Picking Strawberries

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May 18, 2022 By Paul Kawata

I am an old Asian Queen who has spent decades writing about my experiences surviving an epidemic. My musings try to be clever and hopefully funny because the topics are serious and sometimes depressing. Each week I write to thousands about our movement's work to end the HIV epidemic in America, leaning into the tough issues like racism, homophobia, transphobia, and sexism. Frequently, I talk about my challenges with depression, especially PTSD from surviving the early days. Like too many in our work, I've lost more friends than I can remember. I stay in the fight to honor their lives. Regular readers know I don't care very much about spelling or grammar. Too much attention is paid to the skills and not enough to the essence of what is being said. I always look for the kernel of truth, the writer's willingness to be vulnerable.

I'm telling stories because May 19th is National Asian and Pacific Islander HIV/AIDS Awareness Day. Sharing my life is how I celebrate my heritage. Like many Japanese Americans who came of age after World War II, my early years were spent fighting racial stereotypes and expectations. Sadly, I still get "ching-chonged." That's what I call racist statements made by uneducated people who suffer from the illusion that their America is my America. White privilege is alive and not well in our work.

Not only did I grow up Japanese, I also was a Queen. From a very early age, I was one of those little boys who could not hide the fact that he was gay. It must be genetic because nobody else in my family loved Barbra Streisand. Living in the closet was not an option. Now I am grateful for this blessing, but back then it was difficult. I had no role models for what it meant to be Asian and Gay, so I struggled to figure it out by myself. That lonely little boy is still a driving force in my narrative. As you can probably tell, I've spent many years in therapy.

When I turned 12, I was sent to the fields to pick strawberries. We got 25 cents per flat (that was 24 boxes). It was long days and back breaking work, but don't feel sorry for me. I got to keep the money. Back then it was the Japanese American version of summer camp. No one in my circle of friends could afford to pay to go to camp, but we could all catch the bus together to pick berries. Our mothers would pack our lunch and see us off at the stop. It did not seem unusual because I was with all my friends.

I started going to gay bars when I turned 16. I'm still amazed I wasn't carded, but I did have a mustache. Back then most gay bars were on back streets, usually via alleys, places that no self-

respecting Japanese man-child should go, and I loved it. Going to bars and meeting men felt exotic and grown up. I can still hear the thump thump beat of disco music. Donna Summer (back when we still loved her) wailing “Love To Love You Baby.” Coming to terms with being gay helped me to understand that I did not have to live the life my parents expected. I did not have to be the good Asian boy.

In the hierarchy of desire among gay men, Asian men have our “rice queens,” older White men who are trying to relive their youth during World War II. They desire the Geisha experience and prey mostly upon foreign born Asian men. I’ve disappointed too many rice queens with my big mouth and certainty.

Success in our work depends on our ability to reach communities who live in the margins, in worlds most of us will never understand. I’m telling my story to open a window into the world of an old Asian Queen who is also the executive director of NMAC for over 32 years, to be vulnerable in the world that is not kind to people like me. Fighting HIV stigma is key to the success of our work. Now you are 15 minutes closer to being culturally sensitive. Unfortunately, it takes more than reading my exploits to understand the people we need to reach. Malcolm Galdwell, in his book Outliers, says it takes 10,000 hours to become an expert on a topic. I don’t know if that’s true because I’m still on my journey. I just want to be here for the end the epidemic. Then I get to go home to the rice queens who love me.

Yours in the Struggle,
Paul Kawata

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