ALL ROADS LEAD TO STOCKTON

How Stockton ‘Boomerangs’ Are Changing the Narrative of Their City

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Figure 1—Stockton welcome sign in Downtown Stockton on Weber Avenue, one of the oldest streets in the city.
long live the rose that grew from concrete…

and all those just budding
and all those who didn’t make it out
because they matter, too
This thesis explores the role of “boomerangs:” young people who received a college education and decided to return to their hometown and give back. These people are becoming part of the reinvention of Stockton’s city narrative from being the “Most Miserable City” to its revitalization. In order to understand how recently college educated Stocktonians decide whether or not to return, I research their perspectives of their neighborhoods and the city they had growing up, what motivated them to “make it out” of Stockton, what influenced them to come back, and what impact they aspire to make. Previous research in Urban Sociology has studied how an individual’s upbringing determines one’s level of social mobility (Coulton 2014, Sharkey 2014) and the narrow views that some urban residents have of their neighborhood and low social mobility (Kotlowitz 1991). Yet there is a nascent understanding of how the neighborhoods in which one grows up impact how low-income urban residents perceive their own sense of social mobility and the opportunities available to them. Whereas most of this literature looks at neighborhood effects, I aim to expand urban sociology literature by exploring what attitudes low-income urban residents have regarding their neighborhoods, and why they have these perspectives. Additionally, literature examines the effects of brain drain in cities when college educated folks leave, but I ask: why do they return and what happens when they do? Through 12 semi-structured interviews with Stocktonians between the ages of 18-26, I find that these college-educated Stocktonians consider education as the primary method of achieving upward social mobility, are in agreement with the presented narrative, often challenge the stigma associated with the city, and intend to use their education and careers to serve the Stockton community, yet have mixed feelings about choosing Stockton as a long-term place to live. This generation of young people wanting to return to their city and give back are a part of a recent movement to revitalize Stockton, uplift the community and change its narrative.
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Thank you to the Stockton community for making me who I am. I am grateful to have been able to spend my summers working with so many genuine people who inspire change. All of my conversations with you led to the completion of this thesis. I hope that it tells the story of our city. This thesis is dedicated to all the roses growing up in the city, all the communities of color, all the youth of color. I thought of you every day while away and I am looking forward to coming back.
Did you hear about the rose that grew
from a crack in the concrete?
Proving nature's law is wrong it
learned to walk without having feet.
Funny it seems, but by keeping its dreams,
it learned to breathe fresh air.
Long live the rose that grew from concrete
when no one else ever cared.

Tupac Shakur, “The Rose That Grew From Concrete”

My mom always used to say, ‘You have to get out of
Stockton.’ …But I want Stockton to be [a place people]
want to live in.

Mayor Michael Tubbs

Know History, Know Self.
Jose Rizal

All roads lead to Stockton.

Dr. Dawn Bohulano Mabalon, Little Manila is in the Heart
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

In 2008, Forbes magazine first named Stockton, California as one of America’s Most Miserable Cities. The city reappeared on this list for consecutive years until 2013. Predatory lending and subprime mortgages caused many new homebuyers to lose their homes, and Stockton experienced a higher foreclosure rate than any other city in the United States, with one in 25 homes repossessed in 2008, making it “ground zero” for the economic crisis that shocked the nation (Clark). In the years following the 2008 recession, Stockton’s economy and its populace suffered, leading Stockton to become the largest U.S. city to declare bankruptcy in 2012 until it was surpassed by Detroit a year later. In order to offset the city’s $31 million deficit, cuts to pension benefits and funding led to mass layoffs of police officers. These layoffs caused feelings of insecurity and fear, with the city manager at the time, Bob Deis, fearing the city would “slip into municipal chaos” (Rudolph, “Stockton Bankruptcy”). At the time, Stockton was considered among one of the most violent cities in the U.S. and set a streak of breaking its own homicide rates in each consecutive year. Pablo Cano, the owner of a local funeral home, buried 12 murder victims by the end of 2011, most who were teens and young men. “I’m so tired of burying these young kids who barely have a chance to start their lives,” Cano said in an interview with the Huffington Post (Rudolph, “Stockton’s Poor”). The forecast for Stockton at this time was bleak, with residents fearing for their futures and attempting to find hope in the prospect of moving out of these miserable conditions.

Growing up in Stockton during this time, a common message from older generations to younger ones was that there are no opportunities in Stockton, so in order to be successful you must “get out.” This narrative ignored some possible options like say, the potential for growth by reinvestment or giving back to one’s community. Yet, no matter how “miserable” the city was framed, many Stocktonians felt differently. The precedent was set by Michael Tubbs, a Black man raised in South Stockton who made it to Stanford University and returned to Stockton in his senior
year to run for City Council, then later Mayor of the city. National media about Stockton in these years is almost always positive. Articles report the story of the Stockton’s rise out of bankruptcy, Mayor Tubbs’ pioneer Universal Basic Income trial, and equity-increasing programs that are “reinventing” Stockton. For many like me, this has been the first time anyone has seen and felt such strong feelings about giving back to the Stockton community and wanting to see a better future. Leaders who have come back to Stockton like Mayor Tubbs have established a movement of “boomerangs”: young college-educated people returning to Stockton to make it a better place.

It’s important to acknowledge residents’ historical and contemporary paths to and out of Stockton; some migrated seeking jobs as farm or factory workers in the pursuit of “a better life.” This especially resonates with our majority-minority population, most of whom are immigrants, refugees or descendants of Mexico, Central America, Southeast Asia and the Pacific Islands (Mabalon 2013). Perhaps the same logic that these migrants brought to the city influenced their children to similarly view social mobility as spatial mobility. Yet for first-generation college-going students like myself, there is pressure from family and the larger community to work hard in school, go to college and “get out” of Stockton. In these perceptions of social mobility, the goal is to escape Stockton instead of settling there. Why is Stockton viewed as a place to overcome? Why do low-income urban residents of color feel that they need to do better than where they come from?

My research thus aims to answer this question: How do young Stocktonians’ perceptions of their neighborhood affect how they see their own potential social mobility? I aim to explore the social and economic challenges of popularized narratives that my peers and I growing up were familiar with about “being stuck” or “getting out” of your hometown (MacLeod 1987).

In this thesis, I interview Stocktonians in my generation, ages 18 to 26, who, during both their childhood and young adulthood, experienced two particular eras of Stockton’s history: Stockton’s Misery and Stockton’s Reinvention. I gauge whether Stockton residents perceive their
potential level of social mobility in terms of their spatial mobility through neighborhood attainment
(Park and Burgess 1925; Sampson and Sharkey 2008; Sampson 2012), such as believing that moving out of their neighborhood or even out of the city will increase their level of social mobility.

Additionally, I attempt to discover a connection between current efforts to reinvent Stockton, led by Mayor Tubbs’ example, and residents’ plans to stay and invest in the city.

I begin this paper with a review of the literature on neighborhood effects, mobility, and community stigma. I also provide a history of Stockton, discuss the spatial and social context of the city, and explain the conflicting narratives surrounding the community. Then, I describe the methodology I employ for this study, how I collected and analyzed data, and an overview of the participants I selected for interview. Finally, I discuss the findings and limitations of this research and propose suggestions for future studies. Through the interviews I conducted with 12 Stocktonians, I find four major conclusions:

I. Young Stocktonians grew up to believe that educational attainment was the primary way towards any achievement of upward mobility.

II. Most Stocktonians who are currently in college settings have some hesitations about returning to Stockton, mostly concerning their career plans and the opportunities the city provides. Yet, many of them have some desire to return to Stockton and “give back.”

III. Most young Stocktonians with a college education care about issues in the community like poverty, homelessness, violence, and education and they either feel invested in those issues, hopeful for the city’s future, or inspired by positive change.

IV. Most young Stocktonians with a college education were either inspired by city-wide revitalization efforts or were empowered by organizing experiences
and an ethnic studies education that made them feel invested in their hometown.

Based on my research, I argue that despite the negative stigma associated with the city, many young Stocktonians, inspired by new efforts, feel empowered to stay and make a change in their community, while others have mixed feelings about how staying may limit their future aspirations. Influenced by current revitalization efforts famously led by Mayor Tubbs and longtime community activists, these “boomerangs” upon returning to the city will make significant changes, empower youth and communities of color and will work towards changing the narrative of their hometown. This study is the first to define and employ the term boomerang to describe this sociocultural movement based on social justice advocacy and lays the foundation for future research that studies reverse brain drains in formerly struggling cities.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Neighborhood effects, opportunity and mobility

While neighborhood effects literature explains why low-income urban residents develop certain life outcomes, there is still little understanding of how these residents perceive themselves growing up and living in these places. Previous research has studied the neighborhood effects on adolescents (Sampson et al. 2002) and has explored how one’s upbringing determines one’s level of social mobility (Coulton 2014, Sharkey 2014). This neighborhood effects literature demonstrates how young residents of low-income urban areas often have less opportunity and ability to move up in social and economic classes. Moreover, studies explore how neighborhood identity and boundaries are influenced by social boundaries perceived or made by residents themselves (Hwang 2007). Additionally, low-income residents of urban areas often have narrow views of their neighborhood, reflecting their limited path towards upward mobility (Kotlowitz 1991). Adding to this conversation, I ask whether Stockton residents perceive that their own mobility is limited by
both the spatial boundaries of their neighborhood and by the social stratification of race, language, housing, immigration status, and income.

I aim to understand what life experiences drive young Stocktonians’ ambitions and plans for the future, and what is the significance of those experiences in the larger picture. While the neighborhood effects literature measures neighborhood opportunity, often these studies do not ask how residents perceive the opportunities that are actually provided and available to them. For example, a study about how low-income Black men from Chicago’s public housing projects make sense of their mobility, opportunity and future amid the social and cultural forces and attitudes that marginalize their identities finds that these men consider education, at least a high school diploma, essential to their own mobility (Young 2006). Another study offers insight on how reputation and stigma of neighborhoods may affect residents’ opportunities, experiences and life outcomes (Ham et. al. 2012). This study explored how the stigma associated with neighborhoods undergoing urban renewal may have improved. It found that residents perceived their neighborhoods as stigmatized before the renewal more than at the time of the study, and residents generally felt that outsiders rate their neighborhood more negatively than they themselves did.

I hope to extend studies like these one by asking low-income urban residents of Stockton how they make sense of the stigmas surrounding their community and themselves to understand how negative perceptions of communities may limit the possibilities low-income residents who grow up there see for themselves. While conservative thinkers argue a “culture of poverty” exists, where residents of areas with poor reputations adopt self-defeating attitudes and behaviors and lack individual agency and ambition (Murray 1994), I explore in this study how some young Stocktonians develop ambition in spite of the stigma associated with and around them--- and using the case study of Stockton to disprove the culture of poverty hypothesis altogether.
Immigration and Education experiences

Mabalon highlights the educational aspirations many Pilipino immigrants had while coming to the United States. She explains that many of them held college degrees in the Philippines but were unable to work due to discriminatory laws, so they were forced into backbreaking farm labor as asparagus pickers, and farmers were dependent on their labor. On the other hand, due to limited opportunities in rural island provinces, many middle and lower middle-class Pilipinos believed it was less expensive and more prestigious for their children to earn college educations in the United States. According to Mabalon, while Pilipino immigrants came from many class backgrounds, the majority who emigrated to Stockton came from impoverished and sometimes rural provinces of the Philippines (Malabon, 42). Stockton gained this community as it was a site where many immigrants migrated to, and although work was seasonal in most other areas, immigrants would have work 10 months out of the year in Stockton and had little reason to migrate to other labor sites. Mabalon cites Vincente Roldan, a Pilipino writer who contributed to several Pilipino newspapers in California, who says: “They (Pilipino immigrants) talked of the valley of opportunity with Stockton as its axis” (Mabalon 4).

Many of these immigrants from farming backgrounds brought with them cultural values of hard work and stressed migration to “new land with better opportunities” (Malabon, 44). It is estimated that as many as 14,000 Pilipino immigrants studied at educational institutions in the United States between 1910 and 1938 (Mabalon, 39). She writes: “Most who came directly from the Philippines in the mid- to late 1920s arrived hoping to attend college. In 1930 when a university researcher surveyed hundreds of Filipina/o immigrants in the Delta, the vast majority said that they had come to California to further their education. Some self-supporting students tried to prepare for college by attending high school in the United States and working in the fields during school
vacations” (Mabalon, 67) Many young Pilipinos immigrated to the United States to pursue their education and settled and raised families in places like Stockton.

Most importantly, Mabalon links Filipino immigrants’ experiences with education, migration and opportunity with American colonialism. She says:

“Transformed by American colonialism, pushed from their farms by the rapidly changing agricultural economy, and eager to see the fabled “motherland” of the United States, thousands of provincianas/os left their barrios and villages for an uncertain future in the United States in the first decades of the twentieth century. Whether they were more influenced by the American public school curriculum and their teachers or by the poverty in the provinces, no Filipina/o growing up in the years between the Philippine-American War and World War II could escape the pervasive influence of the American colonial state, ideas about the superiority of the American way of life and popular culture, or the notion that there were limitless possibilities awaiting immigrants in the metropole” (Mabalon, 59)

It is necessary to note the reasons why Stockton is such an ethnically and racially diverse place. Histories of U.S. colonialism and imperialism, destabilization of countries in the Global South, extreme violence and poverty, and economic forces drove nationals to escape their home country in search of a better life and future for their descendants. Imperial propaganda and media at the time pushed the notion that the United States was the land of opportunity and ultimate destination for migrants everywhere who sought refuge from poverty, lack of education and the absence of economic mobility. This larger history, combined with California’s history of land and labor exploitation, starting with settlers who stole land from Indigenous peoples, extorted precious resources throughout the Gold Rush, drove Native Americans out of their land and established cities like Stockton, and then created a massive agricultural industry that exploited Black and Brown migrants and lined the pockets of white land owners, informs of the history of Stockton.

Mabalon’s work shares insight on how (im)migrants receive messaging regarding opportunity mobility, what opportunities they consider attainable, how education is valued and sought after, why
space and place limits or expands opportunity, and how labor, survival and resilience is at the core of all understandings of success for migrant people.

**Stigma and Resident Responses**

Sampson and Raudenbush argue that perceptions of neighborhood disorder are independently shaped by the neighborhoods’ racial, ethnic, and class composition, demonstrating in their study that residents supplement their knowledge with “prior beliefs informed by the racial stigmatization of modern urban ghettos” (336). Drawing from Massey and Denton’s definition of the urban underclass, Sampson and Raudenbush suggest that these perceptions, while often incorrect, are in fact grounded in “the social history of urban America which links geographically isolated ethnic minority groups with poverty, economic disinvestment, and visible signs of disorder (Massey and Denton 1993).” This study has potential implications for the effects of perceived disorder on the psychological outcomes of urban residents, that associations of disorder with residents’ perceptions of their racial meaning are negatively felt.

**Media and Narrative-Making: The Impact of the 2008 Recession in Stockton**

In this project, I research how young people from Stockton view their city in the context of the narratives surrounding their neighborhood and even themselves as residents of Stockton, based on media coverage of crime, poverty and well-being in Stockton following the recession and city bankruptcy. I hope to understand how young Stocktonians perceive the stigma associated with their neighborhood or the city overall, and whether their perceptions of these places change with changing outsider attitudes toward them. A chapter in Dialogues of the Delta titled “The Stockton Challenge: Surviving the Misery of the Great Recession” (Hernandez 2018) provides a personal narrative of the Stockton community’s navigation through the financial recession from the point of view of a professor from the University of the Pacific. While employing the sociological imagination (Mills 2000) to understand how personal experience is shaped by social and political forces,
Hernandez describes the impact of both the Great Recession on the economic health of the Stockton community as well as the given title of “Most Miserable City” starting in 2008 on community morale.

Hernandez begins by examining the media’s role in reporting Stockton’s condition during the recession. Hegemonic media messaging, she explains, often framed the impact of the recession as financially-illiterate low-income residents taking out subprime loans and making other poor economic decisions. In spite of the stigmatized narrative that gathered national attention, city officials, business owners and involved residents organized the “Stockton is Magnificent” campaign to highlight the overlooked positive qualities of the community as a counternarrative to the one Forbes announced, showing how many Stocktonians are prideful of their city. Yet, some critique this campaign (Gall and Alkon 2011), led by a white and wealthy local business owner, for only highlighting activities such as sailing yachts in the Delta that only wealthy residents could afford, and not acknowledging the reality of the majority residents of color facing poverty.

Hernandez recounts university students requesting extensions and leaves of absences due to suddenly losing their homes and having to find another place to live mid-semester, and needing to take time to work to support their families during the economic crisis, reinforcing the narrow culture of poverty theory, while very few accounts offered counter-narratives and actually reckoned with the history and present-day practice of racially discriminatory housing policies.

**Can You Gentrify Your Hometown?**

Scholars and activists’ debate what gentrification is and what it isn’t. In 1964, sociologist Ruth Glass first coined the term gentrification while observing upper-class Londoners (the “gentry) move into a working-class urban neighborhood. She writes:
“One by one, many of the working class neighbourhoods of London have been invaded by the middle-classes—upper and lower. Shabby, modest mews and cottages—two rooms up and two down—have been taken over, when their leases have expired, and have become elegant, expensive residences... Once this process of 'gentrification' starts in a district it goes on rapidly, until all or most of the original working-class occupiers are displaced and the whole social character of the district is changed” (Glass).

The definition of gentrification that is widely accepted is that it is a process that occurs when an influx higher income people enters a low-income, working class neighborhood, consequently causing an increase in property and rent values and making the neighborhood no longer affordable to the previous residents. By this, gentrification can cause or happen concurrently with residential displacement and can also result in a change of the cultural, demographic and visible character and qualities of the neighborhood.

In order to complicate the definition of gentrification, some scholars debate whether the identities of the gentrifiers and the gentrified have influence over the process itself. Namely, whether gentrifiers are always white and the gentrified are always people of color. While prevailing studies of gentrification accept this model, some argue that the defining characteristic of gentrification is the class turnover, not the racial demographics. Subverting this idea, Mary Patillo’s Black on the Block presents an interesting study where middle-class African Americans from a predominantly low-income Black neighborhood in Chicago return to their neighborhood and economically invest in local businesses and infrastructure. The research also poses an interesting question: Can people of color from low-income backgrounds gentrify the low-income neighborhood they grew up in? What does community revitalization look like for low-income communities of color, and where is the line versus gentrification? Are people like Michael Tubbs gentrifiers? Is this type of gentrification necessary to de-stigmatize these neighborhoods? How do residents of stigmatized neighborhoods
rebrand their neighborhoods to challenge the stigma about them? According to community
revitalization literature, often times these processes of change is started by community residents who
are concerned and want to change the narrative, perhaps because they are tired of being associated
with the stigma themselves and want to show outsiders what their neighborhood (and residents of
that neighborhood) are really like.

Like Patillo, other scholars have questioned the existence of “Black gentrifiers” as academics
trace the rise of the Black middle class. These scholars, such as Dr. Kesha S. Moore, call this
phenomenon distinct from traditional models of gentrification as observed in the U.S. and argue
that “middle-class African Americans [are] willing to invest their social, economic, and cultural
capital into improving the quality of life for low-income Black neighborhoods and their residents”
(Moore, 118). Arguments such as Moore’s present middle-class African-Americans as committed to
supporting, investing and transforming low-income Black neighborhoods, which have historically
been economically disinvested due to redlining and racist housing and development policies and
practices. Moreover, Japonica Brown-Saracino distinguishes gentrifiers from who she observes are
“social preservationists,” newcomers who tend to be highly-educated and aim to preserve a
neighborhood’s original character and authenticity.

In the same vein, the movement observed in Stockton-- of people of color from
predominantly low-income, first-generation and immigrant backgrounds returning to their
hometown with college educations—is also distinct from the standard gentrification we see
happening with tech employees moving into San Francisco’s Mission District. These two distinct
models involve people of color, who are often the first generations in their families and
communities to earn degrees, buy a house, and earn higher incomes, who want to see the material
conditions of their communities improve so more people of color can overcome poverty,
dereduction, joblessness, incarceration, and housing insecurity.
Scholars call the process of adults coming back to their hometowns “return migration.” Several studies of return migration examine the experiences of migrants returning to their nations of origin and adults moving back to their rural towns in the United States. For example, one undergraduate student thesis explores why adults with college educations return to their rural hometowns and provides insights on the impact of declining economies and the “brain drain” in places where out-migration has a large impact on their small populations. This thesis informs that all participants reported that they want to stay in their hometown but believe that “deteriorating social structures may result in the need to leave” (Mahoney, ii). The findings of this study are that these adults, many of whom are over 40 years old, often desired to go back to their hometowns but didn’t make the decision to return until a significant life event that made it necessary to be closer to family and familiarity. However, the economic decline and lack of jobs in their hometown make the return difficult. Another study asks adults in a low-income rural community their perspectives on successful outcomes for youth. While they associated successful early adulthood outcomes with supporting the needs of the family and community, they understood that limited resources in the community make it difficult for youth to stay there. They put forward the idea of “educating out and giving back,” where they expect youth to go to places with more opportunity, receive an education and establish successful careers but remain connected to their community, return to their hometown and become involved as community leaders, and use the resources they gained to “give back” (Farmer, et al., 9). They also supported the development of programs that motivate youth towards academic and career success and stay out of trouble. These views are consistent with rationales that support “Black gentrification” and efforts to reverse the “brain drain” in low-income communities.

Who Are Boomerangs?
This research addresses a gap in the literature of urban sociology. My thesis defines and employs the term boomerangs to describe and examine a class of people who will likely shift how Stockton will look in the next 10 to 20 years. While gentrification literature distinguishes typical gentrifiers, Black gentrifiers and social preservationists from one another, I introduce boomerangs to focus on how locals can uplift and empower their selves and their own communities. and revitalization literature looks at brain drain and the creative class, there lacks studies on this group of people known as boomerangs and how they impact their city.

When advocating for the reversal of the brain drain, Stockton leaders commonly express the need for more boomerangs. This term refers to a “a group of highly educated, history-minded millennials who defied a lifetime of warnings from their parents and everyone else, and who returned after college to Stockton to make their stand in the place that raised them” (Brenna). One article by Teach for America highlights alum Lange Luntao and the “seven paid and unpaid jobs” he juggles as a leader in Stockton, some of which include a fundraiser and board member for Little Manila Rising, a teacher and counselor at a charter school, and founding director of Stockton Scholars.

Before the word boomerang was used, Lange Luntao and Michael Tubbs described this community as “the young and fabulous.” But many community members, including Luntao and Tubbs, recognized this term carries elitist connotations and did not include dozens of people in the community who had returned to Stockton between the years 2000 and 2012. The idea for “boomerangs” was inspired by the image of locals who are excited to come back. The term boomerang was created by Stockton locals a sociocultural label created by locals to identify market themselves for political and civic networks. The term has been primarily utilized by politically active community members engaged in social justice in to advance a youth-oriented leadership agenda in politics, government and other institutional spaces. One strategy the Stockton leadership uses to
fight the brain drain is through the Stockton Urban revitalization Fellowship (SURF), aimed towards college students and graduates who are passionate about issues in their hometown, as a way to get them connected to local government, business and education in hopes that they will come back and become the generation of leaders. SURF is a program under the Third City Coalition, an organization that believes “Stockton is the city we make it” through civic engagement. With all of these considerations, Stockton is a prime case study to examine and explore how a formerly disinvested city becomes a place for reinvention.

A HISTORY OF STOCKTON, CALIFORNIA

Because I examine two contemporary periods of Stockton, it’s important that I provide historical context for why Stockton is like it is today. The city is challenged by its past and legacies of institutional racism, spatial segregation, education and wealth disparities and other material inequities. With this introduction to Stockton, I aim to illustrate how Stockton’s history is one of resistance.

Stockton’s Segregated History

Stockton is not unlike most cities in the United States. It was chosen for settlement due to its ability to house a port and transportation economy, its fertile land suited for agriculture and its proximity to other major California cities. While white settlers saw Stockton as the ultimate land of opportunity, that vision excluded many who tended to the soil and built its foundations. In the 1930s, as the United States began federal programs to increase the national housing stock (Gross). The Federal Housing Administration, established in 1934, began to subsidize homes for white people, mainly returning war veterans, and created what is now known as suburbia. Meanwhile, FHA and banks practiced widespread policies that barred people of color and immigrants from getting home mortgage loans in areas considered risky for investment. This practice is called
redlining, as cities were mapped and spatially segregated by rating some areas green or “desirable” and other areas red. This meant that those neighborhoods that were green were exclusive to white, wealthy homeowners, and red neighborhoods were predominantly Black or non-white and economically disinvested.

In the 1930s, Stockton was one of several cities in California that was redlined, as indicated by the map created by the Home Owners’ Loan Corporation (HOLC) below. Clearly, the northwest side of Stockton is primarily coded green and blue, while the South and East sides, as well as some of the areas Downtown, are marked red. When we compare this map to modern demographic maps illustrating racial and ethnic makeup as well as income distribution, we see that redlining has directly influenced the spatial organization of the city of Stockton. The practice of redlining determined where first-rate homes were to be built, where wealth accumulated and where whiteness was established. That, combined with discriminatory anti-immigrant and anti-Black laws, excluded people of color from buying and owning homes and segregated where they lived and went to school. Of importance, the redlined areas where people of color lived are adjacent to the port of Stockton and Downtown where laborious industries were located and where environment was polluted, whereas the green areas were alongside beautiful rivers and the most scenic areas.
South Stockton is a significant area of case study because of Stockton’s history of racial segregation. Segregation in Stockton was so severe that people of color were only allowed to live south of Main Street, where the crosstown freeway severs the city into a stark separation of wealth and poverty, white and Black, safety and crime. A 2000 Stockton Record article by Michael Fitzgerald reveals that “despite decades in the so-called melting pot, Stockton’s north side is mostly white. The Southside is mostly Latino and black. Southeast Asians live clumped in ethnic enclaves.” Referring to 1930s redlining maps by the Home Owners’ Loan Corporation and comparing those racially divided lines with the current demographic makeups of the north, south and east sides of...
Stockton, it is evident that Fitzgerald’s analysis of the city’s history of residential racial segregation persists today.

Until the 1970s, when factories in the south of Stockton opened up and the port provided industrial jobs, Stockton was home to white settlers and immigrants from Mexico, China and Japan. What is known today as the South Stockton “ghetto” was formed in the 1970s when the city experienced a great migration of Black people who provided labor to these new industries. Although the city didn’t undertake complex strategies such as large public housing projects or grand plans for urban renewal that occurred in Chicago, the city upheld racially restrictive covenants that drew the clear line of racial segregation. Stockton Unified schools were also severely segregated, with 90 percent of students in South Stockton schools being students of color and 80 percent of students in the north side being white. Although Black people live throughout the city today, in the north and northeast sides especially, the city continues to see that the Black population is concentrated in South Stockton, while the north remains white and wealthier. As Fitzgerald writes, “Stocktonian neighborhoods segregate not by race alone but according to where people can afford to live” and thus South Stockton suffers from extreme divestment while residents live within cycles of poverty, over policing, and crime.

*The Criminalization of South Stockton*

There is an evident link between poverty, race and low educational attainment in Stockton. With Stockton being infamous for its high crime and homicide rates and the prevalence of gangs, there is a general attitude across all areas of the city that crime is a problem that must be resolved in order for Stocktonians to thrive. However, the hysteria surrounding violent crime in Stockton reinforces the association of Black people and criminality. While Figures 3 and 4 show that total, violent, and property crimes are evenly distributed throughout the city, as well as the total amount of arrests, the blame for the high amount of crime and violence is attributed to the violent nature of
South Stockton. Residents of Stockton point towards South Stockton as the breeding grounds for poverty, gangs, crime and homicide violence. As shown by Kotlowitz in *There are No Children Here*, Black youth are stripped of their innocence at childhood and suffer the social consequences of the imposed idea Black criminality. Black children are denied nurturing environments and are over policed in the streets and at school, leading to negative life outcomes such as incarceration and intergenerational poverty.

**FIGURE 3— STOCKTON UNIFIED ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS LAYERED OVER TOTAL BLACK POPULATION IN 2016 COMPARED WITH TOTAL VIOLENT CRIMES ARRESTS AND TOTAL PROPERTY CRIMES ARRESTS IN 2012, STOCKTON’S HIGHEST HOMICIDE YEAR.**
Due to these ideas, residents of South Stockton experience racial isolation as well as segregation; Massey, Denton and Anderson would point to the cyclical nature of poverty as the main force trapping Black people within the confinements of the ghetto, as lack of resources and educational opportunity contribute to resorting to drug use and crime to make a living. Moreover, as white flight from integrated schools left Stockton Unified schools in the Southside disinvested and underfunded, and the entire South Stockton experienced extreme disinvestment that contributes to northside residents’ feelings that South Stockton is blighted and unsafe. In these ways, the relationship between South Stockton and the north side parallels Anderson’s depiction of the Village and Northton, as there are clear racial as well as class divisions that increase misunderstanding of cultures between the two sides. Specifically, white people assume criminality in Black people, even those as young as elementary school children, and Black people only interact with white people in positions of authority, such as police and teachers, who have the power to punish them. Black
children are subjected to more severe punitive measures at a disproportionate rate in South
Stockton, where crime and violence occurs at higher rates. With the disproportionately high rates of
Black students in South Stockton students who receive out of school suspension as punishment, it is
clear that the assumption of Black criminality is perpetuating the school-to-prison pipeline, and the
larger phenomenon of mass incarceration.

The legacies of redlining and residential segregation in Stockton (see Figure 2) is still
experienced today by low-income homebuyers and owners who are limited in their ability to live
north of the Harding Way spatial boundary become middle and low-income classes.

**FIGURE 5— REDLINING MAP GEOREFERENCED TO CURRENT MAP OF STOCKTON (BEGLEY). GREEN LINE INDICATES HARDING WAY SPATIAL BOUNDARY.**
**Ethnic Studies in Stockton**

Ethnic Studies has always played a large role in Stockton’s communities of color, but these efforts have only recently been shed to light through advocacy from Little Manila Rising. Led by the Third World Liberation Front, Black Student Unions, and the Civil Rights Movement in the Bay Area, the campaign to establish Ethnic Studies, a field that examines the role of power, race and institutions in U.S. history and tells the histories of people of color, aimed to empower communities of color who survived decades of enslavement, labor exploitation, racist violence, redlining and exclusion.

San Joaquin Delta College in Stockton was the third institution of higher education to have an Ethnic Studies program, after the first Ethnic Studies Department was established in 1968 at San
Francisco State University (SFSU) and 1969 at UC Berkeley. The department at Delta was formed in May of 1969 and the first classes began the next fall. Courses in Chicano Studies, African American Studies, and Asian American studies were offered and taught by a plethora of scholars including Donald Porath, Richard Rios, and Nelson Nagai. The department was gradually closed in the 1990s and ethnic studies courses were brought into the History, English, and Sociology departments, but these courses are still taught a Delta today.

Ethnic Studies was first brought to Stockton Unified schools in the 1970s, but generations of Stocktonians didn’t have the chance to take this course until very recently. The courses only lasted a year in Stockton Unified before the school board passed a 5-2 vote to remove Ethnic Studies as a class. It’s said that at the time, white farm owners protested against the class because they believed that Chicano, Pilipino and Black history being taught threatened their labor supply. Most of the school board members sided with the landowners, while one of the members was an organizer with a Little Manila group.

Interestingly, boomerangs also have a connection to ethnic studies educations. Stocktonians such as Gary Chin studied at Delta from 1968-1970 before transferring to UC Berkeley and SFSU. Folks like Gary Chin brought this knowledge back to Stockton when he returned to teach at Franklin High School. He was one of first to teach Ethnic Studies to Stockton youth while the course was offered in 1974. Once the program was shut down, ethnic studies were not offered at Stockton Unified schools until over 40 years later. Now, many of the teachers educating Stockton’s youth through ethnic studies grew up in the city, majored in the ethnic studies in college and returned to teach and empower youth when the program was reinstituted.

The “Miserable City” Era

The homeless and housing insecurity issue in Stockton was exacerbated by the housing market bust and the Great Recession, causing the City to file for bankruptcy, as tons of homes were
foreclosed, many in development were left unfinished, and hundreds of residents left unemployed. Now out of bankruptcy as of 2014, the city is challenged by supporting potential population growth due to the threat of gentrification in the Bay Area, meaning that thousands of low-income Stockton residents face the chance of displacement and homelessness. For these reasons, it is imperative that the City of Stockton adopt a permanent supportive housing program in order to reduce homelessness and ensure housing security during the imminent threat of gentrification.

The current issue Stockton is facing has a history of the cyclical boom and bust behavior of the housing market. In the years leading up to the 2007 recession, the housing market in the city was booming, so developers decided to pour investments into the suburban real estate market. The City of Stockton overdeveloped, constructing a huge event arena downtown, buying a new City Hall building, buying new parking garages among other spending projects. Not only were too many homes built, these homes were grandiose and not affordable to the majority of the population, in which the real per capita income at the time was about $26,000. Along with the Great Recession, the housing market crash in Stockton saw home values depreciate dramatically, delayed development, and homes left unfinished and abandoned. In 2000, the median home value was about $120,000. After the new suburban development, the median home value rose in 2005 to $431,000. In May of that year, the homeless count came to at least 3,500 homeless people in the county, with about 2,500, residing in shelters in Stockton. That value plummeted after the recession, making it a mere $117,000 in 2012. Unemployment at the time was nearly 20 percent, with one of the highest foreclosure rates in the nation. In June of 2012, the City filed for Chapter 9 bankruptcy protection, making it the largest city to go bankrupt in U.S. history, owing $26 million, until Detroit, Michigan filed for bankruptcy in 2013.

After making needed spending cuts, the city emerged from bankruptcy in 2014. As the city is anticipating relieving the housing market in the Bay Area and accepting hundreds of new middle-
income white professionals, gentrification is threatening to displace even more residents in Stockton. With a number of sites, blogs, and articles ranking Stockton fourth in the hottest current housing markets and calling for Bay Area professionals to buy their homes in Stockton for a close commute and affordable homes, there is expected to be a wave of middle and high income earners moving into the city and buying homes, in effect raising home values and displacing Stockton’s low-income community. As many cite the increasing homelessness problem in the city as a lingering effect of the Great Recession and the crash of the housing market, it is important that the City establishes a safety net for its residents most vulnerable to displacement and homelessness due to gentrification.

Providing permanent supportive housing for low-income residents living in government-owned housing and for homeless individuals will ensure that more residents are not affected by middle- and high-income earners moving into the city.

Stockton is currently home to over 311,000 residents, experiencing slow but steady growth since reaching the 100,000 milestone in 1970 and 200,000 in 1990. Now entering 2020, Stockton is projected to continue to grow. As the San Joaquin County is expected to exceed 1 million people by 2040 (Center for Business and Policy Research), Stockton is expected to reach over 400,000.

According to a report from the University of the Pacific, the Stockton MSA population is expected to increase 1.5% in 2019 to 767,513 and will continue to increase, reaching 797,063 in 2022. 3,277 housing starts are expected for 2019, an almost 7 percent increase from the previous year (San Joaquin County Population Forecast). In the 2019-2022 period, single-family starts will account for 85% of all housing starts. San Joaquin County saw a 1.25 growth rate overall, one of the highest in California, while the Bay Area region lost an estimated 42,000 more residents than it gained to more affordable regions (Lillis). What is interesting about this population growth is the share of domestic migrants, specifically those migrating out of the Bay Area and moving to Stockton.
At the same time, Stockton had a 24.73 percent apartment rent increase, to $1,349.25, the second largest in the nation according to Apartment Guide. The list cites Stockton’s 80-mile distance from Silicon Valley as the reason why rent is increasing so much: “people who are priced out of San Francisco’s average rent of $3,898 are migrating inland in hopes of finding a cheap enough apartment to offset the drive into work.” According to Zillow, Stockton’s median rental price in August was $1,655 for all homes, up from $1,593 a year earlier. Between 2000-2014, San Joaquin County was one of the counties that saw some of the largest increases in poverty, with Stockton seeing an increase of 2.38 percent. This demographic shift shows implications for places like Stockton becoming “renter suburbs,” as these places with the highest percentages of rental units experiencing a dramatic rise in renter-occupied units during this same time period, as a result of the foreclosure crisis (Romem and Kneebone).

The Rose That Grew from Concrete

In 2012, Michael Tubbs was finishing his senior year of college at Stanford University when he found out his cousin back home in Stockton was killed due to violence in the city. Motivated to make a difference, he decided to begin a campaign for City Councilmember in the district he grew up in. An article from the Sacramento Bee (Hubert) explains Tubbs’ decision to return, despite his relative success as a Stanford graduate:

Why would Tubbs, who graduated from Stanford University with bachelor’s and master’s degrees and a raft of academic and leadership awards, traveled the world and interned at the White House, choose to take his skills and intellect back to Stockton?

“When I first left Stockton for college, I thought, ‘OK, I’m successful now,’” he explained. “I made it.”

Then, in 2010, a cousin was murdered at a Halloween party, and his focus changed. Tubbs decided he did not want to be another educated young person fleeing his home city. He wanted to help change Stockton’s fate. “I decided it would be cowardly for me to continue to
do research and write essays about all of Stockton’s problems and not try to do something about them,” he said.

The question this article poses is emblematic of the cyclical stigma that Stockton is challenged with: Why live in Stockton? What is even there but violence and poverty? Who cares? Yet people like Michael Tubbs are tired of this cycle and driven to change the status quo. Why is it so surprising that someone would return to their hometown to make things better? When we measure success spatially, we are reinforcing a divide between places that are thriving and places that are miserable. For so long, Stockton residents viewed making it out the ultimate sign of success. As Michael Tubb himself says in this quote, leaving the city to go to college was how he knew he achieved upward mobility—and at first that was all that mattered. Yet there is something compelling college educated Stocktonians like Michael Tubbs, who are predominantly first-generation students and often from immigrant backgrounds, to reject this narrative and instead devote their career and passion to making their hometown a better, more equitable place.

**All Roads Lead to Stockton**

Several events in Stockton’s history has shown that boomerangs have always returned home. Like previously mentioned, Stockton teachers have often been locals raised in the city, many of whom like Gary Chin decided to dedicate their life educating and empowering youth. Likewise, those who have inspired some of the greatest changes were Stockton boomerangs impassioned to make a difference. Dawn Mabalon was a boomerang before the community made a term for it. From South Stockton, Dawn attended San Joaquin Delta College and transferred to UCLA, where she completed a Master’s degree. She is recognized as the first Pinay to earn a Ph.D. from Stanford, where she wrote her dissertation that later became the groundbreaking book *Little Manila is in the Heart*. In her book, Dr. Mabalon writes on the history and experiences of Pilipinx immigrants in Stockton. She returned to Stockton and co-founded Little Manila Rising, an organizing committed
This groundbreaking book is one of few comprehensive works written on Stockton and its Pilipinx community, which, at the time when the Little Manila neighborhood was animated with a community of immigrants, was the largest in the world outside of the Philippines. In her book, Mabalon writes that “all roads lead to Stockton,” drawing important parallels between Stockton as a destination for immigrants and a home for people like her to return to.

Recently, Stockton has seen a ripple effect of college graduates returning to serve the community. Like dropping a pebble in a pond, Michael Tubbs set the precedent, but he isn’t alone in these efforts. Others like him found themselves returning to Stockton to join in, such as Lange Luntao, a Harvard graduate of Pilipino background who is currently President of the Stockton Unified School Board -- the first openly gay man to be elected to office in San Joaquin County and the youngest to serve on the board. Many others serve as councilmembers, nonprofit leaders and teachers after earning their degrees and deciding to give back to their community. And more young people graduating high school and entering college are inspired to grow up to be the next community leaders. The participants in this research, especially, give us insights on whether young Stocktonians who “made it” like Tubbs and Luntao believe that they too must return and give back.

CHAPTER TWO: METHODOLOGY

Research Setting

This research is set in Stockton, California, a city in the northern part of the San Joaquin Valley, which is home to over 311,000 residents. The first inhabitants were the Yatchicumne, a group of the northern valley Yokuts people. The discovery of gold along the Sacramento River transformed the area from a small settlement to what was considered then as a major commercial center, as the site served to provide supplies to miners who were travelling to the Sierras (History
and Archaeology). In 1849, it was founded by Captain Charles Weber who purchased 49,000 acres of land through a Spanish land grant. Stockton’s major industry was shipbuilding, water transportation, and shipping, being almost 90 miles inland from the San Francisco Bay. Stockton’s major port and waterfront center served as a site for milling as well as shipping agricultural and manufacturing products from Northern California. After World War II, Stockton’s major industry shifted to agriculture, coinciding with the decline of manufacturing in cities across the U.S.

As a city of the Central Valley, its economy has roots in agriculture, specifically the production of asparagus, and many immigrants from the Philippines and Mexico came to work in those fields. The city is majority-minority and has a significant immigrant population, with 26 percent of the population being foreign-born, including immigrants and refugees who came from Mexico, Guatemala, the Philippines, Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos among other countries of the Global South.

**FIGURE 7— RACIAL DEMOGRAPHICS OF STOCKTON, CA (U.S. CENSUS, 2017)**

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<tr>
<td>White alone, percent</td>
<td>43.9%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Black or African American alone, percent (a)</td>
<td>11.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Indian and Alaska Native alone, percent (a)</td>
<td>0.6%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Asian alone, percent (a)</td>
<td>21.7%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander alone, percent (a)</td>
<td>0.8%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Two or More Races, percent</td>
<td>9.7%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hispanic or Latino, percent (b)</td>
<td>42.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White alone, not Hispanic or Latino, percent</td>
<td>21.2%</td>
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Many Stockton residents are also low-income, with 22 percent of the population living under the poverty level (U.S. Census Bureau). Stockton is known for its record homicide rates and gang
violence in its communities. The median household income in Stockton is $48,396 the per capita income is $21,747, while just 17 percent of the population holds at least a Bachelor’s degree. Because of the city’s demographics and its history, it’s important to situate this research and the responses of my participants in the larger socio-historical context of the experiences of low-income people of color, immigrants or descendants of immigrants and of communities that are predominantly non-white and have experienced housing segregation, educational disparities, and intergenerational poverty.

**Recruitment and Sample Selection**

For this study, I was interested in understanding young Stocktonians who have college educations, a demographic that is only 17 percent of the overall city. I studied this population to understand who boomerangs are, the reasons they decide whether to return to their hometown, and how they may impact the city when they return. My target population in this study are young Stocktonians, from 18 to 29 years old, who have some college education, whether they go to a community college, graduated with a Bachelor’s, or go to college but have not yet completed their degree. My participants consider Stockton home, having either been born in the city or moved there during their childhood, they spent the majority of their life in Stockton. All graduated from high schools in Stockton in the Stockton, Lincoln or Lodi Unified School Districts. Now continuing school in higher education, many are the first in their families to graduate high school and/or have become first-generation students in college settings. The majority of my participants are children of immigrants and are first-generation American citizens or are second or third generation Stocktonians whose parents or grandparents were Black migrants from the U.S. South. All of my participants identify as having grown up middle class or low-income households.

Most importantly, my participants are a part of a particular generation of Stocktonians who experienced two significant periods of the city’s history which I am focusing on for this study. This
generation grew up in Stockton when the city was given the “Most Miserable City” title, when the city entered bankruptcy, and when homicide rates hit record highs, between the years 2008-2015. Now, they are entering young adulthood during Stockton’s period of Reinvention, led by Mayor Michael Tubbs, who left the Southside, graduated from Stanford University, and came back to run for a seat on City Council and eventually become the city’s first Black mayor. Because this generation experienced these significant periods of Stockton’s history in key developmental parts of their lives, they are uniquely positioned to help us understand what it is like to grow up as low-income urban residents of color in a highly stigmatized place, and provide insights on how the era of reinvention may or may not influence their perception of Stockton now as a place to potentially choose to live.

I sampled participants by posting about the project and soliciting participants on social media. I received several responses from people I either went to school with or know from organizing and nonprofit spaces. I also got responses from Stocktonians I didn’t know beforehand, who found out of this study because my posts were shared on social media by mutual contacts. I not only posted on my personal social media but used Facebook groups for students at Delta College, which has over 5000 members, local information groups that have over 5000 members, and a group called The Stockton Boomerangs which has 167 members. I also used a snowball sampling approach to find more potential participants. After I completed each interview, I asked each participant to provide me some references of people in their social circles. With this approach, I hope to limit sample bias as much as possible.

Data Collection

For this project, my data collection method was semi-structured interviews. In order to answer my research question, a qualitative approach was most fitting: I explored what attitudes or perceptions young Stocktonians had about the neighborhoods they grew up in and why those
perceptions formed. Additionally, I wanted to know what plans young Stocktonians have for the future, and if positive or negative attitudes towards their hometown influence them. My interview questions asked participants to describe the neighborhood(s) they grew up in and what their experiences were like. I also questioned the opportunities they were aware of growing up, any changes they may have witnessed over the years, and whether they see themselves living in Stockton in the future. I asked these questions to get a sense of their perceptions of the neighborhoods they grew up in and if they formed a strong neighborhood identity. This aids in understanding whether the perceptions of the opportunities they had access to in their childhood are linked to their perceptions of the opportunities that Stockton might offer them now as an adult, and if those perceptions of opportunity influence their plans to return to Stockton or not.

All interviews were conducted in English. The interviews ranged from 30-60 minutes long, but most took 60 minutes. To date, I conducted two of the interviews in person at the participants’ schools in Stockton and recorded the interview with an iPhone voice memos application. The remaining interviews were conducted over the phone and were recorded with an iPhone application, Tape-A-Call Pro, which records phone calls that I purchased for 10 US dollars. In addition to the audio recording, I typed the participants responses non-verbatim on my laptop during the interview and also took note of themes or concepts the participant explained. Since the demographics of the city includes, but is not limited to, vulnerable populations such as people who have experience with incarceration, people who have family members in (or formerly in) a gang, undocumented immigrants, people with limited English fluency, and people living in poverty, my interview protocol intentionally does not ask questions that may reveal any of this personal or possibly incriminating information from my participants. After explaining the project and their rights as participants, I asked them to give verbal consent which was audio recorded.
Data Analysis

I used a free, online software called Otter.ai to transcribe my interviews. After the software generated a transcription, I listened back to the recording to start my process of selectively transcribing parts of the interview that I wanted to analyze. Because of limitations of the transcription software, I also corrected some of the incorrect scripts it produced by manually transcribing them while playing back the recording. The interviews were transcribed verbatim to maintain the authenticity of the speaker and cursing was not omitted. However, in my transcriptions, I eliminate repetitions, stutters, “ums” and conversational digressions. Any information that was disclosed to me privately but asked to be kept confidential was also omitted from the transcriptions. I manually coded my interviews, coding for the following themes: perceptions of opportunity, issues related to education, participants’ future aspirations, and community stigma.

Interview Sample

My research involved semi-structured interviews that lasted on average an hour each, while a few took 30 minutes or two hours. For this research I interviewed 12 participants, whose ages range from 18 to 26. My interview sample consists of entirely people of color, the majority from immigrant backgrounds. They each have college educations that range from community college to college graduates, and for the most part identify as first-generation students. The majority self-report as having grown up low-income or middle class. In order to protect the privacy of my participants, I refer to them throughout this paper with pseudonyms. I gave my participants the option to choose a pseudonym or be given one by me. Their ages, gender, racial and ethnic identities, and where they went to school remain the same.

Derek, a 22-year-old Black man, born and raised in Stockton, who is the grandchild of Black migrants from the South. He grew up in a few neighborhoods in Stockton but spent the majority in the Southside. He graduated from Stagg Senior High in Stockton Unified School District and is now
completing his fifth year at the University of the Pacific (referred to as UOP or Pacific by participants) in Stockton.

Joshua, a 22-year-old man whose grandparents were Mexican and Pilipino immigrants to the United States and eventually settled in Stockton. He went to Stagg High but did not receive a diploma and earned a GED later. He is currently in his first year of community college at San Joaquin Delta College (referred to as “Delta” by participants) in Stockton.

Erica, a 21-year old Black woman, whose grandparents migrated to Stockton from Louisiana for work. Growing up with divorced parents, Erica split her time growing up in two different neighborhoods on Oak Street and Airport Way. She graduated from a Stockton high school and is now completing her senior year at a four-year university in Southern California.

Micaela, a 19-year old Pilipina-American woman whose grandparents immigrated from the Philippines to Stockton for work as laborers in the asparagus fields and settled in Stockton’s Little Manila. Her family and community were displaced from the Little Manila neighborhood because of urban renewal projects taking place Downtown. She says the majority of that community migrated to the Southside, where many still are today. She grew up on 8th Street in South Stockton and lives on the same street as her entire family. She graduated from Edison High School in the Southside and is currently in her first year at Delta.

Alex, a 26-year old Pilipino-American whose family settled in the Bay Area in the 80s after migrating from the Philippines. After being born in Daly City, they spent their childhood moving between different Bay Area communities and neighborhoods in Stockton, impacted by gentrification in the Bay as well as their house in Stockton being foreclosed in 2008. Their parents first moved to Stockton around 2000 and bought a home in Spanos Park where new homes were being developed at the time. They grew up mainly in Lincoln Village, then moved back to two different cities in the Bay Area, until they moved back to Stockton in a northeast neighborhood by Hammer Lane. Even while
they were in college their family in Stockton still moved between several neighborhoods. After graduating from McNair High School in the Lincoln Unified School District, they went to a University of California but did not finish their degree. They have since moved back to Stockton and now lives in the Southside. They are nonbinary and use they and them pronouns.

**Itzel**, a 19-year-old Mexican-American woman whose grandparents immigrated from Mexico to the San Joaquin County to work as farm laborers. She lived in Linden, California until she was four-years old then moved to South Stockton. She is now a first-year student at the University of California, Davis.

**Anita**, a 24-year-old woman of Puerto Rican and Native American heritage on her mom’s side and Mexican and Native American heritage on her dad’s. Her maternal grandmother is from New York and found her way to Stockton, working in the canneries her whole life. Anita’s mother grew up with her parents on a ranch in Lathrop where her father’s Native-American roots lie in the Yokuts valley, although their family is not formally recognized with a tribe because of loss of connection and trauma. Anita grew up in Midtown Magnolia but spent a lot of time at her grandmothers’ homes in South Stockton. She went to a public specialty school in Stockton and played sports at Stagg High, a comprehensive public school. Anita graduated from one of the University of California schools in 2018 and moved back to Stockton, where she has lived and worked since then.

**Fatima**, an 18-year-old Pakistani-American woman in her first year at the University of Pacific in Stockton. She was born in the U.S. but moved to Pakistan with her parents before she was a year old. Her family moved to Stockton in 2010 and she has lived there since. She grew up in the North Side near Hammer and West Lane and went to Lodi Unified schools. She graduated from McNair High School.

**Sharon**, a 21-year-old Korean-American woman who graduated from a University of California and is now doing a teaching credential program and Master’s in Los Angeles. Her parents
immigrated from Korea to Chicago and Los Angeles when they were thirteen. They both studied at the same university in California, then moved to Stockton for professional school and stayed to raise their family. She grew up in Brookside, graduated from Lincoln High School and went to schools only in the Lincoln Unified School District.

**Rose**, a 19-year-old Southeast Asian-American woman of Thai and Loas descent who uses they and them pronouns. Both of their parents were refugees from Isaan, a rural region of Thailand along the Mekong River which borders border Laos, and Bangkok, Thailand. Their father, from Isaan, speaks Lao and identifies ethnically as Laos. They were born homeless and moved around approximately 5 times until staying at an apartment near Hammer and El Dorado. The graduated from Franklin High’s International Baccalaureate (IB) program. Rose in currently a first-year student at Stanford University.

**Matthew**, a 22-year-old mixed-race Black man who graduated from a four-year private university in Portland, Oregon this year. The youngest and only of his siblings who was born in Stockton, he grew up primarily with his white mother and his siblings. His father’s side of the family is from Oakland, California and his mom grew up in the Bay Area, and the majority of his family now resides in Stockton.

**Antonio**, a 19-year old Mexican-American man who is a first-year student at Delta college. Both of his parents are from Mexico and immigrated when his dad was 15 and his mom was 8 years old, and neither of his parents finished graduated from high school. Antonio grew up in the Southside and went to Franklin High. He is now a first-year student at Delta.
FIGURE 8—MAP OF PARTICIPANTS’ HOME NEIGHBORHOODS, COMPARED TO MEDIAN HOUSEHOLD INCOME (ACS 2017). HIGHLIGHTED AREAS INDICATE OPPORTUNITY ZONES. SOME PARTICIPANTS LIVED IN MORE THAN ONE NEIGHBORHOODS. THE GREEN LINE REPRESENTS THE HARDING WAY BOUNDARY.

CHAPTER THREE: NEIGHBORHOOD PERCEPTIONS

Crime and Community Stigmas

The responses reveal that participants are well aware of the stigmas associated with the neighborhoods they grew up in. My interviewee pool mostly consists of lower-middle class to low-income respondents, people of color, and predominantly Stocktonians that lived south of the Harding Way boundaries for significant portions of their lives (see Figure 8). Some of my
participants also revealed that they grew up housing insecure, having high residential mobility as they lived in multiple homes in different Stockton neighborhoods -- and for at least two -- different communities in San Joaquin County and the Bay Area.

When asked about the neighborhoods they grew up in, respondents would comment on racial and class demographics, as well as a general sense of safety or violence that classifies their neighborhood as “good” or “bad.” Oftentimes, these comments would be made with comparisons of their neighborhoods to another neighborhood. For example, Derek, who grew up in the Southside would compare his neighborhood to Country Club, a neighborhood in the west side of Stockton where he went to high school and where many of his friends lived. He considered his neighborhood “not that bad,” but neighborhoods like Country Club comparably better.

“I knew that my area wasn't really like, as good as living in Country Club. It's not the safest area or whatever. But compared to where I lived, it wasn't like, you know? I don't really know how to compare the two. I kind of just thought of them as the same in the sense. I've always thought of Stockton as like, -- I mean, not, I guess not technically like North Stockton or whatever-- but like, just Stockton, in general, as, like a place where, you know, it's not like, someone's going to just walk up to you and shoot you.”

Derek, like many of the other participants, reveal that he considers North Stockton to be nicer, safer and to have a better reputation than most Stockton neighborhoods. For this analysis, we consider North Stockton to be every neighborhood north of March Lane (see map below). He reasons that the state of crime is generally the same in most Stockton neighborhoods, but South Stockton just has a reputation of being more violent, where shootings are the “norm,” and being considered the most ghetto part of Stockton. While he considers there to be some truth to these stereotypes, he rejects common exaggeration of how “dangerous” and “ghetto” the neighborhood actually is. “It's not like, someone's going to just walk up to you and shoot you,” he explains.
However, Derek’s description of his neighborhood reconciles with the reasons why so many residents reinforce the stereotypes about it. Some of the reasons he offers has to do with the overall appearance of his neighborhood. He describes it as many houses not having kept lawns, trash littering the streets, empty lots, and high presence of homelessness. His perception can be explained by the broken windows theory (Wilson and Kelling), which claims that visible signs of social disorder such as neighborhood blight can invite more crime and disorder as these neighborhoods seemed uncared for and ignored. Possibly, the same rhetoric that criminalizes his neighborhood influences Derek’s own explanation for his neighborhood’s reputation.

Moreover, Derek fixates on South Stockton’s reputation for crime and the probability of being a victim to gun violence there compared to other areas of the city.

“Where I lived, it was not the worst-worst part of Stockton I guess, because, you know, I’m still here… But… I’ve had friends drop me off, and they’re like, Oh, you live in the ghetto…. Like, yeah, I mean, like, my area wasn't really very great…. Like I said, there's crime. And things weren't really kept up with in terms of presentation and stuff, whatever. I do think there are levels to this, you know.

North Stockton, obviously is a better area, in terms of wealth and in terms of how things look and appear. And maybe even in terms of crime too…. But compared to Country Club, generally speaking, which, to me, is a place where things can happen, but it's not like South Stockton, but it's still not like North Stockton …”

Another participant recalls witnessing crime and violence in her neighborhood on Airport Way, a street on the east side of the city that goes north to south. Growing up, Erica said there were known gang members living on her street but that they never caused any trouble and nobody “messed with” them. In fact, she calls the presence of gangs in her neighborhood “subtle.” Yet what’s striking is that Erica remembers watching an altercation her father had with someone outside of her house while he was tending to the lawn. Her father used a leaf blower to remove debris from their yard while someone sat in their parked car with the door open on the street. The man was
angry that her father was blowing in his direction and “pulled a gun” on her father. Yet Erica describes her father as not being “fazed” or upset by it, reassuring her even in the presence of gun violence. Because her father wasn’t shot and he wasn’t scared, she doesn’t consider it to be “that bad,” illuminating how normalized violence is for some residents of Stockton and how some are very familiar with guns and these kinds of interaction. Erica says:

“[The gang presence on Airport Way] was very subtle. I think the one time that I really, it really came to mind and that I can recall the most of when my dad, somebody pulled the gun on my dad once when he was just doing lawn-- He was tending to the lawn one day. And he was like blowing it out to the street. And they were parked in front of our house. And the guys door was open. And he was like, Hey, don't he's like don't blow it in here. Whatever. My dad was like, I gotta finish it. And he was in front of our spots. So like it was just weird. But I think seeing my dad not be fazed by it, and that being like the only time that something ever happened on Airport Way to any of us was like, yeah, it's not that bad here at all.”

Even though these experiences were significant in the lives of young people like Erica, they are far too commonplace and are accepted as part of growing up and living in neighborhoods like South Stockton. Erica believes that this type of violence, however, is not representative of Stockton as a whole and shouldn’t brand the city which the negative reputation it has. She says:

“Stockton isn't a terrible place, as people like to say, and it isn't dangerous, like people try and present it out to be. But it's more so, every city is gonna have, you know, I guess bad people. But overall, everybody there is honestly just trying to make a living. And trying to get on with life, the day to day.”

Erica acknowledges these experiences and positions the prevalence of violence in her community with the undeniable fact that most people in Stockton are “just trying to make a living.” She accurately realizes that people do not participate in crime because they are bad people, or because of “broken windows” rhetoric, but because crime is a symptom of surviving poverty.
Anita also discusses feelings of insecurity and danger while growing up in Stockton. Anita grew up in the Midtown Magnolia neighborhood, a historic district of Stockton she describes as being home to relatively older, mostly white folks, with the exception of a few Black and immigrant neighbors, who are “medium income.” She says she feels “lucky to feel relatively safe when (she) was younger” despite experiencing a few break-ins to her home in that neighborhood. However, Anita’s mom grew up in the Southside, where her two grandmothers have lived since they were young. She spent a lot of time in South Stockton as a child while one of her grandmothers took care of her. Because she says her mother experienced a lot of trauma growing up in South Stockton, her mother was always very cautious and protective of her growing up, even while living in a central neighborhood in the city. Having grown up with this context, she was always very aware of the need for safety because of the crime and violence going on around her. Anita says:

“There’s definitely been some kind of light trauma growing up in Stockton… I think I've always kind of known since I was young that Stockton wasn't a safe space. Just kind of like by really small things, by the way we either cross the street when someone's approaching us. I think my mom would always really worry about men that were probably just walking around in the neighborhood, because she's either been stalked or like I've been stalked or… Yeah, I kind of like, kind of stuff that really tests like your sense of safety. I have had friends that had gone to larger comprehensive schools or cousins that had been like stabbed and just like a lot of really just, I think scary violence. But I think luckily like I didn't get a lot of firsthand of those experiences, but my family largely did and kind of I got like, I think like the second wave of like that impact.”

Anita brings up the trauma she has experienced while growing up in Stockton. Not only did her own experiences traumatize her, she carries the weight of the trauma that her grandmother and, more directly, her mother passed on to her. She also considers her family, like her cousins who grew up in South Stockton while she grew up in Midtown Magnolia, to have been more directly impacted
because of where they lived. However, it is clear that even the proximity to crime, gun violence, interpersonal violence and other forms of neighborhood violence can have a severe impact on one’s upbringing. Based on this quote, Anita even describes the anxiety her mother had by how concerned she was for her daughter’s safety, teaching her rules when walking down the street and avoiding strange men in order to prevent being a victim from an attack. Anita has revealed that since her mother faced several traumatic events in her upbringing, it was important to try to shelter Anita from the realities she lived.

Rose, another participant I interviewed, similarly comments on the traumas they faced related to neighborhood violence. In their interview, Rose mentioned growing up and going to nearby parks nearly every day after school. Then, once they found out news of someone being shot at the park they grew up playing at. That one incident stopped them and their friends from playing evening games of volleyball. When prompted to talk more about their experiences with violence, they said that hearing news about gun violence happened way too often. Other incidents occurred around the apartment she lives at by Anderson Park on El Dorado Street. She says that there are a lot of homeless people that gather around that park, and that she doesn’t feel safe going to that park because “so much happens there” at nighttime. Now that she is in her first year of college, she has been able to reflect on these experiences in classes, through activist spaces and in conversations with friends who have similar backgrounds. When talking to a college friend who grew up in East Oakland, she started unpacking how this neighborhood violence resulted in a lot of trauma that she is beginning to address. She credits her leaving home as her first opportunity to reflect and heal from these traumatic events. Rose says:

“My healing process didn’t start until super recently. We don’t ever talk about how people who grew up in neighborhoods surrounded by gun violence are also survivors of gun violence. It still impacts people a lot.”
Many of these responses demonstrate that Stocktonians today still survive legacies of oppression that has lasted throughout the city’s history. Not only does this data inform that Stockton as a city is tasked with healing from a damaging reputation, as they enter adulthood, Stocktonians also face realizing the trauma that inflicted them growing up. This collective need for community healing is inter-ethnic and intergenerational.

Stockton as Spatially Segregated

Having grown up primarily in South Stockton and going to high school in the Country Club area (see map below), Derek reveals how Stockton neighborhoods are perceived and defined. One illuminating element to his own perceptions is that fact that he went to a high school outside of his neighborhood, which allowed opportunities for interactions such as the one he described where school friends judged his neighborhood for being ghetto because it looked different than their Country Club neighborhoods. These different neighborhood experiences and perceptions lead him to visualize how space is produced in a hierarchal sense. North Stockton neighborhoods like Quail Lakes, Spanos and Lincoln Center are geographically north, but also imagined by Derek to be at the “top” of the ladder in terms of social and economic factors such as the neighborhood’s wealth, racial demographics and crime rates. Describing the most significant neighborhoods he grew up and spent time in, he says:

“Let's say there's different levels to this and let's put North Stockton on the top, I guess. And then I'll just put South Stockton on the bottom. And, I don't know, I mean, I really only have Country Club, because I grew up and I went to school over there, to compare to. I'll just throw that in the middle. And so for me, those are kind of like the three sections of Stockton that I know… And I've seen like North Stockton and Lincoln Center and, you know, different little communities that have money… and places that things could happen in-- you know, you hear stories every once in a while. But it's not like (those places) are presented to be as dangerous as other places.”
FIGURE 9—DEREK’S MAP OF STOCKTON:

Neighborhood Map of Stockton depicting three major neighborhoods in Derek’s analysis: North Stockton (all the neighborhoods north of March Lane), Country Club (a neighborhood in the west side) and South Stockton (neighborhoods south of Highway 4 and east of I-5). The green line indicates the Harding Way boundary. The blue line represents March Lane. South Stockton is outlined by the purple box and Country Club by the red circle.

Derek’s visualization of Stockton informs that the city is spatially segregated. Derek can only name a few neighborhoods and claims that he can only describe three in detail to be able to draw comparisons between them. These neighborhoods include South Stockton where he grew up,
Country Club where he went to school, and North Stockton where a popular retail district known as Lincoln Center is. If Derek went to his home schools in the Southside instead of the schools in the West side, he most likely would not be familiar with the Country Club area enough to talk about it. Derek’s view can be related to Kotlowitz’s theory that low-income urban residents have narrow geographic horizons because they often are spatially limited to their neighborhood or block. Derek was able to overcome that partly because of where he went to school, but it is significant still that there are other parts of Stockton that are unfamiliar to him because he didn’t grow up there.

Another participant similarly views Stockton as spatially segregated. While Derek primarily alludes to class disparities in Stockton, Micaela describes Stockton as racially segregated. She says:

“I feel like every neighborhood has their own sauce to it. Like, I feel like everybody has Stockton in them, but everyone has a different flavor. Like for me where I'm from is dominated by Pilipinos. Like if you go to the east side, it's dominated by the Latinx community. People like up West Lane or something like a lot of the Black community lives there. For me, of course, I'm biased. And I'm going to say like where I'm from, like, is the best in my eyes. But like I have respect for other communities of color. I just feel like everyone has their own way of living. And I'm so like, intrigued to learn about how they do what they do, and how they make their ends meet.”

Micaela describes each neighborhood as having its own “sauce,” or quality that has to do with the community and history in that space. She claims that each neighborhood is dominated primarily by one ethnic or racial group. For example, the East Side is known to be a large Mexican community, where the majority of businesses are locally owned by Mexican-American entrepreneurs, billboards and advertisements are in Spanish, and supermercados stand in place of Safeway’s. She “respects” other communities of color in Stockton for being able to change the landscape of their neighborhood to reflect them in the way that Mexican-Americans in the East Side do. Micaela reveals that despite viewing Stockton as racially segregated, residents are still able to be proud of these distinct yet similar communities of color.
Neighborhood Pride and Belonging

Micaela grew up in the Southside and claims to have a lot of pride in growing up in one of the most stigmatized neighborhoods, one that has a reputation for being the most dangerous in the city. For Micaela, there’s a profound sense of belonging and community in the street she grew up on, because her family and a large community of other Pilipinxs live on the same block. She grew up on 8th street and explains that this street is where a majority of Pilipinxs who lived in Little Manila migrated to after they were displaced from their neighborhood because of urban renewal practices. She ties her familial and ethnic roots to this one street, relating how space and history are always intertwined. She says:

“Where I come from, I always had a sense of pride being from the Southside. I was very aware that I was from like dangerous places. But I grew up in a neighborhood where all my cousins live actually down the street... And I always had a sense of being from Southside, right, even though I was aware, like, people would shut down down real quick. I also became very bitter toward North Side folks, because, in a way, like, I was really angry at the fact that we didn't get as much resources as they did. But I know that when people would say Stockton is very dangerous. I kind of thought like, y'all be trippin. Because for me, like, it really was home. And I feel like it can be really rough, like the streets can be your friend or your enemy, but I think that it really made my skin strong. And I really repped it. It took a lot of digging at my history and the dirt, the soil, like trying to figure out the worth in the soil that I'm from. Like, I knew all of this, subconsciously. But it wasn't until I took like ethnic studies classes were like, everything was contextualized.”

Micaela’s response reveals that some communities in Stockton consider place and history inseparable. It’s important to Micaela that she can find her whole family on one street in the city. In the same vein, the history of Pilipinxs in Stockton has always been rooted in the place they occupied. When that place is uprooted, buildings demolished and streets paved over, the space they create and recreate is vital for keeping their community and history alive. Micaela alludes to her community’s farm-working background when she says that learning about her history required “digging at the
dirt… [and] soil that I’m from.” From Little Manila to 8th Street and the Southside, place and history matter and are inextricably linked.

Rose similarly relates the history of their family and ethnic community with the spaces created and imagined in Stockton. Even though the Laos and Thai community in Stockton is relatively small, Rose still finds meaning in the places they grew up in. Their father lived as a fisherman in a rural area by the river in Thailand. Rose says he spent every day of his life on a boat before coming to the United States. Growing up, their family didn’t have a lot, but Rose fondly remembers going fishing with their father every day. Although they have never been to Thailand, they love fishing and being in the water. The place in Stockton they consider “home” is a house they lived in that had a pool and a thai chili garden in the backyard. “I love that garden so much,” they said. “I used to be able to go to the backyard and pick thai chili and swim every day.” Being born homeless, Rose grew up housing insecure. They lived in a least three different places, and only lived in that house from the ages of 7 to 12. In their interview, Rose says they aren’t used to staying in one place for too long, and that was something to get accustomed to when they moved again at 13 into a small 2-bedroom apartment that has housed at one point 11 people at once.

Despite moving so frequently and rarely having a strong connection to a place as “home,” Rose still finds community and history rooted in the places important to their upbringing. Growing up, Rose shares it was difficult identifying as Laos. They were the only Laos student in their high school. Although they learned English at 6 years old, they quickly lost their native language because there were few opportunities to speak it outside of home. The apartment they live in now is located near Angel Cruz Park, a public park known as a gathering site for the Southeast Asian community, especially Cambodian and Laos folks. In their childhood, Rose went to Angel Cruz Park every day during summer. Their aunt sells food like papaya salad at the park, where a community-initiated street market takes place. This community is important for Rose because, as one of the only Thai
students at their high school. They are able to practice and speak their native language with others at the park. “To be able to have that sense of community was so powerful to me,” they said. Rose recalls an incident that threatened their sense of community. They said:

“I remember the first time the cops shut down Angel Cruz. I was shook. They shut it down because people were selling illegally… I asked, “why did the police shut it down?” I didn’t know why, and my sister said it’s illegal. And I didn’t know that (selling street food was illegal). The police would come a few months later and shut it down for a week and then (the street market) would come back… My aunt’s entire family is being supported by the fact she sells papaya salad. It’s a financial matter but also a community thing. You notice when a vendor isn’t there. You notice when the smoke isn’t going around and when someone isn’t selling naan vahn (dessert). It’s so noticeable… I think the fact that it’s still running is such a strength of the community. I think Stockton is made valuable because of community like (the one at Angel Cruz Park). It’s the same in Thailand and Laos. People sell on the street. It’s from the heart, you can see people making (the food in front of you). It’s funny because I have seen police there ordering food from my auntie.”

Rose’s comment also questions the role of policing in communities of color. Rose grew up seeing family and community members selling food at this local park every day. For them, it was entirely normal and a system of economic exchange that elder community members brought over from Thailand and Laos, where Rose says street vending is commonplace. It is not surprising that Rose didn’t understand that selling food on the street was illegal, because it was custom and typical practice that is well established in this Southeast Asian immigrant community. The street market in Angel Cruz Park is one of the “flavors” of Stockton that Micaela would highlight. As Rose says, it’s something members do out of community but also as a means of making money for survival. Based on this quote, the police shutting down the park’s street market was shocking, out of place and even a potential sign of change. Rose says they first saw an incident like this take place when they were around 15 years old, but the street market has been around their whole childhood. Once the police first came and shut it down, they would come back and do the same every few months.
While many find a deep sense of pride in growing up in South Stockton, others still struggle to shake negative associations with the neighborhood. Some may consider adversity a test of strength and proof of resilience, yet those like Anita are reminded of intense trauma. As someone who has come back to Stockton after graduation and has mostly worked in organizing and nonprofit spaces, Anita enjoys seeing what she describes a recent reclamation of pride in South Stockton from many of her peers. This pride in “South Stockton roots” is something she struggles with claiming because she felt that the dominant narrative growing up was that you shouldn’t be proud of coming from there. She says:

“I'm definitely still kind of unpacking family history because a lot of trauma has been in like my mom's side of the family and they are very quiet about their family history. I don't think there's a lot of pride… I think only recently, or at least for me only recently, like, because of the work I do, folks have been like, ‘Yeah! South Stockton roots!’ But like growing up, like, you would never say that. Like, that would just never be a source of pride. Like, that's something that you would ever mention. You wouldn't like, you know, claim that at all. And so I think that's something that I think is interesting to see. And I think it's like a rise of like ethnic studies and talking about, like, redlining and all these things, but for me, because I think there's a lot of trauma in those roots like it's difficult to be like, ‘Ah, yes, I was raised-- both of my grandmother's live on the Southside of Stockton’… because I think I'm barely kind of like, trying to unpack some of that stuff.”

What Anita and Micaela highlight is that their experience with ethnic studies has helped them and others in their community feel more pride and belonging towards where they’re from. Whereas many Stocktonians are taught to reject where they are from, others learned the importance of their local history and what it means to them personally. Understanding place as history has been essential in shaping the pathway of these young Stocktonians into becoming boomerangs by helping them relate and connect to their neighborhoods.
CHAPTER FOUR: “MAKING IT OUT”

*Overcoming Expectations*

For all of the young Stocktonians that I interviewed, a central theme was needing to make it out of Stockton. Whereas coming of age for young adults typically looks like a high school student graduating, getting into a four-year university and “leaving the nest” when they are 18 years old, this path is not the norm for most low-income youth of color in Stockton. In fact, my participants describe in detail how graduating high school and going to college was something they strived for yet were challenged with overcoming many obstacles to get there.

Matthew reveals that he was an unlikely student that would someday get to college. Growing up low-income in South Stockton, Matthew grew up without his father in his life. School was a challenge for him as a young child and he was held back in the first grade. He says in elementary grades he was known as being the class-clown, would talk a lot and be disruptive during class. He struggled with sitting down and focusing, but says he was able to get his work done and understand the material he was being taught. He recalls a time in his fourth-grade class when the teacher wrote a math problem on the whiteboard and asked the whole class to take time to solve and answer it. As soon as she wrote the problem, she said to the whole class “do not shout out the answer,” but Matthew says he knew that was directed to him. Often times he would be the first to solve problems and would announce the answer before others had the chance to solve it. His teacher would call this behavior disruptive and would have several conversations with him, then would write him up for repeat behavior. Feeling like his teacher’s scrutiny was unfair, Matthew would tell his mom that he felt his teacher would pick on him. During one-on-one conversations with his teacher, he would even tell her he felt like he was singled out, but this reaction wouldn’t lead to the best outcomes. In school, he got written up, handed “green slips” and was even the first in his family to get suspended,
which happened three or four times. His experience feeling treated differently in class isn’t unique to this one teacher. He says:

“I felt like I wasn’t in the wrong. I felt like everyone was against me… Even though I was disruptive I kinda never got a fresh start. Each year someone knew of this kid. I knew I was on the edge pretty much with every teacher. In fourth grade I still had (writes ups, suspensions) on my (record) and people had it against me. If this is who you guys want me to be, then I would be this person … I got suspended for a couple of fights when I was in elementary school. I even got into a fight in high school that I was suspended for. I would get written up and get written up and get written up and eventually I would be suspended because it was continuous.”

While Matthew demonstrates how negative perceptions of his neighborhood affected interpersonal and institutional experiences, others similarly bring up how this played a role in their everyday life. Erica expresses annoyance with microagressive comments made to her by people who aren’t from Stockton and don’t understand the context in the same way she does. To her, these experiences were all formative and facts of her upbringing. In some ways, she seems to feel like her leaving Stockton to pursue a college education shouldn’t be considered exceptional or even a miracle. Erica says:

“… I’m getting tired of people saying ‘oh, how do you how do you survive?’ And ‘how did you make it out of there?’ And it's like, I made it out just like anybody else. And it's the city that has shaped me and given me more of a backbone and allowed me to appreciate the good even if it did come with some bad.”

Some may find comments like the ones Erica quotes as condescending and pitying. For them, being from Stockton shouldn’t feel like a burden to carry or something to overcome. The realities of growing up low-income and experiencing urban traumas is something too many share in common but others still don’t understand. This lack of understanding and compassion can lead to patronizing interactions especially outside of the city. Similarly, Micaela comments on people viewing her as inferior because of where she came from. She says:
“(When others think of my neighborhood), they'll probably think it is dirty. They'll probably clutch their bag when someone walks by. They'll probably just feel like it's not a place where you can raise a kid. Like it's not suitable or good enough. Or like, I feel like when people look at where I'm from, like, my hood, they’re like, there's no way that this smart kid could come from a place like this.”

Micaela mentions that some who have never experienced growing up in her “hood” would likely consider it unclean, assume it’s dangerous, and would call it unfit for raising children. She believes some people would undermine her intelligence if they knew where she was from, and that they would be in disbelief to see a kid from the Southside achieve.

Participants who grew up in the Southside were well aware of the deficit narratives that marked their neighborhood and classified it as dangerous and full of crime and violence. This association with the neighborhood, ideas based off the broken windows theory and culture of poverty, also influenced how people viewed those who came from South Stockton. As Matthew expressed earlier, he felt picked on by his teacher and was always punished for his behavior. In reality, he was a smart and capable student who struggled in the classroom and faced many challenges at home, one being growing up with many siblings, and an autistic brother, to a low-income single mother. He accurately points out that his treatment was cyclical and he never had the opportunity to redeem himself, or to at least not be viewed as a “troublemaker.” Matthew says that if you’re known for being the kid that is always in trouble, anything you do is immediately criminalized and you are punished for it. He finds this as a problem in education as children who act out, having trouble focusing and struggle in school are likely the students who need the most attention, care and support.

Fatima, who went to Lodi Unified schools, also felt the same exclusion due to being non-white. She says that her elementary school experience was horrible, due to her not speaking English very well. In middle school, she remembers her peers, who were predominantly from wealthier
backgrounds, always showing off the brand clothing they wore, the big, two-story houses they lived in the cars their parents drove. Fatima felt out of place because she didn’t have all of those things. This is one of her first experiences seeing wealth disparities. She says she felt like an outsider and that she didn’t belong. Being around these children in school, who were mostly white and upper middle class, she felt like she was in a different city because the rest of Stockton was not like this. In high school, she enrolled in Advanced Placement (AP) classes and was involved in many activities, but she still felt out of place in these spaces and that she couldn’t connect with the rest of her peers. Instead, she had better friendships with students of color, who for the most part were not in AP classes with her. It was hard for her to be friends with her other peers because she felt aggression from them and that they resented her because she would receive test and college application fee waivers and other financial aid due to her income level.

Anita had a similar experience in white settings. When talking about her high school experience as a competitive athlete, she says:

ANITA: “I honestly a lot of this comes from I think something that that is like a pinpoint of how I kind of been aware at a different level about like disparities in Stockton… I did water polo at a club, and I played at Delta college… I was very much reminded when I was in those spaces that I wasn't white. That people had a different perception around like, “Oh, your home school was Stagg and Stagg kids don’t swim.” Like, there's nobody good that comes out of Stagg because Stagg is a large comprehensive school. You don’t see a lot of Hispanics out here swimming, you just don't. I think because a lot of kids were coming from Lodi– because that's like a really wealthy area that had like a really robust, like aquatics program– that folks really doubted that I could swim or swim well.”

These experiences that Fatima and Anita share hurt because they never felt a part of the crowd while in white spaces and were rejected and belittled by their peers.
Pressures for Children of Immigrants

For most, the first step was leaving for education. Access to education and getting a degree in itself becomes a goal for many, as it is viewed as the gateway to upward social mobility. Education then is considered one of the only ways out for young students growing up in Stockton. When options are limited, many feel pressure from a young age to succeed in school to be able to get into a four-year university outside of the city. Many, like Alex, can relate to the pressures of guaranteeing one’s future success and life outcomes at an early age by working hard in high school.

“I was really invested in education…. I worked really hard in high school. Like at least get decent grades to go to like some CSU or UC, so that’s really when I hung on to the A-G (requirements) and really trying to like my counselors.”

Alex went to a four-year university, but did not finish their degree, and now reflects on how hard it was to not only be a college student and have to take leaves of absences but being a first-generation student in K-12 preparing to go to college in the first place. As the youngest child in an immigrant family, they saw their other siblings work hard to go to school. Alex remembers what it was like to see their oldest sibling not go to college at all, one of their older sister being sent to the Philippines for a college education by their father and then dropping out, and their other siblings get their degree in the Philippines and then returning to just “start all over” because their credentials were not accepted in the United States. Having witnessed none of their family members “make it” in the Philippines, Alex viewed their parents’ desires to send them to the island to pursue higher education there as more of a punishment than an opportunity. Considering their siblings’ as failed opportunities reaffirmed their drive to achieve, get into a four-year university and earn their degree in the United States. They credit their upbringing in Stockton’s north side as the reason for having more educational resources and strong values of education early in life.

“I feel like if it weren’t for those really early stages of education opportunities growing up in the north side, I feel like I wouldn’t be so
overachieving. Oh, I felt like I was also kind of like fulfilling this like model minority role so like, I recognize that retrospectively. Back then, I was like, Oh yeah, I’m Asian. I guess I’ll be like, you know, good at math. I was actually really quiet and nerdy.”

Although they grew up in a low-income immigrant household, Alex reconciles with the relative privilege they had growing up in the north side of Stockton and going to schools that were considered better. However, Alex, coming from a Pilipino immigrant family, recalls feeling like they were constantly having to fulfill the model minority role of Asian-American students in school, but never quite feeling enough. This imposter syndrome can possibly be explained by their ethnic Pilipino identity being considered under the umbrella “Asian” category but not being equally represented in the stereotype of Asians being smart, which is widely a stereotype of East and South Asians that excludes Southeast Asians, Pilipino and other groups from the Pacific Islands. Whereas South Stockton is home to a majority of Southeast Asians including Cambodians and also Pilipino, North Stockton has a larger presence of East and South Asians. Alex says:

“Growing up in North Side like there was actually like a lot of privilege when it comes to class. I can see why I was like super overachieving and wanting to make more money for my family because I wanted to make hella bank like all these other freakin families that I saw... I thought maybe I could live like this if I did really well in school and like really accept this like American Dream narrative: If you go to school then you can go up the social ladder. But even post-college and during college I realized all that shit was bullshit.”

Alex describes feeling disillusioned and even jaded by their college experience. Although they say they grew up around so much privilege and wealth that they used to aspire to attain, now they feel more critical of the American Dream narrative that was presented to them and reinforced in the media and in school as a first-generation student and a child of immigrants. Alex’s story demonstrates how higher education is not the only path and sometimes isn’t the best path for everyone. The pressure for first-generation children of immigrants can be toxic and limiting instead
of fulfilling and promising. For someone like Alex, who “made it” out of Stockton and into a four-year university, only to struggle and have little resources and no safety net to fall back on, going to college again feels less like an opportunity and more disappointing as they see through the American Dream’s promise of intergenerational mobility.

Others, like Micaela, who has stayed in Stockton to earn her Associate’s at Delta, have also looked past the narrative of making it out. Having also listened to messaging that Stockton was a place to overcome in order to secure a narrow vision of success, what changed for her was witnessing a generational shift while she was in high school from 2014-2018. When describing what this shift meant to her, she says:

“I feel like growing up, at first, it's very much like you need to get out of Stockton to be happy. Then all of a sudden, like now that I think when I started getting to high school, there's like these generations that like, went away to college, they graduated, and they came home now. And like you could see the work that they do. And I feel like my culture like totally switched because now my mind says like, I'm from Stockton. I can do this. When before it used to be like, nah I can't do this, because I'm from Stockton. But now I'm like, if I want it, like, I'm gonna go get it. And if I want something to be brought to Stockton, I'ma bring it.”

This quote from Micaela parallels the previous themes of Stocktonians either loving and having pride in the neighborhood they come from or rejecting the identity of place to distance themselves from its negative associations as well as the trauma they experienced there. Micaela demonstrates that these neighborhood perspectives similarly occur in educational settings. By describing how her mentality shifted from believing she was incapable “because I’m from Stockton” to telling herself “I’m from Stockton. I can do this,” she relates how negative stigmas associated with one’s neighborhood or hometown identity can affect their self-esteem and performance in school. Micaela’s change in mindset allows her to rethink education in the context of her own family and community. She says:
“A lot of my family members as well, like a lot of our family were not exactly like into higher education. Like for me, I'm the first generation, but like, they're either hella smart, when it comes like survival or like, hella smart in the fields, or hella smart in the streets. And I could see that resilience in my family. So that's what made me proud.”

Here, Micaela positions the value of her education in the same light as her family’s experiences “in the fields (and) in the streets.” She sees the labor and survival that generations of her family, who were immigrants from the Philippines, as resilience and a source of pride for her as a first-generation college student. While her parents and grandparents may have not received any formal education, especially a college degree, she asserts that they are “hella smart” nonetheless as equates the idea of being educated with being street smart and being highly skilled in farm labor, as many Pilipinos were asparagus pickers, which was a difficult crop to harvest and required workers to be highly efficient and able to withstand extremely back-breaking labor.

Anita shares these feelings that receiving higher education does not make her any smarter, more capable or more successful than her peers or family members. As children of immigrants, both Micaela and Anita allude to being first-generation college students who have received messaging either from parents or others regarding education. For Anita, becoming the first in her family to leave Stockton to pursue a college education was difficult, and she realized that her success is merited by the fact that she was “able to make it.” She describes how her Puerto Rican mother, who grew up on the Southside and went to Edison High School, a school that serves predominantly low-income students of color and has reputations for being “ghetto” and “underperforming,” “[made] sure that we didn’t grow up in South Stockton because she faced a lot of trauma.”

Reflecting on her mother’s experience, Anita says:

“If she wasn’t able to do it, like, why would I be able to do it? I'm not the smartest person in my family. I just think there's clearly a really big hold on people, and whether that's poverty or commitment to family… Because I think for me, there's some guilt there. Like I can't leave like I'm just gonna go off and live a cool, weird metropolitan life
and probably make a little bit of money, and y'all are still gonna be here? Like, I don't like it here, I'm sure you don't like it here. I just respected my mom a lot and thought she the smartest person I know. I just had doubts like, if she can't do it, why can I? Why would I be able to?"

Despite her mom not having a college degree, Anita still considered her the smartest person she knows because her mom possesses intelligence that cannot be taught at educational institutions. In this way, her mother is her role model and someone she aspires to be like. Yet, on the pursuits of her own career, Anita feels guilty to do something that her mother and the rest of her family did not have access to. Anita does not consider herself special or exceptional for getting into college and earning a degree, because she understands how opportunities like education are reserved for some but unavailable to many others.

**Mentorship and Role Models**

Several participants mention that they had at least one person in their life growing up that encouraged or influenced them to “make it out” and go to college. Many, like Micaela previously expressed, felt that the prevalent narrative was that kids from Stockton couldn't make it and be successful. Oftentimes, that narrative was reinforced because they lacked role models and examples of people in their lives who had done it themselves. Having a role model was significant for many.

One participant in this sample differs from the rest because she actually wasn’t the first in her family who graduated from high school or went to college. Itzel’s parents were immigrants from Mexico and went to college during a time when they offered a college assistance program for migrants. They were able to not only get a college education, but they also received financial aid. Itzel identifies as growing up middle class and having some resources that assisted her educational success. Itzel says:

“For me, it was that my parents have already gone to college. So even though they already went to college, they didn’t really understand their
privilege, I guess in a sense, because they had all their education paid for. So, when I was applying to college, they didn't understand the financial situation of it, because they didn't have to pay for it. So I had to go and get the resources to become financially literate in terms of subsidized and unsubsidized loans. And then I had older cousins who already went to college. So they were a resource as well. So women of color, going to get their secondary education and thriving there was really a push for me. I mean, they all went far too. One of my aunts, she went to UC Irvine. My cousin, she went to UCLA. Then they also verbally talked about their goals. So not only did my aunt go to UC Irvine, and got her bachelor's, she also got her master's. And being so verbal about that made me realize that “Oh, I can even go further in my education!” One of my cousins goes to UCLA. She’s gonna graduate this year. She's doing research. So like, oh, wow, doing research, but also, we'll be like, ‘Oh, she's going to be a doctor too because she wants to go get her doctorate as well.’ Like, ‘Dr. [surname] here you go!’ So having role models was also a big thing.”

Itzel credits her college-educated parents as sources of knowledge about going to college. Although they couldn’t assist her with navigating paying for school, she also had cousins who went to college and could give her advice. Her role models include the women of color in her family who succeeded and earned professional degrees. Another participant, Matthew, had a different upbringing. His single mom dropped out of college and neither of his parents have a degree. Most importantly, Matthew grew up without a father in his life which really impacted his sense of self.

“I think we (me and my friends growing up in South Stockton) all had relatives who lived a life that isn’t very sustainable, and I think we all knew that that wasn’t gonna work. We had to do something different to make it out. We couldn’t sell drugs or missing class or getting in trouble, I think we all knew in order to get out… growing up in the Southside a lot of things happened when I was younger. I seen a lot of people in my neighborhood who got hurt, a lot of people lost their family members. That’s not what we wanted. There was a lot of pain. We were just trying to figure out what was gonna work for us and trying to get there. A lot of what we got was a couple of great mentors, whether it was coaches or teachers. Teachers who spent a lot of time w me because they knew I was smart enough. I just didn’t have the
right mindset at the time. Stay in school, go to high school and college. Become a young man.”

For Matthew, his experience playing football helped him stay on track. Football is where he learned discipline and the value of dedicating yourself to doing your best. When he strived to be a great player, he realized he also needed to strive to be a great student. He said that along the way he also had teachers, counselors and coaches who sat down with him and helped him realize his path. He hopes to give back by doing the same for the next generations of youth and become a high school counselor.

CHAPTER FIVE: COMING BACK

Place as Opportunity

While there is overall uncertainty regarding their plans for the future, the question to stay or return to Stockton doesn’t have a uniform answer. Many participants signaled that they have some hesitations about returning to Stockton after leaving to pursue opportunities elsewhere. Most of the responses suggest that the participants aspire to leave Stockton someday to pursue higher education and/or achieve their career goals. When asked where he plans to live in the next ten years, Joshua couldn’t provide one answer. He says:

“I don't want to stay in Stockton. Don't get me wrong. I love Stockton to death like I'll forever be a Stockton baby. I am a product of Stockton .... I have to go to like L.A or something where music's more super big. I would want to leave and experience it… but at the same time come back .... It's just, opportunity-wise I would go and also come back for sure. I would want to die out here, if that makes sense.”

For him, it’s really about where he’ll make it. Even if Stockton is the place he wants to be long-term, he feels that opportunity is limited there especially in terms of his career. For many like Joshua, who have grown up in and have only ever known Stockton their whole lives, there’s a feeling that staying in the city means missing out on opportunities elsewhere, especially big ones. Likewise, Derek, who has similar music-related career ambitions, wants to take his talents to bigger
cities where he has a better chance of making it big. However, for both Joshua and Derek, there is still hope that the current changes happening in the community can lead the city in a positive direction for growth, that one day might include establishing a bigger and better-known music scene and industry. Derek says:

“If I end up staying here for the next five years, and release three albums, and then blow up in Stockton, what reason do I have to leave? I can just stay here and wait for more things more for more of this growth to happen. I suddenly won’t have a need to leave because things are happening here. Or, you know, there’s more money or more jobs or just more places to do gigs, I guess.”

For both of them, these plans depend on a lot of “what-ifs,” and none of them are guaranteed to happen. But the prospects of making it in Stockton with the ambitions and plans they have seem the most unlikely. Yet the ability to leave is difficult for those like Derek, who have stayed in Stockton for school and don’t have the financial security of “dropping everything and leaving.” He rather stay awhile and see what opportunities come. For others, like Erica, there isn’t any value in staying and waiting. Unlike Derek, she believes that she’s already seen everything there is to see and there is little possibility of more opportunities popping up. When I asked Erica what she hoped for Stockton’s future, she hesitated for a while and responded that she hadn’t thought about it much before. She responded:

“I don't think there's anything for me there anymore. I think I've spent enough time to know that Stockton is a place I grew up in. And it's not some place that I necessarily would want to stay for the rest of my life, like my parents.... I knew that I have to get out of Stockton to get an opportunity.”

Rationalizations like this one rely on associating staying in Stockton with failure. Erica refers back to her parents’ lack of upward mobility during their lifetime living and working in Stockton. From her perspective, Stockton is not a place people live in out of choice or preference, but because they ended up in or got stuck there. This belief is widely backed by messaging from older
generations who believe their statuses as low-income and under-educated are due to their living in Stockton. It has resulted in the idea that in order to have upward economic and social mobility, you must also have spatial mobility. So, it is necessary to then leave Stockton entirely, leaving behind expectations from family members, associations with people they grew up with, and everything else connected to the place that might hold them back. Leaving the city would give them the opportunity for something new, exciting and worth pursuing.

_Giving Back_

Generally, most of the participants imagine themselves living in Stockton for some period of their life in the future, but there isn’t agreement across the board whether Stockton will become their permanent home. While many are impassioned and excited about their role to give back to the community, others feel more hesitant to commit to coming back. As Joshua, Derek and Erica previously express, Stockton currently lacks the kinds of career and economic opportunities they want to invest in. While they view Stockton as their roots, where their family calls home, and a place they are fond of, because of limited resources and opportunities they believe it’s unlikely to establish their careers in creative industries in the city itself. Instead, they plan to establish them elsewhere, but call Stockton a home they could return to when they want.

However, others will make their career about Stockton. Many participants discussed their feelings about grappling with a new sense of privilege and what they believe is a responsibility to their community to return to Stockton and “give back.” They feel that because they are part of the few Stocktonians who “made it out,” they have a duty to come back and serve the community in a way that will change it for the better. They consider serving through efforts around education and mentorship, community organizing to address inequity, and financial investment in underserved communities.
Throughout the interview, Matthew underscored the impact mentors in educational settings had on his academic success. Now that he has earned his B.A. in psychology, he plans on eventually earning a Master’s in counseling, which he will use to become a high school counselor at his alma mater, Stagg Senior High. He credits his counselor for inspiring him and letting students know they are capable of achieving great things despite being challenged with many obstacles in life. Matthew says:

“It’s not very easy being raised in Stockton you know. Stockton is rough. I know people who make fun of kids who don’t have lot of things. I want to be that role model that I didn’t have for different people. To inspire them to do something with themselves. At the end of the day if you work hard it’s not really that hard. That’s one of the things I learned in school. You have to put in time. You just gotta work at it. If you need help, then come to me and we’ll figure it out. Not many people have someone like that. One of the things I realized coming from Stockton and coming (to school) there’s so much more help [offered there].”

Matthew acknowledges that for many youths in Stockton, growing up under circumstances like intergenerational poverty, proximity to community violence, and lack of role models and resources is a difficult way to grow up. He recognizes that many students are not given the right resources to flourish and even imagine themselves in college or having a fulfilling career. As one mentor made all the difference for him, he desires to inspire and motivate youth too. Going from public schools in Stockton to a private college in Portland, he observed so many disparities in the resources available in his hometown and the resources his peers, many of whom were white and from middle to upper middle-class backgrounds, had access to. This gap in opportunity that he witnessed is reason why he decided to devote his career to connecting students with sufficient resources so they can succeed.
While many participants highlight the need to come back and serve the community, some need time to consider what that means for them. Rose says it felt empowering to be involved in community efforts while in high school and realizing they would be able to come back and reinvest in the city. Now a freshman at Stanford, they have returned home during school breaks and has experienced a lot of feelings they didn’t realize until leaving. A lot of that has been from grappling with trauma. They told their mom that being back in Stockton makes them sad and saw that being honest about their feelings made their mom sad, too. Rose assures that they love Stockton and is proud of being from “the 209,” and feel supported and empowered by the community there. But before they can be sure they will come back they say they need to take the needed time to heal and grow. Rose says:

“I honestly really did want to come back to Stockton. Currently, at the end of my first year of college and being back home with some higher education, I’m taking time to process what that means for me. Getting involved in local government so young there’s so many obligations. Finding balance between the obligations you have for your family and your community and the respect you deserve for yourself. I’m still very rooted in the work happening here... The reason why I need more time to think about it is because being in college is the first time I have been able to think about my own traumas rather than other people.”

Rose points out that being a community advocate and someone who organizes for social justice demands a lot of emotional and mental work. Yet, community organizers are paid so little for the important work they do. They emphasize that organizers and people involved in social justice work tend to burn put quickly; because of how emotionally demanding and taxing their work is. Rose is deliberating what is worth it to them. Right now, they are prioritizing their wellbeing and emotional healing, because they think it’s essential that when people return to organize, they come back energized and able to take on that much work. In the dialogue around returning and giving
back, this message is rarely discussed. Rose displays a level of introspection that is mature and needed for all people who are considering social justice work.

CHAPTER SIX: THE STOCKTON WE MAKE IT

Changing the Narrative

Every participant said that while they grew up, they were taught that Stockton is a place you need to overcome, but all of them have now rejected this narrative that positions Stockton in a deficit. Now in college, they view Stockton positively and see all of the qualities they call “beautiful” or “amazing” that “makes Stockton what it is.” Alluding to the collective power Stocktonians have to change their city’s narrative, Matthew says:

“It’s gonna take some time to change. I think the narrative right now is the same as before. Just because we come from that (narrative about Stockton) doesn’t mean that (the negative association) is us. Whenever I tell someone I’m from Stockton, it’s not ever a very nice remark. Everyone is kinda against us. We’re treated as the little brother of the area. Even though we’re known for that (negative narrative), people (from Stockton) take that personal and we come together to show that’s not really what we’re about. I know there’s a lot of athletes coming back and giving back. I’ve seen a lot more mentors come back and just try to help out… We just need to continue to try to inspire people, the youth, and just move out of that narrative. It’s gonna take some time. I think it’s something that a lot of ppl in Stockton do take personally and it brings us together. We know what we can make Stockton. We know what we can turn it into.”

Matthew believes it’ll take time to full reinvent the city. The prevailing narrative has lasted for decades, defining Stockton as a city that is miserable and failing. Yet, he says Stocktonians are motivated to subvert this narrative because they collectively desire to prove naysayers wrong. This shared frustration and cease of tolerating this negative reputation has the power to transform Stockton through collective action. This action through collaboration requires intergenerational
support and connectedness. As discussed earlier, Matthew traces the return of boomerangs who are giving back to the city and often serve the youth as mentors. With aspirations to become a high school counselor, Matthew considers mentorship and guidance a critical component of changing the narrative. He recognizes the potential in the youth of the city in creating long-term change and believes more people need to tap into it by empowering youth.

Antonio says that when he started practicing photography, he was able to meet people from different areas of Stockton and hear their perspectives of the city. Before, he used to believe that he needed to get out of Stockton. But hearing the stories of others and witnessing people return and become involved in public service has changed his view completely. Having heard the term before, Antonio said he wants to become a boomerang, “go out to experience outside of the city, and bring that back.” He says that this community wants to change the deficit narrative people place on the city. They want to show that Stockton is a place to be proud of, because throughout the years not a lot of people claimed city pride. The current efforts to revitalize Stockton through locals returning has inspired him to stay in the city. Analyzing Stockton’s reinvention, he says:

“The reinvention of Stockton is not a brand-new makeover of the city. It’s taking core principles of what people from Stockton have. Like grit. I think Reinvent Stockton is adding things, taking apart things that haven’t worked… Helping people who are living here now and implementing ideas that will be here for generations to come… Before, Stockton was a place that people would come to, people would migrate to. Now its perceived as the opposite… Basically, it is recreating this image of Stockton that was kinda loss throughout time”

Antonio sheds light on an important revelation. This movement is not reinventing Stockton. It is restoring Stockton’s image to reflect what it has always been. By deconstructing the deficit narrative and subverting it into one that is critical and productive, we are able to reimagine Stockton as a site of opportunity and aspiration, a setting for complicated sociocultural history, and a community known for resisting oppressive power structures.
Several participants believe that transforming the narrative of the city can only be achieved by reforming the Stockton education system. Participants who were former students of Us History say that the key is teaching Stockton history through ethnic studies. In particular, Antonio recalls lessons on Stockton’s history, the role of colonialism in the U.S., and issues that affect Stockton today such as redlining and environmental racism. This class moved him to become an advocate for ethnic studies and get involved in Little Manila Rising’s campaign to reestablish Ethnic Studies classes in Stockton Unified schools. When discussing how the experience influenced him, he says:

“We talked about a lot of different topics that were going on in the city. Being a part of the Us History program gave me a lot more insight about the city and these (revitalization efforts). It opened my eyes more. And I think it will open the eyes of others.”

Micaela, another Us History student involved with Little Manila Rising believes that ethnic studies has the power to uncover the problems Stocktonians face and empower the community. Her vision for Stockton is rooted in improving conditions for people of color who are historically surviving poverty.

MICAELE: “It’s giving black and brown youth especially in Stockton like, the childhood and like, the life that they deserve… because when I think of Stockton right now, I think of black single mothers working at like McDonald's. I think of the Mexican man down the street pushing carts of plastic. It's a survival city. And my vision is to give us so much love and work that our people don't have to worry about just surviving. I want them to live and be able to express themselves. You know, just be proud of where they're from, while getting resources. And I feel like the foundation of this all that can like fix all these problems is education. Because I feel like a lot of the problems that Stockton has is because we don't know about like where we’re from. We're not given that sense of empowerment from a young age. It's either were miseducated, lack of education. I don’t know, just empower
the youth and then they’ll go up and then do it for the generations to come.”

As Micaela expressed, learning about one’s history, the history of their ancestors and their community is truly empowering. Alex, who majored in Ethnic Studies in college, agrees that their education was transformative for them. They credit their motivation to stay in Stockton and advance efforts in social justice is because they felt moved by the history of people in Stockton. Alex says:

“What helps me to stay here is the history and the people. Yeah, like the history of this place and the history of the people that live here and that legacy. How do we how do we like carry on that legacy? Yeah, that’s kind of why I want to stay in Stockton because I feel like actually learning about so much about my own community and those communities standing in solidarity with other folks. It helps me, you know, imagine and do work with other people. Imagine what like liberation and freedom looks like here. I learned to listen to these histories as like models for what can be in the future.”

People like Alex and Micaela are inspired by the communities they grew up with and are able to learn about through ethnic studies. They have been able to realize the significance of being in solidarity with different communities and ethnic groups and join together in a collective movement towards social justice and liberation. These communities are what inspire them to work towards, create, fight for and imagine a better future for all Stocktonians.

**Empowering Stocktonians**

In high school, some liked Sharon and Fatima were frustrated by their peers who didn’t seem to care about the welfare of people in Stockton. In her interview, Sharon explains that the predominant narrative that students at her high school beloved was that you should go to college and never come back to Stockton. She understood that this narrative didn’t apply to places like her neighborhood in Brookside, but disproportionately impacted South Stockton. Sharon was annoyed
by this coming from mostly white and class-privileged students. She personally felt strongly against
this narrative because her closest friends were from the Southside and believed these ideas were
insults at them. Sharon believed that more of her peers should be more motivated to return to
Stockton to improve the conditions for all residents. However, now she is more wary of the push
for college educated folks to come back. She is concerned that this movement is more emphasizing
elitist ideals rather than centering the lives on vulnerable community members. She says:

“The idea is that Stockton needs really highly educated people to solve things. The primary ways that people who go to elite colleges choose to make change is through the government and through the nonprofit complex. A lot of people who come back think they have a lot of the answers. There’s also this pitfall of seeing Stockton as this neoliberal open landscape. This message of exceptionalism is really narrow. There are roles for politicians and lawyers in our movement, but our movement shouldn't center highly educated college people.”

Others like Rose agree that the movement to revitalize Stockton should be community-based rather than to advance individual agendas. They say:

“Change should be made from a place of love and deep respect. What are you building if it isn’t community? My fear is that we think we are making so much change and being super progressive and reforming systems. But we have to make sure we are doing it in the right way. I think the right way is very community based… I think that putting our investments in the right place is what’s valuable and being conscious of time. We can try to make so much change but what is the timeline? What are we sacrificing? Who are the people we have let down? Some families live literally day to day. We can’t even think about what a month to month goal looks like.”

While Rose generally views the current revitalization efforts as positive, they worry that the movement could lose direction and meaning. They believe that these efforts must be based in community and in the insert of building community. At the same time, it is essential that leaders consider the implications of what efforts they are putting forth. Rose thinks that these efforts are susceptible to making many sacrifices,
CHAPTER SEVEN: DISCUSSION

In this chapter, I discuss major findings and engage my participants’ responses with relevant sociological literature. I devote this chapter to making sense of a few key themes that recurred throughout my interviews. First, I provide discussion on how participants perceive the neighborhoods they grew up in within the wider socioeconomic context of the city. This includes their descriptions of their neighborhoods as well as the stigma surrounding them.

_Inspiring Youth to Overcome Stigma_

The data in this study reveals that the majority of participants were inspired and empowered as youth to become involved in civic engagement. Although he wasn’t the first to return and give back, Michael Tubbs’ notoriety allowed him to become the exception that broke the rule. He subverted the narrative that Stockton was not a place you could return and become successful in when he ran for City Council his senior year at Stanford, won the seat and two years later ran for and became the first Black Mayor in Stockton and youngest to lead a city of its size. As the Reinvent Stockton movement began to take place, Michael Tubbs gave speeches about being “the rose that grew from concrete,” a reference to a famous poem written by rapper Tupac Shakur. Tubbs uses this metaphor to illustrate how he succeeded despite being severely impeded by poverty, his father being incarcerated, his mother raising him on his own, and growing up in the under-resourced Southside. Being a first-generation college student, coming from a background of poverty, impacted by incarceration, and Black, he is able to relate to hundreds of kids from Stockton, and his story resonates with them. Visiting elementary and high school campuses, hosting events targeted at youth, and starting programs in education, Tubbs went out into the community and met with youth.
who for a long time were conditioned to be shameful of their upbringing and were rarely empowered in their own sense of worth.

Unsurprisingly, the recent return of prominent Stockton boomerangs had a significant, positive influence on many youths. Participants such as Micaela, Antonio, Sharon, Rose and Fatima were in high school during the election of Michael Tubbs as Mayor of Stockton in 2016 and when other boomerangs assumed elected positions, became involved in nonprofits and taught in high schools. Sharon explained that the teachers she had in high school who talked about why they decided to come back to Stockton and encouraged students to do the same inspired her to get involved in local efforts and even dream to become an ethnic studies teacher. Similarly, Antonio revealed that he earned a scholarship from the Stockton Scholars program, which was launched by Mayor Tubbs and Lange Luntao in 2018. This program provides him and other college-bound students in Stockton annual scholarships to pay for college at a 2- or 4-year institution or trade school, mentorship, and leadership opportunities by becoming a student ambassador for the program.

Another significant event to note is the campaign to re-introduce Ethnic Studies into the Stockton Unified School District (SUSD) which ended in the SUSD School Board passing the resolution to add ethnic studies as an elective class in all high schools in 2017 (National Civic League). Several participants highlight their educations in ethnic studies and introductions to Stockton history, either in high school, college or community spaces, as the catalyzing push that empowered them to believe they were capable of social justice-oriented change and that their community was worth investing in.

However, not all of the participants had this same experience. In this research, we witness a shift in attitude and perception between older and younger participants. Younger participants were more likely to feel positively and close to their neighborhood and Stockton overall. On the other
end, participants 22 and older more commonly hesitated about their position to return to Stockton. This can be explained first by a difference in messaging about education and Stockton pride, and second by an opportunity gap between these two age groups. It is significant to note that this shift in attitudes occurred between a very small window of time, but the impact is already seen. Many of the participants who had graduated high school and went on to college before the Mayoral election of Michael Tubbs didn’t have as strong of a connection to community revitalization efforts as the younger participants did. This may explain why those like Erica, Joshua and Derek, while interested in current efforts and thinking about giving back to Stockton, don’t see themselves directly contributing. None of these participants had ever been connected to nonprofits, leaders or teachers who were involved in social change. Because of these observations, I argue that increased resources such as scholarships, mentorship and outreach, and educational programs are the catalysts moving youth to pursue college educations and careers in public service. These programs are essential to increasing equity and opportunity for low-income youth of color and investing in the next generation of leaders.

**Is College the Answer?**

Boomerangs are defined as college-educated locals who decide to return to their hometown, bring back the education and social capital they possess, and become involved in local civic efforts as educators, organizers and other professionals. Therefore, this thesis focuses on the experience of college-bound and college-educated Stocktonians. The term boomerang, while defining a subgroup of empowered public servants, only helps identify a community of people who are part of an elitist and exclusive group.

In the brilliant piece “When Universities Swallow Cities,” Davarian L. Baldwin critiques the role of the University in altering the space, demographics and economies of cities and pushes back on the common notion that universities are public goods when, in fact, they historically have caused
more harm to neighboring communities than disseminating knowledge and providing other contributions to the community. For Baldwin, simply educating, employing and providing health care to communities is not enough to save universities from criticism. Universities “swallow” cities in the sense that they become machines that control the city’s housing stock, land use, ordinances, police practices, policies through policy research labs, major employers, and access to health care. By influencing and oftentimes controlling these areas of city life, universities can completely change the demographics of neighboring communities by feeding into the pipeline of elite professionals that Richard Florida calls the “creative class.”

Especially after the decline of the industrial industry, universities function to create an elite class of educated, skilled and competitive workers who can enter job markets in elite professions such as technology, finance, law, medicine, and the arts. While universities have been thought of as institutions that provide education, serving as the “great equalizer” to first generation and legacy students, in reality they funnel a set of individuals into what Richard Florida calls the “creative class”– educated and skilled professionals who are desirable to cities who want to revitalize neighborhoods and reverse the “brain drain” in their community. The emphasis on raising such an elite class is a direct result of cities wanting to establish a competitive “21st century” industry, such as Silicon Valley’s tech bubble, and having the social capital of educated professionals to fill that workforce. Cities depend less on blue-collar workers and jobs as many industries have become automated, as the focus has seemed to shift to this creative class.

To attract these “precious imported individuals” urban universities influence the city to become college towns, transforming the area into a youthful, hip, gentrified neighborhood made for yuppies by pushing out the Black and brown folks who lived there. In the example of UChicago, Hyde Park went from a primarily low-income Black neighborhood to a site of urban renewal housing projects started by the university to house professors and students. Hyde Park since has
been transformed into an enclave of liberal, wealthy educated white folks in Chicago’s once-
primarily Black South Side. As Baldwin writes, “urban schools have become islands of wealth amid a
sea of poverty.” The dissonance between the communities universities are posed to serve and the
class they actually do serve is as clear as segregation in these cities; Hyde Park vs. Englewood, Palo
Alto vs. East Palo Alto, USC vs. South Central, Berkeley vs. Oakland. If the goal is to provide public
goods to their communities, universities cannot continue to be complicit in displacing low-income
residents and contributing to rising rents.

Baldwin’s exploration of universities has several implications for the role of education in
improving Stockton. The city currently is home to the University of the Pacific, a private institution.
Since Stockton is the only major city in California without a nearby public university, local leaders
are pushing to get a California State University campus in Stockton in order to increase the number
of students who go to a four-year university and reverse the brain drain. Proponents of CSU
Stockton claim that a public university will also bring jobs, improve the economy and transform
Stockton into a livelier city. The emphasis on college education is a good effort at solving these
issues, yet largely fail to consider the ramifications of establishing another educational institution and
what effects that will have on residential segregation, gentrification and displacement in the city.

Florida’s assessment of cities needing to attract residents with creative capital in order to
revitalize their failing economies relies on an elitist mentality and vision for communities. This
suggests that only highly, formally educated individuals possess the ability to make good decisions
around city planning, politics and governance. Florida’s argument relies on the belief that the only
productive members of society are those who can contribute with various forms of capital. Why
should only this class of people have a say in planning dynamic, livable communities? While
recognizing the positive impact boomerangs can bring back to a city, I argue that they alone cannot
accomplish the goals of social justice and equity advancement without having the backing of the communities of color that have existed and resisted for centuries.

**Implications for Gentrification**

In the last decade, California cities have rapidly transformed. The state is championed for being a diverse melting pot, upholding liberal and democratic values, and being a place for new beginnings for immigrants and Americans alike. Yet, the California Dream has been ruined by exclusion, increasing costs of living, and racist sentiments. Scholars have examined and tracked these changes through a process known as gentrification, when middle to upper class people move into a predominantly low-income neighborhood, often a community of color, and subsequently housing values rise, and longtime residents are pushed out. San Francisco, Los Angeles, and Oakland are well known sites exemplifying how gentrification dramatically changes the landscape, culture and makeup of a city. Most recently, this phenomenon is ever apparent and swiftly changing the entire Bay Area due to the rise of Silicon Valley and the tech boom where large corporations such as Google, Facebook and Amazon are located and expanding their empires. Meanwhile, low-income Black, Latinx and Asian communities are being pushed out from the Mission to San Jose. For example, San Francisco’s Mission, historically known for being home to low-income Latinx immigrants, is becoming lost to “yuppies” working in the tech industry due to it being one of the most affordable districts to live in. The problem is worsening each year as more Bay Arcans are moving out Eastward for more affordable housing. Yet, while jobs remain in the Bay, the issue evolved into the rise of super commuters who must spend sometimes over 4 hours to travel to work. Once the most affordable city to live in California, in 2019 Stockton led the nation in rent increases over the last five years. Rents increased by almost 30 percent and several residents faced evictions last year. In response, the city council unanimously passed a moratorium on no-fault evictions to protect vulnerable renters from losing their housing.
This thesis explores how boomerangs can contribute positively to their hometown by bringing back educational and social capital and engaging in politics, education, community organizing and social justice work. It is important to consider the implications of a “reverse brain drain,” where college-educated young people come back to Stockton and start to assume professional roles, take political office, and head nonprofits. Classical studies of gentrification in Chicago, New York City, and San Francisco exhibits a pattern of middle to upper class white, educated and wealthy “yuppie[s]” moving into historically low-income Black and Latinx neighborhoods. However, the key difference in this case study of Stockton is the growing movement of predominantly low-income people of color, often from immigrant backgrounds, starting to earn college educations and then returning with hopes to “give back.” Significantly, boomerangs in Stockton 1) come from mostly low-income backgrounds, 2) navigate spatial and social mobility that gives them access to more knowledge, resources and opportunities, 3) return to their hometown with a credential, and 4) are able to reintegrate into the community because of their authenticity as locals and by using their professional networks to assume leadership roles.

While the larger discourse frames millennials and Gen Zers as unengaged, uninvolved and ambivalent towards civics, this case study of Stockton proves otherwise. But do boomerangs truly differ from gentrifiers or social preservationists? At this time, it is difficult to conclude whether boomerangs returning to the city has a direct effect on rising housing prices or the number of evictions. However, what should be closely examined is the rhetoric and policies coming out because of it. For young Stocktonians with educations coming back, it is imperative that we are critical of policies that continue to oppress the most vulnerable groups in the city, including but not limited to people experiencing homelessness, system-impacted families and youth, those surviving poverty, and the undocumented community. As many participants underscored, the purpose of returning often should be to distribute knowledge, resources and labor to support the community.
that remains in Stockton. Social justice movements and efforts to revitalize a city must center the lives of the most impacted, the low-income communities of color who historically have been neglected by their city. Moreover, boomerangs must contemplate their role in this movement. This growing rebound of young, passionate Stocktonians presents an opportunity for all to come together, collaborate and strategize over the future of Stockton.

**Stockton: A Model for Empowering Local History**

This thesis contributes Stockton, California as an important case study examining the history and contemporary reinvention of a major city with over 300,000 residents and one of the highest rates of diversity in the United States. Large urban centers such as Los Angeles and Chicago are often sites where issues of gentrification and revitalization are studied and discussed, but the Chicago, and LA schools of urban centers are severely limited in that, while providing rich models to learn from, they do not apply to all cities. For example, the concentric Chicago model of urban growth, looks different in Los Angeles and Stockton where there is no distinct city center but multiple urban and residential pockets. Stockton offers similar cases of gentrification and revitalization as in Chicago or LA but is embodied differently because of its rich and unique history. Stockton also mirrors communities like San Bernardino with similar demographically diverse populations and population sizes that likewise struggle with negative reputation. Yet, studies on other places cannot tell the story of Stockton because these histories diverge in distinct and interesting ways. This paper attempts to highlight the histories that make Stockton a worthwhile cases study.

This research provides a compelling argument for the necessity of teaching ethnic studies and local urban histories to residents of any place. Nearly every participant and exemplary boomerang has underscored the importance of Stockton’s city history and the impact of educating
youth about their own stories. José Rizal, a Pilipino revolutionary who is often quoted in Ethnic Studies spaces in Stockton, said that to know one’s history is the key to knowing one’s self. Without this knowledge, it is difficult to fully understand where you come from and who you are. This idea is exemplified by the fact that every participant renounced the claim that Stockton is a bad place to grow up in, and several argue that Stocktonians are led to believe that because the history of the community has been neglected for decades. The parts of Stockton’s past that are dark: racism, segregation, displacement, policing and disinvestment, created legacies that are still impact the lives of Stocktonians today and this is important to understand why people of color, low-income people and residents in the Southside of Stockton are placed at a disadvantage. Unfortunately, this history is seldom revealed, so youth grow up believing that the culture of poverty and broken window theories define them and their neighborhoods. My participants put forward the claim that if youth were taught the history of the city and why it is so complex, rich and beautiful, more people would consider Stockton a place worth investing. It is impossible to understand Stockton without understanding the story of the people. Moreover, these important local histories are rarely found in any textbook, so Stocktonians must be the sources informing us about poverty, segregation, racism, and gentrification in Stockton. By providing oral histories of young Stocktonians of color, this thesis gets closer to understanding the history of Stockton and the people who make it.

CHAPTER EIGHT: CONCLUSION

In this project, I explored how young people who grew up in Stockton developed perceptions of the neighborhood they grew up in during the 2008 recession and economic crisis. I interviewed a cohort of Stocktonians between the ages of 18 to 26, as they offer unique insights on their experiences growing up during this timeframe and also provide an explanation for their own rationale in choosing where to live and work currently as they enter young adulthood.
This thesis research produces four major findings: 1) Young Stocktonians grew up to believe that educational attainment was the primary way towards achieving upward mobility. 2) Most Stocktonians who are currently in college settings expressed hesitation about returning to Stockton, mostly concerning their career plans and the opportunities the city provides. Still, many of them shared some desire to return to Stockton and “give back.” 3) Most young Stocktonians with a college education care about issues in the community like poverty, homelessness, violence, and education and they either feel invested in those issues, hopeful for the city’s future, or are inspired by positive change. 4) Most young Stocktonians with a college education were either inspired by city-wide revitalization efforts or were empowered by organizing experiences and ethnic studies education that propelled them to feel invested in their hometown of Stockton.

**Limitations**

Because there is hardly any research on the concept of ‘boomerangs’ or how boomerangs peoples impact their hometowns, my thesis lays emerging foundation for evaluating this subgroup of people in the neighborhood gentrification and revitalization literature. However, this study has some considerable limitations. First, I observed a small sample size (n = 12) over a small period of time. While it’s true that boomerangs make up a small percentage of Stocktonians, as only 17 percent of Stocktonians possess a Bachelor’s degree, the Stockton Boomerangs Facebook group is currently made up of 167 members. But there are more Stocktonians currently enrolled in or aspiring to matriculate into colleges and universities across the country, so I expect the number of Stockton boomerangs to increase. Despite the small sample size, due to the fact that I studied a group that makes up a small percentage of Stockton, I still achieved a meaningful and representative sample of boomerangs. Additionally, this research could benefit from studying boomerangs over the age of 30, who have already returned and established themselves and their careers in Stockton, to trace how boomerangs reintegrate into the community once they finish their collegiate education and how they
perceive their return benefits or impacts the community. Further research could also consider conducting longitudinal studies that track and report participant experiences and allow for sociologists to view the impact across time, or also consider controlled experiments to increase internal and external validity.

Another notable limitation is that while I have distinguished boomerangs from archetypical gentrifiers, by only observing the perspectives of boomerangs ages 18-26, this study is unable to demonstrate the holistic effect boomerangs have on their low-income hometown neighborhoods once they return. A few of my participants speculated that recent increases in rents and reports of evictions in the city are potential signs of gentrification taking place. Several of the participants in this study have discussed their concerns that Stockton may become gentrified in the upcoming years. Much of their concerns stems from the risks low-income residents face regarding displacement, a community whom most of the participants feel an affinity towards. Some even contemplate their role in possibly contributing to gentrification. While boomerangs are distinct from gentrifiers, currently, it is implausible to claim whether they similarly impact housing prices and displacement. It should be noted that like the exemplary boomerangs I have discussed earlier in the paper, many young Stocktonians who return with a college education tend to take on professional careers and are highly involved in civic engagement. They possess the social and educational capital necessary to directly participate in and influence local policies, social programs, and investments, such as those that affect businesses, land use, and the housing stock. What this study does not show is whether boomerangs across all age cohorts use their civic platforms to work in favor of gentrification or against it. Considering the perspectives of the cohort I study, the majority expressed the stance to work against gentrification and instead work towards the improved living conditions of Stockton’s low-income residents.
The Future of Stockton

C. Wright Mills developed the idea of the sociological imagination, which helps us understand the relationship between the self and the larger society. Using this as a framework, backed by José Rizal’s lesson, learning individual histories and experiences of Stocktonians allows us to understand the history of Stockton. Many of my participants intuitively referred to this concept, especially when relating to the empowerment they feel by and through their community due to their educational attainment and background experiences in ethnic studies through high school, college and organizing spaces. By way of collecting these stories, this project becomes a collection of narratives of the people who make Stockton the most diverse city in the United States, as reported by U.S. News and World Report in January of 2020 (Galvin). The participants in this research provide personal stories and reveal what it was like as youth of color growing up in a city with a complex set of issues, such as a complicated history of political and residential racism, urban renewal and the displacement of ethnic communities, economic decline including a period of bankruptcy, extreme levels of community violence, policing that manifests into a school-to-prison nexus, a progressive Black millennial elected into major office, and a shift in national media coverage of the city.

These responses provide insight on the future of Stockton. My respondents are in their 20s, have college educations and are mostly service-oriented towards their communities in Stockton. Known as boomerangs, when this cohort decides to return back to Stockton, they will likely assume roles as organizers, teachers, professors, nonprofit leaders, parents, business owners, mentors, politicians, and other community leaders. The majority of this sample leans towards returning to Stockton, providing hope that the “brain drain” potentially will be reversed and even more young people who leave the city to get educations return.
Finally, this thesis ruminates on this important question: How will Stockton move forward when this generation of passionate advocates move back? Stockton is at a turning point where the next 10 to 20 years can dramatically shift its trajectory and how it will look in the future. The key considerations for boomerangs and Stocktonians going forward is how we can collectively work towards efforts of social justice, equity and liberation without sacrificing our ideals, our authenticity and the visions for the community our ancestors rooted. Perhaps for once, Stockton’s future is very, very bright.
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