

IF

YOU

CAN'T

HEAR

US

what  
that  
means *to me //*

READ

OUR

WORDS.

Artists, who met through the Collegiate Association for Artists of Color, came together to have a conversation with one another about their experiences as Asians in America, as Asian American artists, and what they hope for society in the future. Below is an abridged version of the larger conversation between the following individuals //



*Rajiv Awasthi, he/bim*



*Emily Anne Goes, she/ber/any*



*Rachel Ha-Eun Lee, she/ber*



*Riya Panjwani, she/ber*

**RACHEL LEE (RL):** "I grew up being one of the only Asians in my community in Texas and that just says a lot about it in itself. I wanted to separate myself from being Asian as much as possible and felt rewarded when I was told, 'Rachel, you're so white.' I refused to speak in Korean, even though my parents are both from Korea and mostly speak Korean to me at home. In dance competitions they wanted our hair and makeup to look the same but sometimes my hair wouldn't fit, or the makeup wouldn't work because I don't have a crease in my eye. I physically could not make it look the same, and I was punished for that.

**RIYA PANJWANI (RP):** Specifically speaking as an Indian girl, I'm much hairier than the average white girl I guess, so you know, people would be like "look at your unibrow, your mustache" and I'm like, "Oh my god, great, I'm like 5-years-old, do you want me to start waxing this point?" So I think I worked hard to fit in [with white peers]. At some point it felt natural, but in the back of my head I knew I didn't feel comfortable hanging out with these people. And then I went to a performing arts high school in Astoria, Queens and that was the best thing ever. It was so diverse and people from literally all over the city attended that school.

**EMILY GOES (EG):** I am from the area of East Side San Jose, near Milpitas, and that area, man, is a hub of Asian immigrants. I took for granted that I grew up in the ESSJ public school system surrounded by a lot of people that looked like me. Of course, as a mixed raced person, my proximity to whiteness was apparent and real. All my racialized friends considered me as white. That's a whole other thing, am I white? I am not sure. And then all my white [theater] friends considered

me Asian. I prided myself in being in those white spaces. Being able to pay for private school in Silicon Valley was the norm. White beauty standards were the norm. Whiteness was the norm for white people, but also a lot of non white people, including myself. I have a friend who said to me a couple years ago, "Sometimes I forget you're a woman of color."

**RAJIV AWASTHI (RA):** I wasn't surrounded by people that looked like me, or had conversations like that. When I was in my teens, early in high school, I was like

*I've gotta choose which crowd to run with. The white crowd, the black crowd, the Latinx crowd, or just hang out in the physics room.*

I didn't have other choices. So in a way, the AAPI-ness didn't really exist because I wasn't interacting with other AAPI people outside of my home.

**RL:** Me neither! I've spent so much of my life sucking up to white people, because it works. Throughout my experience in the final years of high school and into college, I started to immerse myself in K-pop and tried to learn the language to speak to my grandparents. That's so important to me. How have I gone my whole life and they're like, strangers?

**EG:** *I think we are the first generation to consider that assimilating to WHITE AMERICA isn't the move*

**RP:** I feel like if my parents don't progress with society and learn about what's going on and how it's problematic, then they're kind of stuck in the past, not really moving forward. And I think that it's important that you help them take those steps forward and understand just what's going on in the world and how we have to rethink the narrative that we've been told this whole time.

**EG:** Yes. My mom likes to describe how she has "Americanized" herself. I'll catch her saying, "People think I'm American because I blend in with white people." And I'm like, "Regardless of if you blend in', you're American." My Mom will entertain my opinions but she is ultimately fine and proud of that assimilation. Our parents lived the lives that they lived and if they didn't, we wouldn't have the lives that we currently hold. Although, I very much grew up in a colorblind household. I recently realized that I really needed to unpack the feeling of being stuck between two different cultures with an immigrant mother who did what she needed to survive.

**RL:** I was also talking about this with my mom. As I was going through the hardships of the American school system, I never talked about it with my parents because I didn't want them to think I was selfish or ungrateful. Maybe if we had these conversations, I would've felt being Asian as a strength of mine rather than a weakness. Finally this year I was able to perform a dance that was about taking back our Asian identity from how it has been appropriated. Whether or not we intentionally want to make it about our identity, when people see 3 Asian girls on stage dancing they're going to assume it's about our identity. And in my experience at NYU (New York University), based on how the faculty

treated me, I very much question how much of my experience is because I belong here and how much is me just checking off a diversity quota.

**RP:** I think a lot of my friends of color are unlearning that too. We really want to work hard to figure out how we can have a seat at the table and what we can contribute and how we can get our work out there in an authentic way without it being kind of shadowed over. Honestly sometimes at FIT (Fashion Institute of Technology), just to pass the class, I'll have to adjust my own style and fit into a mold that my teachers want. But I think it's something I've been working hard to fight against, especially as I'm coming towards senior year where I want to find my own voice as an artist and figure out what my style is.

**RA:** I feel that. It took until coming to college where I even thought about what being an AAPI meant...if that means something. Because that concept was in the back of my mind. And then all of a sudden I come to college and I'm like "Oh, I've been checking Asian on this form, like the SAT form, the whole time" without realizing what that meant. And it's something that I've started reckoning with but I don't even really know that I have fully done that or like how to chart that progress.

**EG:** Whoa that's so true, checking the box and not even clocking what that means. But same Rajiv, I never saw my identity as an asset until I got to college. In my year at NYU New Studio on Broadway, my program was nearly 70 people. Out of 70, 4 of us were Mixed Asian. MIXED Asian.

**RL:** Emily, do you ever feel pressured to only go for Asian roles? Also, because there were only 4 other Asian people in





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Musical Theatre with you, did you feel the need to be competitive since y'all might be going for the same token Asian role? Or what about everyone else? Do y'all ever feel pressured to bring your Asian-ness to your art?

**EG:** Within New Studio on Broadway, I never felt that competition. It's easier to not give into a white narrative in spaces that you inhabit on a regular basis. I am more comfortable to disrupt that there than an audition room I am in for the first time. Which is another conversation that needs unpacking. But going back to NSB, there actually wasn't much opportunity to compare because they often picked white shows and white people anyway. Bringing my "Asianess" to my work - outside of just being me - wasn't explicitly an option.

**RA:** I am trying to relieve myself of any pressure I feel to bring my Asianness into my work. I think there's times when I wished I knew more about my cultural background and the specificity of that, but I feel like that is part of bringing Asianness into my work on terms that I set for myself.

**EG:** Sometimes I feel that imposter syndrome because I don't know as much about my Filipinx culture as another Filipinx probably does. I don't speak Tagalog. I only know a few dishes like, adobo, tapsilog, kaldereta, lugao, halo halo. But hmm. Doesn't make me less Filipinx, right?

**RA:** Right. The way I want to bring my Asianness to my work could be by sprinkling small details or mentions that are reflective of Indian culture, which could be something like a character playing tabla onstage or passing mentions of Hindu gods or something like that. And I think the

opposite of making it on my own is when people say they wanna see more of my Indianness reflected in work. When I hear shit like that I'm hearing people say 'if I can't reduce you and your work down to your identity how will I understand it' and it pisses me off a bit.

**RL:** Yeah, that is such a thing. Being Asian is such a range of different things. Clearly, with all of us talking today.

*But the term "Asian" is grouped into one Asian idea and seen within that model minority myth. And that adds pressure for me to be perfect, do as instructed, and stay quiet.*

**RP:** My parents have always had that mentality. Where they have to keep their head low and just survive. Especially after 9/11 where they were easily seen as targets, they are kind of just in survival mode and we just have to do as we're told, and not really question or fight back the system in any way.

**RL:** It's this thing where in a world ruled by white supremacy, what does it mean for us to stand up for ourselves? The few times I feel like I've stood up for myself, it's been met with ignorance. What does it mean to stand up for myself when people may say, "She's difficult to work with." So naturally, my reaction to personal oppression is to not say anything. But things seemed to change a bit more during all this "Stop Asian Hate." It was interesting because I felt angry at the people who did reach out to me because it felt like they did it for them. But then there were people who were closest to me and they did not say a single word. And that made me mad too.

**EG:** They can check in without it being rooted in cultural trauma. Like, 'how

are you' works great. Also, one of the C.A.A.C. Converse and Celebrate panelists, Molly Hurley, made a brilliant point about the words "anti Asian hate." Why do we say "hate" when it's actually racism. Racism and hate are different words and hate dilutes the racism. #stopasianhate. But rather, #stopracismtowardasians. But I feel that. Social media desensitizes. It's so easy to click, click, send and bam, now you care about the issue.

**RL:** Right, yes. It was interesting to see who posted stuff. How much of it is a portrayal to seem like they care? Of course, I am working through my own biases too. There is not an end point that anyone can say, "Yes I defeated racism."

**EG:** Decolonizing the narrative is an everyday practice. Shout out Dr. Michelle R. Montgomery.

**RL:** I had so many thoughts after Atlanta. And part of it was because of social media. I am glad people are paying attention but it took so many deaths, hate crimes, and mass shootings for people to pay attention. That was really heartbreaking for me. In dance class none of the teachers talked about it at all. One of the other Asian students took it upon themselves to make space for all the Asian dancers to come and speak but then it became a thing where the faculty said "Oh we want to come to the meetings! We will send an email to everyone saying how you are creating this amazing space!"

**EG:** No. I am over any of that shit at NYU. They love to create platforms for traumatized bodies to fend for themselves and pat themselves on the back for it. And I'll say that your relationship to March 16th is different

from my relationship to March 16th, and Riya's relationship, and Rajiv's relationship.

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**RP:** The mass shooting in Atlanta left me feeling very heartbroken and frustrated, especially after everything we've been fighting for since last summer, and years prior.

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**EG:** Same, the whole period after Atlanta personally hit me. Thinking about my relationship to the racist violence as a Southeast Asian woman, getting all the white guilt check ins, you know, just doing a lot of unpacking and racial healing. I was out for a couple days. And I felt very privileged to be in the position to say to my employers and say, I need a couple days. We need room in our workplaces and institutions to heal. And that is not built in as a priority.

**RL:** For sure. I am curious, since we are all in New York City, if others have felt this. Seeing that it was predominantly Asian women who lost their lives on March 16th, I was scared to do anything. I had one instance in particular a couple days after where I was meeting my friend at Veselka. There was this man standing on the street, he was staring at me, and started running towards me. It was for something behind me but I just saw this man running toward me. After that, I was trying to hide my Asianness while walking outside. Put sunglasses on, and wore a hat, because I was scared. When I look at myself in the mirror before I leave my house I notice myself. But when I leave my house and people notice me, they see, "oh she's Asian." I forget I'm Asian before I walk outside my door.



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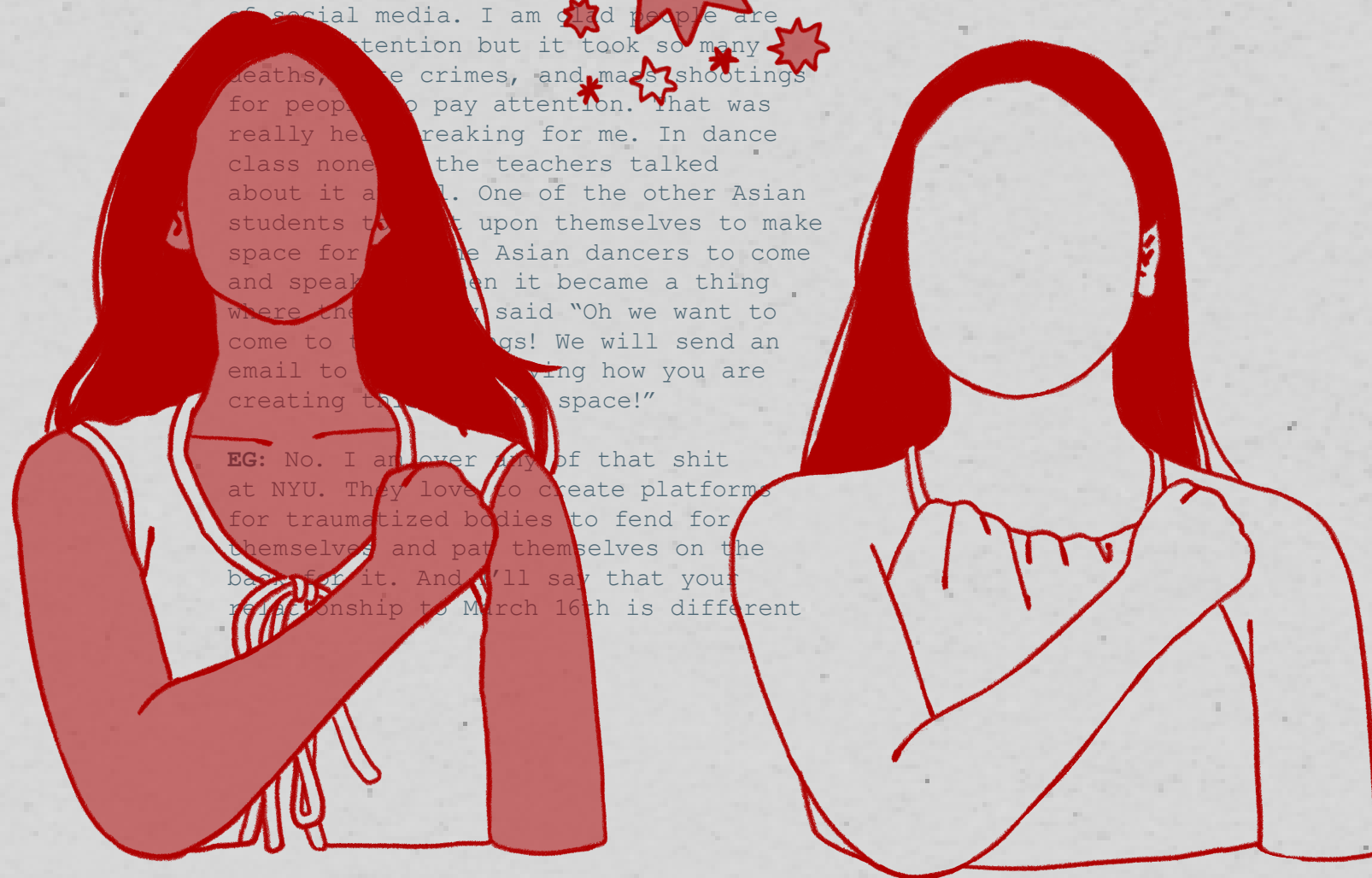
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**RP:** Thankfully I haven't experienced any of that overt racism over the past few months. However, I do have some close friends who were impacted by the rise in hate crimes, and I fear for their safety a lot.

**EG:** Especially being in NYC, having the biggest rise of hate crimes against Asians, even in a world where so many under-reported racist crimes against Asians exist.

**RP:** Yeah, it's important to me that my friends and family are feeling okay, and it really does upset me that the pandemic has made this issue even worse.

**RA:** When I started really hearing about the spike in anti-Asian violence I immediately became super aware of anytime I saw Asian people walking down the street or like in the grocery store or something and it was almost as if I was mentally preparing myself to hit some motherfucker if he was gonna try shit. The other thing that happened was that I really had to start to reckon with the differences in how people view me as a South Asian and how they view East Asians and the nuances within those identities especially in a time where being brown and not stereotypically "Asian looking" is potentially shielding me from being attacked.

**EG:** Really thought provoking how colorism exists in this specific context.

**RL:** I have a lot of fear when it comes to coming forward but we are at this position where we just got to talk about it.

**EG:** Of course we as people who experience trauma need to heal, we shouldn't beat ourselves up when we can't stand up for ourselves. I think taking

it day by day, joining in community with each other like we are right now, and talking about our experiences is powerful and supports that healing.

**RP:** Yeah, seeing the way our generation is working hard towards advocacy and equality gives me a sense of hope.

I FEEL VERY MOVED BY THE WAY OUR COMMUNITIES ARE SHOWING UP FOR EACH OTHER, AND BEING THE SUPPORT SYSTEM THAT WE ALL NEEDED OVER THE PAST FEW MONTHS.

**RL:** Yes. That's something I've definitely prided myself in the last year, having C.A.A.C. as a space to talk with people and heal with people. After Atlanta, I had people to talk to. For example, if this happened 4 years ago I would've felt super alone and not been able to speak about it.

**EG:** I feel that. And as much as it means for white friend groups to have a token friend of color, it also means a lot for that person of color to be a part of a white friend group.

**RL:** That's true.

**EG:** What do you all hope for yourself going into post grad and life and the world?

**RP:** I think a lot of people see art as a shortcut and do it because they think it's just fun and they can find a way to make money out of it but there's like no real passion there. I hope that I continue to find people and communities that really really care about what they do and really feel like they belong in

that space is also important. I think I'm actively seeking out people who are just passionate about it and really want to make a change in terms of the way things are set up.

**RL:** Love that. I feel similarly. My skills and interests have broadened so much and I'm happy to do different things, but what's important for me is to be a part of a company that works for something that I believe in. I've always wanted to create a platform for unheard voices. When I initially thought of unheard voices, for some reason I didn't consider race as much. What I've realized in conversations about my identity is that I grew up feeling like I was the only one who was experiencing what I was experiencing. But that's not the reality. I want to carve pathways for others to have conversations like these and not wait until they are my age to begin to accept who they are.

**RA:** Yes, I'm also thinking about the material that I engage with, the people that I engage with, how I'm engaging with the content, and the literal words that I'm writing as well. I'm also unearthing specific things that are Indian about me, I guess. Like going to the mandir, or my dad banging on the tabla, or we make chai every morning, instead of coffee. And things that are just like culturally specific.

**EG:** Damn y'all, thanks for sharing all that. For myself, I want to continue listening. I want to see emotion as strong and powerful. I want to read more. I want to consume more Filipina media and books. I want to be someone who is really specific with what they say and really specific with what they want, and encourage others to want that specificity for themselves. Within art, I have never seen myself as the biggest

creator. I hope to learn how to flex that muscle and learn what it means to uphold equitable practices in the world of arts and entertainment. Lots of love and happiness.

And health.

Health is wealth.



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In my dream world,  
I am free, boundless.

my success is measured by white supremacy  
it feels like it doesn't matter how much i achieve  
but who i've achieved it for  
spoiler alert: it wasn't always for me.

I considered my success to occur cuz I was a token  
But I awoke and slapped myself across the face and spoke -  
"Why do I view myself through these white settler myths?"  
I moved from trying to join their table and use my bandwidth to start decolonizing race.  
What is my history of place?  
How do I move through this world with humility and grace?  
We can't disregard race because that erases our history of place.

i've been "good" for as long as i can remember  
smiling and nodding, holding it together  
because if i showed anything less  
i would be viewed as lesser

than, not enough  
as someone going through a "rough"  
patch, someone who spoke up  
when they shouldn't have.  
no matter how much i've tried to disassociate from my identity emotionally,  
physically,  
asian is the first thing you see from me  
or you see the other girl who looks like me and call me by her name constantly.

Life is golden but the sun won't shine if we keep holdin that my trauma,  
That your trauma,  
That even those that level their privileges trauma is played through a white narrative.  
We have the ability to claim  
We have the ability to heal  
We have the ability to live life like its golden  
Fly from oppression and limitation to freedom and liberation.

but my people are dying  
and i'm tired of striving  
to fit the myth of model minority  
and in the waves of crying  
i'm still forced to deny  
who i am and  
what that means to me.

What that means to me.

Scan to watch "What that Means to Me".

Written, Choreographed, Performed,  
and Edited by Rachel Ha-Eun Lee &  
Emily A Goes

Music by Rajiv Awasthi

Graphic Design by Riya Panjwani and Sally Chen

Produced by Guru Ramanathan and Han Lee

Cinematography by Tuânminh Đỗ





Bai  
Ka  
~