

**“So Are You Chinese or Japanese?”: An Oral History Analysis of Asian American
Migration and Regional Racial Formations in Idaho, 1965–2020**

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I. INTRODUCTION

This historical inquiry begins from a place of personal history. I was born in 1999 in Nampa, Idaho, a small town less than an hour's drive away from the state capital of Boise. My parents had migrated from Sichuan, China, first to Montana in 1994 for my father's master's degrees, then to Idaho by the time I was born for careers in Boise's flourishing technology industries. Until moving to the East Coast for college, I had spent almost all of my life in Boise.

Growing up in Idaho, a state that is 90 percent white and 1.4 percent Asian, I had always felt like an anomaly.¹ My feelings of abnormality stemmed, at least in part, from the lack of serious attention to the historical forces that have shaped Idaho's Asian American communities over the past several decades. Almost no academic writing addresses Asian American history in Idaho after 1965, with the exceptions of Janet French's 2002 master's thesis on Indian Americans who settled in Boise between 1975 to 1998 and Kathleen Rubinow Hodges's 2017 article on the development of Boise's Vietnamese American community between 1975 to 2017.² In many ways, the dearth of writing is linked to the shortage of primary source materials available on Asian Americans in Idaho after 1965. For example, the Asian American Comparative Collection at the University of Idaho has an impressive collection of Asian American archival and archaeological materials, but focuses almost exclusively on Chinese and Japanese Americans from the late nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century.³

¹ U.S. Census Bureau, ACS 2019 (5-Year Estimates) (SE), ACS 2019 (5-Year Estimates), prepared by Social Explorer (accessed February 2021).

² Janet French, "The Invisible Immigrants: A History of the South Asian Indian Community in Boise, Idaho," MA Thesis (Boise State University, 2002); Kathleen Rubinow Hodges, "Across the Pacific," *Investigate Boise Community Research Series* 8 (2017): 26-45.

³ Asian American Comparative Collection, "Asian American Comparative Collection," accessed March 19, 2021, <https://webpages.uidaho.edu/aacc/index.htm>.

In response to a clear archival need, I designed a 19-person oral history project over the summer of 2020 to help fill the gaps in the historical record and challenge the seeming “randomness” of Asian Americans in Idaho. I conducted 17 virtual interviews with Asian Americans who had previously lived or continued to live in Idaho, with each interview totaling between two to three hours in length. All but one of the participants traced their roots in the U.S. to the time period following 1965. To seek out interviewees, I reached out to a mix of personal contacts, Asian businesses, student groups, and LGBTQ+ organizations across Idaho. The interviewees, whom I refer to as “narrators” as per the Oral History Association’s terminology, span a wide range of ethnicities, including Chinese, Filipinx, Indian, Javanese, Khmer, Korean, Lao, Taiwanese, and Vietnamese.⁴ There were slightly more female than male participants, and three of my narrators identified as queer. Most of the narrators were under 25 years of age, although several older adults participated as well. While the vast majority of my narrators came from the greater Boise area, two were from Idaho Falls, Twin Falls, and Rexburg. Additionally, two narrators from Boise had spent time in other parts of the state, namely Moscow and Pocatello. The interview recordings and transcripts will be stored at the Asian American Comparative Collection at the University of Idaho, where they will be freely available to the public.

⁴ Oral History Association, “Best Practices,” accessed March 27, 2021, <https://www.oralhistory.org/best-practices/>.

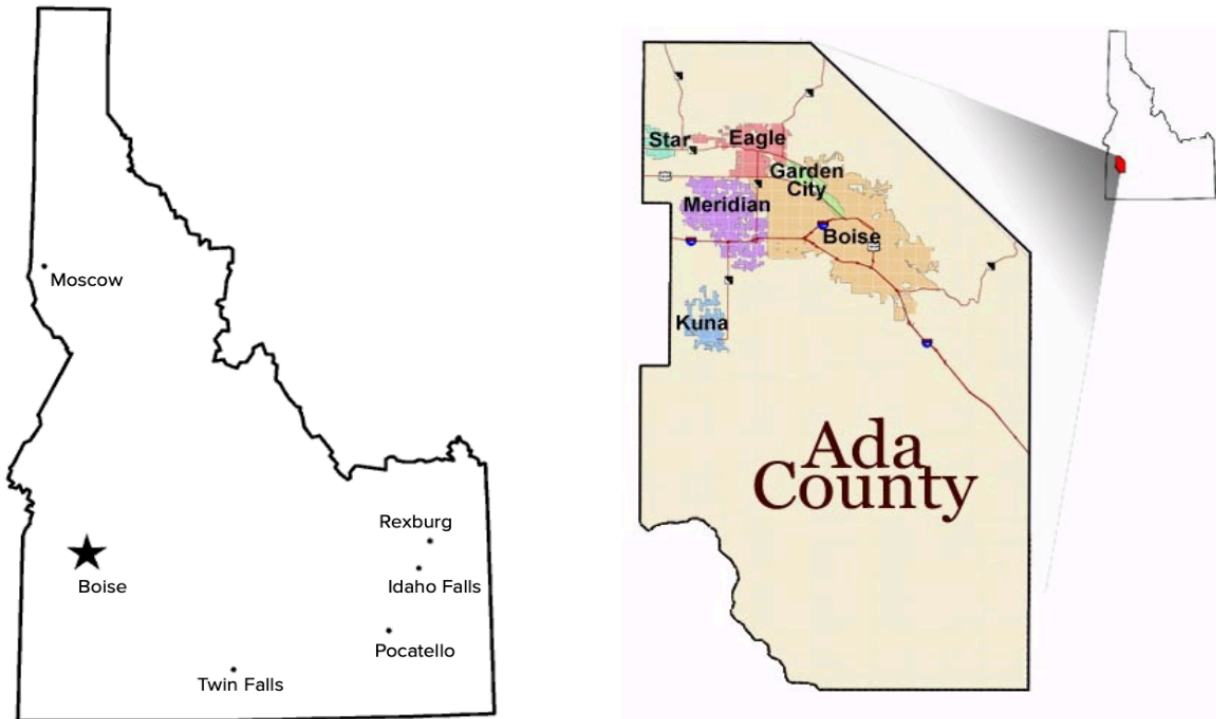


Figure 1. Map of Idaho (left) and map of Ada County (right), detailing where narrators have lived. Most narrators lived in Ada County and the greater Boise area, particularly in Boise proper, Eagle, and Meridian. Map of Idaho created by author. Map of Ada County from “About Ada County,” *Ada County*, <https://adacounty.id.gov/about-ada-county/>.

While this relatively small group of narrators is far from comprehensive, some striking themes from their interviews emerged, specifically around issues of migration and regional racial formations from the 1970s through the 2010s. The combination of national and local forces after 1965 resulted in unprecedented Asian American migration to Idaho, in terms of sheer numbers, ethnic diversity, and migration channels. For most of Idaho’s history, the Asian American population of mostly Japanese and Chinese Americans remained below 3,000 people. However, the Asian American population swelled to approximately 6,000 by 1980 and 12,000 by 2000. By 2019, the American Community Survey (ACS) counted over 24,000 Asian Americans, comprising

at least 20 different ethnicities.⁵ Lending a personal perspective to these broad historical trends, my narrators recounted the varied modes of migration and historical forces that have characterized the post-1965 era.

Year	Total Population	Asian / Pacific Islander (* = Asian Alone)	Native American	Black	White (* = not of Hispanic origin)	Hispanic origin (of any race)	Other Race
2019	1,717,750	24,287*	23,136	11,918	1,407,883	215,476	59,676
2010	1,567,582	19,069*	21,441	9,810	1,316,243*	175,901	79,523
2000	1,293,953	11,889*	17,645	5,456	1,192,263	101,690	54,742
1990	1,006,749	8,492*	13,780	3,370	928,661*	52,927	29,783
1980	943,935	5,948	10,521	2,716	901,641*	36,615	23,109
1970	712,567	3,212	6,687	2,130	698,802	-	1,736
1960	667,191	2,758	5,231	1,502	657,383	-	317
1950	588,637	2,304	3,800	1,050	581,395	-	88
1940	524,873	1,449	1,449	595	516,573*	2,719	-
1930	445,032	1,886	3,638	668	438,840	-	-
1920	431,866	2,180	3,098	920	425,668	-	-
1910	325,594	2,234	3,488	651	319,221	-	-
1900	161,772	2,758	4,226	293	154,495	-	-
1890	88,548	2,007	4,223	201	82,117	-	-
1880	32,610	3,379	165	53	29,013	-	-
1870	14,999	4,274	60	47	10,618	-	-

Figure 2. Racial demographics in Idaho, 1870-2019. Data from Gibson and Jung, 2002; U.S. Census Bureau, Census 1990, Census 2000, Census 2010, ACS 2019 [5-Year Estimates] [SE], ACS 2019 [5-Year Estimates], prepared by Social Explorer.

In the 2013 book *The Changs Next Door to the Diazes: Remapping Race in Southern California*, social scientist Wendy Cheng theorizes the concept of “regional racial formations.”

Says Cheng:

I define regional racial formation broadly as place-specific processes of racial formation, in which locally accepted racial orders and hierarchies complicate and sometimes challenge hegemonic ideologies and facile notions of race. While [Michael] Omi and [Howard] Winant considered racial formation in terms of large-scale, national social processes and

⁵ Campbell Gibson and Kay Jung, “Historical Census Statistics on Population Totals by Race, 1790 to 1990, and by Hispanic Origin, 1970 to 1990, for the United States, Regions, Divisions, and States,” *U.S. Census Bureau*, September 2002; U.S. Census Bureau, Census 1980; U.S. Census Bureau, Census 2000; U.S. Census Bureau, ACS 2019.

movements, regional racial formation is concerned instead with the ways in which these are situated in smaller-scale contexts (neighborhoods, localities, regions), important to the production of these scales themselves and intertwined with complex geographies of race. How and where do racial projects and moments of racial formation take place, and what do these have to do with regionally specific identities?⁶

Cheng chronicles regional racial formations in late twentieth and early twenty-first century southern California, especially as they related to Asian Americans and Mexican Americans in the San Gabriel Valley (SGV). Cheng concentrates on the contradictory “everyday processes” of racial formation as constituted through both national and local forces, including unequal housing access in the SGV, discourses of “color-blindness” unfurling across majority-Asian and Latinx high schools and Boy Scout troops, and Asian and Latinx contestations with the state government over space and gentrification.⁷

Similar to Cheng’s subjects, my narrators, too, vocalized a particular race-making process in post-1965 Idaho in the greater Boise metropolitan area and in south-central and southeastern Idaho. At times, these racial formations converged with “large-scale, national social processes and movements,” while at other times, they possessed a uniquely local quality, reflecting the “sedimentation” of decades or even centuries of local history that have accumulated over time.⁸ While journalists, scholars, and everyday observers have posited that Asian Americans have ostensibly become “honorary whites” through socioeconomic mobility and social acceptance, my interviews suggested a very different reality of Asian American identity formation in Idaho shaped by racial and socioeconomic power imbalances.⁹ My narrators foregrounded the racially and ethnically splintered sites of employment and education as two particular loci of racial formation

⁶ Wendy Cheng, *Chang's Next Door to the Díazes: Remapping Race in Suburban California* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 9.

⁷ Ibid, 11.

⁸ Ibid, 10-11.

⁹ Mia Tuan, *Forever Foreigners or Honorary Whites? The Asian Ethnic Experience Today* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1998), 30.

that privileged whiteness and excluded Asian Americans, particularly in conjunction with gender, ethnicity, class, and histories of migration. Despite the ever-increasing Asian American and non-white population in Idaho, many narrators described a pervasive sense of white dominance, leading many to resist through forging their own multi-racial and multi-ethnic communities of color, and, in some cases, even leaving the state.

II. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND: Early Asian Americans in Idaho, 1860s–1960s

Asian American history in Idaho, as is the case with many parts of the West, commences with Chinese miners in the mid-nineteenth century. Gold strikes in Idaho began in the 1860s, one decade after the discovery of gold in California. Many Chinese miners flocked to Idaho, and by 1870, Idaho had the highest proportional population of Chinese people out of all states and territories in the U.S.¹⁰ Like elsewhere in the West, anti-Chinese sentiment—ranging from discriminatory taxes on Chinese miners to violent massacres—afflicted Chinese Americans in Idaho. The 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act, which banned the migration of laborers and severely restricted almost all Chinese immigration to the U.S., hastened the decline of Idaho’s Chinese American population.¹¹ Although small Chinese communities remained, most notably in Boise and Lewiston in northern Idaho, brutal anti-Chinese violence continued.¹² Census data as

¹⁰ Laurie Mercier, “Confronting Race and Creating Community: Idaho’s Ethnic History,” in *Idaho’s Place: A New History of the Gem State*, ed. Adam M. Sowards (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press), 169.

¹¹ The Chinese Exclusion Act banned the immigration of all Chinese immigrants for ten years. Merchants, students, teachers, and diplomats were considered exempt from the Act, although they were still subject to harassment by the Bureau of Immigration and vulnerable to arrest. The law was renewed in 1892 through the Geary Act, renewed again in 1902, and then renewed indefinitely in 1904, until its repeal in 1943. Nevertheless, migration from China continued “illegally,” including through the “paper sons” route. From Erika Lee, *At America’s Gates: Chinese Immigration During the Exclusion Era, 1882-1943* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 45-46, 203-204, 240.

¹² Examples of anti-Chinese violence after the Exclusion Act include open threats to Chinese residents in the towns of Hailey, Ketchum, Clarks Fork, and Bonners Ferry; the hanging of five Chinese men in Pierce in 1885; and the massacre and robbing of thirty-four Chinese miners in Snake River Canyon in 1887, with no convictions for the killers. From Mercier, “Confronting Race and Creating Community,” 169, 173-174.

displayed below in Figure 3 documents the steep decline of Idaho's Chinese population after 1882, from the high of 4,274 in 1870 to less than a thousand by 1910.¹³

Following the Chinese Exclusion Act, Japanese laborers increasingly migrated from Hawai'i and Japan to the Pacific Northwest to fill the labor shortages left by Chinese laborers. With the growth of Idaho's agricultural economy and especially its sugar beet industry in the 1900s, employers like the Utah-Idaho Sugar Company recruited first-generation Japanese issei laborers to their farms for seasonal work.¹⁴ Quickly, Japanese Americans became the largest Asian group in Idaho, far outnumbering the few hundred Chinese Americans that had stayed. By the 1920 census, other Asian Americans had settled in Idaho, including seven South Asians, three Filipinos, and 16 Koreans.¹⁵

The racism and xenophobia of the anti-Chinese movement fueled similar backlash against Japanese migrant laborers.¹⁶ In 1907, the U.S. and Japanese governments negotiated the so-called Gentlemen's Agreement, whereby Japan halted Japanese labor migration, so long as the U.S. didn't enact explicitly anti-Japanese policies.¹⁷ Over the next two decades, the U.S. would continue to pass racially exclusionary immigration laws. The Immigration Act of 1917 created the "Asiatic Barred Zone," which prohibited immigration from most parts of Asia, while the 1924 Immigration Act created new immigration quotas that severely limited immigration.¹⁸ The 1924 Immigration Act also forbade immigration for all "aliens ineligible to citizenship"—a euphemism for Asian

¹³ Gibson and Jung, "Historical Census Statistics on Population Totals by Race."

¹⁴ Mercier, "Confronting Race and Creating Community," 179-180.

¹⁵ Academic writing has yet to address early South Asian, Filipinx, and Korean American history in Idaho. Gibson and Jung, "Historical Census Statistics on Population Totals by Race."

¹⁶ Louis Fiset and Gail M. Nomura (eds), "Introduction: Nikkei in the Pacific Northwest," in *Nikkei in the Pacific Northwest: Japanese Americans and Japanese Canadians in the Twentieth Century* (University of Washington Press, 2005), 5.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Mae M. Ngai, "The Architecture of Race in American Immigration Law: A Reexamination of the Immigration Act of 1924," *The Journal of American History* 86, no. 1 (June 1999): 80-81.

migrants, who were barred from naturalized citizenship—“and their descendants,” closing the door on Asian migration.¹⁹ With the Exclusion Act and ensuing restrictive immigration laws, Idaho’s total Asian population would remain low—always hovering around 2,000 people—for the next several decades.

Year	Asian Indian	Chinese	Filipino	Japanese	Korean	Total Asian Population
1870	-	4,274	-	-	-	4,274
1880	-	3,379	-	-	-	3,379
1890	-	2,007	-	-	-	2,007
1900	-	1,467	-	1,291	-	2,758
1910	-	859	-	2,363	12	2,234
1920	7	585	3	1,569	16	2,180
1930	7	335	97	1,421	21	1,886
1940	4	208	24	1,191	20	1,449
1950	-	244	80	1,980	-	2,304
1960	-	311	193	2,254	-	2,758
1970	-	498	206	2,255	133	3,212

Figure 3. Idaho’s Asian American population by ethnicity, 1870-1970. Data from Gibson and Jung, 2002.

Asian Americans had a bifurcated experience of World War II, with acceptance and belonging predicated on national and ethnic identity as well as U.S. wartime alliances. For Chinese Americans, World War II heralded welcome shifts in treatment. Because China and the U.S. were allied against Japan, wartime propaganda celebrated Chinese people and Chinese Americans as what historian Kevin Scott Wong calls “good Asians.”²⁰

The inverse of this treatment, however, manifested in virulent anti-Japanese sentiment, most notably in the incarceration of 120,000 West Coast Japanese Americans, 13,000 of whom were incarcerated at the Minidoka Relocation Center, 130 miles southeast of Boise. In addition, a handful of Japanese Americans built part of what is now U.S. Route 12 at the Kooskia Internment

¹⁹ Ibid, 72.

²⁰ Kevin Scott Wong, *Americans First: Chinese Americans and the Second World War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 74.

Camp in north central Idaho, while Idaho’s preexisting Japanese American population avoided relocation and incarceration as “free zoners,” exempt from the camps.²¹ As with the turn of the twentieth century, agricultural interests across the intermountain West again solicited Japanese Americans for their labor. Minidoka inmates performed the backbreaking harvest of over one-fifth of all sugar beet crops in the intermountain West.²² After the war, most Minidoka inmates left Idaho, although several hundred resettled around Idaho, including in Ada County, where Boise is located.²³

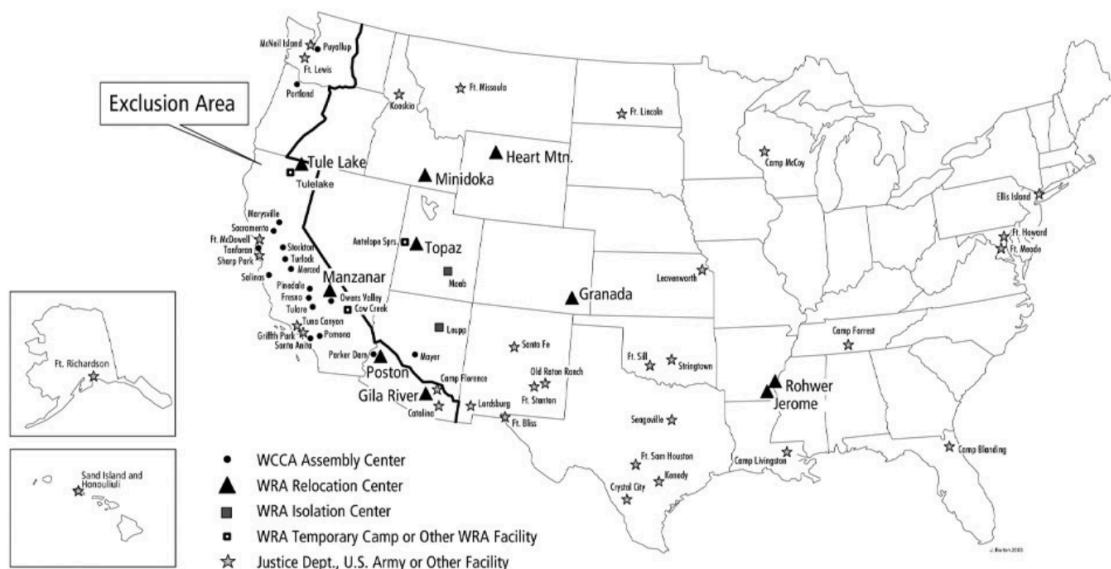


Figure 4. Japanese internment and incarceration sites during World War II. From Roger E. Kelly, “America’s World War II Home Front Heritage,” *National Park Service*, Summer 2004, <https://home1.nps.gov/CRMJournal/summer2004/article1.html>.

²¹ Because Japanese Americans in Idaho lived outside of the military exclusion area that subject Japanese Americans on the West Coast to incarceration, they lived in the “free zone.” (See Figure 4.) From Robert C. Sims, “The ‘Free Zone’ Nikkei: Japanese Americans in Idaho and Eastern Oregon in World War II,” in Fiset and Nomura, *Nikkei in the Pacific Northwest*, 236-237; Priscilla Wegars, *Imprisoned in Paradise: Japanese Internee Road Workers at the World War II Kooskia Internment Camp* (Moscow, ID: Asian American Comparative Collection, University of Idaho, 2010), xx-xxv.

²² Louis Fiset, “Thinning, Topping, and Loading: Japanese Americans and Beet Sugar in World War II,” *The Pacific Northwest Quarterly* 90, no. 3 (1999): 133, 136.

²³ Fiset, “Thinning, Topping, and Loading,” 137; Sims, “The ‘Free Zone’ Nikkei,” 249.

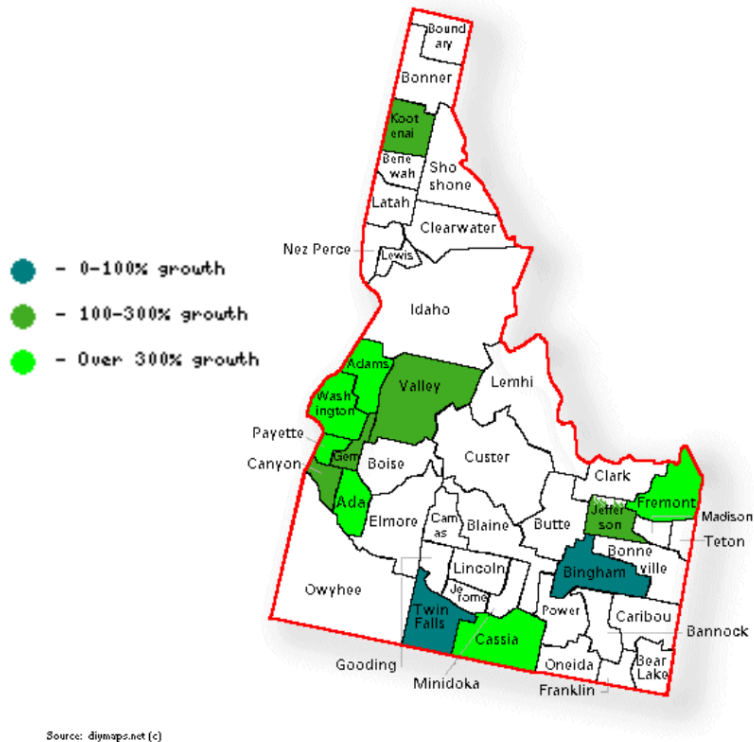


Figure 5. Population growth (%) in Idaho’s Japanese American population by select county, 1940-1950. Only includes counties that grew by more than 10 Japanese Americans. Data from U.S. Census Bureau, 1940 Census, and 1950 Census. Map created by author through diymaps.net.

During and after World War II, the U.S. began liberalizing its immigration and citizenship laws. In 1943, Congress repealed the Chinese Exclusion Act and permitted Chinese naturalization through the Magnuson Act.²⁴ Ten years later, Congress passed the Immigration Act of 1952, which eliminated race as the basis of naturalization. However, both the Magnuson Act and the 1952 Immigration Act left the 1924 Immigration Act’s quotas untouched, maintaining the restrictions on Asian migration.²⁵ In the postwar decades, Idaho’s Asian American communities remained small, although the Japanese American population nearly doubled from 1,191 in 1940 to 1,980 in 1950, largely as the result of wartime relocations.²⁶ Meanwhile, by the end of the war, Boise’s

²⁴ Wong, *Americans First*, 110.

²⁵ Wong, *Americans First*, 122; Jane Hong, “Immigration Act of 1952,” *Densho Encyclopedia*, accessed March 19, 2021, https://encyclopedia.densho.org/Immigration_Act_of_1952/.

²⁶ Gibson and Jung, “Historical Census Statistics on Population Totals by Race.”

modest Chinese community had created home for nearly a century in downtown Boise's Chinatown. However, with the age of urban renewal reaching Boise by the 1960s, the Boise Redevelopment Agency demolished all of Chinatown, despite the resistance of its last resident Billy Fong.²⁷ While city developers destroyed many of the physical markers of Idaho's Asian American community, the passage of the 1965 immigration Act and U.S. military interventionism throughout the Cold War reopened migration from Asia, ushering in new changes for Idaho's Asian American communities.

III. ASIAN AMERICAN MIGRATION TO IDAHO, 1970s–2000s

Out of my 19 narrators and their families, the earliest date of arrival to Idaho was between 1979 and 1980, although some narrators migrated to the U.S. as early as 1969.²⁸ Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, U.S. militarism and chain migration, in tandem with new immigration laws, drove widespread Southeast Asian refugee migration to Idaho and the rest of the country. From the 1990s to the early 2000s, technological growth, transnational adoption, and religious influence, alongside continuing chain migration and impacts from U.S. militarism, further spurred Asian migration to Idaho. The legacies of these historical forces continue through the present moment, resulting in an ever-growing and ever-diversifying Asian American population in Idaho.

²⁷ Ann Felton, "Second Chinatown: It's Rise and Fall," *Boise State University Center for Idaho History and Politics*, accessed November 29, 2020, <https://www.boisestate.edu/sps-cihp/second-chinatown/>.

²⁸ Trinh's family—specifically their parents and grandparents—were the first family to arrive to Idaho out of all my narrators. Trinh was unsure of the exact year of arrival; the estimates of the years 1979 to 1980 reflect Trinh's father's birth year (1979) and Trinh's father's stated age of migration (one year old). Arun Gupta immigrated from India to Kansas in 1969 as a student. Manny Jimenez immigrated from the Philippines to Hawai'i the same year, also as a student. See appendix for more details on each narrator cited in this essay, including on the use of Trinh's surname as the name used in this essay. From Erica Anne Trinh, "The Reminiscences of Erica Anne Trinh," interview by Kathy Min on July 1, 2020, over Zoom (Moscow, ID: Asian American Comparative Collection, 2020), 2; Arun K. Gupta, "The Reminiscences of Arun K. Gupta," interview by Kathy Min on August 5, 2020, over Zoom (Moscow, ID: Asian American Comparative Collection, 2020), 9; Manuel Garcia Jimenez, "The Reminiscences of Manuel Garcia Jimenez," interview by Kathy Min on July 24, 2020, over Zoom (Moscow, ID: Asian American Comparative Collection, 2020), 7-8.

1970s – 1980s

The 1965 Immigration Act, also known as the Hart-Cellar Act, ended the legal architecture of racially restrictive immigration quotas, prioritizing the immigration of skilled workers and family members, which allowed for further chain migration. Congress passed the bill not out of any antiracist motivations, but rather to safeguard the country’s international reputation during the Cold War.²⁹ Although Senator Ted Kennedy promised that the bill would not “flood our cities with immigrants,” the Act betrayed the senator’s expectations and indeed “opened the floodgates of Asian immigration.”³⁰ Untethered from race-based immigration quotas, many of my narrators and their families immigrated to the U.S. almost immediately after the Act’s passage, including Arun Gupta from India to Kansas in 1969 and Manny Jimenez from the Philippines to Hawai‘i in the same year. Both Arun and Manny immigrated as college students.³¹

Within the 1965 Immigration Act’s newly established migration framework, American militarism in Southeast Asia further incited new migration to the U.S. During the 1950s and 1960s, American Cold War anxieties over the “domino theory”—that if one country in a region fell to communism, the rest of the region would fall like dominoes—led to boots on the ground, bombings, and chemical warfare in Vietnam, as well as covert warfare in neighboring Laos and Cambodia.³² Large-scale Vietnamese migration to Idaho and other parts of the U.S. began in 1975, when Saigon, the capital of South Vietnam, fell to the communist North, prompting the first wave of over 100,000 Vietnamese refugees to escape to the United States.³³ Beginning in 1978, a second

²⁹ Ellen Wu, *The Color of Success: Asian Americans and the Origins of the Model Minority* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013), 251.

³⁰ Willow Lung-Amam, *Trespassers? Asian Americans and the Battle for Suburbia* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2017), 36.

³¹ Gupta, 9; Jimenez, 7-8.

³² Chia Youyee Vang, “Southeast Asian Americans,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Asian American History*, eds. David K. Yoo and Eiichiro Azuma (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2016), 91.

³³ Vang, “Southeast Asian Americans,” 92-94.

wave of Vietnamese refugees, fleeing political repression and lingering tumult from the war, undertook treacherous voyages to UN refugee camps in hopes of resettlement to the U.S. or another country. In total, over half a million Southeast Asian refugees settled in the U.S. between 1975 to the mid-1980s.³⁴ As a result of sponsorship from the initial refuge waves, an additional million Vietnamese immigrants arrived through the family reunification category established by the 1965 Immigration Act.³⁵

Both waves of Vietnamese refugees came to Boise. Sponsored by individuals and churches, the first wave brought 400 Vietnamese refugees to Boise in 1975 following the fall of Saigon.³⁶ That year, the director of adult education at Boise State University (BSU), Helen Huff, began offering “survival English” classes to Vietnamese refugee families. Slowly, this informal refugee resettlement program at BSU expanded into a statewide refugee program.³⁷ Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the organization, with the “reluctant” support of Idaho Governor John Evans, would go on to resettle refugees from not only Southeast Asia but from Eastern and Southeastern Europe as well.³⁸ In 1997, the program became housed under the nonprofit Jannus, Inc., which continues to resettle refugees in Idaho today.³⁹

One of my narrator’s families—Trinh’s father and paternal grandparents—were among the second wave arrivals to Boise in 1979 or 1980.⁴⁰ Why their family came to Boise, said Trinh, was “because they knew they had some friends in the area that would help them out,” perhaps alluding

³⁴ Linda W. Gordon, “Southeast Asian Refugee Migration to the United States,” *Center for Migration Studies* 5, no. 3 (May 1987): 153.

³⁵ Elijah Alperin and Jeanne Batalova, “Vietnamese Immigrants in the United States,” *Migration Policy Institute*, September 13, 2018, <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/vietnamese-immigrants-united-states-5>.

³⁶ Hodges, “Across the Pacific,” 33.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 33-37.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ Todd Shallat, “Improbable Sanctuary,” *Investigate Boise Community Research Series* 8 (2017): 16.

⁴⁰ Trinh is their last name, which is the name they chose to be identified with, although they also go by Erica. See appendix for further details on narrators.

to Boise's infrastructure for refugee resettlement and its burgeoning Vietnamese community by 1980.⁴¹ Trinh's mother, also from Vietnam, immigrated to the U.S. much later—around 1998—as Trinh's father's spouse. Trinh's family thus reflects the ways in which refugee migration, in Trinh's father's case, and chain migration, in their mother's case, worked in tandem to grow Boise's Vietnamese community.

As the second wave of Vietnamese refugees arrived in the U.S., so too did refugees from Cambodia and Laos, fleeing dangerous upheavals exacerbated by years of clandestine U.S. military intervention.⁴² For example, the U.S.'s "secret war" in Laos killed tens of thousands of civilians; ravaged the country's villages, infrastructure, and agricultural systems; and left behind 78 million tons of unexploded ordinance.⁴³ After the U.S. ended its military campaign in Laos, the communist Pathet Lao took over the country and began persecuting former U.S. associates like the Hmong ethnic minority.⁴⁴ Since 1975, over three hundred thousand Laotian refugees have fled the country to refugee camps along the border of Laos and Thailand and resettled in the U.S., France, and other countries.⁴⁵ During the 1980s, alongside the second-wave Vietnamese refugees, almost five hundred Laotian refugees came to Idaho.⁴⁶ Far fewer Cambodian refugees settled in Idaho;

⁴¹ Trinh, 2.

⁴² In the case of Laos, between the 1940s to 1975, the Royal Lao Government and the communist Pathet Lao waged a civil war, with the Pathet Lao eventually seizing power in 1975. Although the U.S. would deny any involvement throughout the 1960s, the U.S. surreptitiously backed the Royal Lao Government by training the ethnic Hmong minority as troops and sending over "humanitarian" planes loaded with military supplies and bombs. In Cambodia, the US waged a secret bombing campaign beginning in 1969; invaded the country with 32,000 American troops in 1970; and lent support to the Khmer Rouge after Vietnam invaded Cambodia in 1978, despite known reports of the atrocities of the Khmer Rouge. From Vathana Pholsena, *Post-war Laos: The Politics of Culture, History and Identity* (Singapore: ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute, 2006), 2; Channapha Khamvongsa and Elaine Russell, "Legacies of War: Cluster Bombs in Laos," *Critical Asian Studies* 41, no. 2 (2009): 288-89; Sucheng Chan, *Survivors: Cambodian Refugees in the United States* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 35-37.

⁴³ According to Khamyongsa and Russell, the unexploded ordinance contaminates at least 37 percent of Laos' land mass and endangers Laotians to this day. From Khamyongsa and Russell, "Legacies of War," 282-99.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 297.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 302.

⁴⁶ U.S. Census Bureau, Census 1990.

the 1990 census counted only 66 Cambodians.⁴⁷ The 1980s Laotian refugee arrivals to Boise included Alex Bounyavong's family. According to Alex, the tumultuous and dangerous conditions of the country after the Pathet Lao takeover caused his parents to flee.⁴⁸

The migration journeys of Alex's family underscore the intertwined importance of family sponsorships and Idaho's refugee resettlement infrastructure, as well as the transnational linkages of refugee families. Alex's parents met as children in refugee camps in Thailand, and, sponsored by relatives, later settled in Boise during the 1980s. Reflecting the transnational nature of Southeast Asian refugee migration, Alex's extended family is currently spread across multiple cities and continents, including Boise, Las Vegas, San Diego, Argentina, and France.⁴⁹

1990s – early 2000s

Idaho's Asian American population continued to multiply between the 1990s and early 2000s, exceeding 10,000 people for the first time in 2000. While the 1980 Idaho census counted about 5,090 people of Asian descent and only six Asian ethnicities—Chinese, Filipino, Japanese, Korean, and Vietnamese—by 2000, the Asian American population had more than doubled to 11,693, with far more ethnicities and national origins represented, including Hmong, Indonesian, Thai, Sri Lankan, and more.⁵⁰

One of the main drivers of this population explosion was Idaho's tech boom, especially with companies like Hewlett-Packard (HP) and Micron Technology. HP set up its burgeoning printer division in Boise in 1973, because "HP wanted a place outside of California that was not

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Bounyavong, interview on July 12, 2020, 4.

⁴⁹ Ibid, 2-5.

⁵⁰ U.S. Census Bureau, Census 1980; U.S. Census Bureau, Census 2000.

more than a two-hour flight from the Bay Area.”⁵¹ During the late 1980s and 1990s, HP’s inkjet printers helped propel the company’s phenomenal growth.⁵² In 1994, Micron Technology, a semiconductor and microchip company founded in 1978 and headquartered in Boise, reached Fortune 500 status.⁵³ Other tech companies founded within Boise’s technology scene include wireless equipment developer Cradlepoint and financial technology company Clearwater Analytics in 2004, as well as time tracking software company TSheets in 2006.⁵⁴

Alongside enormous economic growth, the tech boom in Idaho precipitated both Asian American and overall population growth. Throughout the decade, Idaho had one of the fastest-growing economies in the nation.⁵⁵ Meanwhile, the “shortage of qualified employees,” such as engineers and computer scientists, for Idaho’s high-technology industries prompted HP, Micron, and other companies to recruit highly-educated workers from around the country and around the world.⁵⁶

The vast majority of my narrators traced their family’s migration to Idaho during the tech boom of the 1990s and early 2000s: In 1986, HP’s Boise division recruited Arun Gupta, who had

⁵¹ Ray Smelek, interview by Bill Roberts, “How Hewlett Packard came to build along Chinden Boulevard – a remembrance,” *Idaho Statesman*, March 17, 2017, <https://www.idahostatesman.com/news/local/article139236633.html>.

⁵² HP Computer Museum, “Printers,” accessed February 25, 2021, <http://www.hpmuseum.net/exhibit.php?class=5&cat=20>; Jim Hall, “HP LaserJet – The Early History,” *HP Memory Project*, 2011, https://www.hpmemoryproject.org/an/pdf/HP_LaserJet_early_history.pdf.

⁵³ David Staats, “How an executive’s hair dryer saved the memory chips — tales of Micron’s 40 years,” *Idaho Statesman*, October 18, 2018, <https://www.idahostatesman.com/news/business/article220062090.html>.

⁵⁴ Intuit acquired TSheets in 2018, although their software is still called TSheets. From Kate Talerico, “A Idaho tech company just sold for \$1 billion, creating several ‘newly minted millionaires,’” *Times-News*, September 21, 2020, https://magicvalley.com/business/a-idaho-tech-company-just-sold-for-1-billion-creating-several-newly-minted-millionaires/article_5cc38d6f-567d-5307-be7f-669895212b5d.html; Don Day, “Boise’s Clearwater Analytics to expand, adds new CEO,” *BoiseDev*, July 25, 2018, <https://boisedev.com/news/2018/7/25/boises-clearwater-analytics-to-expand-adds-new-ceo/>; Patty Bowen, “TSheets changes: CEO to exit, Boise campus rebranded to Intuit; growth expected,” *BoiseDev*, August 9, 2019, <https://boisedev.com/news/2019/08/09/tsheets-changes-ceo-to-exit-boise-campus-rebranded-for-intuit-growth-expected/>.

⁵⁵ French, “The Invisible Immigrants,” 47.

⁵⁶ *Ibid*, 48.

originally immigrated from India to Kansas as a college student in 1969.⁵⁷ In 1992, HP also recruited Yul Kim, a Korean American born in Boston in 1964.⁵⁸ In 1996, MicronPC recruited as a network engineer Manny Jimenez, who had immigrated from the Philippines to attend the University of Hawai'i in 1969. In 1999, Manny switched jobs to HP, where he worked as a test engineer until he retired.⁵⁹ Upon their arrival to Boise as a young couple in the early 2000s, Puja Batchu's parents took up jobs in Boise's tech companies, including HP and EnerNOC at SuperValu.⁶⁰

Not everyone who migrated to Idaho in the 1990s, however, came as a graduate degree-level computer scientist or engineer. The parents and grandparents of cousins Janny Bui and Eric Nguyen migrated from Vietnam to Boise in the early 1990s, as a result of Janny and Eric's grandfather's assistance to the U.S. military during the Vietnam War.⁶¹ Janny and Eric were born in the U.S. in 1996 and 2001, respectively, after their parents had settled in the U.S. Although Janny and Eric were unsure what specific legislation enabled their family's migration, their family likely came through the 1980 Orderly Departure Program (ODP), which resettled over 200,000 Vietnamese political prisoners over the course of the 1990s.⁶² Janny and Eric's grandfather, a

⁵⁷ Gupta, 8-9, 12, 14.

⁵⁸ Yul Hoon Kim, "The Reminiscences of Yul Hoon Kim," interview by Kathy Min on August 3, 2020, over Zoom (Moscow, ID: Asian American Comparative Collection, 2020), 1, 25.

⁵⁹ Jimenez, 7, 14-19.

⁶⁰ Puja Batchu, "The Reminiscences of Puja Batchu," interview by Kathy Min on July 3, 2020, over Zoom (Moscow, ID: Asian American Comparative Collection, 2020), 3, 8, 10.

⁶¹ Janny's mother and Eric's father are siblings. Janny Bui, "The Reminiscences of Janny Bui," interview by Kathy Min on July 6, 2020, over Zoom (Moscow, ID: Asian American Comparative Collection, 2020), 1, 6; Eric Nguyen, "The Reminiscences of Eric Nguyen," interview by Kathy Min on July 1, 2020, over Zoom (Moscow, ID: Asian American Comparative Collection, 2020), 1-2.

⁶² Given humanitarian concerns over precarious Vietnamese refugee migrations by water, the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) established the ODP, which systematized the immigration of "those with family members living in the United States, former U.S. government or firm or organization employees, and reeducation center detainees." The ODP's specific program for political prisoners was the Humanitarian Operation Program. From Vang, "Southeast Asian Americans," 92; Phuong Nguyen, "Vietnamese Americans in Little Saigon, California," *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of American History*, July 2, 2015, 12.

police officer in Vietnam, helped the American military during the Vietnam War. As a result, during the 1970s, the new communist government imprisoned Janny and Eric’s grandfather in a labor camp for seven years and blacklisted their family from job and college opportunities, which motivated their grandparents and parents to migrate.⁶³

As seen previously during the 1970s and 1980s, many narrators relied on family members already living in the U.S. to sponsor their immigration. Geneve Lau’s parents migrated to Boise from Guangzhou, China, in 1996 or 1997. Geneve’s paternal uncle had first migrated to Boise during the 1990s, allowing the chain migration of Geneve’s family as well as her second paternal uncle’s family.⁶⁴ In 2001, when she was around three or four years old, Himani Patel immigrated with her parents from Gujarat, India, to the U.S.—first to Portland, Oregon, then to Boise. Similar to Geneve’s family, Himani’s family followed the earlier immigration of her aunt and uncle’s family to Portland and Boise.⁶⁵

For two of my narrators, GB (a pseudonym) and Paige Harwood, the early 2000s also marked a previously undiscussed form of Asian migration: transracial international adoption. The history of Asian international adoption to the U.S. is linked to the post-World War II era and broader Cold War histories of U.S. militarism and military occupation in Asia.⁶⁶ By the 1980s, adoption from Korea and Vietnam had waned, especially with the rising use of birth control and

⁶³ Bui, interview on July 24, 2020, 42-43.

⁶⁴ Geneve Lau, “The Reminiscences of Geneve Lau,” interview by Kathy Min on July 25, 2020, over Zoom (Moscow, ID: Asian American Comparative Collection, 2020), 2-3, 7.

⁶⁵ Himani Patel, “The Reminiscences of Himani Patel,” interview by Kathy Min on July 13, 2020, over Zoom (Moscow, ID: Asian American Comparative Collection, 2020), 2-3.

⁶⁶ In particular, moralistic rhetoric surrounding mixed-race children born to American soldiers and Asian women fueled thousands of Asian adoptions. As Asian American historian Catherine Ceniza Choy notes, American public sympathy focused exclusively on what they perceived to be “inherent Asian prejudice toward mixed-race children,” a form of sympathy that rendered U.S. military occupation “justifiable, palatable, and even desirable” [sic] while overlooking other factors like paternal abandonment. From Catherine Ceniza Choy, “A History of Asian International Adoption in the United States,” in Yoo and Azuma, *The Oxford Handbook of Asian American History*, 209-210.

allegations of “baby hunting” practices.⁶⁷ Meanwhile, throughout the 1990s, China’s international adoption program—created in part to deflect criticism of its 1979 one-child policy—had expanded greatly. By 2000, China was the top sending country for international adoptions, with American citizens adopting over 5,000 Chinese children that year.⁶⁸ Over 97 percent of the children adopted were girls, as “the enforcement of the nation’s one-child policy and weaknesses in its child-welfare system had created a relative abundance of abandoned, mostly female babies.”⁶⁹ As Sara K. Dorow documents in her ethnographic research on Chinese transnational adoption during the late 1990s and early 2000s, some adoptive parents saw Chinese children as particularly “needy,” in line with research that suggests “being Third World and nonwhite makes for more rescuable subjects.”⁷⁰

GB and Paige were both adopted from China within months of one another—GB in December 2001 at nine months old and Paige in February 2002 at a little over a year old.⁷¹ Paige also has an adopted sister from China, and their family lives in Boise.⁷² GB has two brothers, who

⁶⁷ Allison Varzally, “Asian International Adoptions,” in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia, American History* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press USA, 2020), 5, 7.

⁶⁸ Choy, “A History of Asian International Adoption,” 205.

⁶⁹ Media coverage has often focused on the gender preference, although, as John James Kennedy and Yaojiang Shi note, the gender preference has declined with rising educational levels in China. In China, babies are increasingly abandoned due to disability rather than gender. From Varzally, “Asian International Adoptions,” 8; U.S. State Department, “Adoption Statistics,” accessed February 2021, https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/Intercountry-Adoption/adopt_ref/adoption-statistics-esri.html; John James Kennedy and Yaojiang Shi, *Lost and Found: The “Missing Girls” in Rural China* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2019), 8-12; Li Hui and Ben Blanchard, “China’s unwanted babies once mostly girls, now mostly sick, disabled,” *Reuters*, February 2, 2014, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-babies/chinas-unwanted-babies-once-mostly-girls-now-mostly-sick-disabled-idUSBREA110M120140202>.

⁷⁰ Sara K. Dorow, *Transnational Adoption: A Cultural Economy of Race, Gender, and Kinship* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2006), 54. Since the mid-2000s, Asian international adoption as a whole has declined, reflecting the interplay of the tightening of adoption laws by sending countries, U.S. State Department concerns over corrupt adoption practices, and the relaxing of the one-child policy in China. From Varzally, “Asian International Adoptions,” 9; Abby Budiman and Mark Hugo Lopez, “Amid decline in international adoptions to U.S., boys outnumber girls for the first time,” *Pew Research Center*, October 17, 2017, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/10/17/amid-decline-in-international-adoptions-to-u-s-boys-outnumber-girls-for-the-first-time/>.

⁷¹ GB, “The Reminiscences of GB,” interview by Kathy Min on August 1, 2020, over Zoom (interview used with permission of interviewee), 10; Paige Hong Yang Harwood, “The Reminiscences of Paige Hong Yang Harwood,” interview by Kathy Min on July 30, 2020, over Zoom (Moscow, ID: Asian American Comparative Collection, 2020), 17.

⁷² Harwood, 17.

are her parents' biological children. She resided in Idaho Falls in eastern Idaho, up until attending Boise State University for college. Both Paige's and GB's parents are white. According to Paige, her parents chose to adopt from China because it was the "easiest and most streamlined," compared to adopting domestically or from other countries like Russia.⁷³ The ease of her adoption thus reflected the Chinese government's own policy interests during the 1990s of using adoption to temper critique of its family-planning policies.

According to GB, the Latter-day Saints—also known somewhat imprecisely as Mormon—church in Idaho Falls shared information and resources on Chinese adoption with her mother.⁷⁴ Even though GB's family was agnostic, they could access valuable adoption information through local Latter-day Saints, who comprised the majority of residents in GB's county.⁷⁵ The Church's connections to Asian adoption reflected their broader interest in Asia over the latter half of the twentieth century, during which the Church dramatically increased their missionary activity throughout Asia.⁷⁶ GB explicitly linked the Church's missionary activity to the prevalence of Chinese adoptees—including her teacher's daughter, her neighbors, and herself—in her area.⁷⁷

The late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries thus witnessed the complex and multifaceted mass migration of Asian Americans to Idaho, encompassing a wide range of historical forces and reasons for migration: dramatic changes in immigration laws, Cold War international

⁷³ Ibid, 5-6.

⁷⁴ The Church of the Latter-day Saints of Jesus Christ has asked for people to refrain from using the terms "LDS" and "Mormon." From Alex Dobuzinskis. "Do not call us Mormons or LDS Church, leaders of faith ask," *Reuters*, August 16, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-religion-mormon/do-not-call-us-mormons-or-lds-church-leaders-of-faith-ask-idUSKBN1L207C>.

⁷⁵ According to the 2000 census, Latter-day Saints comprise 54 percent of the population of Bonneville County, where Idaho Falls is located. From U.S. Census Bureau, RCMS 2000 (RCMS), Religion 2000 (RCMS), RCMS, the ARDA, Social Explorer, prepared by Social Explorer (accessed March 2021).

⁷⁶ R. Lanier Britsch. *From the East: The History of the Latter-Day Saints in Asia, 1851–1996* (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book Company, 1998), 3; Burgert, interview on August 1, 2020, 14-15.

⁷⁷ Burgert, interview on August 1, 2020, 14-15.

politics, a budding technology economy, and transnational adoption. As Idaho's Asian American population expanded, new discourses and expressions of race enmeshed with older racial ideologies to redefine racial formations in Idaho.

IV. REGIONAL RACIAL FORMATIONS IN BOISE AND IN IDAHO, 1970s–2010s

As Wendy Cheng has noted, through the intricate interplay of local and national forces, regional racial formations both converge and diverge with national racial formations. Indeed, my narrators articulated their own “regionally specific identities” in conversation with their surroundings while at the same time echoing broader historical forces across the nation.⁷⁸ Although regional racial formation unfolded across all facets of everyday life—from neighborhoods to friendships and beyond—the two most significant sites of racial formation foregrounded by narrators were the workplace and schools, from K-12 public schools to local universities. Race intersected with ethnicity, age, gender, and mode of migration to produce social and economic hierarchies that marginalized Asian Americans, particularly across spaces of education and employment. Meanwhile, the racialization of all of my narrators took place not in a vacuum, but in conversation and sometimes in contradiction with shifting meanings of whiteness in the region.

(Unstable) regional racial formations of “whiteness”

Throughout Idaho's history, whiteness has never been a stable nor fixed category. For example, at various points throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Latter-day Saints, Basques, and Italians in Idaho had all been considered “less than white.” However, each group was able to “become white,” especially by the mid-twentieth century, much like Southern

⁷⁸ Cheng, *Changs Next Door to the Díazes*, 9.

Europeans across the country.⁷⁹ In the case of Latter-day Saints, they “became white” by adopting oppressive racial ideologies, including anti-miscegenation teachings and the infamous ban on Black priesthood that lasted until 1978.⁸⁰

During the 1970s and 1980s, on the precipice of Idaho’s tech boom of the 1990s, whiteness in Idaho became defined by white supremacist activity. In 1974, attracted by Idaho’s “overwhelmingly white population, gun-friendly culture, remote landscape, and cheap land,” Richard Butler moved from Los Angeles to Coeur d’Alene in the Idaho panhandle, 400 miles north of Boise.⁸¹ Three years later, he founded the Aryan Nations, which would gain notoriety throughout the 1980s—first, with an offshoot organization that went on a “killing, bombing, counterfeiting, and robbery spree” across the West in 1984, and again in 1986 when white supremacists bombed multiple buildings in Coeur d’Alene.⁸²

In Idaho, local residents organized to protest the Aryan Nations, while lawmakers sought to distance themselves from the tremendously bad press of the Aryan Nations. Beginning in 1989, local residents joined thousand-person rallies, marches, and other human rights events in order to pressure state lawmakers to enact a statewide Martin Luther King, Jr. holiday, which they approved

⁷⁹ As Karen Brodtkin notes in her research on Jewish American whiteness, there is a conceptual distinction between “ethnoracial assumptions” and “ethnoracial identity”: “Assignment is about popularly held classifications and their deployment by those with national power to make them matter economically, politically, and socially to the individuals classified. We construct ethnoracial identities ourselves, but we do it within the context of ethnoracial assignment.” Scholars have argued that various ethnic groups assumed to be “white” in the twenty-first century—for example, Irish Americans, Italian Americans, and Jewish Americans—faced differing, more oppressive ethnoracial assignments whereby their “whiteness” and its presumed benefits were far more contested throughout the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries. From Noel Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1995); Karen Brodtkin, *How Jews Became White Folks and What That Says About Race in America* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1998); David R. Roediger, *Working Toward Whiteness: How America’s Immigrants Became White* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2005); Mercier, “Confronting Race and Creating Community,” 185-190.

⁸⁰ W. Paul Reeve, “The Mormon Church in Utah,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Mormonism*, eds. Terryl L. Givens and Philip L. Barlow (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2018), 49-50.

⁸¹ Jill K. Gill, “Idaho’s ‘Aryan’ Education: Martin Luther King, Jr., Day and Racial Politics,” *The Pacific Northwest Quarterly* 102, no. 4 (Fall 2011): 163.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 163, 165.

a year later.⁸³ Through this activism, predominantly white citizens conceptualized a new kind of whiteness that rejected the white supremacist inclinations of the Aryan Nations. For example, an anti-Aryan marcher from the University of Idaho explained, “We’re trying to show the rest of the country that Idaho is not just potatoes and Nazis.”⁸⁴ Meanwhile, a slogan for the Ada County Human Rights Task Force, one of Idaho’s human rights organizations, read, “Not in our town, not in our state, Idaho is too great for hate.”⁸⁵

Additionally, local protesters leaned on the rhetoric of multiculturalism, coinciding with national discourses of multiculturalism throughout the 1990s. Beyond rejecting the violence of the Aryan Nations, local marchers also called for embracing cultural diversity, brandishing posters with headings like “Equal Opportunity for All Persons: Indian, Negro, Spanish-speaking American, White” and “[Unclear] Policies Must Be Cross-Cultural.”⁸⁶ However, as many scholars have critiqued, multiculturalism only “accept[ed]” difference to the extent that such difference did not “pos[e] a threat to the dynamic power of whiteness.”⁸⁷

On the surface, at least, white Idahoans seemed to embrace their Asian neighbors under the spirit of tolerance and embracing cultural diversity. Arun, who came to Boise in 1986 and opened the Boise Hare Krishna Temple in 1999, emphasized the perceived friendliness of Boise during the 1990s:

...it was a typical, conservative town at that time, but very nice. I don't recall any incident where I felt like somebody looked down on me or something like that. Actually, Boiseans appreciated—they always felt that they didn't have diversity. So at that time, at least, and

⁸³ Ibid, 168.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Ibid, 173-74.

⁸⁶ Ibid, 161, 168.

⁸⁷ Sarah Banet-Weiser, “Miss America, National Identity, and the Identity Politics of Whiteness,” in *There She Is, Miss America: The Politics of Sex, Beauty, and Race in America's Most Famous Pageant*, eds. Elwood Watson and Darcy Martin (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 67.

for many years, they appreciated when somebody of a different cultural background moved in. ... We have always been welcome and we still are welcome in town.⁸⁸

Arun described a sense of being “welcome” as an Indian American and Hare Krishna practitioner in Boise’s mostly white community, in some ways as a result of Boise’s lack of racial diversity. However, Arun’s welcome was inextricable from statewide dialogues generated by the movement against the Aryan Nations over anti-extremism and multiculturalism. At the same time, Yul, who came to Boise in 1992, noted the continued race-based stereotypes he faced in the age of so-called multiculturalism. For example, Yul recalled “drunk white women” approaching him in bars and asking him if he knew karate.⁸⁹ While his encounters with whiteness in Idaho during the 1990s were not dangerously violent in the way of the Aryan Nations, Idaho’s era of multiculturalism coexisted with the racial otherization of Asian Americans like Yul. Nevertheless, sentiments of Boise’s and Idaho’s “kindness” continued to circulate decades after the demise of the Aryan Nations, most notably in the 2018 city government initiative “Boise Kind” to “ensur[e] that Boise remains a kind and welcoming city.”⁹⁰

Meanwhile, throughout the 1990s, Idaho’s message of welcome extended to its acceptance of refugees from Eastern Europe and the Balkan Peninsula in Southeastern Europe. With the breakup of Yugoslavia and the wars, ethnic conflicts, and human rights abuses that transpired across the Balkan Peninsula throughout the 1990s, many people fled the region to other countries. This included over 1,300 refugees from Bosnia and Herzegovina to Idaho.⁹¹

For many of my younger narrators, the presence of Bosnian and other Southeast European classmates—many of whom were U.S.-born children of refugees from the original refugee wave

⁸⁸ Gupta, 17.

⁸⁹ Kim, 25.

⁹⁰ Boise Kind, “About Boise Kind,” accessed March 19, 2021, <https://boisekind.cityofboise.org/kindness-in-the-community/about-boise-kind/>.

⁹¹ U.S. Census Bureau, Census 2000.

of the 1990s—further complicated notions of whiteness. As ethnic studies scholar Yen Le Espiritu argues, the term “refugee” has become a racial category for Southeast Asians, such that even non-refugees like Southeast Asian immigrants and U.S.-born children bear stereotypes of “Third World poverty, foreignness, and statelessness.”⁹² However, from the perspective of narrators like Brittany Yann, the U.S.-born children of Balkan Peninsula refugees avoided the racialization experienced by Southeast Asian refugees and their children. Brittany, a Khmer American and daughter of Cambodian refugees, moved from the Bay Area in California to Boise in 2008 when she was in fifth grade. When describing her high school friend group, Brittany noted the conflicted whiteness of her Southeast European classmates: “[I]t's not like everyone was all-white. There were a mix of Caucasian and Mexican—even Caucasian being like Bosnian and Croatian friends. And it's not like our group wasn't diverse, but it wasn't Asian-diverse.”⁹³ While Brittany racialized her Bosnian and Croatian friends as not “all-white,” she nevertheless emphasized the gap between her own experiences as an Asian American and her “Caucasian” friends.

Grappling with similar tensions between race and diversity, Geneve stated, “My high school had a lot of Bosnian students. So I felt like that was really interesting, because they have a really diverse perspective. ... I also feel like...a lot of people in my high school just thought, ‘Because we have Bosnian refugees, we're a diverse school.’ And it's like, no, try again.”⁹⁴ Between 2012 and 2017, Geneve attended Renaissance High School in the Boise area, where white students made up the vast majority—78 percent—of the student body. While Brittany framed her

⁹² Yen Le Espiritu, *Body Counts: The Vietnam War and Militarized Refuge(es)* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press), 4.

⁹³ Brittany Yann, “The Reminiscences of Brittany Monarvy Yann,” interview by Kathy Min on July 27, 2020, over Zoom (Moscow, ID: Asian American Comparative Collection, 2020), 27.

⁹⁴ Lau, 36.

Bosnian and Croatian friends as more tenuously white, Geneve identified her Bosnian classmates as unequivocally white, who therefore left the overall structures of white racial dominance intact.

Brittany and Geneve thus acknowledged the troubled entity of whiteness, particularly as it applied to their Southeast European classmates. Although many of my narrators' classmates were the children of refugees and immigrants, their presence did not fundamentally alter the dominance of whiteness in schools or the state. Instead, whiteness continued to consolidate around particular groups while excluding those deemed non-white, like my narrators.

Work and employment (1980s – 2020)

One of the most significant sites of racial formation that emerged through my interviews was the workplace, especially for the older adults I interviewed and younger narrators' parents. Specific industries and jobs took on particular race, ethnic, and class-based meanings. From my interviews, Asian American adults generally pursued employment in three broad categories: computer science and engineering work at technology companies; manual labor at technology companies; and ethnic entrepreneurship. Social scientists Ivan Light and Edna Bonacich define “ethnic entrepreneurship” as the economic niches filled by a particular ethnic group through class- and ethnic-based resource mobilization.⁹⁵

Tech employers like HP and Micron sought out many of my narrators and their families as engineers and computer scientists, especially throughout the 1990s and early 2000s. These recruits tended to be highly educated: HP and Micron's recruits—Arun, Manny, and Yul—not only held bachelor's degrees in computer science and engineering, but they all had master's degrees too.⁹⁶

⁹⁵ Ivan Light and Edna Bonacich, *Immigrant entrepreneurs: Koreans in Los Angeles, 1965-1982* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1991), 18-19.

⁹⁶ Arun, recruited to Boise by HP, has a bachelor's and master's degree in mechanical engineering and an MBA in marketing. Manny, recruited by both Micron and HP, has a bachelor's in architecture from the Philippines, bachelor's in computer science from the University of Hawai'i, and an MBA. Yul, a software engineer at HP, has a bachelor's in

Both of Puja’s parents, who have held science- and technology-related positions at various companies, are college-educated with engineering and science degrees; Puja’s father also completed his master’s degree in the U.S.⁹⁷

Beyond recruiting Asian American workers from outside of the state, during the 1980s and 1990s, Micron also implemented a refugee-hiring policy that employed many Southeast Asian refugees around the area.⁹⁸ However, the employment of Southeast Asian refugees deviated from Micron’s recruitment of Asian Americans like Manny that had computer science and software engineering skills. Instead, many refugees took on assembly work and other manual labor, thus dividing Micron’s Asian American workforce by income, skill level, migration background, education level, and ethnicity.

Several of my narrators’ parents worked at Micron as manual laborers. Some of Alex’s parents’ earliest jobs were as assembly line workers and janitors at Micron.⁹⁹ Janny’s mother, Mai Nguyen, has been a seamstress at Micron since approximately 2003. “She makes the bunny suits for the uniforms that all the technicians wear in the labs and stuff,” explained Janny.¹⁰⁰ When I asked Janny whether her mother liked the work, Janny said:

I wouldn’t say “like” it. But I think it's more of, that's her established job, and she doesn't mind it. ... It's not a bad job. I mean, considering that she doesn't have a college degree—she only has a high school diploma—and moving here as an immigrant, it's a pretty good job.¹⁰¹

Janny’s response implied, to some degree, a lack of choice. Sewing was not necessarily Mai’s passion, but rather a “good job” compared to the other options ostensibly available for someone

electrical engineering, a master’s in computer engineering, and a master’s in computer science. From Gupta, 2; Jimenez, 1, 2, 6; Kim, 1.

⁹⁷ Batchu, 4, 8.

⁹⁸ Hodges, “Across the Pacific,” 40.

⁹⁹ Bounyavong, interview on July 12, 2020, 10.

¹⁰⁰ Bui, interview on July 6, 2020, 5.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

of Mai's background: an immigrant with "only a high school diploma." Although Janny did not specify other jobs that Mai could potentially have, other Vietnamese immigrants and refugees in Idaho throughout the latter half of the twentieth century found employment as casual labor, including at trailer factories in Nampa and Caldwell; assembly workers at HP and Micron; and business owners.¹⁰² Mai herself previously worked at a Mongolian grill, dry cleaner, and factory, before transitioning to the more "stable" sewing occupation at Micron for seventeen years.¹⁰³ Thus, in the case of Idaho's tech companies like Micron, Asian American racial formation did not develop uniformly. Instead, heterogeneity along lines of ethnicity, migration, and class bifurcated Asian American racial formation within the workplace, establishing a pronounced gap between some of Micron's most highly-paid employees, Asian American computer scientists and engineers, and its lower-paid, Southeast Asian assembly workers and laborers.

Given the limited opportunities at companies like Micron for upward mobility through manual labor, many of my narrators' families instead turned to entrepreneurship. In particular, several families opened Asian restaurants in Boise, reflecting longer legacies of the relegation of Asian Americans to the restaurant sector as well as obsessions with the "exotic." As Robert Ji-Song Ku, Martin F. Manalansan IV, and Anita Mannur argue in their anthology *Eating Asian America*, "Asians in the United States have long been associated—often reluctantly or against their will, as well as voluntarily or with pleasure—with images of and practices regarding food."¹⁰⁴

¹⁰² Although Hodges does not explain the conditions of Vietnamese casual labor, sociologist Richard Baker describes some of the working conditions Mexican and white Americans faced at trailer factories in Idaho in the early 1990s (Baker did not name the exact location of his study to protect the privacy of the people he interviewed). Baker documented the precarity of trailer factory work, which was seasonal, prone to layoffs, low-paid, and lacking health insurance and guaranteed hours. From Hodges, "Across the Pacific," 38-40; Richard Baker, *Los Dos Mundos: Rural Mexican Americans, Another America* (Logan, UT: Utah State University Press, 1995), 127, 201.

¹⁰³ Bui, interview on July 6, 2020, 5-6.

¹⁰⁴ Robert Ji-Song Ku, Martin F. Manalansan IV, and Anita Mannur. *Eating Asian America* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2013), 3.

After working at Micron and at other Asian restaurants, Alex’s parents opened Chiang Mai House Thai Restaurant in 2004, which they continue to operate today.¹⁰⁵ Similarly, after working at Chinese restaurants for several years, Trinh’s grandfather eventually opened a Chinese restaurant.¹⁰⁶ Alongside the Southeast Asian-opened Asian restaurants, Geneve’s family also opened a Chinese restaurant in the 1990s. Both Geneve’s parents and one of her aunts ran Chinese American restaurants in the Boise area: A few years after Geneve’s aunt opened Wok King, Geneve’s parents opened Top Wok in 1997.¹⁰⁷

For Geneve, Trinh, and Alex’s families, “ethnic” food service meant adapting foods, flavors, and branding to the limited script of Asian ethnicity in Boise and Idaho. According to Geneve, Top Wok’s menu consists of “very Americanized Chinese food, like the typical orange chicken, nothing like traditional dim sum.”¹⁰⁸ For Trinh and Alex, their family’s restaurants differed from their own ethnicities—“Americanized Chinese food” by Trinh’s Vietnamese family and Thai food by Alex’s Lao family.¹⁰⁹ The “Americanized Chinese food” that Trinh and Geneve described spans centuries of history, beginning in the late 1800s and early 1900s with Chinese restaurateurs, who often had few other employment options in face of a discriminatory job market. Chinese cooks thickened, sweetened, and batter-fried their sauces and dishes, to the delight of the white American consumer.¹¹⁰ Meanwhile, despite the Laotian American community predating and consistently outnumbering the Thai American community in Idaho, Thai cuisine has dominated Idaho’s Southeast Asian culinary landscape. To date, there are no explicitly marketed Lao or

¹⁰⁵ Bounyavong, interview on July 12, 2020, 10-11.

¹⁰⁶ Trinh, 4.

¹⁰⁷ Lau, 6.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid, 14.

¹⁰⁹ Trinh, 6.

¹¹⁰ Paul Freedman, *American Cuisine and How It Got This Way* (New York, NY: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2019), 263-267.

Cambodian restaurants in Boise, even though Boise has several Lao and Cambodian eatery owners, including Alex’s family.¹¹¹ In contrast, there are at least ten explicitly marketed Thai restaurants in Boise, including Chiang Mai.

According to Thai American food scholar Mark Padoongpatt, post-World War II American militarism in Southeast Asia—and specifically the American military presence in Thailand meant to counteract communism in the region—introduced enthusiastic Americans to Thai cuisine, which reached widespread popularity by the 1980s.¹¹² As Alex stated:

I didn't understand why they chose Thai, but then it's always been Thai, Thai food. So it was never Lao, of course, because popularity-wise, Thai was just bigger. Thai was more popular.¹¹³

Alex framed his family’s decision to open a Thai, as opposed to Lao, restaurant in the language of already-established “truths”: Lao cuisine “of course” could not compete since “it’s always been Thai.” Alex’s tone of inevitability thus speaks to the difficulty of deviating from preexisting ethnic scripts in Idaho.

While Geneve, Trinh, and Alex’s ethnic family businesses catered to the general Boise population, Himani Patel’s family business—an Indian grocery—served a specific ethnic community: Boise’s Indian community. Drawing on longer legacies of Gujarati entrepreneurial culture, Himani’s parents opened an Indian grocery shortly after arriving in Boise in 2001.¹¹⁴ As Padma Rangaswamy notes in her research on Indian immigrants in Chicago in the 1980s and 1990s, Indian immigration followed a pattern of “first-wave” skilled professionals succeeded by “family-sponsored, second-wave” immigrants that operated small businesses servicing the

¹¹¹ According to Brittany, at least one Cambodian family operates Boise’s local donut stores. From Yann, interview on July 27, 2020, 13.

¹¹² Mark Padoongpatt, *Flavors of Empire: Food and the Making of Thai America* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2017), 5-8.

¹¹³ Bounyavong, interview on July 26, 2020, 47.

¹¹⁴ Patel, interview on July 13, 2020, 7-8, 13.

antecedent Indian community.¹¹⁵ Although Himani’s family was not sponsored by a “first-wave” skilled professional, the tech-fueled growth of Boise’s Indian community generated a “need for an Indian grocery store” that her family’s store fulfilled.¹¹⁶

Outside of businesses with overtly “ethnic” signifiers, the nail salon industry in Boise was also ethnically partitioned in all but name. After working at a dry-cleaning store and various Mongolian grills, Eric’s parents began working—in his words—as “the stereotypical nail technician[s]” at Top Nail, the nail salon they own in Boise.¹¹⁷ As sociologists Susan Eckstein and Thanh-Nghi Nguyen note, since the 1990s, Vietnamese immigrants have dominated the nail salon industry across the U.S., far outnumbering all other ethnic groups in the 2000 census count of foreign-born hairdressers and grooming-service workers.¹¹⁸ The history of Vietnamese American manicuring is tied to actress Tippi Hedren, who, in 1975, “concerned with the plight of Vietnamese refugees housed in a tent city in California,” trained a group of Vietnamese women in manicuring. As Vietnamese refugees opened beauty schools and salons, they provided manicuring training to other Vietnamese refugees and migrants, facilitating the eventual nationwide spread of Vietnamese-operated nail salons.¹¹⁹ In Boise, too, Vietnamese entrepreneurs own many—if not most—nail salons.¹²⁰

¹¹⁵ Padma Rangaswamy, *Namasté America: Indian Immigrants in a Metropolis* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000), 62-63, 89-90.

¹¹⁶ Patel, interview on July 13, 2020, 8.

¹¹⁷ Nguyen, interview on July 1, 2020, 6.

¹¹⁸ Susan Eckstein and Thanh-Nghi Nguyen, “The Making and Transnationalization of an Ethnic Niche: Vietnamese Manicurists,” *International Migration Review* 45, no. 3 (2011): 647.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 651.

¹²⁰ According to Hodges, “A quick look at the community bulletin board at the Orient Market on Emerald Street [in Boise] shows multiple handwritten help wanted ads, in both English and Vietnamese, advertising for nail artists. A Vietnamese American woman, Lynde Bailey, confirmed that most of the nail salons in and around Boise are owned by Vietnamese.” From Hodges, “Across the Pacific,” 43-44.

Employment thus reinforced distinctive racial meanings for many of my narrators and their parents, particularly along extant cleavages of ethnicity, class, and migration background. Of course, all the workers discussed were Asian American, whether they were computer scientists like Yul and Manny; small business owners and restaurateurs like the families of Alex, Geneve, Trinh, Himani, and Eric; or manual laborers like Janny's mother Mai. At the same time, the immense range between their employment experiences signifies the strained coherence of regional formations based upon race. Increasingly, economic niches followed ethnic-based, rather than race-based, patterns of development, from Vietnamese nail salons to Indian grocery stores.

Public Schools: Coming of age with race (2000s – 2010s)

By the twenty-first century, Idaho's Asian American population had grown enormously. Nevertheless, for all of the young Asian Americans I interviewed, the growth in racial diversity did not mean they felt that the classrooms and neighborhoods of their adolescence had become racially diverse. Instead, they continued to articulate their sense, as young Asian Americans in Idaho throughout the 2000s and 2010s, of a pervasive whiteness that excluded Asian Americans. Because all of my narrators spent time in public schools in Idaho and interacted with non-Asian students in public schools, the state's educational system emerged as a particularly salient locus of racial formation. Almost all of my narrators commented on classrooms that seemed almost entirely white, to the point of my narrators feeling like a "sore thumb" or wishing that they themselves were white.¹²¹ While some narrators did describe a sense of kindness and welcome that aligned with Idaho's self-conceptions of whiteness in the post-Aryan era, many of those same narrators concurrently encountered more racially exclusionary practices of whiteness.

¹²¹ Bui, interview on July 6, 2020, 21; Bounyavong, interview on July 12, 2020, 22.

Almost all of my narrators attended schools in the West Ada School District, which encompassed parts of Boise and the neighboring towns of Meridian and Eagle.¹²² Student demographics varied between West Ada schools. For example, Eagle High School, which Trinh attended between 2013 and 2016, was substantially whiter and wealthier than the other schools my narrators attended.¹²³ However, across each high school attended by my narrators, both in the West Ada School District and outside Boise, white students comprised at least three-quarters of the student body. Asian American students generally made up less than five percent of the student body, except at Meridian Medical Arts Charter High School and Renaissance High School, a magnet school known for its International Baccalaureate program.

Narrator	High School	City	School District	Total # students	American Indian/ Alaska Native (%)	Asian (%)	Black (%)	Hispanic(%)	Native Hawaiian / Pacific Islander (%)	White (%)	Two or More Races (%)
Janny Bui; Puja Batchu	Centennial High School	Boise	West Ada	2088	0.6	4	5	13	0.3	73	4
Trinh	Eagle High School	Eagle	West Ada	2051	0.5	2	0.4	7	0.1	87	3
Alex Bounyavong; Brittany Yann	Meridian High School	Meridian	West Ada	1860	0.6	1.4	2	14	0.2	78	3.5
Himani Patel	Meridian Medical Arts Charter High School	Meridian	West Ada	198	0	6	0.5	6.6	0	81	5
Geneve Lau; Eric Nguyen	Renaissance High School	Meridian	West Ada	742	0.3	8	0.4	9	0	78	5
Paige Harwood	Rocky Mountain High School	Meridian	West Ada	2417	0.3	2.3	1	8	0.4	83	4
Grace Burgert	Idaho Falls High School	Idaho Falls	Idaho Falls School District	1293	0.5	2	1	15	0.2	79	2
Yun	Twin Falls High School	Twin Falls	Twin Falls School District	1232	1	1	1	14	1	80	2

Figure 6. Demographics of Idaho high schools attended by my narrators. Data from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), 2018-2019.

¹²² West Ada School District was called the Meridian School District until 2014. Boise School District is the other main public school district in Boise. However, none of my narrators attended Boise School District schools.

¹²³ Idaho State Department of Education, “Lunch Eligibility Data by District (2018-2019),” accessed April 2, 2021, <https://apps.sde.idaho.gov/CnpEligibility/Report>.

One of the most salient modes of racialization noted by my narrators was the model minority myth, a stereotype of Asian American academic and economic success and “nondelinquency.”¹²⁴ The model minority myth became prominent during the Civil Rights Movement as a way of discrediting African American demands for a “meaningful redistribution of wealth and power.”¹²⁵ In the decades since the Civil Rights Movement, newspaper articles, films, and books like Amy Chua’s *The Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* (2011) have reinforced the model minority myth, alleging that “Asian culture” has driven the so-called socioeconomic mobility of Asian Americans—even though income inequality is highest among Asian Americans as a racial group.¹²⁶ Almost all of my narrators recounted being stereotyped as a model minority, from Alex hearing “Asians are always good at math” to Trinh’s classmates remarking to them, “You should easily get an A-plus.”¹²⁷ However, while the model minority myth has led many journalists, scholars, and everyday observers to claim that Asian Americans have become “honorary whites,” my narrators depicted a very different reality of racial exclusion and of being singled out for their race throughout their adolescence in Idaho schools.¹²⁸

Phenotypic “difference” has long been an avenue of Asian American racialization. White Americans in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries fixated on the supposed “biological” and “bodily” differences between “Caucasians” and “Orientals,” ranging from the queues of Chinese

¹²⁴ Wu, *The Color of Success*, 6.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 208-209.

¹²⁶ Srividya Ramasubramanian, “Television exposure, model minority portrayals, and Asian-American stereotypes: An exploratory study,” *Journal of Intercultural Communication* (July 2011): 4-5; David Brand, Jennifer Hull, Jeannie Park, and James Willwerth, “The New Whiz Kids: Why Asian Americans are doing so well, and what it costs them,” *Time*, August 31, 1987, 4; Rakesh Kochhar and Anthony Cilluffo, “Income Inequality in the U.S. Is Rising Most Rapidly Among Asians,” *Pew Research*, July 12, 2018, <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2018/07/12/income-inequality-in-the-u-s-is-rising-most-rapidly-among-asians/>.

¹²⁷ Bounyavong, interview on July 12, 2020, 31; Trinh, 25.

¹²⁸ Tuan, *Forever Foreigners or Honorary Whites?*, 30.

laborers to the “long magnetic eyes” of “Yellow Peril” caricatures like Fu Manchu.¹²⁹ As historian Robert G. Lee emphasizes, race is socially, not biologically, constructed: “Asia is not a biological fact but a geographic destination. ...Physiognomy is relevant to race only insofar as certain physical characteristics, such as skin color or hue, eye color or shape, shape of the nose, color or texture of the hair, over- or underbite, etc., are socially defined as markers of racial difference.”¹³⁰

Nevertheless, physical characteristics remained a preoccupation for many Idahoans that my narrators encountered. For example, throughout the 2000s and 2010s, all of my East and Southeast Asian school-aged narrators experienced insensitive jokes and comments about their eye size. In GB’s case, as a transracial adoptee, the visibility of race meant that other people she met “visually...wouldn’t see me as part of the family.” By the time GB reached high school in Idaho Falls during the late 2010s, “[W]hen I was with my brothers or even my dad, people would think that we were dating or something like that, which is super uncomfortable.”¹³¹

Moreover, Idaho’s specific histories of Chinese and Japanese settlement and lack of understanding of post-1965 Asian migration promoted stereotypes of “Asian” identity, thus denying the diverse cultural and ethnic heritages of narrators by virtue of their “Chinese” or “Japanese” appearances. Said Yun, who attended public schools in Rexburg and Twin Falls throughout the 2010s, “I grew up in small towns and people were like, ‘So are you Chinese or Japanese?’ And I’d be like, ‘I’m Korean.’ And they’d ... [make a confused face.] ‘Is that Chinese or Japanese?’”¹³² Similarly, Eric, who is Vietnamese, was often racialized as “Chinese” while he attended North Star Charter Middle School and Renaissance High School in Boise from 2013 to

¹²⁹ Robert G. Lee, *Orientalism: Asian Americans in Popular Culture* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1999), 39, 113.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 2.

¹³¹ Burgert, interview on August 1, 2020, 25.

¹³² Yun is a pseudonym. Yun, “The Reminiscences of Yun,” interview by Kathy Min on January 12, 2021, over Zoom (Moscow, ID: Asian American Comparative Collection, 2020), 33.

2020. Eric recalled people asking him if he was “Chinese or Asian” and greeting him with, “Yo, what up, chink.”¹³³

Meanwhile, some denied the Asian identities of narrators who didn’t fit the stereotypes of how an “Asian” should look, particularly for those who were not East Asian. Brittany, who is ethnically Khmer, often had to defend her Asian identity because she was not perceived as “Asian” when she attended Eagle Middle School, Meridian Middle School, and Meridian High School from 2008 to 2015:

[C]omments I received is that “your eyes aren't chinky.” ...a lot of people question me being Asian, because they had never seen a Cambodian person. So they obviously have this image of Asian people being similar to East Asian cultures, like Chinese people or Japanese people.

...And so many times, people would ask me, “What are you?” And I would say, “I'm Cambodian. I'm Asian.” And they're like, “No way, you look Mexican.” And it's like, “No, I'm not Mexican. I'm Cambodian.” And they're like, “But you have”—you know, they pick out my facial features. It's like “you have big eyes” or “you have really big lips.”¹³⁴

The specific dissection of Brittany’s facial features emphasizes the specific racial attributions of what constituted “Asian-ness,” down to eye size and lip thickness. Similarly, given the conflation between Chinese, Japanese, and “Asian,” Puja felt that many people did not see her, an Indian American, as “Asian.”¹³⁵

Idaho’s limited ethnic scripts thus overlooked and rebuffed the identities of my non-Chinese and non-Japanese narrators. The comparatively longer—and more studied—histories of Chinese and Japanese Americans in Idaho pigeonholed people of East or Southeast Asian descent as “Chinese” or “Japanese,” while also dismissing the existence of other Asian ethnicities. Despite decades of substantial migration to Idaho from other Asian countries since 1965, the earlier, more

¹³³ Nguyen, interview on July 1, 2020, 28-29.

¹³⁴ Yann, interview on July 27, 2020, 36.

¹³⁵ Batchu, 41.

limited assumptions of race persisted well into the 2000s and 2010s. Moreover, many of my narrators of Chinese descent, like Geneve, continued to encounter ignorance and stereotypes based on ethnicity, from classmates mocking the sounds of Chinese languages to judgment over Chinese food consumption.¹³⁶

Questions of gender intersected with racial formation, with specific standards of masculinity and femininity shaped by race. Some of Eric's classmates made comments about Asian men having "small" genitalia, a stereotype rooted in longer histories of feminizing Asian men.¹³⁷ For example, discriminatory laws in the nineteenth century relegated male Chinese miners to feminized service industries like restaurants, laundries, and domestic work.¹³⁸ Representation in mainstream media has reinforced these racial stereotypes, from a 2017 segment by comedian Steve Harvey quipping that Asian men were undateable, to the character of Han in the television series *Two Broke Girls* (2011-2017), who was portrayed as "short, unattractive, and lacking experience with women."¹³⁹

Meanwhile, as Asian American women, Himani, Geneve, and Brittany recounted the pervasive influence of Eurocentric beauty standards, which have disproportionately targeted women and especially women of color throughout American history.¹⁴⁰ Himani said she had always felt "ugly" in comparison to other women, which she "attribute[s]...a lot to race."¹⁴¹

¹³⁶ Lau, 19, 37-38.

¹³⁷ Nguyen, interview on July 1, 2020, 27.

¹³⁸ Lee, *Orientalism*, 89, 104-105.

¹³⁹ Grace Kao, Kelly Stamper Balistreri, and Kara Joyner, "Asian American Men in Romantic Dating Markets," *Contexts* 17, no. 4 (2018): 49, 52.

¹⁴⁰ Eduardo Bonilla-Silva writes, "Normative whiteness is still the not-so-hidden standard: the cultural essence of 500 years of 'racist culture' (Goldberg 1993), a culture that since Kant, Voltaire, Hume, and all the other enlightened white men of Europe and America, has depicted non-whites as ugly and particular and whites as beautiful and universal beings (Sala-Molins 2006)." From Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, "The invisible weight of whiteness: the racial grammar of everyday life in contemporary America," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 35, no. 2 (2012): 178; Banet-Weiser, "Miss America," 69-71; Rosalind S. Chou, *Asian American Sexual Politics: The Construction of Race, Gender, and Sexuality* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2012), 77-79.

¹⁴¹ Patel, interview on August 6, 2020, 51.

Geneve and Brittany's comments on the pervasiveness of Eurocentric beauty standards were nearly identical. Said Brittany:

I felt like I just wasn't as pretty as a white girl, because, you know, we lived in Idaho. ... And I just felt like, the boys I liked, they were like, "I like so-and-so and so-and-so happens to be this, you know, beautiful, blue-eyed, blonde-haired girl." And of course, it's like I would struggle and think that meant I wasn't beautiful.¹⁴²

Similarly, Geneve stated:

...if there was a boy I had a crush on, he would never like me. And I could never say out loud, "It's because I'm Asian." But it's definitely like I would understand that their type is, you know, the white blondes. And that wasn't me.¹⁴³

Facing the flipside of Eurocentric beauty standards that internalized feelings of "ugliness" for many of my Asian woman narrators, GB experienced immense fetishization as an Asian woman. From early stereotypes of Chinese and Japanese women in the nineteenth century as prostitutes, to twentieth century media and film depictions of Asian women as simultaneously hypersexual "dragon ladies" and sexually submissive "geishas," to U.S. military escapades in Southeast Asia—incidentally, to which the modern sex industry in the region owes its credit—the roots of sexually fetishizing Asian women run deep.¹⁴⁴ By the 2000s and 2010s, media productions that sexualized Asian women were par for the course, from Lucy Liu's "femme fatale" film roles in *Charlie's Angels* (2000), *Kill Bill* (2003), and their sequels, to Asian American women comprising "their own special genre" within American pornography.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴² Yann, interview on July 27, 2020, 36.

¹⁴³ Lau, 30.

¹⁴⁴ Yen Le Espiritu, *Asian American Women and Men: Labor, Laws, and Love* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2008), 105-107; Liang Tien, "U.S. Attitudes Toward Women of Asian Ancestry: Legislative and Media Perspectives," in *Relationships among Asian American women*, ed. Jean Lau Chin (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2000), 29-47; Kimberly Kay Hoang, *Dealing in Desire: Asian Ascendancy, Western Decline, and the Hidden Currencies of Global Sex Work* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2015), 29-30; Aki Uchida, "The Orientalization of Asian Women in America," *Women's Studies International Forum* 21, no. 2 (1998): 161-174.

¹⁴⁵ Filmmaker and film scholar Celine Parreñas Shimizu argues that "race-positive sexuality" is needed in conceptualizing sexuality, sex work, pornography, race, and gender. She calls attention to the ways that stereotypes of Asian women's sexuality circumscribe Asian American women's agency, while also celebrating the complex ways

GB recounted how she had encountered predatory behavior as early as high school, receiving “creepy” social media messages from older men and “really uncomfortable” comments from adult judges at high school debate tournaments.¹⁴⁶ The fetishization GB faced, rather than being distinct from racialized questions of attractiveness faced by Himani, Brittany, and Geneve, instead also reinscribed race onto GB’s body. As GB stated, the fetishization she experienced has been inextricable from race: “And so I get even more comments like, ‘Oh, wow, you’re so exotic,’ or ‘Have you seen this hentai before?’, or ‘You look just like an anime girl,’ when I’m just wearing normal clothes or something like that.”¹⁴⁷ The omnipresence of racial representations in cultural media—especially aided by the accessibility offered by the Internet during the early twenty-first century—thus promoted the fetishization of Asian women, to the extreme discomfort of narrators like GB.

Food played a dichotomous role in the racialization of my narrators. On one hand, one of the most significant economic niches filled by my narrators’ families—to the hungry delight of the (white) Idaho consumer—was Idaho’s Asian restaurant sector. On the other hand, stereotypes about Asian food, eating habits, and smells mixed with racial meanings to denigrate many of the

Asian women navigate and lean into their own sexuality. Parreña Shimizu writes: “... ‘race-positive sexuality’ argues for the need to acknowledge how sexuality can be pleasurable, powerful, and painful simultaneously. Rather than authorize critics to decide what good and bad sexualities look like for whatever racial agenda, we need to account for the specific ways sexuality works as described by Asian/American women’s practices.” From Celine Parreñas Shimizu, *The Hypersexuality of Race: Performing Asian/American Women on Screen and Scene* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 60, 140-145.

¹⁴⁶ Burgert, interview on August 1, 2020, 34.

¹⁴⁷ Hentai and anime are both Japanese cultural productions. Anime is a Japanese style of animation that has gained wide audiences in the U.S. since the 1980s, while hentai in the North American context refers to sexually explicit and/or pornographic anime. In 2019, “hentai” was the second-most searched term and “Asian” was the fourth-most searched term for Americans on Pornhub, an internet pornography website with an average of 115 million visits per day. Americans are the top consumers of Pornhub content. From Burgert, interview on August 1, 2020, 34; Mariana Ortega-Brena, “Peek-a-boo, I See You: Watching Japanese Hard-core Animation,” *Sexuality & Culture* 13, no. 1 (2009): 17-18; Andrew C. McKevitt, “‘You Are Not Alone!’: Anime and the Globalizing of America,” *Diplomatic History* 34, no. 5 (November 2010): 893-94; Pornhub Insights, “The 2019 Year in Review,” December 11, 2019. <https://www.pornhub.com/insights/2019-year-in-review>.

younger narrators at schools and school activities. GB recalled accusations of “you eat dogs,”¹⁴⁸ while Eric succinctly stated, “I used to bring Vietnamese food for cold lunch. I got made fun of and I never brought Vietnamese food ever again.”¹⁴⁹

In particular, smell became a means of otherizing many of my narrators. When Himani was in high school, her extracurricular activity partner would “smell the air and make faces” when visiting Himani’s home; people pointed out how Yun smelled, because “I always smelled like Asian food, I guess”; and for Brittany, a classmate had once surreptitiously sniffed Brittany’s shoe during a school play and declared that it smelled like “Panda Express.”¹⁵⁰ Brittany described her sensitivity to bringing Asian food to school, sharing that she “didn’t want to bring anything that would be out of the norm as my lunch to school.”¹⁵¹ Even when Brittany became more “accepting” of her culture and packed herself Asian lunches while at Meridian High School, she continued to express hesitation at using ingredients like fish sauce that could “potentially offend anyone.”¹⁵² As Ji-Song Ku, Manalansan, and Mannur note, the stereotype of the “smelly and unwashed” Asian immigrant has persisted throughout American history.¹⁵³ For example, resettlement guides given to Southeast Asian refugees in the 1970s and 1980s recommended they “reduc[e] the odor of their food” and avoid cooking with seafood and other ingredients.¹⁵⁴

The social valorization of whiteness—physically and culturally—pressured many of my narrators to try and “shed” their Asian culture and appearances in order to aspire towards whiteness. Says Janny, “I felt so different and I hated feeling different. And so I guess I just didn’t

¹⁴⁸ Burgert, interview on August 1, 2020, 23.

¹⁴⁹ Nguyen, interview on July 1, 2020, 20.

¹⁵⁰ Patel, interview on July 13, 2020, 29; Yun, interview on August 9, 2020, 15; Yann, interview on July 27, 2020, 27.

¹⁵¹ Ibid, 29.

¹⁵² Ibid, 26.

¹⁵³ Ku, Manalansan, and Mannur, *Eating Asian America*, 3.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

want to be associated with any of it, like coming from a different culture and all that stuff. It sucks to say that I even felt that way, but I felt ashamed and I felt like people just never understood me. And I hated not being understood.”¹⁵⁵ Brittany echoed Janny’s sentiments, saying that “I felt like I needed to be as white as I had to be,” which entailed statements like “I’m Asian, but I’m not really Asian” and disavowals of her interests in Asian cultural productions like Korean dramas and anime.¹⁵⁶ Geneve spoke at length about the psychological harm enacted by her ultimately unsuccessful attempts at assimilation:

...when I was younger, a lot of people were like, “I wouldn’t date you because you’re Asian” or “I don’t like Asians.” I think that really is an attack on your self-worth, right? If you’re growing up in a very white community, and you’re already trying your hardest to fit into white stereotypes to look like the white people that you know, and then to have someone tell you—even if you on the outside are dressed exactly like your white friends, and even physical appearance-wise you try to do your hair, your makeup a certain way to look really white—that you still can’t fit in. That you still aren’t enough. I think that’s a really big hit on self-confidence.¹⁵⁷

Geneve described her attempts to visually present “on the outside” as “white” through clothing choices, hair-styling, and cosmetics. Nevertheless, as Geneve concluded, the interlinked expectations of race and gender overrode any aspirations towards “whiteness.”

Regional racial formations of Asian Americans across Idaho also featured the interplay between the dominant race and religion—whiteness and the Church of Latter-day Saints—which often modulated belonging for Asian Americans that belonged to neither category.¹⁵⁸ While Latter-day Saints have historically faced persecution, my narrators described a very different kind of

¹⁵⁵ Bui, interview on July 6, 2020, 30.

¹⁵⁶ Yann, interview on July 27, 2020, 27, 33.

¹⁵⁷ Lau, 34.

¹⁵⁸ According to the 2014 Religious Landscape Study by Pew Research Center, the Latter-day Saints Church is one of the largest religions in Idaho, comprising 19 percent of the population. Other large religious groups include various denominations of Evangelical Protestants (cumulatively 21 percent of the population) and Mainline Protestants (cumulatively 16 percent of the population). From Pew Research Center, “Adults in Idaho,” *Religious Landscape Study*, 2014, <https://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/state/idaho/>.

social ordering unfolding across their classrooms and neighborhoods. Of her experiences at Ustick Elementary in Boise in the mid-2000s, Himani said, "...that's when racism started. That's where I felt way out of place. I had no friends."¹⁵⁹ She went on to describe an experience where a white Latter-day Saints classmate came to her house, when suddenly the classmate saw her family's temple for Ganesh, as Himani's family is Hindu. Himani recalled:

And then she was sitting there for a second. And she started crying. And she's like, "I want to go home right now" and freaked out. And I was like, "Are you okay? Why? Are you okay?" And she's like, "I've just never seen other gods." She'd never even seen other gods than Jesus, because she grew up Mormon. And that was actually very common in the Ustick area. Most of the Mormon kids just fully did not understand. Her mom picked her up.

And then the next day at school, a bunch of the girls came over and were like, "Himani, is it true your god has an elephant face?" I was like, "Yeah." And then they started laughing and pointing and walked away and stuff. It was a lot of children not understanding other religions and other cultures, so making fun of them, and at the same time, making fun of me.¹⁶⁰

Although not all Latter-day Saints are white—Yun's family members are Korean and Latter-day Saints, for example—Himani nevertheless linked "racism" with her experience with the Latter-day Saints classmate.

The Church of Latter-day Saints has struggled with its own histories of racial exclusion. As historian Paul Reeve argues, throughout the nineteenth century, the Protestant majority often racialized Latter-day Saints alongside Asian Americans, particularly Chinese Americans. While Latter-day Saints in the 1850s embraced evangelizing Asians and Asian Americans, by the 1890s, Church publications began explicitly racializing Chinese people as "mongrel[s]" and "villainous" as a means of attaining whiteness.¹⁶¹ Although the Church has gradually diversified in its racial makeup—mostly through its international missionary outreach, including to Asia, which expanded

¹⁵⁹ Patel, interview on July 13, 2020, 23.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid, 24.

¹⁶¹ W. Paul Reeve, "Oriental, White, and Mormon," in *Religion of a Different Color: Race and the Mormon Struggle for Whiteness* (Oxford, England: Oxford Scholarship Online, 2015), 28-41.

beginning in the 1950s—its leadership has remained overwhelmingly white and male. Only in 2018 did Gerrit Gong break into the “upper echelons” of Church leadership as its first Asian American and non-white Apostle.¹⁶²

Beyond the Latter-day Saints Church, many religious institutions remained racially and ethnically segmented in the greater Boise area. Many of my narrators that practiced an organized religion attended services at majority-Asian American churches and temples, including Eric and his family with the majority-Vietnamese Linh Thuu Buddhist Temple, founded in 1992, as well as Alex and his family with the temple Wat Idahophoxaiyaraam, which was founded by Idaho’s Lao community in 2006. As such, public schools constituted one of the primary spaces for white, Latter-day Saints children to interact with non-white children of other faiths. However, as Himani’s experience demonstrates, public schools as interpersonal meeting points across lines of race and religion often failed to break down cultural and racial boundaries, instead reinforcing division, exclusion, and stigmatization.

Geneve’s family, who resided in a neighborhood heavily populated by Latter-day Saints, did not practice any religions. Geneve associated the social dominance of Latter-day Saints with her own feelings of exclusion:

[I]t was always like there was an inner circle that you can never tap into. And you didn't really know why. And it could be maybe their family told them they couldn't be friends with me, or maybe it was just an unconscious bias in your mind.

... I was never the girl that everyone wanted to be friends with. I was the girl that wanted to be friends with the people that everyone wanted to be friends with, right? I was never sitting in the middle of the seat. I was always sitting one seat behind or looking in. You know? That's kind of how it felt like, now that I think about it. I still remember there were two girls that I rode the school bus with, and they always sat together, and I just sat behind them. And we were friends. But they were obviously closer.¹⁶³

¹⁶² Christina Caron, “Mormon Church Selects 2 Senior Leaders, and Neither Is a White American,” *The New York Times*, April 2, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/02/us/mormon-church-minority-leaders.html>.

¹⁶³ Lau, 29.

In this poignant passage, Geneve does not explicitly specify her race as the cause of her social isolation. Instead, like Alex’s tone of inevitable “truths” of Thai culinary preeminence over other Southeast Asian cuisines, there is an implicit inevitability to Geneve’s language: in the Latter-day Saints-dominated social ordering of Boise adolescents, Asian Americans like Geneve were—quite literally in Geneve’s example of the bus—on the outside “looking in.”

While interactions with peers shaped regional racial formations, teachers, administrators, and curricula in the public education system also configured and reinforced racialization on an institutional level. Many narrators encountered culturally insensitive teachers and administrators throughout their time in Idaho. For example, one of Himani’s teachers at Franklin Elementary School would often try to push her in English-language learner (ELL) classes, even though Himani understood English.¹⁶⁴ When Janny was in either first or second grade at Frontier Elementary School, a teacher asked Janny to bring snacks to a class party. However, when Janny tried to bring shrimp chips, a snack commonly found in Asian grocery stores, the teacher ridiculed her and told her to “just bring something else,” like celery and peanut butter; the teacher then got upset with Janny for not serving the celery and peanut butter “properly.”¹⁶⁵ Himani’s teacher thus leaned on the stereotype of Asians as “perpetual foreigners,” while Janny’s teacher fostered a classroom environment hostile to even a mild expression of Asian culture.¹⁶⁶

Outside of racialization perpetuated by some teachers, every single school-aged narrator noted the dearth of Asian and Asian American history in their classrooms. Some narrators mentioned briefly learning about Chinese American railroad workers, Japanese American internees, and the War in Vietnam through general U.S. history classes in middle and high school.

¹⁶⁴ Patel, interview on July 13, 2020, 27.

¹⁶⁵ Bui, interview on July 6, 2020, 21.

¹⁶⁶ Tuan, *Forever Foreigners or Honorary Whites?*

However, the lack of public education about Asia and Asian America—especially outside of China, Japan, and Vietnam—resulted in, for Alex, “hav[ing] to explain myself a lot, about where I came from. Where I was at on the map.”¹⁶⁷

Similarly, Brittany laid out a hierarchy of awareness toward Southeast Asia—mostly based on rudimentary understandings of food, rather than any particular country’s history—with Cambodia and Laos at the bottom:

And of course, throughout school, and of course, in general, growing up in Idaho, people didn’t know about Cambodia, Laos. They kind of know about Thailand, but not. They kind of start learning about Vietnam, because I think Vietnamese foods are becoming more popular. So they’re like, “Oh yeah, ‘foe’ [mispronunciation of pho].” And you’re like, “No [shakes head].”¹⁶⁸

Given the general ignorance towards Southeast Asia, and especially towards her own Cambodian heritage, Brittany recounted her feelings of disappointment in an eighth-grade world geography class at Meridian Middle School, when the teacher selected another student to present on Cambodia:

... I was super jealous. I was like, “I’m Cambodian. I know everything that I need to know.” And I watched that kid butcher his presentation, and I’m like, “Ugh. That’s it. That’s all people will get to know.”¹⁶⁹

The phrase “that’s all people will get to know” underscored Brittany’s own understanding of the rarity of Asian and Asian American education in Idaho classrooms: there would be only one opportunity most of her classmates would learn about Cambodia, and it would be from an eighth grader’s “butcher[ed]” presentation.

While some high school classes mentioned the Vietnam War, my narrators found the material rushed and centered on American soldiers’ experiences. Says Janny, who attended

¹⁶⁷ Bounyavong, interview on July 12, 2020, 48.

¹⁶⁸ Yann, interview on July 27, 2020, 33.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid, 32.

Centennial High School from 2009 to 2014, “I definitely feel like I remember learning about the Vietnam War, but it wasn't a whole week of learning about the Vietnam War. It was like, ‘Vietnam War happened this and this time. We [the United States] helped them.’ And then that was it, ‘moving on’ type of thing.”¹⁷⁰ Trinh, who attended Eagle High School from 2013 to 2016, and Eric, who attended Renaissance High School from 2015 until 2020, both noted the lessons’ focus on “the American perspective” and never a “Vietnamese American perspective.”¹⁷¹ As Yen Le Espiritu argues, “[P]ublic discussions of the Vietnam War often skip over the history of militarized violence inflicted on Vietnam and its people,” unlinking the deeply intimate connections between war and the migrations of families like Trinh’s and Eric’s.¹⁷² For example, Eric recalled arguing with a non-Vietnamese classmate about the details of the Vietnam War. The classmate asserted, “My grandfather fought in the war, so I should know,” to which Eric replied, “Well, my grandfather also fought in the war. So I know.”¹⁷³ In this exchange, Eric’s classmate engaged in the act of “decoupling” militarism and migration, presuming that his grandfather’s military service acted as the ultimate authority over the war in Vietnam with little regard to Eric’s own family history.¹⁷⁴

Resisting and reformulating racial formations (2000s – 2010s)

For many of the school-aged narrators, the overwhelming sense of “whiteness” and racialization—with relation to physical features, religion, teachers’ dictates, and otherwise—led them to seek out more “diverse” communities. Especially throughout high school and college, forming friendships with other people of color—or perhaps people with “cultures” outside the

¹⁷⁰ Bui, interview on July 24, 2020, 47.

¹⁷¹ Nguyen, interview on July 20, 2020, 48; Trinh, 19.

¹⁷² Espiritu, *Body Counts*, 17-18.

¹⁷³ Nguyen, interview on July 20, 2020, 49.

¹⁷⁴ Espiritu, *Body Counts*, 17.

dominant white, Latter-day Saints culture—constituted resistance against the prevailing whiteness they encountered. Alex described his closest friends as “all foreign” and of various Asian, Latin American, African, and Middle Eastern backgrounds, with the exception of one “open-minded,” “Caucasian” friend.¹⁷⁵ Alex explained, “People who share culture get people who have culture. And it's a different energy, something about it. ... It's your thoughts. It's how you were raised, you know. ... [K]ids without culture interact differently, let me just say that.”¹⁷⁶ Who exactly were the “people who have culture,” as opposed to those “without culture”? As critical race theorists like Eduardo Bonilla-Silva have critiqued, whiteness exercises racial domination invisibly, such as in the naming of historically Black colleges and universities as “HBCUs” without naming historically white colleges and universities “HWCUs.”¹⁷⁷ On one hand, Alex’s description of his friends reified both white cultural invisibility and the “perpetual foreigner” stereotype ascribed to Asian Americans. At the same time, his language suggested a resistive pride in cultural heritage and a subversive racial formation of solidarities among young people of “culture.”

The idea of “having culture” was much more fraught for GB and Paige, transracial Chinese adoptees with white families. Both their parents introduced some Chinese culture to them, ranging from red envelopes for Lunar New Year in Paige’s family to private Mandarin lessons for GB.¹⁷⁸ Paige also participated in an adoption group in Boise with other Chinese adoptees.¹⁷⁹ Of course, given the immense cultural diversity and cultural dynamism within China, the more fixed “Chinese culture” experienced by GB and Paige in twenty-first century Idaho, largely filtered through their adoption communities and language teachers, was a construction in of itself. Nevertheless, neither

¹⁷⁵ Bounyavong, interview on July 12, 2020, 28.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid, 29.

¹⁷⁷ Bonilla-Silva, “The invisible weight of whiteness,” 173-194.

¹⁷⁸ Harwood, 16; Burgert, interview on August 1, 2020, 17.

¹⁷⁹ Harwood, 17-18.

felt that their parents nor they themselves connected fully with the Chinese culture that they learned about. Paige appreciated that her mother didn't "appropriate[]" Chinese culture from a "white American perspective,"¹⁸⁰ while Paige herself also felt cautious about how she interacted with Chinese culture: "I am always careful that I don't want to appropriate anything, and I want to be respectful to that, because it's not my culture. My culture is the American culture, right?"¹⁸¹ GB's Mandarin teachers were Chinese immigrant women in Idaho Falls. GB felt "put in the middle" by one of her Mandarin teacher's "distaste" for her American heritage, an experience that contributed to GB's sense that she did not "feel Chinese," and instead would "always feel American."¹⁸² Thus, for both GB and Paige, a harsh distinction laid between "Chinese" and "American."

GB and Paige felt more comfortable identifying as Asian Americans as opposed to purely "Chinese" or "Asian," and thus sought to create community centered around people of color, rather than presumed shared ethnic heritage. Paige, whose friends are "[d]efinitely majority POC" and otherwise "queer in some way," explained that she preferred meeting people with "diverse experiences."¹⁸³ She explained that "white and straight, cisgendered" people from Idaho had "a lot of experiences that I already have had in my life. And so it's not anything new when I speak to them."¹⁸⁴

Meanwhile, GB felt connected with the Latinx community of Idaho Falls. Idaho has always had a long history of Latinx settlement, dating to as early as Idaho's territorial period in the 1860s with the arrival of Mexican, Chilean, and Peruvian miners, muleteers, and cowboys.¹⁸⁵ Idaho's

¹⁸⁰ Ibid, 16.

¹⁸¹ Ibid, 25.

¹⁸² Burgert, interview on August 1, 2020, 18, 27.

¹⁸³ Harwood, 23.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid.

¹⁸⁵ Errol D. Jones, "Latinos in Idaho: Making Their Way in the Gem State," in Sowards, *Idaho's Place*, 203.

agricultural industry has drawn Latinx farm laborers for over a century, including through the first (1917-19) and second bracero programs (1942-48).¹⁸⁶ According to the 2010 census, about 11 percent of the Idaho Falls population was Latinx, while 0.7 percent of the population is Asian.¹⁸⁷ Says GB, “I have had so many really close friends be in that [Latinx] community, because I think when you're one of the only races in one community, you kind of gravitate towards other people of color. And so I gravitated towards Latinx kind of friend groups and even the people I dated, they were Latinx, and so I've been in their communities a lot.”¹⁸⁸

Although Yun was not an adoptee, she also sought to foster friendships centered on racial solidarity. Yun described the heritage of her current friends as Middle Eastern, Mexican, and Asian, because she wanted to befriend people who “are more similar to me,” in contrast to her “few white friends.” Although the groups Yun specified were not all inherently “similar”—in terms of culture and race—to her, she emphasized the sense of solidarity and community that she felt with “people of color” and “marginalized people”: “I think I can relate a lot more in a lot of different levels with people of color and people in similar situations as I am, than the majority of the white people. ...[I]t's a lot more fun and it's easier to be myself...and express my heritage and culture.”¹⁸⁹

While my narrators embedded themselves in ethnically and racially diverse social circles, most self-identified as Asian American. The term “Asian American” emerged as a political identity during the Civil Rights Movement. In contrast to older terms like “Oriental” and “Asiatic” that conflated all Asian American experiences and culture, Asian American activists instead coined

¹⁸⁶ Ibid, 203-209.

¹⁸⁷ U.S. Census Bureau, Census 2010.

¹⁸⁸ Burgert, interview on August 1, 2020, 29.

¹⁸⁹ Yun, interview on August 9, 2020, 17.

“Asian American” to express pan-ethnic solidarity against racism.¹⁹⁰ However, almost all of my narrators expressed some ambivalence towards identification as “Asian American.” Geneve, Himani, Paige, and GB all said that the term felt too broad, given the immense cultural diversity and political tensions between countries in Asia.¹⁹¹ Indeed, most narrators preferred more specific identifications based on ethnicity. Eric explained that he only identified as Asian American when speaking to white people. As Eric stated,

[I]f I'm interacting with other Asians, I'll identify as Vietnamese American, just distinguish the type of Asian I am. Whenever I'm interacting directly with Caucasian people, I'll say I'm Asian American. Most of the time I won't distinguish what type of Asian I am, because mostly I don't think it's important information, unless they ask for it. Most of the time, I think they're ignorant of the type of Asian too.¹⁹²

Despite the antiracist origins of “Asian American,” Eric’s usage of the term aligned more closely with the meaning of “Oriental”: an undistinguishable mass of Asians lumped together. Indeed, none of the narrators mentioned the history of the term “Asian American,” perhaps reflecting its limitations in politically mobilizing Asian Americans in Idaho.

For several narrators, resisting the marginalization and exclusion of Asian Americans in Idaho meant leaving the state. Geneve, who attends Boston University, said she far preferred living in the “more diverse” city of Boston.¹⁹³ Yun’s family was considering leaving Twin Falls for Atlanta, Georgia, because of its comparatively larger Korean American community.¹⁹⁴ Janny also wanted to move to a larger city, because “Boise is a little too small for me and not as diverse as I want it to be.”¹⁹⁵

¹⁹⁰ Nazli Kibria, “The contested meanings of ‘Asian American’: Racial dilemmas in the contemporary US,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 21, no. 5 (1998): 943.

¹⁹¹ Burgert, interview on August 1, 2020, 37; Patel, interview on July 13, 2020, 35; Lau, 41; Harwood, 25.

¹⁹² Nguyen, interview on July 1, 2020, 37.

¹⁹³ Lau, 42.

¹⁹⁴ Yun, interview on January 12, 2021, 30.

¹⁹⁵ Bui, interview on July 6, 2020, 36.

V. CONCLUSION

Through conducting this oral history research and writing this essay, I have aimed to make sense of the time, space, and place of my upbringing, especially amid the absence of research on Asian Americans in Idaho after 1965. My narrators' interviews—while only skimming the surface of Asian American perspectives in Idaho—illuminate the complex junctures of varied historical forces at the heart of Asian Americans migration and settlement in Idaho. Operating synchronously with other historical forces like U.S. military interventionism and adoption, the 1965 Immigration Act opened large-scale Asian migration to the U.S. Businesses and institutions across the state—such as churches, refugee resettlement programs, and tech companies—helped facilitate the unparalleled growth of Idaho's Asian American population. In Idaho, narrators grappled with the meanings of race in their daily lives, especially across schools and the workplace. Although whites constituted the racial majority in the state, the category of whiteness itself remained embattled. Nevertheless, questions of race—alongside gender, ethnicity, class, and religion—upheld power imbalances that marginalized Asian American narrators in distinctive ways. By the late 2010s, the younger generation of narrators evoked new and resistive regional racial formations, of an Asian American identity and community unbounded by race and ethnicity.

More than just filling an archival gap, this research elucidates the importance of race and migration in the making of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century histories of the U.S. West. In particular, while traditional accounts of Asian American history, especially in the West, focus on California and the Pacific Northwest, this research expands notions of the modern West to inland states like Idaho. In many ways, Idaho's Asian American history intertwines with broader histories of the West, from shared histories of mining and frontier settlement, to regional migrations between neighboring states like Washington and Oregon, to the religious ties between

Utah and Idaho, and even to Idaho's proximity to Silicon Valley, which drove a much smaller scale version of tech-based migration resonant with its West Coast neighbors to Idaho.

Beyond the West, Idaho's Asian American history remains entangled within the history of the nation, including the making and undoing of racially restrictive immigration laws; interstate and international migrations forged by war, militarism, and race; and ever-fraught concerns over belonging in a time of supposed post-racialism. To understand the West and the nation, then, requires attention to the constitutive parts of the whole.

The local focus of this research, too, matters abundantly, if only because of this rather obvious point: The experiences of a Vietnamese American in Boise are not the same as those of a Vietnamese American in Orange County, and neither are the same as the experiences of a Vietnamese American in New Orleans. Of course, the experiences of Vietnamese Americans within Boise are not identical either. The value of place-based research, then, is in considering the details of historical forces across multiple planes, a collision of individual, regional, national, and transnational histories unfolding all at once and sometimes in contradiction.

Asian American history in Idaho is a living, breathing history—of migration, of militarism, of racial formation, and of contested belonging—that is still writing itself. Indeed, if, as Walt Whitman says, an individual contains multitudes, then the 17 oral histories I collected contained multitudes upon multitudes. There were far too many topics that I could not cover in the space of this essay: love for grandparents and grandchildren, gender-affirming surgeries and queer community-building, dreams of curing cancer and directing films and completing fine arts degrees, and more. In recent years, Idaho's communities of color have continued to grow, especially aided by refugee resettlement programs in Boise, Twin Falls, and other towns in Idaho. Migrants and refugees from Myanmar, Bhutan, Nepal, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Nigeria, Syria, and

many other countries have come to Idaho, and they will continue to challenge and reshape the extant contours of racial formation in Idaho.¹⁹⁶ There are more histories to tell—past, present, and future—of the dynamism of Asian Americans in Idaho. I look forward to these future elaborations.

Word Count: 12,488

¹⁹⁶ Idaho Office for Refugees, “About Refugees in Idaho,” accessed March 19, 2021, <https://www.idahorefugees.org/resettlement-in-idaho.html>.

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Finally, I am grateful to everyone who has been a part of my last four years at Yale. It has been a privilege to learn and grow with you all.

Appendix – Oral History Narrators List

Alexander Bounyavong

Born in 1995 in Boise, Idaho. Currently a dance instructor and restaurant worker at his family's restaurant. His parents came to the U.S. as Laotian refugees; his father came first to Las Vegas and then Boise in the mid-1980s, and his mother came to Boise in 1988.

Arun Gupta

Born in 1950 in Bijnor, Uttar Pradesh, India. Currently retired; founder of Hare Krishna temple in Boise. First migrated to Manhattan, Kansas, as a student in January 1969, and moved to Boise in 1986 to work at Hewlett-Packard (HP).

Brittany Yann

Born in 1997 in Oakland, California. Currently working at KQED radio station in the Bay Area. Her parents came to the U.S. as Cambodian refugees; her father came to California in the late 1970s and her mother came to New Jersey in 1985, then California shortly after. Brittany, her brother, and her mother moved to Meridian, Idaho, in 2008. Brittany moved back to the Bay Area in the late 2010s.

Eric Nguyen

Born in 2001 in Boise, Idaho. Currently a student at Yale University. His father's side of the family, including his father, migrated to Boise in the early 1990s as a result of his grandfather's assistance to the U.S. military during the American War in Vietnam. His mother came to Boise in 2001. (His cousin Janny Bui is also part of this project.)

Geneve Lau

Born in 1999 in Boise, Idaho. Currently a student at Boston University. After one of Geneve's paternal uncles first migrated to Boise, Geneve's parents came to Boise in 1996 or 1997 and opened their restaurant shortly after.

GB

Born in 2001 in Gaoyou, China. Currently a student at Boise State University. GB was adopted in 2001 by a family in Idaho Falls, Idaho.

Himani Patel

Born in 1998 in Gujarat, India. Currently a master's student at University of Denver. After her extended family members came to the U.S. (including to Idaho), Himani and her parents migrated to Portland and then Boise in 2001. Shortly after, Himani's family owned an Indian grocery store, and more recently now co-own a motel in Idaho.

Janny Bui

Born in 1996 in Fountain Valley, California. Currently a content creator at a startup marketing company based in Boise. Her mother's side of the family, including her grandfather, migrated to

Boise in the early 1990s as a result of her grandfather's assistance to the U.S. military during the American War in Vietnam. Her mother moved from Boise to California in the 1990s, then moved back to Boise by 2003. (Janny's cousin Eric Nguyen is also part of this project.)

Manny Jimenez

Born in 1950 in Baguio City, Philippines. Currently retired. Migrated to Hawai'i as a student in 1969, served in the Navy during the War in Vietnam, and moved around the U.S. until MicronPC recruited him to work in Boise in 1996. He then worked for HP from 1999 until he retired.

Paige Harwood

Born in 2001 in Yangzhou, China. Currently a student at Boise State University. Paige was adopted in 2002 by a family in Boise, Idaho.

Puja Batchu

Born in 2001 in Boise, Idaho. Currently a student at Utah State University. Her father, who is from a village near Hyderabad, India, first migrated in 1991 to New Orleans, Louisiana, as a student. Her mother is from Chandrapur, India. Her parents married in India in 1995 or 1996, then migrated together to Detroit and at some point lived in Memphis, Tennessee. They settled in Boise around the late 1990s or early 2000s.

Trinh

Born in 1999 in Boise, Idaho. Recently graduated from University of Idaho. Trinh's paternal grandparents and father migrated to Boise around 1979 or 1980 as Vietnamese refugees. Trinh's father and mother met in Vietnam in 1998, and they came to Boise together the same year. (Trinh is their last name and the name they suggested I use for them, although they are also okay being addressed as Erica as well.)

Yul Kim

Born in 1964 in Boston, Massachusetts. Currently a software engineer at HP. Yul's father served as a liaison to the U.S. military during the Korean War. His parents married in 1957, his father migrated to the U.S. in 1958, and his mother migrated in 1959. After moving around, they settled in the suburbs of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, where Yul grew up. Yul has been working for HP's Boise division since 1992.

Yun

Born in 2000 in South Korea. Because her family are Latter-day Saints, Yun's family migrated to Utah when Yun was young. They then moved to Rexburg, Idaho, in 2009 or 2010, and then Twin Falls, Idaho, by the time Yun was in middle school. (Yun is a pseudonym.)

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Bibliographic Essay

I was first introduced to the methodology of oral history in my sophomore year of college through Professor Mary Lui's lecture class "Asian American History, 1800–Present." For a class assignment, I interviewed a Vietnamese American classmate at Yale, and I quickly grew to love the practice and ethos of oral history, which, through the centering of family histories, life experiences, and individual voices, enriches our understandings of broad historical forces.

In particular, scholars like Gary Okihiro have argued that oral histories are invaluable to the writing of ethnic history:

Oral history has been shown to be an invaluable means by which to recover the past of the inarticulate—women, the working class, ethnic and racial minorities, and people in non-literate societies—because these groups rarely leave written records of their lives; the meager documentary evidence about them is usually biased against them and rarely penetrates to the ideational, and they have largely been ignored by historians who view history in terms of "big men" and "important" events.¹⁹⁷

Rooted in the ethnic studies movements of the 1970s, the practice of ethnic history in the U.S. is relatively young. The comparatively longer *durée* of "big men"-centric history has excluded many of the voices of people of color and other marginalized communities. As such, oral history constitutes an incredibly important and rich method of filling in the gaps of the historical record, particularly as it relates to the writing of ethnic history.

In my own life, I have intensely felt what it means to lack historical representation. As an Asian American, I grew up in Idaho as one of the only people (and women) of color in a state that is 90 percent white—an experience that is perhaps best summarized as always feeling like an anomaly. My fourth grade Idaho history class briefly mentioned Chinese miners in the 1800s, with little relevance to the present day, while my high school history classes only marginally discussed

¹⁹⁷ Gary Y. Okihiro, "Oral History and the Writing of Ethnic History: A Reconnaissance into Method and Theory," *The Oral History Review* 9, no. 1 (1981): 42.

Asian American history up until World War II—a history that did not quite feel like my own, given that my parents migrated to the U.S. in the 1990s.

As it turns out, part of the reason my teachers had very little to say about people like me is that researchers and academics, too, have had little to say. Over the summer of 2020, I came across the Asian American Comparative Collection (AACC), a University of Idaho-based archive dedicated to Asian American history in Idaho. At first, I was thrilled by the fact that such a collection even existed. However, as I perused their materials, I realized the collection was almost entirely centered on early Asian American history in Idaho—namely, in relation to the Chinese and Japanese American populations that first arrived in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as well as Japanese American carceral experiences in Minidoka, Idaho. Since 1965, with the end of racially restrictive immigration quotas, the Asian American population in Idaho and nationally has grown tremendously, both in size and diversity—a reality the AACC devoted far less attention towards.

The disproportionate academic attention to early Asian American history in Idaho also extends beyond the AACC. The 2014 book *Idaho's Place: A New History of the Gem State*, for example, bills itself as an anthology of “the most current and original writing” on Idaho.¹⁹⁸ However, *Idaho's Place* contains only one chapter on Idaho’s “ethnic history,” focusing exclusively on Chinese migration and settlement from the 1860s to the early 1900s and Japanese American history from the early 1900s to the 1950s.¹⁹⁹ In fact, the collection’s few references to post-1965 Asian American history take on a somewhat disingenuous tone of optimism towards racial relations in Idaho. Says Laurie Mercier, author of the chapter on Idaho’s ethnic history:

¹⁹⁸ University of Washington Press, “Idaho's Place: A New History of the Gem State,” accessed November 29, 2020, <https://uwapress.uw.edu/book/9780295995564/idahos-place/>.

¹⁹⁹ Laurie Mercier, “Confronting Race and Creating Community: Idaho’s Ethnic History,” in *Idaho's Place: A New History of the Gem State*, ed. Adam M. Sowards (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2014), 167–197.

Many residents have actively fought against and defeated racist groups in their communities. The Center for Public Policy and Administration at Boise State University found in a 1999 survey that racial prejudice had declined and attitudes toward ethnic and religious minorities had improved since a previous 1988 survey...And many ethnic groups and communities have sought to honor their heritage, establishing in recent years the Black History, Basque, and Ontario multiethnic cultural museums. These institutions and a growing interest in ethnic celebrations, foods, and festivals highlight both the enduring legacies and the new contributions of Idaho's ethnic groups.²⁰⁰

The sanguine tone Mercier employs towards “defeated racist groups,” “declining” racial prejudice, and “growing interest” in “ethnic” life insinuates Idaho has achieved or is close to achieving post-racial, multicultural harmony—a claim that was not true for myself nor other Asian Americans I grew up with.

It was within this framework that I designed my oral history project, *Oral Histories of the Post-1965 Lives of Asian Americans in Idaho*. Over the summer of 2020, I conducted 17 oral history interviews with Asian Americans across Idaho, almost all of whom could trace their family histories in the U.S. and Idaho to after 1965. Due to COVID-19, I conducted all of my interviews over Zoom. I contacted participants by reaching out to personal connections, local businesses, and various organizations. The interviewees, also known as “narrators,” span a wide range of ethnicities, ages, forms of employment, migration backgrounds, and sexualities. These interviews will be archived at the AACC, where they will be freely accessible to future researchers, and I am very grateful to the AACC staff, and particularly Renae Campbell, for all the support and advice they have lent to this project. Although I did not intend for this project to become my senior essay, with my advisor Mary Lui’s encouragement, I concluded that writing this essay could be of great importance to future researchers and anyone else who shared an interest in this history. In particular, I hope that this essay, which bridges my own familiarity with Asian American history

²⁰⁰ Ibid, 192.

and Idaho's culture, can be a helpful resource for other people trying to navigate the 40 hours of interviews that I collected.

While these oral histories represent many voices that have been traditionally left out of Idaho's historical narratives, there are several limitations to my collection of interviews. Most fundamentally, with only 17 interviews and 19 narrators out of 25,000 Asian Americans in Idaho, these interviews can not be understood as representative by any means. For example, none of my narrators are multiracial, and several ethnicities and nationalities are not represented by these interviews. In addition, most narrators tended to be young (between the ages of 18 to 25) and concentrated around Boise. Finally, almost all of my narrators spoke at length about their experiences with racial discrimination and microaggressions, which may reflect their own interests and motivations in this project, as opposed to the prevalence of racism in Idaho. For myself, the realities of an incredibly small "sample size" (so to speak) pose challenges for articulating my argument: I have to, at times, write from a bird's-eye view about Asian American history in Idaho, yet also avoid over-generalizing. Of course, crafting an overarching narrative based on individual stories is always the problem of oral history and history more generally. As such, I have focused on specific themes that have emerged through the oral histories and used secondary sources to fill in gaps where possible.

To help structure my essay, I have consulted a mix of academic works on Asian American history not specific to Idaho; pre-1965, Idaho-specific works; and post-1965, Idaho-specific works. For general Asian American history, *The Oxford Handbook of Asian American History* has been extremely helpful in providing overviews and reading lists on various strains of Asian American history.²⁰¹ In addition, Wendy Cheng's research on regional racial formations—albeit from a

²⁰¹ David K. Yoo and Eiichiro Azuma, *The Oxford Handbook of Asian American History* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2016).

California context—has been instructive for conceptualizing my own argument. Cheng defines regional racial formations as “place-specific processes of racial formation, in which locally accepted racial orders and hierarchies complicate and sometimes challenge hegemonic ideologies and facile notions of race.”²⁰² Questions that I am particularly interested in answering with my research include: What does regional racial formation look like in the context of Idaho (and/or Boise) over the past three to four decades? What are the historical forces—or “sedimentation,” in Cheng’s parlance—that shape this formation?

An abundance of literature on Idaho’s early Asian American history can help answer these questions. In particular, I found Laura Mercier’s book chapter “Confronting Race and Creating Community: Idaho’s Ethnic History”²⁰³ (albeit somewhat problematic for its intimations of Idaho’s racial progress, as mentioned previously), as well as Robert C. Sims’s,²⁰⁴ Louis Fiset’s,²⁰⁵ and Eric L. Muller’s²⁰⁶ writings on Japanese American experiences in Idaho during World War II, to be particularly informative. These works skim the surface of secondary literature on early Asian American history in Idaho, but I believe they provide ample evidence and explanation for my essay’s historical background section.

Far less writing on post-1965 Asian American history in Idaho exists. In her 2017 article “Across the Pacific,” Kathleen Rubinow Hodges provides an extremely detailed history of Vietnamese Americans in Boise, relying on a mix of interviews with community members and

²⁰² Wendy Cheng, *Chang’s Next Door to the Díazes: Remapping Race in Suburban California* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 10.

²⁰³ Mercier, “Confronting Race and Creating Community.”

²⁰⁴ Robert C. Sims, “The ‘Free Zone’ Nikkei: Japanese Americans in Idaho and Eastern Oregon in World War II,” in *Nikkei in the Pacific Northwest: Japanese Americans and Japanese Canadians in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Louis Fiset and Gail M. Nomura (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2005), 236-253.

²⁰⁵ Louis Fiset, “Thinning, Topping, and Loading: Japanese Americans and Beet Sugar in World War II,” *The Pacific Northwest Quarterly* 90, no. 3 (1999): 123-139.

²⁰⁶ Eric L. Muller, “The Minidoka Draft Resisters in a Federal Kangaroo Court,” in Fiset and Nomura, *Nikkei in the Pacific Northwest*, 171-189.

newspaper articles to explicate the growth and decline of Boise’s Vietnamese community between 1975 to 2017.²⁰⁷ Janet French’s 2002 master’s thesis, “The Invisible Immigrants: A History of the South Asian Indian Community in Boise, Idaho,” similarly combines oral history and local news articles to provide a history of Indian Americans that settled in Boise between 1975 to 1998.²⁰⁸ The aforementioned book *Idaho’s Place* also offers broader political, religious, and social context for Idaho’s recent history, albeit without an explicit focus on Asian Americans in Idaho.²⁰⁹ The dearth of post-1965 writings has been challenging for me, since I need to present my research historically (and *not* sociologically).

COVID-19 also presented many difficulties for my research, especially when it came to finding Idaho-specific, post-1965 secondary literature. I located a few other resources on Asian American history in Idaho at my local public library in Boise and the Boise State University (BSU) archives, including “The influence of Asians in Idaho history” (1964-2000), “Other faces, other lives: Asian Americans in Idaho” (1990), and “Idaho’s history of human rights” (2004). However, due to COVID-19, I was unable to access these works. In fact, the only way I was able to access Janet French’s master’s thesis (which is contained at BSU) was by contacting her directly; unfortunately, because the oral histories she collected are stored at BSU, I could not access the oral histories themselves. (I also tried contacting Kathleen Rubinow Hodges for her interviews with Vietnamese Americans in Boise, but I never got a response.)

Although I do feel slightly constrained by the extant/available secondary literature on these topics, I believe my oral history interviews will provide a level of personal insight to these

²⁰⁷ Kathleen Rubinow Hodges, “Across the Pacific,” *Investigate Boise Community Research Series* 8 (2017): 26-45.

²⁰⁸ Janet French, “The Invisible Immigrants: A History of the South Asian Indian Community in Boise, Idaho,” MA Thesis (Boise State University, 2002).

²⁰⁹ Adam M. Sowards (ed.), *Idaho’s Place: A New History of the Gem State*, (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2014).

questions that no other secondary literature thus far has been able to address. There is only one Asian American-centered oral history collection in Idaho’s state archives: the *Chinese in Idaho* oral history collection.²¹⁰ The collection, based on interviews from 1976 to 1977, is—again—focused on early Chinese American residents from the early twentieth century. In fact, most of the *Chinese in Idaho* interviewees are not even Chinese. Because the voices of Asian Americans themselves are largely absent from Idaho’s historical record, I am extremely grateful to all the narrators who have shared their life experiences with me and the archive. This is a project that places at front and center the voices of Asian Americans in Idaho, and I hope that my essay and my research can be a valuable resource for educators, historians, and most importantly, other people of color in Idaho struggling with the ever-salient questions of race, personhood, and place.

²¹⁰ Idaho State Historical Society, “Oral History,” accessed February 10, 2021, <https://history.idaho.gov/collections/oral-history/>.

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