform them about the accident and asking them to stay in place. And then five minutes later the Health Department called them (field notes 3/30/99). Of those Laotian households that received timely calls, many residents did not understand them because the message was in English. Many Laotians, especially the elderly are limited-English-proficient (Kong, with Chiang 2001:18). Moreover, for the Laotian community in West Contra Costa County, there does not exist a full-time television or radio station that would have been able to broadcast the warning alert.

At a subsequent youth meeting on March 30, 1999, discussion on the Chevron explosion revealed some of the side effects of exposure to sulfuric gases that the residents had suffered, but also the confusion that surrounded the incident. Jennifer, the Youth Program Coordinator, asked the eighteen youth from Groups 1, 2, 3, 4 present, what they knew about the incident. Here is an excerpt from my field notes:

"I want to do this check-in about Chevron. Who knows what happened?" asks Jennifer. Various people shout out that it was sulfur and it could be smelt in the Oakland hills, but that it was no risk to people. After allowing the girls to share what they know Jennifer goes through what actually happened. She tells them

⁶ "Shelter-in-place" alerts warn residents to seek shelter, close the doors and windows, and shut off ventilation systems (Kong, with Chiang, 20001:17).

that the hydrocracking unit had a fire but there was a 20-minute lapse before sirens went off. She states “in many ways the emergency systems failed.” She also tells the girls that while the public line that Chevron is holding to is that there was no risk, from the community LOP is hearing that people had difficulty breathing, had burning eyes, and that long term effects such as cancer, respiratory problems and asthma are exacerbated.

Jennifer then inquires “what happened at school?” Someone reports that the bell rang and the students were let out at Richmond High School. Leah says that at Middle College classes were cancelled and students were allowed to go home. She adds, “like police officers walked around telling people to stay in.” At Richmond High School an announcement was made over the loudspeaker that there is an accident at Chevron. Gabriela reports that the school was not notified until one hour later. She also mentions that parents were calling to get students but the students were asked to stay in.

Jennifer asks people to pair up and interview each other about how they felt and what happened during the accident. [There is a lot of energy today and everyone is lively.] She gives them ten minutes, then asks people to shout out a few of the answers. The youth report that they were scared, confused, worried about their health, and some people had suffered minor ailments.⁷

This discussion indicates that while the official position from Chevron suggested that the smoke was nontoxic, many area residents suffered minor ailments, including nausea, skin rashes, headaches and respiratory ailments (Kong, with Chiang 2001:18).⁸ More significantly, youth were not sure how to respond when emergency sirens sounded. Many were released from school and allowed to go home, in the process exposing them to the toxins in the air. Among elderly Laotians, many were unaware that an industrial explosion had occurred and thought that the black smoke came from a burning house. In the southwest section of San Pablo, an elderly Laotian said that he had climbed the bunker behind his apartment, beyond which was the Chevron oil refinery, to see where the smoke was coming from (field notes April 19, 1999). Others could not understand the

⁷ Ferris (1999) reports that more than 1000 people went to area hospitals, and one youth broke out in a rash.

⁸ Given that almost 60 percent of Laotians in Contra Costa County depend on welfare, many families rely on MediCal or emergency care for their health care needs.

English language news announcements on television and radio asking residents to “shelter in place” (Kong, with Chiang, 2001:17). These elders, and the grandchildren they typically take care of at home during the day, were particularly at risk to exposure from toxic chemicals.

At a small community meeting soon after the accident, APEN staff heard adult and senior Laotian members of LOP express anger over the inadequacies in the current emergency warning system. They knew that the explosion on March 25, 1999 was one of many that had occurred in Richmond. They expressed frustration at the frequent and ongoing exposure to toxins as a result of accidents (Kong, with Chiang 2001:18). In these emotions APEN staff saw an opportunity to galvanize the diverse ethnic groups in the Laotian community to fight for an environmental justice issue that directly affected them. Over the ensuing months a team of APEN staff and elderly Laotian men and women devised a campaign to press for alternatives to the current emergency warning system. They decided to target Contra Costa County’s Health Services and the Internal Operations Committee of Contra Costa County’s Board of Supervisors to implement this change (Kong, with Chiang 2001:8).

Previously, APEN had joined efforts with other environmental organizations to demand corporate accountability from large corporations like Chevron, which have a history of environmental accidents. But in this campaign, APEN staff decided that LOP did not have the capacity or the power to confront a large corporation that plays a significant role in the economy of Contra Costa County and the large Bay Area (Kong, with Chiang 2001:19-20). Instead they insisted that government has the responsibility to ensure the community’s well being and health protection. In making this strategic

decision, APEN linked environmental justice to race and citizenship for new immigrants.⁹

Second generation Laotians had multiple roles in the campaign. Several of my informants in AYA played an active part at meetings and events. A few weeks after the incident APEN organized a “small, controlled” (Informal Conversation with Jennifer 4/12/99) community meeting with Mr. Walker, the director of the County’s Health Department and the person with the authority to make decisions about the current warning system. In addition to Bryanna, Tsiet and Gain, two other youth from Group 4, elderly Laotian men and women, and APEN/LOP staff were present at this meeting. This was the first meeting of its kind for LOP and staff were unsure how it was going to unfold. The atmosphere was quite tense and Vicki, an APEN staff person, remained in charge of facilitating the whole meeting (APEN video, 4/8/99).

Mr. Walker heard testimonies from the Laotian seniors as well as fifteen year-old Tsiet about their experience on March 25, 1999. Tsiet described what happened at Richmond High School on that day: “The school broadcast said that there was an explosion at the oil refinery, but we were let out of school at the usual time, making us walk home as usual.” Tsiet stated that later that night she felt dizzy after coming home. She was extremely angry because “the school should have made us stay within the classrooms and not let us out to breathe the poisoned air” (APEN video, 4/8/99).

After the testimonies, Vicki presented Mr. Walker with four demands that the County Health Services Department should commit to: reaching out to diverse populations in the County; conduct a Language Equity Analysis on the County’s capacity

⁹ In this discussion on the multilingual emergency warning system I am not assessing the relative merits of APEN’s and LOP’s campaign targets but am focusing on the role that my informants played in the

to serve non-English-speaking populations, particularly Laotians, in the event of an emergency; develop a plan that addresses language access for limited-English-speaking populations, particularly Laotians; conduct community-based education activities on emergency warning procedures for Laotian residents. To the surprise of everyone present at the meeting Mr. Walker categorically accepted each of the demands presented to him (APEN video, 4/8/99). This was a powerful moment for everyone at the meeting, but especially the youth. Jennifer, APEN's youth organizer, recalled:

It was new for them to see seniors speak in Mien at a public meeting to a decision-maker, and it was great to present our demands to Mr. Walker and have him say yes to all of them. This was a positive and exciting experience for the youth. It was also the first LOP meeting for them (Conversation with Jennifer, 4/12/99).

Fourteen-year old Bryanna of Group 4 reported at a youth meeting that the campaign work around the multi-lingual warning system has "been great! We put in a lot of work and they've (Director of County Health Department) supported us" (field notes 5/3/99).

During the campaign my informants also acted as translators and communicators for the non-English speaking elders, as so often happens in immigrant communities. Ten days after the meeting with Mr. Walker, APEN staff organized a press conference in front of two apartment buildings in southwest San Pablo to publicize their mini-victory. This location was selected to highlight the proximity of Laotians to the refinery. Most of the residents in these two buildings are Laotians from the Khmu and Thaidam ethnic groups. Here is an excerpt from my field notes describing the scene:

The two apartment buildings are at a T-angle to each other, separated by a driveway. A couple of cars were parked in the driveway, which was shaded by a large tree. A chain-link fence separates the apartments from a huge bunker with a railway track sitting atop. No trains passed by while we were there but when a train does go by I am sure it is deafening and shakes every home. Beyond the

campaign and the kind of political subjectivities that were created through participation in the campaign.

bunker I can see the tops of a couple of factories. The chevron refinery that had the explosion is in that vicinity.

A few people are at home on this Monday afternoon. An elderly man, who is holding a baby in a sling, a middle-aged man, a couple of teenage boys and a teenage girl. Some of the African American neighborhood kids come to watch too.

Ten elderly Laotian women are standing in a line in front of the bunker, holding onto a banner that says "The Laotian Organizing Project" in Lao. Eight of the youth are standing behind the women holding signs asserting "safe systems for all people," "we deserve health & safety," and "everyone deserves to be safe." It is really good to see so many of the Group 4 youth here. Five of the APEN/LOP staff are also here, either talking to reporters on the side or standing with the Laotian youth and elders. Two television crews and two newspaper reporters (one from the Asian press) are here.

As the press conference rolls, one of the elderly Laotian women speaks in Mien and Tsiet translates for her: "On that day I heard the alerts and saw the dense smoke from afar but didn't know what happened, and didn't understand the news reports. I thought that was a fire from someone's home and was extremely afraid" (Field notes, 4/19/99).

At this event second generation Laotians acted as translators for elderly Laotians, as well as made visible the Laotian community in West Contra Costa County. Sixteen year-old Gain ended that press conference by stating "our community's health and safety should not be put on hold when these accidents happen so often," (Field notes, 4/19/99). Before and after the press conference, the media present interviewed Vicki, the elderly Laotian woman and LOP's Laotian organizer.

After the initial success APEN and LOP made little progress with the County Health Department to have their demands implemented. Staff had expected the County Health Department to move quickly, but instead faced "entrenched resistance" (Kong, with Chiang 2001:19). Thus they decided to take the initiative to develop and present specific proposals to improve the emergency warning system. Through language specific house-meetings in the Laotian community APEN/LOP staff began to prioritize the

development of a multi-lingual phone-alert system, rather than a multi-lingual radio station or community outreach and education. Mr. Walker was invited to another meeting to discuss these proposals but this time APEN and LOP staff found that he was quite inaccessible. In order to have their proposal heard, the campaign team agreed to a meeting with a county health ombudsman and a press officer from the County Health Department. My field notes describe the tense atmosphere in the LOP office that evening:

The front room of the office had been set up so that the chairs were in a circle. Two chairs were in front of the fireplace. Jennifer was sitting in front of the window with her papers and notepad. There were two empty chairs nearest to the door, then Bryanna and Tsiet were sitting in line with the door. Then Loun and Muey Saephan were seated, with another empty chair next to them. Since everyone else had a role at this meeting, Vicki suggested that I take the responsibility of recording the meeting on video. The video camera was set up behind Bryanna and Tsiet. Everyone was quiet. The atmosphere was tense and there was very little conversation among us while we were waiting for the two guests to arrive. Bryanna said that she didn't feel like doing this. I don't know if she was tired or nervous. Jennifer suggested she drink some coke to get some energy.

Around 5.40 p.m. a white woman and a white man came to the office. These were the guests they had been waiting for. They were asked to sign-in, make name tags for themselves and then shown where they should sit. The woman, Teri, was a press officer and representing Mr. Walker. The man, Michael, was the county health ombudsman. Vicki asked each of us to introduce ourselves and then went over the agenda. There was no informal chitchat (Field notes 5/6/99).

Neither of these two representatives of the County Health Department had been present at the initial meeting with Mr. Walker, so Jennifer updated them about that meeting. Then Vicki informed them that they (LOP and the Laotian community) had come up with a set of specific proposals to improve the emergency warning system so that it would reach Laotian residents, and a set of specific proposal for doing community outreach and education in the Laotian community. Vicki stated that they would present each set and then expect Teri to respond to each proposal in the set individually.

The two elder Laotians, Bryanna and Tsiet took turns to present each proposal. Teri's response to all the proposals was that the County Health Department is very committed to working with the Laotian community but that she could not make decisions on any of the proposals. All she could do was to take them back to Mr. Walker who would decide on the next steps for each.

In general, the two County Health Department representatives were polite and expressed great interest and commitment to working with LOP. They acknowledged the time and work that had gone into putting these proposals together but held their ground, referring to the established budget process and the County Board of Supervisors as the decisions making body for the allocation of funds for these proposals. They also asked that LOP remain open to other ideas besides the ones they have proposed, such as installing radio frequency devices in each Laotian home. Jennifer jumped in and stated that they are very open, but that they do see these proposals as a baseline of what needs to be implemented. Vicki expressed disappointment that they could not make any decisions, and tried to impress upon Teri the need and the urgency on this matter.

Tsiet, Bryanna and the two elder Laotians listened attentively during the meeting. As the meeting was coming to an end Bryanna raised her hand and asked Teri how much the radio frequency devices that they are proposing should be installed in every Laotian home, would cost. Michael said about \$60. "At that price we can buy them too," stated Bryanna.

After the meeting ended, I asked Tsiet what she thought of the meeting. "It wasn't as good as the first one," replied Tsiet. At the first meeting Mr. Walker had given clear yes/no answers. At this one Teri was not able to say anything of substance. Over some

Chinese food, Vicki facilitated a deeper debriefing of the meeting. One LOP staff person thought they are stalling them. Vicki suggested that they probably did not expect such specific proposals to be presented. Bryanna asked, “if she (Teri) was representing Mr. Walker, didn’t she have authority to make decisions?” Vicki was struck by Bryanna’s astuteness, as I was, and replied: “That’s a really good question. We should have thought to ask her at the meeting.” Vicki asked Bryanna to flag it for next time (Field notes 5/6/99).

While the first meeting with Mr. Walker of the Contra Costa County Health Department was a powerful and positive experience, this meeting gave Laotian elders and second generation youth a real insight into local government bureaucracy and the power structures that they were challenging. The multi-lingual warning system campaign became a protracted struggle with the County’s elected leadership and public workers. Reflecting the general political climate and trend of privatization of key government roles, some of the County Board of Supervisors believed that community organizations such as LOP should do the work of educating the Laotian population (Kong, with Chiang 2001:21).

During this time APEN/LOP staff sought to maintain momentum on the campaign by extending contacts in the Laotian community, increasing membership and deepening the involvement of interested Laotian adults and elders who had been difficult to organize previously. For APEN, this was an opportunity to do base-building work and build LOP, thereby furthering the goal of creating an Asian Pacific American face in the environmental justice community. LOP’s Laotian staff organized language specific house and neighborhood meetings, conducted presentations at churches, adult education classes

and Laotian ethnic associations, as well as made personal visits to those who showed a keen interest in the campaign (Kong, with Chiang 2001:23). Members of the community were asked to sign postcards demanding that Mr. Walker and the Department of Health Services take steps to protect the health of the community. Towards the end of the campaign there were 100 Laotians actively involved in campaign pressure activities (Kong, with Chiang 2001:21). There were several delegations to meet with various County Board of Supervisors, which included APEN/LOP staff, Laotian elders and/or Bryanna and Tsiet.

After six months of organizing and sustained pressure, on September 27, 1999 the County Board of Supervisors agreed to a new multi-lingual phone alert system in Contra Costa County.¹⁰ For APEN and the Laotian community this campaign demanded that citizens and non-citizens alike, who live, work and play in Contra Costa County have a basic right to a safe environment, regardless of their race or class.

The multilingual emergency warning system campaign emphasized vertical relationship between the Laotian community and established decision makers in Contra Costa County. They demanded that local government ensure the social rights of immigrants and non-immigrants, English-speaking and non-English speaking alike, in a County that has experienced a dramatic socio-demographic transformation in its

¹⁰ By early 2000 Contra Costa County had not begun to implement the multi-lingual warning system, citing the need to secure resources. APEN/LOP began a second campaign to pressure to County to commit resources for the new system. LOP also developed a model pilot program to reach the Laotian community and enroll households into the new system, and identified potential outside funding for the work. On July 24, 2000, the County Board of Supervisors' Internal Operations Committee agreed to the following demands from LOP: a) secure outside funding sources for the implementation of the Laotian languages pilot program (with the commitment to set up other languages after the pilot); b) investigate the potential of Chevron penalty money from the March 1999 explosion towards funding the multi-lingual phone alert system; and c) launch a new program to help Laotian families get access to low-cost health care programs (Kong, with Chiang 2001:20). As of this writing the Contra Costa County had finally located a source of funding to implement the pilot multi-lingual phone alert system (informal conversation with LOP staff).

population with the increase in immigrant communities. In this APEN activists display an awareness of the way in which the American sociopolitical environment is structured so that interest-group politics on the racial model is necessary not only to gain access to resources and political influence but also because discrimination and repression, both official and informal, is meted out along racial categories and thus becomes a logical basis for resistance (Gamson 1995:400-401). APEN thus defined social rights in terms of the group, in the process challenging liberal definitions of citizenship which constructs all citizens as equal in terms of status, rights and duties. At the same time, the organizing strategy in this campaign called attention to an increased role for the state to ensure social rights, not less, in order to create the enabling conditions for all citizens to be full and active members of the nation.

APEN/LOP sought to execute the campaign for a multilingual emergency alert system through the leadership of community members who were monolingual elders and or women, or who were adults and youth. These sections of the community challenged the leadership of a few established leaders. Early on in the campaign, they had disparaged the ability, and viability, of a grassroots membership to represent the needs and concerns of the Laotian community to the County.¹¹ Perhaps these established leaders were also questioning the legitimacy of individuals exogenous to the Laotian community representing the needs of the community to state officials.¹² As my discussion of the various campaign related meetings suggests, Laotian youth and elders provided testimony and presented previously defined solutions to the problem that the campaign was

¹¹ This was not the first time APEN's work in the Laotian community has come under attack, as I discussed in Chapter Two.

¹² Over time some ethnic organizations were willing to participate in the campaign by writing letters of support to County officials (Kong, with Chiang 2001:30).

addressing. But it was Vicki, the lead organizer for the campaign, and sometimes Jennifer (third- and second-generation East Asian Americans respectively) who controlled meetings and took responsibility for the delicate political negotiations with state representatives. I am not questioning their ability to represent the needs and interests of Laotians adequately. I am pointing to the participation of Laotians in this campaign, which was circumscribed within specific roles. As Espiritu and Ong (1994) have observed, the U.S. political system rewards those with language skills and political sophistication, both of which most Laotians do not as yet have.

Nevertheless, I want to highlight the fact that through the campaign the needs of Laotians as a new immigrant community in the County were made more visible. APEN/LOP staff found that many grassroots campaign participants had little experience in expressing their views in a formal setting, let alone possessing an understanding of community organizing and civic participation (Kong, with Chiang 2001:33). In part, this may be due to what Hein (1995:100-101) calls a “deferential view of authority figures” among Laotian refugees. In contrast to participatory democracy in the United States, political decision-making in Laos was the province of elite rather than ordinary citizens. Hein notes that since the Lao have a hierarchical conception of the family, their views of citizens’ relationship to government are similarly organized through the lens of kinship, in which government rules over the people.

Moreover, many Laotians have memories of the way politics were conducted in Laos under authoritarian and then Communist governments. Hein (1995) argues that experiences under authoritarian and then Communist governments, as well as the negative connotations associated with the very term politics act as further disincentives to

political participation.¹³ And, in the US, with increasing assaults on existing social support systems, immigrants are wary of questioning and challenging public officials. One Mien grandmother was hesitant to speak with local government representatives about her experiences and concerns for her family's health because she was afraid she would lose her welfare benefits (APEN Voices, Fall 1999:8). Due to this fear, some Mien members ended their participation early on in the campaign (Kong, with Chiang 2001:33). However, in a community with little community organizing experience and still fearful of government authority, many members were empowered to speak in front of government officials.

Throughout the campaign, diverse strands of the Laotian community were working together to voice the needs and concerns of the Laotian community, including second generation Laotian girls and young women. I believe my informants desire and willingness to work across generation and ethnic affiliations in this campaign stemmed from two sources: their own experiences of the effects of the accident on March 25, 1998; and the on-going work by APEN staff to inform the Laotian teenagers about the environmental hazards in their community. For example, in the summer of 1998 there was an active focus on environmental justice in the curriculum for several of the groups. I witnessed the third cohort of youth give a "toxic tour" to the newly recruited Laotian girls in the fourth group. We visited six of West Contra Costa County's "toxic hot spots" and learned about the types of contamination, the various ways people are exposed, as well as the source of contamination itself. At an elementary school across from a Chevron

¹³ Though Hein (1995:104) does cite instances of grassroots activism around the country related to issues of inadequate social-welfare services, rent increases and segregated school facilities (also see Ellen Somekawa 1995).

incinerator one of our “tour guides” told us that when she was attending that school there were many evacuations and drills.

The principal would tell us, over the intercom, to get into a line and put a paper napkin or tissue over our mouths and nose so that we wouldn’t breathe in the toxins that were in the air. We would get into a bus and ride around town for a few minutes, maybe an hour, so that the spills or leaks would be cleaned up and the school would be safe for us to return to (field notes 7/7/98).

She informed us that test scores at this school have been the lowest one percent of the state (field notes 7/7/98), thus making a direct connection between environmental pollution, the consequent disruption in their schooling, and the ability to get a good education in the shadow of an incinerator. We visited an infamous General Chemical plant, a pier where Laotians fished and is now a Superfund site, a leveled lot of should-high thistles nicknamed Laotian gardens. This was the site of Drew Scrap Metals plant, described earlier.

Through such on-going activities, APEN builds collective self-understandings and a sense of solidarity among second-generation Laotians in AYA. While in the early years achieving environmental justice was tied to corporate accountability, in this campaign the role of the state in ensuring social rights for all was emphasized.

The multilingual emergency warning system also highlights the tension between identity-politics and coalitional politics. Clearly, the inadequacy of the emergency warning system affects the lives of other limited-English-speaking communities in Contra Costa County. The ramifications of this campaign will eventually spread to all non-English speaking residents in the County, including the large Spanish-speaking population. APEN/LOP staff made a strategic decision not to organize a multi-racial campaign. Several factors shaped this decision: 1) staff capacity and the resources

available made a multi-racial campaign impossible; and 2) perhaps more importantly, following the environmental justice principle of people speaking for themselves, APEN/LOP staff sought to develop capacity in the Laotian community for Laotians of various ethnic groups to speak for themselves.

By focusing on the Laotian community APEN prioritized base-building work in a community that lacks resources, experiences extreme poverty, invisibility and is linguistically and culturally isolated.¹⁴ APEN's Laotian Organizing Project provides a space to nurture an emerging political identity and build collective networks in the Laotian community. Ignoring threats and disparaging remarks from established political leaders in the Laotian community, APEN and LOP have built a strategic identity Laotian to bring together at least three of the ethnic Laotian groups in West Contra Costa County, which staff had language capacity to communicate with and organize. The campaign planning committee included men and women from the Mien, Khmu and Lao ethnic groups (APEN Voices, Fall 1999:8), and campaign activities involved adults, seniors and youth in the community. In pursuing this political strategy, APEN downplays internal divisions of ethnic affiliation and nurtures a new collective political identity. These inter-ethnic divisions have a historical basis and continue to exist in West Contra Costa County.¹⁵

¹⁴ Staff resources and time were spent on removing or minimizing structural barriers that prevent elders, women, and poor and working people from participating in grassroots social change. LOP provided childcare, transportation as well as food and snacks. Meetings were mostly held during evenings and weekends to accommodate those working. In addition, staff had to devise ways to conduct multilingual and interactive community meetings that ensured the participation of all, not just the established leaders in the community, or those with a good command of English, those with political experience (Kong, with Chiang 2001:26-29).

¹⁵ Smith and Tarallo (1993:98) observe that the Laotian population, in Laos, remains divided between the dominant, relatively urbanized and nationally integrated lowland Lao, and more than 40 different ethnic minorities, many of who reside in the mountain regions, such as the Mien. The historical isolation of these villages, their limited integration into the nation's economy, and their ethnic and linguistic diversity have all mitigated the development of a unified Laotian national identity. Here in the U.S., there are a lot of

There is no doubt that APEN runs “the ‘risk’ of essence” (Fuss 1989:1), of homogenizing Laotian people. But this Laotian identity only becomes salient within the context of being an immigrant in the US. Laotians of different ethnic affiliations share a common structural location in the US and common contexts of struggle. Thus, a community organization such as the Laotian Organizing Project has to enact “a strategic use of positivist essentialism” (Spivak 1987, cited in Fuss 1989:31) in order to have a collective basis for action against economic and state structures. Indeed, Diana Fuss (1989:32) has argued that we do not throw away essentialism prematurely but examine the motives of those who are deploying it. While there is always the risk that a “temporary” intervention will become entrenched into a reactionary form of essentialism and reification of group boundaries, Fuss argues that the “risk” is worth taking. The determining factor in deciding essentialism’s strategic value is dependent on who practices it, and I would add, to what purpose.

Laotian political identity, constructed out of different languages, cultural traditions, classes, gender and generation, is shaped by the shared experiences of racialization and its consequences. As a political identity it appears strategic, but in terms of community and personal identity the category “Laotian” remains a contested space, as we saw in Chapter Three. In the next section, I discuss the ways in which APEN sought to maintain the Laotian political identity as fluid, dynamic and open to making connections with other limited-English-speaking communities more directly.

informal community organizations representing Lao, Mien, Khmu, Hmong and Thaidam groups in Contra Costa County, as I noted in Chapter Two. These organizations have tended to be territorial and work separately rather than in coalition with each other, according to Lily, a one-and-a-half generation Laotian woman who had worked as a counselor with AYA in the summers of 1995 and 1996.

Race, Language and Belonging: The Fight against Proposition 227

On June 2, 1998, Californians decisively rejected bilingual education by approving Proposition 227, the so-called “English for the Children” initiative (One Nation/One California Pamphlet). Proposition 227 represented a continuation of an extreme antipathy towards non-English languages embodied in previous “English Only” legislation that has swept the nation (Sanchez 1997:1020). Such legislation, together with attacks on multiculturalism and affirmative action (for example Proposition 209 which was approved in California in 1996), and anti-immigrant focus on the drain of public resources of education, healthcare and welfare benefits by illegal immigrants (the “Save Our State” Proposition 187 in 1994) assert what Sanchez (1997:1019) has called a racialized nativism at the end of the twentieth century.

In the 1990s, issues of immigration, race, ethnicity and language have preoccupied and often divided Californians (Crawford 1999). The passage of Proposition 227 represents a fear among sections of the population in California that linguistic difference will undermine the American nation (Sanchez 1997:1020). Upholding English as the language of the nation is thus seen as protecting a way of life.¹⁶ However, Proposition 227 not only raised issues of race, language and belonging for immigrant and refugee communities but also the issue of language minorities having access to a good and adequate education.¹⁷

¹⁶ In the *Unmaking of Americans*, John Miller (1998:239-249) delineates a contemporary ‘Americanization’ program that would, among other things, eliminate bilingual education, allow employers to adopt English-only rules, end exemptions to the English-language requirements for elderly seeking naturalization, abolish affirmative action, and deny welfare to noncitizens.

¹⁷ It is worth noting the divisions in current nativist sentiments. Ron Unz, the creator and sponsor of Propositions 227, did not see it as an anti-immigrant proposition but rather an immigrant’s ticket to “the American Dream of economic and social advancement” (English Language in Public School, 1998, cited in Crawford 1999). However Crawford (1999) argues that Unz’s attempt to dismantle bilingual education

Elaine, APEN's executive director, notes that "our [APEN/LOP's] ability to be involved in working against 227 was really predicated by the growing understanding of what the barriers were for the [Laotian] community in their local school and they couldn't have access" (Interview 10/21/98). Over a period of six months in 1997 and 1998 the Organizing Committee of LOP, consisting of LOP staff, adult Laotians from the community and four girls from the youth project, Sarah, Gain, Pham and Tsiet, had met to identify and discuss the barriers facing the Laotian community in their local schools. Parents did not have access because many did not speak English but also because they were not familiar with the most basic practices of U.S. schools.¹⁸ This meant that parents could not participate in matters dealing with the education of their children. In addition, during the school-year 1997-1998 over 50 percent of the Asian students categorized as Limited-English-Proficient in the West Contra Costa Unified School District (WCCUSD) were Laotian (derived from California Department of Education data). These students would be directly affected if voters approved Proposition 227.¹⁹ Thus, for APEN organizing a campaign against Proposition 227 was an opportunity to mobilize Laotian parents against a ballot initiative that would be detrimental to the needs of their children and community.

APEN decided to join forces with Californians for Justice (CFJ), a grassroots multiracial social justice organization, to work in key precincts within West Contra Costa

represents a "broader, neoconservative agenda" of rolling back social programs and civil rights reforms of the 1960s while at the same time casting him as "pro-immigrant" and "pro-assimilation."

¹⁸ 1990 census statistics indicate over 50 percent of Laotians live in linguistically isolated households, meaning that no-one over the age of 14 in that household speaks English only or very well (Rumbaut 1995:248). This effectively cuts these families from most major forms of mass communication, and has serious implications on whether the community understands the way U.S. society works.

¹⁹ At Richmond High School, where the majority of the girls in the APEN youth program go to school, there were 700 students in the Bilingual Program in 1999 and fifty percent of them were Asian. At least 75

County. CFJ was organizing a campaign to raise awareness about the initiative and persuade people to vote against it, and conducting a voter registration drive. For APEN/LOP staff, this electoral campaign represented an organizing effort that would be completed in a short time frame, would not require a lot of staff resources since CFJ was leading the organizing effort, and it would give the AYA youth experience in organizing against a statewide initiative that directly affected the community (Interview with Emiko, 9/22/98). At the same time bilingual education was an issue that was also important in the Latino community. Thus, for APEN, involvement in the “No on 227” campaign provided an opportunity to draw connections between all the immigrant communities in Contra Costa County.

Proposition 227 and the issues surrounding it were introduced to the youth in AYA at a Whole Group Meeting in March 1998:

It is a gray and rainy afternoon, but this store-front office is buzzing with the sound of teenagers excited to see each other and rock music blaring from the radio. Nineteen of the youth are here today from Groups 1, 2 and 3. Only three of the girls are not present. Almost everyone is dressed in blue jeans, black T-shirts, rain gear and black lace-up platform boots or FILA running shoes. [The first one and half hour of this meeting was filled with a game, announcements of upcoming events that AYA staff wanted some of the youth to attend, updates on the retreat in April, and a short ceremony honoring Elaine, APEN’s Executive Director, for winning the Woman Warrior Award].

After a ten-minute break, Gain of Group 2, and Pham and Tsiet of Group 3, with the aid of staff, present a short skit on bilingual education and Proposition 227.

Scene 1: non-English speaking parent comes to school to meet with one of the school administrators. Someone goes to pull her daughter out of class to translate for the parent, but the daughter is extremely reluctant to go because she will miss part of the class. Later that day there is a LOP meeting during which time the upcoming Proposition 227 is discussed.

Scene 2: A subsequent day in a classroom with a bilingual teacher and students. The teacher explains something in English but the students do not understand

percent of Asians at Richmond High are Laotians (interview with Resource Teacher for the Bilingual Program at Richmond High, 5/19/99).

her. So, the teacher repeats it in the students' native language, Mien. Then 2 people, holding placards with Proposition 227 and "English Only" stomp through the classroom.

Scene 3: AYA youth are trying to persuade people to vote "No" for Proposition 227 and asking them to sign a petition against it (Field notes, March 23, 1998).

After the presentation, Jennifer, the Youth Program Coordinator, briefly mentions the discussions around school issues that have occurred in LOP's Organizing Committee (OC) and states: "if Prop. 227 passes OC has no grounds to ask for bilingual education and services in schools." She informs the youth that Californians for Justice will be working out of the LOP office to campaign against it in key precincts in West Contra Costa County. Then Jennifer asks the youth to suggest some of the ways to get people involved in such a campaign. Someone shouts out, "phone-banking." Another youth shouts, "Door-to-door." This prompts Seng to mention a difficult experience that she and Gain had when working precincts during the campaign against Proposition 209.²⁰ Jennifer affirms their experience and tells the youth that one can meet difficult people who can not be persuaded, "but you also meet some cool people" (field notes 3/23/98). When Jennifer asks for volunteers, Tsiet, Paeng, Tracy, Pham, Lai, Gain and Leah immediately sign-up to work on the campaign. For these teenagers the ways in which Proposition 227 would directly affect the Laotian community struck a chord, as I argue below.

Tsiet, Pham, Cuo, Leah and Rachel got their first experience of informing others in Laotian community about Proposition 227 and persuading them to sign a petition

²⁰ APEN and AYA staff had encouraged Groups 1 and 2 to get involved in the campaign against Proposition 209 in 1996. Seng had become a precinct leader, Rachel and Gain had worked some precincts and Gabriela had accompanied staff on a demonstration against the Proposition (Field notes April 6, 1998).

against it at the annual Lao New Year celebration in Richmond in early April.²¹ With a clip-board and petition in my hand, I accompanied Pham and Tsiet as they walked around the reception area outside the auditorium. Several organizations, including LOP, had set-up information booths by the front entrances to the auditorium. Adjacent to the side entrances there was a mini-market, with vendors selling Laotian textiles, ready-made clothing and food cooked on the premises. While, several hundred guests were inside the auditorium watching a beauty pageant, the reception area was fairly quiet.

Pham and Tsiet decided to approach people as they were standing around chatting to friends and family. I observed Tsiet confidently introduce herself as a member of the LOP and inform them about Proposition 227 and reasons why they should oppose it. Pham found it difficult to approach individuals at the event. When I tried to encourage her and suggested that she use the words Tsiet was using, she said: "I am too embarrassed." AYA staff had coached the youth earlier in the day to tell people that in addition to cutting bilingual education and services if it passed, Proposition 227 represented an attack on Laotian cultures and languages. This was a powerful argument for some Laotians who already feared that their children would be mono-lingual in English. They signed the petition without questions or discussions, and Jennifer reported that she heard many people say "they can't take away our language" (Field notes, April 6, 1998). Others refused to sign the petition stating that they were not citizens. Others still were fearful of signing because it might mean they would have to give money to someone or an organization. They were also afraid of being included in some kind of list. Despite reassurances, these Laotian community members were not persuaded by three

²¹ The Lao New Year Festival in Richmond has been organized annually since 1996. Twenty-four Laotian Mutual Assistance Associations sponsored the 1998 celebrations in the Bay Area (Lao National New Year

unknown individuals, Tsiet, Pham or myself, representing a little known organization, LOP (Field notes, April 4, 1998). But the youth volunteers, staff and I did gather 80 signatures that afternoon.

At a subsequent youth meeting all my informants were encouraged, I would say expected to work precincts, do phone banking, pass out flyers and get petitions signed at school and hang information on doors in local precincts, in response to media polls showing that Proposition 227 had strong voter support. Jennifer framed the youth's involvement in the campaign against Proposition 227 and working with CFJ as "a learning experience" and because "it ties in with LOP's school issues campaign." In other words it was an important part of the youth's work as members of AYA/LOP. However, she did not elaborate on LOP's school issues campaign even though only four of the youth had been involved in those discussions with LOP's Organizing Committee. And no space was created for a conversation with the youth about the importance of the role the youth could play, whether they wanted to do electoral organizing, and their reactions to the Proposition (Field notes, April 6, 1998).

Once APEN staff and LOP's Organizing Committee made the decision to support CFJ's campaign against Proposition 227 and provide precinct organizers, APEN and CFJ staff trained the youth on how to work precincts and do phone banking through role plays. A staff person from CFJ emphasized to the twenty youth attending a meeting in early April that they should always ask for three things when working a precinct – "to vote, volunteer and donate money for the production of campaign materials." (Field notes April 6, 1998).

Festival 1998 Program).

How did involvement in the campaign against Proposition 227 shape my informants' political subjectivities? I explored their perspectives on a statewide initiative that would end bilingual education in schools, and feelings about getting involved in electoral organizing to fight the Proposition. When asked how they felt about the Proposition 227, many of the youth expressed confusion over the supporting and contrary arguments. They were categorical about needing to learn English if one wants to live in the United States, but at the same time they objected to the provisions for learning English and what this meant for getting a good education under proposition 227. For example, sixteen year-old Lon, who did phone-banking and talked to family members about the initiative, believed that bilingual classes were necessary because non-English speaking students would not understand nor learn anything in English-only classes:

Bindi: So, do you think then classes should be held in Spanish for chemistry or algebra or something like that so they learn enough in it or should they just go to an English speaking class?

Lon: Well, I think certain subjects, say chemistry could be, it doesn't have to necessarily have to be taught in all Spanish. It could occasionally like have English you know. It could be on and off or something. But then I don't think it should be all English and I don't think it should be all-Spanish. Because, if it's either then they'll never learn. If it's all Spanish how are they gonna learn English? If it's all-English, they'll never learn English. So, it should be like mixed.

Like other immigrants, Lon believed that the children of immigrants and immigrant children in the US should learn English.²² But Lon recognizes the need for flexibility in teaching methods based on the needs of the students, something that the passage of

²² Bill Ong Hing notes that immigrants entering the U.S. today learn English at the same rate as other immigrant groups before them. Demand of English as a Second Language classes is high and immigrant parents encourage their children to learn English. Even among Latinos, who are often accused by cultural assimilationists of not wanting to learn English, those who have lived in the U.S. for 15 years regularly speak English. In addition, about 93 percent of all Mexican immigrants agree that U.S. residents should learn English (1996:17-18).

Proposition 227 has eliminated. Other informants drew on their experiences of learning Spanish to argue that it was impossible to learn adequate English in one year. Seng had taken Spanish as a second language for three years but still had minimal competency in the language (Field notes, April 6, 1998). Seng's experience is supported by a considerable body of research that shows on average, academic proficiency in a second language takes four to seven years to develop (Collier and Thomas 1989, cited in Crawford 1999:8).

Two other informants, Maya from the third cohort and Leah from the second cohort, both of whom had worked precincts, asked friends to sign petitions and participated in phone-banking, made a direct connection between schools not meeting the educational needs of some students and dropping out or engaging in criminal activity.

Maya: Leaving them in all English classes, of course they like learn to adapt and mix in and learn like what they're saying in English or doing whatever. But then when they have like help from a translator and stuff, they understand that. They are more eager you know to learn about more stuff instead of like, because they can be pulled down right like if they don't understand any of it. "What's the point of me coming to class if I don't understand what they are saying?" Or like you know "I'm having such a hard time and stressing over this," you know. They just like, they give up.

Leah: What I was thinking about 227 is if we were to say No, and then you cancel all the things like they say... I think that it's going to cause crime, crime rates. People tend to cut when they don't understand school... Then if they cut then they doing something out there, not good for their health and not good for their community. So that's why I supported it (the APEN campaign against Proposition 227).

The connection between bilingual education and academic performance that Maya and Leah delineate is also recognized by academics. In reference to second generation Vietnamese and Mien youth in Sacramento, California, Smith and Tarallo

(1993:xiii) assert that access to appropriate bilingual teaching assistance for some children of immigrants is particularly important, and may help to prevent problems such as involvement in gang-related activities.

Maya and Leah's comments echo the alienation experienced by some Laotian youth that Laotian social workers have observed in west Contra Costa County. All of my informants knew of Laotian peers who were involved in gangs or who had become teen mothers. And Maya had recounted in her interview that her male friends had often told her there was not any point in working hard and going to school because teachers did not care about them. Here Maya's friends are pointing to the racialization young Laotians experience in schools in Contra Costa County. Similarly Walker-Moffat (1995:111) has argued that juvenile delinquency and gang related activity among Hmong youth may be in part explained by their disillusionment with school and the "realization that school replaces their cultural identity with a new minority identity that has limited their opportunity in a racist environment."

In the comments above, my informants focus on the pedagogical issues involved in bilingual education rather than the proposition's nativist implications, which motivated APEN staff to join forces with CFJ in challenging it. However, I argue that this does not necessarily represent a rejection of APEN's interpretation of the proposition. Rather it appears to be a response to the dominant framing of the proposition as a children's "right" to learn English in the media and the purported failure of bilingual education programs (Crawford 1999).²³ But some informants were concerned about the unfairness

²³ Crawford (1999) argues that in the more than 600 newspaper articles, as well as countless radio and television broadcasts, appeared on Proposition 227 in the six-months before election day, most framed the debate in terms of an either/or decision and did not ask questions about ways to improve bilingual education.

of not allowing immigrants to maintain their language while taking advantage of the opportunities in this country. Fourteen year-old Bryanna said:

It's not fair. I mean, what's wrong with people from another country not being able to speak English. I think we should give them opportunities 'cause this is a land of opportunities. But that's like kinda, that's kinda unconstitutional for them to do that stuff.

Bryanna, who was born in the US, as well as some other youth recognized the anti-immigrant elements of Proposition 227. Three days after California voters approved the elimination of bi-lingual education, Maya reported "earlier today a Spanish lady was speaking in Spanish and someone else came and said to her 'have you guys heard about 227?'" (Field notes, June 5, 1998). Seventeen year-old Seng saw the Proposition as a direct attack on language and cultural minorities. At a youth meeting in April 1998, where staff was training the youth about how to work precincts, the CFJ staff person asked, "why is it [Proposition 227] bad?" Seng's responded passionately, "most people in here can't even talk in their own language. They are so caught up in learning English and doing school work that when they go home they forget to speak their language" (Field notes, April 6, 1998). For Seng the strategy of intensive English for one-year that Proposition 227 proposed would put even more pressure on immigrant children to speak English at all times and abandon other languages. Bryanna, who had become involved in the campaign even before she became an official youth member of AYA, Seng and Maya had all been very active in the electoral organizing activities because it directly affected the Laotian community. But once they were engaged in the campaign they began to understand the implications of the proposition for other communities, as well as its ideological underpinnings.

For other informants the campaign against Proposition 227 presented an opportunity to inform their immigrant parents and get them involved in fighting for their rights.

Sarah: In that it was like a good issue for us to try and help them you know... cause some people didn't know what it was about so we, so APEN explained it to them.

Tracy: Yeah it also gives me a chance to let the people be aware, like the Proposition 227, like most of us Asians, like our parents, their, everyone, they didn't like know what's going on.

Pham: And they think, they either think it's good or bad. They don't know the real reason you know, so they'll just pick one or the other.

Tracy: Yeah.

Pham: And then we try to like let them know that it's a very bad thing.

Here Sarah, Tracy and Pham point to the lack of information and access to information in a community that is linguistically isolated. Working with APEN on the campaign against Proposition 227 provided my informants with an opportunity to educate family and friends about the consequences for bilingual education if the proposition was approved.

In this campaign to defeat Proposition 227, APEN provided the language and created the conditions for my informants to get involved in mobilizing the Laotian community. Although the initiative passed in California,²⁴ in every single precinct that APEN and CFJ worked the ballot measure was defeated. For these Laotian teenagers, who cannot vote, getting involved in this electoral campaign showed them that they can still influence voter opinion. And it illustrated the importance of exercising one's right to vote and to participate in building a democratic society. When I asked my informants what they were most proud of being involved in at APEN, Fiey, from the third cohort,

²⁴ On June 2, 1998 Californians approved Proposition 227 and rejected bilingual education 61% to 39% (Crawford 1999). Crawford (1999) provides a detailed analysis of the role of the Proposition's backers, the

mentioned her role in this victory (Interview 1/7/99). Gabriela, from the first cohort, was also ecstatic that their efforts had paid-off:

Another thing about is that it passed within all the other cities but it didn't pass in Richmond. That really like, that really like, you know that's like one of the biggest moments in this thing, it didn't pass. Yehhh!

Almost all the youth participated in one or more of the campaign related activities, whether it was asking friends to sign petitions, passing out information, or actually working precincts with other youth of color from CFJ. Many of these activities, such as walking in unfamiliar neighborhoods and talking to strangers in person, required some level of courage. Some informants participated due to the strong expectations from AYA staff that they become involved even though they did not care about the issue. Other informants got involved "because of like their obligation and loyalty (to APEN)" according to Jennifer. But for a core group of my informants Proposition 227 struck a chord with them. Even though none of them needed bilingual classes, they all knew of Laotian peers in school who did. And most of the youth had had the experience of being pulled out of class to translate for their parents when they came to meet with a school official. Among this core group there was a collective self-understanding of the implications of Proposition 227, and a realization that no one else was mobilizing the Laotian community against a ballot measure that would affect them directly.

In the campaign to defeat Proposition 227, APEN made a link between immigration, culture and citizenship. The appearance of such an initiative was seen as part of the trend in the 1990s of rise in nativism and attacks on people of color. As the CFJ representative categorically stated to the twenty AYA youth during a training

media and bilingual educators in framing the issues in specific ways that was bound to deliver a "yes" vote

session, “this is an attack on some people, on immigrants and African Americans” (Field notes, April 6, 1998). Thus besides the practical aims of getting the community involved and educating them about their rights, the campaign sought to make connections between immigrant communities and communities of color. However, as I stated above there was no explicit discussion during the campaign about the connections and commonalities between different communities of color in Contra Costa County. Consequently, my informants understood Proposition 227 as an attack on ‘difference’, and were aware of the practical implications of banning bilingual education in schools, but failed to reach a “complex antiracist consciousness” (Angela Davis in Lowe 1997:320). I discuss some of the possible reasons for this in Chapter Five. This campaign against Proposition 227 again highlights the ease with which social justice organizations can fall into the “power and pathos of identity politics (Brubaker and Cooper 2000:1), and the need for clear, intentional strategies to create a politics based on commonalities.

In the next section I discuss a campaign that sought to build the Laotian Organizing Project and to make explicit connections with other communities in West Contra Costa County.

Race and Education: The School Counselor Campaign

My informants attend inner-city public schools where they are subjected to surveillance and intervention, and constrained from reaching their full potential because of a lack of resources, inadequate number of teachers with credentials, non-challenging curricula, and the prevalence of violence.²⁵ At a brainstorming session early in the 1998-

on the proposition.

²⁵ In a recent report the Fiscal Crisis and Management Assistance Team used professional and legal standards to assess the West Contra Costa Unified School District in five areas: community relations, personnel management, pupil achievement, financial management and facilities management. On a scale of

1999 school year, I remember being aghast at the whole litany of problems my informants identified at Richmond High School, which most of them attend: not enough counselors to give adequate advice, favoritism exercised by security guards, not enough textbooks, dirty, unusable bathrooms, violence and weapons brought to school by students, lack of respect from some teachers, and drugs (field notes 11/23/98). On the occasions that I had visited the school it had felt like a low-security prison with security guards everywhere, locked gates, crowded classrooms without windows, and absolutely no greenery. I could not imagine learning anything in what appeared to me as a very alienating school environment. But the girls did not express anger; the tone in which the girls stated the problems was very matter-of-fact. Perhaps this is because they have to build a protective barrier around themselves and get on with school.

Some of my informants' school experiences have origins in past tax policies in California and changing funding priorities at the local, state and federal levels. In addition, the rapid demographic changes in California over the last twenty years have led to a severe competition for resources. Others stem from dominant constructions of urban youth as "at-risk," with proclivities for teenage pregnancy, gang-involvement, violence and drug addiction, and welfare dependency, in the 1990s. Kelly (2000) argues that the categorization of youth as "at-risk" provides a rationale for increased surveillance of and

0 to 10, where 10 represented not only full implementation of standards, but sustaining them with high quality, the Report gave the District a 6.27 for community relations, 5.30 for personnel management, 5.26 for facilities management, and 4.38 for financial management, but only 2.76 for pupil achievement (West Contra Costa Unified School District Assessment and Improvement Plan, 2001). Annual California Schools Safety Assessments indicate that in the West Contra Costa Unified School District crimes in certain categories (assault with deadly weapon, possession of weapons, property crimes) have gone down over the period 1995-2000, but crimes in other categories such as battery has increased dramatically, while those related to sex offenses, robbery and drug/alcohol related have increased slightly (California Department of Education, www.cde.ca.gov).

intervention into young people's lives by schools, police, health services and the juvenile justice system.²⁶

Yet other experiences are particular to schools in the West Contra Costa Unified School District (WCCUSD). In the late 1980s, the then-Richmond Unified School District was unable to fund a continuance of instructional services and was faced with bankruptcy. The district accepted a multi-million dollar loan from the state of California. In the intervening thirteen years, the district has repaid approximately \$22 million of the loan, but is still burdened with the remaining \$19.9 million debt (WCCUSD Assessment and Improvement Plan, 2001:16). The district's near-bankruptcy and resultant state oversight led to the prohibition from participating in the State School Facilities Program from 1993 to 1998. Consequently existing facilities have deteriorated, custodial and other maintenance staff were reduced by 50 percent and have not been restored, all of which have created "teaching environments [that] are depressing to both students and staff" (WCCUSD Assessment and Improvement Plan, 2001:17). More significantly, the district's budgetary problems led to a focus on financial survival rather than supporting and facilitating pupil achievement (WCCUSD Assessment and Improvement Plan, 2001).

As I noted in Chapter Two, in fall 1998 APEN staff made a programmatic and strategic decision to directly involve the youth in organizing around an issue that affected the Laotian community as a vehicle for building the Laotian Organizing Project. Conducting a campaign around a school-related issue seemed logical since both adults in

²⁶ For example, in April 2001 Governor Gray Davis of California approved \$3.3 million for juvenile crime prevention in Contra Costa County. Among the programs the monies will be used to finance is a program that places probation officers in selected high schools and middle school to provide supervision and services to youths with problems ranging from truancy to major criminal offenses (Jokelson 2001). Federal law also mandates that any public school receiving federal funding institute a "zero-tolerance" policy for certain weapons offenses. Though schools and school districts implement such a policy differently, studies

LOP's Organizing Committee and youth had identified multiple problems at Richmond High School. At a meeting on November 23, 1998, when twelve youth from Groups 1, 2, 3, and 4 were in attendance, Jennifer presented four problems in schools that Groups 1 and 2 had identified the previous year: not enough attention from counselors, and not enough counselors to give adequate advice; teachers unfamiliar with Laotian cultures and cultural norms²⁷; racism among security guards; and inadequate resources and textbooks (Field notes, 11/23/98). These problems had the potential to become campaign issues for the youth.

In order to select the best issue to organize around Jennifer asked the youth to evaluate each issue in terms of the following criteria:

- is serious enough to get specifically Lao youth involved.
- Is not just one person's issue but affects a lot of people.
- Will motivate people to get involved
- Builds alliances with people of other races. It doesn't isolate us.
- Makes a real and specific change happen at school.

Jennifer elaborated on each criterion further. On the fourth criteria of building alliances with other races, Jennifer reminded my informants, "We would never want to work against other races, especially other people of color, because that divides us. That often happens (that others try to divide people of color)" (field notes 11/23/98). Thus any campaign that APEN/LOP conducts must not only meet the goals of building the organization but also promote bridges with other communities of color. The following excerpt from my field notes illustrates that my informants believed a campaign around

by community organizations around the country find that "zero-tolerance" policies disproportionately affect students of color (ERASE Initiative, 2000).

²⁷ Trueba et. al. (1990:75) found that Hmong students attempts to belong and participate fully in the class were undermined by teachers who remained firmly in their own training and cultural values, and demanded compliance with American cultural norms of performance. When the teachers' expectations were not met,

the problem of inadequate number of text books, and not enough counselors would satisfy these two goals.

Jennifer asks each group to come to the front and give highlights of their discussion. Fiey comes up first to report on the problem of discrimination among security guards that she, Leah and Tsiet evaluated. They thought that Laotian students wouldn't care about this problem because Asian kids don't get into trouble. They think it is only a problem for "kids who do bad stuff." When Fiey finishes Jennifer asks the whole group if they have any questions. Sarah doesn't agree with this group's assessment. She thinks security guards are a problem, "it does happen to a lot of people, may be you guys haven't heard about it." Tsiet thinks that the problem is not so much discrimination but that "they (security guards) don't do their job. Jennifer expands Tsiet's assertion by asking if the problem is that they don't stop people from smoking or stop them if they are cutting classes. Tsiet and Sarah nod. "So we need to re-frame the problem," responds Jennifer.

Rachel reports next on the problem of not enough textbooks that she, Pham and Paeng evaluated. They thought that Laotian students would be interested because success rides on it. The came up with the equation "new books=motivation=success" and thought that this issue would motivate people to get involved and build racial alliances.

Lon reports on the problem of lack of cultural sensitivity that she Sarah and Koy discussed. They don't think people care about this issue and don't see it as one that would motivate people.

Finally, Cuo reports on the problem of not enough counselors that she, Maya and Julia evaluated. Cuo, like the others, started by stating the problem. But, unlike the others, she reads from her sheet and speaks softly. Jennifer asks her to speak up. Cuo continues to read from her sheet but speaks a little louder. (She is still very shy among the AYA girls). Cuo's group thought that this issue would motivate people because students care about their classes and more counselors would help. In their opinion, this issue would be of interest to all races. (Field notes, 11/23/98).

The two issues that my informants selected as good campaign issues were those that were directly related to educational performance. Most of my informants were performing well at school and highly motivated. They had learned the cultural codes

the Hmong children were judged to be performing at low levels of achievement, and giving clear signs of suffering learning disabilities.

required for high academic achievement and navigating school life. Thus they did not encounter cultural dissonance or problems from security guards. At subsequent meetings the youth voted to work on the issue of the lack of sufficient support and guidance for students at Richmond High, thus deciding to take proactive stance on a long-term problem. It was also an issue that benefited all the communities in West Contra Costa County since 95 percent of students at this school are students of color.

The first step in this work was to find out how other students at Richmond High felt about the issue. With leadership from Blia of Group 1, Bryanna, Lisa and Yen of Group 4, Maya and Fiey of Group 3 and Cuo of Group 2, which formed the core group of youth working with staff to devise campaign activities, the teenagers designed a survey questionnaire. At a meeting in April 1999 staff trained the youth on how to introduce the surveys to their friends and peers, but reminded them to be careful about alerting the teachers and the principal that a campaign was underway:

“What’s the rap?” asks Chit [one of the AYA counselors]. Jennifer requests suggestions from the girls. Bryanna rattles off “try to get more counselors,” “doing survey for student opinion.” Blia offers another version, “I am part of AYA, a student here and concerned that students are not getting enough academic counseling.” Jennifer nods in approval but is concerned about not alerting the teachers and principal about a campaign. She asks the youth to emphasize the information gathering aspect only when introducing the survey in class, but if they are talking to their friends, she encourages them to talk about the campaign stuff to excite them (Field notes, 4/20/99).

During the month of May my informants administered over 500 surveys to students at Richmond High (field notes 6/3/99). Other youth, accompanied by staff but still taking the lead, interviewed counselors and deans at four of the high schools in the school district. At the final school-year meeting in June the mood was celebratory and

positive. Jennifer congratulated the thirteen youth present on their hard work and told them that the valuable information they had gathered was an achievement in itself:

Jennifer jumps in and announces the first ever student created report on the state of counselors in California. In an excited tone she says that students haven't done this before. "Students don't normally go out and interview 500 students and counselors." She really plays it up. "We've already won, so we really need to celebrate just that." Jennifer asks for another round of applause for everyone. She tells them that this is a great job even before they do anything with it. "We are going to influence state policy with it!" (Field notes, 6/3/99).

In the wake of high-school shootings over the last few years, such as that at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado in 1999, much public attention has focused on the role of counselors at high schools. With over 1500 students in 1999, Richmond High had only two-full time counselors. They were responsible for a range of duties that support students' academic and social development, including scheduling classes, giving college and career guidance, meeting with parents, giving referrals, and handling crisis situations. In other words they were expected to be accessible caring adults in the school who are trained to provide the guidance and support students need.

Findings from the survey conducted by AYA youth revealed that there are not enough counseling resources to meet all students' needs at Richmond High, and a large number of students surveyed have never seen a counselor; students feel an inequity in service due to their age, with seniors getting priority; and students want and would use more counseling resources if available (field notes 6/23/99). These findings reflect my informants' experiences with school counselors (field notes 6/23/99) and reinforce the overall lack of resources available in WCCUSD to support pupil achievement. For the seventeen youth from Groups 2, 3 and 4 that were participating in this summer session the need for an adequate number of academic counselors was transparent. When staff

asked the youth to think about the consequences when a student doesn't get the support she/he needs from a counselor, the youth shouted out "gangs," "welfare," "pregnancy" (field notes 6/23/99) and "no good jobs" (6/29/99). The survey found that students often feel lost and detached from school, resulting in poor attendance and poor academic performance.

Emboldened by these findings, during the summer of 1999 APEN staff developed a curriculum for the second, third and fourth cohort of girls that addressed a broader understanding of the problem in the school district and the state. The early part of the summer program was spent in intense sessions of analysis and learning about the state of education at Richmond High and WCCUSD, the counseling related needs of students, as well as dominant perception of youth. This collective knowledge was created through visual charts, creation of short skits by the youth, the use of television game show formats, and dissection of relevant news articles (Field notes 6/23/99-6/24/99).

The next step was to brainstorm feasible solutions and demands, which would not divide different communities and groups. The following excerpt from my field notes illustrates the range of solutions my informants thought of, as well as the ways in which the politics of race is integral to the campaign:

Jennifer goes over the facts again. Then she breaks the youth into three groups and asks them to brainstorm solutions to the following problems: students not having access to counselors; access based on race; access based on age. They have ten minutes to do this.

I observe Martha's group. She asks, "do you think racism still exists in this world?" "To me the president's..." replies Gain. Martha nods and repeats Gain's thought "the fact that all the presidents are white." "Racial slurs," says Jodi. Pham says something too but I don't catch it. Martha states that racism permeates all the different levels of society, TV etc., and that this is a big issue and has been a focus historically. She asks them to brainstorm what some historical solutions to racism were and suggests that they might be able to

incorporate these. "Marches" suggests Pham. Martha asks if marches were a solution or an attempt to get some thing. "Equality," replies Pham. "Equality for what?" prods Martha. Gain responds "for the same rights." Martha is having a hard time getting them to think about lack of access based on race. Sandy suggests having more counselors of color as a solution. Jodi points out that "it's not just counselors, you could also hire college mentors. It's cheaper."

About ten minutes later the other groups come back in to the room. A spokesperson for Chit's group reads the solutions they came up with to the problem of not enough counselors: greater role for teachers, redistribute loads and times for counselors.

A spokesperson for Jennifer's group reads their solutions to the problem of lack of access based on age: better orientation; more counselors, and split time for each grade.

Cept reads the solutions for lack of access based on race: affirmative action. Jennifer asks about the meaning of affirmative action. The youth don't really know what it means so Jennifer gives them a quick history of how affirmative action came about and mentions Proposition 209. Then she translates that into counselors of color since most students are of color and gives the example of hiring an Asian counselor or Latino counselor or whatever. "I don't like that," states Tsiet, referring to hiring someone based on race. "No, I don't either," adds Lai. "It's complicated. We need to talk about it more," responds GK and leaves it at that (Field notes 6/29/99).

The list of solutions generated by my informants involved teachers having a greater role in academic counseling, a re-organization of existing counselors' time, better promotion of the roles and responsibilities of counselors, as well as hiring more counselors of color. Several youth oppose this latter solution, suggesting that it is not racial bias but inadequate resources of all kinds that prevent all of the students at Richmond High from getting quality and timely counseling.

As I stated earlier two key goal of conducting any campaign were to building LOP and develop links with other communities of color. My informants identified potential allies, both Laotian and non-Laotian, at Richmond High School and in the community. At a brainstorming session at the end of June, the youth were divided into

three and asked to develop two lists of groups who may be interested in getting involved in the campaign. I observed Martha's group:

Martha asks the girls to think about groups that would help build LOP. Gain shouts "ACTION." She thinks ACTION is a good candidate because it's mixed (racially) and the problem affects them. Martha tries to clarify the immediate task at hand by saying that "this isn't about exclusion but would they be on-going members of LOP?" Then she asks them to think about groups to help build LOP. Consequently Gain suggests that ACTION should be on the allies list.

The girls identify the youth group of Lao Family, Laotian students in CSF [California Scholarship Federation], and various ethnic cliques and social cliques. Molli suggests the Khmu Association and then asks about RYP [Richmond Youth Program]. "It's mixed," says Gain. Martha moves to the "allies" list, which already has a number of entries under it. The girls identify additional groups such as Alma Latina, International, popular social cliques, and smart cliques. Gain and Cept are offering most of the suggestions, with Yen adding a few here and there. Alison doesn't say a word.

Martha asks the girls to pick two or three groups they would start with since they cannot work with all of them right away. Gain suggests Lao Family because they have a lot of groups. Everyone agrees with this. The Khmu Assoc. and the freshman group are also prioritized. Gain states that the recently immigrated will not be of help "because they are too shy." On the allies list they prioritize RYP, and Leadership and Alma Latina at Richmond High. Martha asks for a volunteer to report back. Lisa volunteers and asks Yen to help.

Martha's and one of the other groups have finished. Lisa has started to work on Marn's hair. [This seems to be the activity of the summer.] Pham is back doing Molli's hair. Tsiet starts on Maya's hair. Jennifer comes back into the room with her group. She notices all this hair activity and looks annoyed. She tells the girls to stop this and concentrate on what's going on (Field notes, 6/30/99).

My informants identified social organizations and service agencies in the Laotian community as potential sources for recruiting members for the Laotian Organizing Project. But what was significant about the potential allies list is that these were all multiracial groups, except AlmaLatina, that were either academically oriented or already involved in improving their school and community. Jennifer reiterated to the youth over

and over again that this campaign to improve counseling services at Richmond High, and potentially at other schools in the district, was not just for girls, or for Laotian youth, but “we are trying to improve the whole community for everyone” (field notes, 7/3/99). This was the message my informants imparted as they developed interactive presentations on the campaign issue and made five presentations to youth in summer school and other youth groups. These presentations, which included information from the survey, a short humorous skit that illustrated the problem and possible consequences for youth of a lack of quality and timely counseling, and a discussion on possible solutions, ended with a call to sign action cards and the following statement:

We believe that all youth deserve a good education, even us, who live here in Richmond. We deserve to have lots of people in the schools that will help us with our classes, help us graduate, help us go to college, or whatever we need. In our survey, 91 percent of students said they would use more counseling services if they were available. We’re going to try to improve our school by looking more at this problem. We need people who want to do something to make our schools better for us. No one is going to do it for us. We have to act now —OUR future is at stake (Presentation at Kennedy High, Field notes 7/15/99)

Summer school students were not as excited about the campaign at the other youth groups. But doing these presentations gave my informants the first experiences of persuading others to get involved. Towards the end of the summer session, key decision-makers and targets for the campaign were identified, as were sources of potential funding for any solutions they devised. In addition APEN staff facilitated discussions on campaign strategies and tactics, conducting training through role-plays to implement some of these tactics, and created opportunities to put them in practice. One afternoon in July, the youth, staff and myself were divided into four teams and assigned one of four sites in Richmond, San Pablo and El Cerrito where there was potential of finding young

people. Our objective was to talk to as many high school students as possible, inform them about the problem and how it impacts young people, and have them sign a post card in show of support. Rachel, Blia, Cuo, Bryanna, Maya and I spent an hour at the local train station in El Cerrito in search of potential supporters. I had anticipated staying in the background and observing my informants. But as the following excerpt from my field notes indicates, this sort of community organizing work was difficult for most of the young women:

We don't see any high school students at first. Two guys are walking into the BART [Bay Area Rapid Transit] station but nobody wants to approach them. Everyone in the group, except Maya is too shy about talking people they don't know. So, I break the ice by asking two Asian girls if they are high school students. They say "yes," and so I turn to Rachel and Cuo and ask them to take over. That seems to have got the ball rolling for Rachel. We split up, Rachel, Blia and Maya walk to one end of the station. Cuo, Byanna and I stay at the other end.

Cuo and Bryanna are still nervous about stopping strangers, so I decide to do the initial approaching. If the young people say they are high school students, then I ask Cuo to take over and do the rap, and get them to sign a post card. Byanna still doesn't want to talk to anyone. I try to encourage her. "It's embarrassing," she responds. Maya is the only one who is not shy about approaching people and talks to them with confidence. Cuo doesn't exude confidence but she is overcoming her shyness (Field notes, 7/20/99).

I was particularly surprised by Bryanna's timidity, given that she had been so involved in the multilingual emergency warning system campaign and participated in the campaign against Proposition 227 even before she became a member of the youth program. My informants were shy, nervous and afraid of encountering rude and mean people. The next afternoon, when Jennifer asked how they had felt doing this, the adjectives that they had offered included not good, uncomfortable, lonely, disappointed, brave, cold, okay, good, charged, scared and nervous. While a few youth were confident and found this form of organizing easy, for many of the shy youth it was very

uncomfortable approaching total strangers to talk to them about a campaign and ask them to support them. Jennifer acknowledged these feelings and noted that “this kind of work is hard.” Then as a way to build positive energy and motivation, she asked the youth if they see other young people doing it. Someone said, “no.” Jennifer responded, “that’s right. Some young people do it, but most don’t.” She stated that they should feel good about doing this kind of work (Field notes 7/21/99).

As my field notes illustrate this summer session was eye opening, intense, at times difficult and often tedious for youth who were on their summer break. A core group remained engaged and made astute comments and evaluations of various demands, tactics and solutions they discussed. Doing presentations to youth they were unfamiliar with, going up to strangers in public places and asking them to sign post cards in support of the campaign required a lot of courage. At the beginning of the summer 1999 session Jennifer asked how excited the youth were about the campaign, most were moderately excited. But Fifteen year-old Maya was very excited because she believed that it was mostly Asians who were dropping out and she wanted to work on the campaign because of that. Tsiet, Maya’s peer in Group 3 wanted to help her community and Pham stated “we want to build a future for ourselves.” A handful continued to attend the summer program even though they appeared bored, perhaps because they were being paid a stipend and it was a chance to spend time with friends. They whiled away the time by grooming each other, sharing photo albums, even napping.

APEN staff frequently reminded the youth the reasons behind organizing and doing campaign work. At one session Jennifer asked the youth why they are organizing instead of just getting a lawyer to advocate on their behalf. Fiey of group 3 responded,

“because we don’t want it that way.” “Why not?” fired back Jennifer. Fourteen-year old Bryanna of Group 4 answered “because you don’t know what our problems are.” Jennifer affirmed both of them and reminded the youth that “we are trying to build a voice for the Laotian community.” (Field notes 6/30/99). In this and other ways APEN staff attempted to keep all the youth motivated and build a sense of power among my informants, as well as skills to use their power more effectively to create change. Also significant in this campaign is the ways in which Laotian youth took greater leadership roles in meetings and presentations while APEN staff provided more supportive roles. This increased participation was facilitated by their language skills, knowledge of the school environment and growing collective self-understandings of the issues affecting youth of color in Richmond.

Based on analysis and research on other programs that addressed this issue of inadequate academic counselors, as well as potential monies available to fund any kind of program, youth and staff decided that an advisory program would be the most valuable and feasible solution to the lack of counseling resources and guidance for students at Richmond High.²⁸ Moreover, decisions about such a program could be made at the School Site Council, which APEN perceived as an easier target than approaching the WCCUSD or higher levels of authority. Beginning in Fall 1999, after I had left the field, the youth built on all the preparation they had done during the summer. They talked to hundreds of students at Richmond High, collected over 500 postcards in support, and identified other groups in school, such as Healthy Start, Leadership and Youth Together, as potential allies. Success in the school counselor campaign required alliances with

²⁸ APEN staff did a lot of background research in all of these areas before presenting the options to the youth.

diverse groups in school that shared an interest in improving the quality of education.

Thus staff and youth organized a coordinated effort to win a program to improve guidance for students at Richmond high. Campaigning during the school year was a challenge for many youth who were juggling jobs, school, and commitments at home and at APEN (APEN Voices, Fall 2000).

On May 25, 2000, over 40 Laotian, Latino and African American students, teachers and parents packed the School Site Council (SSC) meeting at Richmond High to speak out and urge council members to vote “yes” on a pilot teacher advisory program. The SSC approved the program for the following school year (APEN Voices, 2000:15). The program will add an advisory period to the regular school day and will build in mentoring time for students and teachers. The advisory program will give every student at least one adult to go to for help or with questions by placing a small number of students with a teacher-advisor to guide students through school. Fourteen-year old Chan Lathanasonk, of Group 5, who worked to get the advisory period approved, said “it was very worth it. As youth, reaching out for what we wanted – it felt good” (Jenny Sit, West County Times 8/4/00).

This politicized youth identity was constructed on the common structural location of youth living in and attending inner-city, severely resource deprived schools. Given that 96 percent of students attending Richmond High School are youth of color, this politicized youth identity appears to draw on the Laotian, other Asian and Pacific Islander, Latino and African American students. However, I would argue that the campaign did not assert a rigid black/white difference but aimed to reach the four percent of white students who also experience a similar lack of quality and timely counseling

services. This campaign aimed to improve the quality of education for all students at Richmond High School, and potentially in the whole school district.

This campaign and victory also challenges popular constructions of youth as “at-risk” and models how students in inner-city schools and youth of color can have a positive influence on decisions that affect their lives. Rather than being blamed for lagging achievement and failure, students of color drew attention to and challenged the structural sources that led to low student achievements, dropping out, being locked into low-paying jobs. Schools can be sites of resistance and contestation even as they constrain youth from reaching their full potential.

Conclusion

Contemporary social justice organizations such as APEN adopt the position that citizenship rights can only be secured through political mobilization and active participation in the polity. In that regard, the Laotian Organizing Project plays a critical role as a vehicle for leadership training among a group that is marginalized by gender and generational hierarchies, for cultivating resources, sparking community mobilization, and creating a basis for communication and negotiation among groups (Saito and Park 2000:441). Second-generation Laotians are learning to be community organizers and actively address the structural inequities they experience in their communities. In the process Laotians, once seen as refugees and victims, are becoming active in creating the future they will inherit. Furthermore, though AYA youth of color challenge both dominant constructions of youth as social problems and Laotian youth as “at-risk” of delinquency, gang involvement and teenage pregnancy. As Fam Linh Saechao, one of the AYA members, explained why she has remained committed and involved in APEN’s

work throughout her high-school years: “My family and the people I care about live here.” As a young person I want to work with other youth to change the toxic web in Richmond into a place where we can breath clean air, drink clean water and play on uncontaminated land.” (Janet Dang, AsianWeek, 7/23/98).

The youth program at APEN provides an institutional space where second-generation Laotians of various ethnic affiliations can come together to form a cohesive interpersonal network as well as mobilize the collective power of Laotians, one of our newest immigrant groups. Through APEN/LOP Laotians can come together “to establish social ties and to discuss their common problems and experiences” (Espiritu 1992:164). Sider (1980: 21-26) argues that “the capacity of a people to resist domination lies, in part, in their cultural unity,” a unity “based on actual ties people develop with one another in the course of organizing both the labor of production and daily life, and the social appropriation of production.” Thus oppositional ideologies, like other forms of culture, “do not just emerge out of people’s thought and individual experiences, but out of their mutual understanding of their social relation.” In short Sider asserts that without first developing the ties between people, in daily life, and in production there will be no basis for developing an oppositional consciousness.

While Sider’s argument refers to a class-stratified society and class-consciousness, I suggest that race and gender consciousness is also based on people’s mutual perceptions of their social relations, on the ties that people develop in the course of daily life. As Espiritu (1992) and Espiritu and Ong (1994) have argued in relation to Asian American Studies programs within the academy and Asian American forums, the youth program and the Laotian Organizing Project provided my informants with a shared

framework to understand their common problems and experiences as second-generation Laotians in the United States. These frameworks are predicated on the understanding that race is a central dynamic of US society, and that Laotians, whatever their ethnic affiliation, share a racial status and history in the US. Furthermore, beyond forming a cohesive interpersonal network, collective self-understandings and a sense of solidarity, they are learning to be community organizers and actively address the structural inequities they experience in their communities.

This chapter also demonstrates that social rights are racialized, thus prompting us to re-evaluate the concept of citizenship. In the liberal tradition, U.S. citizenship and individual rights are constructed in abstract terms, with all people within the nation-state having equal status, equal rights and duties. Inequalities deriving from gender, ethnic, class or other systems of stratification are not supposed to be of relevance to the status of citizenship. In the modern welfare state, notions of difference are conceived in terms of class differences exclusively. As Yuval-Davis observes, “the provision of social welfare rights were aimed at improving the quality of life of the working classes (as well as the smooth working of capitalism)” (parenthesis in the original, 1997: 8). In contemporary U.S. society, social needs are not only derived from class differences, but also from racial and ethnic differences, as this chapter has demonstrated.²⁹ Pollution-free, healthy environments, language access to public institutions such as schools and social service agencies for new immigrants, and the availability of quality education are all governed by race and ethnicity in the U.S. The political implications of these findings point to a reinstatement of the role of the state in ensuring access to social rights for all, at a time

²⁹ While I do not discuss other social needs here, I do acknowledge that social needs are also derived from other sets of differences such as religious, sexual and so on.

when the state is withdrawing from this role. The findings in this chapter also call for multiculturalist policies in an era when racialized nativism continues and there is heightened anxiety about challenges to the dominant American national identity.³⁰ Theoretically, the findings in this chapter suggest a need to expand the notion of citizenship to include cultural rights of citizens.

Finally, APEN's work with the Laotian community in Contra Costa County illuminates several points about politics in Asian Pacific refugee and new immigrant communities in the United States. The kinds of political identities created through collective action challenge our thinking on 'race' and the prospects for a Pan-Asian ethnic identity. Many would conclude that APEN is a quintessential American social movement organization seeking to secure benefits and representation for Laotians, along the lines of racial group interest, through democratic participation and collective action in the tradition of the Civil Rights Movement. However, while organizing and establishing institutions on racial grounds are important for the maintenance and expansion of group interests (Espirtu and Ong, 1994), APEN attempts to avoid reification of these racial distinctions, and in the process erase class divisions among Asian Americans. APEN is changing the nature of racial politics by interjecting ethnicity. By focusing on issues of immigration, nativism, and the ethnic specific and class concerns of Laotians, APEN draws attention to the ethnic and class differences among Asian Pacific Americans.

Through the education, electoral campaigns and issue-oriented community campaigns, APEN has sought to not create an abstract political identity but one that arises out of the concrete material realities that the Laotian community faces. Grassroots

³⁰ Multiculturalist policies also have the danger of reifying ethnic and racial group boundaries and locating communities of color in marginal spaces and secondary markets (Yuval-Davis 1997: 17).

activism creates a common culture, collective self-understandings, and a politicized

Laotian identity. As Espiritu et. al. (2000:133) argue:

racial identities and racial organizations are not innately either progressive or reactionary: their politics depends upon their ability to promote both organic solidarity and connecting ideologies, to serve as repositories of the lessons of past movements for social justice, to frame racial injuries as collective systematic, and social, and to persuade people that their problems are part of a larger pattern and that they can and must do something about them.

APEN aims to build “both organic solidarity and a connecting ideology” (Espiritu et. al. 2000:132) by framing the siting of toxic plants in communities of color, monolingual English emergency warning systems, the attempt to ban bi-lingual education and inadequate school counseling services in a school which is 95% students of color as evidence of deep-seated societal racism and classism. Rather than imposing an Asian American pan-ethnic identity on a community that thinks of itself as refugees, immigrants, poor and low-wage workers, APEN is creating a politicized Laotian identity, which has connections to other communities of color in Contra Costa County. APEN clearly recognizes the importance of race in society but it has resisted narrow race-based politics.

As we saw in Chapter Two, the demographics in Richmond and Contra Costa County are becoming increasingly diverse and complex. I agree with Saito and Park (2000) that these shifts demand that we examine and address the inter-group relations emerging from the changing racial dynamics. The Laotian community in West Contra Costa County shares an economically, socially and environmentally impacted social milieu with their African American, Latino and white neighbors. Yet this common context is often overshadowed by the “model minority” myth. By selectively highlighting

the education and economic success of some Asian Pacific Americans, the media and some academics depict the entire group as high achieving. The model-minority image occludes the severe social class disadvantages and conditions of the Laotian community, and overlooks the possibilities for alliances with other communities arising out of their common material contexts. As illustrated in the school counselor campaign, a major concern was to negotiate and establish common ground, while putting aside differences temporarily.

Media attention and scholarly research has focused primarily on conflicts such as the Black-Korean struggles in New York, Chicago and Los Angeles (Saito and Park 2000:436). In the next chapter I assess the prospects for future cross-racial alliances between Laotians and other communities of color in West Contra Costa County.

Chapter Five

The Politics of Race II: Critical Assimilation and Inter-group Relations

Well environmental justice is like, it's like you're, it's sort of like your basic right in the constitution... And, I just like basically believe that environmental justice like, like the right for *everyone* to live in a healthy safe environment you know (Lon, Interview 12/7/98, emphasis in original).

In Chapter Four I demonstrated that, even while specific organizing strategies may vary according to contexts, circumstances and issues being addressed, a basic principle that guides APEN's organizing is that their work should not create a wedge between Laotians and other communities of color. Rather the goal should be to identify linkages and produce alliances across race. This principle stems from both an ideological belief and a pragmatic position based on the situation of Laotians in Contra Costa County. Elaine, the executive director remarked that she was proud to have held on to and worked toward the "same vision of a multicultural democracy" in the U.S. for the last 25 or 26 years based on the belief "that people of color in this country have a particular history, a shared history and a shared struggle that needs to be, that's life long."

In stating her ideological beliefs Elaine evokes Gary Okihiro's (1994:33) question "is yellow black or white?" in his discussion of the bi-polar race relations model of American society. Okihiro (34) writes that African and Asian Americans

are a kindred people, forged in the fire of white supremacy and struggle, but how can we recall that kinship when our memories have been massaged by white hands, and how can we remember the past when our storytellers have been whispering amid the din of Western civilization and Anglo-conformity?

However, as we saw in Chapter Four, APEN does not rely on essentialist categories of race, black or white or yellow, rather it views racial identity as multiple, fluid and context-specific. By framing the siting of toxic plants in communities of color, mono-lingual English emergency warning systems, the attempt to ban bi-lingual education and inadequate school counseling services in a school which is 95% students of color as evidence of deep-seated societal racism and classism, Laotians and other communities of color are perceived as “kindred people.”

At the same time APEN staff understands the practical necessity of working with other communities in order to achieve systemic change. Emiko explained that:

even though we live in California where a very substantial part of the population is Asian, we are still too small in the population to actually on our own to have any impact on the quality of life, on government or laws that we need to... You know we can't just, well we won't do enough in this community. You know there's a substantial population of Laotians here, but we won't do enough for the community by just doing, if we keep organizing just Laotians. So part of building their skills, like building their leadership skills, I think part of it is working with other groups.

Working with other communities is necessitated by the low numerical numbers of Laotians but also because Laotians experience racial tension with their Latino and African American neighbors which “breeds a wedge between groups,” and “puts up another barrier to the community not coming together,” noted Emiko (Interview, 9/22/98).

In this chapter I examine second-generation Laotians' political imagination. I analyze how particularistic self-understandings (Brubaker and Cooper 2000: 17) around race create the possibilities and limitations to APEN's goal of engendering critical racial subjectivities and a sense of being “kindred people.” I also discuss the prospects for

cross-racial and cross ethnic alliances. Following Omi and Winant (1994), I argue that race has been central to, and shaped by, American politics. The varied racial projects that have established the color-line and ordered the nation around the black-white axis, promoted the model-minority thesis, and led to the conceptualization of pan-Asian American racial solidarity have contradictory effects on engendering collective self-understandings (Brubaker and Cooper 2000: 7) around race. Present-day racial politics both creates cleavages in cross-race and cross-ethnic solidarity, and consolidates these alliances at other times.

I utilize Ruth Frankenberg's (1993:43) notion of "the social geography of race" to understand the effects of contemporary racial politics on my informants' racial and ethnic identities and the meanings these identities have for them. This method allows us to perceive the physical landscape through social rather than natural processes. As Frankenberg (44) argues, racial social geography enables us to ground individual attitudes and beliefs in the material world. Thus it becomes possible to examine how racial politics and informal meanings and stereotypes have shaped my informants daily environments and interactions, and link these to larger social, historical and political forces that brought these environments into being.

Engendering Collective Self-Understandings

As we saw in Chapter Four, APEN attempts to nurture collective self-understandings around a radical political ideology which links environmental problems to broader social justice issues. In all of the discussions, activities and campaigns that the youth are involved in, APEN staff present an underlying analysis of race, class and citizenship. In order to understand the impact of such political action on my informants'

collective self-understandings, I asked them what environmental justice means to them. The responses from the first and second cohort of girls, who had been in the youth project for four and three years respectively, suggest that they have absorbed APEN's perspective and language on environmental justice. Leah from the second cohort wanted to educate other young people about what she learns in APEN because:

Then, it's like "oh! Environmental justice, What's that?" And they think it's the grass, the trees and the water and the air, that's it. But they don't really know what's really in between those things and what really makes the environment.

Leah states that most young people understand environmental activism in terms of the traditional narrow focus of U.S. environmental movements on conserving land, or cleaning air and water. For Leah, the environment also included hazardous homes, schools and workplaces. Seng and Allison from the first cohort articulated a specific race and class analysis on environmental issues.

Seng: (no hesitation) I think just having the things like as any like girls, like rich people have, you know all that. Clean air and like no refinery or what ever behind your backyard and all that stuff. Like having the same right as they do and like I think that it's not fair that just because we are minorities and then we live in a like lower like you know, lower income you know neighborhood and like we don't have as much as money as they do and all that stuff. That you know we get all this you know discrimination and get all that stuff.

Allison: (long pause), what it means to me is like having equality in the environment...It's like every community, it's not perfect but then they should all be treated equal regardless of color because the way Chevron is treating us, it's not right. Cause just, just because we're colored, it doesn't mean that we can't do anything about it. And to me, it also means to have a right to everything else that like the rich people up in the hills get.

Seng and Allison's words echo the findings of a 1987 United Church of Christ report, "Toxic Waste and Race in the U.S." that found that race was the single most important

determinant of where toxic waste facilities are sited. But Allison's comments challenge another common assumption; that people of color, poor people and immigrants do not care about the environment as much as they care about jobs and economic development (Bullard 1992).

The youth from the first cohort also understand that environmental activism must be linked to civil rights and social justice issues. The language of rights, of the right to live in a clean and healthy environment regardless of one's race and class, comes through in Seng's and Allison's quotes. But, as my epigraph illustrates, Lon, another member of the first cohort, stated it much more emphatically. For her the right to live in a clean and healthy environment was a basic right enshrined in the Constitution. The focus on achieving equal rights regardless of race, ethnicity or socio-economic status is an integral part of the principles of environmental justice adopted at the People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit in October 1991.

The girls in the third and the fourth cohorts, who had spent less time in the youth project, had not absorbed the language of rights or a clear analysis of race and class. The third cohort had spent the summer of 1998 learning about various aspects of environmental justice, giving "toxic tours," and meeting with other youth groups working on environmental justice issues. Thus they articulated the meaning of environmental justice in terms of educating others in the community about environmental hazards, and supporting the work of other groups.

Environmental justice encompasses a broad economic, social and environmental agenda. Thus for many of the youth it is difficult to define it in specific terms. But the longer they participate in the youth project, and get involved in campaigns to shut down

toxic industries, hold these industries accountable, or educate the community about the environmental hazards present, the greater the likelihood that they will adopt a race and class analysis. APEN gives them the information and the language to understand what they and their families experience viscerally, that of rising cancer rates and respiratory problems.

The kind of collective self-understandings that APEN nurtures on the perception of youth, and particularly youth of color, in dominant society is illustrated in the following excerpt from my field notes. At a meeting in November 1998, Jennifer introduced my informants to the basic elements of organizing. She facilitated a training session on what constitutes a campaign and how to choose a campaign issue. Twelve of the young women from Groups 1, 2, 3, and 4 were present at this meeting. Jennifer used the example of drug dealing in the community to clarify the difference between a campaign issue and a problem:

On her flip-chart Jennifer has written a problem inside a circle - drug-dealers on the corner outside school. She points that out and says, "you all know who Pete Wilson¹ is, right?" Then she asks, "what would Pete Wilson see as the solution to this problem?" pointing to the circle. Leah shouts, "give them marijuana." Jennifer laughs and says, "no, I don't think Pete Wilson would want to do that." Maya says, "put more police on the corner." Tsiet suggests, "bootcamp." Fiey suggests build new prisons, and longer sentencing. Jennifer writes all of these down above a line she has drawn through the circle.

To the last suggestion, "longer sentencing," Maya responds, "I don't think that's going to help." Jennifer stops writing and looks up. She asks, "Maya, you said you don't think that will work. Why do you think that?" Before Maya can answer, Sarah responds, "there's just more and more of them." Maya says, "it's not going to change their attitude." Jennifer takes this as a cue to ask, "what are some issues that LOP could put out that are different to Wilson's?"

Tsiet suggests, "workshops." Maya says, "recreation centers." Jennifer writes these down and then asks Maya "what kind of recreation centers?" I don't catch everything that Maya says but she ends with "you know, fun stuff with some

¹ Pete Wilson was Governor of California in 1998 and a Republican.

learning." Cuo suggests working with parents on communications. Leah says, "we can be peer educators. Like go into schools and talk to the kids about drugs." Jennifer writes all of these down below the line she drew through the circle.

Then Jennifer asks, "what can be done about the fact that some kids sell drugs to earn money?" Rachel answers, "jobs." Jennifer asks her to elaborate and Rachel responds, "like have an organization that helps kids find jobs." Sarah adds, "like have training programs."

Once Jennifer has written all of these down she points to the difference between the top half and the bottom half of the circle. she tells the youth that these are different ways of framing an issue, "they each project different values." Jennifer goes on to say, "when LOP is working on an issue we need to be aware of what kind of values we want to project." Though Jennifer hasn't asked, Tsiet responds, "the bottom," referring to solutions to drug-dealing that are not punitive but deals with the root causes (field notes 11/23/98).

During the meeting, though all the youth were paying attention and focusing on the discussion, youth in Group 4, the newest cohort recruited during the summer, were quiet. The most active and vocal participants were mainly from Groups 1, 2 and 3. These youth who had been involved in AYA for one to three years, displayed a critical understanding of the consequences of punitive versus supportive solutions to the problem of drug-dealing in the community. They did not believe that incarcerating youth and tough sentences would address the structural causes of drug dealing in poor inner-city neighborhoods. Rather, they suggested measures such as training for jobs, supportive parent-child structures, meaningful education and recreation centers,² which offered a safe place for youth. In so doing they displayed solidarity with other youth in their multiracial neighborhoods and community.

APEN's strategy of organizing young women and making youth a central element in building the Laotian Organizing Project appears to have been subversive within the

² My informants frequently cited the lack of recreation centers for youth in Richmond and San Pablo as the reason why they congregated at the local mall. The public library had become another safe venue for youth to gather after school.

Laotian community as well as within the larger society. While second-generation Laotians identify in ethno-national terms, as I discussed in Chapter Three, my informants have come to identify themselves in political terms as Laotians, as immigrants, and as youth of color in specific contexts and situations. Moreover, some of them understand the power of collective organizing. At the November youth meeting cited above, Jennifer asked if the youth knew what a campaign was. Sixteen-year old Sarah said, “ it builds our voice, to show that minorities have a voice.” (Field notes 11/23/98). Sarah’s response indicates that she has absorbed the language used by APEN staff and understands their collective work as not only about building the Laotian Organizing Project but also strengthening and making visible the Laotian community as a whole. Through their participation in APEN’s youth program and working on issue-based campaigns across ethnic affiliations and across generations, my informants understand the importance of building the Laotian Organizing Project and working to improve the lives of all Laotians in Contra Costa County.

The perspectives, organizing skills and leadership abilities that they gain at APEN are already being translated into other arenas in the girls’ lives. For one youth there has been a dramatic change in the kinds of careers she wishes to have. Jennifer noted that when seventeen-year old Gabriela first joined the youth program in the summer of 1995 she had wanted to work at Chevron, which is “a big company in the community.” After being involved in APEN for several years and learning about Chevron’s role in polluting the environment in Contra Costa County she wanted to become a lawyer. When I interviewed her in 1998 she wanted to become a journalist and focus on political issues. And in her final year at APEN she decided she wanted to be an organizer and work

directly with people to make change. After graduating from high school she went to work for a community organization working on reproductive health issues in the Asian and Pacific Islander communities. Gabriela's peer in Group 1, Seng has taken action to address the racial tension at Richmond High, as I described in Chapter Three.

Second-generation Laotians are discovering that they have a stake in their local and broader community and are getting involved. I suggest that APEN acts as what Scott Kurashige (2000:177) calls a "subjective agent in the construction of oppositional culture" based on "a transformative vision" that identifies systemic injustices in society and that calls for cross-race and cross-ethnic political alliances to transform those injustices. The three campaigns discussed in Chapter Four, that of the multilingual emergency warning system, the fight against Proposition 227, and the school counselor campaign were predicated on the goals of building the Laotian Organizing Project and/or building bridges with other communities of color. Thus it is important to examine the long-term prospects of building alliances between the Laotian community and other communities in West Contra Costa County.

Deborah Misir argues in relation to South Asian activism against the racial violence of the Dotbusters and other anti-Indian sentiments, that the "progressive ideology of alliance and identification with other people of color espoused by student activists is in many ways itself an *elite* ideology. Misir points out that the student activists, who were second-generation, viewed the racial violence as part of a larger historical continuum of racism against all racial minority groups in the United States. However, working-class Indian immigrants are anxiously engaged in a daily struggle to improve their social and economic status. They do not appear to be interested in

identifying with African Americans and Latinos, rather they often emphasize their differences with these groups” (emphasis in original, 1996: 72).

Like the South Asian student activists, the third- and second-generation Asian American staff at APEN also views the issues that affect Laotians in Contra Costa County within the prism of the larger sociopolitical and economic structures in the United States. However, contemporary racial politics and countervailing ideologies in the U.S. may undermine the creation of radical collective self-understandings, and the prospects for such coalition work.

Distancing From Other Youth: “I Ain’t Ghetto”

During my two years in the field I had heard my informants use the term “ghetto” quite often. They would say, “Oh! That’s ghetto,” or “I ain’t ghetto.” I wondered what meaning this term had for them and how they related to it since they too lived in very poor multiracial neighborhoods, went to schools that were severely impoverished and often spoke in Black English. Focus group discussions revealed that term ghetto referred to language, but also to a specific part of the city, to dress styles, behavior and to “black people.”

My informants enlightened me that not “talking properly,” using a “lot of profanity” and slang were part of ghetto culture. However, while they themselves attempted to distance themselves from this culture, my informants are “not secluded from the environment,” as one Richmond High school teacher put it. Ms. Goodbeer, a ninth-grade English teacher, admitted being surprised to hear her Mien students “all speak Black English, Ebonics,” and sometimes even “write Ebonics.” The use of Black English was most evident among the youngest girls in Group 4. For example, at the end of one

afternoon during the summer of 1998, APEN staff was facilitating an evaluation of some of the activities that Group 4 had participated in that afternoon. When the youth were asked what they had liked, Julia said “magazine thang.” Angela immediately corrected her and emphasized “thing,” and then asserted, ironically in improper English, that she “ain’t no ghetto.” In another conversation during a Focus Group with Group 4, Marn expressed her opinion about the way some of her peers dress: “I be hating people that be hella, I don’t know they be wearing some tight-ass pants even though you can’t fit them they still wear it. It’s hella ugly. I don’t like that.”

The familiarity that the girls in Group 4 had with what Ms. Goodbeer called “playground language,” was evident during a review of the script for a skit that they had put together for their first summer graduation presentation in 1998. The skit was about teen pregnancy, safe sex and peer pressure. Sarah, one of the LYIs, had helped them write the script and it was in Standard English for the most part. As they were reviewing the script Claire, the APIRH staff person working with Group 4, asked if they wanted “slang or proper English.” One of the youth replied “slang” and another commented that the part of Benz, a boyfriend of one of the other characters, was too straight. Though much of the script remained in Standard English even after this review, the first scene of the skit, set at school and involving four friends, was transformed:

Mercedes – WassUp Camery!
 Camery – WassUp!
 Mercedes – So what are u doing tonight?
 Camery – Nothing. Just chillin’! And U?
 Mercedes – I’m just going to Benz house.
 Camery – For Realz! What yal fista to do?
 Mercedes – Benz made plans for us tonight, but he wouldn’t tell me.
 Camery – Well I gotta go. Have fun with Benz tonight, but don’t have too much fun. (wave). Bye!
 Camery – (walks towards Megan)

Camery – Sup Megan! I gots to tell u something girl!

Megan – (eager) What!

Camery – Well I over heard Benz said he fista to get some tonight from Mercedes.

Megan – (shocked) For realz?

Camery – Word! Well I gotta bounce. Don't say u heard it from me.

Megan – Aiight. (whispers to the girl)

The girl – (say it like you are disgusted) Oh my gosh! That hoochie!

This familiarity with Black English highlights the resettlement of Laotian refugees in poor, inner-city neighborhoods where the majority of the population is African American. However, my informants' everyday conversations at APEN were peppered with improper English, but rarely with slang and never with profanity. Moreover, in emphasizing slang and Black English in this skit, my informants were also associating ghetto culture with casual teenage sex and teenage pregnancy, a practice from which they distanced themselves.

The use of Ebonics was not as striking in the older girls, though they too would use the Ebonics "be" verb. For the most part they were more self-conscious about how they talked, and had had four years of high school level English as well as numerous opportunities for writing and public speaking in APEN. As fourteen year-old Bryanna noted: "It's easy for us cause we can switch because we have APEN. Because we have APEN we can switch really easily." The college educated staff at APEN created an environment in which the use of standard English was the norm. While they did not correct my informants when they spoke Black English, staff helped my informants write in standard English when they were writing speeches and essays, or creating published journals.

The term “ghetto” also referred to a particular culture, according to my informants. Pham stated “...it’s all about the attitude when you’re ghetto...like I don’t know just the way that you present yourself.” Tsiet explained what Pham meant by the attitude:

the way you talk, it’s the way you dress. Like when you’re outside and then like there’s elder people and stuff, you like have no respect, you just always yelling and (again a loud chorus of laughter from everyone). Yeah.

All of my informants agreed that ghetto culture was signified by doing “whatever looks bad to other people,” including wearing baggy clothes, echoing what Zhou (1997a:69) has called an “oppositional culture.” For Cuo ghetto culture referred to: “... where you do stuff that’s not really proper, like when you wear your pants backward or something like inside-out.” Gain gave another example of not doing things proper: “they use cardboard to pick up your dust, [use it] as a dustpan.” Gain’s comment suggests that she does not participate in this ghetto culture. Indeed, in over two years of field work, I observed that none of my informants wore baggy clothes or clothes inside-out. In fact many of the youth expressed a ‘70s retro dress style, with black, blue or white flared jeans, short T-shirts that hugged their figures and black platform shoes or sandals. The difference between the 1990s and the 1970s was that the colors were muted and the clothes often bore the logos of Tommy Hilfiger, Nautica, The Gap, Old Navy and Bebe.

In their attitudes and behaviors also, my informants displayed a culture different to the ghetto culture that they described. It has to be acknowledged that I only observed my informants in the context of AYA meetings, activities and retreats, and not when they were around their peers outside of AYA. But within the context of AYA and APEN, staff aims to create a very respectful and supportive environment, and each young woman is

seen as a valued member. The peer counseling sessions teach them to listen attentively as well as communicate openly. During meetings and other activities, staff expects all youth to participate actively and voice their opinions and positions. The staff immediately addresses disrespectful and negative statements. They attempt to create a culture in which everyone is recognized as having a particular skill, experience or perspective to bring to the group and that all of these are to be valued. Older youth in the program acted as role models for the younger members and monitored their behaviors. Thus I rarely heard my informants being disrespectful to each other or to the staff.

A few of my informants specifically associated the term “ghetto” with African Americans, indicating that they have adopted the wider society’s negative portrayal of poor blacks. For fifteen year-old Fiey the word ghetto usually refers to black people:

That’s how I see them. They be like tough like, and they speak in slang, they don’t speak in like clear English you know. And they usually wear like a lot of baggy clothes; they don’t have any respect.

Sixteen year-old Sarah made the same association even as she admitted that she called herself ghetto:

And like I talk ghetto. I talk like black peoples...that’s like the majority of black people cause majority of black people talk that way. So that’s what I consider ghetto.

My informants have generalized the negative portrayals of poor blacks to all blacks because in their daily interactions at school, in their neighborhoods and stores they only come across poor blacks. There are very, very few African American teachers at Richmond High. As we saw in Chapter Two, deindustrialization and global economic restructuring hollowed out Richmond by the 1950s, leaving behind Black workers and

their families, economic marginality (Walker and The Bay Area Study Group, 1990), restricted opportunities, and impoverished central business and residential areas.

It is also important to note in Sarah's comment above that while she identifies as being ghetto, and many of my informants spoke in black English and listened to rap music, they did not embrace the African American peer culture. When I asked my informants how they would like a reporter to portray Laotian women Sarah's comment was revealing:

Yeah, the thing is that mostly that we work hard for what we want. I mean we build our own goals you know and we work hard for it. We don't get it like other people, we don't like ask for it, we work for it you know. That's what they need to understand.

Even though Sarah is not explicit, she contrasts Laotian culture and values to that of poor African Americans, who are perceived to lack a work ethic, to be lazy and to have few aspirations for social mobility. Sarah wanted reporters to recognize that they reject the ghetto culture of their African American peers. Other youth were much more explicit in disassociating themselves from "ghetto" culture because, as Lisa said, "it makes it seem bad you know. Like ghetto, "oh! You so ghetto..." Maya, a very self-assured and articulate Group 3 member, exemplifies the extent to which some of them go to distance themselves:

Well I have, I guess like I can call myself ghetto right, cause I guess was born and raised in like worst part there is in Richmond you know. That's why everybody's like 'oh that's the ghetto!' you know, north Richmond right...but most people don't say that to me right. Cause I'm like I could come from the ghetto and you know I could be ghetto, I could talk ghetto but that's not the way I present myself you know. It's like I could present myself as like, I feel like corporate... if you didn't know me I would be like from the street, you know the rich hills you know.

She was right. She was always dressed smartly, her clothes and nail polish were color coordinated, and she wore a lot of gold jewelry, and spoke standard English. Based on her appearance and the way she carried herself I had made an assumption on the class status of her family. So when I went to pick her up for our interview date, I was quite shocked to see that she shared a small dilapidated house with her parents, three siblings and a cousin on the edge of north Richmond, the area that other informants had described as decidedly ghetto.

Other youth distanced themselves by not wearing baggy clothes, as I described earlier, or not being rude and “howling hecka loud” as Cuo remarked. Another strategy that my informants employ is to use different terms to describe where they live. Leah noted that other people described where she lived as the projects “just cause they have a lot of houses around it.” But she believed “it look like no projects,” and called it “the manors.” Others express a sense of denial that where they live is ghetto when compared to other parts of Richmond. Yen, of Group 4 noted that she “used to live down there (north Richmond) but it wasn’t that bad.” Yen also acknowledged that “everybody leaves the ghetto.”

“Down there” in Yen’s comment referred to north Richmond, which together with central Richmond were considered to be the worst parts of the city in terms of gangs, garbage on the streets, broken windows and peeling paint on houses, few working street lights, no trees, and close proximity to industrial sites. North Richmond was considered to be an especially dangerous part of town. Lisa, of Group 4, remarked: “...you never mess with north Richmond,” because as Yen, also of Group 4, explained, “they do have ghetto people down there. When you go there people be throwing rocks at you.” African

Americans predominate in North Richmond, with a few Laotian families. My informants said that they rarely go to that part of Richmond, and if they do, it's always in groups.

I was struck by the identification of only very specific parts of Richmond as ghetto. And by implication, the neighborhoods where the majority of my informants lived were not perceived as ghetto. Only two of my informants lived in north Richmond. I would often pick-up and drop-off my informants before and after meetings or interviews. This gave me the opportunity to see the condition of housing and environment in which they lived. The girls lived in the "flats," (as opposed to the hills) which were considered the poorer parts of the cities of Richmond and San Pablo. And while a few lived in well-kept housing surrounded by yards and on clean streets, most resided in run down apartments or houses with no gardens or trees to soften the stark landscape. And several informants mentioned that in the early 1990s they had to scrutinize their dress and who accompanied them before stepping out of their homes because of roaming gangs. But gang activity had subsided in the late 1990s, according to my informants. Moreover these neighborhoods were also racially mixed with Asian, Latino and African American residents.

My informants go to great lengths to distance themselves from ghetto culture. Even though some of them speak Ebonics, listen to R&B and Rap, and are attracted to black men, these preferences and desires does not necessarily lead to an identification with African Americans. Nor does it necessarily foster an understanding of political and economic disenfranchisement, and political solidarity, as Maira (1998:282) observes of young South Asians in New York City who have adopted black styles.

Like other recent immigrants and their children (see Prashad 2000; Waters 1999b) my informants had adopted a negative portrayal of African Americans in the U.S. However, unlike the South Asian immigrants in Prashad's study or the ethnically-identified West Indian youth in Water's study, who were more likely to be middle-class, my informants came from poor families, and live in impoverished urban cities. But it must be acknowledged that my informants represented a self-selected group, have middle-class aspirations and have adopted their parents' belief that hard work, perseverance, and the right values and attitudes will lead to social mobility, as I demonstrate in the next section. Their attempts at distancing themselves from ghetto culture reveal an awareness of the racialization processes operating in the U.S. My informants displayed an understanding of the fact of life in the U.S., that if they talk "proper," act "right," dress smart, and work hard they will set themselves apart from blacks and not be subjected to racism. In short if they become middle class (read white) they will have possibility of upward mobility and acceptance into U.S. society by the dominant culture. This finding suggests that growing up in poor inner-city neighborhoods populated by native born minorities does not necessarily lead to an "adversarial stance" (Portes and Zhou 1993) towards dominant society among the children of immigrants. Moreover, the adaptation outcomes for this group may be shaped by gender, as I discuss below.

My informants' desire to distance themselves from the "ghetto" indicates the power of media, some politicians and commentators, as well as non-state institutions in portraying the presence of the "underclass" in terms of the culture of poverty among blacks rather than structural racism. Their perspectives also reflect the power of the

master paradigm of assimilation into dominant society, thus pointing to limitations to APEN's goal of instilling a critical perspective on race relations in this country. The ideology of assimilation into middle-class America undermines APEN's attempts to nurture collective self-understanding in the youth regarding the importance and necessity of building "complex cultures of solidarity" (Prashad 2000:132) with other communities of color in Contra Costa County.

If ghetto culture is associated with "black people" and a "black attitude," then not being ghetto is associated with being white. Sixteen year-old Leah, of Group 2, mentioned that other people call her a "white girl" because:

It's like cause I dress a certain way. Cause I don't dress like all the, I don't know I don't like to wear baggy clothes ...It's like the way I talk too. Cause sometimes I talk like normal you know but I don't use slang and stuff. And sometime I do but then not as much as the people that do.

Cuo's uncle calls her a "white girl." A little baffled I asked her why:

Cuo: He's like cause, the way you talk, the way you act. I'm like 'you know how do I act and stuff like a white girl? I'm like why, because I don't slang and stuff, cause I don't act in all you know ghetto whatever, slanging using Ebonics whatever?' I mean that don't make me a white girl whatever.

Bindi: But that wouldn't make you Laotian either, to speak Ebonics that would be more like some black girls. (Some of the others laugh)

Cuo: Yeah. But then like you know my uncle, he uses slang, he's all trendy. He's with the Honda Civics and you know the hooboo and the clothing and stuff.

Bindi: The hip-hop stuff?

Cuo: And I'm not doing like wearing that kind of clothes or whatever, and he calls me a "white girl" and stuff. But then I don't see myself as a "white girl."

Leah's and Cuo's peers see them as having been co-opted into white norms. For Cuo's uncle speaking standard English, not wearing baggy clothes and not adopting black ways of acting, the phenomenon of "acting white" is not "cool." Lee (1996:101) found that ethnic Chinese, Vietnamese and Cambodian boys and girls in inner-city areas of

Boston adopted black popular cultural styles because they viewed it as having a high level of “cool capital,” which Asian Americans lacked. Waters (1999b:319-321) reports similar findings among adolescent West Indian Americans in New York but she also notes that boys are more likely to suffer social stigma if they speak standard English among their friends. Girls have more leeway to code switch in speaking when the situation calls for it.

For Cuo’s uncle, like the young West Indian men in New York, adopting black styles perhaps also represented his own alienation from school and wider society and an understanding of how racism and poverty operate in American society.³ On the other hand, the second generation young women in my study believed that America offered freedom, more power to women and opportunities for education and work regardless of social status, unlike in Laos. Leah, Cuo, and the majority of youth who became involved in AYA had positive attitudes towards school, high aspirations for college and careers. My informants understood and were able to conform to mainstream educational requirements, without adversely losing face with peers. These findings suggest that the adaptation outcomes predicted by the segmented assimilation model (Portes and Zhou 1993) is a gendered phenomenon. In a community with weak ethnic networks, little access to capital and broad ties to other communities of color, second-generation Laotian girls can locate material and moral resources in contemporary social justice organization and the ideology of gender equality to resist “oppositional cultures” (Zhou 1997a).

However, to juxtapose “black culture” and “white culture” is to frame them in “ethnically absolute” (Gilroy 1987:13) terms. Classifying second generation Laotian

³ Smith-Hefner (1999:195) reports that in the late 1980s, when she conducted research, young Khmer men also experienced alienation from school and were embarrassed to ask for help. She also notes that most

women in these absolute ways masks the complex, dynamic and negotiated nature of the identities they embody. Cuo did not find resonance with the identity of a “white” girl just as she rejected identification with a “black” girl. When I asked how she would like a reporter to write about young Laotian women, Cuo said:

Like ghetto stuff, like we are trying to break the stereotype and stuff. Just you know look beyond the stereotype, create a role. Like listen to youth whatever. And we are really positive...

Cuo demands that dominant society jettison the stereotypes that classifies second-generation Laotians as “just like blacks,” stresses an identity that is created within the context of American social life, an identity in which youth are seen as positive, active and creating change in their communities. Other informants demanded that dominant society jettison stereotypes that place them “near whites” in America’s racial classification system, as I discuss in the next section.

On Being a Model Minority

Having lived in the U.S. for 14 years I am by now familiar with the positive statements made towards me as a South Asian, and towards Asians in the U.S. in general, with regard to how well I speak English, how smart I am or how hard I work. I regard these statements not as compliments but as condescension, as stereotyping and as a mechanism to set me apart from other people of color, though it does depend on who is making them. Thus I was curious how my informants, who occupy different class and ethnic locations than I do, would regard such statements. From interviews I knew that the majority of my informants were doing well at school and committed to attending college and having careers. At the same time the staff at APEN adopt a middle-class ethos. They

preferred to dress in the “gangsta” or “hip-hop” style associated with urban black and Latino males.

create a culture and a set of expectations where attending school regularly, maintaining grades, going to college, and acquiring skills while at APEN are seen as important aspects of becoming responsible and productive adults.

My informants' educational performance and attitudes were in marked contrast to general statistics on Laotian youth in Contra Costa County, cited in Chapter Two. They also deviated from patterns of achievement and aspirations among Southeast Asian youth found by earlier studies.⁴ I was curious about how teachers perceived my informants and other high performing Laotian students at Richmond High where Laotians made up ten percent of the 1587 student body in the school-year 1998-1999, according to Dean Phan of Richmond High.⁵ Did these students complicate the dominant perception of Laotian youth in Contra Costa County? Did teachers and fellow students label them a model minority? If so, how did they react to being called a "model minority?"

In the Spring of 1999 I informally interviewed several teachers at Richmond High School, all of whom painted a very mixed picture of the educational performance of Laotian students. Dean Phan, who has been teaching at Richmond High for seven years, who was previously a student there, and who claimed to be the first Mien teacher in the country, noted that up to the mid-1980s Laotian students viewed education as an opportunity.

⁴ Based on a 1992 survey of over 5000 teenage children of immigrants in San Diego and Miami metropolitan areas, Rumbaut (1994) found that Laotians and Cambodians have the lowest scores on English language proficiency and in Stanford reading achievement test scores. Hmong and Cambodian students are also well below national math norms, followed by Lao, among Asian students. Rumbaut (1995) cites a 1986-1987 study by the Indochinese Health and Adaptation Research Project among a representative sample of Indochinese refugees in San Diego which found that Cambodian and Lao students showed lowest levels of attainment in GPAs and test scores in math and reading, with Vietnamese and Chinese having the highest scores and Hmong occupied an intermediate positions for both scores. And in a survey of 8th and 9th graders in San Diego schools, Hmong, Lao, as well as Cambodians and Mexicans expressed lower occupational aspirations than other groups (Rumbaut 1995).

⁵ During the school year 1998-1999, the ethnic breakdown of a total of 1587 enrolled students at Richmond High was as follows: 49.8% Latino, 26.0% African American, 17.9% Asian, 3.6% White, 0.2 % Native

However, from the mid-eighties to the late eighties things changed. Echoing Portes and Zhou (1993) who argue that proximity to native born minorities exposes the second generation to an “adversarial subculture,” Dean Phan noted that Laotian “youth adapted,” and they “accepted the negative values similar to the population around them.” Thus, “academic achievement is no longer the goal” for Laotian youth and school is seen as a place for “social gathering,” according to Dean Phan. Gang activities have been on the rise since the mid-eighties and incarceration and suspension of Mien/Lao students has “increased dramatically.” Dean Phan remarked that “since 1992 at Richmond High, this trend is very persistent.” These patterns have been reported by other studies on Laotian youth (see Ima 1995; Walker-Moffat 1995: 111).⁶

When I asked Dean Phan about current academic achievement levels among Laotian students at Richmond High, he reported that in the past “achievement was at different levels.” Many Laotian youth were in English As A Second Language (ESL) or remedial classes and few were in college prep classes. But Dean Phan asserted “today, Mien students are the highest achievement group,” and they have the highest grade point average (GPA). Other teachers also described Laotian students as spanning the spectrum of educational performance. Ms. Cohen, who teaches ESL 4 and who is also the Resource Teacher for the Bilingual Program informed me that Laotian students fall into two groups: one group that is “extremely diligent, hardworking, studious and with high level skills,” and the other group has “low level skills, is truant, into drugs and into gangs.” She

American, 2.5% Filipino, and 0.0% Pacific Islander according to the California Department of Education.

⁶ There are two perspectives on the dramatic rise in gang-activity among Southeast Asian youth. Ima (1995) argues that the increase in juvenile delinquency and gang-related activity reflects schools’ inability to retain Southeast Asian youth in classes, and an increasing proportion find themselves in trouble with the law. Walker-Moffat (1995) offers a racial analysis, arguing that the rise in these statistics reflects a disillusionment with school and a realization that the kind of education they are receiving in inner-city schools will not equip them entrance into college and white-collar jobs which would lead to social mobility.

also noted that the students she sees in her classes “have generally been here ten years, I don’t see the newly arrived.”

Mr. Errikila, a veteran teacher of 18 years at Richmond High School and who teaches Economics and ESL 4, attributed the very low level of performance among some Laotian students to not wanting to appear “geeky” or “nerdy,” not wanting to stand out (see also Lee 1996). Though having said this Mr. Errikila pointed to the California Scholarship Federation (CSF) roll for 1999 that was pinned on a wall in his classroom and noted that while only about 40 students out of 1587 were on the list the majority of them were Mien, based on their last names. It takes a 3.00 GPA to be on the CSF roll.

Other teachers who teach college preparatory classes and therefore only see college bound students confirmed the high performance levels of some Laotian youth. Ms. Casey, who teaches English 1 and College Preparation besides cooking, described Laotian students as “good students” who “do their homework pretty well.” In fact, Ms. Goodbeer, who teaches college preparation and non-preparation English to 9th graders, told me that most Laotian students speak English well and “some of them are more advanced than some of the American kids without ESL.”⁷ She also mentioned that she has a lot of Mien students in her college preparation class, with few white, black or Latino kids.

I also inquired about the gender breakdown in school performance of Laotian students since several of my informants acknowledged that their brothers were in gangs or faced peer pressure to join a gang. Some teachers affirmed that Laotian boys experience a great deal of pressure to join gangs, and Ms. Cohen observed that “boys are

⁷ It is interesting to note that Ms. Goodbeer did not perceive the Laotian students as American. As I noted in Chapter Two, twenty-three out of my 31 informants were born in the United States.

more into the gang culture.” At the same time Mr. Mooney, who teaches ESL 4 and English 3 to juniors, reported that while girls take school seriously, “a whole slew of students,” mostly girls, disappear and more of the Laotian students than others are teen mothers. However, in Ms. Cohen’s experience Laotian girls do better in school though they do not significantly outnumber boys. But the girls do have high career aspirations, wanting to be doctors, lawyers or fashion designers, according to Ms. Cohen.

So, in the late 1990s, at Richmond High the patterns of academic performance and aspirations among Laotian students is not clearly demarcated. But, as I noted earlier, the majority of my informants are performing well at school and expressed high ambitions for college and careers. In focus groups I asked my informants if they had been labeled a model minority and how they would feel about being called that. With the exception of two informants, none of the other youth had heard of the term. So I explained what it meant in the following terms:

Well people call Asian model minorities because while we are seen to be doing well at school, like focus on going to college, doing well in math and science, nerds or working hard. Or when you get a job you do well in jobs, own your businesses, and then you go on to buy your own homes and cars. You are achieving the American Dream sort of. Asian immigrants are seen like that especially when they compare us to like Hispanics or black people. You know they are not seen as doing so well.

Having proffered this explanation, I asked them again what they would think if someone called them a model minority.⁸ Their initial reaction was positive, they would take the label as a compliment. Pham’s response typified how most youth felt:

⁸ Kim (1999) identifies a process of “racial triangulation” through which the dominant group, Whites, marginalizes African Americans with respect to Asian Americans, and at the same time ensures the inassimilability of Asian Americans with whites on racial and/or cultural grounds. Through historical research Kim finds that racial triangulation of Asian Americans has persisted since its inception in the mid-1800s to the present.

Pham: I'll take that as a compliment.

Bindi: You would take that as a compliment.

Pham: Not just, just because you're a model minority or whatever, but for myself you know. Just, just, just the fact that I'm doing good.

These Laotian youth, who attend a severely resource deprived inner-city high school, felt proud to be called a model minority or smart because it implied a recognition of their individual performance. They embraced the stereotype because as Lee (1996:9) argues, this stereotype appears flattering especially when compared to the stigmatized stereotypes of other racial minorities.

Others, like Maya said she would be proud to be called a model minority because it affirmed her parents' hopes and desires for their children:

I feel proud to hear that cause it's like, cause that's what my, most our families came for right. Like you know they always tell us 'we came to America to get education, for you guys to do better'. Like when we, you grow up you know like Asian people do better. We're like 'yeah we're really determined you know'. Like we're not just here just to be here you know. So that's why I would be happy to hear that kids these days are you know really striving for something you know, better and all that.

Leah's response struck a nationalistic tone:

It's like sometimes, I mean sometimes I feel proud to be Asian cause of that stereotype. It's like "yeah us Asians this and this and Asian that" (Raises her voice).

Maya's and Leah's comments convey an opposition to the ghetto culture of their neighborhoods and schools, which I discussed earlier, and adoption of their immigrant parents' values that hard work and determination will lead to success and social mobility. Maya's response echoes Caplan, Choy and Whitmore's (1991) argument that the children of Southeast Asians have impressive accomplishments at school because they bring with them the values of hard work and willingness to delay immediate gratification for future

gains. Leah's comment in particular is pregnant with the divisive implications of the model minority myth. It appears that she has bought into the culturalist argument that attributes whatever my informants do or say to their 'Asianess'.

However, as my informants considered how the model minority label affects them in their daily interactions with fellow students, there was an overwhelming sense that certain expectations were being imposed on them just because they are Asian. My informants expressed annoyance and anger because the stereotype brought expectations with it that they did not fulfil or did not wish to fulfil.

Bindi: So do you like being called smart?

Bryanna: Um it's good sometimes but sometimes you know...

Marn: Get on your nerves, hunh?

It appears that other students of color, mainly African Americans, have adopted the view that culture is the determining force, a finding confirmed by Lee (1996). This is so despite the fact that teachers at Richmond High report that patterns of educational performance among Laotians span the whole spectrum. And it points to the power of the media in generating the model minority myth, as well as state and non-state institutions casting all Asian groups into a single homogenous racial category.⁹

Fiey, was annoyed when an African American student in her science class told her "all Asian girls are smart you know" because she herself doesn't "get" science and she does not like it. When I asked if there was a situation in which she would take it as a compliment, she said:

Fiey: It varies, like, like let's say like I aced something you know and they say 'see I know you're smart'. I know I'm smart, you can call me that (laughter)

⁹ In the 2000 US Census there were 126 racial and ethnic categories and individuals could check-off more than one racial/ethnic box.

from everyone). But like if I wasn't doing well and then they just say it, then you know I feel offended.

Bindi: So, it's like putting you down almost, like 'why aren't you smart?'

Fiey: Yeah

As Prashad (2000:6) notes "when one is typecast as a success, one's ability cease to be the measure of one's capacity." What the girls objected to strongly was the assumption that smartness is a genetic trait among Asians, not just a cultural attribute. As Fiey remarks: "They all think we're naturally smart. It just depends on how hard you work." And if at times they fail to do well, then fellow students chastise them for not measuring up to "the levels expected of their genes" (Prashad 2000:6), as Alison commented in focus group discussions:

I mean like okay my algebra class right, it's like, it's not a lot of Asian people, it's only a couple, and then me and her cousin right. Like whenever we go to class and stuff and when we do our work and stuff and we get good grades. And then there be like African American kids right, and they sit right in back of us and they always asks us for help and stuff. And then when we don't get it they be like 'what you don't get it!' They're like, 'you supposed to know, you're smart', you know, 'you're Asian'. We're like 'no we don't get it' you know but they think that we just, we're just lying to them. We just don't want to help them. (Again several people say "yeah," and "uhunh.")

The assumption of smartness as innate serves to deny the hard work and effort that they put in to do well. Maya is exasperated with her peers who fail to recognize that she "tried her best," and simply assume she is "smart anyways" in order to explain away why she did better than they in school work. She emphasizes that "we worked hard to deserve the A, not just teacher come in and then you know 'oh I could get a A', you know what I'm saying. Uh, uh." Tsiet remarks that she would "be mad" when someone says to her "oh you're smart cause you got an A on this test" because:

I know that everybody tried so that, I mean you can't just say that 'oh you're smart'. I mean everybody's smart. It's just that they didn't do well or something, like get a B grade and stuff. That's why I wouldn't feel bad, I would feel proud if somebody said 'oh you are a model minority'. But in a way I would feel bad and stuff with that compliment.

For Tsiet everybody is capable of getting good grades if they work hard and try. So, while she would be proud to be called 'smart' she also does not want to be stereotyped by culturalist or biologicistic assumptions. But Tsiet also mentioned the 'free rider' problem. She disliked people who wanted to be in the same groups as her because she got good grades. Tsiet pointed out that she tries, she studies, she goes over the "thing like four different times," while "they just sit there and talk a lot...cause they go 'oh no you smart, we could just copy'". Yen resisted her "black friends" exhortations of "can I copy on to you?" by acting dumb. As Yen was making this comment several other Focus Group members were saying "yeah" in agreement. Fiey remarked that "they (peers at school) don't want all the Asian girls together cause they could like get the best grade," indicating that some students perceived Asian students as a threat.

These critical comments from my informants do not represent a sophisticated racial and class analysis on the operation of the model minority myth but focus on how the stereotype shapes their daily interactions with fellow students. In most of their comments I hear a desire not to be set apart, not to be seen as belonging to a distinctive group but to be recognized for the diverse individuals that they are, for their humanity, as well as for their effort. And while they oppose the ghetto culture of some of their peers they also do not employ culturalist explanations to denigrate those who do not do well. This can be explained by the social geography of race that second generation Laotians encountered. African Americans are the dominant minority in schools and in

neighborhoods. Half of my informants stated that they had a mixed group of friends at school that included African Americans, and four had African American boyfriends.

One youth, who was actively involved in fighting political issues such as welfare reform and Proposition 209 through APEN, offered a much a sophisticated response to why she objected to being called a model minority. Gabriela recognized that being called a “model minority” not only pitted them against other communities of color but also served to obliterate the specific situation of Laotians in this country:

Gabriela: I don't fall under none of those categories. Another thing is that I think that its such (emphasis) a stereotype about Asian Americans because like um it might help one Asian American group but then at the same time it might hurt another group.

Bindi: Uhunh. How?

Gabriela: For example like the welfare reform, like when they said that um you know Asians are supposed to be the perfect you know Asian role models or whatever. And then like they are talking more about like um Chinese-American, how somebody can't be like that you know... or Japanese-American or Korean-American or whatever. How come like none of these other ethnic groups can be like that right. And it's just because we are Asians they assume that we are like that you know quote-unquote you know that um model minority. And we (Laotians) are not even like that you know cause we have only established out roots in America for like the last 15 years and no where near the fact of running a university or starting our own corporation within America you know unlike the Chinese.

Bindi: Except perhaps the Vietnamese.

Gabriela: Yeah. So we are no where near that and at the same time they are putting us under the same group and it hurts because it hurts us socially in terms of climbing up the social ladder of America.

Gabriela understood that the stereotype of Asian Americans as a “model minority,” leads to the needs of non-affluent Asian groups being unrecognized and, therefore unmet. And she also recognized that cultural explanations of why Asians have become economically successful and have integrated into mainstream US economy are applied to economically unsuccessful groups such as African Americans, Native Americans and Latinos, without regard to structural factors. Gabriela's comments contain

the seed of the “complex cultures of solidarity” (Prashad 2000:132) that APEN is attempting to foster among my informants.

Thus I argue that, at least in the arena of school-related issues, the model minority thesis does not serve to create a wedge in interracial relationships between Laotians and other communities of color. In fact, as we saw in Chapter Four, this group of second generation Laotians understand that the resource-deprived school they attend shapes the educational performance of all the students, what ever their race. Within the context of APEN, my informants’ common experience of school and attendant structural inequalities is translated into collective self-understandings and a sense of solidarity with other youth.

At the same time, the variable positioning of Asian immigrants and Asian Americans along the black-white axis (Espiritu 1997:109-110) suggests that ethnic hierarchies are not given or stable. The shifting and contradictory constructions of racial meanings can provide second-generation Laotians with resources, which are interpreted and mobilized in new contexts (Sewell 1992). The segmented assimilation model (Portes and Zhou 1993) predicts that Laotians will be positioned at the bottom of the ethnic hierarchy, creating a social context defined by prejudice and racism, akin to that experienced by African Americans. But the model minority status applied to some Laotians in school provides second-generation Laotians with resources to challenge such a positioning at the bottom of the hierarchy.

Ethnic and Class Constraints on Pan-Asian American Racial Solidarity

Since the civil rights era and the subsequent racial minority movements of the 1960s the state has become the preeminent site of struggle for power, representation, and

resources related to employment, welfare and education. As Gamson (1995:400-401) has noted, the American sociopolitical environment has become structured so that interest-group politics on the racial model is necessary not only to gain access to resources and political influence but also because discrimination and repression, both official and informal, is meted out along racial categories and thus becomes a logical basis for resistance. Thus, Espiritu and Ong (1994) observe that the state no longer uses race to oppress its minority population, instead it provides an incentive for racial solidarity.

For example, the political category “Asian American” arose in the 1960s among college students to express the similarity of experiences and treatment which specific Asian ethnic groups, such as the Japanese, Chinese, Koreans and Filipinos, received from state institutions. These groups had previously been divided by cultural and historical antagonisms (Omi and Winant 1994:109-110). However, in the post-civil rights era Asian American communities have become extremely differentiated along lines of class, culture, language, histories of migration, and patterns of settlement and adaptation. U.S. immigration policy informs this diversity, and Asian Pacific Americans are recent refugees and immigrants, native-born and affiliated to communities several generations old, highly-skilled professionals, and low-wage workers. Even though state and non-state institutions, continue to identify different Asian ethnic groups along racial lines, and therefore the Asian American racial category remains an institutionally relevant category in the political and legal system, a number of scholars (Espiritu and Ong 1994; Omi and Winant 1994) have argued that class and ethnic cleavages will mitigate racial solidarity.¹⁰

¹⁰ Espiritu and Ong (1994), while acknowledging ethnic cleavages, argues that class division will constitute the greatest barrier to racial solidarity.

In this section I discuss the prospects for pan Asian racial solidarity among teenage Laotians, the children of one of our most recent refugee communities, who are exposed to Asian American frameworks indirectly. Even though my informants are participating in an ethnic-specific youth program, the program is part of the Laotian Organizing Project, which in turn is part of APEN. One of the expressed goals of APEN is to promote the specific concerns of Asians and Pacific Islanders within the broader environmental justice and social justice movements (Elaine, Interview 10/21/98). The majority of permanent staff in the youth program, and in APEN in general, are second and third generation Japanese, Chinese and Korean Americans. In addition, archival research indicated that Groups 1 and 2 were introduced to Asian American history during their second summer in the program.

As I discussed in Chapter Three, almost all of my informants self-identify as Lao, Mien, Khmuu or Laotian, and in the process affirmed ethnic identities that emphasize ethnic distinctiveness and national boundaries. But as Waters (1999b: 303-304) demonstrates, ethnic identifications are used selectively by individuals and can shift with context. On occasion my informants would identify as Asian. For example, Cuo, who said she would identify herself as Mien or Laotian, later qualified this assertion by noting that she might label herself as Asian depending on the social context and the race of the person:

I think who asks me too but if it's like a white person then I'll tell them that I'm Asian. If it's someone like from San Francisco or whatever, I'll probably say Asian, but if it's like around Richmond or something then I'll probably say like Mien or Laotian because you know they know more.

Here Cuo reveals that her interactions in Richmond, where she lives and goes to school, are confined to non-whites; to other Laotians, Southeast Asians, African Americans and Latinos.¹¹ And as several informants noted, many of their peers, teachers and others in West Contra Costa County have heard of the label Laotian.

Other second generation Laotians identify as Asian even in West Contra Costa County, in order to avoid lengthy explanations of the ethnic group they belong to. When I asked my informants in Group 4 if they would always identify as Mien or Lao, or if they would choose to label themselves as Asian Americans, this is what they said:

Yen: Mien.

Byranna: I just say Asian.

BS: How about you Karouna?

Karouna: I say Lao.

BS: How about you Marn?

Marn: I say Asian.

Yen: I say Mien. They say, "what's that?" "Don't trip it's Asian." [Everyone laughs].

BS: Is it easier to say you are Asian?

Bryanna: Yeah.

Marn: Cause I don't wanna explain.

Even though Laotians are the dominant Asian group in Richmond and San Pablo, peers often categorized my informants as Chinese, Vietnamese or Filipino. Thus, my informants often found it easier to just call themselves Asian. However, for Leah, the identification she chooses depends on how much she wants to reveal of herself: "It depends [on] how much I wanna tell them about myself. So if I don't wanna tell them that much about myself then I'll say Asian you know." Identifying in pan-Asian terms is a strategic move to avoid, as Maya indicates, having "to explain the whole process," and a refusal to help peers and others unravel assumptions of racial sameness. Thus, as Espiritu (1992) observed, second-generation Laotians assess different settings and

¹¹ The percentage of whites in this community is very small, as noted in Chapter Two.

audiences and select from a range of pan-ethnic and nationality-based identity categories based on their strategic utility and symbolic appropriateness.

For this group of second generation Laotians, at the present moment identifying as Asian is not synonymous with the label Asian American. They do not resort to the pan-ethnic label Asian American to avoid lengthy explanations of Laotian migration history. Maya conveys the complicated dance my informants go through in selecting ethnic identifications:

But then when I think Asian American, sometimes I think like American born Asian or like being here for so long we can name ourselves as Asian American right. But like when other people ask us 'what are you?' or 'what's your nationality?' you know, and then we don't want to say Asian American because they gonna think our ethnicity or whatever is Asian you know. They won't understand which one so...

For Maya, the label Asian American not only referred to someone who was born in the U.S. or who had had lived here for a long time, but also a label that denied ethnic specificity. Yet twenty-three out of thirty-two informants, including Maya were born in the U.S. Their understanding of the label Asian American became clearer when I asked if they could be Laotian, Mien, Lao or Khmuu and be Asian American. For them identifying as Asian American represented a dissolving of ethnic boundaries and a blending into dominant American norms. For Pham it meant a loss of traditions and lifestyles:

Hmmm, I think that when you talk about being Asian American like you change, like you go from being like Laotian or whatever and then just changing your whole lifestyle and becoming American you know. And like your whole religion or tradition or whatever, it's all gone. It's just American tradition you know.

For Pham, identifying as Asian American represented a loss of what made Laotians different and unique, even though she admitted to practicing many of the Laotian

traditions. Sarah distinguished Laotians and Asian American in terms of education, English language facility and community organizing:

They (Asian American staff at APEN) talk more English, they seem way smarter than us, like they have more education than we have and they just come across as more Americanized...And like in Laos, people, we don't do stuff like this. Or now they do you know because they are in America but...Like we don't have officers, we don't sit here in meetings you know, just go in the house and talk. They are different people, so Americanized.

Here Sarah contrasts the cultural capital and class characteristics of the predominantly Asian American staff at APEN and the Laotian community. In doing so, Sarah underscores Espiritu and Ong's (1994:303-304) observation that the managerial and professional class dominates most pan-Asian organizations. Though all the APEN staff had a long history of community organizing, they all had a college education, and several had attended elite universities such as University of California, Berkeley, Stanford and Oberlin. By identifying them as "so Americanized" Sarah also indicates that the staff are not part of recent Asian immigrant communities that she encounters in Richmond and San Pablo.

The times when my informants opted to label themselves Asian American it was an imposed identity, when others classified them in terms of a pan-ethnic label rather than an ethno-national label. Maya notes the times when she, as a second-generation Laotian, does not have a choice but to check the Asian American box:

It's like the surveys we have to take at school, like you would never have a category like Laotian, it's like Asian for everyone right. It's just like African American, Asian American, Latino or just white. We have no other choice but put Asian American so they don't really know.

These findings suggest the importance of qualitative data in uncovering the range of ethnic identity choices in different social contexts at a particular point in time, and how

and why people choose between these choices. Quantitative surveys such as those reported in Portes and Rumbaut (2001: 154-160) can only reveal static labels at specific points in time. The preceding narratives indicate that for some second-generation youth ethnic distinctiveness is important rather than being subsumed under a pan-ethnic umbrella.¹² My informants have a strong preference for identifying in terms of ethno-national categories, thus challenging the tendency in dominant discourses to lump all Asian ethnic groups into the racialized category 'Asian'. When at times they identify in pan-Asian terms, it is a matter of strategic utility even as it affirms perceptions of racial sameness in dominant society. Second-generation Laotians wish to underscore their immigrant experience and resist the imposition of an Asian American category by state and non-state institutions. However, as I argued in Chapter Three, even though Laotian teenager girls select ethnic categories that connect them to their parents' homeland, the contents and meanings of these categories are reconstructed within the specific context of the U.S.

Moreover, identifying with a political label such as "Asian Americans," which arose in the 1960s, also implies identifying with a certain political perspective on the position of racial minorities in the US that includes an emphasis on shared histories of immigration and common experiences of discrimination. Second-generation Laotians in this study belong to a recent immigrant community that was not involved in the struggles of the 1960s. Laotians also represent a group that is distinct in terms of ethnic and class composition from other Asian ethnic groups in the U.S. The legacies of the civil rights

¹² Maira (1998) also found that second generation Indian Americans resisted identification with pan-ethnic labels, preferring to emphasize ethnic distinctiveness. For the most part these are the children of Indian immigrants who arrived post-1965 and who were professionals, scientists and graduate students and not involved in the political and social movements of the 1960s and 1970s.

movements may not be understood by them even though Asian American history and organizing is part of the summer curriculum for the older cohorts of youth. In addition, for working-class Laotians, the struggle to improve their social and economic status suggests the potential for solidarity across race rather than within racial boundaries. Identifying with pan-ethnic labels such as Asian American is also more common in college but Kibria (2000) notes that currently there is little evidence of pan-Asian ethnicization.

Conclusion

This analysis clarifies both “the conceptual mappings of self” (Frankenberg 1993:44) and the attitudes and beliefs that second generation Laotians hold towards other racial and ethnic groups. The social geography of race has created particular material worlds, which in turn have shaped my informants daily environments and interactions in specific ways. These material worlds are informed by racial politics in US society, and the informal meanings and stereotypes emanating from it, which structure everyday experiences of minority groups (Nagel 1994:156). Particularistic understandings of self and social location of second-generation Laotian girls living in such material environments has two implications: 1) The narratives of my informants suggest that the adaptation outcomes for those children of immigrants living in close proximity to native-born minorities in poor inner-city neighborhoods are more complex than those predicted by the segmented assimilation model (Portes and Zhou 1993). We need to account for the ways in which racial politics and power relations in society shape the particularistic self-understandings of the children of immigrants and the range of everyday experiences related to such understandings; and 2) such particularistic self-understandings serve to

counter and complicate the possibility of fundamentally altering dominant conceptions of integration and incorporation into American society.

As an Asian American environmental justice organization, APEN represents a radical perspective on integration and incorporation into American society. In this sense, while APEN is fundamentally an American organization and is involved in a process of socialization of new immigrants, it does not represent just another mode of incorporation (Portes and Rumbaut 1996) that immigrants are subjected to. APEN's practices represent a different claim to be an American than the welfare system, social workers, schools, churches, media and so on. APEN's critique of "hegemonic ideas about belonging and not belonging in racial and cultural terms" (Ong 1996:738) means that this is not an uncritical emphasis on adaptation and acculturation but rather a conscious and deliberate attempt to foster "critical assimilation."

However, the findings in this chapter suggest that particularistic understandings, one's sense of one's social location (Brubaker and Cooper 2000: 17), and the range of experiences related to one's social location cannot be interpreted and translated into collective self-understandings through political action within contemporary social justice organizations with any certainty (cf Moya 1997: 140-141). The contradictory effects of racial politics in U.S. society complicate the long-term prospects for cross-race and pan-ethnic coalitions.

Second generation Laotian girls and young women are aware of the hierarchical ordering of the nation along the white-black racial axis. They distance themselves from the "ghetto" culture of their African American peers and adopt middle-class values and practices that will potentially lead to upward social mobility and acceptance in the

dominant culture. At the same time they reject the model minority thesis, with all its implications. Both of these positions have contradictory possibilities for cross-race alliances. The narratives from this group of second generation Laotians also reveal the constraints of ethnicity and class on pan-Asian racial solidarity.

Recalling Okihiro's (1994:33) question "is yellow black or white?" my informants' narratives suggest that they resist such racial positioning on the bi-polar model of U.S. society. But they also resist the continuing imposition of racial boundaries and classification on Asian groups by state and non-state institutions and the U.S. public. The contradictory and multiple effects of contemporary racial politics on second generation Laotians' racial subjectivities may not lead to a collective pan-Asian American identity. But such uneven effects may actually serve to maintain collective identities as contingent and open up the space for cross-race and pan-ethnic alliances to counter inequalities related to specific issues and in specific contexts.

Chapter Six

Building Community, Crafting Belonging

Dorinne Kondo (1996) paraphrases Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak to argue that “home,” for many people on the margins, is that which we cannot not want. It stands for a safe place, where there is not need to explain oneself to outsiders; it stands for community. We all need to know who our friends and foes are and which are the safe spaces where we can rest; who are the supports on whom we can rely and whom we should distrust. We all need to know where we fit in and where is ‘home’ (Afshar 1994:127).

Focusing on the material lives of second generation Laotians and their communities, the previous chapters have discussed my informants’ multiple subjectivities derived from their situatedness in multiple relations of domination, and the ways in which they shape personal experiences, and condition social practices and political action. In this chapter I address notions of belonging and community. As Afshar (1994) and Kondo (1996) suggest, the sense of belonging has two facets: a) the emotional feelings of belonging in a place where one does not have to explain oneself, a sense of personal location. Where the individual can rest in a safe place; and b) the question of collective identity, or the sense of belonging to a distinctive bounded group (Brubaker and Cooper 2000: 19). In this sense, as Bronwen Walter (2001:14) argues, identity is derived from our location “both specifically geographical (which particular place do we feel we belong to?) and positional (what is our place relative to other group identities?).” Both these senses of belongings, the emotional and the identificatory, become explicit for second-generation Laotian girls, and all youth, who, as they enter their teen years, are wrestling

with questions of self-definition, with a sense of where they belong.

I utilize the notion of 'home' to understand the places in which second-generation Laotian girls feel an emotional sense of belonging and sense of solidarity and identification with fellow group members. The term 'home' resonates with multiple associations. Recent writing indicates that homes imply different scales and spaces: the private and the public, the national to the local community. Feminists have focused on the home as a private sphere of intimacy, shelter, comfort, nurture, patriarchal hierarchy, personal relationships and gendered self-identity. For some feminists the 'home' signifies control and imprisonment for women in dominant societies. For other feminists 'home' represents a place of safety and shelter for racialized groups whose physical and cultural integrity is threatened by the dominant group outside (Bronwen Walter 2001:196). Feminists of color and post-colonial feminists (bell hooks, 1990; Avtar Brah, 1992; Grewal et al., 1988) argue that the division between public and private is raced, and central to the construction of middle-class femininity as white. For women of color, 'home' is a space and place to both affirm one's culture and community, and resist racism and prejudice in the larger community.

In literature concerned with notions of location and dislocation, belonging and displacement, and migration and exile, cultural theorists have been interested in the associations of home with origins, identity, attachment and settlement, and with its frequent use as a metaphor for nation. In these writings home is seen as a way of establishing difference, and that which determines who can belong to the nation whose boundaries are fixed. George (1996:9) asserts that homes "are built on select inclusions," which are "grounded in a learned (or taught) sense of kinship that is extended to those

who are perceived as sharing the same blood, race, class, gender or religion.”

These multiple understandings of home allow us to challenge the public/private division; they allow us to examine the ways in which particular experiences of primary and secondary social relations demarcate specific places as ‘home’. Identifying in ethno-national terms, as my informants do, does not give us direct clues to whether a particular ethnic community, or particular institutions within that community, serve as ‘home’ and create a sense of belonging (Martin and Mohanty 1986). I draw on my ethnographic research to argue that the sharing of narratives and experiences of exclusion in primary and secondary social relations, the affirmation of Laotian culture, and engaging in political action on behalf of the Laotian community all serve to demarcate APEN, and specifically AYA as ‘home’ in both its senses for second-generation Laotian girls. The activities that the youth engage in at AYA serve to create safe spaces and define the boundaries of a collective Laotian identity. In the process, Laotian identity created through the institutional site of APEN becomes bounded to some extent. This outcome, together with APEN’s specific goal of nurturing leadership and community organizing skills among second-generation Laotian girls, imposes limits to APEN’s political vision and creativity.

APEN as ‘home’

In my informants narratives APEN¹ is seen as a refuge where one is accepted, respected, supported, nurtured, and as a place and space one can navigate with ease and

¹ While my informants or I used the term APEN, we are referring to AYA, an initiative that is part of LOP. For the most part, my informants’ interactions were confined to AYA related activities and AYA staff. In the early days, several APEN staff worked as AYA staff and so the boundaries between the different entities are not clear-cut.

comfort. During interviews, in journal writings, and in evaluations of AYA² almost 42 percent of my informants described APEN as home, as a second family.

When asked what APEN has come to mean to her, Seventeen year-old Gabriela, who had been in the program for four years, said:

It's like a, like a family now...I was like having problems the first year...so I always thought of APEN as like an organization you know, a group of people you know there to help me... But like, through the years I've come to think of APEN more like family. More, I guess more like a second home that you know that...like I have you know away from home, you know when I come, when I need it or whatever.

For Gabriela, the staff at APEN cared for her, guided her and was there for her when she needed them. Lai, a shy member of Group 3, thanked APEN “for giving me a comfortable second home!” in her end of summer 1998 evaluation, a year after she had joined the program. And in her journal for that summer Lai described APEN in terms of home and family because it was a place where the youth could voice their needs freely and get comfort and support from each other:

APEN is like another family to turn to. It's like a home where we not [only] talk about our own needs but other community and family needs. We are like a super girl who find crime and find smart ways to make it right. Like a family we also comfort each other because we express our feelings...So APEN is very important to me, like my family is important to me.

Gain of Group 2, who had been in the program for three years, thought of APEN as family because “it's like a part of my life now.” Gain felt close to everybody in APEN and able to “talk to anybody,” the counselors and other youth alike. When I interviewed Angela of Group 4, eight months after she had joined the program, she too described APEN as “like my next home” because she felt comfortable talking to the counselors if

² At the end of the summer program AYA staff has each of the youth complete and evaluation of the

she had any problems. Angela's peer in Group 4 Marn wrote this message at the end of her first summer to the following year's new recruits into the APEN program: "You will never be by yourself. You will always have someone by your side to trust..."

These themes of trust, support, understanding, dependability, there when you need them, strong friendships were voiced by another 26 percent of the youth even though they did not specifically describe APEN as a second home or family. And these feelings extended to both the other youth in the program and the counselors at AYA, as I witnessed in August 1998 during a sad and tearful session when Chittraphone, one of the Laotian counselors, announced to group 3 that she was leaving in a few weeks after having worked with them for a year. Many youth in Groups 2 and 3 had grown attached to her. Pham of Group 3 wrote in her journal after Chittraphone's announcement "I tell her things that I could never tell my parents." To other youth she was like an older sister and when she announced that she was leaving, they felt like someone that was a part of their family was leaving them.

It must be noted that not all youth saw APEN as a second family. Two informants from Group 2, who had been with APEN for three years when I interviewed them, said that while they thought the counselors were supportive they did not feel able to talk to them. Caryn wrote in her end of summer evaluation: "I feel kinda uncomfortable sharing my problems with the counselors or the other AYA staff because I don't really communicate with them and when I do it's hard for me to talk cause I don't know what to say." Ruby also did not feel she could approach APEN staff with her problems and nor did she feel she could rely on her peers in Group 2. Two members of Group 4, also said

program. The written comments on the program and how they think it has affected them are quite candid even though they are not anonymous and read by all staff.

that APEN had no special meaning for them. Both of these youth left APEN before the end of their first year there.

But for the majority of my informants, APEN was seen as a refuge. APEN was cast as a 'home', and in so doing my informants conveyed that they are both visible and feel secure in this space. APEN was a place of safety and comfort in the context of growing up as the daughters of immigrants in urban multi-racial neighborhoods. These feelings, emotions and possibilities of belonging, acceptance and community are not always present in other arenas of my informants' lives. One community organizer that I interviewed characterized Laotian youth as being "lost," not fitting into mainstream society or the parents' culture because "it's way too strict." In Chapter Three I discussed the inter-generational and gender relationships within Laotian families in the U.S. in detail. I suggested that for some second generation Laotian girls, becoming teenage mothers represented a way to deal with feelings of alienation and lack of a sense of belonging. For other Laotian youth, instead of resorting to suicide in their efforts to deal with the pressures of adaptation³, they join gangs and "do crazy things," according to the community organizer.

The pressures of adaptation are experienced both within the family but also in the wider society, in the everyday encounters that structures second-generation Laotian girls' lives in California. Assumptions of "foreignness" and "otherness" were among the meanings of "Asian" that shaped both the informal and formal encounters for second-generation Laotians. School is a setting where the Laotian girls and young women in this

³ Studies on second generation Filipinos have found that the pressures of adaptation have led many to suicidal ideation. Wolf (1997) found that almost one-third of the Filipino university students, all female, she interviewed acknowledged having suicidal thoughts. Rumbaut (1994) found lower self-esteem and high depression scores among young Filipinas.

study spent significant amounts of time. It is in this setting that their ties and relationship to U.S. society and culture were frequently questioned (Kibria 2000a:86). Through archival research at AYA, I discovered racial name calling, being called “rice,” having their languages and food disrespected, and assumptions of cleanliness were key issues for second-generation Laotians. All of these labels and stereotypes denote Laotians as “foreign,” as “other.” The ways in which second-generation Laotians are marked by “otherness” and perceived as alien by peers at school is portrayed in a skit that some of my informants created and performed at the 1998 summer retreat. Here is an excerpt from my field notes:

The first scene is a classroom full of students and one teacher. The teacher asks who have done their homework. Several people raise their hands and the teacher asks two of the students to read their essays. The first is a Laotian student who has written about going to her cousin’s house for a ceremony. As she is reading this another student shouts, “they probably eat dogs.” In the next scene the Laotian student goes home and tells her parents what happened. Her father tells her to ignore that person. The student says that she can’t and writes an essay about stereotyping and being proud of who she is.

I have noted that the majority of my informants are performing well at school, and consequently school is one site where their self-confidence and self-esteem as young Laotian women are strengthened. Even so Jennifer, the Youth Program Coordinator reported that many youth have experienced teachers responding with “what’s your problem, don’t you understand English?” when they have asked for clarifications on an assignment or activity. None of my informants mentioned this to me, but if such retorts are prevalent, they mark Laotian students, many of whom are born in the United States, as perpetual foreigners.

Other Laotian adults also noted that schools do not meet the needs of many

Laotian students (also see Trueba et. al. 1990). A Khmu community activist, who works with at-risk youth in cities of Richmond and San Pablo, had this to say about the experiences that Laotian youth have at school:

one of the main problems with the kids is that a lot cut school because they don't like teachers, or they can't understand class and teachers not patient enough, so they cut class and do poorly, which makes the teachers even more inconsiderate. Counselors at school are also very inconsiderate; all they do is discipline and give class schedule. They do not take time to understand what's happened at home, why they are late.

These experiences were particularly common for male friends of my informants, as Maya recounted in an interview. Her male friends had often told her there was not any point in working hard and going to school because teachers did not care about them. Here Maya's friends and the Khmu activist point to the cultural gap between teachers and second-generation Laotians which often leads to the racialization of young Laotians as "at-risk" in Contra Costa County. Similarly Walker-Moffat (1995:111) has argued that juvenile delinquency and gang related activity among Hmong youth may be in part explained by their disillusionment with school and the "realization that school replaces their cultural identity with a new minority identity that has limited their opportunity in a racist environment." All of my informants knew of Laotian peers who were involved in gangs or who were teen mothers.

Laotian students experience marginalization at school in numerous ways. Dean Phan, of Richmond High School, noted that Laotian students complain to him that there is not enough about their own culture and that they prefer to learn Mien rather than Spanish as a second language since English is already their second language.⁴ Dean

⁴ Similarly, there are 7,934 Hmong-speaking students in Sacramento County, California making up 22 percent of the student body (Magagnini, September 10, 2000).⁴ But local activists say that few local school

Phan's comments reflect the fact that Laotian immigration history, culture and languages are not included in the formal school curriculum.⁵ As the only Laotian faculty at Richmond High, he assumes the burden to try and create a meaningful educational experience for Laotian students.

It is in the context of needing supportive family relationships, community and an emotional sense of belonging that the APEN youth program initially becomes important in the lives of adolescent Laotian girls at a critical point in their lives. APEN represents the private sphere of family where my informants do not experience patriarchal oppression and marginalization, but rather enjoy intimacy, comfort and positive personal relationships. APEN thus becomes 'home' in its private sense.

Creating APEN as 'home'

For many of my informants, APEN was a second family because the counselors at APEN and the peer counseling sessions that were part of the program provided a "safe" space where they could share feelings, discuss problems and get advice from other youth. The peer counseling sessions were particularly precious because it provided time for the youth to reflect and express their feelings and experiences without the responsibilities of home or school. As Blia stated: "it gives a chance to like just tell how our life is going because that was the only time we got to spend with each other."

For some of the older youth that had participated in peer counseling sessions, these sessions provided space and time to think about their lives and share with peers how things are going. Blia remembers these sessions as "pretty good because we all had

districts have any materials in Hmong to help students maintain their cultural identity, and there is little communication between parents and school officials (Magagnini, Sept 11, 2000). Tsia Xiong, a Hmong activist in Sacramento asserts that "each school should have a minimum of one Hmong-speaking staff member in the office," (quoted in Magagnini, September 11, 2000).

like stress from school and from family and stuff and we got to RC (re-evaluation counseling)⁶ and we got to like you know take it off our chest and stuff.” Maya, a Group 3 member, valued these sessions because since it was all girls, “we get to talk about anything you know, even our periods and all that stuff.”

AYA provides both structured and informal opportunities to talk about personal, emotional and other issues particularly important to young women at the adolescent stage of their life. But more than the opportunity, these spaces are made “safe” because the interactions are confined to one-and-a-half generation Laotian women counselors, second-generation Laotian girls, and young Asian American women activists. Cept of Group 2 stated that while she was close to her mom and talked to her, “it’s nothing like what I talk to my best friend and my APEN counselors.” For Sarah, APEN was like a family because “it’s like you say whatever you want and they respect what you’re saying.”

Moreover, staff was always there when they needed emotional support or someone to talk to. According to Sarah, “they [AYA staff] are always there, no matter what. I think they are always there. And like they are so tripped [busy] but they are still looking out for you.” Seng noted that

Like every time we go there like they’re always smiling, they’re always, if you’re, like they know that you’re sad or whatever they always ask you and stuff. And they’re always like willing to take out their time and you know spend it with you and help you and stuff.

In these safe spaces, which are not available in any other arena of their lives, my

⁵ Valenzuela (1999:172) also notes that Mexican-American students’ marginal status is reflected in the fact that courses on Mexican American history are only taught occasionally in the formal curriculum.

⁶ Re-evaluation counseling, also known as co-counseling, assumes a peer relationship between two people, where both take turns being the counselor and being the client. Thus, peer-listening is a key concept in re-

informants learn to navigate the competing gender ideologies to which are exposed to, develop strategies to challenge racism and alienation in schools and neighborhoods. In interviews with my informants as well in journals and program evaluations, the youth indicate that they have become more self-confident, know better what they want, and have gained knowledge about their bodies and their community as a result of their participation in APEN.

But perhaps what is more important for second generation Laotian women is that the counselors understood what it's like growing up in America. In my interview with seventeen year-old Gabriela she had mentioned that her time at high school had been the "four toughest years" that she had ever had. She stated that if it had not been for APEN she would not have made it. The staff at APEN "know what it's like to grow up you know just in America, they know all those stuff you know. And, they're the ones who like tell you about it you know, like the pressure of it and everything you know."

Gabriela thought of APEN as family because:

I think it's the nourishment that I need you know, like not in the sense that inner strength, but also like intelligence as well you know. The information, the communication and what you learn as well. I mean at home like we get nourishment and stuff you know like from my mom and stuff, but it's not like the same you know it's different you know. It's very different when its based at home and you learn anything that you just know. Cause at home, half the time my mom doesn't even understand what I'm doing you know. And at APEN, like I do something and they'll be like oh okay, you know. Like they get it you know. And at home I'm like, I sit there and just explain it over and over again you know to my mom cause she questions that, she doesn't know.

Gabriela makes reference to the knowledge about community issues that the girls learn through APEN, as well as the organizing and communication skills. But what is more important to her about APEN is that the staff understands her actions and opinions.

evaluation counseling.

And they know what it's like to grow up in America, unlike her mother.

APEN had become a 'home', a safe place where second-generation Laotian girls could acknowledge their multiple subjectivities. When I asked my informants what identity they feel most while at APEN, to my surprise they said that at APEN they feel "everything," or as 15 year old Pham said, "50:50." When at APEN they will not be judged for such a mundane practice as eating with their hands, or for expressing their opinions. As sixteen year-old Cuo said:

I feel both like Laotian and American cause the things that we are learning and stuff is towards the American side. It's like we are learning how to like do campaigns and whatever, and how to like public speak and stuff. And Laotian because like we are all Laotian, and like when we eat or something we share food and we use our hands.

APEN is a space where second-generation Laotians can practice specific cultural practices freely. Leah of Group 2 commented that APEN allows her to be Laotian because "I am surrounded by Laotian girls and sometimes we speak our own language. It's nice to share that with young girls our age." At APEN the cultural practices of Laotians are not ridiculed, judged as alien and "other." In these different ways, through these different activities Laotian cultural difference in the U.S. can be fully expressed at APEN. But APEN also represents a mode of incorporation into America and as such specific activities and experiences that my informants encounter socializes them into American political cultures and systems. Fifteen year-old Gain described the sense of efficacy and feeling "more in control, helping your community" when working on campaigns or protesting initiatives such as Proposition 187 as "American stuff." Sarah pointed out that "in Laos we don't do stuff like this...they don't organize the community...like we don't have officers, we don't sit here in meetings," but "just go in

the house and talk.” Thus, American is defined as learning to become political subjects, taking control, and working to improve material conditions for the community.

Sarah added two other characteristics of being Americanized when she described the moments that she felt American:

I mean once I got, when I’m around the girls, I don’t know what I felt. But once I am around the staff and like working I feel like too Americanized. Everything has to go right, duh duh duh duh (in order and efficiently). Everyone’s competing with each other.

Sarah and the other five members of Group 1 had taken on more responsible roles at APEN in their final summer there, and had worked as paid interns in the capacity of counselors or organizers. During that summer, when Sarah was around the other APEN staff she felt she had to be more formal, organized and efficient, even competitive, all qualities that denoted Americanization to her. Seng, another group 1 member who had worked as a counselor that summer, also demarcated when she felt American and when she felt Laotian:

Well it’s like the whole, just the whole idea, like you know of being a counselor or whatever is, makes me feel more like American. But then like when you are actually in the group because like they (the other youth in the program) are all Laotian and stuff, makes me feel more you know culture and stuff.

For Seng, when she was a counselor she was being American because “it was a new experience,” which “you wouldn’t get of you were over there in Thailand.” But when she was just a participant in the youth project and “hanging out” with the other youth she felt more Laotian.

Gabriela described APEN as “a comfort zone,” in contrast to the marginalization and exclusion she experiences in other arenas of their lives. In addition to enabling my

informants to navigate the multiple cultural worlds they encounter, the activities and programs at APEN creates a space where they do not have to explain themselves and nurtures a sense of efficacy. In these ways, APEN allows my informants to acknowledge their complex multiple subjectivities.

The narratives of second-generation Laotian girls and young women reveal their marginal position within the Laotian community and dominant society. It is in this context that APEN becomes 'home', a second family. AYA staff act as "authentic carers" (Valenzuela 1999) who are critical to the lives of these young women. Through the multidimensional program activities and support systems my informants are able to create a 'home' and an emotional sense of belonging. APEN enables the youth to interpret, understand and draw from the different cultural worlds they encounter. The initiative acts as a bridge and gives them tools and support structures needed to make sense of their experiences. As one youth put it, "they are teaching us how to survive."⁷

When is APEN not 'home'?

However, this intense emotional sense of belonging, of feeling secure, is disrupted, in some cases severed when conditions change. Two episodes that occurred while I was in the field indicate that the notion of APEN as 'home' was not cast in stone, with any fixity or singular meaning or understanding. The rules and requirements, the "passport" (Sagar 1997:237) to involvement and participation in AYA changed, and with that the feeling of security and safety diminished.

Changes in the available resources, in personnel, and in strategies and priorities

⁷ Even as my informants perceive APEN as 'home' in the private sense, APEN does not intervene in the home of the heterosexual, patriarchal family to seek, for example gender equality for teenage Laotian girls within the family. Running a leadership development and community organizing program for second generation Laotian girls and acting as "authentic carers" (Valenzuela 1999) occurs outside and around the

generated doubts among my informants that APEN is 'home'. In January of 1998 the particularity of the structural relations at APEN changed in a way to induce discomfort, insecurity and the possibility of "homelessness" (Sagar 1997:237). This is how Chittraphone, a one-and-a half generation Laotian counselor at APEN, described the thinking at that time:

We felt like we needed this, that the girls shouldn't just come and go. And once they are here it should be you know things need to be done. And that it's not just a place where they can hang out. You know they can get support and hang out but at the same time we have a program to run. And we had goals. We wanted to achieve like you know just building their leadership skills. That was a major goal and we couldn't do that, you know if not all of them come. Or we couldn't do that if they are just hanging out. It had to be structured, meetings had to be you know, and that was one of the major weakness. That's why we decided that there had to be requirements or rules or stuff like that because we wanted all of them to come, to rein them. And I mean to me, I just see it where as if people started missing during the school year, and when the summer hits, they are not ready for the summer. I mean there would be a few that would be much ahead of them in terms of knowing what the program's all about. Just the fact that during the school year they go to so many field trips, so much different stuff, that they have practice of talking to people, interacting with other youth or just really sharing with people about what we do and their experiences. If the girls start missing that during the school year, or any of the field trips, I think, to me I feel that they would be behind.

The focus on structure, regular and active participation, and visible leadership development among *all* the youth during the school year signaled a change in goals and strategies, varying resources available, and tensions and disagreements among APEN staff. Some had felt that "it would become military type," according to Chittraphone. She described how Emiko perceived APEN as a different place, "where they are always welcome and that you know there's a place for them, and that it should be just that." For Emiko it was important to acknowledge that even though the youth are part of a

family and community, but not within it. In this sense APEN does not contribute to the dissolution of the boundaries between the private and the public (see Bhattacharjee, 1997:328).

community-organizing project that “doesn’t mean that they also don’t have a life, which has turmoil and teenage stuff going on all the time.” Thus, for her, it was not as important to have the youth “produce” all the time.

This view contrasted with Jennifer’s. She also recognized the need for second generation Laotian girls and young women to have both the space to discuss “issues that are important to them,” and have caring adults around them. But Jennifer also expected the youth to show progress in the arena of leadership development and community organizing skills, APEN’s primary goals for the youth in AYA. She believed that some kind of structure and requirements needed to be imposed so that the youth would come to an adequate number of meetings and activities during the school year. Jennifer perceived the school year as preparation for their participation in the summer program for which the youth were paid.

These discussions cast doubt in Chittraphone’s own mind. She felt that, as teenagers, the youth needed some structure and clear expectations. At the same time she was fearful that the staff might be asking too much and the youth would leave. For Chittraphone, she “didn’t want it [APEN] to be like school” but a place where the youth would come from their own volition. As a young Laotian woman, who had also grown up in Richmond, she understood the role that a place and space like APEN played in the lives of Laotian girls and young women. As she told Group 3 during her announcement that she would be leaving the program at the end of the summer session, this program “has made me feel like I am part of the community. That I have a connection” (field notes 7/23/98). Nevertheless, Chittraphone agreed to the upcoming changes in the program and worked with Jennifer to assess the attendance and participation levels of the youth during

the school year, and to institute new mechanisms for continued involvement in the youth program.

This change in strategy reflected a change in priorities and perspectives of different staff members concerning the youth program. However, I suggest that it also reflected a desire on the part of Jennifer and Chittraphone to address issues arising from changes in staff capacity. Beginning in the school year 1997-1998 there were only two staff members, Jennifer and Chittraphone, working with twenty-two youth, compared to higher staff-youth ratios in previous years. Such favorable ratios had allowed staff to convey to the youth that staff were not there just to teach them organizing skills, or writing skills, but “we’re here because we really care about you” as Ming recounted. Ming and Emiko had expressed concern that the ability of staff to develop deep relationships with the youth, and help them address their immediate needs as well as carry out the leadership development goals of the program would become increasingly difficult as more youth joined the program and staff capacity decreased.

Jennifer, who had joined as a counselor during the summer of 1997, had been thrust into the position of Youth Program Coordinator, with little preparation, when Emiko shifted to another position in LOP in September 1997. The changes in rules and responsibilities thus represented an attempt to address the difficulties that Jennifer and Chittraphone had during the first few months of that school year in sustaining participation among the twenty-two youth.

However, in the eyes of the my informants these assessments signaled a change in the norms of the program. It was no longer voluntary. They had to attend a specified number of individual group meetings and whole group meetings, as well as the Spring

retreat to earn the privilege of the paid summer program. In fact Jennifer acknowledged the change at a Whole Group Meeting in early March of 1998: “it’s different then the first few years of the program. If it feels different, it is different.” These changes affected Groups 1, 2 and 3. When I interviewed my informants at the end of 1998/early 1999 these changes in the program requirements were still weighing on their minds both directly and indirectly.

Fiey was nonchalant about the requirements and asserted: “for the people who like who don’t come a lot I think it was a good idea for them to do that. Cause you know most people have to come cause they signed up for it.” Seng perceived these requirements as a way to winnow out “like the people who really wanted to be there you know to like you know show up and stuff,” from the youth “who didn’t really want to be there.” But several other youth, who themselves attended regularly and participated fully, noted that the changes had generated resentment. While they understood the rationale behind these new requirements, they still questioned them, as Tracy of Group 3 recounted: “why are they forcing us you know? Like why are they becoming so strict?” Pham, also of group 3, said, “I didn’t think that was necessary to make us, to make us feel obligated to go to the meetings you know.” Cuo of Group 2 understood why “they had to like lay down something” but also believed that “it (AYA) is like you know kind of the program where, they don’t kick us out we kick ourselves out or something like that.”

For the youth, the change signaled a new regime, one that was formal, rule oriented and tightly structured. The conditions, the “passports” to belonging to AYA had altered and that threatened the possibility of “homelessness” for some. Biet of Group 2 recalled that Jennifer had imposed restrictions on her and if she did not meet the

requirements then she was “going to be kicked out.” Biet was angry about this possibility because “like I’ve been at APEN longer than her (Jennifer).” Biet was invoking the notion of family here. She believe that she had seniority based on her length of time at APEN and was suggesting that Jennifer, a junior in this case, had no right to challenge her participation.

Sarah, of Group 1, recounted that many members of her group as well as all the youth in Group 2 felt that the expectations from Jennifer and Chittraphone were unreasonable:

I’m going to say it, I know a lot of people want to say it. There is problems, the expectations are too hard, they get so much stuff to do, they expect just too much from like, and we’re like you know we need to have like our time off too you know.

Five of my informants mentioned that they wanted the APEN counselors to understand that they had competing demands on their time, especially during the school year, and could not participate in every meeting. The pressure from staff to attend meetings frequently caused stress and frustration among some informants. Alison said that she wanted to go to meetings but couldn’t go because she had schoolwork or other things to do. In addition some informants, particularly in Group 2 had become angry when Jennifer had called them at home to talk both about their performance and how she felt about them. Again this was different from previous norms in the program as Sarah and Rachel recalled:

Sarah: I guess before Jennifer came in it was like, everyone else was like, I mean never say that but the counselors, they were just like girls, they didn’t really care. I mean they want you to be there but they didn’t like...

Rachel: But not like that.

Sarah: Yeah. They didn’t pressure you to be at the meetings unless you want to

be there. They don't make personal phone calls and tell you that, you know like she did that. She made personal phone calls and told us how she felt about you.

Bindi: About each person?

Sarah: yeah.

Bindi: About your performance?

Rachel: Yeah.

Sarah: She was just talking about everything. Like how she felt about you, what she sees that's wrong with you or...

Sarah felt this was inappropriate because "their (Group 2 members) self-esteem goes down." Unlike Group 1 youth who had been to a lot of peer counseling sessions and would know how to deal with such negative evaluations of themselves, Sarah asserted that Group 2 members had not participated in such support sessions and instead of prodding them to increase their involvement at APEN, these phone calls had the effect of pushing many Group 2 members wanting to leave the program. Many of my informants resented the mandatory meetings because as Leah noted: "we didn't accept it cause we didn't have to do that when Emiko was head coordinator (of the youth program)." And a year later, two of my informants felt "nervous" and "weird" talking to Jennifer. In fact they believed she was not "looking out" for them and were scared of her rather than seeing her as a friend.

The changes in the rules and mechanisms of inclusions that occurred in early 1998 represented a change from the unconditional belonging in APEN, a membership that heretofore had not been based on obligations and responsibilities. I do not know if this shift actually occurred or was my informants' current perception of the program in previous years. But what is clear is that power relations between staff and youth were reintroduced by these changes, with the effect that my informants no longer felt that they could influence the AYA program in ways that they had done in previous years.

The culture at APEN changed in other ways too after Jennifer became the youth program coordinator, as members of Group 1 complained during my focus group with them in August 1999. Here is an excerpt from my field notes:

It's 9 o'clock on a warm August evening in 1999. I am just wrapping up a focus group discussion with members of Group 1 in a back room at the APEN office, which also serves as a meeting place for Laotian seniors. I turn off the tape recorder and ask the young women, who all graduated from the APEN youth program last summer, how they are feeling about APEN. I tell them that I am curious because several of them had asked if the staff would be present at the focus group when I called the night before to confirm the meeting. Their response surprises me because they express feelings about APEN in stark contrast to the ones they had expressed when I interviewed them in late 1998 and early 1999.

Many negative feelings about Jennifer come through. Seng says that the program has changed since Jennifer came along. Sarah, her head turned down and towards Blia, says, "I don't feel welcomed any more." Sarah is upset because she had applied to work at APEN for the summer and she had not heard from Jennifer until a few days before the program started. By that time she had committed to working at a local store during the summer. Sarah says that Jennifer contended that she couldn't get hold of her to inform her sooner. Sarah did not believe this because Jennifer could have called her on her pager or left a message at home. Rachel mentions that Jennifer had told her only two days before the program started that she had a job in the summer program.

Gabriela is also quite mad with Jennifer because she had given up a \$12.00/hour job to work at APEN, and in the end they didn't hire her. Gabriela tells us that for her other job all she had to do was sit at home and write stories and then e-mail them in. Rachel asks why she gave up that job. Gabriela replies that Vicki (APEN staff) and Jennifer had said that it was either 100% at APEN or nothing... Gabriela states, "and now I have nothing." She explains how she gave up her position as senior editor of the youth magazine at a local news service, which has already been filled by the person she had been supervising. Gabriela laments that "APEN has become like a corporate structure."

As the disgruntled youth are expressing their feelings I recall a meeting I had with Jennifer in May where I was asking her about the summer program and staff recruitment, and possible roles for Group 1 who have already graduated. Jennifer had informed me that she has asked each of the members from Group 1 to send an application stating what they want to do and what skills they can apply to it. She had got a couple of applications but expressed disappointment because one of the youth had said that she didn't know and that she would do whatever they wanted her to. Jennifer stated that she wanted to break this

expectation that there's always going to be a job for them at APEN. I did not share this conversation with the youth.

As I discussed in the previous sections, many youth had felt that APEN staff strove to build an environment in which the girls always felt welcomed, where there were resources to help them and opportunities for them learn from and grow. But these positive feelings of acceptance changed among the first group of young women who "graduated" from the program in June 1999, at the end of their senior year at school. While they were still welcomed and staff were available to talk with them and advise them, the opportunities that they had over their four years were no longer automatically available to them. Their relationship with APEN and its staff was no longer informal and certain. Rather than the flexible peer-relationships that they had enjoyed previously, and which had created a secure and trusting atmosphere, their relationship had become structured and rigid. Earlier during the focus group discussion, which I was recording, two of the young women had also expressed these frustrations. When I asked what everybody was feeling Sarah stated, "you have to go with the flow." Gabriela elaborated: "I feel like kind of like a corporation. Like an all American corporation I feel like sometimes."

APEN had represented a place of safety and security for my informants in Group 1. But now that they had "graduated" from the program, there was the fear of loss of a second family. Part of the issue for Group 1 was getting used to no longer being members of the youth program, and as the first cohort, having a lot of resources made available to them. Part of the issue was also that APEN had not thought through how to incorporate these young women who had been groomed to become leaders by APEN for four years.

Staff had recruited one-and-a-half generation Laotian women from outside for that summer, rather than from this group of trained leaders and organizers. But more generally, in an attempt to address the practical concerns of resources and staff availability, and in the desire of some staff to re-orient the conditions for membership in AYA so that they more directly met APEN's goals of changing the leadership structure of the Laotian community, led to a more impersonal, bureaucratic program. In the process, the emotional ties and sense of belonging diminished for some youth, thus imposing limits on APEN's goals and creativity.

Moreover, this emotional sense of belonging was built on select inclusions and exclusions (George 1996: 2). While all youth would have joined AYA if it was open to girls of all races and ethnicities, and in fact some would have preferred that, for many youth it was important that APEN was place and space for just Laotian girls.⁸ Gain of Group 2 said: "I like it a lot (with conviction) like because there's girls, all different (in terms of personality) girls and we can like communicate with each other better." Lon of Group 1 commented that "there's a kind of closeness between women" that would not have occurred if young Laotian men had also been part of the program. She remarked that she didn't think "the outcome would have turned out as good either" nor would "the girls would be as into and as committed to the program" if boys had been involved in APEN. And for many other youth "since it's all girls we get to talk about anything you know, even our periods and all that stuff," as fifteen year-old Maya of Group 3 remarked.

A Laotian community organizer, who worked with Laotian boys and girls who are at-risk, noted that while APEN "is excellent for girls," it should recruit more at-risk girls,

⁸ Two informants wished that APEN had created a separate but similar program for boys. Both of these young women had brothers who were touched by gang activity in their neighborhoods and believed that

not just those who are college-bound. Here this organizer was identifying a selection criteria and believed that a lot of at-risk girls are “better” for the APEN program since they analyze the “system” in a way that college-bound girls do not. In other words, at-risk girls would have a similar political orientation to APEN staff.

So far I have discussed APEN as ‘home’ in the private sense. But, in its broader signification of community, APEN also becomes the place where one belongs (George 1996:11).

The Creation of a Collective Laotian Identity

As Espiritu (1992) argues, and as I discussed in Chapter Five, ethnic institutions such as APEN are important because they provide a setting for Asian Americans to establish social ties and to discuss their common problems and experiences; in so doing they have an opportunity to develop a racial/ethnic consciousness out of their shared history of discrimination. In this section I discuss the unintentional and intentional ways in which the symbolic boundaries of a collective Laotian identity, as opposed to a sub-ethnic Laotian identity are heightened among second-generation Laotian girls. As Emiko explained to my informants during the summer 1998 AYA retreat “you all are part of this trip that we are on. Our goal is to build a healthy, strong, unified, powerful Laotian community.”

All of my informants, except four said they “kick it” with Laotian friends and cousins outside of school.⁹ Even those four spent time with Laotians, but also had Latino and African American friends. And in school half of my informants mainly spend free time with Laotians, while the other half spend time with Laotians, other Asians, Latinos

such a program would help them deal with these pressures as well as the pressures from their families.

⁹ Portes and Rumbaut (2001:167) argue that friendships within the ethnic circle are an indicator of selective

and African Americans. So my informants have plenty of opportunities to develop strong ties with other second generation Laotians living in Richmond and San Pablo. However the intensive summer program, the end of summer graduations, twice year retreats that are part of the youth initiative, and the meetings throughout the school year provide fellowship and a chance to develop bonds with other Laotian girls going through similar things. During interviews with my informants I asked the following question: “what has been the most memorable moment at APEN so far?” Fourteen youth mentioned the retreats without any hesitation. Sarah’s comments capture the reasons why the retreat had made an impression on at least half of my informants:

Sarah: I think all the retreats that we’ve had. Some of them can be successful; some of them can’t you know. And, it’s just that that’s when everyone hangs out. Mostly we don’t, they talk about different issues during the day and you know how, you know how it is at the retreat, during the day it’s all different issues, but then in the afternoon and stuff you spend doing games and things. So that’s what sticks out for me...

Bindi: At the retreat you have the time?

Sarah: Yeah, now at the retreat it’s like where you hang out with other people, so that’s what sticks out mostly, the retreat.

Other youth also mentioned that the retreats were a chance to get away from their everyday environments, and to play games and do activities that were fun. So while the retreats were a mix of a mini-vacation and summer camp, overwhelmingly the retreats had made an impression because it provided space and time for the youth to get to know each other as well as the staff.

Ten youth mentioned that the end of summer graduations were most memorable for them. The planning for the graduation involved the youth working in their individual cohorts as well as together with all the groups to create presentations, performances,

acculturation.

skits, speeches and so on to represent what they had learned during the summer. Family, friends and community members were invited to the event. For some youth the graduations provided an opportunity to overcome their fears of public speaking as well as learn a variety of other skills. But the graduations were also memorable because as Maya said, "Everybody was in it." For Seng the graduations were

really fun because then we all come together in you know cause like during the summer we do our own individual thing in our own individual groups. Then at the end we all come together and even though we haven't like been together for that long you know we still perform together and put our feelings aside and you know just do what we need to do.

It was a time to share in the camaraderie developed during the summer, the school year and at the retreats. But more than that, as Espiritu (1992) has argued in relation to Asian American Studies programs and other Asian American forums, APEN provided an arena for my informants to understand their common experiences as young Laotian women growing up in the U.S. in immigrant Laotian families.¹⁰ Moreover, APEN was a space to address the multiple pressures of adaptation that Laotians experience.

APEN allows my informants to explore and affirm valued aspects of the culture and history of Laotians that are disallowed or ignored in dominant culture. Activities at APEN, such discussions on culture, writing and reflection on what is Laotian culture and identity, allow my informants to explore who they are as second generation Laotians. For example, the oral history project, which Group 2 carried out in the summer of 1998, was a way to build an understanding among the youth about their family's history and the different Laotian ethnic groups here in the U.S. As Cept said in her end of summer

¹⁰ APEN also provided a place free of violence and drugs to interact with other Laotians girls. In the cities of Richmond and San Pablo there are very few safe places for youth to gather, as so many of the youth had remarked during the time I was in the field. And APEN provided an alternative to staying at home.

evaluation of the program: “it helped me learn more about my mom’s life in Laos.” Gain, a self-confident and vocal member of Group 2, wrote in her end of summer evaluation: “this (the Oral History Project) was the most valuable activity because I learned more about other people’s experiences in Laos.”

Most youth have little knowledge of their family history and for many parents and grandparents it is difficult to talk about the painful period of their lives in Laos, escape from Laos, and life in refugee camps in Thailand, as Chittraphone had remarked in an informal conversation. The Oral History Project was a vehicle through which parents could begin to talk about aspects of their history and through which my informants gained a better understanding of, and an interest in their parents’ and grandparents’ lives.

Group 3 conducted a writing project for the school year 1997-1998, for which each member had to select and write on three essay topics. Alison wrote an essay entitled “Culture & Family.” In this she describes how hard it is living in multiple cultural worlds but also how hard it is “living in a world where you feel you are not wanted.” Alison talks of being called names and disrespected because of her culture and who she is. She writes “everyday I think of why we get disrespected because of our culture...” Over time Alison writes she started thinking more about her culture and realized “how important my culture means to me. My culture represents who I am. My culture also is my pride.” Through this writing project, Alison was able to reflect on the source of her alienation and identify positively as a Laotian. Through these activities, cultural similarities, common histories and similar fates of being categorized as Laotians is stressed, thus creating ties between the different Laotian ethnic groups.

APEN also involves the youth in intentional activities that increase the visibility

of Laotians in Contra Costa County and address the structural inequalities they experience. In newspaper story after story the repeated theme is one of Laotians remaining invisible, lacking representation and their needs going unmet (see Lee 1998; Lochner 1997; Sandosham 1999). Laotians lack visibility and voice even at federal, state and local levels of government.¹¹

Through APEN my informants are involved in many different efforts to make the needs of Laotians visible and access resources to meet the needs of the Laotian community. For example in 1996, the year before I entered the field, two of my informants accompanied APEN staff to lobby the then California senators and to ask them to vote “No” on the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act. This bill made all immigrants, including permanent resident aliens, ineligible for Medicaid (if states choose to exclude them), food stamps and Supplemental Security Income (SSI), which is designated for the elderly, blind and disabled. A year after the welfare reform bill was passed one of them felt compelled to write about how welfare had helped her family rebuild their lives in the U.S. when they first arrived, and about her fears that this support would not be available to other new arrivals. As sixteen year-old Fam Linh

¹¹ For example, in California Lochner (1997) notes that San Pablo is the “most Hispanic and Laotian city in Contra Costa County,” judging by the number of grocery stores and restaurants along the city’s main streets. In fact, San Pablo is 27 percent Hispanic, 17 percent Asian, 21 percent black and 35 percent white according to Lochner, yet there are no Latinos or Asians on the San Pablo city council which is four-fifths white. Inh Sooksampan, of Lao Family Community Development, Inc., which provides social service, crime victim and employment referrals and counseling to Laotians from San Pablo and neighboring cities, remarked that he doesn’t “have any direct contact to the city (of San Pablo),” (quoted in Lochner, 1997). Similarly, in the state of Minnesota, the needs in the Hmong community were brought to light only after a series of violent tragedies that beset the Twin Cities (Minneapolis-St. Paul), Minnesota Hmong community, including the slaying and sexual assault of a 13 year-old Hmong girl at the hands of five white youths in fall 1998. Thirty Hmong educators, human service providers and community organizers met with Minnesota legislators to explore state policy solutions (Lee 1998). Ilean Her, executive director of the Council on Asian-Pacific Minnesotans, noted that the Hmong “never had a strong voice [at the capitol] on youth issues, domestic violence, mental health issues,” (quoted in Lee 1998) in part due Hmong community preferences for dealing with issues internally. Other Hmong leaders described the effects of welfare reform

Saechao, a youth member of APEN, wrote in Youth Outlook in 1998, “we didn’t come to the United States to get welfare. We came because we had no choice.” (Her father and grandfather had been killed by landmines while fighting with the U.S. army during the Vietnam War). For Saechao (1998), democracy means:

that the government cares about us and represents us. But now I’m confused. It looks like the elected government officials care more about rich people who give money to their campaigns, but those people don’t make up most of our society. People like me and my family make up most of this country, yet we don’t have a voice. We don’t get to tell our side of the story.

My hope is that these politicians hear my story. I hope that they listen with their hearts, and understand that a life preserver is often the only thing that separates life and death.

In this article Saechao underscored the fact Laotians have no representation in the U.S., they are in fact excluded from the nation. Espiritu (2000) uses the term “differential inclusion” to refer to the fact that at times some Asian Americans have been forcibly included in the American nation and at other times excluded.¹² In the quote above Saechao recognizes that Laotians and their children experience symbolic and material exclusion despite being differentially *included* when the CIA recruited Laotian men to fight alongside the U.S. army in the Vietnam War. However, here in the United States Laotians refugees and their children, like Cambodian refugees (Ong 1996), are also excluded from the nation and placed closer to African Americans on the bi-polar racial model of the United States. Dominant society perceives Laotians as having little economic or cultural capital, and therefore they are seen as less desirous, less worthy of becoming Americans.

on the Hmong - a desperate need for public housing, more child-care respite and some relief from the strict welfare rules – which are going unrecognized (Lee 1998).

¹² Yen Le Espiritu introduced this term at a presentation titled, “Race, Immigration and Asian America, at

By telling her family's story and lobbying U.S. politicians she hoped to influence dominant perceptions of Laotians but also voice the specific needs of the Laotian community in the U.S.¹³ At the same time, in noting that people like her and her family make up most of the country, Saechao also acknowledged the ties that Laotians have to other racially and economically marginalized communities in the U.S.

Another opportunity to put Laotians on the "local" map arose on March 25, 1999 when an accident at the Chevron refinery in Contra Costa County released sulfuric gas into the atmosphere. I describe this incident and the ensuing efforts by APEN to mobilize the Laotian community and campaign for a multi-lingual phone alert system in Contra Costa County in Chapter Four. The skills and knowledge that second-generation Laotian girls acquire through APEN allows them to understand the needs of the community better and give voice to them. More importantly, the shared experiences of structural oppression, together with the particular perspectives and relationships nurtured by APEN staff generate solidarity between different generations of Laotians. In view of the exclusion, marginalization and invisibility that Laotians experience in the larger society APEN serves as a space and place from which to restore dignity, integrity and learn to have faith (hooks 1990:42). APEN represents an alternative arena from which to nurture meaningful and empowering construction of the Laotian community in the U.S., and convey that they are both visible and belong.

Through these activities of remembering Laotian history and culture, as well as struggle around social rights a collective Laotian identity is created with a concomitant sense of groupness and solidarity. In this sense, a collective Laotian ethnic identity

the American Sociological Association meetings, August 15, 2000.

¹³ Saechao's grandmother, who was not a US citizen, had lost her Supplemental Security Income as a result

becomes socially and politically relevant not simply because it is imposed by state classificatory systems, but actively constructed through struggle and resistance (Espiritu 1992). However, the danger is that it also serves to reinforce the distinctions between Laotians and other racial groups in Contra Costa County. Perhaps, at this point in Laotian history in the U.S., it makes sense to defend a politics of location (Crenshaw 1995: 375) in order to make Laotians visible within the environmental justice movement and assert claims on the nation for whom they fought. However, this political strategy loses its radical potential as it re-legitimizes racial difference and undermines APEN's ideological belief that Laotians and other communities of color are a "kindred people" (Okihiro 1994: 34). As a Laotian identity becomes bounded to some extent within institutions such as APEN, the possibilities for political coalitions based on multiple, contingent identities become more difficult. Moreover, in the quest for building LOP and a collective Laotian identity, APEN must guard against suppressing differences, such as gender and age, and the needs derived from these identities.

Asserting Cultural Difference

My informants' informal and formal encounters, discussed earlier, indicate that in dominant conceptualizations of the nation, 'home' is seen as bounded and unchanging (Massey 1994). In fact, scholars from a variety of disciplines (Tuan 1998, Gotanda 1999, Ancheta 1998, Kibria 2000a, Espiritu 1997, and Ong 1996) have noted that Asian Pacific Americans are still considered outside America's national imaginary, outside the hegemonic culture. Massey (1994:167) states that "the most common formulation of the concept of geographical place in current debate associates it with stasis and nostalgia, and

of the 1996 welfare reform bill.

with an enclosed security.” In other words the inclusions and exclusions to ‘home’ have been based on a particular conception of a place – as singular and bounded. But Massey points out that the identity of space, a ‘place’ is defined by a particular set of social relations which interact at a particular location:

And the singularity of any individual place is formed in part out of the specificity of the interactions which occur at that location (nowhere else does this precise mixture occur) and in part out of the fact that the meeting of those social relations at that location (their partly happenstance juxtaposition) will in turn produce new social effects (Massey 1994:168).

With this formulation of space “the identity of any place, including the place called home, is in one sense for ever open to contestation” (Massey 1994:169). Utilizing this re-conceptualization, I argue that, for second generation Laotian girls and young women APEN was a place of safety and security from which they could create a community of resistance to dominant images of Laotians, and Laotian youth in particular, and assert cultural difference (hooks 1990).

However, just as second-generation Laotian girls’ collective Laotian identity is affirmed and they are learning to assert cultural difference and the wish to participate fully in this difference, the narratives of my informants also reflect the contradictions that arise when dominant perceptions of ethnicity define Laotians as forever foreign. When I asked fourteen year-old Bryanna how she would like a newspaper reporter to portray Laotian youth her response was: “We’re not as bad as it seems because what’s the outside doesn’t tell what’s in the inside.” When I queried how my informants think they are perceived of, Bryanna said “Bad and do a lot of bad stuff.” Fourteen year-old Yen said that a reporter should portray them in a way “that’s not mean.” When I asked her to elaborate she replied: “Like ‘oh these ghetto kids’ dah dah dah” (etc. etc. etc.). Not

wanting to be seen as “these ghetto kids” reveals an awareness of the racialization processes operating in the U.S. and particularly the power of media in portraying the presence of the “underclass” in terms of the culture of poverty among blacks rather than structural racism. But later in other conversations with Group 4 it became clear that these images of Laotian youth also cast them as “un-American.” When I asked what specifically my informants would like others to know about them, Bryanna said:

That you know we are just like any other people you know. We can do what anybody else can do, you know we adapt quickly too and I don’t know. That’s it. Just don’t judge us for what we look like cause that’s not what’s inside.

Sarah’s response to my question about how they would like a newspaper reporter to write about them was passionate:

That we are nice. We ain’t dirty. First of all we are not dirty. We may be like, might not be rich now but we are not poor. Like everybody thinks that we are poor, we eat dog, we eat cat [Seng makes a “ugh!” sound]. That need to get straightened up.

Bryanna and Sarah want to erase difference; to be perceived just like “anybody else” in the U.S. Gabriela too, wanted a reporter not just write about “sympathy and stuff, and you know like it’s all pain and like it’s all sad and gloomy and everything,” nor write about them as a model minority, “the story that we are so successful you know that it’s beyond reach. Why can’t other immigrants do the same thing you know?” Gabriela wanted “a combination, a mixture” which portrayed the reality in the Laotian community. Being cast as refugees or as the model minority are both images that project Laotians as fundamentally opposite to what is American (Kibria 2000a).

My informants want to erase the taint of “otherness” and in-assimilability. They want to be seen as like any other community in the U.S. and imagine possibilities that

other Americans can imagine. Over a period of a year the youth in Groups 1 and 2 worked on a “story cloth,” a traditional Laotian art form which uses textiles and quilting to document village and family history. My informants had created a semi-autobiographical story that was represented in the center three panels of the story cloth. The story is about a young Laotian girl who grows up in the United States after arriving from a Thai refugee camp following the Vietnam War. The journey ends with the young woman becoming president of the United States. Twenty-three of my thirty-one informants were born in the U.S. so this was a theoretical possibility, leaving aside the race, gender, sexual and class politics of becoming the president of the United States. But through the story cloth my informants were able to imagine a more empowering construction of Laotians in the nation that is America, and in the process create a sense of belonging in the nation.

Perhaps such a possibility of agency and empowerment, despite exclusion and marginalization, is imaginable because through APEN my informants construct a different claim to be an American, in the process redefining dominant ideas of who can and cannot belong to the nation that is America. As Kim (1990:147) argues that the claim to be American does not necessarily signify an assimilationist strategy, it can mean “inventing a new identity.” APEN embodies a critical stance towards dominant ideas about belonging and not belonging. As I have noted APEN is part of the environmental justice movement in the US which links grassroots activism concerning environmental protection to issues of economic development, racial and social equality, and community empowerment. Through their participation in AYA my informants come to understand the position of Laotians in a racially conscious, hierarchical society.

The episode that I described in Chapter Three, where one of the Contra Costa County's Board of Supervisors, attending a ceremony, to present an award to the Laotian Organizing Project, recognized fourteen year-old Bryanna and came to the back of the room to shake her hand, is perhaps an indication that Laotians have entered the nation and claimed a space on the agenda at the local level, if not yet at the national level. But the question remains whether Laotians will be able to challenge dominant constructions of difference and dismantle racial and ethnic hierarchies that lead to both social and symbolic exclusion from the nation.

Conclusion

Recent sociological theorizing on the second generation has focused attention on adaptation outcomes of different immigrant groups. To ask questions about educational attainment and shifts in language and ethnic identity, still begs the question of where is 'home' for the children of immigrants? Where do they feel a sense of community and belonging? Will new immigrant be accepted into the nation and on what terms? Sociological theorizing ignores the racialization processes in the U.S., which for immigrants and refugees begin in the homeland and refugee camps, that still define normative expectations in terms of ideal white middle-class America and which slots new immigrants along the black-white spectrum (Ong 1996) with all its ideological and structural ramifications. Thus, ethnic identity is not only about "where do I come from?" It is not only about ancestry and origin as Portes and Rumbaut (2001) suggest, but also about "where do I belong?" "Where do I fit in?" "Where is home?"

As I argued in Chapter Three, second generation Laotian girls and young women want to maintain cultural difference in the U.S. and identify in ethno-national terms.

Portes and Rumbaut (2001:160) also found that 66.7% of Lao teenagers surveyed identified by a foreign national origin. They argue that groups experiencing racial discrimination and derogation of their national origins are likely to embrace immigrant origin identities even more fiercely (187). In other words, those who have experienced discrimination are less likely to identify as American. And those who expect discrimination no matter the level of education are more likely to maintain a national-origin identity (Rumbaut 1994). Selection of ethno-national categories in the face of exclusion and marginalization is termed “reactive ethnicity” by Portes and Rumbaut (2001:160).

I have also argued in Chapter Three and this chapter that my informants felt genuine pride in being Laotian, Khmu, Mien or Lao, and in certain aspects of Laotian culture. At the same time involvement in a leadership development and community organizing project for Laotian teenage girls serves to further heighten group consciousness (see also Portes and Rumbaut 2001:148) and affirms aspects of Laotian culture disallowed in the dominant culture. APEN fosters sharper symbolic boundaries around the Laotian community and my informants’ membership in that community despite the acute alienation that many informants experience in their natal families, their decreasing command of Laotian languages and devaluation of specific cultural practices and norms as I discussed in Chapter Three.¹⁴ However, as I noted, while second generation Laotians choose to self-identify in terms of unhybridized national labels, the meanings and practices these ethnic identities represent have been reconstructed within local contexts (see also Espiritu 1994; Butler 1999). Thus, identification with “foreign

¹⁴ Trueba (1993:259) asserts that language is a key denominator of a sense of identity. Language allows the sharing of cultural values and norms, and provides the social context of interpersonal communication, all of

national identities” is not an indication of “less acculturation” as Portes and Rumbaut (2001:158) argue but the active cultural construction of Laotian identity in the U.S., which embodies multiple and complex subjectivities.

For second generation Laotians, it is their experiences of exclusion, marginalization and invisibility in the U.S. that provides a backdrop to their self-definition and identity. And it is against this backdrop that APEN and its youth program must be seen as a creative response to the specific circumstances and positioning of second generation Laotians in the United States. While second-generation Laotian women experience exclusion in the larger society, and their location within the Laotian community is marginalized, their placement within APEN, at specific moments, is secure. From this solid ground, even if temporarily so, they develop intimate and trusting personal ties, and strong emotional sense of belonging. These feelings of community and support allow second-generation Laotians to resist the alienating demands of complete assimilation into American cultures.

From placement and visibility at APEN second generation Laotians can speak of their difference, their uniqueness, their ‘otherness’ in dominant society, peer culture and the Laotian community (Mirza 1997:4). They are able to give expression to a fluid and multiple cultural face: I am a woman, I am Laotian, I am Asian and I am living here (Hall 1997; see also Gardner and Shukur 1994). Thus placement and visibility in APEN is a way to express placement and belonging in the U.S., rather than remaining forever refugees.

At the same time, as Bhattacharjee (1997:327) reminds us, organizations working for social transformation need to remain self-reflexive. They need to ask themselves:

which facilitate a sense of belonging within a group.

Who is creating this ‘home’, for whom, and for what purpose. Community is created through constant struggle; thus APEN must guard against creating oppressive structures that exclude along differences of political beliefs and interests, decision-making styles, class aspirations, and needs and interests arising from gender and generational identities. These tensions are never resolved but remain the cause for continued struggle and community building. Only if APEN is cognizant of the on-going tensions and willing to address them will it have success in nurturing more than a core group of committed youth into leaders and as active shapers of their communities fate.

In this sense ‘home’ in its private sense and in its broader signification is closely intertwined. Staking out moral claims as racial and economic minorities, and challenging dominant constructions of Laotians enable Laotian girls to both define Laotian collective identity and community, and redefine who can and cannot belong in the nation. In all of these ways they are working to subvert the dominant constructions of Asians and Asian Americans as inassimilable alien and claim full citizenship. As Espiritu (1997:98) puts it, APEN represents a cultural project which “performs the important task of correcting histories, shaping legacies, creating new cultures, constructing a politics of resistance, and opening spaces for the forcibly excluded.”

Chapter Seven

Conclusion: Immigration and the Challenge to Liberal Concepts of Citizenship in Multiethnic and Multiracial Societies

Returning to the questions posed in the introduction, what do the narratives and social and political practices of second generation Laotian girls and young women in the APEN youth program tell us about the politics of belonging? How do their experiences of adaptation inform notions of citizenship in multiethnic and multiracial societies? The sociological literature on the second-generation has, for the most part, focused on the modes of incorporation and contexts of reception to predict specific socio-economic outcomes among the children of immigrants. Given the racial and ethnic make-up of new immigrants and their descendants, such narrow concerns ignore the ways in which the *politics of incorporation* in contemporary United States structures processes of adaptation in specific ways. Nor can a focus on structural assimilation indicate whether the children of new immigrants will ever acquire full citizenship. As this dissertation has demonstrated, questions of belonging, community and citizenship are integral to understanding the future life-trajectories of the new second-generation.

As several recent case studies (see Kibria 1993; Wolf 1997; Espiritu and Wolf 2001; Fernandez-Kelly and Curran 2001; Stepick et. al. 2001) have underscored, and this dissertation has illustrated, intersecting systems of race, class, gender, ethnicity and other hierarchies ensure that there will be multiple permutations in the adaptation outcomes for the new second-generation. However, my aim in this dissertation has been also to reveal the process and meaning of adaptation for the children of immigrants. By focusing on different contexts - the family, civil society institutions, and the nation - this case study

uncovers the ways in which the life experiences of teenage daughters of immigrants are shaped by the intersecting relations of power in *and* between these profoundly connected contexts. Through an examination of the interconnectedness of primary and secondary social relations, as well as the linkages between individual and collective identities and practices, this dissertation unravels the linear and bipolar concepts of ethnic consciousness and affiliation in assimilationist and multiculturalist frameworks in the U.S. Both of these frameworks invoke fixed, stable identities, and reified, impermeable cultural boundaries. Within such constructions of identity and culture, Laotian girls are in danger of remaining invisible and marginalized in the family, community and nation.

An emphasis on the social construction of the nation, as well as of gender, ethnicity, race among other social categories, acknowledges the fact that individuals can play an active role in the creation and maintenance of relationships and meaning. Nevertheless, these activities take place within particular historical and structural constraints which shape people's actions and choices, and make certain responses more likely than others. The prevalent material conditions, discourses and power relations shape the opportunities and constraints to exert differing degrees of control over the social relations in which second generation Laotian girls and young women are enmeshed. Structures are laden with differences in power, which engender negotiation, resistance and accommodation in the everyday relations of domination experienced in a range of primary and secondary social relations. These interconnections and linkages illustrate that identities are not free-floating and always in flux. Particular identities become salient and acquire meaning as second-generation Laotians negotiate gender and inter-generational politics, experience racializing processes in the U.S., struggle over

neighborhood quality of life issues and claim social rights, or as they are constructed within institutional contexts such as that of a social justice organization. So, for example, when second-generation Laotian girls self-identify in terms of ethno-national categories, this desire to maintain ethnic distinctiveness is a reaction to racializing processes that lump all Asians together as well as an affirmation of their membership in the Laotian community.

However, this study has also demonstrated that the meanings attached to particular ethnic identities are subject to contestation and change. Cultural practices and meanings attached to a Laotian identity may be given a diverse array of inflections as a result of particularistic self-understandings and multiple subjectivities produced through generation, gender, class, ethnicity and race. Thus, as academics and researchers we must guard against conflating ethnicity with culture; guard against the tendency to assume that a particular ethnic identity delineates cultural practices that privileges ethnic constructs, at the expense of those that embody gender or class or other social relations (Solomos and Schuster 2000:91). Even as second-generation Laotian girls affirm their Laotian ethnic identity, their social and cultural practices reveal a desire to transform the meaning of such an identity. The narrative and social practices of Laotian adolescents in this study do not represent the deliberate preservation of immigrant cultures through selective acculturation. It is not a nostalgic definition of being Laotian, which, in the racializing process of the US, would cast them as Asian and therefore, constitute second generation Laotians as outsiders and perpetual foreigners, or as an interest group that sought the American dream (Mohanty 1998:492). It represents a desire to be ethnic without being foreign.

Second-generation Laotian girls in the U.S. traverse multiple cultural worlds which can provide them with the material and moral resources to exert some degree of control over the social relations in which they are enmeshed (Sewell 1992). These youth draw on different discourses to resist family control in certain arenas, negotiate their marginal position arising out of age, gender, class and race hierarchies in the family and the nation, and through collective contexts claim a place in the nation as Laotians as well as imagine alternative constructions of the nation. These contestations, negotiations, collusions and transformations do not represent the logic of linear development of progress and change. But what they do suggest is that the articulation of Laotianess is inextricably linked with on-going struggles to define belonging in the family, civil society institutions and nation.

The construction of identity, community, and belonging takes place at the local level, in everyday interactions as people navigate primary and secondary relations and make decisions about particular courses of actions or particular associations and affiliations within specific sociopolitical and cultural contexts. In other words, discourses of the nation and otherness are negotiated in everyday interactions within primary and secondary relationships. Thus, it is necessary to take into account identity formation and acquisition at the individual and community level to understand the possibilities for changing notions of belonging and citizenship in the U.S.

These processes are highlighted because the experiences of Laotians, and more generally of Asian Americans (Lowe 1996), and other racial/ethnic groups (Collins 2001; Almaguer 1994), challenge the dominant narratives of the nation that “this is the Promised Land” (Hsu 1996:38). In these narratives “America” is an inclusive country,

open to all who are willing to work hard and believe in the principles of equality, democracy and freedom, and there by reap the rewards they desire. Thus “America is the place of rebirth, a land in which [any and all] may shed old allegiances and Old World notions” and adopt new ones (Hsu 1996:38).

These narratives construct the nation as a symbolic community with particular meanings and identities. As Benedict Anderson (1991) has argued, national identity is an “imagined community.” In the United States, racial identity has always been the crucial factor in representations of the national culture and in deciding who fully belongs to this nation. The racial identity that has held currency is “white” and, as Omi and Winant (1994) have argued, American identity has come to be defined as white, ordering the nation along the black-white axis, and in which Asian Americans are the “race-d Other” (Hsu 1996:42), the foreigner within. Thus there is a basic contradiction between liberal democratic principles and belief in universal human rights and the experiences of various communities of color in the US. Principles of equality, freedom, democracy and individualism have led to unequal treatment, unequal outcomes and exclusion from the nation.

This case study demonstrates that in the construction of a national culture, an “imagined community” (Anderson 1991) differences do not disappear (Hall 1997:58). Rather difference is suppressed in the bid to construct all-encompassing, homogenous, unified collective identity of the nation. I also reject the multiculturalist assertion that in multiethnic and multiracial societies immigrants belong only to their own cultural communities. The notion of ‘belonging’ implies an emotional sense of personal location and security, and an identificatory sense of groupness and solidarity. This study has

demonstrated that second-generation Laotian girls and young women assert diverse ways of associating, from the particular to the universal, and have a sense of belonging in multiple groups - the family, civil society institutions and the nation. Given these realities in multiethnic and multiracial societies, there is a need to rethink our liberal political concept of citizenship in ways that are more inclusive.

Discussions of citizenship cannot proceed without reference to T. H. Marshall's (1950) triad of civil, political and social rights. Marshall suggested an evolutionary scheme of rights and citizenship, and progressive attainment of universal standards. The attainment of civil, political and social rights ensured full membership in the national political community. As several scholars have noted (see for example Mac an Ghaill 1999:97) the primary focus of this evolutionary model was the gradual incorporation of previously excluded social classes. Marshall's concern was not with eliminating class inequality but creating a democracy in which substantive equality existed despite structural inequality. Moreover, it was a class story, which assumed that in the nation-state there is an overlap between membership of the national collectivity and the citizenship of the state (Anthias and Yuval-Davis 1993:30), between formal and substantive citizenship (Castles 2000:192).

As I have noted, debates in the U.S. around immigrant groups have been constructed in terms of an assimilationist view of citizenship that demands cultural conformity in exchange for conferment of citizenship. The demand for assimilation and acculturation asks that differences – race, class, gender, locality – be denied to become the “abstract citizen” of the political state and qualify for equal rights and political representation (Lowe 1996). But assimilation as a concept is not adequate to think about

membership and belonging in a nation. It assumes that immigrants do all the adapting while the system remains unchanged. Moreover, as this case study has shown and as numerous scholars have argued, citizenship and belonging in the United States is structured in terms of racial, ethnic, gender, age, hierarchies among others.

Recent debates on citizenship have alerted us to the inadequacy of Marshall's triad in understanding the situation of communities of color and immigrants.

Multiculturalists envision a plural society in which cultural rights are a necessary condition of developing civil, political and social rights and full citizenship. For example, Rosaldo (1994:402) defines cultural citizenship as

the right to be different and to belong in a participatory democratic sense. It claims that, in a democracy, social justice calls for equity among all citizens, even when such differences as race, religion, class, gender, or sexual orientation potentially could be used to make certain people less equal or inferior to others. The notion of belonging means full membership in a group and the ability to influence one's destiny by having a significant voice in basic decisions.

In general, the construction of cultural citizenship developed by Rosaldo and other Latino scholars (see Flores and Benmayor 1997), advocates incorporation into U.S. society while simultaneously developing specifically Latino cultural forms of expression. Ong (1996) critiques Rosaldo's definition of cultural citizenship for re-inscribing the liberal principle of universal equality that he seeks to unravel, and ignoring the complex relations of power that define the criteria for belonging. Any notion of citizenship in the twenty-first century needs to take into account 'difference' and how social power excludes and includes certain groups. Recent scholarly debates have argued for a re-thinking of the contemporary politics of citizenship and the challenges posed by 'difference' (Hall and Held 1989, Stevenson 1997, Stevenson 2001, Isin and Wood 1999,

Castles 2000, Solomos 2001, Mac an Ghaill 1999). As Solomos (2001:206) writes in the context of Europe:

A recognition of the rights of minorities places the complicated issue of difference fundamental to addressing the discourse of substantive citizenship; more over it favors looking at the conflict over relations of power, identity and culture as central to a broader struggle to advance the critical imperatives of a democratic society.

I agree with these scholars, that a progressive and more inclusive concept of citizenship needs to acknowledge the diverse ways in which people associate and articulate their rights. However, current discussions only consider cultural citizenship vis-à-vis the nation-state and do not offer an operational framework. As this case study has demonstrated, second-generation Laotians girls negotiate the intersections and inscriptions of multiple power relations within primary social relations as well as within secondary relations in the civil and political domains. In order to incorporate the diverse ways in which we associate, as individuals and as groups, within primary and secondary social relations we need, as Yuval-Davis (1997) has suggested, a gendered notion of citizenship. She draws on Marshall's (1950: 14) definition of citizenship as "a status bestowed on those who are fully members of a community" to argue that such a definition implies that people can have membership in a variety of collectivities (5). Yuval-Davis advocates a "multi-layered construct of citizenship" (5).

Such a construct can avoid the conflation of ethnicity with culture, and the construction of cultural groups as homogenous entities, ignoring differences such as gender, age, sexuality, and class. It also captures the idea that particularistic and collective self-understandings and collective identities develop and change, and can be contextually and historically specific. Therefore, bounded groupness must be understood

as a contingent, emergent property, not an axiomatic given (Brubaker and Cooper 2000: 31).

A multi-tiered construct of citizenship implies power relations operate horizontally as well as vertically (Yuval-Davis 1997:13). Despite this Foucauldian (1982) notion of power, I agree with Yuval-Davis that there is a need to retain the state as a separate sphere. As this dissertation has demonstrated, social rights are racialized in the U.S. and therefore, the interdependence of civil, political, social, and cultural rights is paramount. But the goal is not to merely accept diversity. I am not arguing just for incorporation and equalization of cultural capital, cultural opportunity and life chances, as Bloomfield and Bianchini (2001:105) put it. I suggest the need to go beyond that to transform the cultural values that created the institutions, including the capitalist market economy, and the symbols and representations that have shaped the nation as a particular imagined community with fixed boundaries. For as Stevenson (1997) observes, even in this era of globalization and postmodernism, a tie between citizenship and nationality remains.

I continue to use the term cultural citizenship to denote belonging in the nation, civil society institutions and the family. I suggest that a reformulation of Turner's (1993:2) notion of citizenship can provide a framework for cultural citizenship at multiple levels. Cultural citizenship then, equals that set of practices (juridical, political, economic, social and cultural) which define a person as able to exert a degree of agency and as a competent member of the nation, civil society institutions and family, all operating in a variety of conflicting and cooperative relationships, and which as a consequence shapes the flow of material and moral resources, and belonging to persons

and social groups. In other words cultural citizenship is not a mere collection of rights and obligations, and incorporation into the nation-state as cultural minorities, but rather a set of practices in the cultural and political realm that transform power relations through critical assimilation and allow the children of immigrants to feel a sense of belonging and exercise citizenship in multiple groups. Like Turner's definition, this definition also alerts us to the dynamic social construction of citizenship which changes historically as a consequence of cultural and political struggles within primary and secondary social relations.

This study has focused on one institutional site that of a youth initiative within an ethnic-identity based social justice organization, which must be perceived as representative of the new politics in immigrant communities. It can also be interpreted as a struggle to "'win' a sense of citizenship *from below*" (Mac an Ghaill 1999:98, emphasis in the original). I do not wish to privilege this institutional space or to suggest a differentiated category of immigrant youth as a source of social change. There is no self-evident equation between social location, knowledge and identity as Moya (1997) has argued. However, within the collective context of a social justice organization, experiences of oppression or marginalization can be interpreted and alternative possibilities constructed so that immigrant youth can struggle for an expanded notion of citizenship and a more inclusive nation.

Citizenship is generally understood as an adult experience. Such a characterization ignores both the social/cultural context of young people's lives, as well as their efforts to achieve social change (France 1998:99-100). For the most part, when

we do hear youth voices in the contemporary era, they appear in subcultural sites such as underground magazines, alternative music, and computer hacker clubs (Giroux 1998:24). Rarely do we hear of youth engaged in politics in its widest sense, or involved in alliances with other subordinated groups to achieve social transformation. As Giroux (1998:24) observes youth are restricted from speaking in those arenas where “public conversations shapes social policy, and refused the power to make knowledge consequential with respect to their own individual and collective needs.” And I would add this is even truer of youth of color in contemporary United States. The daughters of one of our newest immigrant groups in this study display a wide range of responses to life in poor, multiracial, urban cities. But they can give us the beginnings of a practice and a vision that uses difference as a resource to transform wider frameworks of social justice, rights and citizenship through political struggle.

APPENDIX I
Principles of Environmental Justice
The First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit

October 24-27, 1991
Washington, D.C.

Preamble

WE, THE PEOPLE OF COLOR, gathered together at this multinational People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit, to begin to build a national and international movement of all peoples of color to fight the destruction and taking of our lands and communities, do hereby re-establish our spiritual inter-dependence to the sacredness of our Mother Earth; to respect and celebrate each of our cultures, languages and beliefs about the natural world and our roles in healing ourselves; to ensure environmental justice; to promote economic alternatives which would contribute to the development of environmentally safe livelihoods; and, to secure our political, economic, and cultural liberation that has been denied for over 500 years of colonization and oppression, resulting in the poisoning of our communities and land and the genocide of our peoples, do affirm and adopt these Principles of Environmental Justice.

1 Environmental justice affirms the sacredness of Mother Earth, ecological unity and the interdependence of all species and the right to be free from ecological destruction.

2 Environmental justice demands that public policy be based on mutual respect and justice for all peoples, free from any form of discrimination or bias.

3 Environmental justice mandates the right to ethical, balanced and responsible uses of land and renewable resources in the interest of a sustainable planet for humans and other living things.

4 Environmental justice calls for universal protection from nuclear testing, extraction, production and disposal of toxic/hazardous wastes and poisons and nuclear testing that threaten the fundamental right to clean air, land, water, and food.

5 Environmental justice affirms the fundamental right to political, economic, cultural and environmental self-determination of all peoples.

6 Environmental justice demands the cessation of the production of all toxins, hazardous waste, and radioactive materials, and that all past and current producers be held strictly accountable to the people for detoxification and containment at the point of production.

7 Environmental justice demands the right to participate as equal partners at every level of decision-making including needs assessment, planning, implementation, enforcement and evaluation.

8 Environmental justice affirms the right of all workers to a safe and healthy work environment, without being forced to choose between an unsafe livelihood and unemployment. It also affirms the right of those who work at home to be free from environmental hazards.

9 Environmental justice protects the right of victims of environmental injustice to receive full compensation and reparations for damages as well as quality health care.

10 Environmental justice considers governmental acts of environmental injustice a violation of international law, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and the United Nations Convention on Genocide.

11 Environmental justice must recognize a special legal and natural relationship of Native Peoples to the U.S. government through treaties, agreements, compacts, and covenants affirming sovereignty and self-determination.

12 Environmental justice affirms the need for urban and rural ecological policies to clean up and rebuild our cities and rural areas in balance with nature, honoring the cultural integrity of all our communities, and providing fair access for all to the full range of resources.

13 Environmental justice calls for the strict enforcement of principles of informed consent and a halt to the testing of experimental reproductive and medical procedures and vaccinations on people of color.

14 Environmental justice opposes the destructive operations of multi-national corporations.

15 Environmental justice opposes military occupation, repression and exploitation of lands, people and cultures, and other life forms.

16 Environmental justice calls for the education of present and future generations, which emphasizes social and environmental issues, based on our experiences and on appreciation of our diverse cultural perspectives.

17 Environmental justice requires that we, as individuals, make personal and consumer choices to consume as little of Mother Earth's resources and to produce as little waste as possible; and make the conscious decision to challenge and reprioritize our lifestyles to insure the health of the natural world for present and future generations.

Adopted October 27, 1991
The First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit
Washington, D.C.

APPENDIX 11
SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION ON SECOND-GENERATION LAOTIANS
IN MY STUDY

Name *	Age in June 1998	Ethnic self-identifications	Country of birth	Age at migration	Langs. spoken	# they live with
Bryanna	14	Mien, Asian, Asian American & American	US		Mien, English	8
Lisa	13	Lao, Mien, Asian, Asian American	US		Mien, English	9
Julia	14	Lao, Mien, Asian, Asian American	US		Mien, English	5
Marn	14	Mien	Thailand	2-3 years	English, Mien	11
Karouna	14	Lao	US		Laotian, English	5
Huk	14	Khmu	Thailand	1-2 years	Khmu, English	9
Koy	14	Mien	US		Mien, English	3
Yen	14	Mien	US		Mien, English	6
Angela	13	Lao	US		Laotian, English	6
Paeng	15.5	Asian	Thailand	2 years	Khmu, English	
Tracy	15	Lao, Mien, Asian, Asian American	Thailand	3 months	Mien, English	
Lai	14	Mien, Asian, Asian American	US		Mien, English	7
Pham	15	Mien, Asian	Thailand	6 months	Mien, English	4
Alison	14	Mien	US		Mien, English	6
Tsiet	15	Mien	Thailand	6 years	Mien, English	7

Fiey	15	Mien, Asian American	US		Mien, English	6
Maya	15.5	Lao, Asian, Asian American	US		Laotian, English	10
Biet	15	Mien	US		Mien, English	6
Ruby	15	Lao, Lue, Asian American	US		Laotian, English	6
Lily	15.5	Lao, Asian, Asian American	US		Laotian, Thaidam, English	
Cept	15.5	Mien, Asian American	US		Mien, English	
Cuo	16	Mien, Khmu, Asian American	US		Mien, English	8
Caryn	16	Khmu	US		Khmu, English	3
Gain	15	Mien, Asian, Asian American	US		Mien, English	6
Leah	16	Lao	US		Laotian, English	6
Seng	17	Mien	Thailand	2.5 years	Mien, English	8
Lon	16	Mien	US		Mien, English	4
Sarah	16	Lao	US		Laotian, English	8
Blia	16	Hmong, Asian American	US		Hmong, English	5
Rachel	17	Lao	US		Laotian, English	5
Gabriela	17	Mien	Thailand	6 years	Mien, English	6

* All names are pseudonyms

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