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PRESENT AND PASSIONATE:
A Critical Analysis of Asian American Involvement
in The United States Environmental Justice Movement

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IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF A BACHELOR'S OF ARTS DEGREE IN
ENVIRONMENTAL ANALYSIS AND SOCIOLOGY

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ABSTRACT

Communities of color are disproportionately exposed to toxins and pollution. The environmental justice movement addresses the greater health and environmental risks experienced by minority groups. Although Asian Americans are the fastest growing population in the United States, there is little known about their involvement in the movement. In this thesis, I further observe Asian American involvement in the United States environmental justice movement. By analyzing community case studies, I identify Asian American-specific mobilization challenges and strategies. Interviews with prominent Asian American environmental justice activists reveal activism and collective identity are connected, but vary greatly according to individualized Asian American experiences. Results show Asian Americans stereotypes, as the civically disengaged model minority, are inaccurate and outdated. Asian Americans are currently active in the movement for environmental justice and will continue to become increasingly active as they become more aware of issues in their respective communities.

Keywords: Asian Americans, social movements, environmental justice, environmental racism, community mobilization, civic engagement

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INTRODUCTION

Asian Americans are currently the fastest growing population. In 2055, they will make up the largest immigrant group in the United States (López, Ruiz, & Patten, 2017). Despite the ever-growing population, Asian Americans are still excluded from a myriad of conversations, which often focus solely on white, Black, and Hispanic populations. In addition to being left out of generalized population research statistics, Asian Americans are forgotten in efforts led by other communities of color. In this thesis I will address the lack of discussion of Asian American involvement in the United States environmental justice movement. Using multi-method qualitative research, I will address the following research question: “What does Asian American participation look like in the U.S. environmental justice movement?” In answering this question I hope to diversify narratives of environmental leaders, bring visibility to existing Asian American environmental justice activists, and understand social movement participation patterns of this racial group.

Systemic racism portrays minorities as expendable bodies compared to those of white affluent individuals. Communities of color are placed on the frontlines, in polluted, toxic, and dangerous conditions. The environmental justice movement aims to address the disproportional environmental burdens faced by communities of color. While large organizing efforts have been led by Black and Hispanic communities, Asian American involvement has not been equally discussed. Asian Americans are sometimes overlooked as identifying as a community of color. Arguments suggest Asian Americans should not be considered a minority because they do not face the same systemic barriers of other groups. 2012 statistics show that Asian Americans earned the highest national median household income, even outearning whites (Ramakrishnan and Ahmad, 2012, p. 86). Household Asian American income is used as evidence to argue the group is not

oppressed, as they even outearn whites. This statistic is not representative of the entire heterogeneous Asian American population, as data from affluent and highly skilled individuals is aggregated with low income, refugee individuals. A small portion of Asian Americans may be privileged, but this is not the case for the entire Asian American group, which includes all South, East, and Southeast Asian ethnicities. The mainstream Asian American narrative focuses on the highly educated and affluent. Stories of Asian American populations facing systemic barriers and hardship are untold, but still exist. Asian Americans are a minority and should be included in the community of color's fight for environmental justice. As environmental issues continue to worsen, conditions in communities of color will continue to worsen. More environmental justice advocates are needed to address social inequities. It is important to illuminate and further understand the role and contributions of Asian Americans in the environmental justice movement, especially as this demographic group continues to grow.

In Chapter 1, I first situate relevant historical events and literature relating to topics of Asian immigration in the United States, Asian American social movements, and the history of the United States environmental justice movement. I begin with a broad discussion of these topics before drawing connections between Asian Americans and the environmental justice movement. A broad research question is posed in this thesis due to the current lack of information on Asian American environmental justice work.

In Chapters 3, 4, 5, and 6 I engage with past community level mobilization efforts by Asian Americans and then go on to discuss successful cases of Asian American environmental justice community organizing. I analyze details from the case studies to provide specific tactics that can be used for future environmental justice organizing in Asian American communities.

To understand Asian American involvement on an individual level, Chapters 7, 8, 9, and 10 highlight interviews I conducted with five prominent environmental justice activists from three significant time periods. Interviews reveal various individuals' organizing experience, initial interest for environmental justice, and perceptions on Asian American activism. These interviews diversify the pantheon of environmental justice activists, to also include Asian American individuals, and furthers understanding around individual participation patterns of the racial group.

Environmental justice involvement will be discussed at both community and individual levels to allow for different depths of understanding. Connections will be drawn between the two research methods to discuss overall patterns of participation and also provide tactics for future community organizing and strategies to increase Asian American activism.

CHAPTER 1: LITERATURE REVIEW

Asians in America

Asian Americans have been historically excluded from immigrating to the United States dating back to the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. The United States did not witness a large influx of Asian Americans until Congress passed the Hart-Cellar Act in 1965. The Hart-Cellar Act was monumental for abolishing the national origins immigration quota system. The motive behind this action was to reunite families, but more importantly to increase skilled labor in the United States as an economic advantage. Since the 1980s, one third of all American engineers and medical professionals have come from abroad, most specifically China, Taiwan, India and the Philippines (Zhou et al., 2016). Skilled individuals from Asia are often drawn to the United States due to its focus on education and specialized training, globalized market, and the wide varieties of opportunities. Frustrated middle class individuals from India, Korea, Taiwan, and the Philippines immigrate to the United States in hopes of economic mobility, a stable economy, and political government free of corruption (Zhou et al., 2016). Asian immigrants from these countries were mostly highly educated and skilled individuals with high levels of social, cultural, and economic capital relative to their home countries.

To many Americans, Asian immigrants appear to be the epitome of achieving the American Dream. Racialization discusses the connection between social and symbolic meanings and phenotypic differences (Omi & Winant, 1986). Racial groups have not only been defined for the color of their skin, but also according to their structural power. Bonilla-Silva (1997) discusses disproportionate powers as *racialized social systems*, in which “economic, political, social, and ideological levels are particularly structured by the placement of actors in racial categories.” Levels of power are ranked and portrayed as a racial hierarchy, with whites on top and Blacks on

the bottom. Asian Americans were coined as the “model minority,” a term used to valorize the success of the group, in comparison to Blacks’ lack of economic success. The term portrayed Asian Americans as hard-working and Blacks as lazy. According to the racial hierarchy structure, Asian Americans are situated above Blacks but below white Americans. The 1987 cover of the *Times Magazine* depicts a group of Asian Americans as “Whiz Kids,” portraying individuals with high educational status, technical skilled jobs, and high salaries. Illustrating Asian Americans as the model minority depicted the group as successful and well-off, the “best” (economically successful) minority (Wong et al., 1998).

Clare Kim’s concept of *racial triangulation*, however, argues that Asian Americans’ structural power is not equal among all categories (economic, political, and social). Kim creates a new analysis of powers, titled *racial triangulation*, to address perceptions of Asian Americans as “perpetual foreigners.” While Blacks do not achieve as high levels of economic security compared to other racial groups, they are still depicted as an “insider” and part of the United States. Implications of Asian Americans’ power place the group in a particular position straddled between reaching similar economic capital of whites, but still being perceived as an outsider minority (Shah, 2008). Racial triangulation acknowledges the portrayal of Asian Americans as “perpetual foreigners,” an outsider group which is often overlooked by society. The image is further reinforced through stereotypical representations of Asian Americans as reticent and docile, a follower, and disengaged from political and social decision-making.

The model minority stereotype depicts the highly skilled, well-resourced middle class Asians who immigrated and achieved economic success in the United States. This stereotype, however, does not resonate with the immigrant stories of all Asian Americans. Since 1975, over one million refugees from Southeast Asia, such as Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, have immigrated

to the United States (Zhou et al., 2016). Individuals from refugee countries were not equipped with the same capital as those who immigrated for opportunities in skilled labor. The model minority myth only acknowledges the stories of Asian Americans who were already economically well-off in their home countries before seeking further upward mobility in the United States. Illustrating Asian Americans as financially stable and the successful minority is inaccurate. The narrative fails to capture the stories of under-resourced individuals, such as Southeast Asian refugees. The model minority and perpetual foreigner stereotypes cause Asian Americans to often be overlooked for support, services, and resources.

Asian Americans & Social Movements

Asian American populations began to multiply and concentrate in certain areas such as the West Coast. These hotspots became the sites where Asian Americans would mobilize and advocate for the overlooked support, services, and resources the group needed. Not all Asian Americans were well-off, and the community had problems that needed to be vocalized. The civil rights movement fought for the inequities of marginalized groups. Asian Americans in Oakland, California were inspired by powerful organizations that emerged out of the civil rights movement, such as the Black Panther party (1966), and their influence on the Black Power movement. Two years later in 1968, Asian Americans banded together as a collective force at San Francisco State College, marking the official birth of the Asian American Movement. The college's Asian American student organization united with other campus minority groups (Black, Latino, Native American) to create the Third World Liberation Front (TWLF) for a five month strike (Wei, 1993). TWLF demanded a list of fifteen goals, which included that the administration offer an ethnic studies department to acknowledge the histories of marginalized groups and empower them to address issues in their communities. The creation of ethnic studies would support the idea of the

United States as an ethnic pluralistic country. This demonstration also inspired University of California, Berkeley students to create their own TWLF strike in 1969.

While the first collective force that marked the Asian American movement was not exclusively a demonstration led by Asian Americans, it more importantly symbolized the potential of Asian American activism. Prior to 1968, Asian ethnicities publicly existed in their own disjointed realms. The creation of TWLF brought together Asian American ethnicities. Student Yuji Ichioka coined the term “Asian American” and founded the Asian American Political Alliance as a unifying act between different Asian ethnic groups on campus (Wei 1993, Geron 2001, Unemoto 2016). This organization created the current-day “Asian American” identity, which consists of one pan-Asian group that shares similar racial treatment despite differences in home countries. Encapsulating all Asian American identities increased the visibility of the population and its needs.

Vincent Chin’s murder in 1982 was the second most impactful and unifying event for the Asian American community. Chin was a Chinese American who was mistaken by a group of vengeful unemployed automobile workers as Japanese. At the time, Japan’s automobile industry was booming, and unemployment in the United States’ industry was high. Angered by their job losses, a group of American men violently abused Chin and ultimately killed him. The punishment for this crime, however, was four years of probation and a \$3000 fine, and not a single day in prison (Harrison, 1986). The verdict of this trial angered many Asian American activists who demanded that the manslaughter of an Asian American was equally as punishable as the manslaughter of a white American. Simultaneously, this event unified Asian Americans, who were fearful that other hate crimes against them, regardless of their ethnicity, would occur due to similarities in overall Asian phenotypic appearance. Vincent Chin continues to be a symbol for

Asian American activists to fight against anti-Asian biases and violence against the Asian American community. These efforts make up a large portion of present-day Asian American activism.

Asian Americans have used their unified presence to advocate for a variety of issues facing their communities. Shortly after the Asian American movement gained traction, Asian American women developed their own movement to combine the white-centered feminist movement and the male-dominated Asian American movement. Community building initially took place in localized groups, where Asian American women would have “rap sessions” or “study groups” to talk about specific issues (Wei, 1993). These meetings eventually turned into larger group projects that contributed tangibly to the community. The Asian American women’s movement recognized specific areas where their community experienced double the oppression (Wei, 1993). The movement focused on issues such as Vietnamese women in the Vietnam war, arranged marriages, domestic violence and the exotification of Asian women, and the exploitative conditions of Asian American women in sweatshops.

More recently, Asian Americans have been vocal in cases regarding college admissions and affirmative action (Takagi, 1992; Wu, 1995). Asian American activism in college admissions is distinct from the examples of activism listed above, because of differing opinions among Asian Americans. Generally speaking, more conservative and affluent Asian Americans oppose affirmative action. Chinese Americans who immigrated to the United States with large amounts of capital often believe affirmative action makes college admissions more competitive and devalues their child’s stellar grade point average and college preparatory exam scores. These individuals benefit from the lack of affirmative action because they have the resources to obtain high test scores and grades. Because affirmative action admission policies consider other factors in addition

to test scores and grades, more conservative Asian Americans tend to view this as a “give-away” to a “less-achieving” Black student while limiting admission for a high-achieving Chinese American student. On the other hand, more progressive Asian Americans, and those who immigrated with less financial resources, are more likely to support affirmative action to increase diversity, accessibility, and equity in higher education. Affirmative action demands have been requested since the first TWLF strike in 1968, but are resurfacing again (Wei, 1993).

Still, not all Asian Americans are politically active. Asian Americans are the most politically disengaged group (Aguirre & Lio, 2008; Ramakrishnan, 2001; Rim, 2009), with the lowest political turnout. Rim (2009) uses theories to explain how some minorities are more politically active than others, specifically Latino and Asian American mobilization protest efforts. *Grievance and issue theories* reason that low-status minority groups are more likely to protest because they are more dissatisfied with the system’s work or because the policy specifically affects a group. Most importantly, Rim (2009) outlines differences in ethnic media between the two groups. Latinos can all access the same media delivered in Spanish. Asian languages, however, are complex and differ based on ethnic groups. These complexities make advocacy educational information more difficult and costly to produce, and nonprofit groups may leave out Asian language translations when underfunded. Lastly, many Asian Americans are still fearful of engaging in political involvement, due to the repercussions they witnessed in their homelands. For example, for those from China and Korea, some immigration rallies in the United States remind individuals of anti-government, socialist mobilization that occurred in their home country, which led to punishment by the government. For these individuals, mobilization in the United States still comes with connotations of deviant behavior and harsh punishment. Rim’s points can be used to

explain some reasons why Asian Americans may be less likely to engage in social movement organizing than other minorities.

Depictions of Asian Americans as silent, withdrawn, and apolitical perpetual foreigners are not entirely true. Asian Americans are more than just co-leaders who were involved in minority-based coalition building such as the TWLF, but also leaders who have mobilized to bring attention to their own distinct racial issues. Asian Americans may not be the most politically active group, but activism is still present. Activism within the Asian American community has become more common within the last 50 years, as the Asian American population itself has exponentially grown. They are the fastest growing racial group in the country, growing over four times as rapidly as the total U.S. population (López, Ruiz, & Patten, 2017). Asian Americans are not invisible, and their growing numbers will likely make them more vocal, politically engaged, and difficult to overlook in the upcoming years. Their inclusion and activism in the United States environmental justice movement is crucial in order to demand systemic changes.

The United States Environmental Justice Movement

The United States environmental justice movement aims to address aspects of race, class, and gender inequity that white mainstream environmentalism fails to acknowledge (Sarathy, 2018). The movement combines white environmentalism and civil rights movements in attempts to understand environmental issues prevalent in communities of color. Early leaders of the environmental justice movement channeled Civil Rights Movement experience into their organizing. The first acknowledged environmental justice case occurred in Warren County, North Carolina (1980). Warren County's case sparked increased activism within Black communities in the south. The fight for environmental justice was led by Black leaders and was framed as the fight for environmental racism. Environmental racism advocates for equal treatment, access, and

healthy environments regardless of race, income, and origin. Scholars have examined the relationship between environmental justice and race, despite only formally recognizing the movement for thirty years (Bullard 1990; Pellow 2004; Pullido 1996).

Warren County's environmental justice case began with Ward Transformer Company. Each night, the company illegally sprayed toxic PCB-contaminated oils on the shoulders of North Carolina roads for three months in the summer of 1978 (United States Office of Energy Office of Legacy Management, n.d.). Gallons of toxin-laced oil were dumped along the highway, with toxic runoff contaminating the land. PCB is a toxic chemical, a carcinogen, and an endocrine disruptor. To prevent the dispersion of toxins, the United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) decided to remove the soil from the roads and dispose of them in an underground location. The proposed dump site was Warren County, North Carolina, a small low-income Black community.

Reverend Benjamin F. Chavis Jr. of the United Church of Christ stepped in to organize the community and stop this environmental racist act. After his success with Warren County's dump site, Chavis formed the United Church Commission for Racial Justice to continue to advocate for these issues. The commission published *Toxic Wastes and Race* in 1987, a monumental report that analyzes correlations between community exposure to environmental toxins and racial demographics. This report was groundbreaking, and the first of its kind to connect the two topics together.

Reactions from *Toxic Wastes and Race* sparked particular activism from people of color, as they began to acknowledge the power of their communities and coalition-building across all racial groups. Growing conversations ultimately led to the First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit in Washington D.C. (1991). This summit was unique as only minority attendees were given the vocal platform to collaborate, and attendees of traditionally

white environmentalism were spectators (Faber & McCarthy, 2001). The environmental justice movement's foundational efforts stressed the importance of encompassing people of color, but some groups were better represented than others. Black participation overwhelmingly made up the majority because of the movement's early leaders and roots. The Asian American community was left out.

Warren County, *Toxic Wastes and Race*, and the First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit are all pivotal events which served to envision and define the environmental justice movement. These three events were all coordinated by the United Church of Christ Commission for Racial Justice, a group of predominantly Blacks (C. Lee, personal communication, August 5, 2019). The United Church of Christ's rhetoric and tactics used to fuel the environmental justice movement reflected a central focus on Black communities, and continued much of the advocacy linked to the civil rights movement twenty years ago. *Toxic Wastes and Race* solely focused on toxic waste sites in Black and Latino communities, leaving out other minority groups including Asian Americans. The absence of Asian Americans can also be seen in the attendees invited by the United Church of Christ to attend the Summit. Attendees of the Summit included 158 Blacks, 64 Latinos, 55 Native Americans, and 24 Asian Americans (Kim & Matsuoka, 2013). The United Church of Christ was quick to acknowledge this oversight a year later in the Summit's proceedings (United Church of Christ, 1992), however, Asian Americans' absence continued. Two years after the Summit, environmental justice scholar Robert Bullard published his foundational work titled *Race and Environmental Justice*. He states environmental racism as "practices that place African Americans, Latinos, and Native Americans at greater health and environmental risk than the rest of society," but fails to mention Asian Americans (Bullard, 1993, p. 319). I highlight Bullard's statement not to disprove it, nor to compare the oppressions of

the three groups to that of Asian Americans'. Bullard's statement defining environmental racism lists out minorities that are impacted by injustices, but again overlooks the impacts on Asian Americans as a minority racial group. Historic Asian American absence from environmental justice movement literature is evident through the language and rhetoric used by the movement's monumental events, reports, and leaders. Early sentiments portrayed Asian Americans as disparate and unaffected from the environmental justice movement.

Lack of representation or acknowledgement in the foundational years of the movement could be a result of Asian American's physical lack of presence in the United States during the late 1980s and early 1990s. From 1980 to 1990, the Asian American population grew from 1.5 percent of the U.S. population to 2.9 percent (United States Census, 1990). The movement's monumental events overlapped with the years of increased Asian American immigration and settlement in the country, thus the sheer number of Asian Americans able to participate in these events was less than other minorities. Representation at the First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit, however, did not accurately reflect attendees according to population sizes. Twice as many American Indians attended the event over Asian Americans, despite making up 0.8 percent of the population (United States Census, 1990). As stated in the section above, foreign born Asian immigrants may have been less willing to engage in oppositional political and social discourse despite making up a larger population because of negative connotations and experiences associated with political activism in their home countries (Rim, 2009). Asian American absence in the monumental period of the environmental justice movement may be due to historic immigration trends at the time. Nonetheless, failing to recognize Asian Americans in the "canon" of the movement has had a lasting impact. The importance of Asian

American involvement in the United States environmental justice movement lacks the same visibility and acknowledgement as other minority groups.

Asian Americans & the U.S. Environmental Justice Movement

Examining Asian American involvement in the United States environmental justice movement, a movement upheld by minorities, is particularly fascinating due to the group's distinct position in the racial hierarchy. Existing social movement literature discusses the impact of collective identification as an indicator to represent whether an individual chooses to participate in social movement organizing (Simon et. al, 1998; Polletta & Jasper, 2001; Snow, 2001). Collective identity is a sense of "we-ness" and belonging, or a feeling of commonality between shared experiences. A strong sense of collective identification in an individual acknowledges that their experiences and hardships are not singular, but are also felt by a group of individuals. The collective experience that bonds the group together also identifies a sense of othering, in that their experience is different from the majority of society. Individuals with a strong collective identity will likely seek out others who face similar problems, and feel the people-powered support necessary to mobilize and engage in a social movement.

Collective identification theory can be used to observe Asian American involvement, or lack thereof, in the environmental justice movement. "Asian American" is a homogenous umbrella term for ethnicities of various cultures, languages, and histories of exploitation and isolation. Differences in immigration journeys and income result in different lifestyles, needs, and environmental exposures. Immigrants relocating for upward mobility will not have the same needs of refugees. The Asian American identity captures a wide array of individuals with different needs, making it difficult to unify over specific issues supported by the entire community. In this thesis,

I choose to group all Asian American identities together, due to lack of disaggregate data and representation.

Academic scholarship discussing Asian American involvement in environmental movements is scarce. Julie Sze is one of the few academics who has addressed the prominent voice of Asian Americans to the environmental conversation. Her work, *Asian American Activism for Environmental Justice* (2004), outlines the few examples of Asian American mobilization around environmental justice issues. Sze acknowledges Asian American women's occupational health conditions and exposure to toxins from textile and garment workers as a historic injustice. The continuation of these occupational health conditions are reproduced today in Silicon Valley technology production. 70 to 80 percent of Silicon Valley production workers are either Latino or Asian immigrants, and 60 percent of those workers are women (Park & Pellow, 2004). Workers are exposed to over 1000 toxic chemicals daily, and occupational illnesses are found more than three times of "any other basic industry" (Park & Pellow, 2004). Sze (2004, 2011) further discusses other prominent issues such as: the fight for land use and location of toxic facilities, gentrification and housing displacement of Chinatowns and ethnoburbs, and contaminated food consumption and production. She ends her work by stating the invisibility of Asian Americans in the multiracial environmental justice fight is unjust due to race, culture, language and citizenship issues which bar them from actively participating (Sze, 2004).

In the few works about Asian American environmentalism, particular individuals are repeatedly cited. Quotes and case studies from members of the first Asian American environmental justice group, Asian Pacific Environmental Network (APEN), are customarily referenced as the sole example of Asian American environmentalism. Narratives from East Asian-identifying leaders, such as APEN's Pam Tau Lee, Peggy Saika, Pamela Chiang, and Miya Yoshitani are

crucial in understanding the foundation of Asian American environmentalism, but literature must also reflect representation from other groups such as Southeast Asians with refugee backgrounds. The most inclusive written work that features Asians from different ethnicities is *AAPI Nexus: Asian American Environmentalism*, which recounts a few environmental mobilization efforts in California (UCLA Asian American Studies Center, 2013).

Analyzing pertinent literature, there appears to be a lack of discussion regarding Asian American environmentalism. Available literature repeats the narratives from the same individuals and ethnicities. In the following thesis, I will diversify the narratives of environmental leaders in existing literature by bringing visibility to efforts carried out by Asian American environmental justice activists. Analyzing three case studies and interviewing five prominent Asian American environmental justice leaders from different time periods will aid in understanding the varied participation and involvement patterns of Asian Americans in the United States environmental justice movement.

CHAPTER 2

METHODS

In this study I utilize a multimethod qualitative research approach to further understand Asian American environmental justice involvement through both community and individual lenses. Information on three Asian American environmental justice case studies was collected through secondary research (newspaper articles, interviews, and academic publications) to analyze patterns and successful strategies for future Asian American environmental justice community organizing. Case studies were strategically selected to represent the different complexities within Asian American environmental justice issues.

Primary research was conducted through five in-depth and personal interviews. Interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed (Appendix 3), and coded. Participants were intentionally selected to highlight key Asian American activists throughout different significant time periods: the formation of the environmental justice movement, the first Asian American environmental justice organization, and a present-day, newly developed Asian American Pacific Islander environmental justice and public health organization. Individuals were invited to participate in the study through email communication (Appendix 1). Interviews were conducted either in-person or through video or voice call for a duration of 45 minutes to an hour and a half. Different modes of communication varied based on geographic location, availability, and preference of the participant. Interviews were semi-structured on topics such as upbringing, personal accomplishments, identity, and Asian American activism (Appendix 2). Questions included: “What was your experience as an Asian American growing up?,” “Was there a specific aspect of your life or your upbringing that played a role in shaping your passion for environmental justice?,” and “How do you feel about the current level of political and community engagement within the Asian American community?”

Asian Americans are made up of a myriad of different ethnicities. Conversations on whether to include Pacific Islanders under the “Asian American umbrella term” have also been considered. For this study, I use the term “Asian American” to focus primarily on the groups represented in the study, both East and Southeast Asians. Terms such as “Asian American Pacific Islander” or “AAPI” were not changed in interview responses. APIFM, an organization highlighted in this study, serves both Asian American and Pacific Islander populations. For this study, “Asian American” focuses primarily on East and Southeast Asians. If “Asian American Pacific Islander” is used the statement is in reference to both groups.

An unexpected challenge was experienced when trying to recruit a diverse sample of Asian ethnicities, especially to represent current-day activists. Concerted effort was made to represent more South Asians, Southeast Asians and Pacific Islanders. Southeast Asians and Pacific Islanders who initially expressed interest in participating in this study eventually fell out of touch. This outcome may simply be due to the individual’s time constraints or may be connected to my own positionality as an East Asian. My positionality as an East Asian may have increased the likelihood of other East Asians participating in this study over other ethnicities due to comfortability and relatability in shared experiences.

I am Chinese American. At eight years old, my parents moved from Southern China to the United States in 1972 with my grandparents. They settled on a mattress in cramped quarters in hopes of establishing a better life in the United States. Both sides of my family moved around the nation before eventually settling in Los Angeles. I was born and raised in the San Gabriel Valley, next to one of the biggest East Asian ethnoburbs, yet in a small, upper middle class suburb. Considering my East Asian heritage, family’s immigration story, and upbringing, I recognize my privilege in comparison to other Asian American individuals. My family’s immigration journey

differs from other Asian American families, especially those who immigrated to seek refuge from war-torn countries.

Between individuals in this study, a shared commonality with many native San Gabriel Valley participants may have increased the degree of comfort and material shared during interviews. Prior professionally-established relationships with some of the respondents may have also skewed data collection. Still, my identity as an Asian American passionate about environmental justice provides me with a degree of commonality and insider perspective between all respondents. All interviews brought out playful aspects of shared experiences, challenges, and cultural references.

CASE STUDIES

In this section, detailed case studies show that Asian Americans are not apolitical and civically disengaged, but active in the environmental justice movement. I outline three significant Asian American case studies to diversify and divert from the mainstream environmental justice success stories. The Laotian Organizing Project's Multilingual Warning System Campaign, rebuilding Versailles, and the Vietnamese Nail Salon Worker Movement are three successful examples of initially apolitical Asian American communities that mobilized to fight injustices faced by their community. Following their victories, these Asian American communities have been transformed into vocal and politically active groups. Analyzing these three successful cases will provide insight that can be used for future Asian American environmental justice community organizing.

CHAPTER 3

Case Study: Laotian Organizing Project's Multilingual Warning System Campaign

The Laotian Organizing Project's (LOP) Multilingual Warning System campaign is frequently mentioned in existing literature on Asian American involvement in the environmental justice movement. Due to the recognition of APEN as the first Asian Pacific environmental justice organization, the campaign is often discussed while mentioning the foundational years of the group. LOP's multilingual warning system campaign is significant as one of the first well-known Asian American community-led environmental justice cases. The campaign was both APEN's first project directly organizing with impacted individuals, and LOP's first significant grassroots campaign. The case highlights the refugee community of Richmond, California and its fight against place-based environmental injustices. Cultural and language differences between different Laotian tribes were put aside as the group mobilizes together to achieve a common goal. Lessons learned in civic participation and participatory democracy have transformed and continue to shape the involvement of Laotians in local decision-making.

Laotians in Richmond, California

During the Vietnam War, the United States dropped 18 million tons of Agent Orange, contaminating water and food supplies. Agent Orange was an herbicide mixture used by United States troops during the war to destroy greenery. This tactic was used to prevent the United States' enemies from sneak attacks. Due to Laos' geographic proximity to Vietnam, Agent Orange also affected Laotian lives. The nearby countries of Laos and Cambodia were also sprayed with Agent Orange through an aircraft from 1962 to 1971 (Schechter et al., 2001). In the 1970s many Vietnamese, Laotian, and Cambodians fled their polluted and war-ridden cities to seek refuge in

Thailand. From Thailand, many sought to continue their travels to the United States. Laotians were only allowed to remain in the United States if they found an American sponsor. About 60 percent of Laotians were sponsored by families and 25 percent were sponsored by churches (Kong and Chiang, 2001). As of 2001, 40 percent of all Laotians in the United States reside in California (Kong and Chiang, 2001). Resettlement agencies relocated many Laotian families to areas such as Richmond and San Pablo, neighboring cities in Northern California's West Contra Costa County, because of affordable housing prices.

The environmental injustices experienced by Richmond's Laotian community are place-based issues. West Contra Costa County, specifically the Richmond area, is known as the "toxic hot spot" with over 350 industrial facilities including Chevron's oldest and third largest refinery, General Chemical plants, dry cleaners, and pesticide use. Richmond residents are exposed to over 350 different toxic chemicals that are stored or released by nearby industrial buildings (Communities for a Better Environment, 1989). Rather than preparing school children for earthquakes or fire drills, schools focus on the necessary steps to practice for chemical accidents. Like all residents in the West Contra Costa County area, Laotians are exposed to a myriad of chemicals. Laotian refugees, however, are more likely to be exposed to toxins due to language barriers and cultural practices. The Laotian community continues agrarian practices from Laos such as subsistence fishing and gardening to provide food for their families. They are unaware that their houses are located in the area of Drew Scrap Metals, a metal dumping site which disposed of old car batteries and industrial materials until 1976, when it was placed on the Environmental Protection Agency's Superfund site list. This is the same toxic soil on which Lao immigrants are now growing food to feed their families. These foods are often exposed to toxic chemicals, such as polychlorinated biphenyl (PCB), mercury, dioxins, lead, and pesticides, due to the surrounding

industrial sites. Laotians are not properly informed by urgent and timely health announcements because of language barriers. The government's refusal to educate and inform the Laotian community of toxic conditions is an act of environmental racism. As a result, this community unknowingly continues agricultural practices that further expose them to hazardous chemicals.

Laotian Organizing Project: Multilingual Warning System

On March 25, 1999 the Chevron oil refinery in Richmond exploded, spewing toxic chemicals into the air. The community experienced two additional leaks from the same refinery in June and July of 1999. Contra Costa County did not have the proper health advisory warning system implemented to warn its community of these incidents. Laotian residents did not receive the "shelter in place" advisory which warns residents to remain inside, lock all doors and windows, and prevent any exposure to outside air. For the few that did receive the warning on time, many Laotians did not understand the English-only message. Others never received the advisory and some received them hours later. Limited English speaking residents did not know the proper precautions to protect themselves, and some were not even aware of the explosion. Chevron's refinery explosion in March was not the first in Richmond's community, but came at a time when LOP was ready to mobilize and take action. LOP did not have adequate resources to confront Chevron in lawsuits, but was ready to take the first step and advocate for better emergency procedures in Contra Costa County.

The multilingual warning system campaign was LOP's most significant grassroots campaign because it was the first one led by community members directly affected. Organizing began in April 1999 through Laotian neighborhood meetings to discuss environmental health in their community. This campaign was significant because it was the community's first opportunity to express concerns about County actions and their impacts. Efforts increased and community

members held a press conference outside an apartment complex across from one of Chevron's smoke stacks to gain media attention. The campaign started with no formal members, but eventually garnered activism of over 600 Laotian residents. They wrote postcards, presented at churches, and held adult education classes. LOP launched the campaign to demand Contra Costa County's Health Services and the Internal Operations Committee of Contra Costa County's Board of Supervisors to implement a multilingual emergency phone-alert system. On April 8, 1999, Contra Costa County's Director of Health Services (DHS) met with Laotian youth and seniors at a local church. Residents conveyed 4 demands: DHS must commit to further reach out to more diverse populations, conduct a language equity analysis for an intake of non-speaking English residents in emergencies, develop a plan that addresses language inaccessibility, conduct community-based educational activities about warning procedures, especially for the Laotian community.

After six months of organizing, on September 27, 1999, Contra Costa County Supervisors and the Internal Operations Committee granted LOP's request to implement emergency phone warnings in languages other than English. This promise, however, did not result in direct action. The County had still not implemented a new system by the early months of 2000 due to a lack of funding. By July 2000, LOP began to grow impatient and demanded to meet with the Internal Operations Committee and Supervisors. They had created a more concrete set of demands that would ensure progress. LOP demanded the County secure necessary funding to begin implementing the multilingual system with a pilot program in Laotian, fine Chevron for its explosions and use the money for the warning system, and implement a new program to address the Laotian community's health and environmental issues. A \$14,000 grant was given from the

Bay Area Air Quality Management District and the California Air Resources Board, regional and state government agencies dedicated to air quality (Contra Costa County, 2005).

Contra Costa County successfully initiated the nation's first multilingual emergency warning system. In 2003, recorded warnings were sent to households in Lao, Mien, Khmu, and Hmong languages. In 2005, the system was updated to include audible alerts. The county's pilot program distributed 300 caller identification boxes, which rang a special alarm when the Contra Costa County's emergency alert telephone line called these households. Funding and accessibility continue to be an issue, with caller identification box household monthly subscription prices at \$8.67 (Contra Costa County, 2005). Implementing the multilingual warning system was a victory for all of Contra Costa County. While this paper focuses on the implementation of Laotian notifications, the system also featured Spanish notifications. In 1990, about 7 percent of Richmond's adult population and 12 percent of San Pablo's, two areas in West Contra Costa County, did not speak English (United States Census, 1990). According to the 2000 U.S. Census, Richmond Asian Americans made up 12.2 percent of the city's population. Due to the Census' lack of disaggregated data, however, it is unclear the exact percentage of Asians who identify as Laotians.

LOP community organizer Torm Nompraseurt reflects back to the challenges faced throughout the campaign and remarked,

Some people might think that the refugee immigrant is the one who creates the problem, is the one who caused the problem. They need to look at the hearts of the refugee and colored people and what we contribute to society, and to understand that we have the interest and the stake of the community here, and everyone has a basic pride in the community. We are here in America. We cannot go back to our home. This is our home. This is our community.

We should have the opportunity to participate in the decision making for what we think is the best for all people in this community. (Walters & Buckley, 2001, p. 2)

The warning system's success signified more than ensuring public health for the community. Its success proved the county acknowledged the Laotian's presence in the community as citizens, rather than just a temporary resident or perpetual foreigner.

Mobilizing the Laotian Community

Strategic organizing was crucial in engaging the Richmond Laotian community. LOP implemented three strategies to increase community activism (Walters & Buckley, 2001). In the early stages of organizing, LOP first took specific steps to establish trust between other community members. LOP organizers went door-to-door educating Laotian neighbors about Chevron's refinery explosion and the emergency warning system in place. If individuals were interested, they were invited to a group discussion with other organizers. LOP organizers were sure to follow-up with phone calls and remind neighbors to attend events. Small actions, such as driving someone else to the meeting, established trust and a sense of community. This action is perceived as a kind gesture to the newcomer while also increasing the likelihood of their attendance. Individuals established a collective identity within the group, a "we-ness" bond that links common similarities. LOP also ensured that all decisions and actions were done openly, welcoming all individuals to weigh in on the discussion.

Secondly, the most integral part of LOP's campaign was building an inclusive leadership. The Laotian community in Contra Costa County is separated into different tribal groups (Khmu, Mien, Lao) which speak different languages. Although there may be some similarities in their written languages, many residents did not know how to read. These various ethnic groups had no history of working together, and the language barrier made this even more challenging. LOP was

also very intentional to include women, young people, and elderly in their organizing. Convincing women and youth to advocate was more difficult due to traditional Laotian cultural values. In Laotian family dynamics, the male holds the power, authority, and decisions of the family. Women and children must show respect to the male. They were not to vocalize their opinions or speak against the status quo. To encourage mothers and working women to attend LOP's events, the group provided childcare, offered rides, and provided food and snacks.

LOP created the Asian Youth Advocates (AYA) program to promote inclusive leadership, and to address LOP's third strategy, to prioritize crossing generational boundaries. AYA was created in the summer of 1995 to respond to the lack of opportunities in the Laotian community. AYA's four year program is focused on providing young women with skills to actively participate in decision-making processes and express their opinions. The purpose of AYA's program is to equip young Laotian women with the knowledge to become community leaders, ultimately generating new sources of social capital for the Laotian community (Shah, 2006). This program continues to engage youth to practice independence and self-assertion, while also promoting sustained female activism as these young women continue to mature into adulthood. To prioritize crossing generational boundaries, LOP first held separate youth and elder meetings to discuss issues. The two groups would then come together, realizing they had both shared similar concerns. LOP organizer Torm Normpraseurt noticed "the youth appreciate that they can come and have meetings with adults, and adults also appreciate that, 'Hey, our own children are doing the work like we do'" (Walters & Buckley, 2005, p. 1).

Aside from language barriers from different ethnic tribes, LOP also encountered the difficult challenge of addressing fear from civic engagement, especially within elders. Elders were wary of challenging the powerful United States government, fearing common punishments back

home in Laos during the war, such as repression or imprisonment. Since the majority of Laotian refugees in Contra Costa County identified as low-income working class families, many were worried that their welfare and social security checks would be terminated. Laotian youth were more comfortable with advocating because of their English proficiency. They were also accustomed to the government's system through attending American schools, unlike many elders. Recent immigrants did not witness the civil rights movement or aware of people exercising their power in the United States. By framing the issue as the government's responsibility and fault and as an issue regarding lack of health protection, LOP was able to increase participation. LOP informed Laotian residents that the English-only alert system was an act of institutional racism, and the community needed to hold the government accountable. Residents felt strongly about their languages' exclusion from the warning system and attended LOP's first accountability meeting with Contra Costa County government officials. From that point onward, LOP worked to familiarize Laotian residents with civic participation and participatory democracy through practicing public speaking for city council meetings and encouraging individual opinions. LOP campaign leader Grace Kong reflects about the impact on the community:

I think that the warning system campaign was, for LOP, very significant. The way that it brought people together to show that there is a different way we can be, and there are different outcomes that are possible if we take action and do things together. It's seeing that and being part of it. You saw Mien at the same table with Khmu. Back in Laos, separate tribes really do not interact or have a history of interacting. (Walters & Buckley, 2001, p. 2)

LOP's campaign transformed the Laotian community forever. Efforts continue to bring ethnic tribes together as one united force to allow visibility. Elders are aware of the importance of civic

engagement and their right to gather free of punishment. Youth recognize their power to lead and instill change through the AYA program. When framing the campaign as a fight for health protection and government responsibility, residents organized. Local government officials now recognize the Laotian population as engaged residents who must be considered in decision-making.

CHAPTER 4

Case Study: Rebuilding Versailles & New Orleans East

Efforts to rebuild Versailles, Louisiana in the post-Hurricane Katrina context show multiple examples of environmental racism toward the Vietnamese American community. This case study also provides insight into varying tensions between minority groups who are all impacted by environmental injustices, albeit in different ways and to different extents. In this case, Vietnamese Americans were overshadowed by Blacks' efforts, and aid and resources were diverted away from Versailles. The environmental justice movement, a movement building off the traction of Black civil rights action, aims to be a network of minorities across different backgrounds. Societal perceptions of Asian Americans as the model minority, or racial triangulation diagrams, played a role in pitting Asian Americans against Blacks in the fight for resources. In this case study, two minority communities compete rather than uplift each other.

Vietnamese in Versailles, Louisiana

In 1954, three North Vietnamese villages fled to South Vietnam to escape the Communist ruling. About twenty years later in 1975, when Southern Vietnam's Saigon territory was captured by North Vietnam, these individuals fled to the United States and ended up in Fort Chaffee, Arkansas (Li, 2011). The United States relocated various Vietnamese refugee communities throughout the nation. With the help of non-governmental and faith-based organizations, Vietnamese refugees were relocated across 821 zip codes (Leong et al., 2007). Later that same year, the Associated Catholic Charities of New Orleans invited 1,000 refugees in Arkansas to move to property in New Orleans East (Village de l'Est). The property was named the Versailles Arms Apartments, and was part of the Section 8 affordable housing program. During the 1960s and

1970s, the newly built affordable housing project in the New Orleans East attracted low-income Blacks. At the time of the refugees' arrival, the affordable housing area surrounding Versailles was 90 percent Black (Leong et al., 2007).

Vietnamese refugees quickly adjusted to life in New Orleans, as living conditions were similar to those of Vietnam. They were able to continue work in fishing and shrimping industries due to New Orleans' proximity to the water and similar climates to Vietnam. New Orleans' historic Catholic presence also aligned with the community's strong religious views. Approximately 80 percent of the Vietnamese American community in the area are Roman Catholic (Airriess et al., 2008). Friends and family members followed and settled next to the initial Versailles Arms Apartment complex. As a result of chain migration, in 2000 the Vietnamese population in New Orleans East grew to 50.9 percent, and Blacks made up 50.9 percent of the total population of 10,699 (Airriess et al., 2008). The Vietnamese community in New Orleans East is referred to as Versailles, after the initial housing unit that started the wave of migration.

Hurricane Katrina's Ruins & Rebuilding Efforts

In August 2005, Hurricane Katrina hit the Northern Gulf coast and resulted in a total of 1,833 fatalities (NOAA, 2016). New Orleans East was hit particularly hard (Image 1). At the time of Katrina, approximately seven thousand Vietnamese individuals lived in Versailles (Li, 2011). Media coverage of the hurricane, however, only showed a narrative that the low income Black community in New Orleans was being overlooked. On September 2, 2005, NBC Television Group aired *A Concert for Hurricane Relief*, where celebrities performed to raise money for the Red Cross. Popular Black singer and songwriter Kanye West appeared on screen asking for donations on behalf of the Black community, and stated "George Bush doesn't care about Black people." This statement sparked controversy throughout the media and further garnered attention for New

Orleans East's Black community. Black film director and actor Spike Lee created the HBO documentary *When the Levees Broke*, which captured the aftermath and living conditions after Hurricane Katrina. At the same time, national coverage on the Vietnamese population was scarce, or only featured feel-good stories highlighting their resilience to return and rebuild the community (Li, 2011).

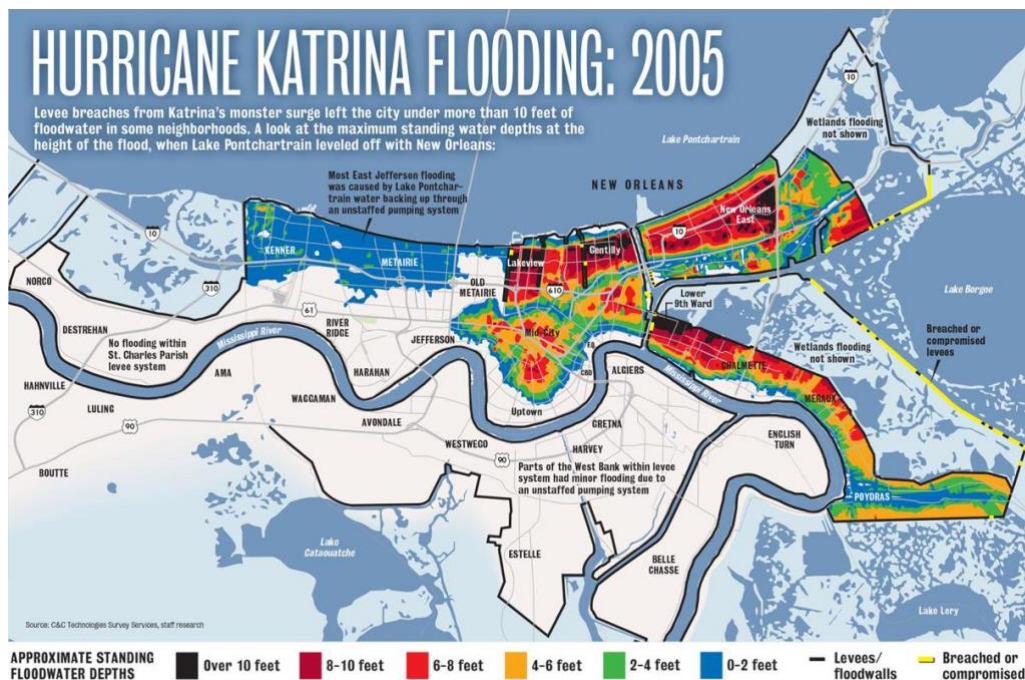


Image 1: Hurricane Katrina flood map depicting New Orleans East destruction
 Swenson, D. (2013, August 16). [Hurricane Katrina 2005 Flood Map]. Retrieved from
https://www.nola.com/news/weather/article_a07212b9-6057-5ed6-8914-07b8135a430b.html

Stories commending the community's return to Versailles without much government assistance further perpetuated model minority and racial triangulation perceptions of Vietnamese Americans. The immigrants were seen as hardworking and self-reliant, as compared to the Black community's government dependency (Tang, 2011). Only Vietnamese ethnic media accurately addressed specific struggles of Versailles' Vietnamese community, but was only heard among other Vietnamese Americans in the United States. Local ethnic media radio stations used their platforms to urge Vietnamese refugee families in Houston, Texas to open their doors to families

from Versailles. As a result, Vietnamese were absent from New Orleans government shelters, and were deemed ineligible for assistance because their lodging in Houston was defined as “permanent housing” (Li, 2011). Their absence from media and government shelters made the Vietnamese community easily forgotten and overlooked for assistance.

On Wednesday, October 5, 2005, Mayor Nagin announced New Orleans residents had the ability to “look and leave,” to check on the destruction of their property and see whether Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and city officials declared the site recoverable or unrecoverable. Father Vien Nguyen, the head pastor of Mary Queen of Vietnam Church (MQVC), led a group of community members currently in Houston back to Versailles. Although MQVC’s property, like the majority of New Orleans East, was deemed unrecoverable, Father Vien announced that the church would hold mass four days later on Sunday, October 9. Three hundred people returned to New Orleans East for mass that day, and by the third mass, 2,200 people (Vietnamese and non-Vietnamese) attended (Li, 2011). Father Vien utilized his hierarchical position in an area with strong ties to the Catholic church to unite his parishioners and rebuild the community. Residents began to move back to Versailles as word continued to spread about mass.

Rather than remaining complacent and following FEMA’s orders, Vietnamese Americans of Versailles returned. Theories such as *equal yet opposite economic* and *ethnic economy* can be used to understand the community’s persistence (Leong et al., 2007). The equal yet opposite theory states that Vietnamese refugees settled and developed the pre-existing community into their own labor market that ethnically aligns with their culture. The market provides opportunities and services, such as Vietnamese-owned stores, restaurants, and factories, that lessen the likelihood of poverty and underemployment. They have turned Versailles into their own ethnic economy, and thus want to return to the hub they helped create. Secondly, for many community members,

hurricane shelters brought up memories in refugee camps when first arriving to the United States from Vietnam. When asked about parallels between evacuating New Orleans and fleeing Vietnam, an individual stated, “It is harder leaving from your culture. Hurricane is nothing. In the hurricane, you have your family with you all the time” (Leong et al., 2007). Comparing the two relocation events, community members found strength in their past, knowing that nothing they were going to endure upon returning to Versailles would be equivalent to their refugee experiences. This attitude fostered a sense of collective community identification, and individuals were eager to return to a community whose refugee experiences are historically linked together.

While residents were returning to Versailles, MQVC served as a hub for supplies and information. The unique challenge the Vietnamese community experienced during Hurricane Katrina was the language barrier. Community members in Versailles were the same first generation immigrants that uprooted their lives and fled from Vietnam after 1975. Most residents only spoke Vietnamese. Translated information about evacuations and returns did not exist. In September 2005, a month before the community moved back to New Orleans East, Representative Mike Honda, chair of the Congressional Asian Pacific American Caucus (CAPAC) identified this as an issue to the community:

[W]ith the AAPI community's resources severely limited throughout the Katrina storm area, the federal government and national assistance organizations must be prepared to accommodate issues involving language access and cultural competence.... FEMA and American Red Cross must pay equal attention to the victims regardless of their race, ethnicity, and level of income. (Li, 2011, p. 30)

Representative Honda’s statement was released the same month as the NBC fundraising concert and Kanye West’s remark about the Black community. Honda’s remark did not receive the same

publicity, and when Vietnamese returned to Versailles there was little federal assistance during the rebuilding process. Father Vien and MQVC played a tremendous role in the initial rebuilding efforts. By November 2005, with Father Vien's leadership, Versailles became the first city in New Orleans East to receive electricity and running water. Local energy company Entergy required a petition of at least 500 signatures demanding utilities. Father Vien went to MQVC and came back with 1000 signatures (Li, 2011).

Chef Menteur Landfill

While the Vietnamese population in New Orleans East continued to return, white and Black communities in the area were still abandoned. The Bring New Orleans Back Commission served as a sounding board for the city's rebuilding process, but overlooked the voice of the Vietnamese community. Proposed plans by Urban Land Institute, the planning firm hired by the city, suggested that New Orleans East and the area of Versailles be turned into green space and water drainage. Damage from the three broken levees was too costly and the planners could not justify the benefits of building New Orleans East. Father Vien and his community packed city council meetings to remind city officials of their presence and state their opposition.

In two months about one hundred seniors, forty business owners, and sixty youths collaborated to envision the future of Versailles (Li, 2011). The community collaborated with architects and urban planners from across the country to draft four city plans. These plans were presented and voted on by all community members at the annual Tet New Year Festival in February 2006. The Vietnamese community was still ignored and uninvited to city planning meetings despite having tangible, well-thought out plans.

In April 2006, New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin filed an emergency executive order to reopen Chef Menteur landfill less than two miles away from the homes in Versailles (Eaton, 2006).

The landfill's location can be seen below in Image 2. In the past, the landfill served exclusively as a site for construction debris because it was not equipped with a clay lining to prevent hazardous contaminants from leaching into the soil and groundwater. But, under Nagin's executive order, signed off by the Louisiana Department of Environmental Quality and the Army Corps of Engineers, diverting Katrina's waste to Chef Menteur was acceptable and safe (Eaton, 2006). In a press release on April 27, 2006 the Department of Environmental Quality, Assistant Secretary Chuck Carr Brown stated,

We understand that there are not many people who are going to welcome a disposal facility near them. ... We also understand we are in an emergency situation and there are 18 million cubic yards of debris left to be removed from the New Orleans area. (Department of Environmental Quality, 2006)

Brown justified the reopening of the landfill with urgency, stating that proposing to ship the debris out of the city would stall the city's redevelopment timeline. This case of "Not in My Backyard" (NIMBYism) identified New Orleans East's low income Black and Vietnamese community as expendable bodies that would experience the burdens of the entire city's waste.

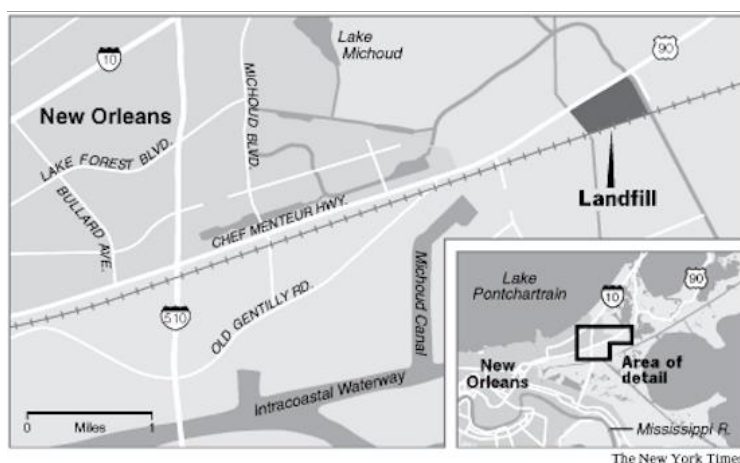


Image 2: Chef Menteur landfill site proposed in the middle of New Orleans East
 Eaton, L. (2006, May 8). *Uproar Over Landfill in New Orleans* [Map]. Retrieved from
<https://www.nytimes.com/2006/05/08/us/08landfill.html?ex=1147752000&en=7190e6a4d05e99df&ei=5070&emc=eta1>

Environmental lawyers and organizations from around the United States assisted with the technical knowledge of lawsuits and court cases. Due to the Vietnamese refugee's strong collective identification bond, many educated and skilled Vietnamese Americans from around the nation joined in on the movement. Black activists from New Orleans East also affected by the landfill assisted in familiarizing the Vietnamese community with "crash courses" in environmental justice movement tactics. The neighboring Black community was more familiar with environmental justice organizing because it combined similar aspects of the civil rights movement. Residents of Versailles were unaware of social movement tactics because of their recent arrival to the United States. Still, the Chef Menteur case sparked a light of activism in the Vietnamese community of Versailles. Vietnamese American Youth Leaders Association of New Orleans (VAYLA) formed as a result of passionate youth advocating for the future of their community. VAYLA's frontline presence was crucial to the overturn of Chef Menteur. Vietnamese youth were able to understand and translate the issues at stake to their monolingual, Vietnamese-speaking elders. They were more accustomed to the United States political system, and able to navigate it more easily. Many Vietnamese elders were initially hesitant to participate in public demonstrations and vocalize their opposition. They feared the government would punish them and take away their social security, punishments similar to back home in Vietnam. Vietnamese youth were more comfortable to mobilize because of their knowledge of the freedom of speech and assembly. As youth persisted and led with passion and force, Vietnamese individuals of all ages followed. Collaborating with various groups and demographics on a local and national scale landed Chef Menteur and Versailles' demonstrations in the national headlines. Protesters gathered outside city hall for three hours demanding to speak with the mayor. Mayor Nagin reached a compromise with protest leaders and agreed to suspend dumping for 72 hours to conduct onsite toxicity testing (Chang,

2009). This statement soon became one of false hope, as city officials could not agree on testing methods, and the site continued operations five days later.

Environmental organizations partnered with New Orleans East community members to file lawsuits at federal, state, and agency levels. While awaiting decisions, Vietnamese Americans formed human chain links to block trucks from dumping waste into the landfill. The federal court ruled that the landfill could not continue to operate, and Mayor Nagin officially announced the permanent closure of Chef Menteur landfill on August 15, 2006.

Mobilizing the Vietnamese Community

New Orleans' rebuilding process and the Chef Menteur landfill are two examples of environmental injustices against Vietnamese Americans. The city's attempt to discount the Vietnamese voice, about half the population of New Orleans East, during the planning process was intentional. The city did not want them back. Vietnamese resisted Mayor Nagin's orders and returned to Versailles, despite the city's continuous message expressing the expendability of New Orleans East communities. Nagin's decision to place the toxic debris of the entire city of New Orleans into New Orleans East was a deliberate decision. Rather than placing the dump site in a white and affluent area, it was placed in New Orleans East, an area of low income affordable housing for Blacks and Vietnamese refugees who lack English proficiency and civic engagement knowledge. In both cases, the Vietnamese American community was overlooked.

Racial triangulation and the model minority myth can be used to understand the treatment of the Vietnamese community in the two cases described above. When returning to their destroyed town, the Vietnamese community was not prioritized by the government or media as needing significant aid, compared to the New Orleans East Black community. Media praised and highlighted Vietnamese resilience through rebuilding stories, but failed to mention the struggles

they faced. Such coverage depicts the Vietnamese as the well-off model minority and focused government resources on the more reliant Black community. City officials viewed the Vietnamese American community as “perpetual foreigners,” unassimilable aliens who lack the political power to participate in civic engagement. They viewed the community’s refugee history as the potential for their actions to be overlooked.

Although initially hesitant, Vietnamese Americans used their past to fight for the future of their community. Crucial leader, Father Vien, stated that Chef Menteur was “something that was disrupting peace in their world. This time it wasn’t the [Vietnam] war, but something [individuals] could actually challenge: a person” (Chang, 2009). For Vietnamese elders, they were given their first opportunity to fight for tangible change. Vietnamese youth were passionate about the issue, but initially were unsure how to participate. VAYLA youth leader Minh Nguyen recalled “youth first didn’t know how to become involved because they weren’t allowed to *be* involved pre-Katrina” (Chang, 2009). They began educating themselves about the landfill, then spread their awareness through letter writing and educational outreach for Vietnamese-speaking individuals. The hurdles faced when rebuilding Versailles after Hurricane Katrina transformed the community forever. The Vietnamese American community in Versailles found their voice and established their presence in local community decision-making.

The Vietnamese American community still remains civically engaged today. Two non-profits that were created during the Chef Menteur fight continue to advocate for the community’s issues. Mary Queen Vietnam Community Development Corporation (CDC) mission is to:

preserve and promote our unique diversity and improving the quality of life of residents in the Greater New Orleans area, beginning in New Orleans East. Together with community

partners, our work encompasses health care, environmental and agricultural concerns, education, housing, social services, economic development and culture and the arts.

Despite its shared name with the MQVC church, CDC now operates independently in order to expand networks beyond the church and advocate for other demographics in addition to Vietnamese Americans. CDC has been successful in working with both the Vietnamese and Black community of New Orleans East to redevelop an area that aligns with both communities' needs. The CDC has since opened an intercultural charter school, geriatric and pediatric health clinics, and a sustainable agriculture community farm.

Vietnamese American Youth Leaders Association of New Orleans (VAYLA) remains a platform that empowers the younger generation to continue their involvement. VAYLA's programming advocates for issues such as reproductive justice, civic engagement, environmental justice, educational equity, and health equity through organizing campaigns and educational workshops. Their work informs their peers and elders of issues affecting the community in order to promote continued advocacy.

The Vietnamese community of Versailles disproved model minority myths depicting Asian Americans as silent, apolitical, and docile. They vocalized their presence and demanded to be included in decision-making. New Orleans City Council soon recognized and accepted the Vietnamese as part of the community. As of 2020, Councilmember Cyndi Nguyen, Vietnamese refugee and Versailles local, represents the Vietnamese community in discussions at city hall. Bottom-up mobilization from community advocacy organizations, coupled with representation in city council decisions ensure that the Vietnamese community in Versailles will no longer be overlooked.

The cases of rebuilding New Orleans East and halting Chef Menteur capture the tension and collaboration between Black and Asian American groups in the environmental justice movement. In the “oppression olympics,” Asian Americans do not often come to mind as the most oppressed, especially when compared to Black communities, due to implications of being the successful and well-off model minority. While this stereotype only captures a small subset of Asian Americans, it is one reason why Asian Americans are left out of the environmental justice conversation. Struggles to rebuild Versailles show that not all Asian Americans are resilient through their levels of financial and social capital. Rather than competing for “who needs more help,” the two communities were able to mutually benefit from unified support when banning together to stop Chef Menteur landfill.

CHAPTER 5

Case Study: The Vietnamese Nail Salon Worker Movement

The room was silent as a piano track played throughout the room. I was greeted by the relaxing smell of lemongrass and a small waterfall. The room was silent, as clients scrolled through their phones and nail technicians diligently painted away. Vincent was an older Vietnamese man perhaps in his early sixties. He pushed his metal cart of tools over to a station and began applying different bottles of products onto my nails and skin for a manicure. Although he works with moisturizing products and nail softeners all day, his hands did not appear upkeep like the services he provided. His hands were worn; red, cracked, and dry, appearing to be a reaction from the various products used. His nails were yellow and dull. He sniffled quietly behind his face mask. Vincent has worked as a nail salon technician for eight years. Any of the strong toxins from the salon's products seemed to be masked by the serene smell of lemongrass, and the service I was paying for was slowly poisoning Vincent.

The case studies of Versailles and LOP in Richmond are both examples of, placed-based environmental injustices. For this last case study, however, I expand the arena of environmental justice beyond issues of geographic siting, to also address labor conditions that take place in particular places. More specifically, I examine Vietnamese manicurists' toxic working conditions to broaden the definition of environmental injustices to encompass labor and occupational health. As previously mentioned, there is a lack of sufficient literature on Asian American environmental justice involvement. Research on nail salon toxicity, with a particular focus on Vietnamese workers, has been widely covered compared to the previous two case studies. Literature under this topic was not classified under environmental justice literature, but rather from occupation health and public health journals. Thus, perhaps more documentation of Asian American environmental

injustices and their efforts to mobilize have been documented, but have been classified under different terms. In this chapter, I argue that occupational health cases are also cases of environmental injustice.

Vietnamese American's Ethnic Niche

The linkage between Vietnamese and nail manicurists can be traced back to refugee camps. American actress Tippi Hedren invited her manicurist to come to the camp and teach twenty of Vietnamese women manicuring skills. One Vietnamese woman later opened Advance Beauty College (ABC) in Orange County's Little Saigon ethnic enclave in 1999. ABC offered nail technician training and certification in both Vietnamese and English, which eliminated language barriers of entry for non-proficient English refugees. Many Vietnamese immigrants entered the manicuring industry due to the ability of training to be taught in their native language and quick training and certification processes

According to the industry magazine *Nails*, Vietnamese now make up 80 percent of California's licensed manicurists, and about 45 percent of manicurists nationwide (Garcia-Navarro, 2019). The term "ethnic niche" (Lieberson, 1980; Light and Gold, 2000; Waldinger, 1994; Wilson, 2003) is used to describe the oversaturation of an ethnic group in distinct types of jobs. The concentration is considered a niche when "one ethnic group accounts for a greater percent of persons employed in a line of work than their share of the overall labor force" (Eckstein & Nguyen, 2018). Foreign-born groups form ethnic niches when: 1) there is a demand/they have created demand for their services; 2) they are more skilled than native-born workers or will work at lower wages; 3) native-born (Eckstein & Nguyen, 2018). The range in occupations for foreign-born workers is usually limited due to lack in language proficiency and lower education levels. They often resort to "3-D jobs" (dirty, dangerous, and demanding) that are undesirable to native-born

individuals due to low pay, irregular and long hours, physically demanding, and unhealthy and dangerous working conditions (Moyce & Schenker, 2018). Institutional forces, such as immigration and labor laws, also influence ethnic niches. Access to green cards widen the array of opportunities for individuals, including those in the private and public sector. These factors have all contributed to the formation of the Vietnamese ethnic nail salon niche. Vietnamese women are responsible for the “McNailing of America” (Eckstein & Nguyen, 2018), in which manicure services became accessible to a mass public, with quick walk-in options at half the price. Eckstein and Nguyen (2018) dubbed the transformation as “McNailing” because of its similarities to McDonalds’ services. Vietnamese catered to the busy lifestyles of working Americans by providing quick and convenient services.

Occupational Health & Toxicity

We made money off of it, but was it worth it? It came with a price. It’s a beautiful industry, it makes people feel better. But if a lot of people knew the truth behind it, it wouldn’t happen. They wouldn’t go. (Nir, 2015)

New York salon owner Ms. Colon reflects on her time working as a nail esthetician, recognizing the impact of her work to clients but also the health risks she is exposed to. Nail products are made of toxic chemicals to achieve aesthetic sheen, lasting power, and vibrant colors. These chemicals cause health issues such as asthma, cancer, neurological disorders, and pregnancy miscarriages. The most well-known group of chemicals used in nail salon products is referred to as the “Toxic Trio” (Quach et al., 2012; White et al., 2013; Pak, 2014; Chang, 2019). The “toxic trio” is composed of formaldehyde, toluene, and dibutyl phthalate (DBP). Formaldehyde, a nail hardener, is a carcinogen. Toluene, which creates a smooth finish over nail products, affects nervous and reproductive systems. DBP adds flexibility and moisture to the nail, and also affects the

reproductive system and developmental growth. Growing popularity in acrylic nails increases manicurists' exposure to polymethyl methacrylate acrylics, thus developing rhinitis (nose irritation) and contact dermatitis (White et al., 2013). The nail salon workplace features a myriad of toxic chemicals (Table 1) that adversely affect nail technicians in both the short and long term.

| Nail products | Common chemical ingredients | Potential health effects |
|--|--|---|
| Nail polish (Basecoat, Colors, and Topcoats) <i>Includes: Pigments, Resins, Solvents, Plasticizers, Dispersants, and UV Stabilizers</i> | Ethyl acetate | Irritation eyes, skin, nose, throat; dermatitis |
| | Butyl acetate | Irritation eyes, skin, upper respiratory system; headache |
| | Ethyl alcohol | Irritation eyes, skin, nose; headache, CNS syndrome; cough; liver damage; anemia; reproductive effects |
| | Isopropyl alcohol | Irritation eyes, nose, throat; CNS syndrome, headache; dry, cracking skin |
| | Acetone | Irritation eyes, nose, throat; headache; CNS syndrome; dermatitis |
| | Methyl ethyl ketone | Irritation eyes, nose, throat; headache; CNS syndrome; dermatitis |
| | Toluene | Irritation eyes, nose, throat; headache; CNS syndrome; dermatitis; dilated pupils, lacrimation; anxiety, muscle fatigue, insomnia; paresthesia; liver, kidney damage; |
| | Xylene | Irritation eyes, nose, throat; headache; CNS syndrome; corneal damage; dermatitis; reproductive effects |
| | Dibutyl phthalate | Irritation eyes, upper respiratory system, stomach; reproductive effects (fetotoxic) |
| | Nitrocellulose | Unknown |
| | Toluene Sulfonamide Formaldehyde Resin | Dermatitis |
| Nail polish removers | Titanium dioxide | Lung fibrosis; potential occupational carcinogen |
| | Acetone | see above |
| | Ethyl acetate | see above |
| | Butyl Acetate | see above |
| Artificial Nails <i>Includes: acrylic polymers, hardeners, primers, dehydrators</i> | Ethyl methacrylate | Irritation eyes, skin, nose, throat; allergic contact dermatitis; respiratory sensitizer (asthmagen) |
| | Methyl methacrylate | Irritation eyes, skin, nose, throat; allergic contact dermatitis; respiratory sensitizer (asthmagen) |
| | Butyl methacrylate | Irritation eyes, skin, nose, throat; allergic contact dermatitis; respiratory sensitizer (asthmagen) |
| | Methacrylic acid | Irritation eyes, skin, mucous membrane; eye, skin burns |
| | Methyl ethyl ketone | see above |
| Nail tips adhesives | Ethyl cyanoacrylate | Irritation eyes, skin, nose, throat; allergic contact dermatitis |
| Artificial nail removers | Acetone | see above |
| | N-methyl pyrrolidone | Dermatitis, reproductive effects |
| | Acetonitrile | Irritation nose, throat; asphyxia; nausea, vomiting; chest pain; CNS syndrome; convulsions; in animals: liver, kidney damage |
| Disinfectants | Formalin/ paraformaldehyde (formaldehyde) | Irritation eyes, nose, throat, respiratory system; lacrimation; cough; wheezing; dermatitis; potential occupational carcinogen |
| | Isopropyl alcohol | see above |
| | Bleach (sodium hypochlorite) | Irritation eyes, nose, throat, respiratory system; skin sensitizer |
| | Hospital grade disinfectants, e.g. Quaternary ammonium compounds | Respiratory sensitizers (asthmagens) |

Table 1: Nail salon products, toxins, and health impacts

Roelofs, C., Azaroff, L. S., Holcroft, C., Nguyen, H., & Doan, T. (2008). *Results from a community-based occupational health survey of vietnamese-american nail salon workers*. Journal of Immigrant and Minority Health, 10(4), 353-61. doi:<http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s10903-007-9084-4>

The Occupational Safety and Health Act (OSHA) regulates nail salon health compliance. Nail salons are often overlooked as hazardous workplaces because their physical size is much smaller than large industrial factories. In 2005, OSHA inspected just eighteen nail salons (Roelofs et al., 2008). OSHA's inspections evaluate labor conditions such as ensuring proper ventilation in

salons for indoor air quality standards. The nail products, along with cosmetic products generally, are not well regulated. The United States Food and Drug Administration (FDA) outlines:

Under the law, cosmetic products and ingredients, including nail products, do not need FDA approval before they go on the market, with the exception of most color additives. However, FDA may take action against cosmetics that do not comply with the law, or against firms or individuals who violate the laws we enforce. (United States FDA, 2018)

Cosmetic companies can voluntarily assist the FDA in regulating cosmetics through the Voluntary Cosmetic Registration Program (VCRP), but ingredients are not regulated for toxicity and exposure effects by the United States government. In 1976, the cosmetics industry took it into their own hands to establish the Cosmetic Ingredient Review, a panel to assess ingredients in cosmetics. Personal care product companies (Procter & Gamble, Johnson & Johnson, Unilever, L'Oréal, etc.) heavily lobby the Cosmetic Ingredient Review group, pushing for continued deregulation of products to increase their own sales.

In the 1970s, the FDA received consumer complaints tracing back to artificial nails containing methyl methacrylate monomer (MMA), with reports such as nail damage and deformity and contact dermatitis. While conducting further toxicology research, federal court proceedings ordered that nail products containing 100 percent methyl methacrylate monomer be removed from the market (FDA, 2018). In 1997, nail technicians mobilized to ban MMA from the industry in their own states. According to the Methacrylate Producers Association, by 2012, thirty states had banned MMA from nail salon services. MMA, however, is still prevalent in states that have since banned its use. In a study conducted in 2008 and 2009, 80 Vietnamese female nail salon workers from 20 different nail salons in Alameda County, California wore small, personal air monitors throughout their work shifts (Quach et al, 2010). Stationary monitors also recorded indoor ambient

air quality. Air monitors detected levels of MMA in salons that averaged ambient levels of 0.54 parts per million, three times more than the United States Environmental Protection Agency's 0.17 parts per million ambient air quality level (Quach et al, 2010). Despite being banned in 1974, MMA is used, knowingly and unknowingly, by manicurists to keep costs down. The study additionally found average levels of toluene, one of the Toxic Trios, was higher than California EPA's ambient levels especially when salons were not properly ventilated. Concentrations of these volatile organic compounds were recorded at levels much higher than recommended for indoor nonindustrial workers, thus explaining the health conditions they experience.

The nail industry provides Vietnamese immigrants with financial opportunities despite lack of English fluency. Many are grateful for the financial stability their occupation provides, yet are also aware that this stability will not last forever. Van, a 32 year old nail salon worker reflects on the future of her work:

I know that my ability to earn money is limited by age in the nail salon industry. The longer you work in the industry, the more your skills decline. Around 40 to 50 years old, your eyesight starts deteriorating and your hands become shaky, which means that you cannot offer good services. I know people who have developed permanent pimples on their hands from working with nail salon chemicals. My friend became allergic to acetone and started developing extremely itchy rashes. (Sharma et al., 2018)

Van, like many nail salon workers, are aware of the toxins in the products they use every day, and the effects of cumulative long term exposure. She knows her health and nail technician skills will start to deteriorate, but must work long hours before her body becomes too poisoned to do so anymore. She has had two miscarriages. Van believes her job is still better than the opportunities available in Vietnam, as the environment is also polluted there. Similarly, Cathy, a 32 year old

previous nail salon worker, weighs the cost and benefits of her family's participation in the nail industry:

Customers would complain about the smell, but we all became immune to the smell. My mother's health deteriorated throughout the years, including blurrier eyes and digestive issues. Both of my parents would always apply Salonpas and turn on the heating system to warm their tired shoulders. Sometimes I ask whether all the money we earned was even worth it to treat my mother's ailments now. It was all about "work, work, work," and making money. Now we are facing the aftermath of it. (Sharma et al., 2018)

Cathy wonders if the tireless hours her family spent was fruitful in the long run. She looks at her parents who experience daily suffering still after quitting their jobs. The long shifts spent in the salon provide nail salon workers with an immediate source of income, but affect the workers' health. The cost of nail technician work includes physical deterioration of the body, through constant aches and pains to chronic diseases. Individuals must spend their hard earned money to address and find cures for these health issues. In the end, the cost is both physical and financial.

Many Vietnamese immigrants, like Van and Cathy, do not have alternative options to support their families. Factors such as immigration status, English proficiency, and education limit available job opportunities for the group. The environment is defined as where people live, work, and play, and thus, toxic nail salon workplaces are an example of an environmental injustice. Bullard further defines an environmental injustice as "'practices that place [minorities] at greater health and environmental risk than the rest of society'" (Bullard, 1993, p. 319) Vietnamese manicurists' occupational health is a particular example of an environmental injustice. This occupation is one of the few available given many Vietnamese individuals' socioeconomic status and capital. They must resort to a workplace that exposes them to a myriad of toxic chemicals each

day. Some are aware of how toxin-ridden nail products affect their personal health, while others lack the proper information due to language barriers. Proper regulation and legislation of the nail industry is overlooked, as federal resources such as OSHA and the FDA focus on protecting the environmental health of larger corporations. The Vietnamese manicurists soon realized they needed to vocalize their experiences to demand attention.

Mobilizing Nail Salon Workers

In Oakland, California, community health center Asian Health Services (AHS) observed many of their Vietnamese nail salon worker community members were experiencing acute health symptoms. AHS collaborated with various groups to find connections such as the Cancer Prevention Institute of California, Asian Law Caucus, and National Pacific American Women's Forum for Policy Advocacy. The groups banded together to create the California Healthy Nail Salon Collaborative in 2005. The Collaborative's first effort was to provide evidence of toxic nail salon conditions through empirical research. On April 27 and 28, 2009 the Collaborative held a multi-stakeholder research convening event with more than 120 researchers representing environmental, public health, labor, nail salon workers and owners, cosmetologists, and government agency fields. Stakeholders began suggesting ways to mitigate toxic exposure in nail salons. Many suggested advocating for nail salon product reformation to be free of toxins, incentivizing nail salons to use these alternatives, increasing regulations and inspections, or banning toxic nail services (such as acrylic nail application). Many nail technicians opposed suggestions by other stakeholders, pointing out they did not consider how these changes would impact their livelihood. Further regulations and inspections would only hurt salons because regulatory agencies already lacked transparency. Van was conflicted as she expressed her passion to fight for cleaner product alternatives, hoping that these would not increase service costs and

drive customers to nearby competitors (Griffin & Jordan, 2016). Salon workers vocalized their concerns over policy and regulatory solutions and urged them to consider the economic impact of the industry. Manicurists like Van were asked to share their experiences and thoughts at city hall events, and eventually testify in front of Congress for the Safe Cosmetics and Personal Care Products Act (2015). A manicurist asked, “We pay taxes to the government, so we expect that you would protect us. So why do you allow manufacturers to put bad chemicals in products to sell to us? Why do you then ask us to make changes?” to a room full of government agency representatives (Quach et al., 2012). Salon workers argued that it is the government’s responsibility to enact change, not the salons.

In 2010 the Collaborative established a Research Advisory Committee to address the salon workers concerns in policy implementation. Later that year, the Collaborative had their first success, when the City of San Francisco passed the nation’s first act to recognize salons who used products free of the Toxic Trio. The Healthy Nail Salon Recognition Program (HNSRP) was a voluntary program where manicurists ensured healthy workplaces, safer products, and staff training to qualify as a “Healthy Nail Salon.” HNSRP has been integrated in Northern California and Santa Monica. The Collaborative’s efforts have since assisted in passing statewide California Assembly Bills 2253, 2025, 2125, 2775, and 647. Most recently passed in 2019, AB 647 aids in protecting customer and worker health by mandating manufacturers post Safety Data Sheets for their products in additional Spanish, Vietnamese, Chinese, and Korean languages.

The environmental justice movement for nail salon workers gained momentum through vocal Vietnamese manicurists in the Bay Area. Locals salons worked with Asian Health Services to identify health risks of their occupation. Nail technician’s testimonies presented to the city, state, and federal levels have helped legitimize advocacy efforts. Valuable input in policy proposals

highlights the importance of salons' voices and ensuring that recommendations do not stifle financial security and livelihood. Nail salon workers movement efforts have spread across the nation. In the midst of their research, the Collaborative also created the National Healthy Nail and Beauty Salon Alliance to bring attention to a national scale. New York and Oregon have since followed similar actions to California's efforts.

The nail salon workers movement would have not been effective without initial efforts from workers themselves. Loann, an active member of the Collaborative said, who spoke in front of elected officials in Sacramento stated:

When I first started working, I just thought of working for a living. Now that I work in a Healthy Nail Salon (HNSRP certified), I work not only to put food on the table, but I work for myself, my customers, my community and the environment. I could have never imagined that I could do that, that I can stand up for my career, my job, and advocate for all the workers. (Chang, 2019)

For many immigrants and refugees, providing testimonies is a daunting task. Their lack of English proficiency and unclear understanding of the governmental system make many initially hesitant. This population is the same group that is performing tasks under the most dangerous, dirty, and toxic working conditions. Occupational health is an environmental justice issue because it places minorities and those with a certain immigration status at greater health risks. Hyunh, another advocate for the Collaborative reflected:

How can a person like me, an *immigrant*, talk in front of senators and state representatives, to talk about chemical exposure so the state knows the issues of nail salon workers? But we did that thanks to the collaborative. (Chang, 2019)

Like Hyunh, many immigrants view themselves as disparate from public engagement, instead being grateful and working hard for the opportunities available to them. Fear and apathy result in silence and invisibility. The rise of the nail salon worker movement challenges the dispensability of immigrant and refugee workers and demands rights for a healthy and safe workplace.

CHAPTER 6

Discussion of Case Studies

Asian Americans are portrayed as the model minority and praised for being self-sufficient compared to other minorities. In the case of Versailles, this was used as a reasoning to divert resources away from the group and towards other minorities. These three case studies show that Asian American communities are not invincible, and face a variety of environmental issues. Issues can be place-based, such as targeting a population by placing landfills or refineries next to the community. They may also target Asian American communities through labor, such as unregulated occupational health regulations in areas where the Asian population makes up the majority of the workforce. In some instances, competition between other minorities may exacerbate environmental injustices.

The three case studies above offer strategies for successful Asian American community organizing. Unsurprisingly, all cases highlight the role of systemic racism in perpetuating environmental injustice in the United States. In all the studies, Asian American communities have been overlooked or ignored by local or federal government. These communities are working class, recent immigrant and refugee families with little English proficiency. For the LOP and Versailles place-based cases, the local government justified lack of aid by leveraging model minority stereotypes. Both refugee communities were not recognized in city decision-making processes, despite making up a large portion of the population, because they were seen as temporary residents, perpetual foreigners with homes in other countries. Asian Americans are statistically seen as the least politically active group (Aguirre & Lio, 2008; Ramakrishnan, 2001; Rim 2009), yet these three communities have mobilized to fight for a cause.

Rim (2009) identifies Asian American-specific barriers to mobilizing such as grievance and issue theories, absence of information and translation in ethnic media, and fear of political involvement due to home country's disapproval and harsh punishments. The grievance and issue theories state that low-status minority groups are more likely to protest because they are dissatisfied with the system's work. In these three studies, all groups were working class immigrants and refugees, groups who unarguably work the most dirty and dangerous jobs (Eckstein & Nguyen, 2018; Moyce and Schenker, 2018), such as nail salon workers. Those who are seen as dispensable bodies are the individuals who are directly impacted by the environmental injustices and are more likely to feel stronger about an issue than an upper-middle class, unaffected individual.

The case studies, however, do not support Rim's theory of the weaknesses of ethnic media. Non-English speaking Asian Americans turn to ethnic media sources to consume news in their native language. Rim (2009) argues Asians may not be civically engaged on pressing issues because Asian news sources do not adequately and fully cover these controversial subjects. While summarizing the historical accounts of these cases, ethnic media translated via Google or through bilingual scholarly literature was the most fruitful source. It was rare to find more than a handful of surface-level articles from popular American sources such as The New York Times, Los Angeles Times, and National Public Radio (NPR). For all three cases, ethnic news outlets became an additional tactic to increase community participation. These ethnic news sources often focused more frequently and heavily on environmental justice movements occurring in their communities. In Versailles, national Vietnamese ethnic news was the primary method the community could portray their struggles and needs, and to ask for assistance. Rim's oversight may be in reference to participation in national issues rather than issues that affect a specific Asian ethnic community.

Lastly, similar to Rim's (2009) argument, in the highlighted cases, organizers identified fear as a large hurdle to overcome. As recent immigrants and refugees from Asia, many individuals are fearful of political demonstrations and organizing because of the disapproval and harsh punishments of their home country. Immigrants bring with them the trauma of their countries they have fled. Many are fearful of protesting because they are afraid their family will be killed, their welfare will be taken, and they will be imprisoned. This fear is also rooted in uncertainty. As a recent immigrant with little English fluency, some may not be familiar with the United States democracy, the Bill of Rights, and the freedom of speech and peaceful assembly. They may be unaware of the United States' history of social movements and its impact to progress social change. In all three case studies, Asian American community members were initially afraid of mobilizing. Leadership was a crucial factor in the success of these studies. All case studies had an organization, either non-profit or church related, who acted as the initial leaders. For the nail salon movement, nonprofit Asian Health Services sparked the movement by bringing together stakeholders across different sectors to conduct research and legitimize nail salon workers' health claims. All organization leaders were also faced with the difficult task of mitigating fear in their communities by providing them with lessons on their civil rights and advocacy skills (e.g., developing personal opinions, public speaking, letter writing). Youth additionally served as frontline leaders in LOP and Versailles' organizing. Most youth in early immigrant communities are bilingual and understand much of United States culture and government from their American classroom curriculum. They are less likely to internalize the intensity of fear from their parents, and are more willing to participate in movements. In the cases mentioned above, when youth became vocal, elders took note and joined in. Youth are mediators between two generations, cultures, and countries, and are instrumental in convincing their immigrant parents and elders to join the

movement. Further understanding of how individuals are initially drawn to the environmental movement is beneficial in establishing next generation leaders.

In the following chapters I report on interviews with key Asian American environmental justice activists in order to better understand Asian American involvement on an individual level. Results from upcoming chapters can be used to increase youth involvement and leaders that will advocate for their communities.

INTERVIEWS WITH ASIAN AMERICAN ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE ACTIVISTS

In this section, I interview five prominent Asian American environmental justice activists. Individuals are broken up into three waves to symbolize different time periods of activism. The first wave is identified by actions in the foundational period of the environmental justice movement. Charles Lee, a founder of the United States environmental justice movement was chosen to represent the first wave. Actions from the first wave then sparked the second wave of activists to create the first Asian American environmental justice organization, Asian Pacific Environmental Network (APEN). Founding Board Member Martha Matsuoka was selected to speak about APEN's establishment. APEN's creation inspired others to create similar Asian American environmental justice organizations. These groups are classified as present-day, third wave activism. In the third wave I highlight the newly-formed Asian American environmental justice organization Asian Pacific Islander Forward Movement. Three individuals represent this group to address the lack of literature focused on present day Asian American environmental justice activism.

Individual accounts of each activist will identify their achievements and contributions, upbringing and background, passion for social and environmental justice, and opinions on Asian American activism. An analysis of overall findings between these five interviewees will provide additional insight on factors that may influence an Asian American individual's likelihood of engaging in the environmental justice movement.

CHAPTER 7

First Wave: Charles Lee

Charles Lee marks the first wave of Asian American environmental justice activism. The first wave of environmental justice represents the foundational grassroots efforts of the movement. Lee was selected to represent this first stage, as he was the first Asian American activist to contribute to the modern day environmental justice movement. Acknowledgement, however, is also given to previous Asian American activists and their dedication to environmental justice work far before the establishment of the environmental justice movement. For the purpose of analyzing the established environmental justice movement's transformation, the start of the movement is defined through Warren County's monumental case.

In 1978, Charles Lee made his first trip to Warren County. He had heard about a group of United Church of Christ members working to oppose a PCB landfill in their neighborhood. The occupational health and safety nonprofit he was working with, at the time New Jersey Committee on Occupational Safety and Health, had profiled the work, and Lee found himself drawn to it. Just as Warren County would become iconic of environmental racism at its worst, so too would Charles Lee play a critical role in developing the environmental justice movement at its best. Lee's activism contributed to foundational milestones such as the first environmental justice case, the publication of *Toxic Wastes and Race*, and the coordination of the First People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit. These events helped develop the goals and visions for the environmental justice movement today.

Lee's contributions to the movement are often overlooked when discussing historically prominent environmental justice leaders, even though he was at the forefront strategizing with well-known leader Robert Bullard and the United Church of Christ. Dr. Bullard's individualized

acknowledgement today as the father of the environmental justice movement is supported by his numerous publications on environmental racism. His scholarly work frequently uses his experiences at Warren County as a basis of reflection and analysis and is cited by many in academia.

Lee's first big contribution to the movement began with *Toxic Wastes and Race*. The Warren County protests prompted Delegate Walter Fauntroy to look deeper into the core issue of toxic waste landfills. Fauntroy's position as a non-voting member of the United States House of Representatives was to serve as a representative for Washington D.C's federal district. He requested the United States General Accounting Office (GAO) to conduct a report examining the decision-making process for four hazardous waste site locations within the EPA's Region 4 (covering the states of Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina). Region 4 had a high proportion of minorities, and the study's findings reported that three out of four landfills studied were located in low-income Black communities. Lee was inspired to repeat this same study on a national scale after hearing about the GAO's local report. His work in *Toxic Wastes and Race* was published in 1987 under the United Church of Christ as one of the first reports to draw a relationship between toxic waste sites and Latino and Black communities. It was a landmark publication that brought ideas of traditional white environmentalism and civil rights issues together and brought excitement for activism in the air. The First National People of Color Environmental Summit was held in Washington D.C. in October 1991. Lee served on the National Planning Committee for this summit, both as the Summit Coordinator and Research Director. The EPA began to acknowledge the increasing importance of environmental racism and appointed Lee to the National Environmental Justice Advisory Council's Waste and Facility Siting Subcommittee in 1994, and later created the EPA Office of Environmental Justice, which Lee

would become senior policy advisor for in 1999. Lee spent fifteen years overseeing the United Church of Christ's Environmental Justice program. Today, Lee still carries his dedication for environmental justice as a leader in Washington D.C., and continues to work with environmental justice communities on a national scale.

Background & Identity

Charles Lee was born in Taiwan and immigrated to the United States when he was eight years old. Lee's family followed his father overseas to continue studies to become a chemist, and rooted themselves in The Bronx, New York. When describing life on the corner of Fordham Road and Jerome Avenue, Lee leaned comfortably back into his desk chair. Our conversation took place in his private office at the United States EPA headquarters in Washington D.C. His two desks were situated in an "L" shape, with stacks of thick documents near his desktop computer. Lee sat behind his desk and I sat across the wide wooden table. At the time, I was interning with the EPA, but worked in a different office and building wing. A friend of mine, who was also Lee's summer intern, introduced us. Lee, his two interns, and myself went out to lunch a week before, and naturally questions about his experiences arose. He agreed to meet with me next week to speak more about his experiences.

Lee recalled The Bronx was pretty racially diverse. Despite this diversity, Lee stated that, at the time, Asians were really only present in city Chinatowns and California. Being the only Asian in the classroom and in the neighborhood, he did not have other Asian American friends. Lee did not look back at his minimal exposure to Asian Americans during his upbringing as negative. He pointed out that he was still surrounded and related to other minorities in his diverse neighborhood. Dynamics in the Lee household were not restricted to solely embracing either Asian or American cultures over one another, which gave Lee the ability to balance both cultures. He

interacted with groups from both Asian and American cultures. This duality between cultures is reflected in Lee's career choices, working with other minority nonprofit groups such as an occupational health and safety organization in Newark and with the United Church of Christ in Warren County.

Lee shared his childhood immigration status from Taiwan, but did not use generational terms when identifying himself, such as "first generation Taiwanese American." This point is not acknowledged to pose questions of the authenticity of Lee's racial identification, but rather to examine collective identity, or how strongly and closely Lee as an individual identifies and connects with his racial group. When asked about his experience as an Asian American man working with a predominantly Black community in Warren County, Lee replied that he never saw himself, especially in that specific setting, as an Asian American. He continued to speak about his experience in the foundational environmental justice events in relation to his Asian American identity.

I think I have a very unique place in all of this, because people know [the environmental justice movement] came from the work that I did from the beginning. So I guess I am who I am, and that's just part of the way things unfolded. I don't know. I mean, I definitely know there hasn't been a barrier. People never questioned if it was appropriate for me to be talking about their issues. But it basically comes down to... you can't talk for other people. I talk about these things from my perspective, not as the perspective of me as an Asian American person, but kind of as a person that's been involved during various aspects throughout the movement. I don't think people have questioned why you are talking about [environmental justice] if you're not African American, so I think that's a positive thing.

During his time in The Bronx and grassroots organizing years, Lee was accustomed to being the only Asian American in the crowd. Throughout our interview, Lee described his work throughout the years as very multicultural, recalling that he was the only non-Black staff when working for the Civil Rights Commission. He did not racially identify with Warren County's community, but was still able to connect and understand the group's perspectives.

Conversations about Taiwanese and Asian American culture did not appear to play a large part when talking about family dynamics and upbringing. In discussions relating to the Asian American community, Lee referred to the community as "the Asian American Pacific Islander community" or "AAPIs" rather than possessive pronouns such as "us," "we," or "our." Lee did not deny his racial identity, but chose to associate himself to varying degrees in different circumstances.

Lee is still an active member of the Asian American community. He volunteers as a frequent guest speaker for Asian American young adults panels such as OCA National - Asian American Advocates, Conference on Asian Pacific American Leadership (CAPAL), and Asian Pacific American Institute for Congressional Studies (APAICS) to inspire the next generation's leaders. He is connected to the Asian American community, especially in the context of solidarity and support.

Lee's sense of identity is not exclusive to his activist work or racial identity, but an intersection of the two. In the First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit proceedings, he gives a formal introduction. In addressing the shortcomings of the summit, Lee noted that "as an Asian American," the lack of Asian American perspective was "especially glaring" (Lee, 1991). In this instance, Lee stated his connection to his racial identity, speaking on behalf of the Asian American community. Discussions with Lee show his fluid collective identity

with his racial group. In foundational movements with Blacks he viewed himself solely as an activist, while in others moments he identifies as Asian. Both activist and Asian identities allow Lee to empathize with the Asian American community and across racial groups.

Passion & Interest

Lee attributes his passion for social movement organizing to the era he grew up in. He recounts working alongside activists who grew up in the age of the Vietnam War. The Civil Rights Movement era brought people to the streets to rally for equal rights, instilling the importance of mobilization and collective action. Lee remarks that growing up in the Bronx's diverse area during this distinct time shaped his perspective and values, which ultimately led to the type of career he wanted to pursue. His initial engagement with the environmental justice movement did not begin due to a strong environmental passion or a hunch about the concept of environmental justice. The beginnings of the environmental justice movement focused on toxic hazardous waste sites, like that of the monumental Warren County PCB case depicted earlier. Lee admits he was not particularly interested in toxic waste at the time, but the topic brought in conversations of human health injustices. Lee's strong passion for social justice coincidentally led him to ties with environmental issues. Understanding the synergistic nature between both social justice work and environmental work, the trajectory of Lee's life work soon revolved around all aspects of environmental justice.

Lee reminisces back to the thirty year span on the environmental justice movement with astonishment. He recalled the most impactful experiences were throughout the early years of developing the movement in Warren County and with *Toxic Wastes and Race*. When *Toxic Wastes and Race* was released, Lee received numerous phone calls from activists around the nation. Some callers were grateful organizers, who knew things were happening in their community, but did not

have the proper term to articulate the issues. Others were more skeptical and did not understand how the smokestack across the street was both a civil rights violation and environmental issue. Confusion was prevalent on both sides, within activists of color and white environmental organizations. Lee mentioned attending briefings for New York City's mayoral candidates and bringing the environmental justice perspective to discussions of open space accessibility.

It's a real legacy of racism that [they] never think about where parks and recreational green space is as an issue. People never thought of accessibility in that way...and that's because we're all affected by racism and nobody thinks about it as an issue.

Lee's example depicts the disconnect in the early years of the environmental justice movement. At the time, people did not understand how inaccessibility to open space was a form of structural racism and contributed to the everyday environment of individuals. Comparing the disconnect in the past with the awareness today, Lee stated that "the way people think and perceive the world is actually pretty profound. If you think of how the world has changed, that's pretty remarkable." Lee's choice in identifying the publication of *Toxic Waste and Races* as an impactful point in his activist experience depicts his personal importance of unity. The way Lee spoke of his contributions and achievements were not self-centered, as he portrayed the greater importance and impact of the work itself.

I used to tell the [United Church of Christ] Board of the Commission that they hired me to work on an issue that didn't have a name. And when I left to come to work for the federal government, one of the things I think we could be proud of is that when we all started this, nobody knew what we were talking about, and now it's a whole field of study.

Lee's remarks demonstrate his humility and dedication for the broader movement, downplaying his large contributions and speaking to the successes of the movement itself. For Lee, collectivity is a strong value the movement upholds. His strong presence in developing firsthand the written principles and goals of environmental justice solidifies Lee's understanding of the movement's established goals.

Asian American Activism

Lee paused for reflection when he asked how Asian Americans fit into the environmental justice movement. On average between Asian American ethnic breakdowns, 69 percent of Asian Americans classified themselves as “environmentalists,” 30 points higher than the national average (Ramakrishnan and Ahmad, 2014, p. 54). Lee did not understand the statistics showing Asian Americans as one of the most environmentally conscious minorities.

See, I don't know where Asian Americans fit around environmentalism. The most environmentally conscious group is Asian Americans and I just don't see it...I just don't see it... I just don't know, I just don't see it. And I certainly don't see it in the kind of organizing that goes on. Like the NAACP has a full time organizer focused around climate issues. I don't see any Asian American organizations doing that.

Lee's uncertainty of Asian Americans as the “environmentalist minority” is portrayed in his confusion for a coherent Asian American environmental ethic. The absence of general, national-scale Asian American organizations, matching NAACP's presence, make it difficult to create unified environmental activism approaches.

Lee stated absence in environmental activism, however, does not mean absence in all activism. He acknowledges the Asian American cultural value of individualism and the mindset

of ensuring success for your children to define general success within a family. Asian Americans are not as civically engaged as they could be, or as much as other minority groups have been. Lee pointed to aspects of fulfilling the model minority myth, such as focusing on individualized and technical skills to be a good worker, attorney, or scientist was the main reason for lack of engagement. Connections between technical skill and individualism have also limited Asian Americans under the bamboo ceiling. When asked to give talks to Asian American youth, Lee often poses the question: “What does it mean to be a good leader?” He attempts to foster vocal leadership skills in Asian American youth to think beyond individualistic values and connect with people across different groups. Lee’s discussion of Asian American individuals portrayed stereotypical values of the model minority myth, such as docile, individualistic, and academic. His description of Asian American values are generational, as he provides contrast with differences of young vocal activists today. Lee is optimistic for the future of Asian American environmental justice activism and believes that the community is breaking the model minority mold. Reminiscing to his childhood of being the only Asian family in the Bronx, to the dominating presence of Asians in America today, Lee is certain that change is soon to come.

CHAPTER 8

Second Wave: Martha Matsuoka

After first speaking with Lee about Asian American activism in his Washington D.C. office, I was urged to reach out to individuals involved with APEN locally near my hometown in Los Angeles. I was given a copy of the UCLA Asian American Studies' AAPI Nexus edition on Asian American Pacific Islander environmentalism, where an article written about APEN's progress was co-authored by Martha Matsuoka. I reached out to Matsuoka through her work email and she was overjoyed. While I was not able to physically meet Matsuoka in person, she was personable and excited to speak with me over the phone about her own experiences, but also excited to assist a student in academia due to her current role as a professor.

Martha Matsuoka represents the second wave of Asian American environmental justice activists. Matsuoka served as a founding board member and assisted in establishing the first Asian American environmental justice organization, Asian Pacific Environmental Network (APEN). The idea to create APEN blossomed out of Charles Lee's work coordinating the First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit in 1991. Attendees of the Summit included 158 Blacks, 64 Hispanic/Latinos, 55 Native American/Indigenous, and 24 Asian American Pacific Islanders (Kim & Matsuoka, 2013, p. 141). Of the 24 Asian American attendees included Pam Tau Lee, Miya Yoshitani, Young Shin, Pamela Chiang, and Peggy Saika, among others. The Summit brought these powerful leaders together. From purely observing the representation of attendees at the summit, it was apparent that the Asian American narrative and perspective was not well represented. Conversations with Asian American attendees eventually led to the idea of APEN, led by Pam Tau Lee. Since Pam Tau Lee was a driving force in the creation of this organization, most works featuring APEN focus on her insight. Pam Tau Lee's work should not be overlooked,

but rather complemented by stories from other individuals who assisted in founding APEN. Matsuoka's perspective diversifies this narrative of APEN foundational stories, by offering her insight from a founding board member role. Matsuoka was not an attendee of the Summit, but was recruited by attendee Peggy Saika. Matsuoka received a call from Saika after she had returned from the summit in Washington D.C. Matsuoka and Saika were both acquainted with each other from their childhood years growing up in Northern California. Saika's out of the blue call requested Matsuoka meet with a group of other Asian Americans from various environmental fields to start a conversation. At the time, Matsuoka was working for the National Park Service.

At the meeting, Matsuoka was thrilled to hear Pam Tau Lee, Peggy Saika, and Mia Yoshitani report back on their experiences and conversations from the summit.

How powerful the environmental justice framework was in terms of uniting all of us under this shared frame, that was not just about individual groups of people, but rather a frame that connected us all structurally in all these different ways. To be able to connect our Asian stories in American stories, with those of the Indigenous folks, or with the folks in the south. There's something very powerful about the way that those early conversations were about building and addressing the issues and conditions of leadership in our specific places and in communities, but also developing these relationships across all the different groups across the country to figure out principles of accountability and movement building. That was really exciting.

Conversations eventually discussed tactics to form APEN in 1993. Meetings envisioned the mission statement and values of APEN's organization. From its start, and today, APEN grounds its organization in "the leadership of immigrant and refugee community members, who know that to win what our communities deserve, we have to build power at many levels and in many ways"

(APEN). This statement captures APEN's focus on issues of low-income, immigrant, and refugee communities, such as immigration/refugee status, language, poverty, domestic and community violence, and community leadership (Kim & Matsuoka, 2013, p. 141).

The formation of APEN brought the Asian American perspective to the environmental justice conversation. APEN works alongside other regional networks such as Southwest Network for Economic and Environmental Justice, the Southern Organizing Committee for Economic and Social Justice, Indigenous Environmental Network, and the Farmworkers Network for Economic and Environmental Network. Today, APEN can still be pointed to the largest and most established Asian American environmental justice group across the nation. Although their work is primarily rooted in Northern California communities, APEN is nationally known by all Asian American and environmental justice activists.

Matsuoka was chosen to represent this second wave and APEN's work because she provides a different perspective as a board member and a current academic scholar. After graduating from Occidental College with an East Asian Studies and Political Studies degree, Matsuoka was unsure of her next steps. She began working as a secretary in a downtown development advocacy organization in Los Angeles to make some extra money. Matsuoka overheard conversations about planning development laws and how to avoid policies that would assist low income communities. Afterwards, she went back to study urban planning at the University of California Berkeley, in hopes of making cities more inclusive and just. Matsuoka then ended up working for the National Parks Service, before returning back to school to receive her doctorate degree in Urban Planning at the University of California Los Angeles. She currently resides at her alma mater, Occidental College, as a professor in the Department of Urban and Environmental Policy, where she teaches and empowers the next generation. Matsuoka's

background is heavily tied to academia, but she has never lost sight of the initial appeal that drew her to urban planning. Her academic publications interweave social justice, equity, and community-based approaches. Matsuoka still continues to ground herself in community work while teaching, taking on Project Facilitator and Project Evaluator roles for groups such as The Los Angeles Collaborative for Environmental Health and Justice, The California Endowment, and the statewide California Environmental Justice and Environmental Health Project. Although, in this thesis, Matsuoka is an activist mentioned to represent APEN's organization as a whole, her additional contributions to academia and social justice work at large are not overlooked.

Background & Identity

Martha Matsuoka identifies as a third generation Japanese American woman. She holds a deep grasp of her family's migration history despite her generational status. Matsuoka's Japanese roots trace back to a rural fishing village in the Yamaguchi prefecture and urban Hiroshima. Her mother's family from Yamaguchi later moved to California's Central Valley, in the city of Cortez, to become farmworkers, while her father's ancestors from Hiroshima moved to New York City, and eventually made their way to Brawley, California to start their own labor contractor company. Matsuoka's father grew up in Boyle Heights before relocating to internment camps during World War II. The distinct contrast in Matsuoka's roots, from both rural and urban, are important in how she views race and class, as well as rural and urban topics. Both sides of her family lived very distinct lifestyles in different locations, but "when they [came] to America, the race hammer [came] down and they're all equal." Matsuoka's use of the word "hammer" in this instance refers to the incarceration of her family members on both sides, regardless of class, because in the end, they were all individuals of Japanese heritage. All Japanese Americans, from both rural and urban, were equal, and all ended up in the camps, and had to restructure their lives after being released.

Both Matsuoka's mother and father, despite different upbringings, ended up in Berkeley upon being released from the camps. Matsuoka's family on her mother's side, however, returned to life in the Central Valley. Matsuoka identifies Northern California El Cerrito as her childhood home and Los Angeles as her current home, but still holds rural connections with her family in the Central Valley. After discussing her family's history, Matsuoka stated proudly, "it's a good history to hold on to."

Matsuoka grew up in El Cerrito, just north of Albany and Berkeley, during the 1960's. At this time, there were more people of color settling into this area. Matsuoka describes her neighborhood as very diverse, one that was not redlined. Her neighbors included an Black, Italian American, Mexican American, Chinese American, and French immigrant families. Matsuoka's early childhood was surrounded by a diverse group. Her school bussed students from different neighborhoods to avoid segregated schools. Matsuoka reminisced back to her early years when she was best friends with a Black, Filipino, and white woman. She chuckles stating "we called ourselves the UN. So goofy! I guess it was a way for us to lift up our shared identity somehow." Matsuoka's exposure to a diverse group of friends in school was complemented by her additional connection to the local Japanese American community. She spent much of her time playing on basketball teams and participating in religious activities, due to her mother's strong involvement with the Japanese American based Sycamore Congregational Church.

Growing up with a diverse population, but still connected to the Japanese American community, Matsuoka did not fully understand or think about her Asian identity. In her junior year of college while abroad in Japan, she began to more clearly understand her identity. Matsuoka's visit to her family's motherland solidified her understanding that she was not completely culturally Japanese nor Western. She became aware of her cultural alignment with other Japanese emigrants,

from Central America and Latin America, since they had similar cultural similarities from both their current country and Japan. Matsuoka's strong sense of her racial identity was apparent in the pride she exudes when speaking about her family's history and her dedication to the Asian American community through work with APEN. In conversations regarding identity, Matsuoka often examined her ethnic identity on a larger scale, with comparisons either globally or within other minorities. She carries this large scale perspective to include defining her identity as more than ethnic, but tied to personal values. After many years of grappling her identity, Matsuoka states,

What I now think about my identity is so tied with how I understand my role in making change in the world. So it's not just a culturalized ethnic identity. It's truly about my politics and my idea about what my purpose is in the bigger picture. So, I identify as Japanese American woman. But, I, my people, are much bigger than that. My people are multiracial, they're multi-gendered, they're multi-generational. Values about justice and about liberation about social change, those are all the ways how I would define my identity.

Matsuoka's Japanese American identity is important to her, but equally important is her political identity. Describing her identity through values of liberation connects her to a more expansive group greater than just the Asian community.

Passion & Interest

"Everybody comes and finds their place in the world because of some social moment or another. Mine was the environmental justice movement." Matsuoka shares this message with her students at Occidental College. Her passion for social justice, and specifically environmental justice, was not from one specific "spark" instance, but is attributed to key aspects throughout her upbringing. Growing up in the Bay Area during the 1960s was very impressionable. Recollections

from alternative education programs in her elementary school years depicts progressive ideologies. Matsuoka recalls Black Panthers passing out free lunches at school and singing along to movement songs such as Bob Dylan's "The Times They Are a-Changin'". Speakers taught students about music, art, social sciences through a social justice lens. Matsuoka recalled initially becoming aware of the environment through a lesson on ecology in relation to pollution and waste, which was a relatively new topic at the time. A distinct geographical and temporal upbringing, rooted in a hub of social movement action, left an impression on Matsuoka. Exposure to these initial ideologies would be formative in Matsuoka's activist future.

Matsuoka first heard of the "little bits and pieces" of the growing environmental justice discourse while finishing her masters in Urban Planning. At Berkeley, she continued studying differences in rural and urban spaces and why some places were poor and polluted. The environmental justice movement aligned closely with all of Matsuoka's ideas of place, but also tied in personal connections and ideas around race and civil rights that she had been surrounded by while growing up. These ideas were related to the environment, which she had first become aware of in her school years, but continued to find importance through her work at the National Park Service. Matsuoka identified her unique upbringing as sparking an early interest in environmental justice. Progressive, multicultural, and activists values established throughout her early years became the same passions that drew her to the environmental justice movement.

Matsuoka's interest in the environmental justice movement then turned to involvement, when Miya Yoshitani invited Matsuoka to help envision APEN. She assisted in defining the organization's mission, goals, and strategies. The board initially struggled with strategies to address community injustices. Matsuoka listed off various projects in APEN's early years such as Richmond seafood consumption surveys and lead in ceramic paint research, but acknowledged

“the biggest pivot” that the organization’s strategies were missing dealt with elements of power. The board trained with other environmental justice networks around the country to learn more about power analysis. Matsuoka identifies this understanding as a significant, shifting personal moment. Asian American environmental justice activism is more than cultural programming, but about building power within the community.

Asian American Activism

When asked about Asian American activism, Matsuoka remains optimistic. The model minority stereotype needs to change because it is “limited” and “damaging.” Matsuoka hopes the Asian narrative transforms to connect the group with social justice, solidarity with other groups, and challenging bigger problems. Matsuoka was overwhelmed when seeing so many Asian American activists at the climate strike. She compared the Asian turnout with that of the lack of representation in the first environmental justice summit.

It was so inspiring to go to the climate march in San Francisco in 2018. There were hundreds and hundreds of Asians on the street for climate change. Back in 1991, there were just 24 Asians at the [First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit]. It was really moving to see. Pam Tau Lee (APEN founder) made a sign which said “From Homeland to Heartlines,” which recognized the homelands, the immigration stories, we all come from, but the fact that we’re on the front line. So powerful. That voice has to be there all the time.”

Matsuoka believes Asian American environmental justice activists are not simply those who are Asian and are in mainstream politics. She does not undermine the importance of identity and representation within the movement, but urges individuals to move beyond the conversation and

reflect on questions such as “What’s the bigger frame? What are we organizing for? We’re organizing to be heard, but what’s our bigger planetary kind of goal here?”

Minority-focused environmental justice groups should not compare involvement or be seen as competition. Rather, Matsuoka argues that the variety of different groups add to the complexity of the movement. By considering different narratives such as refugee and immigrant stories, contributions are made to establish a multicultural “we” narrative, as color voices from the front lines. Environmental justice is not always about individual group benefits, and must also address needs across communities of color. Asian American environmental justice leaders must recognize the overlap between their goals and other movements like the Black Lives Matter and farmworker movement.

Standing in front of rooms full of 18 and 21 year olds, Matsuoka remains hopeful that progressive, politically conscious young individuals will change the world. As environmental justice, as a term, becomes normalized, she strives to ensure her students acknowledge the movement’s history, from the discourse to create the 17 principles of environmental justice to historic cases. Matsuoka shares stories of community fights by recognizing organizers in academia, environmental organizations, and cultural groups. She hopes that students will carry these stories and perspectives with them to fight for social justice in all realms.

CHAPTER 9

Third Wave: Asian Pacific Islander Forward Movement

Since the formation of APEN in 1991, Asian American-centered environmental justice organizations have become increasingly common. Asian Pacific Islander Forward Movement (APIFM) represents the third wave of present-day, newly emerging organizations who have been inspired by APEN's work. Individuals at APIFM represent a different period of time in the environmental justice movement, growing up in the 1980's. The decision to focus on specifically APIFM's organization was partly due to my pre-existing knowledge of the mission and diverse array of individuals working there. Living in the San Gabriel Valley myself, I heard about the organization a couple of years ago through their nearby work in Asian American ethnoburbs.

APIFM is a nonprofit focusing on communities in Los Angeles and cities in the San Gabriel Valley, areas heavily populated by Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders. Many Asian American Pacific Islander (AAPI) families in these ethnoburbs are also non-English speaking. APIFM was originally founded in 2007 as the Asian Pacific Islander Obesity Prevention Alliance (APIOPA). APIOPA's initial focus was to interject the AAPI community in public health conversations, with regards to obesity, through community empowerment. Since then, their initiatives have broadened to tackle other community health and environmental justice issues, thus prompting a change to the organization's name to APIFM in 2017. APIFM's mission statement and goal is to "cultivate healthy, long-lasting, and vibrant Asian and Pacific Islander communities through grassroots organizing. We want a world where Asian and Pacific Islander communities – and all communities of color – have full power to access good health and a healthy environment" (APIFM). Current ongoing projects at APIFM aim to address community issues of air quality and pollution (Clean Air San Gabriel Valley & Tobacco Prevention Program), food deserts and healthy food access

(Food Roots), and multilingual and culturally relevant nutrition workshops (Healthy Eating Active Living Workshops), but an expansive array of community issues have been addressed by APIFM over the years. The organization's initiatives aim to educate and empower community members about public health, to possess the knowledge to advocate for their communities.

Scott Chan

I spoke with Scott Chan over the phone on a weekday afternoon. He left the office during his lunch break at the Los Angeles Department of Public Health and sat outside on a bench. The wind was blowing slightly, and Chan appeared laid back and relaxed. Prior to working for Los Angeles County for four months, Chan was the Director of APIFM for eight years. He attended the University of California Los Angeles (UCLA), where he earned his Bachelor of Arts degrees in both Political Science and Asian American Studies. Chan soon returned back to school a year later to receive his Masters of Public Administration for Nonprofit Management at California State University, Northridge. While pursuing his Masters, Chan was already involved in a myriad of nonprofits such as Leadership Education for Asian Pacifics (LEAP) and the Asian Pacific Islander California Action Network. Chan was engaged in various organizations, focused primarily on the Asian American community, before coming to APIFM.

In his role as Director, Chan oversaw APIFM's staff. When asked about specific achievements during his tenure, Chan identifies three major accomplishments. Internally, within APIFM, Chan, with the help of co-worker Kyle Tsukahira, developed a nationally-recognized food hub, now known as Food Roots. Food Roots worked specifically with Asian American farmers and produce sourced outside LA County to bring the food into local schools, homes, and restaurants. The organization supports small Asian American farmers and promotes healthy and affordable eating in the Asian American community through culturally relevant produce.

Prior to his transition to the County, Chan often intervened as an advocate to bring Asian Americans into conversations. In 2013, Chan pushed the LA County Department of Public Health to create the Asian American, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander (AANHPI) Health Initiative. The initiative, which is still running today, is a government and nonprofit cross sector partnership that addresses health issues specific to AANHPI communities. Chan was also a member of the Los Angeles County Measure A implementation Steering Committee. Measure A (2016) addressed community park and open spaces throughout the county. Chan's role was crucial in representing the AAPI community. He was the only individual from an AAPI-serving organization, and only one of the two Asian American members involved in the entire process. Chan advocated not only for park equity for his AAPI community, but for all communities of color. He eventually worked with other advocates to pass equity-based requirements into the Measure.

Chan's strong partnership with Los Angeles County led to his transition from APIFM to Los Angeles Department of Public Health. He continues similar work in the Center for Health Equity, such as working with environmental justice issues (air and water pollution), language access, and data disaggregation. Chan's work now focuses on equity across all minority groups, not solely Asian American and Pacific Islanders. This expansion brings up topics different from his work at APIFM, such as Black infant mortality, sexually transmitted disease rates, and mental health. Comparing APIFM with his County work, Chan stated that the biggest difference is scale and budget.

Any type of work I do, even if I am able to change one percent to be more community-minded, to care more about the folks I've worked with in the past, I think that community engagement is really important. Working with the county to do that is going to be a game changer.

He is not discouraged by the large scale of the County, and is inspired to make an impact on a broader scale. Chan has been a prominent activist and leader for the AAPI community. His passionate fight for equity makes him not only an environmental justice activist for the Asian American and Pacific Islanders, but for all communities of color.

Background & Identity

Chan identifies as a second generation Chinese American from Rowland Heights, California. His parents emigrated from Hong Kong. Chan's father immigrated to the United States in his teenage years on an education visa, while his mother immigrated later on in life to escape Chinese communism. When asked about his childhood upbringing in Rowland Heights, Chan exhales a sigh as he looks back, stating, "It was a journey, growing up in a community where I was the only Asian and my Asian American identity were not really talked about."

As of July 2018, 61 percent of Rowland Heights residents identify as Asian (U.S. Census). Currently, the city is seen as an up-and-coming Asian hub, to replace older ethnoburbs such as Los Angeles' Chinatown and the city of Monterey Park. Reminiscing back to his childhood, Chan stated it's hard to believe that he was once the only Asian family in Rowland Heights. He recalled no Asian restaurants, supermarkets, or families in the area. The city's population was mostly made up of white conservatives. It was not until Chan reached high school that migrations of Asian Americans and Latino families moved in.

Growing up, Chan navigated his unique racial identity through code switching between Asian and American cultures. At school, Chan was American first. He chuckled as he remembered begging his mother to pack him school lunches that would help him fit in. Chan pleaded, "Give me a sandwich! Give me Lunchables! Don't give me Chinese food!" He still desired to fit in with

his peers while growing up, and never quite understood that the bullying he experienced was linked to his own race.

In the household, Chan assumed filial piety roles and obligations as the oldest son in the family. Under filial piety Chinese beliefs, the eldest male presumes the parent caretaker role. This is a tradition to show respect and gratitude for all the work parents put forward to raise their children. Due to differences in Chan's parents' immigration journeys, however, he recalls a slight confusion when navigating his racial identity in the household. Chan's father immigrated at the age of sixteen to the United States with the help of only a few family members. Chan speculated his father faced a lot of racism while growing up. For this reason, his father never spoke to Chan in Chinese. He recalled very early on how his father would always tell Chan "I'm American. You're American," and "believing in a sort of post-racial society where race did not exist." Chan's father identified himself as American first, because he desired to view himself as equal to every white American. His father was defensive about Chan's racial identity, suppressing cultural aspects, so there were not "exotic practices" that could have potentially been used to create othering. Chan was, however, able to connect with his cultural heritage through his grandmother and mother. His mother spent most of her upbringing in Hong Kong, so language and culture were very important to her. She often urged Chan to know his language and treat his culture with support and pride. Differing views conveyed by Chan's parents left him quite confused.

There were a lot of different people putting pressure on me of how I should live my life and what I should know. So, growing up as a kid, you're just like, "okay, well my parents are telling me something, so it's probably important, right?"

Chan began to independently navigate his racial identity as he approached high school. At this time, the Asian American student percentage was at a high of about 50 percent. His childhood

attitude of being embarrassed of his race now transformed into, “I’m Asian! It’s cool. It’s okay for you to celebrate the culture!” While he was more accepting of his culture, Chan admits that he did not embrace his identity as elegantly, since he was still only in high school.

Similar to Matsuoka, Chan also came to a firmer grasp of his racial identity once attending college. His upbringing in conservative Rowland Heights instilled a sense of meritocracy and “picking yourself up by the bootstraps” to get into a good school and get a well-paying job. Once Chan got to UCLA and began taking courses in the Asian American Studies department, his eyes were opened to all the inequities and racism he witnessed as a child but, at the time, did not know how to understand and articulate. Critically articulating his racial identity, Chan stated that this was the time when he fully began to understand the importance of his culture and began “actually celebrating” his Asian identity. Self-reflection in UCLA assisted in informing who Chan was and the work that he does.

Comparing perceptions of identity as a child and currently, Chan is very proud of his Chinese American identity, and understands it in a more nuanced perspective through his work at APIFM. He now understands what it means to be Chinese American, Asian American, or Asian Pacific Islander. Chan is aware of how his Chinese American upbringing is distinct and does not apply to all groups that fall under the term “Asian Pacific Islander,” with different lived experiences. He described times in which he expresses solidarity and collaboration with the Asian Pacific Islander community, but is also cognizant not to “sweep everyone under one group,” referring to the Pacific Islander community. Chan’s racial and ethnic identity is a large factor in what shapes his personal identity. It is apparent that his Asian American racial identity and culture are two factors immensely important in Chan’s life.

Passion & Interest

Chan's passion for environmental justice stemmed from a young age when he began noticing health disparities in different neighborhoods. Health was being an important cultural focus, especially in the ways his mother and grandmother would prioritize it. Chan acknowledged how lucky he was to have his mother serve him healthy, home cooked meals every day while others did not have access to nutritious food and relied on fast food. Although he was not aware of the term "equity" growing up, Chan did not think it was fair that some communities could not exercise at nearby parks or afford healthy food. It is these initial observations of inequities that he later strived to address in Asian Pacific Islander communities through nonprofit work.

When first starting at APIFM, which at the time was known as API Obesity Prevention Alliance, Chan was interested in the health aspect. His first project was the Safe Program project, which addressed park access in Pacific Islanders. It was through this project that Chan began to understand environmental justice to a deeper understanding, beyond observational examples. The Safe Program intended to educate Pacific Islander communities to go to neighborhood parks to attend community classes and exercise due to health benefits. In the very first weeks, Chan realized this project was not as simple as educating the community about the importance of physical exercise. Discussions with community leaders revealed Pacific Islanders were not going to parks because they were unhealthy, but because they were afraid of getting shot by neighborhood gangs. Chan realized coordinating yoga classes in Lennox Park and educating people was not going to be the cure, and their environment needed to be changed. He organized agreements with nonprofits and law enforcement to make the park and neighboring community safer by improving lighting, adding walking trails, and posting multilingual signs in English, Spanish, and Tongan. Chan described working on the Safe Program as powerful. He noticed the dissonance between

community needs and funder requests, and nonprofit's role as a liaison. This project uncovered that surface level health disparities, such as physical inactivity in parks, were linked to larger systemic issues in the community. For Chan, it bridged together public health and environmental justice topics together.

Asian American Activism

Much of Chan's perspective on Asian American activism comes from his years in nonprofit work. Rather than focusing on the general conversation on whether Asian Americans, minority, youth, and women are apolitical or civically disengaged can often place blame on certain groups while overlooking other factors. What are we doing to encourage people to be civically engaged? What type of systems have been created to disenfranchise or discourage these minorities from being civically engaged? Many older generations blame younger generations for being disengaged. To tackle this issue, Chan worked on the Vote at 16 - San Gabriel Valley campaign, to give individuals the opportunity to be civically engaged at an earlier age. Chan clarifies complexities to disengagement, stating it may not simply be because Asian Americans are uninterested. Immigrants came to the United States from areas where civic engagement was not supported or criminalized. This fear can be observed in all three case studies mentioned earlier. Asking individuals to suddenly become involved does not take into account inherited fears passed down through generations of immigrants. It is more effective to acknowledge this weight and find tactics to address these fears, rather than solely criticizing Asian American immigrants for being apolitical.

When discussing lack of Asian American involvement in the environmental justice movement, Chan mentions many factors also cited by Rim (2009). Chan often feels as though Asian Pacific Islanders are left out of the environmental justice conversation. Pacific Islanders are

at the forefront and will soon lose their islands due to climate change and sea level rise. These groups may appear like they do not care about climate change because of the myriad of other structural barriers they are occupied with overcoming. Chan states, “How can Asian Pacific Islander communities in Los Angeles work towards climate change when they can’t even go to their local park? There’s all these other issues people are dealing with on a day-to-day basis that makes it harder for them to focus on [climate change,] something *somewhat* less tangible than the gang issues down the street.” Other environmental justice groups tend to overlook the Asian American community because funds to translate or interpret resources in multiple Asian languages is costly. Chan admits that APIFM was not initially focused on environmental justice related issues, such as climate change, but was called upon to provide translated resources by other mainstream environmental justice groups. As APIFM became known as a public health *and* environmental justice organization, the group was often called to represent the Asian community for the sake of diversity. Chan reflects noting “it was of best intentions to be inclusive, but at one point it’s a fine line between inclusivity and tokenizing.” Still, Chan is appreciative that groups are becoming more cognizant of including Asians in efforts.

To continue increasing civic engagement in both environmental justice and social justice realms, Chan believes a stronger pipeline must be put into place. He uses himself and his peers as an example, who are around 30 years old and have been in nonprofit work. Executive directors of many nonprofits lean towards their 60s or 70s, and do not “pass off the torch” to next generation leaders. The financial payoff to remain in nonprofit work without a promotion becomes a difficult choice. Pressures placed on children of many immigrant parents to succeed and be financially successful still rings in Chan’s head. He still recalls his father calling him his biggest disappointment. In a perfect world Chan envisions alternatives to nonprofits, which are still heavily

community-based, but create desirable, well-paid, sustainable jobs, that recent college graduates will believe it is a career they can pursue.

Kyle Tsukahira

Tsukahira and I spoke through video chat. He dressed in a casual t-shirt and appeared to be sitting at his desk, with a large APIFM logo sprawling the side wall. At the time of this interview, Kyle Tsukahira was currently the Interim Director of APIFM since Scott Chan's departure in June 2019. The Director position has since been filled and Tsukahira has stepped down to Program Director. In his role as Interim Director, Tsukahira was responsible for overseeing the organization's annual budget, coordinating with the advisory board and executive leadership committee, and supervising the entire APIFM team. He has been part of the APIFM team for almost 7 years.

Tsukahira attended Pasadena City College before transferring to California State University, Los Angeles to earn his degree in Asian American Studies. After graduating, he interned at Visual Communications, an arts and film organization that hosts the Los Angeles Asian American Film Festival. At Visual Communications, he learned more about nonprofits, and was introduced to Scott Chan by one of his colleagues. Tsukahira soon joined Chan at APIFM (APIOPA at the time) as an intern, and eventually became a Program Manager. Upon Chan's departure, Tsukahira currently served as the Interim Director.

Tsukahira identifies the Food Roots program as his most impactful project. His dedication to the program began when first starting as a full time employee at APIFM. Now Tsukahira is the Program Manager for Food Roots. The Food Roots program first began in 2013, initially modeling a community supported agriculture (CSA) model. With its initial model, Food Roots expanded from ten subscribers at one pickup site to 120 subscribers at over ten different pickup sites in Los

Angeles County in the span of three years. The program was unique from other CSA models in the area in that they stocked Asian American culturally relevant produce besides the typical carrots, onions, and potatoes. After years of a successful run, Tsukahira and his team decided to re-envision the Food Roots program. Food Roots was not financially sustainable without grant funding, and its CSA program also came at a steep price point, making the produce less accessible for community members who needed them most.

Tsukahira restructured the program to act more as a food hub. The Food Roots program supplied its produce in bulk to community institutions, such as restaurants, hospitals, schools, and nonprofits. Purchasing produce supports Asian American, Pacific Islander, and minority farmers in Southern California, while also helping APIFM generate revenue through its programming. APIFM was able to reinvest its revenue into helping low income communities. Profits from the Food Roots program provide free healthy eating active living (HEAL) workshops, fresh produce donations for low-income families, and subsidized ready-to-eat meals. Under Tsukahira's guidance, Food Roots has become so successful that it is now a nationally recognized program.

Background & Identity

Tsukahira identifies as a fourth generation Japanese American. His family immigrated to the United States in hopes of better economic opportunities. Tsukahira revealed he was not very familiar with his great grandparents' journey. He was more familiar with the stories of his grandparents' incarceration during World War II, and was able to identify the exact internment camp both sides of his family ended up in Wyoming.

Tsukahira is also a native to San Gabriel Valley, growing up in Temple City, California. His hometown was predominantly Asian American, so he did not feel like a minority for most of his life. He estimated that 60 percent of the student population identified as Asian American at the

time. Growing up, Tsukahira felt like he fit in with the majority of the student body in school through some ways, but not completely. Most of his peers were either first or second generation Chinese or Vietnamese, with only a handful of Japanese Americans. He acknowledged that he still felt culturally aligned with the other Asian ethnicities, unlike some of his friends in the Midwest, who were the only Asians in the entire town. Differences in immigration stories made relating to second generation Vietnamese and Chinese peers difficult. Tsukahira's fourth generation Japanese American identity did not closely align with the majority of his peers with more recent immigration histories.

Tsukahira feels a mix of both Japanese and American identities. Recognizing his dual-faceted identity, Tsukahira referenced his trips back to Japan where he realized his "American-ness" because certain aspects of Japanese culture did not reflect himself. He still closely aligns with certain aspects of Japanese culture, such as food and holidays. His generational status is a reason for his hybrid identity. Tsukahira's family has been in the United States since the late 1800s, and has assimilated throughout generations. In attempts to avoid "othering" and be seen as an American, only one of Tsukahira's grandmothers spoke Japanese after World War II. The language, as well as other cultural practices, were lost through his parents' generation. For these reasons, Tsukahira felt that he was not "Asian enough" to connect with his immigrant peers.

Tsukahira embraces both parts of his identity through historical contextualization. He acknowledged his ethnic history differs from other Asian American groups. Tsukahira is proud of his Japanese American identity, and not ashamed of being perceived as too "Americanized" or disconnected from his culture. His fourth generation status, coupled with the incarceration of Japanese American ancestors, are both factors that shaped how he identifies.

Passion & Interest

Tsukahira's curiosity to learn about his family's history led him to study Asian American Studies in college. He wanted to learn more about his own family's history and the experience of the Japanese American community. Tsukahira soon fell in love with learning the untold stories of Asian Americans that he had not heard of in high school. Before graduating with a degree in Asian American Studies, Tsukahira learned about environmental justice through one of his courses. He did a project about South Central Los Angeles farms and the displacement that occurred by Forever 21. The summer after graduating, Tsukahira interned at Visual Communications, a nonprofit that hosted the Los Angeles Asian American Film Festival. Tsukahira soon met Chan, who had been already working at APIFM, through Asian American nonprofit networks. APIFM had been looking to implement a community supported agriculture program, and Tsukahira was able to draw on his knowledge from his college project to offer insight. Tsukahira admitted that he had no idea that he would end up working at a public health and environmental justice organization. It is through his connections within Asian American nonprofits that he discovered a niche organization that focused on these issues. Tsukahira's initial passion for environmental justice stemmed from a desire to engage with the Asian American community.

Asian American Activism

Tsukahira recalled being one of the only Asian Americans in his friend group that was civically engaged. In college, many of his lawyer, doctor, and engineer friends were not exposed to discussions of political engagement or social justice. High school peers were preoccupied studying for SATs and applying to colleges to engage with communities on a deep level. Still, Tsukahira believes the model minority stereotype is harmful. Tsukahira argues Asian Americans

are not apathetic and do care about their communities in other ways. Many Asians care about their immediate families or are active in local church or religious activities. They may be less inclined to organize for social change due to certain barriers, also mentioned previously by Chan. Tsukahira further applies the effects of the model minority myth to public health by discussing the “model minority of health” concept. He argues that the Asian American Pacific Islander community is often overlooked for public health issues because some groups appear thin and healthy. This stereotype, however, is harmful as it does not acknowledge all groups or other health issues prevalent in the Asian American community such as hypertension and diabetes. To increase Asian American activism, Tsukahira has led youth programs such as hosted the Asian American Environmental Leadership Academy and Promoting Youth Advocates. He hopes to spark early interest in community action by creating opportunities for youth to engage and understand civic engagement earlier in life.

Lisa Thong

Lisa Thong and I already had a pre-established relationship before this study. I spent many hours interning under her guidance, and view her as a mentor. We first caught up on personal subjects before discussing interview topics. Thong appeared enthusiastic and passionate to help me with my project when speaking to me on the phone.

At the time of this interview, Lisa Thong was currently the Policy Consultant at APIFM. She is now working at the National Asian Pacific Center on Aging. Thong graduated from Claremont McKenna College with a Bachelors of Arts in Literature and an Asian American Studies sequence. Her career experiences range from working as a Field Representative for State Senator Jack Scott, an Editorial Assistant at a publishing company, a Director in California’s State Controller Office, and an Account Director at a multicultural marketing agency. Due to her

involvement with the Asian American community, Thong was appointed as a member of the California Board of Barbering and Cosmetology by Governor Jerry Brown. She has been active on the board for four years and currently serves as the Board President. Thong has supported the work of the California Healthy Nail Salon Collaborative, whose work with the Vietnamese nail salon worker movement was highlighted in the case study section.

Throughout Thong's career experiences, she has always managed to connect all of her work back to issues that impact Asian American communities. Her dedication and passion for social change extends beyond the office, as Thong continues to give back to the Asian American through various volunteer roles. She has served on boards as chairs, directors, and presidents of various Asian American nonprofit organizations such as Asian Professional Exchange (APEX), OCA - Asian Pacific American Advocates, Asian Pacific American Media Coalition, and APIs Mobilize.

Thong had previously worked at APIFM for a year. Her position focused on policies at the state, county, and city level, that could impact community members. She regularly kept track of bills that could affect the status of APIFM's residents, in both positive and negative lights. Most recently, Thong's main focus was an environmental justice program called Clean Air San Gabriel Valley (Clean Air SGV). Clean Air SGV is a project that is funded by the California Air Resources Board and South Coast Air Quality Management District under a state bill, Assembly Bill 617. The program aims to educate community members in the cities of Monterey Park and Alhambra about existing air pollution.

As Policy Consultant, Thong was responsible for assisting community members in identifying issues that impact their community. By providing them with the proper knowledge, community members are able to participate in the decision-making process. Thong utilizes her

policy background to educate the community about local and district-wide air regulations. Thong identified much of her work as a facilitator, working between stakeholders and community members to help find realistic solutions to advocate for. A large part of her work involved presenting digestible scientific information to the public, and to represent specific concerns of residents to various levels of government. Thong saw her position as a way to make members more aware of issues, so they can provide their own insight on wants and needs. She stressed the importance of empowering community members in the decision-making process, as they are ultimately the ones affected.

Background & Identity

Lisa Thong was raised in Rosemead, California in an Asian and Latino working class environment. Like many of her neighbors, Thong's parents worked in garment factories and restaurants. Her parents were Chinese refugees from Vietnam. Although Thong was the only family member born in the United States, she also identifies with her family's immigration history as a Chinese refugee from Vietnam.

Due to the large Chinese working class population in Rosemead, Thong's parents were able to navigate living in the United States without speaking English. The strong presence of Asians in Thong's neighborhood allowed her to avoid pressures of assimilation. Thong reminisced to being fully immersed in Hong Kong culture growing up. She acknowledged the "privilege of being able to hold on to my identity for most of my upbringing," and exclusively kept up with Hong Kong pop culture, television, and music until junior high. Throughout her childhood, she did not feel like a minority, since her peers at school all came from similar household backgrounds.

When Thong attended Claremont McKenna College, her world suddenly shifted. "For the first time, I was actually the minority." She was referring not only to the racial diversity of her

college, a predominantly white upper class private institution, but also her identity between other Asian American students.

It was really a culture shock. The people I went to school with came from a better socioeconomic background. Most Asian American kids on campus did not really identify with their Asian American identity. It was really hard talking to other students because all of them could not understand what it felt like to come from a family whose parents never finished even sixth grade level education. My background was just so different.

Thong reflected on her college experience as the first instance forming her “outsider mentality.” While her affluent college peers discussed the pressures to become the “typical Asian” engineer or doctor, many of Thong’s high school peers ended up in juvenile detention or did not go to college. She quickly realized her experience differed from the common “Asian American experience” of most of her peers at Claremont McKenna. Thong acknowledges her unique perspective on identity.

When I talk about myself, I prefer to identify as the daughter of refugees because I do not identify with other Chinese or Vietnamese Americans; their experiences are very different from mine. I do not actually identify as Asian American. My ethnic identity is Chinese, but my immigration story is refugee. I feel closer to people who come from refugee backgrounds.

When asked about her background and identity, Thong stated that she often has to give a long-winded explanation. Unlike the other four interviewees, Thong does not use her racial or ethnic identity as a label when speaking about her identity. She believes the Asian American cultural and ethnic categories are too broad, and should rather focus on linking together differing immigration experiences. Although Thong does not fully connect with individuals under the Asian American

category, she does not remain disengaged from the group, and acknowledged that all of her career experiences have been working to empower the Asian American community. She recognized that her perspective on identity is nuanced and unconventional, noting that the Asian American community is “not quite there yet.” Thong does not explicitly identify with Chinese Americans, but shares their culture. Understanding her unique perspective, Thong identifies in an intricate manner, sharing Chinese and Vietnamese linguistic and cultural commonalities, and refugee immigration experiences among all minorities.

Passion & Interest

Thong became passionate about civic engagement from a policy angle. Many of the issues she is passionate about stem from seeing her parents’ struggles. Thong is motivated to ease difficulties for non-English speaking individuals by creating accessible and informative resources to navigate the governmental system. Environmental justice was not a term Thong was well aware of before coming to APIFM. Thong had been aware of Chan’s work at APIFM and was interested in offering a policy lens to his projects. After hearing more about APIFM’s work, the concept of environmental justice clicked. She connected the dots to her own family’s issues as environmental justice issues.

My mom worked in a sweatshop that did not have air conditioning. All of her life she was breathing in different toxins from the fabrics without proper ventilation. Now she has really severe allergies. My family and I also have asthma. I realize now that it was because all of the factories in our residential neighborhood lacked regulations to ensure healthy workplaces.

Much of Thong's passion for social justice and environmental justice activism stems from commonalities from her own personal experiences. She is motivated to assist and uplift those who have experienced the same struggles and conditions of her family.

Asian American Activism

Thong believes the conversations surrounding the model minority myth are inaccurate and miss a bigger picture. She acknowledges the large majority of Asian Americans, such as East Asians and South Asians, who are generally successful. Model minority conversations often focus on those groups but fails to acknowledge Southeast Asians, like Vietnamese, Cambodian, and Hmong, who are refugees from war-torn countries. Rather than grouping all Asian Americans together based off of ethnic identity, a new narrative must be developed to differentiate causation of immigration within Asian Americans. Shedding light on different Asian American experiences that fall outside the "model minority experience" will uplift different Asian ethnicities which are often ignored and overlooked in the general Asian American conversation.

CHAPTER 10

Discussion of Interviews

Identity & Passion

Social movement literature cites a strong sense of collective identification as a motive for joining social movements. Collective identification is a sense of “we-ness,” togetherness, and belonging within a group (Simon et. al 1998, Polletta & Jasper 2001, Snow 2001). Individuals are more likely to participate in organizing when they feel their experiences are not singular, and experienced by a larger group. Identity was selected as a theme to observe if interviewees are passionate about the environmental justice movement because of a strong collective identity to their Asian American community.

Conversations about identity occurred simultaneously while describing family immigration histories and personal upbringings. Lee and Matsuoka, representing both the first and second wave of environmental justice activism, grew up in similar environments. Both individuals identified growing up in the late 1960s during the civil rights movement in diverse neighborhoods as key characteristics that have shaped their passion for activism. The rhetoric of this time period and diverse environment pushed for unification across all racial groups. This same mindset is captured in the way the two identify. Both collectively identify with their ethnic identities and spend much of their free time volunteering to shape younger Asian American leaders, but simultaneously identify through other aspects.

Most significantly, Lee shared his solidarity with the Asian American community when discussing the group’s turnout at the environmental justice summit. However, when Lee described being Asian in early predominately Black-led environmental justice work, he stated, “I talk about these things from my perspective, not as the perspective of me as an Asian American person, but

kind of as a person that's been involved during various aspects throughout the movement." Lee identifies both as Asian American and an activist. He did not feel any racial tension in instances where he stood out because all individuals were fighting the same battle. Snow (2001) states that an individual's degree of collective identification is fluid and can change through time. Lee's identity is multidimensional, and dynamic, balancing both Asian American and activist identities.

Matsuoka shares a similar multifaceted identity, not only identifying as a third generation Japanese American woman, but also with others who share similar social change values. She highlights identifying not just with Asians, but with multiracial, multi-gendered, and multi-generational individuals. Like Lee, Matsuoka believed racial identity is an important characteristic, but should not be used as a label to separate minorities up into different "teams." Lee and Matsuoka collectively identify with both their Asian American ethnic identities, but it is not the only group they feel a strong connection to. Both identify with any individual who shares similar activist mindsets of justice and liberation. Their multicultural collective identification may have been fostered through exposure to a progressive mindset during their upbringing in the 1960s. Early environmental justice activists who grew up in similar environments around this time period may share this same complex identity. This generation features the same activists who outlined multicultural collaboration as one of the seventeen principles of environmental justice. Connecting with individuals across racial lines, both Lee and Matsuoka broaden their definitions of "community." When fighting for environmental justice, both are driven to advocate for all communities of color. Their passion for environmental justice does not necessarily stem from a strong desire to fight exclusively for the Asian American community, but rather their larger community, communities of color. Lee and Matsuoka's strong ethnic and multicultural collective identities fuel their passion to continue to uplift their Asian American community while

simultaneously working to dismantle injustices for all. Values stressing the importance of acceptance, unity, and allyship appeared to be frequent themes throughout Lee and Matsuoka's activist stories.

Individuals in the third wave represent the present-day activists who were brought up in a different environment than the first and second wave. Third wave interviewees were born in the late 1980s in the San Gabriel Valley. All individuals worked at Los Angeles and San Gabriel Valley-based organization APIFM and have grown up in San Gabriel Valley. San Gabriel Valley features large ethnoburbs of Asian Americans, but all three interviewees cited instances in which they felt out of place or were bullied because of their racial or ethnic identity. Chan recalled being one of the few Asians in his school before immigrants moved to the area. At a young age, he was bullied for his race and learned how to code switch between Asian and American cultures when at home and at school. Tsukahira, however, grew up in an environment where Asian Americans were the majority. He recalls being a minority within a majority, feeling as though he could not connect to the majority of first and second generation Chinese immigrant peers because he was more assimilated or "Americanized" as a fourth generation Japanese American. Thong similarly felt out of place later in life when moving to a predominantly white private college, where she suddenly became the minority population. Coming from a refugee working class family, Thong felt further isolated from the generally affluent Asian American students on campus. Negative experiences with identity naturally came up in conversations with activists in the third wave. Although Lee cites being only Asian in his class in the Bronx, he did not express any negative experiences or discomfort with his racial identity both in his childhood and throughout his organizing career. Negative experiences of "othering" can be a turning point for individuals, when they begin to "[reclaim] their identity by working toward an acceptance of self and a sense of pride" (DiFolvio,

2011, p. 1616). With a new acceptance of their ethnic identity, Chan and Tsukahira channeled their sense of pride through a strong collective identity with the Asian American and Japanese American community. The two individuals used their racial and ethnic identities as a main description of their personalized identity.

Chan and Tsukahira's strong connection to their ethnic identity may have been developed through coursework to earn degrees in Asian American Studies. Upon graduating, both began working in various Asian American nonprofits and eventually found their passion for environmental justice by chance. Chan had noticed health inequities in his community early on in life and later pursued health inequities in Asian American communities through nonprofit work. He soon found connections to his work and environmental justice. Tsukahira's previous work was with an Asian American film nonprofit. He eventually met Chan through Asian American nonprofit networking and eventually joined APIFM. Chan and Tsukahira's passion for environmental justice organizing was initially motivated by an overwhelming sense of pride and dedication to uplift their Asian American communities.

Thong's perspective on identity differs from her coworkers interviewed. Her unique outlook is due to her family's immigration refugee history. In this thesis, Thong is the only individual who mentioned refugee stories in their family's immigration histories. The remaining four interviewees described their family's immigration to the United States as a desire for upward mobility and greater job opportunities. As Chinese refugees from Vietnam, Thong's immigration journey is more complicated than others. She linguistically and culturally aligns with both Chinese and Vietnamese groups, but does not identify with Chinese or Vietnamese experiences. Thong explicitly states she does not identify as Asian American, but rather as the daughter of refugees. She more closely identifies with refugees from any background than other Asian Americans.

Thong's connection to multiracial individuals from different backgrounds draws similarities to Lee and Matsuoka's identity perspectives, which extend beyond their Asian American racial identity. Her perception of identity differs from all other individuals in this study, as she fully dissociates herself from her ethnic identity.

While Thong does not identify as Asian American, much of her work has been dedicated to the Asian American community. Like Chan and Tsukahira, Thong also completed an Asian American sequence in college. She was the student representative for the college's Asian American studies program and an active member of the Asian American student organization. Although Thong does not identify with individuals in these groups, she is still able to embrace her ethnic culture through these platforms. Upon graduating, Thong soon found herself supporting Asian American community organizing. She developed her passion for organizing when observing the difficulties her non-English speaking parents faced when trying to navigate the political system and government. She eventually became aware of environmental justice once working on APIFM's projects. It is then that she realized much of her family's health issues came from sources of environmental injustices. Thong's passion for environmental and political activism are rooted in her personal connections and experiences.

Thong recognized her work in Asian American communities may contradict her outlook on identity. She notes that Asian American nonprofits have not yet grown to hold nuanced discussions on the refugee population. Thong aims to bring her different perspective to Asian American groups by being an active member in Asian American organizing. Unlike the other interviewees, disconnect to Thong's ethnic identity inspired her to become civically engaged and change the Asian American narrative.

Identity discussions with prominent Asian American environmental activists show that degrees of collective identity towards a group may increase an individual's likelihood of becoming active in the environmental justice movement. For earlier activists, such as those highlighted in the first and second wave, leaders were motivated by a strong sense of collective identity between both their Asian American ethnic identity as well as their multicultural, multiracial activist identity. Motivation to fight for environmental justice was to fight for equity in all communities of color. For later activists, like those highlighted in the third wave, an overwhelming collective identification to ethnic identity inspired them to address inequities within the Asian American community. It is through dedication to the Asian American community that these leaders became aware and passionate about environmental justice issues.

A notable exception is observed in Thong's perception of identity as the only individual in the study with a refugee family immigration story. Future research should examine a greater sample size and explore refugee and multiethnic Asian Americans with complex immigration histories and perspectives of collective identification. All participants in the study identified unique and complex characteristics in their upbringing that have shaped their views on identity. Findings cannot be isolated to "cherry pick" specific factors, such as immigration generation, ethnicity, or age, that lead to increased activism. Conversations with Asian Americans activists showed that various factors are intertwined together. One cannot solely be viewed as "second generation Chinese American" without recognizing additional factors. Location, time period, generational upbringing, socioeconomic status, historical ethnic trauma, immigration experience are only a few of diverse and individualized characteristics that shape one's identity perspectives and passions. The Asian American group as a whole covers a diverse array of individuals with different complexities. Perhaps it is these differences that make environmental justice organizing across

different Asian American identities particularly difficult. There is no specific set of characteristics or “formula” that increases an individual’s likelihood of becoming an activist within the heterogeneous community.

Asian American Activism

All environmental justice activists interviewed in this piece believed discussions of Asian American stereotypes, the apolitical and civically disengaged model minority, are irrelevant. They are optimistic and believe these stereotypes are especially false and outdated in referring to younger generations of Asian Americans. Perpetuating this stereotype also continues to place blame and stigma on certain groups who are not active. It frames individuals as apathetic, but fails to acknowledge additional barriers to activism such as those such as language, immigration histories and fears, and lack of education and awareness. Rather than repeating the same ideas and stereotypes, the discussion must take the next steps to create a way for Asian Americans to become civically engaged. Conversations should now focus on tactics such as creating programs and positions for Asian American youth to believe that community-oriented work is needed and valued.

In regards to the environmental justice movement, Asian American leaders must avoid fixation on Asian American representation in the environmental justice movement. Identity and representation are important, as it brings in different perspectives and complexities to the movement. Fixation on racial representation, however, can lead to a slippery slope that divides and views organizing efforts by other communities of color as competition. It must not be forgotten that the definition of the environmental justice movement was born through multicultural and multiracial collaboration at The First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit. Environmental justice activists are all contributing to a collective multicultural narrative, as color

voices from the front lines. Environmental justice is not always about individual group benefits, and must also address needs across communities of color.

CHAPTER 11

DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

As the fastest growing population in the United States, Asian Americans must be brought into environmental and social justice conversations. This thesis aims to further understand the largely undiscussed topic of Asian American involvement in the United States environmental justice movement.

Case studies show that Asian Americans, especially working class, recent immigrants, refugees, and non-English speaking communities, experience environmental racism both at home and in the workplace. Asian Americans are civically engaged, and do not fit the model minority racial stereotype of being apolitical and perpetual foreigners. The model minority stereotype is outdated and false, and stigmatizes the group's participation without recognizing uncontrollable factors that may prevent civic engagement participation. Many Asian Americans care about environmental justice issues, but do not or cannot participate in community organizing. Like all communities of color, many individuals work long hours to support family and pay bills. Individuals may not attend organizing events because they are working, exhausted after long shifts, or do not have childcare. More specific to Asian American communities, many are recent immigrants with little English language knowledge. Recent immigration status and language barriers make it difficult for the group to understand the United States of America's political scene and practices. Many may not understand an individual's rights to organize, while others may be fearful due to preconceived notions of political demonstrations brought over from their home country. Patterns of Asian American civic engagement must not be discussed without addressing the myriad of barriers to activism the group must overcome.

Analyzing the three case studies in this thesis additionally provides tactics to address barriers to activism in Asian American communities. Partnering with a local organization, such as a nonprofit or church group, delegates a handful of initial leaders of the movement. These leaders foster trust and a strong sense of collective identification within the group. Providing resources such as individualized home meetings, childcare, and food increases trust between community members and motivation to attend organizing events. Organization leaders provide necessary resources, such as educational workshops, translations, and advocacy skill building to ensure the community is aware of the issues facing the community and providing them with skills to mobilize. Utilizing ethnic local media is also a beneficial strategy to increase awareness. Community organizers identify youth as playing the most impactful role in organizing. Youth of immigrant communities educate elders about environmental injustices and how the issue impacts the individual. They are able to navigate the United States political scene and are able to address fear of the unknown. Youth are crucial to frontline organizing because they bridge both their Asian and American cultures together to advocate for their community.

Youth are a significant resource in Asian American environmental justice organizing. Interviews with prominent Asian American activists demonstrated that individual motivation to participate in environmental justice organizing was often connected to their upbringing. Aspects such as location, time period, generational upbringing, socioeconomic status, historical ethnic trauma, and immigration experience were cited as characteristics that shaped one's passion for community organizing. These characteristics fostered a strong sense of collective identification, between either the Asian American community or all communities of color, that fueled individuals' passion to advocate for community injustices. Interview findings showed there is no one specific correlation of characteristics (i.e., second generation Asian Americans are more likely

to become environmental justice activists) because each Asian American interviewee possesses individualized stories that cannot be isolated into singular characteristics. The Asian American racial group covers a diverse array of experiences, and each story is heavily individualized.

Findings do not reveal particular Asian American populations that are more likely to participate in environmental justice organizing. Results reveal collective identity between a community is an overlapping similarity between all prominent activists. All activists interviewed cite Asian American youth empowerment as the ideal method to increase Asian American activism. Youth programs are a way to gather young adults, discuss community issues, and instill the importance of civic engagement. These programs foster a strong sense of community pride and togetherness at an early age, similar to the collective identity described in interviews with prominent activists. These programs will continue to foster the next generation of Asian American environmental justice activists at the frontline of community organizing.

The Asian American model minority label overlooks a group's hardships and struggles. Environmental racism is prevalent in low income and refugee Asian American communities. Historical absence of Asian Americans during foundational years of the environmental justice movement is due to immigration histories. Barriers to activism and preoccupation of more immediate issues in these communities may have led to the low turnout. As the fastest growing population in the United States, Asian Americans are not perpetual foreigners; they are present, politically active, and here to stay. As the group continues to grow and immigrants become more accustomed to the nation, their passion and activism for environmental justice will only increase.

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APPENDIX 1

IRB Application – Senior Thesis in Environmental Analysis & Sociology Research Summary

1. **Title of Research:** *Asian American Involvement in the U.S. Environmental Justice Movement*

Principal Investigator: Emily Ng

2. **Research Question/Questions Under Investigation:** What are the untold stories of Asian American environmental justice cases in the United States? Who are some unacknowledged community activists or how have specific Asian American communities mobilized to advocate for environmental justice issues? What are the societal implications on why these stories have been untold/forgotten? What does Asian American engagement in the U.S. environmental justice movement look like?
3. **Population to be Studied:** The population I intend to study will be individuals who have engaged in environmental justice movement efforts. The projected number of participants to be studied will range from 6 to 12 participants. This population includes individuals in environmental justice organizations, community members, and leaders who have either been impacted by environmental justice issues or have taken part to mobilize against these issues. Participants will be recruited through my own personal connections and networks through previous experiences and internships and will be contacted through email. These individuals may suggest others to interview in their own networks as well, expanding the recruitment to secondary personal relationships. Participants will most likely be over the age of 18, adults since it will involve discussing experiential events from the past, and will not be part of any vulnerable populations. They will have the choice whether to be referred to their legal name or a pseudonym. The project will not require any deception.
4. **Consent:** Consent will be obtained through signed consent forms. Since most of these interviews will take place through phone, they will be emailed and retrieved before the study begins. In order to explain the project, I will introduce myself via email as follows:
Hello,
My name is Emily Ng and I am conducting research for Pitzer College's Environmental Analysis and Sociology departments. I am writing a thesis on Asian American involvement in the U.S. environmental justice movement. My mentors have directed me towards you for more information on this topic due to your key insight, knowledge, and personal experiences regarding the topic. It would be highly beneficial to schedule a phone interview to hear more about your experiences. Please let me know if you are interested, and I can send along additional information regarding this study.

Thank you for your time.

Best,

Emily Ng

5. **Degree of Sensitivity:** The degree of sensitivity of the information gathered will be relatively low. Participants will be discussing their personal experiences, thoughts, and recollections. If, however, the participant does not want to be personally identified, there will be an option to ensure confidentiality and use a pseudonym if preferred. I will ask the participant on their preference before beginning the interview.

6. **Methods:** The methodology used for this research will be first-hand interviews. These interviews will be conducted through phone and last approximately an hour. Interviews will include questions such as:
 - 1) *Describe your ethnic identity, family's immigration journey, and upbringing (parents, neighborhood, childhood).*
 - 2) *Is there anything specific in your life that you think played a role in shaping your interests/passions?*
 - 3) *Was there a defining moment when you became aware of the intersection of traditional white environmentalism with social justice issues?*
 - 4) *How did your family/Asian American community respond to your involvement in the EJ movement?*
 - 5) *Through EJ meetings and committees, what type of racial diversity do you tend to notice? Why do you think that is?*
 - 6) *Within the Asian American community is the topic of the model minority myth, which portrays us as civically disengaged and apolitical. What are your thoughts on this?*
 - 7) *Do you think Asian Americans are less often recognized/acknowledged for their contributions to EJ work? If so, why?*
 - 8) *How can we engage AAPI students in a discussion about EJ and encourage environmental leadership?*

7. **Benefits of the Project:** The environmental justice movement comes after combined white environmentalism and civil rights movements, with a goal of fighting for the exploitation of low income communities of color. Other minority-based environmental justice groups greatly outnumber environmental justice Asian American groups. The Asian American community is the fastest growing racial group in the country, growing over four times as rapidly as the total U.S. population (White House Initiative on Asian Pacific Islanders), and thus should be included in this social movement organized around people of color. My research question is important, because as a minority group, Asian American involvement and recorded history in the environmental justice movement is absent. Racial implications,

such as the model minority myth, perceive the group as silent, apolitical, and disengaged from civic engagement, however I believe this is far from the case.

Historic documentation fails to acknowledge Asian Americans, which has, in effect, portrayed them today as disparate from environmentalism. This work will continue to advance and acknowledge the lost compilation of the Asian American community's historical records. It will also examine whether participation in environmental justice issues is less prominent than other minority groups, or if it is simply less recognized. This study will be crucial to other emerging environmental justice activists who identify as Asian American, and will serve as a way to continue to keep Asian Americans relevant in environmental justice and political conversations.

8. **Assessment of Risks:** The risk level for participants of this study is relatively low. There are no risks other than those encountered in day to day life. Participants, however, may become emotional when speaking about personal opinions, thoughts, memories, and opinions. Interviews may relate to sensitive topics for the individual. To mitigate this risk, participants will have the option to use a pseudonym. I will also remind them of the ability to discontinue the interviewing at any time, should they grow uncomfortable, although I do not anticipate this will be the case.
9. **Other Documents:** Consent Form (*please see attached*)

Hello,

You are invited to participate in a study examining Asian American involvement in the U.S. environmental justice movement. You have been selected as a potential participant due to your key insight, knowledge, and personal experiences regarding the topic. Please read this form and follow up with any questions before we begin this study.

Background Information: The purpose of this study is to examine the relationship between Asian American and the U.S. environmental justice movement. It aims to shed light on the untold stories of Asian American involvement by highlighting unacknowledged community activists or Asian American communities that have mobilized to advocate for environmental justice issues.

Procedures: If agreeing to participate in this study, you will be asked a set of questions based on your own personal relationship and role to the environmental justice movement as an Asian American-identifying individual. This interview will be digitally recorded for future playback references, and should take approximately an hour. Follow up questions may be also asked at a later time.

Risks & Benefits of the Study: There are no large identified risks in this study. However, since the questions asked are based on personal opinions and insights, they will be quoted in the study. If requested, participants may use a pseudonym if this is a concern. Benefits of participating in this study would play a large contribution to the Asian American community, as they continue to compile their own histories. Additionally, it will further the understanding of the environmental justice movement in the United States.

Voluntary Nature of Participation: Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relationship with Pitzer College. You may choose to skip any question that you do not wish to answer. If you choose to participate in this study, you are free to withdraw and stop at any time without affecting your relationship with Pitzer College.

Confidentiality: Records of this study will be privately kept in a password protected device. Once this study has been successfully submitted, all digital records from participants will be destroyed. Your name will be referenced unless otherwise requested to use a pseudonym.

Contacts and Questions: Emily Ng will be the researcher conducting this study, with advising from Professor of Environmental Analysis Susan Phillips of Pitzer College. If you have any questions now or in the future please contact Emily Ng at emilng@students.pitzer.edu or Susan

Phillips at susan_phillips@pitzer.edu . If you have any questions or concerns regarding your rights as a subject in this study please contact Pitzer College Institutional Review Board at IRB@pitzer.edu

You will be given a copy of this form to keep for your records. Thank you for your participation.

If you agree to the above statements, please sign and return this form to Emily Ng at emilng@students.pitzer.edu.

Statement of Consent

PLEASE MARK AN “X” AND SIGN BELOW.

I give permission _____

I do not give permission _____

for this interview to be recorded only for reference purposes. It will be destroyed upon completion of this study.

Signature of Participant _____ Date _____

PLEASE SIGN BELOW.

I have read the above information, and have received answers to any questions I asked. I am at least 18 years old and I consent to participate in the study.

Signature of Participant _____ Date _____

Signature of Principal Investigator: _____ Date _____

This consent form will be kept by the researcher for at least three years beyond the end of the study and was approved by the IRB on _____.

Student Researcher Certificate

| | | |
|---|---|--|
|  |  | Completion Date 10-Sep-2019 Expiration Date 09-Sep-2022 Record ID 33207293 |
| This is to certify that: | | |
| Emily Ng | | |
| Has completed the following CITI Program course: | | |
| Social & Behavioral Research - Basic/Refresher (Curriculum Group) Social & Behavioral Research - Basic/Refresher (Course Learner Group) 1 - Basic Course (Stage) | | |
| Under requirements set by: | | |
| Claremont Graduate University | | |
| | |  |
| Verify at www.citiprogram.org/verify/?wba10727b-030d-4fc2-8600-ce12d71ec0d5-33207293 | | |

Faculty Certificate

Certificate of Completion

The National Institutes of Health (NIH) Office of Extramural Research certifies that *Susan Phillips* successfully completed the NIH Web-based training course ?Protecting Human Research Participants?.

Date of completion: 12/26/2009

Certification Number: 296129

APPENDIX 2

INTERVIEW GUIDE

Background and Racial Identity

1. Can you start by telling me a little bit about yourself? Your background, upbringing, experience, etc.
2. Can you describe your ethnic identity, family's immigration journey, and upbringing (parents, neighborhood, childhood)?
3. What was your experience as an Asian American growing up?
4. What kinds of cultures did you embody at home versus at school, etc.?
5. Did you find yourself identifying with one culture over another?
6. How does this [how you view your identity] compare now?

Personal Passion for EJ and Social Justice

1. Was there a specific aspect of your life or your upbringing that played a role in shaping your interests/passions?
2. When and how did you learn about the topic of environmental justice or how environmentalism related to social justice?
3. What did your Asian friends/family members think you were doing (referring to social justice-oriented actions)? How did they react?
4. What's the importance of your specific role and work?
5. Could you speak to one of the most impactful or memorable experiences you had organizing for something EJ related?

Asian American Activism

1. How do you feel about the current level of political and community engagement within the Asian American community?
2. What are your thoughts on the model minority myth (apolitical-ness, civically disengaged, "perpetually foreign") and Asian Americans? ...Is this an accurate or inaccurate representation?
3. What do you think about the current representation of EJ groups advocating for Asian American communities? Are there enough, too many, too few? Why do you think that is?
4. How do we bring in more of the Asian American community in to social justice/environmental justice activism?

APPENDIX 3

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPTIONS

Interview with Charles Lee

CL is laid back, leans backwards into desk chair, at ease and comfortable.

EN: Can you describe your ethnic identity, family's immigration journey, and upbringing (parents, neighborhood, childhood)?

CL: I was born in Taiwan and I came here when I was 8 years old. My father was a chemist and I grew up in New York and uhhh... and that's my background.

EN: And what was your neighborhood like?

CL: I grew up in the Bronx...it wasn't an Asian American community you know...it uh was uhh a pretty diverse community in the...like near Fordham Rd and Jerome Ave like I don't remember anymore gee... yeah so it was pretty diverse you know but umm... I think in terms of if there were a lot of Asian Americans in that area? No, very few. Except for places like California or like uh places like Chinatowns you don't have but a few AAPIs at any given point. Like when I went to school there weren't a lot of AAPIs. Like when you're in a classroom you may be the only one and stuff like that... So I didn't necessarily grow up with a lot of Asian American friends because the neighborhood and everything I grew up with didn't have a lot of us to begin with.

EN: So your parents immigrated here? At what age and for what reason?

CL: I was born in Taiwan. My parents came here when I was young...They weren't youthful but there were pretty young. My father came here to study and the rest of us came over here too.

Becomes hesitant and questions if there was anything else he should discuss.

EN: While you were growing up, where there differences in cultures you observed in the household versus outside in your neighborhood? Did you parents stick strongly to Taiwanese culture, or did they kind of assimilate into American culture?

CL: I think it was a little bit of both. I don't think I was very restricted in terms of culturally like...I wasn't forced to go in one way or the other. You know I think I found myself when I became more on my own, you know I interacted with both groups. I ended up taking a career where I was in a lot of different groups of people of color.

EN: Do you think there was any specific aspect of your life or your upbringing that played a role into shaping your interests/passions?

CL: You know, I think a lot of us came to age during the Vietnam War and um... during the time of the civil rights movement ...and so those are things that probably shaped me in terms of perspective and values a lot. And those are the types of things I pursued in terms of my career. Umm.. you know I don't think I necessarily wanted to...I mean I got into environment and environmental justice more because... let me think...it wasn't because I felt as strongly about the environment at first, I think I felt more strongly about social justice than about the environment per se.

EN: And when did you start to see this sort of intersection between social justice and how it relates to environmental movement. Was there a specific time you can point to or was it gradually over time that you started you started to notice these connections?

Well I think there was some interest in the ideas, but when, you know, Warren County took place I kinda like put it all together and I realized this is a pretty big deal. Uhh.. you know, as I could see how uh civil rights and environmental issues and how impactful it could be. And I think you know after when I went to work for the Commission of Racial Justice, you know I spent a lot of time at first just researching how environmental issues manifest themselves among poc and low income communities. And the more I was able to do that the more I realized what a big issue this was. And that's when I decided that if you really want to do something, you gotta really figure out how to show and really put the issue on the map. And that's why I decided to do the report *Toxic Wastes and Race* and um... you know it was because the general accountability office, because congressman Fauntroy had requested it, did that study on 4 off site hazardous waste landfills in EPA

region 4 . And that was a pretty limited study you know only looking at four sites and I said you know..what if you could take this and do it on a national basis? And that's when that idea came up. And I wasn't *that* particularly interested in hazardous waste waste per se, I think it was just because in the early days of EJ movement waste issues and where facilities would be cited just kinda dominated the community issues. It wasn't until later that like uh people started to organize around all kind of environmental issues including..like air quality issues and chemical safety, power plant safety...but in the beginning it was focusing around waste issues. That's not to say that was not the most important or the issue that impacted people the most in terms of human health, but uh... so I guess so you know... the question around how did this all come together? Yeah, it was Warren County. One of the things I did, like I wasn't working for the church back then... I was working for a nonprofit in Newark, New Jersey around occupation safety and health, and I went down there to show solidarity and said "You know I really need to take this story" and I organized a tour for Reverend White and some of the other people involved in the Warren County protest and I went to several cities. It was a pretty moving set of events. I think it kind of opened people's eyes, the fact that there was the protest that actually took place had a connection to the fact that it was an African American community. But people didn't really think about environmental justice back then...they were kinda like ..."So what do civil rights and environment have to do with each other?" **stumbles**... the mainstream environmentalists were a little bit perplexed by this ...the mainstream environmental movement focused on natural resources and conservation and stuff like that... but, you know.. the people that worked on civil rights issues were more interested in economic advancement and educational advancement and individual opportunities, job opportunities, voting rights, and housing ...people didn't think about the environment. So it's actually quite remarkable to think about the 1980's. I mean, right now, when people say environmental racism, people think of things like Flint, Michigan and others..., I mean it's pretty natural... But 30 years ago, people were like..."What do these things have to do with each other?" And so um...it's a real big change. If you think of how the world has changed, that's pretty remarkable. I used to tell the Board of the Commission that uh they hired me to work on an issue that didn't have a name, and uh when I left to come to work for federal government, one of the things I think we could be proud of is...when we all started this, when we all started doing this, nobody knew what we were talking about so uh... yeah...so....uh but, the other thing that was taking place was that a lot of people in the grassroots activists working on environmental issues were really uh began to take issue around mainstream environmental issues around diversity and also around policies and like where are the most egregious negative impacts and environmental practices, and the kind of positions we're taking and not taking...and that's what led to the First People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit. That's one of the things I organized. Now, the reason why I think that was important was at that point, nobody like...if you go and talk to people like Miya Yoshitani, who's the director of Asian Pacific Environmental Network, there was a small group of AAPIs that kind of like opened their eyes to issues about the environment. And some of them started to work together and that was the beginnings of AAPI activism in a conscious way about issues in the environment. To this day, I mean.. AAPI environmentalism is still pretty localized. The major ongoing kind of organizing is taking place in California, and primarily around Oakland and Richmond areas... even outside of California there isn't *that* much organizing going on. I mean, there are things happening to fish consumption issues, and there's a lot of organizing, and I think that's because of a lot of different factors like things around nail salons and stuff like that. But, you know, it's still in small pockets. You know like Piyachat pointed out, like New Orleans, in Hawaii, throughout California, and up through the Pacific Northwest, there's some uhh... there's a lot of struggles that go on around displacement because of the location of AAPI communities and uh how they've been moved. That's why I keep thinking, a lot of AAPI EJ issues are very intertwined with development. And, I've never gotten a chance, there's a thing called Asian American Caucus on Neighborhood Development. And I've always wanted to sit down to sit down and talk about this but I've never had the time. But you know it was interesting because CA had its SB535, the one that took 25 percent of proceeds from greenhouse gas reduction funds... Kevin DeLeon runs this immigrant-based kind of job, you know... like a CDC that helped job service provider for immigrant workers and they became interested in this issue because of the potential for jobs and things of that

nature. I mean, AAPIs there's a strand that's very worker oriented, like garment factories, hotel workers, farm workers but... it isn't... not that in any other communities.. There's organizing in different ways but... I've never...this is good that people like you are interested in this, cuz I've never figured out like how deep this organizing is around environmentalism is and how systematic it is around AAPI community. I don't think anyone has really pulled it together. You know I had gotten a... someone is now doing a PHD at UC Berkeley and she told me she wanted to interview me at 1st People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit because she thought that was the place where a lot of AAPI-EJ consciousness got sparked and she's doing here thesis on it right now..

When you first introduced the EJ term, what were the initial reactions? Approving? Disapproving?

When *Toxic Wastes and Race* came out I got a buncha phone calls and people would tell me they're really happy about. People who were organizing around communities essentially around environmental issues and they had a sense that something was wrong about what was going on didn't have a way to articulate it as something to do with race and racial inequity and environ racism. With Aaron Mair, in Albany New York, it was a black community,... wasn't totally poor, but it was cited for an incinerator but it was around the time *Toxic Wastes and Race* came out, and he would always say how the report helped him he articulated what was happening. Aaron became the first African American president of the Sierra Club. So I get tat a lot of that... so people started making connections. And there's an interesting study by Susan Carter... she had done a study on levels of environmental concern in the city of Chicago and she basically found where the environmental issues were perceivable, there was a slightly high percentage of people concerned by African Americans. That's cuz down the street when you see the smokestack and the tap water discolored... I think most people don't appreciate how the environmental movement ideology colors people's perception of reality. People think environment must be about conservation about wildlife saving endangered species and things like that... but it has to do with environment in inner cities and things like that. When I was in New York, they were doing these briefings for candidates for mayor, and I said to them... you guys gotta think about this. It's probably a real legacy of racism that you guys never think about where parks and recreational greenspace is as something of an issue. That whole area people like kinda never thought about it... and that's probably because we're all affected by racism and nobody thinks about it as an issue... So I would say that the question that was most asked of me when we first started to talk about these issues was like so what does civil rights have to do with the environment? That wasn't just asked by white environmentalists but also by people of color who just weren't connecting it. So when the EJ movement was about where we work, live, play and when you get down to the nuances about it...

That's like 20 years ago there was a lot of skepticism ...people wouldn't make the connection and i would say that the way the environmentalism ideology have impacted the way ppl think and perceive the world is actually pretty profound. Now i think ppl are very diff. They would see what's happening in terms of the kind of chemical exposure as well as other things like lack of walkability and all these things that are very skewed accordingly as race and income, as environmental issues. As part of a whole panorama of issues that affect ppl's lives, that would be all considered in part of the way environment affected these lives.

See I don't know where AAPIs fit around that... [refers to UCLA study] most environmentally conscious group is AAPIs and I just don't see it... I just don't see it... I just don't know... I just don't see it.... And I certainly don't see it in the kind of organizing that goes on...you know like the NAACP has a full time organizer focused around climate issues. I don't see any AAPI organizations do that. Not to say that AAPIs don't tend to do a lot of that organizing to begin with beause u know the philosophy behind AAPI is you know make sure ur kids are successful cuz that's the pathway to make sure things are successful. But you know I don't see the kind of real strong environmental organizing going on. So it would be important to understand what is going on and see what it all means. I mean there is a lot going on but it hasn't been fully encapsulated. You know, I never thought about...

You know, preservation is an essential part of AAPI environmentalism. A lot of people have pointed out historical preservation in defense of cultural heritage, particularly in contexts of native indigenous sites...

transfer that in terms of AAPI ethic. But obviously, there's a group focused around cultural preservation of AAPI, so that's another aspect of this... so I don't think there's a coherent AAPI environmental ethics.... And at least it's not conscious yet.

On a more personal note, people call you the father of EJ, and you are AAPI-identifying. How was it like going into Warren County being from a different minority group? Did you feel a sort of disconnect?

You know what, I said.. I never saw myself, especially in this context as AAPI. I mean, I always thought of my work as being very multicultural. When I went to work for civil rights commission, I was the only non-African American on staff at that time. And so no, I didn't think that then there became a barrier for me... and um... I think that EJ movement promotes the ethic of trying to work cross-culturally. You know that doesn't mean there are tensions between various groups and there are between various groups in EJ movement, but yeah the environment includes everyone, and therefore people of color should distributed as multiracial, multicultural type of endeavor. I mean, you know...I think I have a very unique place in all of this, 'cuz people know this came from the work that I did from the beginning. So I guess I am who I am... and that's just part of the way things unfolded. I don't know... I mean, I definitely know there hasn't been a barrier. People never questioned if it was appropriate for me to be talking about their issues... it may be different for other people, and how they talk about people's other issues. But it basically comes down to... you can't talk for other people. I talk about these things from my perspective, not as the perspective of me as an Asian American person, but kinda as a person that's been involved during various aspects throughout the movement. I don't think people have questioned why are you talking about this if you're not African American, so I think that's a positive thing.

What are your thoughts on the model minority myth (apoliticalness, civically disengaged) and AAPIs?

I think the AAPI community is not as civically engaged as they could be or as many others have been. I think many AAPIs tend to be focused more on as like..they see a strength as technical knowhow, individual effort, so they hit a point where...that's the ceiling. I think that... whenever AAPI groups ask me to give a talk, I say... you need to see yourself as leaders versus what it means to be a good worker so to speak: a good scientist, attorney, technical person, writer... but what does it mean to be a good leader? But I think that's true for... I think there's a real generational aspect to this... I mean people like you, that are coming of age now, I don't think issues of model minority and bamboo ceiling are gonna be that strong. Because I think I see people like you, who are pretty vocal..., pretty able to think across look across different groups and connect with a lot of diff types of people. I think it's gonna be very different. That doesn't mean you're totally right, that all coming of age AAPIs are like that and I'm sure some of the other traits we talked about are pretty strong in people. But I think it's gonna be different..And this country is a lot more diverse now... a lot more AAPIs...instead of 1 to 2 Asians you see 5 to 10 now.

Chuckles

Do you think that there are more cases than recognized by AAPI community, and if so, why?

Well, I think there are a lot that have gone unrecognized. And I don't know if it's that different than any other racial ethnic groups in the US because there's a lot of lack of recognition with African Americans, Native Americans, and Latinos and maybe even more so. They was a story about how one of the instrumental national park service was a chinese cook. There's a lot of different stories that nobody connected. And a lot of Filipinos were instrumental in the formation of United Farmworker Movement. So I don't think any of that has been well documented well articulated well told. As to why, well I think well certain groups are pushed to the side. So they're not recognized as much. As far as EJ is concerned, I think this is still a developing story so I don't think that there's enough work that has been done yet to kind of document and articulate and you know i kinda not thought about this enough... like when we were talking... like I don't think there's a strong...what is the environmental ethic within the AAPI community at large? I don;t think that's been articulated well. So I think that would be good to have someone focus on that.

Why do you think there are less AAPI EJ orgs than other minorities?

I don't know... i think that.. You know it would be interesting to go to a lot of this national AAPI groups like health forums and ask them you know ... are you interested in issues of the environment? You know

why or why not? How do you define them in terms of your mission and theirs? Generally speaking, AAPIs, in terms of national umbrella organizations, they don't really exist and of those that do, they're very niche. So it would be interesting to see what they say. I don't know if I could answer that question but it would be interesting to find out.

What do you see as the next step for the movement? How do we bring in more of the AAPI community?

You know I have to think more about that one... I'm not really sure, those are big questions. The EJ movement is so complex now it's kinda remarkable to see how far things have changed, but there are so many different actors now, at the community level, government level, research, and they are all intertwined with each other and it's all remarkable to see.

Interview with Martha Matsuoka

Emily Ng 0:00

With knowing a little bit more about yourself, so can you just tell me like, a little bit about yourself like your background, upbringing and experiences.

Martha Matsuoka 0:13

So I was born and raised in San Francisco the Bay Area. But I spent my life you know, my adult life. I came to Occidental College as a student in college, and then I sort of bounced back and forth between LA and the Bay Area, and uh Asia. I studied abroad in Japan and then after grad school, I went to Okinawa for a couple years. Came back to the Bay Area, came back to LA, and so I feel like my I would define my place to serve the Pacific, California all the way out to Asia. Let's see you know, I currently am a professor at Occidental College, which is ironic because I never thought I'd come back here but, um, and I teach urban and environmental policy now.

Emily Ng 1:11

Can you describe a little bit about your ethnic identity? Maybe like your family's immigration journey or your immigration journey.

Martha Matsuoka 1:22

Yeah, so I'm a third generation Japanese American. You know, my family is part of a big wave of Japanese Americans who came to this country in the turn of the early part of the century. They came from two places my mom side of the family, I think this is sort of interesting but, they came from a fishing village in a more rural fishing village in Yamaguchi prefecture, which is South of Hiroshima. And they were, you know, first farm and field workers in Santa Cruz at Watsonville area. Then later, my grandfather and my grandmother came much later but they went with a few other 20 something other families to the Central Valley and we're part of something called the Cortez community with the San Joaquin Valley. Cortez is celebrated their hundred anniversary this year. So wonderful. It was just really nice to be there with multiple multiple generations of people. My father's side of the family came from a slightly different class of people in Japan at the time. They were more urban, right, so they lived in Hiroshima. And my grandfather was one of five brothers. And he came, he was the fifth one and his brothers are already here. met on the west coast. He came when he was 14 but went to New York City. I have never quite figured out that story. But he learned how to speak English. And when he was a young adult he was back in California with his brothers, but he spoke English well enough to start his own company, it was a labor contractor company. He was sort of a broker of Japanese labor in California at the time who needed Japanese workers and in the field, so he and my grandmother started, I guess he started, he came back to California and went to Brawley, which is in in the southern part of the state near the border. But they settled, My father grew up in Boyle Heights with numbers of other Japanese Americans. So that's where I can be called home. My great grandparents are buried still in Evergreen

Cemetery here in Los Angeles. But after, you know, after Pearl Harbor during the war, you know, that racist you know, the incarceration just cut across all Japanese Americans regardless of their class background. My mother's family went to eastern Colorado to El Monte and then my father's family tried to dodge the evacuation. You know, they kept moving. I say this all because it helps me tell the story about race and class and, and also about rural and urban. But yet, you know, when they come to America, the race, hammer comes down and they're all equal. They went, after my mother went to Berkeley after camp. My father actually was already in Berkeley, they had settled. They didn't go back to Los Angeles, they went to the Bay Area cuz my father was also going to Berkeley at the time. And they were, they were resettled with the sycamore Congregational Church in Northern California. And it was in Oakland at the time. And so that's where my grandfather's family ended up. My mother's family. My father's family ended up in Berkeley. And my mom was the only one of her family who went to the Bay Area, the rest of them went back to the farm in the Central Valley. My uncles were in the military. And so we were considered the urban cousins of my bigger extended family. But I'm very think we still hold all the rural connections to my family that still lives in the Central Valley. You know, I live here in Los Angeles. So I feel like I'm living the next generation of folks in Los Angeles. It's an it's a good history to hold on to, I think.

Emily Ng 6:21

So then you spent the most of your childhood growing up in like Northern California, you were saying?

Martha Matsuoka 6:27

Yep, that's right. In the Bay Area.

Emily Ng 6:29

And so how was your upbringing? I mean, how did your parents sort of like navigate this, like Asian American cultural balance when you were growing up in the household?

Martha Matsuoka 6:45

I'm older. So my childhood was defined by several things. The first time we were, we grew up in El Cerrito, which is, you know, just north of Albany and Berkeley. But you know, when I was eight years old, I remember being very impacted by the Black Panthers and watching them, you know I distinctly remember them providing free lunches to poor folks. You know, the same time we were also told not to go to Berkeley because it is too dangerous, right? So my parents were really focused on trying to carve out some stable postwar life. Right, in El Cerrito. But, you know, in a way that was connected to community, my mom was very active because Sycamore Congregational Church was not far away. And we grew up. We grew up in the church, we played basketball for that church, but the Bay Area's roots of all different kinds of Japanese American religious institutions, right. So my grandmother, my father's side of the family, were affiliated with the Buddhist church. I mean, the Oakland Buddhist church in Chinatown, and which is that time So, you know, we played basketball, Kathy and I Professor you know, and we went to we're tied together by all the church activities are tied together a basketball that connected us to all these other communities around California. So that's pretty well defined and now you know, kind of a well recognized Japanese American coming up.

Emily Ng 8:29

So but your hometown at the time, you mentioned there were like a lot of Japanese churches but we're like Japanese and Asian Americans the majority of that town or was like what was the demographics I guess?

Martha Matsuoka 8:44

You know, my, I don't know what the exactly were but you know, this was a time when people of color

were just settling into the bay area in ways in turn, well, they had already been always been there, right. So big, Filipino and Japanese community even before the war, were in Alameda, places like that, right in San Francisco. Those other folks had to leave and then come back. So I felt like this was my upbringing, there were a lot of Asians, spread around and in pockets of things. I think later, I would recognize that there was also big Chinese American community. And then later on as I got older, you know, a growing Southeast Asian to me in the life that because of the impact of the Vietnam War, people came in coming back. So, Asian America got bigger for me as I got older, in terms of my ability to recognize what was going on. But also because the, you know, the migration was actually happening right starting to happen in the 60s 70s 80s. So yeah, I mean, you know, the O mean think but now, I mean, I always think the bay area so much more Asian, right?

Emily Ng 10:09

Yeah. Um, so when you were growing up as a Japanese American, did you find yourself like really connecting or identifying with one culture over another?

Martha Matsuoka 10:23

Other than Japanese?

Emily Ng 10:25

I guess like, you know, kind of, like choosing to identify more of like the Japanese side of your Japanese American identity or like the American side.

Martha Matsuoka 10:36

You know, in those teenage years, I don't think I had an explicit Asian identity frame. Yeah, we didn't learn about ethnic studies at school. We didn't have any of the language then. All I knew was that We were really diverse, you know, we had, and this is a function to me of, you know, housing segregation in the Bay Area. So we live in neighborhoods that were that were homes that were not red lines, you know, with full of people who were just starting to, you know, cross those old red lines that were drawn. So my block had we had African American families, Italian American families, Mexican Americans, Chinese American, French immigrant family. Likewise, elementary school was pretty diverse. I remember them busing kids in and but when I got to high school, we were diverse but much more segregated for sure. Some identity politics at that time, you know, I didn't You know, had my Japanese American community I had my we had a club it and when I was in high school, my best friends were a black woman, a Filipino woman and a white woman. And we called ourselves the UN. So goofy I was just talking to them about this the other day. And, but that was, I guess the way for us to kind of lift up our shared identity somehow, but I had that crew at school and then I had all my JA friends playing basketball and said to church, you know, but you know, this is the way I manage things at that point.

Emily Ng 12:37

Hmm. So how does this like, how did your previous perception of how you like, identified yourself, compare with how you identify yourself today?

Martha Matsuoka 12:50

That's a really good question. You know, I think, well because you know you go to college. I think many people go to college and you find your identity in a different way about you're much more clear about what it what that is. I went to my junior year, in college, I went abroad and I went to Japan. And any was very eye opening to me that I wasn't Japanese. Right? I was something very particular that was Japanese American. And very Western, right. So that I was very cognizant of the fact that I was culturally really aligned with my folks from, you know, Central American, Latin America who, you know, who are Okinawan for example, right, but speaking Spanish, and grew up in Colombia, and Bolivia. So it was

very clarifying to see yourself in a different context. I recognize that my experiences were very particular to having grown up in the United States. But I didn't you know, none of that was clear to me until you know much later in my life. You know, just like, what I think now about my identity is so tied with how I understand my role in making change in the world. So it's not just a culturalized ethnic identity. It's truly about my politics and my idea about, you know, what my purpose is in the broader, you know, in the broader, bigger picture.

So, I identify as Japanese American woman. But, you know, I, my people are much bigger than that, right? I mean, my people are multiracial. They're multi gendered. They're multi generational, but every, but they're valid values sort of ground. You know, Values about justice and about liberation about social change. Those are all how I would define my identity in that way.

Emily Ng 15:21

I know you talk very passionately about social movements and social change in general. And what sparked this interest?

Martha Matsuoka 15:32

Yeah, that's a good question, um, I think i have remembered key events in my life. You know, I grew up in the Bay Area, and at that time during the late 60s, it was a big time. Being a little kid and watching this all kind of unfold, right. So, you know, we grew up with the Panthers on one hand, you know, in there were Chinese gangs in San Francisco I remember. We had alternative education programs in my elementary school, my mom was pretty committed to getting exposed to lots of things. And so we I was in an elementary school program where the fourth, fifth and sixth graders were all together in the same class. We had resource people coming to talk to us about music and art and social sciences, but they were teaching us stuff like the movement songs, like I remember seeing Bob Dylan in fifth grade with an accordion, and then we would learn about ecology. So that was when ecology was sort of a new term, for us, at least in the mainstream, and you know about waste and pollution. And it was just it was a pretty interesting time to be thinking about all these things. But I don't think my actually, kind of my movement and activist stuff showed up until the environmental justice movement. So I call that I was just telling my students the other day that I think Everybody comes, finds their place in the world, because of some social moment or another. So mine was environmental justice movement. And I think my students now are coming through with sort of an identity and climate change movement. That's going to shape how you think about your values and about how you want to be in the world. But mine was absolutely about the environmental justice movement.

Emily Ng 17:28

When the environmental justice movements first started gaining traction, and people started hearing about it, Where were you in life, and like, How old were you at the time? What were you doing?

Martha Matsuoka 17:41

I was out of my master's program, I finished Berkeley in Urban planning and, you know, urban planning was kind of my way to, I really was interested in understanding place and people, right, why are some places poor, why are some people poor...I was interested in why some places are polluted. You know, it was all those ideas I was interested in why in the relationship between my family who are farmers, right And my family who were in urban places, I mean, so it was, but everything was about place, you know, that was important to me. So, as I finished my master's program, I was working. Let me just think about what I was doing. So, I went to work for a foundation as an intern for a little bit but then I went to Okinawa for two years to do some research. I don't think I was fully paying attention to environmental justice at the time I but it did that experience in Okinawa reminded me about how powerful the US military is in the in the rest of the world. And how I couldn't just do a study on affordable housing without thinking about the US military. So when I came home, I worked for a base conversion project out of the

National Park Service because they were transferring the national Presidio, the Presidio, the old army base, into the National Park. So that's what I did. And it was there that I started sitting there in my office, I started learning more about the environmental justice movement. I mean people were starting to talk about it. There were articles written about race and the environment, about civil rights in the environment. And that was where I started hearing about, you know, people like Dana Austin, who was writing some of the early work. where I heard about the organizing that was happening in the southwest with the stuff with network of an economic and environmental justice needs. where i heard about the all the work in the south about cancer alley and that organizing. But it was my view was powerful to me because it was linked up my, my thinking about place, for sure. But it also tied my personal connection around racial grace and civil rights to environment cuz I growing up, you know, Berkeley were all, you know, thinking money college the environment I was working for the National Park Service know, all that came together and was very powerful in it. But it was it was what I thought it was just these little bits and pieces, right? Although people later learn have been doing it for decades and decades, right, talking about these issues. So the Native Americans and the uranium mining, for example, right, that didn't just show up in 1990 was something that they've been organizing for a long time. But I think by 1990 all these pieces are starting to come together, right? United Farm Workers with the indigenous peoples with the folks in cancer alley with the folks in LA breathing, you know, air pollution all have to come together. So it was a powerful time.

Emily Ng 21:16

Yeah. So you said at the time you were studying, you were getting your masters in city regional ... When did you start sort of becoming aware of like think spatially and where things were placed like Was it something very early on like throughout like your childhood that you observed or was it just like, the further on you got throughout your education?

Martha Matsuoka 21:55

Yes. After I graduated from Oxy I didn't know What I wanted to do, I graduated with a degree in East Asian Studies an political science. And I, and the only thing I can do was I knew how to type and I could type pretty fast. And, you know, back then there wasn't there was computers were processing was starting to show up. But I made \$1 a page signing papers for people when I was in college. It's a hard concept for York City. So in the secretary, and I was a secretary for a downtown development advocacy organization in Los Angeles. And those folks that organization was really interested in developing downtown LA, so their members, people that they work for with the membership of all these high powered developers and civic leaders, who will, I would say civic leaders, people, like civic leaders will say, spin and just developing downtown LA and there was probably Three people of color in there, but which was representational of, you know, through diversity, but their focus was really not about as I would later come to kind of learn, it was not about making equitable cities I just developers and development in kind of the traditional civic way, you know, quote unquote cynically. But I was typing memos about, you know, how to help our constituency, all the developers get around things like get around planning law to actually develop so but and nobody was talking about what to do with poor people. And I was really struck by that thought. Why is it so much attention on trying to get around planning law and policy to avoid poor people and why can't see these people, poor people, and I guess that's my first point was playing school. And so that's what I did. They really wanted me I like these people. They were perfectly nice people, right. But the agenda was different than what I had what I wanted to see with my life. So they all wanted me to go to get a Masters, an MBA. And I didn't want to do that I wanted to go to planning because I knew that if I thought at that time planning could be a really important tool for making cities really inclusive and just. So that's what I did. Yep.

Emily Ng 24:29

Okay. Um, so now I'd like to like divert a few questions A little more specifically about your work and

experiences more relating to environmental justice work? So, in the article you sent me, it mentions attendees at the first national people of color summit, including Pam Tau Lee, Peggy Saika and Mia Yoshitami, and so on. Did you also attend the summit? or How did you really connect with them and decide to be a part of like, the a pen foundational process?

Martha Matsuoka 25:11

Yeah, good question. I was not there. But I hope you get to interview Pam and Mia and some of these other folks. Yeah, they're great. Especially Pam. She I mean, I think I see her as kind of a mentor to me to see her as somebody I just look up to so much. She's been doing labor organizing for decades and decades and social justice work and she was one of the forces I think that actually wanted to make sure APEN got founded. But no, I didn't go I actually. But what happened was that those 13 people, right, who went to came back to the Bay Area and said, okay, we gotta do something, right. I mean, there was this excitement and there was these new ideas that they shared. Peggy Saika at the time came back. And they started the convening meeting. And, you know, she Peggy is a great fundraiser and connector of people. And she managed to get the San Francisco foundation right in San Francisco to support some of the early planning of APEN. And so that's what happened. She started to just call people up and said, Can we just create start conversations? I cant even remember the first meeting, but that's how that happened. And she pulled people who were doing work in environmental fields, and at that time, I still working with the Park Service. And um, and so I think, you know, she had known her, our families know each other from back in the day. But yes, so we haven't started having conversation and it was the sole purpose was to create an Asian environmental justice organization to participate in this growing movement? Right? That would be part of this movement growing movement. And then secondly, to inject an API perspective into this movement, right? Because there's there was a lot of, you know, stories coming out of the South, for example, right would have traditionally African American story. There were indigenous stories there were, you know, Latinx stories coming off the border. And but we knew that Asian, Asian and Pacific Islanders certainly had a story as well. You know, I have to say to you, at some point, we had long conversations about Pacific Islanders and Asian Americans right and in the Bay Area. I think that you mia might be able to answer this more but they're very distinct, right or Asian American experiences really different and very separate from but related to the Pacific Islander I think people are very conscious about that now. Certainly, the early folks who were part of the movement, like Mily Lani Task, and you know, folks from Hawaii were strong players in some of that early ej movement. So I don't think APEN I think we've set ourselves up as a Asian American. Pacific. Yeah, I think we decided to not focus on the PI part of it. Although that's something you posed to clarify with me. Okay. Yeah. That's how it started. It was really it was a really exciting time in the very beginning.

Emily Ng 28:46

Yeah. So what was your reaction? I think you said she like called you up one day and she was sort of talking about this idea. How did you feel about that?

Martha Matsuoka 29:00

It was exciting to hear the report back from Pam and Peggy Mia, you know, who else was there? A number of them went. And, you know, just talking about this new analysis about environment and justice, right from the perspective of people of color in this country. And, and how powerful that framework was in terms of uniting all of us under kind of this shared frame that wasn't just about individual groups of people, but rather kind of a frame that connected us all by all these structural in all these different ways. So I think that was really exciting. To be able to connect our Asian stories in American stories with those of the indigenous folks in the, you know, or with the folks in the south. There's something very powerful About the the way that we, those early conversations were about building, addressing the issues and conditions of leadership in our specific places and in communities, but also developing these relationships

across all the different groups, right and across the country and figure out principles of accountability and movement building. That was really exciting.

Emily Ng 30:34

As a founding board member, really, you know, like the first Asian Pacific American ej org, how did you really go about refining the goals and the mission of a pen when they was like really nothing to base it off of?

Martha Matsuoka 30:52

Wow, I mean, one. I mean, I guess in some ways, we assumed it's different now. But back then, We intend to be a nonprofit organization. Right? So in some ways that already is that that's kind of a standard, right? We weren't a labor union, for example, we were going to be a non profit. So, because of that there's certain requirements, right? You have to have a mission, you got to have a board of directors, you know. So that's what we set on to do that. I'm trying to remember all the mission conversations. The mission was always pretty clear. I think. We spent lots of time on was half the strategies. We spent a lot of time in the early years doing things like seafood consumption surveys and lead in ceramic paint. And, you know, making sure that the folks in Richmond could fish in the bay and understand what the health implications might be for eating lots of this. So we did a lot of that But you know, within the first three or four, five years, we realized that something was kind of missing. And that missing elements had to do with power. And so we meaning that there are structural issues about this about different models, environmental justice that we weren't quite recognizing, and that we weren't. Our strategies weren't quite hitting. And so we did a few years worth of training about with other groups, other groups around the country around power analysis. That was a big to me a big shifting moment for this wasn't about this cultural programming. This was about power building. And I think that was important. The big pivot, but that was one of the biggest ones, I think, and one that you certainly see today.

Emily Ng 33:10

I know right now currently APEN is like pretty well known as being like an Asian Pacific American focused organization. But while you were developing and forming your organization, did you get like invitations to collaborate with other, like minority based ej organizations as well to kind of bring in diversity or was it like pretty like, minorities working in their own communities?

Martha Matsuoka 34:19

Okay, well, part of I think this this beginning days were about making sure we were connected with the other networks in the country. Everybody, this is why we're called a network. Because all the EPA we regions have network. So SNEED was a network. SOC Southern organizing committee with a network, I mean, everybody had these regional networks. And so the whole there was all these conversations all the time with other folks in the country, about how we build these networks, how we build internal and external accountability to the movement. that's what the conversation So wasn't just like we were just a new organization. We were really tied to the growing movement of EJ. And I will say that the ones that it was, it was the indigenous environ network, SNED, SOC and i Think of another one. There were other ones that came up afterwards to the African American network. I mean, there's numbers of them. But that's who our primary, we were building a movement. I mean, it wasn't just we were just starting an organization and suddenly, you know, we were in the midst of all these other nonprofits, but it was lots of conversation about how to build the movement and each other's networks together. So lots of planning a lot of meetings, a lot of people wanted to come talk for sure. funders and things like that. There was also Yes, there was also kind of the whole

conversation about diversifying environmental organizations because that was part of the history. Right. And I think that was never a big strategy. I mean, because it didn't get at the issues about power and movement building. Right? So wasn't about just race environmental movement, this is about something entirely different

Emily Ng 36:35

I know I contacted you to talk about APEN, but like I was also reading about some of your accomplishments and what you've done. And I know there's like so much more that you've done. So I guess Could you just speak to one of the most either impactful or memorable experiences you had organizing for something ej related

Martha Matsuoka 36:59

you know, for me EJ is everything to me? I mean, EJ is the big frame I use, right. I mean, for everything, I'm actually just writing about this. Because it's about this idea that people most impacted define, you know, campaigns and the defined researcher, people who are most impacted by policy, you need to be able to have a voice. Right. So whether that's about the environment or whether that's about prison reform, or whether it's about you know, food security, right, I mean, so normal justice to me, particularly in this moment in time, is, I think, a really necessary frame for people. I'm just thinking about other things that have influenced me. So within that frame, I mean, there were points in my life that has really changed how I think about things. Going to Okinawa was certainly one had to do with really thinking about things globally. You know, there's some global power structures that exist that define our national politics at night to find our local conditions and things. I think that's really important. You know, I also think that I have learned from my students to about all their different histories and trajectories that are really different than mine. Right. And that's, that's always kind of keeps me kind of shifting my frame a little bit. But just think about a big thing for me. 911 was a big one. nationalism and militarization is and wearable justice. I mean, they all kind of fit together for me, but that's a very big thing that had a big impact on how we think about the world and our communities. But there is some core across all these things are. So, I think APEN, you know, really good organization is actually nimble. And it's actually wrap up some of those core principles about justice and about people's stories and how people everyday people actually can define the policies and rules that you know are going to affect them. And sort of democracy kind of kind of value. I think that a time really roots down. But yeah you know APEN just turned 25 so I was there at the went to their event a couple weeks ago. And yeah, it was really impressive to see that it could say that, you know, the building power frame and the fact that community organizing is is their primary strategy for change. You could see it I mean, there was hundreds of people at this event. Hundred and Nikki bass who is a council member, she's a Filipino, she said first Filipino to be Oakland city council. Nikki's to be on the board of APEN She grew up with APEN, you know, she carries an EJ frame. I think that she her speech and standing up in front of all these people was so impressive and was the result of you know, decades and decades. So that was really inspiring to me. It was also inspiring to go to the Climate March in San Francisco last year, and This is Pam Tau Lee. She does I think she probably single handedly. You know, she is such a force. And there were hundreds and hundreds of Asians on the street for climate change, and, you know, back in 1992, you know, there was like 13 people at the, at the summit, right? So, it goes to Yeah, it was it was just a really moving. I think part of that. And the impact of having that Asian perspective is, was illustrated in this big banner that pam and made which said From Homeland to heartlines, right. And so it recognized for the homeland where we all come from in our immigration stories, but also the fact that in America we're on the front line. Well, wherever we are in the in the world, right? We're on the front lines of climate change, whether you're in the Philippines, right, or whether you're in any of these other countries. so powerful. So I mean, the voice has to be there all the time.

Emily Ng 42:22

What response to friends and family family members from the Asian American community have while you're doing this today, I guess like how did they react? And did they understand?

Martha Matsuoka 42:39

Yeah. Yeah, I think it was. I think so. I mean, yeah, I mean, there was you know, I remember having member of Peggy having long conversations with folks in the social service sector for example, right. So, folks, I and we have a very big that in a, you know, in our community of orgs that the social services, right, whatever. And, you know, pick spend a lot of time meeting together these relationships to show how social service agencies were actually also could pick up some environmental aspects of the, you know, the work. So, um, I think it was just always trying to I don't think we ever got resistance from anybody, although, we will Well, yeah, I mean, some people that, like even own businesses, or owners and things like that, right. I mean, that was big restaurant owners in Chinatown, for example. Right. So, there was, but I think it APEN was about, you know, there is some justice to be had, and for workers or for you know, marginalized folks, and that was what the focus

Emily Ng 44:03

Okay, so I have a few more questions just now kind of switching to API activism in general. So you kind of touched on this when you were talking about the Climate March. But I guess on a national scale, how do you feel about the current level of political and community engagement within the API community?

Martha Matsuoka 44:32

Within?

Emily Ng 44:33

Yeah,

Martha Matsuoka 44:34

um, I think it's, you know, it's, I don't know what, what you want. But see, let me think about this for a second. I think it's growing. I think it's necessary. I think there's lots of young leaders who are stepping up. And this is not just activists who are activists saying I'm an Asian person and I need to be mainstream politics, right. These are really progressive politically conscious, you know, young folks who want to change the world, right. And it's not just getting individual benefits. Right. But it's also about meeting the needs of communities and across the agent spectrum, but also, I think this sounds like there's lots of new leadership that recognizes that even our, our goals related to the Black Lives Matter movement, right, are related to farmworkers, you know, and their conditions are related to, you know, some of the organizing up here in the south. So, that's, to me the most promising part. I mean, I think climate certainly is the reason why we need to do that. Climate change. I guess. You know, sometimes I get tired hearing some of the the Congress some of the more petty conversations, you know, when people just want to focus on representation is something you know, and as well, that's important. absolutely important. And identity is absolutely important. I'm always wanting towards Pam Tau always wants to say, what's the bigger frame? Right? What? For what why are we organizing for right? And we're organizing to be heard for sure. But, you know, we want to what's our bigger planetary bigger kind of goal here? And I always appreciate that.

Emily Ng 46:44

So, I know you just mentioned you don't really like talking about the representation question so much,

but what are your thoughts about the model minority myth and portraying Asian Americans as a political or civic leaders engaged?

Martha Matsuoka 47:02

Well, I don't think that's true. I mean, the model minority myth has done has limited and damaging. Sorry. I mean, I don't think I think and I, you know, I think to say that Asians are not civically engaged, this is wrong, because they are, you know, so I feel like those, those marriages need to be really just, we have to find new, we have to find stronger narratives that that eliminate those other kinds of narratives, right. But somehow they just keep persisting. And so I know my students had a whole conversation following Andrew Yang comment about the model minority model minority myth. And, you know, I think we could we can make a point About that comment he made, but I feel like he's not the enemy. Apparently, right? There's a bigger kind of conversation to be had right about, let's put out a different narrative, let's, you know show that there are different ways to talk about Asian America that are about social justice or about solidarity with other groups, or about tackling some of these bigger challenge bigger kind of the real problem, right.

Emily Ng 48:38

Kind of linking back to a pen for a second, although it's like not exclusively, an Asian Pacific American organization because you're mentioning it's more of a network. A lot of ej groups and organizations are more connected to certain ethnic groups. So How do you feel about like, I guess, the current activism and representation of ej groups advocating for Asian American Pacific Islander communities?

Martha Matsuoka 49:15

I guess first like a pen is organization, right? network is kind of a funny word, but it has, you know. Okay, sorry. Can you say the last part of the question again?

Emily Ng 49:37

Yeah, um, let me move this phone closer. You can hear me better. So what do you think about the current representation of EJ groups advocating for API communities? For example. Do you think there are Going number too many too few?

Martha Matsuoka 50:02

Well, there could always be more. And, you know, this could be more organizations, but I think there just has to be a stronger movement of people. Right. So whatever that I think that it has represented and been around long enough where people recognize APEN, but they also recognize the issues in a different way now. And APEN is part of a broader coalition of groups. So there's a California Environmental Justice Alliance, right, which is in the states and you know, within SAYHA, everything, see how it does really recognizes the leadership and the issues and conditions and the solutions from even America. Likewise to the national level, there's a group called it takes there's a the Climate Justice Alliance APEN In the leadership of that, and, you know, to inject the API perspective into those conversations. So, in that way, I feel like yeah, you know, all these issues and leadership of Asian America is actually there could be more, of course, right. without even trying to build some of that. And other groups are actually holding that too, right, like cats in New York City doing some amazing organizing work. So yeah, and other, you know, other groups tooright. I mean, it's interesting that I'm glad you're going to protect the API movement forward. You know, that's exciting. So it's a new organization, and we're going to have a different kind of history, right, because we come at a different kind of period of time. But we lost the group doing this right. But we have t's also getting the existing user groups, right, to actually align more to me right around these issues about environment and given the climate change, for sure, right. I mean, and it's not to say that those

groups have to stop what they're doing. But somehow, you know, kind of having a more collective frame around it or some just a greater understanding of environmental justice is always useful, whatever they're doing.

Emily Ng 52:32

Yeah. So I know earlier on in our conversation, you were talking about how initially, there are the formation of the EJ movement. There were a lot of specific narratives from the Latino community, and also the southern black community. I guess I relating to that now. Do you think the balance between narratives has changed.

Martha Matsuoka 53:06

I don't think it's a balance. I think it's about complexity. You know, I think what APEN came in to the theme movement, you know, folks, we're talking about immigration, some things, but they weren't talking about being refugees, for example, and what kind of conditions the different kinds of immigrant stories. We were working with the laotian community, I mean, you know, huge bump, much different kind of stories coming out of that community that people hadn't paid attention to. So it turns the narrative, you know, I think, in many good ways, the narrative is a we narrative, right? So it's about sort of this collective multiracial kind of perspective on and largely people of color who are most impacted. Color voices from the front lines talking about what conditions we need to address and how we're going to solve them. So, that to me is a narrative that's been on the rise. You know, but it's always up against the dominant narrative which is, you know, more about the white, white, anti blackness the anti black or white supremacist framing. But, you know, this is why they keep focusing on the tension between them, right. I mean, these are these are twosets of power that we need to kind of disrupt, right so we want to make sure that the people color voices actually They have more power to actually set the narrative. And that's what I think about.

Emily Ng 55:09

Okay, um, so my final question is, um, you know, as a Japanese American individual who has been very active in the social movement, social justice scene, and I guess, how would you bring more of like younger and the future? Asian American Pacific Islander community members into this organizing?

Martha Matsuoka 55:40

Good Question. You know, I work in an academic institution now. So, you know, when I teach classes, I just take the intro class right now and we just finished a whole segment on the environmental justice movement, either where we, students had to learn about how this one one came Maybe they know environmental justice now because it's been kind of normalized, you know. But people don't kind of have a sense of where that where that came from. And it came from real struggle with, you know, real people and people sitting in a hotel room coming up with that set of principles, the 17 principles, you know, I think knowing history is really key. And I am committed to making sure that history gets told, as well as, you know, past stories and current stories. We just brought a film to campus about this journey as a traditional Hawaiian apologies and I went around the world for three years. And you know, it was powerful because when you sent her stories like that, you look at the world differently, right. So and you think about what, how those stories kind of informed by a place in the world and what we should be doing about it. My fights for you know, even every story matters and what how do you tell that story? really any potential those stories, the reality looks different, right? And we need to just always lift that up. And so I guess I use my little my small, my small little contribution it is to, you know, now at this point to teach 18 to 21 year olds for years, right. But yeah, so yeah, there's a lot of I know, there's a lot of good organizers out there working on these issues and in every arena, right, whether it's in the workplace or in environmental organizations

or in cultural groups or anywhere, but, you know, I think the panels are really a generator of some of these, these big ideas, you know, and that's important.

Emily Ng 58:01

Okay, um, well, thank you so much. We're pretty much finished. But did you have any final things you'd like to add or any questions for me?

Martha Matsuoka 58:09

Oh, no, but thank you, you have some really good questions. You know, I teach my seniors and they're doing exactly what you're doing. And so I appreciated the nature of your questions.

INTERVIEW WITH SCOTT CHAN

Racial Identity

Can you start by telling me a little bit about yourself?

Sure, I'm second generation Chinese American uhh... born in Los Angeles, I was raised in a small little ethnoburb called Rowland Heights. Uh... let's see... uh... I... went to UCLA...political science and Asian American Studies. Then I came out to the working world, started doing nonprofit work and uh I've been here ever since. In that, in the time that I was in nonprofit, I also went to csun and got my masters in PA uhh ...when I was in nonprofit working several diff areas such as leadership development, health justice, public health and environmental health. Now I work with Department of Public Health in LA County and I focus on health equity work.

Do you happen to know about your family's immigration journey and the reason for moving over to the States?

Yeah, so for my mom it was fleeing uhh.. Chinese communism. So, she fled from China into HK, came here got a few jobs, that's where she met my dad. My dad came here on an education visa from HK so he was already here when he was like 16 years old. But you know.. He was one of the few Asians around and he went to...I think it was Berkeley High School? And then he went to San Jose State. My mom came here, she came a little later so she didn't really get to go to school...she uh lost out on schooling when she was over in China and she wasn't able to go to school when she came here... yeah... I think that's it.

How would you describe your experience growing up as an AAPI in your hometown?

Uhh...**exhales** it was a journey, I'd say. Growing up in Rowland Heights we were one of the very few, one of the first Asian families. That's hard to believe now if you look at Rowland Heights **laughter** yeah there's everything there now. Back in the day there was no asian markets, asian restaurants ...,uh so most of my friends were not Asian. It was uh... just growing up in a community where you're Asian and your asian american identity were not really talked about...so it wasn't until I got to UCLA, to college, that I learned more about my Asian identity. You know, growing up, you know Rowland Heights is a very conservative area too, so you know "pick yourself up by the bootstraps," that whole typical work hard do well in school get good jobs etc etc. So it wasn't until I got to UCLA that folks like opened my eyes to the inequities, the racism... all the things that I necessarily lived with but didn't know what words to put through them. So you know, dealing with that racism and the bullying growing up, you know you didn't really understand that it was because of your race that people were picking on... oh you know... you're smarter than kids 'cuz you're the Asian kid... so you know once I got to college, I really got to learn more about that understanding, unpack it and here I am now. It informs who I am and the work that I do.

And you said there weren't many Asians there at the time. So... was it mostly white or...?

It was mostly white...at some point more Asian folks were moving in to RH. By the time I got to HS I would say my school was 50 percent Asian ... basically Korean... a lot of Korean folks and a lot of Latino folks.

How did you deal with this mixed Asian American culture at home versus at school?

I mean it's a lot of code switching. You know at the time that is just the reality, but unpacking it now it is very interesting and you know just like tough you know. You know, at home you're like the studious child, I'm the oldest child so there's roles and expectations, especially when you're the oldest male in a Chinese family. You know at school you're an American first. And you know, I think it's interesting you know my dad... you know I think it's interesting because when you're young you face a lot of racism coming over here to America at 16 to live by himself here. You know, maybe with some uncles or whatever, but I think he went through a lot of racism, so like very early on he would tell me like be American. "I'm American" **Imitating voice of dad.** He would never speak Chinese to me, I would only learn from my mom and my grandma. But it was like kinda like.. post-racial kinda thing versus my mom was like treat your culture with support, know the language... so it was like a lot of different people putting pressure on me of how I should live my life and what I should know so... you know as a kid growing up you're just like... okay, well my parents are telling me something, so it's probably important right? But it wasn't until college, until I was off on my own, that I kinda realized like ohhh okay this is what's going on... this is your identity, this is the pressure they faced, and this is why they wanted me to live the life that maybe they didn't get to live.

So I guess having your mom on one end really pushing you to retain your culture, and your dad not so much... Do you remember where you personally landed on that spectrum? Was your culture and identity really important to you at the time or not so much?

I think when I was younger younger like maybe grade school fitting in was really important. You know I think we all have our Asian lunch stories like.... Give me a sandwich! Give me lunchables! Don't give me Chinese food. But you know I think maybe once I got into like junior high school it was more like I'm Asian! It's cool. You know, it's okay for you to celebrate the culture... you know maybe not as elegantly cuz you know high school kids can be high school kids but I think once I got to college it was much like my culture is very important and you know like... really celebrating that.

How do you view your identity now and how does it compare to those stages you just mentioned?

Uh... much more nuanced. I'm very proud of my Chinese American identity. I think there is, in terms of nuanced I think it's like what does it mean to be Chinese American or Asian American or Asian Pacific Islander? I think in working with a lot of different folks who fall under those categories and understand that sometimes, you know, it doesn't make sense that they add these Pacific Islanders. Because you don't really know these lived experiences of different folks, but there are times where it is important for our community to stick together and be like "We're of the Asian community." Like there's moments of solidarity, but I feel like sometimes it's so easy to sweep everybody under one group, that like...hey, do folks even know who Pacific Islanders are? In college I only knew two Pacific Islander folks, but everything we did was API, right? But we don't know about those lived experiences of these communities. And it wasn't until I started working at the nonprofit that I got to meet folks... and I was like... Oh. I didn't know... like these are the struggles of your communities, these are the levels of poverty. These are the concerns in your community versus the concerns in my community. So I think that nuance has been important to me, 'cuz you know, understanding the similarities and differences makes our community stronger together.

Can you give me an example of when solidarity and coalition building between Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders is helpful and hurtful?

I think one specific example where it is helpful is data disaggregation. So like when you work with counties and cities, they collect data a certain way to show like... What are health outcomes for a certain city? What's the educational attainment? So I think it's important for all the API groups to come together and say "we need to disaggregate data. We need to not just lump us into one and really dig into details. 'Cuz you'll see educational attainment is different in between different groups within API and I think time and time again I think I see API groups coming together to do that... to advocate for them, and I

think that's important.

Umm...hmmm... the times that it doesn't work hmm ... I don't know if one example comes to mind but I feel like it's so normal to just... to look at nonprofits who say they're for API... but have they worked with anyone who's PI [pacific islander], have they hired anyone who's PI? I think for us, APIFM when we were thinking of the name change, there was a big piece in there like... do we put PI in there? And we talked to our PI partners and they were like "yeah, dude. You've done work with PI communities, you've hired PI folks." There's actually a need for Pacific Islander folks, for Pacific Islander nonprofits cuz so many of them are going under or uh.. The leaders are retiring... and I think that level of conversation doesn't happen at a lot of other nonprofits I worked at. So.. I think that's like, I definitely had Pacific Islanders come up to me and say like "Don't call me an API person. I'm PI. I don't really, I don't believe in API. Because you all tokenize us, you use us." So yeah, I can't think of a specific example but like I think overall, there is that tension.

Yeah, I know what you mean. When coming up with the focus of this study I wasn't sure if I was going to broadly talk about APIs or just Asian APAs just because of their diverse arrays of lived experiences and histories. I still don't know for sure, but I'm thinking of waiting to see...

Mhmm. And you know, I think it's tough. I had conversations with some of my good friends who work with Pacific Islander communities and there's like no pipeline. Like, the previous generation did not build a good pipeline to get new PI leaders who are able to come in and like take over the role. And the pipeline you know is like 1) Are people coming in? And 2) Is that pipeline built well that people would wanna stay? So like.. Not that many PI nonprofits have a really good sustainable operative infrastructure. There's not even that many Asian American ones, you know... there's like old school ones who stay around, but smaller groups like APIFM, its harder to maintain that kind of organization so I think that pipeline conversation to some sort.... Like we keep saying like "Oh, why don't we give more spots to PI folks?" But we're not actually creating an infrastructure for them to do so and allow them to be leaders in the community and to do the type of work we're doing.

When you say "creating infrastructure," what do you mean by that?

So like...staffing, building and monies for rent in a building, supplies, program, mainly salary...salary, staff.

Personal Passion & Awareness

Was there a specific aspect of your life or your upbringing that played a role into shaping your interests/passions?

Hmm... ummm... like specific passion to do work at APIFM or just nonprofit?

Hmmm.. I guess both?

Umm... I think for me.... Like health was always an important thing talked about culturally. Whether it was my mom or my grandma talking about health is... or just seeing it firsthand. Of people passing away early, or people suffering from diabetes or obesity.. And I think things like that... somewhere in me was like... "Oh. How do I make it so that at least everyone has a chance to be healthy? And I think that, a little bit of me seeing the inequities in my communities... you know people eating fast food, cuz not everyone in my neighborhood could have good food to eat, I think I was lucky in terms of physical activity but there were places near us where not everybody had a safe park close to them. Just not only that, but like oh man... there's some kind of... like at the time I didn't know the term equity growing up but... those are the inequities I noticed and I was like "aww those aren't fair." I'm lucky enough to have a park close to me, I'm lucky enough to have a mom cooking me Chinese food that's everyday that's generally healthy, but not everyone has that. And I think that kinda stuck with me and yeah.. It doesn't seem fair. And I think that kinda came with me into nonprofit work to try to address those health inequities that we see in API communities... uh... really stuck with me.

Did you put the relationship between environmental justice/public health and social justice together just from observation, something someone said or was there a specific moment when "the lightbulb went off" where you really made the connection between the two?

I mean, when I first started APIFM it was known as API Obesity Prevention Alliance and uh.. I remember the first program I was on... cuz at that point it was just me, there was no other staff and at that point I

was given a project called the Safe Program which was about park access for Pacific Islanders, so um. And you know it was kinda like a general grant so they said your job is to like um encourage Pacific Islander folks... Tongan, Chamorro, and Samoans to use parks more..., cut it's healthier. And I think in doing that work it was so mind blowing because the grant was about trying to get people to do classes at the park and what not, but very quickly, I would say in the first few weeks, we talked to community leaders and they were like "No man, we don't go to the parks not because we're unhealthy but because we're afraid of gangs. We're afraid of how we're seen in the community. Our community is siloed." And I think like I've done like a lot of like equity work before that and stuff but I think that was the moment when I was like "We can't fight,...like this public health fight... it's not just educating people about like how to be healthy, you have to change their environment and like you know one of the parks was Lennox Park. It's literally right next to a Tongan Church... like a really well-known Tongan church in Lennox, and it's a small park, but most of the Tongans who went to that church have never been to that park. It is a literally five second walk from the church to the park. But nobody utilized that.. And it was gang issues. People were like "We don't go there, it's not our territory." It was either Tongan Crooks or Lennox 13 (referring to local gangs). You go there and you're gonna get shot. And... I think it was like, working on that it was like, okay, how do we address the gang issue? That's where it was interesting because the nonprofit, it was very unfortunate but the funder was like "Yo, we're not paying you to work on gang issues, we're paying you to just get people to go to the park." Like... that was like "Oh. Can't you just make a yoga program for Tongans?" **laughter** When I spoke with the Tongan leader he was there like "What?! I'm not gonna do yoga there, I'm gonna get frickin' shot!" But I think working on that project, it was so powerful because there was such a disconnect: what the community was looking for, what they viewed as health, and what funders were telling us to do, and what role a nonprofit has... do you let the funders tell you what to do or do you let the community? Do you actually talk to the community to see what's up? But it's so much more complicated because you can't always get funding for the work you wanna do. So, definitely for that grant, there were things that I was just doing for the sake of that grant, but so much of it was like, how do I work extra hours or work differently to be able to talk about the crime issues, community policing issues? It was very powerful because we ended up getting a separate grant when I went out and looked for a separate grant it allowed me to hire a good friend of mine to come on board and she coordinated an event about health, immigrant rights, about gangs you know... what is community policing? It was great you know we brought together from police, community leaders, nonprofits, and were like what's the role of law enforcement? How do we make a safe community? And kinda breaking down... you know some folks are like... "Safe community... I want a cop at the park every time I'm playing at the park. But for other folks, it's like..." Well, that's not sustainable. What about a park where we don't need to have police? What if we limit the role of the police?" And it was very powerful to have that kind of program take place.

And what was the outcome of that project?

We formed a coalition, we came up with agreements from nonprofits and law enforcement on how to make that park safer. We worked with some partners to actually improve the lighting of that park, to make a walking trail, to make signs... If you ever go to Lennox park there's signs for exercise equipment in English, Spanish, and Tongan... and I don't think you have that *anywhere* else in the U.S. And afterwards, this is kinda unfortunate, but people in our coalition, we weren't paid to be there, so it cuts both ways. 1) You could be super flexible and be there but 2) it's hard to sustain it. For me, other grants came in and I had to work on those. Some of the sucky thing is that some of the law enforcement, a lot of them got rotated out so the guys that we were working with were super cool, but they got rotated somewhere else... I don't know, I kinda feel like that's on purpose..., but... that coalition kinda teetered out but.. At least we got some other things I wanted to get done at the park and in the community.

When you were working with that community, was there an initial hesitation to advocate for their parks? Were people just wanting to accept the status quo, or did they want to advocate when you got there?

Totally. At that point, I'm just this young Chinese kid coming in and they were like "Who is this guy?!" and I really had to put in a lot of time over months just like meeting with leaders and just kinda like being

a part of the community... cuz some guy just saw me initially and they were like “Yo, we know you wanna get some stuff done, but we’ve never seen or heard of you... You look different... we need you to just like...we need you to pay your dues. Come in and be a part of the community, and just check yourself.” And you know, it was just like a great lesson for me. Like not just come in be like “Yo, this is an issue we gotta work on it” but like go to festivals and people’s parties and stuff like that, to a point where people were like “Yo, Scott I have this problem, help me out.” and like I was known. And you know, I always check myself, like none of that honorary Tongang or anything..., like I’m an ally. I’m an Asian American ally, I care about this issue, I care about this issue, and when you’re ready, let’s work on it. So it took some time to build that relationship, but even then some people were like “I don’t wanna talk about this” It’s kinda like them saving face. I remember a bunch of gang members they were like church goers, and I was like “Oh, is the pastor willing to talk about it?” and they were like “No, no, no, you can’t even call that out, ‘cuz it’s about saving face.” Like, everyone knows that there are people in certain gangs but we’re not gonna say anything about it. But what ended up really helping was that you have to hire someone really from the community. And so we did, and we hired my good friend and she was able to break down some of those barriers. You know, like “Oh, I know her!” “Oh hey, she’s Tongan.” She spoke the language and that already broke so many barriers that people were willing to trust. So, it definitely took awhile... I think it was a 1 year + for us to make any kind of headway but it was like the quality of that time was well spent, I feel. Cuz people got to know you know myself and my friend, and they opened up and were like, “cool, let’s try and do this.”

24:49

Now I’d like to talk a little more specifically about APIFM.

APIFM Organization Questions

Why did you decide to work at APIFM?

Umm... well because they came over and were like “Hey there’s this project, we know there’s a big learning curve, but it’s about health.” And I think at that moment in my career I was thinking “oh, health ties everything.” I was doing immigrant rights and health before,...and it was tough. People look at immigrant rights and they’re like either on one side or the other. But you look at health, and health can open doors to conversations. Nobody’s like, “I’m against your grandma getting better...getting healthcare.” Well..., maybe some people are now, **laughter** but back in the day it wasn’t so crazy Tea Party and all that stuff. Health was kinda the unifying thing. People really thought their parents should be healthy. Their kids, their grandparents should be healthy. So, I saw that job opportunity and I was like... You know what? I don’t have a Masters of Public Health... I haven’t done necessarily public health work, but I want to see where this goes and put my spin on it. And originally, APIOPA used to be “let’s do public education health workshops for people” and that was kinda it...but then I was like, you know.... It’s environmental. You can’t tell someone to eat healthy if there’s nothing healthy in their neighborhood. So, I kinda brought that mindset with me as we grew and worked on more and more projects. I was like “Yo, this is real....” like the disparity in communities, where you live and where you grow up.... It matters, it determines your health... like your school, it determines everything, your income you can make... And that’s very different growing up Asian American where Chinese parents are like... “As long as you work hard, you’re gonna do fine.”

When you started doing all this non-profit work, did your parents really understand and know what you were doing?

Oh, hell no.... **laughter** No, they didn’t understand that much. They were just like..., umm... he’s just a little lost, he’ll come back to like law school or something, you know? He’ll go back and be a lawyer. My dad was like, “You’re my biggest disappointment” like he would tell me that. And you know, I think that’s tough..., to hear that from a parent. But,... you know I feel, I don’t know... like a lot of Asian American... like second gens are like.. How do you stand up to your parents? Like you can’t necessarily live the life they wanted to live, like you can’t let them live vicariously through you, but culturally, you know, I think we’re taught like you gotta obey your parents, you know? So there’s always that inner conflict. But to me, I think it was most freeing was standing up to my parents and being like “Yo, I know you wanna be that and I know you’re trying to look out for my good too, but this is the path I wanna take.

You gotta support.' So..., it's been kinda hit or miss in terms of support. You know, now that I'm at the county they're like "Ohh, okay he's finding his way back on the journey" **laughter**, but..., they were definitely concerned that like "Uhh...he's still at non-profit, it's been a decade... Are we okay?" **in a joking tone, laughter..**

So you were previously the Director of APIFM. So, as previous director of the organization, what role do you think APIFM played to serve the surrounding community?

I mean I think for San Gabriel Valley specifically, it tried to put the issues plaguing the Asian American communities within the SGV like on the map. Like, I think APIFM, I think the thing that we..., I mean my own critique of what we could've done better is talk about our own work better. Like, our team just does great work. We get out there, we connect with the community. We've created really big institutionally changes even within the county where people who come in from the County are like "Oh, we know APIFM. You've got all these different things." Like, it's been great. We never touted our own successes. And you know, I think that's the critique but also like "Damn, we really did some great work." We did health education on one part of the spectrum, but then we did policy change. We advocated, we did lobbying, we did a lot of different things like that really changed how the typical API nonprofits have worked in the past. Part of that came from, you know... it was just me. I was just like, we're just gonna try different things. As a team group people were like-minded, they were like, let's try different things to challenge County in a firm way, like not yell at them, but how do we challenge them? How do you collect data better? How do you recognize Asian American communities as Pacific Islander as disaggregated groups? So, I think all those pushes has here in County... like people are like "Oh yeah, APIFM. They just do work in SGV." The Air Quality Management District is like "Oh they do work in the SGV." It's crazy when the Air Quality Management District know to call up APIFM. Like "Oh, the Taiwan minister of the EPA is here, let's call up Scott and his group. And that's really powerful and that speaks to what the organization has done.

How does APIFM choose the projects and issues it chooses to work on? Is it all grant-based?

Both, yeah it's a mix. I think if you're a young nonprofit, you're kinda living grant to grant, which makes it harder to be flexible without you working over extra hours. You might get one big grant, like what I did in the beginning, here's 80k a year to work on this long project. You might be able to give like one staff person the benefits and program supplies. But, as you grow as an org, you wanna work to diversify that portfolio. So, you might get a few grants but 1 year, 2 year, 3 year grants, but you also start to do fundraising find donors, try to make it so there's two types of funding: restricted, which is like a grant saying "Hey I'm gonna give you 50 thousand and you have to do x,y,z," and then there's unrestricted funding which is like "I did an annual dinner, I raised \$50k. And with that 50K I can do what's *morally* correct. I can do whatever I want with that money to help with our organization and our mission. And I think that's tough, because I think a lot of nonprofits, if you don't think that way of "How do I get more of those unrestricted dollars?" You're stuck listening to what funders are trying to do. Ideally, you talk to communities, and you're like "Alright, the community's interested in EJ. I'm gonna talk to funders about EJ work and try to get EJ funding." But, it doesn't always fit perfectly like that, and that's where nonprofits, for me, as the director, it's like... How do I find the leeway, you know... what's the longer term goal? We might take this 3 year grant that doesn't necessarily fit in with everything we wanna do, it gives us like 80 percent, but maybe like 20 percent is like not really what we're focused on. Is that worth it for us to take that grant? Does it allow us to keep staff for another 3 years to get me to the next grant cycle to allow me to get to do the work that I *want* to do? So, all the things kinda play in your head as you're trying to think through like if it's worth it. 'Cuz like some folks only take money for what makes sense with what we're doing right now, but I think for me, it's like... you gotta think 5, 10 years down the line. How do I keep staff? Cuz if I only go from grant to grant, not all granters keep giving you money. So, it could be, and this has happened to us, every 2 to 3 years I would go through staff because I had no money to keep people. I would try to take pay cuts to keep people basically. I gave up all my raises every year to keep staff. So, I think that's where nonprofit is really stressful and it's difficult. We don't have a lot of funding. I don't think a lot of people understand, like that's how it works. Yeah, and then on top of it, to get paid well, to pay people well is even *harder* because you have to fund more money.

So, now that you're at the County... what are you doing? Does it relate to what you were doing at APIFM or is it different? 34:08

Right now, I'm at the Center for Health Equity and... it's different than APIFM in that it focuses on the entire LA County and just more than API communities. There's a lot of similarities. I'm working on language access and data disaggregation, I'm working on environmental justice... so like air pollution, water pollution, things like that. But there's new areas, like African American infant mortality, STD rates, mental health work. So there's a lot of similarities like before, but a lot of differences. But the biggest difference is scale. So, DPH is like humongous. The Department of Public Health is 45 hundred staff, 1 billion dollar annual budget. So, any type of work I do, even if I'm able to change a percent like to be more community-minded, to care more about, you know about the folks I've worked with in the past, I think that's... like community engagement is really important. And working with the county to do that well is gonna be a game changer. So that's where I think that's the biggest difference.

AAPIs, Social Justice, and Environmental Justice

How do you feel about the current level of political and community engagement within the AAPI community? 35:44

Uhh..., I mean I think it's tough. **sighs** I feel like..., maybe it's just the circles I'm within, but I feels like we're much more uhh... divided. Like I feel like there's a lot of new, young activism that I feel like is coming out of like anger, about like how the system is and and I think especially with the younger audience, in terms of what millennials and gen z are left with, in terms of what baby boomers have left us with, I definitely seen a lot of organizing that I think addresses the shortfalls. Umm... I don't know, honestly, I just feel like there's a lot more division. Ummm, there's not as much, from what I'm seeing, as much..., from what I'm seeing, coalition building. Uhhh, I think one of the issues about nonprofit is that the kind of, like a lot of us, of the people around my age..., so I'm 34, a lot of us are kinda like... probably I would say were supposed to be like the next gen leaders but there's no positions open. Like a lot of these folks just stay with the nonprofit and they're not you know, passing the baton off. So there are like some executive directors who are like 60, 70, 75 years old and instead of like picking a successor and retiring, they just kinda stay... right, so by staying..., people who would've ideally taken over, they're leaving. A lot of the folks, I think around *my* age I think are having a tough time staying in nonprofit because 1) there's no role in going into because folks don't you know, pass the torch 2) You know, it's just like financially hard now. Like it's hard to actually *stay* in nonprofit. The pay is not great, the benefits aren't great., uh... the *work* is great, right?... the passion and everything behind it like you know, when you have to provide for yourself and your family like that's a tough call, you know? And we're living in a time where like, some of those executive directors, when they were there... like, they grew up in a time where like you can afford a house, and a car, and everything, right? But like a lot of the activists I know, like... they're just like barely scraping by, right? Like they're still racking... like the joke is like "Oh you wanna buy a house? Go to Corona." But, that's far and that's just not realistic. I feel like I see a lot of that and I think I see a lot of... I would say tension. I think growing up and doing nonprofit work in the beginning, I never feel like there was as much division... um I feel like it kinda parallels what's going on with the political world...like things are just so divided, you know...and there's not this room for like nuanced conversation...um, which is how I see it.

What are your thoughts on the model minority myth (apolitical-ness, civically disengaged, "perpetually foreign") and AAPIs?

I think it's very real. It plays out all the time. Umm... I feel like a lot of people still in the professional world feel like "oh, that's a good stereotype to have, but it really hurts, like the Asian American and Pacific Islanders who don't historically have that kind of privilege. But, I feel like it's still very present and everywhere in the County, in nonprofit and for profit.

Emailed Scott for clarification and additional response of question above. I think the general conversation around whether groups (API's, minorities, youth, women etc) are apolitical/civically disengaged focuses on the wrong thing. Often times the blame/shame that is geared towards these groups

is not looking at the real problem; what are we doing to encourage people to be civically engaged? What type of systems have been created to disenfranchise/discourage these minorities from being civically engaged?

Having worked on a campaign called Vote at 16 – SGV, in which high school students from the San Gabriel Valley fought to get the right for 16 and 17 year olds to vote in school board elections. They wanted to do this because there were issues they were seeing in their schools, but they had no power to make change. The way the system was set up, you had to graduate from high school until you could vote in a school board election. It makes no sense that we don't allow students to vote for how their schools are run until they are out of school. Yet at the same time older folks accuse young people of not caring. We need to build in ways that those who may seem to have lower levels of civic engagement, are given the opportunity to be civically engaged at an earlier part of their lives. We must also ensure that we provide all things in-language as well, to ensure that people are able to participate.

Another thread that ties to getting folks to be more civically engaged, is to understand that many immigrants came to America from countries where civic engagement was not supported, or criminalized. It is not easy for these folks to suddenly be civically engaged. You can only imagine that this fear of being involved is passed down to the next generation, and so on. Long way of saying, it's a complex situation that often gets oversimplified. :)

Although APIFM is not exclusive to only advocating for AAPIs, many EJ groups are connected to a certain ethnic group. What do you think about the current representation of EJ groups advocating for AAPI communities? Are there enough, too many, too few? Why do you think that is?

I feel like most EJ groups just totally overlook API communities umm...It's a little silly, I think, you know. I think APEN, the nonprofit up in Norcal, did a whole study on like "Oh we interviewed you guys and they care about climate, they care about environmental issues higher than other groups." But, I think it's just a stereotype that's just like maybe they just don't care. Right? I think it's just a little..shocking to me, cuz, cuz especially when you advocate for pacific islanders with asians, cuz like pacific islanders are the ones who were facing climate change right now, right? Like some folks are losing their island because of sea levels are rising. But, they're not really part of the discussion of... and then it goes back to the pipeline leadership we were talking about and like how API folks here in LA are gonna work towards climate change when they like can't even go to their local park. They're still dealing with gang issues with other levels of poverty and things like that. There's just different things on their plate than climate change, even though a lot of folks are like "Climate change is *the* issue that we gotta be talking about and working on." It's true, but there's all these other issues people are dealing with on the day-to-day that's harder for them to focus on that or something *somewhat* less tangible than the gang issues down the street. But that level of detail and knowing those communities, like in my experience with EJ communities, like... they don't really *care*.... Like maybe they don't care, but they don't know to talk to us and uh engage us. And I think one piece is like, oh, is there's language access right? So I think folks are like "Oh, working with the Asian community? Shoot, we gotta get some like translation, interpretation, things like that. That expensive. So..., maybe we'll just focus on the English-speaking Asians, then we're good." And I think that's like, it said something when APIFM was like often times the group that was being asked to be part of these EJ conversations because they were like..."Well, we don't know who else to go to maybe we'll just have this group. And it seems like they have the translation stuff so maybe we can work with them." But really, were we built to be like an EJ group working on climate change? No. But, I think we were pulled into the role because people saw that there's potential there.

Where there a lot of instances where people reached out to you to be part of these EJ-oriented, diversity represented groups?

All the time, all the time. Cuz like some folks would just be like blunt like "Yo, we need some Asian faces here, we need an Asian group, we need to be diverse." So, that was pretty common, even outside the EJ stuff it was like "Oh, we need an API group that does parks, you know whatever it was, that you work

with us, we like you, and we bring you into this meeting.” You know, I think it was of best intentions to be like inclusive but at one point it’s a fine line between inclusivity and tokenizing.

In a perfect world, how do we bring in more of the AAPI community in SJ EJ paths?

Find different...find alternatives to nonprofits that can create well-paid, sustainable jobs that allow young folks who are graduating to come out and *believe* that’s a common career field that they can pursue. Cuz I think that’s like right now like, if you become nonprofit, there’s very few that will pay well. And I think that’s kinda like the push and shove. Like... can you work on something that you love, or that you think is important for community? But, it has to come at the expense of like what you’re paid. And other things like your benefits and stuff. So for me, in like a perfect world, you have something that’s a little outside the nonprofit and it’s paid, that allows you to work on these issues and to be community-engaged.

Interview with Kyle Tsukahira

Emily Ng 0:00

Okay, okay. Um, so the first question I have is just starting to get to know a little bit more about yourself. So, can you just tell me a little bit about yourself and your background?

Kyle Tsukahira 0:16

Sure. Like I mean, like you just want like, like, just me to talk about how I got to where I am or, I guess what is it that you’re looking for?

Emily Ng 0:32

So it could be like basically describing your upbringing, your childhood, how you identify yourself as...

Kyle Tsukahira 0:41

Okay. Um, well, I was born and raised in Los Angeles, grew up in the San Gabriel Valley area, which is about 15 minutes outside of downtown LA. Are you familiar with that area?

Emily Ng 0:57

Yeah, I grew up in xxxxx

Kyle Tsukahira 1:00

Okay, okay. Yeah, so I grew up in Temple City, for the most part, and, you know, went to school there, I stayed local for college and went to Pasadena City College and then transferred to Cal State LA, where I majored in Asian American Studies. I think, you know, one of the things that led me to that was just my own family’s background and history. So, I think one thing that was that I really loved about Asian American studies is that I just felt like it taught uncovered histories, stories, experiences that I never learned about in school. You know, well, I think a lot of things were in my family’s specifically, I learned later or I learned through family and not necessarily through school. So you know, I’m Fourth Generation Japanese American. So both sets of my grandparents were incarcerated during World War Two. They actually both sets. So, grandfather grandmother on my dad’s side and also my mom side, they both happen to be at the Heart Mountain Internment camp, which is in Wyoming. Although they didn’t know each other, the grandparents didn’t know each other. And so I think that has really informed a lot of just my own passion for social justice. And I think that also fueled me to want to kind of learn more about, you know, Asian American history. And so, you know, being able to major in it was really cool just to, you know, learn more not only about Japanese American history, but just broader Asian American history. And so from that, I think it led me to pursuing an internship opportunity that I had to work at a local Asian American nonprofit. Over this summer, this was in my senior year of college. And I worked at an organization called Visual Communications, which is like an arts film kind of organization they put

on the Los Angeles Asian American Film Festival. Yeah. But, um, so I had an opportunity to like learn more about like nonprofits. And then through that internship, I met one person in my cohort introduced me to the director of the Asian Pacific Islander obesity prevention Alliance, which is the Name of API Forward Movement introduced me to the, the director, I guess he was only a program coordinator at the time, but introduced me to Scott Chan. And then through that, I started interning at that organization. And then, you know, eventually now started as an intern at APIOPA. And now the interim director of API for movement. So, yeah, I don't know if you want me to talk more about anything but yeah. That's an overview.

Emily Ng 4:36

Yeah. And so you mentioned you were a 4th generation. Do you know exactly your family's immigration journey and how the reason why they moved to the States?

Kyle Tsukahira 4:52

Um, I don't quite remember everything. I know. That it was my great grandparents who immigrated. I'm not exactly sure the reason why. I mean, I think one of them was for just better opportunities. You know, both...I think more on the economic side. I know that they had some land out in Riverside. And I think they were farmers, but I'm I don't I don't remember. 100% Yeah, I mean, it's been a while since I've heard that story about, like, why they came to the States.

Emily Ng 5:36

Yeah. Okay. Um, so I guess like, more on you personally. How was it like living in Temple City growing up in there as a Japanese American?

Kyle Tsukahira 5:50

I think it was interesting. Because, you know, I grew up in a predominantly, I would say Asian community, although wasn't necessarily Japanese, or Japanese American, it was primarily like Chinese, Vietnamese population. So I would say like it was unique in that, you know, I was not necessarily I didn't feel like a minority, because, you know, 60% of the student population was Asian, even though it was, you know, different ethnicities, Asian ethnicities, it still felt like, you know, I wasn't necessarily like one Asian in a school of like, you know, all white people, for example, which I know some folks like I have friends from the Midwest, you know, who have had that experience, right. So I think it was that's kind of unique and, and being able to grow up in that environment. But, you know, I would say that there was a handful of Japanese, other Japanese American families in the area, but it wasn't like there were a lot of Japanese Americans. And I think one thing that stands out is that a lot of at least the people that I know, in my community are more are either like the people I grew up with, or have like four generations as well. So I think for a lot of folks in the Japanese American community, you know, our families have been here for a while. That's not true for everybody. But, you know, I think it's different than other communities who maybe have, like, I've had friends whose parents, you know, were the ones that immigrated here. So, you know, it's just, I think, different immigration stories and experiences. But yeah, I mean, I think it was unique in that sense of kind of having that almost like safe, like, feeling safe, you know? And having that growing up in that environment.

Emily Ng 8:15

So, you were saying you are fourth generation and some people around you were probably like second generation or their parents just immigrated over here. I guess for you personally, did you feel like you culturally identified with either like the Japanese/Asian side of your identity more or less than the American cultural identity more?

Kyle Tsukahira 8:48

Um, I mean, I think it's really like for me a mix of both right like, definitely had, you know, there's definitely cultural things that I grew up with, whether that's food or you know, you know, cultural festivals or events. So I think there was always that aspect but because I am fourth generation and because, you know, my family's been here since the late 1800s. You know, I think some things have been lost just because of assimilation. So, for example, language, right, I think that's a big thing is that my parents didn't speak Japanese or very little. Only one, one of my grandmother's spoke Japanese, and the other one actually forgot it because of what happened during World War Two. You know, they just, she just wanted to be American and be seen as American. So I think that's where the whole assimilation thing really plays out is like, just for you know, the loss of language. And, and a lot of other, you know, cultural things that I think maybe some other immigrant communities are trying to hold on to. So yeah, I mean, I feel like it's always been kind of a mix of those identities. And it's a unique identity, right? It's not necessarily I don't know, it's a mix of being, you know, both Japanese, I guess, in terms of ethnicity, but also, you know, not having a direct connection to Japan, for example, right. I think I've been to Japan a couple times. And each time I'm there, I realized that I'm actually like, I feel like I'm an American. You know what I mean? Like, because I'm just there's so many things about Japan, 149lympics culture that doesn't reflect who I am or doesn't really, you know, resonate with me. So it's it's a mix.

Emily Ng 11:11

Yeah. Okay. So final question about this. I remember you were saying how in Temple City there weren't that many Japanese families. So did you like, I don't know, I guess how was the dynamic? Like how was the dynamic between the leaving in a city with different ethnicities even though they were culturally very similar.

Kyle Tsukahira 11:36

Um, no, I mean, I wouldn't say it was weird. I think I was just used to it. I mean, I didn't know anything else. You know, that's, like, the environment I grew up in, so I didn't think it was weird. Yeah.

Emily Ng 11:54

Okay. Um, yeah. Okay, so the next couple of questions I have is just relating to your current passions and awareness of what you do. So you're talking about how you majored in Asian American Studies. How did you decide to study this?

Kyle Tsukahira 12:20

Well, like I said before, I think a lot of it started from just wanting to learn more about my own family's history, and the experience of the Japanese American community. Kind of like through the lens of what happened to my family. So that's where initially that curiosity started. And then I mean, I, I think the clearest memory I have is of starting to take some Asian American studies classes at Pasadena City College. Because I mean, like, there was nothing in high school, right? It's like me a paragraph about internment and you know, a little thing here about, like, let's say the Vietnam War, Korean War, whatever. But like it wasn't until college that they actually offered these kind of courses. So I started taking those classes, just out of curiosity. And then I like fell in love with it, basically. And realized that was like really passionate about it and really interested in the topics. And then that's when I decided once I transferred to major in Asian American Studies.

Emily Ng 13:34

So coming out with that major and eventually talking to Scott, um, did you kind of know you wanted to work in the public health sort of like community engagement realm, or was it just kind of a coincidence?

Kyle Tsukahira 13:49

Yeah, no, I had no idea that I was going to be working in public health specifically. I mean, I really didn't know what I was going to be doing. I didn't even know that like nonprofit, a nonprofit career was even an

option until that internship program. So I think, you know, that was a huge pivotal kind of moment in my life to be able to participate in that program. And then, you know, learn about the nonprofit sector. But yeah, I mean, I didn't know. I think I initially was introduced to the concepts of environmental justice and food justice, you know, social justice, civil rights, all those kind of things through the classes I was taking right in at Cal State LA. So I kind of had some sort of like, at least academic background on the topics, but you know, no real world experience, but I knew was stuff that I was definitely interested in. And when I was doing I guess I had just completed my senior year, when I started senior year of college. When I started the internship program. That semester, before I wrapped up school, I had taken a class, specifically focusing on like environmental and food justice issues. And so I think that was already getting the wheels turning in terms of like thinking about things through that perspective. And I remember doing a project about like, the South Central farms in LA, how they were displaced by I think it was Forever 21 and how that land is still vacant, but all these families were farming there and they were, you know, basically kicked out. So I think that's kind of where I was coming from when I first met with Scott, because they were trying to start, APIOPA at the time, was trying to start like a CSA program, which is Community Supported Agriculture. And we're there we're working with like a local Hmong farmer to try to get culturally relevant produce to the community. And so I think that was like kind of how I initially got connected and what interested in, you know, what drew my interest to APIOPA.

Emily Ng 16:18

That's cool. So was the course you took on like public health and environmental justice? Was that in the context of like Asian American Studies, or is it more just generally?

Kyle Tsukahira 16:29

No what's in an Asian American focus class? It was. I don't know. I forgot what, what the title of it was or what department it was through, but it was just focusing more broadly on environmental issues. And I don't even know if it was food specifically, but I just remember focusing on like environment and food. Yeah, but it wasn't. It didn't have a like necessarily have a lens on Asian American work or movement specifically, huh?

Emily Ng 17:04

Okay. Yeah. Um, so now just moving on to a little bit more about APIFM and what you do there. So first, what is your role at APIFM and just some of the projects you work on?

Kyle Tsukahira 17:21

I am currently the interim director, Asian Pacific Islander Forward Movement. Some of the programs that we work on. Well, I mean, I think our work really centers around, you know, health equity, environmental justice, food accessibility, really factors that impact Asian American Native Hawaiian Pacific Islander families, and their ability to live healthy lives. And so, you know, for example, some of the programs that we work on are centered around like nutrition education, healthy cooking, for example, we do a lot of work through our He'll program which is healthy eating active living. We're working in a lot of the ethnic enclaves in Los Angeles such as Little Tokyo Chinatown, historic Filipino town, and Koreatown. To host these classes with other community based orgs. We're also doing work around like community gardening with, you know, preschoolers all the way up to adults. And then around our environmental work specifically, which is one of the first things that I that I was brought on to work on back as an intern is really centered around our air quality work in the San Gabriel Valley. And so now we're leading a campaign called cleaner SGV, where we're really trying to educate the local communities of Alhambra and Monterey Park, about air pollution and the impacts it has on health and then also, you know, determine through community stakeholder meetings and, and other community events, like what it is that people want to see take place in terms of like local policy changes that can be made to improve our quality. We're doing work around tobacco prevention. So working in the cities of Diamond Bar to San Marino to really raise the issues of the use of tobacco, especially vaping amongst Asian American youth,

and other people, you know, in the population and, and we're also doing work with a collaborative called Nature for All and it's really looking towards expanding the San Gabriel Mountains National Recreation Area. Because it's like such a great resource, right? A lot of people don't even know that, that that's an option for them to go hiking to go you know, out picnic to go for a walk. Like it's such an amazing resource right in our backyard that a lot of people don't know about. And a lot of the communities that we're working in our park poor, and don't necessarily have access to a lot of green space. So I think that, you know, those are some of the issues connected with that campaign specifically. But yeah, I mean, we also do work around like food justice, food accessibility, through our food routes program, where we're partnering with, like local Asian American farmers to get culturally relevant produce to the community. And that started way back, you know, with the CSA program that I mentioned before. But yeah, I mean, it's just a whole variety of different programming that we're doing at APIFM.

Emily Ng 20:48

Yeah. So I guess, for you personally, out of the projects that you've worked on, can you speak to, I guess one of the most impactful or memorable experiences or project you've worked on?

Kyle Tsukahira 21:03

Well, for me, it's probably the food roots program just because that's the one I've been working on the longest, basically since 2013 when I started as a full time staff. And I think it's been, it's been a really great learning experience. Because we started, like I said, with the CSA model, but I think, you know, which was really successful, like we grew the program quite a bit. We started with like, just 10 subscribers at one pickup site and expanded it to over 120 subscribers over like 10 different pickup sites in LA County within just like three years, but you know, I think one of the main reasons we wanted to start this program in the first place was to really be able to provide Most food insecure people in our communities with access to not only fresh produce, but I think more importantly, like culturally relevant Asian produce. Just because there was a lot of CSA type programs that existed, but they all none of them had culturally relevant produce, you know, was your standard carrots, onions, potatoes, you know, that kind of stuff, but that's not necessarily what our communities eat. And, and it's not necessarily what our communities are looking for. So, we wanted to address that aspect. But I think, you know, in running the CSA program, we realized that it was, you know, after years of it running, it was just not sustainable without grant funding, and then also the price point made it not necessarily affordable for low income communities. So there was some challenges with that. Which is why we like restructured and rebranded our program to focus more on like being a food hub. So food hub is essentially a place where we aggregate produce from local farmers and then distribute it out to community institutions, like restaurants, hospitals, schools, you know, nonprofits. And so the model shifted from instead of sourcing produce to hundreds of individual subscribers, we would just be sourcing to larger bulk purchasers. And the goal with that was to like really build staff like free up staff capacity, and also resources and be able to like, I guess, generate more revenue that could go towards our funding our nonprofit work. And so that's kind of where the model is shifted. But yeah, I mean, I would say that has been the most impactful for me just because it's the one that I've been working on for almost my whole time here at API FM. And, you know, it's I think it's close to my heart, something that, you know, is still not perfect. And we're still working on but I don't know, I think there's definitely something here and we just need to figure out how to make it to make it work, but yeah, I don't know. If you, I can talk more about it, but I'll stop there.

Emily Ng 24:29

Yeah, so I'm kind of thinking about, you know, how you're talking about the new model. And so I instead of shipping out to individuals, like bringing them into like community organizations and restaurants and stuff like that, so is the goal then does it shift to more support, like supporting the farmers or, I'm going to guess how, or is there like less of a focus of like, still providing accessible produce, I think I'm still kind of confused a little bit on how that works...

Kyle Tsukahira 25:06

Yeah, I mean, I think it's definitely supporting the farmers in the sense that we want to source more produce from them. Because you know, like these bulk, these larger community institutions are buying a lot more in terms of volume. But the goal is really to like the whole purpose of the program is to generate revenue outside of conventional methods. Because usually, for nonprofits, you get money through grants, you get money from like, you know, whether that's government fund, private foundations, you know, philanthropy, etc. That's usually the standard route. But what we've been trying to do is kind of look outside the box and figure out how do we generate unrestricted funding or revenue that, you know, basically, we can do what we want with it, but there's no restrictions in terms of we have to use it for this point. That's right, we can allocate it where we need it to be. And the goal has always been to try to create revenue streams that could fund work that would go back to our most, you know, food insecure populations. So that's why we're running programs like the HEAL program that I mentioned. And also working with other nonprofits to basically provide fresh produce to low income families. And also start like pop up produce stands and communities where they don't have access to a local farmers market. Or, you know, maybe their local grocery store is not accessible for them. So, yeah, I think that's kind of like what we're trying to do with the program. Yeah,

Emily Ng 26:51

Okay. So then, like the pop up produce stands,...is that like that is that also a major source of revenue is that motors giving back to the company You

Kyle Tsukahira 27:01

No, I mean, it's breakeven at best. You know, some of them are still funded by like grant support, but the goal is not really to generate any revenue off of those programs. It's more just to provide support access, education to the local community.

Emily Ng 27:23

Yeah. Okay. So my next question is, as interim co director right now, what do you see? I guess, like what purpose do you see API FM serving to like the greater SGV area?

Kyle Tsukahira 27:42

I mean, I think our our shift has focused I mean, our our work is focused a lot more towards the SGV area, and more recent years. So you know, like I mentioned before we work we did do a lot of the air quotes We're here for a long time. But now we're really trying to expand our work in the area. So I think, you know, for example, we want to bring more of our HEAL work to the San Gabriel Valley, and be able to provide more nutrition like culturally relevant nutrition education to our community members. And then also really expand our food, environmental work in the area as well. We're going to also be doing more work around the Census that's coming up. So I think really, it's about for us, it's going to be about grassroots organizing in the San Gabriel Valley to really build up a strong base of folks here because, you know, it's an area that has a really high Asian American population. But there's not necessarily a lot of organizations that are doing work with the community. You know, Like I think about my, like how I grew up. And there was nothing that really existed like API FM, in terms of being able to expose me to these kind of programs or ideas. And so I think one thing that's really important that we'd love to do is, is really work with local Asian American youth in the area, to be able to get them to start thinking about some of these things, whether that's environmental justice, or, you know, civic engagement, or, you know, health public health issues. So I think that that's one major thing is really being able to build a base here and and organize around issues that are impacting our communities.

Emily Ng 29:52

Yeah, I think that's actually a perfect segue into my next group of questions. It's more about like, API activism in general. So, how do you feel about like the current level of political and community

engagement within the API community? I guess first in, like the Southern California, sort of the area that APIFM works with.

Kyle Tsukahira 30:20

I mean, I think it's, it could definitely be better. You know, there's definitely a lot of amazing people within the nonprofit sector, specifically the ANHPI, nonprofit sector that are, you know, doing a lot of great work. But I think, you know, it's still relatively small in comparison to the population that we have here in SoCal. And just California in general. We don't want to largest Asian American native Pacific Islander populations in the country. And, you know, I think that there could definitely be a better job in terms of engaging the folks within our communities You're talking about civic engagement. Right? And yeah, just like level political and civic engagement. Yeah. So I think we can do a better job of really engaging folks around those areas. Again, just using my own personal example. I think a lot of people that I know and just in my own friends, circles, people growing up with in high school, college, etc. Like no one was really politically active or engaged. I was probably one of the few people only because I was doing ethnic studies, right. And if it like, talks about that, it teaches us about those kind of things. And so people who are going into become lawyers, doctors, engineers, you know, other professions. They don't necessarily get exposed to any of these kind of ideas, right? Because they're so busy with studying for other things. So, and even like youth, right, for example, they are focused on trying to study for SATs, get into good school, all those kind of things. So I think, you know, the level of political engagement is is relatively low. I think we're, we see a lot of apathy in terms of people caring about politics about caring about what's going on in their communities. From a from a broader perspective, I think there's definitely, I don't want to downplay it. I mean, you know, people obviously care about their communities, but maybe it's in other ways. Like, for example, people really care about their immediate family, right? That's really important. And that's, that's a cultural thing. Or, you know, maybe they're involved in a local like church or religious institution. And so there's those kind of it is that kind of involvement, but I think like it a broader sense, in terms of like ANHPI political movement, like there needs to be more work done around that, you know, in activating people, organizing people and getting people engaged and you know, inspired to make a change.

Emily Ng 33:19

Yeah. So one of I mean, I'm sure you know about this, but you know, one of the perceptions of a lot of our community is that we're apolitical civically disengage perpetual foreigners, all of this coming from the model minority myth. So what are your thoughts on this portrayal?

Kyle Tsukahira 33:46

I mean, yeah, I mean, I think it is. It's a hard stereotype to work against. Because like I said before, there's there are a lot of folks that are doing this type of work, you know, whether that's in the nonprofit sector or you know, another different sector. But I think it's, it's it is it's harmful for us in our communities to be viewed that way. But it's also I don't know, I'm thinking of like, for example, you know, how there's like Asian Americans or other immigrant communities that are I guess you could say like, very conservative. Right? And that's a variety of variety of different reasons. Whether that's like Vietnamese refugees that have a strong distrust of government because of their experiences, being persecuted by their by the communist government in Vietnam, right. So I think the other thing is like trying to do a better job of reaching out to, you know, people in our community that may not necessarily agree with. I don't know, I guess I would say progressive values or agendas. Because I feel like those people are not being engaged. So I'm thinking also of like, you know, for example, affirmative action, right, and how a lot of very conservative Chinese Americans came out against the from affirmative action because they feel like it's going to hurt that their kids basically their kids chances opportunities of getting into a good college, but like trying to, you know, dispel some of the rumors around that work against that kind of ideology. I mean, I don't know, I guess this is kind of going off your question a little

bit, but yeah, I mean, that's kind of what I was. I've been thinking about when I heard that question. I don't know. Does that totally off your question?

Emily Ng 36:05

So I guess you kind of touched on this earlier and throughout your responses. But what are some ways and I guess an ideal perfect world that we can bring more of, like API communities I guess also like youth into this sort of social justice, environmental justice conversation?

Kyle Tsukahira 36:32

I mean, I think it's, it's having programs that are accessible to youth. I think of examples of like things that we've done at API event. Like for example, we hosted the Asian American Environmental Leadership Academy for like, three years.

Emily Ng 36:50

I was in that, actually!

Kyle Tsukahira 36:54

You were?

Emily Ng 36:54

Yeah, a while back, and it was with Jackson Lam. He led it when I was doing it.

Kyle Tsukahira 37:05

What year were you?

Emily Ng 37:07

I was. When was that? That was my sophomore year. And I'm a senior now. I think. So like two or three years ago. Yeah.

Kyle Tsukahira 37:21

But I wasn't there, right?

Emily Ng 37:22

No, I don't think you were there.

Kyle Tsukahira 37:24

Yeah, so it must have been because I transitioned off of that project. And then was it. Was there anyone from APIFM or APIOPA there?

Emily Ng 37:34

I don't remember. I don't think so. It was mostly Asian American Pacific Planning Council.

Kyle Tsukahira 37:48

Because we worked collaboratively with them on that program. Okay.

But yeah, it's programs like that. You know, I think just promote opportunities for us to get involved. So like we've also done a lot of work around air quality and engaging local, like, for example, Mark Keppel High School and their PYA youth. It's a Promoting Youth Advocates group, and then also their crown and septon group, which is like their senior Honor Society. So like engaging local groups on campus around issues that could like get them more engaged or things that they care about, you know, like, right now working with a group at Alhambra High School called Eris, which is like environmental. I don't

know I forgot the acronym. There's so many acronyms, but they're an environmental club at that high school. So I think just yeah, providing opportunities programs chances for you to get engaged is is definitely a great way.

Emily Ng 39:03

Although APIFM isn't, you know, advocating exclusively for API communities, there are a lot of like EJ and public health organizations that are connected to, like certain racial and ethnic groups. So I guess in general, what do you think about the current representation of EJ/public health groups advocating for API communities?

Kyle Tsukahira 39:32

I mean, I think it's very, it's very, I don't know, I guess the word was sparse. Like there's very few groups that are advocating on behalf of our communities. You know, aside from maybe us here in Los Angeles, I know there's APEN up in NorCal Asian Pacific Environmental Network. I think I know, you have to look up these acronyms I sometimes. Well, yeah, there's very few groups that are actually advocating where our communities. You know, and I think this is true, not only within the sector of public health, but also within the environmental sector. Like the whole environmental movement has predominantly or historically been perceived as being more of a white, you know, movement. Although there have been people of color and other Asian American MPO see leaders that just, you know, have never received the spotlight or attention. But, but yeah, I think, you know, it's definitely an area that we need to do a better job of engaging our communities, you know, around issues of like, climate change, for example, right, because, you know, family is really important to culturally, I think culturally speaking, or a lot of folks within our communities, and climate change is going to impact all aspects of our lives. Right. And we're seeing that already with the wildfires that are happening right now, with the increased weather events, you know, around the world in the country. So, so yeah, I mean, I think I would say it's an area that we need to do a lot of work in, and hopefully there's more groups and people that are willing to take leadership roles and work around.

Emily Ng 41:33

So why do you think there are so few groups for representing our communities?

Kyle Tsukahira 41:46

Would I say why? In terms of environmental issues specifically?

Emily Ng 41:51

Um, yeah, we can focus on that. Yeah.

Kyle Tsukahira 41:53

....uh...*pause* I don't know. I mean, I guess I think there are. People might think that there are other priorities that are more important to focus on. Rather than just focusing specifically on environmental issues, just because, you know, there's things that are more salient in people's lives, whether that might be and it really depends on like socio economic status, right. So like, or a middle class family. Let's see in the San Gabriel Valley. The focus might be more on education, right for their kids. For a low income family, the focus might be more on how do I put food on the table? How do I find time to raise my kids when I'm working jobs, right? There's also folks in a lot of folks in our communities who are linguistically isolated, right? Maybe it's a monolingual households, their recent immigrants, or they have lived here for years, but because they lived in an ethnic enclave, they didn't have to learn English necessarily, right? So a lot of the resources and information that's out there isn't translated is in culturally relevant or tailored to our communities. I think we see that across the board and a lot of not just in the environment, but you know, in public health and a lot of different fields. Right. So I think those are some barriers that we're working against. Or it could be like immigration or healthcare issues that are maybe

more prevalent or more at the top of the lesson terms of priority. So some of the other issues kind of fall to the wayside. But, you know, I hope, I mean environment. I think we both know that environment is really important. It's going to impact all those things, whether it is immigration, healthcare, education, all the above because, you know, when I think like we talked about before, what we're seeing with air pollution, for example, here, climate change, access to green space, what that means for health, having access to healthy food, what that means for children's development, you know? And how that impacts education. I think there's just the hardest thing is getting people to see the intersections of all of these different areas that we're working on. And how they all you know, really do influence one another is a lot of times people would ask, like, why are you guys working on air pollution? You know, what does that have to do with obesity for example, but, you know, there are a lot of direct ties like if people don't have access to say parks or green spaces to exercise in then that's going to influence their overall physical health right? If they don't have access to healthy foods, if they only can get you know McDonald's or or they only can go to a fast food restaurant and that's going to also have an influence on health, right? So I don't know I think just to summarize it's like really getting people to see you know, how everything is connected and and that can be a challenge among all the other things that I that I think I highlighted.

Emily Ng 45:41

When you initially like come into these communities and bring out these new initiatives and profit or projects focusing on specific like environmental issues. Do you face like initially face a lot of like skepticism or Like why are you focusing on this? Or is it like a balance between the support and skepticism?

Kyle Tsukahira 46:07

I mean, I guess it depends on the on the topic that we're covering. But I mean, for the most part, we've seen people be very receptive to the issues that we're working on. I think, you know, one struggle. I guess a couple struggles that I would highlight in terms of public health, is that, you know, oftentimes, there's, you know, we know the model minority myth, in terms of like education, right. But there's also a model minority myth in terms of health, right. Asians are seen as generally healthy, were seen as being slim or on the skinnier side. We're seeing is just not having as many like public health concerns as some of compared to like, let's say African Americans are Latinos. But, you know, that's something that we always have to push back against too, because that is again, a stereotype. You know, like, I think one thing that we always have to highlight when we're talking to folks, not only within the our own communities, but other communities of color and, and broader, you know, public health agencies is that, you know, Asian Pacific Islander communities. We're not just like a monolith, right? We're made up of dozens and dozens of diverse groups, ethnic groups, all with our own histories, own experiences, immigration stories. And so, we also all have our own health concerns, and things that impact us, right. And because we're relatively smaller, in terms of numbers, nationwide, you know, some of those things get get covered up. And when people lump all of us, you know, API's together under one umbrella, then it kind of highlights the disparities within our communities. Right? Like with, for example, within the Pacific Islander community, specifically, a lot of folks are struggling with obesity and obesity related diseases, right. There's all just also we're seeing increased rates of like diabetes within the Asian American community, increased rates of other chronic health conditions like hypertension. And I think a lot of that is due to, you know, people are assimilating in terms of their diets, you know, because if we look at, at our, like, what people ate in our home countries, historically, it was a lot of focus on like vegetables, seafood, for example, you know, things that people could get because meat was really expensive, right? But now with depression What's it like fast food? You know, people coming to America having access to a lot more like processed food, junk food, like, we're seeing the results of that and how it's impacting our communities. So yeah, I think that would be one thing in terms of like, just trying to fight against that stereotype and, and really get people to see that. You know, there are a lot of major health concerns and issues that our communities are struggling with. And it shouldn't be about a competition, like who's suffering the most, you know, I don't know if you heard of the term like

oppression 157lympics. But like, but yeah, I think that's, that's something that we have to constantly talk about and just advocate, or because, you know, a lot of people tend to stereotype us.

Emily Ng 49:58

Yeah, yeah. It's cool, either. This is the hear of putting it in that context. I haven't heard of that before. So that was really interesting. But yeah, I it's almost 12. So I guess to conclude, do you have any like, last minute things you want to add or any questions for me?

Kyle Tsukahira 50:19

Nope, I don't. If you have anything else that comes up, just feel free to shoot me an email. I'll try to respond.

Emily Ng 50:25

Yeah. Thanks so much, Kyle. This was like super helpful, and I'm really excited to like put it out together and write it.

Kyle Tsukahira 50:32

Okay, yeah, I'm looking forward to seeing it.

Interview with Lisa Thong

Emily Ng 0:02

So first, I'd like to start by knowing a little bit more about yourself. I know we have a pretty established relationship, but just so I can refer to it again later. So let me just start by telling me, I don't know just like a little bit about yourself.

Lisa Thong 0:21

Um, yeah, I mean, I grew up in Rosemead, so born and raised in San Gabriel Valley. Hitting my family background has a lot to do with the career choices that I've made. I ended up working for a state senator that covered San Gabriel, Temple City, Chinatown, as well as the Asian American community. A lot of that decision came from being an Asian American Studies sequence at Claremont McKenna College. I didn't have at that time, there wasn't an option to to a minor. So we could only do sequences. And I spent a lot of my time on campus really active with the Asian American student group. So as a mentor for a lot of the incoming freshmen, the Asian American students at CMC, I was an IDAAS rep for CMC. So you know, all that kind of pushed me into doing a lot of nonprofit work, which led me ultimately to work in the state senate office. And since then, I kind of spent most of my career working in either state, local government, or nonprofit. And I've also done some private sector work but all of it ultimately still tied back to working on issues that impact not just Asian American communities, but really communities of color.

What state senator did you work for?

I worked for state senator Jack Scott. He retired, ultimately and the districts have changed a lot since then because of the Census and redistricting. So I worked for what was kind of District 21. Senate District 21 looks very different now.

Emily Ng 2:31

Okay, so you kind of briefly touched upon this just now but can you talk a little bit more about your family's immigration journey, if you know of it, and just like your general, like childhood upbringing in the neighborhood and the household?

Lisa Thong 2:51

Yeah. So I grew up Rosemead, which at that time was very working class, is kind of half Asian, half Latino. My mom was a garment worker. My dad was a restaurant worker. So my, the people I grew up with my parents, friends, and those families were all primarily Chinese from Vietnam. So my parents are refugees. I'm the only one in my family born in America. My sister, my sister was born in Vietnam. And when my parents left Vietnam, she was only one. my other sister was actually born in the Malaysian refugee camps. My mom was pregnant when she left Vietnam. So we immigrated here, mostly in thanks to my guides, half brother, who was already in the United States. So he sponsored our family and so Most of the people that I grew up with all came from the same integration with us, my parents, and a lot of them found each other once they moved to the US, and throughout my life, everyone kind of lived in the same communities. So my parents never really had to work in or live in spaces where they needed to speak English. And I myself grew up in a household that was predominantly Chinese culture, especially Cantonese. So I grew up on Hong Kong pop culture. I didn't watch American TV until like junior high. I hadn't listened to American music till about junior high. And a lot of the people that I went to school with were very similar. So I had the, I guess, privilege of being able to hold on to my identity from most of my upbringing, and actually going to Claremont was a huge culture shock. Because for the first time I was actually at minority, and the people that I wanted to school with on campus came from better financial or socio economic background. So most of the Asian American kids on campus came from families, our small business owners, where they came from out of state where most of them didn't really identify with their Asian American identity. So actually my freshman year I was going for opinions writer for the school paper at the time, which was at that time called the Collage I don't know if there's a school paper for the 5C's because I think the Collage shut down a little while ago, but I actually wrote an opinion piece on the apathy of Asian American students on campus because that's how disconnected I felt from everyone there. My background was just so different. And it was really hard talking to other students, because all of them couldn't understand what it felt like to come from a family whose parents never finished, even in sixth grade level education. So I had no help with, you know, taking tests or studying or doing my homework. I did most of that on my own because my sisters were four and six years older. So very, very different experience. And that's why I kind of fell into doing Asian Americans should work on campus because I really needed that community.

Emily Ng 6:45

Yeah, so you mentioned you didn't really, I don't know sort of start to interact with, like American media and like pop culture until Junior High. Was there a specific reason why it happened?

Lisa Thong 7:03

I think because in junior high in high school, that's when you start having like school dances very, you know, like, a lot more student activity. Which, you know, coming from an Asian family My parents didn't really let me go to other people's houses. I wasn't allowed to participate in things that weren't academic. But Junior High, High School that time period where a lot of your friends also start to do a lot of stuff and so I think that my friends circle change a lot once I got into junior high, and that's really because of, you know, classes and the types of classes I ended up in I...you know, typical Asian student ended up in all the AP honors classes. So I was surrounded by a very different set of friends. And the contrast I'll share is that my friend, like my best friend in sixth grade, and through most junior high, he has ended up in juvenile detention. A lot of my friends that I grew up with kind of split roads with me once we hit junior high because I builders club, I was builders club president, I was an honors kid. I was doing a lot of student groups stuff that a lot of my friends in elementary school didn't do anymore. So it's kind of a question that I've always asked myself, it was actually a really good news article that came out recently and it reflects a lot of what I thought about for a very long time, which is, you know, how did I end up being able to go to a really good liberal arts college, and, you know, having your professional career and, for a lot of people I grew up with, that didn't happen for them. They were just as smart as me. You know,

in sixth grade math competition. I was like first and second place on everything. My friends were like third place, second place. But somehow once junior high and high school hit, they ended up in juvie, didn't go to college, didn't really have those opportunities for whatever reason. And even amongst our family friends, me and my sisters are some of the very few who ended up going to college and graduating. So that's always stuck with me that there is an exceptionalism that is within Asian American community that we don't really think about. And there's really no room for for people who don't choose higher education.

Emily Ng 9:59

You've talked about different points in your life so far where you've been surrounded, either being the majority and the minority. So now, currently in your life, I guess, how do you how do you view your identity? And how do you identify with it right now?

Lisa Thong 10:23

Um, I want to say that because my career has taken me into a lot of spaces where often the only person of color or the only female, or the only female color, you know, like, you can go down the list. Um, I think identity is very different for me, in the sense that I don't even know that I agree with most of the narrative that the Asian American community wants to push forward. I think that culturally identities very complex. And I don't think that the terms that we use and the lines that we view, race and ethnicity through right now are adequate to really address a lot of these systemic problems, which is kind of what I've spent my life working on, right? Like I serve on a state commission, which is Barbering and Cosmetology. For the state and the narrative people want to push that it is predominantly Asian American. And that's based on one statistic, which is that 80% of manicurists in California are Asian Americans, specifically Vietnamese American. But I think our community fails to do is to recognize that that is one statistic, out of, you know, a much bigger, bigger pool of demographics as well as the larger pool of problems. Because, for instance, the Barbering and Cosmetology board actually oversees five different license types, not just manicurist, it's actually an even spread with other ethnicities. It's a very diverse population. But I have a really hard time representing the Asian American community, when their viewpoint is very narrow. A lot of times they get very hyper focused on certain pieces of information without looking at a bigger scale, in terms of where we fit in to the picture. And I think about this a lot because having grown up in San Gabriel Valley, your world is not that you're a minority. Like I didn't think of myself as a minority until I started to go to college and be a part of a bigger, bigger working world. And when you think about the demographic of the entire US, we're 6% of the population... that's really small. And so, how we see identities in LA and in metro areas in California, we're 15% of the population in California. So we still feel very significant. But if you go to other states and across the country away, we're practically non-existent. I've met people who told me, I'm the first Asian American that they've met. And so when I talk about myself, I prefer to identify the daughter of a refugees. Because I don't identify with other Chinese Americans, their experience is very different from mine.

I don't identify with Vietnamese Americans, because I'm not Vietnamese and a lot of them won't accept me as part of their community. So I don't actually identify as Asian American even. Because even that narrative, I feel closer to people who come from refugee backgrounds. And that can mean that you're a refugee from anywhere in the world. And I'm going to feel more aligned with that person's history and story than I do with immigrants from China who may be here on student visas or investment visas, or, you know, their parents came here for school, graduated from college, or I guess engineer. That's not my story. So this narrative we're constantly timeout and the people who dominate the conversation about Asian American identity, I think that those are not narratives that I fit into.

Emily Ng 15:26

So, in the work that you do, have you encountered other people with this similar outlook on their identity?

Lisa Thong 16:00

Yeah, I have to say that, you know, like, I have found those people I, I tend to gravitate towards other Chinese, from Vietnam. People who also feel on the outskirts of a lot of these conversations. Um, and, you know, I think it's hard. I think I'm accustomed to explaining my point of view. And I think we're also at a time where there are a lot of people in the community who recognize that, how we have talked about Asian American has been too narrow, and especially with community work. You know, you kind of see this fracture in the community where we're not talking about, you know, Chinese for Trump, or South Asians for Trump, and our community wants to deny them and they want to deny their presence. And our community kind of fails to self-examine in terms of our own work because demographically, Asian Americans are about 70% foreign born. That doesn't necessarily mean that are not English proficient, but there are a super high percentage I want to say anywhere between 50 to 70% of any given ethnicity, that doesn't speak English comfortably. And it's not their native language and it's not their first language. And our community work doesn't reflect that when we talk about, you know, not wanting to be model minority or not wanting to, you know, be seen as non-progressive. That is actually a very small fraction of actual Asian Americans who are dominating a conversation. And even though I may identify with that, I don't think that's helpful in terms of addressing issues. So when we're talking about advocacy work and people want to push for affirmative action. Here's the thing, a lot of people, at the end of the day policy is really trying to address problems at a systemic level that people aren't even aware exists. And a lot of times policy is addressing a problem that probably like one to 5% of the population actually sees and understand. So most people aren't going to agree with policies like affirmative action. And this came into play about, I want to say five years ago with something called SCA 5. There was huge Chinese American outcry in opposition to affirmative action, and you're kind of seeing that play out in headlines across the country right with the Harvard decision about whether or not Harvard was explicitly you know, like, doing things that they shouldn't be doing to keep Asian Americans out of the admissions process. So there's all these storylines, and and what you see and a lot of people saying that that's not how Asian Americans feel. But that's not actually true. Like the people who are leading nonprofit advocacy groups tend to fall along the lines of being progressive. And when they're in denial of what the community actually feels, then they're not really bringing anyone over to their side and they're actually not really speaking for the majority. What they're actually doing speaking for the minority population. So I spend a lot of my time doing this type of work because I see a gap. And even though I believe in a lot of these causes, I understand that there is a huge challenge in getting more people on board. Because people's mindsets are so far from where they need to be in order to bring people along, because they just don't understand. And some of the people that I've been having conversations with about this problem that we're experiencing, and community have agreed, we all are starting to look at things not just as race, because the assumption is, well, you're a person of color, you should support affirmative action, you should support these progressive policies. But the truth is, if you look at people come from certain countries, you bring a lot of those native ideas and cultural kind of tenets and histories with you. And I've actually been starting to talk about this problem not in terms of race, but in terms of whether or not a certain group of people came from colonizer backgrounds. And when you look through that lens, it becomes very interesting because we see white Americans as coming from European kind of colonizer mentality, obviously colonizing the Americas, but kinda also is a colonizer. Japan also is an occupier colonizer. And when you look at how these ethnic groups behave in the American context, you start to realize they bring some of that mindset and mentality here and we're not really addressing that. So these are some of the conversation that some very small groups of people are having about our communities, but it's very small.

Emily Ng 22:05

Has there been any conversations within the APIFM organization's work?

Lisa Thong 22:15

I would say not. Because there, Scott and I had these conversations a lot. I wouldn't say that the rest of the organization in terms of the staff is there. You know, a lot of stuff there's younger, less experienced. Scott and I are probably the same age. We're like 35, 36. We've been doing this work for 15 years now. The rest is staff and pet them. They're probably like in their mid 20s. So they're not there yet.

Emily Ng 23:10

I have a few questions now, shifting the focus back towards your personal experiences, and in terms of like passion and awareness. So my first question is, was there a specific aspect of your life or your upbringing that played a role in shaping your interests and passions?

Lisa Thong 23:45

Um, yeah, for sure, I think, you know, having parents that didn't speak any English has really impacted how I try to create access to different resources. Knowing that people like my parents are not able to navigate a lot of different things like government. And I do think a lot about how their lives would be very different if they could get out of that kind of gap in the system where it's constantly a struggle. Because it's so hard for them to understand and navigate. I mean, even for English speaking like me to natives who grow up in America, it's hard to navigate. Government. People don't know that. You can call your congressperson if you're experiencing these issues and that they're supposed to actually help you. People don't know that if you have issues with medical because it's state run, you can call your state senator or assembly person they're supposed to help you. But I wouldn't know any of that, except that I actually worked in a senate office. And I actually did case work for people and, and a lot of the things that I work on that I care about really comes from looking at my parents and other people in terms of how, how can I make it easier for everyone else, knowing that this is the challenge and the struggles at my own parents experience.

Emily Ng 25:30

So when I guess when or how did you sort of learn and sort of come to understanding the idea of environmental justice and how like environmental as a relates to social justice, and community work?

Lisa Thong 25:54

I think everything's interrelated. I didn't actually think APIFM specifically to work on environmental justice. I joined because I've known Scott for a long time. And I really liked what he was working on. And it was really he who kind of opened my eyes to this correlation between health and environment. And in doing the work and having spent time with organization since December now, it's really expanded my concept of social justice, because so many of the things that you kind of know about, but don't really know how to trade name to kind of fall into this health and environmental justice space. Things like who has access to what, including park space, including transit options, and when we talk about how can somebody who can't afford a car get to work and the job that they have ends up being a like, an hour way by community, if they take public transit, that's like an hour and a half, and walkability, bike lanes all that's really for people who may or may not have access to transit options, right? I think for a very long time, issues like that has kind of been dominated by people who choose those options straight, like people who can make the choice, because they want to be environmentally conscious to ride their bike to work, or to take public transit. And it's not common to have people who don't have a choice participate in that conversation. And the way they have found fell into this where it was really because they were working in communities that didn't have access to healthy choices, which included food options, not having you know grocery stores in their neighborhood that sold fresh produce. So they were eating a lot of fast food. Living in communities where they couldn't really go outside to exercise because it's not safe, or there's not enough lighting or there's no you know, sidewalks even or bike lanes or anything. So not everyone has, you know the money to have a gym membership, or even an access to a park. Like when you talk about, you know, you can name any Park until you wrote Valley and my guess is that there's a track and there's some outdoor kind of exercise machines or equipment The city has put there for everyone to use. But

when you talk about a park in certain areas in the city of LA it's not even safe to go there. Especially at night, which is why most people are going to have the chance to take over there. So these are all things that you kind of know at the back of your head when you're doing social justice work in you. You're doing advocacy work for communities of color, you just don't keep them together under this umbrella of health and environmental justice, like I never considered those things as being environmental justice issues that they are including, you know, my own my own family's health, like knowing that I have asthma, my family has asthma. My mom worked in, you know, basically a sweatshop that didn't have air condition all of her life breathing and fabric. She now has really severe allergies. That's, that's an environmental justice issue, like where you're working in factories in residential neighborhood, without a whole lot of regulation in place to ensure that workplaces healthy. That's an environmental justice issue growing up in a community knowing that there was too much air pollution to go outside and play. I used to remember having no recess in elementary school because the air quality was so bad. Sometimes somebody else mentioned that recently in our stakeholder group meeting, they're like, Don't you remember when it used to be really bad? where like, we couldn't go outside to play outside play? I remember that. It never occurred to me that that was because of air pollution. Because I was like, you know, six. So is that now that I'm doing the work, I'm like, Oh, yeah, that's right. Like, this is what that falls under.

Emily Ng 30:51

When you were explaining to like your family members and friends, but you were doing, how did they react?

Lisa Thong 31:14

I mean, my family really doesn't understand what I do. Um, and that's okay. You know, like, it doesn't bother me. And it doesn't bother them. I have, you know, my parents never asked much of me except that I finished college and that I have a job. So those are off the checklist, so I'm in the clear! In terms of my friends, and you tend to have friends that do similar things, I think, at least in my circles, so it's not really hard for me to explain what I do because most of my friend groups all to policy work, politics, government work are, you know, I would say some of them I would say even leaders on different issues, working on community advocacy, so there isn't a whole there isn't really a need to explain what I'm doing.

Emily Ng 32:24

Can you actually explain what you're doing and like what sort of programs and projects you work on as policy consultant?

Lisa Thong 32:38

Sure. I specifically focus on the air quality work that is currently being funded by California or Resource Board and South Coast AQMD. And this is kind of the intersection of policy and nonprofit work. What people don't realize is like API for a moment and many nonprofit organizations are funded to do this work through state legislation. So there was a bill called AB 617 passed a few years ago and it mandated the California Air Resources Board to invest in developing an air quality monitoring program and plan that would reflect disadvantaged communities and by disadvantaged it's kind of a specific definition from Calaveras screen, which takes 19 different factors into consideration and scales, communities according to these different factors, which takes into account socioeconomic, education levels, poverty levels, below birth rates, so health issues like you know, percentage of people who have asthma or other upper respiratory issues as well as examining environmental factors. So for instance, I didn't realize this but I recently looked at this Alhambra has, I believe three oil or gas vaults. And Monterey Park has I believe 11. So these are things that are heavily impacted by different things that may or may not create contamination in the area and at six months seven basically authorizes and puts money towards funding community driven strategies and planning to basically counter toxic air emissions from a variety of sources. And so that's how you carry forward movement was funded. We were funded to place purple air

sensors and communities as part of the monitoring plan, but we're also doing advocacy related outreach work to move communities like our park and Alhambra that are impacted, to find solutions for the concerns that they have about their community. So being surrounded by a lot of free ways, being in the flight path, or three different airports, including LAX, these communities are heavily impacted by things that they don't even fully know about. Everyone's going to care about things that they can see or hear. So people complain about the flight path, because Monterey Park gets a lot of noise from the air, the airplanes fly overhead, but they're not thinking about is also a missions that are coming from those planes and those engines, so there's also a lot of railways that come through this area. So my job as policy person is to basically build this foundation for this organization and this community to reach a point where they can make a decision on what they want to do about some of these problems that they have identified in the community. And the approach that we're taking is that it needs to come from the community because we as an organization, as so called, you know, subject matter experts or whatever you want to call it. We may be knowledgeable about what is happening, what needs to be done. That doesn't necessarily mean that that's what the community wants or needs. So looking at all of this through the lens of I'm not an expert, I'm just facilitator. That's what I've been doing. I've been facilitating meetings with stakeholders that represent the community to talk about air quality And to give them tools to understand how to look at the different issues impacting their community and help guide them into a decision making process where they can actually identify the problems that they want to work on and put them into an order of priority and then find fashionable solutions for them to advocate for.

Emily Ng 37:30

So just for clarification, because I thought my understanding way back when AB 617 does CARB fund more than just like I know they have like designated like areas, which they have to go through this huge extensive process but they are funding others than the 10 or 8 that they identified?

Lisa Thong 38:09

Yeah, so there's different levels of funding. Their initial, there's like that initial group of 10, which is definitely heavy focus is getting more resources than likely more dollars. I haven't looked at the pleasure allocations for everyone else, but as I'm sure you're aware, there are at 607 meetings occurring in East LA Boyle Heights. There's also one in Wilmington. And I think there's a third one in the LA County area and they can't remember that third space. But those are communities that are basically prioritize because of the heavy heavy impact that they're dealing with. Like what Alhambra Monterey Park is dealing with is not on the same scale. Obviously because you know, those communities are way worse off. And not that this is a game of like who's, who's worse off than who, but. And like those are communities that that has like drilling or oil refineries or other other major emissions, or contamination factors. So we're considered a low priority. And so it's a different kind of budget allocation. So my guess is that those communities are getting probably double, if not more, in terms of budget allocations and what we're getting fatter.

Emily Ng 39:39

So you cannot spoke about this, but what do you think APIs role and contribution or API FM's role and contribution is in the surrounding community?

Lisa Thong 40:00

So, you know, our work is, has always been spread out through LA County, and LA City and organization moved into San Gabriel Valley just within the past year and a half. We've been in Alhambra for about a year and a half now. And the goal is to provide similar services and resources to this community because there's actually a much smaller percentage of people doing organizing work in the region. If you do a comparison between what kinds of services or nonprofits are operating in this area, there are just a handful of organizations focused on environmental justice work or even on how that is not service, direct service work. So you'll see that there's, you know, Chinatown service center or Planned Parenthood. Those are what we call direct service providers, you know, their actual clinics. For You

know, there's certain organizations that are maybe food pantries or shelters. So those are more service provider entities. What a pair for women wants to do is to move forward into organizing work. And a big part of organizing work is outreach and education. So, you know, our health programming touches on access to food, right, like food justice or food access work. The other piece of that has to do with government funded programs like snap, or general Assistance. We are Not a direct service provider, but we understand kind of the intersection between what needs the community has, and also these bigger kind of advocacy efforts that need to happen a lot more education that needs to happen in these communities. Because for a lot of more suburban cities, which is what, you know, Arcadia or temple city or Alhambra really kind of are they're very residential focused. The dynamic is very different and the needs are very different than, say, City of Los Angeles where there's a huge concentration of different types of organizations doing a lot of different work.

Emily Ng 42:53

So can you speak to maybe one of the most impactful or memorable experiences you've had organizing for something like EJ or health related at APIFM so far.

Lisa Thong 43:13

Um, I mean, I think it's ongoing. And I just started taking me in the stakeholder Working Group. Just a few weeks ago, I have another meeting coming up. I see this space is being really important in terms of trying to educate people while simultaneously leading them to decision making and coming up with solutions. That's what I find to be most of value, not just the outreach and education person that say, okay, so you know this now, what do you want to do with that knowledge? And how can we come up with actionable steps that are realistic to actually create change. That's the type of work that I care most about. And so I feel fortunate that that's the piece of work that I was given to do at daycare. And right now, the stakeholders that I've convened are representative of both Monterey Park and Alhambra. It's very diverse. It's not just Asian American, please cut younger folks who are older folks. We have students from our couple of high school and I'll hammer High School. We have, you know, city council members and commissioners, as well as teachers and parents. And we're still trying to expand that. So as long as I can continue working on making sure that our work is reflective of their demographics of the communities. It's gonna be very meaningful because I'm starting to line up a lot of resources for this group as well, that I know that they probably have not had a chance to hear from before or access. So for instance that this next meeting I'm having Wendy from USC environmental deficient, come and talk about different case studies of surrounding communities like the East LA, Boyle Heights, AV six months seven string committee, what they're working on, what does this work look like another community is having someone from the National Parks Conservation Association come in to talk about environmental justice, terminology and the history of that with communities of color, to have a foundation for everyone to start talking about environmental justice with the kind of right terms And the right hat concepts behind it. And then moving forward, hopefully, I'll be bringing in people from SCAQMD, or, you know, the Southern California Association of Governments to look at what already exists. So that this group of people has a very informed kind of background on how to address some of the issues because a lot of times what you have with working groups is everyone has an idea. And the truth is that it may already exist, somebody may already have done work on it. So and there's no reason to spin wheels, trying to reinvent something that already exists. So that's kind of what my approaches and it's the work that I find most meaningful.

Emily Ng 47:01

Well, it seems like you've engaged a lot of the community in the work that you've been doing. But I guess more generally speaking, how do you feel about like the current level of political and community engagement within the API folks?

Lisa Thong 47:29

I think it's always going to be a challenge. I want to say that people in general, and especially Asian Americans, they don't want to engage. Politics is kind of a dirty word. So if you say that you're trying to engage people on policy, people are very disinterested. So I actually don't really talk about this frickin' grip in terms of policy. Even though that's my title, I actually talked about the scripts work in terms of initiatives. So community initiatives that people can take, because the idea of policy is very broad. And when you remove that kind of lens, people are much more open to talking about things that they want to see change in their community. And then you kind of bring it back into the lens of Okay, well, that's one specific change. How do we systematize that change on a bigger scale. But overall, I'll be honest, most of the people who want to participate, tend to be people who are already active and engaged. And at the end of the day, people don't are still having a hard time understanding relevance. And I think this has to do with the problems that paint feel maybe too big to solve. you know, when we talk about climate change, it's very difficult for people to wrap their minds around, you know, what kind of role can I play in terms of impacting climate change? And that's why you have a lot of these more consumer focused campaigns of like the plastic straw bans, right, like people. People want to feel like they're able to contribute in some way. And when you don't have that concrete pathway for people, I think it's very hard for them to say yes to something because in a lot of my conversations, even with other nonprofits like Chinatown tours, planned parenthood, the big question is, well, how do I contribute? What am I supposed to contribute to this working group? And when you say knowledge, or expertise or an opinion or perspective People don't feel like they're equipped to do that. And I think Asian Americans specifically have a hard time with that, because we always feel like we don't know enough. Right? Like, it's like, well, I'm not an expert on that. So, I don't know that, you know, I'm the right person to be a part of this group. So So that's kind of a weird dynamic that you actually work through for a lot of it.

Emily Ng 50:28

Yeah, you mentioned that you try and avoid using the word policy. Why do you think people are kind of like, scared of that term?

Lisa Thong 50:40

Um, any cuz most people don't understand what policy is or what that processes. So when you say like, hey, I need you to, to weigh in on policy changes that we can enact. Any people are really scared about it...like I don't know anything about policy here. So I don't really want to participate in that. Or the other reaction I've gotten from people who are politically engaged is it's a dirty word. And they're just like, I don't really want to get into politics. It's too, it's too much for me to deal with. And I just want to stay out of it. Because local politics can get very dirty and very ugly. So people have a perception that it's primarily driven by, you know, elected officials who have their own agenda, or other kind of perspective is there's no point because policy is something that is driven by elected and therefore, you know, we can't really expect them to do what we want them to do. So there's a lot of different like personal reasons. I think people have This avoidance of and not just policy work, but voting in general, Asian Americans still have one of the lowest participation rates and voting, even though they have a high percentage of people who are eligible to vote. It's just something that the AA communities is very... they're not you know, kind of goes back to, to native experience and their home countries, whether or not we're second generation or third generation. You know, if I talk to my parents about voting, it took me seven years to get my parents to vote, by the way, because they just feel like what's the point we come from a communist country, government is corrupt. Politics is corrupt. Doesn't matter how you vote. Because politicians don't care about you anyway, and everyone can be bothered. Like, that's literally what my parents said to me for a very long time. And they still think that you know, and there's some evidence of that. You read the headlines in the news, you know, but again, like what you read in the news is small percentage of what's really going on. So there's always corruption, if we see it as being a bigger part of government than it actually is. That it's really hard to shake those types of ideas, especially for people who, like my parents were persecuted for, you know, being successful. Like if you were a business owner, and you were Chinese and Vietnam, you have your business taken from you. You know, like, when we talk about how

our older generation folks are not progressive or you know, they don't want to participate. I think people kind of are not compassionate about Some of the choices that are older generation folks had to make, and how do we help them trust again, I think that's the big thing is like building trust. And that takes time, it takes a lot of time, it takes a lot of work. And you really have to show people that you're not just having conversations. Anything that's such a piece of why it's hard to get people on board with something that is new. And is kind of like the first run of something, like easier to get people on board with something when you can point to like a year's worth of work. And you can say, this is what we did last year. And this is what I want you to help us to this year, or do something very similar. Like you have to show people an example of what the end product can be. In order for people to sign on to something a lot of times is what I've experienced I mean that's not hundred percent true for everyone. But that's kind of from my own personal experience.

Emily Ng 55:09

So relating to this, what are your thoughts on the model minority myth portraying Asian Americans as a very like apolitical and civically disengaged and just like perpetually foreigners?

Lisa Thong 55:27

I think that that's a very complex question. So I would chunk it out in terms of their responses. I think the response to each piece of that is very different. Being perpetual foreigners, yes. Obviously we look different. The mainstream identity what's considered American is, you know, white. But I think there's also a narrative choice that we as a community, need to also look at in terms of certain realities that I think we fail to accept, which is, you know, like, yes, there's model minority myth. Yes, we were kind of forced into a conversation. You know, based on. I think it was a New York Times reporter who labeled us model minority, to compare us to other minorities, especially African Americans, due to success, but we also can't deny numbers. You know, like we can disaggregate data all we want. But the truth is, there's a high percentage of very educated very professional Asian Americans if we want to categorize a message, so I think it's really hard for us to to deny, certain truths about who we are, we can talk about the driving factors of that which is immigration pattern, right like. Why is it that sir in ethnic groups are more successful than others, namely, you know, Taiwanese, South Asian, Chinese, Korean, all these East Asians, but I think it would be more at adequate or more accurate to talk about our community in terms of immigration waves and immigration patterns. Because, for instance, when you talk about Southeast Asians, Vietnamese, Cambodian, Hmong. These are refugees who come from war torn backgrounds, they escaped to their countries. A lot of these hosts were not able to receive an education. So those demographics are going to be vastly different than people who chose to emigrate based on certain pieces. I think we would be able to develop a different narrative, we started looking at the causation of immigration versus ethnic identity. And you know that, you know, the conversation around Asian American identity is how do we come together? How do we build coalition? How do we help everyone identify under this term? And I'm kind of have a different opinion. I don't think we should be identifying under Asian American as a term. It's a made up term that we forced ourselves into and with everything I think we need to evolve. And we need to move beyond how we're talking about all these different ethnicities, which is like what 65 different ethnicities under the term Asian American. And most of the groups during Asian American work, don't even actually to work on Pacific Islander communities and completely leave them outside of the work, or even consider South Asian as being part of Asian American. They see this over and over again and coalition work when everyone at the table is the East Asian group. Like we need to, we really need to be looking at ourselves in terms of what is it that we want to accomplish with all of these different narratives we're using to talk about ourselves and how Is it really leading to change? Because I don't know that continuing to talk about ourselves and others in relation to model minority myth is going to really serve the people who need it the most, which is, you know, the people who need to be kind of brought into the conversation. I mean, I don't know that I have an answer to your question, really. I don't even know if this is a suitable answer for it, or what you're trying to get for thesis, but those are just some of my thoughts, and there are popular thoughts. That's okay.

Emily Ng 1:00:50

Yeah, I mean, I think I've interviewed quite a few people now and you're the first person to sort of bring up this idea. So I think it's really interesting. Yeah.

Lisa Thong 1:01:07

Yeah, I mean, I wouldn't even say don't don't even like include it. Because it's probably going to be a super outlier. Um, because I don't think that other people would agree with me, which is fine. And it probably doesn't take your thesis where, where it needs to go. But, you know, I think what I've seen, which is very at odds with the narrative and the work that the to me does is I worked in private sector for more than three years in marketing and there is, you know, when you work in marketing, what companies are trying to do is to try to sell something and hey, Tell you the difference and how Asian Americans are seen through that lens. And what's interesting is, you know, companies at the end of the day, like we talked about philanthropy, a lot of nonprofits are all about, like, you know, corporate corporate foundations who give to us because we do meaningful work. But the truth is a lot of these companies aren't giving to organizations because we believe in the work. There's a lot of companies that kids because they want to be in front of a certain demographic. And at the end of the day, companies looked at target markets like Chinese as a consumer group. The reason they wanted to invest in Chinese American organizations is not that is the goodness of their heart, but because they wanted brand recognition, and there's a Lot of stereotyping that is involved with marketing. And when you look at why is it that the movie studios never chose to do an Asian American film until we could prove that there was a market for it was crazy rich Asians and people sold out theaters. Like we are, we're not living in a different time because all of a sudden, like it appropriate for for TV or for movie studios to to, you know ethnically diverse films. It's because they can make money off of it. And I think that's like a really harsh reality for advocates to have to look at and admit to. So, you know, a lot of the narrative community orgs are pushing for at the end of the day sometimes hurt the community. at large, because sometimes these bigger companies only choose to invest in, like in language services or in language products, because they can make money off of it. And when you're talking about the community, as if there is no money there, then a lot of these companies that she's choose not to invest their dollars and that way. It's also a chicken before the egg thing. me It's very, it's all very complex. And, you know, that's not the purpose of your thesis. But there's, as I see, I think there are too many different viewpoints being pushed by the communities that don't support each other. And I think it makes it really hard for both private sector and others to come on board with what the community actually want to happen? So those are very complex, you know, problems that, you know, I can't solve and you're not going to be able to talk to your thesis. But like it, I think that talking about identity, like especially talking about Asian American identity, like I think I'm just an outlier in that I'm kind of tired of people trying to fit 65 different ethnicities into one identity, and to try to get everyone to agree with that. And I think there has to be a third path to that.

Emily Ng 1:05:47

Yeah, I mean, I think it is also interesting because out of the people that I have interviewed so far, I mean, you're you are like the only individual who has this background from coming, being raised by a refugee family. So I'm wondering if maybe that might be a pattern that I look further into to.

Lisa Thong 1:06:11

Yeah, I mean, it definitely has contributed to my outsider mentality. Because, you know, I've been in a lot of spaces where I'm in an Asian American room, but nothing anyone is saying actually hits home to me, because their experience is so different from mine. Like, everyone's like, Oh, my God, you know, like, typical Asian is an engineer or a doctor. And I'm like, that's great. That's not my background. You know, or when I talked about how a lot of people I grew up with ended up in juvie. Like, that's not who I'm surrounded by right now because the truth is for people to finish college become successful. There's a lot of different factors that go into making sure that happens. And you know, there's only 30% of the US

population has graduates from college. Like we don't think about that, we kind of assume that that's everyone. And my colleagues are in that statistic, right? Like they are college educated. They're professionals. They work in good paying jobs, or they choose to not make money and work in nonprofit. But those are choices they can make. Because the truth is, if you couldn't make that choice, if you don't have some type of support, to enable you to make choices where you don't make a whole lot of money, like people from my background, if you can make money you're gonna go make money, because you need that much because you have a family to support so You know, when we talk about like, to Asian Americans vote, my assumption is that people who are college educated, who grew up in the US are working professionals, they will go vote. But people that are like my parents, they're not going to take time out of their schedules ago. The only reason I bought them to vote was because I signed them up for absentee ballots, you know, and I sat with them. And I said, this is what this person was about, and like what you think, and we talked politics that that's not typical, I would pay for a household where English is not a primary language. And so, you know, I think we have to change how we're talking about people because it's not about ethnic identity.

Our ethnic identity is Chinese. But my immigration story is refugee. So how do we start to look at Not just Asian American identity, but like people of color, in terms of what issues they're dealing with and how they're dealing with them. I think it comes down to immigration status, not even just socio economics. Because, you know, if you're, if you're Mexican American, and your family, you know, somehow immigrated to the US legally, your experience to me vastly different from someone who, whose parents are undocumented and cross the border illegally. Hey, so I don't think there's room for those types of conversations and how we're dealing with race right now.

Emily Ng 1:09:52

What would be the way to sort of shed light on these differences in histories and lived experiences into social justice activist conversations?

Lisa Thong 1:10:27

I think that that would be a really good question to ask paper organizers. Like I don't know that I have an answer to that something that I asked myself a lot. Lot of these conversations have to be one on one. And they have to be couched in trust. Great. So like, for instance, if I wanted to go in to talk to the people, my mom used to work with In the sweatshops, like coming in, there's a lot of fear no one's going to go on record to talk about different issues. And it takes a lot of courage and a willingness for people to sacrifice their financial stability in order to advocate for things. Any I think labor is wholly the only entity out there doing things at that level. Like I would say, not even advocacy groups are doing that. Like I can't name any Asian American organization except maybe like KIWA, the Koreatown Immigrant Workers Alliance which is again like they specialize in labor maybe California Healthy Nail Salon because they go in person to do that type of work and to talk about people. But even then, I think there has been a lot of challenge, a lot of trouble in terms of getting people to speak up and to show up, and to turn out for things like advocating for themselves even.

Emily Ng 1:12:31

Okay, um, well, so my last question I know you were just talking about how you don't prefer that. We focus on like, lumping together, everyone under like API's and as a race because different histories and things like that, but this is something this was like Basically, what got me interested in thesis? And to start with so I was just wondering that because although API FM isn't like exclusively advocating for API's and others other groups, they are. I mean, it does say like API in the organization's name. But there are a lot of other ej related groups who like kind of have connections to a certain ethnic or racial group. So I guess in terms of like, representation for the API communities advocating for ej, how do you feel about that current status?

Lisa Thong 1:13:55

Definitely need more. You know, I'm sure You're aware it is kind of like a handful of so called environmental justice organizations that focus on issue American population. And so there's never enough organizations doing this type of work, because it is unfair, it is needed. But the truth is, in order to best serve the community, like so much of the work needs to take place in language. And, you know, other thing is, communities don't necessarily identify with the terminology in America can either. So, you know, where do we stand right now? I mean, I think, honestly, like every every ethnic like core language group means its own kind of entity to do its work. I mean, that's how the community would be best served.

Unless an organization like API forward movement grows to the point where, you know, they have staff with every single language under the Asian American umbrella. That's how we would best serve the community. A lot of it, you know, goes back to funding even. That's a whole other conversation, but grant funding, government funding all that tied to different factors, that may not be the best way to actually try to address problems. For instance, a lot of government grants are geographic in terms of how they fund things, that's why care for movement can only focus on Monterey Park and Alhambra. Even though It'd be great if we could turn all of San Gabriel Valley. You know, in order to serve in language, a lot more money needs to be allocated. And the truth is, a lot of funders don't put resources into staff, a lot of the budgets that are given to nonprofits to do their work on structure to actually value I'm asking, all of the money goes to programs and services provided. So that's why you have people who are not paid a whole lot. And you can't really carve out money in the program budget to have translations or interpreters. So the word suffers because I think there are just so many factors that need to happen in the right way for good work to be done.

Emily Ng 1:17:01

Okay, um, I think that's pretty much of the questions I have. But do you have anything to add or any questions for me?

Lisa Thong 1:17:14

Um, I don't, I don't really have any questions, but I just hope that I didn't go off on too many tangents for you...that it was actually helpful. I don't know what your time frame is for putting together a thesis. But I would just kind of asked that. If you decide to quote me on anything that I have a chance to like sign off on it. Just so I know what goes in. Okay.

Emily Ng 1:17:51

Yeah, Your thoughts and perspectives are new and different. And but I think I'm kind of interested to kind of, I don't know, like, look more into it.

Lisa Thong 1:18:25

yeah, I hope that doesn't, you know, take you too far from the focus of your work that I'd be interested to see if there are other people who are thinking about things differently.

Especially when it comes to data. I don't really know of any groups or academics who are trying to cut data on Asian Americans in a way that's different from ethnicity, Mom, like I would love to find out if somebody is trying to develop data around

You know, he says, what types of pieces or what type of immigration, like vehicle that people take and to see if there's any correlation around that I haven't come across yet. So be really exciting if you found somebody.

Emily Ng 1:19:21

Yeah, well, okay, I know it's been past an hour now and I'm sure you have just so many other things to do today. Thank you so much for just like sitting down and you know, talking about some personal stuff. And just giving me a lot of really valuable information.

Lisa Thong 1:19:44

Yeah, no problem. And thanks for reaching out and wanting to keep it. So just keep me updated on how things are going.