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Journal Committed to Social Change on Race and Ethnicity

The Journal of the National Conference on Race and Ethnicity in American Higher Education

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Journal Committed to Social Change on Race and Ethnicity
Volume 1, Issue 1 | 2015

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“There’s a Korean on TV!” Finding Connection, Community and Citizenship in “Angry Asian America”

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I have a curious early memory that has defined my lifelong consumption, criticism and celebration of popular culture through an Asian American lens. This definitive childhood moment is buoyed by an unlikely, awkward premise from the fourth season of *Diff'rent Strokes*, one of my favorite TV shows at the time. In the episode, titled *Hello Daddy*, a young Korean man shows up at the doorstep of the penthouse, claiming to be the illegitimate son of patriarch Phil Drummond. Turns out, Mr. Drummond might have fathered a child with a former flame – a Korean country gal – while serving in the Korean War. Sitcom high jinks ensue, as the family attempts to untangle the messy, *hilarious* web of wartime paternity.

It is not a particularly good episode. However, it was the first time I could ever recall seeing Korean characters – someone who looked like me, shared my family’s background – on a television show. It was an exciting, delightful surprise. When they popped up on screen, I leapt from my spot on the living room rug and ran to find someone in the house who could share in my excitement. “There’s a Korean on TV!” (My grandmother was nonplussed.) The moment left an indelible mark on my memory, not least because moments like it were few and far between throughout my childhood (and frankly, most of my adult life too).

Ironically, neither Keone Young nor Nobu McCarthy, the actors who played the Korean characters, were actually Korean. But my eager reaction to their mere presence

on the show expressed an early longing to see myself reflected somewhere, anywhere in popular culture. For this young viewer, in that moment, their part in this silly storyline offered a small, simple validation that my Korean American identity and experience were not being lived out in isolation: there was a spot for me in the spaces that mattered, and my story was not written invisible ink. Much later, I would realize that I did not have to wait in front of a glowing screen for someone else to tell my story.

Like many young people, college was an important formative period for my burgeoning sense of racial, ethnic and cultural empowerment. Inspired by the texts and lessons of Asian American Studies, I embraced “Asian American” as a political identity. More than just a box I checked off on forms, “Asian American” became a journey of self, struggle and community – a journey I am still on today.

Looking back, I started my blog “Angry Asian Man” as a way to document this journey. Sparked by ethnic studies and fueled by the born-again fire of Asian American identity, I just wanted a place to write down all the thoughts and observations swirling around in my head, and carved out a small corner on the web to give shelter to these ideas. I wrote, from an unapologetic Asian American perspective, about things I was seeing in the media, reported and reacted to current events, and offered commentary on the representation of Asians in pop culture (and the paltry lack thereof). If that infamous episode of *Diff'rent Strokes* had aired in the era of Angry Asian Man, I can guarantee I would have had more than a few things to say.

As I tapped out my website’s first few lines of rudimentary HTML code, it did not occur to me that anyone would actually read what I was writing. Maybe some friends, family and a few casual internet stumblers, but that would probably be it. There was no

master plan or grand design to take it any further than a place to express myself. At the time, I did not even know the activity I was engaging in was referred to as “blogging.” (The term existed, but had not yet entered the vernacular.) Had Twitter, Facebook, or other social media publishing platforms existed at the time, it is likely I would have simply channeled my efforts into one of those outlets. It certainly would have been much easier than building and maintaining a website from scratch.

Not long after the launch – more like an unceremonious nudge, actually – of *Angry Asian Man* onto the world wide web, it became apparent that my blog was reaching more than just a few of those casual internet stumblers I had originally envisioned. I began hearing from readers with words of encouragement, thanking me for speaking out. The traffic ticker reflected a growing readership from all over the country. I also received a considerable amount of hate mail. Clearly, the blog had struck a nerve. Emboldened by the unexpected response, but also by a sense of purpose, I kept writing.

Over a dozen years later, I am still writing, and along the way I have found an audience and a professional calling. *Angry Asian Man* is now one of the most widely-read news/culture/opinion websites covering the Asian American community. At cocktail parties, I usually introduce myself vaguely as a “writer” or “blogger,” but depending on when I am asked, and who is asking, I also find myself playing the part of journalist, activist, critic, cheerleader, gossip and/or town crier. It is been a gradual and sometimes reluctant process to embrace these roles, in large part because I did not set out wanting or expecting any of them, but I have recognized the privilege, power and responsibility of wielding this platform. It has given me a voice to tell my Asian American story.

Most unexpectedly, also most importantly, I have discovered a community. Somewhere embedded in the hours upon hours that went into the research, writing and publishing of *Angry Asian Man*, it turns out I had also been laying the groundwork for a community, of sorts – a loyal, dedicated readership I have affectionately dubbed “Angry Asian America.”

I do not have a firm demographic profile of this readership. Many are among the previously mentioned internet stumblers, who perhaps entered a fortuitous combination of search terms, navigated their way to my blog, and connected with content that kept them coming back. Many are high school and college students who, like me many years before, are exploring their own burgeoning or renewed Asian American political identity and refer to *Angry Asian Man* as a resource. Over the years, I have had numerous interactions with readers who professed that they first became fans of the blog while in college, when they “really got into being Asian American.” I have also frequently heard from students who initially learned of *Angry Asian Man* because the blog was assigned as required reading for an ethnic studies course (bless you, professors), but continued to be regular readers long after their classes concluded.

What I could not have anticipated when I first hit “upload” in 2001, and have only begun to realize in the later years since, is that for many readers, *Angry Asian Man* serves as an online hub, rallying point and gateway to a broader Asian American community not bound by geography. The blog began as an expression of my own identity and experiences, but it has expanded to serve others seeking connection, insight and citizenship in “Angry Asian America.”

My stated goals for the blog are to inform, entertain and activate. From a basic content standpoint, Angry Asian Man acts as a news source, providing updates on current events and other ephemera aggregated from the Asian American community, which is too often rendered invisible or relegated to the periphery in mainstream media. In many ways, the blog speaks to that young, marginalized TV fan, searching for meaning and reflection in a silly episode of *Different Strokes*. Rather than waiting in anticipation or asking permission to be seen and heard, I am telling my own story, starting a conversation and provoking a response.

The thing about running a blog called Angry Asian Man is that everyone expects you to be that guy. I have never been that guy. In person, many seem just a little bit disappointed to discover that I am not a particularly angry person (whatever that is supposed to look like). But “Angry Asian Man” is not an avatar. It is a provocation.

In a culture that too often marginalizes Asian American experiences and silences our voices, the very idea of “Angry Asian” anything stands in defiance to the destructive expectation that Asian Americans are supposed to be passive, willing subjects just along for the ride. It is okay to stand up. It is okay to speak out. It is okay to get angry.

Over time, I have settled into a few personal guiding editorial principles for Angry Asian Man: write content that I would want to read, serve and respect my community, and ignore the haters. Still, my blog is just one voice of many, and I am aware of the limitations of this platform. I have never pretended to be objective, and I have certainly never claimed to speak as representative of all things Asian American – a perilously convenient label for a group too diverse, that spans too many histories, experiences and identities to be pinned on any single perspective.

That is the thing about community. I cannot do this on my own – I do not want to, and I do not have to. As I enter the fifteenth year of writing and running *Angry Asian Man*, I can only hope that my work inspires and provokes a stream of Asian American voices in online spaces and beyond to continue to tell the stories of our community.