

### 'Is yellow black or white?'

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## 'Is yellow black or white?'<sup>1</sup>

### *Inter-minority relations and the prospects for cross-racial coalitions between Laotians and African Americans in the San Francisco Bay Area*

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**ABSTRACT** Given recent demographic shifts and changes in the racial landscape of many urban areas, what kind of inter-group relations have emerged and what are the prospects for cross-racial coalitions to contest racial hierarchies and structures of racial inequality in the USA? Drawing on qualitative data, I examine the efforts of an environmental justice organization, defined as a 'border space', to build solidarity and forge alliances between second-generation Laotians and other communities of color in the San Francisco Bay Area. I argue that the possibilities and limits to engendering cross-racial solidarity are also shaped by Laotians' status as new immigrants and as Asian Pacific Americans, as well as by everyday encounters and interactions between racial groups. Racializing processes in the US engender complex inter-minority relations that are marked by cooperation or conflict. In such a context, cross-racial alliances are based on political commitments and shared interests that are contingent and situationally specific.

**KEYWORDS** cross-race coalitions ● inter-group relations ● political mobilization ● positionality ● racial hierarchy ● second-generation Laotians ● social geography of race ● USA

The post-1965 demographic revolution, heralded by the 1965 Hart–Cellar immigration reform law, has changed the racial composition of the USA to one that is increasingly diverse and complex. The Act lifted racial quotas on immigration and opened the door to large numbers of immigrants from Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean. From the mid-1970s, in the period following the end of the Vietnam War, the USA also witnessed the arrival of refugees from southeast Asia, particularly Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia.

These immigration patterns have changed the racial landscape of many urban areas, where ethnic and racial minorities are beginning to form majorities (Camarillo, 2004) and processes of acculturation are shaped by interaction between non-white groups (Kasinitz, 2004: 293). These demographic shifts demand that we examine inter-minority relations emerging from the changing racial dynamics (Vo and Torres, 2004), particularly the prospects for cross-racial coalitions to contest existing racial hierarchies and to dismantle related structures and processes of racial inequality in the USA.

Drawing on qualitative data, in this article I examine the efforts of an environmental justice organization in the San Francisco Bay Area, California to build racial solidarity and forge alliances between second-generation<sup>2</sup> Laotians<sup>3</sup> and other communities of color. Laotians and their African American and Latino neighbors in this region experience racialization through the structural 'neighborhood race effects' (Espiritu et al., 2000) of under-funded and resource-deprived schools, environmental pollution, and low-wage jobs. Such structural inequalities and environmentally impacted material contexts experienced by several racial groups can have the potential to foster solidarity and coalitions across race. However, the possibilities and limits to such cross-racial political alliances are also shaped by Laotians' status as new immigrants and as Asian Pacific Americans, as well as their everyday interactions and encounters between racial groups. I utilize the notion of 'social geography of race' (Frankenberg, 1993) to understand both my respondents' racial and ethnic identities, and the racialized perceptions and stereotypes that second-generation Laotians have of African Americans. Racializing processes in the US engender inter-minority relations that are marked by cooperation or conflict, engagement or distancing. In the context of multiple and shifting identities, cross-racial and/or cross-ethnic alliances are based on political commitments and shared interests that are contingent and situationally specific.

## **ANALYTICAL FRAMING**

Contemporary immigration flows, momentous demographic changes and growing emergence of 'mixed race' people are contesting the established biracial hierarchy of the USA. These changing racial dynamics are accompanied by increasingly diverse and complex meanings of 'race' and ethnicity, assertions of ethnic and racial difference and experience, and manifestations of racisms and racial oppression (Song, 2004a). Recently, several scholars have debated the continuing utility of the concept of racial hierarchy and have concluded that while we need to retain the concept, it

needs to be qualified, refined and understood as a more dynamic and nuanced model (see Bonilla-Silva, 2004; Kim, 2004a; Song, 2004a, 2004b). As Song (2004b: 172) observes, the concept of racial hierarchy is valuable in suggesting 'an *overall* picture of how different groups fare in multi-ethnic societies' (emphasis in the original). An understanding of differentials in socioeconomic status, privilege and power can provide clues to the nature and dynamics of inter-minority relations emerging in the changing US racial landscape.

One model that sheds light on the racial positioning of Laotians, one of the newest immigrant groups to the USA, and assists in understanding inter-minority relations and the prospects for cross-racial coalitions between Laotians and other communities of color is that offered by Bonilla-Silva (2004). For Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, changes in racial dynamics in the USA suggest that the bi-racial (white versus non-white) structure is evolving into a tri-racial order, comprising whites, honorary whites and a diverse collective black group. Based on objective indicators of standing such as income and occupational status, subjective indicators of 'consciousness', such as self-reports on race and racial attitudes, and data on social interaction – interracial marriage and residential segregation – among members of the three racial strata, Bonilla-Silva (2004: 932–3) hypothesizes that the white group will include 'traditional' whites, new 'white' immigrants and totally assimilated white Latinos; the intermediate group of honorary whites will comprise most light-skinned Latinos, Japanese Americans, Korean Americans, Asian Indians, Chinese Americans, Filipinos and most Middle Eastern Americans; and the collective black group will include blacks, dark-skinned Latinos, Vietnamese, Cambodians and Laotians.

Scholarship on immigrant incorporation that emphasizes the segmented nature of acculturation and assimilation (Portes and Rumbaut, 2001; Portes and Zhou, 1993) also predicts that second-generation Laotians will assimilate into the black underclass. Moreover, socioeconomic data on Laotians in this study, presented below, appears to confirm Bonilla-Silva's positioning of Laotians nearer blacks in the US racial hierarchy.<sup>4</sup>

As many scholars have argued, there is no overarching homogeneity of experiences among the broad ethnic and racial groups in each of these strata. For example, Asian American scholars such as Espiritu and Ong (1994) observe that Asian Pacific American (APA) communities have become extremely differentiated along lines of class, culture, language, histories of immigration, and patterns of settlement and adaptation. Second-generation Laotians in this study belong to a recent immigrant community and represent a group that is distinct in terms of ethnic and class composition from other Asian and Pacific Islander groups in the USA. The struggle to improve their social and economic status suggests the potential for solidarity across 'race' rather than within racial boundaries. Indeed, Bonilla-Silva (2004: 942) anticipates 'higher levels of collective action and

consciousness among the poles of the racial order (i.e. among whites and the collective black strata)?

However, Gotanda (1999) and Ancheta (1998) argue that anti-Asian subordination is qualitatively different from subordination of African Americans. Rather than based on notions of racial superiority and inferiority, anti-Asian subordination is centered on citizenship, which divides racially between American and foreigner. A prominent recent example is the experience of Wen Ho Lee, who was arrested in 1999 and charged with mishandling sensitive information at Los Alamos National Laboratory in New Mexico where he worked. Dr Lee spent nine months in solitary confinement before being released in September 2000 with an apology from the presiding US District Judge. During his incarceration Dr Lee was subjected to anti-Asian stereotyping and cast as a foreigner, despite being a highly successful US citizen (Zia, 2006).

If, as scholars from a variety of disciplines have noted (Ancheta, 1998; Gotanda, 1999; Kibria, 2000; Ong, 1996; Tuan, 1998), Asian Pacific Americans are still considered outside America's national imaginary, outside the hegemonic culture, then Kim's (2004a: 999) conceptualization of 'racial positionality' allows us to explore multiple dimensions of relationality among different racial and ethnic groups. She argues that, historically, whites have racialized 'Indians', 'Negroes', 'Mexicans', and 'Orientals' 'differently from and in relation to one another' (Kim, 2004b: 345, emphasis in the original). Kim advocates locating racialized groups on a plane defined by at least two axes – that of superior/inferior and that of American/foreigner. 'This would allow us to recognize that Asian Americans and Latinos have been seen historically as *both* between black and white on the former scale and quite foreign on the latter scale' (Kim, 2004a: 999, emphasis in the original). The notion of 'racial positionality' conveys more fluidity and complexity in racial and ethnic categories than the concept of racial hierarchy acknowledges. It allows for shifting positions of racial groups relative to one another over time and has the potential to be less politically divisive. Such a complex relationality allows for shifting cross-racial and/or cross-ethnic alliances based on political commitments and shared interests that are highly contingent and situationally specific.

In recent times, the US media and some academic analyses have portrayed African Americans, Asian Americans and Latinos as competing for scarce resources and political inclusion rather than as potential allies and coalition partners (Camarillo, 2004; Lie, 2004). These encounters and interactions between racial and ethnic groups in the contemporary US urban landscape are fashioned by larger economic and political structures, government policies, and racialized perceptions and misperceptions. However, opportunities exist at the local level to create cooperative cross-racial relations through, for example, efforts to keep neighborhoods free of crime and drugs (Camarillo, 2004) or coalitions to address environmental

pollution or improve schools in the local community. Vo and Torres (2004: 310) call such opportunities 'border spaces' where racial groups interact, sometimes with overt or covert tension and at other times quite amicably. The Asian Pacific Environmental Network (APEN) is one such border space, which advocates racial justice for all communities of color and resists artificial racial boundaries in favor of fluid, multiple identities where race, class, gender and generation intersect. Such fluidity allows for issue-specific coalitions and strategies.

In the following sections, I analyze the macro- and micro-level processes that create possibilities and constraints to challenging structures of racial difference. Specifically, I describe APEN's community organizing work with Laotians in northern California and discuss the impact that this has had on second-generation Laotians' political identities and collective self-understandings (Brubaker and Cooper, 2000: 7) around race. As I demonstrate below, Laotians in northern California share a common economic, social and environmentally impacted context with their African American and Latino neighbors. While many analysts would assume that in this common material context lies the potential for shared class interests across race (see for example Camarillo, 2004; Murguia and Forman, 2003: 72), I argue that the possibilities and limits to APEN's goal of engendering critical racial subjectivities and a sense of being 'kindred people' (Okimoto, 1994: 34) are also influenced by an 'immigrant ideology' (Cheng and Espiritu, 1989) among Laotians and their children, as well as shaped by racialized perceptions and stereotypes.

I analyze second-generation Laotian's particularistic self-understandings, or one's sense of one's social location and the range of experiences related to one's social location (Brubaker and Cooper, 2000: 17), around 'race'. Though the migration of Laotians to the USA is intimately linked to a violent history of US involvement in southeast Asia and the deep entanglement of Laotians in the Vietnam War, Laotians arrived in the USA as refugees with high aspirations for rebuilding their lives and accessing opportunities for their children. These aspirations and a sense of optimism are prevalent among their children, though as I demonstrate below, it is a gendered phenomenon. At the same time growing up in the USA, second-generation Laotians are acutely aware of the racialization processes that attribute racial power and prestige to whites (Bonilla-Silva, 2003: 271) and assign blacks to the bottom of the racial hierarchy. I utilize Ruth Frankenberg's (1993: 43) notion of 'the social geography of race' to understand the effects of contemporary racial politics on my respondents' racial and ethnic identities and the meanings these identities have for them. As Frankenberg (1993: 44) argues, racial social geography enables us to ground individual attitudes and beliefs in the material world. These material worlds are informed by racial politics in US society, and the informal meanings and stereotypes emanating from it, which structure everyday experiences of

minority groups (Nagel, 1994: 156). Thus it becomes possible to examine how racialized perceptions influence inter-group relations between Laotians and African Americans, and link these to larger social, historical and political forces that brought these environments into being.

## LAOTIANS IN THE USA

Laotians are among the newest immigrants to the USA, arriving as refugees in the early 1980s. The 2000 census enumerated 384,516 Laotians living in the USA. Patterns of settlement reveal that despite the initial government placement policy of refugee dispersal, California has emerged as the favored state, with 33 percent of Lao and 39 percent of Hmong living in this state. The 2000 census indicates that 136,799 (including 71,741 Hmong) Laotians reside in California, of which 4206 live in the northern California county of Contra Costa. Nearly 30 percent of Contra Costa's Laotian community lives in a two square-mile area in San Pablo and Richmond, part of West Contra Costa County and the location of APEN's Laotian Organizing Project (USA Census Bureau, 2000a).

Together with an increase in Asian and Pacific Islander populations, the cities of Richmond and San Pablo have witnessed a dramatic increase in Latino and Spanish speaking groups.<sup>5</sup> The 2000 US census indicates that Latinos made up 27 percent of the population in Richmond, Asian and Pacific Islanders constituted 13 percent of the residents, African Americans numbered 36 percent and those who identified as white represented 21 percent (USA Census, 2000b). Lochner (1997) has observed that San Pablo is the 'most Hispanic and Laotian city in Contra Costa County', judging by the number of grocery stores and restaurants along the city's main streets. In fact, San Pablo is 27 percent Hispanic, 17 percent Asian, 21 percent black and 35 percent white according to Lochner.

Richmond and San Pablo represent poverty-stricken and marginal housing areas in which Laotian refugees were placed and continue to make their home (Crystal and Saepharn, 1992; Walker and The Bay Area Study Group, 1990). In addition, Richmond residents faced double-digit unemployment rates from 1992 to 1995, a time when the eastern part of the San Francisco Bay Area was well under a 10 percent rate. In fact, during the 1990s, while the rest of the Bay Area experienced an economic boom and consequently a tight labor market, especially in the high-technology sector, Richmond's jobless rate was much greater than the unemployment rate in the East Bay (Avalos, 2001). Moreover, local communities frequently suffer from environmental pollution emitted by the 350 industrial sites in West Contra Costa County.

In addition to this marginal social, economic and environmental context,

the lives of Laotians are shaped by an additional set of factors. Along with other southeast Asians, Laotians have the highest rates of poverty and welfare dependency among other Asian Pacific American groups and the US population in general (Rumbaut, 2000: 188). Moreover, Laotian parents have the lowest education compared with other groups of Asian immigrant parents (Rumbaut, 1994). According to Rumbaut (1995: 248), the 1990 US Census indicates that over 50 percent of Laotians live in linguistically isolated households nationally, meaning that no-one over the age of 14 in that household speaks English only or very well.

Statistics for second-generation Laotians in Contra Costa County suggest that they have adopted traits and behaviors associated with the black underclass. In 1996, 208 Laotian youth were in the California Youth Authority (CYA) institutions.<sup>6</sup> This figure represents 16.6 percent of the total Asian commitments and contract cases for that year, second to the number of Vietnamese youth commitments. The actual number of Laotian youth in CYA facilities has remained fairly stable over the years, but proportionally, Laotian 13 to 18 year olds represented 25.4 percent of all Asian youth commitments and contracts in 2000, outstripping Vietnamese youth in CYA facilities (personal communication with CYA Information Systems Bureau, 6 March 2002). In addition, a recent study has revealed that Laotian high-school girls had the highest teenage pregnancy rate in California of any ethnic group, at almost 19 percent, based on data collected from 1989 to 1998. Moreover, 60 percent of the Laotian teenage mothers were married (Weitz et al., 2001).

School data on English learners provide an indication of the group size and location of new immigrants and the degree of hardship that students in a particular language group may be experiencing. In 1995, 990 or 16.2 percent of English learners in the West Contra Costa Unified School District were Laotians. In 2000, this number had dropped dramatically to 9.3 percent but still represented 810 students. The proportion and number of Laotian English learners for Richmond High School, where the majority of the teenagers in this study go to school, are 19.7 percent or 145 students in 1995. While this percentage dropped to 12 percent in 2000 for Richmond High School, it still represented 104 students, second only to Spanish-speaking students (California Department of Education, 2002a).

At the same time, Asian Americans and whites continually outscore African American and Latinos in general achievement tests in West Contra Costa County schools (Shire, 2001). Data on English learners suggests that over 70 percent of the Asian students at Richmond High School were Laotians in 1998 (California Department of Education, 2002a). Data from the California Department of Education (2002b) indicates that at Richmond High, a greater proportion of students categorized as Asian complete all courses required for entrance to the University of California



and California State University than any other ethnic or racial group, except those students categorized as Filipino.

These data on gang involvement, teenage pregnancy rates, large numbers of English Learners, yet high achievement at school among some Laotians paint a complicated picture of the adaptation experiences of young Laotians in West Contra Costa County. However, these trends also appear to confirm the location of Laotians in Contra Costa County in the 'collective black' strata.

## RESEARCH SITE AND METHOD

As part of a broader effort to mobilize the Laotian community in Contra Costa County, APEN established a leadership development and community organizing program for young Laotian women. The youth program falls under the umbrella of APEN's Laotian Organizing Project (LOP), which encompasses Laotians of all generations and ethnic groups. APEN itself has roots in the environmental justice movement, and specifically in the First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit that was held in October 1991. The Summit propelled the reconceptualization of environmentalism in the USA and referred to the environment as 'where we live, where we work, where we play, where we learn' (Cole and Foster, 2001: 16).<sup>7</sup> This movement links grassroots activism concerning environmental protection to issues of economic development, racial and social equality, and community empowerment. APEN was founded in 1993 by four Asian American activists, who had attended the 1991 summit, with the goal of building an Asian Pacific American face to the environmental justice movement.

Since 1995, the major thrust of APEN's work in this Laotian community has been a youth program for second-generation teenage Laotian girls recruited from a local junior high the summer before they enter high school. The youth project, named Asian Youth Advocates (AYA), began in the summer of 1995 with a group of 12 Laotian girls aged 13 and 14. The following summer a second group of nine girls joined the program, in 1997 a third group of 11 girls enrolled, and in the summer of 1998 a fourth group, of 10 girls, was recruited. All the girls are expected to remain in the program throughout their high-school years.

During the summer, the girls go through an intensive six-week program, meeting four hours a day, four days a week, and are paid a stipend for their summer participation. The curriculum for the first summer session for each new group has remained fairly constant and covers reproductive health, sexuality and sexual orientation, body image and cultural identity, gender roles, team-building exercises and an introduction to the principles of

environmental justice. In the second and subsequent summers, the curriculum for each group varies but includes a stronger emphasis on environmental justice issues, as well as elements of Asian American history, Laotian history and building organizing skills among the girls. Each group continues to meet during the school year under the leadership of young Asian American and Laotian women counselors for peer counseling as well as for implementing specific projects and campaigns.

My study involved all four cohorts of teenage Laotian girls (total 31), ranging from 13 to 17 years of age, and 11 adult staff who were working or had worked in the youth program. Among the young Laotians, 16 self-identified as Mien, 10 as Lao, three as Khmu, and one each as Lue and Hmong. Principal staff at APEN, when I was in the field, included second- and third-generation Asian American women community activists from outside the Laotian community. As part of AYA, APEN also employs young, 'one-and-a-half' generation<sup>8</sup> Laotian women, who are still in college (university) or have recently graduated, as counselors. The ideas presented in this article have been developed from data gathered over a two-year period, 1997–99, through participant observations, in-depth interviews and focus groups with the youth, interviews with staff, and archival research.

## ENGENDERING COLLECTIVE SELF-UNDERSTANDINGS

APEN staff present an underlying analysis of race, class and citizenship in all of the discussions, activities and campaigns that involve the youth. Moreover, a basic principle that guides APEN's organizing is that their work should not create a wedge between Laotians and other communities of color. Rather, the goal should be to identify linkages and produce alliances across race. This principle stems from both an ideological belief and a pragmatic position based on the situation of Laotians in Contra Costa County. Elaine,<sup>9</sup> the executive director remarked that she was proud to have held on to and worked toward the 'same vision of a multicultural democracy' in the USA for the last 25 or 26 years, based on the belief 'that people of color in this country have a particular history, a shared history and a shared struggle that needs to be, that's life long' (Interview, 21 October 1998).<sup>10</sup> At the same time, working with other communities is necessitated by the low numerical numbers of Laotians, as well as the racial tension that Laotians experience with their Latino and African American neighbors. These conflicts breed 'a wedge between groups', and create 'another barrier to the community not coming together', as Emiko noted (Interview, 22 September 1998).

As I discuss below, APEN does not rely on essentialist categories of race; rather it views racial identity as multiple, fluid and context specific. In its

choice of campaign issues and organizing strategies, APEN enacts 'a strategic use of positivist essentialism' (Spivak, 1987, cited in Fuss, 1989: 31) to mobilize Laotians. These shifting racial identities acknowledge both differential racialization processes, which have generated multiple group positions, and a complex relationality between Laotians and other communities of color. During the time that I was in the field, APEN and the young Laotian women engaged in two campaigns that illustrate both APEN's recognition of complex relationality between racial groups and attempts to nurture a critical racial solidarity.

### ***Race and education: The school counselor campaign***

My respondents attended inner-city public schools where they were subjected to surveillance and intervention, and constrained from reaching their full potential because of a lack of resources, inadequate number of teachers with credentials, non-challenging curricula and the prevalence of violence, according to a report on the West Contra Costa Unified School District (WCCUSD) published in 2001 and safety assessments carried out by the California Department of Education.<sup>11</sup> After much brainstorming between the youth and staff in AYA, my respondents decided to develop and organize a campaign to address the issue of the lack of sufficient support and guidance for students at Richmond High School.

In the wake of high-school shootings in recent years, such as that at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado in 1999, much public attention has focused on the role of counselors at high schools. With over 1500 students in 1999, Richmond High School had only two full-time counselors. They were responsible for a range of duties that supported students' academic and social development, including scheduling classes, giving college and career guidance, meeting with parents, giving referrals and handling crisis situations. In other words, they were expected to be accessible caring adults in the school who were trained to provide guidance and support students' needs. Addressing the lack of adequate counseling resources at Richmond High School would benefit all the communities in West Contra Costa County, since more than 95 percent of students at this school are students of color.<sup>12</sup>

My respondents carried out a survey to find out how their friends and peers felt about the issue, as well as to learn about their experience of counseling services at the school. Based on these findings, AYA staff developed a curriculum for the second, third and fourth cohort of girls in AYA that addressed a broader understanding of the problem in the school district and the state, and that built their organizing skills. During the six-week program in summer 1999, staff focused on building a collective knowledge of the state of education at Richmond High School and WCCUSD, the counseling-related needs of students and prevalent perceptions of youth in

society. They facilitated brainstorming sessions to develop feasible solutions and demands that would not divide different communities and groups, and they identified other community organizations and student groups at Richmond High School who would support the campaign. AYA staff believed that success in the school counselor campaign required alliances with diverse groups that shared an interest in improving the quality of education at the school.

AYA youth and staff built on all the preparation they had undertaken during the summer and organized a coordinated campaign to win a program to improve guidance for students at Richmond High School during the school year 1999–2000. In May 2000, the School Site Council approved a pilot teacher advisory program, which would add an advisory period to the regular school day and build in mentoring time for students and teachers. This school counselor campaign aimed to improve the quality of education for all students at Richmond High School, and potentially in the whole school district. Through the campaign, APEN staff instilled the value of direct collective action and nurtured a politicized youth identity among second-generation Laotians. This cross-racial collective identity was constructed on the basis of the shared structural location of young Laotians and youth of color living in inner-city neighborhoods and attending severely resource-deprived schools.

### ***Race and new immigrants: The environmental justice angle***

On 25 March 1999, a fireball that erupted at a Chevron refinery in Richmond ignited a campaign for a 'multilingual' emergency warning system in Contra Costa County. The eruption exposed major inadequacies in the County's warning system, which is supposed to inform residents of 'shelter-in-place'<sup>13</sup> procedures. The severity of the accident demanded that each household receive a timely warning by an automatic phone-alert system operated by the Contra Costa County Health Services Department. Yet, many Laotian households never received a call, while others were informed several hours after the explosion. Of those Laotian households that received timely calls, many residents did not understand them because the message was in English. Many Laotians, especially the elderly, are limited-English-proficient (Kong with Chiang, 2001: 18).

With this incident, APEN staff saw an opportunity to galvanize the diverse ethnic groups in the Laotian community to fight for an environmental justice issue that directly affected them. Over the ensuing months, a team of APEN staff and adult Laotian men and women devised a campaign to press for alternatives to the existing monolingual English emergency warning system. Second-generation Laotians had multiple roles in the campaign. Several of my respondents in AYA played an active part at meetings and events with Contra Costa County's Health Services and the

Internal Operations Committee of Contra Costa County's Board of Supervisors. During the campaign, my respondents also acted as translators and communicators for the non-English-speaking elders, as so often happens in immigrant communities. After six months of organizing and sustained pressure, on 27 September 1999, the County Board of Supervisors agreed to a new multilingual phone alert system to include English and the various Laotian languages represented in Contra Costa County. For APEN and the Laotian community, this campaign demanded that immigrants and non-immigrants alike, who live, work and play in Contra Costa County have a basic right to a safe environment, regardless of their race, class or English-language ability.

The campaign for a 'multilingual' emergency warning system highlights the tension between identity politics and coalitional politics. Clearly, the inadequacy of the emergency warning system affects the lives of other limited-English-speaking new immigrant communities in Contra Costa County. Previously, APEN had joined efforts with other community groups and environmental organizations to demand corporate accountability from large corporations such as Chevron, which have a history of environmental accidents. However, on this occasion, APEN/LOP staff made a strategic decision to emphasise the vertical relationship between the Laotian community and established decision makers in Contra Costa County. In this, APEN activists displayed an awareness of the way in which the American sociopolitical environment is structured so that interest-group politics on the racial model is necessary to gain access to resources and political influence (Gamson, 1995: 400–401).

Lack of staff capacity may have been one practical reason for the decision to focus on mobilizing the Laotian community through this campaign rather than nurturing coalition politics. Certainly, the protracted struggle with the County's leadership and public workers had severely stretched APEN and LOP resources.<sup>14</sup> But perhaps more importantly, following the environmental justice principle of people speaking for themselves, APEN/LOP staff sought to use this incident to develop capacity in the Laotian community for first- and second-generation Laotians of various ethnic groups to speak for themselves.<sup>15</sup> During the campaign, APEN/LOP staff sought to extend contacts in the Laotian community, increase membership, and deepen the involvement of interested Laotian adults and elders who had been difficult to organize previously. By focusing on the Laotian community, APEN prioritized base-building work in a community that lacks resources, experiences extreme poverty, invisibility and in which older Laotians are linguistically and culturally isolated. The ramifications of this campaign may eventually spread to all non-English speaking residents in the county, including the large Spanish-speaking population. However, given the state's practice of allocating scarce economic resources along racial lines, there is no certainty that an

adequately multilingual emergency warning system will emerge without a sustained multiracial campaign.

Through the ongoing education around environmental justice issues and issue-oriented community campaigns, APEN has sought not to foster an abstract political identity among Laotians, but one that arises out of the concrete material realities that the Laotian community faces. Rather than imposing an Asian American pan-ethnic identity on a community that thinks of itself as refugees, immigrants, poor and low-wage workers, APEN acknowledges multiple relationality and seeks to mobilize a politicized Laotian identity, which has connections to other communities of color in Contra Costa County.

### ***Collective self-understandings around race?***

In order to understand the impact of such political action on my respondents' collective self-understandings, I asked them what environmental justice means to them. Their responses indicate that the first cohort of girls, those who have been in the youth program the longest, have absorbed APEN's perspective and language on environmental justice. For example, Seng and Allison from the first cohort articulated a specific race and class analysis on environmental issues:

Seng: (no hesitation) I think just having the things like as any like girls, like rich people have, you know all that. Clean air and like no refinery or whatever behind your backyard and all that stuff. Like having the same right as they do and like I think that it's not fair that just because we are minorities and then we live in a like lower like you know, lower income you know neighborhood and like we don't have as much as money as they do and all that stuff. That you know we get all this you know discrimination and get all that stuff.

Allison: (long pause), what it means to me is like having equality in the environment . . . It's like every community, it's not perfect but then they should all be treated equal regardless of color because the way Chevron is treating us, it's not right. Cause just, just because we're colored, it doesn't mean that we can't do anything about it. And to me, it also means to have a right to everything else that like the rich people up in the hills get.

The language of rights, of the right to live in a clean and healthy environment regardless of one's race and class, comes through in Seng and Allison's quotes. Their words echo the efforts of poor communities of color in the US who have been organizing around issues of toxic waste siting, public health, or land and water rights in both historical and contemporary periods (see Cole and Forster, 2001; Pellow and Park, 2002). After four years of exposure to political education and action through AYA, the youth from the first cohort also understand that environmental activism must be linked to civil

rights and social justice issues. This was not the case for girls in the third and the fourth cohorts, who had spent less time in the youth project, had not absorbed the language of rights, or a clear analysis of race and class. Environmental justice encompasses a broad economic, social and environmental agenda. Thus, for many of the youth it is difficult to define it in specific terms. However, the ongoing political education by APEN staff on the environmental hazards in their community, and the longer they participate in AYA and get involved in campaigns to shut down toxic industries or hold them accountable, the greater the likelihood that they will adopt a race and class analysis. APEN gives them the information and the language to understand what they and their families experience viscerally – rising cancer rates and respiratory problems.

A second example of the kind of collective self-understandings that APEN nurtures on the perception of youth, and particularly youth of color, in dominant society was illustrated during a discussion on drug dealing in the community. At a meeting in November 1998, Jennifer, one of the AYA staff, asked the youth how the then California State Governor, Pete Wilson,<sup>16</sup> would respond to this social problem:

Maya says, 'Put more police on the corner'. Tsiet suggests, 'Bootcamp'. Fiey suggests 'build new prisons and longer sentencing'. (Field notes, 23 November 1998)

A little later in the discussion, when Jennifer asked the girls to suggest the kinds of policy responses that LOP could propose, Tsiet suggested 'workshops', while Maya believed that 'recreation centers' that included 'fun stuff with some learning' could address the problem. Cuo suggested working with parents to improve parent-child communication and Leah thought that the girls could 'be peer educators. Like go into schools and talk to the kids about drugs' (field notes, 23 November 1998). Then Jennifer highlighted the economic motivations of selling drugs and asked the youth if there was an alternative. Rachel emphasized the need for 'an organization that helps kids find jobs' and Sarah believed that 'training programs' would be useful (field notes, 23 November 1998).

During this meeting, of the 12 young women present, the most active and vocal participants were mainly from Groups 1, 2 and 3. These youth, who had been involved in AYA for one to three years, displayed a critical understanding of the consequences of punitive versus supportive solutions to the problem of drug-dealing in the community. They did not believe that incarcerating youth and tough sentences would address the structural causes of drug dealing in poor inner-city neighborhoods. Rather, they suggested measures such as training for jobs, supportive parent-child structures, meaningful education and recreation centers, which offered a safe place for youth. In so doing, they displayed solidarity with other youth in their multiracial neighborhoods and community.

In this 'border space' APEN aims to build 'both organic solidarity and a connecting ideology' (Espiritu et al., 2000: 132) by framing the siting of toxic plants in communities of color, monolingual emergency warning systems and inadequate school counseling services, as evidence of deep-seated societal racism and classism. Through involvement in APEN's youth program, second-generation Laotians are discovering that they have a stake in their local and broader community. However, the key question is whether such collective self-understandings will transcend beyond the context of APEN. Will second-generation Laotians develop a common consciousness and coalesce with other members of the 'collective black' (Bonilla-Silva, 2004) strata or distance themselves from them and struggle to 'position themselves higher in the new racial totem pole' (Bonilla-Silva, 2004: 944)?

## **DISTANCING FROM AFRICAN AMERICAN YOUTH: 'I AIN'T GHETTO'**

What individuals think and believe about the members of other racial and ethnic groups – stereotypes – are commonly recognized as a critical factor in inter-group relations (Allport, 1958). During my two years in the field, I had heard my respondents use the term 'ghetto' quite often. They would say, 'Oh! That's ghetto', or 'I ain't ghetto'. I wondered what meaning this term had for them and how they related to it, since they too lived in very poor multiracial neighborhoods, went to schools that were severely impoverished and often spoke in Black English. Focus group discussions revealed that the term 'ghetto' referred to language, but also to a specific part of the city, to dress styles, behavior and to 'black people'.

My respondents enlightened me that not 'talking properly', using a 'lot of profanity' and slang was part of ghetto culture. However, while they themselves attempted to distance themselves from this culture, my respondents were 'not secluded from the environment', as one Richmond High School English teacher put it. The familiarity with what the English teacher called 'playground language', was most evident among the youngest girls in Group 4. For example, during a focus group with Group 4, Marn expressed her opinion about the way some of her peers dress: 'I be hating people that be hella, I don't know they be wearing some tight-ass pants even though you can't fit them they still wear it. It's hella ugly. I don't like that.' This familiarity with Black English reflects local interactions among Laotian and African American youth, thus highlighting the resettlement of Laotian refugees in poor, inner-city neighborhoods where the majority of the population is African American.

The term 'ghetto' also referred to a particular culture, according to my



respondents. Pham stated 'it's all about the attitude when you're ghetto . . . like I don't know just the way that you present yourself'. Tsiet explained what Pham meant by the 'attitude':

the way you talk, it's the way you dress. Like when you're outside and then like there's elder people and stuff, you like have no respect, you just always yelling and (again a loud chorus of laughter from everyone). Yeah.

All of my respondents agreed that ghetto culture was signified by doing 'whatever looks bad to other people', including wearing baggy clothes, echoing what Zhou (1997: 69) has called an 'oppositional culture' (see also Lee, 1996; Smith-Hefner, 1999). A few of my respondents specifically associated the term 'ghetto' with African Americans, indicating that they have adopted the wider society's negative portrayal of poor blacks.<sup>17</sup> For 15-year-old Fiey, the word ghetto usually referred to black people:

That's how I see them. They be like tough like, and they speak in slang, they don't speak in like clear English you know. And they usually wear like a lot of baggy clothes; they don't have any respect.

Even though some of my respondents spoke in Black English and listened to rap music, most of them did not embrace the African American peer culture as I discuss below. Indeed, in over two years of field work, I observed that none of my respondents wore baggy clothes or clothes inside-out. In fact many of the youth expressed a 1970s retro dress style, with black, blue or white flared jeans, short T-shirts and black platform shoes or sandals. In their attitudes and behaviors also, my respondents displayed a culture different from the ghetto culture that they described. However, it has to be acknowledged that I only observed my respondents in the context of AYA meetings, activities and retreats, and not when they were around their peers outside of AYA.

The desire to distance themselves from other communities of color was powerfully evident when I asked my respondents how they would like a reporter to portray Laotian women. Sarah's comment was revealing:

Yeah, the thing is that mostly that we work hard for what we want. I mean we build our own goals you know and we work hard for it. We don't get it like other people, we don't like ask for it, we work for it you know. That's what they need to understand.

Even though Sarah is not explicit, she contrasts Laotian culture and values with that of poor African Americans, who are perceived to lack a work ethic, to be lazy and to have few aspirations for social mobility. Her comments suggest that Sarah attributes African Americans' lower economic status to these values, rather than to inequalities in society and their lack of power. Sarah wanted reporters to recognize that they reject the ghetto culture of their African American peers. In the process, she positioned Laotians as a 'model minority' who did not accept handouts

from the state but instead worked hard to achieve the American Dream, like other immigrant groups in the USA.

Other youth were much more explicit in disassociating themselves from 'ghetto' culture because, as Lisa said, 'it makes it seem bad you know. Like ghetto, "oh! You so ghetto" . . .'. Maya, a very self-assured and articulate Group 3 member, exemplifies the extent to which some of them go to distance themselves:

Well I have, I guess like I can call myself ghetto right, cause I guess was born and raised in like worst part there is in Richmond you know . . . but most people don't say that to me right. Cause I'm like I could come from the ghetto and you know I could be ghetto, I could talk ghetto but that's not the way I present myself you know. It's like I could present myself as like, I feel like corporate . . . if you didn't know me I would be like from the street, you know the rich hills you know.

She was right. She was always dressed smartly, her clothes and nail polish were color coordinated, and she did not speak Black English. Earlier in the interview, she had recounted her parents' migration stories and had indicated that she had absorbed her parents' belief that hard work, determination and the adoption of middle-class US norms would lead to success and social mobility.

Second-generation Laotians in my study go to great lengths to distance themselves from ghetto culture. They have generalized the negative portrayals of poor blacks to all blacks because in their daily interactions at school, in their neighborhoods and shops, they only come across poor blacks. There are very few African American teachers at Richmond High School. Moreover, deindustrialization and global economic restructuring hollowed out Richmond by the 1950s, leaving behind black workers and their families, economic marginality (Walker and The Bay Area Study Group, 1990), restricted opportunities, and impoverished central business and residential areas.

Even though some of my respondents speak Black English, listen to R&B and rap, have friendship groups that include African Americans, are attracted to black men, and are exposed to APEN's radical political ideology, these preferences, desires and ideologies do not necessarily lead to a critical understanding of political and economic disenfranchisement, and racial solidarity outside the context of APEN. Kasinitz (2004: 288) argues that since the 1960s, the US civil rights movement and the 'African American model . . . provides a real alternative to the mode of incorporation of the European immigrants'. But as Deborah Misir observes of South Asian activism against the racial violence of the Dotbusters<sup>18</sup> and other anti-Indian sentiments, the 'progressive ideology of alliance and identification with other people of color espoused by student activists is in many ways itself an *elite* ideology' (emphasis in original, 1996: 72). Misir points

out that the south Asian activists, who were second-generation, viewed the racial violence as part of a larger historical continuum of racism against all racial minority groups in the USA.

Like the south Asian student activists, the third- and second-generation Asian American staff at APEN also view the issues that affect Laotians in Contra Costa County within the prism of the larger sociopolitical and economic structures in the USA. But Laotians, like other recent immigrants and their children (see Dhingra, 2003; Prashad, 2000; Waters, 1999), as well as earlier immigrants (see Kasinitz, 2004), have adopted a negative portrayal of African Americans in the USA. However, unlike the South Asian immigrants in Prashad's study, the Indian and Korean Americans whom Dhingra interviewed, or the ethnically identified West Indian youth in Water's study, who were all more likely to be middle class, my respondents came from poor families and lived in impoverished urban cities. Though it must be acknowledged that my respondents represented a self-selected group of young women, they have middle-class aspirations and have adopted their parents' belief that hard work, perseverance, and the right values and attitudes will lead to social mobility.<sup>19</sup> Their attitudes reveal what Cheng and Espiritu (1989: 528–31) have called the 'immigrant ideology', or a 'frame of reference different from that held by native born Americans'. Cheng and Espiritu argue that immigrants, who often leave their home countries as a result of economic or political turmoil, view America as the land of opportunity. They are willing to work hard because they have a sense of optimism that their aspirations and dreams will be realized, as was the case with earlier European immigrants to the USA. This is in contrast to African American experiences, which are rooted in the historical legacy of slavery and the associated legal and institutional discrimination and inequality. African Americans often perceive America as a country where opportunities to achieve the American Dream have been denied to them.

An immigrant ideology is also evident in the ethnic identifications that my respondents selected for themselves. As I noted earlier, my respondents self-identified as Mien, Lao, Khmu, Lue or Hmong, thus affirming ethno-national identities that emphasize ethnic distinctiveness and national boundaries.<sup>20</sup> My respondents' attitudes and ethnic identifications suggest that they see themselves not as racialized minorities who experience mobility barriers and levels of discrimination similar to that experienced by African Americans, but as members of new immigrant groups who will achieve mobility and incorporation into America through individual hard work.

In addition to displaying an immigrant ideology, I argue that second-generation Laotians' attempts at distancing themselves from ghetto culture also reveal an awareness of the racialization processes operating in the US, which attributes racial power to whites (Bonilla-Silva, 2003: 271) and links

urban poverty to the pathological values of black inner-city residents, rather than to structural inequalities and barriers to opportunities for success. Bonilla-Silva argues that those regarded as . . . 'white' or as 'near white' 'receive systemic privileges . . . whereas those regarded as nonwhite are denied those privileges' (2003: 271). New immigrant groups as well as longer-term citizens maximize distance between themselves and African Americans, and attempt to minimize the distance between themselves and majority whites (see Bobo and Johnson, 2000; Lee et al., 2004; Murguia and Forman, 2003).

However, my research indicates that not all second-generation Laotians practice distancing strategies; rather, gender and generation intersect with race and class. Some of the young women in my study are seen by their male peers as having adopted white norms because they speak standard English, do not wear baggy clothes and have not adopted black ways of acting. If ghetto culture is associated with 'black people' and a 'black attitude', then not being ghetto is the exact opposite and associated with being white (also see Kao, 2000). Cuo's uncle called her a 'white girl' because:

- Cuo: He's like 'cause, the way you talk, the way you act'. I'm like 'you know how do I act and stuff like a white girl?' I'm like 'why, because I don't slang and stuff, cause I don't act in all you know ghetto whatever, slanging using Ebonics [Black English] whatever?' I mean that don't make me a white girl whatever.
- Bindi: But that wouldn't make you Laotian either, to speak Ebonics that would be more like some African American girls. [Some of the others laugh.]
- Cuo: Yeah. But then like you know my uncle, he uses slang, he's all trendy. He's with the Honda Civics and you know the hooboo and the clothing and stuff.
- Bindi: The hip-hop stuff?
- Cuo: And I'm not doing like wearing that kind of clothes or whatever, and he calls me a 'white girl' and stuff. But then I don't see myself as a 'white girl'.

For Cuo's uncle, this phenomenon of 'acting white' is not 'cool' (also see Lee, 1996: 101). Waters (1999: 319–21) reports similar findings among adolescent West Indian Americans in New York but she also notes that boys are more likely to suffer social stigma if they speak standard English among their friends. Girls have more leeway to codeswitch in speaking, when the situation calls for it. Like the young West Indian men in New York, for Cuo's uncle adopting black styles perhaps mirrored the embodied masculinities dominant amongst his peers. Additionally, it may also represent his alienation from school and wider society, and reflect an understanding of how racism and poverty operate in American society.<sup>21</sup> On the other hand, the second-generation young women in my study believed that America offered freedom, more power to women, and opportunities for education and work, regardless of social status, unlike in Laos. The majority of youth

who became involved in AYA had positive attitudes towards school, were performing well, and had high aspirations for college and careers.<sup>22</sup> Kao (2000) has found that group images and stereotypes of Asian Pacific American (APA) students as smart, hardworking and excelling in math and science had the effect of creating high educational expectations for APA students among their black, white and Hispanic peers, and compelled APA students to meet these high expectations of them as well as avoid disappointing their parents. My respondents understood and were able to conform to these expectations and mainstream educational requirements, without adversely losing face with peers.

Second-generation Laotian girls in this study may follow the South Asian student activists and Asian American staff at APEN and adopt a progressive ideology of alliance and a sense of being 'kindred people' (Okiihiro, 1994: 34) as they continue to be exposed to the history of racism in the USA. However, at this stage of their life, as teenage girls, they perceive the USA to be an open, fair and meritocratic society; if they talk 'proper', act 'right', dress smart and work hard, they will set themselves apart from blacks and not be subjected to racism. In short, they are convinced that if they become middle class (read white) they will have the possibility of upward mobility and acceptance into US society by the dominant culture.

## CONCLUSION

This article has sought to address the ways in which immigration patterns have changed racial landscapes in many urban areas and their impact on inter-minority relations. In particular, I considered some of the contexts in which social relations develop between Laotians, a new immigrant group, and established African American residents, the nature of these relations and their consequences. The article has demonstrated that these inter-minority relations are a complex web of cooperation and conflict, intermingling and distancing, influenced by geography, immigration histories, race, class, gender and generation.

Based on socioeconomic indicators, as well as residential patterns, low rates of interracial marriage to whites and friendship groups that include African Americans, Laotians in this study fall into the 'collective black' group hypothesized by Bonilla-Silva (2004). This common social location on the racial hierarchy in the USA, together with shared experiences of marginal social and economic conditions, and environmental degradation, suggests the potential for cross-racial coalitions. Indeed, within 'border spaces' such as APEN we see the emergence of collective self-understandings around race and ethnicity and cooperation with other members of the 'collective black' strata, while campaigning against toxic emissions by

corporations, monolingual English-only emergency warning systems in communities where at least 40 percent of the residents are new immigrants, or inadequate school counseling services in a school that is 95 percent students of color.

However, the ways in which new immigrants and their children make sense of racializing processes reveal the complexities of racial politics in the USA, and the difficulties of nurturing a common consciousness among members of the collective black strata. The variable positioning of Asian immigrants and Asian Pacific Americans along the bi-racial hierarchy suggests that ethnic and racial hierarchies are not given or stable. The shifting and contradictory constructions of racial meanings can provide second-generation Laotians with resources, which are interpreted and mobilized in new contexts (Sewell, 1992). The young women's attitudes and self-identification in ethnonational terms suggest an 'immigrant ideology' (Cheng and Espiritu, 1989). Unlike many of their male peers, the majority of Laotian girls in this study are educationally oriented, have high aspirations and are strongly connected to their families' immigrant communities and values. They perceive American society to be open, meritocratic and one that offers many opportunities. They are optimistic that they can fulfill their aspirations, and achieve social mobility and acceptance in US society through the adoption of appropriate values and attitudes as well as individual effort.

This optimism is bolstered by the positive images that teachers and peers have of Laotians performing well in school. The 'model minority' image applied to those Laotians demonstrating high educational performance in school provides second-generation Laotians with additional resources, albeit divisive resources, to challenge the positioning of Laotians at the bottom of the racial hierarchy. This suggests that growing up in poor inner-city neighborhoods populated by native-born minorities does not necessarily lead to an 'adversarial stance' (Portes and Zhou, 1993) towards the dominant society among all the children of immigrants. Rather, these adaptation outcomes are shaped by gender intersecting with class, race and ethnicity.

Collective self-understandings around race are also constrained by contemporary racial politics in the USA. The social geography of race reveals that particular material worlds shape second-generation Laotians' daily environments and interactions in specific ways. These material worlds are informed by racial politics in US society, and the informal meanings and stereotypes emanating from it, which structure the everyday experiences of minority groups (Nagel, 1994: 156). Second-generation Laotians' desire to distance themselves from blacks indicates an awareness of racialization processes in the USA, which attribute the positioning of African Americans at the bottom of the racial hierarchy to moral deficiencies and negative values rather than to racial discrimination and structural inequalities.

Second-generation Laotians' attitudes and aspirations reflect the power of racialization processes in the USA that attribute racial power to whites and that privilege assimilation into middle-class society as a route to gaining social prestige and full citizenship. The ideology of assimilation into middle-class white America creates limits to the effectiveness of 'border spaces' such as APEN and its goal of nurturing collective self-understandings and critical racial solidarity among Laotians and other communities of color in Contra Costa County. However, even if second-generation Laotians experience social mobility and succeed in becoming 'honorary whites' in Bonilla-Silva's (2004) tri-racial social system, like other Asian American groups in the intermediate strata, they will remain *honorary* and will continue to be seen as perpetual foreigners (Kim, 2004a).

The experiences, attitudes and aspirations of Laotians in this study demonstrate the need for a more fluid and complex understanding of racial difference in the USA than the concept of racial hierarchy offers; one that renders visible the differential yet simultaneous racialization processes that create antagonisms among, and a complex relationality between, non-white racial groups. Opportunities for racial groups in the collective black strata to interact in 'border spaces' and create cooperative cross-racial relations are not enough to nurture a common consciousness. Social justice organizations working for a multicultural democracy have to constantly underscore racialization processes operating in the USA, which lead to differentials in power and opportunity among minority groups. The ideology of assimilation projects the USA as a meritocratic society with equality of opportunity and rewards for economic individualism. Whilst official political discourse acknowledges 'difference' (racial, ethnic, cultural), its proper place is seen to be in the private realms of family, culture and economy, not in a collective political identity and assertion (Kim, 2004a). Thus a key challenge for activists and advocates is to highlight the specificities of group histories as well as acknowledge that 'differences' are not equal. At the same time, social justice organizations must instill a sense of solidarity among Asian Pacific Americans with regard to other communities of color by averting the belief amongst this group that movement towards near-whiteness will lead to social prestige and full citizenship for individual racial minority groups when inequalities in power and privilege persist.

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## Notes

- 1 Okihiro (1994: 33)
- 2 The 'second generation' is defined as children born in the USA to immigrant parents and children born abroad who emigrated at a very early age (Portes, 1996: ix).
- 3 Laos is an ethnically, linguistically and culturally diverse country, comprising over 60 ethnic groups (Chan, 1994: 3), including valley-dwelling ethnic Lao and hill tribes such as Iu-Mien, Hmong, Khmu, Lahu and Thai Dam. In the context of the USA, the umbrella term 'Laotian' is used by some scholars (see for example Portes and Rumbaut, 2001), by the criminal justice system, such as the California Youth Authority, and by social justice organizations such as the Asian Pacific Environmental Network. APEN is attempting to bring the various factions and ethnic groups together, despite their cultural differences and past adversarial relations, to build the Laotian Organising Project and mobilize 'Laotian' as a strategic political identity in West Contra Costa County. In this article, I follow this trend and use the umbrella term 'Laotian' to refer to my respondents who have ethnic origins in the diverse Laotian groups.
- 4 In her study of Cambodian refugees and affluent Chinese immigrants to the US, Ong (1996: 737) has argued that 'hierarchical schemes of racial and cultural difference intersect in a complex and contingent way to locate minorities of color from different class backgrounds' on the hegemonic white-black bipolar model of American society. Thus, Cambodians have been subjected to a similar process of 'blackening', and compared to their inner city African American neighbors in terms of low-wage employment, high rates of teenage pregnancy and welfare-dependent families. On the other hand, Vietnamese and rich Chinese immigrants have been upheld for their 'Confucian values' and business acumen, thus seen as closer to the 'white ideal standards of American citizenship' (Ong, 1996: 742-743).
- 5 According to the 2000 US Census, non-white racial groups, at 49 percent, outnumber whites, at 47 percent, in California with Hispanics constituting over 32 percent, African Americans 6 percent and Asian Americans about 11 percent of the population. These figures suggest that California is experiencing more demographic change than the rest of the USA (Johnson, 2004: 382).
- 6 The category Laotian includes Lao, Mien and Hmong youth, though Hmong wards are more common (personal communication with California Youth Authority Information Systems Bureau, 6 March 2002). However, a review of newspaper reports on Richmond and San Pablo indicate that there are Asian gangs operating in West Contra Costa County and from the names of those standing trial it can be inferred that they are young Mien men (see, for example, Fulbright, 2001).
- 7 See Cole and Foster (2001: Chapter 1) for a detailed history of the Environmental Justice Movement in the United States.
- 8 The term 'one-and-a-half' generation refers to foreign-born youths that immigrated to the USA at an early age (Portes and Rumbaut, 2001: 24).
- 9 All names are pseudonyms and were chosen by my respondents.
- 10 The notion of a shared history and struggle with other communities of color emerged among Asian American activists in the late 1960s and early 1970s, who



came together under the collective identity of Yellow Power. While they believed that Asian Americans were distinct from other minority groups, they also believed that they were inextricably connected to them and expressed solidarity with other communities of color (Omi and Winant, 1994).

- 11 In a recent report, the Fiscal Crisis and Management Assistance Team of the California Department of Education used professional and legal standards to assess the West Contra Costa Unified School District in five areas: community relations, personnel management, pupil achievement, financial management and facilities management. On a scale of 0 to 10, where 10 represented not only full implementation of standards, but sustaining them with high quality, the report gave the district a 6.27 for community relations, 5.30 for personnel management, 5.26 for facilities management, and 4.38 for financial management, but only 2.76 for pupil achievement (California Department of Education Fiscal Crisis & Management Assistance Team, 2001). Annual California Schools Safety Assessments indicated that in the West Contra Costa Unified School District, crimes in certain categories (assault with deadly weapon, possession of weapons, property crimes) had gone down over the period 1995–2000, but crimes in other categories such as battery had increased dramatically, while those related to sex offenses, robbery and drug/alcohol related had increased slightly (Shafer, 2000).
- 12 At Richmond High School, Hispanic or Latino students constituted a majority of 50 percent, African Americans numbered 26 per cent, and Asian Pacific Islanders were 18 percent of the student body in 1999.
- 13 ‘Shelter-in-place’ alerts warn residents to seek shelter, close the doors and windows, and shut off ventilation systems (Kong with Chiang, 2001: 17).
- 14 Despite committing to a multilingual phone alert system in 1999, it was not until 2002 that Contra Costa County had finally located a source of funding to implement a pilot version in response to continued pressure from APEN/LOP staff (informal conversation with LOP staff).
- 15 See Shah (2002) for an in-depth analysis of the inter-ethnic power relations that emerge when community organization aimed at mobilizing new, low-income Asian Pacific immigrants are founded and staffed by second- and third-generation college-educated Asian Pacific Americans from outside the community.
- 16 Pete Wilson was Governor of California in 1998 and a Republican.
- 17 Kao (2000) also found that white, Asian and Hispanic students at a high school in Chicago held similar group images and racial stereotypes of their black peers.
- 18 Dotbusters was a gang in Jersey City, New Jersey, that attacked and threatened South Asians in 1987. Their name alludes to the ‘bindi’ (red dot) that some Hindu women wear on their foreheads.
- 19 Paralleling my findings, Nancy Lopez (2003) also reports that Dominican and Haitian second-generation girls in New York are both far more educationally oriented, have middle-class aspirations and are more tied to their families’ immigrant communities than their brothers, who are far more influenced by a street culture that is in large part African American and Puerto Rican.
- 20 As Waters (1999: 303–4) demonstrates, ethnic identifications are used selectively by individuals and can shift with context and audiences. On occasion, my informants would identify as Asian in order to avoid lengthy explanations of the ethnic group they belong to. However, as I have argued elsewhere (Shah,

- 2002: Chapter 3), even though Laotian teenage girls select ethnonational categories that connect them to their parents' homeland, the contents and meanings of these categories are reconstructed within the specific context of the USA.
- 21 Smith-Hefner (1999: 195) reports that in the late 1980s, when she conducted research, young Khmer men also experienced alienation from school and were embarrassed to ask for help. She also notes that most preferred to dress in the 'gangsta' or 'hip-hop' style associated with urban black and Latino males.
  - 22 From informal conversations with teachers at Richmond High School it appears that Laotian students fall into two groups: one that is extremely diligent, hard-working, studious and with high levels of skill, and the other group that has low skill levels, and is prone to truancy, drugs and gang involvement. Of the high academic performers at Richmond High School, Laotian students dominated the California Scholarship Federation (CSF) roll when I was in the field (it takes a 3.00 Grade Point Average (GPA) to be on the CSF roll), large numbers were in the college preparatory classes and they had the highest grade point averages according to one of the deans at the school.

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