



## **“Where We Live, Where We Work, Where We Play, Where We Learn”**

### ***The Asian Pacific Environmental Network***

#### **Ethnographic Moments**

Seventeen thirteen- and fourteen-year-old girls, three Asian Youth Advocates (AYA) staff, reporter Joe Garofoli from the *West County Times*, and I clamber onto a yellow school bus, hired to take us on a “toxic tour” of Richmond and San Pablo, California, in July 1998. The teens in AYA’s Group 3 are leading the tour for the benefit of those in Group 4. Before we set off from Grace Lutheran Church, Lai and Fiey give us a brief overview of the level of contaminants present in the air, water, and land each year in both cities. The most shocking fact is that workers and residents in Contra Costa County are exposed to contaminants from chemical accidents every two and a half months. As we begin our tour, the excitement among the girls is palpable in the cacophony of noise. This trip is a change from sitting in a room at Grace Lutheran. Our first stop is the Electro Forming Chrome Plating Company, situated in a mixed residential-industrial zone. As the bus stops, Tsiet comes to the front and tells us that nitric acid leaked from one of the tanks and spread over a twenty-block area in August 1992. More than one hundred people were hospitalized. Following this incident, the people in the neighborhood organized to file a class-action suit against the company. The company not only changed its name to avoid the lawsuit but also went as far as laying the blame for the leak on a bullet fired into the tank by someone in the community. The police never found the bullet and concluded that rusting caused a hole in the tank. However, the city and the county claimed that their hands were tied because the company had been located at this spot long before the residential area that developed around it.

We continue along the streets of Richmond and come to a halt outside Peres Elementary School. Everybody jumps off the bus, and we assemble by the wire mesh fence that marks the school boundary. It is a stark and desolate place, with asphalt-covered grounds surrounding the one-story brown buildings. There is not a tree in sight, but the Chevron refinery looms over it. Pham, who attended Peres, informs us that instead of doing fire drills or earthquake

drills, they constantly practiced evacuation drills. Whenever there was a toxic leak, “the principal would tell us over the intercom to get into a line and put a paper napkin or tissue over our mouths and nose so that we wouldn’t breathe in the toxins. We would get into a bus and ride around town for a few minutes, maybe an hour, so that the spills or leaks would be cleaned up and it was safe for us to return to school.” Pham ends her story by stating that test scores for students at Peres have been in the lowest 1 percent of the state.

From Peres we drive past the three oil tanks, painted brown so as to blend in with the surrounding hills, and the Chevron refinery. Pham informs us that according to the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), this facility produces over 20 million pounds of toxic emissions per year. Since October 1991 the facility has had ten serious chemical spills, including a 40-ton dust blizzard that spread over a 16-square-mile area. Such toxic emissions have caused health problems such as cancers and brain damage. We continue on our “toxic tour” through north Richmond, where the only store in sight is a liquor store. Our fourth stop is the Drew Scrap Metals Superfund site, where the company operated until 1976. We get off the bus and walk around this empty overgrown lot with a chain-link fence around it. Tracy recounts the history of this site, now dubbed “Laotian Gardens.” Drew Scrap Metals had released heavy metals such as lead and cadmium into the soil, all of which can cause learning disabilities and brain damage. After the company had stopped operations, an African American family moved in to the house adjacent to this lot. They experienced health problems, and some died of cancer. The African American family eventually moved out, but several Laotian families replaced them, growing herbs and vegetables in the toxic soil to supplement their diet. They were completely unaware of the dangers until a public health nurse, concerned about the level of lead in their children, discovered where their food was grown. The primary source was the contaminated soil and the lead-based paint chips from the house. Although there were warning signs at the facility, they were in only English and Spanish. The Laotians were relocated, and the house was torn down. Twelve years after the company shut down, the area became a Superfund site, or one of the worst toxic sites in the United States identified by the EPA. The government attempted to clean up the area by mixing clean soil with the contaminated soil and paving over the land. Tracy points out the EPA warning sign tied to the fence and the white meter in a corner, which the EPA uses to check the level of contaminants. Next to “Laotian Gardens” is what looks like the remains of a factory. Across the lot are a mom-and-pop grocery store and a few single-story houses. Though some are boarded up, others have well-kept gardens. The only people in sight are a few middle-aged African Americans and three younger Latino men.

The next site on the tour is the Chevron Ortho Pesticide Plant and Incinerator, now closed down. Paeng comes to the front of the bus to give us the history of this site. Chevron had operated this plant since 1967 on a temporary permit and had repeatedly tried to get a permanent permit but without success. The company hid the fact that it was manufacturing a chemical called methylene chloride, a known cause of cancer. In 1997 the plant was finally shut down after a campaign led by the West County Toxics Coalition, Communi-

ties for a Better Environment, and Greenpeace, showing how the community organized to solve its worst problem. As Paeng makes this statement, there are cheers and claps. The sixth stop is General Chemical, still in north Richmond. Alison comes to the front of the bus and reminds us that in July 1993 there was a chemical disaster here. Workers were unloading a railcar filled with the chemical oleum for Chevron's use. It became overheated, and a cloud of sulfuric acid escaped through a hole and covered an area three by seventeen miles. More than 20,000 people visited local hospitals with symptoms of burning throats and eyes. As Alison mentions this, several of the Group 4 girls utter "uh-huh" and tell us that they remember the sulfuric acid spill and having to go to the hospital. "One good thing came of this spill," Alison informs us. "Chevron spent \$1.8 million to build a warning system and fund the North Richmond Center for Health."

The final stop on this "toxic tour" of Richmond and San Pablo is the United Heckathorn Superfund site at Richmond harbor. We all get off the bus to look around. I notice that the EPA warning sign telling people not to fish in the San Francisco Bay is in English. Up ahead several men are fishing! I can't tell whether they are Asian or Latino. The wind has picked up now, and we huddle around Maya so we can hear what she has to say about this site. The EPA has put United Heckathorn on the Superfund site list because the company discarded pesticides, including DDT, into the harbor between 1947 and 1966. Once the EPA closed the site, the original plan was to dig up the mud and dump it in a landfill in the small Arizona community of Mobile, where about one hundred Latinos and African Americans lived. The company developed these plans without consultation with or permission from the communities in Richmond and Mobile. Eventually, after strong community pressure in both places, these plans were changed. "But even though they don't dump it here, they'll dump it somewhere else, which is not a solution," asserts Maya. Finally, she reminds us that the toxic dumping, though now ceased, continues to impact Laotians and other local communities that fish in the harbor. Warning signs are ineffective because many Laotians cannot read or understand English. In any case, fishing is an important source of food, as more than 50 percent of Laotians live below the poverty level and about 60 percent are on public assistance, compared with only 17 percent of the general population. I overhear Joe Garofoli say, "I learned a lot today," but the girls in Group 4 do not exhibit surprise at these facts. Perhaps for them these are all too familiar facts of life.

We climb back onto the bus and head back to Grace Lutheran Church. There is a contemplative silence as the teens mull over this "toxic tour" of Richmond and San Pablo.

It's a warm August evening in Richmond in 1999. Several of the AYA youth and I are sitting around a couple of long tables in the Laotian Organizing Project's offices. Over pizzas, soda, and fruit, we are having a wide-ranging conversation about Laotian culture, what it means to be an American, living in Richmond, experiences of racism, how they would envision their dream community, and what kind of image of Laotian teenagers they would want

a reporter to portray. On these last two themes the overwhelming desire among the young women is not to be stereotyped. Gabriela recounts the following incident when she took her mom to the local public hospital when she was having health problems. When Gabriela asked the attending nurse for the diagnosis, the nurse, instead of responding to Gabriela, turned to another nurse nearby and said, "Why can't they just take it and go somewhere else? They are getting it off for free." Understandably angry, Gabriela retorted, "My mom didn't get off for free; we pay for half of the stuff." In response to my question about how they would want a reporter to represent them, Tsiet also recalled how nurses had stereotyped her: "Like in a hospital they go 'Oh! It's good that you're not having sex yet, not having kids, 'cause I just have two twelve-year-old girls in here,' and then, like, 'She's pregnant.' They will say stuff to me like that when I go to the hospital so I'll be mad." Tsiet acknowledged that many young Laotian girls do have children, but she wanted a reporter to show that some "have their own mind, they have goals in their life, and they wanna achieve it."

### **The U.S. Environmental Justice Movement and the Asian Pacific Environmental Network**

These two ethnographic moments, the first based on field notes recorded during a "toxic tour" of Richmond and San Pablo, California, given by a group of fourteen-year-old Laotian girls and the second drawing from focus group discussions with sixteen-year-old Laotian girls, illustrate how they are simultaneously cast as racialized minority, immigrants, refugees, young people of color, poor, and teenage girls and how they challenge dominant understandings of social formations in the United States through participation in Asian Youth Advocates (AYA), a leadership development project established by the Asian Pacific Environmental Network (APEN) in the Laotian community in Richmond, California. Founded in 1993, APEN has roots in the environmental justice movement in the United States. Two reports published in the 1980s, one by the U.S. General Accounting Office (GAO 1983) and a second by the United Church of Christ Commission for Racial Justice, titled *Toxic Wastes and Race in the United States* (1987), found that African Americans and people of color were more likely to be exposed to environmental hazards than white people. These seminal studies and the First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit, held in Washington D.C., in October 1991,<sup>1</sup> popularized the notion of "environmental racism" and "environmental justice." The Principles of Environmental Justice,<sup>2</sup> adopted at the summit, galvanized the environmental justice movement (Sze 2007), and activists in communities of color had a new language to understand their work. The summit mobilized regional environmental justice networks in the late 1980s and early 1990s (Chang and Hwang 2000), propelling the reconceptualization of the environment in the United States as "where we live, where we work, where we play, where we learn" (Cole and Foster 2001:16).<sup>3</sup> With the creation of an Office of Environmental Equity within the Environmental Protection Agency and Pres-

ident Bill Clinton's executive order on environmental justice in 1994, all federal offices and agencies were directed to create policies to address the environmental inequities experienced by communities of color, further institutionalizing the environmental justice framework into U.S. laws (Sze 2007).

In contrast to more traditional environmental groups, the environmental justice movement adopts a civil rights discourse, providing a social justice framework for understanding environmental problems and risks and the uneven distribution of the effects of such risks in terms of race and class. As Cole and Foster (2001:33) point out, it thus offers a broader perspective on environmental activism through its goals (fighting for health, homes, and community), strategies (direct action), and political orientation (linking environmental problems to wider social justice issues). APEN, as part of the environmental justice movement, presents a radical perspective on integration and incorporation into American society to Laotians, a new immigrant community:

All people have the right to a clean and healthy environment in which their communities can live, work, learn, play and thrive. Towards that vision, the Asian Pacific Environmental Network was founded in 1993 to unify, empower, and strengthen the capacities of our diverse Asian and Pacific Islander communities to build a broad movement for environmental, social and economic justice. (Mission statement in APEN's 5th Anniversary Celebration Program, 1998)

One of the central philosophical elements of the environmental justice movement is the concept of self-determination, translated into the credo "We speak for ourselves" (Cole and Foster 2001:27). The staff at APEN has sought to stay true to this principle and do "base building work" (Peggy Saika, then APEN executive director, interview, 21 October 1998), or build community organizations from the bottom up, in communities that have few formalized structures for creating social change. With this goal, in 1995 APEN created the Laotian Organizing Project (LOP) in the city of Richmond, located in west Contra Costa County, California. From the beginning, LOP has focused on a leadership development program for teenage Laotian girls, aiming to raise a political consciousness about environmental and social justice issues as well as address issues pertinent to adolescents, such as self-esteem and identity. APEN hoped to both empower and engage this bilingual second generation in community activism, and through these girls to nurture social capital and political efficacy in this new immigrant community, with the ultimate goal of challenging existing racial hierarchies and related structures and processes of racial inequality (Shah 2007, 2008).

During the time I was in the field, 1997–1999, thirty-one girls ranging from thirteen to seventeen years of age participated in the program. Once accepted, the teens were expected to make a four-year commitment to AYA. They participated in an intensive six-week summer program, meeting four hours a day, four days a week, during which time they earned a stipend. The curriculum for the first summer session for each new group included reproductive health, sexuality and

sexual orientation, body image and cultural identity, gender roles, team-building exercises, and an introduction to the principles of environmental justice. In the second and subsequent summers the curriculum for each group varied but included a stronger emphasis on environmental justice as well as elements of Asian Pacific Island histories and community organizing strategies, Laotian history, and the development of organizing skills among the girls. AYA staff delivered these themes through popular education and experiential learning methods. The summer sessions ended with a graduation, to which the girls' families and other community members were invited. Each group continued to meet several times a month during the school year, under the leadership of young Asian American and Laotian counselors, to carry out specific projects, partake in training (developing skills in, for example, popular theater), and attend conferences, workshops, and exchanges with other youth groups. In these ways AYA staff encouraged the young women to actively participate in developing their leadership and community organizing skills. Another important component of the youth program was emotional support through peer counseling.

During the first three years of AYA the staff primarily focused on building capacity among the teens so they could become active in decisions that affect their lives. In September 1998, with four cohorts of teenage girls in the program, APEN staff decided to shift from what they called "youth programming" to "youth organizing" (Peggy Saika, interview, 21 October 1998), reflecting a desire to harness the energy and leadership skills of the youth to help build LOP as an organization that can eventually form part of an Asian American face in the environmental justice movement in the United States. As I note in Chapter 8, APEN no longer runs a youth program for teenage Laotian girls. Thus this book marks a particular historical moment in APEN's organizing work in the Laotian community in Richmond, California, and captures a specific stage in the lives of these second-generation Laotian girls.

Why write a book about a small youth leadership development project? *Laotian Daughters* offers an ethnographic account of the strategies and practices of APEN's Asian Youth Advocates and second-generation Laotian girls' engagement with community politics and environmental justice activism in order to investigate the process of becoming "American" among the children of one the newest immigrant groups. But it is not a story framed in the dominant paradigm of assimilation and incorporation. It is a story that casts immigration as a generative site for critiquing and transforming American national identity. In other words, this story does not just tell us about the children of immigrants; it also addresses what the experiences of adaptation and incorporation reveal about the contemporary United States, particularly how racialization processes and understandings of national identity and membership play a role in the integration of Laotian immigrants and their children and in the formulation of their claims for citizenship and belonging. These immigrants draw attention to the politics of belonging, the nature of citizenship, and national identity in the United States in the twenty-first century. As Lisa Lowe reminds us,

Asian immigrants and Asian Americans have not only been "subject to" immigration exclusion and restriction but have also been "subjects of" the immigration process and are agents of political change, cultural expression, and social transformation. (Lowe 1996:9)

Contemporary social justice organizations such as APEN acknowledge the intersectionality and simultaneity of processes of racialization, class exploitation, and subordination based on gender, age, and other axes that shape individual and collective experiences in the United States. In addition to race and class, gender has been integral to APEN's vision of a youth leadership development program in the Laotian community in Richmond. APEN staff was increasingly aware of the link between women's reproductive health and the environmental health of the community, as well as the need for access to adequate and timely health care. In a community that is linguistically isolated, bilingual girls play a key role as disseminators of information about reproductive and environmental health to members of their families and community. At the same time, there were barriers to the young women's participation in a leadership development program, including teenage pregnancy. While motherhood confers high status on women within the Laotian community, and parents encouraged girls to marry and have children at a young age, the APEN staff, adopting a feminist and middle-class ethos, believed that the high number of teen births among Laotian girls placed enormous emotional, financial, and educational burdens on them and prevented them from leading stable and productive adult lives. In early conversations with Laotian girls, the staff also heard complaints of gender discrimination from parents and a sense of schizophrenia as the girls navigated different cultures at home, at school, and among peers. The APEN staff thus viewed Laotian girls as the most marginalized sector in the community. A leadership development project aimed at these girls would not only address their specific needs and strengthen their cultural identity but also nurture a new generation of women leaders, in a community where authority is traditionally vested in elderly Laotian males, to act as advocates for the health of their community and to organize around environmental justice, reproductive health, and broader community issues. Few studies focus on immigrant women in the context of politics and civic life.<sup>4</sup> Through rich ethnographic detail, including the four profiles presented later in this chapter, this book makes visible teenage Laotian girls' political development and their engagement with political activism and community building.

The case of AYA also demonstrates that citizenship is not just an adult experience. Such a characterization ignores both the social/cultural context of young people's lives and their efforts to achieve social change (France 1998:99–100). For Asian American young people, the "model minority" stereotype obfuscates the complexity of their lives. Moreover, popular culture and subcultural sites such as underground magazines, alternative music and style, and computer hacker clubs are not the only arenas for oppositional politics among young people (Giroux 1998:24). *Laotian Daughters* illustrates the teenagers' resistance and struggle in



relation to issues of class and race, as well as gender and intergenerational relations, and the construction of substantive citizenship among young people through organized activism. I argue that through Asian Youth Advocates, APEN exposes young Laotians to dominant cultural values of freedom, autonomy, and security, as well as to the more critical discourses of race and gender equality and justice. In so doing, it engages in the cultural politics of *critical incorporation*, or a set of practices in the cultural political realm that challenge, accommodate, or transform power relations within the nation, civil society, and the Laotian family. It is at the level of everyday life that “the interests of the dominant culture are negotiated and contested” (Escobar 1992:75). The cultural work done by APEN allowed the young Laotian women to understand how systems of domination permeate everyday life, to produce meaning in relation to complex relations of power, and to construct collective identities and collective capacities for change. At the same time, in this process of learning to belong and to become subjects through AYA, second-generation Laotian women also resisted specific agendas, modified meanings and practices, and inserted critiques, suggesting active participation in shaping the meaning of what it means to be “American.”

A primary theoretical goal of this book is to analyze multiple spatial scales—the nation, civil society institutions, and the family—to illustrate the ways in which the teenage daughters of Laotian immigrants are negotiating the contradictions between the liberal ideology of universal citizenship and the collective boundaries of race, class, nationality, gender, and life stage that define substantive citizenship. Here I want to distinguish between legal or formal citizenship as a status that confers rights and duties, and substantive citizenship, or citizenship as social practice, which is actively constructed through forging a sense of belonging, political participation in its broadest sense, and equal access to rights and opportunities (Glenn 2004; Ehrkamp and Leitner 2003; Isin and Wood 1999).

The practice of citizenship encompasses the local as well as the national level. The United States has a *laissez-faire* approach to immigrant political incorporation (Bloemraad 2006). Government policy and resources remain focused on managing the entry of immigrants into the country. Beyond entry there is little official involvement with later processes of integration and incorporation, the exception being federal government support in the form of settlement aid to legal refugees. However, as Aihwa Ong (2003) reminds us, refugees and immigrants experience everyday processes of making and self-making in official and public arenas, such as refugee camps, the welfare state, the court system, community hospitals, local churches, and civic organizations, as they become subjects of dominant norms, rules, values, and systems (see also Glenn 2004). Such daily encounters shape their ideas about what being American might mean and provide the resources to contest exclusion and make claims at local, state, and national levels. In other words, they undergo a process of sociopolitical incorporation. In this book I focus on micropolitics to examine the nature of incorporation enacted through a youth leadership development program by a contemporary social justice organization, APEN.



## The Study

In 1995 APEN established the Laotian Organizing Project in the city of Richmond, California. The Laotian community here is invisible: it has no representation in local government structures (Lochner 1997). Moreover, as I discuss in detail in Chapter 2, Richmond is a critical site for APEN's environmental justice work. The city of Richmond's industrial history has left local residents disproportionately prone to environmental toxins emitted from 350 industrial plants. Nearly all the studies that have investigated the distribution of environmental hazards during the 1980s and 1990s have found race and income to be significant factors. Where it has been possible to assess the relative importance of these factors, race has tended to be the better predictor of the location of environmental hazards (Mohai and Bryant 1992). These trends are also evident in Richmond, where the population is overwhelmingly constituted by communities of color—79 percent in 2000 (U.S. Census Bureau 2000b)—and experiences high levels of unemployment and welfare dependency. In the last two decades of the twentieth century the city of Richmond and surrounding areas witnessed a dramatic transformation in the racial landscape. There has been tremendous growth of Latino and Asian communities, though African Americans still represent the largest majority. This socioeconomic milieu creates the potential for interracial tension as well as opportunities for cross-race coalitions and common struggle for a new immigrant and refugee community.

Since 1995 LOP had been focused on creating a leadership development program for teenage Laotian girls. An opportunity to realize such a project arose when the University of California–San Francisco's Center for Reproductive Health Research and Policy (CRHRP) received funding from the California Wellness Foundation to conduct research on teen pregnancy prevention in Asian and Pacific Islander communities. CRHRP sought to implement this grant through community partners and selected Asian Pacific Islanders for Reproductive Health (APIRH), based in Oakland, California, as one such partner. Peggy Saika (then APEN's executive director) and Ming Chang<sup>5</sup> (then a staff member at APEN) were also members of APIRH's board, enabling APIRH and APEN to work together to initiate a youth program for Laotian girls in Richmond. The California Wellness Foundation grant supported AYA for one year; in the second year, funding was more precarious and APEN subsidized the program through its other project budgets. Asian Youth Advocates gained a firm footing in 1997 when the Ms. Foundation for Women awarded APEN a three-year grant through its Healthy Girls/Healthy Women Collaborative Fund. In 2000 the Ms. Foundation renewed this grant for one year, and the California Wellness Foundation awarded APEN a two-year grant to continue health education in the Laotian community through AYA.

Beginning in 1995, the AYA staff recruited young Laotian girls from a local middle school attended by most of the Laotian children who live in Richmond or the adjoining city of San Pablo (Grace Kong, interview, 9 October 1998). An

informal agreement with the principal at the school allowed AYA staff to present the program to all the Laotian girls in the seventh grade. Fliers posted at the school promoted the summer program as a chance for the girls to work with other exciting Laotian girls; develop leadership skills; organize a campaign; learn about their health, their community, and their environment; build a community; take field trips; and earn money. In early June AYA staff and one or two youth members already involved in AYA visited the school to present the summer program and meet with the girls. Those who were interested completed an application form that asked why they wanted to join the program, what they thought of their community and environment, and what they would do to change it; they were asked as well to describe the experiences they had had at school, work, church, or in other settings that would help them in the program. The staff also gave them a consent form and an information packet to take home to their parents. After reviewing the applications and interviewing potential recruits, the staff selected ten to twelve girls to join the program each summer based on their interest and their willingness to make a four-year commitment to help build the Laotian Organizing Project and work for social change in the community (Grace Kong, interview, 9 October 1998). Executive Director Peggy Saika suggested that the Asian Youth Advocates is unlike other youth programs:

We were not talking about creating a summer experience for young people, you know. But we were really talking about a four-year program, a four-year experience that would be really at its core about building the community. (Interview, 21 October 1998)

Asian Youth Advocates began in the summer of 1995 with a group of twelve Laotian girls aged thirteen and fourteen.<sup>6</sup> Recalling the very first meeting with these teenagers, Saika remembered “how withdrawn and shy they were. How they hadn’t found their own voice.” But Saika also observed that “they were so streetwise because of their exposure to gangs, and drugs and poverty . . . and yet had so few opportunities for personal growth” (interview, 21 October 1998). In the summer of 1996 a second group of nine girls joined the program, in 1997 a third group of eleven girls enrolled, and in the summer of 1998 a fourth group of ten girls was recruited. While I was in the field, the retention rate for the first group was 50 percent. For the second group, it was 50 percent until the girls in that group reached the end of their third year, when it dropped to 40 percent. Retention rates for the third and fourth groups were approximately 80 percent. These high rates attest to the intensity of staff-youth interactions as well as peer support relationships, which I discuss further in Chapter 7. The following profiles of four girls, each belonging to one of the groups in AYA, provide a portrayal of their social, cultural, and economic experiences and community activism.