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Names and labels: Constructing and Contesting Asian American and Ethnonational Identities in a Dance Scene.

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Names and Labels:

Constructing and contesting Asian American and ethno-national identities¹

Introduction

For decades, scholars of race and ethnicity have emphasized the social construction of racial and ethnic categories and symbolic boundaries between groups (Barth, 1969; Hall, 1992; Omi and Winant, 1994). Racial and ethnic categories and labels—both externally imposed and internally adopted—have shifted dramatically over time and continue to evolve. Working with and researching Asian American youth and young adults, one thing that becomes immediately clear is that the very term “Asian American” brings along with it many issues requiring careful consideration. Simply applying that label without further explanation risks inaccurately implying a homogeneity among the varied groups that comprise “Asian America.” The Asian American population is diverse, with multiple ethno-national groups represented, groups marked by significant differences in colonial and immigration histories, religions, cultures, socioeconomic statuses, and gender and sexual norms. Asian American collective identity has long been the subject of boundary struggles, with some adopting and others rejecting its use.

The designation “Asian American” arose among student activist groups in the 1960s as a means of political mobilization. This is a pan-ethnic identity, “a politico-cultural collectivity made up of peoples of several, hitherto distinct, tribal or national origins” (Espiritu, 1992: 2). It represented a shift from the externally imposed, exoticized ethnic category “Oriental,” which constructed Asians as a unitary, homogenous group (Jenkins 1994; Lowe, 1996; Tuan, 1998). The racial formation of Asian America is the result of a complex interplay between the state,

¹ An earlier version of this article appeared in the Ph.D. dissertation Moloney (2010).

social movements, and lived experience (Omi and Winant, 1994). At one level, scholars have documented the emergence and deployment of Asian American identity as part of political mobilization and activism (Espiritu, 1992; Okamoto, 2006; Wei, 1993). On a second level, others have examined the deployment and entrenchment of the Asian American category within government and bureaucratic spheres, which help to create or reinforce pan-ethnic categories by treating them as “a single administrative unit” (Espiritu and Ong, 1994; S. Lee, 1993). A third level is to examine Asian American ethnicity as personal identity (Kibria, 2002; Lien et al., 2003; Min and Kim, 2000; Park, 2008). These three levels are all interconnected and can influence one another. But it is on this third level that we will primarily focus in this article.

As others have demonstrated, the political and bureaucratic deployment of the Asian American category does not necessarily translate into the everyday identifications of most people who could be described as Asian American, few of whom tend to spontaneously use this label as their primary one (Zhou, 2004). For example, in their survey of Americans of Chinese, Filipino, Japanese, Korean, South Asian and Vietnamese descent, Lien and colleagues (2003) found that a little over half (57%) do identify as Asian American sometimes, but very few use Asian American as their primary identifier. Two-thirds of their respondents preferred to identify with ethnic-specific labels. They also found that ethnic identification varied significantly by national origin, with Japanese Americans most likely to identify as American, Chinese, Korean and Vietnamese most likely to identify with ethnonational group alone, and Filipinos and South Asians most likely to identify as ethnic-American.

Although labels are only one part of identification, and one’s identity is not wholly reducible to the labels one uses, names do have power. Names and labels not only reflect identity; naming oneself or one’s group may be a precondition to identity formation (L.D.

Shankar, 1998). Yet, this does not mean that there is an unfettered ability to choose one's names, labels, or identities, as if off a menu (Cruz, 1996). One's ability to choose a name is constrained by social context and social structure; part of the power wielded by dominant groups is the power to name and influence the parameters of naming. In the United States, a key difference between whites and people of color may be in the flexibility afforded to whites as to when, how, and whether to emphasize ethnic identities, to exercise their "ethnic options"—options that are often more limited for ethnic minorities (Waters, 1990). But neither does this mean that marginalized groups are entirely lacking in agency with respect to self-identification naming, as the ethnic options model can sometimes seem to suggest (Song, 2003). As Nagel (1994) argues "ethnic identity is *both* optional and mandatory, as individual choices are circumscribed by the ethnic categories available at a particular time and place" (156). Ethnicity or ethnic identity is not an immutable essence of one's identity, but rather is something produced through the performance of culturally determined boundaries (Anthias and Yuval-Davis, 1992; Barth, 1969). Ethnic boundaries can thus be understood as socially constructed ways of classifying people and groups (Brubaker et al., 2004). How people define their ethnic identities, then, is the result of a variety of social factors present at any particular historical conjuncture, including domestic racial politics, transnational events, legal strictures, economic conditions, and community mobilization (Cornell and Hartmann, 2007; Lien et al., 2003).

But how are these processes incorporated into people's own sense of self and personal identities? How do young people grapple with the array of ethnic labels which they could draw on to define themselves? Which do they choose, which do they reject, and which are they excluded from? In this article, we examine the construction, adoption and rejection of ethno-national and pan-ethnic identities among a diverse group of American young men and women of

Asian descent. We are not examining groups such as “Asian American youth” or “Chinese Americans” or “Filipinos” as discrete, homogenous, clearly constituted, pre-existing groupings. Rather, we are interested in how these young people interact with, deploy, or deflect such categorizations. We show their negotiations with how to describe and understand themselves, their ethnicity, and their relationship to other groups of young Asian Americans, with particular emphasis on ethnonational distinctions, as well as how their varying positioning vis-à-vis the Asian American label shapes or reflects their involvement in Asian American youth cultures.

The young people discussed in this article were all interviewed as part of a project on young Asian Americans, club drugs, and dance clubs in the San Francisco Bay Area. Youth and young adults are an important group to study as these life course stages are often significant and formative times for the exploration and articulation of racial and ethnic identities (Bettie, 2003; Grasmuck and Kim, 2010; Min and Kim, 2000; Tatum, 1997). Dance clubs are increasingly significant venues for youth leisure, cultural consumption, social group cohesion, and identity exploration for many young people today, including Asian American youth (Anderson, 2009; Hunt et al., 2010; Maira, 2002). In this article, we examine these young people’s articulations of their ethnic identifications as well as explore how the ethnic boundaries they discuss are reflected in patterns of inclusion, exclusion, and participation in the dance scenes.

Methods and Sample

We conducted 250 in-depth interviews with young Asian Americans, ages 14 to 35. They discussed their family backgrounds, friends and social groups, attendance at raves, dance clubs and parties, and experiences with drug consumption.² These young Asian Americans were all

² We analyze relationships between their drug consumption and ethnic identity and social group formation elsewhere in Hunt et al. 2005 and Hunt et al. 2011.

active (to varying degrees) in the youth culture of dance clubs and raves in the San Francisco Bay Area. Some were primarily involved in “the Asian scene”—dance clubs explicitly oriented toward and promoted to Asian American youth. Others preferred to attend mixed-ethnicity dance clubs or raves. The dance clubs ranged from huge mega-clubs with hundreds of patrons to smaller DJ bars and lounges. They varied in demographic make-up, style and attire, and music played (hip-hop and electronic dance music were the two most common musical forms). These venues were important sites for many of these young people’s leisure, social, and romantic lives.

We used a targeted sampling approach (Bluthenthal and Watters, 1995; Peterson et al., 2008), recruiting participants through direct contact at clubs and raves, advertisements, and chain-referrals from previous respondents. While the sample is not representative of all Asian American youth, nor a true probability sample of young Asian Americans in the dance scene, we were able to interview a heterogeneous group of young people with diversity in terms of age, gender, class, sexual identity, and ethnicity (see Table 1). Respondents received a \$50 honorarium for participation as well as \$15 for each friend they recruited. All instruments and recruitment procedures for this project were approved by our Institutional Review Board.

[Insert Table 1 about here]

The mixed-methods interviews comprised a quantitative portion that collected demographic and drug use data as well as a lengthy semi-structured qualitative interview schedule, which focused on issues of ethnic identity, consumption, and participation in the dance scenes. Interviews were conducted by the project manager and 4 additional interviewers. The interviews were audio-recorded digitally and the qualitative portions transcribed verbatim. We used the qualitative data analysis software NVivo to aid in organizing and coding the qualitative

transcripts in terms of primary themes that emerged from the interviews—including the theme focused on in this article: ethnic identity and labels.

Participants in the study identified with twelve distinct ethnic groups, and some self-identified as predominantly of mixed-Asian ethnicity (15% of the sample). The ethnicity most frequently reported as a primary ethnicity was Chinese (22%), followed by Filipino (16%), Vietnamese (11%) and Cambodian (10%) Indian (9%), Korean (8%), Japanese (3%), Laotian and Taiwanese (2% each) and finally Indonesian, Pakistani, and Mien (1% each).

Most of the young people interviewed came from middle-class backgrounds, although class and income can be difficult to accurately assess with this age group (especially for those who are still dependents of their parents). However, there was a fair amount of diversity with respect to socioeconomic status. While some were the children of doctors, entrepreneurs, and other professionals, a significant minority (approximately 25%) of the young people grew up in working-class families who sometimes faced great economic hardship. Most respondents were raised in the San Francisco Bay Area—some in urban underclass neighborhoods of San Francisco or Oakland, some in wealthy, predominantly white suburbs, many in ethnically mixed, middle-class areas. Overall, this was a generally well-educated group of young people. 51% were currently in school (and 66% had been in school at some point in the previous year). Of those not in school, 59% had already completed a bachelors-level degree or higher. A small sub-group of the sample (5%) did not complete high school and were not currently pursuing a degree.

The majority of the participants (69%) were born in the United States. These respondents were predominantly “second generation” Asian Americans, with one or more parents born in Asia (88%), although 11% of the American-born participants were third generation or beyond, with both parents having been born in the US. The other participants were born outside of the US

(in all but 5 cases, born in Asia), part of the second or even third waves of immigration after the 1965 transformations in US immigration law that dramatically opened up Asian and other immigration. Most of the foreign-born respondents (59%) immigrated to the US at age 5 or younger and another 16% between age 6 and 10. This would make them part the “1.5 generation”—born in Asia, but raised in their formative years in the United States (Danico, 2004). The remainder of the foreign-born participants (25%) came to the US at age 11 or older.

The participants varied in their cultural and ethnic attachments and levels of American acculturation. Some spoke no English at home with their families, socialized with other Asians exclusively, and desired to learn more about their culture of origin. Other participants spoke English exclusively at home, had few or no Asian friends, and identify their ethnicity as American because it is the country in which they live or were born. If these mark two poles of a continuum, most of the young people fell in between, and for many, levels of ethnic identification and affiliation varied over their lifetimes and in different settings and contexts.

While the differences in social class, immigration generation, and acculturation levels in this diverse group of young people are important (as we examine in other works [Hunt et al 2010]) the issues that we focus on in this article—ethnic labels chosen by participants—do not always break down neatly along those lines. In the remainder of the article, we will examine the disparate narratives about ethnic labels presented by the young men and women in this study—discussing their reasons for rejecting or adopting Asian, American, and/or ethnonational labels. Then we will turn to how these labeling practices are reflected in some participation patterns in the Asian American dance/club scenes, with particular emphasis on ethnonational differences.

Ethnic and pan-ethnic identifications

Asian American is “too broad”

Close to a third of the young people interviewed explicitly rejected the “Asian American” label for themselves or argued that it is something that they do not identify with or choose to use in most instances. Instead, most of these participants self-describe their ethnicity in terms of national background, such as “Chinese American” or “Korean.” The most common reason given is that they find the category “Asian American” to be “too broad,” (Larissa, Chinese, 19),³ they don’t like the way it “lumps” different people together (Karl, Korean, 33), and they prefer the greater specificity of their national label. Dara (Cambodian, 17) said that he only identifies himself as Cambodian, rather than Asian or Asian American.

Because I represent for my, uh, for my people. That's why . . . if I say I was Asian, I'm representing for the whole Asian. I do that, but we got different way of life . . . All Asian not the same. Cuz, Laos, Thai, Vietnamese, and Chinese probably do different things. For Dylan (Japanese/white, 22), the word “Asian” conjures up negative images of white people ignorantly grouping all Asians together:

When I hear Asian, I guess I just think of a white person looking at somebody and...and going, ‘Oh, they're Asian.’ Or, ‘There's an Asian driver.’ Or something. Because they don't know what they are, they don't care, they're just like, ‘Oh, one of those people.’ Instead, he explained that he prefers to be as specific as possible. Others said they prefer the national label because of their pride in their culture or because they don’t want to deny their specific national heritage. Clara (Chinese, 25) said that if she calls herself “Asian American” then “I'm kinda denying myself as being a Chinese American.”

³ All names are pseudonyms, chosen to reflect the ethnic heritage represented in their names (e.g., respondents with western pseudonyms have western names). All participants are Americans or live in the U.S., despite this not being listed with each name.

“I’m not Asian, I’m Indian”: ethnonational exclusions from Asian America

While most of those young people discussed above preferred not to use the Asian American label or did not identify with it deeply, they did generally acknowledge it as a category that applies to them and use it in some instances. Most participants of East and Southeast Asian descent had at least this level of identification as Asian or Asian American. Many of the participants of Indian or Filipino descent, however, have a much more fraught or at least distanced relationship with the label “Asian American.”⁴ Some rejected the label for the very same reasons discussed above: it’s just not specific enough for their—or anyone’s—cultural experience. Sharma (Indian, 26), for example, noted discomfort with “Asian American” as too “blanket” of a label. Others, though, disagreed with the idea that *their* specific group qualifies as Asian or Asian American, although it may be fine for *other* groups. Deepak (Indian, 24) commented that he associates the label with Chinese Americans and says that “It’s hard for brown-skinned people to identify with a completely different race under the same banner,” explaining that he finds very clear differences between South Asians and other Asians, such as Chinese, Vietnamese, and Filipinos. Similarly, Veronica (Filipino, 23), Yati (Indian, 22) and Jack (Filipino/white, 29) each said that they associated “Asian American” with other groups—Chinese, Japanese, Vietnamese—and not with their own groups.

Not all Filipino or South Asian participants rejected the categorization as Asian or Asian American. A few did use the label, though all mentioned that it is contentious for them to do so. Damien (Filipino, 33) likes to say “Asian-Filipino” to emphasize both aspects, saying that he’s

⁴ Filipino and South Asian Americans have very different histories and cultures and wouldn’t typically be grouped together in this way. But regarding alienation from the labels Asian or Asian American they shared a great deal in common in this sample.

“proud to be Asian.” Neo (Filipino, 24) said that most of his Filipino friends get offended if you call them Asian. “They're like, ‘No, I'm not no fucking Asian.’” But, he said “Me, I don’t care . . . I don't know why people get upset when you, when people call you Asian. Like I said, we all look alike.” In addition, a few Indian and Filipino participants explained that they consider themselves Asian Americans, but feel excluded from this category by others, particularly by East and Southeast Asians. Spencer (Filipino, 22) explained that he and his Filipino friends identified as Asian when he lived on the East Coast, but now that he’s in California he’s being told “I’m not an Asian,” though he doesn’t understand why. This highlights the importance of cultural geography and local place in helping shape ethnic identity and possible labels. Tanish (Indian, 20) said he would like to identify as Asian American, but feels excluded from this label by others, particularly other Asian Americans. He recalled describing himself in an ethnic studies course in college as an Asian American, but “people look at you like, ‘You’re not Asian.’” He described this as “not fair,” complaining of the absence of South Asians in Asian American studies articles he read in school. “It kinda sucks, cuz we feel, I feel like our community is excluded from a lotta studies, because they say, ‘The Asian community does this,’ but then they'll only interview Koreans, Japanese, Chinese, and Vietnamese people.”

“Most people see Asian people as Chinese people”

Another reason for avoiding the “Asian” or “Asian American” label was a desire to distinguish oneself from other Asian ethnic groups with whom they did not want to be confused. Nearly every participant described being mistaken for being a member of a different Asian ethnic group, although the responses to this ranged from humor to annoyance to resignation. Some respondents described clearly delineated, often hierarchical, distinctions between different Asian ethnic groups and wanted to be clear about their place within this hierarchy. Jeremy (Chinese 23)

talked about his discomfort with being labeled Asian American due to the danger he might be confused with other groups of Asians. He said he didn't like "sharing . . . this 'Asian' label here in America with all these other races . . . a lot of these other cultures, they're crazy. Not like Chinese people. We're calm and cool." Specifically, he argued that

Korean people are crazy . . . the girls are psycho and the guys are short-tempered.

Japanese people, they're cool. Vietnamese people are real crazy, cuz the Vietnamese girls . . . they will like fight you and shit. And the guys will shoot you . . . And I don't know what to say about these Cambodians. They're like Vietnamese on steroids.

He described a hierarchy among Asian groups saying, "I don't know who's on top, but I'll definitely tell you who's on the lower end: Low Asian." Low Asian, he said, refers to "Cambodian . . . Malaysians, they're down there, Hmongians [sic], they're way down there, and Fukkianese people too." There were some groups he was not sure how to categorize "I don't know any like Pakistani people, Singaporean, I don't know them either." Filipinos he was ambivalent about. "Filipino people, they're cool. Well, some of them are cool," though he excluded recent immigrants from this acceptance saying "they speak ghetto with a Tagalog accent, which annoys everybody. Everybody." Few other respondents provided such detailed negative comments about Asian ethnic groups (though Jeremy wasn't alone in this entirely). But even among more circumspect respondents, value-laden distinctions about different ethnic groups were not uncommon and did suggest challenges for broader Asian American identities or coalitions. Oscar (Cambodian/Chinese, 22) says he identifies as Cambodian as opposed to Asian because "certain Asians are suckers," explaining that Cambodians are "savs" who get respect.

A number of respondents (particularly those of Southeast Asian descent) expressed discomfort with the conflation of Asian and Chinese identities, a phenomenon that many of them

resented. Leo (Vietnamese, 20) commented that “most people see Asian people as Chinese people. So I rather just put myself out as, um, I’m Vietnamese, I’m not Chinese.” Similarly, Bianca thinks it’s important to call herself Cambodian American rather than Asian, “To let them know that I’m Cambodian, not Chinese.” Sovann (Cambodian, 23) has shifted from an Asian identification to a Cambodian one because “I got sick of being called Chinese.”

“Yeah, we’re in this together”: Embracing an Asian American identity

None of this is to suggest that all of the participants rejected the label “Asian American.” Indeed, many did identify as Asian American. Contra those who reject the label as too broad, Wade (Vietnamese/Chinese, 27) specifically likes it *because* of its broad, all-encompassing nature. Others said that they are proud of being Asian or Asian American and identify as such to express this. Damien (Filipino, 33) says he likes to identify as “Filipino-Asian” because he’s proud of being Filipino and proud of being Asian. There were a variety of specific reasons given by individual participants for calling themselves Asian American. Nancy (Vietnamese, 18) has some misgivings about the generality of “Asian American” but tends to identify herself as such because she finds that when she identifies as Vietnamese, people tend to place more distinct stereotypes on her. Hua (Mien, 18) said that she often identifies as Asian American because most Americans have no idea what Mien means and she’s sick of having to constantly explain.

Some identify as Asian American to express solidarity with other Asian Americans. Adriana (Korean, 28), who grew up in a white suburb and only recently developed a network of Asian American friends (from a variety of backgrounds) now uses the label “Asian American” to express her newfound sense of connection and commonality. “When I’m with other Asians, there’s just like an underlying knowledge of like, ‘Yeah, we’re in this together,’ kind of thing.”

Other participants stated that they don't really think about the labels and that they use "Asian" or "Asian American" and their specific ethno-national category interchangeably. Arnold (Filipino, 21), says that he'll say Filipino or Asian, "I don't mind either." Tessa (Chinese, 23) commented "to me it's the same. Asian American, Chinese American, it's the same." Shing (Chinese, 20) says "I don't think there's a difference" between calling himself Chinese vs. Asian. And Bridget (Chinese/Taiwanese, 17) said that she thinks "it's pretty much the same," whether she calls herself Chinese, Taiwanese, or Asian. Although they were not the only ones to do so, Chinese American participants were much more likely than others to see their ethnonational label and "Asian American" as interchangeable. This may be the flip side or mirror image of the perception of the non-Chinese respondents who shy away from the Asian American label due to its perceived conflation with Chinese identity. According to the young people in this study (both Chinese and non-Chinese respondents), Chinese- and Asian American *are* more interchangeable than other Asian ethnic group labels would be, in terms of everyday experiences.

Strategic Identifications: "If I'm talking to a white person, I'll say Asian"

Many participants who argued strongly against the Asian American label as too broad did say that they describe themselves as Asian American in certain specific contexts. The most common situation in which these respondents describe themselves as Asian American, particularly for the young men and women still in school, is in filling out forms or standardized tests, checking off the box that says "Asian American." Others adopt this label when involved in Asian American organizations. Karl (Korean, 33) says he generally only identifies as Asian American in the context of involvement with an Asian Arts society. Many describe themselves variably based on the ethnicity of those they are with. Some said that they were more likely to use the more general "Asian American" label when with non-Asians, whom they assume have

less knowledge of specific national differences. Eean (Filipino, 28) typically identifies as Asian American when around white people because it “simplifies things” (although he does explain that he’s Filipino if they mistakenly call him Chinese or some other group). Similarly Kiri (Cambodian, 19) said “if I’m talking to like a white person, I’ll say Asian . . . If I’m talking to like a Cambodian or a Asian person, I’ll tell ‘em Cambodian.” Andreana (Cambodian/Chinese, 19) adjusts the specificity of her self-description among other Asian Americans as well. When talking to Cambodians she describes herself as Cambodian or Khmer, but when talking with other groups (white, black, or other Asians), she’s most likely to say “Cambodian/Chinese. Cuz like if I say Khmer, they’re like, ‘What is that?’ It’s like, ‘I’ve never heard of that.’”

Others use the Asian or Asian American label when with people of different Asian national backgrounds, in order to emphasize commonalities. Amanda (Filipino/Mexican, 22) identifies primarily as Filipino, but identifies as “Asian” if she is with non-Filipino Asian friends.

The thing is like when I hang out with my other Asian friends who are Indian or Chinese or whatever, we say Asian . . . we derive a sense of community by saying Asian . . . we can relate, we have a lot of the same, not traditions but similar, just sort of a kind of sensibility . . . when it comes to things. We can relate to each other much more.

For similar reasons, Binh (Vietnamese/Chinese, 21) mentions his Chinese heritage when speaking to Chinese Americans. “Somebody will be like, ‘Oh, I’m Chinese,’ and I’ll be like, ‘Oh, yeah? I’m half Chinese. What’s up?’” Otherwise he identifies as Vietnamese.

Hapa, mixed, and other: multi-ethnic youth grappling with identities and labels

These sorts of strategic decisions to describe oneself variably in different contexts were mentioned most frequently and in greatest detail in the interviews with those from multi-ethnic or multi-racial backgrounds. People reporting multiple ethnic or national backgrounds

represented a significant minority of the overall sample. Out of the 250 total participants, 34% identified with at least two different ethnicities. Of these, 57% (or 20% of the total sample) identified primarily with only one ethnic/national origin, despite reporting a secondary ethnicity as well. The remaining 43% (or 15% of the total sample) identified themselves as predominantly mixed. Dylan (Japanese/White, 22) described his strategic identifications:

Being half . . . you can kinda pick and choose when you wanna identify as what . . . it's a good thing for me. I guess I just play whatever, whatever card is gonna get me in the door. You know, if I'm trying to get into a Taiko drumming school, you know, I'm gonna say I'm Japanese. If I'm trying to work at an Irish bar, I'm gonna say, "Yeah, I'm Irish."

Some of the multiracial participants described themselves as “Hapa,” a term that comes from a native Hawaiian word meaning “part” or “mix,” and which has been adopted to mean any person of partial or mixed Asian or Pacific descent (Bernstein and De la Cruz, 2009). Among the participants in our study, it was particularly those of Japanese and European/white origins who engaged with this label. Ben (Japanese/white, 20), said he likes the term because “I think it's very unique. I think it, like, just narrows me down more specifically [than] to say like biracial or something.” Others, though, expressed reservations about using “Hapa.” Tyson (Japanese/White, 20) dismissed “Hapa” as a trendy Bay Area term, laughing that the only people who use it “all come from people that were in Oakland. (laugh) Or Berkeley at some point.”

Among the multi-ethnic and multi-racial participants, some said that they identify more with one “side” than another. Reina (Japanese/White, 20) described herself as half-white and half-Japanese, but says her “personality is very white.” She tends to identify as white on many standardized forms and job applications but will sometimes check the “other box.” She said she is able to do this because she “passes” as white and bases her identity on physical looks. Rowan

(Korean/White, 20) identifies himself a Korean/White, but explained that he puts his Korean side as primary because “the white part is not interesting.”

The multiethnic and multiracial respondents, perhaps not surprisingly, also tended to display the most ambivalence over how and whether to label themselves. Some discussed a desire to devise and employ “inclusive” labels for themselves or to use multiple different labels. Bradley (Indian/white, 24) used the analogy of email folders to discuss the inclusivity he desired:

I don't wanna define myself as just one thing. It's kind of like G-mail versus like . . . Outlook Express. In Outlook Express . . . you take an e-mail and you can only put it into one folder. So if it's in the... "From Dad" folder, it can't go in the "From Mom" folder. G-mail you just add labels. And you can have 100 labels on one piece of e-mail . . . And so I, I guess I define myself by, like, a bunch of different labels.

He did not think a single label could capture his identity or be uniformly appropriate for the different people he interacted with. Many of these multi-racial and multi-ethnic young people expressed some degree of uncertainty about how to identify themselves and ambivalence about whether to use any labels at all. Agnes (Mien/Laotian/Chinese/Thai, 15) sometimes identifies as mixed, sometimes as Mien, but overall “prefers not to title herself.” Indira (Indian/White, 27) said that she’s always had a hard time with ethnic identification, elaborating:

I feel kinda white, like white-bread, TV, that kind of thing. But, at the same time, I don’t look white so I don’t get treated like a white person. And I’m also not completely white so I definitely feel related to the struggles or the issues with people who are of other ethnicities. I don’t think I fit in anywhere.

Mishti (Indian/White, 22) described the experience of a racially ambiguous appearance, saying that people often think she’s Iranian or Brazilian or Palestinian. She said that “It just makes me

feel like, identity-less and culture-less, you know” and that she increasingly identifies as “mixed.” While in her childhood “it was like a flip-flop . . . it was like I’m either white or Indian.” But now she says “but I’m mixed, you know, and that’s...that’s an entire race in itself.” Cielo (Filipino/Columbian, 28) agreed that “there’s a identification there, just in, you know, being in that in-between space . . . mixed race people identify with each other, in a way that they don’t with [others]”

With this discussion of ambiguities and ambivalences faced by multi-ethnic participants about how to identify, we do not wish to emphasize too stark of a contrast between the multi-ethnic young men and women we interviewed and the rest of the sample. For, if anything, they are simply further along a continuum of ambivalence about labels and strategic situational identifications. These are issues faced by all of the young men and women interviewed, and the boundary-marking exercise of ethnic identity is fraught or at least often in flux for many.

Asian ‘American?’

It is not just the “Asian” part of the designation “Asian American” that many of the young people questioned. Whether or not to describe oneself as *American*, as Chinese American, as Asian American, was a contested topic for many of the participants, who were somewhat evenly split on this issue. Among those who use “American” as part of their self-described ethnicity, a common reason for doing so was to emphasize the dual nature of their identity. Brenda (Korean, 25) said that it was when she visited Korea for the first time that she became very aware of her Korean-*American* identity. “I think that’s when I realized that I’m really . . . Korean American, rather than Korean.” She said that it’s important for her to describe herself as Korean American. “Like if I say I’m Korean, it’s kind of like forgetting the American side of me. . . . saying that I’m American, it’s kind of letting go of the Korean side of me . . . If I say I’m

Korean American, it kinda keeps it so it's balanced, like I'm, I'm a little bit of both.” Similarly, Veronica explained that “Filipino American” best described her “’cause I feel like I’m both.” On the other hand, Amanda (Filipina, 33) worried this would dilute her identity:

I never really got into the whole hyphenated thing. Like I never would say I'm Asian American. I'm Filipina before I'm Asian American. Or I'm Asian, not Asian American. I think because I do have such a strong identification as a Filipina, like as an immigrant . . . the slash, you know, the hyphen American part kinda dilutes that or something.

Adding “American” to her self-description is presented as diminishing her ethnic identity claim.

For some, the issue of citizenship was mentioned as a key determinant of whether to call oneself American. Sahla (Pakistani, 23) immigrated to the US as a child and said that she now sees herself as a Pakistani American, rather than simply Pakistani, since she recently became a US citizen. Similarly, Rohan (Indonesian, 18) said that he is not Indonesian-American or Asian American because he is not a US citizen. For others, whether or not one was born in the United States is seen as the key for whether to identify as American. Charline connects being Asian American with being born in the US. “I claim myself as Asian American . . . I am Asian, but was born in America.” Jade (Chinese, 26) has lived in the United States for most of her life, but was born in China. Because of this she does not describe herself as Chinese American “I never say Chinese American . . . I feel like that’s for people that are born here.” She identifies as Chinese, except when she’s in China. There she identifies as American, because she’s a US citizen and because “they feel like I’m not from there. They can tell.” For Travis (Chinese, 26) being born in China is part of the reason he doesn’t call himself Chinese American, but another reason is due to a conflation between “white and American.”

Well, despite the fact that I'm a US citizen . . . I just cannot seem to like allow myself to say I'm a Chinese American, simply for the fact that I'm not born here . . . [and] it just seems like say "That person is an American." Everybody seems to automatically think, "Oh, that person is Caucasian."

For this group, the decision to describe oneself as American or as Asian American appears, not surprisingly, to be largely connected to level of acculturation or to one's birthplace or citizenship. In those examples, not identifying as American or Asian American is described in terms of not being fully American. But not all of the participants fit in this pattern.

One very common reason given in the interviews for not describing themselves as a "hyphenated American" (e.g., Korean-hyphen-American) had nothing to do with feeling estranged from an American identity. It was just the opposite. They didn't call themselves Asian American or Cambodian American or Indian American because their Americanness was so clear that they didn't see the point of spelling it out. Paige (Chinese, 27) said that "I won't really say I'm Chinese American, I'll just say I'm Chinese. 'Cause I think they can tell that I'm . . . Well most people can tell I'm born here." Similarly, Ojal (Indian 27) said that "The reason I don't [say Indian American] is cuz I don't have an Indian accent, so it's pretty much implied I'm American." In some studies of acculturation, the practice of identifying oneself in terms of one's culture of origin rather than as American or with an American hyphenate is interpreted as being evidence of a reactive ethnic identity or of high degree of ethnicization rather than acculturation or of ambivalence about American identity (Portes and Rumbaut, 2001; Zhou and Xiong, 2005). Yet, that would not necessarily describe all the experiences of these young men and women, who in many cases describe themselves as completely American, as more fluent and comfortable in American cultural traditions than in Asian culture or traditions.

A Pan-Asian dance scene?

How then are these issues of Asian American ethnic identification (or disidentification) reflected in these young people's experiences with the dance scenes? How are the symbolic boundaries that were drawn between groups in their discussions of ethnic identity translated into social boundaries between groups in the dance clubs? (Lamont and Molnár, 2002; Wimmer 2008). Analyzing the Asian American youth culture of import-car racing, Namkung (2004) noted that "a unique characteristic of the import race identity is the formation of a pan-ethnic community" (166). The Asian club scene appears to operate similarly for some participants. Indeed as Garrett (Korean/Japanese, 25) argued, if you want to find what connects a larger Asian youth community, it is precisely to these forms of recreation that one should look:

There's some common threads between the different ethnic groups, ethnic Asian groups. Such as racing, street racing . . . it's pretty safe to say whether you're Filipino or you're Vietnamese, there's a lot of rice heads out there that like to street race. And, um, raves, I'd say is a common thread certainly. Um, yes, street racing and raves (laughs).

A desire for community and commonality is one of the most frequently cited reasons for participating in the Asian dance scene, throughout the interviews. Many respondents stated that they feel more comfortable when surrounded by people who share similar cultural backgrounds as well as physical features. Nancy (Vietnamese, 18) said that "you feel liken of a little a better sense of community." Bridget (Chinese, 17) "birds of a feather flock together." Nadia (Japanese/Korean, 24) said she likes Asian clubs because of "that comfort level . . . not feeling like you're the total minority." And Veronica (Filipino, 23) said that she prefers Asian clubs because "I like being in a place where other people look like me." Asian Americans' minority status plays an important role in the attraction of Asian clubs for some respondents. They said

they felt uncomfortable at more mixed clubs where they are in the minority. Asian clubs provide a safe environment where Asian Americans can experience being the “majority” and socialize with their friends and other Asians who share similar experiences without being singled out for being “Asian.” Nhean (Cambodian 21) says that he feels more scrutinized in non-Asian clubs “in a mixed club, I would tend to lie [low], you know, be aware of my surroundings more than I would if I was at a Asian club. I’ll be like, you know, looking around, making sure, you know, see what everybody else is doing before I do my thing.”

It was not uncommon for respondents who were active in the Asian club scene to talk about the events as representative of a greater pan-Asian community. They felt connected to other attendees due to a sense of shared culture. Denise explained that she only rarely goes to multi-ethnic clubs “Cuz in an Asian club everyone’s personalities are pretty much consistent. Everyone’s pretty much the same . . . there are understandings, no culture difference. . . But in mixed clubs I feel like there’s personality clashes. Among different ethnicities.” Many felt that this shared cultural experience had the potential to transform the experience at a club event for the better. In these discussions, respondents described a commonality, common culture, or shared community among many different ethnic groups under the Asian American banner. This appears to be particularly associated with those young people whose social networks are primarily composed of a multi-ethnic group of Asian American youth.

Participation in the Asian American dance scenes is certainly not limited to those who primarily identified with the Asian American label. Indeed, many of the young people who described their discomfort with identifying with the broad Asian or Asian American label (discussed in the first section), did often deploy it when discussing “the Asian dance scene” or “Asian dance clubs,” which some of them frequently attend. Despite their discomfort with self-

applying the pan-ethnic Asian American label it did have some salience in their lives. The symbolic boundaries between Asian ethnic groups and labels thus do not always translate into social boundaries here (Grasmuck and Kim, 2010).

Some participants involved in the Asian club scene said there is no conflict between different Asian ethnic groups in that scene and that a diverse group of Asians make up the scene. Karl (Korean, 33), for example commented that “usually if it’s an Asian group, it’s a little bit of everybody for the most part. You know, your Chinese, your Korean, Japanese, Filipinos. Little bit of everybody.” He elaborated that even if one particular ethnic group predominates at a particular event, there are always still a handful of other groups and all are welcome. “I never felt discriminated. You know, even if . . . like it’s a Chinese party, I would still go.” Paige (Chinese, 27) says that at Asian clubs, all Asian groups are found “I think it’s just all general. Like the whole Asian, you know, party community out there. Pretty much any young person.”

Limits to the Pan-ethnicity of the scene

However, this feeling of openness and acceptance appears to be less true for others. This came up with some Filipino American respondents and particularly with a number of Cambodian and Laotian American young people.⁵ They remarked that they felt out of place at Asian club events due to differences related to ethnicity, to social class, and to skin color, although some did frequent Asian clubs, nevertheless. Most of these Cambodian and Laotian respondents were part of one social network of low-income, Oakland-based youth, with profiles that were very different from many of our other participants. Some were gang involved (either through direct

⁵ Ethnic tensions are not the only reason cited by respondents for not participating in the Asian club scene or preferring other scenes. Other common reasons included musical preferences, the feeling that the Asian scene is a “meat market,” and dislike of “cliques” in the scene.

gang membership or indirectly through friends or family members). More than half came from families who immigrated to the United States as refugees fleeing the Khmer Rouge in the second half of the 1970s. Overall, this network of respondents was of lower socioeconomic status than most other groups of respondents, not surprising because Cambodians and Laotians have some of the lowest incomes and highest poverty rates of all Asian American groups in the US (Rumbaut 2006). Most came from families where neither parent has a high school diploma, and have parents who are either non-working or employed in labor, customer service, or household service positions. Additionally, more than half live in some form of government-subsidized housing.

Social class appears to be a crucial element shaping their patterns of dance scene participation, and perhaps to their ethnic identification and labels as well. These Cambodian and Laotian youth were more likely to attend private house parties than clubs and raves. Reasons for favoring parties over clubs ranged from the high cost of clubs in the city to feeling more at home and welcomed at the parties. Many of the parties these young people attended were what they referred to as “functions,” hyphy (hip hop) music events that were predominantly African American, with a sizeable minority of Cambodians or Laotians in attendance in some cases. Their distancing from the Asian dance scene echoes their distancing from the Asian American label. These respondents, more than others, described ethnic tensions at Asian clubs and parties, emphasizing an oppositionality with and distinction from Chinese Americans in the scene. They also, though, distinguished themselves from Vietnamese Americans (whom they often lump together with Chinese Americans as the dominant groups found in the dance scenes), highlighting the importance of not homogenizing categories such as “Southeast Asian.”

Oscar (Cambodian/Chinese, 22) described ethnic rivalries or animosity as the key difference between an Asian vs. a mixed-ethnicity party. At Asian clubs or parties there are:

more Asians to be aware of . . . like some Asians don't like different type of Asian race. Like . . . Vietnamese don't like Cambodians. Or it'll be like Chinese folks don't like the Vietnamese folks. You have to be aware of that because . . . they might just want just start it off [provoke a fight] . . . When you at mixed parties, many people just go do their thing . . . Everybody just having, trying to have fun. Ain't nobody worrying about nobody mugging at nobody.

In addition, some described skin-color biases within Asian American scenes, in which lighter-skinned Chinese and Vietnamese disrespected darker-skinned Cambodians and Filipinos.

Intra-Asian skin color distinctions arose in interviews with Filipino respondents as well. Allen (Filipino, 25) said he feels out of place at gay Asian clubs because they are targeted toward more light-skinned Asians, particularly Chinese Americans: "The posters I see or ads tend to be lighter-skinned Asian guys with dark hair . . . They don't look Filipino to me!" Eean (Filipino, 28) commented that when he goes to Asian events "it's either Asian with everybody else but Filipino, and then when I've gone to Filipino parties, it's Filipinos and, you know, a sprinkling of other like Asians. And . . . like it's all hip hop." This separation of Filipinos within the Asian American dance scene appears to reflect the ambivalence and exclusion that many Filipino respondents described regarding Asian American identity.

Despite some young people describing the Asian dance scene as inviting and open to all Asian Americans, these examples show that there are limits to the pan-ethnicity or pan-Asianness of the scene. Many respondents described the scene as primarily Chinese and Vietnamese, and in some cases Filipino (with Filipino Americans being particularly associated with the hip hop club scene). Many Southeast Asian youth (particularly Cambodians and Laotians from working-class or impoverished neighborhoods) felt alienated from this scene. In

addition, the ambivalence that some multi-ethnic or multi-racial youth described regarding their ethnic identity was reflected in an ambivalence many of them felt about the Asian club scene as well. Some mentioned their not being “full Asian” as a reason for feeling alienated in the scene (although this was not an issue for all multi-racial Asian American youth, particularly not those who said they primarily identified with their Asian/ethnic heritage.) Hale (Chinese/Latino, 30) said that he doesn’t like Asian clubs because “in a way I don’t feel like I can relate to them fully . . . cuz I’m not a full Asian . . . people tend to say that we [Asians] need to stick together and that’s what they do. So, I guess in some ways it’s kinda closed-minded, cuz they don’t really allow themselves to experience new things.” Carmen (Indonesian/white/Latina, 17) explained that “I’ve never hung out with Asians . . . I think it would feel kind of weird for me. Unless I was with a bunch of my Asian friends, which I only have one Asian friend now.”

More than any of the other youth interviewed, the least likely to be active in “the” Asian dance/club scene were the young South Asians (primarily Indian). Few participated in “the” Asian club scene and instead attend mainly multi-ethnic clubs or raves or specifically Indian American dance events. When they discussed the Asian club scene and the people found in it, it was usually quite clear that they were referring to other peoples or groups—to Chinese Americans, Vietnamese Americans, but not to themselves or other Indian Americans. While some Filipino young people discussed being active in but also feeling estranged from the Asian dance scene, most of the Indian youth did not describe feeling excluded from the scene, it was simply off their radar or not something that they considered relevant to them. South Asian youth had distinctly different patterns of involvement in nightlife and the dance scenes than other Asian American youth groups. Although about half of the South Asian youth described themselves as current attendees of Asian clubs of some sort, only 5 (of 27) currently attend the pan-ethnic

“Asian Dance Clubs” that other participants describe, and only 9 have ever attended one of these events. Instead, almost all of these respondents were involved in the “desi” scene, attending specifically South Asian or Indian club nights and private Indian dance parties. Others primarily attended mixed-ethnicity or non-Asian bars and clubs—and were more likely to do so than any other ethnic group in the sample. The South Asian or desi dance scene (which itself has many different segments and styles within it) is distinct and separate from the multi-ethnic Asian dance club scene that many of the East, Southeast Asian, and Filipino respondents participate in.⁶

Discussion

Throughout this article we have discussed ethnic identity through the lens of the labels people use to describe themselves—Asian American, Vietnamese, Hapa, etc. Some young people dismissed the Asian American label due to its broadness; others embraced it for this very reason. Some argued it was important to emphasize their ethno-national identity over a pan-ethnic Asian American identity, so as to show their pride, their heritage, or to avoid being confused for a member of a different ethnic group. The ambivalence these young people display toward an Asian American pan-ethnic identity reflects the tension in the category observed by Park (2008): a tension between a multiculturalist influence, which has an emphasis on the diversity of various cultures and each culture’s unique differences versus a racialization of ethnicity (Kibria, 2002), which has a sense of racialized similarity among these Asian cultures and a sense of a common Asian culture underlying it.

⁶ While some of the Korean American respondents attended “K-clubs,”—explicitly Korean-oriented bars and clubs—none of the respondents were exclusively or primarily involved in this scene and there appears to be much more overlap between the K-club scene and the most pan-ethnic Asian scene than is the case for the desi scene.

Some Chinese Americans found it easy to switch back and forth between Chinese and Asian self-identification labels. Others, especially South Asian and Filipino Americans, excluded themselves from or felt excluded by the label Asian American. Here they may be confronted by limits to their ability to self-name or to define the boundaries of the categories they claim for themselves. As Nagel (1994) has argued, “Just as ethnic identity results both from the choices of individuals and from the ascriptions of others, ethnic boundaries and meanings are also constructed from within and from without, propped up by internal and external pressures” (165). While this is most commonly written about in terms of the constraints imposed by dominant/white culture upon marginalized groups, the boundaries of ethnic identity are also often policed by those who inhabit a category, by one’s co-ethnics (Song, 2003).

These various experiences are reflective of the complicated history of inclusion, exclusion, and shifting boundaries in the group “Asian American.” “The term [Asian American] itself has remained constant, but the ethnic constituency it encompasses has changed” (Park, 2008: 543; Portes and Rumbaut, 1996). It is important to attend to the very different histories that various groups have had with the label and politics of “Asian America.” The categorization of Indian and other South Asian Americans provides one example of this. South Asians have not been typically represented in the narratives of the formation of Asian American identity or the birth of the Asian American movement and have in some important ways been “apart” from other Asian American groups (R. Shankar, 1998).⁷ Scholars have provided a number of

⁷ The label “South Asian” (referring to people from countries on and around the Indian sub-continent) is itself a recent construction, one that carries its own set of contestations, as it draws together extremely heterogeneous groups that vary by nationality, religion, language and culture (Kibria, 1998; L. D. Shankar and Srikanth, 1998).

explanations for this. Sizable South Asian immigration did not occur until after 1965, when US immigration law changed dramatically, lifting racial quotas and national restrictions. Thus, although some South Asians were (perhaps relatively invisible) participants in the early Student Asian American movement in the 1960s (Bahri, 1998), they were not highly represented in this movement at its inception. Despite the pan-ethnic rhetoric of the early movement, the initial constructions of an Asian American identity very much centered around Chinese American, Japanese American, and (to a lesser extent) Filipino American experiences (L. D. Shankar and Srikanth, 1998), who were then the three overwhelmingly largest Asian groups in the US (today, Indians are the third largest group, after Chinese and Filipinos, [Kurien, 2005]). We must also consider the greater (and much more fraught) history of encounter and conflict between “America” and Southeast and East Asia, vs. the more distanced history with South Asia, which may play a part in the conflation between Asia and East/Southeast Asia in the American imaginary (Bahri, 1998). Also significant is the issue of race and perceived racial differences between South Asians and other Asians. The shifting history of “official” racial classifications of Indians and South Asians are often cited as a paradigmatic example of the socially constructed nature of racial categories which are not fixed or immutable but emergent projects in motion, which are the subject of contestation and change (Kibria, 1998; S. Lee, 1993; Omi and Winant, 1994). All of these factors may lead to an ambivalent relationship between many South Asian Americans and a potential Asian American identity, with some not identifying with this categorization, some feeling excluded by it, and some desiring a stronger connection with it and coalitions with other Asian American groups (Kurien, 2005; L. D. Shankar, 1998; L. D. Shankar and Srikanth, 1998). These ambivalent and varied positions are very much reflected in the ethnic identities of the young South Asian participants in this project, discussed above. And their

separation from Asian American identity is also reflected in the separation of the Desi/Indian dance scene from other multi-ethnic Asian youth cultures.

In a different way, Filipino Americans have also had a complicated relationship with Asian American identity, historically. Although many Filipino Americans were key, visible members of early Asian American mobilization, Espiritu (2002) refers to Filipino Americans as “Forgotten Asian Americans” (see also Bonus, 2000). She notes that despite being the second-largest Asian American group in the US, and the second largest immigrant group more generally, little is published about them as a group in the US. She attributes an institutional invisibility of Filipino Americans to a historical amnesia in the US over American colonization in the Philippines. But she also notes that the size of the Filipino population has meant that some (but not all) Filipino Americans do not find it necessary to build coalitions with other Asian American groups and hence eschew a pan-ethnic Asian American identity. In our study we saw most of the Filipino American young men and women describe an ambivalent relationship with the label “Asian American,” saying either that they did not consider Filipinos to be Asian American or that they felt excluded from this category by others. Many of these young people were active in the Asian dance club scenes, but were sometimes marginalized within it by those who described predominantly Filipino clubs as “ghetto.”

Some of the young people we interviewed avoided identifying as Asian American because they disliked its conflation with Chinese American or did not want people to think they were Chinese. Southeast Asian youth were particularly likely to express these concerns, reflecting tensions that can be seen in rivalries and altercations in the dance scene as well. The tricky issue of the centrality of Chinese Americans as “the” image of Asian America is one that involves numbers but also that involves social class. Chinese Americans do comprise the largest

segment of Asian Americans, approximately 30% in the 2000 US census.⁸ As well, Chinese Americans have one of the longest immigration histories in the United States dating back to the 19th century, whereas sizable Southeast Asian migration to the US did not take off until 1970s and 1980s, with waves of refugees fleeing conflict and war in the region. By the year 2000, however, Southeast Asians comprised more than 1 in 6 Asian Americans. Southeast Asian Americans are among the most recent immigrants to the United States and the fact that many came as refugees rather than as immigrants has importantly shaped their experiences in ways that differ from many other Asian-origin ethnic groups (Rumbaut, 2006). These different histories connect to significant socioeconomic differences among Asian ethnic groups, with Southeast Asian Americans tending to have higher rates of poverty, lower median income, and lower levels of formal education, trends that were generally reflected in the backgrounds of the Southeast Asian (particularly Laotian and Cambodian) respondents in this study. Many of these youth felt uncomfortable in the Asian American dance scenes, preferring mixed-ethnicity and often predominantly African American scenes. Their discussions about their alienation from other Asian Americans (particularly Chinese Americans) were often as much or more about class than any ethnic cultural differences.

In addition to the varying levels of identification as “Asian” or “Asian American,” there was a split between young people who labeled themselves as Americans of some sort and others who did not use this as part of their label—some did not feel American and hence did not call themselves that, some called themselves Asian Americans or ethnic Americans to emphasize their dual identities, some did not bother to add “American” to their ethnic label because they thought it was so obvious. While there may be some relationship between those who do or do not

⁸ Full 2010 census data on this is not yet available.

identify as American and those young people who were more likely to attend Asian American dance clubs vs. multi-racial or non-Asian dance clubs, we did not find that this was always predictive. There were certainly some young people who were very adamant about their Americanness who were primarily engaged in the Asian club scene, while there were others who did not label themselves in terms of American identity yet also tended to prefer clubs that were predominantly white, predominantly African American, or that had a diverse multi-racial mix. Again, then, we see that ethnic labels and social group participation in the dance scene are somewhat related issues but also importantly distinct and sometimes divergent.

Multi-ethnic and multi-racial young people described the most ambivalence and discomfort with how—or even whether—to label or describe themselves in terms of ethnicity. They struggled with whether to emphasize one aspect of themselves over others or how to construct some sort of distinct mixed identity. Some of these youth also felt out of place in the Asian dance club scene due to this mixed identity. Scholars studying multi-racial and multi-ethnic identities have long noted the pressures faced by many “mixed” people to identify with only one group or another. Song (2010), in her study of divergent racial and ethnic identifications among mixed-race siblings in the same family, notes:

while the very existence of multiracial people might seem to herald a profound rethinking of existing racial categories and their legitimacy, as well as the everyday belief that there are such things as “pure” and distinct races, multiracial people themselves are subject to racial discourses which constrain and shape the ways in which they are able to assert their desired ethnic and racial identifications. (266)

She argues that in-between identities “trouble” the notions of race or ethnicity as fixed, immutable characteristics with firm boundaries and complicate ideas of in- and out-groups.

Many of the young people described identifying themselves differently depending on the setting and who they are with. This “ethnic switching” (Espiritu, 1992: 15), in which people variably describe or invoke aspects of their ethnic identities based on the particular context is an example of what theorists have referred to as “situational ethnicity” (Okamura, 1981). As Danico (2004) describes “ethnic identity gets constructed and reconstructed depending on the situation” (50). Espiritu (1992) describes a “layering” of Asian American identity, in which the pan-ethnic Asian American identity is one layer, but specific national identity is another layer, “a person is Japanese American or Asian American depending on the ethnic identities available to him or her in a particular situation” (15). People choose among these and other identities “depending on the perceived strategic utility and symbolic appropriateness of the identities in different settings and audiences” (Nagel, 1994: 155). Sometimes this idea of the situational variability of ethnic identification and the strategic (or perhaps tactical) decisions made to emphasize different aspects of identity get misrepresented (by critics as well as some proponents) as some sort of unfettered, free choice that individuals make using rational calculations. Yet, from the start, the concept of situational ethnicity has emphasized not only a cognitive dimension of individual choice and perceptions, but also a structural dimension comprising the constraints engendered by social settings and the broader social structure governing ethnicity and power (Okamura, 1981).

The narratives of self-identity and labeling provided by the young people in this study certainly emphasize both elements—choices and constraints. On the one hand, there is the malleability and flexibility of ethnic identities, which change over time and context. On the other hand, they are clearly constrained by the ways that these labels (and they themselves) are perceived by others, both Asian and non-Asian, in how they can describe themselves and with which groups they can find a home. This appears to be one important factor shaping the

parameters of “the Asian dance scene”—who tends to go to Asian-specific vs. mixed-race clubs, who are perceived as insiders and outsiders in these scenes. The articulation of ethnic distinctions and exclusions in the Asian American dance scene allows us to see how the symbolic and cultural boundaries between Asian ethnic groups described by the respondents in the first section of the paper become crystallized into social boundaries between groups in the dance scene (Lamont and Molnar, 2002). Some young men and women experienced the Asian club scene as inviting, open, comforting, and as building a pan-Asian community of young people. Others felt excluded from or had little interest in this community, preferring ethnationally-specific, or non-Asian-specific nightlife scenes instead. Despite the very singular and seemingly pan-ethnic name that most respondents tended to use—“the Asian scene,” “Asian clubs,” “Asian parties”—the actual experiences they described were far from singular or unitary and certainly not truly pan-Asian.

Self-naming is only one aspect of identity and identification. Yet, the names and labels one uses to identify oneself have significance. They shape self-perceptions, the perceptions others have of one, and the connections and communities one may be a part of. Names and labels are a lens through which we can explore the idea that identity is mutable, negotiable, and performatively constituted. Stuart Hall (1992) famously argued that identity “is a matter of ‘becoming’ as well as of ‘being’ . . . Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialized past, they are subject to the continuous ‘play’ of history, culture and power” (225). The stories told by the young men and women interviewed for this study highlight the “becoming” and not simply the “being” of ethnic identity and identifications.

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Table 1: Sample Characteristics (N=250)

	%	(N)
Gender		
Male	54	135
Female	46	115
Age (mean=23.1)		
15 and Under	2	6
16-17	6	16
18-20	25	62
21-24	30	75
25-29	28	70
30 and Over	8	21
Nativity		
American Born	69	172
Immigrated at age 5 or under	18	46
Immigrated at age 6-10	5	13
Immigrated at age 11 or over	8	19
Sexual Orientation		
Heterosexual	84	208
Homosexual	10	25
Bisexual	5	13
Other	1	3
Ethnicities		
Chinese	22	56
Filipino	16	39
Vietnamese	11	27
Cambodian	10	25
Indian	9	22
Korean	8	19
Japanese	3	8
Laotian	2	4
Taiwanese	2	6
Indonesian	1	2
Pakistani	1	2
Mien	1	3
Mixed	15	37