Asian Americans: How We Talk (and Dance and Sing) About Ourselves

David Mura Moderates a Conversation with Ananya Chatterjea, Linda Her, and Bao Phi on May 11, 2015 at The Loft Literary Center

Section 1: David Mura's Opening Remarks and Artist Introductions

David Mura: Thank you. What a great introduction. How are we doing tonight?

[CHEERING]

David Mura: All right. How many of you were here Saturday? Anybody here Saturday? Yeah. We had a terrific reading here. Some of you, we also had an Asian American activist panel at Macalester, what was it, last Tuesday? Yeah. So three Asian American events in a week. Great.

[LAUGHTER]

I'm old enough that I came here long ago enough that I remember when there were none. I'd go to anywhere, and there were very few or no Asian Americans. So to get to point where we can have an audience like this for an Asian American panel on arts and activism is just really heartening for me.

These series of conversations that I'm having, this is the second of four. The next one is going to be on July 10th. And that's with my good friend Alexs Pate. And we're going to be talking over the issues of Asian American-African American relationships, our issues about us being artists, the work Alexs is doing with his amazing innovative program, The Innocent Classroom, which is designed to address the racial achievement gap in American education by training teachers to improve their relationships with students of color. It's an amazing program. Later in October, we're going to have a panel of Native American and Latino American artists and activists.

One of the reasons why I had this idea for these panels is I just wanted to hear and talk in public conversations with a lot of these artists and activists whom I really admire, and I know who are really bright and insightful and have done a lot of significant work in the community.

Ananya Chatterjea is a dancer, choreographer, a dance scholar, a dance educator. And she envisions her work in the field of dance as a call to action with a particular focus on women artists of color. She's the artistic director of Ananya Dance Theater, a dance company of women artists who believe in the powerful intersection of artistic excellence and social justice.

Ananya is Associate Professor in the Department of Theater Arts and Dance and Director of Dance at the University of Minnesota. Her book, "Butting Out: Reading Cultural Politics in the Work of— I'm going to mangle this.

Ananya Chatterjea: Chandralekha and Jawole Willa Jo Zollar.

David Mura: Thank you.

[LAUGHTER]

David Mura: It was published by Wesleyan University in 2004. She's won numerous awards, including a McKnight Foundation Fellowship, a Jerome Foundation Fellowship, and a Guggenheim Foundation Fellowship.

Bao Phi, at the end, is the author of the poetry collection "Song I Sing." Phi has been a two-time Minnesota Grand Slam champion and National Poetry Slam finalist. He's appeared on the HBO series, "Russell Simmons Presents Def Poetry." His work has been featured in "Best American Poetry," "Screaming Monkeys," "Spoken Word Revolution Redux."

In the "Best American Poetry, it's one of my favorite poems, about a bunch of Asian Americans racing cars. It's in his book. It's a terrific poem. Bao also works at the Loft Literary Center. And his series, "Equilibrium" recently won the Minnesota Council of Nonprofits Anti-Racism Initiative Award.

[CHEERING]

[LAUGHTER]

Linda Her is the Associate Director of the Asian American Organizing Project. She's a Hmong American queer feminist writer/poet, and she has extensive experiences on community organizing, on LBTQ and racial justice. And she's worked in different ranges of social justice issues, civic engagements, political campaigns, committees, and non-profit organizations.

One of the reasons why I wanted Linda here is because she's been an integral member of the Don't Buy Miss Saigon Coalition, which has really been a key issue for the Asian American artistic community in the last year. And she and Susan Kikuchi have been working tirelessly to assemble a toolkit for the work the coalition did as activists in order to help activists elsewhere—because unfortunately, "Miss Saigon" is probably going to go elsewhere in the country— to conduct activist activities against "Miss Saigon."

So before I begin, I just have a few brief remarks I want to make. And I'll make them very quickly. One is I recognize that Asian American—and we all recognize— is a sort of unwieldy term. If you look at the umbrella that it covers, it in certain ways just seems unwieldy at best, nonsensical at worst.

But at the same time, it's a term I love. Because without that term, we wouldn't have this panel. We wouldn't have this group here. And I remember years ago when we started this arts organization, Asian American Renaissance, the poets Li-Young Lee, Marilyn Chin, Garrett Hongo, and I were sitting at breakfast. And Marilyn was pointing out about how she came from

peasant stock, Li-Young came from an aristocratic family, they were Chinese, we were Japanese, and probably back in Asia we would never have gotten together. We would probably be enemies, or certainly see no connection with each other. And here we were, sitting around as friends, artistic colleagues.

So I love the way that it actually allows us to do certain things politically. Because some of us come from very small numerical communities. And sometimes the only way to get the powers at be to listen to the issues that we face is through banding together.

The other thing about it is I think the term Asian American is a field of inquiry. Partly it's cultural. Either ourselves, our parents, our grandparents— sometimes for certain Asian Americans, it's seven or eight generations back— came from a country in Asia. So we have a history of immigration. We are dealing with issues of melding the cultures of a country from Asia with American culture.

Asian American is also a political term. And it really has to do with what it's like to go around in our bodies and be in American society, to be what I call "raced." And that's an experience that doesn't happen to us, to people in Asia. And it involves a long history of the ways that Asian Americans have been raced in America. It involves what happens currently. It involves what happens when we go out in American society, looking the way we do, and how the way we look and the way people read our bodies affects our social interactions, affects the way people look at us, and also affects the way we look at ourselves.

So underneath it, it's a very complicated term. And that's one of the things we're going to explore today.

Section 2: Why We Are Artist/Activists

David Mura: So before we get started, I've asked people to sort of do an introduction to their work and to themselves and an issue or two that they feel passionate about. So I'm going to start with Bao. And I'd asked Bao to read a poem as a sort of convocation for this panel.

Bao Phi: OK. So poem first?

David Mura: Why don't you do the poem first? And then you can keep going.

Bao Phi: OK. Hey, everybody.

Audience: Hey.

Bao Phi: Hello. I'll talk more, but first of all, thank you so much, David, for bringing us together with these wonderful folks that I respect so much. And also in the room, a lot of people that I respect and have learned from, thank you for being here. This a new poem I wrote. It's called "Kids." And it actually starts off— he didn't plan this. It starts off with a line from David Mura.

[LAUGHTER]

Bao Phi: And that quote is "I know there is a greater chance that someone will call my daughter a chink than she has a chance of finding true love."

In a dark back corner of me
I didn't want to have kids.
How much blood and history can one last name hold.
Being alive to my people should feel like a golden net –
it doesn't.
Others in my family
tell me what they did
to survive
to come here,
who didn't.

Others will say, you should be glad to be in America, it's better here for your kind
The opposite of history is erasure.

All of you are fresh off the boat and should be grateful we even let you in
Asian Americans are the opposite of history.

Go back to where you came from
Erasure is the opposite of survival.

A boy on the school bus
Says you have a flat face
like someone smashed it in with
a frying pan.
All the kids laughed
except him, he kept staring at you
a monster from his
comic book
could not look away
from me
a screen for projected
demons.

No one will see past
the flatness of our faces,
they mistake those full horizons
for blankness,
will mock our tongues without
understanding our mouths
chant

chink
gook
chink
gook
at my family until my
family
retreats.
No one cares
where.

My daughter
fiver years old, already scared of racists,
smiles at every playground
even the one where a herd of kids
chanted
chink
chink
chink
at her daddy when he was a little boy
as if that was the only song
one of us could ever belong to.

What promise is there except
those chants, words that grind cinders
into skin never thick enough
until she won't want to be herself at all
will she be hated as
a gook first or
a woman first
or a dyke or
will there be new words
for her balled all into one,
as her hands dig into creased school bus seats to brace against
words that have nothing to do with you and yet are meant
only
for
you
a flock of bullies flitting as they follow her home
fists dropping in
the opposite of feathers

will anyone ever ask if the shadows in the corners
have ever been lit to wing
lifted finally
so that in dream she could love
without wondering if she deserves it

can she crack a window and breathe a world that
breathes her back, a lung we are
but we keep tarring, smoking
these bellows
the life we deserve
but that our kids don’t.

How much energy will I spend trying to defend her against men not at all like me
and men exactly like me
You can’t protect her

she’s not a map
she’s a globe
she is not the playground
she is the falling and the getting up
teeter totter of a daughter
she wears the easiest part of you to see
she wears the worst part of you
she wears your face

[APPLAUSE]

Bao Phi: Thank you.

[APPLAUSE]

Bao Phi: And just very quickly, because I got to read a poem, I'm supposed to talk about why I do what I do. And I'll keep it very brief. I was born in Vietnam right before they shelled the airport, trying to kill us. And I grew up in the Phillips Neighborhood of South Minneapolis.

I've pretty much been involved in social justice movements in some capacity, since the first Persian Gulf War, when I had two brothers in the military sent overseas, and I was a Vietnamese refugee trying to make sense of all that, and growing up in the hood in Minneapolis. I've been involved in some capacity with all three "Miss Saigon" protests against The Ordway through the years, also, Justice for Fong Lee.

And the last thing I'll say on why I do what I do— again, I got to read a poem. But the short story that I'll tell you is that I went out to dinner about a year ago with some extended family members. And they were just talking. And suddenly the conversation turned to, in Vietnamese, the horror of coming to this country, what we went through. And some of us didn't make it.

And some of us who are still alive underwent— my family, even though we almost bombed and killed and separated, were relatively lucky, if you can believe that. And some people who are even alive were not even that lucky, and suffered even more than us. And I'm listening to them talk in Vietnamese.

And it just occurred to me that any one of these family members, who have these amazing stories about survival and life, no one's going to ask them. We're nondescript working class Vietnamese American people. No one's gives a shit. And they would walk out that door, and anyone of them could not know this about them and call them a chink or a gook. And that thought filled me with a rage that I could barely contain. And I think that's why I do what I do.

[APPLAUSE]

David Mura: Linda Her.

Linda Her Hello. How do I turn this on? Hello.

Audience: Hi.

Linda Her Hi, everybody. Welcome to those who just came in. My name is Linda Her. I am a second generation Hmong American. And I am an artist, activist, and organizer who identifies queer feminist.

Why do I do social justice? I remember back when, in 2003, I had come out to my parents as gay. I remember thinking back, looking at the ceiling at night, thinking, "Am I the only Hmong gay girl in the world?"

And I made a very difficult decision to leave home, because I didn't have the support that I needed. I also reached out to LGBT organizations in Minnesota, very white, who then said, "Sorry, we don't know how to support the Hmongness of you."

And so I decided to take my [INAUDIBLE] from Metropolitan State University and made my way to San Francisco. And through there, I struggled a lot around my identities, having identity crisis, losing, not being able to be in a community of Hmong people and speaking in Hmong and losing this language that I feel is the Hmong left of me. And then I did research, learning about the struggles of Hmong people who are still currently struggling and being killed in the jungles of Laos, right? And through that knowing, just this unravel of knowing why it's important to know why Hmong people are here, why my parents are here, why are we here, why me being gay/queer is not accepted. Why is it my parents were having such a hard time to even talk about, not having this language to talk with me?

And in that, institutions out there not knowing how to support me because I look different and othered me even further. And so I do what I do because when I closed the door and had left my family, I said that I'm going to make a better life for myself. And if not now, when I come back, everything will be better. And that's why I'm committed to social justice activism and really having those hard conversations with my parents, my family, my community, that challenges the gender and sexuality norms, challenging white supremacy, capitalism. And so there's much more work to do. And I want to be part of that work.

[APPLAUSE]

Ananya Chatterjea: When I came to New York many years ago, in 1989, Mayor Dinkins was the mayor, the first African American mayor of New York. He talked a lot about multiculturalism. Everyone was talking about multiculturalism. I was really excited, because I thought I would meet artists from different parts of the world.

And then I read the fine print, which was sort of not written down, that people of color, artists of color, could only meet each other via whiteness. That's why I do what I do. That started me off on a journey. I wanted to know how I could meet other artists of color.

So I created— when I came to Minnesota, I wanted to just reach out to others, to just meet other artists of color to see, can we dance together? What does it mean to share sweat, space, and rhythm together? And we had really hard conversations.

But the question I'm always interested in is, if we could choreograph ourselves together, would we understand better relations of power? Because I've been waiting for 2050 for a really long time. 2050, right? The year when people of color will be the majority in this country. It's now supposed to be 2027. And I'm really excited.

But there's one thing I know about power. I grew up in Calcutta during a Communist regime. I'm proud of that. But there is one thing I know about power. It's one of the most dangerous things ever. And if we haven't figured out our relationships in that time, we will just end up squabbling with each other over who gets the pieces of the pie, the power pie. And we'll not have dismantled the whole race structure. So being a majority does not mean a thing. So I'm doing my work because I want to be ready for that time. And I already know how to dance, so I'm going to do that.

But I'm going to be really ballsy today. Knowing that there's David Mura and Bao Phi here, I'm going to read something I wrote. Please don't judge me.

[LAUGHTER]

Ananya Chatterjea: Because I also define myself as South Asian, and I'm really not interested in nationalism, so I don't know that I— I have a passport. And I don't know that— I think that ideas of belonging, where my body belongs, is very complicated. And I don't know about that. And I think that we met each other many times before. So I want to call up those past meetings. It's called "The Blasphemy of Petals, Red, Orange, and Purple."

She would soak a handful
Of the pesky little seeds
Carefully
So they wouldn’t skip away.
She would slap them down
On to her grinding slab
Thick black stone.

Swift rolling motions of her wrists
Back and forth
Back and forth
Her bangles bumping into each other
With unrepentant clinks,
The soundtrack to my homework boredom.

Scooping up the soft white paste in her bowl,
She would call,
Sunday lunch served with a treat, ahhhh!

Poppy seed paste
With steaming hot rice
A bit of salt and mustard oil,
And a side of fresh green chillis.

mmmm.
that texture of creamy sharpness
ground just right
by Ma,
she measured the weight of her wrists pressing on the seeds carefully,
lingers in my memory.

but, like the storm that suddenly
whips up a ferocious swaying
of trees
threatening breaks,
history corrugates remembrance
throwing up shreds of panic,
that rush to connect dots
from faraway places
and times.

Poppy seed delicacies in Bengali cuisine
Get tripped up
by
Stories of
Young widows
Overdosed with opium
Pushed to their own immolation
By members of a community
Caught up in the vagaries of
A patriarchy
Nervous about young women
With sexual appetites.

Did that mother gasp when she
Stuffed the opium into her girl's mouth
I wonder.
Did her hands trembled as she remembered making
jhinge-posto,
Poppy seed paste with snake gourd chunks,
A rare treat
For her little girl once,
Today's bride-to-be-murdered?

Poppy seeds, poppy tears
Seeds in cuisine
Tears the latex of poppy seed pods.
Poppy seeds, poppy tears
Lineages criss-cross
In the manipulations of capital
To intertwine
Women's stories of love and hate,
Nurture and kill,
Work and savoring,
In a chokehold around velvety petals
Of poppy, red, orange, and purple.

the poppy seed paste recipes of my youth
pulled up from memory
to tinge my tongue with delight
turn rancid
with unrelenting images
Of young mothers,
Babies strapped to their backs,
Forced into sharecropping long fields,
Monoculture of "Bengal opium"
In fertile lands once harvesting enough rice and greens
To fill the distended bellies of
Their now starving children.

with the records of British East India Company
Listing three million, one hundred and sixty thousand pounds
As revenue earned from the export of opium
To China
For the 1916-17 trade year.
The monopoly of the 1857 Indian opium Act
Double-toothed colonial drug laws
Looting freely on all sides
Of due process

Always tripping up my memories of the delicacies of poppy seed paste
My mother would make.

Brandishing my finished homework
I ask Ma,
Give me a little more, no, please?
Her hands go on her hips,
Of course not,
I got just that much from the market,
It's nutritious, but expensive,
A little bit does the trick.

I lick the edges of my fingers
To make sure
I'm not wasting any.

[APPLAUSE]

Section 3: The Model Minority Myth

David Mura: OK, I'm going to ask anywhere from two to five questions, depending on the time. And then we'll open it up to questions from the audience.

So the first question I'm going to ask involves— we're Asian Americans— the term model minority, which is a term which is frequently associated with Asian Americans. It's something which came about in the '60s. And it's important to understand that in the time before this term emerged, Asian Americans were not looked at as the model minority. Obviously, for instance, during World War— the term "Yellow Peril" has been around for more than a century. Both my parents' families were interned during World War II by the US government.

So the term "model minority" came about, in a way, as a reaction, as an etiological move against the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Power Movement. So that's one thing we should think about.

So the question is, what do you think are the neglected and problematic aspects of the model minority myth that we need to be aware of and deconstruct? So whoever wants to start, you can start.

Ananya Chatterjea: Can we just throw out here?

David Mura: Yeah, yeah.

Ananya Chatterjea: When I hear the model minority thing, I always think about women in my backyard, especially working class South Asian women, who were treated, who were the Guinea pigs for birth control pills. Many people died, I remember. They were never listed in the media.

Linda Her When I think about model minority, I think about my model minority community. I've been reading a lot around and having a lot of conversations around understanding what this term means, as well as where we fit into racial justice and racial equity work. I think a lot around how when I've been in spaces around social justice and racial justice, reflecting that Asian American experiences or Hmong American experiences have been missing, to solve these inequities, right?

And I think, how can we start having these conversations? And I've had these two conversations in particular around model minority lately. And in those spaces we all have talked about whiteness, black, racism. But we don't turn around and really center on what does it mean from the Asian American experience, and how the progressive white social justice movements have centered or built a discourse around us, to not see us as part of this social justice work, and that some of the common themes from those conversations are like, black and brown people and Asian people can't work together, that people end up talking about East Asians are richer, so they have to check their privilege. And it never comes to center around us. And I've just been thinking a lot around racial justice and social justice, and how this work has excluded us. And how does that support and benefit the model minority?

Bao Phi: Thank you.

Linda Her Yeah.

Bao Phi: Thank you. So just really briefly, we know that the model minority is a myth, right? I think what's really discouraging to me is I see a lot of allies, and also actually Asian American activists, who actually think the model minority is true. And that's really discouraging to me.

So just really briefly, let's break down what the model minority is, right? These statistics have been manipulated to present us as a wedge against other people of color, primarily black, to say, you know, if Asians can make it, why can't you?

OK, so really briefly— but we know if we study model minority, that those facts are manipulated, right? We know that Asians are concentrated in the most expensive places to live. We know that the term Asian American represents 48 different ethnicities, all with vastly different socioeconomic realities and experiences.

We know that Asian Americans tend to have more wage earning adults in each household. So you can't just look at household income to say that they're equal. And we also see that actually, Asian Americans have to have higher education than white people to make an equal amount, right? So we know those statistics are manipulated.

And I will push us further, I think, to ask us to consider, if those statistics can be manipulated there in terms of income and class, where else can they manipulated? Where else can it kind of

obfuscate the Asian American experience? And here's one example. I want to be very careful about how I say this.

Right now, the police brutality epidemic is anti-black, OK? It is. And as Asian Americans, we need to recognize that. What I find problematic is I read a lot of things by Asian American scholars and activists saying, well, Asians don't suffer from state sanctioned violence or police brutality, which I think is intensely problematic.

Because one, how then do you explain Chonburi Xiong, Fong Lee, and many other Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders who do suffer from police brutality? And can we take into account that maybe some of these numbers are obscured because people might be undocumented, or mistrust authority and not report it?

And the last thing I'll say is actually something that the scholar and activist Juliana Hu Pegues [INAUDIBLE] — we all know Juliana, right?

[CHEERING]

Bao Phi: Yeah, wonderful. One thing that she asked us to consider that was really brilliant is because we are Asian and Asian American people, we don't have the same experience as black people, Native American people, Latino people, right? We don't. But what we do experience is that we're always the enemy, right? We're always the enemy to people. We're the other. We're the enemy other.

And so what if we started looking at vigilante violence against Asian and Asian American communities, particularly South Asian and Arab post 9/11, right? If we see a high number of vigilante violence against Asian and Asian American communities, the fact that this vigilante violence is happening to us, that police forces fail to protect us, that judicial systems fail to persecute those who enact it on us, and that they also refuse to see it as racism, that is a different form of state sanctioned violence against our bodies.

And I think the reason I bring it up now is that I think model minority should also teach us that we can't trust statistics all the time. And it should encourage us to ask us to think that maybe the common rubrics we use to look at race and racism may render the experiences and suffering of Asian and Asian American people as invisible or less important.

Ananya Chatterjea: Can I add something? You know, there's something about being counted, and not being counted. So when we talk about Asian Americans, I do think we can count the people. There's a census count and a percentage of people. But the clothes we wear— I think we need to pull the frame out farther. Because there are shadow bodies sitting amongst us, right?

Think of the Bangladesh garment industry. Half of the clothes we wear are made there. But there's just so much that is touching our intimate selves that comes from, that is made by these shadow bodies who don't fall in our count. But they are. And they may not be Asian Americans, but they are part of our consciousness in some way, and their stories.

David Mura: A couple things about this. One is that the term "model minority" is really designed to silence the argument that race affects people of color in this society. Because the idea is because there is a certain segment of the Asian American population which has succeeded economically, and because Asian Americans are not— any sort of activist work is not publicized or known— this idea that we don't make waves. We're quiet. And we don't ally ourselves with other people of color. And if everybody else just did that and approached things as if race did not matter, everything would be fine.

Now, we know that's not true. But I think the thing about this is in various different ways, we learn this. So could you talk about the ways we learn this, and also the ways in which you find the term Asian American both useful and unwieldy? Because, Ananya, you're talking about you don't want to set that boundary between America and what goes on in India, and the global connections economically and politically that happen. And so part of this is how do we make our thinking about all these things more sophisticated, and to address the complexities that we're facing?

Linda Her For sure, I think having conversations, hosting space, looking at violence that happened in our own community as Asian Americans, and the piece that Bao wrote around assimilation and not having protection as Asian Americans, in that often the conversations that I hear around the police brutality on Asian Americans, specifically a lot of Hmong hunters who have been assaulted by other hunters or property owners, or police also not diving in deeper to see what are the problems. And a lot of that has to do with institutional racism and systemic racism.

And so I feel, like how do we have these conversations in themselves? Because it's really complex. Hmong peoples particularly— because I've been having a lot conversations around the Sau Lu Vang case that just happened and the complexities around how Hmong folks will come out when it affects the Hmong community, and do they show up around other Asian American communities or police brutality on black folks. And what does it mean to show up for Hmong only? And how does that play a role in shaping our community? And just hearing some of those people say race don't matter, but then show up to the space because of Hmongness or ethnic, right? To know why that happens or why people make sense of race the way that they do, I feel that as Asian Americans or a Hmong community, I feel we need to have more conversations around violence and race as a construct.

And I think that I've learned a lot about this in a very white academic or grassroots social justice place. But when I go home or when I go and talk to my brothers and sisters, they're really disconnected. And I think how we can start to learn it is to unlearn or deconstruct how we learn around race through a black and white lens. And how does race as a construct— even though it's a construct, it's really real. So I feel like starting to create those spaces and having those conversations. Yeah.

Ananya Chatterjea: You know, I'm going to go back to one reminder. Before, I think in the 1920s, when South Asians were working in Long Island construction, some of the men were allowed to bring their wives. They were also tested. They were also the Guinea pigs for the early birth control stuff. The deaths were never reported. So I just want to point that out, that they

didn't even matter. They didn't even count. We only know this primarily through oral history stuff.

So I think our histories are connected in more ways than one, and not just because of place. People from global communities of color, from the South, have histories of migration. We have connections with each other also. I want us to remember that history, so it's not just empire that throws us together. And I want to claim that history of connection and connectivity among us. I want to celebrate that.

So there's that. And then I'm terrified of nationalism and essentialisms. I just think that this division between Asians and Asian Americans, it terrifies me.

David Mura: Can you just, for people, define what you mean by nationalism and essentialism?

Ananya Chatterjea: Yeah. So I was born in India. And I had an Indian passport for a really long time, until it got impossible to do the kind of traveling I was and to just be humiliated over and over again because of that passport. So I changed my passport to an American passport. But I don't belong to any of those, under any of those nation states.

So nationalism would have me claim my practice as Indian in certain ways. And it's complicated. Because I do Indian contemporary dance. The trouble of breaking things down is that it falls into the black hole of whiteness, where everything disappears. And we all become contained in the grand container of whiteness, which can hold all difference.

And this essentialism of what Asians and Asian Americans— technically I guess what I would be called is an FOB, fresh of the boat, still. And there are so many times that I've been told that I'm not a real person of color because I wasn't born here. So I just think it's just incredibly false. It's like we don't understand histories of colony and empire and slavery and how the economies of those have circuited us together in particular ways.

So I just find it really, really scary when we start to not agree to sit in complexity. Our connections are complex. Sometimes they are bad and sometimes they are difficult. And we have to sit with those complexities.

Section 4: Binaries

David Mura: All right, this brings us to our next question, which has to with binaries. You know, race in America is often framed in terms of binaries, for instance, as a black/white conversation framework. What are the ways we need to alter these binaries and this framework? How do we frame conversations about race that go beyond the black/white framework and include Asian Americans and other people of color?

And Bao, you alluded to this, that there is state sanctioned violence against blacks. And it makes me think of my friend Frank Wilderson, who's part of a school called Afro-Pessimism. And what

they argue is that the ontology of slavery has not ever left African Americans, that it continues to exist. And part of that ontology is, you are not a citizen, you are not regarded as human, violence can be done to you without justification or provocation, and that you are fungible. You can be sold.

And if you look at what has happened and what has come to light— which we know has been happening throughout American history— in the past year, you can see the strength of that argument. And I think one of the things I feel like in Baltimore that happened was a recognition, like what do we owe the social contract? What does the contract owe us? When the social contract does not recognize our lives, then do we actually belong to the society?

The other part of this they talk about in Afro-Pessimism— they sometimes link this with colonial settlers, which is obviously the history of American, against the red savage. And sometimes Native Americans are treated like a nation. Obviously you have these treaties. But then those treaties are broken. There was genocide against Native Americans, which is a different condition than slavery. And one of the conditions of Native Americans I think is that their presence as living human beings is not part of the consciousness of America, which is why you can have the Washington Redskins, right? Because it doesn't matter.

And so the question is, how do Asian Americans frame themselves along these lines?

Bao Phi: So I also want to kind of touch upon both what Ananya and Linda have said about an intervention in terms of complicating things, adding nuance. And the things that they've said, the things that I've said, don't fit on Twitter, right? And I think that—

[LAUGHTER]

Bao Phi: You know what I mean? It's like— but anyway, the way that I would answer this question or throw a thought out is to refer back to Andrea Smith, who is a scholar who wrote this really brilliant essay called "Heteropatriarchy and the Three Pillars of White Supremacy."

And a very, very quick summing up of what that is is that there are definitely binary and poles in white supremacy in America, OK? And one of them is the anti-black pole, where white people on one end of the linear equation, and black people are at the other, right? And anyone who is not black, including Asians, including Native Americans, and including Latinos, can participate in anti-black racism, right? They can benefit from that. We are positioned above black people on that binary, right?

But there is also one that is genocide and land theft, OK? And on that pole, white folks are on the top. Native folks are on the bottom. And anyone who is non-native can participate in that. And we positioned above Native Americans.

There is also a third one, orientalism, where Asians, Arabs, are always the enemy. We're never from here. And the US States, wherever's American, is constantly at war with us. And on that pole, Asians, Arabs, we're at the bottom. And anyone who is not Asian and Arab can participate in white supremacy against us, OK?

And some people would say that there's a fourth pole, the anti-immigrant against Latinos, the Chicanos. And I would definitely agree with that. But I bring that theory up to show that— and what's really brilliant about her thesis is she says, if we only recognize one pole at a time, we will not be able to recognize racism and discrimination in other instances.

And I think it's really important that we always look at these different poles at all times. And then to further complicate it is, of course, intersectionality, right? What about women, people who are queer, who are combinations of all of these identities?

David Mura: Linda?

Linda Her So I speak a lot from my personal experience. And when I started doing social justice work, in Hmong spaces, I would talk about queerness and gender and sexuality. And it would be shut down, because they only want to speak about Hmongness or a topic very neutral, like, how do we make our community better, without really talking or addressing these identity politics, right?

And then I would go into LGBT spaces, which is still very apparently really white, that doesn't really want to talk about race, doesn't want to talk about ethnicity and class. And that was like seven years ago. And just struggling around how I understood that I have these multi-identities, and I am wanting to create change through policy, or through community organizing and community education, and not being welcomed, or being shut down, and just being able to see the trends and the themes in our community of Minnesota historically, systemically.

Like campaigns for example, like the 2012 campaign, where the framework just talked about love, using love as defeating the marriage amendment which would only say that marriage will be valid or recognized between one man and one woman. And me and other Asian American organizer social justice folks who were part of the 2012 President Obama re-election, the vote no on voter ID and the marriage amendment, we struggled a lot as Asian American organizers on many levels. Because in the campaign or through social justice framed by whiteness, white supremacy progressiveness, which only had one issue, one message. And that message didn't fit, didn't include us.

On the phones, we talked about the marriage amendment— so vote no. And a lot of the Hmong folks, the Hmong elders especially, they, when we say, "you know, we're voting for love," etc., we found out that most of those folks didn't get married because of love. They got married because it was arranged, or survival, and etc., right?

And so we were like, oh, shit. We need to switch this speech, right? And so we talked about persecution and the struggles around— can you be comfortable making the decisions for someone else's life and the rest of their life? Will you be part of this? And even one guy who was using religion started to shift over.

And so being able to recognize how larger institutions, whether they be white or our own Asian institutions— what are their frameworks? Is it inclusive of our experiences? Is it part of the non-

profit industrial complex that continues to put Band-Aids on these deep wounds? And I think that as our roles as social justice and community organizers and scholars, how are we complicating? How are we inserting and demanding things to be changed from the usual powers that fund this work? So I think we need to push and complicate and ask and provide our own solutions that we have this knowledge already for.

Ananya Chatterjea: Binaries, right? One more in the family of essentialism and nationalism. And I think a lot about June Jordan. You all know that story about June Jordan, where she was asked to speak at a rally for the queer student union? And then she's going, and she sees over there, there's another group who's speaking. And she was like, what's that? The students were like, that's the thing that the black student union organized.

And this is so brilliant. She says, this is crazy. You all are fighting for the same idea of freedom, and you all have two separate rallies. This is the craziest thing. These two should come together, because freedom is indivisible. And that's the most brilliant concept. Because the nature freedom is that it is indivisible.

Of course it's complicated. I don't think hate speech should have a say. I just don't. I'm not a liberal. I'm a progressive.

[LAUGHTER]

Ananya Chatterjea: It's true though, right? But I think about June Jordan's exhortation us to remember that, to build, to really invest in coalitional politics. Because otherwise, I don't know where we're going to go.

And I really think about how in fact— you know, I think of the United Colors of Benetton model of diversity? I was always see that. That's what get pushed in institutions all the time, the same sweater, yellow, green, blue, yellow. And we all fit into the same sweater, look.

So I'm really interested in fostering, both for myself and for others who I work with, these amazing women I get to work with, a very unruly sense of difference. It's messy, and it doesn't fit in. I do also notice that it's easier to come to the table when we're all wearing jeans. So thank you for standing up. I started my 100 Saree Pact today. Thank you, Prachee, for joining me.

It is, I think, difficult to mark your difference all of the time. I think it's damn difficult. And I don't think it's superficial. But I do think that you can take a marker on your body and allow it to sink in, in the way you walk, the way you move, the way you think, and allow it to really point you towards your own difference, and marking it all the time. It's dangerous and it's difficult. But sometimes we take those risks, right? Especially because otherwise we can get consumed in the model minority myths that are there.

Also, I think, inspired by June Jordan, one of the things I remember is that sometimes when you live against this kind of pushing back, it can poison your soul. So I'm always trying to invest in practices that are around the joy of brown folk, to really encourage us to think about our own joy.

I know that I can't disempower racism. But I do want to say that I'm going to give it a little less power in my heart.

[APPLAUSE]

Section 5: What We've Learned through Social Activism

David Mura: I want to open this up just quickly. But I would like to ask one last question. And make your answer brief. All of you are involved in social activism. And in way, you've sort of answered this. But I'd like to ask, what is the one lesson that you have learned about social activism, or one particular difficulty about social activism, that you would like to highlight?

And I would say for me, it is that however you push on an issue, what happens is the people involved in the activism change. So you may be designing to change some law. You may be protesting, doing activist work to change some policy. Or you may be doing work to change this huge thing called racism or white supremacy. And there's a debate about whether any of this is going to change. But what activism does change is the people involved.

In other words, the powers that be can't take that away from you. How you change inside, how the person next to you changes inside, that is permanent. Nobody can take that away. And that is something perfectly within our control. And to remember that I think is important.

Linda Her So what I've learned in my seven years of activism and community organizing— definitely being conscious of not giving power to racism and white supremacy. And that is centering myself, centering my community, centering the good things that happen in my family, even though there are struggles and violence that happened around my queerness, being able to come back and know myself, having the self-knowledge of myself, and being able to share that with my community, and to recognize how I have been sort of a puppet around racial justice or racial equity work, that when we get to the group, it's dictated by white people, and recognizing that that exists, but not giving power to that.

And I've also learned a lot through the Don't Buy Miss Saigon Coalition around, what does it mean to hold our institutions accountable? Because they're so big. And they're doing really great work for the community. But at the same time, they're doing really messed up stuff. And through that, just having a lot of conversations with the folks in there that at the end of this, or through this work, it really should be about centering ourselves and uplifting each other.

Bao Phi: I think when the stakes feel high— and I often think the stakes feel high— there's a tendency for us to want to be right. We want to do the right thing. We want to be a good ally. We don't want to say the wrong thing. We want to make about all of these things before we take a stand.

And I think sometimes when we have that mentality, we can also be very righteous. And I'm speaking from personal experience. We can be very righteous. We can believe that there is one

way to be an activist, that there is one way to be effective. And I think we have to realize that being an activist, trying to make a change, is an ongoing process, we're always learning, that we should be fluid and flexible, that there are many different ways to contribute.

Ananya Chatterjea: I'm an artist. And my job is not to count the number of people whose minds I change. I think art works like the currents under our feet, like the memories that are in the soil on which we walk every day. And I think it's to— I feel like if art creates the soil on which people walk, it's to push through their feet little sensations and memories that then stay in their bodies, that maybe then dissolves in their blood, and asks them, and pushes them to ask questions. That's my job, creating the groundswell of asking questions.

David Mura: Great.

[APPLAUSE]

Section 6: Q&A