**Title**

Beyond Usual Suspects: The Racial Paradox of Asian American and Pacific Islander Gang Affiliated Youth

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**Author**

Le, Annie

**Publication Date**

2021

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

Los Angeles

Beyond Usual Suspects:

The Racial Paradox of Asian American and Pacific Islander Gang Affiliated Youth

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

in Education

By

Annie Le

2021

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION


Beyond Usual Suspects:

The Racial Paradox of Asian American and Pacific Islander Gang Affiliated Youth


By


Annie Le

Doctor of Philosophy in Education

University of California, Los Angeles, 2021

Professor Robert T. Teranishi, Chair

Youth gangs have been described as one of the most important urban youth issues in society today. Given the permeance of street gangs in economically marginalized communities inhabited by predominantly people of color, youth gang formation, membership, and criminalization carry racial connotations. Compared to other racial groups, however, far less is known on Asian American and Pacific Islander (API) youth gangs, despite long standing gang presence in this community. The absence of APIs in this topic of inquiry implies their experiences can be understood in the absence of racial context which contributes to their problematic representation as the "model minority."

Drawing on Asian critical race theory, this qualitative study utilizes a critical phenomenological approach to explore how 30 gang affiliated API youth understand their racial identity and experiences through in-depth phenomenological interviews. Building on an

ethnographic pilot study of Asian American gang affiliated youth in a schooling context, findings

from this study suggest the unique origin and evolution of API youth involvement in gangs.

Specifically, there is a generational distinction when it came to gang membership. Findings also

demonstrate API youth rely on various strategies of racial identity construction through their

gang affiliation. For example, they embrace racialized stereotypes and ascribe racial/ethnic

meaning to cultural practices to make meaning of their identity. Finally, findings reveal API

youth adopt the "schoolboy gangster" paradox to navigate the tensions of their racial and gang

identity. This experience produces a double life where they play the role of being a devoted son

at home and in schools to hide their identity as gang members.

This study provides empirical contribution to a group overlooked in gang subculture and

bridges the theoretical gap between youth gangs and racial categorization. Additionally, this

study offers implications for policy and practice in the field of urban education committed to

racial equity and social justice.

This dissertation of Annie Le is approved.

H. Samy Alim

Subini Annamma

Daniel G. Solórzano

Robert T. Teranishi, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2021

**Dedication**


To my brother and favorite gang member, Phillip



*In loving memory of Anthony Nguyen*

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**Vita**

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## EDUCATION

2020        Ph.D.   University of California, Los Angeles
                    Candidate in Social Science & Comparative Education

2015        M.A.    New York University
                    Steinhardt School of Culture, Education, and Human Development
                    Higher Education and Student Affairs

2013        B.A.    University of California, Santa Cruz
                    Feminist Studies
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## PUBLICATIONS

**Peer Reviewed Journal Articles**
Cabral, B., Annamma, S., **Le, A.**, Harvey, B., Wilmot, J., & Morgan, J. (Forthcoming).
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Annamma, S., Cabral, B., **Le, A.**, Harvey, B., Wilmot, J., & Morgan, J. (Under review). Prison
schooling: Softening youth    prison education and multiscalar abolition. *American Educational
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minority serving institutions  (MSIs). *Innovative Higher Education.*

**Book Chapters**

Teranishi, R. T., **Le, A.,** & Gutierrez, R. A. E. (Forthcoming). Anti-Asian racism in the COVID era: Implications for   higher education. *Edited volume of book.*


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faculty discrimination: Why does it matter?. *Edited volume of book.*

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## SELECTED CONFERENCE PRESENTATIONS


2021            "Asian American gang affiliated youth and the 'model gangster' paradox." Paper
                presented at the annual meeting of the International Congress of Qualitative
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                "Refusing criminalization in carceral classrooms." Paper presented at the annual
                meeting of the American Educational Research Association. Virtual.

                "Education, The Carceral State, and the Case for Abolition." Paper presented at
                the annual meeting of the University of Pennsylvania's Ethnography in Education
                Research Forum. Virtual.

2020            "Model minority or model criminal?: The racial imaginings of Asian American
                gang-affiliated youth." Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American
                Sociological Association's Junior Theorist Symposium. Virtual.

2019            "Asian American and Pacific Islander youth and (a critique of) the school-to-
                prison  pipeline." Paper presented at the annual meeting of The Society for the
                Study of Social Problems. New York, NY.

## UCLA TEACHING EXPERIENCE

FA 2021      Teaching Assistant, EDUC M103: Asian American Education and Schooling

FA 2020      Teaching Assistant, EDUC 19: Asian American Pacific Islanders during COVID

SP 2020      Teaching Assistant, EDUC 35: Introduction to Inquiry and Research in Education

SP 2018      Teaching Assistant, EDUC 162: Real Politics of Education

**Chapter 1**

**Introduction**

It was Sy's birthday, a 16-year-old Cambodian American student. As the class sang

"Happy Birthday" to him, he threw up gang signs as an expression of his membership

with an Asian street gang in Long Beach. Some students reacted in laughter; others rolled

their eyes. The teacher, a young Latina woman, sheepishly looked at me and said, "he's

so goofy.

Perhaps the vignette above is puzzling for those who tend to see Asian Americans as

model minorities—a stubborn and persistent term that has portrayed Asian Americans as high

achievers with and few challenges academically, economically, or socially despite their racial

identity (Lee, 2015; Wu, 2001). However, Sy's behavior would be considered typical in any

public school located in concentrated areas of Asian immigrant communities. In California for

example, Asian gangs have been part and parcel to the school community and larger

neighborhood since the migration of Southeast Asian Americans dating back to the 1960s (Lam,

2015). Yet, pilot study I conducted on Asian American gang affiliated students in Long Beach

revealed their racialized identities were contradicting. Despite being gang members, they were

viewed by teachers and staff as what I coin *model gangsters* (a play of the "model minority"

stereotype) due to the perception of their studious nature and respectful attitude towards

authority. Their reputation was not only rooted in qualities historically associated with the

"model minority" stereotype, but it was also in direct contrast to other racial groups. It is in this

tension I designed a dissertation study that explores the racialized identities of Asian American

gang affiliated youth.

# Statement of the Problem

Compared to other racial groups research on Asian American youth gangs is underdeveloped. Given the hegemonic stereotype of Asian Americans as model minorities, the experiences of Asian American gang members seem to be unintelligible, as indicated in the vignette above. The "model minority" stereotype, generally applied to East Asians (those of Chinese, Korean, and Japanese descent) masks the serious inequities of particularly Southeast Asians (those of Cambodian, Hmong, Laotian, Thai, and Vietnamese descent) who face less favorable educational and economic outcomes (Teranishi, 2010). Yet, since gangs are endemic to neighborhoods and communities with racialized economic structures (Hagerdorn & Macon, 1988), Asian Americans living in those same areas are equally affected by violence and gang subculture (Berthold, 1999; Ho, 2008). The National Youth Gang Center reported Asian youth gangs make up 3–6% of the entire gang population (Vigil et al., 2006). In Los Angeles county alone, it is estimated there are approximately 20,000 Asian American gang members (Lam, 2015). Asian American gang phenomenon has received less legitimacy despite California's increasing racialization and criminalization of youth of color. For example, disaggregated data show Southeast Asians make up a large proportion of Asian youth who are overrepresented in the juvenile justice system in California (Bui, 2018; Tam, 2016). Cambodians, Laotians, and Vietnamese youth in Oakland are known to have high arrest rates (Le, 2002).

Research focusing on youth gangs and race have been useful in understanding gangs of one ethnic group in a local context (Rodriguez, 2005), identity construction (Mendoza-Denton, 2014), and criminalization (Rios, 2011). Given the focus of race in gang research, some studies have tried to establish race and ethnicity as factors or indicators of joining a gang (Pyrooz et al., 2010). While these studies reinforce the saliency of race in the gang experience, they seldom

engage in a critical race analysis and consequently produce deficit discourses around communities of color. Additionally, the absence of Asian Americans in this context falsely implies they do not experience issues related to violence and racism.

Literature on Asian American gangs critique the "model minority" stereotype by revealing how this group experiences criminalization. Most studies focus on criminal trends and statistics (Le, 2002) gang formation (Toy, 1992), and gang behavior and activity (Huang & Ida, 2004; Song & Hurysz, 1995). Even though these studies provide crucial cultural context to understand Asian American gang subculture, they remain descriptive without a theoretical analysis. Given studies on gangs are typically in the field of criminology or public health, they tend to utilize quantitative methods and focus more on explanations for gang membership and violent activities. However, this line of research can perpetuate the problematic notion of the "model minority." For example, research suggests broken family structures (Chang & Le, 2005; Feldmeyer & Cui, 2015) or lack strong ties to their culture (Ngo & Le, 2007; Zhou & Bankston, 2006) are factors for joining a gang. The assumption here is then if Asian Americans were more like the "model minority" stereotype, tight knit with their family and in touch with their racial identity, then they would not need to join gangs. My findings on the *model gangster* disrupts this notion, however, by revealing traditional characteristics assigned to Asians are not lost with gang involved youth.

By considering gangs as a site for racial understanding, my project examines how the distinct experiences of Asian American gang affiliated youth can become more integral to our understanding of race and racism. Given the racial connotations gangs carry, gang subculture constituted a platform in which race is performed, articulated, and contested (Omi & Winant, 1994). Specifically, I examine how the racial context of their gang affiliation influences their

sense of API identity and mitigate how they negotiate their panethnic ties to other racial and ethnic groups (Reyes, 2007). This study aims to fill a theoretical gap to render visible how API gang affiliated youth seem to break the rules of normative racial logic (e.g., the "model gangster" paradox).

## Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this study is twofold. First, this study aimed to understand the evolution of API gangs through the perspective of how youth get involved. Participants were asked to reflect on factors that led to their gang involvement which hints at the formation and evolution of ethnic gangs. Much of the literature on gang involvement excludes the voices of those directly impacted, and tend to focus on criminological behavior which reifies deficit perspectives on crime and violence (Cohen, 2017). Since the participants in this study became gang affiliated at various points across three decades, I utilize a generational perspective that offers a deeper analysis on gang culture that considers differences in sociohistorical forces that shape their involvement with gangs.

Second, another purpose of this study was to investigate how participants navigate both their racial and gang identity. I paid particular attention to interactional context that brought meaning to racial categories. In other words, I was interested in when race became meaningful for participants (Murji & Solomos, 2005). My study builds on previous research on API gangs by nuancing their racial categorizations as either model minorities/honorary whites (Cacho, 2012) *or* racially blackened (Ong, 1996). Based on my ethnographic pilot study at an urban high school in Long Beach, I theorize the racialization of Asian American gang involved youth as the "model gangster" paradox: in the same vein as the "model minority" stereotype, Asian American gang affiliated youth were perceived to be studious, obedient to authority, and even sophisticated

with their gang activity. It is in this tension my dissertation highlights youth agency to gain a clearer understanding of the salience of race for API youth involved in gang subculture. Given the racial connotations gangs carry, as "no ethnic community has been immune" (Vigil, 2006, p. 6) to gang formation, gang subculture presents one avenue in which race is performed and contested for API gang involved youth. Driven by the interest of what it means to be both API and gang affiliated, my study is I by the following research questions:

1. How do API gang affiliated youth interpret the origins and evolution of API gangs?

2. How do API gang affiliated youth make meaning of their racial identity?

California makes a compelling backdrop for this study due to the notoriety of Asian American street gangs (Wang, 2002). The concentration of Asian American gangs in cities like San Jose, San Francisco, Oakland, and Los Angeles (historically been known as the "gang capital" of the nation) reflect the sizable Asian American populations in urban and suburban areas, tracing back to historical war and migration patterns (Lam, 2015). In the API community, gangs played a role in the formation of youth culture and identity. In fact, Long Beach is the birthplace of two of the largest Asian youth gangs: Asian Boyz and Tiny Rascal Gang (Moore, 2008).

It is imperative we rethink how Asian American gang affiliated youth are racialized and represented as their stories are part of a larger narrative of urban youth marked by racism and criminalization. The purpose of this research is twofold. First, I call attention to an understudied group that warrant greater attention in scholarly and public discourse. Given that Asian Americans are the fastest growing racial demographic (Teranishi & Kim, 2017) there is a pressing need to fill in some of the gaps around Asian American youth and gang subculture. This need is more urgent knowing youth make up nearly a quarter of that population, and the number

of Asian American youth are expected to increase by nearly 20% from 2010 to 2030 (Zhuo &

Zhang, 2018). Second, by analyzing Asian American gang affiliated youth, I contribute to

contemporary race scholarship. The persistent image of Black and Latino youth as gang

members (Rios, 2011), but not Asian Americans who come from the same impoverished

neighborhoods, falsely assumes Asian Americans do not experience violence, poverty, or racism.

More importantly, this notion perpetuates racist ideologies rooted in anti-Blackness as it

pathologizes Black and Brown communities without critically examining racist structures that

give way to youth gang formations. While this study centers the experiences of gang affiliated

youth, it has larger implications for students who live and attend schools in neighborhoods

affected by poverty, crime, and racism. This research offers an opportunity to give testimony to

the voice and humanity of marginalized students as a political, ideological, and pedagogical

intervention.

### Conceptualization of Terms

I define key terms to provide context for this study. To avoid problematic notions of the

aggregate "API" term (Gogue et al., 2021), I deliberately use Asian, Asian American, and API

distinctively. If I am not referring to Pacific Islander participants, I do not use the panethnic

"API" label to avoid erasing the experiences of Pacific Islanders under the homogenous Asian

American racial category. However, there are instances where their stories aligned with Asian

Americans, which is when I use "API." I also separate the terms "Asians" and "Asian

Americans" to make a distinction not all Asian individuals identify with the political panethnic

identity of "Asian American." I use *Asian Americans* to refer to individuals in my study who

identify as such. Filipinos occupy a complex relationship with the Asian American racial

category (O'Campo, 2016), but for the purpose of this study I include them under Asian

Americans. The terms I use also reflect how the literature I cite used them.

I use "gang affiliated," "gang involvement," and "gang membership" interchangeably as

the definition of a gang has varied throughout history (Fagan, 1989). Thus, it is important to

establish a flexible working definition but not so much it imposes a rigid academic definition and

reifies assumptions about gang membership and affiliation.

I use the term "youth" to refer to all participants, even if they are currently adults since

this study examines the youth experience. When I make distinctions between the adults (25 years

of age or older) in the study from the youth, I refer to the adults as Ogs (i.e., original gangsters)

as homage to their experiences being gang affiliated.

### Theoretical Framework

My study is informed by Asian critical theory (AsianCrit) to tend to the theoretical

oversight surrounding the role of race and racism as a key factor in understanding the racialized

identities and experiences of Asian American gang affiliated youth (Museus & Iftikar, 2013). This

framework helped inform my analysis of how racial meanings are attached to gang affiliation for

Asian American youth, and how these practices reinforce and condition racial meanings through

discusourse and racialized identities. Traditional research approaches on Asian American youth

gangs normalize processes that view race as biological and encourage a deficit approach to racial

differences. The stigmatization of gangs centers whiteness in economic, social, and cultural terms

(Karenga, 2003). Despite racial signifiers of youth gangs, there is an unwillingness in scholarship

to consider their racial impacts. This color evasive approach dismisses gangs as racial in form and

content, failing to consider how gang formation and membership might contribute to racial

hegemony. The critical orientations of AsianCrit thereby generate new insights into how gang

affiliated youth interpret a racialized social structure that shapes their experiences and conditions the meaning of their experiences. Much remains to be learned about how race and racialization is endemic to the experiences of Asian American gang affiliated youth, how they are racialized differently from other races, and how might that differ by Asian ethnic groups.

**Asian Critical Race Theory (AsianCrit)**

AsianCrit was founded upon the tenets of Critical Race Theory in education (CRT), a theoretical framework that investigates the role of race and racism in perpetuating inequality and centers race as a significant factor in student experiences (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2016; Solorzano, 1997). CRT as a framework was first developed in the legal field to challenge racial biases in American law and culture (Bell, 1987; Crenshaw, 1991; Delgado & Stefancic 2001). Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) introduced CRT to the education field, asserting the importance of this framework in analyzing seemingly race neutral policies and practices in U.S. educational institutions and its impact on the experiences of students of color. Education scholars have adopted CRT to "identify, analyze, and transform those structural and cultural aspects of education that maintain subordinate and dominant racial positions in and out of the classroom" (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 25). Solórzano and Yosso (2002) offered the following five tenets for CRT in education: (1) the intersections of multiple oppressions such as race, racism, class, and gender; (2) challenging dominant ideologies pervasive in education research; (3) a commitment to social justice by interrogating research and practices that are harmful to students of color; (4) centering students experiences as a form of legitimate knowledge; and (5) drawing on interdisciplinary approaches to studying race and racism. Additionally, CRT theorists employ storytelling to deconstruct oppressive structures that sustain the dominance of whiteness in U.S. society (Borromeo, 2018; Brown & Jackson, 2013). Since its evolution, CRT has branched out to

theorize the racial experiences of subset populations (e.g., BlackCrit, DisCrit, LatCrit. TribalCrit).

AsianCrit is a tailored framework to inform critical analysis of racism specific to Asian Americans (Chang, 1993; Museus & Iftikar, 2013). While CRT is vital in understanding the racial oppression faced by communities of color, in depth analysis on the experiences of Asian Americans can contribute to more nuanced and holistic understandings of race and racialization. Museus and Iftikar (2013) asserted:

> A critical race framework that is specifically tailored to Asian American populations might prompt analyses to begin with an assumption that these forms of racialization are key mechanisms through which Asian Americans are racialized and are designed to uphold White supremacy, thereby prompting a focus on such deeper questions and analyses. (p. 939)

The multiple and complex racialization processes Asian Americans experience as a result of the historical context that shapes how they view racial oppression, both intra and inter, are yet to be understood. AsianCrit is therefore a useful framework to read, interpret, and disrupt representations of Asian Americans also contributes to a nuanced understanding of race and racism in the United States. AsianCrit specifically focuses on seven tenets:

- Asianization: The homogenous identity of Asian Americans and their representation as model minorities, perpetual foreigners, and yellow perils

- Transnational contexts: The historical, economic, political, and social processes that shape the conditions of Asian Americans (e.g., imperialism, migration)

- (Re)constructive history: The reclaiming of history that reveal racism toward and racial exclusion of Asian Americans

- Strategic (anti)essentialism: The reclaiming of oppressive economic, political, and social context that shape Asian American racial categories and racialization

- Intersectionality: The multiple ways Asian Americans experience systematic oppression

- Story, theory, and praxis: The use of stories and centering marginalized voices to inform theory and practice

- Commitment to social justice: The goal of eliminating racism and other forms of oppression

Tenet one explores the monolithic racial depiction of Asian Americans through problematic stereotypes, such as the "model minority" myth. Though seemingly positive, the "model minority" myth racializes Asian Americans in ways that contribute to racial hegemony by reinforcing whiteness as the standard (Borromeo, 2018).

The second tenet considers how the experiences of Asian Americans are traced back to war, imperialism, and migration. For example, U.S. military interventions during the Indochina War displaced Southeast Asian refugees and subjected them to trauma as a result of violence, genocide, and dispossession (Ngo, 2006; Portes & Rumbaut, 1996; Takaki, 1998). Consequently, high rates of poverty and low educational attainment of Southeast Asians in the U.S. are shaped by these realities.

Tenet three recognizes the invisibility of Asian Americans in producing their own stories and narratives. For the times Asian Americans are represented, certain identities may be more privileged which reifies problematic notions of racial categories.

The fourth tenet troubles the stereotype "all Asians are Chinese" and argues there is no singular Asian American experience. The panethnic identity of Asian Americans conceptually

suffer from remnants of ways in which Southeast Asians, for example, may be subject to multiple levels and processes of racialization.

Tenet five explores how multiple social identities (e.g., in relation to gender, socioeconomic status) shape the experiences and outcomes for Asian Americans. For example, gang affiliated API youth enables distinct racial/ethnic masculine identities that redefine traditional notions of Asian American identities.

Tenet six acknowledges the experiential knowledge of communities of color. Those who are multiply marginalize, such as gang affiliated individuals, are typically not heard. Centering their stories and using it to inform theory and practice is transformational.

The last tenet proposes a commitment to anti-racist ideologies and structures. In considering anti-Blackness, for example, researchers can challenge deficit notions of racial constructions among the Asian American community.

AsianCrit allowed me us to tend to the ideological ramifications of an undertheorized population. Gang affiliated Asian Americans generate insight into how their experiences are influences by transnational projects that shape how they navigate and assign meaning to racial categories maintained through White supremacy. In reproducing racial hierarchy and categories, racial ideologies sustain race by various means. How Asian American gang affiliated youth are "raced" require racial frameworks with ideological justification. AsianCrit afforded me the opportunity to examine the dialectical relationship between racial structures of youth gang formation and racial ideologies of API youth. I center the identities and racialized experiences of Asian American youth to generate the most useful understandings and entrenched ways of thinking about and acting on race.

Though AsianCrit is helpful in understanding the experiences for most of the participants, it only partially speaks to the racialized experiences for Pacific Islander youth. While AsianCrit challenges the Black-white racial binary, Pacific Islander racialization does not fit under the panethnic Asian experience (Reyes, 2018; Wright et al., 2013). Alternatively, I turn to CRT as an interdisciplinary approach to capture the complexities of Pacific Islander youth in this study, specifically Samoan youth. I make this conceptual choice as this framework can capture the tensions with racial meaning-making that disrupt or maintain dominant practices and institutional power (Vaught, 2012).

## Significance of the Study

To date, we have a one dimensional understanding of the lived experiences of Asian Americans, especially those that do not fit the "model minority" stereotype. Historically, their experiences have been viewed in dichotomous ways that portray them as "model minorities" or yellow perils depending on the socio-historic political economy (Lam, 2015). Yet, I find API youth's negotiation of racial identity is much more complex, where they may reproduce racial stereotypes, either about themselves or other races, as a strategy to navigate their racialized experiences. This is a direct result of a white supremacy. Research on API gang subculture must name and analyze racial and social structures that position this group, and others, relative to the "model minority" stereotype. This study's exploration of racial realities for a community that has been depicted in ahistorical and aracialized ways will have implications for research on students of color broadly, particularly those affected by racialized structures of poverty and crime.

In an era of anti-youth legislation, this study offers an analysis for a framework that uses gang culture as pedagogy for racial understanding. I challenge notions that have deemed gangs as unworthy of scholarly examination. Instead, I argue youth gang formation, membership,

and/or affiliation can be used as a pedagogical tool for understanding race and racialization. It is not my intention to romanticize or pathologize gang subculture. Instead, I am arguing the potential for gang subculture as a site of epistemology. Too often, gangs are painted in a negative light and deemed insignificant for intellectual inquiry (Cohen, 2004; Dixon-Roman, 2014). By centering API gang affiliated youth, I provide an empirical contribution of an overlooked population in gang subculture and a theoretical contribution to contemporary race and critical education scholarship.

## Dissertation Overview

The dissertation is arranged in seven Chapters. In Chapter Two, I provide a review of the research literature on how Asian American youth are racialized, specifically in a bifurcated representation as model minorities or problem minorities. Chapter Three presents an overview of the methodological approaches used in this study, which includes the design of the study, sources of data, analytical process, and my positionality as a community based scholar. In Chapter Four, I answer RQ1: *How do API gang affiliated youth interpret the origins and evolution of API gangs?* by exploring the reasons for gang involvement from the perspective of API youth in this study. Chapters Five and Six answers RQ2: *How do API gang affiliated youth make meaning of their racial identity?* Chapter Five focuses on how API youth construct their racial and ethnic identity through their gang affiliation, while in Chapter Six I conceptualize the "school boy" gangster paradox as a strategy for how API youth navigate both their racial and gang identity. Finally, in Chapter Seven I address the discussion and implications for scholars and practitioners alike.

**Chapter 2**

**Review of the Literature**

This chapter provides a review of the scholarship on the racialization of API youth gangs. Asian Americans occupy a unique position in the racial hierarchy, where they are either seen as the "model minority" or "yellow peril" (Lam, 2015). Thus, I begin by assessing literature on Asian Americans' racialization as the "model minority" stereotype, followed by their racialization as the "yellow peril" as these stereotypes are the most dominant frameworks in how we understand the racialized experiences and identities of Asian Americans. Then, I examine how API youth are discussed in a carceral context, such as gang subculture. Finally, I posit another frame of racialization for Asian Americans, the model minority-yellow peril dialectic, to highlight the complexities of Asian American racial category. This review seeks to deepen our understanding of how API youth critically position themselves in U.S. racial discourses.

**Racialization as "Model Minorities"**

**Historical Context of Racial Exclusion**

Researchers have written extensively on the model minority" stereotype since the 1960s (Ngo & Lee, 2007). The idea of Asians as the "model minority" traces back as early as the mid-1800s with the migration of Chinese railroad workers (Chun, 1995). The term regained momentum in the 1960s to describe the overall success of Japanese people in the U.S. most notable was the *New York Times* article by sociologist William Peterson in 1966. He found Japanese people had higher education and income levels along with low rates of crime and "deviant" behavior (Chun, 1995; Lee, 2015; Suzuki, 1977). Later academic articles published throughout the 1960s would support Peterson's conclusion (Kitano, 1969; Schmid & Nobbe, 1965; Yuan, 1969). In the 1980s, psychologist Philip Vernon published a book titled *The*

*Abilities and Achievements of Orientals in North America*, outlining characteristics of Chinese

and Japanese people in U.S. and Canada (Vernon, 1982). He attributed their success to the

following "distinctly Asian" traits: following social norms, being loyal, having strong ties to

family members and ancestors, respecting authority, being academically motivated, and working

hard to uphold family honor (Wu, 2001).

Though the "model minority" suggests Asian Americans are not seen as a racial group

(Astin, 1982; Nakanishi, 1995; Ogbu, 1978), a closer examination of immigration laws and

patterns in a sociohistorical context tells otherwise. For example, the 1882 Chinese Exclusion

Act was the first law to prevent a specific racial group from immigrating to the U.S.

(ChangeLab, n.d.). Similarly, the same source stated in 1904 the first border patrol was set up to

stop Asian immigrants from entering through Mexico. It would not be until 1943 where Asians

would be allowed to become naturalized citizens. The immigration exclusion laws were

dependent on the U.S's political and economic ties to the country of origin. As a reminder, the

first Asian Americans in the U.S. were Chinese migrant workers working in the Central Pacific

Railroad in 1865, until they were accused of "stealing" jobs from Americans (hence the Chinese

Exclusion Act). The Japanese also faced pernicious relationships to the U.S., as illustrated by the

Gentlemen's Agreement in 1907, reducing the number of Japanese immigrants, and the forced

confinement of Japanese Americans in internment camps during World War II.

Histories of inclusive and exclusive migration policies for Asian Americans are

foundational in understanding them as racialized subjects, particularly as it relates to capitalism

(Lowe, 1996). Indeed, the racialization of Asian Americans are rooted in material conditions tied

to the political economy and colonialism (Lam, 2015). This is not to say the racialization of other

groups is not rooted in capitalism, but Asian immigration exclusion laws points to "race as a

contradictory site of struggle for cultural, economic, and political membership in the United States" (Lowe, 1996, p. iv). The "model minority" myth, for example, is based off capitalist characteristics such as being obedient, law abiding, and a good worker. The idea of Asian Americans not relying on federal assistance restores capitalist ideas and moral values, especially against other racial groups. A 1966 article in the *U.S. News and World Report* lauded Asian Americans for their educational and economic mobility, stating: "At a time when it is being proposed 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" (p. 62).

Throughout history, Asian Americans have been racialized depending on the U.S.'s political and economic relationship with the countries of origin. During the Second World War, for example, Chinese, Korean, and Filipino Americans distinguished themselves by wearing cultural clothing or identification markings for fear of being mistaken as Japanese Americans (Lam, 2015). Similarly, during the Cold War era, Japanese Americans avoided being associated with Chinese Americans. In present day, we see the act of distancing oneself from an ethnic group with Muslim and Arab Americans post 9/11. The racialization of Asian Americans therefore, as illustrated by history, should reveal the complexity in which Asian Americans navigate race in the U.S. and the ways in which they have been used as wedge group not just for other races, but within the Asian subgroups as well. The rest of this section details how scholars have critiqued the "model minority" stereotype despite its pervasiveness in race research for Asian Americans.

**Southeast Asian Youth**

Scholars have contested the racialization of the "model minority" as a problematic representation Asian Americans as a homogenous group. Asians represent over 48 different

ethnic groups, yet they are often clumped together in research (National Commission on Asian American and Pacific Islander Research in Education [CARE], 2008). Having a uniform statistic for all Asian ethnicities not only ignores the variance in identity, culture and history but also the immigration pattern. Their immigration history is telling of their acculturation experience, access to resources, and socioeconomic status that shape their academic achievement. While East and South Asians immigrated to the U.S. for job opportunities, Southeast Asians were mainly refugees (Portes & Rumbaut, 2006). They were more likely to immigrate during the third wave (1980s) and have less formal education and lower socioeconomic status, carrying varying levels of trauma from war, displacement, and violence prior to their entry in the U.S.

The variance in immigration history provides an important context for the drastic disparities in education attainment. Disaggregated data reveals among Asian Americans, Southeast Asians are one of the least educated and poorest racial groups throughout the nation (Um, 2003). For example, it was reported 59.6% of Hmongs, 53.3% of Cambodians, 49.6% of Laotians, and 38.1% of Vietnamese adults over the age of 25 do not have a high school diploma compared to 12.5% of Chinese, 14.6 of South Asians, and 8.6% of Japanese adults (Ngo & Lee, 2007; Teranishi, 2007). In fact, the highest drop out rates in California during the 1980s were actually from Southeast Asians at 48% (Siu, 1996). There is a similar disparity for Asian Americans obtaining college degrees. While 42.7% of all APIs over 25 have at least a bachelor's degree, this is only the case for 28.8% of Cambodian Americans, 25.2% of Hmong Americans, 25.6% of Lao Americans, and 34.3% of Vietnamese Americans between 2006–2008 (CARE, 2011). In fact, for that same year period it was reported 65.8% of Cambodians, 66.5% Laotians, 63.2% of Hmong, and 51.1% of Vietnamese Americans have not attended college. These findings are consistent with other studies throughout the past few decades that have provided

empirical evidence Asian American youth have high drop out rates and low grades (Her, 2014; Ngo & Lee, 2007; Noguera, 2003; Pang et al., 2011; Rumbaut, 1985, 2008; Siu, 1996; Uy, 2009).

The disparities in education is parallel when it comes to economic status. In 1990, the poverty levels for Hmong were 64%, Cambodians were 43%, and Laotians were 35% (compared to 30% of the black population and 28% of the Latino population nationally; Teranishi, 2002). When Teranishi (2007) surveyed high school seniors in California, it was reported that, for Cambodian students, 49% of their fathers and 75% of their mothers were unemployed. While 4.2% of Asian Americans need public assistance, 10% of Southeast Asians required assistance from the government (Chang & Lee, 2005).

The statistics on Asian Americans exaggerate their achievements and further draws attention away from differences in achievement between East Asians and Southeast Asians.

In a schooling context, even Asian American youth were under the gaze of the model minority myth. In her book *Unraveling the "Model Minority" Stereotype: Listening to Asian American Youth*, Lee (2004) wrote about how Hmong male students in her study were thought to be harmless, even if they adopt behavior identical to African American or Latino males labeled "at risk." In an ethnographic study at a high school in Texas, Morris (2005) observed when Asian American students violated discipline codes in schools, they were not referred to school officials or even considered as dangerous compared to African American or Latino students. Even when Asian American students were suspected to be gang affiliated, they were still stereotyped as "good students" to teachers and school officials (Endo, 2017).

**Pacific Islander Youth**

Though often aggregated under the panethnic API racial category, Pacific Islanders have disparate trajectories and outcomes than Asian Americans (CARE, 2015). Pacific Islanders refer to those whose origins are from the original places of Polynesia (e.g., Samoan, Native Hawaiian, Tongan), Micronesia (e.g., Guamanian, Chamorro), and Melanesia (e.g., Fijian). As a whole, scholarship specifically on Pacific Islander youth are sparse and typically focus in places in the Pacific as opposed to the continental U.S. Still, Pacific Islander communities have been rapidly growing on the West Coast and Hawaii and the number of Samoan immigrants continues to increase in the United States (Harris & Jones, 2005).

While APIs are linked to high academic attainment, disaggregated data reveals a different reality for Pacific Islanders. For example, in school districts in Oakland and Los Angeles, Pacific Islanders have a 50% drop out rate, three times the national average (CARE, 2015). Further, 62% of Samoans specifically attend college without earning a degree. In terms of employment, Samoan men have one of the highest unemployment rates in the API group at 17%. Research has also suggested Samoan youth are overrepresented in the juvenile court system, both in the U.S. (Stewart, 2005) and in Hawai'i (Mayeda et al., 2006). They are also frequently labeled as gang members (Chesney-Lind et al., 1994). Indeed, scholars have documented the bleak statistics for Samoans in terms of educational, social, and economic challenges (Chesney-Lind et al., 2003; Godinet & Vakalahi, 2009; Yeh et al., 2014). The presence of the mentioned factors warrant an investigation on the racialized experiences of Samoan and Pacific Islander youth.

A recent report by Le and colleagues (2021) found in California, over one in three Pacific Islander students in 11th grade reported being harassed or bullied, the highest rate when compared to other racial groups. Additionally, they were more likely than other racial groups to

be bullied due to racial bias. Unlike Asian Americans, the racialization of Pacific Islanders tend to be invisible or one dimensional. In one of the few studies that discuss how Samoan youth are racialized, Vaught (2012) found they are positioned closely to Black students, which only further pathologized their racial identity.

It is important to note Samoan youth have strong family and cultural ties (Borrero et al., 2010). Oftentimes, this can compete with their academics as they have cultural expectations to take care of their siblings, attend religious events, and help out their parents instead of prioritizing school work (Godinet & Vakalahi, 2009). These competing values can be misinterpreted and portray Samoans as "dumb" and "lazy" (Irwin & Umemoto, 2016). Given the grave challenges Pacific Islanders face, it is crucial research disaggregates data under the API subgroup to get a more accurate depiction of their unique experiences.

## Racialization as "Yellow Peril"

Another popular stereotype for Asian Americans is the "yellow peril." Like the "model minority," this stereotype also originated in 1800s, depicting Chinese laborers as a threat to American workforce and western values (Kawai, 2005). This concept fueled anti-Asian paranoia throughout history using Asians as political scapegoats for national dilemmas and justification for immigration exclusion laws. Further, the imagery of "yellow perils" significantly shaped our understanding of desirable Asian traits and qualities. Asian Americans as the sign of villainy and threat has been portrayed through media, such as figures like Bruce Lee, and historical events like Pearl Harbor and the COVID-19 pandemic.

Emerging from the "yellow peril" stereotype is the positioning of Asian Americans as problem minorities. Comparative racialization portrays Southeast Asian Americans in particular as ideologically blackened (Ong, 1996) due to similar criminalization patterns of Black youth

and other youth of color (Tang, 2015; Vue, 2012). Observing Cambodian male students at a high school in Long Beach, Chhuon (2014) found school staff perceived the students to be lazy, poor, and "ghetto," assumed to be criminals or gang affiliated. The students shared how they received unequal treatment especially when it comes to school discipline policies compared to their White and other Asian counterparts. As a result, they not only feel targeted but a sense of neglect and mistrust from the school. Similarly, Endo (2017) conducted an ethnographic study of "at risk" Hmong high school students in Minneapolis. One student from her study explained school was a negative environment for him because he felt school officials singled him and his Hmong American peers out. He felt constant surveillance from minor infractions that led him to being pushed into developmental classes. More recently, Lo (2019) demonstrated the ways second-generation Hmong American boys in Sacramento were targeted by police and profiled as gang members. The youth in her study claimed they were consistently harassed by the police and more likely to be singled out than their peers.

Outside of schools, Asian Americans have historically been perceived in the community and public as violent. One police officer, in response to an opinion piece on Southeast Asian youth crime, wrote he "found Asians (particularly Vietnamese punks) to be even more vicious" than other racial groups (Tsang, 1993). A handbook for law enforcement officers titled advised field officers to "look for groups of two, three, or four Vietnamese male teens all in the same car. Their dress will be modern, semi-punk, all the way to heavy metal counter-culture. They will often wear their hair in punk or similar style. Look for them to be in a mustang" (Munks, 1989, p. 12).

Other archival sources explicated how Southeast Asians have been unjustly targeted by law enforcement. One newspaper titled "Do Police Take Your Photo Because They Can't

Pronounce Your Name or Tell You Apart from Other Asians/Latinos?" stated while Asian

Americans only made up a little over 20% of the population in Westminster in 1990, 72% of

them were detained under the Tri-Agency Resource Gang Enforcement Team program

(compared to 21% of Latinos and 6% Whites; Alliance Working for Asian Rights and

Empowerment, 1994). During a city council meeting in 1993 in Fountain Valley, community

activist and writer Daniel Tsang urged the public "just because Asians hang out together do not

mean necessarily we are part of gangs or are criminals" (Tsang, 1993).

In response to the severity of Southeast Asian "delinquency," law enforcement and

community members have responded by organizing various Asian task forces to address this

issue. According to their website, the first Gang Task Force in the San Francisco Police

Department was created in 1977 in response to crimes committed by Asian gangs. In addition to

the task forces, there was an "Asian Mug Book" that was utilized by various police departments

in efforts to stop Asian crimes (Tsang, 1993). This would result in questionable practices of

physical violence and racial profiling for Asian American youth (Alliance Working for Asian

Rights and Empowerment, 1994).

In many ways, the criminalization of Southeast Asians tie back to the Indochinese War.

Community members suspected that the mechanisms used to surveillance Southeast Asians were

parallel to how U.S. soldiers could not tell Viet Cong soldiers apart from the Southern Army

during the Vietnam War (Alliance Working for Asian Rights and Empowerment, 1994). Their

criminalization therefore is not only rooted in racism, but has postcolonial residue.

Asian American youth gangs in particular have been portrayed as a serious threat to the

community and nation. In the Handbook of *Gangs, Groups, and Cults*, the authors wrote Asian

gang activity in Orange County is a "growing threat" both in the state of California and

nationally (San Diego County Deputy Sheriffs Association, 1990, p. 19). One newspaper noted how Southeast Asian gangs "have helped bring a harder edge to the county's gang culture" (Flaccus, 2004). A police officer in Long Beach stated "These guys are ruthless. They're killers. They're not to be taken lightly," (Moore, 2008). Another officer elaborated that their violence stems back to the "killing fields" under the Khmer regime: "They come from a very, very violent country. These people who grew up under a repressive regime with violence around them bring some of those experiences with them into the streets" (Flaccus, 2004). These discourses are prevalent in the description of Southeast Asian gangs. A newspaper offered a profile of Tiny Rascal Gang, one of the largest Southeast Asian gangs:

> Tiny Rascal Gang has carved out its reputation through a path of violence and drugs.The gang first emerged in the 1980s in Long Beach, a product of simple survival, not turf protection. Thrown into the streets of Long Beach, the children of Cambodian refugees had to protect themselves from Hispanic and black gangs. They fought back with violence, eventually expanding their expertise into drugs and home-invasion robberies and murder. Initially, the gang was restricted to just Cambodians, but the rules were later relaxed to include other Asians and white members. With their shaved heads, baggy pants and Old English tattoos, the gang mimics Hispanic gangs. The resemblance is so striking even Tustin police had a tough time distinguishing the gang from other Hispanic gangs when they first moved into a Tustin safehouse in the early 1990s, Blair said. What makes them different is their talent for getting their hands on guns and their reputation for brutality. (Puente, 2014)

Consistent with other racial groups, Southeast Asians and Pacific Islanders have historically experienced racial profiling in a hypercriminalization era (Lam, 2015; Rios, 2011).

**API Youth, Violence, and Carcerality**

In contemporary research, far less is known about Asian Americans and violence compared to other racial groups. The inattention to Asian American crime trends is likely due to several methodological reasons. First, the seemingly low level of crimes for Asian Americans as a whole can make them a low priority for research (Feldmeyer & Cui, 2015). Arguably their numbers may not be significant for statistical testing. Research has shown, however, that violence has been prevalent in Asian Americans communities (Berthold, 1999; Ho, 2008) and that their crime rates have been increasing (Huynh-Hohnhaum, 2006; Lam, 2015; Le, 2002; Lai, 2009). In fact, arrest rates for Black and White youth have been declining for the past 20 years, but the arrest rates for Asian American youth increased dramatically (Lam, 2015). Compared to their white counterparts, Asian American youth reported higher numbers of violence offenses (Choi & Lahey, 2006) and were more than twice as likely to be tried as adults who had committed similar crimes in the 1990s (Lam, 2015). Asian American youth also have higher conviction rates (Huynh-Hohnhaum, 2006; Lai 2009) and are less likely to leave the juvenile justice system once they enter it (Lai, 2009).

Despite research that suggests lower level of offending for Asian American youth, disaggregating crime data by ethnic group paint a different picture for their involvement with crime and violence. Studies have reported that Southeast Asians are more likely than East Asians to witness serious crimes (Ho, 2008), exhibit delinquent behavior (Nagasawa et al., 2001), commit violent offenses (Chong et al., 2009; Felson & Kreager, 2015, Le & Wallen, 2006; Mayeda et al., 2006), be involved in gangs (Huang & Ida, 2004; Reyes, 2007), and be arrested

(Le, 2002). In California, disaggregated data show that Southeast Asians indeed make up a large proportion of Asian youth who are overrepresented in the juvenile justice system (Bui, 2018; Goebert et al., 2013; Chheang & Connolly, 2017; Tam, 2016). Chheang and Connolly (2017) found that in Oakland, 25% of the arrests from 1991 to 2000 were drug-related offenses committed by Southeast Asian American youth compared with 4.3% of Asian American youths. In 2007, the highest arrest rates in Oakland were of Samoan youth (Asian American and Pacific Islanders Behind Bars, 2015). Cambodians, Laotians, and Vietnamese youth in Oakland also had high arrest rates California (Le, 2002). The recidivism rates for Southeast Asians are also higher than East Asians (Chheang & Connelly, 2017; Zhuo & Zhang, 2018).

Fewer studies have focused on Pacific Islander youth as they are often clumped together in the Asian American category. However, research has shown that Pacific Islanders report higher rates of violence, deviant behavior, and are overrepresented in all points of the juvenile justice system (Baker et al., 2010; Davis et al., 2015; Godinet & Vakalahi, 2009; Irwin & Umemoto, 2017; Le, 2002).

Asian Americans can be racially categorized as "others" in crime statistics, such as in the Uniform Crime Reports and the National Crime Victimization survey, which causes their representation to be overlooked (Arifuku et al., 2006; Asian American and Pacific Islanders Behind Bars, 2015). When they are discussed in research, findings may be inconsistent due to small sample size (Le, 2002) or the variance in variables used by researchers (Zhuo & Zhang, 2018). These factors contribute to Asian American underrepresentation in crime statistics (Chheang & Connelly, 2017; Goebert et al., 2013).

In much of the literature on Asian Americans in a carceral context, scholars attempt to understand offending patterns for Asian Americans. Typically, is dominated on studies that focus

on cultural explanations such as lack of family structure or strong cultrial identity (Chang & Le, 2005; Choi et al., 2008; Davis et al., 2015; Feldmeyer & Cui, 2015; Huynh-Hohnhaum, 2006; Kent & Felkenes, 1998; Le et al., 2005; Pan & Farrell, 2006; Willgerodt, 2008; Xiong et al., 2008).

Another common explanation is acculturation. Scholars have argued that Asian American youth are most likely to engage in deviant behavior if they lack strong ties to their culture (Le & Wallen, 2006; Ngo & Le, 2007; Zhou and Bankston, 2006). Studies have also focused on school-based factors that shape how API youth engage with violence. Bullying and peer rejection, for example, was a significant factor (Huang & Ida, 2004; Kent & Felkenes, 1998; Le & Wallen, 2006) along with discrimination and racial tension (Kang, 1999; Vigil & Yun, 1990).

With few exceptions, the body of research on Asian Americans and violence point to cultural conflict as explanation for outcomes related to "deviancy." Though literature on Asian American gangs critique the model minority stereotype by delineating how this group experiences criminalization, this line of research perpetuated the problematic notion of the model minority. For example, research suggests that broken family structures or lack strong ties to their culture are factors for joining a gang. The assumption here is then that if Asian Americans were more like the "model minority" stereotype, they would not experience behavioral problems such as joining gangs. Criminologists Takagi and Platt (1978) contended that cultural compatibility is used to explain law abiding Asians, whereas explanations for gang involvement are linked to culturally derived traits. More research is needed on structural explanations to account for a more nuanced understanding, especially as it relates to race and class analysis.

**Racialization Within a Model Minority-Yellow Peril Dialectic**

What is missing from the "model minority" and "yellow peril" stereotype is a deep investigation of how Asian Americans are racialized in a model minority-yellow peril dialectic (Kawai, 2006). Though seemingly distinct, racial meanings for Asian Americans are racially triangulated (Kim, 1999) through a "seamless continuum" of both these stereotypes. Kawai posited: "Asian Americans as the model minorities is 'a complementary, benign image' of the yellow peril'" (p. 110).

The model minority—yellow peril dialetcis is particularly visible in gang subculture. Historically, Asian gangs have been described as sophisticated, smart, organized, and efficient (Gang Activities, 1972). Davidson (1996) found that Asian gang members in Chicago "often do not admit to gang membership, often change their personal names and the name of the gang to avoid detection from law enforcement (p. 300)." Lee (2016) also wrote about their discretion, especially compared to other racial groups: "Unlike their black and Hispanic counterparts, they are often secretive and loyal to inhibit law enforcement intrusion. They infrequently engage in fighting, drug dealing, and using hand signs to avoid drawing attention to their illegal activities (p. 15). Shelden and colleagues (2013) found that "they are entrepreneurial and very pragmatic in that they victimize their own ethnic community because of its lack of understanding and utilization of the criminal justice system (p. 56).

In a comparative study on Southeast Asian "delinquent" youth in San Diego, 65% of the participants were perceived to show respect and have positive attitude towards law enforcement (Rumbaut, 1985, p. 69). One newspaper article reported that Asian American gang affiliated youth are known to be A students or honor roll students (Larrubia, 1998), which can make it challenging for law enforcement to detect gang members. Common in law enforcement and

media accounts of them is their portrayal as being from stable, wealthy, or educated families. For example, one newspaper postulated that "It's real popular to say these kids are gang members so they must come from dysfunctional families. But a lot of these kids come from very, very good families. And some of these families are very well educated (Chin, 1995). Chin further added:

> When I first started working with Southeast Asian gang members, I'd pull them over. I was very polite. They said yes, sir; no, sir — did exactly what you wanted 'em to do, and you go away feeling, "What a nice kid!" But this guy could have been the worst kid in the world. And so they play that game. You know, they try to come across, especially to policemen, as, "Well, I stay at home. I'm a hard-working student," when in fact he hasn't been in school in two years.

Thus, the deception of Asian gang members are portrayed as being both sophisticated and dangerous, fitting into the narrative of the model minority—yellow peril dialectic.

To be sure, research on racial identity for Asian American youth highlights the complexities and fluidity of how youth negotiate identities beyond the dominant racial frameworks (Chhuon & Hudley, 2010; Lee, 2001; Ngo, 2009; Tuan 1998; Uy, 2018). These studies move beyond honorary whiteness or "ideaological blackening", determining which aspects of their racial and cultural they maintain and which to resist. However, even though some of these studies took place with youth in urban settings, they did not account for youth who are already criminalized like those involved in gangs. The distinct racialization of API gang affiliated youth is critical because it adds another layer of marginalization which complicates racialization.

**Gangs and Race**

Race and racialization in youth gangs have been studied in different ways. For the most part, scholars tend to study gangs of one ethnic group in a local context (Alsaybar, 1999; Alonso, 2004; Miranda, 2003; Moore et al., 1978; Vigil, 2010). In doing so we gain an in depth understanding of their formation (Parker, 2001; Thrasher, 1927), identity construction (Mendoza-Denton, 2014; Parker, 2001), gang membership and behavior (Chesney-Lind & Hagedorn, 1999; Tapia, 2011), and criminalization (Rios, 2011; Zatz & Krecker, 2003) in a sociohistorical and/or racial context.

In other cases, comparative race research has been done on two or more gangs, often from different racial or ethnic groups (Bankston, 1998; Jankowski, 1991; Rodriguez, 2005; Williams & Clarke, 2016). From these studies we gain a deeper sense of racial dynamics that play out in the same communities whether it be racial tensions or race riots (Umemoto, 2006) or a more general understanding vis-a-vis a relational race approach (Vigil, 2010).

Given the focus of race in gang research, some studies have tried to establish race/ethnicity as factors or indicators of joining a gang (Brownfield et al., 2001; Freng & Esbensen, 2007; Pyrooz et al., 2010). While these studies reinforce the saliency of race in the gang experience, they can produce deficit discourses around communities of color. For example, a study on gang membership, race, and socioeconomic status posed the following research question: "Do police patrolling practices, which probably are concentrated in gang-occupied, lower class, black neighborhoods, artificially increase the probability that youth matching these characteristics will be arrested, independent of delinquent activity?" (Brownfield et al., 2001). The pathologizing nature of these studies falsely contribute to perceptions of gangs as a Black issue, or communities of color issue, despite gang phenomenon in the United States being traced

back to Irish and Italian migrants in the 19th century (Hagedorn, 2006; Parker, 2001; Vigil, 2010).

On the other hand, some research altogether suggested that race is not as central to the gang experience, oftentimes citing neighborhood as the underlying factor (Rosenthal, 2000; Thrasher, 1927; Vigil, 2010). These scholars have stated that the gang experience has no racial boundaries and is endemic to any community of color. While I build on this argument, it is worth noting that a colorblind approach to studying gangs can be problematic. As Hagedorn (2006) argued, "The prime theoretical error of the Chicago School was that they did not consider race to be a true independent variable, but merely something 'to be explained' away when researching social inequality or urban violence" (p. 205). Thus, understanding the complex ways that race and racism manifests itself in economically marginalized communities is critical.

Despite the volumes of studies that associate race, racism, and racialization with youth gangs, research in this field has yet to account for the racial meanings assigned to gangs. Given the racial logic that underpins the gang experience, future research should shed light on the various meanings of race for different ethnic groups.

## Chapter Summary

There are several implications for future research based on the experiences of gang affiliated API youth. First, understandings of race, racism, and racialization for API youth focus primarily on comparative racialization that positions them as honorary whites (e.g., "model minority") or problem minorities. Second, scholarship that discussed API youth in a carceral context normalize cultural traits as an explanation for criminal behavior while saying less about racialized economic and social structures that give way to gang formation. Finally, the

experiences of multiply marginalized populations, such as API youth involved in gangs, are rarely the focus of inquiry despite the racial connotations that gangs carry.

This study will be a point of departure from previous empirical research and theoretical investigations surrounding Asian Americans and carcerality, however, by nuancing their racial categorizations as neither honorary whites *or* racially blackened (Kim, 2000). Instead, I argue that Asian American gang affiliated youth are racialized within the model minority-yellow peril dialectic (Kawai, 2005). That is, based on my ethnographic pilot study at an urban high school in Long Beach, I theorize the racialization of Asian American gang involved youth as the "model gangster" paradox: In the same vein as the model minority stereotype, Asian American gang affiliated youth were perceived to be studious, obedient to authority, and even sophisticated with their gang activity. It is in this tension this current study highlights youth agency to gain a clearer understanding of the saliency of race for Asian American youth involved in gang subculture.

# Chapter 3

## Methodology

The purpose of this study is to better understand the racialized experiences of API gang affiliated youth from their worldview. The methodological approach that I used for this study is phenomenology because it is most appropriate to develop a rich understanding of how gang affiliation informs API youths' racialized experiences and identities. My study is guided by the following research questions:

1. How do API gang affiliated youth interpret the origins and evolution of API gangs?

2. How do API gang affiliated youth make meaning of their racial identity?

In this chapter, I offer a rationale for using phenomenology as the most appropriate mode of inquiry for this study. I then describe my pilot study and researcher positionality, which informs my current study and addresses my relationship to the phenomenon of interest. Next, I outline the procedural steps of data collection and data analysis. I conclude by accounting for limitations of the study.

## Research Design and Method

Phenomenology is a study of "the experience itself" and how "experiencing something is transformed into consciousness" (Merriam, 2009, p. 25). The philosophy of phenomenology is that "there is an essence or essences to shared experience…the assumption of essence, like the ethnographer's assumption that culture exists and is important, becomes the defining characteristic of a purely phenomenological study" (Patton, 2002, p. 106). A phenomenological approach is well suited to studying intense human experiences, such as those involved with gangs. My goal was to capture how participants described their experiences, and how they assigned meaning, particularly around racial logic and discourse, to their racial identity and gang

affiliation. Phenomenology allowed me to explicate the phenomenon of API youth gangs from their worldview. Thus, I ask participants to reconstruct and reflect on their experiences to reveal the essence of what it means to be API and gang affiliated. Phenomenology, along with AsianCrit, allowed me to interpret and represent the complexities of how API gang affiliated youth navigate the world with the goal of offering a perspective on gang culture that does not focus on deviance. I discuss my positionality in the next section as a phenomenological researcher to offer how my relationship to this phenomenon provides a unique lens to the experiences of API gang affiliated youth.

### Researcher Positionality

Studying gang affiliated youth can amount to several challenges. These effects are heightened in research contexts where there is an inherent power dynamic at play. Due to my social locations and privileges that can perpetuate unequal power relations, it is important to consider my identities and backgrounds in relation to this study.

Given the nature of the research topic, I would not have been able to conceive or carry out this study without my racial identity as Vietnamese American, my family's involvement in Asian gang subculture in the Bay Area, and my background working with gang affiliated youth and adults, both in and out of correctional facilities for the last six years. As a result, I bring much subjectivity to this research inquiry. Gang affiliation ran deep in my family, as my dad's social network consisted of known gang members and my brother was an active member of a youth street gang. I lost both my best friend at 15, and my cousin in 2016 to gang violence. Aside from my family background, my upbringing as a child of refugees in San Jose resonated with a lot of my participants. I was born in a refugee camp in the Philippines, before my mom migrated to the United States in 1993 under the Amerasian Homecoming Act. My dad, a teenager at the

time, was a boat person who escaped Vietnam with his family after the war ended. As in any typical Asian household, they spoke very little of their refugee experiences: their sacrifices, their survival, their trauma. Though my mom received little formal education and my dad did not attend college, we lived in an upper middle class suburban neighborhood with fellow migrant communities (mainly from Mexico, the Philippines, and Vietnam) in East San Jose.

After receiving my master's degree at New York University (NYU), I began teaching inside the prison system. I saw how the same institutional violence I faced growing up in the Bay Area played into their painful narratives, leading to their incarceration and gang membership. As a result, I rejected pathologizing notions of students who were incarcerated and/or gang involved. In my years of working inside correctional facilities and being involved with community organizations, I found that Asian Americans were generally excluded from this discourse both in research and practice. Research and media depict them as a group that does not experience issues with gang involvement, crime, or incarceration. I did not recognize it at the time, but the pain of erasure would later fuel my desire to learn more about racial and social inequities, in the context of education and carcerality.

At UCLA I became involved with various prison reentry organizations. I also worked with incarcerated adults and youth both nationally and internationally. By the time I started data collection I have built a wide network of key stakeholders in the prison education field. While my educational privilege and socioeconomic status may be factors that distance myself from my participants, and undeniably contribute to the power dynamic, my involvement in the community was advantageous in building trust. I regularly attend meetings and events, so much so that I have been "adopted" into various spaces. Having the community's support with my research endeavors has made it easier to recruit and build rapport with participants. The participants saw

me as a researcher and regarded me as a future doctor, but often our relationship was more familial and friendly. Some of the older Vietnamese participants referred to me as *em* (little sister), while others explicitly state that they consider me a friend. On occasion I would be invited to family gatherings and social events. With some participants I maintain communication via texting, phone calls, or social media. As a result, I noticed how forthcoming and open the participants tend to be with their responses. Admittedly, my racial background does help as Asian communities tend to be more open with other Asians around contentious issues such as race.

I still do not view myself as a complete insider given that I do not identify as being gang affiliated, and cannot relate to the gendered violence that most of my participants experienced as young men. What I can offer, however, is an interpretation of what it was like for 30 API youth and men to come of age in California. Their stories are filled with pain and trauma, but it is also filled with beauty and hope.

**Pilot Study**

From 2019–2020 I conducted a 14-month pilot case study at a public high school in Long Beach, located in the heart of Cambodia Town. According to the California School Dashboard, for the 2018 school year there were over 4,000 students enrolled. Asian American (predominantly Cambodian Americans) students made up 18% of the student body. Black, Latino, and White students made up 17%, 45%, and 10% of the population respectively. As for Filipino and Pacific Islander students, they made up 4% and 6% respectively. Nearly 63% of students qualify for free or reduced lunch. Thus, I selected this school because of its critical mass of low-income, Asian American youth both on- and off-campus (Chan, 2004). In particular, Long Beach is known for being the home to the nation's largest Cambodian community (Das

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Gupta, 2019; Kwan, 2020). Long Beach is also the birthplace of two prominent Asian American gangs: Asian Boyz and Tiny Rascal Gang.

I used participant observation to immerse myself at my field site, working as a tutor for a college prep program up to three days a week. My role as a paraprofessional gave me access to Asian American gang affiliated students both inside and outside the classroom. In addition to the weekly ethnographic observations in class and field notes, I interviewed 10 teachers and staff for this study. The semi-structured interviews (Creswell, 2013) explored their experience working with gang affiliated youth and their perspective on Asian American gang affiliated youth. Each interview lasted between 30 and 120 minutes. The racial demographics included: five Cambodian Americans, one Filipino, one White, one Mexican, and two Black participants. Nearly all of them grew up in Long Beach and spoke to their own upbringing in a diverse albeit gang heavy community. Although it was not my intent to study top down, their racial understanding is vital in articulating issues of representation and racialization for API gang affiliated youth.

My initial analysis of data on Asian American gang affiliated youth pointed to the ways in which were valorized *as* "model gangsters." That is, despite being involved in gangs, they were perceived to have similar traits as the model minority stereotype: smart and studious, obedient towards authority, and sophisticated with crime. In a sense, Asian Americans served as a "model" to which other racial groups should aspire to be even in a gang context. My findings on the "model gangster" stereotype helped inform the research questions and design of the current study in a few ways. First, I wanted to draw from the perspective of youth themselves to understand how they construct their own racial identity. Second, since my fieldwork was based in Long Beach, I wanted to explore whether the "model gangster" paradox would resonate in

different regional contexts throughout California. Finally, I recognized that moving beyond the school setting would yield a deeper understanding of their experiences with gang subculture.

**Table 1**

*Pilot Study Participant Demographics*

| Name | Role | Race Ethnicity | Age |
|------|------|----------------|-----|
| Ms. Ortega | Teacher | Mexican | 26 |
| Mr. Lee | Probation Office | Black | 46 |
| Mr. Sok | Activities Director | Cambodian | 34 |
| Mr. Bautista | Teacher | Filipino | 35 |
| Mrs. Chan | Teacher | Cambodian | 40 |
| Mr. Dillon | Teacher | White | 50 |
| Mr. Brown | Campus Security Officer | Black | 46 |
| Ms. Touch | Teacher's Aide | Cambodian | 21 |
| Mr. Phon | Campus Security Officer | Cambodian | 45 |
| Mr. Nang | Counselor | Cambodian | 33 |

## Data Collection

To answer RQ1 (What are the gang trajectories of API youth?), I employed in depth phenomenological interviews. Secondary sources included ethnographic observations from my pilot study. The interviews were also the primary source for RQ 2 (How do API gang affiliated youth make meaning of their racial identity?). Additionally, ethnographic data from community organizations, including field notes and analytical memos, and media archives were analyzed as a tertiary source of data. In the next section, I outline each phase of data collection.

**Recruitment and Sample**

In keeping with Merriam's (2009) assertion that participants in a study should be selected because of their experience, and given the unique lived experience of my participants, I

determined that the most appropriate method for this study was purposeful nonrandom sampling of gang affiliated youth. I used snowball sampling to recruit participants for my study in a few ways. First, I directly contacted (either through mobile phone, social media, or e-mail) potential participants through the various organizations that I was involved with. During my time in Los Angeles I was a member of two organizations led by API formerly incarcerated adults: Asian Pacific Islander Reentry and Inclusion Support and Empowerment (API RISE) and Fa' Atasiga O Uso's (FOU). Most of them were also gang affiliated as youth. I was transparent with my research interest on API youth gangs when I first entered both organizations, so by the time I was recruiting for my study I had already built rapport with potential participants. Second, I also recruited through individuals I knew personally. For example, both my brothers connected me to their homeboys who agreed to participate in my study because of their close relationships. After each interview I asked participants to connect me with friends or family that met the study criteria and might be interested in doing the interviews.

Participants for my study were chosen if they met the following criteria: (1) identified as Asian, Asian American, or Pacific Islander, and (2) identified as being currently or formerly affiliated with an API gang as a youth. To clarify, I used the term youth not as a biological state but rather as a "social and mutable category" to locate "particular social and historical contexts" (Lam, 2009, p. 90). As such I did not have any age restrictions for my sample. For the purposes of sampling and recruitment, I adopted Vigil's (1988) typology of gang involvement to establish a flexible working definition but not so much that it imposes a rigid academic definition and reifies assumptions about gang membership and affiliation. He organized the levels of gang attachment as the following: regular (strongly attached to gang), peripheral (participates less than regular), temporary (marginally committed, remain in gang for short period), and situational

(very marginally attached, joined gang for certain activities, avoids violent activities when possible).

California makes a compelling backdrop for this study due to the notoriety of Asian American street gangs (Wang, 2002). The concentration of Asian American gangs in cities like San Jose, San Francisco, Oakland, and Los Angeles reflect the sizable Asian American populations in urban and suburban areas, tracing back to historical war and migration patterns (Lam, 2015).

**Participants**

A total of 30 participants participated in the study. The demographic breakdown of participants included: five Cambodian Americans, five Chinese Americans, one Korean American, six Filipino Americans, eight Vietnamese Americans, and five Samoan Americans. Only two of the participants, Alex and Hailey, identified as women. The rest identified as either men or young men. They were between the ages of 16–48 years old. The average age for gang involvement was 14 years old. The participants represented different parts of California, including the Bay Area, Los Angeles, and Orange County. A majority of participants were refugees and first generation immigrants. Two thirds of the participants have been formerly incarcerated. Table 2 offers a visual representation of the demographics of each participant.

**Table 2**

*Participant Demographics*

| Name | Ethnicity | Hometown | Age (of gang involvement) |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Rick | Vietnamese | San Jose | 15 |
| Jacob | Filipino | San Jose | 16 |
| Henry | Vietnamese | San Jose | 18 |
| Hailey | Filipino | San Jose | 12 |
| Tyler | Vietnamese | San Jose | 14 |
| Alex | Samoan | Carson | 15 |
| Jay | Filipino | Sacramento | 16 |
| Nick | Chinese | San Gabriel Valley | 16 |
| Steven | Vietnamese | Pomona | 12 |
| Anh | Vietnamese | Orange County | 14 |
| Brian | Vietnamese | San Gabriel Valley | 13 |
| Paul | Filipino | Daly City | 14 |
| Som | Cambodian | Long Beach | 13 |
| Nathan | Filipino | Los Angeles | 13 |
| Adam | Filipino | Inland Empire | 13 |
| Harry | Korean | Los Angeles | 14 |
| Caleb | Samoan | Carson | 12 |
| Chea | Cambodian | Oakland | 15 |
| Bao | Chinese | San Francisco | 15 |
| Marcus | Samoan | Carson | 20 |
| Tuan | Vietnamese | Orange County | 15 |
| Dave | Vietnamese | Orange County | 13 |
| Tommy | Chinese | Sacramento | 14 |
| Sokthea | Cambodian | Long Beach | 12 |
| Arthur | Chinese | Orange County | 13 |
| Huy | Chinese | San Gabriel Valley | 15 |
| Aaron | Samoan | Oceanside | 14 |
| Isiah | Samoan | Long Beach | 11 |
| Sy | Cambodian | Long Beach | 16 |
| Vichet | Cambodian | Long Beach | 16 |

**In Depth Phenomenological Interviews**

Phenomenological interviews were the primary method for data collection to get at the essence of their experience (Moustakas, 1994). Since my goal was to capture the gang trajectories of API youth and what meaning they made of those experiences, interviews were critical tools to explore the phenomenon of interest (Kvale, 1994; Merriam, 2009; Seidman, 2006). Interviewing allowed me to situate their individual trajectories in a sociohistorical context.

I interviewed all participants individually in the 2020–2021 academic year. Due to COVID-19 restrictions for research activities, most interviews were conducted via zoom or mobile phone. In some cases, in person interviews were conducted at the participants preference either at an event, in the participants' home, or at coffee shops and dineries. I interviewed a few participants twice who agreed for a follow up interview. In sum, I conducted a total of 36 interviews across the sample of 30 participants. I asked permission for the interview to be audio recorded. Only two participants denied my request for recording, so I typed out notes during our interview. I was explicit that at any moment they can ask me to stop the recording or inform me of anything they did not want to be used for the study. I was clear in what my research questions were, how their interview would be used, and who would have access to the data.

The interviews were semi structured, and we discussed experiences that led them to join a gang, how they navigated being both API and gang affiliated, and their overall expertise on youth gang culture. To facilitate a dialectic engagement (Lam, 2009) with my participants, I was open with my own story and upbringing. I believed my transparency built trust and allowed for a more open conversation about how they made sense of their own lives.

**Ethnographic Observations**

In addition to interviews, I relied on ethnographic observations to round out my understanding of the experiences of API youth involved in gangs. In May 2021, I was introduced to Fa' Atasiga O Uso's (FOU), a nonprofit organization started by 20 formerly incarcerated Samoan men. I joined their youth outreach committee dedicated to gang prevention in the Samoan community. Though I am the only woman and non-Samoan on the committee, I built a positive rapport with the members. I attend the virtual weekly meetings, am part of their mobile phone group chat, and am often consulted about programming efforts targeting gang affiliated youth. When our committee organized focus groups with different constituents in the Samoan community to discuss how we can better support youth, they asked me to facilitate each one. Currently, I am working with them to design a demographic survey for their members so that they have descriptive data for grant applications. I was able to collect data from seven meetings, one focus group, three events, four conversations with different members, and fieldnotes on what it means to be Samoan and gang affiliated.

**Archival Data**

In addition to observations and interviews, I drew on historical documents to better contextualize issues of representation and patterns of racialization for Asian American youth gangs. The collection of material at the Southeast Asian Archives at the University of California, Irvine, and their digital archive, comprised of reports, flyers, handbooks, manuscripts, newspaper clippings, letters, and local government proceedings over the period 1970–1999. These archival materials focused on the community's response and law enforcement's to the rise of Asian street gangs in Southern California. The Office of Urban Affairs collection in the Los Angeles Unified School District Board of Education Records Archives at the University of California, Los

Angeles included school pamphlets, reports, meeting minutes, newsletters on youth gangs in a schooling context during the 1980s and 1990s. Local media coverage during the 1980s and 1990s also complemented these documentary materials. The time periods of the historical documents coincide with the prevalent gang activity in Asian American communities (Puente, 2004). These archives provide rich documentation of how Asian youth gangs were racialized and represented. I situate these documents in a sociohistorical context to understand the racial discourse when considering the experiences of Asian American gang affiliated youth. They served as another layer of nuance and triangulated data from participant observations and interviews.

## Data Analysis and Coding

To critically approach the data, I engaged in an ongoing, reiterative process where I collected and analyzed data simultaneously (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Data analysis occurred in two phases. For my pilot study, I began by constructing the data top down using the literature. Research on API youth portray them as either honorary whites (e.g., model minority stereotype) or idealologically blackened/problem minorities (Ong, 1996) so I looked for patterns that fit this racial discourse or directly contrasted it. For example, when teachers and staff talked about Asian gang affiliated youth, virtually all of them associated the students with positive traits. I was initially surprised by this perception so I revisited literature on how API youth were being racialized, particularly through the model minority *and* yellow peril stereotype. This binary served as an entry point into my conceptualization of the "model gangster" paradox. For my interviews with API youth, I analyzed using the bottom up approach from the data itself. Given my phenomenological approach, I focused on experiences of participants, and my analysis was close to data as possible (Van Manen, 2016). After each interview I wrote an analytic memo to

identify patterns of meaning which helped me identify emerging themes (Larkin et al., 2006). In particular, I took note of how their experiences aligned or nuanced the "model gangster" paradox. I also wrote down instances where they shared something that was not previously mentioned in other interviews. I utilized the constant comparative method which allowed me to continually return to the data as I confirmed or disconfirmed what previous participants said (Straus & Glaser, 1967).

All interviews were transcribed by Rev, a speech-to-text company that provides transcription services. I then listened and followed along to each interview for accuracy as some transcripts would misspell words that were slang, Vietnamese words/phrases, and different API ethnicities. After cleaning each transcript I uploaded them (along with field notes and analytic memos) to Dedoose, a qualitative analysis software. In the first round of coding, I used an in-vivo approach where I stayed as close to participant language as possible (Saldaña, 2016). My goal was to understand participants' experiences and concepts from their worldview. For example, one participant coined the term "schoolboy gangster" to describe how he lived a double life by being a "good boy" at school and at home, while being someone completely different (i.e., violent) with his gang. I then made that term a root code to illustrate when participants felt they had multiple identities because of their race/ethnicity and being gang affiliated. I also used values coding to reflect a participants' values, attitudes, and beliefs around their racial understanding and experiences (Saldaña, 2016). I chose to use values coding given the focus on how participants make sense of their racial identity. A few examples of values I coded were *Asians gangs as smarter, different ethnic experiences, and race as not important.* These strategies aligned with a phenomenological approach since it allowed me to use the youth as my

unit of analysis and understanding their experiences and perceptions around race and racial

identity.

After coding and categorizing the data, several themes appeared on the "schoolboy

gangster" concept, racial positioning against other racial and ethnic gangs, and Asianness in

relation to gang culture, which I then refined through a second round of coding (Emerson et al.,

2011). For example, "racialized violence" was a code to explain a factor that shaped API youths'

gang involvement. However, I noticed that racialized violence came from various communities

(White communities, other communities of color, and Asian communities) that had distinct

implications. I then made a child code for each community that was committing the racialized

violence against the participants. I also explored relationship between codes (Maxwell, 2013).

For example, one of my codes was "walk in gangster" which described gang affiliated youth who

do the bare minimum to stay in gangs, but do not get too involved particularly with violent

activities. I found that this code served as a possible explanation for the "schoolboy gangster

code." These patterns helped me to generate conceptual categories and develop a code tree and

frequency counts. A third round of coding involved creating a chart to further investigate the

experiences and social locations for each participant. Figure 1 displays a visual of my code tree

(see Figure 1).

**Figure 1**

*Code Tree in Progress*

| Carcerality | Reason for gang involvement | Navigating Race |
|---|---|---|
| •Contact with police<br>•Contact with carceral system<br>•Prison pedagogy | •Racialized violence<br>•Immigration<br>•Living in the hood | •Messages about Asianess or Islanderness<br>•Reaction to model minority steeotype<br>•Ethnic differences |

| Upbringing | Schoolboy Gangster |
|---|---|
| •Family<br>•School experience<br>•Trauma | •Living a double life<br>•Asian gangs as smarter<br>•Cultural values in gangs |

**Validity**

I employed several validity strategies throughout the research process to ensure fidelity to participants' perspectives (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). First, I sustained my involvement with participants through organization meetings, attending various professional, community, and social events, and following them on social media to build trust and check for misinformation (Creswell, 2013). Most importantly, I informed them of my analysis and allowed them to read their transcripts to member check whenever possible. I also used dialogic engagement with three academics who study gangs and five former gang members outside my study to help me process my findings. They offered me feedback, explanation, and nuance to my arguments. Finally, I triangulated the data to incorporate: ethnographic observations and interviews with teachers/staff from my pilot study, in depth phenomological interviews of API youth with varying ethnicities, ages. and degree of gang involvement, my involvement in the community, and my professional and personal relationships with API gang involved youth. Employing these strategies not only validate findings, but help facilitate co-construction of knowledge about the phenomenon.

## Limitations

Recruiting youth for my study, particularly those that are still active in gang culture, was (understandably) challenging. Some denied to be interviewed for fear of being a "snitch," even though I was explicit that we would not discuss criminal activities. COVID-19 also restricted interactions I could have to build rapport and recruit potential participants. Consequently, only one-third of my participants are between the ages of 16–25. Additionally, For the adults in my study, their active participation in gang culture may have occurred decades ago. Thus, some of their stories may not be as accurate as youth who were more recently involved. However, most of them had no trouble recalling their youth experiences. As Harry told me, "I still remember it as if it was yesterday."

Additionally, our university had research restrictions for in person fieldwork and community-based activities for most of the 2020–2021 academic year, so I was not able to supplement my interviews with as much ethnographic fieldwork that I had planned for. Ethnography would allow me to "study the relationship between meaning and action" and observe how explain discrepancies between what people say and what people do (Jerolmack & Khan, 2014, p. 194). For my future research I would incorporate more ethnographic data to account for variations across context to strengthen my conceptualizations and explanations.

## Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I offered a rationale for why a phenomenological approach was best suited for an inquiry on the racialized experiences of API gang affiliated youth. I delineated my steps for my pilot study, my process for data collection and analysis, described my positionality, and discussed limitations. The next three findings chapters outline how API gang affiliated youth navigate their racialized experiences: the context to their gang affiliation (Chapter 4), the

schoolboy gangster narrative (Chapter 5) and how they construct their racial identity through gang subculture (Chapter 6). Each chapter will seek to answer my research questions in understanding how they make meaning of their race/ethnicity and gang affiliation.

# Chapter 4

## Tracing API Youth Gang Origin and Evolution

While research on Asian youth gangs reinforce the saliency of culture in the gang experience, there remains a limited discussion of how race and structure have worked together to create communities that have produced gangs (Ngo & Lee, 2007). As a result, there is limited research that connects their experiences with gangs to a broader racial analysis informed by transnational contexts, which is an important tenet of AsianCrit (Iftikar & Museus, 2018). This omission overlooks the role racial discrimination and racism may have contributed to and fostered gang formation in Asian American communities (Lam, 2015; Vigil, 2010). Additionally, while reasons for gang membership may be consistent across racial groups (Vigil, 2002), API youth cited being victimized from other racial groups as reasons for joining gangs (Huang & Ida, 2004; Le & Wallen, 2006). Drawing on AsianCrit, I build on literature that examines the unique gang evolution and involvement for API youth by tracing it back to broader patterns of U.S. imperialism and migration from the perspective of the participants (Lam, 2015; Vigil, 2010). Given that most of the participants were refugees and immigrants, mainly from Southeast Asia, their identity and experiences are shaped by systemic violence (Iftikar & Museus, 2018).

This findings chapter explores the how API gang affiliated youth interpret the origins and evolution of API gangs. Ultimately, the participants' narratives will shed light on the racialized violence that shaped their connection to gang affiliation. Additionally, there is a generational distinctiveness when it comes to their role with gang affiliation. For the original gangsters (OGs) in my study, who are currently adults (over 25 years of age), their gang involvement was primarily out of survival and necessity against racialized violence. For current youth in the study (under 25 years of age), their gang involvement is much more fluid and contextual (Vigil, 2004).

In this chapter, I begin by tracing the formation of Asian youth gangs through the lens of the OGs involved with gangs as teenagers. Some of them are still affiliated, while others may have phased out. I then discuss the gang involvement of the current youth, noting that their involvement stems from familial obligation and/or financial gains. This chapter is not intended to be a criminological explanation of why youth join gangs, but rather to provide sociohistorical context that conditions the experiences of gang involvement specific to API youth.

## OGs: Fighting for Honor

When I was recruiting for my dissertation, I asked Jay, a Filipino participant from Sacramento, if he knew anyone that fit the sampling criteria. He replied, "All my homies is gang bangers and retired gang bangers." What Jay implied in his response was the normalization of API gang subculture. Jay's worldview, like many other of my participants, is a stark difference from what is represented in media about Asian Americans having low involvement with crimes and gangs (Walsh & Yun, 2018). However, for participants like Jay who were immigrants and/or had parents who were immigrants, they grew up in impoverished ethnic and economic enclaves that facilitated their entry with gang involvement (Light & Gold, 2000). Virtually all participants had at least one immediately family member involved in gangs and cited how prevalent gang subculture was in their communities. Compared to the youth, OGs were more likely to attribute the role of racial violence in their childhood as part of their gang affiliation.

In this section I begin by outlining the sociohistorical context, such as refugee and migration patterns along with socioeconomic status that give way to their gang affiliation. I then focus on the pipeline of racialized violence beginning with being bullied by other racial groups, to fighting back, and then building a reputation of being violent. I end with how racialized

violence is contextualized in school settings and cultural settings, which they defined as "toxic Asian culture."

**Refugee and Migration Patterns**

Discussions around the participants' background typically involved refugee and migration patterns. Sixty percent of them identified as being refugees and immigrants from another country, and all of participants' parents were born outside the U.S. As such, they spoke of the painful memories that they or their families faced escaping war torn countries, witnessing genocide, surviving refugee camps, all to be relocated in areas of the U.S. negatively impacted by poverty, crime and violence. This was especially salient for Southeast Asian refugees and migrants, who were forcefully displaced by U.S. war interventions and its aftermath in Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam in the 1970s (Ngo & Lee, 2007).

Nick, a Chinese participant from San Gabriel Valley, was only a toddler when his mother and brother relocated to the U.S. Though ethnically Chinese, Nick and his family lived in Cambodia before the Khmer Rouge regime. They executed his dad for being a Chinese professor, accusing him of conspiring against the government. Nick was told that "they beat him in front of us... and dragged him away in the middle of the night." Under Pol Pot's dictatorship Cambodia was known as the "killing fields," given that nearly 2 million of Cambodian's residents were executed, especially the elite such as intellectuals, teachers, and doctors (McGinnis, 2007; Wallitt, 2008).

Growing up, Nick often felt isolated. His mom, now widowed, was always working and hardly home, while his older brother began experimenting with drugs and gang life as a coping mechanism. Enamored by his brother and his friends, Nick decided to join a Chinese street gang at age 16. He spoke about ditching school, drinking, smoking, and eventually illegal activities,

"For us, it's like, we challenged each other to do bad things. And I think being a first generation immigrant, I think a lot of times, I don't know, we just don't understand the full consequence of our action." Here, Nick attributes his immigration status as central to his experiences being an adolescent in a new country and experimenting with delinquency.

While participants had difficulty adjusting to their new life in the U.S., they also mentioned the trauma their parents carried. They were too young to understand at the time the impact of displacement and dispossession on their parents, but they remembered how it shaped their family dynamocs. Bao, a Chinese participant from San Francisco, fled Vietnam in 1978 by boat, where they were stranded for six months in the South China sea. They were rescued by fishermen who towed their boat to a refugee camp in Hong Kong. Two years later their visas were granted to come to the U.S. Bao and his family "moved to the ghetto" in Potrero Hill, San Francisco. He recalled meeting a lot of Black residents and that "they all were mean mugging us." Even though Bao did not speak English at the time, he understood that he was not welcomed in his new neighborhood. He expressed his discomfort to his mom, who replied, "Well, we got nowhere to go, all right. We're poor, which is why we're going to live here." Growing up, Bao built resentment towards his mom. When he got in fights, she never took his side. When she had his younger siblings, he was left to take care of them. When he attempted suicide, she yelled at him and blamed him. He stated:

> I felt like she abandoned me, left me on my own. She chose her friend and at that time I didn't understand that. She lost her parents on our escape from Vietnam. They were murdered by pirates in the South China Sea. And so I didn't know that at that time. I didn't know she was carrying all that trauma. . . . So I just built a hella resentment towards her because of, like you're supposed to be my mother, you're supposed to protect

me, you're supposed to provide for me, but you're not doing none of that stuff. I've been

taking care of myself and my little brother.

Studies have shown that immigrant youth, and especially Cambodian, Filipino, and Vietnamese

youth report highest levels of culture conflict compared to other racial and ethnic groups (Choi et

al., 2008). Their parents may still be affected by war-conflict experiences, which contributes to

conflict in family dynamics. Brian, a Vietnamese participant and refugee, expressed how

miserable he was at home. Not only were him and his siblings figuring out their identity and

adapting to the U.S., but his parents were constantly arguing. When he was with his gang,

however, he felt happy, "something that I wasn't feeling a lot." Similar to Bao, Brian now

recognized how the trauma of being refugees impacted his family dynamic:

> I can't say about my dad because he went through a mental collapse. For somebody from
>
> Vietnam to come to the United States, to be nobody. Have a wife, got to take care of their
>
> wife, going from provider to become someone that no longer provides, he caved in that
>
> little time. So he has a lot of issues he has to work out himself. So he wasn't really a good
>
> role model for me in a way. He was very abusive in a sense.

For Brian, joining a gang gave him a sense of belonging (i.e., "I felt happy") which was

important for him since he did not have the healthy family structure at home (i.e., "he wasn't

really a good role model", "he was very abusive"). Indeed, research has cited that Asian

immigrant youth are likely to join gangs as a family substitute (Chang & Le, 2005; Feldmeyer &

Cui, 2015).

Anh, another Vietnamese participant and refugee, also recalled how much he despised his

family members as a child. He described his family as rowdy—they had big parties all the time

and drank alcohol. He remembered they always talked about the war and Vietnam, and though

he could not understand it, he hated when they brought it up. He often left the house with his cousins to hang out a neighbors place when his family had their get togethers. In retrospect, he stated:

> I understand them now, because they were traumatized, and all of the things that they were facing were more so worse than what I was facing as a kid because they had the responsibility as adults to take care of us…I really sympathize for them now, but at the time, I hated them.

At 16, Anh was introduced to a group of Vietnamese refugee boys around his age. They not only shared similar family backgrounds, but they also wanted to protect each other from bullying and earn money. They started a gang in Pomona and built up its reputation for being violent. Their gang caught the attention of more established Asian gangs, which they would then become alliances with.

Other participants spoke of how they were bullied because of their immigrant background, leading them to build a reputation of being tough and violence. Paul, a Filipino immigrant from the Bay Area, recounted how he was picked on because he did not know English. Growing up in a rough neighborhood in the Philippines, Paul was accustomed to fighting. He discussed how he adopted a tough and violent persona:

> I wasn't going to let nobody pick on me. But at the same time, it gave me this feeling that I didn't belong. I was a outsider. No matter what, I wasn't accepted. So as I got older, my persona's just to be a tough. A person that fights and all that, so that's the only way I knew how to be accepted.

Being violent was a focal point in a lot of the participants' narratives. As Paul got older, he identified with other Filipino students who were equally dedicated to preventing students from being bullied. At 14, they formed a gang.

Like Paul, Adam was another Filipino participant who experienced bullying in school. He was also a refugee and at the time spoke little English. It was not until Adam was introduced to his brother's friends, other refugees, where he felt a sense of belonging:

> At 12 years old, my older brother met refugees, also. And my brother introduced me to his friends like, "Hey." That was like eye opening for me, somebody that spoke like me, talked like me, saw the life and experienced it the same way I did. I don't feel alone, with them, anymore. And the first week I was hanging around with them, I wanted to show off. I snuck my mom's car out. And then that night, we got pulled over because I was like 12 years old driving.

As a result of the joyride, Adam went to juvenile hall at 12 years old but refused to snitch on his new friends. When he came back to school, he noticed his social status change. His brother's friends would pick him up from school and even fought for him. Other students started respecting him. At 13, Adam got jumped into their gang.

**Racial Tension**

Participants had visceral memories of being bullied at a young age mainly by other students of color. Indeed, scholarship has explored racial tensions among Asian youth and other youth of color in schools (Kiang & Kaplan, 1994; Niwa et al., 2011). The 1992 race riots in Los Angeles, for example, demonstrate the racial conflict particularly between the Asian and Black communities (Tso, 2020). Media portrayals of race riots in movies such as *Freedom Writers* also illustrate the historical context of racial tensions. For the OGs growing up in the late 1980s and

1990s, racial tensions divided the population along ethnic and racial lines. Som traced how his gang, Tiny Rascals Gang (TRG), was formed in Long Beach as a result of victimization by other groups:

> When we first came, we get picked on that Blacks, Hispanics, or the older one used to get their necklace snatched and stuff. And that's how gangs started. TRG started because of that. Asian Boyz and everything. . . . My older brother and stuff was the first wave, and then when I went to school, gangs started to establish themselves. During my older brother's generation, I mean, we're all in the same generation, but just that few years apart, it's a big difference. For him, it was . . . Look, he went gang-banging and he used to get beat up by the Mexicans. Walking in the alley or whatever, trying to take shortcuts to get home from school, and you run into them and they'll jump you. There used to be high school dudes, or dudes in cars, while we're in elementary and junior high. You grow up to kind of hate them, basically.

In the above quote, Som noted how the attacks against Asians were unprovoked (i.e., "you run into them and they'll jump you"). He also stated the age difference (e.g., Mexicans in high school, Asians in elementary and junior high) to show how unfair the fights were. For these reasons, Som and his family "grow up to kind of hate them."

Anh reiterated the mistrust he had for the Black community, stating:

> The only interaction we have with the community is all bad. We lived in the ghetto, so the Blacks always hated us for no reason. They would just shoot into our windows just for fun. Set our cars on fire, and so I don't blame the older generations for hating.

To Anh, the incidents of bullying and victimization were racial (i.e., "Blacks always hated us") and also unprovoked (i.e., "just for fun"). Additionally, he used statements such as "interaction

we have with the community is all bad" and "I don't blame the older generations for hating" to express how palpable the racial conflicts were in his community.

Sokthea, a former member of a Cambodian street gang in Long Beach, shared similar sentiments with Anh and Som. He expressed how growing up as an immigrant in a community with other racial groups contributed to his distrust in Mexicans and Blacks specifically:

> When I went to schools, I was different. I'm Asian. There wasn't that many Asians back then, in my school, so I was in a white school, but they had Mexicans, they had Blacks, so Asians were new. To me, it's new. I'm seeing all these different faces, and my last name was my first name. That was made fun of, my name. You would hear racial comments, as a kid. Even when I was around the neighborhood, I would have to deal with Mexicans, blacks, and whites, you see. Even my friends had to deal with them, because I guess we were easy prey in the neighborhood, because we were the new face in town. Now they're picking on us, they're robbing, beating up our elders and stuff like that, so growing up I had to go through this and had to witness this. Then, little by little, I just started having some type of animosity towards a certain group that's out in my community.

Indeed, "being different" was a theme that came up in the participants' childhood. For Sokthea, the bullying was tied to his migration status (i.e., "there wasn't that many Asians back then", "new face in town") and heritage (i.e., "made fun of my name"). He implied that their racial identity made them easy targets (i.e., "we were easy prey"). Witnessing the violence against his community (i.e., "picking on us, they're robbing, beating up our elders") caused "animosity" toward other groups.

In discussing racism and racialized violence, participants felt that their parents were disconnected from the struggles they experienced as children being bullied. Occasionally participants noted how their parents were ill equipped to handle issues surrounding racial conflict. Anh shared an example of when he felt a sense of powerlessness from his parents:

> A very critical moment was that I remember I saw this kid, this Black guy, really tall. . . . I know now he was just looking for trouble…I remember one day, a whole group of us, my sisters, my brother and I, just a bunch of little kids, we walked by, and he started getting our ratio and taunting us and making fun of us. I remember my sister telling him to stop, "If you don't stop, I'm going to go call my dad." I was peeping the whole scene. I was like, "My parents, they're going to protect us. My dad, that's my dad." I remember him. He laughed. He's like, "What? Come on, I'll go with you," so he went with us. He escorted us. He knew where we live. We went to the house, got my dad out. I remember my dad, he couldn't handle the situation. He was way smaller. I don't remember if he fought him or whatever, but I remember being very disappointed like, "My parents, they can't handle this shit."

Anh's disappointment was palpable. Not only did he not know how to cope with the situation, but neither did his dad (i.e., "They can't handle this shit"). Further, for Anh this situation reinforced the utilization of violence as necessary for survival which would only lead him deeper in gang involvement.

**Fighting Back**

Brian, a Vietnamese participant from San Gabriel Valley, traced his gang involvement as a result of persistent racialized bullying throughout his childhood. Being an immigrant and not speaking English made him an easy target in elementary school, where he said he was bullied daily. He

was briefly part of a Boys Scout until his troop of four other Vietnamese boys were "jumped" by older Black kids:

> I remember they were laughing at us and that. And I remember on the ground, looking at my Boy Scout like, "Man, this sucks." So of my troop, the 10 of us, I'm thinking around 10 of us, majority of us became gang members. So we just clicked together and decided, "Forget the Boy Scouts." We became hoodlums. So, from Boy Scout to hoodlum…Yeah, so that's the beginning of the path down the wrong road.

For Brian, it was debilitating to constantly be the target of racist slurs and violent assaults. He idolized his older brother, who was involved with gang life, and how he confronted racist bullies. He shared a story of how his brother fought back against racist bullies and how that shaped his understanding of violence:

> I still remember, we were playing volleyball and putting up a house. And you know Vietnamese house, three, four in one block. We all kids play together and everything. . . . And Vietnamese sound system in the background, whatever . . . our dads listening to, right? So my brother and my cousin was driving down the street from Pomona, where we live. And they was driving down with their Toyota Silica . . . and they passed by this house across the street with a bunch of white kids. So before all this, these white kids was already clowning us. "Gook, go home". . . And we just getting it, calling ching chongs, gooks, and stuff like that, whatever…But then we kids, we ignored them. These are bigger high school kids. . . . So those group of white kids flipped them off, throw beer bottles at my brother's car. So automatic my brother stopped and he popped out . . . he was fighting with them. . . . He kicked one in the stomach. . . . And when he landed one, the other two are like, "Oh shit, this guy might know kung fu." Typical stereotype . . . So

they backed them off and because of that incident, the white guy would give my brother

the respect. *They didn't call us ching chongs or gooks no more.*

Brian's story was filled with racial imagery. First, he highlights the collective culture of Asian

families (i.e., "three, four in one block", "we all kids play together"), the Vietnamese music in

the background, and the Toyota Silica as symbols of the acculturation process for Asian

immigrant families. Then, he states how his brother successfully confronted racist stereotypes

(i.e., "ching chongs," "gooks") through violence in exclaiming "They didn't call us ching chongs

or gooks no more." Brian spoke of his heightened racial pride after that incident and associated

violence as a unfailing method of bullying prevention. Brian noted, "So it wasn't so long after

that, the first white boy to call me ching chong, I hit them in the mouth."

Like Brian, most participants used violence as a strategy to confront racial injustice

(Irwin & Umemoto, 2016). During the late 1980s and 1990s, when most of the participants were

growing up, bullying against Asian students was very common (Koo et al., 2012; Magsaysay,

2021). This held true in both racially heterogeneous and homogenous neighborhoods.

Participants had an altruistic view of how they engaged violence for the greater Asian

community. Steven recalled how standing up for other Asian students made him feel heroic:

I remember seeing them [Mexicans] picking on other Asian kids and I didn't like that

feeling of powerlessness. I didn't like feeling vulnerable. So I would tell myself, "The

first time it happens to me, I'm going to stand up for myself." And when it did, that's

how I responded. I stood up for myself so it wouldn't happen again. Other Asians that

were a grade or two higher than me, they praised me, so I felt proud of myself. But I

really fell in love with that attention, that validation, and I just wanted to continue to

chase that . . . I loved it. Everywhere I went, people would acknowledge me . . . And so, I

started standing up for other Asian kids. You know what I mean? I don't know. For some

reason, even to this day, I see other Asian kids getting picked on, and I want to step in.

And I know that's really none of my business, but I make it my business.

Steven's race based motivation for fighting stemmed not only from gaining respect from his

peers (i.e., "they praised me", "I felt so proud") but also the responsibility to protect others (i.e.,

"I want to step in", "I made it my business"). He added:

> My whole thing, what I fell into was, it's funny, I felt like I was fighting for a cause. I
>
> wanted to establish our respect as Asians in the community. I couldn't stand seeing the
>
> others being picked on. So I felt like if I had to sacrifice myself, that's what I was going
>
> to do. If I had to gain that respect through violence, that what we would do.

Participants had a universal distaste for students being bullied. So much so that Asian gangs have

built a reputation of engaging in senseless and unfathomable violence acts (Joe, 1994; Tsunokai

& Kposowa, 2002) so that the Asian communities would no longer be targeted.

**Internalizing Violence**

For Asian immigrants and refugees involved with gang subculture, violence has been a

way that they make sense of the world (Lam, 2015). Further, their understanding of violence

traces back to transnational context of U.S. imperialism and postcolonialism. Sokthea, a

Cambodian participant from Long Beach, described the depth of youth violence:

> So we [Asians] went through the bullying that they put us through as a kid, so now we're
>
> all grown up. Now we're gang members. We're like, "Man, you guys ain't going to punk
>
> us." . . . We're going to go out and get you. You bust on us, we're going to sort it out and
>
> gang-bang it." That's what it was. It's like, us against you. My 'hood is better than yours.

It's the pride thing now. You hurt one of my people, then it's like you're hurting one of

us. That's how a lot of us took that. You're attacking my family member.

Sokthea's statement underscores the transition of Asians being bullied to Asians fighting back

(i.e., "now we're all grown up," "you guys ain't going to punk us"). He also highlights

performative aspects of violence (i.e., "You hurt one of my people, then it's like you're hurting

one of us," "We're going to go out and get you").

Sokthea and other participants related the violent expressions of their gangs back to their

need to project an image of hegemonic masculinity. Nathan explained:

I didn't want to accept any vulnerable emotions I may have had. And I tried to build this

image for myself that I wanted to see, and I wanted other people to see. And I felt like if

anybody tainted this image by words or even anything, I felt like I had to do something.

And the only way to fix that was through violence, because I didn't know no better.

Like Nathan, participants were concerned with their image and deliberately engaged with

violence to build their reputation. Arthur summarized the mentality that most participants

adopted during that time, "You either a gang member, or you get picked on. So, you don't want

to get picked on, you become a gang member."

Indeed, participants followed the code of the streets (Anderson, 1994). During the height

of his gang activity, Steven admitted he was so wild that no one could "check him." He

contended, "I grew up not listening to my parents. What makes you think I'm going to listen to

you?" This mentality was common among the participants. Harry explained how the violence

progressed after he officially jumped in a gang:

You get into fights and things like that, and you have people you don't like, you have so-

called enemies or whatever, but not gang affiliation like when you're in the lifestyles.

There's no other way to make a say. It was life and death now. It's for keeps, like this

whole different ball gang. It's not just hanging out. . . . It involved hurting people,

stabbing, shooting, carrying weapons. I'll freely say, my intention was to hurt and kill my

enemies because, also my belief that they're out there trying to do the same. . . . So I'm

not going to justify it by saying, "Oh, so I had to, because they" . . . No, I know better. I

chose that life, but that's just the reality. You either get them or they get you. So I chose

that, and that's what I was living by.

Harry and other participants believed to be part of a gang one must be clear about expectations,

which included violent activities (i.e., "hurting people, stabbing, shooting"). Harry made it clear

that as a gang there was no other way to function aside from being extremely violent (i.e.,

"there's no other way to make a say," "you either get them or they get you").

Similarly, Bao cautioned the severity of Asians gangs:

Because now they know Asian, ain't the one to be messed with no more. Now they know

that Asians, we're strapped and that we'll put a bullet in you. So we build up some kind

of reputation now, not the one to be messed with. So even in prison we're like that too

now. They know that we will stab the hell out somebody, if you guys try run up on us. So

because they know that even though we're rival gangs on the street, we will stand back to

back to each other inside the pen.

Participants understood the race based hierarchy which positioned them as the most vulnerable,

given their newcomer status. API youth were aware of larger injustices, especially in a racial

context. They used violence as a means to get even or punish those who took advantage of them.

They viewed other races as perpetrators of violence, often in unfair circumstances. Their use of

violence to resist disrespect was also tied to masculinity. Whereas other boys of color are labeled as hypermasculine, API youth enacted masculinity to confront racial injustices.

**Toxic Asian Culture**

Though participants had immense racial and ethnic pride, they also felt that there were certain traits in Asian culture that was "toxic." Their resistance to toxic Asian culture led them create a subculture in gangs. One variation of a toxic trait was physical punishment. Participants agreed that being beaten by their parents was common. Additionally, participants were told not to tell authority figures or else they would receive harsher punishment. Participants like Sokthea blamed strict discipline and punishment as a reason for his absence in the household and deeper into gang life:

> I was the member that was always getting beat up, because I was out there hanging out with my cousins, coming home late, and just bringing worry to my parents, because we had just came from a war-torn country, and I'm over there running around the streets and just bringing that extra stress to them and stuff like that. When I get home, then I get my ass-whooping, but to me, that's just how it was. Through time, I just kind of distanced myself from my family because of the abuse, so I started running in the streets more.

In his comment, Sokthea acknowledged the reasons for his beating, which included "hanging out with my cousins, coming home late, and just bringing worry." He showed sympathy for his parents, recognizing the "extra stress" he caused "because we had just came from a war-torn country." Even then, he "distanced" himself as a result of the physical abuse, leading him to "run in the streets more."

Participants overwhelmingly felt that though they believed their parents did the best they could, their parents were absent during their formative years. They believed their parents did not

understand the struggles they encountered, especially when it came to racialized bullying. Bao shared an account on how dismissive his mom can be with his struggles:

> From my house to my elementary school was just up the street, no more than maybe 5-minute walk. But normally it'd take me about 20 minutes to get to school, because I had to go the long routes so I don't get bullied. . . . And I remember they hit me with a bat one time, broke my ankle. So they pushed me where I sprain my wrist and my mom was just like, "Suck it up, man up." I'm like, "What the hell does that mean? I'm a kid, I don't know how to suck."

As a kid, Bao was targeted for being one of the few Asians in his "ghetto" San Francisco neighborhood. He walked the long way to school to avoid areas where his bullies would be. Because of his bullying experience he already felt vulnerable. So when his mom told him to "suck it up, man up" instead of tending to his needs (both physically and emotionally), it confused him. He admitted that the validation he did not receive at home, he found on the streets.

For some participants, the Asian culture was too overwhelming that they felt they could not abide by their household norms. Whether it was constant comparison to others achievements, persistent nagging, or strict upbringing, they felt they could not meet their parents' expectations. As a result, many participants sought refuge in gang culture, which they felt accepted them. Nick explained how being in a gang give him a sense of identity outside his home:

> At home, I'm always feeling like powerless, because . . . You know what I mean? Like, Asians... I don't know, my mom was like, "Hey, just be an obedient son, and don't talk back," and stuff like that. And when my brother ran away too was like, I had nobody to talk to, right? . . . Yeah, so I was very quiet, and I don't know, I just feel like, I didn't have much of a voice at home, just feel kind of like, yeah, powerless, weak. So, I don't

know, just the gang atmosphere allowed me to be . . . I feel like I was accepted,

embraced, and by the homies. And, yeah, I know being in the gang it's not something to

be proud of, right? But it just made me felt like I can be someone else, other than the

obedient son, or that quiet son, right?

Nick pointed out how he was expected to be "an obedient son" and to not talk back, which he

states earlier as a cultural value. In following his mom's expectations; however, he felt

"powerless, weak" because he did not "have much of a voice at home." He contrasted this with

his gang life where he felt "accepted, embraced." He acknowledged that "being in the gang it's

not something to be proud of" yet he found acceptance there. In a sense the gang was a

distraction from his reality living at home because it offered an opportunity for him to "be

someone else, other than the obedient son." Gang culture was an escape and also a way he

resisted Asian cultural expectations of being obedient or quiet.

Like Nick, Harry attributed a key factor in his gang involvement to his family dynamic at

home. Though Harry grew up in an area with heavy gang presence, he did not aspire to join a

gang. He was a talented student and having a pastor for a dad deterred him from that route until

he was a teenager. Being the son of a pastor; however, had its cost. He felt a cultural disconnect

between him and his father. Harry also had conflicts with his dad's parenting style (Park, 2010),

stating, "it had a very negative, uber effect on me to the point where, I pretty much rejected

everything from my father and to the point where I pretty much did a 180." The tenuous

relationship he had with his father led him to "despise authority, reject authority, hate authority."

He also recalled his parents fighting a lot, which impacted his desire to be at home.

Steven had a similar story of resisting cultural traits. He explained how he felt his efforts

to please his parents, especially academically, were never good enough. He stated:

I was always being compared. I remember my sister got straight As and I was trying to

get straight As, too. I got all As and one B, and the B was for my handwriting. And they

were like, "All right, yeah. You did good, but you need to do something about that,

right?" I'm like, "Oh, shit." Again, that just became too difficult to please them. It's like,

"Damn." I just felt like I always fell short. I just, again, acting out. I got that attention that

I wanted or desired and fighting and all that, I became good at it. I was getting that

validation from my peers, so I'm like, "Oh shit, all right. I'm on way to becoming a

hardcore gangster." That's what I prided myself on. I prided myself on being a bad boy.

You know what I mean? So that meant rebelling against any authority. You know what I

mean? Even with my parents, they couldn't understand why. But again, after doing a lot

of work on myself, come to find out, it was these stories I created and I didn't really

know how to process that hurt. You know what I mean?

Both the comparison to his sister and his parents being disappointed about getting a B was said

to be typical in Asian culture. Steven felt his parents did not see him, arguing they were "too

difficult to please." Also, Steven felt frustrated that he was disappointed them (i.e., "always fell

short"). Since he did not get validation from his parents, he instead received it from his peers

because he was good at violence. He decided to focus his energy where he felt valued and heard,

which through his gang (i.e., "I prided myself on being a bad boy").

For participants like Anh, Vietnamese culture played a key role in his gang membership.

In fact, he argued that his cultural and refugee background helped him become a better gang

member. He asserted "If I cried, I would get beat, so I was trained to be a gang member way

before getting into a gang." He went on to explain how his parents blamed him whenever he got

in a fight and did not advocate for him:

Every time I got in trouble, got in a fight, they would say, "What did you do? Oh, poor them, are they okay?" It's never like, "What happened? How dare they. Let me go defend you." It's more like, "Let me whip your ass, and what the fuck is wrong with you? Are they okay? I hope they're okay. In fact, here. Let me fucking make some egg rolls. You bring it over there and offer it to them." I'm like, "Fuck this punk shit," right? Straight up.

Anh pointed out how hurt he felt that his parents did not validate his pain (i.e., "what happened? How dare they") but instead took the other party's side (i.e., "Are they okay?"). Even if the fights were a result of self-defense, his parents not only blame him (i.e., "what the fuck is wrong with you?") but on top of that physically discipline him i.e., (i.e., "let me whip your ass"). Additionally, his parents would force him to apologize to the other party by sending food over. Anh emphasized how much he despised his parents for dealing with his conflicts in a dismissive manner, which he attributes to being "very Vietnamese." He explained:

You should be able to see now how that leads right into the gang, because I was living the gang lifestyle, right? Be victimized. Shut up. Don't call the cops. You're hurt. Walk it off. So what? Be quiet. Don't snitch. I got my ass whipped one time for snitching.

Anh made it clear that there were many traits he did not like about Vietnamese culture. He brought up being ashamed of being Vietnamese as a child several times in our interviews. It was not until he started a gang with his friends that he embraced his racial pride. His gang friends, who were also Vietnamese refugees, understood his struggles and they shared a common bond of disliking their parents. He further explained how having dismissive parents pushed him away from his culture, but that the gang actually heightened his racial pride:

I hated that. Not only to be invisible, but to be a punk, to be visibly punk. And so here I am, I meet these guys that I can fully relate to. Everything that I was ashamed of is a point of pride.

Vietnamese, I was shameful in any other space. . . . And then here I am with these guys, and being poor connected us. Hating our parents, and our culture connected us. . . . So we loved being Vietnamese. We loved it so much that we're going to create a new culture that we can be proud of, and hopefully phase out or kill out through violence whatever. And that's why we're able to rob and hurt people that we feel are not with our new agenda

Through his gang Anh was able to "create a new culture that we can be proud of." In this sense he is resisting his culture through gang affiliation, yet claiming his racial identity as part of the gang culture. Additionally, he is keeping the tradition of gang culture to be violent as he noted how they will "kill out through violence" anyone that did not accept what they stood for.

**School Violence**

In discussions about their gang affiliation, schooling came up as a key role. This makes sense, given that during their adolescent years, school was a major component of their life. Participants shared various ways school has impacted their gang membership.

For Bao, he remembered a negative experience with a teacher that led to his distrust in authority figure:

I remember in, I think after my third grade, my English was still bad and my teacher he gets so frustrated with me because there was a lot of kids in the classroom . . . there was another Chinese kid next to me I would always talk to, to understand what's going on. So he considered me as a disturbance, so he put my desk outside the classroom and made me sit outside and he said, "Wait till your ESL teacher come get you." And I'm like, "Wow, okay." And that happened for the whole year…So I started developing no trust for authority figures. . . . I don't know what's going on, but I know how you made me feel. Feel like I was nothing, I was a nobody, I didn't matter.

Instead of caring for Bao, the teacher labeled him as a disturbant and physically removed him from class (Vavrus & Cole, 2002). Not only does Bao not understand what is going on, but now he feels like a bad student since he got in trouble. The neglect of his teacher caused him to "develop no trust for authority figures" and not feel cared for in schools.

Like Bao, Tuan also experienced inequality in the schooling system. He went to high school in Anaheim after immigrating from Vietnam. He barely spoke English at the time, which caused his peers to tease him, calling him a FOB, and making fun of the way he dressed. One day, a group of four Hispanic students were taunting him when Tuan hit one of them. They jumped him, but he was the one to get expelled. He explained:

> I got kicked out of school, because I don't know why four guys beat me up, but I'm the one that got to kicked out. No, actually I didn't get kicked out of school. I got away with it. I came home and I make a homemade weapon, watching lots of Bruce Lee movie coming up. So I made me like a weapon to come back to schools and try to retaliate against them though. So I got caught with it. I didn't able to do anything. I was just chasing them and I got caught with it and I got kicked out of school.

As a result of the fight, Tuan caught the attention of the Asian Boys gang members based in Orange County. As he was cleaning out his locker that day to leave school, they approached him and said "Don't worry about it. We're going to get the back for you." They instructed him to go in their car and he watched as they jumped one of his bullies after school. He started hanging out with them and officially joined their gang at 15 years old.

Adam had a unique experience in terms of his relationship with school. He was in juvenile hall at 13, where he took some tests and found out his intelligence level. When he went back to school, he was placed in the gifted class. However, he felt the class was "keeping me

away from my friends" because the class extended for another hour. Additionally, his mom was unsupportive because there was a financial charge to the program. After that, he "just gave up that class and just started ditching it." Adam's story reveals the limitations of schools in intervening for students. In his case he was identified as a talented student and essentially tracked. Even then, he gave in to his social influences and prioritized social relationships over his academics.  While schools did not serve a primary factor or influence in the student's decision to be gang involved, their stories were very much grounded in schoolings. Whether it was hanging out with friends, negative experiences, or simply ditching, school played a role.

In this section I delineated the gang origins and evolution for the OGs in the study. Unlike the youth, their trajectories were tied to racialized violence as a direct result of U.S. imperialism, war, and migration. They had to relocate in impoverished areas with high gang activity, where eventually they felt the need to join out of protection. In the next section I discuss the trajectories of youth gangs currently, and how their gang identity is more fluid and contextual than the OGs. This has implications for understanding the evolvement of gang culture and better supporting the youth involved.

### Contemporary Youth Gangs

I asked the OGs their thoughts on youth gang culture today. Unanimously, their response was somewhere along the lines of "Nobody really gang-bangs anymore." Deeper into our discussions they defined "gang banging" as an aesthetic and mindset, both of which are devoid in youth gang culture today. Unlike the 90s, gang involved youth today are not sporting Dickies or Ben Davis. Their fashion choices are considered bold among the OGs. Brian mockingly stated:

> In the 90s, it's not like this day. In the 90s, gang banging was gang banging. We were
>
> decked out in gang gear. These days, usually you got to wear the ties, you wear skinny

jeans, you tat up, but you have skinny jeans and the whole nine yards with some silk pink

shirt.

The skinny jeans and pink shirt referenced a more feminine aesthetic to gang culture, which the

OGs joked about. Brian and other participants found it shocking as it is a direct contrast to what

they would wear back in the day. Here, Brian used the imagery of a skinny jeans and pink shirt

to suggest a more feminine style. He stated this in contrast to how in his generation they "Were

decked out in gang gear." During their heyday, gang culture had a distinctive look of baggy

clothes (Tsang, 1993). Though Brian did not explicitly state it, his joking tone indicated that OGs

certainly were more masculine at least in the way they dressed. Youth today could still have a

certain edge to them (i.e., "you tat up") but his following statement "but you have skinny jeans"

negates the tattoos as being masculine.

Other participants, like Dave, shared the same sentiment with youth gang culture today.

He reiterated the difference in gang aesthetic:

There's a running joke in prison that now. . . . Some of my friends who told me, they're

like, "Yeah, gang members, you can't tell. . . . Even Orange County, you can't tell if

they're gang members or not. They're wearing skinny jeans, they're looking proper, no

one's sagging their pants. And if they do, they do like it little Wayne, it's a little bit

sticking out, whatever, right?" Just very . . . you can't tell the difference. They could be

packing a heat, you don't know, but you can't tell that they're gang members anymore.

Dave made a clear stance that violence is still embedded in gang culture by phrases such as "they

could still be packing heat" after discussing their dress (i.e., "skinny jeans," "proper"). Both

Brian and Dave hint at the discretion of gang culture since "you can't tell the difference,"

whereas in their generation gang members were clearly marked.

To this point, Tuan made a statement in response to conversations he's had with other OGs about the youth today not looking like stereotypical gangsters. He responded, "They obviously don't act like one." The point Tuan was making in his response is the deviation of gangs today from his generation not only in terms of physical appearance but what he considered "gang mentality." He elaborated:

> They say the reason that gang is no longer exists this day, because the new generation, they didn't live by the code of a gang member you supposed to live on. In gang member we have rules. We don't do this. We don't do that. This new generation, they don't live up to it. They don't live up to the standard of a gang member. That's why gang is slowly dead. I think it's dead.

Tuan and other participants criticized youth gangs today for not "liv[ing] by the code of a gang member." To them, there are certain traditions and values of gang culture i.e., (i.e., "we have rules," "we don't do this") that members are expected to abide and embody such as being violent when necessary and not snitching, even if that means serving prison time. The OGs especially emphasized that doing prison time was part of the "code" yet youth today are unwilling to serve prison time. Subsequently, this causes them to snitch on one another which violates the "code."

The OGs also suggested a plausible reason for the stark contrast of gang culture today was the motivation for joining a gang. In their generation, joining a gang was necessary out of survival. Given the racial tensions in their communities, they would still get "hit up" for being API even if they were not gang affiliated. Joining a gang offered a lot of the participants' protection from other racial groups. As Arthur stated, "But it's not like back then, where it's always on site" meaning at any point they would be ready to commit violent acts. Other participants explained how gang culture used to be more visible. "There would be large groups,

you would see it all the tme, and you would always here about stuff going down." They noted that this was not necessarily a bad thing, as they perceive communities to be safer without the presence of gang members.

However, the OGs suggest a lack of unity since the motivation is primarily about money now, as opposed to banding together for what they felt was a greater cause. This can cause youth to "act a fool" as Caleb claimed. Despite the jokes the OGs made about gang cultured being "watered down," some of them agreed that API gangs today are still as violent. Steven stated:

> What a lot of people say now is, "Oh, they wear skinny jeans. Gang banging is all watered down now." No, it's just different now. It's just different now. If you're out there, you can get hurt. You can get hurt. It's a whole lot of killing still going on, so the mentality is still the same.

Steven's comment underscored the seriousness of API gangs (i.e., "you can get hurt") even if they "wear skinny jeans." He pointed out that even though gang activity looks different, there is "a whole lot of killing[s] still going on." To Steven, we should not discount the violence that takes place since "the mentality is still the same."

Like Steven, Chea agreed that youth today are experiencing similar notions of struggle related to socioeconomic status. He elaborated:

> If you speak of the struggle, I think it's still relevant, in terms of poverty and lack of resources in these communities, and also lack of yeah, resources like mentors, and guidance. Anything else that can help these young people see that there's a different way to live.

Despite what gangs look like today, youth are still seeking out gang membership for a variety of factors. The OGs admitted that they would not want their loved ones to be part of this life, but the reality is that gangs provide security (financial, physical, and emotional).

## Landscape of Youth Gangs

In Vigil's (2010) book *Barrio Gangs*, he detailed the different degrees of gang affiliation as 1) regular, 2) peripheral, 3) temporary, and 4) situational. He argued that the degree of severity and duration of gang affiliation is based on the severity of racial discrimination and poverty. Indeed, In my study I found that youth have a more fluid relationship with their gang identity, akin to temporary and situational gang members from Vigil's typology. The OGs made it clear that they were bounded to certain expectations in terms of aesthetic and mentality. Present day youth gangs; however, are either not adopting what we could consider "stereotypical" gang dress or behavior or more lenient with those that are not. Instead, youth generally differed in their identification with a gang, their motives for being in a gang, and their level of involvement with gang activities. In the following section I describe contemporary youth gangs and their involvement through family members or financial gains.

## Flexible Gang Identification

Whereas OGs had a profound identity with their gang, API youth had a flexible one. To be sure, API youth are still committed to the gang life and they will honor their commitment when necessary. However, they do the bare minimum in terms of gang activity, just enough to still be considered part of the gang. In any case they are still seen as authentic gang members.

Marcus, 22, was a Samoan participant from Carson. He explained how he made sure to do the bare minimum with his gang, "I just do my shit and you know? I'm not all big gang banged out. I'm official, I do my shit. Get my money, that's it. When they need me, I'm over

there, that's it." Marcus grew up in Carson and though his dad was a leader of a Samoan gang, he did not get involved until college. His dad tried to protect him from joining the gang, telling others not to approach him about joining, but Marcus was already influenced by his friends and other male relatives.

There are spaces and context where they will not necessarily claim their gang identity. This is not to say they are ashamed, but rather they have other identities and interests outside the gang that they may prioritize. In fact, some of the interviews I had with youth captured their resistance in being labeled as a gang. For example, when asked if Tyler, a Vietnamese youth from San Jose, identifies as gang affiliated he responded, "I mean, amongst ourselves, yeah, we're in a gang. But then, to everyone else, we're just a group of friends, you know what I mean?" Here, Tyler downplays his gang to "a group of friends."

Historically, that was how some of the gangs started out: just as a group of friends hanging out. This would make it hard for law enforcement officials to detect gangs (Davidson, 1996; Lee, 2016). Rick, 24 from San Jose, demonstrated the evasiveness of a gang label when he discussed his gang as well:

> I feel like as the years went I met a really lot of nice people that I called my friends. In the end, we never really classified ourselves as a gang. It was just that one experience where there was one person who claimed to be it all. You know what I mean?

Like Tyler, he also claimed he "met a really lot of nice people" but resisted the gang label by saying they never classified themselves as such. A plausible reason could be that a few of them were still active with their gang and wanted to be cautious since they knew the interviews were recorded. Yet, they were inconsistent with identifying as gang members in our interviews and

would even downplay their involvement. One of the OGs, Anh, offered another alternative, stating:

> The definition of a gang differs. . . . And there are guys who are deep in it, but they will still adamantly deny that they're in a gang, and believe it. Like, "What?" So there different motivations and definitions, to be in a gang, and what is a gang.

So while they might not be hiding gang activity, they may genuinely not see themselves as a gang. This was more common among youth than the OGs. Instead of claiming gang affiliation, Rick explained his commitment to his gang in a different way:

> There was points where I hung out with them for, I would say after a year or two that they realized, the main guy realized that, "Oh, this guy," I was good at what I do for them pretty much. So he tried getting me labeled into it. He was telling me oh they wanted me to be a part of it, this and that and I told him, I was like, "No. I'm not really trying to be anyone. But rather if you ride for me, I'll ride for you guys kind of thing. Like you got my back, I got yours."

Rick resisted being "labeled into it." Though in some circles he stated he was identified as gang affiliated, and he would claim that identity throughout certain parts of the interview. Even his friends, who I know outside of the study, would consider him gang affiliated.

Another youth participant who resisted the gang label was Jay. He said he was not initiated into a gang, but that "all my homies were gangbangers, and I was just around it." He further added:

> So, in reality, it's like if I'm around it and something happens, then I'm expected to follow a protocol. It wasn't like, "Oh you didn't do this, that, or third, so you're not ..."

No, it wasn't like that. If you wanted to do that and get put on, that's your thing. You

know what I'm saying? Because we were just a tight little group of people.

His comment underscores the fluidity of gang membership in present day. He demonstrates how

he shows his commitment to the gang (i.e., "I'm expected to follow protocol") but that him not

formally getting initiated into the gang does not preclude him from affiliation or even

membership. Instead, he refers to his friends as "a tight little group of people" who happen to be

gang bangers. On his social media accounts, however, he often refers to himself as a gang

member.

However, youth agreed that there is not a need to claim gang identity, and that in fact

discretion is part of the culture. Tyler differentiated between gangsters and youth who do "gang

shit":

Gangsters in San Jose are the most silent motherfuckers of all the land, in my opinion.

Because we just stay out of everyone's business, and there's a reason why we're in that

gang, and we got a mission. We're not down to flex, just because that's going to

compromise our mission. Everyone else who's in that gang, they don't really got a

mission. They just want to be seen as hard, but then they're doing it in the worst way

possible. I feel like better we have those people, because they kind of bring the attention

to them rather than to us. So I feel like it kind of just works out for us in that ecosystem.

The flexible identity of API youth gangs today, or just their discretion, makes more sense when

we understand their pathways for gang involvement as through two trajectories: 1) through

family influence, and/or 2) through economic reasons or professional obligation (much like an

employee). In both cases they felt a certain obligation for gang activity, whereas the OGs felt a

more of a social connection to their gang. Youth were more likely to leave the gang after a few

years because the gang lifestyle was not out of necessity. Thus, youth today are more likely to

put in the bare minimum work to be part of the gang, while avoiding the most violent activities

as possible and holding identities outside of the gang.

**"Hood Babies" and Role of Family**

While research on youth gangs examine family cohesion as a predictor of gang

involvement (Decker & Curry, 2000; Fiaui et al., 2009), less is known on youth who have

immediate family members involved in gangs. Further, the limited scholarship that accounts for

family background tend to portray deficit ideologies of youth who have family members in

gangs. The goal of this section is to provide counterstories (Solórzano & Yosso, 2001) about

youth who have immediate family members in gangs. Below I share the stories of Alex, 20, and

Son, 25 to challenge dominant narratives on youth gangs and their families.

Alex is a self-proclaimed "hood baby." Her dad and uncle started the notorious Carson

Westside Pirus, a Samoan gang that originated from the Westside Pirus, a Black gang located in

Compton. As a baby she claimed that they did not listen to lullabies. Instead, her family listened

to "hood anthems." Though her dad, uncles, brothers, cousins, and almost every relative

(including women) she knew was gang affiliated, she grew up sheltered from gang life. Her dad

and brothers were not engaging in gang activity or behavior in front of her. She did not realize

how influential her family was in gang culture until high school. She noted:

> I can't even be like, "Oh, I'm Alex." They're like, "Yeah, we know. You're so-and-so's
>
> daughter." I'm like, "Yeah." But that and my brother. He's very feared. So, a lot of
>
> people be like, "Oh, you Tino's sister." So then after a while, especially getting banged
>
> on a lot, when people would be like, "Oh, you Tino's sister?"

As a child she described herself as shy and obedient. This caused her to be picked on by her older cousins, who were gang affiliated. She remembered how one of her male cousins offered a female cousin to punch her for $20. She also recalled instances of when her cousins jumped her randomly, and her aunts encouraged it. Even with the bullying that took place between her and her relatives, family was a big part of her life. She acknowledged:

> Even though we don't like each other, most of us don't really care for each other. That one common ground is being West Siders. It's one of those things where, if someone bangs on my little brother, or my cousin who I don't like, I still got to retaliate because that's my blood, so it's disrespectful to me that you think you can get away with that. We carry the same last name. My dad's side, they all say last name comes first.

Alex started embracing gang culture in 9th grade. She internalized the violence and admitted to being a bully herself. She saw the respect her brother and father got as a result of their reputation in the streets and started claiming the hood. Students feared her because of her family, to the point where she described herself as " untouchable." Given the normalcy of gangs in her family, she did not see her involvement as a big deal. She expressed:

> It's like, I know why I wanted to get gang affiliated, but there's just so many different components to it. It was the community. It was fun, even though we knew it was dangerous. I don't know. I think growing up, getting my ass beat a lot, it just felt like nothing could hurt me.

For Alex, "claiming her hood" helped her connect with her family. She joked that while other families bond over wholesome activities, hers bonded through gang membership. At the same time, she has had her fair share of trauma. For example, she witnessed her brother getting killed

in front of her and dying in her arms. She also got shot at in June 2018 while she was alone in her car. She knew from that moment that she was marked and officially part of the streets.

The attempt on her life and her already tenuous relationship with her family made her consider other options outside of gang banging. Though she will always claim the west side, even to this day as a junior at UCLA, she felt that she had to find herself outside of her gang and family identity. She reflected:

> Some people, they're so into it that they don't know how to separate themselves as a
> individual from the gang. That's another thing. The only things they think is, "Gang,
> gang, gang." I think the difference between me was I was like, "Yeah, this is my gang.
> This is my family, but I'm Alex. I'm Alex, and this is who I am. This is what I want to
> do." Also, a lot of time, people don't have a plan. I think with me, it was really about
> growing, and having a plan, and just trying to change up the narrative while not giving up
> the hood. I will never stop saying I'm a Westside native

For participants like Perzia who grew into a family of gang involvement, gang affiliation offered a way for her to be closer to her family. Instead of looking down on it, gang affiliation in this context was an asset.

Additionally, her gang affiliation is much more fluid compared to the OGs in the study. Her loyalty to the gang will not be questioned because of her dad's and brother's leadership in the gang. She also stated that women in gangs are not held to the same standards of being gang affiliated (Mendoza-Denton, 2014). As such, she has more flexibility of when she can claim gang membership without it affecting her street cred. Because of her familial ties to her gang she has the opportunity to develop an identity outside of the gang all the while receiving benefits of

being affiliated with the westside pirus. can Thus, she has the freedom to express her membership or not.

Henry, a Vietnamese immigrant and child of refugees from San Jose, was affiliated with an Asian gang through his brother, who served as one of the leaders. He recalled his brother being bullied by other races, mainly Mexicans, and how that shaped his brother's membership with gangs. Henry and his family were tight knit, so when both his brother and father asked him to help out his brother make money illegally, he felt he had no choice but to agree. He described the relationship he had with his brother:

> Because when he would say, "Hey, I need help." What am I going to do? Say no, to my brother? And at that time, me and him, we were super close. I would do anything for him, and he would do, he would do anything for me, too. I got into a fight at my job, because I'm a security guard. This Asian gangster guy just started shit. And me and him got into a fight, and then he's like, "I'll come back for you." All I had to do was call my brother, and then he had his people would just, go get the guy. So, yeah. We were really down, for each other.

Henry did not get involved with his brother and his gang until after high school. At first, he was hands off. But eventually he "did get pretty deep" because of the amount of money they were making. Growing up in a low income neighborhood, Henry's priority at the time was economic gain. He continued to be involved with his brother's gang out of financial means, but also because he wanted his brother and family to succeed. He lost his mom in 2018 and wanted to help his dad buy a house. His dad was not concerned with the money, but stressed that Henry should help his brother to look out for him. Looking back, Henry expressed:

I felt like I wanted to help him, because he was making so much money that, I helped him because I wanted him to buy my dad a home, after my mom passed. But then, he didn't, and now he's in this huge mess. So, I think a big part of me helping him was because I wanted him to do well, but I also wanted my family to do well. And I felt like I was too young. And I think that's a lot of issues, with younger Asians, that want to make money. They want it fast, and then it doesn't always go that route.

His parents turned a blind eye to their business. They knew superficially about the gang involvement, but they chose to look the other way. Henry's brother would often get in trouble with the law. One time, Henry remembered how his brother was on trial for murder, but once he was found not guilty his parents threw a party for him.

Unlike Alex, Henry's parents were not gang involved. And they tried their best to shelter their sons from that lifestyle. However, they upheld this collective culture in Asian families of not wanting to be alone So they relied on Henry to help out his brother, even if that meant being affiliated with the same gang. In a sense, Asian culture facilitated his gang involvement even if "gangs are a bad thing."

Gang affiliation for Henry was a way to help his brother out. He did not choose the gang life, but his own parents asked him to be involved for the sake of kinship. Participants like Henry have a fluid membership as they can claim the gang through a relative, and therefore don't have to "Rep" as much.

Both Alex and Henry got involved with gangs through family members. Gangs were their bonding experience. They both had somewhat of an autonomy of whether or not they chose to get involved, which gave them more flexibility to leave the gang. As second generation gang affiliated youth they did not have to join out of survival. They went on to individual ventures.

Alex as a student at UCLA, and Henry who graduated with his bachelor's in psychology at San Jose State.

**Masculinity and Monetary Gain**

More common among the youth was for monetary gain, and to an extent hegemonic masculinity (Lu & Wong, 2013; Shek, 2007), to be one of the motivating factors for gang involvement. Since there was hardly a need for survival purposes to join a gang, the romanticization of gang culture was appealing to the youth. Participants varied in familial background, socioeconomic status, but the one thing they had in common was that they don't stay for a long time, and usually phase out of the gang after a few years (Vigil, 2010). This tend to be the case when they want to quit the gang to make legitimate money, or when they are not willing to engage in violent or destructive behaviors any longer. Again, they are not considered "wannabees" as they put in the work and are respected by their peers, but rather they have other options.

Jacob, a Filipino participant from San Jose, was introduced to gang life through his cousin. He recalled how much his cousin despised and bullied him growing up because Jacob chose to play with his girl cousins instead of the boys. Jacob grew up in a poor neighborhood "ran by Mexicans" who would bully and rob him and his friends:

> There was always Nortes trying to rob all the little kids, including myself. So the way that I put it as, as a little kid, at least the mindset I had was like, "It's either you're going to get robbed or you're going to rob somebody." Yeah, that was the way that I was thinking. I was always telling people, "There's two people in this world, there's people that get robbed or there's people that do the robbing."

Initially, he decided to join a gang for protection. At first he joined a Blood gang but his cousin had to set him straight. He recalled:

> I joined this like Blood gang and my cousin found out about it, and he whooped my ass and he told me being a Blood in San Jose is the worst decision I could've made. So it just made me think about it, and I was like, all right, fuck it. I'll go tell the person in charge that I'm getting out. Got my ass beat again.

Jacob and his friends decided to start their own gang that was not affiliated with Crips or Bloods. Except this time their priority was making money, and eventually it grew to 30 youth affiliated with his gang.

To that end, youth in this study did not feel the need to claim their gang as much as the OGs. Though part of an Asian crip gang, Tyler, 22, complained, "I don't even like wearing blue." A San Jose native, Tyler was one of the only participants who came from a financially well off family. Growing up in San Jose, however, he was impressionable about Vietnamese gang subculture. He explained:

> I feel like growing up Asian in San Jose, there was kind of a destined path that you had to follow. A lot of the paths that your elders would want you to follow would be like be an engineer, or a doctor, or stuff like that. Or there was a lot of your uncles or your friends who were part of that gang lifestyle. It was kind of like a fork in the road, or you kind of got to choose from an early age, because I feel like everyone. . . . A large population of Asian kids can go down either path, just as equally. So it's either you go down this road where it's just straight-up schooling, or you just try to be out there.

His mom worked at a coffee shop, which in San Jose was a "hotspot" for gang members (Du &

Ricard, 1996). Being with her at work exposed him to the gang lifestyle made him

impressionable about the masculinity. He stated,

> That was always intriguing to me, because it felt like they had a lot of power, and they
>
> were just the pure form of masculinity, and that's what I kind of wanted in my life. Just to
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> be more masculine and stuff like that, because I come from a family where there's mostly
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> girls. So I'm more in touch with my feminine side, which raised some insecurities of how
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> I'd be like more as a man. So I feel like a lot of it came from a desire to be more
>
> masculine.

Tyler was upfront in stating he had a choice about joining a gang and recognized the privilege

had in doing so. To Tyler, there was a certain chip on his shoulder. He expressed:

> Tyler: Now that I'm looking back, I feel like I definitely didn't join for the right reasons,
>
> but I definitely did everything I could to make it a more positive experience in my life
>
> than negative. I joined for reassurance, and that's definitely not the right reason you
>
> should join a gang. Now looking back, I could've saved myself a lot of trauma and
>
> anxiety if I were to just find that reassurance elsewhere.
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> AL: And what type of reassurance were you talking about?
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> Ty: Reassurance of just being more tough and more masculine.

Tyler accepted the fact that he is not traditionally a masculine guy. In fact, he describes himself

as emotional. However, in high school he felt the need to prove his masculinity. He asserted, "I

just really want to be seen as someone that was tough. And I didn't want someone just to look

down on me automatically. I wanted to have a label attached to me that people would not want to

fuck with." He started smoking weed in 8th grade, so when he went to high school he made

friends with like-minded peers who were older than him. They were members of a Southeast Asian gang made up of Vietnamese, Laotian and Cambodian youth. He would later get jumped in his first year in high school. Tyler stayed in the gang for seven years, until he got blessed out[1] last year.

Though Jacob joined a gang for his protection, money also served as a primary factor. For Tyler, although he admitted that his "desire to be a man" was a motivational factor in joining a gang, financial gain was the biggest reason he stayed in the gang.

## Conclusion

The gang origin and evolution of API youth are informed by economic and political conditions tracing back to war and migration, particularly with the conflict in Southeast Asia (Lam, 2015). Utilizing AsianCrit revealed how they understand their racialization and intervene in their racial categorization is shaped by broader sociohistorical factors. For example, the rise of a social movement group called Asians with Attitudes (AWA) formed out of the racialized violence against Asian communities during COVID (CBS Los Angeles, 2021). During the global pandemic, Asian Americans have reported nearly 3,800 incidents of crime victimization since March 2020 (Jeung et al., 2021). The vigilante group, made up of volunteers in Oakland, San Francisco, and San Jose, banded together to stand up against anti-Asian violence. The volunteer members patrol Asian immigrant enclaves, such as Oakland's Chinatown, and provide protection to the shop owners and elderly. Their name is a play off N.W.A, a rap group from Compton that openly spoke up against police brutality against the Black community. Similarly, AWA considers themselves an activist group as they resist notions of the "model minority" stereotype, shedding light to the racial realities they face as predominantly Southeast Asian Americans. They

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[1] A term that means when a gang member is permitted to leaving a gang without physical consequences. This is usually in lieu of getting jumped out

blame popular portrayal of Asians as a result of the lack of protection against Asian American attacks. The formation of AWA, like youth gangs, are consequences of class inequalities and interethnic relations amongst marginalized groups. Large scale forces, like a racialized political economy, impact how they make sense of their racialized identities and experience.

At the core, API youth involved in gangs disrupt the image of the "model minority" (Lam, 2015). Their involvement with gang subculture is a symptom of larger issues of racial and class inequality that are prevalent in other communities of color. This chapter revealed the racial realities for API youth who are marked by racism, poverty, and criminalization. The intersecting forms of oppression condition their experiences as being gang affiliated.

The OGs in the study, their parents, and family faced trauma associated with war, migration, and being refugees displaced from their land. In response to the racialized violence endemic to the communities they lived in, API youth formed or joined gangs out of protection. The racist bullying and marginalization that students experience is shaped by White values of norms related to assimilation (Lee et al., 2016). As a result, communities of color direct racism against one another under the guise of white supremacy. AsianCrit as a framework helped better understand how white supremacy maintains dominant racial narratives (Iftikar & Museus, 2018).

Compared to the first generation gang members, the membership of contemporary youth gangs are more fluid and contextual. They are not held to the rigid script of being gang affiliated as the OGs. For example, their dress is not as masculine (e.g., wearing skinny jeans compared to baggy clothing) and they do not feel the need to consistently claim their gang identity. Unless their immediate family members are involved, API youth are more likely to join gangs out of financial means and buy into the romanticization of gang life. They have other identities outside

of gang life and phase out after several years (Vigil, 2010). This is not to say that they are less authentic as gang members, as they still "put in work" for their gangs.

While API youth gangs today are not necessarily facing the same racial violence as the OGs, their gang involvement hints at the intersecting forms of oppression, such as a racialized economic structure, that shapes their experience. Research must continue to use a racial analysis that accounts for structural and historical factors that hinder the social mobility of API youth.

**Chapter 5**

**Constructing Identities through Gang Affiliation**

Critical race scholars contend that race as a socially and politically constructed category shape the experiences and outcomes of racially minoritized groups (Omi & Winant, 1994). Sociologists Omi and Winant (2014) offer one of the most dominant perspectives on race, arguing that racial categories and the significance of race is constantly contested through sociohistorical, economic, and political processes both on the micro- and macro-level. Given the ubiquitous positioning of APIs in the U.S. racial landscape, gangs provide a vehicle to contest racial identity and social definitions of race. How they are racialized and understand and internalize their racialization can be understood in the historical contexts of their "racial formation" (Omi & Winant, 1994). While there is thoughtful scholarship on racial identity construction for Asian American (Chhuon & Hudley, 2011; Lee et al., 2017; Uy, 2018) and Pacific Islander youth (Irwin & Umemoto, 2016; Vaught, 2012), it generally fails to consider or center those who are gang involved (Alonso, 2004). Yet, in immigrant Asian American communities, gangs have played a significant role in the formation of youth culture (Alsaybar, 1999; Hunt et al., 1997; Lam, 2015). Given the racial connotations that gangs carry, gang subculture constituted a platform in which race is performed, articulated, and contested (Omi & Winant, 1994).

In this chapter I deconstruct stereotypical notions of gangs to examine how API youth construct their identity through gang affiliation and gang culture by addressing the following research question: *How do API gang affiliated youth make meaning of their racial identity?* I am interested in the "continuing significance and changing meaning of race" (Omi & Winant, 1993, p. 3) for API youth in the context of gang subculture. Certainly, race and identity is a significant

factor in their experiences, and their understandings of concepts such as race and racism are influenced by historical contexts such as war, migration, and imperialism (Coloma, 2006; Lam, 2015).

I found that gang affiliation and culture enabled distinct racial/ethnic identities that redefine traditional notions of API identities. This exploration builds on the tenet of strategic (anti)essentialism of AsianCrit by narrating the complex analysis of racial identity and resistance to prevailing notions of race and power (Iftikar & Museus, 2018). First, I describe how API gang affiliated youth respond to racist myths associated with being Asian American and gang affiliated to provide a conceptual foreground for the other themes identified below. Although they reject the "model minority" myth, I argue that there are two strategies of racial identity construction they use that reify the same racial categorization: 1) embracing API stereotypes as part of their gang culture, and 2) ascribing racial and ethnic meaning to cultural practices in their gang. Finally, I conclude with how API youth navigate the complexities of their identity and grapple the tensions of their racial and gang identity.

### Responding to Racist Myths

Undoubtedly, API youth in this study saw the world through a racial lens. Coloma (2006) argued that "the AAPI 'race' is something that is both imposed upon and claimed by a group of people based on political reasons and not on biological, genetic or anthropological criteria" (p. 8). The panethnic Asian American and Pacific Islander category was utilized as a political tool, portraying API as a monolithic group despite the forced grouping of nearly 48 ethnic groups (National Commission on Asian American and Pacific Islander Research in Education [CARE], 2008). Thus, the panethnic identity has been a contested issue in the API community. The inter-ethnic conflict is reflected in the participants' narratives, where they both claim and distance

themselves from the API category. Additionally, it was not until the 2000 census that Asian Americans were separated from Pacific Islanders in racial classification (Coloma, 2006). Given that Asian American and Pacific Islanders experience racialization differently, I use the term API to refer to both Asian American and Pacific Islander participants in the study (Gogue et al., 2021). Otherwise, I differentiate between the terms Asian American and Pacific Islander to capture the nuance of their differing experiences.

The social and political construction of racial categories impacts the ways that API youth in this study make sense of their racial identity. The social construction of Asian Americans as the "model minority" has contributed to a limited understanding of the racial realities for those involved in gangs. They spoke of their racialization as deviant given their gang affiliation, or as emasculated men as it related to the "model minority" stereotype (Iftikar & Museus, 2018). Through the frame of their gang affiliation, they navigated their racial and ethnic identity through a dual index (Reyes, 2007) in which they position themselves against hegemonic representations of what it means to be API and gang involved. They noted how their gang identity was demoralized in Asian American communities, yet invisible in the racial landscape in gang subculture. They contrasted their experience and understanding of racialization to other racial groups, namely other Asians who fit the social construction of the "model minority" myth and their positioning against Black individuals because of their proximity in gang culture. This section describes how they reject stereotypical notions of being API, referring themselves as the "cool Asians" and how they understand their identity in relation to the racialization of gang culture.

**"The Cool Asians"**

Popular representations of Asian Americans, in scholarship and media, portray them as offensive stereotypes, such as nerds (Zhang, 2010). In our discussion on representations of Asian Americans, namely through the "model minority" stereotype, participants made a distinction between "nerdy Asians" and the "cool Asians." All participants viewed themselves under the latter representation. They felt that because they were not book smart or high achieving, they did not fit the nerdy image (nor did they want to). Jacob, a Filipino participant from San Jose, unequivocally disagreed with the stereotype. He explained how he was one of the cool Asians:

> Jacob: I thought we were like fucking . . . like well, definitely come from a different class, there's definitely a separation…But I thought this was the kind of Asian that you're supposed to be.

> AL: Oh wait, can you say more about that? Because I think that's really interesting.

> Jacob: Like growing up, fucking it was definitely out there. There was some nerdy ass Asians and there was also some Asians that fucking were cool, or even Asians that were getting into trouble. . . . But I felt like the ones that were . . . there were also Asians that were getting their money, or at least doing whatever it took to get their money. . . . And I just felt like that was the kind of Asian that everybody should have been at that time and shit.

Jacob noted the differentiation between the Asian representation in statements such as how he, and other gang members, "come from a different class, there's definitely a separation." He aligned himself with the cool Asians, adding "I thought this was the kind of Asian that you're supposed to be." In this instance, he is refusing the "model minority" stereotype as the dominant portrayal of Asian Americans indicating that he did not view his identity under that paradigm. In

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fact, he looked down on "nerdy ass Asians" because the "kind of Asian that everybody should have been" were the ones "getting their money." Another participant, Nathan (former member of one of the earliest Filipino gangs in Los Angeles, the Santanas) similarly expressed, "I felt like a cooler Asian, because then I was protecting the Asian nerds." Nathan's statement also reveals a clear distinction between cool versus nerdy Asians.

Harry, who was involved with an Asian street gang in Boyle Heights, reflected on how he was aware of the "model minority" stereotype and intentionally positioned himself against it:

I do recall thinking about that stereotype, and making sure nobody ever believed that . . . Because, I didn't want to look as being weak or as a nerd . . . those are some of the things that propelled me to be so out loud, out there too. My own issues led me to not want people to think that I was weak, that I couldn't handle my own. And so those things made me do so many other crazy things.

Harry's refusal of the "model minority" stereotype led him to display oppositional behavior (i.e., "those things made me do so many other crazy things") that aligned more with gang culture (i.e., "be so out loud, out there too"). Additionally, Harry's statement reveals the role of masculinity in resisting the stereotype. For example, "I didn't want to look as being weak or being a nerd" signified the association of Asian men as effeminate (Eng, 2001; Keo & Noguera, 2018; Lei, 2008).

Like Harry, Tyler, a Vietnamese participant from San Jose, admitted to the racialized gender construction of Asian men that contradicted with gang affiliation:

Again, a lot of people see Asian men as the weakest link, so a lot of people would give us shit, or think that we won't fight back or think we're all sweet and shit, but then . . . it gives me reassurance that we were able to stand our whole ground this whole time. All

these misconceptions about us and all these things that they thought we were, we really

weren't. We have got shit for it, but then we were able to talk that talk and we were able

to show up for it, so it wasn't like . . . I feel like if anything, that gave me more

reassurance that those stereotypes aren't true. I feel like if anything, it made me more

proud to be Asian being a part of that gang, because it made me feel like we're not weak,

we're not as weak as everyone think that we are. We're not people to take shit from

anyone.

To Tyler, being in a gang was a tactic to resist the "model minority" myth by proving "those

stereotypes aren't true." He was specific in countering perceptions of Asian men through

hegemonic masculinity stating, "we're not as weak as everyone thinks that we are" and being

able to "stand our ground." Indeed, Asian men tend to have unique experiences in the context of

masculinity and the interaction with their racial identity (Lu & Wong, 2013; Shek, 2007). Chua

and Fujino (1999) argued that "Asian American masculinity was socially constructed around

'model minority' maleness and not in terms of the dominant construction of masculinity" (p.

396). Espiritu (1997) noted how images of Asian American men were portrayed "as alternatively

inferior" relegating them to a more emasculated status than other men of color. Harry and Tyler

therefore redefined their masculinity through gang affiliation and violence (Anderson, 2000).

**"I Don't See it": Asian Youth In Gang Culture**

Expression of Asian American masculinities in the realm of gang subculture shed light on

the contestation of normative racial logic (Thangaraj, 2012). Discussions surrounding

racialization revealed that they were attuned of how they received less legitimacy as gang

members compared to other racial groups. In this sense, Asian-ness is seen as irreconcilable with

hegemonic masculinity (Thangaraj, 2012). Even Alex, a Samoan participant from Carson, revealed her own bias against Asian Americans involved in gangs:

>Asians . . . I'm going to be real. I'm one of those where I'll see Asians, and I'm like, "Where you from though?" It's very hard for . . . unless they're Cambodian. If they're Cambodian, they're like, "Yeah, I gangbang." I'm like, "Yeah, I know you do it. I know you do," and then some Filipinos. I think even in high school when we would have Filipinos who are like, "Oh, I gangbang," I'm like, "No, you don't. Nooo, you don't," because I couldn't see it. If I did see it, I didn't take them seriously. There's a lot of Chinese gangs too that are really real deal. There's that stereotype of the model minority, and I definitely played into that in high school. I was like, "Shut up. Your mom throw noodles at you and tell you to do your homework," little shit like that until I'm hearing like, "Oh, did you hear So-and-So got shot?" I'm like, "Shot? He got shot?" They're like, "Yeah, he really gangbang." I'm like, 'Whoa.' I was out here calling him Ping.

Though Alex acknowledged her bias stemming from the "model minority" stereotype, her ideologies hints at how Asian American gang affiliated youth are raced through their masculinity. Her remarks highlight the role of ethnic identity in the authenticity of gang culture. She assigns legitimacy to certain ethnicities. Cambodians, for example, fit the narrative of being a gang member (i.e., "yeah I know you do"), whereas Chinese gangs might be harder to imagine. In fact, she uses racial imagery to question the legitimacy of Chinese gangs such as "your mom throw noodles at you and tell you to do your homework" and "calling him Ping." Despite her own accounts contesting the legitimacy of Asian gangs, Alex discussed her frustration in Samoan gangs not being taken seriously by other communities of color:

Yeah, I think most of the time, I'm telling you, the face of gangbanging is Black people [slight whisper]. I mean that's not a bad thing. It's not bad, but when it comes down to other . . . When you're talking about it, people, a lot of times, won't validate your experience because they can't. It's hard for them to see what you're talking about. It's hard for them to see my little ass dressed up in all burgundy and shit like that or they'll look at my brothers and be like, "I don't see it," until they see it.

Alex slightly whispered stating that Black communities are the dominant racial narratives for gang subculture. She implies that it is easier for people to accept Black individuals as gang affiliated, but this was not the case for API youth (i.e., "they'll look at my brothers and be like 'I don't see it'"). Further, she mentioned the erasure of her experiences (i.e., "people . . . won't validate your experience") as a result of her Pacific Islander identity. Here, Alex sheds light on the different racialization processes for Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders. Though Asian American gangs might be called into question in the context of masculinity, Pacific Islanders are often invisible in racial discourse (Gogue et al., 2021; Vaught, 2010). While Asian gangs may be considered anomalies, Pacific Islander gangs are further marginalized because of their invisibility.

Alex further discussed how the legitimacy of her family's gang involvement was called into question:

A lot of my friends, they were just kind of like, "You bang bang, or what is the case?" I showed them like, "This is my brother. He has WSP tatted on his chest. This is his face tattoos." I was like, "But tattoos don't mean shit. This is him at the gang place. This is him at the warehouse, all them holding up the red rag. This is this. This is that. This is where my brother got shot. This is when this happened. This is us all drinking on our

garage on a Friday night with whatever yelling, 'Soo woop.' No, this is it." They're like, "Oh, shit." I'm like, "Yeah. Yeah, the fuck? Did you guys think it was going to be like Straight Outta Compton? No, this is real shit."

Alex had to provide extensive evidence of her family's gang involvement, such as showing pictures of tattoos and gang territories for her friends to understand her experiences being gang affiliated. She once again implies the palpable perception of Black people being gang affiliated by referring to the movie "Straight Outta Compton," which depicts the story of a Black rap group navigating racism and violence in Compton. Here, Alex hints at the hypervisibility and stereotype of Black communities in gangs (Esbensen & Tusinski, 2007; Wyer et al., 1998)

Aside from gender construction, the racialized experiences of APIs are also mutually shaped by class inequities, which conditions their experiences (Iftikar & Museus, 2018). Yet, we tend to have a one-dimensional understanding of Asian Americans. So much so that experiences of "hood" Asian Americans are illegible as they are a stark contrast from the "model minority" representation (Vue, 2021). Steven, a Vietnamese participant from Pomona, shared a similar experience. He recalled how people were unaware of his gang involvement, and his sister's, based on racial identity alone:

A lot of times, people think of Asians as being rich, but then when I share my struggles or whatnot, when I share that my sister's been caught up in her addiction for 30 plus years...when I share that my sister's been in and out of prison and she's done at least a total of 15 years, they're like, "Oh shit. Damn, we thought they had it good. They're just like us." They take to it. You can tell. They're more compassionate. They're like, "Damn, really?"

Steven's account demonstrate the assumption others have on what it means to be Asian (i.e., "We thought they had it good"). Certainly, gang culture is not part of the racial script for Asian Americans hence their surprised reaction (i.e., "Damn really?"). The assumption here is that Asian communities do not face issues of violence or gang affiliation like other communities of color (i.e., "They're just like us"). However, Southeast Asians disproportionately have higher rates of poverty, lower educational attainment, and experience violence and criminalization compared to East Asians (Bui, 2018; Rodriguez, 2020; Trieu, 2018).

Sokthea, a Cambodian participant and former member of the Tiny Rascals Gang (TRG), pointed to the ways that geographical context shaped the normalization of Asian gangs:

But if a person who's familiar with how the Asians out here in Long Beach, how we function, they would know, "Okay, these guys are real gang members out here," because they'd know the stuff that was going on out here in the eighties, the nineties, the early 2000s. They already know we're different out here.

In his statement above, Sokthea implied that for people living in areas with high concentrations of Asian, especially Southeast Asian immigrant communities, the experiences of "hood" Asians are better understood. He stated, "They already know we're different out here" to position the Asians in Long Beach from the stereotypical Asian Americans.

In discussing gang culture, the appropriation of Black gangs came up frequently. When asked what he wish people knew about Asian gangs, Tyler poignantly expressed:

I wish people would stop thinking that we're trying to bite off of black gangs or culture, because that's not it at all. That's not it at all. . . . Just because, oh, you put any other ethnicity in the same spot, they're going to create the same shit. Not all Asians have it. Some of them actually got to be a part of this shit, and we're not just fucking posers and

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stuff like that. We're really about it. People should stop treating it like we're just some club, and we're actually valid. Because I've known some people who wish they'd known that shit sooner. I just think that they got to stop thinking that Asian people are just something to push over.

Like Alex, he implied how Asian gangs are less seriously entertained through statements such as "we're really about it" and "we're actually valid." He also inferred that gang formation has no racial boundaries by stating how putting any "ethnicity in the same spot" will result in gang violence and activity (Vigil, 2010). Further, it can be inferred that he was referring to the "same spot" as structural conditions that give way to gang formation. Tyler's sentiments (i.e., "Not all Asians have it") also hints at the homogenous representation of Asian Americans as academically and financially successful. In insisting that Asian gangs were not "bit[ing] off of Black gangs or culture" Tyler, like other participants, viewed their experiences as distinct despite being put "in the same spot" as Black people.

Some participants, however, understood why it might seem like Asian gangs were subjected to influences from Black culture. This tend to be the case for participants who lived in racially diverse neighborhoods. Chea, who grew up in Oakland, stated that while he did not view Asian gangs as reappropriation of Black culture, "Superficially, it might seem that way, superficially, because of the clothes we wear or the style." Indeed, scholars have documented how Asian American youth who live in working class neighborhoods with large Black populations are likely to adopt Black culture (Chhuon & Hudley, 2010). Sokthea drew a similar comparison specifically for Asians in Long Beach, noting "Long Beach is a different city on its own, just totally different. The way we dress out here is just ... We have this black Mexican culture in us, the way we dress, because we picked it up from them."

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Participants like Anh, however, who grew up in a racially homogenous neighborhood in Alhambra, rejected the notion that Asian gangs were attempting to "act Black." He emphasized, "First of all, I got into the gangs because I was fighting for our identity, for our place, and more so, for our respect. And for us to adopt anybody else's culture, to me, is selling out." Thus, API youth in this study were deliberate about preserving cultural beliefs, values, and practices as part of their gang culture.

**Pacific Islanders**

The racialization of Pacific Islander youth does not fit the Asian American panethnicity. Lei (2006) argued that there is an "illogical lumping of Pacific Islanders into the 'Asian American' category when the two broad and diverse populations have little in common (p. 88). For example, gang culture is much more prevalent and normalized in the Samoan community (Vaught, 2002). Caleb, a Samoan participant, joked about people's responses to Samoan gangs, especially in Carson where he grew up. He mimicked, "What? That's crazy! A Samoan gang? Wow!' Nah. Hell, no."

Though grouped as an aggregate under the API panethnicity, Samoan youth did not relate to the "model minority" stereotype. They did discuss however, that being a gang member as a Samoan was a stereotype. Further, all the participants expressed shame in reproducing the stereotype as they were gang involved. Marcus, Caleb's son and also a member of the same gang, explained how as a teenager he was intentional about not joining a gang, but since has expressed disappointment in giving into the pressure of being part of one:

 I made that decision in middle school to be like, "All right, I'm going to just do this

  shit," and now it's years later. That's what I'm trying to . . . it's crazy how much . . . you

can try all those years to stay away from this shit, and you know . . . I don't know what

happened. I just fell into the damn stereotype.

## Embracing Stereotypes

Of all participants, Anh was the most intentional in using stereotypical Asian stereotypes

to embrace his racial pride. He was a Vietnamese refugee and came by boat to the United States

with his family. Though he was only four years old at the time, he remembers the traumatic

experience of escaping and nearly dying of starvation before he settled in San Francisco. He

grew up "dirt poor" and barely spoke English, which got him in more fights than he'd like. He

reflected on how he refused to be under the gaze of a stereotypical Asian, such as the model

minority:

> I never want to put on my best face just to make that argument for people, like, "Hey,
>
> Asians are good. We can be professional, we can be productive," all of these things.
>
> That's not to say that I don't admire the people who do that. That's not my role. I want
>
> people to . . . even if I don't eat cats, I'll say I eat cats, because I want them to respect and
>
> accept me and admire me for all of these things that they think are bad.

In his statement Anh revealed his understanding of racial perceptions such as "Fresh off the

Boat" (FOB), a derogatory term for Asian immigrants that suggested their lack of assimilation or

acculturation (Pyke & Dang, 2003). Asian immigrants were associated with behaviors such as

eating dogs or cats. Instead of shying away from that perception, Anh claimed it as a symbolic

refusal of assimilation. He wanted the respect and acceptance for both good and bad stereotypes,

even if it was not accurate. He further explained how his racial pride led him to embracing more

stereotypes:

I was so proud of it that I adopted things that I used to look down on, make fun of. Guys

who would wear jeans with flip flops. And then I found myself doing it, on purpose.

Like, "Fuck, yeah, this is us. I don't want you to respect us or like us if we change for

you to take your image. In fact, I'm going to adopt everything that you hate and make

you love it."

Asian FOBs were associated with dress such as "jeans with flip flops." Though he originally did

not dress like this, he adopted the style as a way to reclaim his racial identity (i.e., "I found

myself doing it on purpose"). Even though Asian FOBs were made fun of for dressing this way,

and other stereotypes, Anh purposefully confronted this racial imagery.

Like Anh, one strategy of racial and ethnic identity construction that participants used

was adopting traditional stereotypes of Asian culture in their gang activity (Ball, 2019). Instead

of suppressing cultural values that would otherwise deviate them from stereotypical gang

members, they embedded cultural practices in their gang subculture to construct their racial and

ethnic identity. In this section, I outline the uniqueness of Asian gangs through their practices of

1) collective culture, 2) filial piety, 3) dragon tattoos, and 4) language. I end with how these

practices contribute to the Asianess in their gang culture, or what they describe as being "Asian

washed."

**Collectivist Culture**

Research on understanding the Asian American experience often emphasize the

hierarchal collectivist culture (Le et al., 2005). Indeed, API youth overwhelmingly stated how

cultural practices of being "tight-knit," family orientated, and loyal made them distinct from

other gangs. In 2019, Jay and his friends went on a Vegas trip. The group amounted to over 20

guys, mainly from different Asian gangs in Sacramento. Jay estimated that they spent well over

$50,000 the entire weekend. He discussed how "looking out for each other" was part of their group norm:

> And the culture of it is like everybody eats. I'm not above you or below you. You know? If we're out together, and I think I'm very good at that, with understanding someone's insecurity level. Where they may be financially insecure. Right? "Come on bro, we're out. It's all good, come on." Like I didn't ask you to pay for nothing. Like I'm here to enjoy your time. It's all good. If I got it, then we all got it.

Jay's statement "If I got it, then we all got it" highlights the collectivist ideology practiced in API culture. Instead of placing responsibility on the individuals for their own outcome, he instead focused on the shared goal of his friends having fun even if that meant paying for some of them. Putting others needs before the individual was common among the participants. Anh described an example of how his gang provides for one another:

> In the gang, I swear to you, you can show up with nothing. Let's say I have a car, and you're like, "Damn, that's nice." I can say, "Here, you can use it." And by use it, means you can have it. But you're trying to do it in a way where it's not demeaning to the person you're giving it to. So, "You can hold it. Here, use it." But that's what we mean, "Here, take it. No big deal."

Jay and Anh demonstrate the "what's mine is yours" mentality in API gangs. They believe in sharing their material wealth with others for the benefit of the group. Anh is sure to address that offering a car does not come from an arrogant place, but rather he wants his friends to be taken care of if he has the means to provide. Reiterating the notion of putting someone else's needs before your own, Sokthea asserted:

Let's say if I see you need something, if you're broke, you don't have nothing . . . I

would go, "You need anything?" If he's struggling, I'll try to help him out. We try to help

each other out. . . . The way I look at it is, we're more family-oriented. My 'hood is more

family-oriented. We're all homies. If I have some, you're going to have some. We're

going to make sure we look after one another.

Similar to Jay and Anh, Sokthea expressed the responsibility he feels to members of his gang if

they need help. They do not view it as a burden, and genuinely enjoy being able to uplift one

another. They consider their fellow gang members' family and as a result treat them as such.

Describing gangs as a family was a consistent theme among participants. Indeed, much

scholarship found that gangs replace family structure (Bankston, 1998; Matsueda & Heimer,

1987, Vigil, 2010). Caleb further explained how the family concept is true in Samoan culture

(Vakalahi & Godinet, 2008) but might not be the case for other races:

I could say with Samoans even though you may not be blood-related, I think Samoan

gangs more family-oriented. They bring that family value to the neighborhood to bring

that love, the loyalty, the respect. I think with other races, I think they're trying to prove

something so they do things to try to . . . yeah, so they're not doing what's in their heart.

They're doing what they think other people think they should be doing it. If that makes

sense. You know what I mean? I know they don't want to go out there and do this and

that, but they think, "Oh, they going to respect me if I do do that."

His statement implies that other racial groups are more concerned with individual goals of

earning rank in the gang (i.e., "they're trying to prove something"), whereas API gangs

emphasize communal values of being loyal and respectful to one another. Similarly, Paul drew

on an example to demonstrate how API gangs are more willing to help each other out:

Let's say with blacks, with the Crips, right, there certain things that, let's say, if they tell you like, "Hey man, you need to put in work. You need to do this," right? So if you don't, you're going to get it. Where in the Filipino culture, where you say, "Hey man, you know what? You need to put in work," and you could tell the person is scared, you'd be more understanding. "Fuck it. I'll do it with you, but you got to come with me." Like that. With the Hispanic it's like that. If you don't do some of the things that they order you to do, you're no good to them.

Being loyal and having someone's back was a theme that came up especially compared to gangs from other racial groups. Hailey, a Filipino gang affiliated youth, moved a lot but grew up in racially diverse areas in the Bay Area. Both her parents were involved in gangs so her social network consisted of mainly gang members. In discussing the differences between her racially diverse friend group, she compared her experience being friends with Mexican gangs versus Asian gangs:

If you hang out with Mexican gangs it's just like it's everybody for themselves more. I feel like Asians, you stick together you know what I mean? They stick together, they look out for each other. They take loyalty to a different . . . they really value that, versus like when I hung out with Mexicans it's like when shit went down it's like you're there by yourself. They were running. It's like it's you on your own, that kind of thing. But I feel like Asian gangs, you're more like a family.

Hailey highlights the collective nature of Asian gangs (i.e., "Stick together," "look out for each other"), whereas Mexican gangs in this example tend to be more individualistic (i.e., "you're there by yourself," "you on your own"). Other participants agreed that being loyal was a distinct trait in API gangs. When discussing API gangs against other races, Marcus condemned other

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racial groups for being unfaithful to one another, "Because even homies are doing homies dirty. But you don't really catch Samoan, or Asian, and Pacific Islanders really doing their people like that. Because at the end of the day . . . that's all we got." Thus, family has long been recognized as the basic unit of API social structures.

**Filial Piety**

Along with adopting a collectivist culture, API gangs keep traditional family values by showing deference to their elders. They acknowledge that it might be counterintuitive to the tough and dangerous persona as a gang member, but API gangs still hold on to that custom. Alex joked about this and offered an example:

> If my grandma walks in and I'm sitting on the couch, I sit on the floor. If we're getting ready to eat, I go make her plate while she sits her ass down and that she eats. We cook, we clean. That stays the same, even if you are gang affiliated. Grandma don't give a fuck, get your ass in the kitchen and go make her plate. . . . And a lot of times, they won't be disrespectful, they'll watch the shit that they say. And that's very interesting because gang members, gangsters do what the fuck they want. But not when grandma and grandpa are around.

Even though API youth may be gang affiliated, they are still expected to respect their elders by offering their seat, preparing their grandparents a plate of food, and using appropriate language. Alex's example highlight how gang affiliation becomes muted in family settings. Bao stated something similar, arguing that "We still held onto some part of our culture of respect. Respect for our family, respect our community in some sense. So we still held up that image. . . . It's a conflict of culture."

Most participants agreed that revering the elderly was instilled at an early age and seemingly an innate quality. Som explained:

> I mean, as far as the respect, it's always been there. Because I don't think anyone that I know is . . . especially Blacks, to me. My experience is they become a little more disrespectful. They don't respect a lot of things. I think Asians and Hispanics are somewhat identical when they do a gang bang or whatever. They still respect their elders and stuff like that.

Here, Som makes a direct contrast to Black gangs who he perceives to be more disrespectful whereas his value of respecting others has "always been there." Tuan also spoke to the innateness of Asians having respect:

> We don't pick on old people. We were always taught growing up not to harm the elderly. So to me, it's people I hanging out with we always treat the elderly with respect. We always treat the other family member will respect. A lot of things. If my friend's mom and dad, I see them, I have to treat them with respect or even their sibling, their brothers, sisters, and I'll have to treat them with respect. So a lot of Asian culture, especially how we are taught to be respectful to the elderly and babies and kids like that, I think.

Both Tuan and Som agree that API gangs carry the value of respect taught to them from their families. Thus, they perceive themselves to still be respectful, even though they are gang affiliated, especially compared to other racial groups (Ahn, 2004).

**Dragon Tattoos**

A racial stereotype that came up frequently was the association of Asian gangs with dragon tattoos (Hoang, 2005). Generally, tattoos are characteristic of gang membership as they are visible identifiers of gang affiliation (Atkinson, 2003). Traditionally, tattooing and body

piercings are culturally uncommon for Asians (Hoang, 2005). While this type of body modification was looked down upon in Asian communities, Asian gang members used tattoos to display their gang membership and racial pride.

In one conversation with Huy, I joked about getting a dragon tattoo. After joining the notorious Wah Ching gang at 15 years old and serving over two decades in prison, Huy is currently facing deportation as an immigrant from Vietnam. I wrote a letter of support for his case, in which he offered to tattoo me as a token of appreciation. When asked what tattoo I would get, I responded:

AL: Should I get something stereotypical like a dragon?

Huy: Why is that stereotypical?

AL: Cause you know how Asians usually get the dragon tattoo so that's why I said I was being stereotypical.

Huy: No that's not stereotypical because we're embracing our culture.

In this conversation, Huy refused the dragon tattoo as being stereotypical, and instead explained that as being part of "our culture." To Huy, the dragon tattoo should symbolize racial and cultural pride. Tuan agreed that dragon tattoos were very common:

We all have a dragon tattoo. 80 or 90% will have some dragon tattoo or a tiger tattoo. I think in our culture dragon is considered powerful…but yeah, the common thing I can tell you now is majority of us have some kind of dragon tattoo.

Dragon tattoos were more common with first generation gang affiliated youth. When asked about specific practices in Asian gangs, Tommy responded:

Tommy: I think one of the things, like tattoos, I guess that was kind of Asian-ish. I got the dragon and tiger, the stereotypical what we think as gangsters.

AL: Right, which is common now.

Tommy: It is very common, but at the time though, I think that's the closest relations to culturally gang practices that was Asian oriented. I think that's probably one of the ones that really stood out to me.

Tommy signaled this with the phrase "At the time time though" as he contrasted how I pointed out its commonality presently. Therefore, in his generation tattoos on Asian bodies hinted at gang subculture. In present day, however, tattoos are universally more acceptable by society and seen as an expression of art. Thus, dragon tattoos are more common in the Asian community and not restricted to those involve with gangs. For Samoan youth and to an extent Filipino youth, tattoos are significant parts of their culture (Salvador-Amores, 2011; Shankman, 1975; Treagus, 2008).

**Language**

Language came up as another cultural practice in Asian gangs. A vast majority of participants were either refugees/immigrants, or children of refugees/immigrants. Their language diversity and variations of English proficiency varied depending on migration status and geographic context. For example, participants in this study who were second generation tend to have higher levels of English proficiency. Additionally, participants who grew up in racially diverse areas like Long Beach and Pomona tend to have high proficiency levels than those in homogenous cities like Alhambra. According to the PEW Research Center, nearly 70% of Asians speak another language at home other than English (Budiman & Ruiz, 2021). Thus, language played a key role in their experiences, and particularly in maintaining their racial identity.

Returning to Anh's adoption of stereotypical practices, he mentioned language as one of

them and in particular how he intentionally spoke with an Asian accent:

> Anh: I used to speak with an Asian accent on purpose.

> AL: Oh, really?

> Anh: Yeah. It's such a bonding thing. It's something that shameful outside of the gang. But I told you that I got into the gangs because everything that was shameful became of value. And having an accent and being different was part of it. That's how I connected to my homies. If I were to speak to them with proper English, there'd be a disconnection, psychologically, everything, subliminally. So no, we spoke with a FOB accent on purpose. For example, if I said, "Motherfucker," it just doesn't sound the same if I were to say in the accent "*du ma*, motherfucker." You know? I know it's funny.

In the spirit of adopting stereotypes, Anh intentionally spoke with a FOB accent even though Asians would get teased for doing so which he indicated by stating how it was "shameful outside of the gang." What's more, speaking with a FOB accent was a way he "connected to [his] homies." He mentioned how language was a divisive tool and that there was a "disconnect" in speaking English as opposed to with an accent. In this sense he used language as a tool to reclaim his racial identity.

For some participants, being part of an Asian gang helped them learn their native language more. Henry, a first generation immigrant from San Jose, commented on how he spoke more Vietnamese because of his gang affiliation:

> I guess I started speaking Vietnamese more, in a way. Like I speak not perfect English, well kind of, but my brother wouldn't, you know? He would have a heavy accent and I always took pride in my English speaking skills. But I speak Vietnamese fluently also but

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I don't really show it because I didn't have that kind of pride back then. But hanging out

with him and his friends, like I spoke more Vietnamese.

Henry indicated that prior to his gang involvement, he did not "have that kind of pride back

then" which was why he did not "show" his fluent Vietnamese language skills. It was not until

after he became affiliated with his brother's gang that he started speaking Vietnamese more.

Learning native language in gang subculture showed up more for Vietnamese, second

generation participants. Rick, a second generation immigrant from San Jose, discussed the role of

language in his sense of belonging:

So when I found this group of Vietnamese guys in high school, it gave me that. . . . Even

with my family culture, my mom, she spoke to me in Vietnamese a little bit. I understand

Vietnamese a lot but I could actually barely speak it. I wasn't really at home much, so me

being a part of this group of guys, it gave me that ethnicity filled in. It filled that whole

being something, especially racially.

Like Henry, Rick also spoke more Vietnamese through his gang. Rick's mom was a single mom

and worked long hours. Additionally, Rick admitted to rarely being at home. Thus, his social

group of peers, namely his gang, provided a more opportune space to practice his native

language. Since he did not receive this type of cultural practice in the household, his feelings of

racial belonging (i.e., "it gave me that ethnicity fill in," "filled that whole being something,

especially racially") was fulfilled through his gang involvement.

Tyler, another second-generation Vietnamese immigrant from San Jose, associated

language with group cohesion (Tseng & Fuligni, 2000). He reported that he identifies as

Vietnamese more so than Asian American. When I asked for his reasoning he explained the

importance of sharing a common language:

Filipino people, they're very social. They're a very social ethnicity . . . they're who you want to be if you want to be like the cool ethnicity. They follow in their footsteps a little too hard to the point where you have confused some Filipino people for Black people, damn near. They dress identical. It feels like you're going to see some Filipino people who don't have any hint of Filipino in the way the dress or they talk. It just sounds like they're completely all black people. But then you see Vietnamese people, no matter how we dress or look like, we talk all the same. We speak Vietlish all the time. There's certain words in Vietnamese where there's not in English, so you're going to say a sentence half English and half Vietnamese. Like, "Dang, that guy's hella *hon*" and shit like that. It just feels like we're still proud to be Vietnamese.

Tyler used "Vietlish" as a way to claim advantage over other ethnic groups. He criticized Filipino youth for not "having any hint of Filipino in the way they dress or they talk" and instead "sound like they're completely all Black people." Vietnamese youth on the other hand, have constructed culture in new ways such as using "Vietlish" (Reyes, 2007). "Vietlish" therefore serves as a mechanism for Tyler to navigate both cultures as a second generation gang affiliated youth.

Unlike Tyler's ethnic differentiation, Arthur spoke of the ways his gang built panethnic pride through different Asian languages. Arthur was part of the Wah Ching gang, predominantly made up of Chinese immigrants. However, he asserted that "a lot of homies weren't Chinese, or spoke Cantonese" but even then, they eventually learned to speak Cantonese. Further, he explained a drinking game he played with his gang to construct panethnic community:

Well, it's like this. We do your language, but when you get to be advanced, you do two or three languages, right? And it's, you call the number out. So, the total is zero or 20. So

it's my hands, or your hands. So if I say 10, and I have two hands held on, and you have

it closed, that's 10. So, and I said five, and you have . . . I got five open, you got . . . your

hands are closed, that means that's two in a row. That means you got to drink. . . . So,

then, so, if I call a number that's wrong, then you call the number, and we can do it too, if

the number's two in a row. But then we do it in our language. Well, actually, we do it in

Cantonese. Then, there on, then you get advanced. And you do it in English and

Cantonese. Then you get more advanced, you do Cantonese, English, and Vietnamese.

Then you get super advanced, and you do Cantonese, English, Vietnamese, and

Mandarin.

The inclusion of multiple Asian ethnic languages in this game demonstrated an example of how

panethnicity could be celebrated. Further, it reveals the heterogeneity and linguistic diversity in

Asian subgroups even within a gang subculture. In this way, API gang affiliated youth are

incorporating their voices (literally) and cultural contributions to gang subculture.

**"Asian-Washed"**

Asian cultural practices were so engrained in their gang culture that participants used the

term "Asian-washed," or different ethnicity-washed, to describe, the very few, non-Asian

members of their group. The term "Asian-washed" is a play on the term "whitewashed,"

historically used to describe people of color who ate devoid of their own cultural identity (Pyke

& Dang, 2003). In this context, participants used the term "Asian-washed" to refer to cultural

expressions in their gang, which vary and has implications for understanding ethnic identities in

a relational way.

Asian gangs tend to be made up of a singular ethnic group, but in some cases are a mix of

multiple ethnic Asian identities (Tsunokai & Kposowa, 2002). Most participants in this study

joined a gang from their same ethnic group. For youth like Rick, joining an Asian, and specifically Vietnamese, gang carried meaningful racial connotations:

> Growing up, I'm *my lai* (biracial). I don't look super Vietnamese. . . . I think my characteristic I really want to emphasize that I was Asian because my entire life I was battling that I didn't look Asian. I feel like me being a part of this Asian group gave me that security feeling. But that's just something that I battled internally. Other people would feel it like that. But then the whole time growing up, I thought all that Asian stuff was pretty cool. I like the culture a lot.

When I met with Rick for an interview, he took off his mask and immediately asked if I thought he looked Vietnamese. "A lot of people tell me I look Hispanic," he said sheepishly. Rick had a lot of Filipino friends growing up, but once he joined a Vietnamese gang in San Jose most of his friends were then Vietnamese. He said he was "completely immersed," in the Vietnamese lifestyle. In San Jose that meant frequenting Vietnamese coffee shops and bars, eating and hanging out at Vietnamese plazas, participating in Vietnamese party and nightlife culture, etc. He felt accepted as Vietnamese, despite not physically passing as Vietnamese, being in a Vietnamese gang which he described as "that security feeling" in his passage. In other words, joining a Vietnamese gang gave him a sense of racial belonging (Freng & Esbensen, 2007).

Tyler was also part of Rick's gang, though he is several years younger, and their membership did not overlap. Still, Tyler confirmed Vietnamese specific practices embedded in their gang:

> Tyler: With Asian gangs, we're very prideful in our culture, and we always do things . . . like even if you didn't grow up Vietnamese, you're going to do Vietnamese traditions
>
> AL: Like what do you mean?

Tyler: You're going to be singing karaoke with us, you're going to be heading out the Vietnamese bars with us, eating *lao*, that's the Vietnamese soup, with all of us. You're going to pray with us, even if you're not religious, you know what I mean?

As second generation Vietnamese Americans, both Tyler and Rick experienced racial and cultural practices through their gang membership that they would otherwise not access. They both joined this gang as adolescents, so they experienced Vietnamese culture in a way that being with family members would not afford them to. For example, Vietnamese coffee shops in San Jose were main sites for gang activity (Du & Ricard, 1996; Long, 1997). It is a hangout for gang members, but also sites for criminal activity. Both participants agreed that joining a Vietnamese gang in San Jose made them feel more Asian and instilled racial/ethnic pride (Alsaybar, 1999).

Ethnic boundaries were recognizable for other participants as well. Though Jacob identifies ethnically as Filipino, he joined a Vietnamese gang in San Jose since most of his friends were Vietnamese but also because they had a stereotype of being "the money makers." He admitted that his gang "Vietnamese-washed for a little bit" because of their ethnocentricity. In another instance, Arthur recalled how a non-Asian member in their gang adopted Chinese culture:

I had one homie that was straight Italian. Or, I found out he's Italian and Armenian. But he started saying certain things, and then he . . . there was certain things he did, it's just like, he would act like . . . he was Chinese-washed, pretty much, you know?

Not everyone felt that their gangs, even though predominantly Asian, instilled cultural practices or traditions. A few participants felt that gang subculture was similar across racial groups and that it was not traced back to racial identity. Consider Harry's account of how he did not consider race as salient to his gang:

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I think my experience and my background . . . we were more Americanized. Our

associations and affiliation, it didn't have that [Asian] culture. You know what I mean?

We were strictly a street gang. We were just all about being in the street, represent the

neighborhood, and straight like the neighborhood. I know there's others that identify

more through cultures or whatever. No, we identified Asian, as in like an Asian gang, but

I don't think that was a major point of emphasis. You know what I mean?

Harry is also a second-generation gang affiliated youth, born in Los Angeles. His gang originated

in Echo Park in a predominantly Latinx neighborhood. Unlike Tyler and Rick, Harry made a

distinction that his gang *happened* to be Asian Americans in a gang. He used the term

"Americanized" to distinguish Asian centric gangs that were likely made up of first generation

immigrants, to members of his gang that were born in the U.S. He further distances himself and

his gang from Asian immigrant gangs by stating above, "I know there's others that identify more

through cultures or whatever." Geographic region is important to consider in his account, and

Tyler's and Rick's. Harry grew up in a racially diverse neighborhood in Los Angeles where he

had more interactions with non-Asians. Tyler and Rick on other hand were both born and raised

in San Jose, considered one of the Vietnamese capitals in the U.S. The saliency of race in their

gang experience will therefore be vastly different.

### Ascribing Racial and Ethnic Value to Cultural Practices

Whereas in the previous section API youth adopted racial stereotypes as a tool to resist

Asianization (Iftikar & Museus, 2018), in this section I discuss how they ascribe ethnic and

racial value to cultural practices in gang subculture. That is, they assign racial meaning to

specific practices as "Asian" (Miles, 1984; Miles & Torres, 1999). This strategy of identity

construction claims racial and ethnic advantages in comparison to other racial and even ethnic

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groups. In both strategies, however, API youth end up reinforcing racial categories as they navigate racial identity politics (Iftikar & Museus, 2018). In this section, I outline how participants perceived their gang to be sophisticated, entrepreneurial, and ironically, altruistic, especially compared to other racial groups.

**Asian Gangs as Sophisticated**

Asian youth in this study consistently believe they outperform other gangs by being more sophisticated with crime. In most cases, they believe their discretion is what makes them successful. Rick discussed how his gang would use racial stereotypes to successfully facilitate their gang operations:

> Rick: And then you got Mexicans who always come in khakis. And a fucking white shirt. I'm just throwing stereotypical shit up out there. But then with the Asians, right, especially with the group I was running, the funny part was that we were intimidating other gangs so that we wouldn't get caught. They wouldn't look for Asian people. That was one thing I emphasize on a lot.
>
> AL: Mmm. How would you intimidate them?
>
> Rick: Like I said, if it was a robbery, I would dress up as a Latino. We'd go in there and start speaking Spanish.
>
> AL: Oh, oh I get it, I get it.
>
> Rick: If they were to tell the cops like, "Oh yeah, it was a bunch of Mexican guys in here." Do you get it? It's just a small thing like that.

Through gang activity, Rick used his racial understanding that Mexican gangs typically wore khakis and a white t-shirt, even when they are committing a crime. The predictability of Mexican gangs made them vulnerable in Rick's view, which is why he exploited their stereotype to the

benefit of the gang. Rick believes that his ability to do so makes him more successful, which he found to be representative of Asian gangs generally.

Nick also spoke of the discretion of Asian gangs and how it makes them more cunning compared to other racial groups:

Nick: I think there's probably more of a level of sophistication involved, as far as planning

AL: What makes you say that?

Nick: A lot of people, if something were to happen, like, say . . . I think a person will call the other ones and say, "This car will have the guns." The one car probably doesn't, but say, if a cop were to . . . You know what I mean? Like, one guy, the front guy would just do something crazy to throw it off, right?

AL: Yeah.

Nick: But I don't know, maybe other gangs are like that. I think we're not too, like, we're not too out there. . . . Say you see the Mexican gangs, you can see them coming a mile away, right? The Bloods and Crips, right?

AL: In terms of, because how they dress or something?

Nick: Yeah, how they dress, tattoo, how they look. But Asian gangs, you really can't tell too much, unless some of the guys wear, say, the hat, or whatever.

Similar to Rick, Nick also believed that Black and Mexican gangs were easier to identify (i.e., "you can see them coming a mile away"). Asians; however, "we're not too out there," which makes it harder for Asian gang members to be detected and caught by law enforcement (Lee, 2016; Vigil, 2010). He later reiterated, "Yeah, we don't have a Bloods and Crips thing, we're just recognized for hard work. We're Chinese, right, we're Asians." To Nick, being hard

working is a distinct Chinese or Asian trait not available to Black gangs who are more recognized as "Bloods and Crips thing." This statement suggests that beyond gangs, Asians have a racial unity and are not divided by gang sets, which is much more common among other races (Vigil, 2010).

Tuan elucidated that Asian gangs were also shrewder and more calculated (Davidson, 1996; Joe, 1994; Vigil, 2002). He explained the difference in Asian gangs when it came to business operations:

> I see the Black gangs most of the time, they sell drugs on the corner and that thing won't last long, or old Hispanic they probably do similar thing, but they don't think how to make a lot more money than we do. For Asian, we do extortion that's our main income, but I would do one fight, a check at that time, we'll make them say check. We would do a lot of white collar crime . . . stealing cars and sell it. A lot of stuff that make us income to buy those guns.

When Tuan mentioned the guns, he is referring to the reputation Asian gangs have for owning more guns than other racial groups. In gang culture, owning guns is a sign of wealth given the expensive prices for them. He implies that Asian gangs are smarter with the type of illegal activities to pursue to generate wealth, whereas Black gangs selling drugs "won't last long."

**Asian Gangs as Entrepreneurial**

Asian gangs are notoriously known for being entrepreneurial (Davidson, 1996; Joe, 1994; Toy, 1992). Participants cited this as a difference between Asian gangs and gangs of other races. For example, Arthur explained that there are two types of gangs:

> And, like, my side, we're all like, "Gang bang/money." You know, you're doing both. You're gang-banging and making money. So they're all, "We know all about making

money. We don't know all about the gang stuff," like, how the fuck are you in this shit?

You know?

In his statement, Arthur considers his gang (i.e., Wah Ching) to be more practical as they have a "gang banging" and "making money" side. He criticized white gangs who only know how to make money because he believes a gang needs to have both sides of business and violence to operate successfully. Anh further added that how a gang operates varies based on ethnicity. He surmised:

> The majority [of Asian gangs] if it hasn't mutated, if they still keep with the traditional structure is very business oriented, so you'll see a lot of gangs, I don't want to name names, but they'll refer to their structure as a corporation. They're actually taking on corporate rules and guidelines. We're very money driven. We don't care about the neighborhood. I can move like that, but that's where the conflict comes in, because we're living in a space where it is very territorial, and so we have to adapt as well. A lot of the Cambodians and the Laos that are around a lot of Blacks, they'll adopt a lot of the Black characteristics, the gang culture. . . . Then mostly, the Vietnamese and the Chinese will invest a lot of energy into keeping it traditional. . . . So for Asians, we don't care too much about the neighborhoods. It's about the money, and not money as an end. We know that the money is what we need to start, to get people's attention, and it's interchangeable between what's priority, money or violence.

Anh's reiteration of gang structure by ethnicity positions Chinese and Vietnamese as superior because they "invest a lot of energy into keeping it traditional" which he defines as "business oriented." This is in contrast to Southeast Asian gangs like Cambodians and Laos who, because of their geographic proximity to Black gangs, adapt similar gang culture which he views as less

"about the money." Instead, they are "living in a space where it is very territorial" leaving the opportunity for "conflict." Chinese and Vietnamese gangs' tendency to not "care too much about the neighborhoods" make them more profitable and successful.

One point Tuan made was the racial capital that Asian gangs used to generate wealth. He shared an example of how Asian gangs utilize their own community to make money:

> Asian gangs, the majority of us is trying to make money. We become a gang so we can have connection or thing to a lot of money by buying guns, doing a lot of illegal activity at that time. The main income that Asian gang was, again at that time was extortion small business owner. . . . I think for us is more about making money. It is more than gang banging. We make a name for ourselves.

In stating "it is more than gang banging," Tuan infers that other gangs care less about making money. According to him, the uniqueness of Asian gangs is therefore to "have connection or thing to a lot of money."

## Asian Gangs as Virtuous

Despite their gang involvement, API youth believed they had good morals. In most cases these morals stem from cultural values instilled in them by their family (e.g., respecting elders). They acknowledged that being in a gang is "bad" and would not want their loved ones in this lifestyle, but they also believe themselves to be well intentioned. When asked if he considered himself a "bad Asian" because of his gang involvement, Tyler responded:

> Yeah, we do illegal shit, so I feel like that's bad. You wouldn't encourage the people you care about to join this shit. But then, just because it took me a while to realize that just because I did bad shit doesn't make me a bad person. Just because I know my intentions will always be genuine and pure. I haven't became numb to the point where I stopped

caring, so I feel like that still makes me a good Asian in a sense where I still want the best

for people.

On one hand, Tyler recognized the legal ramifications of being gang involved, which makes it

morally bad. However, he makes a separation between his actions as a gang member and his

racial identity. His proclamation of being a "good Asian" is his refusal to be under a criminal

gaze.

Nick, a Cambodian refugee, joined a gang at 16 before serving 21 years in prison. When

he was locked up, he would have regular psychology evaluations where he grappled with the

morality of his gang involvement. He explained:

I remember when I joined my gang, I guess to justify it, to like . . . I knew it wasn't

whatever, but the rule was like, oh, they didn't commit any crimes that involved drugs.

So there's no crime selling drugs, or whatever. There's no crime involving prostitution,

or human trafficking. So most of the crime was extortion, robbery... credit cards. So in

my twisted mind, it's like, "All right, at least there was some sort of, I don't know, moral

values in the gang."

Like Tyler, Nick also rationalized his gang involvement and convinced himself that there were

"moral values in the gang." Though he would later change his mind, at the time of his gang

involvement he similarly refused his gang involvement to be criminalized.

Jacob viewed his morality relative to gangs of other races. When he discussed the

differences between Asian gangs, he responded:

Jacob: I feel like Asians definitely have a lot more morals in terms of their gang activity

as opposed to other races, Blacks and Mexicans.

AL: Okay, so morals meaning like . . . can you give an example?

Jacob: So I mean, we were robbing houses when I was a kid and we would leave the

place as if you could barely tell that they got robbed. We would hope that they wouldn't

even notice until fucking like a day or two later. But I remember hearing stories like of

how Mexicans would run up into houses, and they would fucking tear that shit up.

Jacob condemned Black and Mexican gangs for ruining the houses he robbed. He felt Asian

gangs had higher morals because "you could barely tell that they got robbed."

In a similar vein, Rick shared how he believed Asian gangs had more morals:

You assume that just because they commit the same crimes or do the same criminal

activities that they would all act the same. But like I was saying, I think it does matter

about the root and most certainly the culture. Asians could be violent obviously. But at

the same time, other races, I feel like other races, they demonstrate more violent

outcomes than . . . they over-react and do unnecessary force sometimes.

For both Rick and Jacob, there is still a moral compass when it comes to gang activity which

may seem ironic as Rick pointed out. Further, he juxtaposes Asian gangs against other races and

states other gangs are "more violent" and will "overreact and do unnecessary force sometimes."

Though he prefaces by stating Asian gangs are indeed violent, they are still grounded by moral

values.

Some participants expressed a Robin Hood complex, where they commit crimes to give

back to the community. Tuan described how his gang would donate money to the homeless:

A lot of time people don't know gang members. I remember we go do a burglary or a

robbery, we take money to give it to the homeless. They feel we're doing the right thing.

We saw the homeless on the street, we'd give them $15, $20, we'd feel like we're doing

the right thing after we just did a horrible thing.

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Other participants echoed Tuan's sentiments, claiming that they will do some sort of charitable work from the money they stole. Nathan shared that although his gang "rob some fools, some people, but we were told that they had a bad history, so to speak. So we didn't just rob nobody. We were told that these guys did something bad." Again, we see how participants justify their violent actions through egalitarian motives (Dawes et al., 2007).

## Racial Contribution and Destructive Pride

Another strategy of identity construction for API youth was using their gang affiliation as a way to give back to the community. API gang affiliated youth were attuned to how they were constructed in stigmatized and demeaning terms in the larger API community. Despite this, they offered counterstories (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001) to resist dehumanizing representations of gang members and shed light on their positive contributions.

Tyler's account of being gang affiliated was accompanied with a strong sense of racial pride because he felt he was still contributing positively to the Asian American community. He explained:

> We weren't only just in it to make money. We had a mission about trying to protect the Asian people, because what's been going on has been fucked up. A lot of the times, we went to the Buddhist temples to donate, we wanted to make sure that the old Asian ladies would get home safe on King Road, and we would escort them. We were a part of the Asian community, as we want to be seen as guardians. So we just want to make sure that we were safe, because we know that we were a minority that was seen as easily targetable, and we didn't want that for our people. That made me feel more Asian because it made me feel like that I was doing something for the Asian community.

Tyler listed out specific acts of kindness his gang provided for the Asian community to illustrate the humanity in gangs. In a similar vein, Steven poignantly expressed:

> I just felt like [the gang] it was a brotherhood. I felt like whatever work we were putting in, whatever dirt we were doing, it was for the Asian cause. So I felt like I was just paying my dues. Again, I just felt like I was being some type of super hero for the Asians. I felt like some type of savior. If I had to sacrifice my life for somebody else not being picked on, maybe that was my calling. . . . Surrounding myself around other Asian gang members, I just felt at home. And we had each other's back to where we became loyal to each other.

Like Tyler, Steven's gang affiliation was a means for him to contribute to a larger cause for the Asian community. Steven remembered fighting for other Asian students at his school that were being picked on. The service he provided to protect other Asians negated the harmful acts he committed as a gang member (i.e., "paying my dues"). His gang membership made him "some type of super hero for the Asians."

In other instances, participants shared how API gangs contributed to the visibility of the API community. Chea spoke to the ethnic recognizability in the Asian American racial group as a result of Asian gang subculture:

> We made that ultimate sacrifice. For me, my uncle did time in prison because of a self-defense case, but he laid the foundation so that it was easier for the next generation. So, it was built over. Then after several years of being in Oakland, for the first time, they knew we were Khmer. *They didn't mistake us for Chinese anymore.* . . . When they see Cambodians in Oakland, they're like, "They Cambodian. They Khmer." It wasn't, "Oh,

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they're Chinese." That narrative shifted real quick. You see? Nobody really wants to hear about that. So, we definitely contributed in a large way to the community.

His comment underscores the homogenous representation of Asians as Chinese (i.e., "Oh they're Chinese"). His statement, "They didn't mistake us for Chinese anymore" revealed how gangs increased ethnic recognizability for Southeast Asians, and specifically Cambodians. In doing so, Chea draws attention to the diversity in the Asian American experience especially as it relates to socioeconomic status and immigration status (Reyes, 2019; Teranishi, 2010).

Tyler agreed that Asian gangs facilitated racial literacy to broader community and contributed to the visibility of Asian Americans. He explained:

In every aspect, I feel like Asian people are able to climb. . . . Even if gang culture is not one to have a light shined on, I was glad that we were able to make a name for ourselves, that we were able to be pretty much the top contender . . . an Asian gang as one of the top gangs out there.

Even in a criminalized context like gang subculture, Tyler boasted about the ability of Asian gangs to "make a name for ourselves." To him, the plight of Asian gangs (i.e., "able to climb") made significant contributions to the broader API community. Tuan reiterated:

I feel that I've represented my community for some reason. I was just we protect a lot of people and I got picked on when I was in high school, I see any new Asian kid that got picked on or they find out always step in to make sure that won't happen. So at that time I feel I'm representing us more than bringing shame to us.

The sentiments from participants underscore the complexities of understanding their racial imagery from a demeaning lens, yet refusing the criminal gaze (Vázquez, 2020). For some participants, however, their sacrifices to put APIs "on the map" went unnoticed. Som asserted:

[We] started off as a self-defense, in a way, for our own people. And I know a lot of people that's walking down the street now and is like, "Oh, fuck those guys or whatever." But just remember, you wouldn't have been able to do that without those older dudes that paved the way, in a way. You know what I mean? Now you have it easy. You can skateboard down the street or whatever, and people will leave you alone.

Som's remarks highlight how demeaning people can be of gang members (i.e., "fuck those guys"). Yet it is because of the work Asian gangs put in, specifically in the 1990s, for this generation to be able to "skateboard down the street" safely. Som felt that youth culture today has less to worry about because his generation set the foundation. Like Som, Sokthea was involved with a Southeast Asian gang in Long Beach during the 1990s. He somberly recalled sacrifices of gang members for a safer community today, "I mean, I come out here. . . . A lot of us sacrifice for the city, for these people to be able to walk around now. They couldn't be able to walk around now, but a lot of us died. A lot of us died in these streets." Indeed, participants felt like they had to be the "bad guys" for racial barriers to be broken. The fact that youth gang culture has shifted to be less violent today reminds them that the labor they put in, albeit in a deviant context, has contributed to elevating the broader API community.

**Intraracial Tensions**

Though gang membership was a source of immense racial pride for API youth, they spoke of the complexities on what racial pride meant to them, especially concerning violence against other Asian gangs. Nick described the contradiction of what it meant to have racial pride, but using that against other Asian gangs:

And the gangs, we had Asian pride . . . our mentality's more like, we support each other,

we don't let, I don't know, other race pick on our community. But that, it kind of

backfired because we were picking on our own communities, right? So it's like, all right,

the extortion, right? "Hey, we'll protect you, but you have to pay us, and if you're going

to have to pay some to protect you, anyway," right? We victimized our own people

because we weren't going outside of other . . . It's like it was easier, it was easier to rob a

Asian house, because when I go into a Asian house, the neighbors could be like Mexican

or White, but they don't know that we're not relatives or not. All they know is we're

Asians. So I guess we knew that, all right, it was easier to rob Asians, because it would

bring less attention.

On the other hand, Steven and other participants drew boundaries when it came to targeting other

Asians:

But when it comes to the Asians, I felt some type of way about killing another Asian.

You know what I mean? Because that's what it was never about. You know what I mean?

Worst-case scenario, we might get into it, we might beat them up or something. So a lot

of times we would give them a pass. Our whole thing was we were gang banging,

because we're representing Asians. That was my thing. But nowadays, they don't give

fuck. They don't even care.

Anh offered a different perspective on the complexities of targeting Asian communities despite

their sense of racial pride:

And so it got to the point where home invasions, and that's what I went in for. I would

never do that now, and I don't understand how somebody could do it. But I can

understand, because I went through it, and that was part of the reason. It's kind of like

they're saying, "Well, if you love your people, why you victimize your own people?" Well, first of all, the people that we do it to, we don't see them as people. . . . The people that we love, we truly protected. And back then, the only people we felt we loved were our homies. The squares, we had no empathy or sympathy for them, because they're the ones that would call the cops on us, tell our parents, "Hey, you know such and such? They're out there being thugs and fucking good-for-nothing," so we had no love for them. We couldn't relate to them. So people don't understand. They're like, "Hey, if you're all about Vietnamese, why you fucking her, your own Vietnamese people?" Right? But that's the principle. I hated, I wanted to get rid of everything that I hated. Everything in the gang I loved.

To Anh, there were community members that upheld toxic cultural values that he rejected (i.e., "we couldn't relate to them"). He drew a distinction between the Asians he valued (i.e., "everything in the gang I loved") to the ones who represented toxic asian traits that facilitated his trajectory into the gang lifestyle (i.e., "would call the cops on us").

**Conclusion**

This chapter examined the saliency of race and ethnicity for API gang affiliated youth. In understanding API youth gangs, I argue that race is a critical factor to their experiences. Gang affiliation has significant implications for theoretically informed avenues to conceptually think about race. This perspective highlights how social constructions of race play a critical role in developing an understanding of the concepts of race and racism for API youth. In particular, gang affiliation is a vehicle used for the identity construction and meaning making.

The emphasis on sociohistorical context of race draws the importance of how API youth articulate their identity and understandings of race. Colombo (2006) contended that the

"prevailing dichotomy of White and Black frames the racialization of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders in such a way that certain academic attainment, cultural performance, popular representation, or socio-economic status can connote the 'whitening' or Disorienting race and education 'blackening' of AAPIs" (p. 11).

I found that they used their gang affiliation to construct their racial and ethnic identities in various ways. One strategy they used was to reappropriate racial stereotypes (Reyes, 2007). This positioned themselves as different from the hegemonic "model minority" stereotype, but also distanced them from stereotypical gang members through their deliberate perseveration of cultural values, beliefs, and expressions. They reclaimed racial stereotypes that have traditionally been used against them, such as having collectivist orientated values, showing deference to elders, getting dragon tattoos, and speaking native their language. The second strategy was to position themselves in racially meaningful ways through ascribing racial and ethnic value to cultural practices in their gang (Gans, 2017). They provided racial explanations for practices and activities in gang subculture such as being sophisticated, entrepreneurial, and virtuous. In doing so, they claimed racial advantage over other gangs. Additionally, API youth felt their gang involvement gave them a way to contribute to the broader API community, mainly through protection and sacrifice as being the "bad guys" to advance racial justice for their communities.

Aligned with research on how Asian American youth make sense of their racial identity (Chhuon & Hudley, 2011; Lee, 2001; Ngo, 2009; Uy, 2018), the participants in this study unpacked the complexities of what it means to be API and gang affiliated. They challenged dominant narratives by negotiating which aspects of API culture and gang culture to maintain. Therefore, their constructions of race and gang involvement are fluid and dynamic.

In their attempts to resist dominant racial discourse, however, they further reproduce the racial triangulation, positioning them above Black and Latino gangs. In fact, even though they refuse to be racialized as the "model minority," many of their values and practices are rooted in that very stereotype. For example, the collectivist culture has often been associated with low level of crime in the Asian American community (Feldmeyer & Cui, 2015). Yet, in this context participants attribute the same characteristic as a factor for their success as gang members. Additionally, participants view themselves as entrepreneurial, which they did not feel gangs of other races or even ethnicities possessed. Yet, their business orientation in gangs is parallel to social and economic mobility that the "model minority" stereotype derives from. In a sense, API youth portray an image that they are the "model" gangsters—a prototype of what other gang members should be like.

How API youth understand their experiences and identities in comparative to other races are tied to the US racial formations. For example, the social construction of the "model minority" myth was utilized as a political strategy against other racial groups. The inception of the "model minority" myth during the 1960s was not so much about applauding the plight of Asian Americans as it was about condemning African Americans during the civil rights movement (Lam, 2015). In fact, Asian Americans are often used as a mask for societal racial problems. Take, for example, a 1966 article in the *U.S. News and World Report* that lauded Asian Americans for their educational and economic mobility: "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" (p. 62). The "model minority" myth uses Asian Americans a comparison group to blame African Americans and Latinos for not taking advantage of opportunities. Takaki (1995) argued that the

pervasiveness of the term results from "the very useful political functions it serves: preserving the American dream, discrediting the demands of other minorities, and justifying the social agenda of conservatives" (p. 191). What's more, the "model minority" myth assumes that Asian Americans have more in common with each other than other racial groups. Yet, there has not been a singular Asian American past. Nor do Asian ethnic groups necessarily consider themselves Asian Americans. An important tenet of AsianCrit, strategic (anti)essentialism, builds on that argument. Lam (2015) discussed examples of how Asian groups distanced themselves from one another depending on the sociopolitical context. During the Second World War, for example, Chinese, Korean, and Filipino Americans distinguished themselves by wearing cultural clothing or identification markings for fear of being mistaken as Japanese Americans. Similarly, during the Cold War era, Japanese Americans avoided being associated with Chinese Americans. The "model minority" is a U.S. construct that uses Asian Americans as a wedge group among other racial groups and Asian subgroups. However, there were times where participants were strategic with essentializing the homogenous Asian American or even API category, extending the strategic (anti)essentialism tenet in AsianCrit.

The findings from this chapter captures both the marginal and contradictory racial meaning of API youth involved in gangs. While there are opportunities for panethnic possibilities, we also have to consider how efforts to resist White supremacy can lead to problematic constructions of other races (Iftikar & Museus, 2018). Given that Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders experience racialization differently, an urgent review with more Pacific Islander youth is needed. It is not my intention to romanticize gang activity. I use counterstories of the youth in this study to present a dimension of gang culture that has been rarely been

explored. In doing so I orient myself with critical scholars like Annamma (2018) and Rios (2011) who practice humanizing research from carceral spaces.

# Chapter 6

## The Schoolboy Gangster Paradox

I used to tell people, like, 'Hey. I used to be a schoolboy gangster.' You know,

schoolboy by day, gangster by the night - Arthur

My own stereotypes of what a gang member looked like was challenged when I met

Tyler. He walked into the coffee shop wearing thick clear glasses, his small frame accentuated

under his fitted jeans and a supreme t-shirt. He sat across from me, crossed his legs, and flashed

his braces with a huge smile. He was aware of his nontraditional appearance and commented that

he looked "like a Silicon Valley boy rather than a gang boy." He admitted that most people

would not guess that he was in a gang, not only from his physical appearance but with his

lifestyle in general. He hid his gang identity from his family and most his friends for nearly the

seven years that he was involved. In fact, he was so intentional about keeping his gang affiliation

a secret that he purposely targeted extracurricular activities that would make him less suspicious.

He further explained:

> I kept it a really big secret until I would say my senior year of high school, when I just
>
> stopped caring. Because I did a lot of things to alter my image to the common person, just
>
> because I didn't want to get caught. So I joined community service clubs, I was in ASB
>
> and shit. I really made my image in high school look like I was a good boy. But on the
>
> sidelines, I was actually doing some other shit.

Tyler's story of living different lives was common among the participants. I found that

API youth were self-proclaimed "schoolboy gangsters." They admitted that they lived a double

life—they were "good boys" at home to their families and in school, but they were "bad boys" in

the streets. Oftentimes, schoolboy gangsters went out of their way to hide their gang affiliation

from their families and even teachers for fear of their parents finding out, which would cause disappointment (Long, 1997). They would attend to family obligations, such as going to church. However, in the streets and with their gang they were a completely person. The schoolboy gangster phenomenon held true for even the most hardcore gang affiliated youth, and had no geographic, ethnic, or generational bounds. In other words, the schoolboy gangster paradox resonated with virtually all the participants.

Chapter 4 explored the gang trajectories of API youth. Chapter 5 investigated the racial and ethnic identity construction of API youth particularly through their gang affiliation. This findings chapter examines how API youth navigated their racial and gang identity through the guise of the schoolboy gangster paradox. In doing so, I examine how the schoolboy gangster paradox explicates the relationship between the "model minority" and "yellow peril" stereotypes (Kawai, 2005). One the one hand, they adopt a schoolboy mentality where they are attending classes, which positions them as "model minorities." On the other hand, they are still committed to their gang identity and built a violent reputation as gang members, which aligns them closer to the "yellow peril" stereotype. Their internalization of being a schoolboy gangster creates a panethnic possibility that unites their shared experience being both API and gang affiliated. Yet, in internalizing this narrative they risk reappropriating harmful stereotypes to themselves and other racial categories (Iftikar & Museus, 2018).

I begin by introducing the schoolboy gangster paradox and how being both API and gang member are mutually possible. I outline the schooling and cultural context, their strategic ambivalence, and navigation of racial identity politics. In this context, I use the concept of strategic ambiguity (Goffman, 1970; Wong, 2019) to refer to the strategies youth employed to protect their identity as gang members by aligning themselves with the "model minority"

stereotype. Next, I describe how API youth perform the schoolboy gangster narrative to navigate cultural expectations of being both Asian American and gang affiliated. Finally, I problematize notions of the schoolboy gangster paradox and how it can reinforce racist categorizations (Bonilla-Silva, 2006).

## Schoolboy Gangster Paradox

API youth in this study viewed themselves in a dual frame of reference: one where they were expected to abide my cultural expectations of being a good child to their parents as well as social expectations of fitting in with youth culture (Reyes, 2007). Chea, a Cambodian immigrant and participant from Oakland, emphasized the generational dissonance between immigrant youth and their parents:

> Yeah, you've got this Asian parents yelling at you like, "You better do good. You got to study." But at the same time, when they drop you off, they don't really understand your whole experience of school because they're going to work. Every battle, or barrier, or challenges that you faced, or I faced, was just mine. It wasn't really theirs.

Scholars have documented similar notions of negotiated identity with API youth (Bankston & Zhou, 1997; Ngo, 2013; Vaught, 2012). At times, Asian Americans are racialized as either acting white (e.g., model minority) or acting Black despite not fitting into either category (Kim, 1999). As discussed in Chapter 5, API—and more so Pacific Islander—youth feel that they are wrongfully positioned closer to Black youth because of their gang involvement. As a result, they highlight different aspects of their racial identity by essentializing notions of a shared panethnic identity of what it means to be API. This extends AsianCrit by complicating the strategic (anti)essentialism tenet, as one of the ways this experience plays out is through the schoolboy gangster narrative where they actively intervene in the their own racialization process (Iftikar &

Museus, 2018). They claim that unlike Black gangs and to an extent Latino gangs, API gangs take pride in embracing their racial identity even if it counters what it means to be a stereotypical gang member.

**Schooling and Cultural Expectations**

The schoolboy gangster paradox was an identity that participants brought up, for the most part, unprompted. They felt that they were living a double life by being gang affiliated, but by hiding it from their parents and family. When I asked Arthur, a Vietnamese participant from Alhambra, if his parents knew of his gang involvement, he joked, "Well, of course I tried to hide it. It's not like I'm a total idiot." In all seriousness, many of the participants feared the shame or disappointment as a result of their parents finding out. To ensure they were successful in keeping their gang involvement a secret, they abide by cultural expectations of what a "good" son should be. Unanimously, they mentioned the crucial role of schooling in covering their gang identity from family members. To this end, being a schoolboy gangster did not necessarily mean they were straight-A students, but simply doing the bare minimum in school to not get in trouble at home.

Once participants were deep in their gang involvement, school was not a priority or concern. They often did not care about their grades. In the classrooms, they were usually apathetic. They described themselves as quiet, "just being there," and doing the bare minimum amount of work. Some ended up at a continuation school or dropped out altogether. Bao, a Chinese participant from the Bay Area, summarized his time as a student:

> I was a respectful student. I didn't lash out in class, I didn't bring drama to the class. I
>
> didn't pass no issue in class, participated to a brief minimum. I didn't act a fool like some
>
> of the other kids were, where they'd get kicked out of class, go to the principal's office

then detention. I wasn't one of those. Well, a lot of us wasn't. Either we were in school or we weren't in school.

Bao and other participants explained how their parents often stressed the importance of doing well in school (Goyette, 1999; Pong et al., 2005; Warikoo et al., 2020). Tommy, a Chinese participant from Sacramento, linked his parents' attitudes and expectations regarding his education trajectory as cultural. He explained:

I think that's just like the cultural expectations, the understanding that our parents came over to America to find a better life for us, and it was certainly reinforced by the message that they were giving us. At least for myself, I shouldn't be generalizing like that, but going to school was a no-brainer, going to college is second nature, that was already in the plan growing up. I think in a lot of sense, I think there was a cultural expectation that that's something that we would do while we're in school. That just speaks to the double identity that I was talking about earlier, really straddling projecting this image of a devoted a son at home, and then while I'm a criminal at night, being in school or something like that.

Tommy stated that attending school and college was a "no-brainer" indicating the internalization of the "model minority" stereotype that portrays Asian Americans as "whiz kids." He also indicated that schooling was an opportunity to pay respect to parents since they "came over to American to find a better life for us." As a result of their parents' reinforced messages around schooling and academic achievement, coupled with the sympathy for their sacrifices, participants felt obligated to live up to the academic and cultural standards. Participants expressed a deep sense of disappointment when it came to schooling. Bao acknowledged how much shame he

would bring his family if they knew about his gang involvement. Consequently, he went to great lengths to hide his gang affiliation. He expressed:

> It was just instinctual, something that we did. We kept our dirt away from our community. And so we thought that, because we didn't want to be like . . . A lot of us we were being shamed, so we didn't want to be shamed. We didn't want to bring shame to the family even though it was our illogical reasoning. That by being a gang it is bringing shame to our family, and the stuff that we was doing were bringing shame and harm to our family. But we didn't see it like that. We thought if we did it away from them, we didn't get caught, even if we did caught, we did it in a way, so we didn't really bring harm to our community.

Bao revealed how conflicting it was to "keep dirt away from our community" to protect them from knowing the truth about his gang involvement. At the time, he reasoned that hiding it from his family would be better than bringing them shame. Like Bao, Jay, a Filipino participant from Sacramento, also expressed his shame. When I asked Jay if his mother knew about his gang involvement, he adamantly replied:

> She don't know shit. You know, she just assumes. If my mom would've found what I'm doing, she would think the worst. And if I'm not a doctor or going to college, you know, shit. But I didn't have all the resources to do it.

In this statement Jay also posits that he had to hide his gang identity from his mom as she would not understand his reality (i.e., "She would think the worst"). Nathan, a Filipino participant from Los Angeles, added that another reason they hid their gang affiliation from their family was out of respect, which was ingrained in their culture. When I asked him about his experience in school and what type of student he was, he asserted:

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> For me and my friends, we did attend school more. And I think the reason why goes back
> to family respect. I think it's culture too, because since Asians value education more and
> school institutions. And so, I didn't want to displease them. So of course I went to school.
> But if I had the option, I wouldn't have gone.

Similar to Tommy, Nathan also internalized aspects of the "model minority" by stating "Asians value education more." He also attributes having respect for his family and wanting to please them as cultural (i.e., "I think it's culture"). Nathan and other participants made it clear that they attended school out of obligation to their parents, which helps them hide their gang involvement.

Even though participants had good intentions for wanting to hide their gang affiliation, this caused them to be calculated about about their identity and experiences as API youth involved in gangs. Adam, a Filipino participant from the Inland Empire, remembered how his homeboys adopted the schoolboy gangster lifestyle. He recalled:

> It was like, 'How the hell are you gang banging in the nighttime, in the morning you
> guys doing homework?' It was like I see people doing a beat and the next thing I know
> they're doing their homework all night. It's like, 'My mom's going to see my grades.

Adam was one of the few participants who did not care enough to hide his gang affiliation from his family, but stated that his friends were the epitome of schoolboy gangsters. He described their experiences as the following:

> They still sneak out at night time. They still change clothes. Even though they're like . . .
> tough gang bangers out there and they were still doing it . . . Just, a part of them thinks
> that parents shaming them or feeling bad about them, or you just [dis]honoring their
> family name is worse than anything that they can experience in gang banging.

In this statement, Adam highlights how even though API youth have a strong sense of racial identity that may be contradictory to the hegemonic masculinity seen in stereotypical depictions of gang members. In this instance, API youth would consider it worse to "[dis]honor their family name" than any outcome related to gang violence.

Prioritizing family before gang culture was consistent for nearly all participants. Marcus, a Samoan participant from Carson, explained, "It's a whole different culture. Because even though a Pacific Islander and Asian, even though we're gang bangers and shit like that, we still got that family love and that respect for our elders and stuff like that." Steven, a Vietnamese participant from Pomona, felt similarly, adding "I still wanted my parents to be proud of me, so I would put in some type of effort. For some reason, at that age, even though I was so caught up, I still seen a future outside of gang banging." Indeed, even though most participants felt that they were not necessarily talented or gifted students, they admitted to making some effort in school to appease their parents.

Aside from going to school, participants attended to other familial obligation such as participating in religious services (Hagedorn, 2017). Mr. Nang, a Cambodian staff member from the pilot study, spoke of his friend who was a leader in the Tiny Rascals Gang (TRG), a prominent Southeast gang from Long Beach:

> We went to the same church. When I first met him, he was one of the nicest guys, sweetest spirits you'll ever meet…you would have never known that he was one of the shot callers for TRG…It was just hardcore gang member, and then all of a sudden model citizen, and then model citizen running the streets still banging and representing, but yet come back with a Bible, and singing hymns, and letting people know that he's from TRG

Mr. Nang's account of his friend points out the complexities of being both API and gang affiliated. On one hand, his friend is "a hardcore gang member" and "shot callers" all the while "singing hyms" in church. Other participants related to this tension. Harry, a Korean participant from Los Angeles, was the son of a pastor. Begrudgingly, he attended church every week with his parents. However, Harry made it clear that just because he went to church did not mean he was less committed as a gang member. In depicting how he was a schoolboy gangster, he explained:

> Harry: Let's just say theoretically, right?
>
> AL: Theoretically.
>
> Harry: I'd be involved in a shooting Saturday night, and then Sunday morning I'll be sitting in church.

To Harry and other participants, being gang affiliated afforded them the opportunity to determined which aspects of gang culture and their racialized identity they chose to maintain. They recognized the complexities and nuances of their identity and negotiated it in various ways through mannerisms, speech, and dress (Tuan, 1998; Uy, 2018).

**Strategic Ambiguity**

Strategic ambiguity (Goffman, 1970; Wong, 2019) was a common performance of API youth's resistance to racist stereotypes, such as the "model minority" by embracing that stereotype and complicating the dichotomous representation they have traditionally been viewed. Participants created a complex racial image where they moved beyond being good/bad and traditional/modern and instead created and redefined what it meant for them to be API through strategic ambivalence (Ngo, 2009). Aware of how they were racialized as "model minorities," they kept up an image that they were "good kids" through performative behavior by attending

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school and family obligations. In doing so, they learned to be calculated and sophisticated with their image especially towards authority figures, maintaining notions of the "model minority" stereotype by upholding traditional cultural values such as being family oriented and obedient children despite their gang identity. Their strategic ambivalence served as a tool to articulate their identity while revealing their understandings of racial hierarchy and power.

### *Role of Schooling*

Nick, a Chinese participant from San Gabriel Valley, recalled how he attended schools to meet up with his friends to later skip class together. Nick discussed how he and his friends planned out how to ditch school so that they would not get caught by their parents: "I was looking for opportunity to ditch, that I could get away with. So I know that if I ditched fourth period, or whatever, that it's not going to show too much, whereas if I take off a whole week then the school's going to call home." Although most participants lost interest in school, they still attended to seem as normal and innocent as possible to their parents. Hence, Nick and his friends were deliberate in which classes to ditch to avoid their parents finding out.

Consistent with scholarship in this area, participants attributed schools as sites for gang activity (Hagedorn, 2017; Katz, 1996; Lam, 2015). Paul, a Filipino participant from the Bay Area, stated that he "started dealing drugs in school, bringing drugs to school."

Som, a Cambodian participant from TRG in Long Beach, discussed how gang recruitment took place in schools (Gallupe & Gravel, 2018). Since youth typically join gangs between 11 and 15 years of age (Pyrooz, 2014), schools are often ideal environments especially for those living in neighborhoods and attending schools with active gang members (Densley, 2012). Recruiting a lineage was essential for the survival of gangs and the responsibility was placed on the younger members. He asserted:

I think most of the Asian gangs, school was a recruiting ground. You do catch the older

homie saying, 'Oh, you guys need to go to school'…even if you wasn't doing good in

school or whatever, they would want you to go to school just to recruit…Because if you

don't, then your line pretty much ends right there.

API youth recall being told by their "big homies" to stay in school. The reasons varied from

genuine interest for the students' future (e.g., having a future outside of gang life) to potential

benefit for gang activities. Thus, attending school was beneficial to hide their gang affiliation

from their parents while also promoting gang activity.

### Speech, Dress, and Mannerisms

In their commitment to be devoted sons, participants were strategic with their speech,

dress, and mannerisms. Tommy discussed how he got a dragon tattoo, which in Chapter 5 we

learned was stereotypical for Asian gangs at the time. However, he offered a rationale for the

placement of his tattoo because he still wanted to maintain the image of being an obedient and

respectful son. He explained:

Even when I got my tattoos at a very young age, I knew not to get it anywhere that was

really easily seen, just for that reason, because I don't want to be characterized or

prejudiced against because I'm having tattoos showing, or be easily identified by crime

victims, et cetera. There is a conscientious decision making process of covering up the

tracks, being a good student certainly does play into that, and part of the reason why I

subscribed to the two identities at home and also in the streets.

Tommy's remarks underscore notions of the schoolboy gangster. He mentioned the

"conscientious decision making process of covering up the tracks" so that his parents would not

find out about his gang affiliation. He also connected that to how he "subscribed to the two

identities at home and also in the streets." For participants like Tommy, the schoolboy gangster paradox was a necessary part of survival for API youth.

For Dave, proving normalcy to his family came down to code switching. He said he had a distinctive style of language for when he was with his family compared to his peers. He explained:

When I was with [family], not that I'm a good boy, but I keep on a facade of, 'oh, I'm a nice guy.' I speak proper, I wouldn't cuss around them, things like that when I am around. However, when I'm with the gang friends, I'm totally different. My accent comes out, my ghetto accent.

Aside from language, participants also spoke about how they carried themselves physically as schoolboy gangsters. Harry described how he had to change his aesthetic to tone down his gang affiliation around his family members:

I was, how do we describe? Banged up. There's no ifs, ands or buts, I was banged up in LA gang attire, Dickies, Chris' Clothes, Ben Davis. I was always creased up, white shirt, sweaters, or a Jersey, or whatever, and Nike Cortez. That was my every day. Big, big pants. That was my gear every day coming out of the place. The only time I brought it down a little bit was when I was at family functions…The reason only reason for that was, I didn't want attention on me when I'm around my family, or something happening and I get targeted while I'm with my family…you can still tell, but I'll bring it down…I would wear a little bit smaller pants, and maybe I might not even wear my Cortez.

In the statement above Harry described his "every day" attire of being "banged up" as baggy clothes. During the time he was growing up in the 90s, the "LA gang attire" he mentioned was rooted in mainstream apparel for youth, particularly with the hip hop scene (e.g., brands like

Dickies and Ben Davis; Alsaybar, 1999; Lam, 2015). He then explained how he "brought it down" was around family so he would not get mistaken for a gang member, especially out of safety for his family.

Interestingly, the stories about being schoolboy gangsters was consistent across participants. Perhaps the pervasive of the schoolboy gangster narrative could explain how participants' friends also knew how to carry themselves around others' families. Bao discussed how not only he subscribed to being a schoolboy gangster, but his friends were also complicit in the paradox. He said:

> But it's crazy because a lot of my friends that came over, were really polite. Took off their shoes, greeted the parent, offered to help out clean the house…We were hella respectful in the house, it was crazy. And my parents were like, "Man, you've got some good friends." As soon as we leave the house, we'd get into all kinds of nonsense and all kinds of law breaking stuff and then come home like everything's all good.

### *Pacific Islander Youth*

While not all Pacific Islander and Asian American cultural values and practices are compatible, being family oriented and showing deference to elders was something both racial groups shared (Lei, 2006). Caleb, a Samoan participant from Carson, was also insistent on keeping both lifestyles. Like the other participants, Caleb had a strong sense of culture especially growing up with a large Samoan enclave in Carson. His grandparents started the first Samoan church there so his family was well respected. Because of his family's popularity in the Samoan community Caleb wanted to hide his involvement. Caleb explained how he was subscribing to the schoolboy gangster paradox by attending school while partying with his friends:

I still went to school. I still do my thing after school, I would chill, we would party. At 15

years old, sitting in the hood getting faded. But I'll still get up and do your little gang

activities at night but I'll still get up and go to school.

Samoan youth in this study felt there was less stigma about being involved with gangs as they

had at least one family member who was a gang member (Godinet & Vakalahi, 2009; Togia,

2015). In most cases, they tend to feel bad that they reappropriated that stereotype. Although

Samoan youth had family members heavily involved in gangs, they stated that their family, and

more so their parents, discouraged them from joining gangs (see Chapter 4).

Caleb's son, Marcus, was also part of this study. Marcus, 22 years old from Carson,

described himself as a nontraditional gang member, which he also synonymized with being a

schoolboy gangster. He knew of his dad's involvement but did not feel pressured to join his

family's gang until he was 20. After graduating high school Marcus attended the University of

Wisconsin as a Posse Scholar, a program reserved for talented students from racially minoritized

backgrounds. Though Marcus did not necessarily hide his gang affiliation from his dad, he felt

he was an example of a schoolboy gangster because of his academic achievements.

Like Marcus, Alex is also from Carson and has family members involved with gangs.

Currently, she is a junior student at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA). She also

identified as being a high achieving student, even though she did not take school seriously in

high school. She explained:

Also, because academics came very easy for me. There was also two routes with that.

When academics are hard, you don't give a fuck about school. When it's too easy, you

get bored with school. I was one of those get bored and hanging out with the wrong

crowd. I liked going out with my homies. I liked drinking. I liked smoking. I'm just being

real.

Alex was also accepted into Stanford, but she wanted to be close to her family so she chose to

attend UCLA. She joked that her family was not supportive because of UCLA's school color

being blue and her family claiming red as their gang color. Though Alex is at one of the most

selective universities in the state, she feels that she does not need to abandon her gang identity

and instead embraces the "Westside."

For Alex, being a schoolgirl gangster meant that she had to code switch at UCLA. She

does not openly disclose her gang affiliation because she noticed how people look at her

differently in school. Only with other Pacific Islander students will she "rep her hood." For

example, when she's with other students in the Pacific Islander Student Association she feels

comfortable:

I'll walk around and be like, "Yeah, y'all know what it is." They'll be like, "Here she

fucking goes." Hella cool. They know what's up. But outside of PISA, I won't tell

people. I won't just because you can see the switch-up in their head. Like I said, when I

first came in for the FSP, the Freshmen Summer Program, I was very much so like, "I'm

from Westside. I'm from here. I'm from there." Someone was like, "What's cracking?"

I'm like, "What's brackin'?" Little shit like that. They're like, "We're just speaking

English."

In her statement Alex disclosed how she is intentional with how she carried herself, but that it

was not always this way. She noted how when she first got to UCLA she was still reppin, "I'm

from the Westside" or "What's brackin." She admitted that it was a hard transition for her since

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she used to say "blood" all the time out of habit with her family, but that at UCLA she has since

replaced that term with "dude." Consider her account of code switching:

> In the way I talk, I try not to say... If I'm talking to my cousins, I say Blood so much. I be
>
> like, "Blood, Blood, Blood, Blood, Blood." I be like, "Oh, dude. Bro. Damn, bro. Dude,
>
> dude, dude," little shit like that. I'm being dead ass. I be like, "Man, bro." Yeah, I don't
>
> put on as much. I think it's kind of embedded in me, but if you don't ask, I won't tell you
>
> just because you don't got to be so hard in every space.

For Alex and other Samoan youth in this study, they had a different relationship to being

schoolboy/girl gangsters since they were not necessarily hiding their gang affiliation from their

parents. Instead, they discussed the tensions they faced being academically talented and also

gang affiliated, as those two identities can seem contradicting. They live double lives in the sense

that they behave and speak one way as students, but that with their gang they embody a different

persona. In any case, API youth subscribed to the schoolboy gangster narrative and understood

how complex their identities are.

## Performing Schoolboy Gangster

The schoolboy gangster paradox produced a racialized experience for API gang affiliated

youth where they conflated both the "model minority" and yellow peril stereotypes (Wu, 2002).

In internalizing the "model minority" stereotype, participants strategically used that perception to

their advantage in the streets. Tuan, a Vietnamese participant from Orange County, recalled

being in prison and listening to media reports describe Asian gangs as sophisticated because they

were harder to identify:

> With the Asian culture, they don't want to lose face . . . When I'm at home, I was a good
>
> boy. But on the street they're completely different. And it's funny in prison, I [noticed] a

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lot of guys like that too. They show you they is a good student, but on the street they is a

gang member. That's why I remember watching one of the documentary, the detective

said the Asian gang is a harder one to identify because a lot of us was a good student,

smart student, but after school, anything could happen

In this statement, Tuan made a connection between the discretion of Asian gangs to cultural

values such as "los[ing] face." He also spoke to the pervasiveness of the schoolboy gangster

paradox, explaining that with his peers "they show you they [are] a good student, but on the

street they is a gang member." He further described the dichotomy in which schoolboy gangsters

are "good student, smart student, but after school, anything could happen."

Tuan's statements are consistent with media accounts and scholarship that describe Asian

gangs as discrete. One article reported that Asian American gang affiliated youth are known to

be A students or honor roll students (Larrubia, 1998), which can make it challenging for law

enforcement to detect gang members. An article in the *Los Angeles Times* captured a statement

from the police captain warning that for Asians "many honor students are in gangs" (Alliance

Working for Asian Rights and Empowerment, 1994). Similarly, participants described how they

had to play into the image of the "model minority" stereotype by being savvy. Nathan explained,

"Even though I was scared of getting a police ticket at school, but in the streets, I didn't even

think about them. If they see you, you run when you need to run, or you act innocent if and when

you need to act innocent." Bao also reiterated how Asian gangs learn to adapt with law

enforcement to avoid getting caught. He explained, "They're [Asian gangs] quick to flip the

script to. . .They could cover up real fast because they know what's coming, they can play the

part." In doing so, Asian American youth risk reproducing racial categories of Asian Americans

as synonymous to the "model minority" stereotype even as an act of resistance (Ninh, 2011).

Another practice to avoid law enforcement was also *looking* Asian. For Tyler, the schoolboy gangster came down to aesthetics. Though in his early 20s, Tyler kept his braces on for a few years after he needed to to keep up with a schoolboy image. He wore thick glasses and had no tattoos. When his parents offered to buy him a new car, he refused and kept his run down 2007 Honda Accord. That way, when he was pulled over the police would assume he was a "broke college student." All the while, his supply would be in the trunk. Tyler's innocent appearance afforded him routes in safer (i.e., white) neighborhoods in San Jose. He recalled how other guys in his gang complained, "why does Tyler get all the good routes?" to which his OG responded bluntly "because he's the only one that looks like he lives there."

What's more, Tyler identified as a "reverse narc." When I asked him to clarify what he meant, he said "so you know how narcs try to look gangster to blend in? I tried to like more nerdy to blend into those neighborhoods." Tyler admitted his appearance upholds what a stereotypical Asian looked like. "I would feel bad about it, because I felt like if I didn't… just looking the way I am, being Asian…then I probably would've been locked up, but then, I'm just taking my blessings as they are." His statement reveals that he recognized his racial privilege (i.e., "just looking the way I look"), yet actively chooses to reappropriate racial stereotypes (i.e., "I'm just taking my blessings as they are."

**Racial Politics**

API youth in this study understood how they were racially triangulated in that they were valorized over Black individuals (Kim, 1999) even if they were gang affiliated. Like Tyler, they tend to use racially coded language to describe their racial positions relative to Black communities. When asked about his interactions with police, Nick replied, "Well, they'd frisk us a lot, but it's just like a bunch of kids, whatever. I don't know…I think we're probably more

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reserved. . .You know what I mean...than other gangs of other cultures." Nick implied that even though his gang was profiled by the police, they were "more reserved" and therefore did not receive harsh treatment, especially compared to "other gangs of other cultures." His comment underscores the racial privilege Asian Americans receive, especially if they portray the "model minority" image of being polite.

Som, a Cambodian participant from Long Beach, was more explicit in his understandings of how Asian Americans benefit from racial stereotypes. In discussing the "model minority" myth and its impact on the Asian American community, Som admitted there are times it can be beneficial for Asian gangs. He tied this to perception, especially relative to stereotypes that Black people experience:

> I think it goes kind of both ways. For one, the jury don't look at you that way. Because I know for African Americans, the stereotype is there already. The jury's already guilty. But with white kids, with Asians, they're probably like, 'I don't know if this kid could do something like that.' Things like that. I guess you could look at it like that.

His comment invoked how Asian Americans are aligned with whiteness (i.e., "I don't know if this kid could do something like that") whereas Black youth are racialized as criminal (i.e., "the stereotype is already there. The jury's already guilty;" Annamma 2018; Noguera, 2008; Rios, 2011). Though participants acknowledge the impact of dominant racial narratives, and especially how Black people are at the bottom of the hierarchy, their internalization of the "model minority" stereotype reinforces problematic racial inequities.

Racial processes in the pilot study also pit communities of color against each other. Mr. Sok, a young Cambodian staff member at the school site whose brother is gang affiliated, believed that Asian American students involved in gangs benefit from the "model minority"

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myth. He further stated that in general, gang involved student exhibit comparable behavior but

Asian students were less likely to be disrespectful. He provided the following example:

> A Cambodian kid will tell the teacher, "Fuck you, you dumb ass bitch," then go back
>
> home. And "Mom, I'm so sorry, I didn't say anything," or try to hide it because mom
>
> will go crazy on them for even talking to an adult like that.

Mr. Sok's comment is consistent with the double life that participants subscribed to, where they

behave a certain way to their family and a completely different way with their friends or in social

settings. Further, Mr. Sok's remarks also underscores how participants are aware of their

privilege relative to Black youth. In discussing the racial stereotypes that Asian students at the

school site navigate, he candidly noted that their racialization is not as severe as Black students,

which lets them get away with disruptive behavior (Endo, 2017). He explained:

> But for the most part, the perception has always been like, you're one or the other [either
>
> model minority or gang affiliated], but you're not going to be a trouble maker because
>
> you know why? I have this kid to deal with, a Black kid who's probably more mouthier
>
> and so on like that. The Cambodian students here kind of benefit from the fact that the
>
> stereotype of Asians, the quiet model minority still applies to them. And so, they get to
>
> use that to their advantage.

It is important to contextualize racial dynamics against Black and Asian communities. In places

like Long Beach, where the pilot study took place, racial tensions among communities of color

were historically rampant. The Los Angeles race riots in 1992 for example, pitted Black and

Asian communities against each other after the shooting of 15-year-old Latasha Harlins by a

Korean store owner, in addition to the beating of Rodney King by LAPD (McFerson, 2006). In

present day, we again the tensions between Black and Asian communities during the COVID-19

pandemic as the anti-Asian violence has been portrayed in media as being perpetuated by Black individuals (Demsas & Ramirez, 2021). It is important to note that these racial tensions are facilitated by ideological structures of white supremacy resulting in communities being pitted against one another (Iftikar & Museus, 2018). It is crucial to understand relative racialization and how it is all interconnected.

## Conclusion

Dominant racial narratives influenced the production and racialization of API youth as schoolboy gangsters. API youth therefore construct themselves not as model minorities or problem minorities, but rather in a model minority—yellow peril dialect (Kawai, 2005; Wu, 2002). On one hand, they resist the "model minority" stereotype and challenge normative discourse by being gang affiliated. They actively intervene in the racialization process by offering an alternative to their identity, choosing which identities they maintain (Ngo, 2006). To their families and teachers, they behave like "model minorities," yet they are equally violent gang members. Virtually all the participants admitted to committing a violent act against someone else, usually for the benefit of their gang. Two-thirds of the participants had been arrested or incarcerated at some point during their lives. The schoolboy gangster persona is fluid and contextual, and allows them to navigate institutional spaces like schools and streets more effectively. Additionally, the schoolboy gangster narrative fostered a sense of panethnic identity as it was applied to participants across ethnic boundaries, constructing a uniform identity and building solidarity (Reyes, 2007).

To be sure, not all participants subscribed to the schoolboy gangster paradox. In their case, they felt they were too deep in gang involvement to care about school or try to hide their identity from their family. At the time, they were more concerned with building their reputation

in their gangs. Even then, they adopted some aspects of the schoolboy gangster paradox (e.g., utilizing the "model minority" stereotype to their advantage) and identified friends who fit this narrative. This goes to show how pervasive the schoolboy gangster ideology was for API youth.

The schoolboy gangster paradox offers a complex analysis of racialization and racial identity politics. As a result of the strategic ambivalence of API youth, however, they end up reinforcing the "model minority" stereotype for the benefit of their gang activities (Ninh, 2011). They essentialize notions of culture that distance and valorizes API over other racial groups, further pitting communities of color against each other (Yu, 2006). In a hyper racialized context like gang culture, attempts to dismantle racial division may be sparse. The anti-Blackness among Asian Americans are left dangerously promoted as they benefit from negative Black stereotypes (Iftikar & Museus, 2018). More critical analysis is needed on how both communities navigate racial tensions with the goal of racial justice.

# Chapter 7

## Discussion and Implications

In December 2020, Arthur "Yankee" Touch was murdered by rival gang members. He was a freshman student at my research site in Long Beach, only 14 years old. I talked to one of the teachers at the school, who stated, "The gang kids that I have had, you really only find out that they are gang affiliated after something bad happens to them." Local newspapers reported how shocked his teachers were to find out that he was gang affiliated, primarily because he was part of a magnet program and described as "bright" and "quiet" (Echeverry, 2020). Given the hegemonic stereotype of Asian Americans as model minorities, the experiences of Asian American gang members seem to be unintelligible, as indicated in the reception of Yankee's murder and the vignette of Sy in Chapter 1. Yet, gang culture continues to permeate and shape the racial realities for youth like Arthur and participants in this study.

This dissertation speaks to the need to consider experiences of API youth gang members to theorize racialization. Given the limited representation of API gang affiliated youth, I sought to understand what it meant for them to be both API *and* gang involved and how they understand racial categories. The following research questions guided this dissertation study:

1. How do API gang affiliated youth interpret the origins and evolution of API gangs?
2. How do API gang affiliated youth make meaning of their racial identity?

To answer these research questions, this qualitative study drew on ethnographic and interview data from a pilot study at a high school in Long Beach, and interviews from API youth and adults who were either formerly or currently gang involved. I also triangulated the data with archival research and member checked with participants and community members. AsianCrit (Iftikar & Museus, 2018) as the guiding framework for this study allowed me to use

interdisciplinary theories in understanding the unique ways Asian American youth are impacted by dominant racial narratives and how they navigate their racial identity through their gang affiliation. Additionally, I was able to center the stories of API youth to challenge dominant epistemology to inform my own theory on their racial identity. In this chapter, I summarize my findings and connect it to the literature. Then, I discuss the implications for research, policy, and practice. Finally, I account for the limitations of this study.

## The Findings and the Literature

This study helped shed light on how macrostructure of racial inequities impact the ongoing racializations that exist for API youth and shape their experiences, particularly with gangs. My contention is that API gangs emerged organically as a result of racial politics, violent history rooted in imperialism and displacement, and a racialized economic structure. In engaging in their own process of resistance against White ideologies, API youth both redefined, reappropriated, and maintained racial categorization. This alone points to a longstanding need for research and analysis on API youth that examines the inequities, faced by this community, and in particular its youth.

Over three empirical chapters, I theorize API identity formation among gang involved youth and adults to 1) provide an in-depth analysis of how API youth make meaning of their gang involvement through the origin and evolution of API gangs, 2) highlight how Asian American youth negotiate their racial identity through their gang involvement and, 3) analyze how they position themselves in relation to other racial and ethnic gangs particularly through the gaze of the schoolboy gangster paradox.

**Tracing API Youth Gang Origins and Evolution**

The first findings chapter addressed RQ 1: How do API gang affiliated youth interpret the origins and evolution of API gangs? While some of the reasons for gang involvement were consistent with other racial groups, the trajectory of API youth traced back to war, migration, and imperialism (Lam, 2015). Most participants were either first generation immigrants or refugees, and all participants had immigrant parents. They re-settled in cities and neighborhoods negatively shaped by poverty and violence. Thus, their racialization and understanding of racial categories were shaped by class inequities and hegemonic masculinity (Thangaraj, 2012). This finding aligns with research that suggests how the racialized experiences of API youth are largely impacted by White supremacy, and more particularly through the transnational context tenet of AsianCrit (Iftikar & Museus, 2018). Further, this finding disrupts notions that API youth do not face issues with violence, gang affiliation, and criminalization (Jang, 2002).

The findings with generational distinctiveness contributes to a greater understanding of gang involvement, one that accounts for variations between ethnicities and generations, which was a shortcoming in previous research (Tsunokai & Kposowa, 2002). The OGs joined gang primarily out of survival. They cited racial tensions and racialized violence as primary factors for joining gangs. Even if they were not affiliated with gangs, they would still get "banged on" or targeted by Black or Latino gangs, and to an extent Asian gangs, depending on their neighborhood. They justified using violence as a tool to confront racial injustices against other racial groups. In the 1980s and 1990s, Asian American youth experiences racist bullying and harassment so their gang involvement was one avenue where they could stand up for their racial community.

For contemporary youth gangs, racialized violence was not as common. Instead, the primary factors for youth to join gangs now is due to family influence, as they are likely to have an immediate family member be part of a gang, or out of economic gang. Due to these reasons the gang affiliation of youth now are much more fluid and contextual. They do not feel the need to conform to stereotypical gang mentality as the OGs did, such as wearing baggy clothing or consistently "reppin" their gang. Youth today have more options to pursue outside of the gang life, both socially and financially. OGs criticized that this is a reason why there is less cohesion in contemporary youth gangs, whereas with the OGs the gang were an important fabric of their social structure.

**Constructing Identities through Gang Affiliation**

In this chapter I answered RQ 2: How do API gang affiliated youth making meaning of their racial identity? I argue that rather than seeing their gang identity as distinct from their racial identity, API youth constructed their racial and ethnic identities through their gang involvement in a few ways. The first strategy of identity construction was through embracing and adopting racial stereotypes, such as having dragon tattoos, speaking their native language, and cultural traditions of being family oriented. For marginalized communities, reappropriating stereotypes is a common method of resistance (Yu, 2006). The second strategy API youth used was ascribing racial significance to cultural practices in the gang (Alsaybar, 1999). While being sophisticated with crime, entrepreneurial, and altruistic is not necessarily unique to API gangs, participants assigned racial meaning to those traits, claiming racial advantage over Black and Latino gangs. Another strategy for identity construction was reclaiming their criminalization by viewing their gang involvement in altruistic terms, which gave them a heightened sense of racial pride. They spoke about contributing positively to the API community, by donating to charity, helping elders,

or protecting people from being bullied.

Their construction through race and gang affiliation helped them redefine racial categories. Similar to studies on immigrant Asian American youth, this finding uncovered the social processes by which API youth negotiate which racial identities and which aspects of gang culture they wanted to maintain (Ngo, 2006; Uy, 2018). It is important to note that in their resistance to hegemonic racial discourse, they end up reifying the "model minority" stereotype (Iftikar & Museus, 2018). For example, while they reject being model minorities and position themselves against that representation, they believe to be superior to other gangs based on racial values such as being respectful, family oriented, and their economic mobility. In doing so they reproduce narratives that aligns them away from communities of color and closer to honorary white status (Kim, 1999).

Additionally, by exploring how structural factors experienced and defined by gang affiliated youth facilitates a unique identity construction, I contribute to the humanizing of gang subculture in research. There are pedagogical possibilities within deviantly marked spaces (Dixon-Roman, 2014) such as gangs. This finding underscored the fluid, dynamic, and active negotiation of identity construction through gang subculture (Hunt et al., 1997).

**The Schoolboy Gangster Paradox**

The last findings chapter also answered RQ 2: How do API gang affiliated youth making meaning of their racial identity? I theorize their racialization as the schoolboy gangster paradox, where participants admitted to living a double life. In doing so I contradict simplistic notions of APIs in the U.S. They were schoolboys by day, meaning they played the devoted son role by attending school and participating in family obligations, but in the streets they were a completely (i.e., violent) different person. They adopted this narrative to navigate their dual identities of

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being both API and gang affiliated. This finding contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the impact of dominant racial narratives, and strategies APIs use to navigate and resist White supremacy (Iftikar & Museus, 2018).

In existing research on API gangs, studies tend to overemphasize cultural traits as an explanation for criminal behavior (Cacho, 2012) while saying less about racialized economic and social structures (Lowe, 1996) that give way to gang formation. On the other hand, critical race perspectives on API youth focus primarily on comparative racialization that portrays them as ideologically blackened (Ong, 1996) due to similar criminalization patterns of other youth of color (Tang, 2015; Vue, 2012). This finding builds on previous research surrounding Asian Americans and carcerality, however, by nuancing their racial categorizations as either honorary whites *or* racially blackened (Kim, 2000). Instead, I argue that the schoolboy gangster paradox is are racialized within the model minority—yellow peril dialectic (Kawai, 2005; Wu, 2002). This finding also has implications for a panethnic possibility, as this narrative held true regardless of ethnicity, geographic region, and generation. This finding also extended the theorization of the strategic (anti)essentialism tenet of AsianCrit, by revealing how they adopt a panethnic construction as "model minorities" to escape surveillance.

## Implications for Research, Policy, and Practice

### Implications for Research

To date, this is one of the few studies that helped shed light on the relationship between gang formation and activity and racial meaning to understand a specific racial group. In centering API youth, I argue that the history of racism is foundational in understanding their gang involvement as it relates to class and space (Hagedorn, 2006). The significance of race

varies for different groups, and understanding how API youth make sense of their racialized experiences and identities in this subcontext explicates the fluidity of racial categorization.

In studying youth gangs, I challenge researchers to focus on noncriminal aspects of gangs. This research revealed broader understandings of interrelationship among power, hierarchy, and status in everyday life by members (Mendoza-Denton, 2014). How youth involved in gangs interpret the world around them and articulate their identity serves as a vehicle for the politicization of youth. Their projection from their own conditions reveal important concepts of carcerality and racial inequality.

Additionally, this is one of the first studies to employ AsianCrit to investigate the experiences of API gang affiliated youth. The findings provide empirical support for exploring the experiences of API youth through the AsianCrit framework. For example, it underscored transnational context as crucial in understanding the sociohistorical context that influences their racial experiences in the U.S. This was evident especially in the first findings chapter that traced the evolution and origins of API youth gangs to broader patterns of migration and displacement. Also, as AsianCrit's strategic (anti)essentialism tenet considers how white supremacy racializes Asian Americans as a monolithic group, my findings extend this tenet by complicating when and how my participants chose to adopt hegemonic constructions. For example, the schoolboy gangster paradox was a panethnic construction they used to escape surveillance and criminalization by performing the model minority stereotype. Thus, utilizing AsianCrit to study this population advanced deeper and more complex racial understandings for Asian Americans.

Implications for Policy

One of the key implications for policy is the school-to-prison-to-deportation pipeline (Marquez & Prandini, 2018). The school-to-prison pipeline is defined as a deliberate process in

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which school policies and practices push students, mainly poor students of color, into the juvenile justice system (American Civil Liberties Union [ACLU], 2008). This nexus has gained momentum both in scholarship and media for shedding light on the arbitrary nature of zero tolerance policies (Skiba et al., 2014) and the racial disparities for the ways in which youth of color have disproportionately been under patterns of criminalization and surveillance (Annamma, 2015; Duncan, 2000; Winn & Behizadeh, 2011). The addition of the deportation to the pipeline refers to the process by which immigrants with a criminal record are subjected to deportation (Southeast Asian Resource Action Center [SEARAC], 2018). According to SEARAC (2018), 16,000 Southeast Asians have received deportation orders, and over half of those are due to past criminal records. In fact, several of the participants in this study have also received the final order of deportation. The school-to-prison-to-deportation pipeline exacerbates the surveillance, policing, and punishment in communities of color. Thus, the findings from this study should be used to champion policies that protect and humanize immigrants and refugees.

Another policy implication is the need for data disaggregation to better understand the experiences of APIs. Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders are a heterogeneous group with varying degrees of migration patterns, cultural practices, family background, educational attainment, and socioeconomic status. Yet, they are portrayed as a monolithic group. Scholars in education have advocated for the use of data disaggregation for API students as it obscures the racial realities of ethnic subgroups (Teranishi, 2010). Aggregate data makes it difficult to understand the diverse experiences across API communities. Stakeholders in K-12 education and policymakers should have access to this information to better inform local and statewide policies and practices that impact their lived experiences (Le et al., 2021). Los Angeles Unified School

District is championing these efforts as the largest school district in the country to disaggregate race and ethnicity data (SEARAC, 2019).

Implications for Practice

While this study centers the experiences of gang affiliated youth, it has larger implications for students who live and attend schools in neighborhoods affected by poverty, crime, and racism. As Lam (2015) argued, "Schooling experiences are informed by class, gender, and spatial differences, which are crucial factors in their gang involvement" (p. 137). Schools are often sites for their formation, affiliation, and activity given that they are still required to attend schools during their adolescent years (Carson & Esbensen, 2019). Additionally, schools, as a racial microcosm for the surrounding neighborhood, serve as a larger site of apparatus to racialize and criminalize youth (Giroux, 2009; Noguera, 2003). As a result, schools can also be a site of possibility to disrupt racial inequity.

For example, findings from this study highlight gangs as racially affirming. Youth joined and stayed in gangs in part because it allowed them a racial sense of belonging. Their reason for being involved in gangs revealed how harmful the "model minority" stereotype is. The intent of this study is not to romanticize gang culture, however I advise against gang intervention. The findings show how fluid and complex gang involvement is. Instead, we need more racial affirming work that uplifts API communities in ways that disrupt their narrow racial representation. What I am suggesting is in foregrounding race and racism in gang formation, involvement, and culture, we challenge the hegemony of the dominant class. Gang subculture provides a pedagogic space where marginalized youth centralize their experiential knowledge of how their experiences are shaped by larger social institutions (Akom, 2009). Especially amidst

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the debate with using critical race theory in schools (Wang, 2021), utilizing gang culture as culturally sustaining pedagogy allows for transformative learning experiences.

Additionally, the movement to defund police in school districts followed the racial justice protests across as the country as a result of George Floyd's murder on May 25, 2020 (Jacobs et al., 2020). His death, and countless others, because of police brutality sparked uprisings against institutional racism and violence predominantly against Black communities. The protests fixed a spotlight on radical policing reforms, including reducing police presence and resources in schools (Jacobs et al., 2020). In Los Angeles, a coalition of students and community members from community advocacy groups led the charge that resulted in the Los Angeles Unified School District Board approving a plan to cut police presence in schools (Gomez, 2021). Additionally, funds will be diverted to support the achievement of Black students. The calls for defunding have argued that students of color and specifically Black and Latino students are negatively impacted by police presence on campus (Gomez, 2021). This study offers an opportunity reimagine criminalization and inequities in schooling.

## Limitations

There were several limitations to this study. First, I included Pacific Islanders as part of my sample. While this made my findings more nuanced, the stories of Pacific Islander youth were overshadowed by Asian Americans given their small sample size in this study. Thus, not all the findings were generalizable to Pacific Islanders. To account for this discrepancy, I noted when I was referring to Asian Americans solely or to APIs as an aggregate group. Future research should center critical race theories on the experiences of Pacific Islander youth (Gogue et al., 2021). While there is a branch of critical race theory that focuses on Native Hawaiians (Wright & Balutski, 2015), this framework is limited in its application to other Pacific Islander

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groups. There is limited scholarship that informs our understanding on the racialization of Pacific Islander youth. It is crucial that more studies center this population outside of Asian Americans. Second, due to the COVID-19 in person research suspension, I did not collect as much ethnographic data as I would have liked to round out my study. Instead, I focused on anecdotal evidence of the participants' experience. As such, I was not able to confirm their stories through observation (Annamma, 2013). In accepting the participants' narratives as their own however, I empower their epistemology to inform theory from otherwise marginalized academic spaces (Iftikar & Museus, 2018).

**Conclusion**

This is a coming of age story for API youth marked by poverty, crime, and violence. This study tends to the systematic and rigorous understanding of racial identities and categories by way of an analysis on API gang membership. Their stories are filled with complexities and at times contradictions, yet the paradox in which API gang affiliated youth are racialized hints at the serious analytical problem we have in understanding youth from communities affected by racialized structures of poverty and crime. Research on API gang subculture must name and analyze racial and social structures that position this group and others, relative to racist stereotype that pits them against other racial groups.

In an era of anti-youth legislation, this study offers an analysis for a framework that uses gang culture as pedagogy for racial understanding at a critical moment under the sociopolitical climate. I challenge notions that have deemed gangs as unworthy of scholarly examination. Instead, I argue that youth gang formation, membership, and/or affiliation can be used as a pedagogical tool for understanding race and racialization. It is not my intention to romanticize or pathologize gang subculture. Instead, I am arguing the potential for gang subculture as a site of

epistemology. Too often, gangs are painted in a negative light and deemed insignificant for

intellectual inquiry (Cohen, 2004; Dixon-Roman, 2014). By centering Asian American gang

affiliated youth, I provide an empirical contribution of an overlooked population in gang

subculture and a theoretical contribution to contemporary race and critical education scholarship.

**Appendix: Interview Protocol**

**Introduction**

I'd like to first thank you for being willing to participate in the interview. The point of my research is to understand the experiences of Asian American and Pacific Islander youth gangs. I am interviewing you because of your current or previous affiliation with a gang. I appreciate you sharing your expertise and experience with me.

There are no right or wrong answers, or desirable or undesirable answers. I would like you to feel comfortable saying what you really think and how you really feel. You also have the option of skipping answers if you do not feel comfortable discussing it.

If it's okay with you, I will be taperecording our conversation since it is hard for me to write down everything while carrying an attentive conversation with you.

Everything you say will remain confidential, meaning that only myself and my faculty mentor will be aware of your responses. Additionally, your real name will not be used for the interview. You can choose a pseudo name or I can choose one for you.

Our interview today will last approximately one hour during which I will be asking you about your upbringing, experience working in Long Beach, and specifically with Cambodian American youth.

*Before we begin the interview, do you have any questions?* [Discuss questions]

*If questions arise at any point in this study, you can feel free to ask them at any time. I would be more than happy to answer your questions.*

**Childhood/Upbringing**
- Where did you grow up? Tell me about your relationship to the city
    - What was it like growing up Asian in that city?
- What was your schooling experience like?
    - How was your relationship to your teachers?
    - How was your relationship to your peers?
    - Did you have any experience with school discipline?
    - What do you wish schools could do to better support you?

**Gang Affiliation**
- How did you get involved in a gang?
    - Did you know anyone else who was gang affiliated?
    - Why that gang specifically?
- How did that gang form in the first place?
- What would you say are differences between your gang and other ethnic and racial gang groups?

- Did you have any experience with the police?

**Gangs and Race**
- What was it like being Asian and gang affiliated?
    - Was anyone surprised that you joined a gang? Why or why not?
    - Was your family aware of your gang involvement? Why or why not?
    - How did being in an Asian gang enhance your racial/ethnic pride?
    - Were there cultural values instilled in your gang?
- Have you ever heard of the phrase "model minority?"
    - Has the "model minority" label impacted your gang affiliation and/or involvement? If yes, please explain.
    - Do you think "model minority" stereotype helps or hurts Asian gangs?

**[For OG Participants only] Youth Gangs Today**
- How do you think Asian gang affiliation and activity/experience may have differed since you were active?
    - Would you be able to identify those who are gang affiliated now? Why or why not?
- Why do you think Asian youth join gangs today? Is it different from your time?
    - Do you feel other racial groups influence why they join gangs?

**Final Questions**

- What is one thing you would tell a youth who is currently gang involved?
- Is there anything you wanted me to ask that I didn't? What would you like to ask me?

**Closing**
This concludes our interview. Thank you again for taking the time to meet with me to discuss your experience and expertise in this topic. Your story is very helpful for my research. I have one final question for you. Would you be open to doing a follow up interview if I have additional questions after reviewing our interview?

If yes: Great! I will be in touch with you if anything else comes up. Again, thank you for your willingness to participate in my study.

If no: I completely understand.

Do you have any questions for me at this point? [Discuss Questions]

If anything else comes up, please feel free to contact me. Thank you again for your time!

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