

# Blogging while angry: the sustainability of emotional labor in the Asian American blogosphere

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## Abstract

The Asian American blogosphere has developed to encompass a variety of voices regularly providing readers with news items, opinions, and personal narratives of life in Asian America. In this article I investigate the relationship between emotion and activism in order to better understand the potential for using blogs as part of a sustainable social movement, as well as to theorize the kind of labor that activism can entail. This study is based on interviews with 15 bloggers who have created or written for blogs that focus specifically on Asian American issues. Through an analysis of the bloggers' interviews and their blogging archive, I argue that emotion can play a foundational role in generating activist interventions and building the necessary community required for contributing to social change, but can also have a deleterious impact on the individuals involved. It is only through recognizing the ambivalent role of emotion within the affective labor of activism online that we can work toward more sustainable participation and impact.

## Keywords

activism, Asian American, blogging, emotion, new media, social change

In a mediascape that regularly ignores the stories and perspectives of Asian Americans, the outpouring of Asian American voices in the blogosphere has been important to both celebrate and promote. For those who are interested in learning about Asian American news, entertainment, or personal opinions, there is a wide variety of voices available—Angry

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Asian Man, Disgrasian, 8Asians, Hyphen Magazine, Bicoastal Bitchin, Slant Eye for the Round Eye, and many others provide regular entries for the enjoyment of their reading audiences. But what remains unexplored is the foundational role of emotion in the lives of these kinds of bloggers, both in the impetus for their blogging journey and in the sustainability of their labor. If the existence of a thriving blogosphere is seen as beneficial for Asian American communities, it is important to understand the emotions that underlie its existence—the anger that initiates its existence, the camaraderie that sustains it, the potential for exhaustion and burnout. These emotions can play contradictory roles in both supporting and undermining this kind of activist work. In this article I investigate the relationship between emotion and activism in order to better understand the potential for using blogs as part of a sustainable social movement, as well as to theorize the kind of labor that activism can entail.

Although there are many bloggers who happen to be Asian American but blog on specific topics such as politics, food, parenting, or technology, there is a distinct and flourishing category of Asian American bloggers who focus on the topic of Asian America. These bloggers cover news items and write personal stories that relate to a broader political notion of an interconnected Asian American community. The creation of discourse within these blogs stands in marked contrast to the under-representation of Asian Americans within mainstream entertainment and news media, where few Asian Americans have made it past the glass ceiling of the notoriously white-dominated media industries.

This study is based on interviews with 15 bloggers who have created or written for blogs that focus specifically on Asian American issues.<sup>1</sup> My analysis includes interviews with current bloggers as well as those who maintained popular blogs for many years but ceased updating the blog at some point. In talking to these former bloggers, we can gain a richer portrait of the emotional aftermath of blogging, as they can offer a more long-term perspective on the experience of participating in the blogosphere. Interviews focused on the relationship between emotion and blogging, including discussions about the emotions that initiated forays into blogging, the emotions experienced while blogging, and the management of emotion surrounding their work as bloggers. I argue that we need to understand the way that blog platforms, emotions, and identity interact with one another before we can conceive of a public sphere that supports social change. Emotion clearly plays a foundational role in generating activist interventions and building the necessary community required for contributing to social change, but can also have a deleterious impact on the individuals involved. It is only through recognizing the ambivalent role of emotion within the affective labor of activism online that we can work toward more sustainable participation and impact.

## **Blogs and Asian American activism**

An Asian American consciousness and associated political movement arose in the early 1970s and has continued on to this day in varied forms. Scholars like Maeda (2012) and Fujino (2008) have argued that the movement in its early phases focused on strategies of internationalism, anti-war coalition-building, and anti-imperialism. But the movement also operated at a local, personal, and individual level, with activists fighting for the

existence of a pan-ethnic Asian American identity and the right to self-determination. Indeed, anger played an important constitutive role during the birth of this movement, as it was the righteous anger of being systemically suppressed and ignored that necessitated community organizing for social change. Asian American cultural production played an important role in this fight, providing means for self-expression as well as creative pathways for discussing and challenging dominant ideologies. As Maeda argues, “rather than being divorced from politics, Asian American artists and cultural workers rejected art for art’s sake and instead used aesthetics as a means toward social justice” (2012: 85). Although we are now 50 years removed from the birth of the Asian American movement, there still exists a wealth of Asian American activism today that perpetuates many of these same goals. I situate Asian American blogs alongside the artists, musicians, filmmakers, and cultural workers who played such an important role throughout the history of Asian American activism.

When asked whether or not they self-identified as activists, many bloggers openly affirmed that their blogs were connected to Asian American activism. As Byron from Big WOWO stated, “The goal originally was activism. Give people the tools that they need to create change in their society, whether it’s Asian American activism or other things, like food activism.” Some bloggers were more hesitant about giving themselves the title of activist. As Adam from Slant Eye for the Round Eye stated:

I do have a specific agenda, sometimes tied to specific causes and other times more general, I guess in that sense I am [an activist]—but it’s a different form of activism than community organizing on a ground level and in a traditional sense.

Phil Yu from Angry Asian Man called himself a “reluctant activist,” but said that his goal was to confront issues of racism and prejudice, and that he used his blog to call attention to otherwise neglected issues. Others explicitly stated that they did not feel like activists at all—they were simply offering their opinions and personal take on issues without an agenda or a stance.

Despite the different orientations that each of the bloggers personally felt to the term “activist,” none denied the possibility that blogs could contribute to social change, and many believed that other bloggers had already played an important role in changing realities for Asian American communities. Some argued that blogging should be seen in the same vein as any other media, including television or radio or film, and that any of these media could contribute to some aspect of social change. As Cbruhs from Bicoastal Bitchin stated, “Blogging is one tool in the toolbox to contribute to social change. It’s pointless to argue what’s more important, social media or people mobilizing in the streets. They all need to work cohesively.” Bloggers could also point to specific moments where they believed blogging took on an explicitly political role, such as when Angry Asian Man called attention to the physical harassment of Asian Americans in Philadelphia, the continual educating of younger generations about the killing of Vincent Chin, or campaigning by Asian American bloggers for Obama. These moments were each heralded as important activist interventions by the blogging community.

Another means by which Asian American blogs can be seen as activist is in the way that they convert academic knowledge into vernacular language. Blogging has been

acknowledged as a useful tool in the classroom, offering the opportunity for peer-to-peer collaboration and learning as they process course concepts and convert them into something more suited for a wide audience (Brescia and Miller, 2006; Ellison and Wu, 2008). But even blogs that have no connection to academic classrooms can provide a similar function, giving their audience access to the kind of information one might gain in, for instance, an Asian American Studies class. Asian American blogs often take on a deliberately educational tone, purporting to teach their readers lessons about topics including explanations of hate crimes, patterns of oppression, histories of immigration, legislation that impacts the community, theoretical concepts, and even outlines of recent academic publications. In this way, Asian American blogs together can be taken to contribute to politicization in the same way that Asian American Studies courses have been seen to impact the identities of its practitioners. As Chiang argues: "The purpose of Asian American studies, in other words, is to transform Asian ethnic students into Asian American subjects, who will, one hopes, become part of the Asian American body politic or 'community'" (2009: 40). Although Chiang is skeptical that this politicization is effective, it is clear that education is seen as an important aspect of guiding Asian Americans toward realizations of their shared oppression.

We can see a number of different interpretations about the goals of each blog and whether or not those goals align with activist agendas, but each of the blogs analyzed in this study shares a common goal of discussing issues that matter to Asian Americans. In doing so, these blogs contribute to the construction of an Asian American counterpublic wherein this marginalized community has the opportunity to talk about shared values and experiences, challenging their silencing within the public sphere. The idea that new media platforms such as blogs can contribute to activism and social movements has been well researched. As Kahn and Kellner argue, new media provides a means for individuals to participate in a wide range of political activities:

to take part in a worldwide expression of dissent and disgust, to divert corporate agendas and militarism through the construction of freenets and new oppositional spaces and movements, or simply to encourage critical media analysis, debate, and new forms of journalistic community. (2004: 93)

As the relationship between new media and political activism continues to develop, it is important to understand the rich diversity of experiences that this kind of activism engenders.

## **Activism and emotion**

Politics and political analyses are often discussed in terms of rationality and deliberation, as if humans are mere movable pieces to be controlled through the structures of society. Yet there has also been a trend to acknowledge the central role of emotion as a powerful force within activism and social movements. Although emotion has sometimes been portrayed as the irrational, frenzied behavior of an unruly crowd, there has also been acknowledgment that emotion plays a role in all aspects of social life, including the rational, controlled mobilization of resources within social movements. Gould (2009)

argues that, in what she calls “the emotional turn,” thinking about affect and politics can help us to better understand human motivation and behavior, the forces behind social change, and sites of meaning-making and dissemination. Indeed, a wide range of emotions are relevant to politics:

Moral outrage over feared practices, the shame of spoiled collective identities or the pride of refurbished ones, the indignation of perceived encroachment on traditional rights, the joy of imagining a new and better society and participating in a movement toward that end. (Goodwin et al., 2001: 13)

Prolonged participation in any collective would not be possible without emotional incentives, from recruitment and the establishing of structures of feeling that animate action to the pleasures of participation that sustain the movement.

Many of these same emotions carry over into the world of blogging, and in particular with blogging for activist causes, like the Asian American bloggers in this study. It has been well documented that certain emotions provide a strong incentive for starting a blog, even across diverse genres of blogging such as personal diaries, news commentary, or political blogs. Reasons for blogging have been seen to include: “documenting one’s life; providing commentary and opinions; expressing deeply felt emotions; articulating ideas through writing; and forming and maintaining community forums” (Nardi et al., 2004). Blogging also relies on a combination of intrinsic factors such as having a personal desire to express one’s self, and extrinsic factors like the desire to have an impact on their readers (Ekdale et al., 2010).

In talking to Asian American bloggers, there are many overlaps in these findings. There was a strong desire on the part of Asian Americans to express their ideas and emotions. But there was also a recognition even in the earliest stages of blogging that they wanted to make their writing public because they perceived that the kinds of things they were interested in were never discussed in mainstream media. One of the most potent emotions that underscored both of these desires was anger. In the following analysis, I outline three different contours of anger that contributed to the process of blogging—productive/creative anger, community-building and transitioning through anger, and destructive anger. Through an exploration of these emotions, we can begin to understand how the Asian American blogosphere rose, as well as its limitations.

## **Productive/creative anger**

With Angry Asian Man’s Phil Yu maintaining his position as the most popular blogger in the Asian American realm, anger clearly plays a dominant role in the collective discourse. Yu’s titular anger has prompted him to clarify on many occasions that “people who know me know I’m not really that angry! The whole Angry persona is just a way of pushing back on the idea that Asians are the ones who always sit there and take it” (KoreAm, 2010). Although Yu maintains that his angry person is a political statement more than a revelation of his emotional state or personality, rage readily abounds on other blogs. The introduction to Bicoastal Bitchin’s site reads:

we've created a space to allow ourselves to vent, bitch, talk smack, diss, and just basically let it all out. don't read it if you're easily offended, contribute if you got stuff to say, otherwise, you're all welcome to join the ride as we engage in issues from sh!t ppl do that we'll never understand to the f\*ck'd up-ness that happens in our world.<sup>2</sup>

Their website clearly offers a space for releasing and sharing anger about mistreatment in dominant society, and those who disagree are simply asked to leave their online space.

Anger has been used in many other causes, such as feminism, environmental reform, and AIDS activism, among others. For oppressed groups, a growing awareness of one's place in society certainly can lead to anger. In her examination of the politics of anger in girls, Brown argues that there is a stage of development where girls can "see the cultural framework, and girls' and women's subordinate place in it, for the first time. That their reaction to this awakening would be shock, sadness, anger, and a sense of betrayal is not surprising" (Brown, 1998: 16). Anger in girls and women has long been disparaged as unimportant and easily dismissed. Yet this anger at the injustices of society has also moved women to find their own outlets for expression. The zine movement from the late 1980s and early 1990s, particularly in connection with the riot grrrl movement, offered a new space for female authorship and the expression of frustration with the role of women in society. As Comstock argues: "In turning to zine writing and publishing, however, grrrls not only expressed rage, they also radically altered the places and subjects of authorship, resituating them on the conflicted discursive and material sites of the traumatized girl body" (Comstock, 2001: 389). We can see that sharing one's writing can be a performative political act for many different disempowered groups, each working to challenge the norms of traditional practices of publishing and distribution.

In personal interviews with bloggers, the emotion of anger explicitly came to the fore. Gil Asakawa from NikkeiView said that he writes from a number of emotions, including pride in his own culture and history, as well as a desire to educate. But as he states:

The other obvious emotion is anger—all of us get outraged at racism, stereotyping, yellowface in Hollywood, lack of Asian representation in mainstream media and in politics. So whenever any of us write about that it comes from a place of anger.

Sean Yang, one of the founders of the Fighting 44s, similarly noted that blogging helped provide a safe space for venting about infuriating incidents and realizations. Moreover, bloggers on the Fighting 44s were encouraged by the site's editors to deliberately intensify their emotions within their writing styles. In that way, they could accomplish their goals, as Yang explains:

Our goal was to spread the emotion of indignation at all this bad stuff that we perceived had happened. Just from operating the site we learned more about the history of Asians in the US and Canada, so we wanted to spread a bit more of an angrier or wittier or more sarcastic voice than we'd seen previously. To send a message out there to the general public to tell them how we felt, and to let other like-minded people know that they weren't alone and they could join this community.

This sentiment was echoed in the stories of other bloggers, many of whom sought to unsettle and provoke their readers. They were frustrated by their own experiences of

injustice, inequality, or ignorance, and used an emotional style of writing to jolt their readers into action, or at least understanding. Ernie Hsiung, a former editor of the group blog 8Asians, said that:

the whole mindset of 8Asians is to curate things on the web and look at how people feel about those articles. I think by human nature, I'm going to ask them to put some emotion in it, because we are asking them to write about articles that get them emotional.

Yet there were others who sought to deliberately remove emotion from their writing, either out of a more journalistic sensibility, or to shield themselves from negative responses. Jenn from Reappropriate found that she struggled with whether or not to speak from her emotions, eventually shifting to a more personal style in the latest incarnation of her blog:

In the beginning I tried to take emotion out and be more objective. I had been targeted by really nasty things so I tried to give as little as possible. I think it was good, but it also feels a little robotic. It's hard to take emotion out of something if the issue is really personal, you want to inject yourself into it because it matters to you.

For all of the bloggers, emotions of anger, frustration, and outrage were common, even if such feelings were suppressed or avoided for various reasons in the actual writing of the blog.

The kind of anger we see represented in these blogs can be read as a productive emotion—it clearly leads to creative output, it calls others to the cause, and it is vibrant, entertaining, and dynamic. Jen Wang from Disgrasian discussed the importance of anger in her writing:

You can really use to your benefit and something that is also, can careen off into completely useful and destructive. In terms of blogging while angry, I think if I've got something bubbling up in my gut about something I've read, if I feel like I'm thinking about it after a few days and something's really bugging me, that's always a good sign that there is something there to blog about, and that I'm going to write something that is worth reading.

Moreover, as Yu mentioned in his statement about why he takes on the angry persona, demonstrations and articulations of Asian American anger can be seen as a political move to challenge other stereotypes of Asian Americans. For instance, the “model minority” stereotype promotes the image of a community that is high-achieving, successful, and financially well-off. These assumptions are accompanied by cultural teachings that Asians never voice their complaints, refrain from disrupting group harmony, and acquiesce to authority without question. East Asians are thought to have been taught not to “rock the boat,” and that “the nail that sticks out gets hammered down,” rendering this kind of anger illegible for Asian Americans. During the Second World War, the Japanese were labeled “the quiet Americans” when they did not protest their own incarceration in the internment camps. Asian Americans have also been assumed to be uninterested in participating in political causes. As Volpp argues, “Asian Americans have historically been thought incapable of membership in a civic republic.... They were believed to understand only despotic government and political absolutism, not

democratic principles” (2001: 63). Taken together, it is clear why the voicing of Asian American anger is a political stance, designed to challenge these stereotypes and blanket assumptions about Asian American individuals and communities as apolitical, alien, and unemotional.

There are also specifically gendered aspects to these displays of Asian American anger. In the case of Asian American women, they fight more than the model minority myth—for all women, there is a cultural expectation of suppressing, inhibiting, and reshaping anger into a more socially acceptable form. Women have long been socialized into believing that expressing negative emotions is an unfeminine characteristic, and as a result women suffer social consequences for failing to adequately modify their behavior. In response to this emotional hegemony, Jaggar coins the term “outlaw emotions” to describe those emotions that are incompatible with dominant values, such as anger at racism, or pride at overcoming societal obstacles to success. These kinds of outlaw emotions can then be used to reframe one’s experiences and convert such feelings into awareness of one’s mistreatment (Jaggar, 1989). Although Asian American women are expected to hide or rewrite their anger, we can see that the expression of outlaw emotions like anger can be used to call attention to social problems through the blogosphere.

Although Asian American men are not subject to the same demands for suppression of anger as Asian American women, they also have a culturally fraught relationship to the expression of emotion. Asian American men have alternately been constructed in popular imagination as hypermasculine—the martial arts warrior to be feared, or the violent threatening Yellow Peril—but also as effeminate, weak, and unable to compete with white masculinity. These contradictory images have often negatively impacted the ability of Asian American men to create their own self-image (Shek, 2006). The content of many Asian American online spaces in the early 2000s reflected this confusion and anxiety, as discussions heavily revolved around the topic of Asian American masculinity.<sup>3</sup> These spaces were largely dominated by men who wanted to discuss the issue of interracial dating—specifically, the fact that many Asian American women were outmarrying, and not dating Asian American men. Sean Yang noted that there were a number of slams against Asian American masculinity that finally got him and his friends to start the forum. They were frustrated about the *Details* magazine article “Gay or Asian?” that poked fun at Asian men, at the mocking of the famously untalented *American Idol* contestant William Hung, and at all of the Asian women who one of their writers documented using classified ads to look for only white friends and partners. When the site finally closed down, their parting words described their own take on the site’s work:

Our little community seemed to have so many problems around passivity, repression, and self-loathing. We wanted to show the world, and to show ourselves, that we were bigger than that. We wanted to roar “FUCK YOU” at the top of our lungs at everyone who had it coming, spit in their faces, and end the day with a great big belly laugh at the trouble we caused.

It is clear that the site served as a platform and conduit for their frustrations with the treatment of Asian American men.



## Community-building and transitioning through anger

Although anger was a predominant emotion for both initiating and sustaining a passion for anti-racist blogging, many bloggers also described a transition away from anger. As they continued blogging over the course of many years, the driving force for the blog moved toward the sustaining of community and connection to their readers. As Byron from Big WOWO states:

When I first started blogging it was all about me and saying what I had on my mind that I was just dying to get out. When I first started it was kind of a release, and I would shoot off blogs whenever I felt like it. But these days, it's more about the readers and the commenters.

He further explained that he has begun to temper the emotionality of his writing so as not to offend or scare off some of the commenters who he deeply respects and who have changed his life through their interactions on the blog. Comments such as these point to the ambivalent role of deploying emotion within blogging—bloggers must walk a tight-rope between building community through anger at common injustices, but they risk losing their followers if that anger becomes overwhelming, or if it cannot be tempered through humor. Many other bloggers agreed that the support of their readers and the comments that they contribute are among the most rewarding parts of blogging, and that they always consider how their readers will be affected by what they write. Their goals are to entertain, educate, and empower—all of which depend upon a deep engagement with their audience and a sense of mutual commitment between the readers and bloggers.

The creation of this kind of community is an important aspect of blogging for Asian American activism, as social change depends upon developing and sustaining grassroots networks for sharing information and organizing individuals for collective action. As Halcli argues in her exploration AIDS activism: “Activism gave many people touched by AIDS an outlet for their anger and a place to share experiences, while forging a positive identity for PWAs [people with AIDS]” (2009: 148). We can see blogs serving a similar function by transforming the need to share one’s anger into a collective move toward politicization and a positive sense of shared identity. This positive identity is first created through the recognition of similarity, as readers and contributors find common ground in their experiences. But disagreements and conflicts on the blogs are also important, as participants have the opportunity to sharpen their own positions and learn how to respond to critiques. Many bloggers discussed the fact that dealing with those who disagreed with them was one of the most valuable aspects of blogging, because the point of blogging was to eventually be able to change minds and garner supporters from those who might initially be skeptical or outright against their causes. Since all bloggers are writers and creatively minded individuals, this opportunity to clarify their own positions and learn how to better articulate their perspectives was taken as a welcome benefit to participating in the Asian American blogosphere.

Many bloggers also connected this move from anger at social injustice toward sustaining community connections and personal goals to broader developments over the course of people’s lives. As Ernie Hsiung, one of the founding members of the group blog 8Asians, said:

As people get older, their attitude about racial identity and racial politics changes. How you feel about Asian American issues as a political entity changes over time once you get into your early 30s, and then your mid 30s, and then your late 30s. Your priorities change, you get less angry, you've got to make sure you're working a job and your wife and family are happy, and that takes precedence. It's not a bad thing.

This idea that individuals progress from anger at social injustices to taking on a different set of issues later in life makes sense with regard to the fact that priorities change along with major life changes, such as graduating from school, getting married, having children, or getting a new job. Many bloggers who had left the blogosphere behind said that they did so because of these sorts of major life changes—that they naturally no longer had time to blog, or that their priorities had shifted. But the idea that one's attitude about racial politics changes over time also accords with theories of minority identity development.

For those who belong to minority cultures, growing up in the U.S. inevitably involves a process of negotiating one's identity against the dominant mainstream culture. Researchers have developed many models of ethnic identity development that describe common experiences in doing so. A typical model for minority identity development includes conforming to the dominant culture, then resisting the dominant culture, and then integrating both dominant and minority cultural values and norms. Although identity development theories have been criticized for being too linear and not complex enough to encompass the diversity of experiences of different cultural groups (Yeh and Huang, 1996), there are still ways in which minority identity models can be useful in understanding the process of blogging. Kim argues that Asian Americans become awakened to political consciousness when they learn about the Asian American experience and "feel anger and outrage toward the dominant White system for the acts of racism directed toward Asians" (2001: 79). We can see that anger is an important element of this awakening. In later stages of development individuals begin to identify as Asian American, are proud of being Asian American, experience a sense of belonging, and have feelings of anger about the treatment of Asian Americans. These feelings of confidence in one's Asian American identity, however, can then lead to "the blending of individuals' racial identity with the rest of their social identities" (Kim, 2001: 81).

If we understand racial identity as flexible and overlapping, we can see how these different moments in the development of one's identity as an Asian American could lead to different textures of participation in the Asian American blogosphere. For some, it means recognizing the injustices of being a racial minority in American society and expressing that anger to one's peers. For others, it means taking action to remedy those wrongs by educating others. And finally, for some it means abandoning one's Asian American blog and taking up other topics and interests, thereby reflecting the shifting, fluid nature of one's relationship to their racial and ethnic identity.

## **Destructive anger**

Beyond these kinds of shifts in the way that different Asian Americans develop their racial identities, there are many other reasons why Asian American bloggers might

terminate their blog or transition to a different form of expression. The emotional toll of keeping up one's blog can be better understood when we characterize activist blogging as affective labor. Gregg describes affective labor as "meaningful and productive human activity that does not result in a direct financial profit or exchange value, but rather produces a sense of community, esteem, and/or belonging for those who share a common interest" (2009: 209). It is important to note that blogging, then, is categorized as work, rather than leisure or hobby. Gregg notes that conventional economic theory separates private/unpaid and public/paid work, but that feminists in particular have strived to overturn this divide by arguing that work in the home and emotional work is just as material and physically tiring as any traditional workplace. With regard to blogging, it must be noted that all Asian American bloggers have day jobs to pay their bills, and blogging is a side project that largely goes unpaid. While we celebrate the existence of an Asian American blogosphere for providing a space for these under-represented voices, we must also acknowledge that the range of emotions encompassed by the labor of maintaining a blog can include everything from the positive emotions of producing community and self-esteem to the negative emotions of exhaustion and uncomfortable social pressure that can lead to burnout.

When asked about the negative or difficult aspects of blogging, a number of frustrations resonated across nearly all of the bloggers. As Jen Wang from Disgrasian joked, "What's hard about blogging? Everything!" For all of the bloggers, one of the first frustrations mentioned was the work of dealing with the stubborn and prevalent commenters who sought solely to attack. As is the case within many internet arenas, the blanket of anonymity inevitably results in the emergence of commenters who disagree with whatever is being discussed. Carmen Sognovi from Racialicious said: "Anyone who works in the blogosphere online has to deal with jerks, but when you are writing about such a lightning rod topic as race, it's 100 times worse." For many, the attacks became viciously personal, and could not be tolerated. The cruel tenor of personal attacks eventually caused MissMel from the Fighting 44s to give up Asian American blogging altogether:

I stopped because I got frustrated, and since being part of that community I've stopped writing at all about any APA [Asian Pacific American] stuff.... No matter what you do or say, even if you're trying to do the right thing, someone will find a way to turn it around on you. It's not that my feelings have changed at all, it's just that I don't want to deal with the drama.

We can see that the endless stream of dissent was a potent frustration, and a distraction from what many felt were the goals of their blogs. Indeed, nearly all of the bloggers who had quit blogging for Asian American blogs had also ceased all work on Asian American or anti-racist issues, turning their priorities to entirely new topics. Some still maintained blogs of some sort, but they focused on more neutral topics such as travel, personal stories, or work.

Another common frustration was with the time spent working on the blog. As mentioned earlier, financial benefit is not a possibility for Asian American bloggers. For even the most popular bloggers, they can only begin to work on their blogs when they come home from their day job. The majority of bloggers interviewed had never accepted any form of payment for their blogging, and preferred it that way because they didn't want to

have to alter or censor content based on advertisers' interests. Even the two bloggers who did accept payment for things like speaking engagements or small ad spaces remarked that what they were paid did not even cover the cost of maintaining a blog.<sup>4</sup> Many bemoaned the hours that had disappeared into this unpaid labor, and the frustration of feeling the need to constantly update the blog. As Jenn from Reappropriate stated:

It's really time intensive. You have to post often and post regularly so that readers know to check and see something new, or the profile of your blog goes down. It's a lot of pressure and you feel like you're chained to your blog. It's hard to take a vacation. That was pretty horrible.

Others mentioned that they felt they never had enough time to address all of the important stories, issues, and events that were being neglected in the mainstream media. These kinds of frustrations speak directly to the issue of the affective labor of activism, as the need for blogging arises from desiring social change and feeling that their community's needs were being neglected or suppressed. Although none of the bloggers explicitly spoke of cost-benefit analyses when deciding whether or not to continue blogging, it is easy to see that the wearying nature of coming up with regular content, responding to personal attacks, and maintaining a lively dialogue takes its toll on individuals who spend all day working at a separate paid job.

### **Finding potential in the ephemerality of anti-racist blogging**

Although there are certainly Asian American blogs that have existed for well over a decade with consistent updates—for instance, Angry Asian Man passed its 10th anniversary in 2011—it is also important to recognize that blogs are a temporally limited medium, with countless blogs only surviving a year or two. Some are deliberately shut down when they seem to have run their course, as in the case of Sepia Mutiny and the Fighting 44s. Both were group blogs that began in 2004, and when they closed in 2012 their writers had an opportunity to say a final goodbye before leaving only their archives behind. Other blogs seem to simply lose steam, with fewer and fewer postings until they are eventually abandoned. Bryan Worra from *On the Other Side of the Eye* assessed this reality after looking at a 2009 list of Asian American blogs. In his 2012 post, he said, “Out of 55 listed, fewer than 30 are still around. I wouldn't call this a 40% attrition rate but it suggests there are some changes happening on the internet and how Asian Americans are developing their voices” (Worra, 2012). We can also see blogs as a temporally limited medium by the fact that individual entries only grace the front page of a blog temporarily before being replaced by more current entries. Past entries can often be found in the archives of any given blog, but it is also the case that entries can be deleted, and entire blogs disappeared. Many of the bloggers who had stopped blogging due to emotional exhaustion had also either deleted their blogs or made them private so that they could no longer be accessible to the public.

The fact that many blogs are initiated by emotions of anger that dissipate over time or transform into a different set of emotions, as well as the high emotional cost of working on a blog over time, might explain why Asian American blogs have been fated for a short shelf life. Blogs themselves are also a temporally limited medium; for any

particular blog the impact of any single entry often lasts only so long as it is elevated to the front page of the website, and the impact of any single blog lasts only so long as it is being currently updated and visible to the public. Yet if this is the case, what does it mean for Asian American activism and political movement? Is it a bad thing that blogs are temporally limited? Is their political impact blunted by their short-lived nature? Radway asks the same questions about zines, or the “handmade, noncommercial, irregularly issued, small-run, paper publications circulated by individuals” that were often similarly initiated due to feelings of outrage and anger. She states, “If most zines disappeared only a few years after their inception, one has to wonder what they accomplished. In what sense might they have had cultural or political effects?” (2011: 140). In response, she argues that zines clearly played an important role in forming communities, and challenges the idea that zines remained underground and temporary through the existence of what she calls “the afterlives of zines.” That is, in the years since the height of the zine craze in the 1990s, she argues that zines have lived on in anthologies, academic studies, online repositories, libraries, and other archives. Moreover, Radway argues that “zines produced zinesters,” which she believes “drove zine networking and prompted the desire to extend virtual relations into the social and material realms” (2011: 148).

Many of these observations about the impact of zines on cultural and political realities can be applied to our understanding of the Asian American blogosphere. As with zines, it is clear that participants in the blogosphere benefit from the community that is created between bloggers and readers due to a strong emotional connection, as well as between bloggers. Many bloggers mentioned that attending the Asian American blogger conference called Banana in 2010 and 2011 had been important moments of crystallizing the community that had developed virtually over the years. As Cbruhs from Bicoastal Bitchin stated:

I think it's been great just to connect to a community whether it's online or meeting in person. Having people respond to the blog and know that it's out there and people have heard of us is a nice reinforcement of the satisfaction of writing by getting stuff off our chest.

Gil Asakawa from NikkeiWeek also felt that community was a vital aspect of the Asian American blogosphere. He stated: “I just think the sense of community of all of us is so important to promote that and to network and know each other and feel like something bigger than ourselves, we're not just doing it alone.” It's clear that this element of community-building is not dependent on a continued well of generative emotion that contributes to sustained blogging. Rather, in the same way that zines produce zinesters, blogs produce bloggers. Furthermore, it is also important to recognize that Asian American blogs can be said to produce Asian Americans—who then have the potential to fight material injustices from the strength of communities birthed in the virtual world. For those who make this transition toward community activism in conjunction with or beyond individual blog posts, it is emotion that contributes to community solidarity and strength. Those who blog under the title of Asian America participate in the political act of redefining Asian American authorship, and fighting for the validation of Asian American perspectives and opinions.

Although both Asian American blogs and feminist or girl zines share the possibilities for these political and social impacts, it is too soon to say how the emotion-laden, ephemeral texts of the blogosphere will be remembered, archived, or given new lives at any point in the future. While Radway's perspective on an activity from nearly two decades ago allows her to acknowledge what has become of these texts, Asian American blogging is still a vital, living activity. Jenn from Reappropriate offered one perspective on the way that the Asian American blogosphere seemed to sustain its energy, despite its transitory nature:

Bloggging is very transitory in terms of your interest and your bloggging and how much you contribute—all of these things wax and wane. Bloggging is very time intensive, very emotionally draining, and everybody does it voluntarily out of some sort of love for their topic. And people change, so those motivations change too. The wonderful thing is it's a populist medium so as you step out, someone will naturally come in and fill that niche that you've left behind. I think that is pretty much the definition of blogosphere.

In this way of thinking, the temporariness of individual blogs is inevitable, but the existence of a blogosphere naturally absorbs and accounts for both losses and gains. Seasoned activists may turn to new projects, but new activists are becoming angry every day. The interconnected web of those who participate in the Asian American blogosphere provides a sense of permanence that cannot be wiped away through the deletion of single blog entries or even entire blogs.

Yet even if the blogosphere can be sustained while individual members drop in and out, the conversations shared over the course of this research reveal that its affective labor contributes to frustration and burnout. Blogging is time-consuming and thankless, with no financial compensation and much abuse from commenters. The fact that it depends upon emotional investment also makes it difficult to sustain, as the work of having emotions and deploying those emotions into shareable content is no easy task. Activists have long realized the emotional strain of engaging in social movement activism, and community organizers commonly work together to alleviate the possibility for demotivation, despair, and eventual burnout. As Brown and Pickerill (2009) argue, emotion plays a fundamental and strategic role in engendering commitment among activists to identify with a collective movement and participate in activist work, but burnout is tied to negative emotions such as being overworked, under-supported, unsuccessful, inferior, or constantly in a state of resistance and opposition. Their research suggests that there are already many ways in which activists form supportive communities in order to participate in the process of emotional sustainability, but it is less clear that any of these processes are currently being supported through the Asian American blogosphere.

Given the work that exists on emotional sustainability within traditional activist communities, as well as the obvious emotional strain placed on bloggers, it seems that there is ample opportunity for growth and possibility within the realm of emotional support and repair. While a high degree of turnover may be an inevitable component of this kind of blogging—and even, as some stated in their interviews, good for the movement as it encourages new activists to step up and fill the void—it is nonetheless important to recognize and address the high cost of emotional labor for these individuals, and to actively

move toward a model where the emotional labor in this realm of Asian American activism can be supported and sustained.

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## Notes

1. Blogs included in the study are: 8Asians, Angry Asian Man, Big WOWO, Bicoastal Bitchin, Disgrasian, The Fighting 44s, Jozjzoz, Little Yellow Different, Nikkei Week, Racialicious, Reappropriate, and Slant Eye for the Round Eye.
2. See: <http://bicoastalbitchin.com/> (1 March 2012).
3. The online spaces referred to here are the forums at the Fighting 44s, Model Minority, and Yellow World. Some bloggers referred to this time period as being “before the idea of blogs even existed.” Although there are significant structural differences between forums and blogs, many bloggers believed that Asian American online forums served as a precursor to the blogosphere, and felt that their participation in these conversations was similar to what later became the Asian American blogosphere.
4. Creating and maintaining a blog can be done for free on sites like blogger.com, but for unique domain names, hosting services, web design, and other site maintenance, the cost for maintaining a simple blog can add up to hundreds of dollars a year.

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