

Why Didn't I Say Anything? A reflection by Darel Tai Engen

In March, I was asked to contribute to CFA's podcast, *Radio Free CSU: Stronger Together*, a multi-part podcast series in which CFA leaders discuss the principles that guide our anti-racism and social justice transformation. For my episode, I discussed how CFA intertwines our anti-racism and social justice values into our organizational goals, policies, and practices. I was honored, and initially felt good about the recording, but after listening to the podcast, my heart sank. I had said nothing about the API community. I mentioned people of color in general, LGBTQs, the disabled—but not specifically APIs. As Okinawan American on my mother's side, why didn't I say anything about my own community?

Come to think of it, this wasn't an exception. At a CFA Equity Conference a few years ago a colleague denigrated Asian professors during a workshop, saying we were unintelligible to our students on account of our accents. I was there, and although I heard those hurtful and racist words, I said nothing—and I wasn't alone. No one, including my fellow API colleagues, interrupted that racism in the moment, though one of us did try to speak to the offender afterward in private but was prevented by circumstances from doing so. Still, why didn't we say anything when we had the chance?

My Asian mother raised me not to complain, not to cry “crocodile tears,” not to make excuses, not to blame others—just suck it up, work harder, and improve myself. I remember being called a “Chink” in high school and pretending not to hear it, and when a teacher chastised the name-caller, I felt embarrassed. I didn't want to be noticed. I just wanted to ignore it and move on.

But my reaction then, and now, isn't only matter of my personal upbringing—after all, the other Asian Pacific Islanders at the Equity Conference didn't speak up in the moment either. Traditional API culture esteems hard work, dignity, and above all not complaining. This might explain—at least in part—why we are (and feel) so “invisible” in our society. It is assumed that we're doing well financially and in our relationships. It's assumed that we don't cause problems or burden society. We're called the “model minority” that others should emulate. Why don't we say anything?

Sure, some Asian Pacific Islanders have done “well,” but many have not. For every Asian Pacific Islander software engineer living in an expensive home in Silicon Valley there is an API domestic worker making less than minimum wage in Los Angeles. And although we aren't the targets of police brutality and deadly force like our Black neighbors, it wasn't that long ago that Japanese Americans were rounded up and placed in internment camps. And who knows what would happen now if geopolitical tensions further escalate between the U.S. and North Korea, or another Asian nation? Why don't we say anything?

Within CFA, our API Caucus members know these truths, and that's why some of us later sent a letter to CFA leadership expressing concerns about the Equity Conference incident (after all, no one, not just API members, interrupted the racism in that moment). Unfortunately, there was no response initially. Yes, APIs might not speak up enough, but even when we do, we don't feel like we're taken seriously. This situation is particularly problematic for my female API colleagues, who might feel that speaking up—particularly about harassment and discrimination—only earns reprisals for being an “angry woman of color,” thus defying the expectation of subservience and passivity embedded in the stereotypical racial narrative of API women. But our API Caucus persisted, and, to its credit, CFA leadership did acknowledge our concerns, and we have opened up a dialogue around this and related experiences.

Yet there's still more work to be done. We need to continue speaking truth to power, and speak up on behalf of Asian Pacific Islanders, as well as every other group who suffers injustice. I need to speak up, so that I can stop asking “Why didn't I say anything?”

Thankfully, CFA is encouraging conversations about race, no matter how uncomfortable, and I trust that our union will not overlook API concerns in these conversations. Dialogue is a key step toward collective action, and it's collective action that will create the better world we all desire and deserve.