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Everyday Identity Work at an Asian Pacific AIDS Organization

Introduction

In the words of sociologist W. I. Thomas, "What is perceived as real becomes real in its consequences." A power dimension, however, must be added to this statement for fuller understanding of how some human groups are better equipped to realize their ideas and impose their sense of world order on others with less power to negotiate. This paper incorporates a critical approach to the study of race construction and/or reification. I apply Michael Burawoy’s proposed “extended case method” to my ethnographic data in order to explore the link between everyday “identity work” at an Asian Pacific AIDS organization and the larger racialized and gendered political economy. Thus, this paper addresses a critical concern of reifying race in racial politics as well as in studies of race and racism, or race relations. For such purpose, the concept of “racial formation” as proposed by Michael Omi and Howard Winant is most helpful in framing this issue. Using data from my participation-observation, I explore how everyday “identity work” at an Asian Pacific AIDS organization can reify race. This concept of racial “identity work” draws a parallel between works of social scientists and social service providers in reifying and/or deconstructing “race.” Thus, I would also argue that the attempt to separate academic work of “constructing” race from the political sphere is ideological. “Identity work” whether by academics or social service providers consists of racial projects that, for the most part, reinforce the racial (as well as gender, class, and sexuality) order in which we all partake.

In what is now the United States, a racialization project resulted from the differentiation Christian European colonists made as they encountered the non-European stocks of heathens. Different racial categories for social groups emerged and later modified as these non-European “Others” competed or posed threats to the material and symbolic resources that “American” settlers had entitled as their destiny in this
westward expansion to civilize the wild frontier. The notion of a “white race” emerged along with creations of nonwhite races as opposites. This necessary distinction between whites and nonwhites became more sophisticated as it transformed into a system of hierarchical distinction that is based on a combination of phenotypic features, particularly skin color, and, in more subtlety, class and gender/sexual positionings (Takaki 1979; Almaguer 1994). This system that apparently uses physical criteria to socially define and allocate people to different positions in society came to be known as racism (van den Berghe 1978). This historical process from a notion of differences to a system that continues to make differences is an example of how a practical as well as ideologically-based distinction that was perceived by people in power could be realized into a continuous system of processes of not only making distinctions but also ensuring differences. These processes are what Omi and Winant (1994) would refer to as “racial projects.”

In academia, this process of issuing differences disguised itself as studies on race relations. According to Prager (1982) in “American Racial Ideology as Collective Representation,” the original racist framework of presupposing differences between groups and homogeneity within groups remains unquestioned while more sophisticated explanations are given to reify the project of racialization. What is seen here is not just the manifestation of racism in the social science but how racism is also constituted in the production of knowledge. For scholars interested in race and ethnic relations, the question of the role of the researcher in reifying race and ethnicity often incapacitates them from such works and derailed researchers from the more significant focus—the processes of racism. In other words, one must not forget that race reification is the result of responding to a larger system of “racism.” “Race” must be seen in the context of processes that facilitate its construction and of actors who are conscious or not conscious of its political consequences.

As indicated before, the result in academic pursuit of “scientific knowledge” on race relations is a fetishizing of racial differences. Of course, there are few examples of exceptional works that try to move beyond the original autonomous race paradigm and suggest an interlocking systems of oppression, exploitation, and domination based on gender, class, sexuality, etc., not just race (Collins 1990; Lather 1991). For the most part, works on racial relations reify race by imposing the researcher’s definition of race or emphasizing the subject’s understanding of race after the researcher has problematized race to the researched. Although the methods proposed are different, what is in common in both traditions is exploring the effects of racism. Put it another way, their focuses are on race rather than racism. Consequently, both traditions are engaged in racial projects.

Until the researcher consciously admits to be engaging in a racial project, the political consequences of such work of theorizing are glossed over and overshadowed by the celebration of contributing to the scientific enterprise of producing truths. Both micro and macro traditions often neglect the political nature of their research and in effect reify race by producing works that would generate more works to arrive at the best definition/understanding of race. Both traditions often compete to present
site race” emerged as a binary distinction being formed into a system of phenotypic features, sexual positioning, and physical criteria to come to be known as the notion of difference. A practical example in power confounding distinctions between races by social construction (1994) would be studies on race as a multi-dimensional and more sophisticated concept is seen here. Race, as a race and ethnicity often treated more significantly, race reification, must be seen in the ways that are conscious of the role of knowledge.”

A few examples of race paradigms and domination (1991). For the researcher’s definition, the researcher has defined are different. Put it another way, traditions are overshadowed truths. Both their research and works arrive at compete to present a “truer truth,” as the macro would critique the micro on relativism and the micro would critique the macro on abstracting reality. In sum, by engaging in a contest to find truths and to argue for the best tools to be used, both macro and micro traditions overlook their roles in the hegemonic process that depoliticizes scientific inquiries on race as political, racial projects. This oversight, in effect, reifies race rather than giving insights into the analytically distinct macro and micro processes of racism.

Method

Given this concern about the reification of race, a critical ethnography that requires a power-reflexive approach on the very issue of constructing race can shed insights into the micro-processes of race construction in the context of a larger racialized social structure by not just lay people but also social scientists, the legitimate agent of knowledge production. This essay examines the social construction of race by staff and volunteers of an Asian Pacific AIDS organization and includes a discussion of how their presence and self-consciousness as a researcher and volunteer effect my findings and analysis.

This analysis is one level removed from the original research of describing the data and summarizing findings of possible or deemed significant theoretical insights. I consider this a second-level analysis in that a power dimension is added to the original data analysis. Thus, I will examine the power relationship between myself—the researcher—and the research subjects that effects the recording of certain information as data. This power-reflexive approach requires that background information about the researcher and not just about the researched be discussed in the data analysis. First, though, I shall give some background about the Asian Pacific AIDS organization.

APAIT: History, Organization, People

The Racial Funding Politics of Social Services

In my first visit to the Asian Pacific AIDS Intervention Team (APAIT), I asked the staff how was it that they came together to have this “API (Asian and Pacific Islander)” program.” One of the staff responded that “white people in power could not understand us otherwise.” He motioned with his hands as if trying to grasp something amorphous above us and continued, “This is the only way they know how to see us.” Underlying this statement of annoyance in regard to white ignorance is a critical acknowledgment of the need for APAIT staff to work within the confines imposed by “white people in power” in order to deliver AIDS services to the “underserved API population.”

APAIT’s Volunteer Training and Orientation Manual, dated October 29, 1994, contains an article by Deborah A. Lee and Kevin Fong that originally appeared in the
SIECUS Report in February/March 1990 and recounted how mainstream American society reacted to the issue of AIDS and people of API heritage (Lee and Fong 1990). In one of the first public AIDS conferences, held in 1983 in San Francisco at the University of California Medical Center, an epidemiologist stated that Asians were believed to be immune to the deadly virus. At the time, there were no reported cases of AIDS among either Asian (or Italian) men, and the medical community was hopeful that studying this group would reveal important clues about the mysterious disease. Perhaps fueled by myths, stereotypes, and misinformation about Asian male immunity and clean lifestyles (free of drug and alcohol abuse), there was a substantial increase in personals ads between 1982 and 1984 soliciting Asian men for relationships; Asian men may have also endangered themselves because of the popular opinion that they were immune to AIDS.

Three weeks after the AIDS conference in San Francisco, the first case of AIDS in an Asian person was diagnosed in California. From 1983 to 1987, statistics were kept only for white, blacks, Hispanics, and “Others” (lumping together Asian and Pacific Islanders, Native Americans, etc.). No national record of Asian and Pacific Islander AIDS cases existed until 1988. The “Asian/Pacific Islander” category—as well as the separate category for Native Americans—came about because of nationwide advocacy efforts by many different groups. Lee and Fong’s article further provided statistics of the increasing rate of AIDS in the API population. Statistics were possible because data available when the API population became a separate category from the “Others” category. As one speaker at the Los Angeles County Women and HIV Conference puts it, to be identified as a “target population” means receiving direct funding allocation from the government.

APAIT is an API-staffed organization that was funded in 1991 to specifically provide AIDS intervention and prevention services to the “API community.” Since that time, it has gone through tremendous expansion (thanks to statistics to prove needs) from a strictly volunteer-run program in a gay API organization to a primarily government-funded organization. Coming out of the gay API movement, APAIT originally served only the API gay community. However, activists began to realize that “the problem was larger than any could imagine. They needed to educate the Asian community at large because no one was doing it. None of the mainstream agencies were bringing resources to the Asian community because the number was so low. And, the number was so low because people were not getting tested. It was a Catch-22.”

There was also a concern that the “Western models” of AIDS education, support, and outreach were “culturally inappropriate” and therefore ineffective for prevention and intervention work in the API community. Consequently, APAIT became the pioneering agency to meet the needs of the API community. Because it is the first API AIDS agency of its kind and because there were no “culturally sensitive” models available, the staff have had to learn through trial and error what will work for their clients and develop “culturally sensitive programs.” As staff members Nathan and George see it: “It’s better to do something, even if you make a mistake, than nothing at all because there is nothing out there now.” Thus, the work that the staff plan out is based on their best calculation (their knowledge about the target population) and
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Specifically provide needs) from any governmental institutions served as “the problem community” at the number.

Organization, support, for prevention, the importance of it is the first. “Culturally Insensitive” models work for their framework. Nathan and e staff plan out the population and

will be evaluated and modified after implementation. In this process of trial and error and the sharing of information and experiences by staff, the work for specific outreach activity is modified and standardized. As a result, the staff become “experts” in their pioneering work because it does not rely on mainstream models.

Setting themselves in opposition to “Western models” that are “culturally insensitive,” APAIT members in effect reinforce the boundary between themselves and the ignorant or insensitive “white people in power.” Yet, within the API group, the motto of “cultural sensitivity” helps delineate the different ethnic, gender, and sexually- oriented groups. Hence, new programs are being created to provide particular needs for particular groups. These programs, however, are not born out of thin air. They are the result of staff recognition of needs within a particular community and staff advocacy for a specified program to meet those needs. A process of grant-writing to justify funding begins, and a new program is born when funding institutions approve the grant. During the time in which I visited, APAIT was very successful in implementing new programs to serve a “larger arena” of APIs.

Organizational Growth and a Need to Stabilize

In light of staff diversity and continuous growth in programs, APAIT staff admitted being “overwhelmed” and “confused” about the “overall process” of the “hectic” environment. Probably because of APAIT’s origin in opposition to “white” responses, APAIT staff find themselves constantly in a “reactive” or “crisis” mode. They only have enough time to respond to practical issues as they arise and do not have the luxury of planning far ahead. Because of the rapid change within the organization, efforts have been undertaken to make it “more established.” Based on evaluation by staff and clients of “what works and what doesn’t,” the staff began a process of standardizing APAIT’s program activities. Also, “mid-level” positions were created to better coordinate programs. This attempt to stabilize the “chaos” is an organizational necessity. However, I will show later that a fixation on normalizing can impede the progressive objectives of its radical members. As a practical organizational concern, the “grounding” effort in the midst of chaotic possibilities entrenches the staff to define and therefore limit what should be considered “API AIDS work.” In addition, the bureaucratization of APAIT changes the organization structurally, from a “family atmosphere” of peer support to a “more impersonal” bureaucratic organizational pyramid.

The People Involved with APAIT

All APAIT staff are of API descent and are college educated. The majority (at least 80 percent) of staff are in their mid-twenties to early-thirties. For volunteers, the age range is wider, from high-school age to forty-something. The racial composition is also not strictly API. Two members are Caucasian while the rest are of API descent. In both groups of staff and volunteers, the majority of the people are gay men. There are fewer women than men, and their sexual orientations range from lesbian to bisexual to
straight. All the people I met and talked to have a vested interest in the “empowerment of the API community.” They became involved with APAIT through friends who are staff or volunteers with APAIT.

I became involved with APAIT out of academic and personal interest and convenience. I was taking an ethnography class and needed a site for my fieldwork. Given my intellectual interest in identity issues because of my Vietnamese ethnicity, past involvement with the API social service community, and curiosity about my possible lesbian inclination, APAIT was a promising site for my exploration of sexual, ethnic, and racial identities.

Politically, I was hoping to contribute something to the API social service community. Because of my past network in the API social service community, I was able to ask a former coworker (who was then director of APAIT’s counseling unit) if I could research his organization. After many exchanges with him and the main director, I was granted permission to do participation-observation at APAIT in the hope that I could lend an “outsider’s perspective” to the organization that was “growing too fast” for its members. The documentation of the staff and organizational changes sounded beneficial to the overwhelmed members.14

Although never articulated explicitly, another reason for granting me entrée was that I seemed to be on APAIT’s side by showing my interest in working to “empower the Asian American community.” In many conversations with members, I exhibited knowledge and understanding of the problems API social service providers face, which along with my API status facilitated my connection to the staff.

Based on my past work experience, I was aware of a perception in the social service community about academic researchers going into the community to “suck out information” and never giving back anything. In general, researchers are perceived as aloof and part of the elite who are indifferent to the struggle of disenfranchised communities. They are the evaluators sent by the government to enforce administrative guidelines that are irrelevant to the work of “front-line staff.” Thus, I was very conscious of how that perception might hinder me from establishing trust with the staff. My apprehension that the staff would be suspicious of my role was confirmed in my first visit.

Ron . . . joked about me being a spy from the government. . . . I told Ron that I would die before becoming a spy, or be a pawn for the government. . . . Someone half seriously and half jokingly asked if I wanted to check up on them to see if they were doing their jobs.15

My irregular visits, due to a tight school schedule, also did not help to assure the staff of my reliability and therefore my trustworthiness. I found myself continuously trying to establish and reestablish connection with the staff. Consequently, I became very sensitive to the issue of “connecting” or “establishing commonalities” in social interactions among staff and volunteers. This special attention to the process of connecting became one of my ethnographic focuses, even though suspicion faded once I became more integrated into APAIT as a volunteer. In retrospect, my profile fit well into the general profile of staff and volunteers.
The Significance of API Identity Work

"Identity work" refers to the attempt to connect with people by evoking certain categorical identities such as race, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation. As indicated earlier, in my efforts to connect and establish rapport with APAIT members, I noticed a common pattern of everyday interaction between people. In an effort to communicate and establish rapport, people try to discover shared commonalities to further their understanding of each other. By knowing that they share similar experiences, they infer that they might share similar views of such experiences and therefore some aspects of life, thus creating a bond. When people evoke similarities of race, ethnicity, or sexual orientation, the bond is not based on a particular shared incident but rather on a host of assumed events that they might have shared. Such assumptions are commonplace in the United States because its history has been and continues to be organized around race, ethnicity, class, and sexuality. For example, bonding by race is more discursive and at the same time more deeply rooted than bonding because of a particular experience. Even when people do not share all the experiences that are indirectly evoked, an imaginary community is nevertheless conjured and the actors become bounded in this process called "identity work."

In educating about AIDS, the staff and volunteers use this method (connecting based on race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality) to evoke a common community for themselves and the audience. This connection with the audience smoothly lays in the message that AIDS does affect their shared "community."

Because AIDS is still a relatively new issue for many Asian ethnic groups, the Asian connection is the first practical step before addressing all the different ethnic groups. As illustrated in a meeting among AIDS service providers, a Vietnamese AIDS educator commented that because the people don't see [AIDS in their community] they don't think it affects them. What [he] would like to see happening is a panel of API with HIV broadcast by the ethnic media so that the people [can identify with Asian faces and therefore] can see AIDS does affect their community.

Here, the speaker did not focus on a specific ethnic panel but an API panel. His assumption was that people of API descent will make connection with other Asian-looking people. Racial connection will suffice and ethnic connection may help but is not necessary. In the case of targeting the API community, having a specific ethnic panel would alienate some audience members who were not of that ethnicity.

Establishing Racial Commonality in Delivering API AIDS Services

According to The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language (1981), “to identify” is to associate or affiliate oneself closely with a person or group; to ascertain the origin, nature, or definitive characteristics of someone or something; or to equate and determine as identical. The signaling of a common categorical identity (racial, gay,
Defining “API Problems” and Reinforcing Stereotypes in Doing AIDS Work

In an organization where the majority of the people are Japanese American and Pilipino American gay men (despite the growing ethnic and sexual diversity), how do people who do not share these dominant characteristics connect? “Doing API identity” is practical in the concerted effort to fight AIDS. The imposed “API” category that brings together a diverse group of people in this “expanding” and “confused” environment, the only commonality among people of different political and cultural persuasions.

In rejecting “Western models” that are not culturally relevant, the staff reassert certain stereotypes about people of Asian descent. For example, sand-therapy is a model one APAIL staff member preferred over the formal group therapy because it was an effective way for Asians to express themselves nonverbally since Asians “don’t want to talk. It’s very hard because we don’t want to deal with our feelings so a formal support group may not be what they want.” Thus, she believed sand playing may be a better forum for self-expression.

Other assertions I witnessed were that “Asians usually don’t talk about drugs or sex”; Asians are “polite on the outside because it is a typical Asian thing to do”; sex-taboos are a common value among Asian communities; Asians care about stigma and saving face; and HIV+ Asians fear shaming the family and do not come out as being HIV+ or being gay. These assertions distinguish the problems that APIs face from problems of other racial groups, help to re-signify the common experiences of APIs, and reinforce the understanding of why there is a need for a special program specifically for APIs.

In other instances, assertions such as “Asians like to gather over a meal” or “Asians are into group [kinds of] things” are pass-on “knowledge and experience”
to help staff plan activities that would be appropriate and effective to their population clientele.

Similar to defining problems within the “API” community, staff also point to problems outside the community. Receiving little funding to serve the diverse API community is the result of a racist government and a culturally insensitive funding bureaucracy. One problem that the staff highlight is the “racist assumption” that “Asians are not affected by [AIDS].” This common assumption is reinforced by Asian invisibility in mainstream AIDS talk and the low number from the epidemiology data. Staff as well as some experienced volunteers explain that the low numbers are because people do not know about available HIV-test sites and the importance of getting tested. The low statistics on APIs unfortunately result in little or no funding for APAIT. This, in turn, hinders the necessary outreach to advocate HIV-testing for people who are involved in “risky behavior.”

Adding up these challenges from within and outside the API community, the staff have a catch-22 dilemma to explain their limited situation: Asians have this “defensive thinking that it’s people over there” and until they see Asian faces in AIDS/HIV discussions, “they don’t think it affects them” and would not take precautions such as safer-sex practices and HIV testing. Even with the increasing number of HIV+ API clients who have been tested, APAIT staff still have to struggle to get new faces “out there” for county public hearings and local, state, and national conferences. Cultural barriers limit their ability to have HIV+ API speakers.

The fear of being alienated by one’s family and community is illustrated by a Thai woman who would only speak at conferences not in the Thai community. “Clients don’t want to go into an API setting because they don’t want to increase their chances of meeting someone they know.” Hence, “cultural issues” hinder them from freely adopting “Western models” or playing the rules of statistics advocacy. An activist since day one of the API AIDS movement explains at an AIDS conference workshop on API and AIDS that

in order to talk about services, we need to talk about politics, and before we can talk about politics, we need to talk about cultural values. If we in the API community cannot admit the existence of GLB [gays, lesbians, bisexuals], drug users, etc., we cannot deal with the issues of AIDS. Many APIs are reluctant to seek services because they perceive the mainstream agencies won’t understand and the API agency will judge them... Asians are into group things and care about stigma and saving-face.

The problem with HIV is that people have this defensive thinking that “it’s people over there.” So, as this activist saw it, one preventive approach is to have someone whom the community respects talk about AIDS and education the community in an effort to foster a change of thinking.

The examples above show the political implication of staff’s generalizations and explanations of the challenges in the API community. In talking with other APIs, they inevitably engage in API identity work to make connection. This work creates and evokes a common experience that inadvertently define “API problems.” In other
words, identity work stressing commonalities would unite people with common obstacles to advance their common interests. By confirming their values and beliefs, their understanding of their circumstances, and the challenges they must face together, the diverse staff and volunteers could join hands under the “API banner” to provide API AIDS services. As Yen Le Espiritu (1992) argued in Asian American Panethnicity, AIDS caregivers have united to construct and reinforce this Asian and Pacific Islander identity because it is politically and, consequently, economically advantageous to do so.

Recognizing the Importance of API Identity Work

How APAIT organizes itself is based on the politics involved in funding minority groups. Because of the small number of reported AIDS cases for Asian ethnic groups, Asian minority groups banded together for political visibility, voice, and representation.

People involved with APAIT are very much aware of the issue of representation. To have outsiders (non-Asians) see an Asian face is important in the AIDS circle because APIs are usually underrepresented or invisible. To have an Asian workshop or a representative in mainstream organizations and meetings is crucial given the history of marginalization. It is usually understood by outsiders that this Asian-looking person will represent the interests of APIs. On the other hand, among insiders (Asians) the issue of representation focuses more on the specific ethnic groups. The dominance of certain Asian ethnic group undermines the idea of a full spectrum of Asian ethnicities. For example, one member described an API workshop at a Washington, D.C., conference as “being too Japanese” as opposed to being “API.”

APAIT, as an HIV/AIDS organization that specifically serves the Asian and Pacific Islander population, inherits the problems of diversity within the API community. As an organization that has taken on the task of doing HIV/AIDS services to the API diverse population, APAIT has assumed the role of bridging the gap between the API community and the larger society, positioning itself as the API representative. “To be out there” is important in terms of educating the larger society (especially with regard to funding services) about the similar cultural challenges of people of Asian and Pacific Islander descent. APAIT staff have also stressed differences in an attempt to obtain funding for different API groups. The expanding programs, such as the new “South Asian” program, reflect this move to include more API groups.

Language barrier is another reason and justification for more funding in order to hire staff who can serve as interpreters to the monolingual APIs. The staff for these new positions need to be culturally sensitive as well as linguistically proficient.

APAIT also acts as a bridge between the diverse ethnic communities by drawing out similarities to connect and coalesce. Differences are recognized and acknowledged, but only to validate each other’s uniqueness. Diversity is usually not the focus in coalition building. It is only used as an argument for more funding to serve the linguistically and culturally different API communities. Given APAIT’s role, the
The creation and maintenance of the uniqueness of being API and the hypotheses of the "API problems" are negotiated and reaffirmed every day in interactions between actors. In speaking with one of the staff, I realized that as another API person, I was expected to affirm what was said about APIs and that not doing so would be a breach of our API connection:

David began to explain that Asians with HIV or AIDS would rather go to the mainstream organization because they are afraid they may run the risk of running into someone they know in the Asian community. It's this whole notion of saving face, he said. [I wanted to make sure] I knew what he meant by "saving face" but I felt that [the explanation should be self-evident and should not require] me to ask David to spell it out for me. . . . [I realized later that what made me hesitant to ask was] this assumed bond and expected knowledge background that [David and I] had created at the beginning based on our common past—we were employed under the same agency although in very different lines of work.

Our "same agency" was an Asian Pacific drug prevention and intervention organization where both David and I were exposed to "the cultural barriers" for APIs. The issue of saving face is not new to us, and for me to ask David what he meant by "saving face" would have been a breach to our bond and connection as APIs.

The practical everyday work of connecting by race can be extended beyond analysis of the immediate situation. The larger racial funding system is behind the importance of doing API identity work, and the actors are politically conscious of their roles in reifying race and empowering the API community.

**Negotiating "Relevant" Issues and Forging a Common Agenda**

Occasionally, politically conscious actors challenge the popular meanings of "Asian" by raising issues of differences, but in doing so they do not intend to undermine the agenda of coalition building that takes precedence over issues of differences.

**Challenging Sameness of APIs**

In AIDS work, the lumping together of people with diverse cultures and languages has created programs and organizations like APTAT that exist on such diversity and constructed "sameness." Beyond the API labeling, most people identify themselves more specifically in terms of ethnicity and/or cultural upbringing. Yet the label has served as a point of rally and mobilization to demand representation and "API
visibility” in the mainstream discourse. The following is an example of how the notion of sameness of APIs is challenged.

In an exercise to sensitize social service providers to the issues of API lesbian/gay/bisexual youth, a participant was asked to arrange people in a line from “Least Asian” to “Most Asian.” The person having to do the lineup became apologetic in the process. He explained that he arranged people based on his stereotypes of the “typical Asian.” When the facilitator asked how the other participants felt being where they were in the line, they said that they “did not mind” too much the position they were placed in because “we’re all the same.” Moreover, the person who arranged the lineup said:

If it were up to him, he would arrange us in a circle because we are all the same. I wanted to play devil’s advocate and asked him what he meant by the same. As soon as I asked, I realized I was disrupting the cohesive bond of the group. He told me that he didn’t think we were all the same but that, “you know, we are all API.” I shook my head to indicate I did not understand what he meant. He told me that he did not know how to explain this and said it but that we are all Asian and therefore are similar. [It seems that the rubric “Asian” is what we orient our thoughts and actions to when we think of ourselves in the U.S. racial dimension.] I thought I saw others nodding their heads as he turned to them to reconfirm this sameness that we supposedly share and understand. I felt I was becoming a troublemaker and decided to drop it by saying okay. He again apologized to people for having placed them as he did. A different man came and shook his hand to say it’s okay.

The illustration here demonstrates the idea of the power of language to bond people. Just by evoking the word “Asian,” the participants perceived “sameness” among a culturally diverse group of individuals. My challenge to the notion of being the “same” temporarily disrupted the group’s assumed cohesiveness. In building a movement or in raising consciousness, evoking a group identity is a crucial step in rallying people to action. We focus on our similar experiences of being oppressed so that we can unite and fight against the powers that be. Thus, my questioning of our sameness undermines this effort of coalition building.

For purposes of coalition building, we stress the similar fate of being categorized together. We seek cultural similarities. Eating rice, having taboos about sex, and not being comfortable with self-expressions are examples of how the staff established a link between different groups. Fundamental to this work is that we begin to identify ourselves as “Asian,” “API,” or “Asian American.” In this process, we position ourselves and bond with each other around these related labels. Those who challenge this notion of sameness are seen as making trouble and disrupting the cohesiveness of the group.

More Than “A Clash of Styles”: Constructive vs. Deconstructive Politics

Deconstructive politics stresses differences, which are seen as inherent in group politics. To empower the marginalized, disenfranchised, and stigmatized, differences in opinions and experiences must be heard. In this sense, deconstructive politics unites people based on differences rather than on commonalities. It challenges the common
method of forging a consensus through seeking commonalities. According to Ron, it takes things apart before putting them together. It assumes the traditional ways of doing things as inherently biased towards reinforcing the dominant power structure and shutting down dissenting voices. Thus, deconstructive politics stresses differences as a way of challenging the status quo.

The following is an illustration of the different perspectives and styles (constructive vs. deconstructive) of the staff as played out at a volunteer training meeting:

[We] started half an hour late and Miyeong did not want the volunteers to have to stay longer than what was scheduled. Nathan was not as time-oriented and was more concerned with the process—what the volunteers were getting out of this discussion and how they feel about the process. So, I saw Miyeong’s and Nathan’s styles clashed. Nathan was outspoken about what he saw and felt. Miyeong seemed not to want to display their contrasting views in front of the volunteers. . . . After the role-play, we went around the room to ask how people felt. Again, Miyeong and Nathan seemed to clash over how they wanted to facilitate the meeting. Nathan demonstrated that he felt he was being silenced by Miyeong. “I want to wrap this up so I can get in my [say],” Nathan said to Miyeong when he felt she was shutting him out of the conversation. . . . There was another finer point that I can’t remember, but Miyeong thought it was going to go off on a tangent and tried to steer the discussion elsewhere by saying, “I thought we were going to wrap this up.” Nathan responded that if this was going to be an evaluation and we were going to go in a circle to do this, we need to discuss things that arise and include everyone in the circle. Earlier, he also showed that he was upset at how Miyeong (and Trang) had wanted to move the agenda along and did not fully address his suggestion on the structure of the training. . . . When it was Nathan’s turn, he expressed that he wanted more interaction and he thought the outline and note-taking that Miyeong was doing hindered the dynamic of the group. Everyone was looking at the notepad instead of each other. He wanted to do away with the note-taking. He suggested that the information on the different programs could be given out later on. He also thought that the information might be overwhelming for the volunteers. He wanted things to be informal, and he felt Miyeong’s note-taking made the atmosphere too much like a classroom. Miyeong [simply] said that they were wasting precious time evaluating the structure and they needed to move along. Nathan demonstrated this malcontent by talking to George loudly about taking things apart to put them back together, and that was not done here. Miyeong did not allow the time for that but moved on with the discussion.

Nathan’s style of taking things apart and putting them back together was not Miyeong’s style. She, in fact, stated clearly that she had always done things the same way and that it had worked for her. For Nathan to suggest new ways was in a sense undermining Miyeong’s newly established method. In an organization where things are changing rapidly, establishing, normalizing, and standardizing activities and methodologies are necessary and practical solutions. Deconstructive politics, however, is not about approaching the majority’s consensus when it might mean negating dissenting voices. Its intent is processing through differences to arrive at a newfound identity and understanding (Elbaz 1992). Given the different strategies and the present situation at APAIT, the normative praxis of building commonality takes
precedence over the more radical deconstructive practice of queer politics as well as “third world” politics.  

Thus, there are two different aspects into this phenomenon of identity work. One aspect focuses on unity based on constructed common characteristics; the other follows the line of deconstructive politics that focuses on differences and challenges the normative praxis (Gamson 1991; Elbaz 1992). The above example shows how normative praxis can have political impact in dismissing dissenting voices. I observed the incident, at the start, as “a clash in styles.” Upon reconsidering the politics of some of the queer API staff and volunteers, however, I realized that this “embarrassing” moment was a rare moment in which dissenting voices were heard. Unfortunately, it was dismissed in the larger effort to move along the agenda of “doing API AIDS work.”

Undervisibility of Marginalized Issues in API AIDS Prevention Work

Given the funding structure that categorizes people into “high risk” groups, APAlT AIDS services is comprised of programs targeting specific groups such as women and “men who have sex with men.” There is no overarching program to target all APIs, but rather a compilation of specified (ghettoized) programs that hopefully would cover as many APIs as possible. The responsibility of the coordinators for each program is to raise issues that represent their “target populations.” The following examples demonstrate how such funding structure and other situational factors limit the ability of APAlT to fully address feminist, gay, and HIV/AIDS-related issues in its AIDS prevention work.

Women and AIDS

For a long time, the story of women living with HIV was untold. Concerns related to women are often overlooked by men, the dominant decision-makers of the majority of movements and organizations. Indeed, for some women, the saying is that “women don’t get AIDS but they die from it” (The ACT UP/New York Women and AIDS Book Group 1990). In the beginning of the AIDS movement, research was done only on (white) gay and bisexual men. Little was discussed about symptoms occurring in women. This neglect in research on and the lack of education outreach to women made it difficult for women to receive early intervention services. Many women died before they ever found out about the intervention measures (The ACT UP/New York Women and AIDS Book Group 1990). It was only through women advocacy groups that research has begun to address women’s concerns.

Similarly, APAlT started out as a service to gay and bisexual men. It was only through the conscious efforts of a lesbian member to raise awareness of women’s issues that funding was requested for a Women’s Program. At that time, the larger
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society also began to acknowledge the lack of services to women so that funding allocation for women became possible.

In the early years of the AIDS movement (late 1980s to mid-1990s), the composition of many AIDS service organizations had (white) men as paid employers and employees and women as nonpaid volunteers/helpers (Patton 1990; Morales and Bok 1992). A similar structure was seen at APAIT. The Women’s Program was coordinated by a one-woman staff. Although she received help and support from other staff members, she was the only paid staff involved in this program. There was a women’s committee to help her, but it was a volunteer group. Half of this group was comprised of APAIT women staff who were volunteering their time. On the other hand, the programs geared toward “men who have sex with men” have about four and a half full-time paid staff positions. Although this may be a result of the funding system, in some way it was also a reproduction of the larger patriarchal system. The members were not immune to sexism. Given the sexist funding system and the underrepresentation of women at APAIT, efforts to include women’s issues or to raise feminist concerns were activities of feminist members. These attempts, however, may be a challenge to the male-dominated, male-centered way of running APAIT. Feminist concerns interfered with the smooth operation of building consensus by challenging the dominant (male-oriented) way of doing things. At a planning meeting for a safer-sex social event, feminist issues were raised but were dropped due to practical considerations and the praxis of building consensus and not dissension.

When we went over the HIV/AIDS IQ questions, Karla remarked that one question should be revised with the following changes: “HIV+ Mother” to “HIV+ woman” and maybe from “unborn child” to “fetus.” The question should also be reworded so that the focus is on the 75 percent chance of not transmitting instead of the 25 percent chance of the HIV+ woman transmitting to the fetus. We then got into discussing the AZT mandatory test in New York and some other technical issues. When we got back to the revised question the “unborn/newborn child” was left unchanged. I made a remark to Karla that we haven’t changed “unborn child,” and she agreed with regret. It was either a mess to change the wording and to still cover the scope that the original question had or an indication that I did not care too deeply to raise the issue of “fetus” versus “unborn child,” [because I dropped the issue. I felt like it could be a divisive issue since the pro-life and pro-choice movements have constructed the debate. Although both Karla and I decided not to raise the issue again,]... Karla’s suggestion raised our consciousness or at least mine to think of how women are portrayed in the politics of AIDS.

In another planning meeting, a staff member raised the issue of date rape in our discussion on safer-sex negotiations. This issue was dropped in the end because of the limited amount of time that the staff had to deliver the message about AIDS and thus a discussion on date rape would be “beyond [their] scope” and “pass [their] abilities” to adequately deal with the issue. It was settled that if the topic was raised by the audience, the staff could refer them to other service agencies. Their job, though, was to deal with AIDS/HIV education and AIDS/HIV alone.
Thus far, the examples demonstrate the daily negotiations of different political agendas by politically conscious actors. The strategy of building consensus overrides other efforts (e.g., raising feminist issues) that challenge or question the unity and bond of the group as well as the practical limitation of the organization. At APAIT, it is the API identity that prevails. When acts that counter this normative commonality-building praxis occur, we witness something of a breach in the interaction. The everyday practices of connecting thus have political consequences and meaning. Sometimes, the practice is a deliberate and conscious act to connect and evoke a social project to destigmatize and demarginalize oppressed groups. At other times, actors are not as aware of the political implications of their everyday praxis of building a consensus and end up reinforcing the normative identity structure. The evidence thus far supports Omi and Winant’s (1994) concept of a “racial project” and highlight Espiritu’s (1992) micro-level panethnicity processes. In an environment where there is this overarching theme to stabilize and build coalition amidst increasing diversity, the deconstructive style of identity work (focusing on differences) is a rare occasion. When explicitly employed, this style of politics is considered a problem to members of APAIT who are trying to build a coalition through sameness rather than differences.

Dissociating Gay Issues from AIDS

As an organization that tries to ground itself in doing API AIDS work, the connection with the API community is crucial. Given that the API community is either homophobic or reluctant to deal with the issue of homosexuality, APAIT staff tend to dissociate AIDS from homosexuality. This is not an easy task given the intertwining roads of the gay/lesbian movement and the AIDS movement (Elbaz 1992; Patton 1990).

It was the gay community that was hit hardest by AIDS. So, for any individual who considers himself gay, it is impossible not to have to deal with AIDS issues. Ron, who lost ten friends between 1993 and 1995 due to AIDS, terms it “the chronic grieving” of having to cross name after name out of one’s phone book. Historically, it was the gay/lesbian/bisexual community who took on the issue of AIDS to empower themselves and demanded the government be more responsive to this epidemic (Elbaz 1992). So, AIDS issues are not limited to gay and bisexual men but also extend to lesbians and bisexual women who have gay and bisexual men as friends (The ACT UP/New York Women and AIDS Book Group 1990). Moreover, it was the rise of the queer movement that gave the AIDS movement its edge. The gay model of “coming out” was used to talk about the individual process of destigmatization by “coming out HIV+.” The original movement was to empower individuals through education. As the AIDS issue became more incorporated into mainstream discourse, activities of educating and supporting HIV-affected and HIV-infected individuals became professionalized. The goals changed from self-empowerment to services as the AIDS industry emerged (Patton 1990). As the epidemic began to take its toll in the straight community, services and involvement were no longer only gay/lesbian/bisexual although they are still predominantly queer.
Despite APAIT’s derivation in the queer API movement, the following examples show that API issues prevail over queer issues at APAIT. While API identity work is a bonding process, doing API queer identity work undermines the API unity created by evoking differences in sexual orientation among APIs. As an API organization, APAIT structure favors doing API identity work as a strategy of building commonality over doing queer identity work, which may raise divisive issues by focusing on differences of sexual orientations.

The bonding effect of doing API identity work is illustrated in the following exercise at an API GLB Youth sensitivity training workshop:

This time, Nick picked a woman to arrange us in a line from “most gay or lesbian” to “least gay/lesbian.” There was almost a unanimous wail to this grueling exercise. . . . The woman arranged us. . . . The woman explained she did it according to her stereotypes that GLB people are more liberal so that she based it on looks and how we dressed. The woman on the straight end said that she didn’t consider herself conservative but there she was at the conservative end. [She was wearing a business suit—skirt, blouse, blazer, and high heels—and make-up.] The next woman and I started focusing on the issue of being seen as conservative or liberal instead of being seen as straight. The people on the “most gay/lesbian” end said that it was okay with them (in terms of not being offended even though their placement was incorrect) [because] they knew who they were. . . . The people in the middle said that they felt more comfortable being in the middle because they are not at either extreme, [and because of their work as progressive social service providers and API advocates they] especially [did not want to be] perceived as conservative. [When another person did the lineup,] people said that it was fine for them to be seen as more gay/lesbian as long as they know who they are. . . . What was interesting about all of these comments was that no one said it was the same to be on either end of the spectrum or anywhere in between [as happened with the Asianness exercise]. There was no assumption of people with different sexual orientations having something in common. There was some implicit acknowledgment of differences. No one said that they would arrange us in a circle instead of a line because we are all sexual beings. . . . Statements such as “It’s fine with me to be seen as gay/lesbian but I am not” underscore the assumption of the marked, categorical differences in sexual identity and expression. I thought this was an interesting contrast to the most/least Asian exercise where we agreed to be all the same.

Given the staff’s conscious effort to develop a community to fight AIDS, they create or engage in activities and talks that would elicit common bonds between a group of culturally and linguistically diverse people. The API identity prevels over other identity issues such as gay/lesbian/bisexual (or gender) concerns because the latter evokes differences. Moreover, the idea of API was historically a social construction (imposed and reactive) to unite different groups to accomplish a goal. There is an implicit understanding of differences, but the focus is on unity and sameness. We are seen as the same (Oriental), and we face similar stigmas and discrimination.

In contrast, doing gay/lesbian/bisexual identity work would only unite people who identify themselves as such. API people would be divided into straight and
queer. There would be no specific common goal or agenda besides, perhaps, in creating a society that would be more open to different sexual expressions and identities. Whereas *doing API identity work* unites groups of people who were similarly discriminated against, *doing API queer identity work* only unites APIs who see themselves as not straight. The larger straight API community within the API community does not experience sexual-orientation discrimination for being straight. Being straight is the norm. Doing API queer identity work would undermine that sense of commonness. Thus, in an API organization that is sensitive to issues of sexuality, whether sexual identity will come to the forefront is situational in that it depends on the participants’ agenda. For staff, the goal at that moment might be to create unity or to expose different sexual orientations. If the audience is queer, then gay signaling would create bonds. If the audience is straight or mixed, however, gay signaling or hinting at queer sensitivity might or might not be depending on the actors’ agenda. At times, it could be disadvantageous if the audience is homophobic.

In an organization that is predominantly queer (ten out of fifteen), one would think that the queer identity would be much more visible than in a “straight setting.” However, this is not the case in staff representing the agency. At a volunteer orientation meeting, the staff asked the volunteers about their ethnicities and language abilities but did not ask about sexual orientation. It was important to know if the volunteers could speak different languages and whether they were culturally competent to deal with the specific ethnic groups. As important, I would think, would be to know how comfortable the volunteers were in regard to dealing with different sexual identified groups. The volunteers who were “gay-friendly” or “open-minded” would also be an asset to APAIT, especially since the dominant programs were to serve “men who have sex with men.” This “gay knowledge” or “gay friendliness” was, however, not asked about by the staff. Many of the volunteers who were gay did reveal their sexual orientation during lunch, a setting that was not part of APAIT’s formal work environment. After lunch, there was a more playful atmosphere because of this bond of similarity and empathy. Yet, the staff deliberately did not ask about the sexual orientation of the volunteers out of respect for their privacy. The stigma within the API community about homosexuality made management difficult between normalizing nonstraight sexuality and at the same time respecting people’s privacy. Besides sensitivity to the stigmatized label, most staff adhered to respecting individual’s personal identification. Thus, the volunteers had to come out and connect with the staff. The staff would only go halfway in identifying themselves as gay or bisexual. They did not try to probe and label the volunteers because of the ubiquitous stigma on nonstraight behavior in the API community.

In short, a fostering of an “API community” evokes certain shared values. One such shared value happens to be a taboo on homosexuality. Thus, although all the staff and volunteers are “open” or “gay-friendly,” there was still apprehension about evoking such issue in the API identity’s framework. In other words, issues of stigmatization that threaten the API coalition are subsumed by the larger, practical agenda to coalesce.
HIV Infection and AIDS

Like gay identity, "HIV-infected" identity evokes stigmas and does not connect everyone, whereas "HIV-affected" would unite everyone working at APAIT. Hence, there is an undervisibility of HIV+ identity work. Maybe the talk on the disease and its effects is scarce because the activities I observed and participated in revolved around the issue of prevention. Had I studied the Client Services unit, I might have a different take on the morbid reality of AIDS.

This lack of talk on the morbid reality of AIDS reflects my focus on prevention issues. I have no understanding of what it must mean for staff and volunteers in Client Services to deal with issues of sickness and dying. I only had a glimpse of that reality when I interviewed Ron, who told me of "chronic grieving." This is the experience of many HIV-affected gay men who continuously have to cross friends' names out of their phone books. As this treatment advocate pointed out, though, the emphasis at APAIT is on staying healthy and "living long enough for the cure." This positive outlook orientation, however, has its disadvantage in that staff from the Education and Prevention unit have little experience of sickness and dying colleagues and clients and thus do not know how to handle such a "crisis." According to Ron, the staff needs bereavement training. Since some of the staff are HIV+, the time will come when all staff must confront on a "more personal" level (with coworkers rather than just clients) the issue of dying from AIDS. According to Karla, it was hard for everyone when one of the staff got sick. They have all been trained to deal with clients and to reinforce positive aspects of living with HIV, but they have yet to handle issue of a staff member's death. APAIT is a relatively new organization that emphasizes intervention and prevention, so it has not experienced the continuous tragic loss of lives that other organizations face or the deaths that AIDS hospices handle.

Structural constraints and everyday practicalities dictate that identity work focusing on commonalities must prevail over identity work that stresses or causes differences. For the survival of the organization, the API identity work is promoted over other identity issues that might threaten the cohesiveness of the group by evoking differences. Of the different types of identity works discussed, doing API identity work prevails at APAIT.

Conclusion

In my effort to establish rapport with APAIT staff, I began to notice a dominant pattern of interaction that involved finding commonalities and building consensus among staff, volunteers, and clients. When such identification is based on categorical identities (race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation), this form of interaction fits what I defined earlier as "identity work" because it reconstructs (usually reinforces) the meanings of the evoked identity or identities.
In an organization that originated out of queer API politics, these everyday identity works have political significance in redefining the meanings of those identities. Each identity work carries with it a “political” agenda. API identity work is parallel to Omi and Winant’s (1994) “racial project” and is demonstrated in this paper as an everyday “panethnic” project. There are, as well, gay, ethnic, and gender projects that interplay with the project of pan-Asianism at APAIT every day.

Given the increasing diversity of staff and volunteers, there are constant negotiations of different political agendas or projects (ethnic, gay, feminist) in both the planning stage and the delivery of services. And, because the services are framed as AIDS services to the API community, the API political agenda comes to the forefront while queer and feminist issues are subsumed. In other words, the API identity work that stresses sameness prevails because the structure of the organization encourages it. Thus, besides the practical interactional strategy to connect that makes prevalent identity work stressing sameness, the funding system of APAIT reinforces API identity work. As APAIT expands in programs and staff, it needs to build a coalition to provide API AIDS services. For both interactional and structural reasons, API identity work prevails over other identity issues.

This prevalence of API identity work can be framed as examples of the microprocesses whereby “race” plays the “organizing principle” role of shaping daily interactions. These interactions, for the most part, reify “race.” To focus on “race,” however, is to miss the point that racism is the culprit behind these racialized interactions. Fortunately, for me, in doing ethnographic work, the field is open to more interactions than those that would fit perfectly within my hypothesized model of race reification. Identity work is not just an attempt to connect by building commonalities. There is another style of identity work that focuses on differences (deconstructive) rather than sameness.

Identity work that emphasizes differences is an interactive style of deconstructive politics. This style of identity work is rarer, however, because situational strategy to connect with others on commonalities is a practical everyday phenomenon, which most actors do not see as a normative act that reinforces the existing hegemonic order. In other words, the hegemonic racialization is constitutive of the “practical” everyday praxis of establishing commonalities. Conscious of this hegemonic effect, radical activists of APAIT focus on recognizing differences as a way of coalition building. To them, deconstructive politics is the way to challenge the normative practices that reproduce the existing social order.

The normative practice of establishing commonalities to connect with others at APAIT has political consequences in reifying the API identity. To challenge this imposed identity requires the work of politically conscious actors to renegotiate its meaning in everyday identity work. By stressing differences rather than commonalities, these politically conscious actors deconstruct the normative praxis of establishing and assuming commonalities and bring to light the political consequences of such actions.

The political implication of this finding is that the radical intentions of the actors are constrained by government-regulated objectives so long as APAIT remains a
government-defined service organization. Nonetheless, to see how work is negotiated each day by different actors with different identity projects is also to witness where issues can be raised and methods of doing API AIDS work can be renegotiated. Although room for change is limited, there is also conscious resistance every day.

As APAIT tries to stabilize itself, its open space for negotiating different political agendas is becoming narrow because the work is becoming more routinized and standardized. By applying a common identity politics instead of deconstructive politics, APAIT becomes more and more of an organization of normalizing and bureaucratizing instead of a force that challenges the process of normalization, control, and domination.

As a field researcher, being a participant-observer allows me to see the parallel racialized structures that shape my academic work and APAIT members’ AIDS work. Because of the racial funding politics, AIDS works at APAIT are racialized and everyday interpersonal interactions reinforce a common API culture. Likewise, because of the original race paradigm in studies of race relations (a racist project in that it imposed, assumed, and created racial differences), my attempt to understand group relations at APAIT becomes legitimized because I framed my concerns under the subject of race studies. Effectively, my findings further legitimize the importance of race studies by adding more insights to this topic.

Besides seeing the parallel works of scholars and social service providers, as a participant-observer I see the boundary between the academic world and the world of APAIT as blurrer than when I do pure observation. As a volunteer for APAIT, I, like other APAIT members, engage in API identity work that reifies race at that level of interaction at APAIT. As a researcher, I further reify race by recording my volunteerism into the academic world. In so doing, I add to the accumulation of knowledge about race and thus relegitimize the original racist project. Given the same effect of race reification, the two processes from the lay world and the academic world seem similar. When the distinction line between the two worlds is lifted, one can then see as ideological the constructed distinction between laypeople’s racializing and social scientists’ racializing. Participation-observation allows me to be an insider at and outsider of APAIT, but in the process of moving back and forth, I came to realize that there are not many differences between the two worlds. In fact, when this racialized process is contextualized in the larger historical process that Omi and Winant (1994) have termed “racial formation,” it becomes clear that we all engage in large- and small-scale racial projects. In other words, in studying “race,” the processes and methods we engage in to understand race must be examined in context of the larger system of racialization.

My ethnographic study of APAIT reveals the importance of employing a critical approach to studying race. The processes of racialization that make race real are the essential components in understanding both the subjective meanings of race for actors and objective results of reification or deconstruction of “race” in a racialized state.
Notes

1. I am loosely applying Stephen Pfohl’s (1994) outline of a critical approach as consisting of situating the investigated phenomenon in a historical context of power relations. The researcher must also employ a power-reflexive methodology that links power to the production of knowledge. In this case, it is to question how my own work may reinforce the status quo.

2. According to Michael Burawoy in *Ethnography Unbound* (1991), the extended case examines how the microsocial situation is shaped by external forces. It attempts to elaborate the effects of the “macro” on the “micro” and requires that the researcher specify some particular feature of the social situation that requires explanation by reference to particular forces external to itself. The examination and linking of everyday interaction to the larger social structure allow the researcher to explore the different forms of resistance to systems of domination in a postindustrial, capitalist society.

3. I adopted this term from my advisor, Robert Emerson, to initially describe the interaction of establishing commonalities (based on race, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation) and building consensus among APAIT staff and volunteers. This term took on more meaning as I continued the research. Identity work is not just signaling or establishing a categorical identity but involves negotiating on issues pertaining to the meaning of such identity/identities. There is also identity work that stresses differences rather than commonalities. I observed this from politically conscious actors who engage in deconstructive politics. This style of politics challenges actions that reproduce the normative order that activists claim is oppressive. For example, the model minority stereotype applied to APIs limits any discussion of needs and problems people within this category may face. Political activists are aware of the political consequences of such perception of a homogenous API group and thus make a conscious effort of stressing heterogeneity. Whether identity work stresses differences or similarities, the end result is politically significant. Hence, one may consider these types of identity works as “everyday identity politics.”

4. Omi and Winant (1994) define “racial formation” as the sociohistorical process by which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed, and destroyed.

5. For purpose of confidentiality, I have used pseudonyms in place of real names.

6. This conclusion is induced from my own experience in this fieldwork and deduced from the literature on critical, emancipatory works of feminists and scholars of color.

7. The term is as defined by Omi and Winant (1994) and summarized by Tomas Almaguer in *Racial Fault Lines*.

8. Besides larger institutions setting the agenda of racial categorization, David Roediger’s (1991) *The Wages of Whiteness* shows how the European working class began to take advantage of this identity.

9. These are rough estimates because APAIT is continuously expanding, which results in changes in staff size and programs.

10. Throughout this paper I use the term “Asian Pacific” or “API” as interchangeable terms with “Asian American” because the actors also use them interchangeably. The new use of “Asian Pacific,“ or for short “API,” instead of “Asian American” reflects a new thinking in the API social service community to expand their target population. For activists, it is a political tool in the racial politics of representation and a way to be more inclusive and sensitive to issues of historically underrepresented communities. Recently, these communities are the Pacific Islander communities. On the government bureaucracy side, it is convenient to throw
"Pacific Islanders" into the "Asian" category. Evidence of the imposed nature of this categorical identity is the term "Asian Pacific American" or "APA" that was also offered by activists but did not gain popular usage in the social service field.

When not quoting people, I use the term "API" to describe people who look Asian (based on popular understanding of Asiatic phenotypes) and events that are attended by Asian-looking people. Members of APAIT use "Asian" for short to mean "Asian American," a popular term that evolved out of the student movement during the late 1960s to "self-define" its community. The new term "API" or "Asian Pacific" as in the case of APAIT is a recent development and has been used to replace "Asian American" and "Asian" by people who are aware of the politics of representation.

There was a 77 percent jump in API AIDS cases between 1987 and 1988 according to the SIECUS Report. Another report that the volunteers received—"Asian and Pacific Islander AIDS Cases, Los Angeles County," with sources from the Epidemiology of AIDS in Asians and Pacific Islanders in Los Angeles, the Advanced HIV Disease Surveillance Summary, and the Los Angeles County Department of Health Services HIV Epidemiology Program—reported that during 1986-1987, the incidence of AIDS in APIs increased 63 percent while between during 1988-1989 the increase was 73 percent. As of June 30, 1994, 450 API AIDS cases were reported in Los Angeles County and 62 percent of the cases were Asian immigrants. Thirty-three of the cases were women. An average API AIDS rate from 1985 to 1993 was 40.9 percent. Among the API subgroups, the Thai population has the highest rate of 116.4 percent, followed by Samoans with 92.2 percent, Filipinos with 51.9 percent, Japanese with 40.6 percent, and Vietnamese with 35.1 percent. When I spoke with the staff, they did not seem to take the statistics as the only guide to their efforts. They often talked of underreported cases. The reasons given were that people are hiding due to the stigma and shame that the API community fosters. People were not getting tested because of ignorance and misinformation about HIV transmission.

12. A friend of the director and staff who died of AIDS "in silence" galvanized a circle of friends in an API queer organization to learn more about the issue and educate each others in the organization. They pinpointed cultural barriers as a key reason people in the API community are reluctant to talk about AIDS. They were also confronted by Eurocentric models of education and prevention that were "culturally inappropriate" for the API population.

13. Field note no. 1, interview with APAIT director.

14. In fact, I naively agreed to let the director, Dan, see my notes. He thought it might help to read over an outsider's perspectve of the organization that is in a state of flux. At the time, I thought it might be good to have Dan go over the notes in case I misinterpreted something. However, this became complicated as I found myself reassuring the staff that I would delete anything they do not want Dan to read. In addition, Dan also had asked me to not print out certain materials that are sensitive. I thus found myself in an awkward position many times trying to sort out my roles and purposes, which were not that clear to me as a novice ethnographer. Besides printing out and handing in censored notes to respect members' privacy, I excluded my preliminary assessment of my observation so that my interaction with the staff would not be affected too much by what I wrote. This effort to minimize my impact of my actions on the data was, however, a somewhat misguided investment. My very presence as an "outsider" (not staff) created feelings of anxiety and self-consciousness for me, and there was also a sense of awkwardness—if not for staff then certainly for me. I will discuss later how that impacted my focus to build trust with the staff.

15. This and subsequent extracts are taken from my field notes.
16. Karla discussed her difficulty dealing with a Korean newspaper contact person to get APAIT ads in the Korean newspaper:

She would get verbal agreement from them but would not find any ads in the papers. . . . She speculated that it might be cultural reasons: "Maybe they think it doesn't affect Koreans. They're maybe homophobic or AIDS-phobic." . . . Karla said that Doug [a Korean APAIT staff member] was helping her "to understand why the Koreans were having such a hard time with this. Culturally, they just don't think AIDS has anything to do with them. And a lot of times they would just be polite on the outside because that's just the thing to do. But, if they don't agree with it, they would just do something differently. But to your face, they'd be polite to you. That seems to be a typical Asian thing to do anyway. . . . If they had a problem with it, I wish they could just tell me instead of letting me run around in circles thinking everything is fine, and then not getting anything done. So, it's difficult." (Field note no. 5)

17. I was talking to a new South Asian staff member and, since I had little knowledge of the South Asian culture, we were trying to define what were the commonalities among Asians. This was one of the commonalities he drew up for me. (Field note no. 13)

18. Field note nos. 3–6, 9, 10, 12–14.
19. Ibid.
20. Field notes nos. 3 and 14.
21. Field note no. 12, in an API workshop at the Fourth Annual Los Angeles Conference on Women and HIV.
22. Field note no. 4, interview with Karla and Pam on the challenges they face working on API AIDS issues.
23. Field note no. 12, comment from a panelist at the Women and HIV Conference's API workshop.
24. Field note no. 4.
25. The low rate of API AIDS cases and the difficulty of finding people to "come out" and do public testimony present challenges for APAIT staff to play politics of representation in the social services arena, where significant rates and new voices and faces matter in receiving funding or not.
26. The ideas presented here are from my interview with Ron, my observation of Nathan and Miyeong's clash in work styles, and my own readings on radical politics (queer, people of color, third world). Works by Elbaz (1992) and Gason (1991) are two examples of the works I read.
27. According to Richard, a volunteer, third-world politics is another radical, liberation movement by nationalists to fight against capitalist colonialism.
28. Calhoun (1994) also discussed these two styles of identity politics in the new social movements.
29. Funding for women became available after much protest by women ACT UP members (and later men ACT UP members) as well as women in other AIDS organizations and movements.
30. At a planning meeting between staff and volunteers of the Women's Program and the program targeting "men who have sex with men," I witnessed how the female staff members dealt with a comment devaluing women's work that a male staff member made:

This is the first time they are planning a co-gender event. Hence, "Safer-Sex Social/Magnet Event," where the first is the women's version and the latter is the men's version. The staff
apparently never talked in detail of their own events so that part of the beginning session was exchanging information of what the Women’s Committee does in its Safer Sex Social and what the CHOWs [Community Health Outreach Workers, a program targeting men who have sex with men] do in their Magnet Event. There was a question to Nick on the differences between the Magnet Event and the Safer Sex Social. Nick said he was not sure of the difference between the two. Nick said that [the men’s event] is “more ornate.” Miyeong asked for him to explain what he meant by “ornate.” [The men] usually have a dance, skits, and demos. Although the women did not have a dance, the women in the group articulated that it was not much different from the magnet. One of the men said that there was more planning that goes into the Magnet Event. The women protested to say that they also put a lot of planning into their events. In fact, they not only do skits and demos, but more. Unlike the Magnet Event where the primary event is the dance (to draw in crowds) and the education is a sub-event, the Safer Sex Social integrates education into the games. Trang said that the social is usually three hours long and the format that they have used works well, so she wanted to keep it for this two-hour, co-gender event. (Field note no. 1)

The above scenario not only illustrates how the women staff often have to bring attention to the sensitive issues of and about women, but also how Trang in the end asserted the effectiveness of the Women’s Program and proposed that its format be used in the co-gender event.

31. The topic of “everyday identity politics” was something on which I originally wanted to focus the paper, but the dossier process persuaded me to “stick with identity work.” Originally, I used a social movement framework to analyze APAIT. The negotiations of various identity issues were thus seen as everyday identity politics. I had wanted to explore at APAIT what Gilbert Elbaz (1992) called “the politicality of everyday life.” This is a topic worth pursuing, especially if I bring in the data about the staff’s attempt to define professional work versus personal activism. I plan to pursue this idea after the dossier process.

32. This term is the name of the program. Again, this is an example of the sensitivity of staff not to use the stigmatized term “gay or bisexual men.”

33. In my latest visits to APAIT, I have noticed this effort to standardize and routinize activities. One of the staff, Aaron, expressed to me that the work had become more routinized and that he did not feel the excitement he once had.

References


