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ORIGINAL PAPER

Cross-National Identity Transformation: Becoming a Gay 'Asian-American' Man

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Abstract Prior to moving to the U.S., the author, a gay Japanese man, was secure in his multiple identities. After the cross-national transition to the U.S., however, he confronted unique and particular challenges in negotiating his multiple identities. As a foreigner, adopting the cultural discourse of the gay Asian-American identity as a way of life shocked and surprised him—especially because of the ways in which others communicated with him. In particular, others generally viewed his identity expression as reinforcing the stereotypical image of gay men and failing to conform with the social perception of Asian-Americans. Also, the racialized and gendered image of gay Asian-American men became a conflict in his interactions with gay and bisexual men because its image did not fully represent who he is. Being trapped by his dual-identity conflict, he faced difficulty in negotiating performative aspects of gay Asian-American male identity construction. At the same time, this contradiction became an opportunity for him to (de)construct his dual identity conflict and to finally name himself with such labeling. This analysis employs autoethnography to explore the author's cross-national transformation process of becoming a gay Asian-American man. Finally, this analysis intends to link his personal experience and the cultural and social experiences of gay Asian-American male identity.

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Racial category matters in ongoing social interactions. The social construction of racial classification has been deeply ingrained in the U.S., especially since the birth of the nation was enmeshed with the institution of slavery. Omi and Winant (1994) maintain that "one of the first things we notice about people when we meet them (along with their gender) is their race" (p. 59). Such racial consciousness plays a role in characterizing interactions between individuals because they attempt to use a socially constructed racial category as an elemental communication piece in understanding others. Thus, individuals must constantly negotiate their own racial category during the communication process.

I have increased my awareness of racial category in the years following my cross-national transition from Japan to the U.S. After I arrived in the U.S., I came to learn that my racial category was a "big deal"; interactions with others reinforced my racial minority status. I became a gay Asian-American man in the U.S. society "that attaches privileges to being [W]hite and male and heterosexual regardless of your social class" (Johnson 2001, p. 10).

This process of learning about a socially constructed racial category became the biggest surprise of my life, due to the cross-national transition from being an ethnic majority group in Japan to being an ethnic minority group in the U.S. Chen and Starosta (2005) maintain that "the process of adapting to a new culture can produce a feeling of loss of cultural identity in some" (p. 171). Kim (2001) asserts that cultural adaptation may become a long-term process for some individuals in adjusting and, finally, feeling comfortable in a new culture. My cultural adaptation process of negotiating who I have become has been difficult for a long time–and that is largely due to my racial consciousness along with my gender and sexual identities. Coming to terms with my gay Asian-American male identity has been impacted by both anxiety and tension during my interactions. Thus, identifying the communication barriers has provided me with an opportunity to question my multiple identities. At the same time, I have attempted to understand why I have experienced U.S. society in the way that I have.

The uniqueness of my identity negotiation is that I became a gay Asian-American man rather than a gay Asian man. Some communication scholars (e.g., Chen 2004; Kawai 2005; Nakayama 2004) contend that Asian-Americans are marginalized because the *hyphenated identity* locates them as neither fully Asian nor fully American. However, my identity negotiation has been processed in a particular context that Asian-Americans and Asians are not treated differently. Hegde (2002) writes that, "identity is enacted and negotiated in the everyday world of relationships" (p. 262). Thus, my daily interactive experiences in which I was socially located have influenced my identity transformation of becoming a gay Asian-American man. Therefore, I interchangeably use two terms—Asian and Asian-American—as both terms refer to my identity negotiation process.

In this analysis, I utilize autoethnography to explicate my personal text; this is the process by which I have negotiated my gay Asian-American male identity during my "cross-national identity transformation." Holman-Jones (2008) maintains that autoethnography is "setting a scene, telling a story, weaving intricate connections among life and arts, experience and theory, evocation and explanation…and then letting go, hoping for readers who will bring the same careful attention to your words in the context of their own lives" (p. 208). In other words, a researcher hopes that the autoethnographic text functions as a bridge between the researcher and the audience to create a space for dialogue and, hopefully, to promote social change. Thus, I intend to explore all symbolic messages about culture and identity politics embedded in my personal experience. In so doing, I will attempt to show a link between my personal and local identity negotiation process and the cultural and social experiences of a gay Asian-American male identity as I attempt to understand the social world from my viewpoint.

Before addressing my autoethnography, I would like to introduce a brief overview of theoretical frameworks that undergird this analysis.

Identity Negotiation

The contemporary discussion on identity negotiation appeared in the communication discipline when Ting-Toomey spoke about the identity validation model in 1986 (Jackson 2002, 2009). Ting-Toomey (1986) maintains that identity is co-created and co-shaped as it is negotiated "between the self and relevant others" (p. 123) via communication. In her view, communication is the site in which that an individual alters, shapes, and reinforces a sense of self (Ting-Toomey 1986, 1989). As Ting-Toomey has continued to advance this theoretical perspective on identity and communication, identity negotiation theory (Ting-Toomey 1999, 2005) emerges today (Jackson 2002, 2009). Jackson (2002) maintains that Ting-Toomey's identity negotiation theory is "the first interpretive framework found in the literature which not only indicate that identity is relational but also explicitly note that identity is constructed via a negotiation process" (p. 360.)

Identity negotiation theory is an integrative perspective drawn from three major disciplines (i.e., communication, social psychology, and sociology) (Ting-Toomey 1999). In particular, the integration of social identity theory, symbolic interactionism, identity negotiation, and relational dialectics is the basis of identity negotiation perspective. The foundation of identity negotiation theory posits that individuals internalize others' perceptions in interactions to develop their group and personal identity (Mead 1934). In other words, self-images and concepts are co-created in human symbolic interactions (McCall and Simmons 1978). Self-images and concepts are constructed on two distinct levels, social identities and personal identities. Any group memberships (e.g., culture, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, class, and disability) comprise a person's social identities (Tajfel 1981; Turner 1985; Turner et al. 1987). Any individual's unique attributes "in relation to (or in comparison [with]) other individuals" (Brewer and Miller 1996, p. 24) are associated with personal identities.

Drawn from these theoretical foundations, identity negotiation theory assumes the self is a product of communication (Ting-Toomey 1999, 2005). Ting-Toomey (2005) observes that identity is "reflective self-images constructed, experienced, and communicated by the individuals within a culture and in a particular interaction situation" (p. 217). Identity consists of primary identities and situational identities (Ting-Toomey 1999). Four identity domains (i.e., cultural, ethnic, gender, and personal) "are viewed as primary identities that exert an important, ongoing impact throughout our lives" (Ting-Toomey 1999, p. 29). Situational identities, which are flexible and unstable from one situation to another, consist of role, relational, facework, and symbolic interaction identities. Accordingly, during communication with others, an individual refines and modifies his or her multiple identities. This transactional communication process is 'negotiation' (Ting-Toomey 2005). Thus, identity negotiation implies a mutual communication activity whereby "at the same time the communicators attempt to evoke their own desired identities in the interaction, they also attempt to challenge or support the others' identities" (Ting-Toomey 2005, p. 217). From this understanding, identity is relational (Jackson 2002; Ting-Toomey 1986, 1989, 1999, 2005). Identity is explanatory in that it provides a way to understand intercultural interactions.

Identity negotiation theory is also drawn from relational dialectics theory (Baxter and Montgomery 1996, 1997, 1998). Ting-Toomey (2005) introduces five identity dialectics. The *security-vulnerability* dialectic assumes that individuals emotionally feel identity security in a culturally familiar context; however, they feel identity vulnerability in a culturally unfamiliar context. The *inclusion-differentiation* dialectic supposes that identity inclusion occurs when individuals feel that their identity membership is positively viewed in interactions. Identity differentiation occurs when individuals view that their identity membership is stigmatized in interactions. The *predictability-unpredictability* dialectic comprises a contradiction that "individuals experience identity trust [or predictability] in interacting with similar others because expected norms and routines occur with a high degree of frequency" (Ting-Toomey 1999, p. 42). Interactions in an unfamiliar and unpredictable climate cause an individual facing identity distrust or unpredictability. The *autonomy-connection* dialectic is a contradiction that individuals develop personal relationships to seek identity connection. They deal with identity autonomy when a relationship separation occurs. The *consistency-change* dialectic assumes that "individuals perceive identity stability [or consistency] in predictable cultural situations and detect identity change or chaos in unpredictable cultural situations" (Ting-Toomey 1999, p. 41). Importantly, all of these aforementioned identity dialectics are constantly being negotiated in communication processes.

Becoming a Gay Man

Individuals are 'becoming gay" in social interactions by adopting homosexuality as a way of life (Plummer 1975). For instance, Troiden (1998) explains that becoming gay "involves the decision to define oneself as homosexual, the learning of homosexual roles, and the decision to live one's adult life as a practicing

homosexual" (p. 262). According to Plummer (1975), boys first go through the sensitization stage in which they deal with social, emotional, and genital same-sex experiences. Then, when boys reach to the adolescence, signification and disorientation take place. In this stage, boys question whether they may be gay or not. The coming out stage occur when boys begin to internalize homosexuality as a way of life during the middle to late adolescence. Lastly, stabilization takes place when they develop their comfort with their homosexuality and commitment to homosexuality as a way of life.

Additionally, Cass (1979, 1984) introduces a gay identity formation that consists of six stages. Cass assumes that individuals start to question whether they may possess the same-sex attraction or not. This is the first stage named, *identity confusion*. In the second stage of *identity comparison*, individuals start to assume that they are likely to be gay by comparing themselves to heterosexuals. Then, in the *identity tolerance* stage, individuals begin to name themselves as gay although they may be still uncomfortable with their non-heterosexuality. The fourth stage is *identity acceptance* that individuals adopt non-heterosexuality as identity and a way of life while they furthermore interact with other gays. The fifth stage called *identity pride* occurs when gays begin to embrace their identity and a way of life. Lastly, *identity synthesis* takes place when gays are comfortable with disclosing their sexual identity to anyone. In this stage, they also begin to perceive that sexual identity is just one aspect of their multiple identities.

Negotiating non-heterosexual identities, however, can become very problematic in a society that stigmatizes homosexuality (Plummer 1981). In other words, becoming gay is not a simplistic process, as the modern gay world exists in a structural foundation about which Simon and Gagnon (1967) say that homosexuality has been historically characterized by rhetoric of sin and rhetoric of mental health. For example, Dank (1971) was concerned with the process of coming out in the gay world. In his study, Dank (1971) learns that becoming gay only takes place in an environmental condition in which the cognitive category of gay identity exists. In particular, the accessibility to informational knowledge about gays and homosexuality play a major role in the communication process of self-identifying as gay. In this view, a man possessing the same-sex attraction in a societal environment in which the cognitive category of gay identity is not present and/or is negatively viewed by others experiences the difficulty dealing with his sexuality. The stigmatization of homosexuality (e.g., sin and mental illness) can become the source of conflicts in one's process of adopting homosexuality as a way of life. Thus, the recent growing circulation of homosexuality as a way of life co-creates and co-shapes the gay community in which one will claim his group (or community) membership to themselves and to others (Dank 1971). Therefore, the process of sexual identity and negotiation must be understood as one's fluid and unstable ongoing identity transformation.

Processes of Presenting Self

Goffman (1959) introduces a sociological perceptive of dramaturgy to talk about the presentation of identity as performance. In particular, social actors perform their

identities in a particular social setting that is constructed by a front stage and a back stage. A front stage is considered as a mask that social actors use to present their identities in the way that they want their audience to perceive who they are. A back stage is where only the social actors exist but the audience does not. The social actors' performances are directed by props at either a front or a back stage. The audience watches them, while they also become the audience for their viewers' play. In this view, Goffman (1959) maintains that "it should be understood that access to the back and front regions of a performance is controlled not only by the performers but by the others" (p. 229). Thus, Goffman (1959) believes that social actors have an ability to choose how to present who they are in interactions according to a particular setting. Goffman emphasizes the psychological processes that an individual uses to deal with his/her personal experience of social norms and values to present who s/he is in interactions.

Performative Aspects of Gender and Sexual Identity Construction

Butler (1990, 1993a, b, 1997) rejects any notion of inner-self in performing identity. Butler emphasizes the interpretation of action as it relates to gender, sexuality, and body from multiple lenses. Butler's view on gender, sexuality, and body is drawn from the Foucault's (1978) view on the history of sexuality. Foucault views that human sexuality has been regulated as a result of maintaining stability of church, promoting the profits of economy, and functioning of sexuality within the emergence of biology and science in the West. Thus, the history of sexuality has been discursively produced through mechanisms of power and knowledge (Foucault 1978).

According to Butler's (1990) work, *Gender Trouble*, the primary assumption of performativity emphasizes that gender is produced and reproduced through the human body's ritual repetition of performing gender norms. Butler (1993a) states that "performativity must be understood not as a singular or deliberate 'act,' but, rather, as the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names" (p. 2). The performativity is "one of the powerful and insidious ways in which subjects are called into being from diffuse social quarters, inaugurated into sociality by a variety of diffuse and powerful interpellations" (Butler 1997, p. 160). Given these perspectives, it is important to note that performativity is a discursive process that social agents practice in a performative aspect of gender to constitute the social and cultural norm of gender, sexuality, and body. Furthermore, Butler's notion of performativity positions gender as an assignment that is socially constructed through the dialectical interplay of the gendered body's domination and subordination.

Butler (1990) views the meanings of heteronormative gendered performativity as discursively defined as they relate to gay and lesbian identities. The dialectical tension between heterosexuality and homosexuality discursively constitute the normative script of gender performativity. For example, Butler (1993b) notes:

> Gender is a kind of imitation for which there is no original; in fact, it is a kind of imitation that produces the very notion of the original as an effect and consequence of the imitation itself. In other words, the naturalistic effects of heterosexualized genders are produced through imitative strategies; what they imitate is an effect. In this sense, the "reality" of heterosexual identities is perfomatively constituted through an imitation that sets itself up as the origin and ground of all imitations (p. 313).

Given this position, the theory assumes that social agents perform their gender identity by imitating the normative script of gender. In order to do so, heterosexuality becomes a necessary performativity to imitate the normative gender, because we live in a society in which one must desire a different gender. Thus, the binary of heterosexuality and homosexuality co-create and co-define what heterosexuality is and what is not. Therefore, the visual inscription of gay and lesbian identities is necessary to constitute the heterosexuality that is the basis of gender.

Research Design and Procedure

In this section, the autoethnography's strengths and limitations will be discussed first. Then, the research protocol of this project will be discussed.

Autoethnography

Ellis and Bochner (2000) define autoethnography as "an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural" (p. 739). Autoethnography requires that "researchers write, interpret, and/or perform their own narratives about culturally significant experiences" (Chase 2008, p. 69). By doing so, autoethnographic texts will create the intersubjective space between the self and others and between individual and community to seek new possibilities in our lives (Holman-Jones 2008).

Several scholars question the use of autoethnography as a research method. For example, Atkinson (1997) opines that "the narratives seem to float in a social vacuum. The voices echo in an otherwise empty world. There is an extraordinary absence of social context, social action, and social interaction" (p. 339). Some also criticize autoethnography as highly self-indulgent, narcissistic, introspective, and individualized (Atkinson 1997; Burnard 2007; Coffey 1999).

Autoethnography, however, becomes a radical way for epistemology to fill a gap of knowledge (Denzin and Lincoln 1994). In particular, researchers can reflect their situated knowledge to interpret social and cultural phenomenon. Also, autoethnography allows researchers to go beyond the boundary of a researcher versus research participants and/or an outsider versus an insider ingrained in the ethnographic tradition (Gergen and Gergen 2001). In this view, "[autoethnography] allow[s] for the production of new knowledge by a unique and uniquely situated researcher, and

offer [s] small-scale knowledge that can inform specific problems and specific situations" (Wall 2006, p. 148). Thus, autoethnography is a method that opens up new possibilities by allowing researchers to explore unanswered questions from different angles.

Procedure

For this analysis, a research question was posed: "how did I first learn about a socially constructed racial category?" According to Denzin's (1997) three essential elements of autoethnography, I first analyze how I perceive my multiple identities. Then, I examine how I perceive my identity negotiation process in my relationships with others. I particularly pay attention to the larger social, cultural, and political context in which my identity negotiation occurs. To facilitate this procedure, I use my personal writing and reflection recorded in my diaries and photographs to clarify my memories of negotiating my identities. I also engage in some conversations with certain individuals such as my relationship partners and close friends to further remember some dramatic events that have influenced my identity negotiation. This motivation is relevant because others may be able to help me clarify my memories and provide me with other perspectives to look at the research topic. In so doing, I code culturally significant meanings of my identity negotiation process.

Through the aforementioned procedure, multi-faceted implications of my identity negotiation process are revealed in this analysis. Diverse ranges of data beyond the research topic emerge because I negotiate the intersection of not only primary but also situational identity domains. For the purpose of this analysis, my Asian-American identity emerges as a major variable. By analyzing personal narratives surrounding this variable, four themes that have influenced my identity negotiation emerge. I will explore the four themes about my cross-national identity transformation of becoming a gay Asian-American man in the following.

Identity Development Process: Prior to Coming to the US

Before coming to the U.S., I was subconsciously aware of my racial category because I had seen people who racially possessed different physical features from me, (e.g., Whites, Blacks, and Latinos to name a few). However, I did not have a deeper understanding of the social construction of race and the racial issues it presented. In other words, I have had more opportunities to negotiate my national Japanese identity. For example, my father's job took my family to Seoul, South Korea where we lived from 1988 to 1992. While living there, between the ages of six and ten, negotiating my Japanese national identity was constantly necessary in my everyday interactions. Due to the tragic history when Japan colonized, controlled, and enslaved Korea between the years of 1908 to 1945, the memory of colonization still plays a barrier in today's Korean-Japanese interpersonal relations. Even today, I recall vividly instances when I played with other Japanese children at the park and some Korean children would throw stones at us because we were

Japanese. In addition, my family sometimes did not receive Japanese products that were ordered due to the fact that some of packages sent from Japan were confiscated by Korean government officials. Moreover, some older people whom I assume experienced the Japanese colonization strongly imposed their feelings of hatred toward us, when we were engaged in everyday activities such as shopping and eating out. As a direct result of my experience living in South Korea, my Japanese national identity further developed. This identity development occurred because my everyday interactions that I had during that time constantly reminded me that I was an outsider from Japan in South Korea.

After returning to Japan, my life within a particular cultural context near Tokyo was dominated by my immersion into my own culture where the majority of the ethnic population is Japanese. This identity negotiation process was privileged as I own the hegemonic cultural/ethnic group identity membership. In this context, my identity development process was heavily influenced by the social construction of Japanese cultural identity. According to Darling-Wolf (2000), Japanese people have preserved their own cultural identity and tradition while at the same time they have historically integrated foreign cultural elements. To cite a couple of examples, Buddhism was brought to Japan from India. One of the Japanese writing systems, Kanji, was adapted from China. The current Japanese educational system was developed and based on the U.S. system after World War II. And, U.S. pop culture can be seen throughout Japan. Despite these foreign cultural influences and adaptations, Japanese people still tend to maintain their own identity, culture, and tradition as opposed to non-Japanese/foreign elements (Darling-Wolf 2000). Having negotiated my identity in the dialectic of Japanese (insider) vs. non-Japanese (outsider), I was not really conscious of my racial category. In other words, owning a dominant Japanese membership, I had no authentic experience of negotiating a socially constructed illusion of race within the intercultural context before coming to America.

I also developed my gay identity along with my Japanese cultural identity. I first discovered my same-sex attraction when I was thirteen years old. At that time, I did not know how to discursively label the feeling due to the absence of public discourse about sexuality. Dube and Savin-Williams (1999) support that conversations about sexuality and sexual behaviors are generally absent and are kept as a private matter in most Asian cultures. Although people around me often said that my persona was very feminine, they also did not link the feminine persona to non-heterosexuality. However, around age fifteen, I began to explore my same-sex attraction toward boys and wanted to perform who I was according to my feelings. I started to talk about these feelings with the heterosexual identified Japanese adults, some of whom I met through my entertainment business connections as I was pursuing a career in acting between the ages of thirteen to seventeen. Also, I met the rest of the adults in London where I took English language classes for two weeks during my high school spring break in 1998. Those adults could be classified as gay friendly, because they were around gays. In this situation, they taught me to discover the term gay in a positive way and helped me name my same-sex attraction. Furthermore, some of them actually took me to gay social gatherings in

Tokyo to help me reach out to the gay community. In this context, I started to negotiate my sexual identity.

My sexual identity development process that took place in the late 1990's was unique and different. Harada (2001) says that the majority of Japanese gay and bisexual men experience socio-psychological problems in negotiating their sexuality. This difficulty is constructed by the importance of the heteronormative family value. In particular, the cultural notion of a patriarchal linkage to pass on the family name to the next generation plays as a normative ideology to become an obstacle among Japanese men in making sense of their same-sex attraction (Chng et al. 2003). I recognize the existence of heterosexism—the "system by which heterosexuality is assumed to be the only acceptable and viable life option" (Blumenfeld and Raymond 1988, p. 226). Heteronormativity has great influence in the Japanese culture—Japan highly privileges heterosexuality. However, the influence of heterosexism was quite minimized in my personal experience. I was around people who were open to gays or were in-group members of the community. I also did not want to be a conformist and become a 'normal' high school student in Japan. Specifically, I was in search of being 'different' by wanting to be an actor, to go outside of Japan, and to speak another language throughout my adolescence. Moreover, I do not remember any instances when others confronted me about my sexuality. Perhaps, no one wanted to argue with me due to my direct verbal communication style in Japanese. Thus, I negotiated my gay Japanese identity in a positive rather than in a negative way by the time I decided to attend a U.S. university.

My Cross-National Identity Transformation

Soon after my arrival in the U.S. in May 2001, I began to learn about the social construction of racial categories when I lived in a dormitory during my first year of college in Southern California. This racial awareness is still vivid in my memory today. For example, on my first day at the cafeteria, I witnessed most students sitting down together with other students of the same color. Even through my foreign eyes, it was very clear that each racial group of students seemed to have selected their own dining area. I felt uncomfortable with the nonverbal communication that divided people based on their skin color at the cafeteria. I decided to take my meal to my room on my first day in the dormitory. At that time, I could not articulate what I had witnessed in the cafeteria due to my lack of understanding of the racial rhetoric. However, as a newcomer I still remember how shocked I was to not see many interracial friendships in the cafeteria. This was surprising to me, because the U.S.'s outward image portrayed abroad is that of a melting pot and a free and accepting nation. I had assumed that the U.S. was a nation in which individuals from different backgrounds lived together in harmony. Thus, observing the interaction at the cafeteria destroyed my fantasy about diversity and multiculturalism; at the same time this questioning of what I witnessed at the cafeteria became the beginning for me to learn about racial category.

I continued to encounter the multiple interpersonal communication contexts that caused me to think about my racial category. During my first semester at college in

Southern California, in the process of developing friendships with non-Asian classmates, I heard comments such as, “you are very funny and outgoing compared to other Asians” and “you are different from other Asians.” Some of my Caucasian-American classmates even said that “you are very outgoing, even though Asians are usually geeks.” Since I am talkative regardless of speaking English with foreign accent, I was told that “your English is much better than other Asian students.” Listening to these comments generated more confusion about my identity. At that time, I did not know what they meant. So, I kept thinking, “where are these ideas about me coming from?” In this situation, I asked my Caucasian-American roommate why he thought that the classmates made such comments about who I am. He said, “Asians are typically perceived as quiet, serious, submissive, and hard-working in the U.S.”

Presently, I can reflect on the moment described above as my first initial contact with the model minority. Asians-Americans have been socially and culturally depicted as the model minority, that they are ‘successful’, ‘hard-working,’ ‘uncomplaining,’ and ‘hononary whites’ (e.g., Chou 2008; Kawai 2005; Zhang 2010). This model minority stereotype “might be the most pervasive and dominant stereotype about Asian-Americans today” (Zhang 2010, p. 23). In this sense, my outgoing, talkative, and loud communication style did not conform to my aforementioned non-Asian classmates’ perceptions of Asian identity (i.e., being shy and quiet). In other words, I might not appear to be shy and quiet to them, so that the performative aspects of my identity construction conflicted with their stereotype about Asians. At that same time, I came to realize that non-Asian people that I came across in aforementioned college setting characterized me as a gay man first. Madon (1997) suggests that the stereotypes of gay men are feminine, outspoken, sociable, talkative, and concerned about appearance. My Caucasian-American heterosexual roommate told me that my communication characteristics, my flamboyant behavior, and my interest in fashion clearly matched the stereotypical media representation of gay men. He often said, “You are so gay,” to highlight who I am and what I do. In this situation, I started to experience discomfort with the Asian-American identity category because this social construct did not resonate with me in expressing who I was.

Questioning the Asian-American stereotypes, I experienced that the homogeneous categorization of Asians and Asian-Americans represents who I am. For example, during the first semester of my sophomore year in 2002, students in my public speaking class were asked to participate in survey research. The survey required participants to check their racial backgrounds. There were only five categories, (i.e., European-Americans, Asian-Americans, African-Americans, Latin-Americans, and Others). I was uncomfortable to check the ‘Asian-American’ box, because I was neither a U.S. citizen nor American. I was an international student from Japan. So, I said to the survey researcher who looks Caucasian-American that “I am Japanese and not Asian-American.” Then, my Caucasian-American classmate joined the conversation and said, “What are you talking about? You are Asian-American as long as you are in this country.”

This was the vivid moment when I realized that it does not really matter whether an individual of Asian ancestry was born in the U.S. or in a foreign country.

Nakayama (2004) maintains that the racial rhetoric of Asian body and appearance communicates “foreign-ness” in the U.S. This Asian body politic erases uniqueness and differences among diverse members of individuals who appear to be Asians. Such racial categories will never ascribe who an individual is. In other words, the social construction of racial category is ultimately incapable of defining an individual for himself or herself. Therefore, the social construction of Asian-American racial category became a conflict in my identity negotiation process.

Performative Aspects of Gay Asian American Identity Construction

This discomfort with the racial category was constantly reinforced through my social interactions—especially within a gay community in West Hollywood, California in which I was located because racially prescribed stereotypes about Asian Americans are embedded in these communications. For example, Yep et al. (2001) assert that the discourse about Asian-American male sexuality is mostly absent throughout the mainstream gay communities. Han (2006) continues to say that “gay Asian men are virtually non-existent in the gay media” (p. 14). Fung (1998) further maintains that “Asians are largely absent from the images produced by both the political and commercial sectors of the mainstream gay and lesbian communities” (pp. 117–118). Specifically, Fung views that gay Asian men are also consuming the mainstream gay porn targeting White/Caucasian men, because they are more available and well circulated. In this contextual condition, I also experience that the image of the Asian body and sexuality was invisible in the aforementioned community.

As negotiating the absence of the discourse about Asian body and sexuality in the aforementioned context, I began to question whether or not I can ever belong to the mainstream gay communities in which I perceived that most members are Caucasian. Haldeman (2007) supports “the most visible members of the gay community and its norms for interpersonal relating are Euro-American” (p. 76). My feeling of marginalization was exacerbated when I discovered that most gay Asian men went to the gay Asian night club for their social gatherings in Los Angeles, California. I was surprised that the racial segregation occurs in the gay communities. At the same time, this racial rhetoric caused me to question whether the social location of being a gay Asian-American man means being marginalized within the context of another marginalization—or double-marginalized. Han (2006) mentions the following:

> For Asian Americans, they cannot be ‘gay’ because their ‘role’ in society dictates that they value family and tradition over other concerns. For gays, they cannot be anything other than white because to do so is to interject ‘non-gay’ issues such as race into a dialogue built around equality for ‘sexual’ minorities (p. 21).

In this sense, “[t]o be Asian and gay means facing prejudice in both communities” (Poon 2006, p. 39). Thus, being in a gay community context that I was surrounded by non-Asian men, I began to question whether or not my social ‘reality’ was

constructed by the hierarchal power structure of racial category that reinforces the White/Caucasian racial identity as the normative gay membership. Therefore, the invisibility and marginalization of gay Asian men that I witnessed in my social context became very problematic for me in negotiating my multiple identities.

Despite the invisibility of gay Asian men in the mainstream gay communities, certain prescribed stereotypes about gay Asian men have been produced and reproduced in my everyday interactions with non-Asian gay and bisexual men throughout my American life in several cities (e.g., New York City, Los Angeles, Orange County, San Francisco, and Washington DC) between 2001 and 2010. For example, the contemporary cultural image of Asian men is generally being emasculated as opposed to the hegemonic masculinity heavily drawn from Whiteness (Chesebro 2001; Nakayama 2002; Phua 2007). Nakayama (2002) supports that "earlier fears of Asians as sexual demons have given way to more 'domesticated' images of Asians" (p. 94). In this societal condition, the prescribed stereotypes about gay Asian men are feminine, passive, and subservient (Ayres 1999; Chesebro 2001; Cho 1998; Han 2006, 2008, 2010; Phua 2007; Poon 2006). Han (2008) critically analyzes these stereotypes by saying that "because gay White men make an 'investment in Whiteness,' they eradicate whatever male privilege gay Asian men may have by relegating to the feminine position" (p. 20).

Just like the aforementioned stereotypes, many others whom I have came across perceive me as feminine, due to my "skinny little Asian boy" (Han 2010, p. 83) physical appearance. In addition, I present myself with certain feminine mannerisms (i.e., fashion, kinetics, and vocalism) that do not conform to the hegemonic masculinity. This links to what Phua (2007) says that "some gay Asian-American men actively acknowledge their feminine roles" (p. 914) for their strategy in mate selection. Then, he continues to mention that "these gay Asian-Americans tend to reject their masculinity and emphasize their femininity as marketable traits in mate selection" (p. 914). Similarly, Han (2006) asserts that some gay Asian men adopt femininity as a communion strategy to survive in their same-sex dating and relationship market. In this sense, in terms of my physical appearance, I can be categorized as one of these gay Asian men who emphasize on their femininity. Thus, I comfortably own my feminine physical appearance; however, I have had some difficulty in processing the domesticated image of gay Asian men as passive and subservient.

Regardless of their ethnic and cultural backgrounds (i.e., Black/African-Americans, White/European-Americans, Latino-Americans, and multicultural), most non-Asian men with whom I went out on dates wondered why I was not passive and subservient despite my feminine physical appearance. For example, when I was doing the rest of my undergraduate work in San Francisco, CA in 2003, I went on a dinner with "R" who is seven years older than me. "R" said to me, "why are you interested in going to a graduate school if you just want to marry a man who takes care of you?, and "are you going to stay home and take care of the home if we marry?" He basically characterized me as if I want to become a 'house boy' according to the heteronormative gendered feminine stereotype. Also, when I was doing my graduate work in New York City in 2006, I was casually dating "D" who is two years older than me and was also doing his graduate work. Whenever I

expressed my opinions in regular conversations with "D", he often said "why can't you be just one of the cute 'fem' Asian boys instead of being so assertive and opinionated?" Moreover, "A" whom I was dating in New York City in 2007 said that "you look cute when you just listen." These comments that I received clearly reminded me that I was not a feminine gay Asian men performing passivity and subservience conforming to their imaginary illusions.

Whenever I encountered situations similar to aforementioned instances, I always wondered "why do I have to perform being passive and subservient just because I look feminine?" Han (2006) points out the following:

> Because gay Asian men are racialized and gendered, their predicted role performance involves becoming 'feminine' counterpart to the 'masculine' gay white male. Much like the way that women are rewarded for playing the feminine role, gay Asian men are 'rewarded' by the dominant gay community for performing their prescribed gender roles (p. 17).

In this view, I was not 'rewarded' for my feminine role because my identity performance, which breaks passive and subservient stereotypes, was not perfect. In other words, as a feminine looking gay Asian man, I should have been passive and subservient to play a 'feminine' role that satisfies the Western imagined stereotype of gay Asian men. Thus, the dialectic of gender (masculinity vs. femininity) determined by the social construction of racial category has been playing a major role in my everyday interactions with other gay and bisexual men.

The racialized and gendered performative aspects of gay Asian male identity are also communicated through another stereotype. Ayres (1999) maintains that "mirroring this feminine image is the stereotypical Asian/Caucasian relationship" (p. 51). In particular, there is a stereotype that gay Asian men who are younger, feminine, poorer, and sexually passive look for a White man who is older, masculine, wealthier, and sexually assertive (Ayres 1999). Phua (2007) justifies this phenomenon of Asian men's desire for white men by saying that gay Asian men intend to compensate for their emasculation and to locate them as closer to the hegemonic masculinity.

This stereotype of the Asian and White same-sex couplings became a source of conflict in my identity negotiation. Most people across all cultural groups who I met assumed that my partner was White and/or presumed that I was only interested in White men for dating and relationships. For instance, when I was with my ex-partner for two years in San Francisco between December, 2003 and December, 2005, without even asking me, most friends of mine across all cultural groups assumed that he was White. When I disclosed who he was, they were shocked to find out that he was Black/African-American. My gay Caucasian male acquaintance in San Francisco said, "You have a 'euro' looking fashion style, not a 'hip-hop' dressing style. So I would never assume your boyfriend is Black if you did not tell me." His comment revealed that he had not seen any gay Asian and Black interracial couples yet, just like some scholarly works (e.g., Ayres 1999; Chesebro 2001; Cho 1998; Han 2006, 2008, 2010; Phua 2007; Poon 2000, 2006) show the normative pattern of Asian men wanting to be white men. At the same time, his comment really shocked me. I thought, "what does my clothing style have to do

with whomever I am in a relationship with?" and "why do I have to dress like a rapper to date a man who is of Black/African-American cultural background?" This question strongly emerged within myself, because my partner at that time was a professional and did not dress like a 'rapper.' Coming from Japan, I had seen some Japanese men who dress like a 'rapper' due to what Cornyetz (1994) attributes to the recent emergence of the hip-hop phenomenon in Japan. In this sense, I always thought that dressing like 'hip-hop' fashion style was a personal choice and was not a racial choice. Yet, I knew that the hip-hop music was clearly part of the African-American identity, culture, and tradition. Thus, experiencing others' reactions to my interracial and intercultural relationship, I began to feel uncomfortable with the Asian/White male same-sex coupling pattern.

Being in a same-sex interracial and intercultural relationship, I needed to negotiate the discursive label that others uttered "Oh you love 'big' Black guys." Some of both gay and heterosexual acquaintances across all cultural backgrounds perceived that I was in the interracial relationship because I objectified the Black male body as a fetish. They said to me that "once you go to Black, you never come back" to insinuate their perception of the hyper-sexualized Black male body image with a large endowment. Jackson (2006) notes that Black masculinity is discursively scripted as a lusty sexual potency. Living in this racialized society, I was uncomfortable with how others made sense of my interracial relationship according to the hypersexualized Black male body image. I questioned whether or not my aforementioned acquaintances would have made the comments if my partner was White or Asian. Also, I did not understand why those individuals could not think of other relationship elements beyond racial category that motivated me to be in the interracial and intercultural relationship. In other words, I was surprised at them making sense of my relationship from the racialized framework, by omitting the importance of emotional connections. Thus, I constantly negotiated the socially constructed illusion of racial category in developing who I am, while I was involved in the Asian/Black interracial same-sex relational context.

The rhetorical image of gay Asian/White relationship norm also appeared in my everyday conversations. My gay and bisexual male acquaintances of color (e.g., African-Americans and Latino-Americans) in New York and Washington, DC constantly asked me a question "why do Asians prefer Whites?" They perceived that initiating social conversations with gay Asian men in the gay venues is very difficult due to the fear of rejection. For example, Phua (2007) asserts that "[s]ome gay Asian-Americans will not even include someone in their mate consideration set if that man is not White" (p. 915). Han (2006) also says that "because being with a gay white men is seen by gay Asian men as being favorable to being with other men of color, [gay Asian men] learn to behave in the ways that will allow them to be desirable to white men" (p. 17). In this sense, some gay Asian men may act on not acknowledging the presence of non-White gay men in the social gathering contexts. However, this stereotypical image of gay Asian men does not signify who I am, because I value interacting with people over identity differences (e.g., culture, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, national origin, class, etc.). In this sense, negotiating the performative aspects of gay Asian-American male identity construction became a barrier in coming to grips with my multiple identities.

Internalized Racism

Being uncomfortable with the aforementioned image of gay Asian men, I chose to interact with non-Asians in gay male centered social settings in which I was located. I avoided associating with my fellow Asian men in such contexts so that I could prove that I was better than or different from other Asian men to escape from the rhetoric of gay Asian male identity. Pyke and Dang (2003) maintain that internalized racism is an adaptive response to the force of racism that non-dominant members use to "justify the oppression of their group with a belief in their own inferiority" (p. 151). In this sense, associating with gay and bisexual men who are not of Asian cultural and ethnic backgrounds was the way for me to empower my social location and move from invisibility to visibility. In so doing, I tried to justify my difficulties of assimilating and/or integrating myself into the mainstream gay communities that I perceived most members of to be White/Caucasian. Thus, internalized racism influenced how I tried to make sense of my multiple identities throughout my American life experience.

Being in the higher educational context, however, I have been privileged in making sense of my internalized racism by researching communication. That is to say, my educational privilege became a site from which I have decreased the level of internalized racism within me. In particular, being exposed to a variety of scholarly literature as it relates to culture and identity negotiation has provided me with an opportunity to recognize and challenge my discomfort with racial category in general and gay Asian-American identity in particular. Reading Asian-American identity- related literature, especially, has eased my discomfort with racial category because learning that I am not the only one who feels the way I feel about the Asian-American identity healed my internalized racism. Also, learning different standpoints and viewpoints of other non-dominant group members clearly opened my eyes, as I felt a strong sense of similarities with their identity negotiation stories. Moreover, teaching and researching work as a coping strategy has further healed the difficulty of processing my racial category along with gender and sexual identities. Hoping that my role as a researcher may contribute to advancing the scholarly knowledge of intercultural communication particularly motivates me to achieve satisfaction in my own life. From these scholarly activities, I have been able to negotiate my multiple identities in powerful and positive ways.

Although I have begun to identify as a gay Asian-American man, my identity negotiation process remains ongoing. I negotiate and renegotiate my performative aspects of gay Asian-American male identity construction in communication with others. Adams and Kimmel (1997) mention that non-White gay men and lesbian women tend to report racial category-based discriminatory treatment in gay and lesbian community contexts at bars, clubs, and other social gatherings. A Caucasian gay man recently asked me at a gay bar in Washington, DC, "why is an ethnic person here at this bar?" Also, another Caucasian gay man called me at a gay owned restaurant in Washington DC, "Hi, little Miss Saigon," in order to communicate his attraction for gay Asian men. I was still bewildered at these moments, because the situation was a reminder of my struggle in negotiating my multiple identities. Thus,

the journey of negotiating and renegotiating my multiple identities is an ongoing process in my social interactions.

Discussion and Implications

This autoethnographic exploration has analyzed my personal experience about my identity cross-national transformation from a gay Japanese man to a gay Asian-American man. This personal narrative indicates the unique and particular communication challenges that the cross-national transition from Japan to the U.S. places me in a dilemma wherein I must constantly negotiate my multiple identities within a racialized society. As I think of my daily experiences during my stay in the U.S., beginning from day one, my racial category, along with gender and sexual identities, has been a source of conflict in my communication processes of negotiating my multiple identities. This is because I was not aware of the social construction of racial category prior to coming to the U.S. The major contextual difference in my identity negotiation is that I am a Japanese in Japan and I am an Asian-American in the U.S. In other words, I am a cultural/ethnic majority in Japan and a cultural/ethnic minority in the U.S. Thus, my identity negotiation difficulties are a direct and proximate cause of the racial ideology.

It is important to address that my multiple identities may further transform in the future, as identity is an unstable and fluid concept. In their study, Operario et al. (2008) learns that some of their Asian Pacific-Islander gay participants see their ethnic identity first and their sexual identity second. As illustrated in this analysis, at this time, I see my sexual identity first and my cultural/ethnic identity second. Also, I label myself rather with the Asian American ethnic identity than my Japanese national identity. However, this current priority of my multiple identities can change over time in the future, as my surroundings are constantly changing. Poon (2006) maintains that "however salient, ethnicity, race, and sexual orientation are not the only factors mediating our everyday life experiences as gay Asians" (p. 45). Therefore, there is a possibility that other primary and situational identity domains that have not been discussed in this analysis may become more important to me than now. If I ever return to Japan permanently, my cultural, ethnic, and national identity as Japanese may become more solid in my identity construction than now. Thus, my identity negotiation story discussed in this analysis should not be understood as permanently stable and fixed.

In this analysis, I have also learned that writing the autoethnographic piece is a far more complicated process than it may appear to be. This analysis focuses on certain aspects of my daily identity negotiation process experience. It relates to my negotiation of the social construction of racial category in particular. However, I continuously make sense of my multiple identities as a gay Asian-American man when I communicate with others. While writing this piece, I constantly questioned why the social construction of racial category was more problematic than gender and sexual identities in my identity negotiation.

This question provided an opportunity for me to reflect on a couple of possibilities. For instance, the cities where I lived in the U.S. were major cities, (i.e.,

New York City, San Francisco, and Washington DC). In these areas, the gay venues were easily accessible in a way that I enjoy expressing my gay male identity. Also, I have never been in a situation wherein I was facing possible physical attacks due to my stereotypical gay male performance. Moreover, when people try to impose on me their heteronormative beliefs and values, I do not intend to internalize heterosexism as I have my own support system including my parents and friends. Thus, I believe that the social construction of racial category became more problematic than any other identity domains in my cross-national identity transformation process.

While writing this manuscript, some critical questions emerged. I view that the research community must pay attention to investigate the issue regarding the same-sex 'color to color' relational arrangement among gay and bisexual men. Most scholarly literature regarding gay Asian American men (e.g., Ayres 1999; Chesebro 2001; Cho 1998; Han 2006, 2008, 2010; Phua 2007; Poon 2000, 2006) suggests that they are mostly interested in developing the intimate relationship with White men. As a participant-observer, however, I have seen several gay Asian-American men who are generally interested in developing relationships with non-White men (e.g., African-American, Asian-American, Latino-American, Pacific-American, and Multiculturals) in U.S. metropolitan cities (e.g., Los Angeles, New York, San Francisco, and Washington DC). I have had some ethnographic conversations with these gay Asian men. Most of them feel that they want to be with non-White men because they share the feeling of marginalization as gay men of color in the White-centered mainstream gay communities. Thus, since the National Research Council projections predict that the Latino and Asian population in the U.S. will triple by the year of 2050 due to immigration (Smith and Edmonston 1997), the numbers of gay male intercultural relationships that do not involve White subjects may continue to grow in the diverse and multicultural American context. In other words, it may be no longer useful as a way to look at the gay male intercultural relationships from the lens of Whiteness. Therefore, studying the influence of the change of American's racial boundaries as it relates to the gay male 'color to color' coupling patterns is important.

Also, I observe a possible identity divide between American-born and foreign-born gay Asians. There may be a hierarchal power structure among gay Asian/Asian-American male identity based on the place of birth. For example, I have encountered the identity term, Fresh off the Boat (FOB). This term implies foreign-born Asians who act and behave too ethnically (Pyke and Dang 2003). In other words, an Asian person is not Americanized enough since he or she performs 'foreignness' that includes speaking English with Asian accent. Apparently, I am a 'FOB' gay Asian-American man. However, American born Asians in general and gay Asian men in particular whom I came across did not impose their 'FOB' negative attitudes on me during their interactions with me. Some of them actually mentioned that I am outside of the FOB definition, as they perceived that I perform somewhat more Americanized behaviors. Perhaps, my privilege of being in higher education allows me to move beyond the identity boundary constructed by the term, FOB. Thus, I posit that researching the rhetoric of FOB among gay Asian-American men may further advance our understanding of how the social construction of racial

category is negotiated along with gender and sexuality as it relates to the cross-cultural transition.

Lastly, this analysis illustrates my struggle in negotiating my multiple identities. However, I do not intend to present this analysis in a way that I am a victim of oppression. For example, Poon (2006) asserts the following:

> Together with a discourse of multiculturalism that promotes ethnic-racial diversity, global capitalism has transformed this [Asian racial] identity from being stigmatized to being celebrated, turning into a commodity—an Asian 'lifestyle.' This commodification has not only changed the perception of Asians in the West, but also created new possibilities (p. 47).

Coming from Japan, I must admit that my national origin has often played a positive role in developing my personal relationships with certain individuals because they are very interested in Japanese culture. I observe that their curiosities in Japanese culture occur due to the recent celebration of Japanese pop-culture (e.g., animation, cartoons, food, fashion, music, and movies). A diverse range of people that I came across in New York City between 2006 and 2010 were very aware of modern Japanese pop culture. In this sense, I am aware that emphasizing my Asian-American cultural identity and/or my Japanese national identity sometimes becomes a way for me to successfully manage my interactions. However, I still observe the dialectic of East vs. West deeply embedded in the role that Orientalism plays in such communication contexts of mine. Thus, future studies should focus on "multiple" realities of the gay Asian-American identity construction.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I hope that this autoethnographic narrative serves as a critical intervention to further create a space for dialogue about gay Asian-American male identity. Poon (2006) maintains that "[t]oday, gay Asians have become increasingly diverse not only ethnically, but also ideologically, and do not necessarily share common interests or even experiences of being gay and Asian" (p. 48). Given this view, I strongly maintain that research must continue to focus on the gay Asian-American male identity construction, as their social experiences are unique and different. Although the number of gay Asian-American males in the population is smaller than that of other cultural groups in the U.S., this does not mean that we should ignore their social realities.

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