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Asian Pacific Islander Cultural Awareness Group

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Q & A WITH FELIX SITTHIVONG

Felix Sitthivong[†]

How would you describe your writing process?

I am such a lazy person when it comes to writing. To say that I procrastinate would be an understatement. But once I get started, the process is very intuitive. When I write, it's generally about things that piss me off, which is why most of my writing probably comes off like a rant. Because I'm such a sarcastic person by nature, I'm usually coming up with a punchline about a certain topic and then crafting the rest of the piece around that line. I rarely write outlines or formulate a pre-structured piece. I just write what's in my heart and work out the details later. I've even written conclusions first and filled in the blanks afterwards. I know that's not always the most efficient method, but it feels right to me. I don't know any other way.

Do you identify as a writer? What does that identity mean to you?

I don't necessarily identify as a writer. I have read a lot of works by some amazing writers, and trust me, I am nowhere near what they have created and published. My partner calls me a writer all the time, but that's just because she loves me. What I truly identify as is an organizer and builder. I prioritize and focus on directly addressing the issues that affect my community. And if writing about the work helps to further the movement, then that's when I'll write. Nothing against "writers" or writing, because I believe writing is crucial to any movement, but I believe there has to be purpose and action behind the words to really effect change.

[†] Felix Sitthivong is an organizer and advisor for the Asian Pacific Islander Cultural Awareness Group (APICAG). Through APICAG, Sitthivong has organized immigration, social justice, and youth outreach forums and has designed Asian American studies courses, an intersectional feminism 101 class, and anti-domestic violence program. He was previously a GED tutor through Edmonds Community College. He has been published in *The Marshall Project*, *Inquest*, the *Washington State Wire*, and the *International Examiner*. He is currently serving a 65-year sentence at the Stafford Creek Corrections Center in Washington State.

*Is there anything you wanted to put in your article that you didn't?
Why?*

Honestly, I feel like where I'm at in my life, I put everything that I need to say into my piece. I'm still dealing with a lot of trauma and things in my life that I can't explain yet. However, as I continue to grow as a person, I find myself sharing more about what I'm dealing with in my writing. So, what I did share this time was exactly what I was ready for. A mentor once told me that she puts her pain in her writing and leaves it there. I hope to have the courage to do the same someday.

How has the experience of being incarcerated shaped your relationship to writing?

Being incarcerated has shaped my relationship to writing in many ways. However, the most significant is probably the fact that I write about organizing, and I didn't become an organizer until years into my prison sentence. Being incarcerated has also turned me into an avid reader, which has not only shaped my relationship to writing, but helped shape me as a person by forcing me to engage with theories and ideas that were once foreign to me.

What do you see as the root causes of the prison industrial complex, and specifically how might an abolitionist approach/tackle those?

This is such a complex question that I'd probably have to write a whole other piece just to scratch the surface. So, I'll just keep it short and concise: I see the root causes of the prison industrial complex as power and control, racism and hate, greed and more greed. I don't know the perfect way for abolitionists to tackle these issues, but what I do know is that we must have the courage to dream of a better world than this! We cannot afford to be afraid to try and fail.

Have you seen or heard of any successful real-life models of a community based on love, accountability, and transparency? What does this look like?

Ironically, I've only seen this model in prison. It's a wonder that out of a place built on violence, division, and discrimination; humanity can still prevail. In saying that, I believe when put in desperate situations that call for extreme measures, people are naturally inclined to respond more viscerally. Call me naive, but I still have faith that goodness is the foundation of our being, and that compassion is our instinct. However, I'm not saying that it doesn't take work. It's hard to dismantle a lifetime

of competition and selfishness, but it's not impossible. It starts with a mutual respect for one another and a respect for ourselves.

What does it mean to get published as an incarcerated man?

It's still crazy to me every time I get published. As a prisoner, you're constantly told that you don't matter. That you're no longer worthy of humanity. That you're stupid, inadequate, and right where you belong. That it's a privilege to be working with certain publications. It's hard not to internalize those sentiments. So every time I get published, I still can't believe that people want to read something that I formulated sitting in a box. But with every piece published, we begin to break down this system and power dynamic that's built and dependent upon internalized oppression. While it's always a privilege to be published, it's more of a privilege to be a voice for my people.

How does writing inform or enhance other aspects of your life?

As an organizer and builder, writing helps me formulate plans and ideas, and gives me a platform to share these plans and ideas. As a person, my writing has been a way of unpacking and unloading my trauma. The self-reflection I can accomplish through my words has been instrumental to finding and reclaiming my humanity.

What is something you wish your reader knew about you?

I'm a son, father, brother, and friend; a Crip, convict, fuck up, and flawed individual. These are all identities that have contributed to the person I am and the writing that I just shared. They are also the things that have contributed to my growth and evolution as a man. To only accept the pieces of me that society values, and discard the controversial ones, would strip me of my humanity and true identity. I am all these things—proudly.