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Uprooted but Unbroken: Ethnic Studies Programs in California Prisons

Vivian Kuang

2022 Cal in Sacramento Fellow

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I. Introduction

About 239,000 people are currently incarcerated in California prisons, jails, immigration detention, and juvenile facilities¹. While these numbers have declined over the past decade due to a variety of reforms, California continues to incarcerate more people than most countries worldwide, 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 group². Overall, the number of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders (AAPIs) incarcerated in the US increased by 250% from 1990-2000; from 2000-2010, their incarceration rate quadrupled³.

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). 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?

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 to 90 minutes over Zoom and was transcribed afterward.

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

² 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>

³ Magsaysay, Raymond. “Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders and the Prison Industrial Complex.” *Michigan Journal of Race and Law*, February 2021, <https://repository.law.umich.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1377&context=mjrl>.

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.

I. 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”⁴. Indeed, each of the programs examined in this project discussed issues like ethnicity and culture, racism, and white supremacy. 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,” Tan said. “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 to undo injustice, and ultimately imagine a freer and more liberated world where we all can participate and be our fullest human form.” This emphasis on liberation and justice is particularly crucial in prisons, which are in many ways antithetical to freedom. The programs discussed in this research 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.

⁴ “The Department of Ethnic Studies UC Berkeley.” *Department of Ethnic Studies*, <https://ethnicstudies.berkeley.edu/>.

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). Based in Oakland, 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 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 Three⁵.

Tan explains that ROOTS came into full fruition in 2013 as part of a push for rehabilitation in California prisons, as well as recognition of the benefits of ethnic studies in broader society. However, Roger Chung, ethnic studies faculty at Laney College in Oakland and lead outside instructor for ROOTS since 2014, also highlights the role that racial stereotypes about Asian Americans played in ROOTS' approval by prison administration. "I think 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. Aside from San Quentin, it briefly expanded to Solano State Prison before losing access due to prison administration turnover. To date, ROOTS has had about 250 participants, with about 30-35

⁵ Hsu, Hua. "An Education While Incarcerated." *The New Yorker*; 13 December 2021, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2021/12/20/an-education-while-incarcerated>.

people per year. Most recently, the program was interrupted by the onset of COVID-19 lockdowns in 2020, and has not restarted since.

The curriculum and operations of ROOTS is run by a team of inside facilitators, led by the ROOTS chairperson, and supported by APSC and outside facilitators. The chairperson is responsible for leading curriculum development and choosing and training inside facilitators. Prior to the pandemic, ROOTS operated in one-year cycles of weekly two-hour meetings. Each cycle is broken into three modules. One focuses on ethnic studies and comparative history, including “culture days” in which participants, broken into groups based on their ethnicity, present to the program on their culture and traditions. For example, in one culture day, the Vietnamese group presented a skit on their shared experience of being born in Vietnam, moving to America, and the struggles they faced in a new country. In another, the Filipino group led a trivia game and cooked a prison version of chicken adobo for the class. This module also includes lessons on ethnic studies topics such as a timeline of major events and legislation affecting Asian American immigration to the US, the history of US imperialism and its connection to incarceration, assimilation vs. acculturation, and the relationship between Black history and Asian American racial identity. The second module focuses on intergenerational trauma, its causes, and how to address it. One major exercise in this module used a series of chairs, each with a bag of rocks, to simulate the accumulation of untreated 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 centers on meeting a healing goal through completing a project, such as art, a podcast, or writing.

Those involved with ROOTS identified several aspects of the curriculum that make it unique. First, it is community-based and driven from the inside. “I think what's really powerful about how the classes are ran ... 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,” Thanh Tran, a formerly incarcerated ROOTS participant starting in 2017 and ROOTS chairman for the most recent cycle, said. “There's so much ownership in this curriculum when it comes to incarcerated people.” Rather than a traditional

teacher-student dynamic, “in ROOTS we resource information from each other,” Tan added. “So ethnic studies is learned from each other, and facilitated by each other.” Furthermore, ROOTS approaches education from a non-traditional perspective, discussing histories that are seldom covered in schools and utilizing a variety of learning methods beyond just lectures and readings. “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, concurs. “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, teaching in prisons, and helping found Underground Scholars, which supports formerly incarcerated students at UC Berkeley. In the summer of 2022, she is teaching a course on Native American history, literature, and politics at San Quentin through its college program, Mount Tamalpais College. The 1-unit course will have between 10 and 20 students. In the course, students will engage with Native American literature 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 will submit a total of four short response papers, one per week. Through the course material, Hilden will cover topics such as Native American history, epistemological violence committed against Native American peoples, 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. They drew on these experiences when teaching classes on the 1960s and the Freedom Movement (also known as the Civil Rights Movement) while they were incarcerated at Terminal Island

Federal Correctional Institution from 2017 to 2020. Teaching classes in the education department was their work assignment while incarcerated, as they preferred teaching to working in the kitchen – “it was like trying to avoid the draft again,” they joked. While incarcerated, Fischman also facilitated a book group on immigrants and refugees in America. Due to prison bureaucracy, it was difficult for them to create a class from scratch, so they structured the curriculum for their classes around DVD documentaries and materials that had been previously approved for prior classes, 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 degree there in the future⁶. 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, the history of incarceration, residential segregation, and the War on Drugs. In contrast to ROOTS, the DJJ pilot functions like a traditional classroom, with a syllabus, lectures, discussions, assignments, and a grade. Ethnic studies is particularly relevant for incarcerated youth, as youth of color are disproportionately overpoliced and funneled into the juvenile justice system; as of June 2020, 88.3% of youth in DJJ custody were Black or Latinx⁷.

Finally, in addition to ROOTS, APSC helps facilitate Lit Club, a correspondence-based ethnic studies program for incarcerated people at California Institution for Women and Central California Women’s Facility. In Lit Club, people read books by authors like Maya Angelou and Andre Lorde and

⁶ Hall, Emma. “‘A change in narrative’: Ethnic studies program helps incarcerated youth navigate identity.” *CalMatters*, 11 February 2022, <https://calmatters.org/education/higher-education/college-beat-higher-education/2022/02/ethnic-studies-youth-prison-san-francisco-state/>.

⁷ 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>.

discuss the readings with a partner via mail. Similar to ROOTS, Lit Club is driven by inside facilitators who organize people to read and discuss the books, with support from APSC.

II. “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 knew about this history that was really important to them that they didn’t know ... I actually had something to offer to their own historical contextualization.” Hilden added that fields such as ethnic studies hold particular appeal for students because they provide an opportunity to see themselves in history, especially for students whose history is neglected in education. “We all learn better, and more actively, when we see ourselves in whatever we’re doing. We’re learning about our own past and not about the past of somebody else,” she said.

Thus, one of the most profound effects that ROOTS had on participants was helping them put their personal history in a broader social and historical context. By learning about intergenerational trauma, the history of their country of origin, and how racial and cultural inequality influenced their path to incarceration, they 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, who is Cambodian, said. “What made you? What in history got you here today?” He explained that after learning more about the history of Cambodia and Cambodian migration to the US, he was able to more deeply understand his and his family’s firsthand experiences.

Tran, who is Vietnamese and Black, described a similar experience. Tran was put into foster care when he was just 18 months old, as his mother struggled with drug addiction after coming to the US from Vietnam. “Growing up, I never understood why my mom would pick drugs over her family,” he said. However, in 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 a mixed child abandoned in Vietnam. This context allowed him to better understand the historical events that had shaped his and his mother's lives and begin healing. "I can only imagine what she experienced in regards to trauma. And 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.

While ROOTS focuses on Asian American history, 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 experience relocating from San Francisco to Sacramento when he was 14 and beginning to be exposed to gun violence. "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 and meeting new people and feeling like a foreigner, and not feeling accepted, and running into conflict – I was able to connect that to my experience of being uprooted from the Bay to Sacramento." 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.

Having a better understanding of one's sense of self helped cultivate self love and healing. "Self hatred is a huge thing, especially in the AAPI community, and especially in the incarcerated community," Chung said. Learning about their culture and the ways in which institutions had shaped and failed them helped participants overcome the shame they may have felt about their past and embrace 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.'"

III. “The ultimate goal for everyone is the same, which is to be free”: Community in ethnic studies

a. Creating community in prison

Through ROOTS, people gained a sense of community and solidarity that supported them during their time in prison. In part, Tan explains that this was a product of ethnic studies’ emphasis on solidarity and the ways in which individuals are collectively affected by oppression. “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. “I think 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 in context not only helped people conceptualize the events of their life, but showed them how they were connected to others with a similar story.

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 it that way. 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 shared program, but 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, I believe. 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 tradition of collective decision making and a commitment to making ROOTS a safe space. When Tran was

ROOTS chairman, he described the responsibility he felt to honor the legacy of the program. In accordance with this, when planning the curriculum, he led a democratic discussion with the entire facilitation team to discuss which curriculum from prior cycles to retain and which aspects to improve on. One area of improvement they identified was to create protocols and train facilitators to make ROOTS a safe space for its participants when they shared vulnerable and traumatic experiences. For instance, they created protocols to hold space for those having an emotional moment, rather than brushing them aside and moving on. “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 and comfortable with showing vulnerability, the inside facilitators created a community with a culture of trust. “People were willing to share ... because we had an inside co-facilitation team that we met with months before the launch of the program to really figure out how to create safe spaces, how to model, how to hold trauma,” Chung said. “For the most part, I think the safe spaces were kind of created by the incarcerated people themselves.”

The communities created through ethnic studies programs, like any community, were not always free of conflict. Indeed, participants described prison as a place that often brought out aggression in people as a survival mechanism. “Although ROOTS is focused on non-exclusion and the meaning of ethnicities,” Hancock said, “outside of ROOTS, prison is prison. It doesn't change.” Furthermore, these programs involved difficult discussions of issues like race, trauma, and discrimination that at times grew contentious. “Let me say that these conversations, it's not like they were easy,” Fischman said of discussions in their classes. “In fact, many of them were not easy at all. They were passionate and heated and honest. And people are not all coming from the same place.”

Despite these conflicts, participants' shared commitment to the missions of the programs, as well as content taught in the programs themselves, helped them resolve conflicts effectively. For instance, after gaining a better understanding of trauma and its effects, participants were able to identify how their

response in a conflict may have been driven by trauma and address that underlying cause. “Instead of the old ways ... we come together, we talk about it ... we always go back to the trauma piece, where because of trauma we live hypervigilant, and then we just want to go, go, go, go, and survive,” Bun said. “And we have to ground ourselves and check ourselves that we are a community.” Concepts of solidarity from ethnic studies also helped people navigate and resolve 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. “And 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.’ ... So I think 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 people in the US, 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 in the class about solidarity and recognizing others without unnecessary comparison.

One contentious issue within ROOTS that particularly models its ethos of solidarity and conflict resolution was the way in which gender and sexuality were discussed in the program. Participants described prison as an extremely hypermasculine place that 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. “That one part of ROOTS is the biggest challenge.” 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 for the community to heal. This restorative justice process created a safe space for facilitators and participants to express their perspective and the ways in which they had been hurt, as well as ask questions without fear of judgment. It also tied in elements of culture and ethnicity by discussing ancient restorative justice

practices that predate both modern Western conceptions of punishment and more recent developments in restorative justice. In response to harm and conflict within the community, ROOTS actively made space to discuss and heal from the incident, rather than sweeping it under the rug or responding punitively.

In future cycles, ROOTS reframed how content about gender and sexuality was introduced and framed. The topic was previewed in more depth at the beginning of the cycle and introduced more gradually. The workshop was also reoriented to frame gender and sexuality in the context of the prison. “The prison is a very sexualized place,” Chung said. “It’s a place that has significant contributions to understanding queer theory, as long as we give examples and meet folks where they are.” For example, while the workshop previously began by having everyone in the room share their pronouns without first explaining pronouns’ relevance to an audience that nearly all identified as male, in later workshops, Chung connected queer people’s and incarcerated people’s shared struggle for bodily autonomy. “I might say, ‘Hey, how many people here feel like they have control over their own body and they can share their body with whoever they want, whenever they want?’ This means platonically, it means sexually, it means familialy. And I think that’s when we began kind of understanding that sexuality isn’t necessarily about sexual orientation. 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, its culture of communication, healing, and solidarity helped it emerge stronger.

c. Stigma and healing in the Asian American community

The community created through ROOTS 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 unflattering or shameful experiences, such as incarceration. While such stigma undoubtedly exists for other races, it is amplified for incarcerated Asian Americans due to the model minority myth, and, as Tran said, “a lot of stale ... ideologies ... about what it means to be Asian and what that looks like.” Thus, their incarceration

is often a point of shame and tension in their families, 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 say that their child is “at school” or working in another state when uncomfortable questions arise at family or community gatherings. For years, often decades, their true circumstances are kept secret. Another consequence of this stigma is physical ostracization, particularly for Asian Americans in more remotely located prisons. “One of the actual very physical punishments around stigma is that your family might not come visit you, your family might not talk about you, your family might forget you,” Chung said. “And 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 one avenue for those who were less connected to their families to maintain connections with people of a similar cultural background. “By being able to be in community with each other in a way that isn't necessarily about prison politics – having a space to talk about issues and having a space where those issues are facilitated for you, that gives you the ways to name it in your own terms – I think 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. By normalizing discussions about the struggles faced by incarcerated Asian Americans, it also helped deconstruct the stigma around incarceration in the Asian American community. For instance, Bun explained that a friend’s family who felt embarrassment speaking about their son’s incarceration became more comfortable accepting what had happened 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. The more you hide it, the more you suffer by yourself. And that gave him 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, the awareness ROOTS created can help people and their families take the first step towards acknowledgement and healing, in turn improving broader conceptions surrounding incarcerated Asian Americans. “[ROOTS] was something that was really needed in CDCR. Because nobody knew

how high of a percentage it was of a lot of us [Asian Americans] that were going to prison. Because our family wasn't speaking about it. Our community wasn't speaking about it," Bun explained. "So now, 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 ... Once we start recognizing and being accountable for our community, that's when healing starts."

IV. "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 explained. "Intensely self-segregated – by television rooms, by where you sit in the chow hall, where you can be on yard." Aside from divisions between broad racial categories, within the umbrella of Asian American, there is further division by country of origin. "In the Asian communities in prison, there's prison politics," Tran explained. "There's already segregation between Blacks, Mexicans, Asians, and then with the Asians, there's this whole other level of segregation internally."

Despite this environment, these ethnic studies programs worked to build racial solidarity through their curriculum. While most ROOTS participants are Asian American, all races are welcomed. Some participants who are not Asian American joined to better connect with a loved one with a direct connection to ROOTS' curriculum, such as an Asian American significant other or a family member who fought in conflicts like the Vietnam War. Fischman's students also spanned across races, classes, and backgrounds. "There's no interaction and communication and discussion among people with all those kinds of containers in prison," Fischman said. "This never happens. But there are people who are hungry for that. And this was one of the few spaces where that was happening."

To raise consciousness about racial solidarity, 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 Huerta⁸. Another key part of the ROOTS 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. “I learned my own history,” Bun said, “but I’ve learned way more, and the solidarity piece I didn’t know about. Asians and Blacks were in solidarity, fighting for our freedoms, our rights.” 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 emphasis on solidarity helped begin the deconstruction of racial barriers, despite the racially segregated nature of the prison. “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 that did not exist before,” Tran added. “I think 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.”

Studying this history and being in community with other races, Fischman hopes, will lead to further progress in racial solidarity. “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,” they said. “At the end of the day,” Hancock added, “we share the same struggle, on a different detour.”

⁸ Arguelles, Dennis. “Remembering the Manongs and Story of the Filipino Farm Worker Movement.” *National Parks Conservation Association*, 25 May 2017, <https://www.npca.org/articles/1555-remembering-the-manongs-and-story-of-the-filipino-farm-worker-movement>.

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

Another key component identified by those involved with these programs was their ability to empower participants to see themselves as agents of change. “What I like to think of [ethnic studies] is a really political, insurgent education,” Tan explained. “And when I say insurgent, I mean it's an education to really politicize people to get involved and to recognize injustices. So what I want my students to take away is how do you recognize an injustice, and what can you do against this injustice? How can you be agents of change?” To build this political consciousness, the ROOTS curriculum examined various aspects of institutional economic and racial inequality, as well as past social movements. Similarly, Fischman’s class not only studied the events of the social movements of the 1960s, but examined the failures of the era and what lessons it held for modern day social movements. “In the 60s, we actually believed that we were part of a movement that was changing the course of history, inside and out. That every dimension of oppression and exploitation, racial, economic, and the colonial period, holistic, personal, and political was going to be overthrown,” Fischman said. “And we failed, right? ... So I always raised the question of why did we fail? And what are the lessons to be learned?”

ROOTS participants were able to put these lessons into action while they were incarcerated. For instance, podcasts, art, and writing produced in the ROOTS curriculum by participants are often used in APSC’s advocacy work. When APSC is asked to present about their work to labor organizations, educational organizations, or other lobbying or constituency organizations, they uplift the work of ROOTS participants in order to educate others on the experiences of incarcerated Asian Americans, criminalization, and deportation. Raising broader awareness about the needs of incarcerated Asian Americans subsequently opens up the possibility for these organizations to leverage their resources to support APSC’s advocacy. Furthermore, when APSC runs public campaigns to push the Governor to pardon a community member in order to prevent their deportation after incarceration, art and other materials produced by ROOTS participants are essential parts of the campaign.

Often, after being released, those involved with these programs continue to be involved with organizing, policy, and volunteering work. “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 first 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,’” he said. “My job revolves around my folks.” Tran was the 2021 Inside Fellow for the Ella Baker Center for Human Rights, and after his release in May 2022, he continues to work with them on their campaigns for decarceration and racial justice. Hancock is involved with volunteer and food distribution work in his community, which he in part attributes to the effect that ROOTS’ emphasis on giving back to the community had on him. Fischman is a writer and storyteller, is involved with advocacy work, and is the co-organizer for the End of Isolation Tour, a theatrical production aimed at raising consciousness around solitary confinement in the United States. “The stories I have to tell, especially about prison, have importance to people outside. They have meaning to people,” 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, is telling the stories.”

Through this work, people affect long-term change in their communities. They also make crucial contributions to the field of ethnic studies, whether it be the DJJ students who tell Tan that they want to pursue ethnic studies in the future, those who become involved with organizing and advocacy work, or simply those who work towards their own freedom. “When I think of ethnic studies, I don't think about researchers, I don't think about academics, I don't think about scholars. Even though they're important. They contribute something to the field,” 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 or people in the struggle or oppressed people. People doing ethnic studies work are trying to benefit their community. And that's a contribution that I think they're all trying to make ... even if it's working on their own freedom, or when

they're released and working to get other people free.” Eventually, the power of these programs goes full circle, as people use their agency to shape the history they studied.

VI. “People are coming home”: Freedom and life after incarceration

a. ROOTS and the parole process

Many ROOTS participants were sentenced to indeterminate sentences (ex. 25 years to life) or committed their crime prior to turning 26 years old (making them eligible for early parole hearings due to new youth offender laws). In these cases, their path to freedom mostly lies through parole. Several months prior to someone’s Minimum Eligible Parole Date (ex. after 25 years of incarceration for a 25-to-life sentence), they undergo a parole suitability hearing, in which commissioners of the California Board of Parole Hearings (also known as BPH or Board) issue a decision on whether they should be released. In the two to three hour hearing, a central component of a parole applicant convincing the Board to grant release is telling their story, starting from their life background leading up to their crime, how and why the crime occurred, how they have rehabilitated themselves while incarcerated, and their parole 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 between 3 and 15 years. Even if an applicant is granted parole in their hearing, the decision is further reviewed by the BPH’s Decision Review Unit and the governor’s office. The governor can unilaterally reverse parole grants for murder cases, or request another hearing to review parole grants for non-murder cases (known as “en banc review”)⁹.

In 2021, only 16% of parole hearings scheduled, or 34% of parole hearings held, resulted in a parole grant¹⁰ (a scheduled hearing can be postponed by the Board or waived by an applicant, often because they believe their prospects for a grant are slim and prefer a waiver over the risk of a lengthier

⁹ “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>.

¹⁰ “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>.

denial)¹¹. 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 denials¹². BPH has faced criticism for its narrow and subjective determination of insight. For instance, one study interviewing California BPH commissioners revealed that from their perspective, applicants misrepresenting even small details of their crime, such as the number of gunshots fired, was an indication of poor insight, even if the crime had occurred long ago; similarly, an applicant suggesting that institutional factors played some role in their offense rather than purely individual deficits was also viewed as making excuses and exhibiting inadequate remorse¹³. Another study raised similar concerns, saying of parole hearings, “They are often hearings without listening”¹⁴.

Despite these odds, ROOTS’ paramount objective for its participants is obtaining freedom. “It’d be great if a person understood these major concepts in ethnic studies,” Chung said. “But I think for us, we really wanted to center the goals of the folks that were inside ... for us, the most important thing is a person’s freedom.” Through ROOTS, participants learned to leverage tools of ethnic studies to process and heal from their trauma, and ultimately communicate their story to the Board in a compelling, effective way. “We don’t like playing prison games,” Chung said. “But 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 terms of preparing for parole hearings. While a variety of programs in prison can contribute to someone’s ability to communicate effectively to the Board, they are not tailored to the unique trauma of incarcerated Asian Americans who often came to the US as refugees fleeing war and genocide and struggled to navigate life

¹¹ Shammas, Victor L. “The Perils of Parole Hearings: California Lifers, Performative Disadvantage, and the Ideology of Insight.” *Political and Legal Anthropology Review*, 2019, <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5a8d8d5c80bd5e24bc0797f6/t/5ca4636d4e17b61118e42658/1554277231479/Shammas+-+The+Perils+of+Parole+Hearings.pdf>.

¹² Young, Kathryn M., and Hannah Chimowitz. “How parole boards judge remorse: Relational legal consciousness and the reproduction of carceral logic.” *Law and Society Review*, 19 May 2022, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/lasr.12601>.

¹³ Young and Chimowitz.

¹⁴ Shammas.

in a new country. The Board itself is often unaware of this history, putting a further burden on Asian Americans seeking parole to have the ability to explain themselves. “There is no class for a Southeast Asian – especially a Cambodian like myself – there is no class that I’ve ever heard of that could cover the issues that we have from genocide and war, from just living life on survival,” Bun explained. “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 new changes in the law made him eligible for an earlier parole hearing as a youth offender. He was granted parole in his very first hearing, a success that 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. “There’s so much trauma that wasn’t explained to me. There’s so much history that I do know [now] and I can then connect it to my own life.” Tran, who was released through resentencing made possible by recent changes in the law, agreed that ROOTS played a central role in his ability to gain his freedom. “It was very hard to get out, let me tell you ... I have over 20 programs to compare ROOTS to, and ROOTS stands out every single time.”

Indeed, the long-term impact of ROOTS on the freedom of incarcerated Asian Americans at San Quentin has already emerged. Since ROOTS was suspended more than two years ago, many of its participants at San Quentin 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 in need of assistance often receive support from APSC and those they met in ROOTS. Through programs like their Formerly Incarcerated Internship Program and ROOTS 2 Reentry, APSC provides support with transportation, employment opportunities, navigating social services, and more. In addition to material support, APSC aims to support people emotionally and make them feel valued and engaged in their community. For those adjusting to release, particularly for those without access to highly supportive family networks, this support is crucial.

This community and support, both material and emotional, helps recently released people navigate the jarring transition between prison and the free world. “I dreamed about what it might be like to get out. But then 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,” Tran explained about his initial feelings after release. “The first few days, I sobbed. Like I just cried, because I couldn't believe it was over. I did 10 and a half years, and 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. And every single person loves me and wants the best for 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.”

In many cases, relationships created and fostered through ROOTS persist after incarceration. ROOTS participants often stay in touch and visit each other in their respective communities. While they are no longer bound together by a weekly class or interacting in the same prison, “We have a whole community out here,” Tran said. “We love each other like family.” Bun added, “It's not just a program ... For me it's a lifelong friendship.” Those who choose to pursue advocacy work also remain in touch, or even collaborate, with ROOTS and APSC in that respect.

However, for others, reentry means starting fresh. While many formerly incarcerated ROOTS participants stay very engaged in the network, many others utilize the tools they gained from the program 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. And for some people, that means moving out of the state and starting all over again. For some people, that means not doing something that is social justice related.” For instance, Hancock explains that since he was released in 2020, he has focused on “cruising my way out of parole and working and going about doing me. But I still stay in touch with them for sure,” he added. “I know how to get in touch with

them for sure when needed. They're my partners, they're my brothers." These post-incarceration paths, whether it be remaining highly engaged with people from ROOTS and movement work, or pursuing something else, are equally valued and celebrated as successes of the program. "I think sometimes in the social justice world, we hope that we intervene on marginalized communities and hope that we turn them into activists," Chung said. "But I think the reality is, 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.' And that's ultimately what we feel like is the success – if a person has self determination, and feels like they have at least some form of human citizenship to pursue something on their own behalf."

VII. Expansion of ethnic studies and next steps

The positive impact of ethnic studies programs such as ROOTS raises the question of how feasible it is to expand. "I just really want to emphasize the need for making this program more accessible for incarcerated people outside of San Quentin," Tran said.

However, those involved with ROOTS recognize that San Quentin is unique from other prisons. First, location is a crucial component of a prison's level of programming. San Quentin's location near the Bay Area gives it an extensive volunteer base to help facilitate programs such as ROOTS; in contrast, many of California's prisons are located in remote areas and in prison towns composed mostly of families who depend on the local prison for their livelihoods. Furthermore, culture matters; San Quentin's administration has historically been more favorable towards incarcerated people compared to administration at other prisons, and it has a history of staff and wardens who have supported the expansion of programming. People incarcerated at San Quentin also tend to be older and have worked to be transferred there in hopes of accessing more programming opportunities.

All in all, this means that replicating the success of ROOTS elsewhere 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 [California prisons] is unique. It's not the norm. I think those are things that we have to

actually be very real about.” Tan concurred, saying, “I think we are looking to expand because we believe in the mission of ethnic studies, but we also believe in intentional expansion.” However beneficial ROOTS has been, there is a limit to the feasibility of expansion.

The closest structural solution, Chung argued, is to close more remotely located prisons and transfer people to prisons in areas with more resources and programming. “We don’t have solutions other than to advocate for the closure of prisons and to move people,” he said. “The structural solution is to combat the history of the ideologies of isolating people in desolate parts of the state.” Amidst a declining prison population and community advocacy, in September 2021, Governor Newsom’s administration closed down Deuel Vocational Institution in Tracy¹⁵. The administration has also attempted to close California Correctional Center in Susanville, but is undergoing a lawsuit by the city to stop the closure, as much of Susanville’s economy relies on the prison. Advocacy groups and coalitions continue to call on the governor to reduce the number of people in prisons, such as Californians United for a Responsible Budget, which has set a goal to close at least 10 prisons in the next five years¹⁶.

In the meantime, APSC continues to carry on the correspondence-based Lit Club ethnic studies program. It also sends a newsletter to Asian Americans incarcerated around the country with writings from community members, news about immigration, resources, and updates on APSC’s work. Bun helped start the newsletter in 2017 in hopes of supporting incarcerated Asian Americans without proximity to ROOTS. “We want to make sure if there’s an Asian dude in, like, Wyoming by himself, he can at least read our newsletter and we can be like, ‘Oh, you have folks that are just like you,’” he said.

ROOTS also highlights the importance of bolstering resources for reentry. “I think a lot of people are very fascinated by working inside of prison,” Chung said. “But I don’t think they’re fascinated about what it means to come back home and the services needed to bring a person back home ... I think that’s something that we really need to highlight more, not just for Asian Americans, but for everybody.” Formerly incarcerated people have a dearth of resources at their disposal to address the challenges of

¹⁵ 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/>.

¹⁶ Californians United for a Responsible Budget, <https://curbprisonspending.org/>.

reentry. For instance, California currently only gives \$200 to people as they are released (known as “gate money”) – an amount that has not been adjusted since 1973¹⁷. Formerly incarcerated people also face difficulties finding employment and housing with a criminal record, leading to a 27% unemployment rate¹⁸ and a houselessness rate 10 times higher than the general public¹⁹. This barely scratches the surface of the challenges formerly incarcerated people face regarding employment, housing, substance abuse treatment, mental health treatment, navigating the social safety net, and emotional well-being. Investing in the success of formerly incarcerated people is the next step in healing and true public safety.

VIII. Conclusion

This research explored the landscape of ethnic studies programs in California prisons and their effect on participants’ sense of self, sense of community, and path to freedom, with a particular focus on incarcerated Asian Americans. Ethnic studies proved to be a powerful mechanism for people to confront and heal their trauma, more deeply 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 project was able to discuss five programs and the perspectives of participants and facilitators with experience on both sides of the prison walls, it is important to recognize its limitations, given that it was completed in a two-month timeframe. Using this as a starting point, future research should interview more ROOTS participants, especially those who are still incarcerated. For the other programs discussed, it should also interview participants, as this research only captures the facilitators’ point of view. Interviewing a broader range and greater number of participants will allow for more robust comparison between different programs, as well as any differences in impact on participants of varying ages, races, genders, and backgrounds.

¹⁷ Singh, Manavi. “California gives people leaving prison just \$200 to start over. After 50 years, that could change.” *The Guardian*, 18 February 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2022/feb/18/california-legislation-gate-money-prison>.

¹⁸ 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>.

¹⁹ Couloute, Lucius. “Nowhere to Go: Homelessness among formerly incarcerated people.” *Prison Policy Initiative*, August 2018, <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/housing.html>.

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 incarcerated people of color can deepen their understanding of themselves, recognize systems of injustice, and build networks of community and solidarity. These programs' interaction with other mechanisms of California's legal and prison system also makes it clear that radical change is needed to solve problems in the system as a whole, ranging from the isolation of incarcerated people in under-resourced areas of the state, to the flawed standards of the 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, navigating intergenerational trauma and family separation, 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 model 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.