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Reframing the Frame: Towards a More Inclusive Racial Equity Framework

A Racial Equity Framework for Asian Americans, Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders

March 9, 2015

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Social Policy Research Associates would like to thank the staff of the Asian & Pacific Islander American Health Forum and the partners of the Racial Equity Initiative for their critical racial equity work that serves as the foundation of the AA and NHPI Racial Equity Framework.

California REI Partners

- Empowering Pacific Islander Communities (EPIC)
- Tongan Community Service Center (TCSC)
- Pacific Islanders Center for Economic Development (PICED)
- Tongan American Youth Foundation (TAYF)
- TOA Institute
- National Pacific Islanders Educators Network (NPIEN)
- Pacific Islanders Education and Retention Center (PIER)
- Bangladeshi American Public Affairs Committee
- Michigan Asian Pacific American Affairs Commission

Mississippi REI Partners

- Mississippi Steps Coalition
- Mississippi Center for Justice
- Hijra House Association
- MS Coalition for Vietnamese-American Fisher Folks and Families
- Boat People SOS – Biloxi-Bayou La Batre

Hawaii REI Partners

- Pacific American Foundation
- Association of Hawaiian Civic Clubs
- Council for Native Hawaiian Advancement
- AIM HI Youth Advisory Council

Michigan REI Partners

- APIA Vote Michigan
- Mai Family Services

New Orleans REI Partners

- MQVN Community Development Corporation
- VEGGI Farmers' Cooperative
- Japanese American Citizens League
- Vietnamese American Young Leaders Association of New Orleans (VAYLA)
- Kids Rethink New Orleans Schools
- Supporting Urban Agriculture (SUA)

A special thanks to the following individuals for their specific contributions as participants in the Tea Talk series:

Alisi Tulua, Empowering Pacific Islander Communities

Vanessa Tuione, Tongan Community Service Center

Herb Lee, Pacific American Foundation

Helen Tupai, Pacific American Foundation

Representative Karen Awana, Hawaii State Legislature

Soulee Stroud, Association of Hawaiian Civic Clubs

Daniel Nguyen, VEGGI Farmers' Cooperative

Tuan Nguyen, MQVN Community Development Corporation

Roberta Avila, Mississippi Steps Coalition

Thao Vu, Mississippi Steps Coalition

Ya-Sin Shabazz, Hijra House Association

LeKeisha Cotten, Mississippi Steps Coalition

Theresa Tran, APIA Vote, Michigan

Sana Khan, APIA Vote, Michigan

Aziz Khandker, Bangladeshi American Public Affairs Committee

Representing the fastest growing racial group at almost 19 million, Asian Americans, Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders (AAs and NHPs) currently comprise approximately 6% of the U.S. population. While their growing presence adds to the rich multicultural landscape of the country, the stark reality is that, in many communities across the country, AAs and NHPs also face significant systemic barriers that lead to growing inequities in terms of educational, economic and health outcomes for this population.

In response to this challenge, the Asian & Pacific Islander American Health Forum (APIAHF) —with Social Policy Research Associates (SPR) as the evaluation and learning partner—launched a two-year **“Racial Equity Initiative” (REI)**. Funded from within the W. K. Kellogg Foundation’s racial equity portfolio, five local collaboratives were supported from across the country to advance policy, systems, and environmental changes that address racial inequities facing their respective AA and NHPI communities.

Given decades of work in their communities, each funded REI partner knew intuitively how to approach and navigate the challenges of addressing educational, health and economic disparities facing AA and

“Our AA and NHPI histories, experiences and struggles in America are just beginning to gain visibility within discussions about racism and racial equity.....”

NHPs. At the same time, during early evaluation interviews, it was clear that partners were struggling with sense-making around “racial equity” as a framework for their work—and in some cases, a sense of disconnect with some of the racial equity/healing terminology introduced within their grant. APIAHF staff shared this was not surprising, since on the national front, racial equity discussions have not traditionally been inclusive of AA and NHPs. Staff explained, “Our histories, experiences

and struggles in America are just beginning to gain visibility within discussions about racism and racial equity. Further, because terms like ‘racial healing’ and ‘racial equity’ are not in our communities’ lexicon, it has made it challenging for AA and NHPs to find the ‘on ramp’ into these discussions.”

Recognizing the challenge and opportunity presenting itself, the APIAHF made a decision to invest in a process by which REI partners could collectively make meaning of racial equity and healing within the AA and NHPI context, and ultimately surface an AA and NHPI Racial Equity framework—not externally imposed upon the community—but organically derived *from* the unique AA and NHPI experience. The framework that culminated from this process is the focus of this paper.

Toward a Shared Framework: The “Tea Talk” Process

In approaching framework development, limited travel resources and the national scope of the REI necessitated a creative approach to bridge distance. Ultimately, the APIAHF and SPR co-facilitated a series of five monthly conference calls made up of representatives from each of the five REI partners. Called “Tea Talks,” these calls were described as a way for partners to come together monthly around a virtual cup of tea to explore issues of racial equity in their work.

Although each of the partners had met each other previously, the diversity of the cohort and the sensitivity of the subject matter—compounded by a lack of shared language going in—made it imperative for the team to consider how to create a structure for these talks that would foster honest and productive dialogue. Creating a feeling of safety was essential, but not easy, given that these dialogues were being held in a virtual space. Ultimately, adopting a grantee-driven “talk story” tone—a

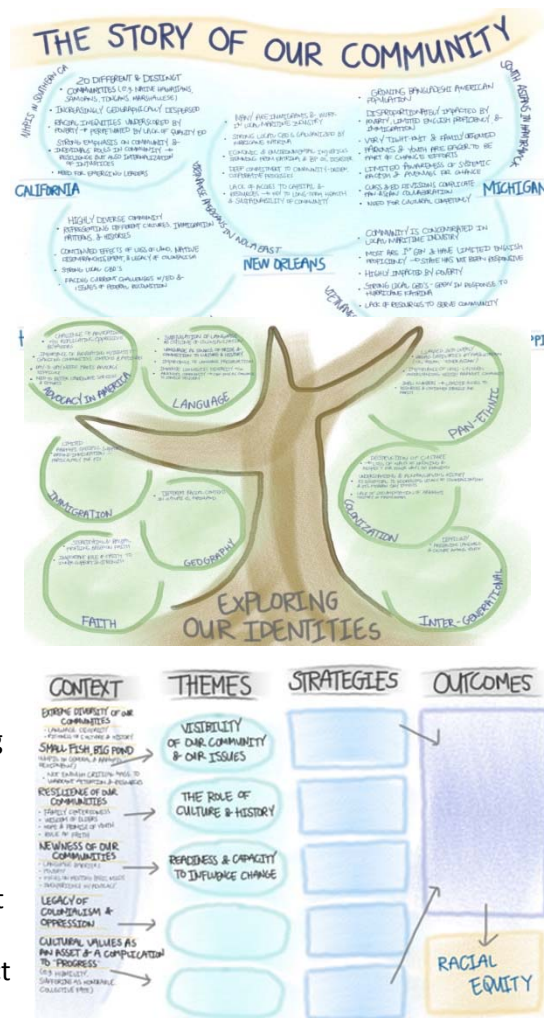
conversation amongst friends focused on personal and community histories and experience—allowed for authentic and organic dialogue.

The text box below provides an overview of the topics covered over the six month period. When the Tea Talk series began, participants were tentative in their speech, with discussions around race, equity, and healing taking on a cautious tone and requiring a great deal of thoughtful facilitation and adaptation to create safe spaces for difficult dialogue. As the talks progressed, the conversations moved more freely and the participants took the lead in directing the conversations. As the evaluation partner, SPR graphically recorded the conversations, continuously summarizing and reflecting back what was being shared, with the Tea Talks culminating in an in-person opportunity to discuss and fine tune the emerging framework to ensure that the framework captured authentic community voice and perspective.

Reflecting on the resulting framework presented next, REI partners expressed pleasure in the fact that they finally had a racial framework in which they could see themselves, and pride in the fact that their voices drove its development. As one participant shared, *“We all contributed to this framework. This is ours, versus letting others make choices for us. This is self-determination versus determinism.”*

Overview of the Tea Talk Series

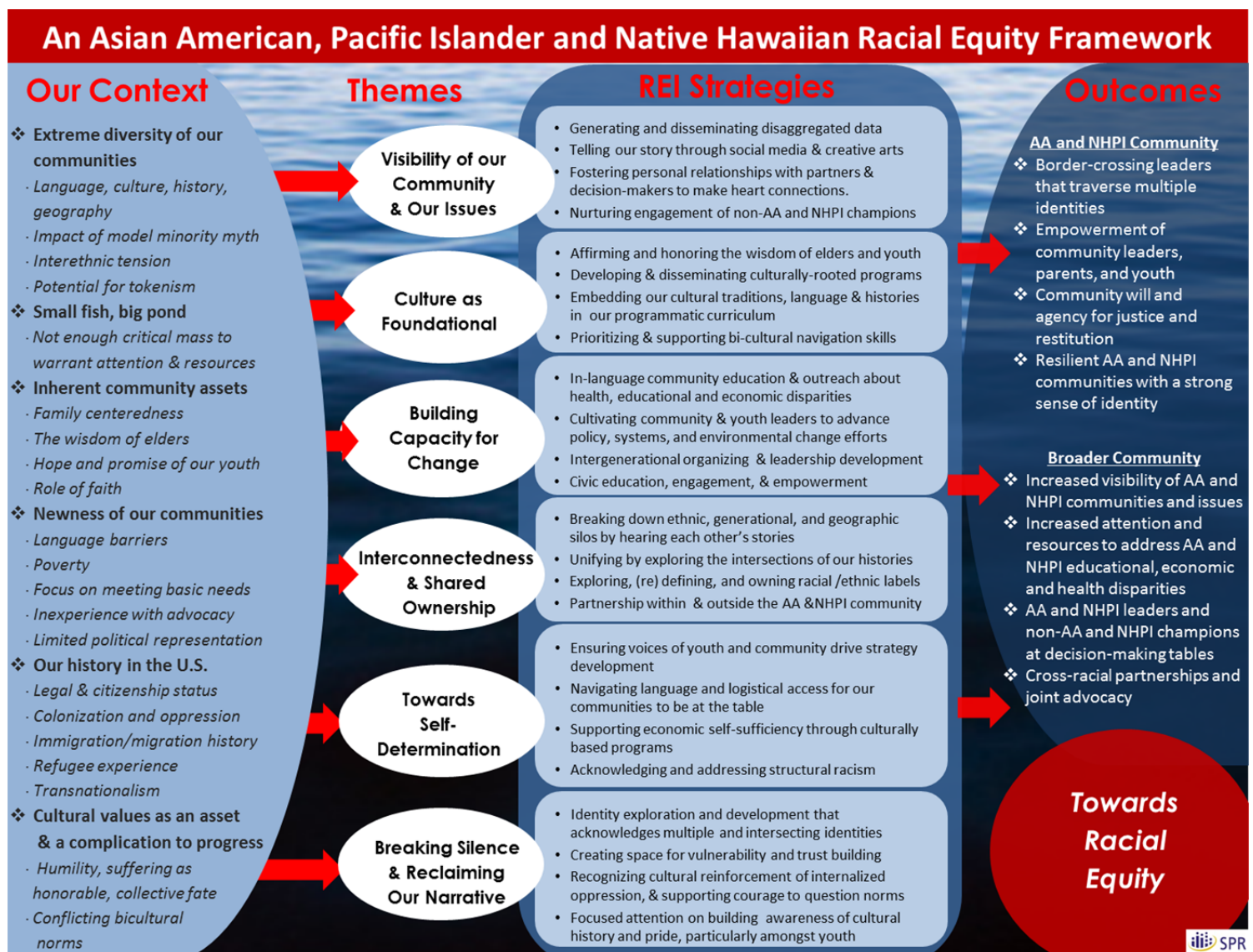
1. **Understanding Our Shared Experience: The Story of Our Communities.** This initial Tea Talk was aimed at giving REI partners a space to get to know one another, the work that each was engaged in, and a sense of the cultural and geographic contexts that influenced inequities in their respective communities.
2. **Unpacking AA and NHPI Stories: Our Complex Identities.** By request of REI partners, this second Tea Talk delved more deeply into how context played a central role in identity formation across the different communities, as well as across the different ethnic subgroups, generations, religions, migration histories, experiences of colonization, class, etc. within those communities.
3. **Communities of Learners: Search for Understanding.** Given a desire for even deeper exploration, REI partners opted to pair up to hold more in-depth “Mini Tea Talks” with just one other region, the results of which they discussed in this third Talk.
4. **Understanding our Narrative: Our Place in the Current Landscape.** By this point, REI partners felt ready to talk about the relevance of Tea Talk discussions to their program work. They shared how they were applying their learning into their programs, as well as their struggles with translating learnings in ways that made sense to their community.
5. **Understanding the Strength of Our Diversity: Our Community, Our United States of America!** In this final Tea Talk, partners discussed what they felt “racism” and “healing” looked like in their communities, what “success” would look like, and how they know they have made an impact in their Racial Equity Initiative work.



THE AA and NHPI RACIAL EQUITY FRAMEWORK

Ultimately, the Tea Talk process resulted in an AA and NHPI framework that not only serves as an organizing framework for REI partners' racial equity work, but also embeds this work within a distinct theory of change that leads directly from the unique AA and NHPI experience to long-term outcomes of equity for their communities. While the framework was not intended to represent the entirety of the AA and NHPI experience, it provides useful starting point for deeper conversations with their communities and an unprecedented entre for AA and NHPI groups, non-AA and NHPI racial equity allies, and racial equity funders to directly consider approaches for best supporting efforts to achieve equitable outcomes for AA and NHPI children and families.

Shown in full below and described in the following pages, by starting with first-hand stories, the AA and NHPI Racial Equity framework is grounded in a shared **context** from which SPR was able to distill **key themes** that bridged to a range of REI partners **strategies** tied to racial equity **outcomes**.



Grounded in AA and NHPI Context

While recognizing there is no singular, defining “Asian Pacific American experience,” in REI partner Tea Talks, common themes emerged about the ways in which key aspects of culture, identity, and place have implications for how to understand the AA and NHPI experience in the United States, particularly as it pertains to structural inequities, the capacity to effectively call out racism and systemic inequity, and the ability to draw on their cultural contexts to shape strategies to effect change.

Captured on the left hand side the framework, REI partners were able to distill key aspects of their shared experience that ranged from the extreme diversity within the AA and NHPI umbrella, to how small numbers result in limited attention and resources within their respective communities, to wrestling with a host of issues related to being a relatively new racial group--including challenges of economic insecurity, limited political representation, and acclimation to a new language and culture.

REI partners also found common ground in a rich sharing of what they hold most dear, as they shared elements of their cultures and communities that foster a sense of resilience and strength. Though there were nuances across cultures, these assets include being family- and community-centered, relying on and respecting the wisdom of elders, acknowledging and capitalizing on the hope and promise of youth, and leaning on faith as a unifying and connecting force.

Shared experience was also found in how different AA and NHPI communities’ relational histories with the United States have complex and sometime painful bearing on both their experience as racialized people in the United States and their need for healing. In particular, grantees noted that *how* groups of people in the AA and NHPI community came to the U.S. plays a significant role in their level of affinity to the U.S, their experience here, and their desire to embrace an American or bicultural (or multi-cultural) identity. For example, immigrants from economically stable countries that have established communities in the U.S. and who willingly and legally migrate to the U.S. to seek out greater economic opportunities may experience a different America than those who arrive here as



either refugees or undocumented immigrants, and having fled war, violence, or extreme poverty from their homelands. They may also experience a different America than those who are here as a result of imperialism or colonization, as is the case with the Native Hawaiian community, whose overthrow of their monarchy was so recent that it remains an open and painful wound for many in that community. Many AA and NHPI ethnic groups bring histories of conflict and struggle with each other that can result in divides within and across communities, as homeland conflicts continue to have an impact on relationships here in the states. Older community members struggle with a sense of loss of their home country and traditional ways, and younger generations seek to find balance in a bicultural identity and a path to success as they navigate multiple worlds

Finally, REI grantees shared tensions around cultural values and assets that served as key strengths in their communities, but that also complicated efforts at forward movement, as community members grappled with how to ensure “progress” without inadvertently encouraging cultural erosion or sacrificing cultural dignity and honor. Though all grantees acknowledged the complexity and pain this sometimes causes, all also emphasized their deep commitment to their cultural values and a recognition that these values, and the opportunity to wrestle with the bicultural challenges they present, “has a place” in their journey and ultimately “makes for a resilient community”—a community that is “resourceful” and “finds solutions from within.”

AA and NHPI Racial Equity Themes and Strategies

Through the powerful process of sharing community stories and context, the racial equity framework that emerged centered on six key themes, represented by the white circles in the framework shown on page 3. These themes echoed the grantees’ stories of their AA and NHPI context, served as an organizing framework for the work taking place in REI communities, and offered a clear through-line from the AA and NHPI context to ultimate goals of equality and justice on behalf of AA and NHPI communities. By virtue of the common threads of historical oppression and structural racism that bind the experiences of all communities of color, naturally, these themes were conceptually connected to broader racial equity work of other racial groups throughout the country. However, because they were organically borne directly out of a discussion of the AA and NHPI context, they also served to articulate the *uniqueness* of AA and NHPI approaches toward addressing racial equity on behalf of their community.

The framework presented in this paper includes examples of APIAHF REI partner voices, as well their strategies within each of these six themes. However, partners agreed that specific approaches that other AA and NHPI communities might take in addressing racial equity through these themes might look different, depending on their specific community issues, history, and community infrastructure.

Theme 1: “Visibility of Our Community & Our Issues”

The first theme centers on AA and NHPI community struggles to be “seen.” The challenge of visibility is, in part, related to small numbers of AA and NHPIs relative to the larger population, particularly in regions of the country outside of California, Hawaii, and the East Coast.

This challenge is further exacerbated by the extreme *diversity* of the AA and NHPI population, which encompasses multitudes of people from different nations, who speak over a hundred different languages and dialects, practice a variety of faiths, have varied levels of education, and fall under a wide range of income levels. Because AAs and NHPIs are typically “lumped” together into one broad category, the socioeconomic challenges many of them face are often masked, rendering the subgroups within this community—and their issues—even less visible. Moreover, the ever-persistent model minority myth, which implies that all people of Asian descent are faring well, adds additional layers of complication. REI partners shared that they are constantly facing societal perceptions that educational, health, and economic disparities are simply not a part of the AA and NHPI experience.

This challenge sets the AA and NHPI experience apart from other racial groups. Namely, prior to even *beginning* to engage local decision-makers about structural racism or equitable policies, there is a whole layer of investment that AA and NHPI communities are making, just to let it be known that ‘we are here’ and ‘disparities exist that affect us.’

To counteract this challenge, across the country, REI partners are telling their community story, through research and data, or more creatively, through story and art. For example, REI partners in Michigan conducted a community needs assessment to surface and share South Asian parent concerns related to food bullying in the Hamtramck area of the state. Southern California partners from EPIC (Empowering Pacific Islander Communities) partnered with others to produce the first-ever data book summarizing the educational, economic, and health status of Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islanders in the U.S. Young people from many REI partners engaged in social media campaigns, spoken word poetry, and video narrative to lift up their voices and raise visibility around their concerns and issues.

Acknowledging long-held stereotypes of Asians as “outsiders” or “foreigners,” partners emphasized the importance of not just broadly raising community visibility, but making personal “heart connections” with individuals. In Mississippi, REI partners invited funders, partners, and eventually researchers and policymakers to shrimp boat tours to have them “walk a day in our shoes.” The focus was to raise the visibility of Vietnamese community and to humanize their experience by providing invited guests with an understanding of the inherent challenges of the fishing industry, as well as the deep sense of pride and skill the Vietnamese fisherfolk community bring to their work, and the devastation wrought by Hurricane Katrina and the BP Oil spill in the region.

“The city has this mentality of leaving us alone or maybe even forgetting about us in New Orleans East because we’re a predominantly minority community...”

“I don’t think that [the school] thinks there are challenges within the South Asian population. They don’t see [the food bullying issue] almost, because in this area, most of the South Asians kids do pretty well academically. They are kind of the model minorities in this area, so they don’t think that there’s any issues that need to be dealt with.”

Theme 2: “Culture as Foundational”

A second theme acknowledges the central role of the key cultural values and traditions that fortify AA and NHI communities, making them strong and resilient. These cultural strengths have undergirded AA and NHPI communities for centuries, enabling them to persevere in the face of inequity and injustice, to endure significant hardship with a certain level of grace, and to continue to work towards the collective betterment of their communities.

Thus, in their work, REI partners have purposefully and creatively embedded bi-cultural considerations throughout their programmatic and advocacy strategies to address injustice and inequity. REI partners in California and Hawaii have each rooted their youth leadership development programs in Pacific Islander history and tradition as a means of ensuring that the next generation of leaders draw from centuries of indigenous wisdom and shared values. In New Orleans, REI partners have drawn from a long farming tradition to create an intergenerational economic cooperative model that capitalizes upon the traditional wisdom of Vietnamese elders and entrepreneurship of youth. By design, REI collaborative partner meetings across the country include ceremonies, stories, language, and cultural speak that keep participants rooted in the AA and NHPI communities that they represent and serve.

A focus on language was infused throughout the work of multiple collaboratives, which grantees described as a core strength in AA and NHPI culture, a vehicle that “unlocks a lot of the meaning in culture.” While addressing language access was a common strategy across multiple grantees, language *preservation* also emerged as an important focus. This was especially true in Hawaii, where concerns about destruction and erosion of Hawaiian language and culture led to policies and programs aimed specifically at cultural preservation.¹ Members of the Hawaii collaborative noted a kind of spiritual connection to language, highlighting the connections between language and land, language and culture, language and ways of knowing. They voiced concerns about language loss and how that equates to an erosion of culture, and a loss of ways of being and ways of knowing. Thus, as the collaborative works to build leadership and advocacy skills in Hawaiian youth, they include a focus on language preservation and incorporate the spirit and language of the Hawaiian culture in their work with their partners. As one partner noted, the work is rooted in the power of love, the power of Aloha – “Ka mana o ke Aloha.”

“All of our work is rooted in understanding where we come from, our history, and building opportunities for our young people, our next generation.”

“Most of our history is translated orally. In the western world, the written is validated. But most of our history is captured in our language, in our dances, in the ways we talk to each other.”

¹ Hawaii is the only state in the union that has two official languages—Hawaiian and English.

Theme 3: “Building Capacity for Change”

All advocacy groups partnering with vulnerable communities typically invest in building capacity of those community members to have a meaningful voice in change efforts. REI partners, however, emphasized specific nuances around how to do this effectively within the AA and NHPI context— educating new immigrants who have a lack of familiarity with the American policy process, wrestling with a cultural reticence to raise one’s voice in some cases, or bridging language gaps through interpretation in other cases. A lack of AA and NHPI political representation and limited community infrastructure to promote ongoing channels of political engagement further serve as barriers to community-driven change.

*“There’s so much that we take for granted when we talk in English about histories of oppression...
...how do you even begin to translate the concept of ‘food deserts’ into Vietnamese? We’ve essentially been living this whole food justice movement without that kind of terminology.”*

This context has given rise to a wide range of education, engagement and empowerment strategies among REI partners, all tailored for the unique experiences of those with whom they are partnering. In Hawaii, REI partners have been working shoulder-to-shoulder with cohorts of vulnerable youth to develop an experiential curriculum that empowers youth leaders to drive policy change. Leveraging opportunities to explore current issues in non-traditional ways (i.e., through spoken word workshops, mural tours), spending time at the state legislature, holding conversations with legislators and other policy leaders, utilizing on-air opportunities to share views on local public access television, and fostering intergenerational opportunities to hear and be *heard*, youth share they are finding their voice. In preparation for the 2015 legislative session, several participated in legislative caucus meetings wherein they discussed prioritizing youth-related issues for the upcoming session.

“There aren’t that many of us with the framework of understanding injustices. That is why we are reaching out to foster a base of young emerging leaders....”

In Mississippi, REI partners have been focused on building capacity of the Vietnamese fisherfolk community to have a voice in advocacy related to equitable distribution of reparation dollars in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina and the BP Oil Spill. Although 80 percent of commercial fishing licenses in the Gulf States belong to members of the AA and NHPI community, a majority are first- generation immigrants that face language barriers. According to partners, Mississippi has been “slow to acknowledge the language issue,” resulting in a sense of disenfranchisement and exclusion by the Vietnamese fisherfolk community. Collaborative partners are therefore not only focused on ensuring translation of public meetings and materials, but also placing a strong focus on civic education so that their communities are fully informed about their rights and understand processes and procedures related to accessing resources.

Theme 4: “Interconnectedness and Shared Ownership”

This central theme is derived from the challenge and promise associated with being categorized under the Asian American, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander label, particularly given the extreme diversity encompassed within it.

This racial group encompasses over 50 distinct ethnic groups, each of which have a different level of affinity to (or comfort with) the broader AA and NHPI label, for a variety of reasons. More established ethnic subgroups that have been in the U.S. for multiple generations came together as part of the civil rights movement to claim the Asian American label to build collective power and voice. Newer immigrant groups who do not have this shared history of identity reclamation instead have had the racial label externally imposed upon them. In some cases, ethnic groups are still coming to terms with prior histories of conflict and domination with other AA and NHPI ethnic groups, or current political tension among Asian countries or Pacific Islands.

“[The reason] why we’ve had a lot of difficulty – a lot of South Asians don’t necessarily see themselves as part of the Asian American identity. They identify more specifically to their ethnic identity. That’s been...especially [true among] first-generation immigrants.”

“The more that we understand each other’s history as AA and NHPIs, the stronger we will be.”

REI partners recognized that, in order to make meaningful progress on a shared racial equity agenda, they needed to foster a sense of collective identity and interconnectedness with other ethnic groups and other communities of color. To this end, in their work, REI partners placed a strong emphasis on knowing each other’s “story” as a means for breaking down ethnic, geographic, and intergenerational silos in their work. Through sharing stories, the goal has been to find connections with each other, in some cases work through painful histories, and ultimately recognize the interconnectedness of experience when engaging in racial equity work. At a recent meeting of partners, they emphasized this aspect of their work through a ceremony, where individual cups of water were blessed to represent the hopes and dreams of their own community and then poured into a larger bowl to represent how, by sharing one’s story, it becomes forever interconnected with the stories of others within the larger collective.

In all of their respective communities, REI partners focused on making connections within *and* outside their local AA and NHPI communities. For example, in their work within the Bangladeshi community, Michigan REI partners have invested in fostering a better understanding of what it means to be part of a larger, panethnic identity to help community members to locate and define their space within that identity, incorporate their voices into advocacy efforts, and take better advantage of the collective power of the group. In so doing, they have been navigating intergenerational differences in Bangladeshi affinity to an Asian label, explaining that first generation Bangladeshis perceive the Asian or API label as a cultural designation whereas second generation Bangladeshis are more inclined to view it as a separate, political identity. Because of the importance of faith in the Bangladeshi community, partners have also focused on being mindful of the community’s deeper connection to an ethnic and religious identity than a panethnic identity.

In the Gulf Coast, REI partners drew from a common sense of heartbreak and loss in the wake of Hurricane Katrina and the BP Oil spill to foster partnership between the Vietnamese fisherfolk and the African American community to address the ways in which they were both harmed and neglected in the aftermath of the environmental disasters. To accomplish this, they engaged the support of the William Winter Institute for Racial Reconciliation to broker fractured group relationships and introduce a “Welcome Table” process—a community process to foster relational trust, unity, teamwork, and cohesiveness. Moved by the way in which the humanizing process of the Welcome Table transformed their collaborative, the group brought the process outward, to the fishing docks. There, they brought fisherfolk, collaborative partners, and scientists together to share their stories about the role of fishing and fisherfolk in the community, their connection to the water, and the impact of the disasters on their way of life. By bringing the Welcome Table experience to the docks, the Mississippi collaborative aimed to “bridge the gap between fisherfolk and scientists,” so that as scientists move forward with restoration efforts, they could hold these stories close and include them in their broader understanding of the role that the Gulf plays in the lives of multiple communities.

Theme 5: “Towards Self-Determination”

In their programmatic work, all REI partners remained acutely aware of the educational, economic, and health disparities facing their respective communities. Collaborative partners also recognized the importance of addressing these disparities in ways that enabled their communities to maintain a sense of dignity, rooted in cultural values of self-reliance and self-determination. Thus, for these communities, the work was not just about gaining *access* to resources or opportunities, but to understand their role in shaping these resources and opportunities—as a means to rectify inequities and to achieve greater community well-being, as opposed to a “handout.” To that end, their focus was also in ensuring that these resources were used to support programs and projects that were rooted in cultural values and practices to ensure that their communities could thrive.

The VEGGI Farmer’s Cooperative, a project supported through the New Orleans REI collaborative, serves as a strong example of promotion of AA and NHPI community self-determination and community resilience. Food access, for example, is a challenge for many who lost their livelihood in the wake of the BP oil spill and Hurricane Katrina, and REI partners are approaching the challenge through thoughtful and strategic efforts to build food sovereignty by taking control of their food supply. Utilizing an intergenerational approach to aquaponics² and traditional

“The Vietnamese American community here in New Orleans East, we’ve always had this mentality that we live in this little bubble, and so we don’t ask for help, we don’t ask for assistance, and we don’t go beyond what we need or what the community is already doing...”

“Many of the common challenges stem from adapting [to a] new culture, structure, and governing....this has prevented many immigrant generation families from accessing equal footing for opportunities as other established communities.”

² Aquaponics is a sustainable farming practice that simultaneously grows fish and produce by using recirculating water.

farming, they ensure that the food eaten by their communities is fresh, organic, and healthy, and is grown with the kind of care, skill, and love passed down through their community elders to a generation of younger farmers. VEGGI's efforts at transformative action and self-determination are rooted in ideals around food justice, which includes visualizing how their efforts will impact the ninth generation as well as their local community. Thus, their work includes instilling in young people a love for farming and a greater understanding about the connection between the land, the food they eat, and their health. It also includes ensuring that their bounty not only goes to local restaurants, but that it also is offered at reduced cost in the Lower Ninth Ward farmer's market or shared in giving circles and in meals offered at their monthly food bank event. They visualize their work as an effort to build a sustainable solidarity economy— creating quality, sustainable jobs and sharing the fruits of their labor with other communities to widen the circle of social good.

REI partners also fostered self-determination in more discrete ways, as community members took the lead in addressing structural racism by insisting that systems acknowledge their histories and cultures. In Michigan, this included having conversations with school officials to educate them about the importance halal food in the Muslim faith and the deeper implications of food bullying in their schools. In Hawaii, REI partners have emphasized the importance of studying and sharing their history in order to understand the impact of colonization and how it affects their lives today. It was important for their communities to take charge of this education process, given the limited and narrow ways in which history is typically taught in schools. As one Pacific Islander youth from California noted, *"Just because our story is told post colonialism, that doesn't mean that's where it started."*

Theme 6: "Breaking Silence and Reclaiming Our Narrative"

Finally, like other racial groups, the pain of oppression is a present theme in AA and NHPI racial equity work. Through candid and sometimes painful discussion, however, here too we saw distinct aspects of how this manifests within the AA and NHPI context. According to REI partners, work within this theme has been the most challenging and, two years into the work, an area where they felt they had the most work yet to do.

Part of the challenge has been a sense of discomfort with simply acknowledging oppression and structural racism in their communities. Yet despite their discomfort, all REI partners could share examples of the many ways in which it manifested in their communities. For Pacific Islander youth in California, for example, it was in the way they quietly endured repeated racial profiling. Or, for those who were in college, how the pervasive assumption by students and faculty that they only reason they made it to the university was through a football scholarship, started to erode their confidence— even for those Pacific Islander and Native Hawaiian college students who were not football players. For the

fisherfolk in Mississippi, it was the way in which their sense of dignity and pride in their economic self-sufficiency made them initially reticent to seek support. In Michigan, it was in the choices made by Bangladeshi parents to incorporate unhealthy foods in their children's lunches to make them more "American" and less Bangladeshi, in an effort to stop food bullying and help their children "fit in." It was also in the way in which rampant anti-black racism in Michigan and fear of becoming the "chosen next target" (or somehow inadvertently taking on the role of the oppressor) inhibits the community from making more purposeful efforts at cross-racial collaboration and advocacy. Across all collaboratives, it was seen in the desire not to "make waves" or "cause trouble," resulting in a silence that reinforced their communities' invisibility.

Perhaps the most challenging topic the group explored was around the ways in which cultural strengths or norms can also inadvertently serve as an additional source of oppression. Participants shared the tension they felt around cultural traits that they deeply valued (e.g. humility, respectful deference to age and authority, prioritizing community) and the ways in which those same traits made it challenging to succeed in the U.S., where assertiveness (and sometimes aggression), a competitive spirit, self-advocacy, and individuality are posited as key factors for success. For Tea Talk participants, simply naming this tension and its associated outcomes felt uncomfortable and somewhat controversial. Some spoke freely about how this

"Learning more about their history, issues of community—and their place in it—has helped our students to accept and be more confident about being a Pacific Islander. For one of our Samoan youth, he said it was the first time he fully accepted and felt confident about being a young Samoan man. He feels he can now be a leader to other Pacific Islander youth."

tension led to a kind of internalized oppression or "self-hate," while others felt vehemently opposed to using the term "internalized oppression," finding it either demeaning or discordant with how they perceive themselves.

In their programmatic work with youth, REI partners prioritized identity exploration as a key strategy for addressing these painful realities, breaking the silence, and reclaiming their narratives. For Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander youth in California, this included focused attention on exploring not only the aspects of their cultures that made them powerful, but also naming, acknowledging, and addressing the negative stereotypes that cause psychological harm and limit opportunities for these youth. Partners foster safe space for the youth to be vulnerable as they

"Sometimes we lose perspective of our identity... There is also that clash of cultures (American versus Pacific Islander culture versus faith culture) that affects how we express our identities in public, in private, and within the Pacific Islander – only community."

"Asian Americans in this area don't want to talk about race because there is fear that they will become targeted in the same way that Black communities have been targeted."

"As API Americans, sometimes our culture...our own personal, native identities become barriers and it's a key reason why we have this internalized oppression. The challenge is walking around with two identities. Samoan identity is 'about us.' American identity is 'about me.' I feel like it's about navigating, finding the balance across both."

confront these painful realities and work towards building confidence by reclaiming and finding strength in their identities so that they could become “thoughtful leaders that will become thought leaders.” California REI partners have also extended their confrontation of stereotypes outward, into the social media sphere, through “I am Beyond!”—a social media campaign that invited AA and NHPI youth to post pictures of themselves to social media sites, holding up a positive quote, message, or statement explaining how they are living beyond stereotypes or stigma. Through their powerful and candid reflections of the ways they see themselves and the ways they are seen, the youth are using this campaign to “*reclaim the injustices endured by our ancestors, reshape the narrative that is told of our journeys, and retell the stories with our own words.*”³

Towards Racial Equity: Outcomes

As our Tea Talk series came to a close, participants talked about the kinds of outcomes that they envisioned would emerge as a result of their REI strategies, and that ultimately bookended the strategies within the AA and NHPI racial equity framework. They articulated outcomes that they hoped to see both within their AA and NHPI communities and within the broader community in order to build a foundation for racial equity for their communities. The community-level outcomes were focused on building empowerment and community capacity for change. These included:

- Development of a ***cadre of border-crossing leaders*** that could adeptly and sensitively traverse multiple identities and generations, enabling them to help surface and heal inter- and intra-ethnic wounds and serve as strong ambassadors for change within and beyond their communities;
- ***Empowerment of community leaders, parents and youth*** to ask hard questions (of themselves and each other, as well as of decision makers), and to feel confident in voicing their concerns and becoming agents for change;
- A greater sense of ***community will and agency for justice and restitution***, as community members gain a greater understanding of their rights and the ways in which disparities are unfairly affecting the health and well-being of their communities;
- ***Resilient AA and NHPI communities with a strong sense of identity*** that can readily embrace their histories and their futures, and all the glory and complications therein.

In addition to community-level outcomes, Tea Talk participants shared broader outcomes that they hoped would emerge as a result of their efforts at achieving racial equity. These outcomes were largely focused around building a foundation and infrastructure that would increase broader awareness and deeper understanding of the community and their issues, and effectively address their needs. They include increased visibility for the AA and NHPI communities and their issues, greater attention and resources to address disparities in their community, an increase in AA and NHPI leaders and non-AA and NHPI champions at decision-making tables, and the development of cross-racial partnerships and joint advocacy efforts.

³ <http://empoweredpi.org/i-am-beyond/>

Looking Ahead

In the end, REI shared that the Tea Talk process created a means of enhancing their respective REI work because of its focus on exploring the intersections of AA and NHPI ethnic histories with each other and with the histories of other oppressed racial groups. The structured space to have safe conversations allowed partners to challenge each other and themselves with hard questions about the meaning of identity, and how and whether each fit within an “AA and NHPI”

label....or under an even broader umbrella with other communities of color engaged in a struggle for racial equity. One partner shared, *“It [has been] really important to hear not only where people are coming from but understanding holistically how we as a group are forming this shared narrative that will help us to better root our work.”*

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The grantees agreed that while the framework captured their particular contexts, issues, and strategies well, it is important to underscore the fact that this should not be seen as *the* vehicle for interpreting or understanding the AA and NHPI experience. Rather, they saw the framework as something that could not only educate broader communities about their concerns and their efforts, but it could also serve as a useful starting point for deeper conversations with their communities. They also agreed that the framework should serve as a kind of living document, one that could and should be modified as needed so as to better resonate with the cultural, linguistic, generational, and geographic contexts of the communities using it. Moving forward, they saw the framework as supporting their efforts towards achieving what we came to call the “Four Rs” of the grantees’ work to achieve racial equity and healing: *remediation* and *restoration*, to address injustices and support their communities’ *recovery* from these wrongs, and to support their efforts in ensuring community *resilience*.