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Fang, Sabrina. (1993). Angela oh. Boston University Public Interest Law Journal, 3(2), 313-314.

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Every American generation has its formative event, usually a precipitating incident in the evolution of the generation's consciousness and remembered with hushed reverence. American subcultures have their own galvanizing incidents. For Angela Oh, a Korean-American poised to enter law school at University of California, Davis in the fall of 1983, the first such incident was the beating death of Vincent Chin, a Chinese-American. Chin was killed in Detroit in 1982 by two who thought he was Japanese, and who blamed the Japanese for the woes of American industry. The killing transformed the Japan-bashing of the 1980's from economic finger-pointing to its literal, murderous extreme. The Asian-American community was shocked by Chin's death but even more stunned by the light punishment imposed on the guilty: only fines and probation, but no jail time. The next year, a second incident rocked the Asian-American community, this one occurring close by: a Vietnamese high-school student in Davis was knifed to death after a racially motivated argument.

Angela Oh's work in the Asian movement began in the afterglow of these flashpoints of anti-Asian sentiment. Her forays into public interest work also encompassed the women's movement, environmental, and labor issues. In Oh's first few years after graduating from law school in 1986, she joined firms with labor practices specializing in representing unions, including unions of law enforcement officers. She returned to Los Angeles from Northern California in 1987 and continued her work in Asian-American issues. In 1987 she helped to found, and was later president of, Women's Organization Reaching Koreans (WORK), an advocacy group dealing with women's rights and issues and "help[ing] Korean women meet the demands of jobs and family."¹ She has been active in and sits on the boards of the California Women's Law Center and The ACLU Southern California chapter.

Oh found herself whirled into the center of the latest of precipitating events, the Los Angeles civil disturbance which erupted on April 29, 1992. Her ability to articulate the Korean-American experience and the impact of the riots on Korean-Americans won her national recognition and an invitation to act as co-counsel to the California Assembly's special committee on the Los Angeles Crisis. Oh was initially hesitant about accepting the position as Committee counsel, "I thought it was set up for failure."² She was afraid "this [was] going to be another report that is going to go on a shelf and some minion is going to summarize it for the legislator so he or she doesn't sound like a complete idiot when they talk about this report."³ She remains realistic in assessing the purpose and potential of the Committee's report. The report is "an honest record . . . of what the issues are and what we see and what the community is telling us and the experts are telling us is possible in 1992, given the

¹ Rosemary Kaul, *Out of Chaos, A New Voice*, L.A. TIMES, July 20, 1992, at E1.

² Jean Guccione, *Reluctant Warrior*, CAL. LAW BUS., June 29, 1992, at 6.

³ *Ramona Ripston in Conversation with Angela Oh*, ACLU OF SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA, Winter 1993, at 6.

information and experience to date.”⁴ Throughout the civil disturbance and into the present, Oh has been a voice for trust, cooperation and understanding between the black and Korean-American communities. In her writings, talks, and work with the Committee she has tried to draw attention to the larger reasons behind the civil disturbance: the political, social, and economic failures of recent years, and the lack of minority control over the political agenda.

Oh acts as an intermediary and educator on a variety of issues involving the Korean-American community. In 1992 a Korea-based corporation bought a Los Angeles hotel and attempted to rid itself of the original workers, largely Latino and African-American, in order to avoid dealing with the employees’ union. Angela Oh spoke out in an attempt to show the corporation the effect its actions would have on the Korean-American community and the community’s attempts to reduce tensions between it and the black and Latino communities. She lambasted a foreign-based corporation that sought “to reap the benefits of an expanding marketplace, yet neglect[ed] their responsibility to the communities in which they hope to flourish.”⁵ She also encouraged Korean-Americans to “play a key role in developing a community conscience” by holding “Korea-based corporations accountable to the issues and concerns of our community.”⁶

For Oh, dispelling ignorance and fostering communication, understanding, and trust among divergent communities are the keys to remedying the polarization and sense of powerlessness felt by the community. She recognizes the lack of institutional support for these goals, as witnessed in her daily work as a criminal defense attorney. The solution, she reminds us, lies within us.

Sabrina Fang

⁴ *Id.*

⁵ Angela Oh, *Corporate Insensitivity*, L.A. TIMES, Jan. 21, 1992, at B7.

⁶ *Id.*