

Self-Realized: Asian in America

Minya “Miss Info” Oh w/ Julie Won, Zara Rahim, Maia Ruth Lee, Kyle Ng, and Jeff Staple.

Maia Ruth Lee, Zara Rahim, Julie Won, Jeff Staple, and Kyle Ng talk with moderator Minya Oh about being AAPI in the face of hate and erasure, with an eye on the future.

Minya Oh: Hey everybody, my name is Minya Oh. I'm also known as Miss Info. Welcome to everybody watching, this is Social Studies. And I just want to shout out Angelo and Shaniqwa for inviting us to have this conversation today, and I guess it's obvious that we're going to talk about being Asian-American and all of the complex and beautiful things that are involved in that identity. I have some incredible people with me, new friends, old friends and so if you guys can just introduce yourselves, one by one, that would be great.

Julie Won: Minya, aren't you're going to introduce yourself a little bit too?

Minya Oh: Oh, shit. Okay. Are we allowed to curse by the way? Yes. Okay, so I'll go first. As I mentioned, my aka is Miss Info, I was on Hot 97 for many years and before that, and forever I will be a hip-hop journalist. So, I think that as a Korean-American, I grew up in Chicago, I came to New York, I've never left and I have a lot of complex emotions about this groundswell that our people are going through. Because I experienced very high profile racism in my career, things that are famous on Google and YouTube. And I think that now being able to talk about it is one of the single most important things that have happened in my life. Finally, being able to come to terms with a lot of the emotions that all of us have been dealing with. And generationally have been dealing with. So, I really appreciate being here. I'm so excited to hear from the rest of the panelists and I think people can also probably find me on Instagram, but I think that most people know me as a hip-hop girl. Now Julie, you're on.

Julie Won: Thanks Minya. We all love you, so we wanted to make sure that we got to hear more before we start. So, my name is Julie Won and I am also a first-generation immigrant, I came here when I was eight years old from South Korea with my family. And I am currently running for City Council in district 26, which encompasses Western Queens. Because Queens is where we're at and it's Long Island city, Sunnyside, Woodside and Astoria. And within the last year, I would say, it's become more and more important for us as Asian-Americans to really start to have this dialogue, even amongst ourselves to really hash through, even our differences and our similarities, as well as things that we agree on and disagree on.

Julie Won: And just making sure that we're creating this space, that is safe like Minya is doing for us, so that we can have this dialogue to talk through a lot of the complexities in our culture and our country of systemic racism, the model minority myth, different stereotypes and some of the difficulties that AAPIs go through. For example, that people often misunderstand that ... everyone thinks that a lot of us are very wealthy and well-to-do and privileged, when in reality in New York city Asian-Americans are the highest populace living under the poverty line. So, I look forward to having this conversation with you all.

Zara Rahim: Thank you. Minya, you're an icon, Julie, I can't wait to throw money at your campaign, right after this. My name is Zara Rahim, I am a communication strategists, culture advisor and really thrilled to be here. I'm a first-generation immigrant, my parents are from Bangladesh and I grew up in Florida. So, you can imagine the type of childhood that I had was extremely, exciting to use one word, but I'm a Florida girl through and through but I live in Brooklyn, New York now, but I cut my teeth in politics. I started working for Barack Obama at the ripe age of 21 years old and then my life changed from there. I started working at The White House and then served as a spokesperson for Secretary Clinton for coalitions. Specifically I was a national spokesperson for the AAPI community and all the policies that the secretary is speaking to there.

Zara Rahim: But went on to work at Vogue magazine and currently, working on exciting projects including right now, I'm helping produce Ziwe Fumudoh's new show with A24, which is really exciting. And so, I have been really, really, fascinated in my career with language, how people, companies, brands, communities talk about issues that have real policy implications. And I think that language is deeply important and especially in these last few weeks. I've been really, really thinking a lot about how we talk about hate crimes, how we talk about our communities, the way that we speak about the Asian community. In particular, I think a lot of the conversation has been rightfully so focused so much on the East Asian community, but there's a lot of people in Asia. So, I think that I'm really excited to dive in on how we actually talk about, what's going on right now in our country and how we actually put real solutions into play.

Maia Ruth Lee: Hi, everyone. Thank you so much for having me. My name is Maia Ruth Lee, I'm an artist and educator. I was born in South Korea and raised in Kathmandu, Nepal for about 13 years and immigrated to the U.S in 2011. So, I think out of this group, I might be the newest member of being Asian-American I guess. And I've lived in New York for about 10 years before moving here, where I am now currently, which is Colorado. In my personal work, I really relate a lot to what you're talking about Zara. I work with a lot around surrounding language, my parents were linguists, so growing up language was first and foremost deemed very important.

Maia Ruth Lee: So, in my personal artwork, I deal with a lot surrounding conceptually around language. And as a visual artist, I like to take the challenge of expressing the language of grief specifically, currently, in an abstract way, and I wanted to give up notions of language identity writing systems or semantics, especially when it comes to the emotional language such as the language of grief. So, that's something that I'm currently working on as an artist and I'm just really honored to be here with such an awesome group of people and I'm here to learn. So, thank you.

Kyle Ng: Hi, my name is Kylie Ng. I'm the co-founder and creative director of Brain Dead and again, this is a super honor to speak with such intelligent, amazing people, all big fans of. I'm a sixth-generation Chinese-American, so I'm probably the most American out of all you guys. And that was an interesting thing because we were actually, from what the records say, we're one of the first Chinese in Texas. In San Antonio. So, that's always been part of our life, my grandfather was a cowboy, he wears a turquoise belt and we used to listen to Western cassettes in his car. And I grew up in the Bay area, which is very multicultural and my family lived in Oakland at the time. My parents grew up there in Berkeley.

Kyle Ng: So, they grew up around everyone, Blacks, Hispanic, everyone. But then I grew up in Orinda, which is literally across the tunnel from Berkeley, which is a very White, like vanilla place. And that was a really interesting perspective because on the weekends, I'd go with my family to 99 Ranch, eat crazy food, chicken feet, everything. But my other life for the most part was sports, hanging out with ... my White friends had like three Asian friends and it was just a very different world. And at sometimes very uncomfortable, where they would make fun of me for my interests with my life, outside of that with my Asian friends in Berkeley or Oakland. And that's sparked a lot in my life, realizing how crazy it was to see real culture and see people who are a little more sheltered in their world, like mainstream world.

Kyle Ng: And I just didn't understand how that thing wasn't connecting. At my school it wasn't connecting, I was a jock. I was a very sports kid, hung out with the cool kids or whatever but that one part which is not really resonating, I'm like, "Whoa!" The coolest stuff animated me, even real hip-hop music or punk. And until when I turned 13, I got really invested in the punk community, and that's when I realized, I saw a lot of diversity and I saw this really inclusiveness that I really enjoyed. So, with my brand now Brain Dead, the main focus was showcasing a brand that focused mostly on community and the artists and musicians and world that we can create.

Kyle Ng: And as we got bigger, we want to create community platforms, whether it's venues, we have a movie theater now in Fairfax, but places that inspired me to grow up and feel connected to a culture that was bigger than me or any race. And I think that's the most important part, was how do you take, what I think is the evil of capitalism or this idea of just make money. But take that idea of being successful but always having to give back to the world that inspired us and create inspiration in a world of, let's say, algorithmic gain in some form or just control.

Jeff Staple: Cool. What's up everyone? My name is Jeff Staple, I'm the founder of one of the early street wear brands that I started in the mid 90s, called Staple. Our icon's a pigeon, in case you've ever seen a pigeon on clothing or shoes, I'm responsible for that one. I also founded a creative agency called the Reed Art Department, aka RAD, also founded a lifestyle street wear store called Reed Space, that was based in the lower East side of New York, one of the first pioneers of a multi-genre retail experience. And I have a podcast on HYPEBEAST called The Business of Hype. I was born in the mid 70s, in New Jersey to a mother from Hong Kong, a father from Guangzhou, China, who decided the middle of New Jersey, about 30 minutes from Atlantic city was the place to land.

Jeff Staple: I went to a high school that had 1,600 graduating students and three Asians. So, you can imagine my assimilation into Caucasian culture was a means of survival. And muting or shunning, anything that was of Asian culture was the only way to be accepted. And not because there was hardcore racism or burning crosses on the front of my lawn, but because they just didn't know what we were. And so the only way to not be foreign was to be familiar to them. But when I went to New York University, when I was 17, it was the first time that I had probably not had a racial slur thrown at me for the first 17 years of my life. Every day, there was tiny jabs of racism, that when they start from the age of zero, you don't even know that's racism. Because that's just everyday regular life.

Jeff Staple: It wasn't until NYU, which has a 55% Asian student body and people aren't making fun of Asians because they will kick your ass if you do. That was when I was like, "Oh, that

was wrong. That feeling was wrong. This is the right feeling." And it was really trying to unprogrammed myself from the first two decades of upbringing, and frankly still trying to untangle those knots. And as I was telling Minya before, these conversations of race and what it means to be Asian and Asian-American, and even sometimes because we have businesses and brands, sometimes strangely being more accepted by Asians in Asia than Asian-Americans in America, which is another conversation about as us versus them. I'm still untangling this, it's a very uncomfortable situation for me to be in and have. But I'm glad that we're able to talk in the safe space and I hope people watching can understand that even your favorite icons that have quote unquote made it, are still figuring this shit out too, just alongside with you.

Minya Oh: Thank you to everybody for these stories. And I think that Jeff and Kyle, you guys bring up something that is so interesting because, what a lot of this moment ... and when I say this moment, it's just an umbrella term for anti-Asian violence, anti-Asian racism and anti-Asian super micro, small things that have just been built up and we all have these calluses. I think that one of the interesting things about it, is that it has really flattened a lot of the differences among us. So, if you talk about a sixth-generation Chinese-American family, and you talk about a first-generation immigrant family from Bangladesh, suddenly we are being painted with the same brush and we're going through the same experiences. And so that I think has actually been a huge shock for a lot of, let's say you're a Chinatown born and bred, New York city, you feel like this is your town.

Minya Oh: And suddenly someone is speaking to you as if you just got off the boat. And at the same time, someone who is first-generation and has to literally translate to their parents what the racism is, they're not even necessarily recognizing it, when somebody says something to them on the street. That is deeply painful, but also really interesting in the way that it's bringing us all together experience. I wanted to ask you guys how you are personally coping with what is happening right now. Because I think that we all have different ways, so for Jeff, for you being somebody who you grew up in a White community, you are very, very accepted by all races because of what you've accomplished. Did you experience what's happening almost as a aside, like a third person? Or did it just suddenly bring back things that you didn't know hurt you? I wanted to ask all of you guys how you're coping, how you're experiencing this moment. Jeff you can start.

Jeff Staple: I'll start with that. Number one for me is obviously the safety and protection of my elder. I think that's a very Asian thing. You hear about these atrocities that are happening to particularly the elderly, it's just crazy. Why aren't they fucking with Daniel Wu or Ben Baller? I can be like, "I'd love to see someone mess with them." My grandmother thankfully is still alive and my mother is healthy and my mother-in-law, and I look to them and I think the initial reaction is protection. Like, "Don't go out. Don't go to the market yourself. Make sure you don't go into that neighborhood." And then you see nonprofits that are offering free pepper spray to Asian women. This is 2021. When I see these headlines, I'm was just like, "Wow, I can't believe we're at this place in society."

Jeff Staple: And then I think the other thing that I immediately jumped to, is that because ... I mentioned I grew up with this racism constantly. It sadly doesn't surprise me, and in some ways, this is because I'm an eternal optimist and I try to find the silver linings in everything. People are showing their true colors now and maybe there's some good in this because now the people who were harboring feelings and suppressing them, are now getting

outed in the most terrible way possible. But I think ... you mentioned callused, we are callused by this. I think opening these wounds in some way, initially it's painful, but we have to have these conversations and get to the root of it.

Jeff Staple: It almost doesn't help if all of us are censoring ourselves and muting ourselves and just going about our daily lives, it also doesn't help that people are openly attacking each other for sure. But I think these conversations have that happen. Even just a small intimate group like this, may not have been happening if it wasn't for some of these events that were going on. I go back to the BLM issue that was going on, I'm sure you guys saw that Dave Chappelle ... when he did the monologue right after that and it started because Don Lemon was calling celebrities out for not saying anything. And it's ironic because Dave called out Don Lemon like, "Don't, you dare come at me and Drake and Oprah." But it was Don Lemon's poking that got you on that stage. So, it worked in a way.

Jeff Staple: I look at it in a similar way, we are now coming together, we are all on the same boat, as you said, Minya. And if we can find a silver lining in these atrocities that have happened, if they're getting us together now talk about something positive, then let's make the best of that. So, I'm torn between protection and proaction at the same time. But it's weird, you want to be out there, but you also want to make sure that your home front and your family is safe at the same time.

Minya Oh: I definitely agree that, that's probably the best thing that has happened, is that it has created so many conversations and even ones that we're just having with ourselves, where we're analyzing things in the past. You mentioned you looking back at things that happened to you in the past and seeing them in a new framework. And I actually attribute that framework solely to younger Asian-Americans who are indignantly saying like, "This is not okay. I need this space. I need to voice my opinions." And so as much as we want to say like, "Oh." There's the old person in me that's like, "Well, we didn't complain. We just took it. We just kept going." But in the end ... and this is something that I've actually shared with other Asian-Americans during some of these conversations is that, I forever felt like that was some badge of honor, but it's actually, when we really look at it, perhaps the ones that are shouldering that, are the most hurt. Because we've been only letting it fester and not letting it out.

Minya Oh: So, I think one thing about young people in this movement, is that they are all about letting it out. Even if something is a micro, they want to make sure that you know. And then moving forward, you will always remember that. So, one thing I wanted to ask Zara is, how do you care for yourself and your heart when you are also working on how to address this issue for brands, for businesses, how do you do that?

Zara Rahim: It's hard, because I think I'm now getting to a point in my career where I'm actually making active decisions about not wanting to help as much as I used to. I think that, just speaking to what Jeff was saying earlier, I think White adjacency is a means of survival in this country for anybody who's nonWhite. And I think that so much of the way that we navigate school, our communities, our neighborhoods, our workplaces, is by being the best, most elite, helpful versions of ourselves. And I think that translates a lot into my work. And I think that, I've been unpacking that a lot with my therapist, and I think that as much as I've radically changed from being the girl who grew up in Port St. Lucie, Florida that was surrounded by lower income

White people, snowbirds, Cubans, Puerto Ricans, Black folks and being the only Bengali family in my city.

Zara Rahim: I think that's so much of who I've become has been an unraveling of the affirmation that I was seeking from Whiteness. And I think that right now, particularly ... and just because I think that we can be frank here, I've been really frustrated over these last few weeks. I find the phrase, "Stop Asian Hate" a little lazy. I think that it feels like somebody was like, "Stop Asian Hate." And it was like, "What does that mean? Huh? What are we talking about?" It's like, "Stop bad things?" "Yes, of course."

Zara Rahim: Whereas, "Black Lives Matter" was an affirmative statement. And that's why it caused so much backlash within White communities. Because they were like, "What do you mean Black Lives Matter?" It's like, "No." Their liberation, is our liberation is what we're saying versus, "Stop Asian Hate," felt like a really easy thing for White people or people who are nonAsian to move on easily. And I think that a lot of again, as I was alluding to earlier, I'm really, really fascinated by language. I think that AAPI, in the political term Asian-American Pacific Islander, is chaotic. I think it's chaotic and even as somebody who's worked in politics and been the technical national spokesperson for a presidential candidate who's doing this, Cultural heterogeneity is really real amongst Asian people.

Zara Rahim: Yes, there are so many interconnected, cultural values and things like family and migration patterns, different things that connect us. But when we're talking about violence, it is really, really frustrating for me to talk about a continent that literally has billions of people and thousands of languages and hundreds of ethnicities and tons of different religions. Because when we're talking about Islamophobia for example, when we're talking about recording and collecting data on hate crimes, it all really just falls into whatever the government says, is defined under that. And as we have learned over the past few decades is that hate crimes are really, really difficult to punish and are really difficult to name. And it's why so many folks get really frustrated around these conversations. Particularly, the trauma is imposed upon us because we're always like, "Name it a hate crime." And it's like, "Actually, well, what is a hate crime?" How do you name the thing? And it's like we don't even know how to talk about our communities.

Zara Rahim: And so unless we can have that conversation first, and also talk about the racism that exists in our own community, amongst each other, that is also really critical. I feel a lot of things, I feel frustrated, I feel like..Where do we begin? Where do we look? How do we unpack all of this? And so between the pandemic between George Floyd, between the Civil rights movement we watched last summer and between now, it's like I'm tired. I'm tired and I'm just like, "Where do we look? Where do we go? What do we do?" And I just don't think that labor should rest on our shoulders. I think it's somebody else's job.

Minya Oh: I think that in a lot of cases, we have to give ourself the space to opt out of some of the work, because we're taking on other parts. And so if even some Asian-Americans are deciding that they want to take on the really heavy burden of therapy, I think that has been an amazing part of the conversation that has come up a lot. Or another huge load, which is talking to older generations, talking to your parents about this. That's such a massive undertaking that maybe you also can advocate for allyship at the same time. Or understand the multitudes of the Asian community.

Minya Oh: I think that even us analyzing how we look at colorism, how we look at socioeconomic issues, one interesting thing that I think, Julie, I think you mentioned even before this conversation, when we were just getting to know each other, was about the model minority, and how one thing that has become very evident through this and through these conversations is that, the model minority, even when it has gotten us individual things like a better job, higher pay, certain colleges, has never really translated into any type of power for us.

Minya Oh: We aren't asking for power, we don't know how to ask for certain things. And so it doesn't lift all the boats. And so that is one of the biggest revelations about being a model. Is that you get nothing. Except for maybe your own accolade. So, what I also wanted to know, especially from Maia is, when you were analyzing language, I want to call out one thing you probably posted and I know that, that's a lot of emotional work to post things on social media but something that resonated with so many people and we shared it, we read it, was just a message of ... and if you can paraphrase it, a message about taking care of yourself.

Maia Ruth Lee: Really, I was very taken by the shock and sadness from the Atlanta shooting but also the cumulative violence that have been happening. And I'm physically isolated here in terms of, I am one of two Asians in this town. And so this town is still a liberal town, it's a mountain town, there's a lot of hippies and whatnot. But still I just really felt this longing to be with my people. I just really felt this deep sadness and I was just really taken aback by just the grief that AAPI folks have been feeling these past months and also for a long time. And for me being new to America, 10 years is still very short.

Maia Ruth Lee: One thing I kept thinking about, and I think this is one thing that maybe a lot of people can relate to especially Asian-Americans is that, in my life growing up as a child of Korean immigrants, because we had immigrated to Nepal, or just a child with Korean parents in general, my brother and I were brought up to not take up any space. We weren't encouraged to speak up for ourselves, because that was seen as an act of defiance. And that was inconsiderate to others. If we spoke up, it was considered complaining, it was considered rude. So, we weren't allowed to speak up in front of our parents, so that automatically made it very impossible for us to speak up in front of other adults or other authoritative people in our lives, like even in our schools or teachers.

Maia Ruth Lee: Even if someone else was in the wrong and we were right, we still couldn't speak up for ourselves. And that ingrained behavior, it just doesn't change easily, and I think this is a generational thing, like you mentioned earlier Minya. This is how our parents and maybe their parents have endured grief and difficulties through their lives, through wars and through being in a new environment and having to assimilate like you said, Jeff. All of these things combined, I think it's, what they know is obviously what they're going to teach us, and so what we are passed on then is that same method which is, "Stay quiet, stay invisible, do good, be that be the model minority, be grateful, do not complain."

Maia Ruth Lee: And I think that ingrained behavior, even as we become adults, we're still trying not to take up space. And I say it from a personal place where it's ... like Jeff said, it's very uncomfortable for me to be like, "Okay, we got to talk about me now, we've got to talk about us." It's just very uncomfortable but I think it's because of that ingrained upbringing. And I go back to so many situations where I've let myself become invisible and almost choose not to be heard,

and that has created over time a cumulative harm to my own growth, in my workplace or my own personal life. And that's something that really struck me as we were dealing with the violence now, and going back to, not only are we facing the suppression from society and government, but also our internal impressions from our upbringing and generational experiences too. So, it's just really opened up this time machine for me.

Jeff Staple: Have you seen this photo, circling the internet of this Asian woman holding up this sign that says, "You say Kung flu, I say fuck you." Have you seen that one? When I saw that, my initial reaction was like, "Oh, my God. Yes." And then my second reaction was her mom thinking like, "Don't write that sign. No, no, no, no, no. Don't do that." Her mom must be so terrified of her holding up that sign and that's the old us, like, "Shh!"

Maia Ruth Lee: Yeah. Absolutely

Jeff Staple: Immediate to your point, that young people are made, they're just like, "Fuck this." It's so dope.

Maia Ruth Lee: That's why gen Z and younger generations are so powerful. I think our job maybe as, whatever generation we're in, to sever that, to stop that oppression from continuing and to really amplify and really encourage the younger generation to really speak up and to just be like, "Just say your piece, it doesn't matter if you're right or wrong or if your parents are going to get mad or not." And I think that's really important.

Maia Ruth Lee: I have a three-year-old and a lot of the times, I swear it's just like, I have this war going on in my head where, I'm still carrying on what my parents have given me, which is being really strict. I'm like the strict parent of the two of us, and I'm the one who's the disciplinary like, "Don't complain, don't whine, don't speak up for yourself." And then I have this other voice in my head where I'm like, "No, I can't do that anymore. This is what I received and I need to stop this from my generation onwards." So, I don't know. It made me really think about historically what our parents and the generation who has gone through so much of the trouble to immigrate to the U.S or to other Western societies to really assimilate, and frankly just to survive.

Minya Oh: I think what's really interesting too is that, Asian-Americans are caught in the middle between America and Asia. And also I think that our generation, although some of you guys, I would say more open-minded but some of us are definitely stuck in the indoctrination of what our parents were telling. We're also stuck in the middle, so a lot of times there is also this need to inform younger folks who are so outspoken, to understand that our parents were not monsters. They didn't have the luxury of thinking about racism. So, racist things happen to them and they had to push through because they were so focused on survival. They didn't have the luxury of being able to advocate for themselves because that was not an option. They couldn't speak up.

Minya Oh: And I think that when younger people understand that, they fight harder for the things that we've gone through and what are our parents and our grandparents have gone through. But the other challenge for young people is, and Julia, I would love to hear what your thoughts are. Is what do we want? So, Zara mentioned how we are able to look at BLM and it's

so crystal clear, we understand BLM, there's no gray area. It's either you respect Black life or you don't. We want law enforcement to stop killing Black people that. But when we say, "Stop Asian Hate," it's so amorphous. And so, Julia, as somebody in politics and somebody making changes, what do we ask for? What do we want? What's realistic? Or not even realistic but what is actionable?

Julie Won: I think first we need to recognize that the model minority myth was created as a racialization to serve a broader political purpose, which was to make sure that there was a clear contrast between Asian-American Pacific Islanders and the Black Americans in America. Who were actively protesting due to economic oppression, systemic racism and all of the disparities that they were facing, and White Americans were saying, "Hey, these people don't have nuclear families, are not focused on education, but look at these Asians."

Julie Won: "Hey, hey, look at these Asians. These Asians, they are focused on education, they're quiet, they're docile, they're submissive, they're focused on making sure their children go through our education system and they're not going to ruffle any feathers, and they will be great workers in our capitalistic society." And this was intentionally imposed on us, to invisibilize and erase a lot of our own personal journeys as immigrants, as well as our achievements. And we see even today in 2021, that even in corporate America or in any industry across America, we are very well-represented in these Ivy league schools and we might be represented in these companies in Hollywood, yet we have no leadership roles or executive positions in any of these places.

Kyle Ng: To that point, there's really ... how do I say? There's these really micro changes in that ... how do I say ... like social and economic caste systems within Asian and White America, that you see where maybe in Black America it's very polarizing to White America. But in Asian America, to that point, the model minority myth it's like, when the BLM thing was happening and I was talking to my sister, she was saying the same thing, it's like, "Well, why don't the Black community take care of their own, like Asian community?" And I was like, "I'm not sure of the last time Asian community really took care of their own." We take care of our family, and if you make money, you take care of the wealthy side of Asian America, but it's not like I'm hanging out with the guy. My family is not taking care of the lower income Asian community in Oakland. There's no crossover.

Kyle Ng: It's just, when you get to that level, you stay at that level and you're like, "Oh, cool, I can be next to this White guy at the country club, but at the same time, I think I made it, but it's all right, they're a little more because they're White, so they really made it."

Kyle Ng: And that's the point you can be successful in this country go to good school, but you probably won't have a leadership position because you're just happy to be here. And I think that's the thing that is the big issue, that I think Zara mentions too. Is that, capitalism puts us in this really crazy place where our goals are economic gain or these ideas of making it, but at some point it's just overshadowing the bigger topics. And we throw things out like, "Oh, "Stop Asian Hate"." Which is the Panda in the room, like, "Oh this will cover it all." But at the end of the day, it's really just covering up the idea that it's a social class issue that we're just tossing all these things in front of, but the real mechanics of this country or a lot of the world is just so flawed.

Julie Won: So, I think it's first and foremost, we as AAPI have to recognize the facade that we're living under, that we have been fed and we have been taught. And we have to recognize as AAPIs that we are people of color and we are minorities and we are part of the social economic caste system or whatever it is that you want to call it. So, we ourselves have to recognize that and identify as that, first and foremost. Secondly, we need to make sure that America recognizes us as people of color. Because when convenient to them, then we are White Adjacent, but when also inconvenient to them, now we are no longer White Adjacent and we're people of color. What is it? Because coming from a tech background, I know that in a lot of technology companies or even an education, White Americans are very quick to say like, "AAPIs are not underrepresented in these spaces."

Julie Won: I know that in my diversity and inclusion programs, I've had multiple conversations with the workforce team for HR to say, "Why are we not included in HR, as part of the diversity and inclusion program, especially when it comes to building a pipeline for leadership, why are you racing us?" And they're like, "Well, you have plenty of AAPIs who are going to be naturally working through the leadership pipeline because they're hardworking." That is false. So, we need to make sure that we're recognized by the media, we're recognized by all these corporations, that we're recognized by the government as people of color who need to continue to have special funding, we need to have budgets. The fact that AAPIS get the least amount of funding from New York City, while nonprofits are represent and service, AAPIs is a shame.

Julie Won: And the fact that we've had even within this last year in DOE in the Department of Education for children and even in our New York City government from City Hall, they've had public press releases that say, "AAPIs don't need mental health funding, they're doing perfectly fine, they're great." They're continuing to feed us the model minority myth, and we're continuing to see it, play out on our lives and it's hurting us. So, I think those are the top two things that we have to come to agreement in both as AAPIs well, amongst ourselves, as well as with non-AAPIs in our society. But even more than that, that it's most important to me, in my campaign as I'm continuing to be out here, having these conversations, whether it's online or at rallies or whatever it is that I get invited to, is that we need to have [BiPAP 00:45:56] solidarity. We have not been there, when we talk about Black, brown and API solidarity, people are having a hard time conceptualizing even in a theory. Theoretically, what does this mean for our society?

Julie Won: What does this mean for my community? And how do I embody that? And what does that look like? And how do we get started? Because at the end of the day, we all have different experiences when it comes to racism, we have different journeys, we have different histories in this country, but at the end of the day we suffer the same fate. The same way that Zara was saying, "Until they are liberated, none of us are liberated." And until everyone is safe, none of us are safe. And when it comes to, right now I know that especially in the political sphere, you see such a different array of political legislative proposals or ideas from candidates or current elected officials. Where some people are calling for more policing. They want to live in a surveillance State where we're going to have cops on every single block, in every single elevator and every single subway.

Julie Won: Is that really realistic? And is that really going to keep us safe? Does policing, over policing? And I'm not saying that we need to abolish the police but I'm saying will over policing really end racism? Has that worked for us? No. So, having these conversations as

painful as it is, especially when it comes to multi-generational, because there's so much fear. Because it's a knee-jerk reaction and we are so scared to go outside. These are difficult conversations to have but we really need to understand our own deeply rooted racism, even within the AAPI community amongst each other, as well as the broader anti-Blackness that lives within us. And why are we so scared of melanin? Stop with the skin lightening stuff. Stop it. And with all this plastic surgery. It gets nuts out here. So, those are some of the things that I would ask for.

Minya Oh: It's so interesting to think about when someone finally listens to you, and maybe they're only doing it because they feel like they have to right now. But then they turn the light on, they're like, "Okay, so what's your order? What do you want?" And suddenly we're all looking at each other and we all want different things, depending on if it's the grandparents or if it's the new immigrants or the multi-generational ingrained Asian Americans. We have to get it together, and I think that, that's been super hard. I think it's been very uncomfortable. I remember when Daniel Dae Kim and was it Danny Wu?

Jeff Staple: Mm-hmm

Julie Won: Mm-hmm

Minya Oh: When they put up this bounty.

Jeff Staple: Bounty. Like a bounty.

Minya Oh: It felt really wrong. It felt really wrong but then at the same time, it was just a couple of weeks prior to that, there was a woman, a mom who was just buying bottle of wine in Harlem and she was brutalized by these guys, they tried to kick it to her and then she rebuffed them, she went outside and then they beat her up. Though it was maybe not an official bounty, but there was a bounty on these guys' heads. And they found them and that was like street justice, that did not feel wrong because it was within the same community.

Minya Oh: So, it made me question, "Okay, if this assailant was clearly Asian and there was this reward money, would it feel bad? And if not money behind it, would people have been motivated to turn this person in?" So, I'm curious to find out from you guys, what are the biggest contradictions or struggles that you were having with ... and then I think we've identified just the hashtag alone is problematic. But what are some other thorny issues that you think that we need to deal with? And anybody can jump in.

Julie Won: I also want to add that in addition to what I addressed earlier, for what we need. Obviously this is a very complex issue and I want to hear more from Zara about, actually, how do we reform hate crimes and the ways that we have criminal justice and how we persecute, and what does that look like for us. But also in addition to that, I'd like to go back to funding, when we think long-term, like short-term, we do need to make sure that these hate crimes and these people who have perpetrated these things, we need to have justice. But at the end of the day, like long-term, what do we need?

Julie Won: We need to make sure that we're working with anti-violence organizations that have been cure violence, they are proven with track records to decrease violence in the neighborhoods that they're in. And they have actual proven tactics for conflict mediation, bystander training, self-defense training and they also provide mental health services, job opportunities because all of these things are tied together and making sure that everyone in the community that is hurting right now is continuing to rebuild and heal. And that's, what's really going to end racism when all of us, especially the BiPAP community stands in solidarity and there are actual investment into these resources to make sure that everyone in the community is doing well.

Zara Rahim: Again, I think so much of how I think about this has radically changed since last summer. I'm like a full abolitionist at this point. So, I don't believe justice can be served by a system that was designed by White supremacy. And so it's really hard to talk about how we solve these issues and punish people in it. And I think any policy makers, and Julie you'll know this well, it just all comes back to education reform and how our schools are being integrated, how much money we're spending on non-English speaking students being able to learn their own languages or how much we're investing in the opposite. Understanding that English should not be a primary language or named as such in any education space. Thinking about how that representation shows up in the media, how about telling stories? Who's telling those stories? Who are the gatekeepers?

Zara Rahim: To me, I'm more interested in imagining a world in which the solutions are so much more. I think, interesting and hopeful and where we are able to have conversations about reform, through educating each other and our neighbors and people who've not been exposed to, or refuse to be exposed and having conversations about that, about the nuance that exists in Asian American culture. For me, even just being a Bengali American, we're considered the poor working class part of the subcontinent.

Zara Rahim: There's racism and classism that is imposed upon us by our neighbors to the West and by our oppressors and that happened through the genocide. And I was thinking earlier about what I think it was Maia and Minya, who were alluding to what our parents survived. In my conversations with my mom, even now she knows me as this radical, I'm just ... all the time I'm getting scolded for talking back and have been since I was little. But that landed me in the career that I ended up in but it was ... My mom survived a genocide, like a literal genocide.

Zara Rahim: My mom survived a genocide. And sometimes when I'm like, the casualness in which she talks about watching people be shot in front of her, and me getting mad that the lady looked at her wrong in the grocery store, those are two such separate emotional planes that it took me a long time to empathize with. Because I was like, "Why aren't you getting as mad as I am. You have to understand that, when we watch what's happening to Black people or when we watch what's happening to me." And it is because we have been living in this system that actually has designed us to feel grateful for being here, feel grateful for having safe haven and living in a place where capitalism allows us to work really hard and make our way to the top.

Zara Rahim: Or have designed systems in which we are pitted against each other. Kyle, when you were alluding to what your sister was saying earlier, that is very much exactly how the system was designed. For us to feel like we are supposed to be looking at each other versus looking at the White supremacist structure that was designed to make us the least among our

communities. And so to me, I like to imagine a world in which ... and I think that's really the only way that I can think about this stuff. Because I think about so many abolitionists, I think about ... gosh, what's her name? Yuri Kochiyama who so immediately aligned herself with Malcolm X.

Zara Rahim: Because she was like, "If Malcolm X is not liberated, if the concepts that he is not talking about are not accomplishable, sure as hell are we not talking about Japanese internment, are we talking about the violence that's happening against Asian people. And that imagination in which we are talking about positive changes to systems that exist, I think is where I like to focus, versus how we punish crimes, because I don't believe in that. And so it's really hard to talk about, because I don't live in a world in which that's totally possible yet, but I think that's how I keep myself remotely positive in what feels like a really, really negative space.

Maia Ruth Lee: I totally agree with you Zara. I think what I ended up thinking about a lot was, what does then collective care look like? Can we focus on collective care as opposed to punishment? And even in that video, that terrible video of that Asian elderly woman getting beat up in front of a store and the security guard closing the door on her, I was just like, "Where is the care?" Obviously for her security. But, "Where is the care for these houseless folks? "Where is the care and mental care for the houseless folks who have probably endured more than any of us combined." Especially through COVID. And it just really made me think about, we need to imagine solutions in a more imaginative and more open and out of the box way, than we have been trained to do. So, I totally relate to what you're speaking about.

Jeff Staple: There's also always an asterisk, when it comes to Asian issues. When that horrible event happened, Maia that you're talking about, and then when they dug deeper into that attacker, and then you find out that he killed his own mother, it's like, "See, he was just crazy. He killed his mother." And then the Atlanta shooting. "Oh, my God, eight people dead" "Oh, but they was like spa worker, oh." There's always this...

Zara Rahim: He was just having a "bad day".

Jeff Staple: Yeah, "He was just having a bad day and he's a sex addict." So, everything has just got to reason out. There's always a nullification of the actual event that happened. I'm so sick of that asterisk.

Kyle Ng: What made me feel crazy about the whole Atlanta shooting was, it was just in the media to that point, "A spa worker." And they looked at this ... from my perspective as sexualizing Asians like, "Oh, it's, they're bad. They worked at the spa." So, you're immediately in danger if you work within that. And that's the only thing I commented on, on social media. Because I was like, "Look it, you think these Asian women want to work in spas? You think that's like the ultimate American dream? Like that's what you think of us? That's the goal?" "Is that Asian women want to be sexualized and be working in spas, whatever." They're forced, it's pretty much a lot of times slavery or sex trafficking. And it's super unfortunate that, that's how we're picked in lights.

Kyle Ng: When the number one successful movie a few years ago was Crazy Rich Asians. I didn't really watch it, but obviously the name says a lot about how people perceive us and what the goal of being Asian is. I took a meeting with a company right after that movie because they're like, "Oh, we should make a TV show around you." I'm like, "I know what this is about."

"And you just kind of sell this thing." And I'm like, "I'm good. It's all good." But it's just funny how, to all you guys' points, there's these little details, the asterisks of like, "Oh, what's the real reason."

Kyle Ng: Are we super focused on the hate crimes, the violence happening to Asians? Because to me that's just, again, the surface level of these issues. The BLM thing like Zara said was like, "Oh, that's, what's happening." They're killing Black people. That's a thing that's not hatred, the system hates Black people. I don't think these people were like, "Oh, I hate Asian people." I think it's like, "Oh look, we push them to the side." Like, "Oh, you're in my way." Boom! It's like, "I don't hate you, but you're nothing to me. You're dirt under the rug."

Jeff Staple: Kyle, can you imagine, you mentioned Crazy Rich Asians. Just apply that title to any other race.

Kyle Ng: It's the same.

Jeff Staple: Can you imagine, if someone made a movie like, Funny Dunking Black Folk. That's the name of my movie?

Kyle Ng: It's insane.

Jeff Staple: Stop Asian Hate, is basically saying, "Please don't hate us." That's our mantra? Is, "Please don't hate us."

Kyle Ng: And to that point, Maia, it's really funny because that's the craziest thing. It's like when we have these surface things, it just becomes the commercialized version of how to portray what's happening, and then the other side the younger generation they're so political, which is so cool. But it's really funny because to that point, my friend Fred from Burgerlords, we made a vegan burger, and he made the proceeds, we have this burger that's always donation to some cause. So, it was the BLM, that's how it started and then it went to this anti-Asian hate group and they were attacking the burger because there's this group in Chinatown of younger Chinese who are very outspoken about Chinatown who were like, "Do you guys want to comment on how Burgerlords and Brandon are part of the systemic White supremacy of Chinatown and all this stuff." And basically just gentrification.

Kyle Ng: And that was funny, because at that point, we think we're being progressive, and then we are just as part of the problem, which is so funny. But then you're also like, "Okay, there's this idealism that exists from them." When I'm like, "Hey, look it," from my perspective, "I want to create a company or be part of friends who have companies that address it in a way that works within the system to better the system." And yes, there are going to be this idea of people want to come here to move here or build within the system to gentrify it. But I'm not going to build my companies within the place that has a Starbucks next to it. We're going to try to work within a system and build a \$10 burger for people. Let's say. That's affordable, not open a fine dining restaurant.

Kyle Ng: And to that point I asked them, "What's your solution?" And there was a sense of so much ... how do I say ... fieriness or just anger from the youth, yet they didn't really have a

solution. And I think that's the interesting thing, that there is that bell curve that I see, or not bell curve but like this plane where our older generation don't even want to talk about it, they're just like, "Let's assimilate." The young generation's idealistic, revolutionaries, BLM was huge for them. They were finally in the streets, they feel the energy. But maybe fully, they're still learning like, "Oh, I don't even have a job. Like, you know what I mean? I don't have a job. I'm still in school."

Kyle Ng: The reality is haven't kicked in of like, "Oh, we do live in a capitalistic society." And I think to that point with Zara and Julie and Minya, everyone here, it's, what do we see as the goals if we are stuck in that society, within the industry of capitalism? How do we navigate that without, one, being so political it just becomes a nonprofit organization or just so focused on that. Which to me, I don't think that works personally. Just focusing on that and donating money, I think it has to be within our own industries or our own practice that does give back in everyday ways. Not just preaching because like Zara said, "We get sick of just preaching about this stuff." Because it's like, "Dude, I don't need to speak upon it. I want to act upon it in some form with my every day." Because at the end say, our mechanics, the gears that we move should be lubricated to be ready for these interactions on the day-to-day.

Jeff Staple: I was just going to add, that can be applied. I want to just go back real quick to Crazy Rich Asians, because even though we threw them under the bus a little bit. I will say that a good half of my soul when I saw that movie was like, "Wow, I'm seeing mad Asian faces on a big screen and they're not going like, Hayaah! Kung fuing people, they're just acting." And I was super proud also at the same time. And I think I understand, that was a foot in the door move, and now that we've got our foot in the door, we can get more in through this door now. So, I don't want to just rank on them when I think that was a way in and I think, to your point Kyle, I'm of the same mindset where, I'm doing a couple of Stop Asian Hate initiatives with Staple, and the people that I'm working with are like, "Let's put, Stop Asian Hate, really big on a T and then give the fun."

Jeff Staple: And I was like, "That'll help, but my goal is to not take someone who would wear a Stop Asian Hate shirt and get them to donate." Because they're in the club, they're helping. My goal is to trick someone to give money and be like, "Oh my God, I accidentally donated to the Stop Asian Hate thing and I'm a crazy racist." That's what I'm to do and maybe get them to switch. So, I'm actually trying to take away. There was this tweet going around where it was like, "If you love like bubble tea, dim sum and Kung fu movies, then you can't hate ..." They're not hating Asians, if you are waiting in line for bubble tea, you are not part of the problem. That tweet doesn't even make it in front of the eyes of the person that it needs to make it through. So, like we're speaking in a vacuum often and it's great because I think speaking in that, often rallies the group up but we can't just stay in the vacuum. To your point Kyle, we have to venture outside of that and start converting, not just preaching to the choir.

Minya Oh: I think before we run out of time, I want to make sure that everybody has a chance to just have their final thoughts. But one thing I wanted to add is that, for one thing there isn't necessarily a unified action plan, and there's a lot of passion but you need to have the follow-up for that. So, I think one of the best things that we can do is turn it on ourselves and not necessarily think about what the other got from Crazy Rich Asians or what the other is thinking about their bubble tea and how it relates to the culture of the people who invented it. If we are internalizing and really looking at ourselves and having these conversations, then that is the

most centering thing. Because the way that Kyle you were saying, I don't think they think about us, they erase us.

Minya Oh: I think that we need to think about us and I think that we need to talk to ourselves and talk to each other in both intergenerationally and especially within the Asian community because there are many different colors of the Asian community. Many different subsets, many different ideals and dreams. So, I think that one thing that I've noticed is that each Asian American feels this pressure to make some statement, but that statement is always projected to the outside, and maybe it's to the kindly White person that might want to get on board or to the racist person who like really hates us. But I think that what we can be doing is just talking to ourselves and celebrating ourselves.

Minya Oh: And we don't necessarily do that enough, we haven't been trained to, to Maya's point. We haven't been allowed to. So, at least that's what I love the most, even in reading a lot of these incredible pieces of writing that are coming out from Min Jin Lee and from [Khosla 01:08:59] and anybody who is writing J Caspian Kang. I don't think about, "Oh, wow. I hope all these White people are reading this and really understanding us." I'm just like, "Oh my God, I feel so seen. I feel so like my heart is being torn apart because finally someone is saying something that I relate to."

Minya Oh: So, I hope that after that, after we do all of that internalizing and talking with each other, then we'll come out of it with this idea of what we want, what we need, what we deserve and from a place that is revolutionary towards our saying. That is a rejection of the system. So, maybe this is a first step, but if everybody can also just add in. I just am so thankful for you guys for just being so open and sharing and I feel like we could talk here for hours and hours, so thank you to Social Studies. Maya, could you just give us some parting words.

Maia Ruth Lee: Yeah, from what you were saying Minya. I think just even this group of amazing people getting together because of obviously a very weighted and heavy topic, we're able to really even just share our stories, I think it's so incredibly powerful. And I think the solution never really comes overnight, I don't think that's just how it works but I think accumulatively over time as we are listening to each other and being there for each other, something will ... I want to imagine, I want to believe that something positive will come from this. So, honored to be in this space with you guys and be able to speak and listen. So, thank you.

Minya Oh: Julie, you want to go?

Julie Won: Yeah. I think there is a lot of work to be done and I really hope that we ourselves can continue to take care of one another and collective healing is really what we need. Because the more I am in these spaces, the more I get private messages, especially from AAPI women who are hurting saying things like, "Hey, I'm so angry that I can't cry." Or, "I can't get on my elevator because I'm so scared, and every time a delivery worker tries to hop in with me, I have a knee-jerk reaction like, "No, get off the elevator". "I can't walk outside by myself without hearing footsteps and it feels too close to comfort that I'm constantly looking over my shoulder and clutching my keys." These are real traumas that will be formed if we don't have relational spaces like this that are safe for us to share these experiences with. Because emotional traumas form when you go through an emotional painful experience alone.

Julie Won: And that's not what we want. Especially if culturally we've been told to minimize it or dismiss it, not to talk about it, not to speak up. These are how we make changes for our generation and for our culture, for our society. So, I really hope we continue to provide these spaces of community for everybody. And I think we have a lot of learning to do even for education. I know the Congresswoman Grace Meng is pushing in legislation to make sure that we have ethnic studies for AAPIs in the school curriculum. And I really hope that curriculum is not sanitized by someone who is not AAPI but really telling our stories is as it is. So, I really hope we can continue to be in solidarity with each other as well as the BiPAP community.

Minya Oh: Zara.

Zara Rahim: I just want to say, I hope that every day we're able to remember just being in our bodies and existing is such a revolutionary act. Moving through the world, looking the way that we do and having the duality that we have, knowing what we know about our ancestors, like Kyle, just hearing that you have your sixth-generation American just gives me chills. That's so prolific and it is wild to me to feel like I'm getting emotional in a good way. Not in anything that makes me feel bad but like, "Wow! we are our ancestors wildest dreams and it's really, really special. And it'll be good to have these conversations and it sucks, but it also is just like, I feel so proud of all of us. And I feel protective and I feel in community and I feel so just hopeful and I hope that again, just to my earlier point, I just want us to imagine a new world in which our kids or the generation that comes after us, is able to just dream even bigger.

Zara Rahim: And I think that's what our ancestors, whether or not they intended it that way, is what ultimately they were fighting for and what they were working for, what they came here for, even if that promise was tainted and if they were a little lied to. So, I hope that every day that you remember that you were just such a radical, your existence is radical, you're revolutionary and I'm so glad you all exist. And I'm really happy to be here. So, thank you.

Minya Oh: I love you. That's amazing. Jeff.

Jeff Staple: That was emotional. I want to say to all my non-Asian people out there that might be listening, don't forget the golden rule, "Do unto others as you would have done to yourself." Anything that you do whether it's a snide remark, all the way to a nudge to a full on attack is someone's grandmother and mother, brother, sister, that could be your mother, brother, sister, grandmother, we're all human at the end of the day. And I'm a through and through New Yorker, so I'm not saying you have to love and hug everyone, but you don't have to touch them either. Just stay in your lane. You eveR been on a Southern train in New York, there's like 46 different nationalities in a 200 square foot space and we just stay in your lane.

Jeff Staple: You don't got to fall in love with them, just stay in your lane. And to my Asian brothers and sisters we're in a phase right now where you have to be vigilant, you have to be smart and you have to protect yourself. But at the same time, you have to keep speaking and you have to keep talking because I myself sometimes I'm fatigued like you are Zara, about speaking about this constantly and just giving myself a rest. But I shit you not, every time I post something about some occurrence that has happened, someone on my feed, who I thought was woke knowledgeable and intelligent is like, "Wait, what happened?" They're literally not knowing. You just have to keep saying it because people need to be informed.

Jeff Staple: So, please keep talking about this and keep bubbling the message up and we're going to get through this. And thank you for having me on this panel. It's been really an honor, Julie, you are a rock star, I can't wait to support you. This is also like a multi-pronged attack. So, everything from the people who are making Crazy Rich Asians to the people who are at the highest level of politics, we have to all fire on all of our cylinders. So, thank you.

Minya Oh: Vote for Julie Won. Obviously. Kyle.

Kyle Ng: Again, thank you so much for having me here. The greatest thing, since I would say the summer is that it has been this really crazy therapy session for everyone. It feels like we've been in this therapy room in the world, the social media, where everyone is just saying that the craziest in the best ways, when it's really uncensored and some people retracted or some people are like, "I don't want to talk about," some people totally opened up. But the one thing I really learned from it, if I had to take something away is that, privilege is a big problem in this country, whether it's class or race or just economic. And when you get a sense of privilege, you start losing focus on people under you or around you, and you strive for more privilege.

Kyle Ng: And we have to realize what our goals as humans are in this country or in the world. But I will say this country, because that's what I feel the most connected to. Being a sixth-generation American, I find myself very American and when I'm told, what country am I from? "I'm from America." So, the thing is we look at all these issues and to make America better, we have to realize that the system is at fault. There's a lot of systemic racism, a lot of economic issues. And as we strive for success just being economic gain, that's when we lose focus of the larger thing at hand and that's, what's going to create ... how do I say, this violence and the pain that we see in this community, because everyone just clawing to get on top.

Kyle Ng: And from the lowest levels where you don't even have a home. We look at them a homeless, "Oh, they're taking over land or whatever." Because they have nowhere to live, but how do we help them? Why is there a riot force to protect echo park from fencing up the homeless people. We don't want homeless in the park because we want them for the families but we also don't want homeless in the park because, "Why are they in the park in the beginning, we need homes for them and we need places for them to live."

Kyle Ng: And that's the most important thing is where we got to think broader in more detail and the meta behind why we do the things we do. And I think once we learn the meta of our society and why am I doing business? Why am I here? And loving your family, loving people around you, your community is the most important thing. Then you'll make better decisions. , what I'm saying? And that's the goal. Just think harder about why you do everything you do

Minya Oh: Think harder. Love harder. Don't touch me on the seven train. Don't touch me. That's the message. Thanks everybody. At Social Studies and everybody on the panel, I don't know. I know this is going to be online forever and ever, and ever, and I hope everybody enjoys it. Take care.

Kyle Ng: Bye guys.

Julie Won: Thank you everyone. Bye.