

## Uprooted but Unbroken: Ethnic Studies Programs in California Prisons

*Vivian Kuang*

### **Abstract**

Asian Americans compose a relatively small but growing portion of the prison population both nationwide and in California, with the number of AAPIs incarcerated in the US quadrupling from 2000 to 2010. Incarcerated Asian Americans face unique challenges, often having arrived to the US as refugees fleeing war and genocide and struggling with intergenerational trauma, familial isolation and stigma, and a lack of culturally informed programs in prison. Thus, this research project focuses on ethnic studies programs in California prisons, with a specific focus on Asian American studies programs. Constructed through interviews with participants and facilitators of these programs, this project finds that ethnic studies programs have transformative effects on incarcerated people's sense of self, personal healing, sense of community, and capacity as agents of change for themselves and others during and after incarceration.

## **Introduction**

About 239,000 people are currently incarcerated in California prisons, jails, immigration detention, and juvenile facilities.<sup>1</sup> While these numbers have declined over the past decade due to a variety of reforms, there are still more incarcerated individuals in California than some entire countries, and people of color continue to be overrepresented in prisons and jails. More specifically, Asian Americans are a relatively small but growing ethnic group within prisons. From 2010 to 2019, the number of Asian men incarcerated in California prisons increased by 7.4%, despite decreases for every other recorded ethnic group.<sup>2</sup> Overall, the number of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders (APIs) incarcerated in the U.S. increased 250% from 1990–2000; from 2000–2010, their incarceration rate quadrupled.<sup>3</sup>

One effort to address the needs of incarcerated people of color in California is the growing number of ethnic studies programs in prison. For example, since 2013, incarcerated people at San Quentin State Prison, with support from Oakland-based nonprofit Asian Prisoner Support Committee, have facilitated an Asian American ethnic studies program known as ROOTS (Restoring Our Original True Selves).<sup>4</sup> However, there is very little existing research on these ethnic studies programs and their effect on incarcerated people, particularly Asian Americans. Thus, this research asks: what is the landscape of ethnic studies programs in prisons in California, and what impacts do they have on their participants? It finds that these programs have transformative effects on participants by helping them develop a strong sense of self and

---

<sup>1</sup> “California profile,” Prison Policy Center, <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/profiles/CA.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Scott Graves, “Racial Disparities in California’s State Prisons Remain Large Despite Justice System Reforms,” California Budget & Policy Center, June 2021, <https://calbudgetcenter.org/app/uploads/2021/06/R-FP-Prison-Racial-Disparities.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Raymond Magsaysay, “Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders and the Prison Industrial Complex.” *Michigan Journal of Race and Law* 26, no. 443 (February 2021): 453-454, <https://repository.law.umich.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1377&context=mjrl>.

<sup>4</sup> Roger Chung, interview by Vivian Kuang, July 13, 2022.

community, as well as helping them develop skills to both advocate for their freedom and assert their self-determination after incarceration.

This research was conducted as part of the 2022 Cal in Sacramento Fellowship at the Institute for Governmental Studies at UC Berkeley. The data for this research was collected from interviews with seven participants and facilitators of ethnic studies programs, conducted in June and July 2022. After reaching out to my first several interviewees, I recruited more participants through the snowball method, asking each interviewee for the contact information of others that would be interested. Each interview lasted between 60–90 minutes over Zoom and was transcribed afterward. Special thanks to Isa Borgenson for connecting me with interviewees and helping me gain a better conceptual foundation for this project, as well as everyone who shared their insights and story in an interview: Chanthon Bun, Roger Chung, Arnie Fischman, Joe Hancock, Patricia Hilden, Nate Tan, and Thanh Tran.

## **Overview of ethnic studies programs in California prisons**

### *a. What is ethnic studies?*

As defined by the UC Berkeley Ethnic Studies Department, ethnic studies is “the critical and interdisciplinary study of race, ethnicity, and indigeneity with a focus on the experiences and perspectives of people of color within and beyond the United States.”<sup>5</sup> However, Nate Tan, co-Director of Asian Prisoner Support Committee, ROOTS instructor, and ethnic studies faculty at San Francisco State University, offered an additional definition: “Ethnic studies is a political, insurgent, incomplete project. Incomplete in that it’s an ongoing study and ongoing field, an ongoing participation in an unjust world. So our role in ethnic studies and ethnic studies fields is

---

<sup>5</sup> “The Department of Ethnic Studies UC Berkeley.” *Department of Ethnic Studies*, <https://ethnicstudies.berkeley.edu/>.

to undo injustice, and ultimately imagine a freer and more liberated world.” This emphasis on liberation and justice is particularly crucial in prisons, which are, in many ways, antithetical to freedom. The programs discussed in this paper have a particular focus on empowering participants to engage in liberation work for themselves and others, in a way that an ethnic studies program outside of a setting of incarceration may not. Furthermore, it emphasizes that ethnic studies is not just about ethnicity and race; these programs also discuss incarceration, gender and sexuality, social movements and more.

*b. Restoring Our Original True Selves (ROOTS)*

This research focuses particularly on ROOTS, which is the largest-scale ethnic studies program in a California prison to date. ROOTS was launched in 2013 at San Quentin State Prison by incarcerated participants, with support from Asian Prisoner Support Committee (APSC).<sup>6</sup> APSC supports incarcerated Asian Americans through ROOTS, deportation defense campaigns, and reentry support. However, the introduction of ethnic studies at San Quentin was hard-fought and contentious. In 2002, Eddy Zheng, Viet Mike Ngo, and Rico Riemedio, three men incarcerated at San Quentin, began advocating for an ethnic studies program at the prison in order to explore their cultural heritage. In response, they were placed in solitary confinement—Zheng for the longest at 11 months. APSC was initially founded by community members on the outside to support Zheng, Ngo, and Riemedio, who became known as the San Quentin Three.<sup>7</sup>

Ultimately, Tan explained that ROOTS came to fruition in 2013 as part of a push for rehabilitation in California prisons, as well as increased recognition of the benefits of ethnic studies. However, Roger Chung, an ethnic studies faculty member at Laney College in Oakland and lead outside instructor for ROOTS since 2014, highlighted the role that racial stereotypes

---

<sup>6</sup> Chung, interview.

<sup>7</sup> Hua Hsu, “An Education While Incarcerated,” *The New Yorker*, December 13, 2021, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2021/12/20/an-education-while-incarcerated>.

about Asian Americans played in ROOTS' approval by prison administration. "It's important to also understand that Black people have been fighting for programs to learn more about their history and to do Black studies. And I don't think it's random that an Asian American group is able to do it in a way that is perceived as not as threatening as a Black political group," Chung said. "In the same way the model minority stereotype has impacted the lives of incarcerated people, these are the types of stereotypes that may allow for programming to be perceived as less threatening when it comes to Asian Americans than, for example, Black or Latinx communities."

Over time, ROOTS evolved from a community-based workshop program into an ethnic studies curriculum. To date, ROOTS has had about 250 participants, with about 30–35 people per year; however, most recently, the program was interrupted by the onset of COVID-19 lockdowns in 2020 and has not restarted as of 2023.<sup>8</sup>

Prior to the pandemic, the curriculum and operations of ROOTS was run by a team of "inside" incarcerated facilitators, led by the ROOTS chairperson, and supported by APSC and outside facilitators. The chairperson was responsible for leading curriculum development and choosing and training inside facilitators. ROOTS operated in one-year cycles broken into three modules. One focused on ethnic studies and comparative history, including "culture days" in which groups of participants, separated based on their ethnicity, presented to the program on their culture and traditions. This module also included lessons on a timeline of major events and legislation affecting Asian American immigration to the U.S., the history of U.S. imperialism and its connection to incarceration, and the relationship between Black history and Asian American identity. A second module focused on intergenerational trauma. One major exercise used a series of chairs, each with a bag of rocks, to simulate the accumulation of untreated

---

<sup>8</sup> Thanh Tran, interview by Vivian Kuang, June 10, 2023.

trauma across generations. Participants progressed through each chair, putting rocks into the next bag, until they reached the final chair with the heaviest bag, representing the current generation. The final module centered on meeting a healing goal through completing a project using mediums such as art, a podcast, or writing.

Several aspects of ROOTS' curriculum make it unique. First, it is community-based and driven from the inside. "I think what's really powerful about how the classes are run ... [is] the brain power and the muscle and the sweat equity of the incarcerated people to make sure that this curriculum exists—that a good job is done," said Thanh Tran, a formerly incarcerated ROOTS participant starting in 2017 and ROOTS chairman for the most recent cycle. Furthermore, ROOTS approaches education from a non-traditional perspective, using unique learning methods to discuss histories that are seldom covered in schools. "It takes standard conventions of education ... and [teaches] them in a way that resonates with us," Tran said. Chanthon Bun, another formerly incarcerated ROOTS participant starting in 2015 and former inside facilitator, concurred with Tran: "The number one thing you hear is, 'I was never taught this in school.'"

*c. Related programs*

In addition to ROOTS, I interviewed people involved in four similar programs relating to ethnic studies, race, and cultural history.

Patricia Hilden is a Professor Emerita of Native American and Comparative Ethnic Studies at UC Berkeley and has been involved with Indigenous rights and prison abolition in many capacities, including her own scholarship, prison education programs, and the foundation of Underground Scholars, a program that supports formerly incarcerated students at UC Berkeley. In the summer of 2022, she taught a course on Native American history, literature, and politics at San Quentin through its Mount Tamalpais College program. In the course, students

engaged with foundational Native American texts and media such as *Ceremony* by Leslie Marmon Silko, *There, There* by Tommy Orange, *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* by Sherman Alexie, and the film *Smoke Signals*. Students submitted one short response paper a week for a total of four short response papers. Through the course material, Hilden covered topics such as Native American history and the effects of the imposition of English on Native Americans.

In the 1960s, Arnie Fischman was involved with social movements such as draft resistance and the Cornell University chapter of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), a national student activist organization. While incarcerated at Terminal Island Federal Correctional Institution in Los Angeles from 2017 to 2020, they drew on these experiences to teach classes about the 1960s and the Freedom Movement (also known as the Civil Rights Movement). Due to prison bureaucracy, it was difficult for Fischman to create a class from scratch, so they structured their classes around previously prison-approved documentaries and materials, supplemented by mini-lectures, discussion questions, and protest songs of the 1960s.

San Francisco State University is currently piloting an ethnic studies certificate program at California's youth prisons, known as the Division of Juvenile Justice, or DJJ. Students earn the certificate by completing four ethnic studies classes; the credits also fulfill requirements in the California State University system, if students choose to pursue a college degree in the future.<sup>9</sup> In addition to his work with APSC and ROOTS, Nate Tan teaches a Critical Thinking and Ethnic Studies class for the DJJ certificate program. His class is composed of about 25 students, ages 18 to 25. In this class, Tan discusses issues like the prison industrial complex, white supremacy,

---

<sup>9</sup> Emma Hall, "A change in narrative": Ethnic studies program helps incarcerated youth navigate identity," CalMatters, February 11, 2022, <https://calmatters.org/education/higher-education/college-beat-higher-education/2022/02/ethnic-studies-youth-prison-san-francisco-state/>.

residential segregation, and the War on Drugs. The DJJ pilot functions like a traditional college course, with a syllabus, lectures, assignments, and a final grade. Ethnic studies is particularly relevant for incarcerated youth, as youth of color are disproportionately represented in the juvenile justice system; as of June 2020, 88.3% of youth in DJJ custody were Black or Latinx.<sup>10</sup>

Finally, in addition to ROOTS, APSC helps facilitate Lit Club, a correspondence-based ethnic studies program for incarcerated people at the California Institution for Women and Central California Women's Facility. In Lit Club, participants read books by authors such as Maya Angelou and Audre Lorde and discuss the readings with a partner via mail. Similar to ROOTS, Lit Club is driven by inside facilitators with support from APSC.

### **“Living a life of healing”: Putting personal history in context**

Those involved with these programs described participants' strong desire to learn more about their history and culture. “That’s one of the things I came to realize about why younger Black guys in prison were very open and accepting of me teaching this class,” Fischman said, explaining that they were unsure if they would be overstepping by teaching about the social movements of the 1960s as a white person. “I actually had something to offer to their own historical contextualization.” Hilden added that fields such as ethnic studies hold a particular appeal because it provides an opportunity for students to see themselves in history, especially for individuals whose history is often neglected in traditional academia. “We all learn better, and more actively, when we see ourselves in whatever we're doing,” Hilden said.

Thus, one of the most profound effects of ROOTS was helping participants put their personal history in a broader social and historical context. By learning about intergenerational

---

<sup>10</sup> Laura Ridolfi, Renée Menart, and Israel Villa, “CALIFORNIA YOUTH FACE HEIGHTENED RACIAL AND ETHNIC DISPARITIES IN DIVISION OF JUVENILE JUSTICE,” W. Haywood Burns Institute, Center on Juvenile and Criminal Justice, and California Alliance of Youth and Community Justice, August 2020, <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED610669.pdf>.

trauma, the history of their country of origin, and how racial inequality influenced their path to incarceration, students were able to better understand themselves. “Professor Roger [Chung] always asked in our first class, ‘How did we get here? How did you get here?’” Bun said. He explained that after learning more about the history of Cambodia and Cambodian refugees, he was able to more deeply understand his and his family’s experiences.

Tran, who is Vietnamese and Black, described a similar experience. Tran was put into foster care when he was 18 months old, as his mother struggled with substance abuse after coming to the U.S. from Vietnam. “Growing up, I never understood why my mom would pick drugs over her family,” he said. However, through ROOTS, he learned about how his mother was a child of war, born from an American soldier father and Vietnamese mother, who suffered from trauma as an abandoned mixed child. This allowed him to better understand the historical events that had shaped his and his mother’s lives and begin healing. “Having that insight, it allowed me to heal and it allowed me to forgive my mom. Even though she’s still on drugs to this day, I still am able to love her in a way I wasn’t able to before ... It was pivotal to my transformation and my growth as a person who was living a life of hurt, to now living a life of healing,” Tran said.

Non-Asian participants were also able to draw parallels between the program’s material and their own experience. Joe Hancock, a formerly incarcerated ROOTS participant since 2016 and former inside facilitator, is Black, but connected the experiences of Asian immigrants to his own experience relocating from San Francisco to Sacramento when he was 14. “It was a migration of my identity being upset too. I yearned to be in the Bay,” he explained. “The migration experience as a result of war, the relocation experience of coming to a new country—meeting new people, feeling like a foreigner, not feeling accepted, and running into conflict—I was able to connect that to my experience.” While these experiences were not

identical, learning about the ways in which migration affected his Asian American classmates helped Hancock understand how his own dislocation to a new community affected him in a similar way.

Developing a better understanding of one's sense of self helped many of the participants cultivate self-love. "Self-hatred is a huge thing, especially in the AAPI community, and especially in the incarcerated community," Chung said. By learning about their history and the ways in which institutions had shaped or failed them, participants overcame their feelings of shame and embraced themselves again. "One major, major, major skill that we want people to have is to love themselves again," Chung explained. "We're hearing people come out saying, 'I love my history. I'm not ashamed of that anymore. I love my history. I love my community. I love myself.'"

### **"The ultimate goal for everyone ... is to be free": Community in ethnic studies**

#### *a. Creating community in prison*

Through ROOTS, participants gained a community that supported them during their time in prison. In part, Tan explains that this was a product of ethnic studies' emphasis on solidarity. "In ethnic studies work, seeing how our struggles are intimately tied with one another creates community in that people feel like they're not alone in this injustice," Tan explained. "It's common to feel like, 'How can all this happen to me? Why is this only happening to me?' But when people feel like, 'Why is this happening to *us*? How can *we* change this?' I think that's something powerful." Learning about their personal history not only helped people conceptualize the events of their life, but also showed them those experiences were shared by others.

This sense of community was amplified by participants' shared experience of incarceration. "I never really was a person that identified with a community, so to speak," Hancock said. "My approach to ROOTS was different. I shifted my thinking, and I remember one of the participants mentioning something about, 'Our community's here, right?' ... I never looked at having a community while I was incarcerated and being able to consider people to be family or friends, so it was just eye-opening." Those involved in ROOTS were tied together not just by race or a program, but by a shared struggle for freedom. "There's something about loving each other—not like romantically loving—but like loving each other so much that you want to see each other free," Tan said. "There's a camaraderie. There's a common struggle, that some of them didn't realize until ROOTS, ... that the ultimate goal for everyone is the same, which is to be free."

*b. Decision making and conflict resolution*

However, this community was not sustained purely on shared experience; it relied on a culture of collective decision making and a commitment to creating a safe space. For example, when Tran was ROOTS chairman, he described the responsibility he felt to honor the program's legacy. Accordingly, when planning the curriculum, he led a democratic discussion with the entire facilitation team to review and refine the curriculum. One area of improvement was to create protocols and train facilitators to make ROOTS a safe space for its participants when sharing traumatic experiences. For instance, they created protocols to hold space for those having an emotional moment, rather than brushing them aside. "When you just drop someone off a cliff like that, when they're experiencing a really vulnerable moment, it can close them off and sometimes you can even harm them further," Tran said. They also trained facilitators to not use physical touch as an automatic response to comfort someone, as many participants in ROOTS

have experienced sexual trauma. By proactively working to make participants feel supported, the inside facilitators created a community with a culture of trust.

As with any community, these groups were not always free of conflict. Indeed, participants described prison as a place that often brought out aggression in people as a survival mechanism. Furthermore, these programs involved discussions of issues like race, trauma, and discrimination that at times grew contentious.

Despite these conflicts, the participants' shared commitment to the programs, as well as the programs' curriculum, helped them resolve conflicts. For instance, after gaining a better understanding of trauma, ROOTS participants were able to account for the fact that their response in a conflict may have been driven by trauma. "Instead of the old ways ... we come together, we talk about it ... we always go back to the trauma piece," Bun said. Concepts of solidarity also helped people navigate conflict. "An important question I ask at the start of classes is, 'When I get mine, does that mean I stop helping you get yours?'" Tan explained. "That's a question of, 'Once my rights are met, is that where the struggle ends?' And a lot of my students are like, 'No, that's not where the struggle ends.' ... Viewing it from that framework has really prevented people from stepping on each other's toes." Similarly, when Fischman's class was in conflict over a white student who argued that his level of oppression as someone in prison was equivalent to the oppression of Black Americans, Fischman used it as an opportunity for discussion. Using "I Wish I Knew How It Would Feel to Be Free" by Nina Simone, with the lyrics "I wish you could know what it means to be me / Then you'd see and agree / That every man should be free," they led a discussion about solidarity and recognizing others without unnecessary comparison.

One contentious issue within ROOTS modeling the program's ethos of conflict resolution was how gender and sexuality were discussed. Participants described prison as an extremely hyper masculine place, which meant it was not conducive to learning about the patriarchy and queer theory. "To break that [hypermasculinity] down, even to get an understanding, it's very hard," Bun said. Thus, when outside facilitators presented on issues like male privilege, LGBTQ+ rights, and using appropriate pronouns, some participants did not take the content seriously or said that they would not attend, hurting the facilitators and undermining a crucial component of a well-rounded ethnic studies education.

To address this harm, the next week's curriculum was replaced by a restorative justice circle. This process created a safe space for facilitators and participants to express their perspective about how they had been hurt, as well as to ask questions without judgment. In response to harm, ROOTS actively made space to discuss and heal, rather than sweeping it under the rug or responding punitively. In future cycles, ROOTS reframed gender and sexuality in the context of the prison. For example, facilitators previously began the workshop by having everyone share their pronouns without first explaining the relevance of pronouns, but in later workshops, Chung connected queer people's and incarcerated people's shared struggle for bodily autonomy. He began to ask students if they felt as though they had control over their own bodies and who they shared it with, both romantically or otherwise. "I think that's when we began understanding that sexuality isn't necessarily about sexual orientation," he said. "It's about the politics of who gets to share their body with whom and how state apparatuses either allow for it or repress it. And so I think when we approach it in that way, folks are like, 'Okay, yeah, then this does have something to do with me.'" While these discussions were challenging for the ROOTS community, the culture of communication and solidarity of the program helped

participants emerge stronger. This also highlights the importance of an intersectional approach to an ethnic studies curriculum, as the shared struggle for freedom spans beyond different races to include marginalized identities of all kinds, including gender and sexuality.

*c. Stigma and healing in the Asian American community*

The ROOTS community was particularly important for incarcerated Asian Americans who are not in close contact or on good terms with their families. Interviewees explained that in the Asian American community, there is often reluctance to speak about potentially shameful experiences, such as incarceration. Thus, their incarceration is often a point of tension, straining family relationships that are lifelines during incarceration.

As a result, a common experience among incarcerated Asian Americans is that their families are unable to fully acknowledge them in prison. For instance, interviewees explained that many families will say that their child is “at school” or “working in another state” when uncomfortable questions arise at family or community gatherings. Another consequence of this stigma is physical ostracization, particularly for those in more remotely located prisons. “One of the actual, very physical punishments around stigma is that your family might not come visit you,” Chung said. “So I think [for] a lot of the incarcerated Asian people that got these lifetime sentences ... if their families weren't coming, no one was.”

Thus, ROOTS was an avenue for people less connected to their families to maintain connections with others of a similar cultural background. “Being able to be in community with each other ... is a very significant way for people to address the trauma of the physical and social distancing of their communities and their families,” Chung said. ROOTS also normalized discussions about the struggles faced by incarcerated Asian Americans. For instance, Bun explained that a friend’s father who felt embarrassment speaking about his son’s incarceration

became more accepting of it after meeting Bun's family, who is open about Bun's time in prison. "I explained to them, 'Why hide it? That's the truth,'" he said. "The more you hide it, the more you suffer by yourself. And that gave him [the friend's father] a lot of strength to start saying, 'My son was in prison since he was 14. He has a second chance now, and it's beautiful.'"

Ultimately, ROOTS helped families begin the process of acknowledgement and healing. "What ROOTS and what APSC has started has empowered folks to come to terms with, 'You know what? We did have problems, my kids did have problems,'" Bun said. "Once we start recognizing and being accountable for our community, that's when healing starts."

### **"I want to take you into my world": Building racial solidarity**

Prison was described by interviewees as an extremely racialized place, with people strongly identifying with their racial group as a means of protection. "Prison is an intense racial container," Fischman said. "Intensely self-segregated—by television rooms, by where you sit in the chow hall, where you can be on yard." In addition to divisions between broad racial categories, Tran explained, "There's already segregation between Blacks, Mexicans, Asians; then with the Asians, there's this whole other level of segregation internally."

Despite this, these ethnic studies programs worked to build racial solidarity. While most ROOTS participants are Asian American, all are welcome. Fischman's students also spanned races, classes, and backgrounds. "There's no interaction and communication and discussion among people with all those kinds of containers in prison," Fischman said. "But there are people who are hungry for that. And this was one of the few spaces where that was happening."

ROOTS discussed the extensive history of organizing between Asian Americans and other races, such as the contributions of Filipino farmworkers to the farmworker movement

organizing alongside Cesar Chavez and Dolores Huerta.<sup>11</sup> Another key part of the curriculum was understanding how all participants, regardless of race, were embedded in an anti-Black prison system, as well as discussing the nuanced history of Black-Asian activism alongside anti-Blackness in the Asian American community. Overall, these classes built a strong awareness of the ways in which different races were connected. “We have curriculum that really deepens a person's understanding of themselves in relationship to Blackness, themselves in relationship to Latinx people,” Chung said.

Ultimately, this began to break down racial barriers. “The prison’s saying, ‘You shouldn’t be building communities with LGBTQ+ people, you should stay in your racial category, you shouldn’t be on the yard with Black people or white people,’ and we want to challenge that,” Chung said.

“Even though there’ll still be cliques ... there was a lot of love and bridges built between races,” Tran added. “That was so healthy, to be able to not only build a bridge, but be able to be like, ‘I want to take you into my world. I want to take you into my world and what it means to be Vietnamese, or Cambodian, or Tongan, or Samoan.’ I think that was beautiful.”

This solidarity, Fischman hopes, will lead to further progress. “This separation—these barriers between races and ethnicities—in fact empower no one but the cops, empower no one but the guards, and prevent real empowerment among people in prisons,” Fischman said. “At the end of the day, we share the same struggle, on a different detour,” Hancock added.

---

<sup>11</sup> Dennis Arguelles. “Remembering the Manongs and Story of the Filipino Farm Worker Movement,” National Parks Conservation Association, May 25, 2017, <https://www.npsca.org/articles/1555-remembering-the-manongs-and-story-of-the-filipino-farm-worker-movement>.

**“We know how it is to be underserved”: People as agents of change**

Another key component identified by interviewees was these programs’ ability to empower participants as agents of change. “What I want my students to take away is, ‘How do you recognize an injustice, and what can you do against this injustice?’” Tan said. To build this political consciousness, ROOTS studied various aspects of institutional economic and racial inequality, as well as social movements. Similarly, Fischman’s class examined the successes and failures of the 1960s and what lessons it held for modern movements.

ROOTS participants were able to put these lessons into action while they were incarcerated. For instance, their podcasts, art, and writing are often used in APSC’s advocacy work. When APSC is asked to present its work to other advocacy and constituency organizations, the organization uplifts the work of ROOTS participants in order to educate others about the experiences of incarcerated Asian Americans. Furthermore, when APSC runs public campaigns to push the California Governor to pardon a community member to prevent their deportation after incarceration, art and other materials produced by ROOTS participants are essential parts of the campaign.

Often, participants continue to be involved with organizing, policy, and volunteering work after their release. “A lot of us that come home know that there's more work to be done,” Bun explained. “We jump right in and become of service because we know how it is to be underserved, to be overseen and overlooked.” For instance, Bun interned with APSC after he was released in 2020, and is currently working for Asian Law Caucus on criminal legal reform and immigration issues. “Every part of my work is because of what I learned from ROOTS and my strong sense of, ‘I need to help folks like me,’” Bun said. Tran was the 2021 Inside Fellow for the Ella Baker Center for Human Rights (EBC), and since his release in May 2022, he

continues to work with EBC on its campaigns for decarceration and racial justice. Hancock is involved with volunteer and food distribution work, which he in part attributes to ROOTS' influence. Fischman is a writer, storyteller, advocate, and co-organizer for the End of Isolation Tour, a theatrical production raising consciousness around solitary confinement. "The stories I have to tell, especially about prison, have importance to people outside," they said. "So being a storyteller about these experiences I had in prison, especially my teaching experiences, has something to offer to people in movements ... It's what the rest of my life is devoted to."

Through this advocacy work, formerly incarcerated people affect long-term change in their communities. They also make crucial contributions to ethnic studies, whether it be the DJJ students who tell Tan that they want to pursue ethnic studies, those who become involved with organizing and advocacy, or simply those who work towards achieving their own freedom from prison. "When I think of ethnic studies, I don't think about researchers ... even though they're important," Tan said. "But they wouldn't be anything if they didn't have anything to research. And that's the true nature of ethnic studies, right? The people who do ethnic studies are doing the work that people are going to benefit from, marginalized people ... even if it's working on their own freedom [from prison]." Eventually, the power of these programs goes full circle, as people use their agency to shape the history they studied.

### **"People are coming home": Freedom and life after incarceration**

#### *a. ROOTS and the parole process*

Many ROOTS participants were sentenced to indeterminate sentences (i.e., 25 years to life), or committed their crime at a young age, making them eligible for early parole hearings due to new state laws. In these cases, their path to freedom is mainly through parole. Several months

prior to an individual's Minimum Eligible Parole Date, they will undergo a parole suitability hearing, in which commissioners of the California Board of Parole Hearings (also known as BPH or Board) decide whether they should be released. In the two- to three-hour hearing, a central component of a parole applicant's goal is to tell their story, starting from their life background leading up to the crime, how and why the crime occurred, their rehabilitation process in prison, and their post-incarceration plans. If a person is deemed by the Board to lack awareness and remorse about their crime, also known as "insight," they are denied parole and do not become eligible again for 3–15 years.<sup>12</sup>

In 2021, only 16% of scheduled parole hearings resulted in a parole grant.<sup>13</sup> Despite acknowledgement by the California Supreme Court that "there is no special formula" to gauge insight and remorse, in the last decade, insight has become the most common justification for parole denials.<sup>14</sup> BPH has faced criticism for its narrow and subjective determination of insight. For instance, one study revealed that from the perspective of several California BPH commissioners, an applicant suggesting that institutional factors played some role in their offense, rather than purely individual deficits was viewed as making excuses and exhibiting inadequate insight.<sup>15</sup>

Despite these odds, ROOTS' chief objective for its participants is obtaining freedom. "It'd be great if a person understood these major concepts in ethnic studies," Chung said. "[But] for us, the most important thing is a person's freedom." Through ROOTS, participants learned to

---

<sup>12</sup> "OVERVIEW OF CALIFORNIA PAROLE CONSIDERATION PROCESS & HOW TO PREPARE FOR IT," Uncommon Law, Spring 2022, <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5b5f9d4be7494070b92d76f3/t/6254806c805f576301f58de5/1649705069360/22.04.06+Parole+Process+and+Preparation+Overview+Guide.pdf>.

<sup>13</sup> "2021 Report of Significant Events," California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation, 2022, <https://www.cdcr.ca.gov/bph/wp-content/uploads/sites/161/2022/03/2021-Significant-Events.pdf>.

<sup>14</sup> Kathryn M. Young and Hannah Chimowitz, "How parole boards judge remorse: Relational legal consciousness and the reproduction of carceral logic," *Law and Society Review* 56 no. 2 (May 19, 2022): 239, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/lasr.12601>.

<sup>15</sup> Young and Chimowitz, "How parole boards judge remorse," 247.

leverage ethnic studies to process and heal from their trauma, and ultimately communicate their story to the Board in an effective way. “We don’t like playing prison games,” Chung said. “But [we will] if this is what it takes to get you home ... We wanted to focus on the individual being able to acquire a form of literacy and self advocacy to help them get their freedom.”

Bun explained that ROOTS filled an important niche for incarcerated Asian Americans in preparing for parole hearings. While a variety of prison programs can improve someone’s ability to communicate with the Board, they are not tailored to the trauma of incarcerated Asian Americans who often came to the U.S. as refugees fleeing war and genocide. The Board itself is often unaware of this history, putting a further burden on Asian Americans to have the proficiency to explain their generational circumstances. “There is no class for a Southeast Asian—especially a Cambodian like myself—that I've ever heard of that could cover the issues that we have from genocide and war,” Bun said. “There's no other class other than ROOTS that could help me explain that, even help heal from it, and sit in front of 3 to 4 people to get them to understand the life I was born into.” After being transferred to San Quentin in 2015, Bun learned that changes in the law made him eligible for an earlier parole hearing. He was granted parole in his very first hearing—a success he attributes to ROOTS. “I don’t think without ROOTS and the education that I learned from ROOTS, I would ever make Board,” Bun said. Tran, who was released through resentencing made possible by recent changes in the law, agreed with Bun’s assessment. “I have over 20 programs to compare ROOTS to, and ROOTS stands out every single time,” Tran said.

Indeed, the freedom impact of ROOTS on incarcerated Asian Americans at San Quentin has already emerged. Since ROOTS was last held over two years ago, many of its participants

have been released. “That’s the systemic impact of ROOTS,” Tran said. “It created such healed individuals that people are getting [parole] dates, and people are coming home.”

*b. Support and independence in reentry*

Upon reentry, former ROOTS participants often receive support from APSC through programs like their Formerly Incarcerated Internship Program and ROOTS 2 Reentry. APSC and the ROOTS community also aims to emotionally support individuals to help them feel valued and engaged in their community. This support is crucial in navigating the jarring transition between prison and the free world, particularly for those without supportive family networks. Tran discussed the emotional turbulence he experienced following his release:

Getting out was everything I could hope for but nothing I expected at the same time, especially when it came to healing from the trauma of being incarcerated. The first few days, I sobbed. Like I just cried, because I couldn't believe it was over ... I went from a place where everybody, seemingly, in the world hated me and thought I was just the worst scum in America, to getting back out to a community of people and my family where every single person is excited to see me ... The contrast alone was jarring enough to just break me down emotionally. It made me realize the traumas I experienced while incarcerated. So I say all that to say, having that support, having a network, having a community to come home to – that's everything.<sup>16</sup>

Relationships created through ROOTS often persist after incarceration, and participants often stay in touch and visit each other in their respective communities. “We have a whole community out here,” Tran said. “We love each other like family.” Those who choose to pursue advocacy work also remain in touch or collaborate with ROOTS and APSC. However, for others,

---

<sup>16</sup> Tran, interview.

reentry means starting fresh. While many former ROOTS participants stay engaged in the network, others utilize the tools they gained to chart a separate path. Chung explains, “Part of ethnic studies is about self determination. And we don’t want anyone to be in debt to ROOTS or anything ... So when you get your freedom, you’ve got to do you.” For instance, Hancock explains that since he was released in 2020, he has focused on working and meeting his parole requirements. “But I know how to get in touch with them [his ROOTS community] for sure when needed,” Hancock said. “They’re my partners, they’re my brothers.” These post-incarceration paths, whether it be remaining engaged with movement work or otherwise, are equally valued and celebrated as successes of the program. “Sometimes in the social justice world, we hope that we intervene on marginalized communities and hope that we turn them into activists,” Chung said. “A lot of people do that, but a lot of people are like, ‘Alright, now I have my freedom, I get to make a choice.’ That’s ultimately what we feel like is the success.”

### **Expansion of ethnic studies and next steps**

The positive impact of programs such as ROOTS raises the question of how feasible it is to expand. Those involved with ROOTS recognize that San Quentin is a unique prison. First, San Quentin’s location near the Bay Area gives it an extensive volunteer base to help facilitate such programs; in contrast, many California prisons are located in remote prison towns composed mostly of people who depend on the prison for their livelihoods. Furthermore, San Quentin’s administration has historically been more favorable towards incarcerated people and the expansion of programming. People incarcerated at San Quentin also tend to be older and have worked to be transferred to the prison in hopes of accessing more programming opportunities. This means that replicating ROOTS’ success is far from guaranteed. “If you talk to anybody that

comes from San Quentin, everyone will tell you it's a very special place," Chung said. "It maybe can be considered what rehabilitation can look like in a prison setting, but San Quentin out of all the CDCRs [California prisons] is unique—it's not the norm."

The nearest structural solution, Chung argued, is to close remotely located prisons and transfer people to areas with more resources and programming. Amid a declining prison population and increased community advocacy, in September 2021, California Governor Gavin Newsom's administration closed down Deuel Vocational Institution in Tracy.<sup>17</sup> Advocacy groups and coalitions such as Californians United for a Responsible Budget continue to call for a reduction in the number of people in prisons.<sup>18</sup> As of 2023, APSC continues to facilitate the correspondence-based Lit Club and distributes a national newsletter to incarcerated Asian Americans containing writing by community members, immigration policy news, legal resources, and APSC updates.

ROOTS also highlights the importance of bolstering resources for reentry. Formerly incarcerated people have a dearth of resources at their disposal to address the challenges of reentry. For instance, California currently only gives \$200 to people upon release (known as "gate money")—an amount that has not been adjusted since 1973.<sup>19</sup> Formerly incarcerated people also face difficulties finding employment and housing with a criminal record, leading to a 27% unemployment rate<sup>20</sup> and a houselessness rate 10 times higher than the general public.<sup>21</sup> This only scratches the surface of challenges that formerly incarcerated people face regarding

---

<sup>17</sup> Angelaydet Roda, "Tracy's Deuel Vocational Institution closes following state's 2020 multi-year budget plan," Stockton Record, <https://www.recordnet.com/story/news/2021/09/30/tracys-deuel-vocational-institution-closes/5939895001/>.

<sup>18</sup> Californians United for a Responsible Budget, <https://curbprisonspending.org/>.

<sup>19</sup> Manavi Singh, "California gives people leaving prison just \$200 to start over. After 50 years, that could change," The Guardian, February 18, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2022/feb/18/california-legislation-gate-money-prison>.

<sup>20</sup> Lucius Couloute and Daniel Kopf, "Out of Prison & Out of Work: Unemployment among formerly incarcerated people," Prison Policy Initiative, July 2018, <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/outofwork.html>.

<sup>21</sup> Lucius Couloute, "Nowhere to Go: Homelessness among formerly incarcerated people," Prison Policy Initiative, August 2018, <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/housing.html>.

employment, housing, substance abuse, mental health, and more. Investing resources into the success of formerly incarcerated people is the next step in healing and true public safety.

## **Conclusion**

This research explored the landscape of ethnic studies programs in California prisons. Ethnic studies proved to be a powerful mechanism for people, particularly Asian Americans, to heal their trauma, connect with their family and culture, build community within and between races, and ultimately become agents of change for the liberation of themselves and others.

While this paper discussed five programs and perspectives from both sides of the prison walls, it has limitations given its short timeframe. Future research should interview more program participants, especially those who are still incarcerated. Interviewing a broader range of participants will allow for more robust comparison between different programs, as well as the experiences of participants of varying ages, races, genders, and backgrounds.

Looking forward, this research demonstrates the necessity for more trauma-informed, culturally relevant, and ethnic studies-based programs in settings of incarceration for Asian Americans and other people of color. While a ROOTS replica may not be entirely feasible, the five programs discussed provide a range of possible models for an ethnic studies education. It is clear that there is both a desire and need for spaces in prisons where people of color can deepen their understanding of themselves, recognize systems of injustice, and build networks of community and solidarity. These programs' interactions with mechanisms of California's legal and prison system also make it clear that radical change is needed in the system as a whole, ranging from the isolation of incarcerated people in under-resourced areas, to the flawed parole process, to the lack of compassion and support for formerly incarcerated people.

Finally, the findings of this research are a testament to the resilience, intelligence, and humanity of incarcerated people. Despite experiencing severe trauma in their youth as uprooted survivors of war and genocide and spending years in an environment designed for degradation, those involved with these programs not only survived, but created opportunities for healing, community, and social change. In many ways, programs like ROOTS can be a model for what our society could look like when harm occurs. A world of possibility opens up when we begin to address harm from a standpoint of solidarity and restoration rather than judgment and punishment, and when we recognize our shared stake in the struggle for collective liberation.

## Bibliography

- “2021 Report of Significant Events.” California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation. 2022.  
<https://www.cdcr.ca.gov/bph/wp-content/uploads/sites/161/2022/03/2021-Significant-Events.pdf>.
- Arguelles, Dennis. “Remembering the Manongs and Story of the Filipino Farm Worker Movement.”  
National Parks Conservation Association. May 25, 2017.  
<https://www.npca.org/articles/1555-remembering-the-manongs-and-story-of-the-filipino-farm-worker-movement>.
- “California profile.” Prison Policy Center. <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/profiles/CA.html>.
- Californians United for a Responsible Budget, <https://curbprisonspending.org/>.
- Couloute, Lucius, and Daniel Kopf. “Out of Prison & Out of Work: Unemployment among formerly incarcerated people.” Prison Policy Initiative. July 2018.  
<https://www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/outofwork.html>.
- Couloute, Lucius. “Nowhere to Go: Homelessness among formerly incarcerated people.” Prison Policy Initiative. August 2018. <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/housing.html>.
- Graves, Scott. “Racial Disparities in California’s State Prisons Remain Large Despite Justice System Reforms.” California Budget & Policy Center. June 2021.  
<https://calbudgetcenter.org/app/uploads/2021/06/R-FP-Prison-Racial-Disparities.pdf>
- Hall, Emma. “‘A change in narrative’: Ethnic studies program helps incarcerated youth navigate identity.” CalMatters. February 11, 2022.  
<https://calmatters.org/education/higher-education/college-beat-higher-education/2022/02/ethnic-studies-youth-prison-san-francisco-state/>.
- Hsu, Hua. “An Education While Incarcerated.” The New Yorker. December 13, 2021.  
<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2021/12/20/an-education-while-incarcerated>.

Magsaysay, Raymond. "Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders and the Prison Industrial Complex."

*Michigan Journal of Race and Law* 26, no. 44 (February 2021): 453-454.

<https://repository.law.umich.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1377&context=mjrl>, p. 453-454.

"OVERVIEW OF CALIFORNIA PAROLE CONSIDERATION PROCESS & HOW TO PREPARE FOR IT." *Uncommon Law*. Spring 2022.

<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5b5f9d4be7494070b92d76f3/t/6254806c805f576301f58de5/1649705069360/22.04.06+Parole+Process+and+Preparation+Overview+Guide.pdf>.

Ridolfi, Laura, Renée Menart, and Israel Villa. "CALIFORNIA YOUTH FACE HEIGHTENED RACIAL AND ETHNIC DISPARITIES IN DIVISION OF JUVENILE JUSTICE." W. Haywood Burns Institute, Center on Juvenile and Criminal Justice, and California Alliance of Youth and Community Justice. August 2020. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED610669.pdf>.

Roda, Angelaydet. "Tracy's Deuel Vocational Institution closes following state's 2020 multi-year budget plan." *Stockton Record*.

<https://www.recordnet.com/story/news/2021/09/30/tracys-deuel-vocational-institution-closes/5939895001/>.

Singh, Manavi. "California gives people leaving prison just \$200 to start over. After 50 years, that could change." *The Guardian*. February 18, 2022.

<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2022/feb/18/california-legislation-gate-money-prison>.

"The Department of Ethnic Studies UC Berkeley." Department of Ethnic Studies.

<https://ethnicstudies.berkeley.edu/>.

Young, Kathryne M., and Hannah Chimowitz. "How parole boards judge remorse: Relational legal consciousness and the reproduction of carceral logic." *Law and Society Review* 56 no. 2 (May 19, 2022): 239. <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/lasr.12601>.