Moving from Complaints to Action: Oppositional Consciousness and Collective Action in a Political Community

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This article analyzes the process of youth political activism and development by drawing on ethnographic research on Asian and Pacific Islander youth activists. Young people revealed that collective action begins with a critical analysis of their lived experiences with inequalities. Their actions also involved oppositional consciousness that was nurtured in social justice-oriented community organizations. Tracking youth's successful efforts for school reform, I show how oppositional consciousness is realized and what activism looks like in practice. [youth activism, oppositional consciousness, social–educational change, Asian and Pacific Islanders]

About 40 young people gathered behind darkened windows in a neighborhood community center that opened onto a busy intersection in East Oakland. As scattered groups of Cambodian, Chinese, and Mien teenagers traded gossip, played video games on the Internet, or consumed burgers and fries from nearby fast-food joints, three youth leaders arranged chairs in a large circle and another transcribed the agenda for the upcoming meeting on an easel. Dressed in baggy jeans and white T-shirt that came down past his hips, Matt,[1] a senior at a nearby high school, called the meeting to order and then launched an icebreaker exercise, a game of charades in which the young people tried to guess what kind of electrical machine—typewriter, blender, washer, or dryer—their peers simulated with their bodies. After a few minutes, Matt shifted gears and got to the point: "The reason we are doing this workshop on hip-hop is because lots of people in our community like hip-hop, and hip-hop culture is sometimes seen negatively and the people who participate in it get stereotyped." As a break-dancer and member of a hip-hop crew that performs in shows throughout the city, Matt was familiar with images associating hip-hop culture with gangsters and violence. Sammy, another break-dancer and cofacilitator of the workshop, posed a question: "Does anyone know what criminalization means?" When there was no response, he provided a definition: "It is when a group of people or a culture is designated as criminals. It's like a stereotype, making a generalization about all people of a certain group."

The large group broke into six small circles and each was asked to role-play situations in which they themselves or others were treated unfairly or stereotyped. The small groups recorded the concerns they identified on a large piece of butcher paper taped to the wall. Educational experiences took priority on the list they generated. "Teachers look at me crazy," one student said. "Teachers are racist," four young people asserted. Others mentioned gentrification, unfair grading, short lunch periods, harassment by school security and staff, meager budgets ("schools are cheap"), tardy sweeps, unclean bathrooms ("too much bacteria"), "no teen party clubs," "truancy

officers harassing you on the streets," "teens getting high on drugs." "People think I'm a thief," one student complained. Six pointed to the problem of police harassment. Another charged that study halls are a waste of time.

In the large group discussion, the young people vented their frustration with poor teaching, scarce resources, and discriminatory policies. Their testimony mirrors the experiences of many poor, urban youth today. But such reported grievances are often discounted as knee-jerk complaints born of poverty or of individual misbehavior or both. Despite a steady decrease in youth crime and violence in the past three decades, unfair youth policing practices—evidenced in curfew laws and anti-gang measures such as California's Proposition 21—continue in force (Collins and Kearns 2001; Jeffs and Smith 1996; Males 1998). Too often the effect of these practices is to silence the poor, urban minority youth they target.

As researcher and adult mentor of teen-aged Asian and Pacific Islander participants in the organization Asian and Pacific Islander Youth Promoting Advocacy and Leadership (AYPAL),[2] I came to know many young people who insisted that their voices be heard. A panethnic community-based youth collaborative made up of first- and second-generation Cambodian, Chinese, Filipino, Korean, Laotian, Mien, Samoan, Tongan, and Vietnamese youth, ages 14 to 18 (a majority of whom come from working-class families),[3] AYPAL gathers about 200 young people to its culturally relevant organizing activities each week. The organization, established in 1998, grew out of a perceived need in the Asian and Pacific Islander community to incorporate youth leadership and community organizing into existing youth programs that offered direct services such as educational tutoring and drug and violence prevention. AYPAL is guided by three principles: (1) youth ownership, (2) community involvement, and (3) promotion of social justice. It hews to a youth organizing model that stems from the tradition of community organizing by people of color as represented in the civil rights movement of the 1960s (Edwards et al. 2003; Ginwright 2003; HoSang 2003; Omatsu 1994).

Every year, AYPAL youth decide on and lead a campaign to create concrete changes in their schools and communities. Past campaigns pressured city council members to increase programming and staff at neighborhood recreation centers, stopped the expansion of the local juvenile hall, and garnered support to put an end to deportations of immigrants convicted of minor or nonviolent crimes. This article concentrates on one such effort, what AYPAL members called the "Unfair Treatment Campaign," in which young people persuaded the superintendent of their schools to institute districtwide reform policies. The yearlong effort culminated in a televised press conference at which the superintendent addressed such issues as unfair grading policies, school police harassment, and locked bathrooms.

The field of educational anthropology has long grappled with the topic of educational inequalities. Yet little is known about young people's activism to challenge these conditions. How do young people go about creating change? What spurs them to take action? And who supports them in their efforts? In this article, I analyze a process through which young people openly identify problems in their lives and organize to resolve them through collective action. I call that process moving from complaints to action. As it unfolds, young people develop oppositional consciousness, by which I mean a critical analysis of inequalities that links their everyday experiences of injustice to a structural analysis of social inequality and to an awareness of collective forms of action. AYPAL members pointed to the critical role the organi-

zation played in their fight for social justice. I detail how AYPAL fosters, trains, and supports young people's efforts to move from complaints to action by equipping them with knowledge of community-organizing principles and strategies to enact those principles. Through the shared social change practices of the unfair treatment campaign, AYPAL members learned how collective action led to social change. My aim in chronicling their activities is to contribute to a praxis of educational social change. But before delving into an ethnographic account of young people's activism, I briefly outline my research methodology and build on the literature on youth resistance and oppositional consciousness to inform my analysis.

Research Methodology

My analysis of young people's political development in this article stems from my experience as a volunteer with and ethnographer of AYPAL for three and a half years in the early 2000s. My research evolved from my experience as an AYPAL volunteer. Initially, my involvement was personal. I was immediately drawn to this group of young Asian and Pacific Islander activists and their sophisticated display of political consciousness that was so far from my experience growing up as a 1.5 generation Korean American in Los Angeles.[4] As I got to know them better, I came to realize the significance of their efforts and the role I could play as an ethnographer in theorizing, documenting, and understanding their experiences. Thus, my ethnography can also be described as activist-research or participatory research as I shared in the actions, analysis, and reflections organized by AYPAL.[5]

There is no doubt that my similar personal background as a young Asian American immigrant who lived in a diverse working-class urban neighborhood and attended public schools increased my legitimacy in the organization. But other factors such as previous community work with AYPAL staff members, including the project director, on educational advocacy projects, and my long-term commitment to the program, facilitated my acceptance as an insider by staff members. Community organizations such as AYPAL are weary of encounters with graduate students and university researchers who demand precious staff time and then leave the group after a short period. I was introduced to youth by other staff members as a volunteer and was regarded as one. This became apparent when I started to approach youth individually for interviews, and many expressed surprise at being reminded that I was also a graduate student. To most young people, my role as a researcher was secondary and for some irrelevant: I was just another staff member.

As a volunteer (my official AYPAL title is "super volunteer"), I quickly became integrated into the everyday practices and functioning of AYPAL. On any given week, I spent at least four out of five weekdays at AYPAL meetings and at least one—sometimes both—weekend day attending AYPAL-related events such as rallies, conferences, or socials. My ethnography consists of participation in and participant-observation of many activities: I attended and led daily youth meetings; prepped AYPAL members for peer meetings and facilitated workshops; attended weekly staff meetings; spent late nights and early mornings with other adult staff members plan-ning workshops and youth meetings; attended political rallies and protests and community forums and meetings; and participated in various AYPAL social occasions such as dinners, movies, and camping trips. I took copious field notes at all AYPAL activities and events; I conducted in-depth, semistructured, one-on-one interviews

with 18 youth and eight adult staff members (the interviews were approximately 1 to 1.5 hours in length and were tape-recorded and transcribed); I conducted nine youth focus group interviews, involving approximately 70 young people; and I am relying on organizational documents including weekly staff notes and workshop write-ups for this article. In sum, over 3.5 years, I came into contact with more than 1,000 young people who participated in AYPAL activities. I developed close ties with more than 100 AYPAL youth and close friendships with adult staff members, several of whom remain confidants to this day.

From Resistance to Political Activism

In educational anthropology, the topic of youth resistance has and continues to be of central importance as it reveals how youth are traversing the unsettled terrain of agency and structure. It has generated rich ethnographic studies of young people in varied social locations. For instance, Willis's *lads*, MacLeod's *Hallway Hangers*, and Foley's *vatos* provide us with vivid examples of young people's everyday acts of resistance, identity formations, and oppositional culture against their subordinate status as working-class youth (Foley 1990; MacLeod 1995; Willis 1977). Young people's actions in these studies remind us that social reproduction is never simple or complete. Rather, as Paul Willis (1981) explains, cultural reproduction is different from social reproduction in that it offers potential for outcomes that do not replicate dominant social relations and structures. Willis notes: "Cultural reproduction's contribution to social reproduction is an ever-repeated *creative* process which each time carries no more guarantee than the last, and which, in *different* material or political circumstances, can produce *different* outcomes" (1981:60).

Resistance takes on vibrant forms of music, dance, dress, style, and identity claims in studies of oppositional youth subculture (Amit-Talai and Wulff 1995; Clarke et al. 1997; Hebdige 1979; Ross and Rose 1994; Skeleton and Valentine 1998). Other works underscore different ways race, class, gender, and culture inform resistance (Bettie 2003; Brayboy 2005; Deyhle 1995; Fordham and Ogbu 1986; Foster 2003; Gibson 1988; Ogbu 1987; Valenzuela 1999). For instance, Julie Bettie (2003) illuminates how *las chicas* and *las cholas*' oppositional school identities closely intersect with class and gender, while others like Bryan Brayboy (2005) describe how young people's resistance was about maintaining cultural integrity. From these studies we learn that some youth are capable of offering powerful critiques of inequalities or of penetrating systems of oppression but in many instances failed to change the conditions of inequality around them, as their resistance lacked organizational spaces and opportunities for collective action for social and political change.

Scholars of positive youth development and civic engagement (Flanagan 2003; Flanagan and Gallay 1995; Ginwright and Cammarota 2002; Ginwright and James 2002; Lewis-Charp et al. 2006; O'Donoghue et al. 2002; Watts and Guessous 2006) are recognizing the importance of young people's social and political development—their critical awareness of social inequalities and its potential for individual and social transformation, or what Shawn Ginwright and Julio Cammarota (2002) refer to as "social justice youth development." I build on these works to establish a framework for youth political development that includes young people's experiences with and understanding of social inequalities and assesses the power of such experiences to politicize thinking and serve as a basis of action. In a similar vein, they heed Henry

Giroux's (1983) calls for a more "theoretically precise" investigation of the kind of resistance that takes into account critical analysis and thinking, reflective action, collective political struggle, and explicit goals of emancipation:

> It must be strongly emphasized that the ultimate value of the notion of resistance has to be measured against the degree to which it not only promotes critical thinking and reflective action, but, more importantly, against the degree to which it contains the possibility of galvanizing collective political struggle around the issues of power and social determination. [Giroux 1983:111]

Similarly, Paulo Freire (1996) refers to *conscientizacao*, a shift in awareness by an individual of the social, economic, and political conditions that structure his/her personal experiences of injustice and allows him or her to "perceive oppression not as a closed world from which there is no exit, but as a limiting situation which they can transform" (1996:31). Consciousness is dialectical process of praxis—of reflection and action—on which an individual sees social inequality as a fabrication that can be dismantled through collective human action. Jane Mansbridge (2001) adds to an understanding of oppositional consciousness by pointing to how oppositional consciousness is also shared and realized in relationship with others. In her analysis, oppositional consciousness includes "identifying with members of the subordinate group, identifying injustices done to that group, opposing those injustices, and seeing the group as having a shared interest in ending or diminishing those injustices" (Mansbridge 2001:5).

Thus, oppositional consciousness provides a framework for how people come to an individual and/or collective awareness of injustice, which may incite collective action. I am not suggesting that the young people I worked with experienced or exhibited oppositional consciousness as a direct progression from consciousness to collective action. Rather, they came to an understanding of oppositional consciousness in different ways: for some it was realized through direct action and for others it was learned in political workshops and planning community-organizing campaigns. As Mansbridge reveals, oppositional consciousness does not necessarily lead to collective action; it can be a cause for action as well as a result of collective action: "Oppositional consciousness functions as an intermediate factor, or variable, that is caused by and also causes some of the important dynamics of social movements" (2001:16).

In my day-to-day work with AYPAL, I witnessed the important role the organization played in developing youth oppositional consciousness and supporting collective actions. As social movement scholars (McAdam 1982; McAdam et al. 2001) note, oppositional consciousness and collective action, although important, nevertheless depend on organizational resources (or indigenous organizations) and political opportunities for political mobilizations. Dan HoSang (2006) underscores the role of activist-based youth organizations in supporting young people's activism in Los Angeles and New York City. These groups "provide structured, strategic spaces, and experiences through which young people and their allies can make sense of the vexing and contradictory forces that shape their lives and allow them to test new avenues of struggle and resistance" (HoSang 2006:16). Political and cultural community organizations teach students to understand that their lives are shaped by structural race and class inequalities, as opposed to individual failures, and help them shift the blame from the individual to the systemic workings of power inequalities.[6] In the following section, I turn my focus to how AYPAL begins the process of training

young people in the skills of community organizing strategies by taking their problems seriously and offering them structured opportunities for collective action. AYPAL's process enables them to conceive a structural analysis of power inequalities (or oppositional consciousness).

From Complaints to Action: Youth Political Activism

Complaints: Identifying Problems

In the opening vignette, young people listed as educational concerns absent teachers, racist teachers, unprepared teachers, and teachers whose grading policies were unfair. They pointed to missing textbooks, unclean bathrooms, and cracking classroom walls: evidence, as one student aptly claimed, that "schools are cheap." At AYPAL meetings such as this one, youth are encouraged to discuss problems openly. An often-repeated mantra is "youth-owned and youth-led." For any youth organizing campaign to be successful, a staff member said, youth must "feel the issue." In my many conversations and interactions with AYPAL members, their dissatisfaction with their schools surfaced again and again. Over the years, I got to know well two Mien brothers, Johnny and Alex. Johnny is older than Alex by one year and their closeness in age is reflected in their daily lives: they are seldom seen apart from each other. For what was meant to be a personal interview with Johnny, Alex turned up, too, and they both talked about discrimination at school. "There's always one or two teachers that's always hella f'ed up to you," Johnny said. "Your first impression in that class means everything to you." I asked them to expand. "I don't know 'cause she's like, the teacher did favor people, they favor [certain] students. So I can't help not being as smart as the other students she favors, you know. It's not my fault I'm not as smart, you know."

No notion of a model minority applied to them, Johnny and Alex insisted. ("I can't help not being as smart as the other students she favors.") Instead, they were stigmatized " 'cause of the way we dress," Johnny said. "The way we dress and act," Alex added. When I asked them to elaborate on their dress, they noted that their style was not too different from that of their schoolmates. The real issue, they said, was their reputation with teachers as "rowdy Mien boys" who hang out in ethnic peer groups on and off campus and are often characterized as "gangsters."

Johnny and Alex were both born in Oakland, but their parents are Mien refugees. Most of the first-generation Mien in Oakland came from the hills of Laos via refugee camps in Thailand as a direct result of U.S. intervention in the civil wars of Laos during the 1970s (Chan 1994; Hein 1995). Johnny and Alex live in what they call the "Mien Village" in East Oakland's San Antonio neighborhood, where a large concentration of Mien families relocated and built social and economic networks for survival, similar to other ethnic enclaves in the United States. Many Mien and other Asian communities are poor. The 2000 Census reveals that in Oakland, almost half the Cambodian population and approximately 37 percent of Laotian (and Mien) live below the poverty line.[7] A large number are dependent on welfare and suffer from crowded, substandard housing (Younis 1998). These factors help shape the preemptively negative images of Asian refugees that Johnny and Alex believe their teachers hold against them.[8] Moreover, their tendency to "roll with" a large group of other Mien boys evokes many negative associations with gangs and violence. But for the boys themselves, the group actually invokes family bonds. Observers may not realize

that many of the boys are related; Johnny and Alex come from a family of 12 siblings, three of whom attend the same school, along with five of their cousins.

Matt, a schoolmate, generalized their complaints against hostile teachers in an indictment of the system itself:

> I think our school district has bad preparation skills. We are so behind [other] schools. You know like other [private] schools. . . . They have more money, have higher requirements, and they are ahead of [our] district. So if I were to go to a different school outside of here, then I would learn more. Not only that but the way they run the school, I just got too many problems with the way they run it. Like their policies and things, it's just kind of ridiculous.

Matt points to the disparities between a depleted public school system and that of better-funded private schools, and other young people echoed his reference to "rich schools" in neighboring cities. The voices of Alex, Johnny, and Matt give life to the complaints generated at the youth meeting I described earlier. Although complaints about educational experiences are not uncommon among young people, for AYPAL youth, those complaints served as a foundation for collective action, the understanding of one's subordinate position and the causes of one's powerlessness that Freire identifies as the starting point for social action to dismantle structures of inequality. My intention here is not to document yet another example of failing schools or yet again to place blame on "bad" and unprepared teachers; rather, it is to give serious weight to the daily realities and concerns young people face in their lives. At AYPAL meetings, young people are encouraged to identify and discuss their complaints and problems. These discussions then serve as the basis to translate complaints into collective action through the medium of such youth-led community-organizing efforts as the unfair treatment campaign. But before I examine the details of their school-reform efforts, I delve deeper into the middle steps that laid the groundwork for collective action and informed opportunities to develop oppositional consciousness.

Middle Steps: Oppositional Consciousness in a Political Community

As an organization with the stated goal of promoting social justice, AYPAL staff members are explicit about training young people to understand their lives as structured by social inequalities and to challenge power. Each year, the staff decides on a core training curriculum that covers three main categories: leadership training, community organizing, and power analysis (or the "isms"). For example, the topics that we as a staff brainstormed and later developed into workshops one year included: meeting facilitation skills; building group inclusion; public speaking skills; principles and strategies of community organizing, police brutality–militarism, racism–classism, sexuality–LGBT issues, affirmative action, labor, and globalization. As a facilitator and observer of, and at times a participant in these workshops, I witnessed how participation provided an avenue for youth to develop oppositional consciousness. Although I along with other adult staff members recounted informal moments such as conversations on car and bus rides home and during meals when young people expressed insightful critiques of racism and capitalism, AYPAL's workshops in community organizing and power analysis provided the background to make such analyses.

For example, the aim of the Power Game workshop (a favorite among staff until it was banned for too-frequent use) was to encourage youth to analyze unequal distri-

bution of power and reflect on how it is replicated in real life. The object of the game is for players on three teams to amass the largest number of chips by trading different colored chips in several rounds of negotiation. Players are not told that each color represents different value points, nor do they know that one team starts out with a larger number of the most valuable chips. After a couple of rounds of trading, first-, second-, and third-place teams emerge and game facilitators give favors to members of the leading team; the last-place team is admonished to try harder. At the end of one such game, several young people—especially those on the losing team—expressed anger at Pham, the game master and a staff member, when she revealed the truth about the unequal distribution of chips.

Pham asked the obvious question: "Does everyone start out with the same number of chips in society?" Of course most of the players said no. "So what if the game was not fair?" she prodded them. "Some of you had the opportunity to catch up by trying harder, right?" Her comment initiated debate about the notions of meritocracy and individual effort and showed, in Pham's words, "how the cards are stacked in favor of those who have more power." To drive home her point, she offered many examples of institutional power (such as CEOs of multinational corporations who give themselves raises at the expense of their factory workers) and asked how people get power in the game and in real life. "By stepping on people, by selling out like Sean did!" Cindy answered. (Sean had traded a large portion of his team's chips in a secret deal with a player on the first-place team.) Youth defined power as "knowledge, money, people" and debated the need for power ("to control people," "to take over," "to help others without it"). At the end of the processing period, Pham summarized: Although "it's much easier for people with power to get more power, there are ways for us to fight that. That's what we mean by community organizing, if we get lots of people together to challenge power, like you guys, the 'Immigrants' [ironically, the name the team that scored lowest gave itself at the beginning of the game], if you were able to get more people to be on your side, you could try to tip the point scale. But you can't do it alone." Her final comment captured the spirit of AYPAL workshops: to underscore an institutional and structural analysis of power inequality and the strength of collective action to chip away at the power structure, or in the words of a learning goal of the workshop: "To demonstrate how community organizing is related to developing collective power."

Workshop tools such as the power game encourage youth to link individual issues to structural causes and develop an understanding of structural power inequalities. In a personal interview, Sandy reflected on the effects of exercises like these:

> I feel so much different from other kids because I know more. I know about how the government is rigged. I never thought about how the government always gives money to the corporations and military and stuff. I mean who thinks about that stuff? But you join the program, and all the sudden, I'm like, man, that really is true because if we are really low-income then why don't they try to help us out? I kind of thought about it, and now I know it is true.

Sandy has taken Freire's first step toward social action to dismantle structures of inequality: She understands the causes of her powerlessness.

Other community-organizing workshops helped AYPAL members identify concrete demands, articulate targets for each demand, assess organizational power, develop tactics and strategies, identify allies and opponents, and produce campaign

outlines. I served as facilitator in a session we called "Youth Political Landscaping." Before tackling the exercise, we reviewed the three principles of community organizing posted in the meeting room: "(1) win real, immediate, concrete improvements in people's lives; (2) give people a sense of their power; (3) shift power from those who have it to those who don't." I asked eight young people to pair up to discuss three problem scenarios and solutions and to identify the solution that embodied all three community-organizing principles. I sat with Danny and May as they worked. "O.K. Scenario one," May began:

> Our schools are 95% students of color, but its curriculum is still all about white men. Students don't care about school because they don't learn nuttin' about their own culture and their own history. Also there are a lot of racial fights because they don't learn to appreciate other people of color from other races. An ethnic studies class would help solve all these issues.

She then handed the sheet to Danny who read the first possible solution: "Student organizers start up an after school ethnic studies and find a teacher to volunteer to teach the class." "Well that doesn't really give students that much power and it only makes a difference for the students who will take that class," May said. "Yeah, and we are only targeting teachers. We need to go after the district and make them offer ethnic studies to everyone," Danny added. After reading the last two solutions, they agreed that solution number two—"Students organizers get 1,000 other students to sign a petition and fill out surveys and present the results to the superintendent, who agrees to implement an ethnic studies class in all the high schools"—followed all three principles of community organizing.[9]

While Danny and May were weighing the correct solution for the ethnic studies scenario, I overheard Johnny and Kathy wrestling with the issue of poor school facilities. "Just look at what they are spending on the military!" Johnny shouted, drawing on the obvious disparities between education and military budgeting. Although he always seemed confident in his ability to provide sharp critical analysis, Johnny admitted that he had not understood the social critique offered by his peers and adult mentors until he started attending AYPAL meetings. "I didn't get it," he said one day when I was driving himself and his brother home from a meeting. But participation in AYPAL changed his consciousness: "What I'm really learning from AYPAL is that you can complain about a lot of stuff, but the important thing is that you have to do something about it. And you know, we can do something about it." Another youth, Kenny, added, "A lot of political questions have been questioned by me because of AYPAL."

These young people make the crucial point: social change efforts do not occur in a vacuum. Rather, activism unfolds within what cultural historian George Lipsitz (1988) has described as "networks of opposition." In social justice-oriented community organizations such as AYPAL, young people learn that negative experiences in their lives are not isolated personal encounters; they unearth structural conditions of inequalities that allow them to translate their individual experiences into a critical analysis of social inequality. In other words, they develop an oppositional consciousness, the middle steps. But let me be clear. It is not my intention to romanticize youth political consciousness or to claim that every young person I met in AYPAL developed and exhibited oppositional consciousness. A few expressed little social critique of their situation and little interest in collective action; they were attracted to the organization because of its social activities and cultural programs and the safe space it

provided. A handful joined the program as self-defined activists, their political consciousness already developing. Most learned political consciousness within AYPAL, through activities and adult mentorship that offered them opportunities to "break down the system" and engage in collective action. For some, that collective action informed oppositional consciousness. As such, AYPAL offered young people structured opportunities to link everyday injustices to a systemic critique and provided them with the tools to organize collectively.

AYPAL does more than foster social-change practices. A significant part of their work is general positive youth development. Through close mentoring relationships, staff members worked hard to promote self-confidence, self-esteem, leadership skills, nonviolent practices, and positive racial identity (or what one staff member called "cultural competency"). Many young people are attracted to the organization's strong emphasis on racial identities and cultural heritage. Jenny, who is of Chinese descent, said she had joined AYPAL because "I don't know of any other Asian after-school programs . . . that like, you know, does stuff that has anything to do with Asians." AYPAL gives Asian and Pacific Islander youth space to negotiate their position as marginalized and racialized people in U.S. society in interactions with other second-generation youth and adults. In many instances, their racial identities and their experiences with racism were central to their formulation of oppositional consciousness as well as to their commitment to collective action.[10]

Collective Action: The Campaign for School Reform

Equipped with a background in community-organizing principles and the capacity to analyze power inequalities, AYPAL members put their knowledge into practice in the unfair treatment campaign. It is important to reiterate that the campaign originated from concerns generated at six neighborhood-based AYPAL meetings such as the one I described earlier. The three issues that appeared most frequently on the students' list of complaints that year were unfair treatment at school, "krusty" (dilapidated) schools, and gentrification. But unfair treatment took on a larger meaning to encompass student rights. As the young people analyzed the medley of students' concerns in a campaign strategy planning session, several argued that the real problem was that students had no effective means of making people in power take their problems seriously. Julie, a veteran AYPALer, pointed out, "It's the same thing every year! We get the same complaints about schools every year." Like many of her friends, she was frustrated. Most believed that there was no institutionalized method through which they could express their dissatisfaction with unfair school or classroom policies or report incidences of discrimination or violation of student rights. After speaking with student groups on different campuses and with teachers they identified as cool, researching district policies, and contacting administration personnel about creating a forum for student rights, they discovered that students already had the right to file formal grievance complaint forms with the district. When such complaints are initiated, the administration is required by law to ensure that the district is complying with state and federal laws that govern educational programs.

AYPAL members started informing their schoolmates about the complaint process and urged them to use the district's complaint forms to address their concerns. They were excited and felt empowered, but at first they encountered student apathy and reluctance to challenge power. At one AYPAL meeting, Chenda, a high

school junior, reported a complaint from a schoolmate who was stuck in study hall for half the school day with 20 other students who had been caught up in a tardy sweep. They sat at their desks and did nothing the whole time while a security officer kept watch, Chenda declared. She encouraged her friend to file a complaint form questioning the fairness of the tardy policy and the loss of instruction time. But to her disappointment, Chenda's friend replied, "That's not going to do any good." Although students liked to talk about their problems at school, many dismissed the notion that they could produce any real changes in school policies. Those who had more serious complaints of discrimination by teachers and staff feared retribution for filing their grievances. Some were uncomfortable at the thought of even writing their names on the forms.

Facing these difficulties, AYPAL members strategized as a collective about how to get their fellow students to take a stand. It was imperative that students understand the seriousness of their own complaints, the young people believed. And it was critical that they understand, as AYPAL members had learned in community-organizing workshops, that there is strength in numbers. The right to file a complaint could have no effect until students exercised that right. If many did so at the same time, the flurry of grievance forms would force the superintendent to take notice. So AYPAL members worked extraordinarily hard to collect complaint forms. They teamed up during lunch hour and after school to approach classmates together. They also made presentations in classes, school clubs, and other community youth organizations.

Over the course of five months, at six high schools and eight junior high schools, they collected 487 complaint forms from their peers. AYPAL youth and staff spent an intense month summarizing and analyzing the results. Many complaints targeted decrepit school facilities including dirty bathrooms, broken windows in classrooms, peeling paint, and missing ceiling tiles. That bathrooms were locked during passing periods was a common complaint. Students charged that some teachers gave better grades to Asian Americans than to African Americans. More serious complaints surfaced of harassment by specific teachers and school security personnel. Several school employees attracted many complaints; one teacher received a total of 18. Other grievances addressed school policies on suspension, tardiness, and student identification cards.

In a series of strategy meetings, AYPAL members discussed their next move. Their target was the superintendent; they knew that he held ultimate power in the system. In one session, they weighed their options: Should they present their findings publicly at a school board meeting; should they seek a private meeting with the superintendent; should they invite him to a public forum organized by AYPAL; or should they announce a press conference to air their complaints? A staff member told the young people that a lesson learned about the superintendent from a previous AYPAL campaign to demand an ethnic studies curriculum was that he "was a type of person that will make promises in private but will do little unless pressured publicly." Everyone agreed that some kind of public presentation of grievances was necessary. They also heeded the warning of one of their members: "We want to make him accountable, but we shouldn't piss him off. I mean, don't we want him as an ally later on?" So they settled on the following plan of action: Present the superintendent with a stack of 487 complaint forms in a private meeting and make these demands:

- Require teachers to hand out a written grading policy;
- Unlock bathrooms during passing periods;
- Include a lesson plan in the social studies curriculum for all middle schools and high schools on student rights, which includes information on the complaint process;
- [Institute] a process that will deal with repeatedly problematic teachers;
- Make the identity of a student who files a complaint against a teacher or staff remain anonymous until the student gives formal written permission;
- Hire a nurse at a particular high school;
- Allow students to attend classes and receive lunch if they forget their school identification;
- Change tardy sweep policies.

The young people believed that the unfair treatment campaign would be a success if they could persuade the superintendent to agree to five of the eight demands and to announce his commitments at a press conference.

Armed with stacks of butcher paper filled with bar graphs, pie charts, bullet points detailing the campaign, and analysis of the complaints, the stack of complaint forms, and a list of demands with "yes" and "no" boxes for the superintendent to check off, five AYPAL youth representatives and two staff members entered a private meeting with the superintendent. Having prepped for the meeting the prior week, including role-playing their parts, the young people walked in confidently. The superintendent complied with their demands. Before the start of a new school year, he announced plans to require all teachers to pass out grading polices in the beginning of the school year, to inform students of their rights to make formal complaints, to provide an anonymous complaint box at each school so that complaints could be collected, and to unlock school bathrooms during passing periods. In front of television cameras from local news stations KTSF and KRON, and field reporters from the *Oakland Tribune, Asian Week*, and *Sing Tao*, a local Chinese paper, the superintendent applauded the young people's efforts. "Our students are learning about democracy," he said. "We want them to be active members of society. We must meet the needs of our students. Students have rights, these rights are the basics of what a youngster should receive. Students have to have a voice." He then grabbed the enormous pencil made of cardboard and reaching almost four feet tall that AYPAL youth had made as a media prop and erased the "UN" from the "UNFAIR TREATMENT" written on a whiteboard.

In this campaign, young people exercised their democratic rights and won a voice in the laws and rules that govern the institution that affects them most: their schools. The success of the campaign underscores a key point, that the roots of young people's political activism spring from their realities they confront everyday, their lived experiences with injustice. But injustice itself does not necessarily spur young people to collective direct action, as we have seen with AYPAL members' schoolmates, whose unwillingness to lodge complaints grew out of a sense of hopelessness. What differentiated AYPAL members and motivated them to move from complaints to action was the development of oppositional consciousness within a social justice-oriented youth group that structured opportunities to engage in collective action. As Mansbridge notes: "when political opportunities open and sufficient resources, including *social networks*, are in place, oppositional consciousness then acts as a cause, helping to bring an effective social movement into being" (2001:16, emphasis added).

What is important about young people's oppositional consciousness and organizing efforts is their belief that collective action can and does lead to change. To repeat Johnny's words, "The important thing is that you have to do something about it. And you know, we can do something about it." Like Johnny, Sandy also spoke of this collective political agency:

> It makes me, like, look at things differently 'cause I never really thought about stuff like, oh, if I could change, like, recreation centers, or if I could actually change, you know, somebody getting deported, I'm like, whoa, it feels like that's not something I can do. And then being in the program with so many people that, you know, and we have, like, good site coordinators [adult mentors], yeah. You kind of realize that you could make a difference . . . [at] rallies or meetings with people in power, I mean, you could make a difference.

These young people display an open belief in the transformative possibilities of collective human action. Belief in and hope for change are critical first steps, as Freire points out: "Without a minimum of hope, we cannot so much as start the struggle. . . . Hopelessness and despair are both the consequence and the cause of inaction or immobilism" (1997:9).

Toward a Youth Movement

In detailing political activism and analysis of political development among the young people of AYPAL, my purpose was to contribute to a more rigorous understanding in educational anthropology of youth resistance in theory and in practice. Rather than presenting a formulaic answer about how social change happens among young people, I wanted to focus attention on the circumstances that allowed a particular group of young people to challenge the conditions of inequality in their lives. Previous works on youth resistance have revealed that some young people lacked a structural analysis of their social conditions, or they were not privy to structured spaces to inform oppositional consciousness nor offered opportunities to organize collective actions. As Jay MacLeod said of the *Hallway Hangers* and *Brothers* of his study: "Among them there is very little political or collective energy, or even a sense that change is possible" (1995:256). The story of AYPAL youth speaks to how their "complaints" are translated into collective empowerment and action.

Young people here reveal that their activism is informed by their lived experiences of marginalization and oppression. Like countless others subordinated by race, class, gender, and age, young working-class Asian and Pacific Islanders are confronted with the material day-to-day consequences of shrinking educational spending. Youth of color are most adversely affected by increased policing policies and, alarmingly, represent the majority in juvenile halls. Youth political activism and development took on different forms for the young people described in this essay who were closely tied to multiple oppressions of race, class, and gender. Further examination of young people's social change efforts must also explore the tensions, contradictions, intersecting oppressions, and silences underlying these efforts.

The success of the unfair treatment campaign illuminates the critical importance of institutional spaces—in schools and in communities—that nurture oppositional consciousness and provide networks and opportunities within which young people can implement plans for collective action. In a study of youth participation in community organizations in New York City, Leonisa Ardizzone (2003) discovered that

a significant number deliberately chose to participate in organizations that were social justice–oriented. As AYPALer Kat said, "I like what we stand for, you know, promoting social justice and, you know, we are for the youth and we make it so, like, we have a voice, 'cause not that many adults believe in us; they just think we are kids." Although not every AYPAL member joined with the explicit intention of fighting for social justice, every young person I interviewed did express the importance of being part of something that in Aaron's words was "good for the community." His friend Kathy added: "I wanted to [do] . . . something dealing with the community, and like, I felt like I wanted to be a part of that, to try to help out."

Young people's activism is working to bring about small and not-so-small changes in their schools and communities. As HoSang (2006) argues, issue-based youth organizing works to produce change at the political-ideological level as young people's actions disrupt dominant or hegemonic political discourses that identify marginalized youth as the "problem." Although youth organizing campaigns may seem piecemeal compared to large-scale social movements, they are nevertheless part of a growing youth movement. Many examples of youth-led efforts for educational and community change in the Northern California Bay Area and across the country (see California Tomorrow 2001; Cervone 2002; Ginwright et al. 2006; HoSang 2003, 2006; Kwon 2006) attest to Elizabeth Martinez's (2000) claim that youth activism in the United States is the "new civil rights movement." The young people of AYPAL are a small part of this burgeoning movement and they are actively participating in creating a more just and equitable democratic society.

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Notes

1. All names of people described in ethnographic accounts in this article are pseudonyms.

2. I deliberately use the term *Asian and Pacific Islander* as opposed to *Asian American* or *Asian Pacific American* to describe different racial groups who have come under one common category, because that is how the constituents of the group identified themselves. These multiple identifications point to the social construction of racial and pan-ethnic categories. See Michael Omi and Howard Winant 1994 and Yen Le Espiritu 1992.

3. For the purpose of this article, I define *youth* as people between the ages 14 and 18, which correlates with the subjects of my study. I acknowledge, however, the construction of youth as a social category (see Lesko 1996).

4. The phrase "one and a half generation" was coined by Ruben Rumbaut to refer to people who immigrated to the United States at an early age and straddles both their immigrant and dominant cultures. See Kyeyoung Park 1999 and Min Zhou 1999.

5. See Kysa Nygreen et al. 2006 for a more detailed discussion of my role as an activist researcher engaging in participatory research with youth.

6. Also see Bettie 2003 and Nidia Flores-Gonzalez et al. 2006 on the crucial role of cultural organizations in providing young people spaces for positive racial identity claims and analyses of racism.

7. Although racial sub-groups among Laotians, such as the Mien, are not reported in the census, the largest group of Laotians in Oakland is the Mien people. It is estimated that approximately 30,000 Mien refugees live in the United States; approximately 5,000 reside in Oakland (see Banerjee 2000).

8. See Aihwa Ong 2003 for a discussion of how Southeast Asian refugees are racialized differently in relation to other Northeast Asian Americans in the U.S. racial order.

9. This scenario is based on an actual campaign led by a previous cohort of AYPAL youth.

10. The relationship between young people's racial identities and political activism is an important one that warrants a more detailed discussion beyond the limits of this paper. See Kwon 2006 for an elaboration of racial and political identities, particularly the formation of a political youth-of-color identity in opposition to the criminalization of youth of color.

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