

**REPPIN' 4 LIFE: THE FORMATION AND RACIALIZATION OF VIETNAMESE
AMERICAN YOUTH GANGS IN SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA**

BY

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ABSTRACT

The Asian American youth gang phenomenon has been a major concern the last three decades. This dissertation is on the formation and racialization of Vietnamese American youth gangs in Southern California: Why did these gangs emerge at a particular time? Under what social, historical, political, and economic contexts did they emerge? In addition, how are these youth racialized?

Using critical narrative methodology, I examine the emergence of “1.5” and second-generation Vietnamese and ethnic Chinese-Vietnamese youth in the Los Angeles metropolitan area. The narratives of three former and current Vietnamese and ethnic Chinese-Vietnamese gang members are presented in this research project. Themes that reoccurred in the narratives include the politics of migration; questions of space, labor, and class; racialization and representation; and contesting the urban/suburban divide. These themes lead to understanding new and different articulations of youth gangs in U.S. contemporary life.

Yet the lives of Vietnamese American youth cannot be discussed apart from larger Southeast Asian and Asian American contexts, namely Vietnamese exodus to the diaspora and Vietnamese migration patterns within the U.S. In addition, this research situates Vietnamese American youth in relation to U.S. empire and racialized class formations/inequalities in Southern California. I engage the theoretical analysis of “race” and racism and describe the historical and contemporary context for the racialization of

U.S. Asians, with a focus on Asian American identity, identity politics, and the limitations of pan-ethnicity and “race relations” paradigm.

The experiences of Vietnamese American youth gang members need to be considered in order to theorize racialization and class formation in a changing world. There are material and ideological consequences for Vietnamese and Asian American youth gang formation in Southern California, including local, state, and national policy implications. A major concern is around the politics of deportation and question of citizenship. By understanding the political economy of racism, migration, and schooling—historically, contextually, and comparatively—this project, fundamentally, attempts to restore and recover our collective humanity.

*To my aunt Nga B. Lam, father Minh A. Lam,
brothers Jimmy, Alan, Kerry, and sister Lana
Thank you for their love, respect, and support
—as we take this journey together*

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

This research project is on the formation and racialization of Vietnamese/Asian American youth gangs in Southern California. I look specifically at the emergence of “1.5” (migrated to U.S. as toddlers) and second-generation Vietnamese-Chinese youth in the Los Angeles metropolitan area. I attempt to capture a historical moment for Vietnamese and Southeast Asian American gang formation: Why did these gangs emerge at a particular time? Under what social, historical, political, and economic contexts did they emerge? In addition, I also try to understand how these youth are racialized—that is, how their bodies are marked and demarcated both as gang members and also as Asian American subjects. Thus, the title, “Reppin’ 4 Life,” has two meanings. One, it is the manner in which Vietnamese/Asian Americans, like other racialized youth, represent or claim gang membership—anytime, anywhere—regardless of the consequences. Two, I use it to talk about the representation, or rather more specifically, the racialization of Asian American youth historically and in current times. Indeed, it is for life.

My work has always been with immigrant poor and working-class populations, in particular Asians and Latinos. Essentially, what I hope to do through this project is recover and reclaim my own history because I came from similar political and economic conditions. In so doing, I hope to give testimony to the voice and humanity of those who

have been racialized and colonized in different ways. I am also building on the literature in the fields of Asian American studies, cultural studies, and critical pedagogy. There is some research on Asian American youth; however, they tend to be university-based college students (Chan, 2006; Alsaybar, 1999; Lee, 2004). Although there is some work on Asian American gangs and organized crime, they tend to be in the fields of criminology, deviancy, and the law (Chin, 1996; Long, 1996, Klein, 1995). This body of literature contributes much to our (mis)understanding of gangs. However, my work and this dissertation are in conversation with others in the aforementioned fields of Asian American studies, cultural studies, and critical pedagogy. I am more interested in theoretical understanding of gang formation; violence (both real and symbolic); class struggle, and the (re)articulation/(de)construction of “race,” racism, and representation. Ultimately, this work is an anti-imperialist, anti-colonial, and anti-capitalist critique of the U.S. state apparatus.

It is my attempt to broaden the discussion on subculture, identity, and schooling in a changing U.S. political economy, especially in the context of multi-ethnic Southern California. It is by no means coincidental that there is not more research on Asian American youth, as they are racialized and stereotyped as quiet, submissive, apolitical, studious, and do not get into trouble with the law, and therefore, do not warrant serious and critical examination. These simplistic notions are problematic and inaccurate, given the heterogeneous nature of any racialized population. Through research, personal history and anecdotes, in-depth interviews with former and current gang members, and my experience as a youth worker and K-12 teacher in the Los Angeles area, I hope to paint a more complex picture of Vietnamese and Asian American youth. I humbly want

to document the voices of those who are most marginalized and deemed voiceless. One can argue that they are already heard in some circles.

Immigration from Vietnam, Southeast Asia, and Asia has subsided. The formation of Vietnamese, Vietnamese-Chinese, and Southeast Asian youth gangs in the early 1980s and an emergent second generation in the early 1990s has become a permanent and persistent part of California's urban and suburban landscape. This is also apparent in other states with visible Vietnamese and Southeast Asian populations. The first generation of Vietnamese and Cambodian youth who got involved in the early and mid-1980s are dead, in prison, or grew out of "the game." Based on my research, folks I engaged with back home in Southern California, and building on James Diego Vigil's work (1998, 2002, 2006), there is a very prominent second generation Vietnamese and Asian American youth gang phenomenon that is more "street"-socialized than their predecessors. By any account, they are products of the U.S. youth gang culture that emerged in major cities across the U.S. Vietnamese and Asian American gangs are not necessarily "street" as traditionally defined, given that they have very different residential and settlement patterns than other racialized populations. In addition, their businesses, both legitimate and illegitimate, are not necessarily demarcated by streets and blocks—something that is more associated with black and Chicano youth gangs.

I would argue that second-generation Vietnamese/Asian American gang formation does not happen in a vacuum. As migration from Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos reached its peak in the late 1970s and early 1980s as a result of the Vietnam conflict, many of the youth who migrate to the U.S. under the most horrendous conditions came of age in the early 1990s. Many started high school after arriving to the

U.S. as toddlers. It also coincided with California's increasing criminalization of youth, and in particular, gang members of all hues. To be sure, such "criminalization" is usually associated with black and Chicano youth. Accordingly, discussions of "youth of color" impacted by the juvenile justice system often overlook Asian American and Pacific Islander youth. However, the reality is that arrest rates for Asian and Pacific Islander youth have increased dramatically while the national arrest rates for black and white youth have declined in the last 20 years (Kwon in Ginwright, Noguera, and Cammarota, 2006, 221; Le, 2002). Since Asian American youth are racialized as "model," and presumably "non-violent," they are not necessarily given the same kind of legitimacy by their peers, policy makers, scholars, and educators when discussing gang violence and historical/personal struggles. In California's urban centers, however, they are racialized as both "model minority" *and* "gang-banger" because of the substantial number of Asian American youth gangs.

Many (certainly not all) of these youth grew up in poor and working-class neighborhoods with other Asians and Latinos, in areas where there has been a long history of gangs. Inevitably, these youth come into conflict because they have to share the same spaces and go to the same schools. Some Vietnamese and Southeast Asian youth got picked on when they were younger by more established Chicano gangs in the area. As a way to protect themselves, establish their own sense of identity, and find ways to deal with their family's material conditions, these youth form their own gangs. As a youth from these neighborhoods, I have always been intrigued, but not surprised, that these youth pick up certain characteristics that are associated with Chicano gangs. The *cholo* aesthetics become part of the representations that are uniquely Southern California.

Gang formation and violence have always been part of urban life and immigrant communities, and the Vietnamese/Asian American gang phenomenon is very much a part of that history. Here, I make the distinction between Vietnamese/Southeast Asian youth gangs and Chinese/Taiwanese and some Filipino American youth gangs. The latter two migrated under very different contexts, as a number of these youth (certainly not all) settled in more “suburban” middle-class areas.

Even though immigration has subsided from Southeast Asia, we see and feel the lasting effects of war and displacements. As a result, there is a permanence of Asian American youth gangs, given the convergences of populations in a globalizing world. Due to different residential patterns and demographic shifts for U.S. Asians the last few decades, they do not necessarily claim “turf” or territory, as it is understood (Gonzales, *Pasadena Star News*, 2004). Perhaps the exception might be Cambodians American youth gangs in Long Beach. Vietnamese and Asian American youth gangs are not spatially bound. If anything, Vietnamese/Asian American youth gangs complicate our commonsense notions of “urban” and “street” gangs. The political economy of gang formation then begins to have diasporic and national effects. They become connected to the larger patterns of people moving out to other areas of California or other parts of the U.S. Given the deportation of youth gangs to their countries of origin since the mid to late 1990s, there is also a transnational element that is also taking place. We see this take form in countries like El Salvador and Cambodia (Guerra Vasquez, 2005; Chow, 2005). Vietnamese American gang members are very aware that they might be next in line to get deported, as the U.S. and Vietnam continue to normalize diplomatic relations.

Tracing and Revisiting History

The colonized man who writes for his people ought to use the past with the intention of opening the future, as an invitation to action and basis for hope (Frantz Fanon, 1963, 232).

As a young Vietnamese-Chinese American male socialized in Southern California in the 1980s and 1990s, I was an active participant in Asian American social and cultural scenes. Like many other youth in their late teens and early twenties, I was very much part of the burgeoning Asian American party scene. Growing up, I knew of guys who were involved with gangs, or at least, claimed some form of gang membership. I was too involved with organized basketball, both at school and for an Asian American club team, to be engaged with anything else. The love for the game kept me occupied and out of trouble. Growing up in Los Angeles's Chinatown and the San Gabriel Valley, it also gave me a chance to get out of "the hood." I went on basketball trips with my club team to Northern California to compete against other Asian American youth. This is the only time I ever left the neighborhood. We did not have the means to go on vacations. Basketball also kept one of my brothers out of trouble, but he had friends growing up who became more intimately involved with gangs. I would like to share a couple of anecdotes of two of his friends who were heavily involved with gangs in the early 1990s, especially in the context of the West San Gabriel Valley. These anecdotes, I hope, will provide contexts and depth to the Asian American youth gang experience and give groundedness to Vietnamese-Chinese youth from these particular locations.



Figure 1. Tattoos on gang member. The Chinese characters identify this gang member as ethnic Chinese-Vietnamese. He also represents Los Angeles, as indicated by the “L” and “A” on each arm. Photographed by the author (2007).

A few of my brother’s friends became members of the Westside Asian Boyz (for West San Gabriel Valley) upon entering high school. Growing up, one friend was always in trouble in school and with the law. He was very much involved with the “race fights” that happened between Asian and Latino students at his high school in Alhambra, CA in February 1992 (Hamilton, *Los Angeles Times*, 1993). When he was 16 years old, he got into a dispute with the local police department. He sheltered himself in a Buddhist temple and refused to come out. His father tried desperately to persuade the police to let him talk to his son before things went down, but the police were unrelenting. His friend was shot and killed in an instant, as his father looked on and could not do anything about it. My brother was a pall-bearer at his friend’s funeral.

A second friend, also from the same Asian Boyz gang, was the driver of a getaway car after they shot up their rival, Wah Ching, at a graduation house party in San Marino, an affluent area in San Gabriel Valley on June 5, 1994. This shooting left two youth dead and seven wounded after these youth opened fire on 35 people (Torres, *Los Angeles Times*, 1994). The San Marino incident followed a year of shootings, assaults, and murders between these two rivals in the San Gabriel Valley. This childhood friend, the same friend my brother used to walk to school with in junior high school, is doing life. My brother last visited his friend at Wayside Corrections in Valencia shortly after but lost touch after he transferred to the state penitentiary. His family does not necessarily want his friends to know where he is locked up. My brother's friend and his three homeboys were 17 and 18 years old at the time of the shooting. All four are doing life with no parole. These are the consequences of gang life for youth who became involved after migrating from Vietnam and resettling in the U.S. with their families.

Not surprising, the formation of youth gangs in Southern California is inextricably linked to migration patterns to the region. For example, Chicano gangs began to take shape with the large-scale migration from Mexico in the 1920s and 1930s (Vigil, 1988). Many of these youth were products of working-class families who left Mexico after the war looking for work and a better life. This can also be said for black families coming from the U.S. South after WWII in the 1940s and 1950s, as many looked for opportunities and prosperity out West and to get away from the overt racism of the Jim Crow South (Davis, 1992; Vigil, 2002; Gilmore, 2003, Alonso, 2004). The Asian American "street" gang phenomenon emerged at a time when various Asian groups began to take root in different neighborhoods. One can argue that initial Asian American

gang formation occurred during the first large-scale migration of Asian Americans in the latter part of the 19th century. When Asian Americans, predominantly men, arrived to the U.S. as cheap laborers and workers, they formed social organizations and tongs (Chan, 1994; Kwong, 1996). However, contemporary Asian American gang formation is relatively recent due to selective immigration policies and U.S. war in Southeast Asia over the last four decades.

The rise of youth gangs in Southern California can be attributed to continuous waves of immigration, both historically and in contemporary times, from Central American/Mexico and Southeast Asia as a result of U.S. economic imperialism and geopolitics. Moreover, the late 1980s and 1990s also served as a historical backdrop to the proliferation of “youth gangs” in the state of California. Not coincidentally, this rise had much to do with the waves of propositions imposed on the state’s youth, and in particular, youth from working-class and marginalized communities. Certain laws like Proposition 21 (Gang Violence and Juvenile Crime Prevention Act), STEP (Street Terrorism Enforcement and Prevention) Act of 1988, and Proposition 184 (passed in 1994), also known as the “three strikes” law directly impacted gang members and non-gang members alike. Many youth who were perceived as “gang members” were pulled over, photographed, and accordingly placed in the state’s gang database, also known as Cal-Gang (Gilmore, 2007; Pintado-Vertner and Chang, 2000). These youth were labeled as “core” or “associate” members of particular gangs. In addition, to fight against the increasing gang violence or rather the *moral panic* (Hall and Jefferson, 1975; Cohen, 1955; Cloward and Ohlin, 1960) in the state, certain gangs were handed gang injunctions. One can receive a longer sentence if one is associated with specific gangs on the list. The

notorious Asian Boyz, with its multiple cliques in Long Beach, San Fernando and San Gabriel valleys, Los Angeles, and other parts of the state were placed on the list for “putting in work” for much of the 1990s. They continue to be on the list in 2009.

Given the changing terrain, we need to redefine “urban” youth gangs.

Traditionally, youth gangs have been associated with the “inner-city.” According to Robin Kelley (1997), “inner-city” pathologizing has its roots in the rise of the liberal university as a result of the War on Poverty campaign during the Johnson administration in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Sociologists and anthropologists began to saturate poor and working-class areas that were spatially-bound. Certain territories were marked and racialized, as a way to make sense of the social science research that desired to understand the poor and the urban political economy (Kelley, 1997). As such, analysis and findings on the “inner-city” are objectified and framed within a traditional black/white paradigm. As diverse immigrant populations have relocated to U.S. urban centers like Los Angeles, San Francisco, New York City, and Chicago, there has to be a re-articulation and re-theorization of youth gangs, spatial relations, and class formations. Given the pathologizing of “the barrio” or “the hood,” youth gang violence is synonymous with “inner-city” discord. Undoubtedly, these areas are greatly impacted by gang violence and the continued criminalization of youth. However, there is a need to problematize liberal social science and even “progressive” research that comes from these historical and methodological traditions. Much of this literature continues to mark, racialize, categorize, and divide populations within a black/white lens—when, in fact, the “inner-city” and the poor have always been multi-ethnic (Kelley, 1997).

Vietnamese/Asian American Youth Gangs

In order to understand the Vietnamese American youth gang phenomenon, it is necessary to do comparative work and provide historical contexts. At the turn of the 21st century, the estimated number of youth gangs nationally is over 30,000, and the number of gang members is over 800,000. The Los Angeles area, being the “gang capital of the U.S.,” tops the list with close to 8,000 gangs and 200,000 gang members (Vigil, 2002). Asian American youth gangs account for 3 to 6 percent of the entire gang population (data from the National Youth Gang Center). Although these statistics give us a sense of gang formation numerically, it is very difficult to gauge the discourse. Oftentimes, the numbers are arbitrary. This is especially the case for Vietnamese/Asian American youth gangs. With that said, they make up a relatively small number of all youth gangs nationally. However, it is estimated that there are 20,000 to 50,000 Asian American gang members in Los Angeles County alone (Alonso, www.streetgangs.com, accessed April 20, 2008). Vietnamese and Asian American youth gangs are overwhelmingly concentrated in Los Angeles County, as well as Orange County and in cities like San Jose, San Francisco/Oakland, San Diego, Seattle, Houston, Dallas, New Orleans, and New York/New Jersey, where there are sizeable Asian American populations, particularly Vietnamese and Vietnamese-Chinese (U.S. Census, 2000).

Historically, Vietnamese and Vietnamese-Chinese community leaders and politicians have not acknowledged the existence of youth gangs or when they do, they deem it an aberration. Often the focus is on Vietnamese American youth who have made adjustments academically and financially. The educational achievements of Vietnamese American youth are highly publicized and lauded in Vietnamese language newspapers.

The nation-building from within and rhetoric of reconciliation speaks to the Vietnamese refugee discourse on “success” in the U.S. Undoubtedly, a significant number go on to graduate from major U.S. universities and colleges, become part of the managerial and intellectual class, and assimilate into American middle-class life. Others have not fared as well in the education system and workforce. Their situation is comparable to those who migrated to the U.S. under difficult circumstances. This can be generally concluded for youth and their families who migrated out of the legacy of war and genocide in both Southeast Asia and Central America.

These realities are overshadowed by stories of economic success, self-sufficiency, and educational attainment. Nevertheless, it is important to note that unemployment and underemployment have been and remain a major problem for Vietnamese and other Southeast Asians in the U.S. The average family income for Asians Americans and Vietnamese is deceptively higher because they have more workers in each family and tend to live in metropolitan areas where the income might be higher, but with an even higher standard of living (Chan, 1994). For many working-class Vietnamese American families, they pool their low-wage incomes together to make workable households. For many youth who come from this history, these are the material realities with which they have to contend.

The emergence of a Vietnamese American youth gang subculture materialized from the U.S.’s military and economic intervention in Southeast Asia, beginning in the 1950s. The effects and traumas of war, poverty, racism, and negative educational experiences drive some Vietnamese youth into the margins, and further fuel the formation of gang subculture. Gang subculture moved quickly from fundamental

concerns regarding protection, self-preservation, and ethnic pride to potentially lucrative, and oftentimes, illegal means. The rise of materialism in late U.S. capitalist society and first-hand accounts of economic struggles in their own families, in many ways, accelerated the desire for working-class immigrant subjects to achieve material wealth and status by any means and to get “a piece of the American pie.”

It is important to note that the emergence of Vietnamese American youth gangs coincides with the “second wave” that came from Vietnam in the late 1970s and early 1980s, which exacerbated the “boat people” crisis in their escape from Vietnam. A significant number of the “boat people” (over 50 percent) were young children or teenagers, and some came without parents or other family members (Chan, 1994; Vigil, 2002). Unlike “first-wave” families that came mostly intact, a significant number of “second-wave” youth came on their own, because parents did not have the resources to pay for their own escape. Oftentimes, these youth would make the journey with a relative or a family friend. The “second wave” refugees were also comprised of more rural and working-class Vietnamese and ethnic Chinese, which made up 70 percent of these refugees (Takaki, 1989; Chan, 1994). As a group, they were less educated and familiar with Western ideology and values, compared to the “first wave” that migrated immediately after the “Fall of Saigon” in 1975.

In the context of schooling, the early arrivals in the 1980s faced the negative effects of a fairly recent and highly divisive war. They were reminders of the enemy, the “yellow peril” who moved into next door, both literally and metaphorically. Invariably, they were often targets of physical and verbal attacks from other youth due to their comparatively smaller stature, different physical characteristics, refugee status, limited

English language proficiency, and distinct hair style and dress. The stereotypes of Asian Americans as “model minority” and Vietnamese as the “good refugee” has been harmful in understanding complex issues that exist in immigrant and racialized communities. The simplistic representation of Asian American youth as “whiz kids,” their “over-representation” in higher education, and the ability of Asian Americans to “overcome” any obstacles to excel and flourish reinforce the idea of the U.S. as the “land of opportunity” and “refuge for democracy.” For this reason, a critique of capitalism and U.S. empire must exist at the heart of the discussion.

Gangster Nationalism and Identity Politics

History teaches us clearly that the battle against colonialism does not run straight away along the lines of nationalism (Frantz Fanon, 1963, 148).

The interethnic relationships between and betwixt certain racialized groups on the streets impacts their relationships within institutions like prisons and schools. I focus on two incidents that give context to the rise of Asian American gang violence and “gangster nationalism.” First, I discuss how Asian youth have been racialized due to Asian/Latino conflict on the streets. In 1989, a car-load of Tiny Rascal Gang (TRG) members, a Cambodian American gang, shot and killed a member of the Eastside Longos (ESL), perhaps the largest Chicano gang in the city of Long Beach (Helfand, *Los Angeles Times*, 1994; Manzer, *Los Angeles Daily News*, 2004). Many observers see this as *the* incident that called for the Surenos (collective term for Southern California’s Latino gangs) to place a “green light” (assaults including beatings and stabbings) on Asian inmates in Los Angeles and Orange County’s correctional facilities (Tran, *Los Angeles Times*, 2004; Watanabe, *Los Angeles Times*, 2004). To be sure, there were other incidents on “the

outside” (mostly unreported) that led up tensions in “the inside.” There are also reported incidents of a “green light” on Asian Americans in the state penitentiaries (Yokota, *Buddhahead Productions*, 2002).

Identity politics and “race relations” are just as murky in the joint, as it is on “the outside.” In placing “green light” on Asian Americans by the Mexican Mafia (La Eme), Latino inmates have to decide who is, in fact, “Asian.”

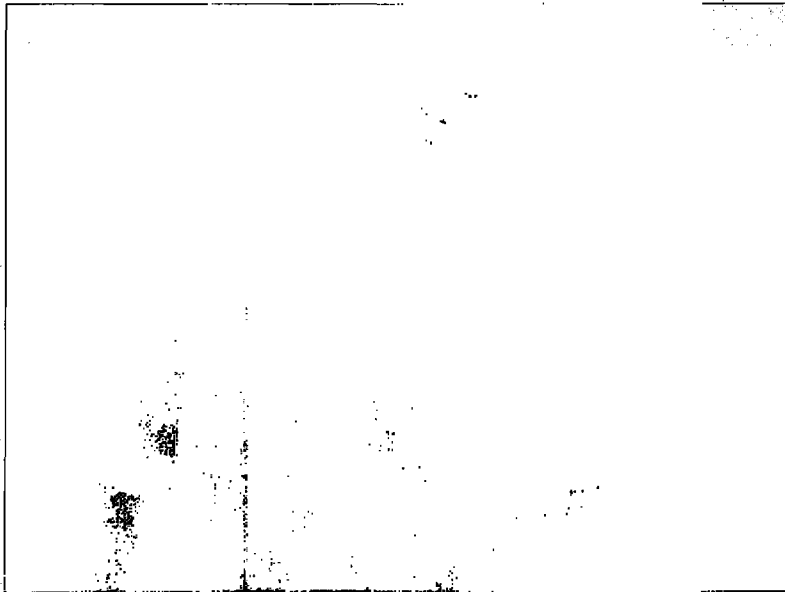


Figure 2. Vietnamese American gang member in prison. Despite identity politics in the joint, he shows pride in his gang affiliation. Courtesy of *You Tube* (2008).

According to one 1997 hit list obtained by a veteran gang investigator, assaults were approved against Vietnamese, Cambodians, Koreans, Japanese, and Chinese. However, Filipinos, Hawaiians, and natives of Guam were asked to be “leave alone” (Watanabe, *Los Angeles Times*, 2004). In practice, many Latino inmates/gang members did not make distinctions among the different groups. This has been a serious concern for Asian American inmates and their families. The concern escalated after the Los Angeles County Jail system decided to return Asian American inmates to the general population on January 20, 2004 after a decade of protective separation (Watanabe, *Los Angeles*

Times, 2004). Many Asian American inmates resisted orders to return to the general jail population by barricading their cell doors with beds and setting their mattresses on fire (Watanabe, *Los Angeles Times*, 2004). The resistance eventually was “quelled” by pepper spray. Lockdowns were also imposed on 3,500 inmates at two Orange County jails (Theo Lacy and Men’s Central) on April 1, 2004, after officials received tips that some Latino gangs placed a “green light” on Asian American inmates as a result of two gang-related shootings in Garden Grove, CA (Tran, *Los Angeles Times*, 2004).

As prisons are implicated, so are our schools. There are incidents of “race fights” between Asian and Latino students in Orange County (Rivera and Lichthblau, *Los Angeles Times*, 1991; Welborn, *Orange County Register*, 2006), the West San Gabriel Valley (Hamilton, *Los Angeles Times*, 1993), Long Beach (Haldane *Los Angeles Times*, 1991), and Los Angeles (Quintanilla, *Los Angeles Times*, 1995). Although different racialized youth have been involved with violence in the schools, the brown/black conflict received much of the coverage in both local and national press. These exchanges between specific groups have much to do with demographic and economic changes, and shifting class relations in Southern California the last few decades (Darder and Torres, 2003). As the black population is in decline in the city/state, Asians and Latinos comprised the two largest populations, with Asian Americans being the fastest-growing over this period. It is estimated that by the year 2020, Asian Americans will make up about 20 million of the U.S. population (LEAP, 1993). They will increase by 412.5 percent from 1992 to 2050 as compared to 50.2 percent for all groups (*New York Times* in LEAP, 1993).

Second, I examine how Asian American youth are racialized “from within”—that is, how they are represented to each other. I focus on the 1993 pool-hall shooting

incident in El Monte, CA as an example of such racialization. This violent incident (caught on video), where a Wah Ching member shot and killed an Asian Boyz member point blank, exacerbated tensions between the two groups that still exist today. Historically, Wah Ching members in the San Gabriel Valley are predominantly Chinese/Taiwanese and tend to be more “well-off” and Asian Boyz members are typically more working-class and products of war and empire from Southeast Asia. Undoubtedly, class and nationalist discourse are clearly at work and need to be interrogated in understanding migration patterns and educational attainments of Asian American students.

Some of the most recognizable Asian American youth gangs in Southern California include the Asian Boyz (ABZ), Tiny Rascal Gang (TRG), and Wah Ching (WC). The practice of using a recognizable moniker is similar to that of black gangs like the Bloods and Crips, where there might be some loose affiliation or no association at all. As I will discuss later in the dissertation, such homogenization of the groups was strategic in creating a more powerful historic bloc (Gramsci, 1971). The politics of identity and representation are developed over real and imagined discourses as to why they are “enemies” and “allies.” For example, the Asian Boyz gangs know and understand that their common enemies are Wah Ching and Lomas in the San Gabriel Valley and Tiny Rascal Gang and Eastside Longos outside of the area. WC and TRG are allies and their common enemies are Asian Boyz. However, not all the Asian Boyz groups, like other gangs, get along even though they are under the same banner. A few Southeast Asian American gangs also claim Crips affiliation due partly to their alliances

with other black gangs in some areas and largely due to their on-going battles with Latino gangs like the Eastside Longos in Long Beach.

Certain Asian American gangs are more inclined to keep their membership “Asians only.” Some groups are ethnic-specific (e.g., Filipinos) and some groups have a mixture of Asian backgrounds, especially with similar immigrant history and class backgrounds (e.g. Asian Boyz). In recent years, a few Asian American gangs have also included other nationalities and ethnicities. As one of my interviewee states: “I am proud of being Vietnamese-Chinese, you know... I can’t be nothing else.” He frowned upon Asian American gangs with non-Asian members: “No Mexicans... no nothing. It wouldn’t be right, you know. Like these days I see they [Asian gangs] would be having Mexicans, whites, this and that.” Another interviewee expresses similar sentiments in having non-Asian members in a historically Asian American gang. Given the history with Asian and Chicano youth in the area, it is hard for them (and others) to fathom the idea of having non-Asian members in a historically “Asian” gang. Clearly, for many youth, it is about ethnic pride and solidarity. To be sure, a certain nationalism is constantly at work in making sense of ethnic identification.

Theoretical Lineages

My examination of the racialized discourse and formation of Vietnamese youth gangs in Southern California speaks to my desire to understand this phenomenon historically, comparatively, and contextually. It is my intent to study gang subculture in relation to questions of racism, migration, class, and schooling. Undoubtedly, these issues are inextricably linked. I attempt to show how they are interconnected and why

there is a need to frame the subject matter within larger social, political, and economic contexts. This dissertation seeks to understand the dialectical relationship between “large-scale” forces like migration, war, geo-politics, and empire and the “particularities” of youth gang formation. Hence, it is necessary to connect the *cultural* and the *material*.

My exploration of the Vietnamese American youth gang phenomenon as a subculture has its theoretical genesis from the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS), at the University of Birmingham in Britain in the 1960s and 1970s. In the mid-1970s, the Birmingham School, and especially scholars doing “youth research” provided a systematic analysis of subculture from a Marxist perspective (Hall and Jefferson, 1975; Wulff, 1995). These cultural studies scholars borrowed heavily from the radical traditions of Antonio Gramsci and Louis Althusser. More specifically, they re-articulated Gramsci’s notion of class and hegemony in their studies of working-class youth in post-war Britain. The influential works of Stuart Hall (1976), Paul Willis (1977), Dick Hebdige (1979) and others have provided me the analytical tools to discuss questions of identity, racism, diaspora, youth, style, and subculture in the transnational contexts. I will further discuss some of the major theoretical concerns and limitations put forth by these scholars in the methodology chapter.

At this time, I would like to bring my research back to gang formation, as a way to ground my theoretical analysis within the lived realities of marginalized youth in Southern California. I critically examine the process of racialization as it pertains to Vietnamese American youth gangs and their relationships to identity formation and schooling. To discuss this phenomenon and racialized discourse in the Los Angeles metropole, I examine the important work of sociologist Robert Miles and his notion of

racialization, anchored in a critical interpretive approach to understanding racism. More specifically, Miles (1989) defines racialization as:

those instances where social relations between people have been structured by the signification of human biological characteristics in such a way as to define and construct differentiated social collectivities. The characteristics signified vary historically and, although they have been usually been visible somatic features, other non-visible (alleged or real) biological features have also been signified (75).

The idea of “race” is employed as the result of a “process of signification” that are attributed with meaning and thereby used to organize and sort out populations. The notion of racialization has been widely used and understood in different ways. For Miles, the concept is synonymous with racialized categorization. I find Miles’s notion of racialization to be useful because his work is framed within a political economy of migration that attempts to understand when, why and how people move. In addition, he complicates the notion of racism by situating it in multiple forms and localities. In line with Miles (1982, 1989, 1993, 2003), Antonia Darder and Rodolfo Torres (1999, 2000, 2004), Chorswang Ngin (1997, 2001), Peter McLaren (1999), and others have vehemently attempted to break the conceptual link between the notion of “race” with that of racism as a way to distinguish the analytical use of racism and re-center racialized class relations. Darder and Torres’s work, in particular, has been helpful in understanding the study of racism and class formations in the Southern California/U.S. contexts. They bring much specificity and depth to their analysis of racialized populations in a changing political economy.

Compared to other racialized youth groups, very little is known about Asian American youth and even less about who are gang members. This is by no means surprising, given that Asian Americans are not necessarily perceived as “worthy”

theoretical and political subjects of inquiry, due to where they are “located” in the U.S. racialized hierarchy, manifested within and outside of the academy. To put it more clearly, Asian Americans are not considered “marginalized enough” in their marginal status as a minority population in the U.S. to warrant critical examination. In our attempts to create a truly progressive politics of difference and a more sustained understanding of class struggle in these “new times,” it is fundamental that we rethink the idea of representation. Although much research is needed, the available data does suggest that certain Asian American ethnic youth groups, including Vietnamese, face serious issues with poverty, school dropouts, and juvenile delinquency (Ong and Umemoto, 2006).

Purpose of Study and Key Research Questions

The purpose of the study is to examine the racialization and formation of Vietnamese American youth gangs in Southern California. I do so by taking on the question of subculture and its relationship to the political economy of racism, migration, and schooling. Although I recognize the important contributions made by other traditions and schools of thought in both Britain and the U.S., the scholarship from the Birmingham School resonates most with my study. This is so in large part because the Birmingham School theorists offered a theoretically rich and grounded analysis of subculture, based on studies of youth in Britain during the 1970s. Although I work from a different time and place, I hope to bring similar rigor to my analysis of Vietnamese American youth gang culture in Southern California.

Below are some key questions that will be engaged in the dissertation:

1. How have immigration history and U.S. empire been implicated in our understanding of Vietnamese American subjects?
2. How has the question of class informed our understanding on the formation of Vietnamese/Asian American youth gang culture?
3. How do Vietnamese/Asian American youth/gang members experience racism in and outside the context of schooling?
4. What are the consequences of the process of racialization for Vietnamese/Asian American gang youth/students in contemporary U.S.?

These questions are significant because they bring complexities to our understanding of Asian American populations. This is certainly the case for Vietnamese American youth who came out of or are products of U.S. empire. In Chapter 2, I provide a detailed analysis of the Vietnamese exodus to the diaspora. I examine Vietnamese migration patterns in the U.S. and then proceed to situate this population within racialized class inequalities in Southern California. In Chapter 3, I engage the theoretical analysis of “race” and racism and describe the historical and contemporary context for the racialization of U.S. Asians. I focus on Asian American identity, identity politics, and the limitations of pan-ethnicity. I will examine more closely the racialization of Vietnamese gang youth in later chapters to understand the process of signification for Asian Americans. In Chapter 4, I discuss/critique the methodological traditions of social science research, as a way to locate myself theoretically. I go on to talk about data sources and history, as I employ a critical narrative methodology. In Chapter 5 and using critical narrative, I dedicate the entire chapter to my three interviewees who were former and current gang members. Here, we hear them speak from their respective locations about their stories. In Chapter 6, I do an analysis of the three narratives and their

relationship to the theoretical/background literature(s). Finally, in Chapter 7, I make conclusions and recommendations regarding the Vietnamese/Asian American youth gang phenomenon in Southern California, as to understand policy implications and consequences nationally.

Significance of the Study

Along with my interpretive approach, I also use critical narrative methodology. I did in-depth interviews with three (3) former and/or current Vietnamese American gang members. These narratives are juxtaposed with the theoretical and background literature(s). My objective here is to use these stories to ground my theoretical considerations. I believe they have much to say about the complexities of being a youth and Vietnamese/Asian American in the midst of major demographic and structural changes in the contemporary U.S. landscape, and in particular, California. Hence, this research speaks to the importance of understanding historical, political, and economic trajectories from which students and populations emerge. It also points to a longstanding need for research and analysis on Asian Americans that examines substantively the problems, concerns, and hardships, faced by this population, especially its youth. There are material and policy implications and consequences that are at play and needs to be addressed.

Although this research project may involve some risks for both subject and researcher, their narratives are essential to the story. It gives voice to populations that historically have been deemed voiceless and reconfigures the notion of “marginality.” Although there is research on black and Latino urban youth gangs, not much is done on

Vietnamese/Southeast Asian Americans and other youth groups that have a relatively recent immigration, but oftentimes violent geo-political history. This research is much needed in our understandings of diverse populations in the U.S. It will hopefully shed light on policy-making at the local, state, and national levels. These narratives and analyses are significant in our understanding of racialized populations in the 21st century.

CHAPTER 2

VIETNAMESE IN THE U.S. POLITICAL ECONOMY

In order for me to provide a systematic analysis of the Vietnamese refugee experience in Southern California and to engage questions of migration, diaspora, class, and racialized identity as it related to Vietnamese American youth gangs, it is necessary to provide a historical context. To this end, I have chosen to talk about the Vietnamese refugee experience in relation to U.S. imperialism and continued empire-building after the “Fall of Saigon” in April 1975. As a result of war, a mass exodus ensued as Vietnamese exiles ended up in different parts of the globe. Many were resettled in the United States due to U.S.’s military intervention since the 1950s. Much of this chapter focuses on migration patterns of Vietnamese in the U.S. diaspora, as part of the U.S. nation-state’s attempt to assimilate its refugee population. It also speaks to the racialization of Vietnamese bodies during the war and in contemporary U.S. society, as well as its location within the Asian American class structure in Southern California. As such, it provides a deeper understanding of the context in which Vietnamese youth gangs evolved.

Contextualizing Empire

By most accounts, Vietnam was the site of one of the most brutal and destructive wars between western imperial powers and the people of Asia, Africa, and Latin America. U.S. military policies-search and destroy missions in the South, carpet bombing raids in the North, free-fire zones, and chemical defoliation-cost

Vietnam at least three million lives, the maiming of countless bodies, the poisoning of its water, land, and air, the razing of its countryside, and the devastation of most of its infrastructure. Indeed, more explosives were dropped on Vietnam, a country two-thirds the size of California, than in all of World War II (Espiritu, 2005, xiii).

Yen Le Espiritu (2005) gives context to the devastation of war and empire-building in Vietnam and Southeast Asia more than thirty years ago. One can argue that a different kind of imperialist project has manifested since the “Fall of Saigon” in April 1975. As we moved into the 21st century, the war in Southeast Asia seemed like a distant memory. The destruction of land, water, air, and the lost of over three million Vietnamese lives faded into the background, as it leaves behind the lasting images of helicopters departing Saigon (now Ho Chi Minh City), South Vietnam’s capital. The conflict in Vietnam has not been forgotten in the U.S. imagination largely because it was such an unpopular and divisive war, and it lacked national resolve. The Americans were not able to “liberate” the Vietnamese people from the “evils” of communism in their anointed role as “protectors” of democracy.

As the U.S. recovered from the war in Vietnam, the Vietnamese (and other Southeast Asians) are still feeling (and living) the residues of such destruction more than three decades later. After the U.S. ended the military phase of the war in 1975, it continued to maintain and enforce an eighteen-year boycott on a country it practically destroyed. According to Vietnamese estimates, the war cost them over 3 million lives, 300,000 missing, 4.4 million wounded, and 2 million harmed by toxic chemicals. Its land was left ravaged by bombs and Rome plows (land clearing by large tractors) as well as chemical weapons (Herman and Chomsky, 2002, xxx). In contrast, the U.S. death toll

from the war was 58,000 or one-tenth of 1 percent of its troops. Vietnam's death toll was 17 percent of its population.

Only the Vietnamese people were attacked by chemical warfare and had their countryside destroyed. In 1961 and 1962, the Kennedy administration authorized the use of chemicals to destroy rice crops in South Vietnam. This was in violation of U.S. tradition, as well as international law. The policy of attempting to force enemy submission by destroying its food supply was not only against the rules of war, but its "first and overwhelming" affect was on small children. In addition, the U.S. Air Force, between 1961 to 1971, sprayed 20 million gallons of concentrated arsenic-based and dioxin laden herbicides (mainly Agent Orange) on 6 million acres of crops and trees, besides using large quantities of the "super tear gas," napalm, and phosphorous bombs (Herman and Chomsky, 2002, xxx). An estimated 13 percent of South Vietnam's land was subjected to chemical attacks.

The use of chemical weapons and napalm in Vietnam was primarily confined to the South. One reason it remained in the South is because the North Vietnamese government had diplomatic relations with other countries. Hence, such devastation and barbarous acts would be widely publicized at the international level. Much of the North's social, economic, and political centers were left unharmed from the fighting. South Vietnam, on the other hand, became a de facto U.S. colony. The South Vietnamese government was essentially a puppet government, and thus, its people deemed voiceless. In February 1997, the *Wall Street Journal* reported that as many as 500,000 children may have been born with dioxin-related deformities; and birth defects in the South were four times of those in the North (Herman and Chomsky, 2002, xxxii). As these actions and

numbers suggest, the claim of the U.S. government “protecting” South Vietnam was not only dubious but also a blatant contradiction to the facts. This contradiction remained invisible to the U.S. media.

As a result of this invisibility, the history of war and military occupation in Southeast Asia has largely been neglected in the U.S. mainstream public discourse. The issue of racism was apparently “too sensitive” to discuss, as many American soldiers choose not to comment when asked about their hostility toward the Vietnamese people (Herman and Chomsky, 2002, 2003). This was a prominent theme in the veterans’ recollections of the war. To be sure, three decades of warfare destruction, from 1945 to 1975 (first French colonialism and then U.S. imperialism), and the subsequent post-war U.S. trade and aid economic embargo for the next two decades crippled Vietnam’s infrastructure. This destruction left the country as one of the poorest in the world. It forced the impending mass exodus of Vietnamese people to different parts of the globe, emotionally torn and broken. The “skipping over” of this devastating history by the U.S., according to Espiritu (2005), constitutes an “organized and strategic forgetting” of the war that “went wrong” (xiii).

A telling example of such “forgetting” is the construction of the Vietnam War Memorial in Washington D.C., established in 1982. It was commissioned to commemorate and memorialize the U.S. soldiers who fought in Vietnam. The “remembering” of American soldiers also suggests the “forgetting” of Vietnamese bodies within its nationalist construction of remembrance. As Viet Thanh Nguyen (2002), Yen Le Espiritu (2005), and other Vietnamese American scholars argue, Vietnamese bodies must be “dehumanized”, in order for the humanization of American soldiers to occur.

This metaphorical American body represents the “humanization” of the U.S. nation-state and its notions of ideology, culture, and freedom. It is clear that racialized Vietnamese bodies do not accord the same kind of dignity and humanity given to American bodies.

Many scholars and activists are concerned that after many years, the Vietnam War has been used as a site for (re)production of American identities, and thereby, reinventing neo-colonial projects. Vietnam, as a historical site, has become ahistorical. Vietnamese, and subsequently, Vietnamese in the diaspora are not afforded a voice to “remember” their perspectives on the war. As we commemorated the 30th anniversary of the “Fall of Saigon” a few years ago, there are new terrains to which we must tend to. In conjunction with *Doi Moi* (economic renovation) that started in the mid-1980s and Vietnam’s call for “free-market” ideology, the U.S. ended its economic embargo of Vietnam in 1994 and began “normalizing” relations. Since then, it has become Vietnam’s top trading partner, and the two countries have worked closely to fight “anti-terrorism” in Southeast Asia. In many respects, the U.S. has “won” the war it “lost” thirty years ago. As Espiritu (2005) points out, the “we-win-even-when-we-lose” syndrome justified the war in Vietnam as “necessary” for progress and democracy (xv).

War and Migration

A refugee from a communist country once had a role in the story Americans told themselves. He who risked his life jumping over the barbed wire fence in Berlin or sailed across the treacherous sea from Vietnam to search for freedom reassured those at the end of the exodus trail that the American way of life represented something worth having, that they lived on the right side of the cold war divide...once the West readily opened its arms to these poor souls to validate the myth, and to score political points in their constant vigilance against communism. Give us your tired, your poor, your huddled masses... (Lam, 2005, 76).

Sucheng Chan (1994) points out that contemporary Asian immigration and the refugee influx have been shaped by changes in U.S. immigration legislation and Asia's political, economic, and military relationships with the United States since World War II. As the U.S. emerged as leader of the "free world" after the Cold War, there was a need to implement anti-poverty and anti-racism programs in the domestic sphere, as well as eliminate restrictive immigration policies to suggest that the U.S. is in fact a "land of opportunity." While the highly-educated Asian professional class migrated as a result of the 1965 Immigration Act, more than a million refugees migrated from war-ravaged countries of Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia after 1975. By 1995, the number of refugees from these three respective countries was close to two million people.



Figure 3. A Vietnamese refugee woman and her three children. Over seventy-five percent of the refugee population came from Southeast Asia came from Vietnam. Courtesy of the National Archives.

Refugees differ from immigrants in that their exodus was not always voluntary. More than half from Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia ended up in the U.S. largely because

of American military involvement in Southeast Asia. Although Southeast Asians are a marginalized historical bloc in Asian American studies, this chapter attempts to show that the categories of “Southeast Asians” and “Vietnamese” are not homogenous entities and differ in qualitative ways. In the case of the Vietnamese, I will describe the departure of various waves; class heterogeneity of the Vietnamese population; and geo-political positioning with the U.S. and its neighboring countries, especially China. As border hostilities intensified between China and Vietnam and nationalism grew in the late 1970s, ethnic Chinese who had resided in Vietnam for decades, sometimes centuries, were asked to leave.

In the popular imagination, the “Fall of Saigon” in 1975 marked the beginning of the Vietnamese American experience. However, there were approximately fifteen thousand Vietnamese in the U.S. prior to 1975. They consisted mostly of diplomats, exchange students, and wives of U.S. servicemen (Pham, 2005). The “first wave” evacuated shortly after “The Fall of the Saigon.” The 1975 evacuees were a select group primarily of the Vietnamese managerial and elite class. Some worked closely with the American embassy and many were connected to the South Vietnamese government or military. When the communist North took control of the country, they feared for their lives. Aside from political affiliation and economic status, many feared they would be persecuted for their religious beliefs. More than half were Catholics.

The “first-wave” refugees who left before April 29 (and a few who left on that date) boarded planes at Tan Son Nhat airport and were flown to Clark Air Base in the Philippines. Those who left on April 29 were flown by helicopters or taken by barges to waiting naval ships that carried them to Subic Bay in the Philippines. From the

Philippines, the refugees were flown to Guam and then to one of four refugee camps in the U.S. (Camp Pendleton in California, Fort Chaffee in Arkansas, Eglin Air Base in Florida, and Fort Indiantown Gap in Pennsylvania), where they received security clearance and waited for sponsorship and then, permanent relocation (Zhou and Bankston, 1998, 42-43).

By the end of 1975, more than 130,000 refugees resettled in the U.S. (Vo, 2000, 291). Federal agencies and other voluntary agencies (volags) were set up to assist in the transition. Many of these “volags” were religious charities, predominantly Catholic charities. The “first wave” Vietnamese had a comparatively easier time adjusting to life in the United States than the later waves. They generally came from the educated class in which 37 percent of the “heads” of households had completed high school and 16 percent had been to college (Takaki, 1989, 451). Many had been incorporated into Western bourgeois life, since French and U.S. colonialism had left a deleterious impact on Vietnam. Hence, many had both French and English language proficiency, which ultimately helped with the transition to a new country. They also had more marketable skills for employment. In many ways, Western assimilation had well begun before they arrived on U.S. soil.

The “second wave” refugees left Vietnam beginning in 1978-1979, at the height of the Sino-Vietnamese conflict. They consisted of more rural and working-class Vietnamese and Sino-Vietnamese. Seventy percent of these refugees were ethnic Chinese. As China/Vietnam relations worsened, China opened up its border as over a quarter million ethnic Chinese relocated. Many ethnic Vietnamese also joined their compatriots because they were able to buy false papers and register themselves as

“Chinese” for the purpose of “unofficial departure” (Haines, 1996, 43). The two flows of migration during the late 1970s consisted of “unofficial departures” and clandestine escapees that resulted in the “boat people” crisis. The Vietnamese “boat people” captured international attention, at a time when the globalization of labor and bodies began to emerge.

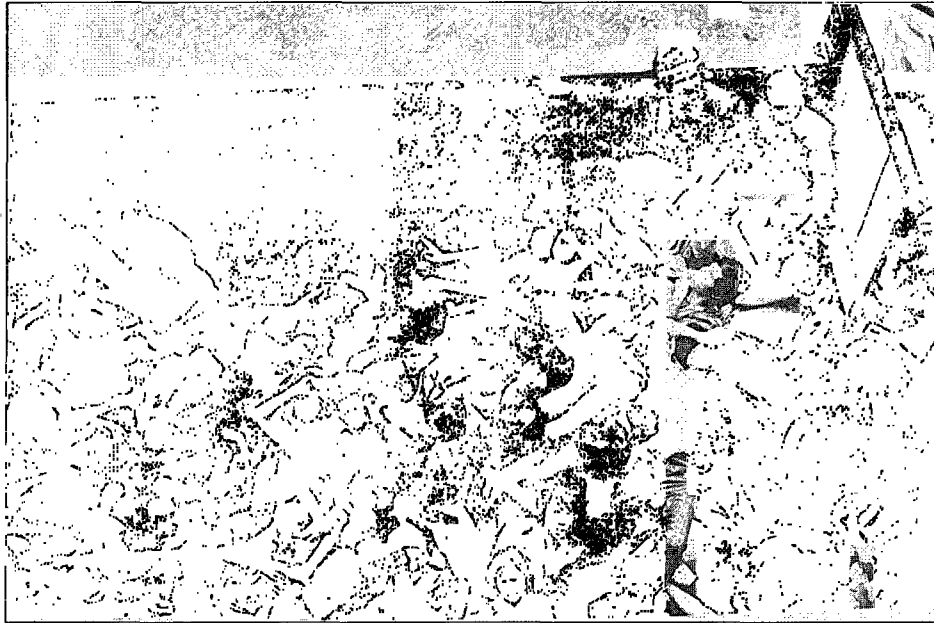


Figure 4. “Boat people.” Vietnamese leaving their homeland by sea to refugee camps in Southeast Asia. Courtesy of the National Archives.

Many of the “second wave” left in poorly equipped and grossly overcrowded small boats unsuitable for the open sea. The “boat people” left with no inclinations to return and their future uncertain. In some instances, they ran out of food, water, and fuel. Some were preyed on by Thai pirates in the Gulf of Siam on their way to different refugee camps in Southeast Asia. There are countless stories of rape and torture. There were also tales of cannibalism. In some cases, these boats were forbidden to land by authorities in Malaysia, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Hong Kong and were told to go back. Scholars and federal reports have estimated that fifty percent or higher of the

Vietnamese refugees drowned at sea or were killed during their escape (Chan, 1994, 157).

The “boat people” received much sympathy from the international community, including the United States, for their harrowing experiences. However, public sentiments were not in favor of admitting Vietnamese, because they were blatant reminders of a very recent and unpopular war. The Gallup Poll and Harris Survey reported that more than half of the American public did not favor Vietnamese resettlement in the U.S. (Reimers cited in Vo, 2000, 293). Similar to that of Cuban political refugees who left Mariel Harbor from April 15 to October 31 of 1980, the U.S. government officials were inclined to admit their Vietnamese counterparts partly as a strategic maneuver to “undermine” communist regimes in both countries.

The last wave of Vietnamese involves the Orderly Departure Program. The program was the result of the 1979 Memorandum of Understanding between Vietnam and the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), endorsed by all the major resettlement countries, including the United States. In subsequent years, Orderly Program has been the mechanism for U.S. efforts to help relocate two particular Vietnamese groups. The first group includes Amerasian children, primarily offspring of U.S. servicemen and Vietnamese women. The second group is those who had been placed in reeducation camps as a result of their involvement with the South Vietnamese regime. Those who worked closely with the U.S. government were incarcerated for many years (as many as twenty) and faced tremendous discrimination when released (Haines, 1996, 44). The adjustment to life abroad has been especially difficult for these

refugees due to health issues, the trauma of being imprisoned and tortured, and the strain from family members who had migrated years ago.

Some refugees were not able to resettle because they lacked both legal and familial connections. With little opportunities for resettlement to North America, Europe, Australia or other parts of Asia, many stayed in refugee camps for years. The distinction between “economic refugee” and “political refugee” is often arbitrary. Thus, many were sent back home under the assumption of being “economic refugees.” When forced Vietnamese repatriation began in July 1989, there was uproar from the international and human rights community. In the few proceeding years, not much was done to prevent forced repatriation. Andrew Lam (2005), in his role as translator and undercover journalist for *Pacific News Service*, entered a few of these refugees camps and listened to tragic stories of rape and suicide, witnessed inhumane living conditions, and heard murderous tales of gang fights in the camps.

Hong Kong, a one-time British island colony (and other refugee centers) simply got tired of the refugee crisis. The United Nations High Commission for Refugees, according to several former staff members, confessed that they created living conditions that were so unbearable that the Vietnamese would volunteer to repatriate (Lam, 2005). Hong Kong, in particular, wanted to get rid of its “impossible subjects” because it was being prepared to return to the People’s Republic of China in 1997. Thirty-five thousand boat people in refugee camps in Southeast Asia were sent back to Vietnam against their will (Lam, 2005, 71). Many resisted, but to no avail. Their voices, once again, were not heard. Their humanity was not deemed human. A few committed suicide or self-

immolation, reminiscent of Buddhist monk Thich Quang Duc during the war, as the ultimate sign of protest (Viet Nguyen, 2002).

Vietnamese in the Diaspora

The word *diaspora*, according to Aihwa Ong (1995), evokes two intellectual predicaments. The first is that of cultural Otherness, in relation to our notion of cultural difference. The second concerns a notion of the West as a “refuge for democracy” (806). Ong suggests that for traditional Western liberals, *diaspora* offered “the fantasy” of the melting pot. It is a way for “third-world” subjects and racialized others to assimilate into Anglo-American norms, ideologies, and values. For the New Left, however, immigration provides a space for cultural hybridity, a kind of “intercultural subjectivity” that “creates transnational solidarities against totalitarian forces on the one hand and the excesses of capitalist and environmental exploitation on the other” (807). It suggests that critiques of both totalitarian regimes of the homeland and global capitalism are linked dialectically. Yet, as we see increasingly, immigrants from the “newly affluent” Asia are more concerned with the question of capital than human rights (Ong, 1995). As a group, they might be more concerned with class status than class struggle. In the end, U.S.-styled “democracy” and capitalism go hand in hand, with a lack of substantive critique.

The notion of *diaspora* has a different meaning for Southeast Asians refugees. They are part of the newer diaspora and one they did not covet. There is a long history of diaspora on the Asian continent, as many Chinese migrated to different parts of Southeast Asia for economic opportunities (Whitmore, 1996, 225). But their diaspora was one of necessity as a result of war, genocide, and empire-building. For many people,

immigration from communist countries, such as Vietnam and Cuba, reaffirms the U.S. as the “refuge for democracy.” It is where political exiles and refugees are welcomed with open arms. This is where the United States can make the claim as “moral leader” of the “free world.” The Vietnam War and its subsequent refugees have added a twist to this narrative. The powerful U.S. military machine was defeated by cadres of Vietnamese “peasants.” The Vietnamese people were on both ends of victory and defeat. Vietnamese in the diaspora were not sure what to make of it, given their role as signifiers for the decline of “U.S. military and moral force in the world” (Ong, 1995, 807).

In some respects, it was easier to fight the war half way around the world on “enemy” territory. It is more difficult when “the enemy” shows up at your doorstep. Many Vietnamese and Southeast Asian refugees did end up at the U.S.’s “doorstep.” They entered under the Indochina Migration and Refugee Assistance of 1975 or the Refugee Act of 1980, as they were provided public assistance in their resettlement process. Undoubtedly, resistance toward admitting refugees has much to do with the history between the two nations. Furthermore, high unemployment, competition with Japan, and high inflation rates during the mid- and late-1970s added to this anti-Asian and Vietnamese sentiment. The rhetoric of foreigners (once again) taking over American jobs in a declining U.S. political economy re-emerged during this period. In addition, it was a concern that Vietnamese and other Southeast Asians would be a burden on the welfare system, as federal programs were implemented to assist these “political refugees.”

Aware of negative public sentiments on the Vietnam War, government officials strategically distributed the refugee population all across the United States. The intent

was to make their resettlement less conspicuous and forcing them to assimilate (Vo, 2000). Each state received at least 100 refugees. The Vietnamese were dispersed into small groups through various U.S. cities and towns to maintain low visibility. Inevitably, tensions between refugees and other racialized and working-class communities grew over competition for resources, housing, and jobs, especially in urban spaces. However, competition over jobs was not limited to urban spaces. There were tensions in the fish and shrimp industry in the Gulf Coast states as Vietnamese refugees were perceived as economic competitors. Vietnamese and other Southeast Asians sent to smaller cities and towns with a very small Asian presence felt culturally and socially removed. For this reason, one can see the emergence of ethnic communities. The formation of the Vietnamese community is similar to other immigrant communities who settled before and after them.

Attempts by government officials to prevent such ethnic clustering backfired because refugee populations moved anyway. Since there are no laws to prohibit the movement of refugees within its borders, secondary migration and chain migration emerged not too long after resettlement. Oftentimes, Vietnamese refugees were sent to regions where they have not been able to integrate into the local economy. They were sent to places with limited job opportunities (Vo, 2000; Zhou and Bankston, 1998; Chan, 1994). Their sponsors, including both private families or local charities and organizations, could only provide minimal financial assistance. As a result, many refugees relied on public assistance. To complicate matters, financial assistance from the government was cut from 36 months to 18 months in 1982 (Vo, 2000, 292). Social

programs for poor and working-class populations in general, and immigrants and refugees in particular, were cut dramatically during the early 1980s.

Secondary migration and chain migration led Vietnamese refugees to areas with more opportunities and with more visible immigrant communities. Secondary migration has been prompted by factors such as climate, employment opportunities, reunification with family members and friends, accessibility to social services, and the pull of established ethnic communities such as the Little Saigon area in Orange County, California. Like most other Asian-origin populations (except Asian Indians), the Vietnamese population were concentrated on the West Coast. However, California is not the only site of relocation. Unlike other Asian-origin groups, they also have a sizeable representation in southern states, especially in metropolitan areas like Houston (63,924), Dallas (47,090), Atlanta (23,996), and New Orleans (14,868) (2000 U.S. Census).

The development of ethnic communities suggests the importance of maintaining ties with other co-ethnics. They shared with other Vietnamese the trauma of war, a sense of displacement and alienation, and feelings of guilt and loss of family members who were killed or left behind. They also had to contend with “starting over” in a new country and their complex relationships with the U.S. and Vietnam, an “imagined homeland” since many have been gone for thirty years. As sociologist David Haines (1996) contends, the formation of ethnic enclaves has both positive and negative consequences. On a positive note, it provides exiles a sense of identity and belonging, often offering mutual assistance in the forms of resettlement and the reduction of anxiety and distress for newly arrived immigrants. On the downside, it may lead to the development of an insular community, contributing to instability, ethnic conflict, and

criminal activities (46). Unfortunately, this point has been largely ignored when discussing the Vietnamese experience in the diaspora.

The occupational distribution of the U.S. Vietnamese population includes 27% in management, professional, and related occupations; 19.1% in sales and office and office occupations; 0.5% in farming, fishing, and forestry occupations; 5.9% in construction, extraction, and maintenance, and 28.1% in production, transportation, and material moving occupations (2000 U.S. Census). The educational attainment rates of Vietnamese Americans twenty-five years and older are: 18.2% with less than a 9th grade education; 19.9% from 9th-12th with no diploma; 19.0% are high school graduates (include equivalency); 15.9% with some college but no degree; 7.6% with an associate degree; 14.6% with a bachelor degree; and 4.9% with graduate or professional degree. 62% of all Vietnamese Americans have at least attained a high school degree or higher, and almost 20% have attained a bachelor's degree or higher.

These statistics clearly shows that the U.S. Vietnamese population, close to 1.3 million and almost 11% of total Asians (2004 U.S. Census Bureau), is extremely diverse in both labor distribution and educational attainment. The statistics from the Census give us, in broad stroke, a portrait of the Vietnamese American population. However, the Census is limited and always problematic, since it obscures the specificities of particular populations and their historical trajectories. In addition, the stereotype of Asian Americans as "model minority" and "economic success" hides the fact that a significant number of them live below the poverty line (Ngoan, 1994, 167). The economic progress of the Vietnamese population in the U.S. has steadily improved since the last census. Yet, 14.3% still live below the poverty line (2000 U.S. Census).

Political Economy of Southern California

Since the 1980s, Vietnamese ethnic communities have quickly formed in the U.S. Secondary and chain migration developed clusters in several metropolitan areas in California, Texas, Georgia, and Louisiana; but some also settled in the Washington, D.C./Northern Virginia/Maryland area, and in the Northwest. The most established Vietnamese enclave incorporates the cities of Westminster, Garden Grove, and Santa Ana. This enclave, known as Little Saigon, is considered the largest Vietnamese community in the United States, with the highest concentration of Vietnamese out of Vietnam (Zhou & Bankston, 1998, 74). Little Saigon began when 2,500 refugee families resettled in Southern California in 1975. By 1990, the community grew to 70,000 Vietnamese, making up 12% of Orange County's population. According to the 2000 Census, there are 233,573 Vietnamese in Los Angeles, Riverside and Orange counties. Vietnamese leaders maintain that the number is much higher, perhaps twice as much. They insist that the Vietnamese population is undercounted and some might be identified as "Chinese" or with another ethnicity.

The development of Little Saigon, in some ways, is different than older Asian American communities. The Chinatowns, Manilatowns, and ethnic pockets in farming communities were developed out of residential segregation and overt racism toward a mostly "bachelor society." Consequently, these ethnic enclaves historically consisted of predominantly male laborers and were located near the downtown area of major cities. Little Saigon, on the other hand, was developed in a once exclusively white, middle-class area. In the last three decades, the demographics have shifted to large Asian and Latino

populations in Westminster, Garden Grove, and Santa Ana. To be sure, Little Saigon has grown to be the center of Vietnamese American cultural, social, and political life.

The Little Saigon area in Southern California is distinct from newer Vietnamese communities. As the first and most prominent Vietnamese enclave in the U.S., its residents were predominantly from the “first wave,” and hence, included many from the Vietnamese elite and educated class. Other Vietnamese communities in the U.S. were established by newer refugees, consisting disproportionately of “second and third wave” refugees. In cities like Los Angeles, San Francisco, Seattle, Oakland, New York, and Chicago, Vietnamese tend to live and work in close proximity to established Chinese businesses (i.e., Chinatown) partly as a result of ethnic Chinese-Vietnamese entrepreneurship (Gold, 1994; Vo, 2000). Since their incorporation into the U.S. political economy, Vietnamese Americans have revitalized many cities, most noticeably, working-class areas in San Jose, San Diego, Oakland, Minneapolis-St. Paul, Philadelphia, and Boston. Oftentimes, they share these urban spaces with other racialized working-class and immigrant populations.

In comparison to other established Asian American groups, the Vietnamese population has a much lower average age, much larger households, and lower educational levels (Haines, 1986). They also tend to be much more frequently below the poverty line. Although poverty rates have declined with longer U.S. residency and higher levels of educational attainment, Vietnamese families are still twice as likely, in comparison to the U.S. average, to remain highly dependent on public assistance (Zhou and Bankston, 1998). They work as machine operators, assembly line laborers, electronic technicians, nail salon and beauty care specialists, service-type work in the restaurants and ethnic

supermarkets, and other unskilled or low-skilled jobs. These jobs tend to require minimal language skills and formal education is not required. Many of these jobs cater primarily to ethnic communities.

Given the formation of the Vietnamese community in Orange County and other parts of the state, residents tend to be politically conservative. Many fought with the U.S. against the North Vietnamese and are vehemently anti-communist. Nothing exemplified anti-communist sentiments more than the “Hi-Tek” incident that occurred in Spring 1999 in Westminster, in the heart of Little Saigon. Truong Van Tran, the Hi-Tek video store owner, claiming allegiance to Vietnam and perhaps protesting U.S. military involvement, displayed a picture of Ho Chi Minh, the former communist leader, and a large North Vietnamese flag in his store (Collet and Sedine, 2003, 1999). The Vietnamese community in Orange County was outraged by Tran’s actions and his insistence of free speech, as protected by the 1st amendment. An estimated 15,000 came out to observe the protest. His actions are likened to putting up a picture of Fidel Castro, long-time communist leader of Cuba, in Miami’s Little Havana.

Protests also ensued by Vietnamese Americans when Vietnamese Prime Minister Phan Van Khai visited during June 2005. Many carried signs comparing Phan to Saddam Hussein, “the face” of current U.S. agitation and military action. The protestors made the connection with Phan and Vietnam to Hussein and Iraq. They hoped that Washington would not acquiesce to Hanoi’s “overtures” to form closer U.S.-Vietnam diplomatic and economic relations. President Bush rejected the protestors’ effort to link the war in Vietnam to Iraq and wanted the two nations to work together to fight “terrorism” in Southeast Asia: “thirty years after the war’s end, from the U.S. perspective, Vietnam

appears to be well on its way to become yet other 'satellite regime' of the ever-expanding American empire" (Espiritu, 2005, xvi).

Racialization of Vietnamese Bodies

The creation of the Vietnamese as a subaltern in American history served the interests of the United States during the war. The facelessness of the enemy and their lack of voice-as well as the lack of voice of American's South Vietnamese allies-created a void for American discourse to dominate. (Viet Nguyen, 2002, 111).

Viet Thanh Nguyen (2002) argues that Vietnamese bodies are racialized in two ways: the subaltern and emblematic victim. He defines the "subaltern" as "a person or group that is prevented from public speech, specifically in a colonial situation of domination" (111). During the war, the communist Vietnamese or those sympathetic with the cause were perceived as subalterns. Although their voices were "heard" in their resistance to U.S. military intervention, their "facelessness" allowed the U.S. to dehumanize these bodies. The second kind of Vietnamese racialization is the "emblematic victim." Nguyen (2002) notes that the "emblematic victim" is "the way in which the victimized body politic manifest itself in American discourse, which makes no difference between representative and represented" (112). This person becomes "the voice" for all oppressed people, or more specifically, "the representative" for the Vietnamese refugee experience.

The racialization of Vietnamese bodies and their experiences have played out in very interesting ways in the post-war years. There are many stories that have been told by the refugees themselves and even more written about them. However, what is clear is that it is an "official narrative" from the Vietnamese living in the diaspora. It is the

“emblematic victim” who transcends the stigma and has “done good” in the U.S. Espiritu (2005) and others are concerned that the “good refugee” narrative, as articulated by hegemonic U.S. discourse and Vietnamese American themselves, has enabled the U.S. to turn the Vietnam War into a “good war” (xv). Vietnamese refugees, though absent from much of U.S. public discussions around the war have become “the voice” of assimilation and success and “the representative” of U.S. democracy, here at home and abroad. This narrative suggests that the war was “just and necessary,” regardless of its devastating impact on the people.

The “good refugee” narrative assures that Vietnamese are on their way to being the latest addition to the national discourse on Asian Americans as “model minority.” The “good refugee” discourse “valorizes capitalism, equating ‘freedom’ with economic access and choice, upward social mobility, and free enterprise” (Espiritu, 2005, xv). The rhetoric of free-market ideology and capitalism has been deceptively used interchangeably with notions of “freedom, citizenship, and democracy.” This is manifested for Vietnamese on both sides of the ocean. Furthermore, this rhetoric has, according to Espiritu (2005), “discursively distanced” the “free world” from that of “enemies of freedom.” It has thereby justified continued military and economic interventions in Vietnam today, as it did thirty years ago.

This rhetoric enabled public figures like U.S. Representative Dana Rohrabacher (R-CA-45) to state in a press release on the twenty-fifth anniversary of the end of the Vietnam War: “The compelling difference between [Vietnamese American] success and the poverty and under-development in their homeland is democracy and freedom” (cited in Espiritu, 2005, xv). To be sure, Rohrabacher is not the only one to think this way.

Many Vietnamese Americans themselves are producers of this “good refugee” narrative. There is an emerging Vietnamese middle-class in both the U.S. and Vietnam. And with that said, structural and economic inequalities continue to persist, as the gap between the rich and poor continues to widen in both the U.S. and Vietnam.

Asian Americans and Class Formations

Since the 1970s, manufacturing has moved internationally to make use of low-wage labor markets. As the manufacturing sector has fallen, the service industry in the U.S. has increased dramatically. As a result, the “structural transformations” of the political economy requires for immigrants to fill these minimum-wage, unskilled or low-skilled, and part-time work. In order to meet economic imperatives, U.S. capital moved to Asian and Latin American countries for cheaper labor and production (Lowe, 1996, 15). In addition, the 1965 Immigration Act allows for a renewed domestic labor market, with the intent of attracting a technically trained labor force. Although immigration included people from previous sending countries like China and the Philippines, the new sending countries include, most notably, South Korea, India, and Vietnam.

As work became more fragmented and specialized, the U.S. needed workers to meet those demands. After World War II, occupational preferences favored individuals in technical fields such as engineering, science, and health. The 1965 Immigration Act “opened up” its doors to attract scientists, engineers, nurses, and doctors. The U.S. failed to attract the targeted groups of highly-educated Europeans because Europe, at the time, was enjoying an economic boom in the post-war era (Ong and Liu, 1994, 161). The elimination of exclusion acts, in conjunction with occupational preferences, allowed for

highly educated Asians to come to the U.S. It is significant to note that a huge labor pool had already developed through educational exchange programs with certain Asian countries. The number of South and East Asian foreign students in U.S. universities and colleges grew exponentially after World War II (Ong and Liu, 1994, 163). Many Asian countries embraced Western-style education as a way to advance politically and economically. Thus, students from wealthy and elite families were sent to pursue advanced degrees. As a result, class relations were reproduced in Asia when they returned or in the U.S. domestic sphere if they stayed.

Even after occupational preferences were tightened up, it did not slow the movement of Asian technical specialists, health professionals and business elites. People who migrated in the late 1960s and early 1970s became eligible to sponsor family members and relatives, many of whom are also professionals. As Ong and Liu (1994) note, while skilled labor was the primary economic target of the 1965 Act, it also made it easier for capitalists to relocate when the U.S. allocated 10,000 visas for employment (163). This accommodation for investors put the U.S. in competition for Asian capitalists with other economically advanced countries such as Canada and Australia. While family reunification is an important dimension, it was also clear that capital served as the driving force during this period of economic restructuring.

Global restructuring has reshaped many U.S. cities. Los Angeles emerged as one of these "global cities" (Sassen, 1988). It has arguably become the most important "global city," given its location along the Pacific Rim (Davis cited in Ong, Bonacich, and Cheng, 1994). Los Angeles is a prime area for economic development. It caters to large international conglomerates and their employees. Migrants include lawyers, doctors,

engineers, housing developers, financiers, brokers, and accountants. Many of these white-collar workers include technically-trained professionals from Asian countries. With the proliferation of white-collar work in a global city, there is also a need for service-type jobs. These jobs consist of cleaning offices and homes, taking care of children, and working in restaurants, bars, entertainment, and other personnel services. These workers are primarily Latino immigrant labor from Mexico and Central America (Ong, Bonacich, and Cheng, 1994).

The Asian American class structure in the Los Angeles area is highly polarized. It ranges from high-level executives and investors from the Pacific Rim trade of major Asian companies and corporations to working professionals to small business owners in ethnic enclaves or the declining inner-city, decimated by deindustrialization. Others join working-class Latino immigrants in the service industry or light manufacturing such as garment work. On that note, the increased "proletarianization" of Asian immigrant women's labor in the U.S., and Los Angeles since the 1980s, brings new forms of contradictions to Asian labor that has been historically "male" or "patriarchal." It is, as Lowe (1996) contends, "commensurate with a new gendered international division of labor that make use of third world and racialized immigrant women as 'flexible' work force in the restructuring of capitalism globally" (16).

Ong (1989), Davis (1987), Darder (1999, 2004), Torres (1999, 2001, 2004), Ngim (2001), and other scholars have noted that in recent years, Los Angeles has experienced a widening divide between the rich and poor, a divide marked by racialized class formations. A report by the California Assembly Select Committee on the California Middle Class shows that the income inequality in Los Angeles has greatly increased. The

1996 study showed that 41% of the residents of Los Angeles County lived in households making less than \$20,000 a year; two-thirds of the population had an annual income of less than \$40,000. Twenty-six percent of the county residents lived in households in the “middle-income” range of \$40,000 to \$100,000, while only 8% were making more than \$100,000 (Ngin and Torres, 2001).

Furthermore, structural inequalities in Southern California became more noticeable when jobs available were primarily low paying. The number of jobs created after the recession consisted mostly of service industry employment. As Ngin and Torres (2001) indicate, the majority of jobs paid less than \$25,000 annually and only one in ten jobs surpassed \$60,000. This is compounded by the fact that the cost of living in the Los Angeles area is much higher than most large cities, and many of its constituency work jobs that do not afford them full health benefits.

In the case of Asian immigrant workers in Los Angeles, the employment rates (low-paying jobs notwithstanding) are 83% for prime working-age (twenty four-sixty four) and 63% for prime working-age females (1990 U.S. Census cited in Ong and Azores, 1994, 109). These rates are comparable to African Americans and Latinos, and slightly lower than those of Anglos. However, there are two major exceptions to the relatively high level of economic activity (Ong and Azores, 1994). Joblessness in Los Angeles among Southeast Asian (including Vietnamese) males is at 33%, two to three times higher than for other Asian immigrant groups. Hence, the creation of an underground economy by gang and non-gang members can certainly be linked to relatively high unemployment among Southeast Asian males. There is also a huge gap for female unemployment, as Southeast Asian females are at 58%. The group that

exhibits a low employment rate is Japanese immigrant women at 49%. This figure is due partly to the large number of Japanese women who are wives of employees of Japanese national corporations (109). Given cultural norms and visa restrictions, these women seldom participate in the workforce.

The need for class analysis is undeniable in discussing racialized populations. This is most evident in a city like Los Angeles, where there have been tremendous demographic, social, political, and economic changes during the last four decades. However, it has been extremely difficult due to the overwhelming influence and power of capitalism. By nature, capitalism totalizes and homogenizes the human experience, while intensifying competition for jobs and other privileges, resources, and opportunities. Although classical Marxism did not explicitly address issues of “racial” conflict, it did speak to class divisions among racialized groups. In addition, the implementation of “divide and conquer” strategies has worked effectively with labor and immigration policies, historically and in these “new times.” This plays an extremely prominent role in the division of racialized groups, limiting working-class unity. To be sure, the capitalist class benefits greatly from racialized divisions and the lack of working-class unity.

The 1992 Los Angeles uprisings serve as a prime example. As a result of “race relations” analysis used by academics, journalists, politicians, and the media, it failed to take into account the multiplicity of issues and concerns relevant in multiethnic communities. The focus once again was on the black “underclass” rather than the discontent of many different racialized populations. The media seemed to be preoccupied with “race relations” between blacks and Koreans, rather than the victims of the class rebellion. More than half of the businesses destroyed were Korean-owned,

while a third were Mexican, Latino, or Cuban-owned. The media did not seem to care or notice that more Latinos were arrested than African Americans and that a substantial number of whites were also involved in the looting and burning. Nor did it take into account the drastic demographic changes that were at work in the creation of new class and racialized ethnic formations (Darder and Torres, 1999). As such, the capitalist imperatives that created the social conditions, which precipitated the events in the first place, were never part of the discussion. The real problems of social and economic inequalities in Los Angeles were therefore left unattended.

CHAPTER 3

RACISM, IDENTITY, AND THE RACIALIZATION OF ASIAN AMERICANS

Situating the Discourse

Understanding Asian immigration to the United States is fundamental to understanding the racialized foundations of both the emergence of the United States as a nation and the development of American capitalism. This is far from claiming that Asians are the only group to have been racialized in the founding of the United States but rather to suggest that the history of the nation's attempt to resolve the contradictions between its economic and political imperatives through laws that excluded Asians from citizenship—from 1790 until the 1940s—contributes to our general understanding of race as a contradictory site of struggle for cultural, economic, as well as political membership in the United States. (Lowe, 1996, iv).

As Lisa Lowe (1996) sought to link this particular genealogy of citizenship and racialization to the importance of Asia in the development of capitalist America, I seek to do the same, but with an alternative paradigm grounded in the political economy of migration and racism. This perspective, first proposed in Robert Miles's *Racism and Migrant Labour* (1982), has given Marxist scholars an opportunity to reclaim class analysis. Along with Lowe, many scholars have greatly been influenced (and rightfully so) by Michael Omi and Howard Winant's *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s* (1986, 1994). However, the work of Omi and Winant (and most U.S. scholars) is grounded in a "race" analysis and "race relations" sociology. In this chapter, I discuss the analytical limitations of using "race" as *the* central unit of analysis, in the context of the 21st century. I seek to further discuss the political and ideological positionalities of scholars working from a "race" perspective and the few that work from

a racism paradigm. In order to articulate the increasing significance of class, I will ultimately reject the analytical use of “race” and re-emphasize the multiple forms of racism that impact marginalized populations within and outside of the U.S.

Historically, the development of U.S. capitalism and the American *citizen* are defined “against” the Asian *immigrant* (again not limited to Asians), legally, economically, and culturally (Lowe, 1996, 4). Hence, the racialization of Asians in the U.S. must be framed historically and contextually. “Asia,” “Asians,” and “Asian Americans” have always been on contested and tenuous terrain in their relationship with the U.S. nation-state. It is safe to conclude that Asian countries are perceived as “exotic, barbaric, and alien,” and Asian laborers migrating to the United States since the 1850s onward as a “yellow peril,” threatening to displace white European immigrants and to a lesser extent, black laborers in the U.S. South after emancipation (Ibid, 4).

Racializing the “Gook”

An Orientalist racialization of Asian American subjects as “physically,” “culturally,” and “intellectually” different from “whites” has predominated since the first wave of Chinese workers migrated from Guangdong Province, China in the 1850s. They labored on the railroads and gold mines of the Western U.S. Such racialization, especially in times of economic crisis, resulted in the legal immigration exclusion acts and laws against the naturalization of U.S. Asians in 1882, 1924, and 1934. According to Lowe, Asia has emerged as a particularly complicated “double front of threat and encroachment” for the United States (5). On the one hand, some Asian countries have become rivals to U.S. imperial domination within the global economy; and on the other

hand, Asian migrants are still a necessary racialized labor force within the domestic political economy. By all means, immigration exclusion acts and naturalization laws continue to be used to regulate Asian bodies, but how these bodies are racialized has varied historically and contextually.

In our attempts to analyze contemporary racialized discourse, it is important to understand historical developments of U.S. Asians. However, the focus of this chapter is on Asian American identity, pan-ethnicity, and its relationship to the study of racism and class formations *after* 1965. 1965 marked the year the Naturalization and Immigration Act was imposed, which ultimately changed the face of “Asian America” forever. The first decade from 1965-1975 laid the groundwork for a renewed articulation of Asian Americans as both “good” and “bad” subjects. I will explore this dichotomy later in this chapter. Along with different Asian groups who have been in the U.S. for generations, we also see the emergence of “new” Asian migration during the last four decades. I choose to situate U.S. Asians who migrated as a result of educational and professional preferences with those who arrived as political refugees after the war in Southeast Asia, beginning in the mid-1970s.

The Korean conflict and the war in Southeast Asia (i.e., Vietnam) laid the foundation for U.S. investment and “material” extraction in Asia (Lowe, 1996, 18). It allowed Asian countries to play prominent roles in economic restructuring since the 1970s and thus, open up markets for low-wage labor overseas (and here in the U.S.). In addition, the “return” of Asian migrants to the U.S. “imperial center” brings together the Asian petit-bourgeois class and those from the working class. They eventually merge into a pan-Asian identity, a topic I will also address later in this chapter. “Asians” and

“Asian Americans” are discursively fixed due to the growing need for U.S. economic domination. According to Lowe (1996), the stereotypes constructing Asians as “yellow peril” and domesticated “model minority” are not a matter of exclusively stereotypical representation in the cultural sphere, but they have historically been “instantiated” through the state’s classification of racialized Asian immigrant subjects (19).

The work of Omi and Winant (1986, 1994) examines the legal genealogy of Asian Americans (and other racialized populations) in what they called “racial formation.” They defined “racial formation” as the “sociohistorical process by which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed, and destroyed” (1994, 55). They argue for a theory of “racial formation” by proposing a process of historically situated projects in which “humans and social structures are represented and organized” (56). As Omi and Winant indicate, “race” is both a matter of social structure and cultural representation for U.S. national groups like African Americans, Latinos, Native Americans, and Asian Americans. They state that too often, attempts to understand “race” and “racial inequality” simply as a social structural phenomenon, for example, are unable to account for the origins, patterning, and transformation of “racial” difference (1994, 56).

Although the critique made by Omi and Winant of mainstream approaches to “racial” theory and politics are useful in understanding racialized formation since the 1960s in the U.S., there are limitations to their theoretical and political approach. Before looking at these limitations, I agree with Omi and Winant that racialized (rather than “racial”) categories are socially constructed, transformed, and then destroyed. In addition, they continue to problematize the temptation to think of “race” as something “fixed, concrete, and objective” or to see the concept just as an ideological construction.

As they critique both positions, they also reify the concept of “race” by stating that it “signifies and symbolizes social conflicts and interests by referring to different types of human bodies (55). Omi and Winant (1994) correctly point out that selection of these particular human features for purposes of “racial” signification is always and necessarily a social and historical process. However, in an attempt to make such a distinction on “race,” Omi and Winant reify social relations by concluding that all human beings belong to a “race” (i.e., Asian American race, Latino race, et cetera).

Despite the uncertainties and contradictions of such a term, Omi and Winant (1994) insist that “race” continues to play a fundamental role in structuring and representing the social world. As I have stated in the previous paragraph, “race” scholars in this tradition insist that “race” is neither mere illusion nor something fixed. They want to see “race” as a dimension of human representation. Omi and Winant (1994) conclude that it is not possible to “jettison” widely held beliefs that are central to everyone’s identity and fundamental to their understanding of the social world (55). This commonsense notion of “race” naturalizes racialized categorization of different subjects. The fact of the matter is that “race” has its limits because it is simultaneously geographical and historical. Furthermore, the focus on “racial” identity as the basis for political mobilization has led to serious analytical problems. Scholars often continue to use the concept without critically engaging the construct itself. “Obviousness,” as Miles (1993) indicates, is a “condition which depends upon the location of the observer and the set of concepts employed to conceive and interpret the object” (3). Clearly, our location and the lens through which we see vary in depth and perspective.

According to Robert Miles (1989), “race” is a social construction of reality “imagined” rather than based on biological reality (71). Its commonsense usage speaks volumes for its practicality but not its specific utility. The fact that we are selectively choosing physical characteristics indicates that this is by no means a natural category. For example, before “whites” were given their own “racial” category, there were many “white races” (i.e., Celtic race, Italian race, Anglo Saxon, et cetera). Miles (1987) notes that the processes and representations of “race” have a history. Signification and representation have been used in Europe the last centuries to categorize human beings. When somatic and phenotypical characteristics were not convenient, religion and nationality were used as a way to demarcate populations. The creation of the “Other” was based on the signification of human biological characteristics and socially-constructed mental capacities. Furthermore, to simply focus on “race” is problematic due to the “abstraction” of cultural differentiations and the failure to identify class divisions within distinct groups. Given that Miles’s analysis is fundamental to my work, it would be important at this point to define his notion of racialization.

Miles’s Notion of Racialization

Robert Miles (1982, 1989, 1993, 2003) notes that the notion of “race” first appeared in the English language in the 17th century. However, it did not become prominent until the scientific movements in the late 18th century Europe and North America (69). Miles (1989) posits that the contemporary theoretical framework of racism was first used to identify Nazi Germany’s notion of Aryan superiority and Jewish inferiority. As a result, racism came to refer strictly and exclusively to “race.” What

Miles vehemently attempts to do is break the conceptual link between the notion of “race” with that of racism as a way to distinguish the analytical use of racism. The word “race” is used to label groups on the sole basis of phenotypical features. There is no scientific justification to simply distinguish “races” based on select phenotypical characteristics that vary widely from height, to weight, length of arms and legs, hair, skin color, and so on. The idea of “race” is employed as the result of a “process of signification” that are attributed with meaning and thereby used to organize and sort out populations.

The notion of racialization has been widely used and understood in different ways. Frantz Fanon (1963) was one of the first to use the concept in discussing the difficulties facing decolonized intellectuals in Africa when constructing a cultural future (Miles and Brown, 2003, 99). Michael Banton uses racialization to refer more formally to the use of “race” to “structure” people’s perceptions of the world’s population. Miles and Brown (2003) note that Banton’s usage of the concept was limited due to its scientific theories of topology for categorizing populations (100). Some scholars during the 1980s distinguished between “practical” and “ideological” racialization. The former refers to the formation of “racial” groups and the latter refer to the idea of “race” in discourse. U.S. scholars like Omi and Winant (1994) use the concept to “signify the extension of racial meaning to a previously racially unclassified relationship, social practices or group...racialization is an ideological process, a historically specific one” (Miles and Brown, 2003, 100). For Miles, the concept is synonymous with racialized categorization.

There are three characteristics to Miles's racialization model in his attempt to deconstruct "race." The first characteristic encompasses a "dialectical process of signification" (104). It is the ascribing a real or alleged biological characteristics with meaning to define the "Other" that necessarily entails defining Self by the same criterion (Miles, 1987). The examples given include the differentiated physical characteristics of European explorers and merchants and Africans. The Europeans saw themselves as binary opposites of Africans in the construction of "race." The African's blackness "reflects" the European's whiteness. When Africans were later taken in as slaves and deemed "inferior" (especially in the U.S.), "whiteness" implicitly and explicitly (through brute force) was looked upon as "superior." This relationship is legitimated and reinforced by power and domination over racialized populations.

The second characteristic entails the process of racialization as a means to identify the emergence of "race" and its impact on the world's population. Miles makes it clear that the world's population has been sorted, organized, and divided by European thought since the 1700s. As a result, although "race" is no longer articulated in formal political discourse, it is still assumed that "races" exist as distinct and biologically defined terms (Miles, 1989). However, as Miles and other have argued, "race" is ideologically managed and socially constructed for the benefit of the dominant group.

The third and last characteristic is that the "racialization of human beings entails the racialization of the processes in which they participate and the structures and institutions that result" (Miles, 1989, 76). As a result of racialization, the institutions and structures are also racialized. Therefore, issues of power will come to the forefront and be attributed to various phenotypical characteristics of racialized groups. Two examples

are the representation of racialized groups in decision-making positions and the privileged status of immigration law. For example, Miles looks at the privileged migration patterns for “whites” in both Australia and Britain, while Asian, African, and Caribbean bodies were condemned as “illegitimate” in these places.

In an attempt to contextualize Miles’s deconstruction of “race” and the move to racialization, Chorswang Ngin and Rodolfo Torres (2001) discuss the racialization model by suggesting that the language of “race” and “race relations” should be carefully analyzed without reifying it. This is done so by some scholars who consciously place the term “race” in quotation marks to distinguish its use from any biological implications. These scholars mention that not until recently, discourse on African Americans, Latinos, Native Americans, and Asian Americans was largely based on phenotypical characteristics. These physical makers were used as a mechanism to exclude and exploit racialized groups. For Miles (1993), concepts of racialization, racism, and exclusionary practice identify specific means of disrupting the “reproduction” of the capitalist mode of production. This allows us to “stress consistently and rigorously the role of human agency even within particular historical and material circumstances and to recognize the specificity of particular forms of oppression” (52).

Marxist Project of Theorizing Racism

Omi and Winant (1994) argue that “radical” theories of racism, while critical of the existing “racial” order, can not appreciate the uniqueness of “race” in the U.S. (3). They claim that these radical theories simply fail to address specific U.S. conditions due to the fact that they have been influenced by movements and intellectual traditions

outside of the U.S. The left, as Omi and Winant (1994) would have us believe, have “succumbed” to romantic illusions. Even more significant, they state that there are little theoretical and analytical efforts to “counter” the right (viii). It might be true, but it is also clear that there is much analysis done by Miles and other scholars working from a particular strand of Marxist analysis. This “racism” paradigm, which surfaced in the 1970s and was re-articulated, most nobly by Miles (1982), is critiqued by scholars in the U.S. and abroad. This approach, according to “race” scholars, reduces “race” to ethnicity. It neglects to see the “continuing organization” of social inequality and oppression along “racial” lines (Omi and Winant, 1994, 70). The theoretical and political discussion of reducing “race” to ethnicity has many people up in arm, because for them, it advocates a “color-blind” discourse.

It is assumed that the elimination of “race” as an analytical category would lead to a “color blind” discourse. This is not what Miles and other scholars are arguing. This is certainly not what I am arguing. For this reason, there is much resistance to the deconstruction of “race” due to the fear of de-legitimizing the historical movements that are grounded in “race.” Instead, the intent is to argue that skin color is not an inherent characteristic, but in fact, a product of signification. For example, human beings “identify” skin color to mark or symbolize other phenomena in a historical context in which other signification occurs. “Collective identities are produced and social inequalities are structured when people include and exclude people through the signification of skin color” (Darder and Torres, 2004, 41). Thus, it is important to understand the signification of skin color and to understand how it is produced and reproduced, given different historical contexts. In order for us to address structural

inequalities, there has to be a shift from “race” to a plural conceptualization of racism. In so doing, we can interrogate the different meanings attributed to racialized groups.

At this point, it is important to make some distinctions on the various Marxist critiques on “race” and racism. The two strands I will be addressing are the Marxist theory of “race relations” and those working from political economy of migration. One of the first Marxist texts to analyze “race relations” is from sociologist Oliver Cromwell Cox’s *Caste, Class and Race* (1970). Although his work was cited in 1970, it was first published in 1948 in the U.S. Cox’s *Caste, Class and Race* were considered by many to be *the* seminal text in the Marxist tradition. Essentially, Cox set out to develop a Marxist critique of “race relations.” The central idea in his text is to articulate the inter-relationship of caste and “race relations” in the U.S. South. In addition, Cox sought to develop a materialist approach that “identified” class interests and exploitative practices in what he called “race prejudice,” the concept used before the creation of the term “racism” (Miles, 1993, 31).

In line with a “race relations” perspective, Marxist scholars and activists in the U.S. have attempted to combine both a “race” and class analysis. To be clear, this is the source of theoretical disagreement. Marxist analysis on “race” and “race relations” became prevalent with the emergence of racialized groups during the New Left movement in the 1960s and 1970s. For example, many Asian American Marxist organizations grew out of this movement. However, the Asian American “New Left” also separated themselves from the dominant New Left when it came to the anti-war movement and to questions of racism and national oppression (Espiritu, 1992, 45). Asian Americans scholars and activists did not see the contradictions of theorizing a Marxism

that emphasized both “race” and class. In many ways, they were articulating class analysis from a “racial” perspective. The national liberation movements in Asia were a source of inspiration and solidarity, as well as the internal colonial critique made by oppressed groups in the U.S. The latter, in particular, was very much grounded in a “race” analysis. Although the internal colonial model is not as widely used now as it was in the 1960s and 1970s, it can be argued that this discourse is articulated in a different capacity as much today as it was four decades ago.

The strongest case for retention of “race” as an analytical concept has much to do with how victims of racism have taken on this term as a way to resist their political and economic subordinations. This retention of “race” has many consequences because of its lack of analytical rigor. The idea of “race” was closely associated with the idea of “black” in the U.S. and Britain (Miles, 1993; Hall, 1996). In fact, one can argue that the notion of “race” struggle is synonymous with the “black” struggle. However, the use of “black” as a means of political mobilization “embodies” a specific rather than a universal tradition of resistance, a resistance that focuses solely on the colonial domination of African subjects (Miles, 1993, 3). The attempt to generalize the “black” struggle to all colonized subjects, whose lives are influenced by racism, “disavows” the specific cultural and historical origin of non-African people. The analysis of racism in the U.S. (and Britain) with a “race” perspective, radical or otherwise, is misleading because the idea of “race” is highly ideological. The political economy of migration perspective, proposed by Miles (1982, 1989, 1993, and 2003) and others is a major theoretical break from Marxist theory of “race relations,” prevalent in much of the Marxist writings in the U.S. academy.

Paul Gilroy (1989) (who has since shifted his position along the lines of Miles's critique) and other "race" scholars argue that a Marxist analysis of capitalism based on historical stances of 19th century Europe is inappropriate. While both Gilroy and A. Sivanandan (1983) distance themselves from the Eurocentric Marxist tradition (largely because of its presumed inability to deal with "race"), Sivanandan has reclaimed Marxism in order to contextualize "race" relative to class, while Gilroy rejects Marxism in order to establish the absolute autonomy of "race" apart from class (Miles, 1993, 43). This important distinction reminds us that neither Marxism nor the "black radical tradition" is monolithic; but in fact, has very diverse conflicting and contradictory positions.

Thus, the task for scholars working from a political economy of migration perspective is not to create a Marxist theory of "race" that is more "valid" than conservative or liberal theories. The task at hand is to deconstruct the notion of "race" and detach it from the concept of racism. Skeptics reiterate that Marx's theoretical and historical analysis on the mode of production has limited analytical value because examples are specific to the nature of capitalist development in Britain and Europe in general. This type of analysis presumes that it would be best to articulate the notion of "race" in a place like the U.S. where there is a long history of slavery. On the contrary, Miles has convincingly argued that the totalizing nature of capitalism does not recognize the color or national line.

Question of Political Economy

Due to the utility of “race” as the central unit of analysis, it is not surprising that the theories, practices, and policies that have informed social science analysis of marginalized populations during the last few decades are deeply rooted in identity politics (Darder and Torres, 2004). A political economy-inspired class analysis and a critique of capitalism are noticeably missing from much of the historical and contemporary analysis of racialized groups. In addition, most scholars doing work on African Americans, Latinos, Asian Americans, and other subordinated groups are unwilling to engage class divisions and their contradictions within and between these diverse racialized populations. This neglect of class analysis is often carried out with an effort to sustain a political base that was first developed during the civil rights movements in the 1960s. When class is mentioned, it is done through references to the “race, class, and gender” intersection of oppressions. As a result, it reinforces the idea that class should be treated as one of many equally-valued components of analysis. The fact of the matter is that class and “race” are concepts of different sociological order. Antonia Darder and Rodolfo Torres (2004) make this very important distinction by positing that class and “race” do not occupy the same analytical space and “thereby cannot constitute explanatory alternatives to one another...class is a material space, even within the mainstream definition that links the concept to occupation, income status, and educational attainment-all of which reflect the materiality of class, though without analytical specificity” (128). In effect, it places “race” in the middle of the discussion and moves the analysis of class to the background.

Despite the fact that “race” and gender invariably intersect and interact with class, they are not co-primary (McLaren and Jaramillo, 2006, 79). In agreement with McLaren and Jaramillo (2006), I also conceptualize class struggle as one in a series of social antagonisms, but argue that class most often “sustains” the conditions that produce and reproduce the other antagonisms (79). This is not to say that we can reduce racism and sexism to class. These antagonisms are indeed dialectical in its nature. However, class struggle as the primary antagonism, help shapes and forms the particularities of other social antagonisms like racism, ethnocentrism, gender, et cetera. Class exploitation as a topic of discussion is hardly explored in schools of education and teacher education programs (McLaren and Jaramillo, 79) when speaking of income and educational stratification. It is often linked (in very limited way) to distribution of resources and opportunity.

In their conceptual interrogation of critical race theory (CRT), Darder and Torres (2004) are concerned that CRT, in using “race” as the central unit of analysis, does not carefully undertake a systematic discussion of class and, more important, a substantive critique of capitalism (99). In contending with questions of “race” and institutional power, references are made to “class” and/or “capitalism.” However, the lack of serious engagement by critical race theorists with these issues is a serious shortcoming. Their efforts in analyzing socioeconomic interests grounded in law and education are “generally vague and under-theorized” (99). Due to under-theorizing, critical race theory fails to provide an in-depth analysis of capitalist social relations in our efforts to understand social, educational, and economic inequalities. Ambiguous concepts like “white supremacy” and “institutional racism” used by critical race theorists are,

according to Robert Miles, problematic due to the tendency toward conceptual inflation (99). The intent is not for critical scholars to dismiss the important body of work in CRT. However, there is a clear analytical distinction in the political and intellectual project of scholars and those of racism, grounded in political economy.

Problems With “Race Relations” Paradigm

In attempts to analyze the complexities of “race” and “race relations” problems in the U.S., most scholars have placed tremendous emphasis on the notion of “white supremacy.” This concept connotes the existence of an ideology that has “black” people as the primary object of racism and “white” people as perpetrators of racism. The reification of skin color as the most active determinant of social relations between black and white populations ignores the “historical and contemporary oppression of populations who have been treated as distinct and inferior “race” without the necessary reference to skin color” (Darder and Torres, 1999, 194). The analysis of “white supremacy” essentializes social relations and inherently reproduces a racism that perceives whites as “superior” and blacks as “inferior” based solely on phenotypes. This dichotomy presupposes blacks as victims and whites as perpetrators, tends to homogenize the objects of racism. This does not take into account the different experiences of social class, ethnicity, gender, and sexual identity. Antonia Darder and Rodolfo Torres (1999, 2004) challenge traditional notions of “race” by calling for a return to class analysis in understanding racism in the U.S., succinctly point to the oppositional limits of “white supremacy”:

Theories of racism that are founded upon the racialized idea of White Supremacy adhere rigidly to a “race relations paradigm.” As such, White people and the

psychological influence of White ideology on both Whites and Blacks, rather than to the complex nature of historically constituted social relations of power and their material consequences...despite its oppositional intent and popularity among many activists and scholars in the field, still fails to critically advance our understanding of the debilitating structures of capitalism and the nature of class formations within a racialized world (Darder and Torres, 1999, 184).

Miles (1989) insists that racism is not a “white problem.” Rather, the exploitative power structure is white. The reification of skin color mistakenly privileges signification and ignores the labeling of inferior “races” without reference to skin color. Some examples of this include the racialization of Jews, Irish, Italians, and the Gypsies in Europe, and much of the Asian continent in its subordinate position to colonial Japan for so many years. Therefore, it is imperative that we do not reproduce the racist notions of racialized inferiority. Instead, Darder and Torres (1999) insist that scholars, educators, and policy makers need to create a critical theory of racism that will better confront issues of social, economic, and educational inequalities.

In conjunction with a “white supremacy” critique, there are also analytical problems with the discourse of “institutional racism.” The term “institutional racism” was first developed in Stokely Carmichael and Charles V. Hamilton’s *Black Power: Politics of Liberation in America*, published in 1967. Carmichael and Hamilton (2001) define *racism* as the “predication of decisions and policies on considerations of race for the purpose of *subordinating* a racial group and maintaining control over that group” (112). They distinguish between two forms of racism: individual racism and institutional racism. Individual racism involved the overt acts of violence on and by individuals (i.e., individual “whites” acting against individual “blacks”) which can result in bodily damage or destruction of property. Institutional racism, on the other hand, is less overt and subtle, but undoubtedly no less destructive than individual racism. Carmichael and

Hamilton describe institutional racism as originating “in the operation of established and respected forces in the society, and thus receives far less public condemnation” than individual racism (112).

Carmichael and Hamilton’s analysis has proved to be highly influential, especially with African American scholars and activists working from the internal colonial perspective. Most scholars who use the notion of institutional racism have emphasized some common themes. In a critical introduction to Barry Troyna’s *Racism and Education* (1993), Fazal Rizvi, in accordance with Miles’s analysis (1989), highlights these common themes. First, the notion of institutional racism is highlighted by the idea that the “defense of a system from which advantage is derived is based on a pattern of racial differentiation” (9). In this sense, racism is perceived as a “structural” relationship in which one group becomes the dominant, and the other, subordinated. Second, the concept of racism in this trajectory presupposes a generalized view of the term, which refers to “all beliefs, actions, process, and practices which lead to, or sustain, discrimination against and the subordination of minority ethnic groups” (9). Third, it involves a rejection of the view that insists that intentionality and/or motivation are “necessary measures” to the absence or presence of racism. And fourth, it suggests that racism has to be in the context of a “dominant” and “subordinate” relationship.

Although a number of U.S. scholars have taken on the notion of “institutional racism” and have attempted to give it more coherence and analytical rigor, many have failed to do so due to its conceptual inflation. The concept of “racism” is used to refer to a “range of phenomena (beliefs, actions, processes) but with a specific emphasis on their consequences for the domination of one group by another” (Miles, 2003, 68).

Consequently, the notion of institutional racism creates a black/white dichotomy that subsequently defined racism as something that “white” people do to “black” people (Darder and Torres, 1999). The concept, for this reason, is used with a lack of substantive analysis. It becomes highly problematic in a society like the U.S. due to its cultural, economic, and demographic diversity. In the next section, I will discuss the implications and consequences of a black/white analysis on Asian American communities and how the U.S. nation-state has historically and contemporarily situated Asian American subjects.

Hegemony, Capitalism, and the “Model Minority”

Asian Americans as the nation-state’s “model minority” has a very long history that can be traced back to the 1850s when the Chinese were “obedient” and “satisfactory” workers in the gold mines and the railroads of the Western U.S. and the “model” Japanese, Chinese, Filipino, and Korean workers labored in the sugar-cane plantations in Hawai’i (Chan, 1991, Takaki, 1989). But the “model minority” thesis that we come to know in popular imagination first arose in the late 1950s, by sociologists attempting to explain the low levels of juvenile delinquency among Chinese and Japanese Americans (Omatsu, 1994, 63). The stereotype remained a social science construct until the 1960s, when it was used again by conservative political commentators to pit Asian Americans’ “respect for the law” against African Americans’ involvement with the black power and civil rights movements. In this sense, Asian Americans are perceived as the “good race” and African Americans the “bad race.” Asian Americans were “good” subjects who represented hope and possibility for other historically marginalized groups in capitalist America.

This rhetoric helped to generate much resentment towards Asians in the U.S at a time of social and political fervor. The intent was to take focus away from the issues at hand. By the 1970s, the stereotype entered the political mainstream, around the same time that a large number of select Asian migrants and political refugees added more complexity to the on-going debate. To reiterate, the racialization of Asian Americans as “model minority” is not just about cultural (mis)representation as Lowe (1996) suggests, but has to do with how the nation-state classifies, sorts, and demarcates bodies as way to maintain hegemony.

According to Glenn Omatsu (1994), the widespread acceptance of the stereotype was not just a result of the growing number of Asians in the U.S. or the increasing attention from mainstream institutions, but in fact, it coincided with the rise of the New Right and the corporate offensive on the poor (63). Omatsu correctly notes that the “model minority” stereotype has been critiqued politically, but not ideologically. It is critical that we do not leave out this important dimension. I would also like to stress a material dimension, in the Marxist sense, in my critique of the “model minority” stereotype of Asian American subjects.

It is fundamental to understand the stereotype in the context of material conditions in U.S. society at different historical junctures. As I alluded at the beginning of this chapter, the labeling of Asians as both “good” and “bad” subjects has much to do with the economic and political imperatives of the U.S. with the Asian country of origin. In this case, Asian Americans as “obedient,” “docile,” and “apolitical” bodies are used to perpetuate and reproduce certain colonial relationships in the domestic sphere. In particular, the neo-conservative movements of the early 1980s played an important role

in redefining the language of civil rights and creating a “moral vision” of capitalism. It clearly constituted a campaign to “restore” trust in capitalism and those values associated with the rhetoric of “free enterprise.” It was a return to a “celebration of values, an emphasis on hard work and self reliance, a respect for authority, and an attack on prevailing civil rights thinking associated with the African American community” (Omatsu, 1994, 63). Asian Americans, in this instance, were used to symbolize the resurrection of capitalist values. The images of hard-working Asian immigrant merchants laboring in our inner-cities and over-achieving students excelling in the classrooms reinforce the long-held belief that if you work hard and do not complain, the system will reward you regardless of ethnicity or class location.

Describing Asian Americans as “model minority” continues to obfuscate the diverse and complex experiences of Asians in the U.S. Instead of recognizing difference, Asian Americans are lumped into a “race.” As I have discussed earlier, the concept of “race” is problematic. By “painting” Asian Americans as a homogeneous group, the “model minority” stereotype “erases ethnic, cultural, social-class, gender, language, sexual, generational, achievement, and other differences (Lee, 1996, 6). The imposition of categorical labeling on a “race” suggests that all Asians are “successful” in the face of racism, in the classrooms, at the office, restaurant, cleaner, liquor store, or doughnut shop. In any case, the stereotype denies the rates of poverty and illiteracy in Asian American communities (U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 1992). Situating Asian American experiences in relation to political economy, migration, and diaspora help us begin to comprehend the complex nature of this racialized population.

The “minority model” stereotype as a hegemonic device (in the Gramscian sense) maintains the dominance of elites in a racialized hierarchy by diverting attention away from racialized inequality and by “setting standards for how minorities should behave” (Lee, 1996, 6). Asian Americans as the “model minority” captured the U.S. imagination when the *U.S. News and World Report* published an article in 1966 “lauding” Chinese Americans as a “success” in the midst political upheavals. As the article states, “At a time when it is being proposed that hundreds of billions be spent to uplift Negroes and other minorities, the nation’s 300,000 Chinese Americans are moving ahead on their own-with no help from anyone (“Success Story,” 73). The article also presents Chinese Americans as “good citizens” and how Chinatowns across the U.S. are “safe” places. Asian American writer and activist Frank Chin (1990) articulates in his writings the notion of a “racist love” for Asian Americans, and paradoxically, a “racist hate” for African Americans and other marginalized groups in their relationship to the nation-state. Chin’s naming gives context to the positionality of racialized populations in U.S. society and how they have always been strategically used against each other.

There are ideological and material implications to which we must tend to. Its use as a hegemonic device tells us that we need to ask and do more substantive analysis of the racialization of Asian Americans (and other populations) and to challenge the presupposition of “race” as a commonsense notion. Antonio Gramsci’s notion of *hegemony* is a concept referring to a particular form of dominance in which the ruling class legitimates its position and secures the acceptance, if not outright support, of those below them (Hoare and Smith, 1971). In this instance, Asian Americans have “consented” to their label as the “model minority.” This is not to suggest that there is no

resistance or agency. In fact, Asian American scholars and activists have critiqued this stereotype from its inception. Regardless, the stereotype has great adhesive value, for it still plays a prominent role in our thinking and analysis of and about Asians in the U.S. One can also go beyond the U.S. borders in understanding Asians, especially Chinese and Japanese, as “middlemen” in other parts of the world.

Omatsu (1994) notes the Asian American movement coincided not with civil rights, but the black power movement and that Malcolm X, rather than Martin Luther King Jr., was the leading influence. The struggle for many Asian American scholars and activists was not based so much on “racial” pride but to reclaim larger political and economic struggles of past generations. Due to the prominence of the black/white paradigm, Asian Americans and other racialized groups get left out of the theoretical and political discussion because they are neither black nor white. The black/white paradigm deemed the histories and issues of Asian Americans as insignificant or secondary in the existing U.S. hierarchy of racialized oppression. Suffice it to say, Gramsci’s *war of position* contends that Asian Americans had to situate themselves as a “racial” group for social, cultural, political and economic purposes. And due to discriminatory practices against U.S. Asians, the desire to create a pan-Asian coalition was a necessary political tool for the sustenance and survival of the group.

The inclusion of Asian Americans in the “people as color” paradigm is a precarious and tenuous one at best. Given that Asian Americans are categorically labeled as the “model minority” and have “honorary white” status, it is sometimes difficult for other racialized groups (who might not be aware of the histories and struggles of Asians in the U.S.) to conceive them as “legitimate” people of color. “Whites” also perceive

them as not as “legitimate” because historically they have not “suffered as much,” in relation to say, African Americans. I have no intention of “showing” or arguing that Asian Americans have “suffered enough” to qualify them as “people of color” or an “oppressed” group. My intent here is to show the limitations of a “people of color” analysis because it still falls into a black/white paradigm. It does not take into account the different political and ideological perspectives or class locations of individuals from different groups. In engaging the discourse, I am not taking away from its historical and political significance in the continued attempt to create solidarity across ethnic and class lines. Asian Americans and their *war of maneuver* speak to how complicated identity politics can get, as they negotiate the murky waters of “race relations.” The analysis on racism must go beyond what “white” people say and do to “black” people. However, this is not to suggest that white-on-black racism is not significant.

Limits of Asian American Pan-ethnicity

Gilroy (2000) warns us about the dangers and limits of identity politics.

He engages with the pressures and demands of multicultural social and political life and insists that the idea of “race” cannot have an “ethically defensible” place in our analysis of racialized populations in late capitalism. For Gilroy, it is fundamental to move from a “short-cut” solidarity based solely on similar phenotypical characteristics or some shared history. He is more interested in a political culture, beyond the color line. Gilroy (2000) urges us to go beyond identity politics and work toward what he calls “planetary humanism.” Frantz Fanon’s work profoundly speaks to Gilroy’s vision of humanity. Gilroy (2000) posits that “(Fanon)...spoke for that dissenting formation, from a position

inside and against the larger cultural and intellectual structures that had shaped his consciousness...[He] demanded national liberation for colonial peoples *but* linked that project of revolutionary reconstruction to the deliberate production of a new conception of humanity” (70).

There are many political gains in playing the game of identity politics. Here, Gilroy states that Dr. Martin Luther, Jr. is one of the few civil rights leaders who did not exploit that association. However, those who “followed in his (King’s) wake have not always been so scrupulous” (133). He also expresses his high esteem for writer James Baldwin by pointing out that Baldwin helps us to see the many “dangers involved in vacuous ‘me-too-ism’ or some other pointless and immoral competition over which peoples, nations, populations, or ethnic groups have suffered the most” (113). Baldwin speaks against this kind of essentialism, by absolutely refusing to speak from the perspective of “the victim.” For him, the victim has no point of reference for the very reason that he or she sees himself or herself as a victim (131).

Viet Nguyen (2002) states that the Asian American body politic has been mostly concerned with *demographic* heterogeneity and not necessarily *ideological* heterogeneity (6). Ideological heterogeneity should not be mistaken for class heterogeneity, which most Asian American scholars and activists are willing to acknowledge. Nguyen points out that the Asian American intellectual class “betrays” their own ideological rigidity when they are not willing to read for ideological heterogeneity (7). The Asian American movement, the subsequent development of Asian American studies programs have attempted, though with limited success, to unify diverse Asian ethnicities into one political and cultural bloc. Along with intellectuals, Asian American capitalists and

unabashed pan-ethnic “entrepreneurs” have transformed perceptions of Asian America. We must engage in self-critique in understanding the limitations of Asian America (Nguyen, 2000).

The racialization of Asian Americans, especially before the 1960s, forced Asians in the U.S. to frequently practice “ethnic disidentification.” This is the act of distancing one’s group from another group so as to not be mistaken for and suffer the blame for the presumed misdeeds of a particular group (Espiritu, 1992, 20). Given the imperial wars between their mother countries and Japan, ethnic disidentification was most evident during the Second World War when Chinese, Koreans, and Filipinos “distanced” themselves from Japanese Americans. Chinese, Filipinos, and Koreans wore “ethnic” clothing and identification buttons to differentiate themselves from Japan and Japanese Americans, seen as “the enemy race” at the time. These identification buttons would explicitly state the hatred and animosity Chinese, Koreans, and Filipinos had for Japan, and thus, Japanese Americans. During the Cold War era, the Chinese were racialized as the “enemy race,” and Japanese Americans were seen in a “positive” light. One can certainly argue that Muslims, Arabs, and South Asian Indians are similarly racialized as such today. This also attests to the pervasive problem of “racial” lumping historically and contemporarily.

The black power and civil rights movements in the U.S. and the anti-colonial national liberation movements in Asia had a profound impact on the political consciousness of Asian Americans. Influenced by these broader political and economic struggles, Americans of Asian ancestry work in solidarity to “denounce racist institutional structures, demand new or unattended rights, and asserts their cultural and

racial distinctiveness” (Espiritu, 1992, 25). However, this does not explain why a pan-Asian identity or consciousness was not able to develop until the 1960s. Given the nature of Asian exclusion acts and naturalization policies, a pan-Asian identity prior to the 1960s was not feasible because the U.S. Asian population was predominantly foreign-born and they did not share a common language. In addition, demographic and residential segregation, with its history grounded in the segregated Chinatown and Manilatown “ghettos” or the farming enclaves in many parts of the West Coast, made it difficult for the creation an “Asian American” consciousness.

There is also a class dimension to the development of pan-Asian identity, coined first by college activists. The term was later extended by professional and community spokespersons to lobby for the “welfare” of *all* Asians (Espiritu, 1992, 35). The term was (and still is) embraced by university students, professionals, artists, and political activists, most of which came from the middle-class. Pan-Asian consciousness “thrived” on college campuses and in urban settings, however, it made very little impact on Asian ethnic enclaves. Here lies the concern of scholars and activists *theorizing* as Asian Americans but also recognizing the limitations (and even dangers) of a pan-Asian identity. The pan-Asian structure has continued to be a source of friction and mistrust, with less “dominant” groups feeling “shortchanged and excluded” (Espiritu, 1992, 51). The influx of Asian immigrants after 1965 and “tightening” of public funding sources further deepened ethnic and class inequalities amongst Asians.

Espiritu and Ong’s (1994) concern is not with “class variations within any given Asian population, but rather with systematic variations in the class distribution among Asian populations” (309). In understanding differences in historical development,

migration patterns and contemporary conditions of different groups, we begin to see why Asian American groups have had very different class profiles. As a result, there are inter-ethnic conflicts and tensions that existed within Asian American communities. This speaks to the reproduction of power and control of resources by certain ethnic groups. Lopez and Espiritu (1990) have argued that the relative success of Asian American pan-ethnicity has largely been due to the influence of a sizeable middle and professional class (Espiritu and Ong, 314). However, I agree with Espiritu and Ong (1994) in saying that there is a heavy price to pay for the “relative success” of coalition-building among Asian American groups, a price that is sometimes too big for some.

Due to material implications to “Asian American” designation, certain groups have made (successful and unsuccessful) attempts to break away from the category. This is largely because their needs are neither met nor addressed under auspicious labeling. Leonardo (2000) looks at the identity of Filipino Americans and their continued struggles with the “Asian American” category (the same can be argued for Southeast Asians and more specifically, Vietnamese Americans). Filipino Americans have adopted new labels like “Pacific Islanders” to signify their desire to shift in association with the category. Unlike most other Asian groups, Filipinos have had a profound Spanish influence due to the colonization of the Philippines by Spain. Some would argue that Filipino identity in the U.S. may perhaps be more linked to “Hispanic” than “Asian.” This is the result of some previous cultural commonalities like language, but more so their own responses to the Asian American “political climate.”

Filipino Americans feel that their disadvantaged position in the labor market and historic under-representation in higher education gives them a strong claim to protection

from the state. Because they are lumped with other Asian American groups, their claim is often “diluted” due to the relatively high socioeconomic level of the Asian aggregate (Espiritu and Ong, 312). In addition, Filipino Americans feel they are marginalized as a topic in Asian American studies, a field dominated by the most established Asian American groups (Japanese and Chinese). They have considered severing ties with Asian American politics and aligning themselves with Latinos, especially in California, where Latinos have increasingly gained political power.

The insistence on pan-ethnicity has and continues to do much harm in obfuscating problems of unemployment and underemployment, unequal reward (i.e., “glass ceiling”), occupational segregation, under-presentation, and most important, class polarization in Asian American communities. The U.S. Census (2002) substantiates this argument. The average yearly income during a three-year period (2000-2002) for “Asians” was \$54,999, about \$10,000 more than “whites,” “\$25,000 more than “blacks,” and \$21,000 more than “Hispanics.” As Harry Kitano and Roger Daniels (1998) point out, this homogenizing mechanism does not reflect the high rate of poverty among Asian Americans refugees: 26 percent for Vietnamese, 35 percent for Laotians, 43 percent for Cambodians, and 64 percent for Hmong (San Juan, 2002, 101). This data does not speak to the historical particularities of different Asian groups and their relationship to U.S. hegemony. Moreover, Ngim and Torres (2001) argue that theorizing Asian American (and Latino) identities and ethnicities can best be understood within the changing U.S. political economy and international division of labor.

The aforementioned statistics clearly show that the Asian American population is not a monolithic socioeconomic group. In fact, it is increasingly differentiated along

class lines. The postwar removal of “racial” barriers in the economic sector did in fact increase the number of educated and professional Asians in the U.S. Yen Le Espiritu and Paul Ong (1994) posit that the preference for highly-educated labor in immigration legislation further widened the economic gap, thereby reinforcing class inequalities in Asian American communities (298). This is most apparent with migration policies: Asian professional class entered the country through occupational categories whereas mostly working-class Asians were allowed entry through family reunification categories. Not surprisingly, the Asian American class structure “mirrors” the structural segmentation of the U.S. political economy (Espiritu and Ong, 303). As expected, there is a large number of Asian Americans laboring in low-paying service occupations, as well as the top tier of the U.S. occupational hierarchy.

CHAPTER 4

METHODOLOGY

Theory as Method

I am proposing that theory at its most simple level is important for indigenous people. At the very least it helps make sense of reality. It enables us to make assumptions and predictions about the world in which live. It contains within it a method or methods for selecting and arranging, for prioritizing, and legitimating what we see and do. Theory enables us to deal with contradictions and uncertainties. Perhaps more significantly, it gives us space to plan, to strategize, and to take greater control over our resistances (Linda Tuhiwai Smith, 1999, 38).

In theorizing the formation and racialization of Vietnamese American youth gangs in Southern California, I employ a *materialist cultural studies* analysis to the study of youth subculture, racialized identities, and contemporary urban studies. My work is framed within the critical tradition in education, U.S. ethnic studies, and cultural studies, inspired by the University of Birmingham's Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) in their studies of working-class youth in Britain. In line with the Marxist-inspired Birmingham School and other critical scholars doing work on youth, identity, and schooling, this dissertation is an attempt to rigorously connect theoretical understandings of the "macro trans(formation)s" and the "micro-politics" of racialized youth in a particular time and space (Nayak, 2003, 6). This dissertation seeks to understand the dialectical relationship between "large-scale" forces like migration, war, geo-politics, and empire and the "particularities" of youth gang formation. Hence, it is necessary to connect the *cultural* and the *material*.

Undeniably, the Birmingham School has been a great source of theoretical innovation; yet they have had their share of criticisms. These criticisms, warranted or not, include the lack of engagement with the questions of “race,” gender, and sexuality (Wulff, 1995). In addition, their seminal collaborative work, *Resistance through Rituals* (1976), has long been criticized for being thorough in its theoretical analysis but lacking empirical studies. For them, the focus on youth subcultures is derived from visual representation, press reports, historical, and secondary sources (Nayak, 2003, 17). Undoubtedly, there were some scholars at the CCCS who were involved with ethnographic research. Paul Willis’ *Learning to Labor* (1977) was probably the most well-known scholarship in this vein of inquiry. He attempts to understand the processes of schooling by engaging inter-ethnic/community relations and the local political economy (Nayak, 2003, 7). I intend to do the same in articulating the Vietnamese American youth gang phenomenon in Southern California.

It is clear that the Birmingham School was critical of the positivist tradition that has its genealogy in the Chicago School of Sociology. As outlined by Norman K. Denzin (2001), the positivist tradition is based on the following assumptions: (a) there is a reality that can be interpreted, (b) the researcher as a subject must be separate from any representation of the object researched, (c) generalizations about the object of research are “free from situational and temporal constraints: that is they are universally generalizable” (44); and 4) there is a cause and effect for all phenomena, and 5) our analyses are objective and “value-free” (44) (in Madison, 2005, 12).

In articulating Vietnamese American youth gangs, the positivist tradition are incoherent (or rather I speak against) with my own political and methodological

interventions. It is my intention to bring specificity to the research by doing in-depth interviews with three subjects from a particular location. In accordance with a critical narrative methodology, it was never my goal to get a “representative” sample, but rather, to allow these interview subjects to stand (and speak) on their own. These narratives bring much life, depth, and analytical rigor to the discussion. As a result, it might be more helpful to understand “reality” in multiple, rather than in singular form. As a researcher and someone from similar contexts, my analyses of these youth and the phenomenon are by no means “objective” and certainly not “value-free.” I asked what I hope to be highly political questions. It was not easy getting interviews for this work. In fact, a couple of potential interview subjects decided not to participate because it, presumably, would conjure up too much pain and anguish. In addition, they did not necessarily want to share information that might implicate them. I was fortunate to be able to conduct the interviews that I did largely because of my relationship with key “cultural brokers.” Thus, the last thing I want to do is to objectify my research subjects—as they have been objectified, labeled, and racialized enough on the streets and in the communities.

Michael Burawoy (2000) makes his critique of the Chicago School: “Even as it practiced a sociology of “the common man,” [the Chicago School] was always hostile to anything that smacked of revolution or socialism. In focusing on urban settlement from the perspective of social control, they were oblivious to the very forces that were transforming the city” (12). It is fundamental that I closely examine the very forces (identified above) that create conditions for the formation of urban youth gangs to emerged and flourished. Burawoy (2000) also critiques the Chicago School for saying

very little about class relations in their scholarship, with the exception of Ernest Hiller's *The Strike* (13).

The Birmingham scholars, on the other hand, were interested in class relations, class consciousness, and class conflict when examining youth subculture in post-war Britain. They do so from a very different ideological and methodological location. I ask similar political questions in looking at post-Vietnam War and the subsequent waves to the U.S. and other industrialized countries. I see the parallels of refugee and immigrant youth coming from war-torn countries like Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos with that of youth from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua in Central America. Although the Chicago School made great contributions to research on urban communities, their methodological approaches and political intents are different than those scholars who are more interested in a radical critique and transformative analysis about the world we live in. To be sure, we still feel the methodological residues of the Chicago School today.

Although much U.S. youth gang literature suggests the importance of ethnographic and qualitative research, it can lack analytical depth at certain critical junctures. This is especially evident for engaging in a fundamental discussion of demographic, social, political, and economic changes of the last four decades, particularly within a multi-ethnic context like Southern California. In effect, the politics of migration, globalization of class and labor, and theorization of racism are generally not a part of the discussion. And if it is, it plays a minimal role. To be sure, most of the literature on gangs and racialized youth are discussed in the context of criminality and deviancy. British cultural studies scholar Dick Hebdige (1979) states:

Participant observation continues to produce some of the most interesting and evocative accounts of subculture, but the method also suffers from a number of

significant flaws. In particular, the absence of any analytical or explanatory framework has guaranteed such work a marginal status in the predominantly positivist tradition of mainstream sociology. More crucially, such an absence has ensured that while accounts based upon a participant observation approach provide a wealth of descriptive detail, the significance of class and power relations is consistently neglected or at least underestimated. In such accounts, the subculture tends to be presented as an independent organism functioning outside the larger social, political, and economic contexts. As a result, the picture of subculture is often incomplete.

It is my intent to paint a more complete picture of subculture, racialized schooling, and identities as they pertain to the Vietnamese/Asian American youth gang formation in contemporary Southern California. I do so by providing a detailed socio-historical analysis of Vietnamese migration in the diaspora, direct results of U.S. foreign policies and intervention in Southeast Asia. I trace the Vietnamese refugee experience to different parts of the U.S., with the emphasis on resettlement in Southern California. To provide greater context and specificity, I focus on Vietnamese-Chinese youth gangs in the San Gabriel Valley and Los Angeles's Chinatown/Lincoln Heights, areas with which I am most familiar and intimately linked. At the same time, I believe there is a need to discuss their formation along with other Asian American youth and the larger gang phenomenon in the Los Angeles metropolitan area.

Data Sources and History

I examined texts on theories of racism, identity and representation, migration, urban youth gangs (especially black and Chicano), subcultures in the U.S. and Britain (in the cultural studies tradition with Stuart Hall, Dick Hebdige, Paul Willis, and colleagues), and the emergence of contemporary ethnic communities (in particular Asian Americans and Latinos); as well as academic journals, census data, government reports, and other

secondary sources that focuses on urban youth and schooling, as broadly defined. I have also spent a substantial amount of time viewing and analyzing Asian American youth gang blogs on YouTube videos. Although it is not my intent to do a discourse analysis on texts, the visual representation (slide shows) on You Tube have been helpful in articulating how bloggers engage issues of representation and racialization—with each other and with other “perceived” non-Asian bloggers in the U.S. and abroad. The slide shows of Asian American youth gangs, and Vietnamese in particular, gives me a sense of the kind of dialogue they are having on-line. It certainly affects conversation off-line and in the community.

I have also used local print media such as the *Los Angeles Times*, *Orange County Register*, *Long Beach Press-Telegram*, *Pasadena Star News*, *San Gabriel Valley Tribune*, *LA Weekly*, and *Pasadena Weekly* to substantiate localized contexts, discourse, and temporality. I traced Vietnamese and Asian American youth gang formation in Southern California from 1988-2008. I choose to focus on the late-1980s because it was at this time that Vietnamese/Asian American youth groups were racialized as “street” gangs. Not coincidentally, it reflected the state of moral panic for California, as the state was infused with various anti-youth (and anti-immigrant) acts, which criminalized youth (and immigrants) with alleged “gang” association. This came out from the War of Drugs campaigns that were hitting our cities and streets hard in the 1980s.

Even though this period saw the emergence of Vietnamese and Asian American youth gangs, these groups have always been part of their communities. Asian American youth gangs gained notoriety in some circles because they were “represented” more like the Chicano and black gangs in terms of dress, style, and speech. While I relied on local

print media, the reality is that most gang-related crimes are unreported. This is especially true for Asian American youth, given the effects and consequences of racializing Asian Americans as a *model* minority. The fact of the matter is that we are unaware of what goes on in our own communities. For every article I was able to dig up from these newspaper clippings regarding Vietnamese/Asian American youth gangs, there are perhaps twenty other incidents that get swept under the rug.

I also draw on my own experience growing up and working as a youth worker and K-12 teacher in predominantly Asian and Latino working-class immigrant communities, first in Los Angeles and then the adjacent San Gabriel Valley. I see first-hand the formation and convergences of different youth gangs as the result of military, political, and economic imposition in Southeast Asia, Central America, and Mexico in the late 1970s and 1980s. This phenomenon brought together established Chinese American and Chicano youth gangs who had been in the Los Angeles area for quite some time with more recent immigrant and refugee youth gangs from Vietnam, Cambodia, and El Salvador, to name a few.

As a youth worker in Chinatown/Lincoln Heights in the late 1990s, I helped coordinate a gang-prevention/after-school program, as many of these youth were coming-of-age. *L.A. Bridges*, a city-funded community program, attempts to link schools, families, and communities. Strategically designed for middle-school students, it is implemented in working-class areas of the city where youth gang activities are most prevalent. Although youth gangs come and go, the specific groups I am engaging today were very much a presence twenty years ago.

My teaching experience at a newcomer school on the Westside (while an undergraduate at UCLA) was helpful in my formative thinking about gang formation and class inequalities in Southern California. The “newcomer” school, designed for recently-arrived immigrants to the country, ironically is located in Bel Air, one of the most affluent areas in California. Since all of our students (including Vietnamese, Korean, Chinese, Armenian, Mexican, and Salvadoran) were bused in from different working-class areas of Los Angeles, the students brought with them a certain amount of “street knowledge” regarding gang formation in their respective neighborhoods. It helped me (and the students) conceptually map out the city and think about the material conditions of particular areas, as we take the buses and drive our cars to Bel Air each morning.

Given dramatic demographic, economic changes, shifting class relations in the Southern California landscape, we need to recognize the rise of various ethnic youth gangs from relatively recent, but extremely violent, migratory and geopolitical histories (i.e., Armenians, Vietnamese, Cambodians, and Salvadorans). In addition, my own active participation in the Southern California party scene as a youth, and more specifically, in Vietnamese and Asian American cultural production gave me first-hand accounts of the complexity of ethnic and identity formation, generation, subculture, and schooling in hybrid and contested spaces. It got me thinking about wanting to help give voice to Vietnamese and Asian American youth that are most marginalized, given their label as “gang members.” More important, they were able to show through these narratives (oral histories) the complexities of life and what it means to be fully human.

Critical Narrative

Upon taking a historical materialist/critical cultural studies approach, I used critical narrative methodology. In researching Vietnamese American youth gangs, I want to clarify the notion of “youth.” Nayak (2003) problematizes the commonsense notion of “youth”:

Terms such as ‘youth’ and ‘young people’ are used for their economical ease. These terms have been subject to critique and should not be seen as biological states (e.g. ‘the pubescent teens’) or psychological phases (e.g. ‘adolescence’) in an individual’s development. Instead, ‘youth’ is treated here as a social and mutable category that continues to have different meanings in different times and places (3).

My three subjects, one woman and two males, were 29 and 30 years old at the time of the interview. The woman was involved from 16-19 years old and both males got involved at 13 and 14 years old and continued to do so at varying degree. Here, I am not using “youth” as a biological state, but rather constructing their formation-situated in very particular social and historical contexts.

In locating a critical narrative methodology, D. Soyini Madison (2005) outlines three key main points that were very helpful for my interviews with former and current Vietnamese American youth gang members. First, Madison discusses the importance of *positionality* as researchers. She suggests that it is fundamental to “acknowledge our own power, privilege, and biases just as we denounce the power structure that surround our subjects” (14). I was clear with my subjects about the research goals and intentions. This is articulated through my research questions, methodology, and theoretical frameworks that drive the dissertation. They agreed to do the interviews because of the level of trust and respect placed on the intermediary. In this manner, it also extends to me because of my close relationship with these two intermediaries. I was positioned both as a “graduate

student/ researcher” and perhaps more significant, as someone “from the neighborhood” that can and will respect their humanity.

Second, Madison speaks of the need to engage in a dialogical manner with your research subjects: “*Dialogue* emphasizes the living communion of a felt-sensing, embodied interplay and engagement between human beings... It keeps the meanings between and the conversations with the researcher and the Other open and ongoing” (14). There was a sense of dialogical engagement with both myself and the subjects. As much as they share with me their life stories, I was also willing to engage them in mine- as open and honest as I possibly can. I believe that they were as open and honest as they were because we were in dialogue with one another. It is clear to me that these subjects, through their narratives, want to be in dialogue with the rest of the world. They, as Vietnamese/Asian American subjects, want to be heard and to be able to share their pain, frustration, joy, sorrow, and happiness. They expressed that no one is really hearing them, and to a greater extent, not recognizing their history/humanity. More succinctly, one interviewee expressed that “no one is looking into shit” and that folks “don’t understand the roots of it.” In many ways, I am trying to do both.

Third, Madison stresses the importance of the *theory/method nexus*. Hence, critical ethnography becomes the “doing” of critical theory: “Theory, when used as a mode of interpretation, is a method, yet it can be distinguished from method when a set of concrete actions grounded by a specific scene is required to complete a task. We rely on theory...to interpret or illuminate a social action.” (15). In looking at the narratives and other sources, I am constantly engaged in *theorizing* Vietnamese American youth gangs. Much theorization, in concrete ways, is done through the grounding of the research,

designing interview questions, developing themes, and coding the data (15). For me, there has to be an alliance with theory and practice (method), as it drives each other.

I interviewed all three former and current Vietnamese and Vietnamese-Chinese American gang members in Southern California in November and December 2007. The youth discussed how and why they got involved with gang life; the ways in which they have been racialized by other Asian and Chicano gangs in prison and on the streets; the racism and discrimination from the police; educational experiences; immigration and family history; and the perpetual label as “thugs.” I used a tape recorder and had a set of interview questions, along with consent form for the interviewees. All subjects, as indicated above, were over 18 years old. The interviews with the two males were done at my brother’s apartment. My brother grew up and went to school with them and a number of their homeboys. He has been a great source on the topic because he understands and knows the context extremely well. He is very knowledgeable and grounded about Southern California’s Asian American gang formation beginning in the early 1990s, but in particular, Vietnamese-Chinese “street” gangs emerging in the West San Gabriel Valley. My interview with the woman was done in her car. She is a friend of a friend. She provided a very different way of looking at this phenomenon due to her location as a Vietnamese American woman, someone who grew up in Orange County, and was part of a Filipino American gang. All interviews were conducted individually.

These in-depth interviews were open-ended and lasted more than two hours each. During interviews, I used a tape recorder. I decided not take notes because I felt that it was fundamental for me to engage them in dialogue. I spent time writing out notes after of the interview as well as my interpretations. The audio-tapes were transcribed using

pseudonyms. All three participants consented to be audio-recorded. Before the interviews began, I made clear the purposes of the research and why they were asked to participate. I made clear that criminal activity is not the focus of the research. Rather, I was interested in hearing about their story. It was made explicit to participants that they were given all rights to turn off the audio-recorder at any given moment, ask questions or for clarification, or to retract certain information once it is recorded.

Below are a list of interview questions I used in my engagement with my research subjects:

1. Where were you born? If in Vietnam, when did your family resettled in the U.S.?
2. What is your relationship with your family like?
3. What kind of work does your family do?
4. What was it like growing up in Southern California? What was it like being Vietnamese in Southern California?
5. What have been your experiences in school?
6. What are your experiences like with other students?
7. Have you experienced racism, prejudice, or other acts of discrimination?
8. How did you get involved in a gang?
9. Have you had experiences with the police? If so, what were your experiences like with the police?
10. What are your family's expectations of you around education, work, and being Vietnamese?
11. What is going on with you now? What's happening in your life?
12. Is there anything else you want to share or add?

CHAPTER 5

VIETNAMESE AMERICAN YOUTH GANG NARRATIVES

Introduction

This chapter consists of three (3) narratives from former and current Vietnamese American youth gang members. All three interviewees are either 29 or 30 old. The first two narratives (P-Dog and Melo) are Vietnam-born male members who immigrated to the U.S. with their families as toddlers. The third narrative (Linh) is from a U.S.-born woman who grew in Orange County, CA. She still lives and works around the area. The two males grew up in the San Gabriel Valley and continue to be part of the Asian American youth gang subculture in Southern California. All three are products of the Vietnamese “boat people” experience. P-Dog and Melo were part of the “second wave” that came in the late 1970s and early 1980s, while Linh’s family were part of the “first wave,” refugees who left the country shortly after the “Fall of Saigon” in April of 1975.

While P-Dog and Melo are connected to Los Angeles County, Linh’s context has also been Orange County, including a lot of time spent in the Long Beach/Cerritos area. Linh grew up going to private Catholic school, until the last two years of high school. P-Dog and Melo went to neighboring public elementary, junior, continuation/high schools in the West San Gabriel Valley, where it is predominantly Asians and Latinos. They have known each other since junior high school and both got involved with the same

gang around the same time. Both are still involved, at varying degree. Linh, on the other hand, no longer claims gang membership. She was heavily involved from 15 to 19 years of age.

P-Dog

P-Dog was born in Vietnam in 1977 and came to the U.S. as a three year old in 1980. His family migrated by boat from Vietnam across the South China Sea to refugee camps in the Philippines and Hong Kong, respectively before resettling in Seattle (WA). His father's siblings also resettled in Seattle. After spending a couple of years in the Northwest, P-Dog's father first made the drive down Interstate-5 to Southern California. P-Dog and his mother came shortly after. Although they did not have relatives in California, his parents had some friends from their home town who settled in the "Golden State," around the same time they moved to Seattle. P-Dog and his parents moved to Lincoln Heights, a predominantly Latino and Asian American working-class section in Los Angeles and eventually to the diverse San Gabriel Valley, eight miles east of Downtown. His mother is ethnic Vietnamese and father ethnic Chinese from Vietnam. He is the oldest of three siblings in the family.

Now 30 years old, P-Dog is a second-generation gang member. His father was an original member of Viet Ching, a Vietnamese-Chinese youth gang whose members were primarily from Vietnam. They were part of the first wave of Southeast Asian youth gangs in Southern California in the late 1970s and early 1980s. According to P-Dog, his father was a "kick-back kid that never went to school...he stole from the rich and gave to the poor." P-Dog's father is the third oldest of sixteen children and "did what he had to

do” to provide for his family. His father worked odd jobs, including as a butcher in Asian supermarkets in Southern California and years later, as a floor-man at a casino in Emeryville, right outside of Oakland (CA). Other than the odd jobs here and there, P-Dog does not remember what his father did for a living.

At an early age, P-Dog was exposed to various types of illicit activities. He states, “born and raised (a gangster)...just like the movie, *Menace to Society*. I wake up and see a gang of jewelry on the table...robbing jewelry store...robbing, you know. I was born and raised in this game, basically. What I saw [was] what I saw when I was young. People saw black people like that, white people, they never see Asian people. We’re still refugees, but we’re living the same style, though.” His father was already involved with street life in Vietnam. P-Dog had this to say about his childhood experiences in Lincoln Heights and the West San Gabriel Valley:

It’s cool. It’s rough, I guess. It’s part of life. I don’t know how to describe it. It’s like other people...we didn’t get no...growing as kids...going back since elementary, we played “kick-the-can,” you know what I’m saying...playing little marbles...running around the apartments...whatever you call it, the “Asian projects.”

He continues:

I don’t know how people have different style, but I grew up doing what I did. I have been a crook all my life, I guess, you know...to now. I see a lot of shit when I was young, you know. I see uncles stealing this...me and my friends when me and my friends went to elementary school...we see the other kids stealing one candy, when we can steal the whole box. That’s how we thought when we kids, you know. That’s when I was six years old. Why steal one candy when you can steal the whole box. That’s my life. That’s how I grew up...just been fucking around.

P-Dog experienced first-hand the emergence of gang culture for Vietnamese and Asian immigrant youth in multi-ethnic Southern California. As P-Dog’s father and his homeboys were coming up in the early 1980s as young refugees, P-Dog and his

homeboys were putting in work in the early 1990s as teenagers. P-Dog states, "...so what escalated is...what the story is...they (his father's generation) brought the gang (Vietnamese-Chinese gangs) down here" (to Southern California from Vietnam). P-Dog draws parallels with his refugee experience with that of fictional character Tony Montana, the notorious Cuban gangster from the movie *Scarface*: "I am from the refugees, man. I am from the camps...same thing you see [with] Tony Montana in the Cuban camps...when he got sponsored to the U.S...same thing with us. He [Montana] came as a dishwasher, my dad came here chopping meat." His mother works in the nail salon business since the early 1980s. They got off welfare five years ago and Section 8 two years ago.

P-Dog has been a member of the Asian Boyz (AB) since 1990 as 13 year old. His age group is the oldest generation of Asian Boyz from the West San Gabriel Valley. One of the initial reasons why P-Dog got involved with AB has much to do with wanting to be part of a family and protecting themselves from other Asian and Chicano gangs (collectively known as "the Mexicans") in the area. In junior high, P-Dog and his friends were bullied one too many times by older Chicano gang members. P-Dog and his homeboys became "a unit" upon entering high school and broke away from traditional Asian gang hierarchy by *not* anointing a leader. He states:

Yeah, we got jumped in...we talk like blacks and dress like eses, you know. We still Asians, though. We still have Asian background. We still got the triple OGs, the forefathers or whatever you want to call it, you know. The people we talk to, man...people for wisdom. It's not like the other (Asian) gangs out there, we got no "dai lo" (big brother) or whatever you want to call it...leader. We got no leaders, no nothing like that...no "shot-callers"...none of that shit. We don't listen to one person, we're a unit. It's teamwork.

He received his education on the streets. He is a high school drop-out with a 9th grade education. He has gotten straight F's on his report card since the 3rd grade. He had been in and out of Los Angeles County's youth detention facilities during his teen years and got most of his high school credits while in juvenile hall. He did time at Camp Scudder and Camp Mendenhall.

In the early 1990s, P-Dog's Asian Boyz clique was the first generation of Asian gang members in the area to break away from tradition with their dress, style, and gang protocol. They were young and trying to build a "rep." For P-Dog, wearing Dickies, Nike Cortez, and shaving off their heads are as much stylistic as it is a lifestyle. P-Dog states:

Yeah, that's how we got problems with the Chinese gangs here (San Gabriel Valley). They didn't like us...the Asian gangs. We're not like the Asian gangs because they say we're disgracing them because we're not the way Asian gangs should be, you know. Back in the early 90s, no one (Asian gangs) was dressing like us. You know, everyone was sticking to their Chinese...whatever Vietnamese style. You're talking about 88', 89', 90', 91'...we're the only one dressing like Mexicans still, talking like blacks with a blue rag hanging on the left side. Other than that, these days everyone...lil' kids out there, trying to dress the way we dressed.

P-Dog continues to dress the way he has the last 18 years of his life. However, he has changed and grown: "my mentality's a different story, though, you know. My age is older than my body." More seasoned, P-Dog serves as a mentor to the "youngsters," the next generation of AB members coming up.

P-Dog and his homeboys are frequently "hit up" by other gang members and the local police departments. As he explains:

They (the police)...they check "what hood are you from?"...what does this number stand for on your body?" They asked for all this stuff, you know. Back when we were young, they asked for cigarette burns...like "why do you have the

cigarette burns here?"...you know...this and that. That's how they represent themselves as Asian gangs, fuck...in 90', 91'.

P-Dog further explains:

The first thing they [the police] ask you, "who do you roll with?" They don't ask "what's your name?" [I'll say] I don't roll with nobody...they decide to check (for tattoos)...what does this stand for? Does it really matter, you know? Back then, I used to tell them where I was from and whatever...this and that. But [as] I see it now, it shouldn't matter where I am from. I'm 30 years old. I hate it when young, little cops come in, like 19 years old, telling me what do , you know what I'm saying...talk to me like a man I'll talk to you like a man. Doesn't mean you have a badge and you think you're cool, man. You know, we got fucked by cops back in the day when they make the Asian [Gang] Task Force. Asian Task Force used to come and beat our ass up.

He still gets harassed on a consistent basis because of his dress and the many tattoos that adorn his body. He covers it up by wearing long pants and sleeves when he can.

However, he has a hard time doing that in the hot and humid Southern California summers. He got his first tattoo on his chest that says, "AB" (Asian Boyz) when he was 13. He continues, "I can't walk around with my mom, ay. My mom wouldn't walk around with me. She's scared...like she embarrassed. Anytime we go to Wal-Mart or some shit, she walks two aisles away from me because I'm tatted out from the head to my toes."

For P-Dog, school is where he went "to meet girls and get into fights." His educational experiences evolved around three institutions: the local high school, continuation high school, and youth camps. The junior and high schools P-Dog attended in the Rosemead/San Gabriel area are predominantly Asian and Latino. At his public high school in San Gabriel (CA), his gang would get into fights with other Asian and Chicano gangs. These "race fights" between racialized groups are by no means just gang members. The general populations at the school also get involved: "Just random

people...I don't know how it starts, man. I just know it starts. One day, we say "fuck the ese...fuck the beaner...and they would say fuck the chino, you know. That's how it is. We'll get into it and don't know why, to tell you the truth. People will be bringing guns to school. I see that shit all the time...back when we were going to school."

To get away from gang life in Southern California, P-Dog moved to Seattle to live with an uncle in 1993 when he was 16. He talks about his high school experience in Seattle: "I tripped out in school over there, man. It was like *Saved by the Bell* (TV show) or something. He compares his high school in Seattle with the one in Southern California: "You went to the restroom, you see mirrors. San Gabriel (HS) and stuff....you don't see mirror, man. They got no lockers for us, man...like fucking six inches big, six inches wide, you know. It's crazy." P-Dog struggles with traditional education and never enjoyed being in the classroom: "I guess I wasn't the kind of person that can sit down and just sit there, you know. I'm not saying I'm stupid. I just can't sit in a classroom." He sums it up: "I just can't do school. Like when I went to continuation [high school], all I got to do is cheat off the notebooks to get a diploma, I couldn't even do that."

Although he moved out of the state and was away from his homeboys, he could not stay away from trouble: "I was busted for stealing cars and radio [in Seattle]. I moved away from the environment that you see in Southern California...just couldn't get away [from] it." He eventually finished off the school year and went back to California. His one year away from California could have saved P-Dog's life. It was at a time when many of his homeboys went to prison for "putting in work" on rival gangs and were involved in other illicit activities. P-Dog states, "Like I said, a group of 10 friends...like

the 10 I kicked it with, like seven of them are doing life, two of them are dead. I basically lost them all of them at the age of 17. We're just like 17 years old at the time. We weren't that old." It pains him to see many of his friends doing double life or dead:

It hurts, man. It's like seeing anything. It's like seeing your own brother die, man. We're not brothers for real, but we're still brothers, man. The only thing is different mom, different dad, basically. You know, we bleed for each other, man. We care for our own, regardless of how it is. That's how it is.

When asked if PD is still involved, he replied by saying, "you can never *not* be involved...we kicked it with the same people because that's all we know, you know. We got no friends outside the circle, man." P-Dog is part of a family. He grew up with a strong sense of family. P-Dog states, "...with family, you're not going to let your little brothers die, but you ain't going to be out there killing people for them, you know." The politics of belonging is very clear for P-Dog and his homeboys: "when we were growing up, it was us against everybody," P-Dog is making attempts to be more "friendly" and "trying to get along" with everybody. As he reflects, "we did what we did when we were young. Basically we're just chilling now. A lot of us are raising family, you know."

P-Dog is a two-strike felon. He was released from prison two months ago at the time of this interview. He is doing a work release program at the Sheriff's headquarters in East Los Angeles to gain his freedom. He has three more months of work before he goes on probation. If P-Dog violates his probation, he will be sent to state prison for three years because of a joint suspension: "I'm straight...I ain't trying to go up-state." Due to his criminal records, P-Dog is not qualified for U.S. naturalization. He is greatly concerned that he might get deported back to Vietnam, a country he has never been to since leaving as a three year old. The deportation issue hits very close to home for P-Dog because he has a friend [due to his criminal records] who recently was deported to Hong

Kong. P-Dog is very well aware that Vietnam and the U.S. are making efforts to make this a reality.

For P-Dog, being involved initially was out of protection and brotherhood on the streets. Over time, there are economic reasons that are work. As P-Dog makes clear:

Not all of us are rich, you know. The government's still helping us after all these years, man. You know, it's not that we're lazy....times are tough out here. We weren't born with a silver spoon. You can only do so much....especially a single lady raising fucking all of us, you know."

He makes it explicit that he has no intentions of putting any "hype" into it, for he is merely telling his story. He referenced movies like *Rush Hour* and *Too Fast, Too Furious*, when talking about inaccurate representations and the lack of depth and complexity in understanding Asian American youth gang culture: "They [the media] don't show the deep roots of it, man." When asked if he has regrets, P-Dog has this to say:

No regrets, no regrets. Well, I do have regrets. My friends had to go too quick, man. Couldn't last longer with them, man...I regret most of my friends went to jail with only one pussy in their lives, you know. They never had kids...barely had sex once...had a girlfriend one time. Most of them went in...like my best friend, my role dog...he got locked up at 17, man. He's going to spend the rest of his life in jail. He had double life and no parole at 17. He's 30 years old now, you know. He's still a teenager. He barely had a girlfriend, you know.

In 2000, he almost got sent away for a murder charge, but fortunately, the case got thrown out. He is taking it day by day, without knowing what tomorrow holds. P-Dog states:

Same shit, different day, just don't know the flavor of the Kool-Aid, you know... that's all it is. You don't know what's going to happen. You live to live, man. That's me....I got no education. I just got to go with what I know best. I do what I got to do in life, you know.

In the same year of his murder charge, he also had a child with a young woman. His son and the mother now live in Texas. He has minimal contact with them. He continues, "Just because we're from somewhere, we're not bad people. We're caring people, too you know." P-Dog acknowledges that he should feel fortunate that he gets support from his family. P-Dog shows a great deal of love and appreciation for his mother: "I love my mom. [To] stick with people in her life like that, people would drop us already, man...to have a son like me, how her husband was, is unconditional love...strong lady. I give it to my fucking mom." P-Dog gives much thanks to his mother for repeatedly using her hard-earned money to bail him out of jail or pay for his lawyer fees over the years.

Melo

Melo was born in Vietnam and immigrated to the U.S in mid-July 1979 when he was about a year and a half. Melo, his parents, paternal grandparents, and four siblings got sponsored to Oklahoma before moving to Phoenix (AZ) shortly after. They moved to Arizona because their relatives resettled there. In Phoenix, Melo's parents both worked to support the family. His father was a dishwasher and his mother worked as a waitress in a Chinese restaurant. His grandmother took care of Melo and his siblings. His siblings started school in Arizona, but he was still too young and stayed home. They resettled in Southern California after a few years in the "Valley of the Sun." Melo and his family of nine moved into a crowded three-bedroom apartment in the city of Monterey Park. Coined the "Chinese Beverly Hills" in the mid-1980s by land developers to attract the

Asian petit bourgeois class overseas, Melo and his family lived on the bottom of the hill along with other primarily lower-middle and working-class Asian and Latino families.

Melo's parents started out selling toys at the local indoor and outdoor swap meets. They worked at the swap meets for about seven years and eventually opened up a toy wholesale business in Downtown Los Angeles in 1988. The parents have since retired after laboring in the business for another 15 years. As his parents were busy working, Melo was under the care of his older siblings growing up. Melo was highly involved in organized basketball. He played on his school team and was solid academically. He was getting above average grades on his report card. Melo attended Richard Garvey Intermediate School. Located in Rosemead (CA), the school is comprised of predominantly Asian and Latino students. Garvey Intermediate was fertile ground for gang recruitment and formation. While at the school, he was introduced to a youth who brought the Asian Boyz gang into the area in 1990. Asian Boyz in the West San Gabriel Valley was initially known as Asian Brotherhood (ABH).

Melo gradually hung out less with his basketball friends and more with his gang friends. He eventually dropped out of the basketball team and got straight F's his freshman year. In his rebellion against an older brother who attended the same high school, Melo chose not to take any of his final exams: "I have my older brother who was trying to be my dad. He was telling me what to do...and I rebelled against him. Who the hell was he to tell me what to do, you know." He also got much more attention as a "gangster" than a "baller." Melo discusses the formation of his AB gang at his high school: "At the time in school, we didn't get along with nobody. We were the most

hated gang. Pretty much because we were, like, new and coming up and we didn't care. We were setting trends."

Melo talks about the stylistic differences with his Asian Boyz gang and that of other Asian gangs in the area:

Early 90s... Those [Asian] gangs were like FOBS ("fresh off the boat"). We were pretty much like new style... coming out looking like eses, wearing Dickies, (Nike) Cortez, bald-headed... they [other Asian and Chicano gangs] hated us. They [Asian gangs] were dressing like Chinatown... dressed up in slacks... their hair going up... got their 1985 [Toyota] Supra going... bumping Modern Talking (popular New Wave band from Europe).

Melo started his sophomore year with freshman standing due to his grades the previous year. Not soon enough into the school year, he got into two fights and got kicked out of Keppel. After being rejected by Rosemead high school, he ended up at San Gabriel HS where he got kicked out again for not going to class in February of 1993. He ended up dropping out the rest of his sophomore year: "They tried to give me continuation (high school) and I said 'for what... it's a waste of time'." The district office also offered home-study, but Melo would not comply. Due largely to the free time he has for not being in school, he became heavily involved with Asian Boyz during the summer of 1993.

He got reinstated at Keppel his junior year. In making efforts to please his parents, he attended class regularly, was getting average grades, and did not want to get into more trouble. However, a month into the school year, he was "hit up" by Lomas gang members. As Melo remembers, "These eses started shit with me... about 5 of them surrounded me. "What do you want to do... I was like "whatevers," you know. So I tell them "lunchtime"... next thing I called my homeboys up. Lunch-time comes around, we catch them at the park... we ended up shooting them." Melo's gang did not get along

with other Asian gangs at Keppel, as well, “we used to hate them (other Asian rival gangs).” Since the Asians and Mexicans got at it...we call peace at that time. We got along. The Hispanics, you know, tried to get at all of us. So we just teamed up...If it meant us, like, getting along with our enemies which was our own race, too...we had to do it, cause’ they made it a racial thing.”

Because of his involvement in the shooting, Melo was locked up for a year, first at Eastlake Central Juvenile Hall and then at Camp C.B. Afflerbaugh in La Verne. As Melo reflects of his time at Eastlake and the fate of taking “the deal” when it was given to him:

I keep going to courts, you know. I had a public defender at that time. They told me the best we can do is give you a year at camp. I had witnesses pointing me out. There’s nothing I could have done so I had to take the deal. I mean, I think if I know what I know now, I would probably just walk. But if I would have walked, I would not be here right now...if I was out at the time that I wasn’t locked up, I would’ve been locked up with the rest of my homeboys...doing life for the other stuff that they did.

Melo quickly shifted topic to talk about his schooling experience while incarcerated:

The school...I didn’t learn anything in there. It’s pretty much stuff I already knew. All the teachers made it seem like I was brilliant or something, you know what I mean. I know all this stuff already...come on! It’s like it’s in high school...“dude, this guy’s smart”...the teacher would look up like, “whoa the Asian kids are smart.”

As Melo reflects on his incarceration, “There was a handful [of Asians]. Like five, six, seven out of like, 60, 70 people in a dorm...the staff loves us. They trust us. In there, there are not many of us...so we [Asians] stick together.” However, Melo recalled a time when he wanted to “get at” a rival Wah Ching gang member. He states: “I had to show face, you know. I called him out and he didn’t want none. So we kept it cool. At that point, it’s whatever, you know. The Hispanics...the black people didn’t say

anything on me because they knew he was my enemy...so they couldn't look down at me...like 'he's a punk'.

Although Asian youth and other wards have rivals from the same racialized group on "the outside," they do not have an option but to hang with "their own" while incarcerated. Melo talks about identity politics in both Juvenile Hall and LA County Jail, two places where he did time and its connection to the streets:

County Jail's totally different, man. Even if you're from WC (rival Asian gang), you still have to get along. Because there're so many Southsiders, which are Hispanics. The Surenos don't like us. The blacks...we're cool with, but still...you know...it's always like that. It started, I think, from TRG (Tiny Rascal Gang). In Long Beach, TRG and Eastside Longos...they're enemies. Eastside Longos are Hispanics...they're Surenos. We don't get along with any of those two [gangs]. But in jail, we get along with TRG because they're Asian...the Surenos gave "green light" on all the Asians in County.

After getting out of Camp Afflerbaugh in 1994, Melo moved to Arizona in to live with relatives his junior and senior year of high school to get from gang life in Southern California. He was on probation at the time, but had the blessing of his probation officer to move out of state. Even though he was still dressed "all banged out" and got into a couple of altercations, he was able to finish school and received his diploma. He received much of his class credits in juvenile hall. Being too homesick, he moved back to Southern California shortly after graduation and proceeded to get caught up in "the life" again: "People were still around. I was still involved. At the time, it was still on the low-low, you know what I mean. We did things on the low. It was not until I moved away again where things blew up again [in 1997].

He also began to take methamphetamine. Melo spent the next few years moving back and forth from California and Arizona struggling to stay clean: "I had to stay away from drugs. My mom went to the fortune teller saying that if 'you would stay [in

California], you would die'." He attended Mt. San Antonio College Community College (CA) sparingly. Most of the time, he was high on meth. Melo ended up finishing his associate degree at Mesa Community College (AZ). He began to work for an electronics company for a short period of time "doing wirings." He moved back to California for good in 2000.

At the time of employment, his criminal records did not show because it was a "juvenile [record]." Once Melo turned 18, he could have conceivably "sealed" his records, ultimately giving him a fresh start. However, when the police found 2,000 pills of Ecstasy on him and a partner in 2003, it came back to "haunt" him. The DA (district attorney) brought Melo's case up and gave him another strike. He states, "...I should have seal [my record] after I turned 18...which I messed up. I was messed up on drugs at that time. Actually, I blamed myself for doing it."

As a two-strike felon, Melo is doing what he can to insure that he does not do more time. He still hangs out with the older Asian Boyz members, but is not "actively involved": "pretty much, I did my time. I earned my stripes already. That's how it works. I can still come around. I still get that respect. No one's gong to talk shit to me, you know." As a seasoned gang member, he feels like he does not have anything to prove because "they know what I'm about already." Now 30 years old, Melo is an OG (original gangster) from his clique. He knows some of the Asian Boyz "youngsters"-the 13 and 14 years olds, about the same age when he first got involved. A lot of young guys are coming up. He talks about the age range of different Asian Boyz cliques in Southern California: "For our area [W. San Gabriel Valley], my generation's the oldest. But in

Long Beach there're fools that are 40 years old, 50 years old. There are people in Van Nuys that are 40 years old that are in ABZ."

Melo has spent more than half of his life as an Asian Boyz member. He has "put in work" for his gang. He is saddened that some of friends had to go away so young. In a span of a year and a half from 2000 to 2001, four of Melo's homeboys passed away.

He reminisces about the consequences of life choices:

It's sad because that's the only time when I see my homeboys [are at funerals], you know. It's like...damn. I mean, there's nothing I can do. I get a phone call, "hey, homie passed away." Of course, I'm going to book a flight to make it to the funeral. It's like shit, you know...it's sad, you know...but got to pay my respect.

Since he has been back permanently to Southern California, he goes to Rose Hills Cemetery in Whittier every two, three months to visit his fallen homeboys: "I know they're looking out for me. They're looking over me so I pray for them...hope they're ok, you know and I'll see them when I get up there or wherever they're at...pretty much tell them I did not forget about them." Although he is not "active," he is nevertheless involved because of the respect that he gets from his younger homeboys. His younger homeboys understand what Melo is trying to do, as he is trying to change his life. Because of that, he still has a strong affinity for the gang because it has been his support group all these years.

Due to his "cholo" dress and shaved head, he gets "hit up" all the time from younger gang members and the police. Although he does not "look" for trouble, he will have to get involved when it comes. He is going to have to claim "Asian Boyz," even if it means "getting jumped." As much as it is important for him to claim membership when his homeboys are around, it is even more significant when no one is looking. Melo explains:

Because it's like, if I didn't do that [claim gang affiliation], everything that all my homeboys did that got locked up for and died for would be [for] nothing, [if] I didn't do that. That's why I do what I do. If I didn't claim, did all this work...kill all this people or the ones that died for Asian Boyz will be for nothing then...it'll never stop. It's not going to stop...it's on-going. It's like Bloods and Crips. It keeps going back and forth, yeah. But I am not active, you know. I don't do any of that stuff. I let the youngsters do it.

Melo straddled the fine and tenuous line of being committed to the homeboys, but also wanting to change his lifestyle. He is also concerned about his citizenship status.

Since he has a criminal record, he is not qualified for naturalization. He frequently thinks about the possibility of getting deported to Vietnam, a country he has no collections of.

His parents are also very concerned regarding this dilemma. His father became a U.S. citizen before Melo turned eighteen and mother *after* he turned eighteen. Hence, he

could not be naturalized through his parents. He reflects: "That's why I hold back on the things that I do because, ok....I mean, it's a good thing, but yet it's a bad thing, you know. It's a good thing because it keeps me, alright, on my toes because you'll get deported. It's a bad thing because I have to keep worrying about it."

Melo is currently a full-time student and lives with his brother. He is set to begin his second semester of the radiology program at Pasadena City College. He has three more semesters to go. When finished with the radiology program, he will have to take the state board to be certified as an x-ray technician. His brother, himself an x-ray technician, got Melo into the program. The teacher is aware of his criminal records and will need to fight for him. Melo is very intent on finishing the program: "...pretty much with me, if I put my mind to it, I can achieve. It's just as long as I stay focused...that's my problem. Right now, I'm very focused because I got nothing else to live for." Melo puts extra efforts into the program because of his records. He has to show the state board

and his teacher that he is very serious about his coursework and fieldwork. His classmates “trips out” because he is doing well in the program. Melo sits in the back of class and feels good that his classmates are asking *him* for help. He likes the fact that they are calling him a “nerd.”

Melo has been clean from drugs for almost four years and has been off probation for a year. At the time of his drug bust in 2003, the judge decided to send him to rehab instead of giving him a longer sentence. He is trying to make the most of this opportunity. His relationship with his siblings has gotten better the last few years. It was not always the smoothest, especially when he was heavily involved with the gang and drugs. He is forever grateful that his parents came to see him every weekend when he was doing time. Melo points out that many of the wards do not get visitors.

Melo has good family support around him: “it’s hard for me to do the things that I do and my family still supports me. Whoa, you know. I give a lot to them. I give thanks to them for doing that. They support...trying to make me a better person...even though I don’t work right now. If I need money, they’ll give it to me, but I don’t ask them. I tried to find little jobs here and there...trying to be legit...trying not to do anything bad. I’m grateful to be here [to be alive].” As Melo reflects, “...for me to witness all that, it has made me humbled...going through what I went through, seeing all that stuff. I’m humbled...I mean, going to jail, too. If everyone went to prison, like once...it’ll make a person more well-rounded. They realized that like, whoa...they treat you like animals in there...being in jail...in [LA] County Jail.”

At the beginning, he was “afraid...that’s why I would only go so far, you know. Alright, this is my final chance, too. If I fuck up, I would lose their support.” It is an issue that he continues to struggle in his commitment to both families.

Linh

Linh was born in Orange County, CA in 1978. Her parents migrated from Vietnam shortly after the “Fall of Saigon” in 1975 to the U.S. They took a circuitous journey by boat from Vietnam to a refugee camp in Guam before resettling in Ohio, where their sponsors reside. Linh is the second oldest of four children in the family. Her older sister was born in Ohio and the rest of the children in California. Linh’s father worked at Kentucky Fried Chicken (KFC) for a couple of years before saving enough money to move the family to Southern California. There, her mother went to adult school and sold Avon products, but Linh did not remember the kind of business her father was involved in the first few years. She states, “My parents pretty much struggled to raise a family of four...as any Vietnamese family, they were really strict. They worked hard for their kids and they want us to see the value of having [an] education.”

When Linh was five years old, her family moved to Lake Forest (in Orange County) and her father started his own aviation company. He did parts for McDonnell-Douglas and her mother got into the real estate business, catering to the Vietnamese community that emerged in the early 1980s in Westminster/Garden Grove/Santa Ana area. Linh states, “...their careers kinda took off with the Asian community because that’s who they worked with.” To be closer to Little Saigon, Linh’s family moved to Westminster when she was seven years old-as a third-grader. Ironically, she felt most

distanced and alienated from the Vietnamese community, because Linh and her siblings attended a predominantly white K-8 private Catholic school. Linh's family was one of two Asian families in the school. Being both Vietnamese and Catholic, her parents wanted the children to attend Catholic school. Thus, Linh and her siblings have been going to Catholic school since kindergarten.

Growing up, Linh struggled with her identity as a young Vietnamese woman. She spoke English at school, but was expected to speak Vietnamese at home: "It was difficult to keep up with my Vietnamese language...so I grew apart from it. The reason for that was I really wanted to be white because that's all I knew. That's all my friends." Linh was "embarrassed" to bring Vietnamese food to school because it looks, tastes, and smells different than the food her classmates brought. As a way to acculturate, she was very active in sports, especially basketball. Basketball was the one thing that helped her fit in. She has been balling since the third grade. However, she can help but to think how she does not fit in when she is off the basketball court and in the homes of her white friends: "I felt somewhat excluded because of just the difference...of culture. But I tried to make myself as accepted as possible, you know." In the first two years at Mater Dei high school in Santa Ana (CA), Linh was highly involved with school and basketball. That was her life. Although her parents "forced" her to play the piano, she felt most comfortable on the hardwood floor with a basketball in her hand.

At Mater Dei in the mid 1990s, Linh also began to hang out with different people. Although there were some Vietnamese students at the high school, she did not hang out with them because she did not find much "in common" with them. She was highly involved with sports and most of her Vietnamese compatriots were not. In trying to make

sense of her Vietnamese identity, she started to hang out with more Asian students: "It was the first time I finally found common likes." She ended up splitting her time between her "jock" friends and her "ethnic" friends. In the process, she got introduced to other friends who were not from her high school: "I would say I had met a few Vietnamese people and Filipinos and I start hanging out with them...it started out as just dancing crews." These dancing crews would "battle" at parties and would invariably get into fights with other crews. The dancing crew she was part of gradually crossed over into being a bona fide gang. She reflects, "...it was predominant guys and it was a few girls. And we [the girls] had probably ten good friends who were part of it. And how they did it was basically jumping you in [getting initiated]...and you know...it's the girls on the girls and the guys on the guys."

As a young Vietnamese woman, Linh was involved with the Westside Islanders, a Filipino/Pacific Islanders gang that has its origins in Long Beach. She belonged to a group that "cliqued out" out in Cerritos (CA). At the time, she was 15 years old. Initially, Linh and a couple of the females were girlfriends of the Islanders gang members. Shortly after, they created a female clique within the gang. Linh explains:

I think the reason why I chose to do it [join up] because...I felt comfortable with this crowd of people. I felt so comfortable that they were my family. And I mean, my parents, I wasn't close talking to them. [With my parents] it's get your schoolwork done and that's it. You don't understand anything else...I'm right, you're wrong. There's was a lot of fear with me and my parents, so I was not close to them. There's no talking to them. But with my friends, I felt invincible.

However, there were some tensions regarding the girls in the gang. There were some questions as to how certain girls got in the gang. As Linh recalls, "...at one point, there were two cliques. It was us that kinda been with our boyfriends for a long time and got jumped in and there was another group that these other guys started when they didn't

get jump in. Pretty much, they got trained in.” Basically, one group of females fought to get into the gang and the other group had sex to get in.

In her desire to please her parents and also wanting to have fun, Linh led a “double life”: of being a “model student” and gang member. Linh states, “I was really, really hard-core into the gang...and beat up people...girls, guys, whatever the case is and assisted them in whatever they need it. But I’ll be that student in the front seat of class” [laughing]. She continues, “...unless you were really in the group, you know...none of my white friends knew [I was involved]...it was just the Asians. So, I was a totally different person at school. But then outside of school, you know, it was totally different. You know, we would start trouble at parties, clubs...or parks...or barbeques...anything we go to.” However, it got to a point where she had a difficult time balancing separate lives. Most of the friends that Linh hung out with went to school in Cerritos and Long Beach. Linh was becoming less interested being at Mater Dei and more interested in “kicking it” with her “outside” friends. As expected, her grades also begin to suffer.

When her junior year came, she “demanded” to her parents that she was done with Catholic school. It was too strict for her, after being in Catholic school all her life. With much resistance from her parents, Linh transferred to La Quinta high school in Westminster (CA). She went from a predominantly white Catholic school to a predominantly Asian and Latino school. Linh states, “So I went to public school...ended up going [to La Quinta] with a friend there. And that’s when it really went downhill from there. You know, it was not so much double life anymore. I was showing people at school who I really was outside [of school]...it was to a point where I was putting my friends...the gang...running away...just wanting to have fun first.”

Linh no longer had to wear her uniforms. She could wear whatever clothes she chooses. Linh dressed the way she was dressing when not in school. She wore a lot of tank and halter tops with jeans. But sometimes she would rock the Dickies, like some of her homegirls. Linh reflects, "...it was funny, though. Because of that, the teachers had a different perception of you. That's when I learn early on that, whoa, they don't know you, but they're going to judge you." Playing on the basketball team at La Quinta her first year did help her get acclimated to the new school: "So I did start playing basketball there, too. So I was still really, really good. I still had my game on and I start having the two separate [set of] friends again. A few Vietnamese male students gave her a hard time because Linh was not hanging out with "her own." In fact, she has gotten into a couple of fistfights with the Vietnamese guys over this issue. According to Linh, the Vietnamese females did not say anything to her because they were "afraid" of her.

One of the reasons why Linh liked hanging out with her Islanders friends was because they were initially dancers. Linh is big fan of hip hop and really enjoyed watching her friends "break" and do routines. Since she was already friends with them, it was difficult for her to break away from them when they decided to join up: "I know it sounds stupid now, but it's like a bond that teenagers have with their friends. The worst thing you can ever do is leave a friend. You went along with the ride." Linh went along for "the ride" her senior year of high school when her then-boyfriend got shot and a friend got stabbed at a "warehouse" party by rival gang members. As she reflects, "it was a big, big commotion all in there. And I don't know what gang it was. It was directed to us because we were the strongest. Someone has to take someone down." As she recalls:

This is the first time I ever saw someone got shot...to be my boyfriend, it was really, really hard and I stood by him. I think I...felt stronger because I was the

stronger person for someone else and you had no choice. You had to help him, you know. Everyone was coming to me to see how he was doing. Everyone come to me to ask questions.

Linh's boyfriend was in a coma for a week. Linh "moved up" in the ranks because people were coming to *her* to ask questions regarding the status of her boyfriend, a respected gang leader. She took care of him throughout his recovery: "I mean it's a big deal for what happen. And me being in high school, I was like, "oh my gosh," I dropped everything...you know, I stopped going to school...I was ditching a lot." In the process, Linh's relationship with her parents began to "plummet." It got to a point where she was staying with her boyfriend and would not talk to her mom for weeks. Through this ordeal, her parents came to understand the extent to which she was involved in gang life. Linh's mother sent her to counseling, but it was of not much help.

Linh's clique went through a lot of turmoil in 1998, her first year in college. Though never a great student, her grades were good enough to get her into Cal-State, Long Beach. That year, her boyfriend got arrested for doing a drive-by on a rival. Since the shooting was done immediately after Linh and her boyfriend got into a big fight, she was blamed for his indiscretions. He was locked up for three years. Although some of his homeboys did put the blame on Linh, they can not deny the fact that she was always there for him when and after he got shot. Around the same time, one of their gang leaders committed suicide. This incident was really hard for Linh because they were close friends *and* the fact that Linh and a few other members found him dead with a gunshot wound to the head in his apartment. It was the first time Linh has seen a dead body. As she reflects:

A lot of people look up to him and he was very high in the ranks. When he died, I mean there were a lot of questions unanswered...why he took his life because he

had side businesses and not a lot of people knew about it. It just broke people apart. People didn't like each other and everyone start fighting one another. And that's when the bond of having fun just went to business and people backstabbing each other.

The gang leader's suicide left Linh and many of the members distraught. It created a lot of tension, distrust, and confusion. By her second year in college, after four years of being heavily involved, she began to pull away from the Islanders clique:

I see my friends not graduating from high school, being pregnant, and having two kids, and using drugs, and again I would still go out to Long Beach, and I would still see the same people...gosh, I never want to be pregnant at this young age...[not] with this guy. I knew that these guys are not the guys that I want to marry...then again, I am dating these guys.

It did help that Linh was in college and met friends not from the gang. It did not help that she wants to leave this life behind. Linh was making attempts to turn her life around.

She was known as "the schoolgirl," but also used to be the "head guy's girlfriend."

Initially, the gang members did give her a hard time when she attempted to distance herself. They were not sure what to make of her wanting to break away.

Linh elaborates on the matter on leaving her old life behind, "Be being involved with the gang for four years and me stepping away from it and [possibly] facing the consequences...I was worried about it. I felt very grateful, but at the same time I felt like I had to make a difference and change." Though not definite, she believes that her ex-boyfriend, while imprisoned, had something to do with her not facing retribution for leaving the gang. Approaching 30 years old, she feels very fortunate that she was able to turn her life around with it not being "too late."

Linh is the only one of her gang friends to obtain a college degree. Many dropped out and half of the members received their high school diploma via the GED. At one point in college, she tried to reach out to some of her girlfriends and talked to their

parents in hopes that they can also turn their lives around and get them to attend college. Her girlfriends felt like she had changed and did not necessarily want her help. She feels fortunate that she made it out, for the most part, unscathed. For her part, she volunteered in after-school programs working with gang members. Linh states, "I remember trying to give back to the community and I would tutor in the midst of Long Beach...and I would tutor my rival gangs in a facility. But the way I dressed outside the gang, they wouldn't even thought that a girl would be [involved]."

Linh has kept in touch with one girlfriend from the clique. She has distanced herself from the rest. It has been a good six years. Although she was able to leave her old life behind, the pain and anguish continue to stay with her to this day. Linh realized that she needed to go to therapy, for she had suppressed the pain for so long. TT reflects:

I probably just seen how many people were just hurt...how many innocent people were hurt. People have taken their own lives....I think that was the wake-up call when my friend committed suicide. I just couldn't understand. He was so well-liked, so popular, has a son...and everything going for him within the gang. I didn't understand why he committed suicide and it really made me sad. I look back and I learned never to take my life for granted again.

Linh makes it clear that perception was always very important to her, "I honestly can say that it's the perception piece. You want the title so bad...something that attracts me. I am attracted to bad guys. That's how I was when I was younger. I want the toughest guys. And that's what I would always date...the toughest guys." She has become more at peace with herself and the decisions that she makes in recent years. Linh is working at a job where she strives and that she enjoy immensely. She has becomes much closer to her parents in recent years. She credits them for "instilling" in her the values and fortitude to change. However, she also uses her parents' marriage as an example of something Linh would *not* want for herself:

My parents' relationship...I think it made me who I am today...because again, my dad...you know, typical Asian father...wants to be in charge...you know, would sit there and would demand that food is ready...kids are taken care of by the mother's side...and didn't show any appreciation. That me stronger and what's the word, "ruthless." I promise myself that I would not let a man tell me what to do. I refuse to learn how to cook at first because I didn't want to cook for a man.

In recent years, her parents are proud of her and confident in the personal and professional decisions that she makes. She now talks openly about her gang experiences with her father. Regarding her father, "he has made a change for the better. We have a great relationship. We talk all the time. You know, me and him are very similar...both of us are hard-headed. But at the same time, we can agree to disagree.

CHAPTER 6

ANALYSIS OF THE NARRATIVES

Introduction

There are three major themes that surfaced from the narratives: 1) Politics of Migration, 2) Space and Labor, and 3) Racialization and Representation. I also included sub-themes for “Racialization and Representation.” These include the Politics of Style, Violence and Schooling, Racism on the Streets, and Racialization from Within.

Politics of Migration

P-Dog and Melo were three years and one year old, respectively, when they left Vietnam with their families in 1979-1980. Linh’s family left the country as part of the “first wave” in 1975. She was born a few years later in California. Instead of leaving by boat to refugee camps in Hong Kong and the Philippines (as P-Dog and Melo’s families did), Linh’s family went to Guam. This is significant because it distinguishes moments in which different groups left the country. As articulated in chapter 2, the “first wave” that left Vietnam was primarily the professional and intellectual class and was linked to the U.S. embassy. They tend to be mostly ethnic Vietnamese and ardently Catholic. This was certainly the case for Linh’s family. Both P-Dog and Melo are ethnic Chinese and were products of the mass exodus that left the country between 1977 and 1980. This

particular wave was comprised of a large laboring class and a high percentage of ethnic Chinese, many of whom have been in Vietnam for generations (Takaki, 1989, Chan, 1991).

It is important to note that all three families initially resettled in different parts of the U.S. They lived in places where their sponsors resided. This is by no means surprising given the U.S. government's intent to disperse Vietnamese and Southeast Asian refugee populations across the country, as a way to assimilate them into mainstream society (Vo, 2000). It was also the attempt to alleviate the high concentration of Vietnamese refugee and immigrant populations in California. Be that as it may, secondary migration to the "Golden State" was very common and something all three families did, however, at varying times and trajectories. P-Dog's family went from Seattle to Los Angeles's Lincoln Heights and the West San Gabriel Valley, while Melo's family went from Oklahoma, Arizona and also to the West San Gabriel Valley. Linh's family went from Ohio to Orange County. These initial locales were places that both P-Dog and Melo revisited in their teens to get away from the Southern California gang culture and drug addiction.

A significant number of Vietnamese had settled in the Westminster/Garden Grove area in Orange County by the early and mid-1980s (Vo, 2000). A number of ethnic-Chinese from Vietnam also resettled in the Little Saigon area. However, this fact gets lost for two reasons: first, the contentious history between the Vietnamese populace and ethnic Chinese from Vietnam; and second, the need for Vietnamese community-building in California. Hence, the Little Saigon area becomes a homogenizing mechanism to gain economic power and political clout for Vietnamese Americans. A substantial number of

ethnic-Chinese Vietnamese started out in the Chinatown and Lincoln Heights areas and eventually made their way up to the San Gabriel Valley in the neighboring cities of Monterey Park, Alhambra, Rosemead, and San Gabriel. To be sure, there is already a very sizeable Asian population in the area (Fong, 1994; Saito, 1998).

Due to their earlier migration, Linh's family had opportunities to establish themselves socially and economically. Even though Linh's parents started out working at fast-food joints and selling make-up products, they possessed certain capital (e.g., education, English language skills) that allowed for mobility. Both Melo and P-Dog's families, and in particular the latter, were not formally educated in Vietnam. Since P-Dog's parents came here as young refugees, they had to work and hustle to support the family. P-Dog's father was already involved with criminal activities prior to their migration to the U.S. He continued this line of work. P-Dog's father and his Viet Ching (Chinese translation: Vietnamese youth) gang was, in fact, a precursor to many of the Vietnamese-Chinese "street" gangs that "cliqued out" in different parts of Southern California. These youth came out of the refugee exodus from Southeast Asia after the Vietnam War.

Linh's involvement as a young Vietnamese woman in a Filipino gang is, of course, her choice; however, her decision came out from a specific context. She grew up going to Catholic school, until the last two years of high school. Ironically, her private K-8 school is in the heart of Little Saigon. In high school, she hung out with mostly Filipino American students at Mater Dei, a private Catholic school in Santa Ana. Hence, it is not surprising that she joined an all-Filipino dance crew. Her then-boyfriend was also Filipino, as the dance crew crossed over to being a full-blown gang. Linh's religious

upbringing might partly have attributed to her attraction to Filipinos, many of whom are Catholics. Even though she lived in Orange County, she never spent time with other Vietnamese youth in Little Saigon. Linh explains, "You know, it's pretty sad. I never hung out with my own culture growing up...just because I saw them [Vietnamese] in their gang and me living my double life, I couldn't let my parents see that." When Linh went to church with her family in Little Saigon, she would see Vietnamese gang members hang out and smoke in front of the church. They were not sure if Linh was involved. They just knew that she was not involved with them.

P-Dog and Melo grew up in the West San Gabriel Valley and hung out with other Asian immigrant youth from similar contexts. Their Westside Asian Boyz (for West San Gabriel Valley) gang is a by-product of the area in terms of class background, ethnic make-up, and immigration history. By all accounts, they are one of five recognized Asian Boyz gangs in Southern California and perhaps one of a couple dozens in other parts of California and in the U.S. Many of the Asian Boyz in Southern California are products of either the Cambodian genocide under the Khmer Rouge or the Vietnamese "boat people" exodus, especially in the contexts of Van Nuys, Los Angeles, and the San Gabriel Valley (Haldane, 1991; Hamilton, 1994). Given their pan-Asian identification, they also include Filipinos, with a large number living in the San Fernando Valley. There are other similar groups comprised of Hmong, Laotian, and Cambodia youth in smaller cities like Fresno, Stockton and Modesto in Central California, and around the San Francisco Bay Area. This speaks to the resettlement patterns of various Southeast Asian American communities. It also indicates the mobile nature of these groups, as they

traversed to other spaces to do businesses or get away from the larger Los Angeles metropolitan area (Vigil, 2002).

Although youth groups like Tiny Rascal Gang (TRG) and Asian Boyz have their origins in the Cambodian enclave of central Long Beach, P-Dog, Melo, and their Asian Boyz gang represent the SGV (San Gabriel Valley) and do business similar to that of other Vietnamese-Chinese and Chinese American gangs in the area. This is reflective of their identity as ethnically Vietnamese-Chinese. They make the distinction of not being a “pure” Vietnamese gang, like the ones coming out from Orange County or the Chinese/Taiwanese American gangs in the San Gabriel Valley. Like other gangs with multiple cliques or “sides,” not all the Asian Boyz cliques know each other intimately given the sizes and locales of these groups, but they did come together to battle Wah Ching (WC) after the infamous El Monte pool-hall shooting in 1993. Their groups range from perhaps 30-40 members to over a few hundred members, with the two largest groups in Long Beach and Van Nuys. To be expected, the number varies from the degree of commitment to the gang (hard-cores and associates) and also having members being in and out of prison. P-Dog and Melo’s group is relatively smaller than other Asian Boyz gangs given that many of their homeboys are locked up for their transgressions as teenagers. A few are dead from gang retributions.

Space and Labor

It goes without saying that the movements of racialized populations are impacted by the existing historical, political, and economic conditions. The Asian ethnic make-up of these youth gangs is contingent on demographic changes in the state. To take a closer

look into Asian American resettlement patterns in Southern California, P-Dog and Melo's Westside Asian Boyz gang in the West San Gabriel Valley, for example, is comprised mostly of Vietnamese-Chinese youth, while Asian Boyz in the San Fernando Valley/Van Nuys tend to be more pan-Asian with Filipinos, Cambodians, and Vietnamese. The Long Beach clique has been predominantly Cambodian, as the area has a large concentration of Cambodian Americans. The Little Saigon area in Orange County, not surprisingly, consists of a number of Vietnamese youth who are involved, while the Cerritos/Lakewood area tends to be pan-Asian and more middle-class. Asian Boyz in the Chinatown/Lincoln Heights, like their Westside cohort, are predominantly Vietnamese-Chinese. To be sure, many of these areas already have existing Chicano gangs. As a result, they "beef" over "turf," both real and imagined, in their fight for supremacy in the streets and a piece of the underground economy. This is confirmed by the interviewees and my personal knowledge of the Southern California terrain.

Some groups do hang out with each other partly due to proximity and similar working-class history. P-Dog, for example, hangs out with some of the homeboys from Chinatown/Lincoln Heights because he is from the area. For P-Dog and many others, their families moved from Chinatown/Lincoln Heights to the San Gabriel Valley. Many ended up going to the same schools in the area-primarily in the Alhambra school district, which includes Mark Keppel, San Gabriel, and Alhambra high schools (Hamilton, 1993). This is also my story because, we too, moved from Los Angeles's Chinatown to the West Gabriel Valley when I was in junior high school in the late 1980s. As a result, schools become sites of gang formation and ethnic solidarity. Groups move back and forth rather easily between Chinatown and the San Gabriel Valley because both groups tend to be

ethnically Chinese and some of them speak Cantonese. Since Chinatown is a short drive down Interstate-10 to the West San Gabriel Valley, these two groups (and others like them) function in a similar tradition to other Chinese American youth gangs in terms of how they handle their businesses. They are more “underground” with the types of activities they are involved with.

Swap Meets, Nail Salons, and Class Conflict

All three subjects and their families, in many ways, are representative of the diverse refugee experiences from Vietnam. For example, Linh’s parents were able to establish themselves in their professions because they were part of the first wave in the mid-1970s. Their labor catered specifically to the growth of the Vietnamese community in Orange County. Linh’s mother, due her language capability and connection to the Vietnamese community, got into the real estate business. It was a good time for her to be in this business as families began to take root in their new country. Linh’s father started a company making airplane parts for McDonnell-Douglas. This proved to be quite lucrative at the time, due to the booming aerospace industry in Southern California (Davis, 1990; Gilmore, 2007). Not coincidentally, the state was also transitioning from manufacturing labor to aerospace and technology, as many of manufacturing jobs went overseas to Southeast Asia and Mexico (Lowe, 1996). Linh and her siblings benefited from her parents’ ability to establish themselves professionally. They, for the most part, lived a middle-class existence. They grew up in Lake Forest and Westminster and went to private school for most of their formative years.

P-Dog and Melo's family work histories are more reflective of most second-wave families, which are mostly working-class (Chan, 1994). P-Dog's mother has worked in the nail salon business in the Los Angeles area for the last 25 years, while his father worked odd jobs including being a butcher in Asian supermarkets. The service-sector jobs that P-Dog's parents occupied catered mostly to other Asian immigrants. The fact that they were also on welfare and Section 8 (assisted housing) suggests that they were getting paid "under the table," a practice that is very common in Vietnamese/Asian immigrant communities. This practice includes getting paid by cash and therefore goes under-reported or unreported. It is only in recent years that P-Dog's family got off welfare and Section 8. Melo's parents labored in the outdoor swap meets selling toys for years before they were able to open a wholesale business in Downtown Los Angeles. This work was much more stable because it was not contingent on weather. Like most small business owners and middle-men, they spent a lot of time and energy over the years trying to make a living.

Unlike P-Dog and Melo, Linh's involvement with gang culture does not necessarily fit under working-class narratives that are associated with the "underclass" theory of gang formation. Then again, the formation of Asian American youth gangs breaks away from traditional understandings of gangs as an "inner-city" phenomenon. Undoubtedly, Asian American gang formation reflects the diverse immigration experiences of U.S. Asians the last four decades. Linh's gang involvement in the Cerritos/Long Beach context was emblematic of a youth subculture that has always extended beyond the Los Angeles "inner-city" core. There have always been youth gangs in all corners of Southern California, from the poorest neighborhoods to more

affluent ones. Although her gang “cliqued out” (another set under the same banner broke off) to Cerritos, middle-class suburban area in Los Angeles, her gang has working-class roots in Long Beach. In fact, this was a source of tension between the two cliques given their different spatial, generational and economic backgrounds.

Linh has this to say about some of the differences between the two groups: “I know the Long Beach clique did look down on the Cerritos clique a lot just because they did not come from where they [Long Beach] was coming from. They’re driving nicer cars. They have their mommy and daddy’s money, you know. And they [Long Beach] can see right through it like other people. ‘You’re just trying to do this for an experience.’ ‘This is my life,’ kinda thing, you know.” A few Cerritos members would go at length to buy apartments in Long Beach so they could be considered “one of them.” The Cerritos clique yearn the kind of respect and legitimacy that is afforded to the Long Beach clique given its established history that goes back three generations. The Filipino gang of which Linh was a part speaks to the different immigration and educational experiences of a particular Asian ethnic group (Alsaybar, 1999).

P-Dog talks about some major differences in economic trajectories within Asian American youth gangs in Southern California. P-Dog indicates that some Asian American gang youth in Southern California are middle-class, and thus, are involved for other reasons, as well as economic. He talks specifically of gang formation and class relations in the San Gabriel Valley, an area he knows very intimately:

A lot of people struggle. The point is that some bad people make it right. There’s a lot of rich kids out here gang-banging. They’re from Arcadia [middle-class area in the San Gabriel Valley]... a lot of Taiwanese gangs. They’re rich, man.... I don’t understand my damn self why rich kids gang-bang. I figure it’s for the thrill.... Lot of us, we go out there and make our money to survive, so I don’t have to get money from my mama or my dad, you know. We got to do what we

got to do to survive, ay. The lifestyle we live.... It's not [that] we choose this life... I was given this fucking life.

As P-Dog makes clear above and as Marx reiterates, "Men [and women] make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please, they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past" (in Hebdige, 80). P-Dog grew up in "the game." He saw first-hand the kind of work his father and his homeboys were putting in growing up. As a young boy, he saw a "gang of jewelry... stick with cash" on the dining room tables, results of robberies and home invasions on their own refugee/immigrant communities. They did what they felt like they had to do to survive and get rich quickly. Most came to the U.S. as teenagers and young adults and did not possess the education/capital needed to function in capitalist America. These Vietnamese youth emerged from mass migration from Asia at a time when others from Mexico and Central America were also immigrating. Both migrations were results of military, political, and economic turmoil in both parts of the world. As a consequence, a new wave of Latino youth gangs (e.g. Salvadoran) also emerged from these communities (Guerra Vasquez in Maira and Soep, 2005). To be sure, there are many parallels with Salvadoran and Vietnamese/Cambodian American youth gangs, as they shared similar geo-political histories. As the case, the life that P-Dog's father and his homeboys led have put many of them behind bars, never to be seen and heard again.

As many of the first-generation Vietnamese gang members are locked up, dead, or "retired," a second-generation came of age in the early 1990s. Many like P-Dog, Melo, and Linh started high school at a time when there was an explosion of youth gangs in California, the militarization of our streets, and subsequently, the increasing

criminalization of youth in racialized and marginalized communities (Davis, 1990; Gilmore, 2007). Rivalries were formed out of a particular formation for first-generation Asian American youth gangs. Oftentimes, it stems from long historical conflict from the home countries, for example, between Chinese/Vietnamese and Vietnamese/Cambodian youth. Perhaps the two largest warring factions in Southern California and certainly the San Gabriel Valley are between P-Dog and Melo's Asian Boyz and the Wah Ching (WC) gang. Wah Ching, with their origins from Hong Kong and San Francisco in the 1970s, battled with the Viet Ching gang for much of the 1980s in Southern California's Asian American communities and now with its many derivatives.

Contesting the Urban/Suburban Divide

Like the Asian Boyz, WC also has multiple cliques, or what they called "sides." The different "sides" include some Vietnamese and other Asian members from working-class families. Like some Asian American youth gangs, it also includes a handful of non-Asian youth. However, a number of WC members tend to be middle-class and of Chinese/Taiwanese background. Some, certainly not all, are from more affluent areas like Arcadia, San Marino, and Rowland Heights in the San Gabriel Valley. Asian American youth gangs bring complexities to the U.S. gang analysis, which is commonly articulated through a black/brown lens. Institutionally, it continues to be framed within a black/white paradigm, with the state taking on the role of "whites." Asian American youth gangs complicate the way we think about urban/suburban divide, given how residential patterns of post-1965 Asian Americans are different from other racialized populations.

Bangele D. Alsaybar (1999) makes the distinction between two dominant gang models in discussing Filipino American youth gangs in Los Angeles. One model is the “urban” type, exemplified by the Satanas, an old-time Filipino gang from the mid-Wilshire and Temple areas in Downtown Los Angeles, and the other model is the “suburban” type, exemplified by the Bahala Na Gang (BNG), whose formation has been in suburbia (126). The formation of Filipino American youth gangs, in this case, speak to different migration patterns of Filipinos to the Southland. Some Filipino Americans, historically, resettled in the “inner-city” and others in more traditionally-defined suburban areas. Although Alsaybar writes specifically about Filipino American youth, his analysis is helpful in understanding other post-1965 Asian American youth groups. Vietnamese/Southeast Asian immigrant youth bring another dimension to the analysis of Asian American youth and urban culture, given their unique historical and material conditions and the decentralized nature of Southern California.

As we see the emergence of Asian American youth gangs in working-class neighborhoods like the Chinatowns and Filipino-towns, we see their formation in other spaces as well. Many consequences of gang formation in “inner-city” areas, like protection from Chicano gangs, ethnic solidarity, and brotherhood in the streets, have always been prominent in “suburban” areas like Long Beach and Van Nuys. We certainly see this in the San Gabriel Valley with P-Dog, Melo, and other Asian American youth and their on-going tensions with each other, as well as Chicano gangs in the area. In Linh’s Cerritos context, her former gang battled with other Asian American youth groups, including other Filipinos, Chinese, and Koreans. In Long Beach, their main rival is the Westside Longos, a long-time Chicano gang. The two dominant models of

Alsaybar (1999) alluded to are useful in conceptualizing the formation of gangs in both “urban” and “suburban” spaces. Perhaps more so than in any other cities, the urban/suburban dichotomy in the Los Angeles area becomes blurred and is conceptually inaccurate. In addition to the urban/suburban problematic, there is also a suburban/suburban divide. For example, Santa Ana, Garden Grove, and Westminster are not the same as Laguna Beach and Mission Viejo in terms of ethnic composition, class differences, and political affiliations. Yet, these cities are lumped as “suburbs” of Orange County. Long Beach, Alhambra, Norwalk, and South Gate differ from Pacific Palisades and Beverly Hills, yet they are all regarded as the “suburbs” of Los Angeles County (Espiritu, 2009, personal communication). Hence, there is a need to re-articulate and re-conceptualize racialized poor/working-class populations and spatial relations in the 21st century.

The San Gabriel Valley and cities like Monterey Park, Alhambra, San Gabriel, and Rosemead provide an excellent example in understanding both the multiplicities and specificities of Asian American populations. The West San Gabriel Valley (along with Little Saigon), with its large concentration of Asians, has replaced Chinatown as the cultural, economic, and social hub for the Asian refugee/immigrant community. The San Gabriel Valley (similar to Little Saigon) has undoubtedly become a thriving business area with many Asian restaurants, cafes, boutiques, superstores, banks, and other institutions (Fong, 1994; Saito, 1998). Although the area is booming, a substantial number of Asian folks who live and work in and around the area are not doing well economically. The economic “success” of these areas obfuscate class divisions among the Asian petit bourgeois class and that its proletariat. It is safe to say that many business owners do not

live in the area. We do not have to go to historic ethnic enclaves to find poor and working-class Asians working side by side with other poor and working-class Latinos, where they labor as garment workers, busboys, dishwashers, waiters, mechanics, butchers, manicurists, and other service sector jobs (Light, 1994).

Since Vietnamese/Asian American youth gangs are reflective of diverse populations, these gangs include members across the socio-economic spectrum. The material conditions of youth gangs like the Asian Boyz and Tiny Rascal Gang (by no means limited to these two gangs) have much to do with the legacy of U.S foreign policies in Southeast Asia and people's subsequent exodus to industrialized countries like the U.S., Canada, Australia, and Germany. As a result, there are also Vietnamese and Vietnamese-Chinese youth gangs in these respective countries, as well (Wallace, *Los Angeles Times*, 1995; Kinzer, *New York Times*, 1996). Furthermore, the formation of middle-class Asian American youth gangs in more affluent areas in Southern California is a product of the nation-state's selective immigration policies and American economic interests in the sending countries (Prashad, 2000; Ong, Bonacich, and Cheng, 1994). This is most prominent in California, given the state's close relationship to the Pacific Rim spatially and economically (Ong, Bonacich, and Cheng, 1994).

Racialization and Representation

Politics of Style

As P-Dog, Melo, and their homeboys started high school in the early 1990s, they distinguished themselves from other Asian gangs in the area with their dress, style, and speech. They were perhaps the first Vietnamese-Chinese gang in the San Gabriel Valley

to dress like the “eses” (Chicano gang members) and talk “black.” More specifically, their mode of speech is associated with urban black vernacular. Undoubtedly, they were influenced by the rise of hip hop music and West Coast “gangsta rap” that was going through the Southern California airwaves. They were rocking the Dickies, Nike Cortez and shaving off their heads, much like their Chicano counterparts. These “cholo” aesthetics echo a particular history tied to the marginalization *and* resistance of second-generation Mexican American youth in the 1930s and 1940s (Vigil, 1988, 6). We can certainly see parallels with refugee and immigrant youth emerging from war, displacements, and poverty from countries like Vietnam, Cambodia, and El Salvador, as they appropriate (and re-articulate) the stylistic dimension of “cholo” youth and counter-cultural speech patterns associated with the black working-class (Kelley, 2000).

Stylistically, many Vietnamese immigrant youth in the 1980s and 1990s favored a more “GQ” look, as opposed to “street.” They wore slacks and dress shirts bought from shops and boutiques in ethnic enclaves like Chinatown or Little Saigon. Vietnamese immigrant youth were influenced by the “New Wave” dress and style that were coming out from Europe beginning in the early 1980s. They were also listening to music that was distinctly from the other side of the globe. Melo states, “Those gangs were like FOBs [“Fresh of the Boat”]. We were like new style...coming out looking like eses...and they hated us.” Melo and his “1.5” and second-generation cohort made a conscious effort to move away from what was associated with the Vietnamese refugee experience. For U.S.-socialized Vietnamese youth, dressing like the “eses” and talking “black” were “symbolic forms of resistance” (Hebdige, 1979, 80). It coincided with the

rise of U.S. gang culture and a response to the “War on Youth” campaigns in California in the 1990s (Pintado-Vertner and Chang, 2000).

P-Dog, Melo, and their homeboys were perceived as “disgraceful” by other Asian American gangs in the area because they did not follow “Asian” gang convention. The Chicano gangs gave them a hard time too, because they did not understand why these “Chinos” were emulating their dress and style. P-Dog makes it clear that it is more than just dress and style. He states: “A lot of people these days...they think it’s a style. But basically, it’s not a style, it’s a way of life... A lot of kids [are] wearing Cortez, Dickies...whatever. It’s how you feel. Like, I am 30 years old, I’m still wearing Dickies. I’m still wearing the jacket representing [Asian Boyz], but I’m not part of it anymore.” Even though P-Dog’s role has evolved in his group, he dresses the way he always has for the last twenty years. This is not going to change any time soon because it is part of his identity.

Even though P-Dog, Melo, and others were the first generation in the San Gabriel Valley to dress like the “eses,” the “choloization” of Asian American youth has been going on for awhile. Along with the “New Wave” style, I remember seeing “Asian cholos” while growing up in Chinatown in the early 1980s. These youth tend to be second and third-generation Chinese American youth, socialized in the streets of Los Angeles. They were influenced by Chicano gang aesthetics (including car culture) in the area. To go back even further, Filipino youth gangs in the 1970s around the mid-Wilshire/Temple area were highly influenced by the “cholo” aesthetics, including dress, graffiti, and tattoos. The precursor to the Temple Street gang (TST) in Downtown Los Angeles was reportedly started by Mexican and Filipino youth in the 1920s and 1930s (Alsaybar,

1999, 122). Nevertheless, it was not until post-1965 immigration legislation that we see the emergence of Asian ethnic-specific “street” gangs.

Violence and Schooling

Schools have always been sites of ideological and political devices for the U.S. state apparatus. Schools are also sites for group socialization. Young people come to congregate for most of the day, five days a week, in schools. It is only natural that gang formation emerges from these institutions, given that this is where youth spend most of their time. Hence, gang formation and schooling are intimately linked in the narratives of P-Dog, Melo, and Linh. Their schooling experiences are informed by class, gender, and spatial differences, which are crucial factors in their gang involvement. A significant reason why P-Dog, Melo and their friends came together as a gang is because they got tired of being bullied by older Chicano gang members in school and on the streets. He tells of incidents of where Lomas (perhaps the largest Chicano gang in the area) gang members were trying to steal his bicycle and pushed him and friends around while they were playing basketball at the park or walking home from their junior high school. They got “hit up” and asked if they belonged to a gang.

Melo and his AB homeboys materialized as a gang in their freshman year at Mark Keppel high school in Alhambra. Melo states, “Once you hit high school, everything changes. You have all these friends around you, ...[a] totally different environment, you know what I mean. It’s like all the friends that I grew up with join gangs. And so you know, I grew up with them, too... so I got involved.” In addition to being in conflict with other Asian gangs at school, they also battle with Chicano gangs. During the 1980s and 1990s, these “race fights,” or rather, racialized conflicts, were common occurrences

at various schools in Southern California. These conflicts are still happening in some Southern Californian schools given dramatic demographic and economic changes and sometimes shifting class relations in some areas. Some of these incidents involving Asian and Latino students occurred in Long Beach (Haldane, *Los Angeles Times*, 1991); Los Angeles's Lincoln Heights (Quintanilla, *Los Angeles Times*, 1995), Orange County's Little Saigon area (Rivera and Lichthblau, *Los Angeles Times*, 1991; Gomez, *Los Angeles Times*, 1991; Welborn, *Orange County Register*, 2006), and the San Gabriel Valley (Hamilton, *Los Angeles Times*, 1993; Tawa, *Los Angeles Times*, 1993).

The P-Dog gives a demographic overview (though not totally accurate, but does give a good sense of the area) of the on-going racialized tension between and within populations at his high school and the general San Gabriel Valley area:

The "race fight" is Asians and Mexicans... basically the whole school. Where we live in the San Gabriel Valley... is 48% Asian, 48% Mexican, 2% black, 2% white... even if it is 2% white or black. I mean, I give 1% each even. That's the luck of the draw, you know. If you see a black guy or white man walking around our neighborhood, it's like they're lost or they are looking for they live. You see the driver next to you is a Mexican or Asian. So when you're talking about the "race fight" thing, that's how it is. You take any two groups... they can be best of friends... stuck in the hall... stuck in a room for a whole day, they're going to start bugging each other.

Over the years, these "race fights" between Asian and Latino students, at varying degree, occurred at all three high schools (Mark Keppel, San Gabriel, and Alhambra) in the district. Gang members are involved, but by no means are they the only ones.

One of the more memorable "race fights" occurred in February of 1992 when Asian and Latino students were in conflict with each other at Mark Keppel high school in Alhambra. The tension "boiled over" in two days of fistfights as five Asian and seven Latino students were arrested (Hamilton, *Los Angeles Times*, 1993). The school was in

lock-down, as students were not allowed to leave their classrooms. The police confiscated seven knives, a piece of sharpened glass, and a loaded gun. School official expelled 24 students and recommended that those arrested be prosecuted for hate crimes. Melo, then a freshman, and his gang called truce with other Asian gangs at the school. They teamed up and went at it with the “eses” from Lomas. Melo indicated that Chicano gangs made it a “racial thing.”

The 1992 conflict at Keppel was a sign of things to come for Melo and his homeboys. He got heavily involved with his Asian Boyz gang over the summer of 1993 and stopped attending class. Once reinstated that fall at Keppel, they went at it again with Lomas. After Melo got “hit up” by a number of them, they decided to meet at a park down the street from the high school where Melo and his homeboys did a drive-by on Lomas members. The shooting got him locked up for a year. The choices that Melo, P-Dog and their gang made as high school students changed their lives forever. The year Melo was incarcerated and P-Dog was sent to live with an uncle out of state, a number of their homeboys got locked up, many of whom are doing double life sentences with no parole for murder. Luis Rodriguez, author of *Always Running, La Vida Loca: Gang Days in L.A.* (1993), and former Lomas member, talks about racialized tension between Chicano and white students when he was a Mark Keppel student in the 1970s. In the early 1980s, tensions were brewing between U.S.-born and newly-arrived refugee and immigrant students. Racialized conflict and gang violence went to another level in the 1990s, as it coincides with the accessibility to high-powered firearms.

P-Dog and Melo’s schooling experiences are similar since they went to neighboring high schools in the area with other Asian and Latino students. Linh’s

schooling was at a private Catholic school with other middle-class white students until her last two years of high school, when she went to school with other Asian and Latino students in Westminster. The Asian students at her high school were primarily Vietnamese, since Little Saigon is around the corner. There were on-going tensions with Vietnamese/Asian and Latino students in this area as well (Rivera and Lichtblau, *Los Angeles Times*, 1991). Linh was the only one from her former gang that went on to obtain a college degree. She led a dual life as both “model student” in class and “gang-banger” outside of school. She struggled with the expectations of being a young Vietnamese American woman and the roles ascribed to it by her parents and others:

I was doing that at such an early age because I wanted to fit in. So at school I acted a certain way. With my friends, I’m going to act a certain way. I’m going to be tough. I’ve always been really tough, but at the same time, I have always been very weak...trying to figure out who I was. And I didn’t have anyone to talk to. I didn’t even how to talk to someone. You know, I had counselors at school, but can you imagine going to them and telling them, “Hey I’m in a gang.” I know it’s wrong, but it’s fun. I’m doing it. She’s going to look at me and have a totally different perception. I mean, I was a good student.

Melo was able to get his high school diploma after moving out to Arizona to finish his junior and senior year. P-Dog did not finish high school. He received his education on the streets.

Racism on the Streets

On the streets, P-Dog and his homeboys have to deal with racism and discriminatory acts by the local police departments and other gang members. According to P-Dog, their relationship with the police and the Asian Gang Task Force, in particular, has always been contentious. Invariably, the first thing the police ask them is, “Who do you roll with?” and proceed to ask them to lift up their shirts to check for tattoos and cigarette burns, signifiers of Asian gang affiliations back in the day. Given the rise of

Asian American youth gangs in Southern California since the 1980s, some police departments created ethnic-specific task forces. Asian Gang Task Force was set up in multiple locations with visible Asian American gang culture, from Los Angeles to Long Beach, down to Orange County, and back to both valleys (San Gabriel and San Fernando).

In 1987, the Law Enforcement Communication Network and the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department began to develop a large database known as the Gang Reporting, Evaluation, and Tracking System (GREAT) to "collect, store, and analyze personal information about suspected gang members" (Pintado-Vertner and Chang, *Colorlines*, 2000). Also known as Cal-Gang, the database contains more than 300,000 names and is used across the country (10). Since Asian American youth gangs are highly mobile and have satellite groups in other parts of the U.S., this form of surveillance did impact them tremendously. As Pintado-Vertner and Chang state (2000), these databases "indiscriminately" criminalize youth and identifying them as suspects before any crime has been committed (10). It is unfathomable to think that wearing FUBU jeans and being related to a gang member qualifies someone as a "gang member" in some states.

These gang databases, no doubt, impact "youth of color" in California. However, given the adhesive value of the "model minority myth," Asian American youth and criminality are not necessarily linked. The dominant discourse assumes that "racial profiling" happens to black and Latino youth only, but as Melo's describes, racialization occurs across the board, regardless of phenotype. This is especially the case for those who might be perceived as "gang members." Melo states, "They [the police] gave us a hard time. Every time we go cruise around...they see a car full of Asians, they'll pull us

over.” Melo continues, “...Back then when we were young, we didn’t know the law.” They would search the car and would find something illegal.” Melo and P-Dog often mentioned that the all cops would give them a difficult time, especially the Asian American police officers. Melo thought they would give him “juice” since they are of Asian descent. On the contrary, the Asian American officers gave them the hardest time. Melo explains, “To them, we’re a disgrace to their ethnicity. The fact that we’re Asians and we’re out gang-banging, it makes them look bad. They would talk shit to us all the time, saying, ‘You guys are a disgrace’. They would say that to us, ‘What the hell are you guys doing? The Asian cops would tell us that.”

As Daniel Tsang (1993, 1994, 1995) and Chorswang Ngin (1997) document in the work with Vietnamese/Asian American students in Orange County, many of these youth unwillingly had their photos taken and are linked to gangs. Ngin (1997) articulates in her ethnographic findings that “Asian youths are racialized through a process of signification based on their fashion and who they ‘hang out’ with.” She further notes that “labels such as ‘gang members’ and ‘gang associate’ and signifiers such as hair styles and clothes have become the new ‘community’ criteria for defining gang membership (<http://sun3.lib.uci.edu/dtsang/AsianYouth>, accessed 7/20/07). A number of Vietnamese/Asian youth have been criminalized through this racializing mechanism, as their mugs and files are in the local police departments’ gang database.

Melo remembers this happening to him as a young teenager: “Back then when we were 14, 15 [years old], they took all kinds of pictures of us... pictures of our tattoos, we didn’t know that. But now I know they can’t do that. Now I know the law. It’s kind of too late, but whatever. Pretty much, they would manipulate our rights without us

knowing.” Although Melo is now aware of his rights, he is also aware of the unequal power dynamic between law enforcement and gangs:

That’s pretty dirty what the cops did. I mean, we didn’t know our rights. They took advantage of us... Nothing we could do about it because we’re gang members. You know, who’s going to win...their words against ours. They’re going to say they got probable cause, in which case they don’t. They’re going to say that. Of course, they’re going to win because they’re cops. So, therefore, we were taken advantage of...as gangsters...being kids, too, you know.

Melo attempts to make sense of the tension of Asian American police officers, in particular:

It’s like we were raised differently than the cops, you know what I mean. We didn’t have nothing. I pretty much...they were raised differently. They didn’t grow up where we grew up. So, it’s different, you know. They grew up...they probably have straight A’s. We grew up, you know what I mean, gang-banging. So it’s kinda different. They see us differently and we see them different at that time.

P-Dog talks about the racialization of gang members in the 1990s in the contexts of anti-youth legislation which include the Street Terrorism Enforcement and Prevention (STEP) Act of 1988 and Proposition 184, also known as “three strikes and you’re out” law. Under the STEP Act, gang membership is punishable up to three years. So in addition to doing time for the offense, gang members do extra time for violent offense. The STEP Act allows for law enforcement to come up with a set of criteria to determine who is and is not a “gang member.” P-Dog were very aware of laws created to criminalize his status as a “gang member” and his Asian Boyz gang, in particular: “It’s not that easy. You get labeled. You’re from AB (Asian Boyz), you get labeled, man...especially with the law, too. Back then, Pete Wilson put the 18th Street law for the Mexicans...they put the Asian Boyz law for us.” Here, P-Dog is referring to gang injunction placed on “high-profile” gangs in California, including 18th Street and his own

gang. This includes getting extra time because of one's association with the Asian Boyz. Both P-Dog and Melo are two-strike felons. Should they receive another "strike," they will have to do time in the state penitentiary (Gilmore, 2007).

Racialization from Within

As they are racialized and labeled by the police, they also racialize each other. Due to the fact that groups like the Asian Boyz encompass ethnicities (Vietnamese, Vietnamese-Chinese, Cambodian, and Filipino), the process of racialization is apparent as they do not know what to make of each other. P-Dog explains:

Even though we're family, we're from the same thing, there's always that line you don't pass, you know. They're [Cambodians and Filipinos] always going to look at you differently because of your race. You look at them differently because you don't know the fuck they're saying to you. Like us down here [W. San Gabriel Valley], we gangbang the Asian way...not like [Asian gangs in] Long Beach. "Long Beach" gangbang like Mexicans and blacks...stand around street corner and shit, taking care of blocks, you know. Why take care of one block when you can take care of the whole neighborhood, the whole city, you know?

The fact that they belonged to an umbrella moniker like the "Asian Boyz" does not guarantee that they will get along with one another. Asian American youth gangs do not necessarily claim "turf" (as traditionally defined), perhaps for the exception of, as P-Dog noted above, Asian gangs (primarily Cambodian, but also include Vietnamese, Laotian, etc.) in Long Beach.

The El Monte pool-hall shooting in December of 1993 added more fuel to the fire that continues to burn today. It was on the night when a Wah Ching member, Chung Lewong Yang (aka "China Dog") shot and killed Lea Mek (aka "Kicker"), an Asian Boyz member in a brawl between the two youth groups (<http://www.amw/fugitives/case>, accessed 2/18/08). The shooting received a tremendous amount of exposure from various

media-service outlets because it was caught on video and due to the violent content. It continues to be notoriously popular on alternative media like You Tube some fifteen years later. This was a highly significant moment in their “beef,” but most members would have a hard time understanding how and why such conflict exists in the first place.

Melo was “pretty pissed” when he heard one of his homeboys was fatally shot by a WC rival while in prison. After this incident, different Asian Boyz cliques came together as an umbrella group, as they sought retaliation on Wah Ching (WC) gang members. Melo states, “...all the homeboys from Long Beach, Van Nuys, Chinatown, out here [W. San Gabriel Valley]...every night, they went looking for them (WC), you know.”

When asked that Wah Ching also has multiple cliques or “sides,” Melo indicated that “it didn’t matter...WC was WC at the time. After awhile, you know, they did too much stuff...it all caught up, you know.” In reflecting on his time in prison: “I think if I know what I know now, I would probably just walk. But if I would have walked, I would not be here right now [doing the interview], pretty much.” During an 18 month stretch between 1995 and 1996, police indicated that the Asian Boyz was connected to a dozen murders (<http://www.amw/fugitives/case>, accessed 2/18/08). A number of the Westside Asian Boyz members are doing life and a few dead from gang retaliations, a car accident, and a dispute with the local police.

CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION

Because it is a distortion of being more fully human, sooner or later being less human leads the oppressed to struggle against those who made them so. In order for this struggle to have meaning, the oppressed must not, in seeking to regain their humanity (which is a way to create it), become in turn oppressors of the oppressors, but rather restorers of the humanity in both (Paulo Freire, 1993, 26).

This dissertation speaks to the need to consider experiences of Vietnamese American youth gang members like P-Dog, Melo, and Linh in order to theorize racialization and class formation in a changing world. More important, it is an attempt to restore their humanity. I begin in Chapter 1 with tracing youth gang formation and history by locating myself in the research. I discuss the formation of Vietnamese and Southeast Asian youth gangs. Although I provide specificity to the research, I can not discuss Vietnamese American youth without situating them in larger Southeast Asian and Asian American contexts because they evolved from similar circumstances. In Chapter 2, I provide a detailed analysis of the Vietnamese exodus to the diaspora. I examine Vietnamese migration patterns in the U.S. and then proceed to situate this population within the context of U.S. empire and racialized class formations/inequalities in Southern California. In Chapter 3, I engage the theoretical analysis of “race” and racism and describe the historical and contemporary context for the racialization of U.S. Asians. I focus on Asian American identity, identity politics, and the limitations of pan-ethnicity and “race

relations” paradigm. In Chapter 4, I discuss and critique the methodological traditions of social science research, as a way to locate myself theoretically. I proceed with my discussion of theory as method and data sources, as I employ a critical narrative methodology.

In Chapter 5, I present the narratives of three interviewees who were former and current Vietnamese and ethnic Chinese-Vietnamese gang members. In Chapter 6, I offer an analysis of the three narratives. Certain themes that reoccurred in all three narratives include the politics of migration; questions of space, labor, and class; representation and racialization; and contesting the urban/suburban divide. These themes lead to understanding new and different articulations of youth gangs in U.S contemporary life. Here in Chapter 7, I make conclusions and recommendations regarding the Vietnamese/Asian American youth gang phenomenon in Southern California, as a means of generating further understandings of national policy implications and consequences. I discuss the issue of deportation and question of citizenship. Here, I am reminded that this dissertation is fundamentally a humanizing project.

Deportation and the Question of Citizenship

I study the idea of citizenship not only in the idiom of rights articulated in the legal context, but also in the context of the ways in which a set of common (in this case American) values concerning family, health, social welfare, gender relations, and work and entrepreneurialism are elaborated in everyday lives (Aihwa Ong, 2003, xvii).

As we close in on the first decade of the 21st century, the Vietnam War and the refugee exodus from Southeast Asia in the 1970s and 1980s seem like a distant memory.

This history is conveniently placed on the shelf as the U.S. (and the rest of the world) focuses on another region. Our collective historical memory (or rather amnesia) deceives us in thinking that we, too, can close the book and move on to the next chapter. Although the book might be closed, the consequences of war will always be felt by those directly and indirectly impacted by this legacy. Malcolm X (1963) referred to the “chickens coming home to roost,” which T. J. English (1995) applied to the impact of U.S. foreign policy in Vietnam, when discussing Vietnamese-Chinese gangs in New York City: “U.S. foreign policy had come home to roost, and the untidy residue of the Vietnam War had taken on yet another ugly, unexpected permutation” (9). Indeed, it is U.S. foreign policy and intervention in Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos that are “coming home to roost,” manifested in gang violence on the streets of California and in other parts of the U.S. We also see this happening with youth coming from similar geo-political histories (e.g., Salvadorans, Armenians).

The question of citizenship—or more specifically, deportation—is a major source of concern and stress for P-Dog, Melo, and others in similar situations. Given their criminal records, they are not eligible for naturalization. They are very worried that they might get deported back to Vietnam, a country they have not been to since they left as toddlers. This is something Linh does not have to worry about since she is U.S.-born. In recent years, the U.S. government has made concerted efforts to deport gang members and other immigrant youth with criminal records back to their countries of origin. Countries like El Salvador and Cambodia have taken youth back with criminal records since the mid to late-1990s (Guerra Vasquez, 2005; Chow, 2005). P-Dog, Melo, and other Vietnamese American youth are cognizant that they might be the next to go, as the

U.S. and Vietnam are “normalizing” relations. Many of these youth have been socialized on the streets in California, as they can potentially import U.S. gang culture back to their countries of origin. Many have little or no recollections of their time in their old countries having left at a very young age. For them, home is Los Angeles, Long Beach, San Gabriel Valley, California, and the U.S. This is all they know.

The question of deportation is always in the back of their minds. Both P-Dog and Melo have two strikes on them. They understand that getting another strike can send them to the state penitentiaries or get them deported through Immigration and Naturalization Services. Melo was three months away from having his juvenile record sealed. As he explains:

My mistake was I didn't seal it. I didn't seal my record. When I turned 18, I should have sealed my record. It came back to haunt me...when I got arrested again back in 2003 for drugs. Automatically after 10 years, your juvenile record seals by itself automatically...even if you don't seal it. It was 9 years and $\frac{3}{4}$ and I got arrested. And then, my juvenile record, the DA (district attorney) brought it back up and gave me a strike for it. Now, I have a strike from my juvenile record which I should have sealed after I turned 18...which I messed up. I was messed up on drugs at that time. Actually, I blamed myself for not doing it. It came back to haunt me.

This specter of “haunting” is always with current *and* former gang members. Even when one no longer claims membership or is “active,” this history is always part of their lives. P-Dog states, “To tell you the truth when I grow up, I just want to live. Living's hard... just live. That's what I'm doing now...just live, man. Next day you could just get shot... get killed...don't matter. That's how I see life as, to tell you the truth.” Here, P-Dog describes his desire to fully live without having to constantly watch over his back. Unfortunately, for most youth who are and were heavily involved with gang life, this is not an option.

Writing Back/Talking Back

The Birmingham School (1982) discusses “writing back” in much of the post-colonial and anti-colonial literature of the Centre for Contemporary Studies (CCCS). Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1997) offers the notion of “researching back,” which “[involves] a ‘knowingness of the colonizer’ and a recovery of ourselves, an analysis of colonialism, and a struggle for self-determination” (7). I attempt to do the same in my analysis and articulation of Vietnamese American youth gangs. I do this by recovering our collective history (mine and the interviewees). Hence, the need to theoretically understand racialization and class formation is necessary in articulating populations that have been racialized, demarcated, and colonized in different ways. This is most evident in cities like Los Angeles, where there have been tremendous demographic shifts and economic changes for the last four decades. It is fundamental that we understand the political economy of migration and racism that are prominent in Southern California and elsewhere. However, it has been extremely difficult due to the essentialized notions of identity and the overwhelming influence and power of capitalism. By nature, capitalism homogenizes the human experience, while intensifying competition for jobs and other privileges, resources, and opportunities. We see this materialized in the streets. The emergence of youth gangs does not happen in a vacuum.

In addition, the implementation of “divide and conquer” strategies has worked effectively to disengage critical questions around racism—with real consequences such as the criminalization of youth, residential/economic segregation, unemployment and under-employment, labor, and immigration policies. “Divide and conquer” strategies further create divisions amongst and within racialized populations. This is dialectically

manifested in the streets, prison system, and in our schools. As such, the capitalist imperatives that created the social conditions which precipitated inter-ethnic tensions—and specifically youth gang conflicts in the first place—are oftentimes not part of the discussion. The real problems of social and economic inequalities and the consequences of representation on racialized bodies in Southern California are, therefore, left unattended. Hence, my research speaks to the need to consider experiences of Vietnamese American youth gang members like P-Dog, Melo, and Linh in the attempt to theorize racialization and class formation in a changing world.

Humanization

But while both humanization and dehumanization are real alternatives, only the first is the people's vocation. This vocation is constantly negated, yet it is affirmed by that very negation. It is thwarted by injustice, exploitation, oppression, and the violence of the oppressors; it is affirmed by the yearning of the oppressed for freedom and justice, and by their struggle to recover their lost humanity (Paulo Freire, 1993, 26).

Freire's (1993) words above succinctly describe the struggles that P-Dog, Melo, Linh, and other former and current youth gang members have to contend with on a daily basis. They struggle to fully live because of the conditions surrounding them, including both real and symbolic violence, racism, and marginalization. P-Dog reflects on his "crazy life." He states, "We grew up too quick. Basically, [because of] our lifestyle, we got to man up before we had to man up. We could have been kids still, but we didn't act like kids. We're acting like young crazy adults, trying to run the world. We didn't have a chance to be regular kids... like join the basketball team or whatever you want to call it, you know." P-Dog and others like him got involved early in junior and high schools. The choices and decisions that they made (arguably, perhaps they did not have a choice)

cost them dearly, as a number of them are locked up, dead, or just trying to survive. They continue to negotiate with gang involvement and cope with the pain of losing friends and their own innocence at such a young age. In many respects, they continue to struggle—and hope—for a more humanizing world, as they yearn for freedom and justice.

Educational/Social Policy Implications and Material Consequences

Ki-Taek Chun (1995) does an excellent job of articulating some of the educational implications and ramifications that Asian Americans face as a consequence of being the “model minority” and having “honorary white” status. One consequence is the pattern of occupational segregation that “delimits the range of occupational aspirations and choices of Asian American youths” (96). There is a general trend for Asian Americans to be over-concentrated in certain areas such as engineering and biophysical sciences where “quantitative, nonlinguistic skills are at a premium, and of avoiding other fields like social sciences, humanities, and the arts, whose primary vehicle for professional activities is with linguistic communication or interpersonal contact” (Chun, 1995, 105). This form of self-imposed exclusion and segregation is a result of past discrimination and the ongoing racialization(s) that exist for Asian Americans in the schools and out on the streets.

It is not by coincidence that Asian Americans are concentrated in certain fields. As Chun notes in Wong’s case study (1977) of Chinese American youth in California, occupational aspirations are greatly influenced by their “fear of economic competition and racial prejudice, and the resultant discrimination” (105). In essence, their occupational aspirations and choices are, in many ways, determined for them by the

racialized world in which they lived. It is an adaptive response to their social realities where the concern is more related to survival than a reflection of aptitude, preference, and open choice. In the context of education, for example, teachers, administrators, counselors and other professionals must not perpetuate the existing stereotypes when working with Asian American students or any student for that matter. There are great pressures to assimilate when survival is at stake, as was the case for the parents and grandparents of these Asian American subjects, which generates much resentment toward the self and toward others. This can potentially lead to a sense of lost identity and even self-hate.

Subsequently, Vietnamese and Southeast Asian refugees from the 1970s and 1980s and their American-born children added another layer to the already complex racialized politics. I examined the Vietnamese American experience in relations to empire-building by the U.S.; its subsequent mass migration to the “imperial center”; the question of class for different “waves”; the heterogeneity of “Vietnamese” America, and how Vietnamese bodies are racialized as both “subaltern” and “emblematic victim” during the war and in contemporary U.S.; and lastly, Asian American class formations in the Los Angeles area since 1975. These issues are highly significant in the exploration/analyses of the formation and racialization of Vietnamese American youth gangs in Southern California and in understanding schooling in capitalist America. As has been noted, the formation of these Vietnamese American “subalterns” (youth gang members) is inextricably linked to war and empire, migration patterns, political economy of racism, and the emergence of ethnic communities.

The rhetoric of Asian Americans as a “model minority” and Vietnamese as the “good refugee” has been harmful in its distortion of the complex issues that take place in immigrant and racialized communities. The simplistic representation, as pointed out earlier, of Asian American youth as “whiz kids,” “over-representation” in higher education, and the ability of Asian Americans to “overcome” any obstacles to excel and flourish, reinforced the idea of “America” as the “land of opportunity” and “refuge for democracy.” Such one-dimensional distortions have definitely cast a “pernicious shadow” over those who have not done as well, including Asian American youth who drop out of school, get caught up in the juvenile system, and struggle with adolescent life (Umemoto and Ong, 2006, v). Indeed, these are some of the central issues in the dissertation. This alone points to a longstanding need for research and analysis on Asian Americans that examines substantively the problems, concerns, and hardships, faced by this population, especially its youth.

This study attempts to fill some of the gaps that currently exist in the literature on Asian American youth today. It is my intent to examine a variety of related issues, within the context of a critical policy analysis and ethnic studies. I consider how the presence of Vietnamese American youth impacts social, public, and educational policy. To what extent are policies taken into consideration when looking at refugee communities and, more specifically, when examining inequalities in education? Can a disaggregate data be useful for Asian Americans? What are the results of an essentialized identity? How does this hinder our quest for justice and economic democracy?

The “over-representation” of Asians in U.S. higher education and other arenas is conceptualized within a “race” discourse. As a result, this analysis is reproduced in how

we think about Asian American populations. The use of “race” as a central unit of analysis has proved debilitating for many. Missing from much of these statistics is a lack of rigorous analysis in understanding the particularities of different groups. This is evident when we talk about schooling of Vietnamese Americans. For example, James Diego Vigil, Tomson H. Nguyen, and Jesse Cheng (2006) discuss how in some high schools in the Westminster/Santa Ana/Garden Grove area in California, the dropout rates for Vietnamese American students are more than thirty percent. This data contradicts simplistic notions of Asians in the U.S. More important, it calls for more specificity, greater interrogation, and critical analysis. Clearly, there is a need to understand immigration policy, labor, racism, and class contextually. The material implications and consequences are real, as reflected through our theorizing and policy-making. Hence, we cannot begin to talk about educational policy issues and their impact on Vietnamese American youth, without understanding both the differences and complexities of the historical, political, and economic trajectories that shape the lives and academic experiences of students from Vietnamese and Asian American communities. This dissertation attempts to take one step in that direction.

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