



EDITOR'S FORUM

Has Asian American Studies Failed?

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In late December 2011, I uploaded a post to my blog titled “Has Asian American Studies Failed?”¹ The immediate impetus for my post was an article in the *New York Times* that contained some shockingly ignorant statements about the internment of Japanese Americans. But it turned into a longer piece that took in the “Tiger Mom” controversy and other media depictions (or distortions) of Asian Americans. A common theme in these misrepresentations of Asian Americans was that most of them could have been avoided if the authors had possessed even the most basic understanding of what’s taught every day in introductory Asian American studies courses. The question I found myself asking was, why, after more than four decades of Asian American studies, wasn’t there a wider public understanding of the most elementary lessons of our field? Had we fallen short in our goal of shifting the racial discourse around Asians in the United States?

Initially, I didn’t think of the post as much more than a cranky rant by a frustrated Asian Americanist. But the topic, it seemed, touched a nerve. The post attracted dozens of comments on my blog and on Facebook and was widely reposted by other Asian Americanists. It was mentioned in a plenary session at the 2012 AAAS conference. It even caught the attention of prominent blogger Angry Asian Man, whose inclusion of the post in his “Read These Blogs” roundup garnered thousands of page views for the piece.

If I were to sum up the desire behind the post in a single phrase, it would be the desire for a more *public* role for Asian American studies. Our field has achieved remarkable successes as an academic institution: we have our own professional organization with its own journal and annual conference, Asian American studies programs can be found in colleges across the country (though their existence is always precarious), and a younger generation of scholars is renewing the field

and pushing it in vibrant directions. Yet all this scholarly activity seems to have had a limited impact on the broader public discourse around race in America.

In a follow-up post,² I tried to distinguish my argument from the frequently heard claim that Asian American studies needs to return to its “activist roots.” I think every Asian Americanist has participated in some version of the latter debate at some point. But I think it’s possible to honor our field’s activist roots by refusing the kind of thinking that sets up a sharp divide between scholarship and activism, between what we do in the classroom and in our offices every day and the “real work” of politics. What I’m arguing for instead is taking the scholarship and teaching we are already doing—in a space that generations of activists have fought to establish—and projecting it more actively into the public sphere, where it has the potential to transform public discourse on race.

Part of the reason I think the “activist roots” impulse is no longer adequate is that the context of Asian American studies and Asian American community is now quite different. Younger Asian Americans are now as likely to respond to national, media-driven controversies as they are to conditions within their own local communities. As I mentioned in my blog post, the notorious “Asians in the Library” video posted by UCLA student Alexandra Wallace was one example of such a controversy. I’d been inclined to ignore the uproar over the video, but when my students invited me to a discussion they’d organized, I realized that the controversy provided them with a window into their own struggles with racism, from their hometowns to campus. At the same time, it was their first exposure to some of the stereotypes and contexts that lay behind those experiences—and it was a moment where the insights of Asian American studies could help them understand that their own experiences of racism were not isolated ones. Asian Americanists need to be more engaged with such events, and more proactive in responding. If we aren’t out there with bloggers, social media mavens, and other cultural first responders, our voices aren’t likely to be heard at all, and we have little chance of pushing these kinds of debates forward onto new ground.

My original post included a list of suggestions for making Asian American studies more public:

- **Popularize** the insights of our field for a wider audience
- **Look outward** toward “mainstream” audiences
- **Advocacy:** rapid response to public controversies involving Asian Americans
- Cultivate **public intellectuals** among the ranks of Asian Americanists

I joked about creating a “rapid response team” of Asian Americanists who would be at the ready to hit back at media racism or political scapegoating with a solid dose of Asian American studies.

Of course, less than two months after I made my post, the unimaginable happened: Linsanity! The meteoric rise of Jeremy Lin, achieving a level of basketball stardom unprecedented for an Asian American, pushed Asian American identity to the center of American popular culture. We saw the curious spectacle of sportscasters carefully emphasizing that Lin was “Chinese or Taiwanese American,” assertions and denials that Lin had been overlooked due to racism, debates over whether it was appropriate to honor Lin with fortune cookies or Chinese takeout references. The discourse around Lin moved almost overnight into uncharted waters. Most Americans simply had no idea how to understand an Asian American public figure of Jeremy Lin’s magnitude.

This vacuum opened up a space for those of us who thought about these kinds of issues for a living. In the rapid-fire pace of commentary around Lin, Asian American academics joined the ranks of crazed fandom, madly blogging, tweeting, and posting on Facebook. For the first time that I can remember, major media outlets actually turned to Asian Americanists for help in understanding the phenomenon of Linsanity. To name just a few examples, I wrote a piece for CNN.com on “the Jeremy Lin Effect” and the firing of an ESPN writer over an offensive headline about Lin; sociologist Oliver Wang provided a roundup of Asian American responses to Lin for the *Los Angeles Times*; and erin Khuê Ninh contributed a piece to ESPN that touched on Vincent Chin, visual culture, and the basic tenets of Asian American studies.

If the media turned to us, it was largely out of a need to feed the insatiable desire for Jeremy Lin commentary. But now that that door has been opened, there’s good reason to hope it will remain open. Whether or not Lin continues to be a star, his rise shifted the discourse around Asian Americans and provided an opportunity for us to bring the lessons of Asian American studies to a wider public. As Linsanity unfolded, I saw new links being made among academics, journalists, bloggers, and a broad audience of young Asian Americans ecstatic over Lin’s rise. It’s that energy that I hope we can capture in propelling Asian American studies to a more prominent public role. If six months ago I was talking about how Asian American studies had failed, Jeremy Lin may have given us the opportunity to save it—if we seize the chance.