

Laotian Daughters

Working toward Community, Belonging, and Environmental Justice



Bindi V. Shah

Laotian Daughters

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*For all the young Laotian women involved in
Asian Youth Advocates from 1997 to 1999—
they demonstrated spirit, perseverance, and commitment
to social justice in the face of adversity*

*And for my children,
Anirudh and Apurva*

*Each has taught me what is important
and what it means to be the new second generation*



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Laotian Daughters



“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 1991,¹ popularized the notion of "environmental racism" and "environmental justice." The Principles of Environmental Justice,² 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).³ 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