

“Know History, Know Self:” Coming Home for Formerly Incarcerated Asian
Americans and Pacific Islanders

Janie Chen

ABSTRACT

During the prison boom of the 1990s, the Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) prison population in the U.S. exploded by 250 percent. Although they occupy a relatively small portion of the total prison population, AAPIs are one of the fastest-growing groups of incarcerated peoples nationwide. Yet, the experiences of this racial “Other” in the carceral system remain marginalized within the canonical studies of mass incarceration and Asian America. Using 20 in-depth interviews, this research seeks to understand how formerly incarcerated AAPIs experience reentry into their families and communities. Drawing upon carceral and critical refugee studies, I adopt the *militarized refugee* to reveal the ways in which the legacies of U.S. militarism and transpacific displacement constitute the conditions of reentry for formerly incarcerated AAPIs. I highlight three key aspects in their reentry that demonstrate the ongoing presence of militarism in their lives – living in limbo, cultural shame, stigma, and silence, and knowledge as a site of healing and resistance. These findings demonstrate the need to move beyond traditional reentry frameworks, to which I conclude with thoughts as to how reentry programs and spaces may rethink ways to better support formerly incarcerated AAPIs as they reenter our communities.

INTRODUCTION

As of 2019, there are roughly 2.2 million individuals incarcerated in United States prisons, jails, juvenile correctional facilities, immigration detention facilities, refugee camps, and

Asian American Research Journal. Issue 1, Volume 1 2021

other systems and institutions of penal control.¹ The increase in the mass of people incarcerated has subsequently entailed drastic numbers of individuals experiencing reentry. Each year, more than 640,000 people are released from federal and state prisons across the country, with an average of 2,700 individuals each day (De Giorgi, 2017). The Urban Institute defines reentry as “the process of leaving prison and returning to society. All prisoners experience re-entry irrespective of their method of release or form of supervision, if any.”² The majority of reentry literature has primarily focused on the disproportionately high volumes of Black and Latinx people incarcerated nationwide. As a result, among the record number of Americans flowing in and out of prison each year, this general body of literature has often failed to capture the complex experiences of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders (AAPIs) entangled in the carceral system.

As a group, AAPIs occupy a small percentage of the total prison population relative to other racial groups. In the prison system, AAPIs are lumped into the single category, “Other.”³ From the most recent available data, the category “Other” comprises roughly 10 percent of the U.S. federal and state correctional facility population, with Asians making up only 1.5 percent.⁴ While small, the AAPI category is also one of the fastest-growing groups of incarcerated peoples nationwide – between 1990 and 2000, the AAPI prison population exploded by 250 percent while the overall prison population increased by 77 percent (Oh & Umemoto, 2005). This is a staggering statistic, and yet there remains a dearth of information around incarcerated AAPIs. It

¹ Sawyer, W., & Wagner, P. (2020). *Mass Incarceration: The Whole Pie 2020*. Prison Policy Initiative. Retrieved from <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/pie2020.html>

² Travis, Jeremy, Amy L. Solomon, and Michelle Waul. 2001. “From Prison to Home: The Dimensions and Consequences of Prisoner Reentry.” *Washington D.C., Urban Institute*.

³ According to the Bureau of Justice, Asians, Native Hawaiians, Other Pacific Islanders, American Indians, Alaska Natives, and persons of two or more races are reported together under the single category of “Other.”

⁴ Urban Institute: *Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders, a missing minority in criminal justice data* (2017). <https://www.urban.org/urban-wire/asian-americans-and-pacific-islanders-missing-minority-criminal-justice-data>. Federal Bureau of Prisons, 5 December 2020 https://www.bop.gov/about/statistics/statistics_inmate_race.jsp Due to different methods of data collection, estimates of API prisoner population vary.

then goes to follow that there is a virtual lack of studies on AAPIs experiencing reentry, and therefore this type of research is especially significant to a group that is marginalized from the fields of traditional mass incarceration and Asian American and Asian Diaspora studies.

In this paper, I ask, how do formerly incarcerated Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders (AAPIs) experience reentry into their families and communities? Qualitative data was gathered through in-depth interviews with 20 formerly incarcerated AAPIs, most of whom are Southeast Asian refugees or children of refugees. Drawing from carceral and critical refugee studies, I employ the latter’s conceptualization of the *militarized refugee* as (1) a product of the racialized violence of U.S. colonization and war-making in Asia and as a result (2) holds the ability to expose most deeply the conditions and possibility for ongoing forms of militarization (Espiritu 2014). Examining the lived experiences of formerly incarcerated AAPIs through this framework exposes the ways in which the historical legacies of U.S. militarism and transpacific displacement have come to shape and inform their lives and their present circumstances of reentry. Provided this critical examination of the militarized refugee in relation to carcerality, this study finds three key aspects of reentry that demonstrate the ongoing presence of U.S. militarism in participants’ lives: living in limbo, cultural shame, stigma, and silence, and healing as a site of healing and resistance. This pushes us to move beyond the traditional reentry framework in order to rethink the ways in which we can better support formerly incarcerated AAPIs in their reentry.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Reentry into Families and Communities

This study understands reentry as elaborated by Harding, Morenoff, and Wyse: “a process that unfolds over time.... The formerly incarcerated individual builds old relationships and forms new ones, develops new social networks and reactivated old ones, becomes incorporated into key social organizations or political activism” (2019, p.8-9). Scholars have demonstrated how “the well-being of most formerly incarcerated individuals is closely tied to that of the families,” and for those who struggled with maintaining outside relationships while incarcerated, their social ties and network shrunk, resulting in greater challenges in reconnecting with family and friends (Comfort 2008; Harding, et. al., 2019). Among the profusion these studies, far less is known about the experiences of formerly incarcerated AAPIs. Within this racial group, their histories and trajectories span beyond the context of the U.S. and suggest other factors, systems, and processes of racialization at play. For example, different Asian groups enter the U.S. under varying legal classifications (e.g., immigrant, refugee, migrant). A connection with these sociohistorical positions sheds light not only on how they differ culturally but also on how the processes of migration and resettlement have shaped what family and kinship infrastructures formerly incarcerated AAPIs return to.

Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders in the Carceral System

In Angela E. Oh and Karen Umemoto’s 2005 demographic study titled “Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders: From Incarceration to Re-Entry,” Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders were found to be one of the fastest-growing groups of incarcerated peoples, with Native Hawaiians and Southeast Asians having a relatively higher rate of incarceration. During the prison boom of the 1990s, the AAPI prison population in the U.S. exploded by 250 percent,

during which from 1977 to 1997, arrest rates of AAPI youth skyrocketed by 726 percent.⁵ At the time of their sentencing, AAPIs were committed at a younger age than other racial groups — 50 percent of incarcerated AAPIs were 27 years old or younger, compared to African Americans of that age group who were 37.8 percent and whites 28.3 percent (Arifuku, Peacock & Glesmann, 2006).

Furthermore, Oh and Umemoto found that the AAPIs represented in the incarceration data largely derived from immigrant and refugee communities. In California specifically, 64.6 percent of incarcerated AAPIs are immigrants and refugees. Within that, the highest percentages consist of Vietnamese (21.9%), Filipino (19.8%), Pacific Islander (9.9%), and Laotian (8.5%). Additionally, in the 1990 census, Southeast Asians made up only 1.5% of California’s population but in 1991, they made up 4.5% of the California Youth Authority (CYA) wards, many of them having been perpetrators or victims of California’s gang wars (Waters 1999 as cited in Hing 2005). With this presentation of statistical data, only few researchers have made connections to the respective historical contexts. In Arifuku, Peacock and Glesmann’s 2006 report on one of the least known populations – AAPI youth in the CYA, they found significant variations and disparities between the AAPI ethnicities represented in the data. Southeast Asian (Laotian, Thai, Cambodian, and Vietnamese) and Pacific Islander youth were proportionally overrepresented, while Korean, Chinese, Japanese, and Filipino youth were underrepresented. The former were groups that had arrived in significant numbers to the U.S. after the mid-1970s whereas the latter had histories in the U.S. from the nineteenth century, with an additional influx after 1965. Given the disproportionate histories of Southeast Asian refugees, it is necessary to examine their unique

⁵ Asian Americans Advancing Justice, Asian Pacific American Labor Alliance, Asian Prisoner Support Committee, and Southeast Asia Resource Action Center. 2015. *Asian Americans & Pacific Islanders Behind Bars: Exposing the School to Prison to Deportation Pipeline*. National Education Association.

sociopolitical positionalities that not only place them in tension with the law and incarceration but also constitute the conditions and context to which they return to prison from.

Critical Refugee Studies: The Militarized Refugee

This section does not intend to provide a comprehensive history, but rather, to provide a broad overview regarding Southeast Asian refugees’ sociohistorical positions and how it comes to later constitute conditions of reentry. Writing in the context of the Vietnam War, Espiritu astutely asserts that the events of U.S. military, economic, and political intervention in Southeast Asia not only “*precede* the refugee flight” but rather are “the actions that *produce* this very exodus, as well as the Vietnamese subject” (2006, p.423). In turn, she reconceptualizes the refugee as “not an object of rescue, but as a site of social and political critiques, whose emergence when traced, make visible the processes of colonization, war, and displacement.”⁶

For most Asian American groups, their immigration histories are divided into two eras by the year 1965 – when the Hart-Cellar Act was established and abolished the national origins quota system, creating new policies and means of immigration into the U.S. (Zhou, Ocampo & Gatewood, 2016). This landmark piece of legislation worked as a catalyst, but it was also a result of macro forces that Asian immigration into the U.S. had accelerated so rapidly. For one, the neoliberal globalization of the U.S. economy in the postindustrial era and the expansion of the labor market demanded more bodies of skilled labor (Byrd, 2016). This facilitated large scale immigration from Asia, notably from India, Korea, Taiwan, and the Philippines (Zhou, Ocampo & Gatewood, 2016). Secondly, during the 1960s, the U.S. was highly embroiled in clandestine military operations across Southeast Asia while also entangled in the revolutionary struggle of

⁶The University of California Humanities Research Institute. *Toward Critical Refugee Studies: Being and Becoming in Exceptional States of War, Violence, and Militarism*. Lan Duong, Yen Le Espiritu

the Civil Rights Movement at home. Scholars have written extensively on the wars in Southeast Asia from 1955 to 1975 – the Vietnam War, the Secret War in Laos, and the Cambodian genocide under the Khmer Rouge regime. Failed U.S. military intervention in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia had resulted in the death and forced expulsion of millions from their homelands (Bankston and Hidalgo 2016). Since 1975, more than 1.5 million Southeast Asian refugees have resettled in the U.S. making them the largest refugee community ever to be resettled in the country.⁷

In response to the large-scale refugee movement, the U.S. implemented the 1980 Refugee Act, but its resettlement efforts failed as it essentially had caused long-lasting detriment for refugee families. Xiong (2016) details how governmental policy of dispersing refugees severed family and kinship networks and further exacerbated existing trauma sustained from the war and their perilous journeys to the U.S. With the neoliberal emphasis on small government during the 1980s and 1990s, federal welfare programs were being cut back (Byrd, 2016). These programs were ill-equipped to handle the influx of refugees seeking public assistance, and as a result, many Southeast Asian refugees were left with little to no social safety net. From fleeing the wars in their homelands, Southeast Asian refugees landed in the U.S. to face another kind of war – the War on Drugs. Contemporaneous with their resettlement, the War on Drugs was a federally funded program declared in 1982 that decreed a paramilitary response on poor communities of color (Gamal, 2016). This era witnessed the historical shift in the militarization of the police and the emergence of mass incarceration (Gamal, 2016; Parenti, 1999). Having been relocated into the urban communities of color targeted by the state, refugees were subjected to hyper-surveillance and criminalization.

⁷ Office of Refugee Resettlement, Report to Congress on the Refugee Resettlement Program (2008)

In summary, Southeast Asian refugees had arrived in the U.S. amidst a changing national and global landscape characterized by neoliberal globalization and the emergence of mass incarceration. The context of reception for refugees is undergirded by the refugee flight produced by U.S. militarism in Southeast Asia (Rumbaut and Portes, 2006). Upon resettlement, they were relocated into impoverished and heavily policed neighborhoods with virtually no social security net. In this light, refugees are not “voluntary immigrants... but displaced victims of war” (Kwon 2018:424) who are “processed by layers of government policies and programs designed to both assist and control them” (Espiritu 2020:197). War-making abroad and neoliberal economic restructuring have rendered populations displaced. In turn, they are deemed disposable and in need to management by the state (Byrd 2016).

My research aims to further this understanding by looking at the reentry experiences of formerly incarcerated AAPIs and approaching them as refugees or children of refugees. I adopt Yén Lê Espiritu’s concept of the “militarized refugee” as (1) a product of the racialized violence of U.S. colonization and war-making in Asia and as a result, (2) holds the ability to expose most deeply the “conditions of possibility for ongoing forms of militarization” (2014, p.23). In this sense, the militarized refugee holds the ability to expose the interrelated systems of the military industrial complex and the carceral state, and how that relationship perpetuates the presence of U.S. militarism in their lives.

METHODOLOGY

The research data for my project is composed of 20 in-depth interviews collected in a span of 11 months from March 2020 to January 2021. The participants must have been at least 18 years of age, be formerly incarcerated, identify as Asian American or Pacific Islander, and

currently reside in California. I gained access to my respondents via my internship work with the Asian Prisoner Support Committee (APSC), an organization located in downtown Oakland that provides direct support to incarcerated and formerly incarcerated AAPIs. To recruit participants, I used the snowball method which entailed providing recruitment materials that included a brief description of my study and contact information to APSC’s reentry coordinators, who then passed it along to their friends or clients who would contact me if interested. Each interview lasted between 60 to 80 minutes and was conducted remotely over the phone or the video platform Zoom. Each participant received compensation for being interviewed. Interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim afterward. I coded each interview using MAXQDA qualitative software and used grounded theory to develop themes and theories from individuals’ experiences and knowledge (Charmaz, 2006). I approached my research from a feminist standpoint theory, which rests on the premise that knowledge is socially situated and “research, particularly that focused on power relations, should begin with the lives of the marginalized” (Hill Collins, 1990). This is of special importance to me given my role of a researcher who is not formerly incarcerated or system impacted.⁸

At the time of the interviews, participants ranged in age from 28 to 52 years old, with most participants in their late-thirties and mid-to-late-forties. 18 participants identified as men and two as women. Given that experiences in the reentry process can change over the course of months and years, the length of time between their date of release and the day of their interview varied; the earliest year of release among the 20 participants was 2001 and the latest release date

⁸ Research in the university can be wielded as a tool against those being “studied,” particularly Black, Indigenous and people of color. The terminology we use is also important when discussing these individual/group identities and experiences. When we center marginalized groups’ ability to exercise control and autonomy over their own narratives, it leads to a more holistic and nuanced understanding of the issue at hand and also challenges the idea of who can and cannot be knowledge producers.

was in July of 2020. The largest ethnic population interviewed was Southeast Asian (six Vietnamese, five Cambodian, one Laotian, and one Hmong), followed by East Asians (three Chinese, one Korean, and one Japanese and Thai) and 2 Samoans. 15 out of 20 participants were juvenile “lifers,” meaning they were under the age of 18 or 23 when sentenced to a life term in prison. My sample population also captures a specific group of 1.5 and 2nd generation Southeast Asians who are refugees or children of refugees and had come of age in California during a proliferation of “tough on crime” policies and an unprecedented prison boom that had resulted in the mass incarceration of youth of color. To maintain confidentiality, all participants’ names have been replaced with pseudonyms. This research study was also approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB).

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

Living in Limbo: “Even though I’m free, I’m also caged”

On a Wednesday evening, Kevin and I sat in the small office of the Asian Prisoner Support Committee (APSC) building. Spread out in front of us on a round, gray table was a small pot of leftover bún bò Huế broth Kevin’s fiancé had made, along with a plastic bag of thick vermicelli noodles, tender slices of beef and pork, and fresh herbs. The aroma from the broth filled the air as we each fixed ourselves a bowl. A boisterous 43-year-old Chinese Vietnamese man, Kevin chuckled as he recalled how his first meal after his brother picked him up from the prison gates was the blandest bowl of phở he’s ever had. As we ate and talked, I learned that Kevin’s family had fled Vietnam in 1982 by boat and was stranded in the South China Sea for six months before being rescued by fishermen. He was four years old when his family was resettled in San Francisco, California. The eldest of six children, he started running the streets at

the age of seven, and when he was 17, he was convicted on a gang-related charge and sentenced to 27 years to life in prison. After serving 23 years, he was granted parole in 2015 but on the day of his release, he was directly transferred into the custody of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). Fortunately, his deportation was barred due to a 2008 U.S.-Vietnam Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) that limits the removal of Vietnamese individuals who immigrated to the U.S. before 1995. However, Kevin remains under a removal order to this day, as the agreement could change anytime as did in the case with the government of Laos. Kevin’s deportation, like many others, is a significant barrier to the full reintegration into their families and communities. Orders of removal force them to live within a liminal space – since final orders of deportation don’t mean immediate removal from the country, they live day-to-day unsure of if and when they would be deported. Those with orders of removal are required to routinely check in with ICE as required by immigration law.

Interviewees shared their difficulty with living in this liminal space, which was intensified by the fear of being detained and deported by ICE. This is illuminated by Peter, a Cambodian man who was born in a Thai refugee camp and eventually entered the U.S. at age four with permanent resident status. He was incarcerated at age 14 and upon his release from the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) in 2016, he was immediately detained for another year and half. In 2018 at age 36, he was finally released to his family, but the joy was stifled by his order of removal:

“I’m always in constant fear. I can be separated from family again after many years. That’s a reality I’m constantly aware of. This stuff makes it very difficult not just to do my job but I’m constantly aware that even though I’m free, I’m also caged. I’m limited. *I’m stuck in this limbo.*”

Even when free from the confinement of prison, formerly incarcerated refugees are forced to live in a state of liminality that makes it difficult for them to move forward with life. The continued state surveillance and supervision they are subjected to make persistently clear their precarious position in the U.S.

Living in limbo includes living with the worry of family separation. The emotional toll of family separation is experienced not just by the individual but also it ripples out to the family. Given the atrocities experienced during the Khmer Rouge regime in Cambodia, it comes as no surprise that survivors of one of the gravest genocides are fearful of having their children forcibly returned to the same grounds. From producing the very conditions of their displacement and incarceration, the U.S. places refugee families, 40 years later, back into harm’s way by facilitating another forced relocation. As participants have illuminated, the fear of deportation – and ICE as its mechanism – plays in the active part of the continued legacy of U.S. militarism in their lives. In this lens, ICE emerges in the carceral age as an extension of U.S. militarism that seeks to govern and control the displaced refugee body long after the wars. From being constructed as the passive recipients of U.S. relief during their resettlement, militarized refugees are now racialized within the U.S. empire as criminal immigrant bodies that must be placed under a form of state supervision.

Cultural Shame, Stigma, and Silence: “*with empty hands*”

Shame and stigma are universally felt across all cultures, but participants illustrated a unique cultural dimension shaping the shame and stigma they faced as formerly incarcerated Asian Americans. As many scholars have conveyed, traditional Asian cultures place great value and emphasis on the family as a unit (Weil and Lee 2004; Um 2015; Yang, Sungeun &

Rosenblatt 2001). Within this collectivist framework, the dynamics of shame are felt not only at the individual level but also at the level of the family. One’s incarceration is often harshly directed onto the immediate and relative families of the individual. For some, reconnecting with family members upon release was not exactly a joyous moment for some as the stigma of criminality lingered.

To demonstrate how shame and stigma are intensified by the profound loss and trauma transpacific displacement produces, Leo offers his thoughts on the prospect of being deported back to Vietnam. Leo had left Vietnam in 1979 with this younger brother when they were 12 and 10 years of age respectively. From a refugee camp in Hong Kong, he was able to be sponsored to the U.S, where at the age of 23 he became incarcerated for 29 years. In December of 2019, Leo was released on parole at age 52. Whereas most people wanted to reestablish family contact once released, Leo’s sense of shame made it so he preferred to avoid contact rather than burden his family with this incarceration. He expressed with a sense of deep concern:

“I came over here to build my life. I thought I would get a good, high education so one day I can go back to my own homeland and visit my family, my neighborhood. So I can show them what I’d become. But now, 40 years away, I been a gang member. I been a criminal. So I’m a bad person. So if they deport me back with empty hands, I’d feel ashamed. So it bother me a lot.... The people, they see this guy been away 40 years. He got nothing. He a shame to his own family.”

Leo speaks to the cultural dislocation he feels in both his homeland in Vietnam and the U.S., where he was spent the majority of his life in prison. Perhaps this is what most distinguishes formerly incarcerated AAPI’s sense of shame and stigma from what’s experienced

by other racial groups. A central characteristic of the militarized refugee is the process of navigating the emotional and material repercussions of transpacific displacement. In the case they are deported to Vietnam, the adjustment and transition back into a society and country they have never stepped foot in, and where deportees are relegated to a lower social and economic class, is an insurmountable challenge.

Silence and Saving Face

When John found out his mother had told her family that he was working for a newspaper company in San Francisco, John responded with disbelief and disappointment. “I’m like, really? You know, inside prison, we’re learning. We learn to be more honest and truthful about ourselves. So I’m like, why are you lying about me?” Feeling that associations with incarceration would taint the family name and honor, parents often lied to conceal their children’s incarceration, typically telling relatives and friends that their son was away in school or in the military. Incarceration remains a taboo topic within Asian American families and communities. The concealment of their children’s incarceration was a strategy of “saving face,” a common practice in Asian culture in which one maintains reputation and dignity by hiding or avoiding humiliating or shameful situations (Chung, 2016). While it was a “coping strategy” (Alexander, 2004) for parents to mitigate stigma and uphold family integrity, participants felt it to be especially diminishing to them. This confirms Braman’s argument of the “repression of self” as a social effect of incarceration; formerly incarcerated individuals are forced to hide or suppress what was a profound and powerful experience for them (2004). Like John’s response indicated, his years incarcerated were formative years in which he developed friendships and bonds with people he now called family and where he built a support system that assisted him in this reentry process. This strategy of concealment not only reproduces shame and stigma but further

perpetuates the culture of silence within Asian American families. In many ways, the culture of silence occurring on an interpersonal level within intimate familial relationships replicates larger systemic silences around U.S. imperialism and militarism in Asia

Knowledge as a Site of Healing and Resistance: “*I’ve always wanted to know my own history*”

Intergenerational Trauma

A key feature of the lives of the militarized refugee is intergenerational trauma, which defined as the process of trauma going unaddressed in previous generations and as a result is passed on through the next generations within the family.⁹ It reveals how war has disrupted the fabric of families in fundamental and irrevocable ways, but more so, it reveals how the events of U.S. militarism in Asia continue to haunt refugees long after the war. As demonstrated in Kevin’s reflection:

“By them not dealing with their own trauma, they passed it onto me. My mom didn’t know how to deal with losing her parents on the escape. Her parents were murdered by pirates and she never talked about it, and I think that ate her up. I think the way she dealt with it was by being absent. Not just physically but emotionally. She wasn’t there. So what I did was started doing the same thing.... I learned it. You don’t share your feelings. You don’t talk about it.”

⁹ Nkauj Iab Yang and Quyen Dinh. n.d. “Intergenerational Trauma and Southeast Asian American Youth in California.” *RISE for Boys and Men of Color*.

Kevin’s relationship with his mother, characterized by an implicit silence about the Vietnam War and the post-traumatic stress sustained from it, is far from unique. Kevin articulated the physical, psychological, and emotional ways in which war and forced displacement have shaped and constrained family relationships growing up and leading to their incarceration; that the war was still very much omnipresent in their lives. Prior research suggests that difficult relationships with family members before prison were often sources of stress upon release (Harding, et al., 2019). However, in conversations about intergenerational trauma, participants expressed how coming to understand these sites of tension and the weight of their family history had strengthened their bond and relationship with their family.

“Know history, know self.”

Participants were critical of prisons as sites of punishment and retribution, but many acknowledged their incarceration as a turning point in which they had an opportunity to sober up, reflect, and mature accordingly. For example, Sam said,

“But since I been in prison and developed a better understanding of my wrongs and my behavior, and the negative effects and the people it affected, it humbled me to do better now, to develop, to rebuild, reconnect with my family. So now, I can say that our relationship is more healthier because we check up on each other.”

Over the twenty years of his incarceration, Sam, like many other lifers, took advantage of the educational, rehabilitative, and vocational prison programs. In addition to these programs that helped them develop relationship-building and communication skills, it was also age and maturity that encouraged them to reconnect and reconcile. Most were incarcerated during their

teenage years, and many attested to how their thinking changed dramatically as they’ve spent such formative years in prison.

Of all the prison programs participants took part in, culturally relevant programs, such as APSC’s ROOTS (Restoring Our Original True Selves) or Native Hawaiian spiritual groups, were the most impactful. The ethnic studies-based curriculum allowed for the space to reflect, process, and navigate their family histories and trauma. By being in community with other AAPI incarcerated people, they were able to situate their lived experiences within the larger history of mass incarceration and the wars in Southeast Asia. Programs such as ROOTS gave them the vocabulary to fill in their existing gaps of knowledge. This labor of self-reflection and education was as much an individual initiative as it was collective. This can be seen through Ben, who recounted,

“They locked me up for 5 years and I sat there. I was like, I’ve always wanted to know my own history, my country. I wanted to know why my father died, why half my family died.... When I got out of the SHU, I continued to read about history... Cambodia’s, Thai’s, Vietnamese, China’s history, and then I put together what happened.... The emotional history is what I’ve learned of myself... the emotion I felt that I didn’t know throughout my life and my grandparents’ life.”

Education is a critical tool of healing that allowed for participants to make sense of and come to terms with forty years of war in Asia and the ways in which it has shaped familial relationships. More significantly was their ability and strategies of cultivating forms of advocacy and resistance within the confines of a place that is not meant for culture or community to be reproduced. The active pursuit of family history and their development of a political analysis for

their conditions not only mended family relationships but also cultivated community relationships that would serve crucial to their reentry. Upon their release, this labor of self-reflection and education carried over to the family sphere where participants strived to heal and mend relationships with family members. Their time spent in community with other incarcerated folks provided them with the tools to confront difficult relationships within their families and work towards breaking the cycle of intergenerational trauma. For Ben, his release allowed him to aspire to a new social role, that of a responsible father, especially for his youngest son: “My son, he hides [resentment] pretty good.... We speak but I’m blessed that I could understand myself so I can hear him out without reacting to it.... That’s the number one thing I try to stop in passing to my kids, my niece and nephews. When I speak, I try to speak with awareness.” By demonstrating renewed investment and commitment to these familial relationships, participants are strengthening their own resolve to grow personally while breaking cycles of intergenerational trauma.

Coming Home and Re-defining Family

For many being released, family was not always easily accessible – physically and/or emotionally. 17 out of 20 participants did not return to the homes or neighborhoods they grew up or lived in prior to prison. There are several reasons as to why: family members were not receptive of the formerly incarcerated individual given their association with criminality; communication with family members ceased when the individual was incarcerated; family resided in their home countries in Asia; and lastly, the restriction of staying within a 50-mile parameter imposed by parole made it difficult for the formerly incarcerated individual to visit family who lived in other counties. This was the case for Tan, who was released on parole after

having been incarcerated for 26 years at age 42. Recalling his initial feelings around his release, he expressed,

“Coming home was scarier than [prison]. When I found out I couldn’t go home to my family because they lived in counties that I couldn’t return to, that was a whole fear in itself. It really stressed me out because where can I go that I’m going to have someone help me because I have to learn everything. I have to learn how to pay my bills... build credit... I’ve never done it.”

Without strong or accessible familial ties, many relied on their networks they had built in prison to help build a new life in the outside world. They understood there were matters specific to their refugee status and were able to give and receive support accordingly. They assisted each other in obtaining papers of citizenship that were lost in the process of resettlement so that they could apply for employment, a driver’s license, and such. They turned to each other to figure out how to apply for a pardon from the governor to eliminate their grounds for deportation.

Participating in local community organizations allowed for them to build new social networks, through which many were able to find jobs simply through word of mouth. More than that, these spaces and networks were where participants felt a sense of belonging. John said, “Yeah, this is where I chose to be... And really, they’re more like my family.” Similarly, David recalled how he felt a sense of “instant comradery” being with other formerly incarcerated AAPIs. For David, who was released in Fullerton, CA, there weren’t any reentry programs where he saw a lot of AAPIs. He recalled how his friend didn’t feel comfortable being the only Asian with an accent in the room. Tan, who now works at a local Asian American community organization, described it as a “larger family” and his work as fulfilling. Many became took on employment roles in local community organizations, such as Peter, who saw reentry work as a

way to “break the cycle of harm. I think that’s where it starts, with me and it manifesting outward to everyone else.” These stories of knowledge and education as sites of resistance help us consider that for these individuals, incarceration and reentry are about more than crime and punishment – it is about being a militarized refugee. It is about understanding and navigating the ongoing effects of U.S. militarization in their present lives. When speaking about healing from deeper traumas, participants echoed the importance of community as a form of survival and protection, as well as a form of radical care and solidarity.

CONCLUSION

This research sought to understand how formerly incarcerated Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders (AAPIs) experience reentry into their family and community. Drawing upon carceral and critical refugee studies, I posited that to understand reentry for AAPIs necessitates a critical examination of the sociohistorical contexts that have shaped and informed their circumstances of incarceration and reentry. Therefore, I evoked the concept of the *militarized refugee* to understand participants as (1) a product of the racialized violence of U.S. colonization and war-making in Asia and as a result (2) holds the ability to expose most deeply the conditions and possibility for ongoing forms of militarization (Espiritu 2014). In this frame, the ongoing presence of U.S. militarism becomes undeniably present in all participants’ lives, particularly in their experiences of living in limbo, cultural shame, stigma, and silence, and healing. The threat of deportation makes visible the different avenues of discipline and punishment as ICE works as an extension of U.S. militarism. The emotional sites of shame, stigma, and silence are often imbued with grief and personal loss as a direct result of war and forced transpacific displacement. The culture of silence perpetuated on the interpersonal level is also reflective of

the militarized relationships particularly built on the national erasure and repression of Western imperialism and the trauma inflicted on Southeast Asia. Given the deliberately crafted silences on micro-and macro-levels, participants’ development of a political consciousness in their position as militarized refugees acts as a disruption and defiance of such silence. In seeking to understand their lives as militarized refugees, it facilitated personal healing and growth. Formerly incarcerated AAPIs as militarized refugees, as emphasized throughout this study, asserts that deeper histories and traumas require deeper structures of healing. It becomes clear then that we must move beyond traditional frameworks of reentry as it isn’t sufficient in supporting this population.

I forward two main community recommendations. The first is to adopt an ethnic studies curriculum into prison reentry programs. The strategy of community building across cultural lines lies in its effective promotion and empowerment of their political consciousness as members of a historically oppressed group subject to the carceral gaze. Participants of ROOTS as mentioned above have shown how its programming brought greater cohesion to the AAPI community inside and out of prison. It allowed for the room and opportunity to re-engage with their history and unearth the deeper traumas that have shaped their and their families’ lives. Secondly, as participants have expressed how they feel a sense of belonging with other formerly incarcerated AAPIs, community reentry programs can consider carving out more of these sustained spaces of support that cater specifically to the cultural and linguistic needs of AAPIs. In addition of the emotional support of personal healing, formerly incarcerated AAPIs who are also deportees require the material support to eliminate their grounds for deportation and the possibilities of having to experience family separation and displacement once again.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Alexander, M., & West, C. (2012). *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (Revised edition). New Press.
- Arifuku, I., Peacock, D., & Glesmann, C. (2006). Profiling Incarcerated Asian and Pacific Islander Youth: Statistics Derived from California Youth Authority Administrative Data. *AAPI Nexus Journal: Policy, Practice, and Community*, 4(2), 95–110. https://doi.org/10.36650/nexus4.2_95-110_ArifukuEtAl
- Braman, D. (2004). *Doing Time on the Outside: Incarceration and Family Life in Urban America*. University of Michigan Press. <https://doi.org/10.3998/mpub.17629>
- Byrd, R. M. (2016). “Punishment’s Twin”: Theorizing Prisoner Reentry for a Politics of Abolition. *Social Justice*, 43(1), 1–22.
- Christopher Wildeman & Bruce Western. (2010). Incarceration in Fragile Families. *The Future of Children*, 20(2), 157–177. <https://doi.org/10.1353/foc.2010.0006>
- De Giorgi, A. (2017). Back to Nothing: Prisoner Reentry and Neoliberal Neglect. *Social Justice*, 44(1), 83–120.
- Espiritu, Y. L. (2006). Toward a Critical Refugee Study: The Vietnamese Refugee Subject in US Scholarship. *Journal of Vietnamese Studies*, 1(1–2), 410–433. <https://doi.org/10.1525/vs.2006.1.1-2.410>
- Espiritu, Y. L. (2006). Toward a Critical Refugee Study: The Vietnamese Refugee Subject in US Scholarship. *Journal of Vietnamese Studies*, 1(1–2), 410–433. <https://doi.org/10.1525/vs.2006.1.1-2.410>

Espiritu, Y. L. (2014). *Body counts: The Vietnam War and militarized refuge(es)*. University of California Press.

Franklin, T. W., & Fearn, N. E. (2015). Sentencing Asian Offenders in State Courts: The Influence of a Prevalent Stereotype. *Crime & Delinquency*, 61(1), 96–120.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/0011128710386200>

Gamal, F. (2016). The Racial Politics of Protection: A Critical Race Examination of Police Militarization. *California Law Review*, 104(4), 979–1008.

Gilmore, R. W. (2007). *Golden gulag: Prisons, surplus, crisis, and opposition in globalizing California*. University of California Press.

Harding, D. J., Morenoff, J. D., & Wyse, J. J. B. (2019). *On the outside: Prisoner reentry and reintegration*. The University of Chicago Press.

Hing, B. O. (1993). *Making and remaking Asian America through immigration policy, 1850-1990*. Stanford University Press.

Hing, B. O. (2005). Deporting Cambodian Refugees: Justice Denied? *Crime & Delinquency*, 51(2), 265–290. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0011128704273468>

Johnson, B. D., & Betsinger, S. (2009). Punishing the “Model Minority:” Asian American Criminal Sentencing Outcomes in Federal District Courts. *American Society of Criminology*, 47(4), 47.

Jolivéte, A. (Ed.). (2015). *Research justice: Methodologies for social change*. Policy Press.

Kato, D. (2017). Carceral State 2.0?: From Enclosure to Control & Punishment to Surveillance. *New Political Science*, 39(2), 198–217. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07393148.2017.1301312>

Kim, C. J. (1999). The Racial Triangulation of Asian Americans. *Politics & Society*, 27(1), 105–138. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0032329299027001005>

- KWON, S. A. (2018). Deporting Cambodian Refugees: In C. McGranahan & J. F. Collins (Eds.), *Ethnographies of U.S. Empire* (pp. 411–430). Duke University Press; JSTOR.
<http://www.jstor.org.libproxy.berkeley.edu/stable/j.ctv120qtmn.24>
- Lee, R. E. (Ed.). (2012). *The longue durée and World-Systems analysis*. State University of New York Press.
- Martin, L. (2018). "Free but Still Walking the Yard": Prisonization and the Problems of Reentry. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 47(5), 671–694.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0891241617737814>
- Michael Cerda-Jara, Steven Czifra, Abel Galindo, Joshua Mason, Christina Ricks, Azadeh Zohrabi, Language Guide for Communicating About Those Involved In The Carceral System. Berkeley, CA: Underground Scholars Initiative, UC Berkeley, 2019.
- Nkauj Iab Yang & Quyen Dinh. (n.d.). Intergenerational Trauma and Southeast Asian American Youth in California. *RISE for Boys and Men of Color*.
- Nopper, T. (2014). Asian Americans, Deviance, Crime, and the Model Minority Myth. In *Color behind bars* (Vol. 1, pp. 207–243). Santa Barbara, California: Praeger.
- Oh, A. E., & Umemoto, K. (2005). Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders: From Incarceration to Re-Entry. *Amerasia Journal*, 31(3), 43–60. <https://doi.org/10.17953/amer.31.3.g01428017553275j>
- Parenti, C. (2001). *Lockdown America: Police and prisons in the age of crisis*. Verso.
- Portes, A., & Rumbaut, R. G. (2014). *Immigrant America: A portrait* (Fourth edition, revised, updated, and expanded). University of California Press.
- Weil, J. M., & Lee, H. H. (2004). Cultural Considerations in Understanding Family Violence among Asian American Pacific Islander Families. *Journal of Community Health Nursing*, 21(4), 217–227. JSTOR.

Western, B., & Muller, C. (2013). Mass Incarceration, Macrosociology, and the Poor. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 647(1), 166–189.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716213475421>

YANG, S., & ROSENBLATT, P. C. (2001). Shame in Korean Families. *Journal of Comparative Family Studies*, 32(3), 361–375. JSTOR.

Zhou, M., & Ocampo, A. C. (Eds.). (2016). *Contemporary Asian America: A Multidisciplinary Reader* (Third edition). New York University Press.

Zhou, M., & Bankston III, C. L. (2016). *The Rise of the New Second Generation*. Polity.