'We dominate the basement!': how Asian American girls construct a borderland community

Tomoko Tokunaga

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

'We dominate the basement!': how Asian American girls construct a borderland community

Tomoko Tokunaga

International Center, Keio University, Tokyo, Japan

ABSTRACT

This article, based on two years of ethnographic fieldwork, explores the ways in which eight Asian American immigrant high school girls construct a borderland community, which they call the 'Basement Group,' after the place where they gather at school. While the girls struggle with displacement in the borderlands, including isolation in their family homes and alienation in formal classes, they have sufficient creativity and improvisational skills to invent a borderland community where they can reject mainstream values and beliefs as well as affirm diversity and cultural hybridity. Examining the possibilities and constraints of youth-led space, this article reveals the otherwise unseen sense of belonging, desires, and capacities of these Asian American immigrant girls who navigate lives in-between multiple nation states, cultures, and traditions. The article illuminates the power and possibilities of youth-created spaces that reflect the strengths, assets, and possibilities that marginalized immigrant youth possess.

Introduction

It is lunchtime at Maple High. Several Asian American girls run downstairs to the school basement and gather on the floor of one of its darkest corners, joining their friends. They form a large loud crowd of about 25 students, including Asian, Latino, and black boys and girls as well as white girls. Some sit next to the Japanese language classroom door at the end of the hallway. Others sit in front of some student lockers, and a few gather in front of the janitor's room. Some sit underneath the stairwell, which they love because it is 'empty,' hidden, and more 'private.' In this space, they share foods from various countries, talk loudly in a pan-Asian language, listen to music from around the world, dance together, use hybrid languages, tease each other, and laugh. It is where Bollywood, K-pop (Korean pop music), Japanese anime, and British boy bands are part of daily conversations. It is a community, a place where they feel comfortable, empowered, and affirmed and yet at times where they experience tensions, contradictions, and challenges. 'We dominate the basement!' Gina, a 15-year-old Chinese American girl, proudly proclaims. This article, based on two years of ethnographic fieldwork, examines how a group of Asian American[1] immigrant high school girls (Filipina, Vietnamese, Chinese, and Indian) construct this basement into a community, which they name the 'Basement Group.' While this group comprises students with diverse backgrounds, I specifically focus on the perspectives, voices, and experiences of a group of Asian American girls who are its founders and core members.

Like other immigrant youth, the Asian American girls in my study navigate a unique borderland position where 'two or more cultures edge each other' (Anzaldúa, 2007, p. 19). They struggle to inhabit 'a

vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary' (Anzaldúa, 2007, p. 25). They face a world of multiple, often contradictory, messages about who they are, what they should become, and how to navigate the world. Their parents expect them to follow and inherit their homeland traditions, beliefs, and values. There are messages inscribed in the contours of their lives, in schools and local communities that define who Asian American youth are, can be, and should be. There are messages embedded in media and popular culture that prescribe idealized versions of who Asian American girls should be and what they should look like. They negotiate this in-between terrain, which is 'in a constant state of displacement – an uncomfortable, even alarming feeling' (Anzaldúa, 2002, p. 1), while carving out a place to belong. Mired in a crucible of profound contradiction, alienation, and ambiguity, the girls fashion a borderland community of their own where they can affirm cultural hybridity, question and reject the mainstream values and beliefs that surround them, and imagine new possibilities for their present and future. Exploring the possibilities and constraints of the 'Basement Group' through the eyes of Asian American girls, this article attempts to illuminate their otherwise unseen sense of belonging, skills, and capacities of these immigrant young people who inhabit the borderlands. I explore the following research questions. (1) How do the girls navigate displacement in the US, specifically in their family homes and school community? (2) How do they construct a community in response to mainstream spaces and homogeneous social groups at school?

I first review literature on the experiences of Asian American girls and in-between spaces created for and by youth. I then present the methodology, including the description of the field site and participants, data collection and analysis, and researcher positionality. In the findings section, I describe the ways in which the girls experience their family homes and school community, and I explore the specific ways they create a borderland community. I conclude by discussing the importance of youth-created spaces for immigrant youth, specifically Asian American girls, who often struggle with perpetual outsider status, racialization, and hypersexualization (Lowe, 1996).

Agency of Asian American girls

While some scholars have studied the lives of Asian American girls and young women specifically, they have almost exclusively exposed the adverse circumstances influencing them. Studies have revealed family pressures, such as strict gender roles and expectations (DasGupta & Dasgupta, 1998; Espiritu, 2003), body images created by media and popular culture (Lee & Vaught, 2003), and model minority stereotypes (Lee, 2009), as primary forces in these girls' lives. This focus on structural inequalities is essential and places the spotlight on the struggles of an often overlooked, yet highly at-risk, population. Asian American girls and young women ages 15–24 have the highest suicide mortality rates across any racial or ethnic group (National Center for Health Statistics, 2003) and the highest rates of depression of any racial, ethnic, or gender group in the US (Schoen et al., 1997). Understanding the constraints these girls experience is important to disrupt this pattern. However, it is equally important that scholars explore the girls' agency, capacity 'for desiring, for forming intentions, and for acting creatively' (Sewell, 1992, p. 20) in navigating these constraints. While the girls are not 'free agents' (Ortner, 2006, p. 152) with complete control over their lives, they are 'capable of exerting some degree of control over the social relations in which one is (they are) enmeshed' (Sewell, 1992, p. 20).

Few scholars have focused on the sites of belonging and power that these young women construct and maintain (Maira, 2002; Ngo, 2002; Shankar, 2008). For example, Maira (2002) examined the ways in which Indian American young women used Bhangra remix music and hybrid fashion to mediate between the multiple cultures in which they were embedded. Ngo (2002) reconsidered the negative connotation of early marriage among Hmong American young women and revealed that they used early marriage to oppose the structural constraints they experienced in school and at home. While these studies focused on college-aged women, Shankar's (2008) study looked at the lives of South Asian American (Desis) high school students. She revealed that teen girls subjected to strong control and surveillance from their families and communities around issues of dating, marriage, and social life, actively negotiate, resist, and/or 'quietly work around this (the) system' (p. 168). As these studies illustrate,

documenting the ways in which these girls potentially serve as agents of cultural change leads us to moving beyond an objectification in which they are pitied and allows us to learn their needs, desires, and capacity to manage their struggles.

In-between spaces for and by youth

Education scholars have commonly understood the lives of youth in the two separate spheres of home and school, and have often relied on this dichotomous understanding when examining sites of learning. Recently, some scholars have examined and theorized various out-of-school settings that are impor- tant to the lives of youth (Fine, Weis, Centrie, & Roberts, 2000; Heath, 2001; Hull & Schultz, 2002; Weis & Dimitriadis, 2008; Weis & Fine, 2000). Community-based organizations (CBO) (Heath, 2001; Reyes, 2007), community-based educational sites (Fine et al., 2000), popular culture (Weis & Dimitriadis, 2008), and various public and private spaces, including schools and neighborhoods (Weis & Fine, 2000), are also important sites where young people learn, know, teach, and (re)create 'authentic and vibrant youth identities' (Weis & Dimitriadis, 2008, p. 2291). These spaces provide opportunities for youth to develop identity, 'a process of making identifications – identifications made, for example, with the different cultural and racialized representations and the multiplying lifestyle possibilities that mark the arena within which social relations are forged' (Yon, 2000, p. 14). Underserved Asian American youth have benefited tremendously from alternative education settings. Reyes (2007) revealed how an after-school video-making project in an Asian American organization provided opportunities for working-class Southeast Asian American teenagers to develop their identities.

While these scholars have explored the 'vibrancy of the "in-between"' (Weis & Dimitriadis, 2008, p. 2307) and revealed nurturing and empowering spaces for youth 'beyond the borders of schooling' (Fine et al., 2000), they often focused on sites that are visible and easy to locate. While these sites possibly value and integrate the knowledge, ability, and strength of young people, they are pre-structured and offered by adults. Scholars rarely have examined less-structured spaces that youth carve out by and for themselves in their daily movements across various sites, including school, home, and neighborhood. In-between spaces where youth navigate the borders between, across, and beyond school and home are crucial sites where youth develop identities, communities, and cultures. These informal spaces with less adult control and intervention could illuminate 'cultural assets and wealth' (Yosso, 2005, p. 82) that youth, specifically immigrant youth, possess (Tokunaga, 2011a, 2011b).

Methodology

This study uses ethnography, a methodology that aims for 'cultural interpretation' (Wolcott, 1999, p. 68), to explore the behaviors, meaning, thoughts, and perspectives of a group of Asian American girls. As ethnography values 'field-oriented activity' (Wolcott, 1999, p. 77), I became immersed in the girls' every- day experiences by accompanying, observing, and having conversations with them in different settings.

Sites of study

The main participants of my study are eight first-, 1.5-, and second-generation[2] Asian American high school girls (ages 13–16) – three Filipinas, two Vietnamese, two Chinese, and one Indian – who are part of the Basement Group at Maple High (pseudonym), a US public high school on the east coast. The school is located in a suburb adjacent to a large urban center that has recently experienced large immigrant population growth. This neighborhood, which used to be a predominantly white middle-class community, has become a racially and ethnically diverse majority-minority area, specifically with a large influx of working-class Latino immigrants. Maple High reflects the demographic characteristics of the neighborhood and has a student population that is about 46% Latino/a, 22% black, 20% white, and 8% Asian (2010–2011). About 40% of the students at Maple High are eligible for free or reduced lunch. The school enrolls about 1500 students. All girls in this study regularly participated in an after-school

Table 1. Main participants.

Name	Grade	Age	Ethnicity	Country born	Immigration generations (age of arrival)
Yin	9th	15	Chinese	China	1.5 generation (8 years old)
Nita	9th	14	Indian	United States	Second generation (US born)
Sierra	9th	15	Filipino	Philippines	First generation (15 years old)
Chelle	10th	13	Filipino	Philippines	1.5 generation (9 years old)
Giang	10th	15	Vietnamese	Vietnam	1.5 generation (10 years old)
Zullie	10th	16	Filipino	Philippines	1.5 generation (8 years old)
Mino	10th	16	Vietnamese	United States	Second generation (US born)
Gina	10th	15	Chinese	United States	Second generation (US born)

Note: Names are pseudonyms that the girls chose for themselves. Grade and ages were recorded in March 2011.

program at Maple High that is run by a CBO called the Asian American Youth Organization (AAYO) (pseudonym).[3] The mission of the AAYO is to improve the lives of underserved Asian American youth by providing them social, academic, and life skills support. As of 2009–2010, the AAYO has developed an array of programs for more than 300 students (K–12) in the larger metropolitan area. At Maple High, one full-time staff member, an Asian American young woman, runs the program twice a week for about 2 h, serving 15–20 students.

The eight girls have different ethnicities, family immigration histories, durations of stay in the US, languages, ages, and classes (Table 1). See Table 1 for each girl's background information.

Some girls recently immigrated to the US, retaining a strong memory of their places of origin, while others were born and raised in the US, having never visited their parents' countries of origin. Some girls' families have been in the US for 20–30 years, with many of their relatives having immigrated to the US where they established and expanded their communities. Other girls are recent immigrants and are still in the process of bringing their family members to the US. Some are part of the wave of Vietnamese refugees following the end of the Vietnam War in 1975. Others are part of the post-1965 Asian immigrant wave, whose families immigrated to the US from the Philippines, India, or China to search for better economic opportunities. Most of the girls' parents are working class and employed in the service industry at hotels, nail salons, or grocery stores. Three Filipina girls' parents have more privileged work in the medical and educational professions.

Since the main goal of this study was to capture the experiences of Asian American girls, I did not include most of the other Basement Group students in my research. There may be gender, ethnic, and/or racial differences that are not reflected in this study. As an exception, I talked with Savannah and Meli, two Salvadoran immigrant girls who were close friends with the Asian American girls and part of the core members of the Basement Community. Their perspectives helped deepen my understanding of the experiences of the main participants.

Data collection and analysis

The data used in this study are part of a larger study in which I explored how a group of Asian American high school girls constructed 'homes,' sites of belonging and empowerment (Tokunaga, 2012). This ethnographic study took a 'multi-instrumental approach' (Wolcott, 1999, p. 44) in collecting data, including participant observations, formal interviews, 'informal ethnographic interviews' (Agar, 1996), focus groups, online observation and engagement, and document collection. Field entry was through the AAYO's after-school program at Maple High, where I volunteered for about two years starting January 2011. I conducted participant observations during after-school programs (once or twice a week), summer programs (two full days a week in summer 2011), and occasional fieldtrips and events hosted by the AAYO. As I developed rapport with the girls and learned of the important spaces in their daily lives, I expanded my field site, including their school, neighborhoods, and homes, and had conversations with their families and friends. I also conducted two to five in-depth, semi-structured interviews, which lasted between 30 and 120 min, with each of the girls, based on her availability and interest, between March and August 2011. Most of these interviews were recorded and transcribed.

Data analysis began during the initial period of my fieldwork. During my fieldwork, I wrote 'observer's comments' (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998, p. 123) in my field notes and transcribed interview data, exploring potential ideas and insights. After I finished the semi-structured interviews and the main part of my fieldwork, I used the qualitative data analysis software *Atlas.ti* to code all field notes and interview data. The coding began with 'open coding' then shifted toward 'focused coding' (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995, p. 143) where I specifically focused on important spaces and communities for the girls and its characteristics. Later in the data analysis, I made network charts and wrote a few 'integrative memos' to 'explore(s) relationships between coded fieldnotes and to provide a more sustained examination of a theme' (Emerson et al., 1995, p. 162). Integrative memos were useful to generate a cohesive idea and overall theme in writing the ethnography.

Researcher positionality

My various identities – a Japanese citizen, an Asian woman, a non-native English speaker, and a doctoral student (at the time of my fieldwork), with a middle-class background, among other aspects of my identity and experiences – impacted the ways I understood phenomena and how I built relationships with the girls. I am aware of my positionality in representing the lives of the girls and producing this ethnography. I constantly reflected on my positionality, specifically thought about the privilege that I had relative to the girls, and negotiated this 'ambiguous insider/outsider position' (Kondo, 1990, p. 23). The girls and I had an Asian identity intersecting with gender identity and shared the marginalized experiences of being an Asian girl/woman in the US. While our common Asian identity was salient in our relationships, I was aware of the privilege I had as a middle-class Japanese citizen compared to girls with working-class backgrounds who come from families from 'developing countries.' They sometimes envied my Japanese ethnicity, associating it with richness and both economic and cultural power. My Japanese language competency and nationality allowed me to build rapport with the girls, who enjoyed Japan's popular culture and had interest in its culture and language. I was specifically mindful of the power of my adult status. I attempted to avoid coercion, for example, by not forcing the girls to talk about issues about which they were hesitant.

Displacement and community building

The girls struggled to 'find meaning in living in the borderlands – marginal, hybrid, liminal spaces, between and among worlds' (Murphy-Shigematsu, 2012, p. 219). They experienced displacement, 'the separation of people from their native culture either through physical dislocation (as refugees, immigrants, migrants, exiles, or expatriates) or the colonizing imposition of a foreign culture' (Bammer, 1994, p. xi). Uprooted from the familiar environment of their (or their parents') countries of origin and emplaced in an unfamiliar and isolating culture in the US, they created a community of their own, a site where they could establish 'secure yet flexible belonging' (Hébert, Hoerder, & Schmitt, 2006, p. 21).

Displacement in their daily lives

The girls struggled navigating the 'interstitial zone of displacement' (Gupta & Ferguson, 1992, p. 18), specifically within their family homes and at school. Their homes were often alienating and isolating for them. They often shared with me the loneliness, isolation, and sorrow they often felt at home. As working-class immigrants, their parents needed to secure economic stability by working long hours, which affected family time in both quantity and quality. Specifically, first- and 1.5-generation girls often longed for the intimate family time they had experienced in their countries of origin including daily family dinners, regular conversations with their parents, and frequent visits by family neighbors, which rarely occurred in the US. Chelle described in a melancholy voice, 'Here [in the US], it's the first time that I was home alone. In the Philippines I was never home alone.' Chelle was surrounded by caring extended family members, neighbors, and babysitters in the Philippines, but, in the US, she was often

alone in the apartment, caring for her younger brother while her parents worked. As teenage daughters, the girls often were responsible for household chores and caring for younger siblings, which furthered their solitary and constrained feelings.

The girls often complained to me that their parents were strict and they felt 'stuck at home.' The girls' movement was under their parents' surveillance due to concerns for their safety and protection. Similar to studies that reveal that Asian American and Latino parents control their daughters' sexual behavior and freedom (DasGupta & Dasgupta, 1998; Espiritu, 2003; Garcia, 2012), the girls' movements were often regulated through, for example, strict curfews and prohibition of public transportation use. One girl said to me in a frustrated voice, 'My mom thinks that I will be raped if I take the bus.' While it was not uncommon for high school students to take local buses in this neighborhood, the girls' parents perceived public buses in the US to be unsafe spaces where the girls would interact in proximity to unknown people.

In addition to the isolation felt at home, school was often alienating and foreign to them. At a school where Asian Americans comprised only 8% of the student population (and one teacher), they told me that they often felt alienated and invisible. Some had difficulty connecting with teachers and other students with different racial and ethnic backgrounds. Excepting the Japanese class that many of them enjoyed taking, there was a sense of silence, invisibility, and isolation in the formal classes. Gina said, 'It is really boring, and most of the time, I'm alone. I don't have many friends in those classes.' She also struggled academically, which might have further marginalized her. They also struggled in classes where teachers and other students referred to them using the model minority myth – the expectation that Asian students are smart and high achieving – which made them feel upset, uncomfortable, and even angry. Zullie said to me in a frustrated voice, 'They [non-Asian students] are always like, "You are Asian you can do that!" I'm like, "Not really…" I don't really like it when people stereotype you. In a way, it's rude and ignorant.'

Community building

In the midst of alienation and displacement in the borderlands, the girls actively and creatively forged a community of their own at Maple High. As I started my fieldwork at the AAYO after-school program, I soon realized that the girls often referred to the group, which they named the 'Basement Group' or 'Downstairs Group.' They happily explained to me that they enjoyed their time with their friends in the school basement, specifically during lunch.[4]

According to the girls, the community was initially a 'small group,' comprising seven members – six Asian American girls, including Giang, Mino, and Gina, and one Latino boy – all of whom attended the same middle school. The Asian American girls, the founding members of the group, often invited their friends, and in two years, it became a 'huge group' of about 25 students with diverse backgrounds. Savannah and Meli, two Salvadoran girls who later became core members, explained that they were invited by Giang when their original groups had broken down. Meli said, 'She's like, "Oh, you can come sit with us in the basement." So, I started going down to the basement.' Many of the girls' friends joined the group, enlarging its size and the diversity, every year.

The group differed from the common depiction of school-based social groups that tend to be segregated by race, ethnicity, class, and/or gender, illuminating power dynamics among students (Lee, 2009; Olsen, 1997; Shankar, 2008; Tatum, 1997). Rather, it was a community 'where people of different races occupy the same territory, where under, lower, middle and upper classes touch, where the space between two individuals shrinks with intimacy' (Anzaldúa, 2007, p. 19). The Basement Group was a 'global microcosm' (Finkelstein, 2013, p. 133) that consisted of Latino, Asian, black, white, and biracial youth. It was a mix of genders and age groups with diverse religious backgrounds. There was class diversity ranging from those who were eligible for free and reduced school meals to others who were middle class. Among the various differences, familial and personal histories of national and cultural border crossings seemed to bind this group in important ways. Most of the students were first-, 1.5-, or second-generation immigrants. They and/or their parents had immigrated to the US from countries in

Asia, Latin America, Africa, and Europe. Some were 'returnees' who spent time elsewhere and moved back to the US. Many of them were parented across cultures and navigated multiple traditions, languages, and nation states in the borderlands.

The Basement Group was where they could feel a sense of community, closeness, and familiarity with their friends. Mino described the group, saying, 'Everyone is connected. We are like a big family. We are close to each other. We know each other a lot. It is like a family thing.' She delightedly showed me her favorite wallpaper, a collage of various pictures of the group, on her laptop. I often encountered moments when the girls listened to and cared for each other, giving advice concerning problems with family, friends, or romantic partners. While this community should not be romanticized, as the girls sometimes struggled with maintaining friendships and peer policing, the group often served as a temporary cocoon from daily struggles, isolation, and alienation.

They created this community in the school basement in response to mainstream spaces and homogeneous social groups, which I discuss in the following sections.

Mainstream or margins?: carving out a space in the basement hallway

Physical space is an important component of social groups as it reflects the ways students form 'a sense of ownership over school resources' (Shankar, 2008, p. 72). Interestingly, the girls refused to occupy the spaces they considered mainstream and actively located themselves in a marginal space.

Rejecting mainstream spaces

The girls rejected mainstream spaces where they often felt marginalized and isolated, such as the 'Main Street,' a popular place to sit during lunch, recess, and after school. 'Main Street' was a 'big hallway' with tall ceilings and many windows located near the main school entrance. It reflected the racial, ethnic, and class diversity of Maple High. It was packed with many groups of students who often sat together based on race, class, and/or gender. The girls often told me that they did not feel comfortable in the main hallway, partially due to the type of students they perceived sat there. Zullie said, 'I don't like to sit there [in the Main Street] because most people who sit there are judgmental people … They look down at people who don't look good.' Through Zullie's eyes, the students in the 'Main Street' saw themselves as top of the clique hierarchy and judged the clothing, appearance, and behavior of other students. Though Zullie also made judgments when describing these students, she felt somewhat marginalized by them. Savannah also explained to me that walking through the 'Main Street' felt 'a little scary' during lunch because some students would 'stare' at her. The girls' rejection of this space was a rejection of the complex power dynamics that occurred in relation to race, ethnicity, class, gender, personality, appearance, values, etc.

The cafeteria was another space where the girls felt marginalized. Though it was a popular place where many students had lunch, the girls avoided it. One day during the after-school program, the girls and their friends gave a presentation on their high school experiences to a group of middle school students who were soon entering Maple High. Savannah recommended the students to avoid the cafeteria because it looked 'lonely and dark.' She and other girls emphasized sitting in the basement. I was surprised because the cafeteria was bright, with multiple windows, unlike the basement, which did not have any. The location and amount of light seemed immaterial to them. The 'Main Street' and the cafeteria were congested, alienating, and lacked a familiar community in which they could feel a sense of belonging and comfort.

Claiming marginality

The girls took pride in occupying the basement hallway, a geographically marginal space in the school. They often declared with pride and passion, 'We sit in the basement!' Mino shared with me that the girls started gathering in the school basement because one of them had her locker there, and soon

it became their hangout. Early in my fieldwork, Giang took me to the basement hallway where they congregated every day. Giang was one of the few Asian American girls who rarely struggled with family issues, had many friends at school, and was academically successful.

Giang The most comfortable place is the basement.

Tomoko Basement?

Giang Yeah, like right here [underneath the stairwell of the basement of the school and near the backdoor exit]. This area.

Tomoko Do you sometimes sit around here?

Giang We come here but we stand over there but we talk more over there [pointing out to the basement hallway near the Japanese language classroom door]…

Tomoko So, you like this kind of space?

Giang Yeah, we like this. We are like the Basement Group [in a strong and delighted voice]!

The corner of the basement hallway was a 'dim' (in Gina's words) and narrow space where they could gather comfortably and visibly. Yet, it was also a space where they could congregate secretively beyond the main corridors that their peers governed. Yin stated that she liked the basement 'because nobody goes there.' Similarly, Savannah said, 'That's why I like it, 'cause in the basement, we're, like, isolated … We don't want people.' The basement was a less congested space where they could occupy and own personal space without fighting with other students. It was a space where they were less vulnerable to the pervasive model minority stereotypes (Lee, 2009).

No matter how dim, narrow, and far from the center of the school campus, the girls comfortably occupied the basement hallway with their peers. They repeatedly stated with pride how 'loud' they were in the basement (especially when compared to anywhere else). As Gina said, 'It's [the basement is] really loud during lunch time!' Scholars have revealed that marginalized students are often pushed to the margins within a school space (Olsen, 1997; Shankar, 2008), and perhaps the school basement space could be an example of this. However, there was a sense of domination, power, ownership, and community in the ways the girls understood and valued this physical location. When I was walking through the 'Main Street' at school with Gina, she told me that she refused to spend time here, preferring the basement instead. She happily claimed, 'We dominate the basement!' Feminist and postcolonial scholars have documented Third Space Theory, describing a site with potential for newness and openness wherein marginality is affirmed (Anzaldúa, 2007; Bhabha, 1990; hooks, 1990; Soja, 1996); the girls reappropriated this peripheral space into an empowering space, even if temporarily. In hooks' words, the girls occupied a 'marginal space that is not a site of domination but a place of resistance' (hooks, 1990, p. 343). They were simultaneously invisible and visible in this space and proudly claimed their existence, developing flexible identities and a sense of belonging.

While the girls treasured the basement, it was not always a nurturing, comfortable, or safe space for them. As part of a school-controlled space, the girls were sometimes cautioned by the teachers and staff regarding misbehavior and noise. Mino explained, 'Yeah, we got kicked out before. We were in the middle from freshman year to beginning of sophomore year. Then we moved and spread.' Mino told me that they had to behave properly and greet the teachers when they passed. Though teachers and staff sometimes made them relocate, they always returned. Savannah said in a strong voice, 'We have gotten kicked out of there three times already… And we always go back.' Sometimes, the girls policed each other when deciding where to sit within the basement hallway, which resulted in some tensions. Some students had quarrels, made new friends in other groups, and left. Zullie sometimes criticized the ways her friends behaved in the basement. She secretively told me, 'They play around like little kids. That's why I don't wanna be downstairs all the time … They hit each other, run around.' The Basement Group was not a cohesive and fixed community that always offered a sense of belonging, but an ephemeral, fleeting, and loosely formed group where students continuously came and went.

Homogeneity or heterogeneity?: affirming diversity and cultural fusion

The girls were proud of their racial, ethnic, and linguistic diversity and the ways they embraced and affirmed cultural hybridity. They viewed diversity and hybridity as 'important cultural resources' (Gutiérrez, Baquedano- López, & Tejeda, 1999) that unified the group and strongly criticized racially homogeneous groups.

Rejecting homogeneous groups

The girls rejected many social groups at school, specifically those they thought were racially segregated with exclusive and homogeneous memberships. They thought that these groups were not open to valuing diversity in their friendships, romantic relationships, music, etc. As Tatum (1997) described in her study with black students, racial grouping seemed crucial for many students at Maple High in developing racial and ethnic identities and creating communities. Early in my fieldwork, the girls enthusiastically introduced me to the names and characteristics of various social groups at school. According to the girls, there was a group of 'Theater Kids' comprising mostly white seniors with a few Asian and black students. There was an 'ESOL Group' that consisted of mostly working-class Latino immigrant students who created their own close-knit clique. The girls also identified an 'Asian Corner,' a narrower, ethnocentric group comprising Asian students with diverse ethnic backgrounds and immigrant generations.

Specifically, the girls in the basement engaged in 'intraethnic othering' (Pyke & Dang, 2003) by criticizing the racial homogeneity and self-segregation of the Asian Corner Group. The girls often talked negatively about the students in the Asian Corner Group, who only gathered with Asian students and tended to exclude others. Zullie described, 'There [They] are like quiet and just by themselves … They are nice people but I don't feel like welcomed when I pass by there.' The girls in the basement also scrutinized the students in the Asian Corner Group who mostly dated Asians. Mino articulated, 'The girls only date the Asian guys.' The girls in the basement who dated boys of different races and ethnicities seemed to think that confinement to intra-racial dating was a loss of opportunity to learn from other cultures.[5] They also disassociated themselves from the Asian Corner Group for their limited interest in consuming Asian popular culture. Mino stated, 'They don't really talk about Asian things like how we do.' The girls' 'othering' of the Asian Corner Group did not fit into the labeling of 'FOB' (too ethnic) or 'Whitewashed' (too assimilated) described in Pyke and Dang's (2003) study of second-generation Vietnamese and Korean immigrants. Rather, it was a complex rejection of a lack of racial and ethnic diversity (e.g. racial homogeneity and intra-racial dating) as well as a lack of enthusiasm about engaging in Asian popular culture. While these two elements seemed to be contradictory, the girls selectively singled out characteristics of the Asian Corner Group that were different from the Basement Group in order to define who they were.

Championing diversity and cultural hybridity

The girls were unquestionably proud of the racial and ethnic diversity of the Basement Group. Mino compared the Basement Group to the Asian Corner group and explained, 'We don't hate them [Asian Corner students]. We can't get along with them 'cause we are different, 'cause we are diverse. We like being very diverse.' Similarly, Chelle proudly asserted, 'My group is mixed. I like being there. It's not like we are going against race. We are not racist.' The girls who were subjected to 'racial formation in the United States' (Omi & Winant, 1994) were omni-aware of race. They acknowledged racial and ethnic differences within the group while valuing what was possible, doable, and thinkable in a group with divergence. They almost claimed a sense of exceptionalism grounded in their diversity, perhaps not unlike similar claims that are part of larger American discourses. As immigrants, they might have internalized a romanticized understanding of 'present-day constructs of multiculturalism' (Shankar, 2008, p. 121) that centers around diversity, which ironically would lead them to reject other groups that value racial homogeneity. It is important to note that they also practiced exclusivity in that they were unlikely to invite students who were part of racially segregated groups to join them.

As a group of borderland dwellers, the girls were empowered to embrace flexibility and opportunities for 'cultural hybridity' (Bhabha, 1990). They collectively appreciated their ability to fuse cultures, including scrambling languages, mixing and trading foods, and blending different types of music. Chelle happily explained to me how the group was 'mixed' by saying, 'It's a good thing because we are gonna get a little bit of both. It's the best of both worlds.'

Unlike formal spaces at school where the girls were forced to speak standardized English, the basement group was a poly-vocal community that encouraged speaking two or more languages daily and where linguistic hybridity was affirmed. The girls had a profound interest in learning and teaching languages, code-switching, creating hybrid languages, and speaking multiple languages with their friends. I often observed some speaking in 'a border tongue' (Anzaldúa, 2007, p. 77), a mix of multiple languages in one conversation, one sentence, or even within one word. Specifically, Filipina girls, Chelle, Sierra, and Zullie, were proud of speaking together in *Taglish*, a mix of Tagalog and English, as it was deeply connected to their identity. When I asked Chelle what language she preferred, she answered Taglish and explained, 'I do that (talking in Taglish) all the time … there's like 90% English and 10% Tagalog in it.' Similar to Zentella's (1997) study on Puerto Rican children in New York, code-switching was a method they used to belong to two worlds and to 'communicate(ing) the realities and values true to themselves' (Anzaldúa, 2007, p. 77), which were often not allowed in other school spaces.

The girls also co-invented a pan-Asian fused language in which Japanese functioned as an Esperanto, an international language. It was their version of 'language crossing' (Rampton, 1995), using a language that did not 'belong' to them. Early in my fieldwork, I was surprised to hear the students use some Japanese words among themselves. While there were no Japanese students or teachers at Maple High, the school offered Japanese as a general language course, and many of the girls took it. Those who had fairly high Japanese skills through taking classes and/or actively watching Japanese dramas, movies, and anime took an active role in using Japanese words such as '*nani*' (what?), '*genki*?' (how are you?), and '*onegai*' (please) with their friends. As the only proximal native Japanese speaker, they happily used a mix of English and Japanese when communicating with me and asked me to teach them Japanese. I often saw the girls carry binders, notebooks, and post-it notes with Japanese words (e.g. their names in Japanese) on them. One day after school, Mino and her basement friends spent time together at a nearby mall writing words and drawing pictures on Meli's arms, hands, and legs. Mino later showed me a picture she drew on Meli's arm: a cute rabbit face, which she called an 'Asian face,' with the Japanese word '*kawaii*' written above it.

While Japanese provided them a tool for creating a pan-Asian language that they felt connected to, their use of Japanese cannot be romanticized. They had access to Japanese language through the global dissemination and popularity of Japanese popular culture, which was based on Japan's strong economic and cultural power (Iwabuchi, 2002). They did not have the similar contact with other Asian popular culture, besides that of Korea, which may have limited their adoption of other Asian languages. Additionally, they seemed to be aware that using Japanese gave them some form of power, given its popularity in the US and Japan's high status within the hierarchy of Asia.

The girls treasured sharing, disseminating, and celebrating food consumption diversity. They valued the ethnic food they often ate at home as it symbolized their family traditions, ethnic backgrounds, identities, and countries of origin (Haiming & Lianlian, 2009). During lunchtime in the basement, they exchanged homemade lunches such as sandwiches, sushi, Chinese and Vietnamese noodles, Indian fried rice, pupusas – a Salvadoran dish – and cafeteria lunches. They sometimes enjoyed walking through American, Latino, and Asian sections of the local grocery stores, discussing favorite foods and often purchasing ethnic foods that they had not eaten before. During a summer break, some girls took me to their favorite Korean-owned grocery store a few times and gave me a tour of some of their favorite sections, such as a corner that sold various Asian snacks. They loved visiting their friends' houses to sample home-cooked, traditional meals. The homemade pho of Mino's mother was their favorite, which I also had a chance to try. They had a profound level of curiosity and perhaps urgency in expanding and diversifying their food experiences.

The girls also enjoyed consuming popular culture from around the world. I often observed the girls enthusiastically watch YouTube clips of their favorite American rappers, Korean boy bands and girl bands, Japanese and American rock bands, British boy bands, Bollywood singers, and others. Specifically, the girls were proud of their shared interests in Asian popular culture despite their diverse racial backgrounds. Mino explained, 'Most of the people I know [in the basement] are into Asian stuff. Even though they are not Asian, they still like Asian stuff.' In the basement, they read manga (Japanese comic books), practiced dancing to their favorite songs by Korean boy bands, listened to K-pop and J-pop music, and exchanged information about Indian, Korean, and Taiwanese dramas and movies. They often happily updated me on this information, as well. They specifically liked K-pop, a mix of Western popular culture, such as hip-hop and R & B, and Asian popular culture (Shim, 2006), as it had hybridized characteristics they valued.

While the girls actively organized these activities, some of their ways of celebrating diverse foods and music could be criticized as essentialist and superficial. As multicultural education scholars have noted, there is a possibility that the girls are complicit in blindly celebrating diversity and not going beyond the philosophy of '"many cultures" existing together in an atmosphere of respect and tolerance' (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2006, p. 25). Yet, their actions might also be mirroring multicultural activities and events organized at schools, communities, and society, which needs critical attention. Perhaps they are pushing the boundaries and borders of identities, cultures, and communities – sometimes by essentializing and other times by hybridizing – as an attempt to construct a new form of borderland community.

Conclusion and implications

While the Asian American girls struggled with navigating displacement in the US, including isolation at home and alienation in classes and mainstream spaces at school, they had sufficient creativity and improvisational skills to invent their own community. As community builders and cultural producers, they constructed the Basement Group, a borderland community that embraced and affirmed characteristics they thought were meaningful, desirable, and valuable. In this youth-created space, the girls were encouraged to foster cultural hybridity, nurture flexible belonging, develop ambivalent identities (Ngo, 2009), and create new cultural scripts that expressed their own and their friends' border-crossing lives. Unlike many other spaces, they were not always forced to fit into stereotypes/labeling and choose a single language, culture, identity, ethnicity, or tradition. While they sometimes expressed racial pride or remarked on race, ethnicity, or gender, they seemed to experiment, with various ways to embrace and expand 'multicultural possibilities inherent in a campus and community that is so diverse' (Olsen, 1997, p. 75). Positioning themselves in a geographically marginal space, they nurtured 'radical perspectives from which to see and create, to imagine alternatives, new worlds' (hooks, 1990, p. 341). Their rejection of mainstream spaces and social groups was complex – they negotiated intersections of race, ethnicity, gender, class, age, personality, interests, etc. Perhaps their experiences in the borderlands, ambiguous, and contentious spaces resulted in an elaborate, dynamic, and intersectional rejection of mainstream norms and values.

This youth-led space also had constraints, challenges, and negative features. While the girls valued their group's diversity and hybridity, they also degraded and criticized other social groups as self-segregating, racially homogeneous, and elitist without acknowledging their different values and interests. Perhaps it was their way of coping with strong border policing by other students and of protecting themselves from teasing and/or bullying. However, their critiques of other groups could be a manifestation of 'internalized racial oppression' (Pyke & Dang, 2003) and could marginalize ethnic and racial minority students further. Furthermore, they were vulnerable to surveillance and control by teachers and staff at school and did not have free autonomy to occupy the space. Specifically, as this community was developed within an educational setting, it became a site of tension between school regulation and youth agency. The process of creating this community was not smooth and linear, but contentious, challenging, and dynamic. This complex process illuminates their difficulties and struggles in discovering and fashioning their community as they negotiate their lives in the borderlands. I suggest scholars to further explore questions such as when, why, and how youth-led spaces become sites of contention, fear, and/or disempowerment.

One of the major contributions of this study was its revelation of the power and possibilities of in-between spaces that marginalized immigrant youth construct in their daily lives. While these informal spaces are often devalued and dismissed in research, this study showed how they could magnify 'community cultural wealth' (Yosso, 2005) of immigrant youth. Specifically, for the Asian American girls in my study who struggled with displacement at home and mainstream spaces at school, this space became a momentary buffer where they experienced a sense of community, self, and power. Perhaps acknowledging and nurturing these youth-led spaces could ameliorate the stressful conditions and improve self-esteem of Asian American girls, the population with the highest rates of suicide and depression in the US, and contribute to their well-being. I suggest that education scholars reimagine the ways they understand youth spaces and explore the meaning, role, and possibilities of the oft-invisible, unstructured spaces that immigrant youth develop and value. When conducting research, methodological creativity and flexibility are crucial. As I discovered the importance of the Basement Group through conducting multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork, I encourage scholars to understand the meaning behind youth making their own spaces and communities and to shadow them in multiple spaces, such as community-based organizations, schools, homes, street corners, and online.

I would like to emphasize the importance of examining the agency of Asian American girls in navigating structural inequalities and constructing a borderland community that they desired. While some scholars have explored the agentic features of these girls (Maira, 2002; Ngo, 2002; Shankar, 2008), more research is needed that explores ways to enhance, support, and build on their strengths and reimagine what is possible for these girls in negotiating their constraints. I also suggest scholars explore the intra-differences of Asian American girls. The girls in this study are relatively recent immigrants who live in a multi-racial suburb of the east coast where there is a small Asian population. Scholars should conduct research on various groups of Asian American girls and explore how different locations, regions, nations of origin, and generations shape their unique experiences and their ways of constructing communities.

Youth-created spaces offer adult educators invaluable information about transforming alienating educational settings into spaces where marginalized immigrant students feel accepted, empowered, and included. Adult educators could learn how immigrant youth use and experience spaces, build relationships, and create activities and rituals. Incorporating some characteristics of these spaces into educational settings might be effective in developing an inclusive and positive learning environment. Educators could encourage and celebrate the cultural and linguistic hybridity of immigrant youth. When these young people do not feel forced to choose a single culture, tradition, identity, or language, they could be more creative and empowered to create spaces of their own. Encouraging students to use the language they prefer, including hybrid languages, or assisting youth in creating their own videos of fusion songs and ideas might be effective. Educators could encourage students to distance themselves from the multicultural events they often experience and think beyond the norms in order to avoid essentializing cultures. We have much to learn from youth-created spaces that reflect the strengths, assets, and possibilities that immigrant youth possess.

Notes

1. I use the term 'Asian American' as a socially constructed and political category (Lowe, 1996). Given the diversity of its population, I do not attempt to create metanarratives or to essentialize their experiences.
2. I define the first generation as foreign-born children who immigrated to the US after the age of 12, the 1.5 generation as foreign-born children who arrived in the US before the age of 12, and the second generation as US-born children of immigrant parents.
3. There was an overlap of the members of the Basement Group and the after-school program, which created two different spaces to share a similar group identity. While the program might have impacted the culture of the Basement Community, this article mainly focuses on the girls' experiences in the basement.
4. Maple High has an open lunch system that allows students to sit anywhere in the school to have lunch.
5. The Basement Community was a decidedly heteronormative space. No girl identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or questioning.

Acknowledgements

Disclosure statement

Funding

Notes on contributor

Tomoko Tokunaga is a project assistant professor of the International Center at Keio University. She received her PhD in Educational Leadership and Policy Studies (Socio-Cultural Foundations of Education) as a Fulbright Scholar at the University of Maryland, College Park. She has conducted ethnographic research with immigrant youth in Japan and the United States, specifically focusing on notions of identity, agency, belonging, and home.

References

Agar, M. (1996). *The professional stranger: An informal introduction to ethnography* (2nd ed.). San Diego, CA: Academic Press.

Anzaldúa, G. (2002). (Un)natural bridges, (un)safe spaces. In G. Anzaldúa & A. Keating (Eds.), *This bridge we call home: Radical visions for transformation* (pp. 1–5). New York, NY: Routledge.

Anzaldúa, G. (2007). *Borderlands la frontera: The new mestiza* (3rd ed.). San Francisco, CA: Aunt Lute Books.

Bammer, A. (1994). *Displacements: Cultural identities in question*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Bhabha, H. K. (1990). The third space. In J. Rutherford (Ed.), *Identity: Community, culture, difference* (pp. 207–221). London: Lawrence & Wishart.

Bogdan, R., & Biklen, S. K. (1998). *Qualitative research for education: An introduction to theory and methods* (3rd ed.). Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon.

DasGupta, S., & Dasgupta, S. D. (1998). Sex, lies, and women's lives: An intergenerational dialogue. In S. D. Dasgupta & H. Ahmed-Ghosh (Eds.), *A patchwork shawl: Chronicles of South Asian women in America* (pp. 111–128). New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

Emerson, R. M., Fretz, R. I., & Shaw, L. L. (1995). *Writing ethnographic fieldnotes*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Espiritu, Y. L. (2003). *Home bound: Filipino lives across cultures, communities, and countries*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Fine, M., Weis, L., Centrie, C., & Roberts, R. (2000). Educating beyond the borders of schooling. *Anthropology & Education Quarterly, 31*, 131–151.

Finkelstein, B. (2013). Teaching outside the lines: Education history for a world in motion. *History of Education Quarterly, 53*, 126–138.

Garcia, L. (2012). *Respect yourself, protect yourself: Latina girls and sexual identity*. New York, NY: New York University.

Gupta, A., & Ferguson, J. (1992). Beyond "culture": Space, identity, and the politics of difference. *Cultural Anthropology, 7*, 6–23.

Gutiérrez, K., Baquedano- López, P., & Tejeda, C. (1999). Rethinking diversity: Hybridity and hybrid language practices in the third space. *Mind, Culture, and Activity, 6*, 286–303.

Haiming, L., & Lianlian, L. (2009). Food, culinary identity, and transnational culture: Chinese restaurant business in Southern California. *Journal of Asian American Studies, 12*, 135–162.

Heath, S. B. (2001). Three's not a crowd: Plans, roles, and focus in the arts. *Educational Researcher, 30*, 10–17.

Hébert, Y. M., Hoerder, D., & Schmitt, I. S. (2006). *Negotiating transcultural lives: Belongings and social capital among youth in comparative perspective*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

hooks, B. (1990). Marginality as site of resistance. In R. Ferguson, M. G. Gever, T. T. Minh-ha, & C. West (Eds.), *Out there: Marginalization and contemporary cultures* (pp. 341–343). New York, NY: New Museum of Contemporary Art/MIT Press.

Hull, G., & Schultz, K. (2002). *School's out: Bridging out-of-school literacies with classroom practice*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

Iwabuchi, K. (2002). *Recentering globalization: Popular culture and Japanese transnationalism*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Kondo, D. K. (1990). *Crafting selves: Power, gender, and discourses of identity in a Japanese workplace*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Ladson-Billings, G., & Tate, W. F. (2006). Toward a critical race theory of education. In A. D. Dixson & C. K. Rousseau (Eds.), *Critical race theory in education: All God's children got a song* (pp. 11–30). New York, NY: Routledge.

Lee, S. J. (2009). *Unraveling the "model minority" stereotype: Listening to Asian American youth* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

Lee, S. J., & Vaught, S. (2003). 'You can never be too rich or too thin': Popular culture and consumer culture and the Americanization of Asian American adolescent girls and young women. *Journal of Negro Education, 72*, 457–466.

Lowe, L. (1996). *Immigrant acts: On Asian American cultural politics*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Maira, S. (2002). *Desis in the house: Indian American youth culture in New York City*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.

Murphy-Shigematsu, S. (2012). *When half is whole: Multiethnic Asian American identities*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

National Center for Health Statistics. (2003). *Health, United States, 2003*. Hyattsville, MD: US Public Health Service.

Ngo, B. (2002). Contesting "culture": The perspectives of Hmong American female students on early marriage. *Anthropology & Education Quarterly, 33*, 163–188.

Ngo, B. (2009). Ambivalent urban, immigrant identities: The incompleteness of Lao American student identities. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education, 22*, 201–220.

Olsen, L. (1997). *Made in America: Immigrant students in our public schools*. New York, NY: New Press.

Omi, M., & Winant, H. (1994). *Racial formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Ortner, S. B. (2006). *Anthropology and social theory: Culture, power, and the acting subject*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Pyke, K., & Dang, T. (2003). "FOB" and "whitewashed": Identity and internalized racism among second generation Asian Americans. *Qualitative Sociology, 26*, 147–172.

Rampton, B. (1995). *Crossing: Language and ethnicity among adolescents*. London: Longman.

Reyes, A. (2007). *Language, identity, and stereotype among Southeast Asian American youth: The other Asian*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Schoen, C., Davis, K., Collins, K. S., Greenberg, L., Des Roches, C., & Abrams, M. (1997). *The commonwealth fund: Survey of the health of adolescent girls*. New York, NY: Louis Harris and Associates.

Sewell, W. H. (1992). A theory of structure: Duality, agency, and transformation. *American Journal of Sociology, 98*(1), 1–29.

Shankar, S. (2008). *Desi land: Teen culture, class, and success in Silicon Valley*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Shim, D. (2006). Hybridity and the rise of Korean popular culture in Asia. *Media, Culture & Society, 28*, 25–44.

Soja, E. W. (1996). *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and other real-and-imagined places*. Cambridge: Blackwell.

Tatum, B. D. (1997). *"Why are all the Black kids sitting together in the cafeteria?" and other conversations about race* (1st ed.). New York, NY: Basic Books.

Tokunaga, T. (2011a). 'I'm not going to be in Japan forever': How Filipina immigrant youth in Japan construct the meaning of home. *Ethnography and Education, 6*, 179–193.

Tokunaga, T. (2011b). *Learning from the in-between spaces of Filipina immigrant youth in Japan* (pp. 12–15). Research Connections: An Annual Publication from the Consortium on Race, Gender and Ethnicity, University of Maryland, College Park.

Tokunaga, T. (2012). *Sites of belonging, sites of empowerment: How Asian American girls construct "home" in a borderland world* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). University of Maryland, College Park.

Weis, L., & Dimitriadis, G. (2008). Dueling banjos: Shifting economic and cultural contexts in the lives of youth. *Teachers College Record, 110*, 2290–2316.

Weis, L., & Fine, M. (2000). *Construction sites: Excavating race, class, and gender among urban youth*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

Wolcott, H. F. (1999). *Ethnography: A way of seeing*. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press.

Yon, D. A. (2000). *Elusive culture: Schooling, race, and identity in global times*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Yosso, T. J. (2005). Whose culture has capital? A critical race theory discussion of community cultural wealth. *Race Ethnicity and Education, 8*, 69–91.

Zentella, A. C. (1997). *Growing up bilingual: Puerto Rican children in New York*. Malden, MA: Blackwell.