UC Santa Barbara

Volume 3 (2022)

Title

Checkmate: The 1998 Protests and the Formation of the Student Resource Building

Permalink

https://escholarship.org/uc/item/5871r1vz

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Publication Date

2023-04-01

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The 1998 Protests and the Formation of the Student Resource Building

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Abstract

The Student Resource Building at UC Santa Barbara, finished in 2007, houses a multitude of departments in addition to the Cultural Resource Centers (CRCs). This paper focuses on the history behind student activism, a focus on Asian American student activism, for a resource center for Asian American students. Starting in the late 1980s to early 1990s, the small population of Asian American students and other students of color resulted in students organizing and working with student administrators, including more faculty of color, more focus on student retention, and support for first-generation college students. In March 1998, the Daily Nexus wrote an article that included a quote stating that missing dogs were due to the Vietnamese and Hmong population living in IV. What followed is a series of protests that would ultimately lead to the establishment of the Cultural Resource Centers, housed in the future Student Resource Building. Student activists, to this day, continue to fight for more resources and support in ways that parallel the Asian American activists a few decades prior.

INTRODUCTION

Historically, Asian Americans have been viewed as outsiders and aliens, often excluded from the national dialogue about race. In the same way, Asian American activism is often overlooked, leaving the opportunity to research more about the history of Asian American activism. The ASAM 163 class "Community Studies and Social Justice" provides an opportunity for students to research more about Asian American activism at UC Santa Barbara during the early 1970s all the way to the late 1990s.

Specifically, for our public history project, our research group observed the student activism surrounding the 1998 protest against the Daily Nexus article stating that the Vietnamese and Hmong population in Isla Vista was the cause for the missing dogs on the campus. The 1998 protests served as a starting point to take a closer look at the political climate and campus climate during this time. However, to have a holistic understanding of what was happening during this time period, more research needed to be conducted in the years before and after 1998. This research paper dives into the events starting in the 1980s that would lead to the eventual construction of the Student Resource Building in 2007. The research questions that I am delving into are "How have students organized and advocated for student resources and spaces?" and "What are some of the challenges students face with activism at the university?"

LITERATURE REVIEW

Understanding examples of Asian American activism can help us understand and relate to the student activism that happened on the UC Santa Barbara campus during the 1990s. The following research papers exemplify the impact that Asian American activism has on their local communities and draws similarities to the student activism happening on the grounds of UC Santa Barbara.

The research paper "'KNOw History/KNOw Self': Khmer Youth Organizing for Justice in Long Beach" explores how Khmer Girls in Action (KGA) is able to educate the Cambodian American youth while engaging and supporting the community. In an interview with Monisha Das Gupta, Chhaya Chhoum, formerly a Cambodian American organizer for the Committee Against Anti-Asian Violence's Bronx-based Youth Leadership Project, talked about understanding and educating the community about the effects of historical policies and legislation, stating "We see clearly how policies impact our experiences. That's what we want our youth and members to think about when we talk about immigrant rights". Chhoum highlights the importance of understanding the political climate and context in order to pave the way towards change. Policies and legislation that happened years or decades ago can still have tremendous impacts on the community. To effectively understand the intentions of historical student activism at UC Santa Barbara, we must take a look at what was happening politically and socially in California and across the nation.

URCAJ 1

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¹ Monisha Das Gupta (2019) "KNOw History/KNOw Self": Khmer Youth Organizing for Justice in Long Beach, Amerasia Journal, 45:2, 137-156, DOI: <u>10.1080/00447471.2019.1671755</u>

In another research paper, "'We Need to Redefine What We Mean by Winning': NAKASEC's Immigrant Justice Activism and Thinking Citizenship Otherwise", the examination of the DACA program brings up questions about citizenship, the connotation of good and bad immigrants, and the excessive, illogical steps that prevent undocumented people from being able to attain citizenship². Undocumented activists have to rethink how they view the current immigration system and imagine one that is actually able to support them. Similarly, Asian American student activists face many barriers, including a lack of student resources. Thus, they are faced with the challenge of fighting for the possibility of a system that is able to support Asian American students and address the needs of the community.

METHODS

Our research team explored the different ways that history has been recorded, distorted, and reshaped through the lens of different mediums, such as interviews and newspapers. The research process began with looking at *Daily Nexus* articles that related to the 1998 protests and the proposal of the Student Resource Building. The original article that incited the 1998 protests was written on March 4, 1998, where Nick Soboleski, a *Daily Nexus* reporter, wrote the article, "Number of Dogs Present in Classes Declining This Year". The March 6, 1998 article described the protest in front of Davidson Library and got opinions from multiple protesters at the time. Stemming from these original articles, our research group expanded our research, uncovering different perspectives and historical insights through additional newspaper articles and interviews with those who participated or played a part in the activism during that period.

METHODOLOGY

For the public history project, we conducted the research primarily through two mediums: interviews and the *Daily Nexus* articles. We used these two methods of research, primarily due to the time constraints of the research project. If given additional time, more research can be done looking at physical documents located at the UCSB Special Research Collections.

The *Daily Nexus* articles were able to provide foundation and background for the historical events happening in the 80s and 90s, providing our research group a better understanding of the social atmosphere and opinions of the student body. However, their effort to be unbiased often caused the

² Elizabeth Hanna Rubio (2019) "We Need to Redefine What We Mean by Winning": NAKASEC's Immigrant Justice Activism and Thinking Citizenship Otherwise, Amerasia Journal, 45:2, 157-172, DOI: 10.1080/00447471.2019.1682921

³ Nick Sobleski, "Number of Dogs In Class Declining This Year," Daily Nexus, March 4, 1998, pg. 1, 5.

⁴ Tennille Tracy, "Comment Leads to Protesting," Daily Nexus, March 6, 1998, pg. 1, 5.

newspaper to have a lack of dimension; they reported what was on the surface rather than delving into the backgrounds of individuals.

Conducting interviews, on the other hand, gave us the multidimensional perspective we needed, helping us delve into different stances concerning events at the time, such as the murder of Vincent Chin and the passing of Proposition 209. Interviewees give more insight into the social and political climate, clarify murky historical details, and offer in-depth personal perspectives that are harder to find within news articles. At the same time, interviews can be biased; interviewees may overstate or understate their actions, positions, and intentions. Because of this, it is important to remember that while interviews offer unique insight, historical perspectives vary and may lack certain details. Even in her interview, Zaveeni stated, "You cannot trust me, even if I am talking. Check your own facts."

Interviewing people about events they experienced in the past adds another dimension of insight and perspective, as they have new-lived experiences and have developed new perspectives over the years since those events. Interviewees provided insight into the background and history from the 1980s to early 2000s and shared their experiences from a different perspective than if interviewed 30 years ago.

HISTORY OF THE PROJECT 1980s-1990s

The 1990s was a time of political unrest, which included "economic restructuring, the rise in conservatism, and FBI and police repression past and present". In the chapter "Radical Resistance in Conservative Times", Fujino and Leung delve into radical Asian American organizations and their efforts to fight against conversative measures and legislation proposed during that time, including Proposition 209, which proposed that state institutions be barred from considering race, sex, or ethnicity for employment, contracting, and educational enrollment.

The 1980s marked a time of anti-Asian sentiment in the United States. In the early 1980s, many refugees from Southeast Asia began to enter the United States; some Americans saw this as a threat to their economic stability and jobs. One extreme example was in 1981 when the Ku Klux Klansmen perceived Vietnamese fishermen to be taking away jobs. In response, the Klansmen began to destroy fishing

URCAJ 3

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⁵ Zaveeni Khan-Marcus, interview by Felix Dong, Vonnie Feng, Chet Iwanaga-Friedman, Christina Lao, November 15, 2019, audio.

⁶ Fujino, Diane, and Kye Leung. "Radical Resistance in Conservative Times." In *Legacy to Liberation: Politics and Culture of Revolutionary Asian Pacific America*, edited by Fred Wei-han. Ho. Brooklyn, NY: Big Red Media, 2000.

businesses and boats⁷. At the same time, rapid industrialization and economic growth in East Asian and Southeast Asian countries, known as the Four Asian Tigers, resulted in competition and development that rivaled the economic growth in the United States. These global economic developments lead to anti-Asian sentiment in the United States, one extreme and notable case being the murder of Vincent Chin in 1982. Vincent Chin was a Chinese American newlywed who was murdered by two white men who believed he was Japanese, blaming him for the decline in the US automobile industry and the subsequent loss of their jobs.

The political and social climate during this time could be a reason why there was already a growing student activism presence on campus. During this time, the primarily white institution had instances of racial discrimination; students of color felt a sense of frustration with the lack of cultural spaces. Chivy Sok, a UCSB alumnus of class of 1993, discussed how there was a lack of documentation at this time for racial discriminatory incidents and non-physical aggression⁸ to Asian American students and other students of color. She recollected how in downtown Santa Barbara, it was not uncommon for a white passersby to make comments such as "Go back to your own country"⁹. While most of Sok's recollections were instances of non-physical aggression, she stated that the assault of Tom Tieu was one incident of surprising physical aggression. In April 1990, Tom Tieu, an Asian American student, was assaulted by Jacob Sarvela, a UCSB Mathematics teaching assistant. This incident led to protests calling for justice for Tieu, but the protests also received opposition as well, with several white students even holding up signs, saying, "Racist nothing, you got beat", and claiming the incident was not racially motivated. The Tom Tieu assault depicted the social climate and demographics at UC Santa Barbara during the 1990s.

We interviewed Elizabeth Robinson, the former director of KCSB and an institutional pillar, someone who works within the university and works with students over the course of their career. Robinson noted how anti-Asian sentiment was present on campus, causing students to feel unsafe. Phrases such as "Al" would be shouted, meaning "Asian Invasion", and racist messages would be posted and scrawled on campus property. These instances of racial discrimination, accumulating over the years, served as moments of frustration for students of color and pushed cultural organizations and students to fight to feel at home and be a part of the university. Institutional pillars, such as Robinson and Khan-Marcus,

⁷ Vietnamese Fishermen's Association v. Knights of the ku klux klan. Southern Poverty Law Center. (n.d.). Retrieved May 24, 2022, from https://www.splcenter.org/seeking-justice/case-docket/vietnamese-fishermens-association-v-knights-ku-klux-klan

⁸ At the time, the term "microaggression" was not coined.

⁹ Chivy Sok and Suran Thrift, interview by Felix Dong, May 22, 2022, audio.

¹⁰ Adams, Jennifer and Joel Brand, "Rally to End Violence Spurs Angry Showing", *Daily Nexus*, May 25, 1990, pg. 1, 5.

¹¹ Elizabeth Robinson, interview by Christine Hoang, November 22, 2019, audio.

served as faculty who students could depend on to express their frustrations. Furthermore, institutional pillars are a great resource for understanding student activism, as they provide historical context and first-hand experiences working with student activists.

Students have been advocating for culturally specific spaces since the late 1980s, beginning with the Multicultural Center in 1987. In 1994, El Congreso conducted a hunger strike, demanding for ethnic studies as well as a Chicanx/Latinx Cultural Center, which they received through the El Centro building. 12 El Congreso and the success of their demands set an example for other minority groups on campus; in fact, their success inspired Asian American student leaders to push harder for an Asian Resource Center. Tu Huynh, a 1998 student protester, talked about how Asian American students envisioned a center where students would be able to have access to culturally specific resources, counseling, and support. 13 Huynh, along with other Asian American students, set up meetings with Yonie Harris and Michael Young to discuss the implementation of the building. Tu stated that although these meetings were hosted regularly, often the meetings were frustrating and not much was ever resolved. She described how "[i]t was all very hypothetical and I remember we walked away feeling frustrated each time. It even got to a point where we didn't want to meet with them anymore, even though whenever we met with them, they were always very nice and friendly". 14 In order to implement change and gain access to student resources, students have to work with administration, who are often opposed to using money and space for students and their demands. An anonymous UC Santa Barbara staff member offered a perspective about the administration's approach to student activism. They commented, "What often happens entirely is that the university waits for people to graduate. They know a four-year cycle or for a five-year cycle and count on people not knowing..." The two interviews were able to offer a critical perspective of the administration, stating how it is possible that the administration uses student temporality, the limited time students reside at the university, to their advantage.

1998

On March 4, 1998, the *Daily Nexus* published an article, associating missing dogs in IV to the Vietnamese and Hmong communities in Isla Vista. In the article, an Isla Vista foot patrol officer, Diane Halliburton, made a comment about the Vietnamese and Hmong population in Isla Vista being the reason for missing dogs, stating that "The problem disappeared after the Vietnam War when the state subsidized housing for Vietnamese and the Mongs in IV... You never wanted to look in a dumpster 'cause you would

¹² Conklin, CJ and Tim Molloy, "Resolution Reached in Campus Hunger Strike", *Daily Nexus*, May 6, 1994 pg. 1, 4.

¹³ Tu Huynh, interview by Felix Dong, Chet Iwanaga-Friedman, Christine Hoang, Christina Lao, Kashia Thao, November 20, 2019, audio.

¹⁴ Tu Huynh, interview by Felix Dong, Chet Iwanaga-Friedman, Christine Hoang, Christina Lao, Kashia Thao, November 20, 2019, audio.

commonly find heads and other discarded portions [of animals]."¹⁵ Asian American students and other students of color, some shocked and others infuriated, came together to protest outside of Davidson Library. The protests served as a pivotal point that allowed for students to call for more cultural and safe spaces for students of color and have their voices heard by the administration. Often, it is only when the administration is pressured to act and worried about their appearance that they are willing to listen to students and the demands they are asking for.

During this time, cultural spaces for students were small and unable to accommodate the growing population of students. Suran Thrift, a class of 1993 alumnus, discussed how the Multicultural Center served as an important place for students of color to gather and organize. In the former MCC building, Building 434, they were able to organize cultural events, write out demands, and host important discussions, one example being open forum discussions during the 1992 Rodney King riots¹⁶. The Multicultural Center served as an important organizing space for students of color; the community of first-generation students of color were incredibly tight-knit due to their united struggles.

In an interview, Blia Yang, a 1998 student protester, noted how the Education Opportunity Program and other cultural resource buildings were run-down and outdated. Yang stated, "Those two buildings [EOP] were some of the oldest temporary buildings and it certainly didn't feel like we were able to be in a space that that would meet the needs [of students] so I think that was an opportunity to say 'And what about X, Y, and Z [demands]?' and this is what we would like to have happen."¹⁷ The Multicultural Center and Education Opportunity Program, however, were limited in that there were no culturally specific spaces for students nor were there faculty and staff members available to support students for culturally specific problems and needs.

Perhaps a more pivotal point that followed after the March 1998 protests were the October 1998 protests against Proposition 209 and UC resolution SP-1. The passing of these measures in 1995, which banned the use of affirmative action by the University of California from the UC Regents Ward Connerly, sparked an uproar at universities nationwide. Earlier that year, in summer 1998, there was also a proposal by Ward Connerly for the end of minority programs and ethnic studies, which only fueled the fire for the protests¹⁸. Alongside various other universities, including Yale and John Hopkins, UC Santa

¹⁵ Nick Sobleski, "Number of Dogs In Class Declining This Year," Daily Nexus, March 4, 1998, pg. 1, 5.

¹⁶ Chivy Sok and Suran Thrift, interview by Felix Dong, May 22, 2022, audio.

¹⁷ Blia Yang, interview by Felix Dong, Christine Hoang, and Kashia Thao, November 12, 2019, audio.

¹⁸ Butterworth, Lisa, "Students Plan Walkout Encouraging Activism" *Daily Nexus*, October 20, 1998, pg. 1, 5.

Barbara was one of the five University of California campuses to protest the ban of affirmative action¹⁹. Unique to UC Santa Barbara, these protests served as an opportunity to demand action from university administration to establish cultural spaces and ensure ethnic studies programs. On October 22, 1998, Chancellor Yang and Yonie Harris, acknowledging the tense atmosphere and the frustrations of the students, sat down with a panel of minority students to hear their concerns.²⁰ Students from multiple minority organizations, such as Asian Student Union, Black Student Union, and Queer Student Union, sat down with Chancellor Yang and listed the nine demands they had to address the needs of the diverse population at the university. One of the demands proposed was an "on-campus resource center and student space for historically underrepresented students at UCSB... the resource centers must have a full-time director and funding to hire student staff".²¹ The demands served as an official way for students to be able to get the resources and cultural spaces they had been fighting for.

Notably, the 1998 protests against the Daily Nexus article and Proposition 209 serve as a reminder of one of the moments of solidarity between students of color. Although many of the leaders of these protests consisted of Asian Americans, it is important to see how they were able to build a coalition of students of all races through similarities in their fight for cultural resources. In "This Tree Needs Water" by Jeanelle Hope, Hope notes that the African American community and Asian American community in South Sacramento face similar struggles with law enforcement and state-sanctioned violence.²² By making the effort to understand one another and acting as both allies and accomplices in their fight for equality, these communities of color are able to advocate and help one another, similar to the students at the university frustrated by the inaction of the administration.

The approval of the demand by the chancellor led to the proposal of the Student Resource Building. On April 20, 1999, a year later after the 1998 protests, the chair of the Student Fee Advisory Committee, Raul Rojas, submitted a statement about the project, stating that "this building would serve as a home

¹⁹ Frost, J. (1998, October 28). *Faculty, Students Walk Out, Rally Protest of Affirmative Action Ban.* 10.28.98 - faculty, students walk out, rally. Retrieved May 24, 2022, from https://www.berkeley.edu/news/berkeleyan/1998/1028/209.html

²⁰ Webb, Kerri and Ted Andersen, "Protesters Storm Cheadle with Demands; Negotiations Made" *Daily Nexus*, October 23, 1998, pg. 1, 5.

²¹ Webb, Kerri and Ted Andersen, "Protesters Storm Cheadle with Demands; Negotiations Made" *Daily Nexus*, October 23, 1998, pg. 1, 5.

²² Hope, Jeanelle K. "This Tree Needs Water!: A Case Study on the Radical Potential of Afro-Asian Solidarity in the Era of Black Lives Matter." *Amerasia Journal*, July 2019, 1–16. https://doi.org/10.1080/00447471.2019.1684807.

base for not only these student groups, but to a myriad of interests and groups".²³ However, the Student Resource Building measure did not gather enough support, gathering 51.1% of the votes while needing 52.8%. On April 9, 2001, the second time the Student Resource Building was proposed, the measure passed but only by a small margin of nine votes.²⁴ This small margin was in part due to the lower voting turnout of 21.7% compared to the five-year average of 28.5%. Because the voting turnout was lower than the average, the measure could only pass if it received a ¾ majority vote²⁵.

Zaveeni Khan-Marcus, the director of the Multicultural Center, highlighted that the administration prioritizes allocating funds for their own needs over students, causing interactions between students and administration to be strained. She notes, "The administration wanted their own offices so when you go there, you can see only administrative offices. If the university wants a program like DSP or the OISS, they have to pay for their buildings. Why should the students pay for their building? Why should they pay for essential services? Why?" The interview with Zaveeni specifically highlights power dynamics within the university. Although the students are finally able to corner the administration and demand what they need, the administration works these proposals in their favor by incorporating their own needs for renovated buildings and putting the costs on the backs of students.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION (2007)

The Student Resource Building was finished with construction in May 2007. Elizabeth Robinson, however, critiques the institution, saying "What the students were asking for and what ended up being given to them in the SRB was very different. What they ended up doing was floating a bond measure to students to build something for them that ended up mostly... [as] other Student Affairs offices. Some of them serve students very directly, but it's not a student space". The cultural resource center, although included in the building, did not live up to the expectations and vision proposed by Asian American activists in the 1990s. Huynh stated, "The whole idea was we didn't just want a space but a space that is filled with activities, right? [When] you go into the Counseling Center, [it] doesn't necessarily mean that there will be someone who understands what some of the issues are, you know, so the idea was that we wanted a functional space with actual real resources for students to use." 27

²³ Raul L. Rojas, "Pro/Con Statements: Student Resource Building Initiative" *Daily Nexus*, April 20, 1999, pg. 4

²⁴ Needing ¾ of the votes due to low turnout, the narrow margins for these measures could have been due to the way the bill was proposed by administration, saying that departments were added and removed accordingly to student needs.

²⁵ Healy, Sarah, "Sports Fees Wash Out, SRB Passes by 9 Votes" *Daily Nexus*, April 27, 2001, pg. 1, 3, 8.

²⁶ Elizabeth Robinson, interview by Christine Hoang, November 22, 2019, audio.

²⁷ Tu Huynh, interview

Student activism and the fight for cultural student spaces is still ongoing today. In spring 2019, the Pan Asian Network (PAN), a student organization at UCSB, came together to demand for more Asian and Asian American representation of students and faculty in academic programs, campus resources, and campus programs. Prior to PAN's demands, the Black Student Union (BSU) at UC Santa Barbara successfully advocated in 2013 and 2018 for the "hiring of an admissions counselor for diversity initiatives, two psychologists, and four endowed Chairs; all of which were created to enhance initiatives to recruit Black students to UCSB" and for the Office of Black Student Development²⁸. More recently, El Congreso listed a series of demands, some of the demands calling for more accommodations and funding to the El Centro building, an increase in Latine student initiatives and retention programs, while also calling for an end to the Munger Hall dormitory plan²⁹. Even today, students continue to take into account and listen to the needs of their community, persisting in their efforts to reach an agreement with the administration and put their ideas into action. Administration and students are constantly in struggle, fighting between status quo and institutional change.

As described in *The People's Guide to Los Angeles*, "All landscapes reflect the contemporary period, offering information about the practices and everyday life of the people currently using and inhabiting a place. Yet landscapes also provide evidence about past generations, economic and political regimes, and ecologies. History is literally embedded in the landscape." The Student Resource Building was built only after many years of students demanding and working with administration to have their voices heard. It serves as a prime example of the university landscape. Through archival documents as well as conducting interviews, we can learn more about the university's history, the student activism behind it, and their results from the fight.

²⁸ 2013 BSU demands. Office of Black Student Development. (2022). Retrieved May 24, 2022, from https://obsd.ext-prod.sa.ucsb.edu/2013-bsu-demands

²⁹ El Congreso. (2022, April 28). *El Congreso Demands: HSI, El Centro, CLG, CRCs, Housing*. Google Drive. Retrieved May 24, 2022, from https://drive.google.com/file/d/1EwiJ_X35Qh4xRxXtFcJ01rdZZ-AIDXHm/view?usp=drivesdk

³⁰ Pulido, Laura, Laura R. Barraclough, and Wendy Cheng. "Introduction" In *A People's Guide to Los Angeles*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012.

Notes

- 1. Blia Yang, interview by Felix Dong, Christine Hoang, and Kashia Thao, November 12, 2019, audio.
- 2. Monisha Das Gupta (2019) "KNOw History/KNOw Self": Khmer Youth Organizing for Justice in Long Beach, Amerasia Journal, 45:2, 137-156, DOI: 10.1080/00447471.2019.1671755
- 3. Elizabeth Hanna Rubio (2019) "We Need to Redefine What We Mean by Winning": NAKASEC's Immigrant Justice Activism and Thinking Citizenship Otherwise, Amerasia Journal, 45:2, 157-172, DOI: 10.1080/00447471.2019.1682921
- 4. Elizabeth Robinson, interview by Christine Hoang, November 22, 2019, audio.
- 5. Tu Huynh, interview by Felix Dong, Chet Iwanaga-Friedman, Christine Hoang, Christina Lao, Kashia Thao, November 20, 2019, audio.
- 6. Yonie Harris and Michael Young, interview by Felix Dong and Kashia Thao, November 12, 2019, audio.
- 7. Zaveeni Khan-Marcus, interview by Felix Dong, Vonnie Feng, Chet Iwanaga-Friedman, Christina Lao, November 15, 2019, audio.
- 8. Nick Sobleski, "Number of Dogs In Class Declining This Year," *Daily Nexus*, March 4, 1998, pg. 1, 5.
- 9. Tennille Tracy, "Comment Leads to Protesting," Daily Nexus, March 6, 1998, pg. 1, 5.
- 10. Adams, Jennifer and Joel Brand, "Rally to End Violence Spurs Angry Showing", *Daily Nexus*, May 25, 1990, pg. 1, 5.
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- 15. Hope, Jeanelle K. "This Tree Needs Water!: A Case Study on the Radical Potential of Afro-Asian Solidarity in the Era of Black Lives Matter." *Amerasia Journal*, July 2019, 1–16. https://doi.org/10.1080/00447471.2019.1684807.
- 16. Raul L. Rojas, "Pro/Con Statements: Student Resource Building Initiative" *Daily Nexus*, April 20, 1999, pg. 4