



Brief No. 5: **Radically Reimagining Our Future**

INTRODUCTION

In the aftermath of the November 2020 elections, the Coalition of Asian American Leaders held the fifth session on the state of Asian Minnesotans, convening three panelists to speak to the political moment and the work ahead. As organizations and groups began to debrief the elections and grapple with how to advance their issues with newly-elected decision-makers, this conversation served as a more expansive visioning of the work ahead. By framing the conversation on radical re-imagination, panelists Ananya Chatterjea, Nausheena Hussain and Scot Nakagawa were all invited to name the current challenges we face while also sharing how to fully engage with the work it will take to truly build the future our communities need.

KEY THEMES

- 1.** Though the world we need represents a departure from what we know, this vision—of our safety and survival—is only seen as radical due to how deeply our current systems are rooted in dehumanization and disposability.
- 2.** Even before the pandemic or Donald Trump's presidency, the "status quo" was deeply harmful to many families and communities. For all of us to truly thrive, we need to build something new, not return to what was.
- 3.** To live toward the reimagined world we seek to create, we need to strengthen our practices of democracy, solidarity and care for one another.

CONTEXT

At the time of this webinar, the 2020 United States Presidential Election had been mostly settled in favor of Joe Biden and Sen. Kamala Harris. Incumbent President Donald Trump had yet to concede the loss, and had filed a number of lawsuits against different states challenging the election results and the validity of absentee ballots.

The 2020 Presidential Election saw the highest voter turnout since 1908, with many first time voters and voters of color making the winning difference in key states (See SOAM 4). Across many communities, people were breathing a sigh of relief and wondering what would come next. "There is still work to be done" became a common refrain, almost a disclaimer, among those celebrating Biden and Harris' historic win; after all, nearly 74 million Americans had still voted for a continuation of the previous administration.

In the midst of this political moment, community organizers were already planning ways to continue year-round engagement and maintain momentum in municipal races and the 2022 midterm elections. Communities and organizations concerned with BIPOC liberation and police abolition grappled with Sen. Harris' career as a prosecutor and what might be possible to push the new administration on.

It was against this backdrop that the Coalition of Asian American Leaders convened a short discussion panel featuring two local leaders and a national organizer to talk about what we really mean when we say "there is still work to be done."

SUMMARY

Throughout the session, panelists Ananya Chatterjea, Nausheena Hussain and Scot Nakagawa grappled with a number of themes that wove throughout their panel discussion. The following themes stood out from the conversation.

What We Mean When We Say "Radical"

As happens throughout the history of political discourse, the word "radical" has been imbued with different, sometimes conflicting meanings based on who says it and when. In the case of CAAL's vision for the future, "radical" refers to both the breadth and scale of change as well as the origins of the word as of the "root," recognizing that creating the world we need requires deep work, not surface-level changes.

Importantly, this word can have a negative connotation for our Muslim community members who experienced discrimination after George W. Bush's "war on terror" and bully pulpit vilification of "radical Islam."

"When did being able to live our lives with dignity and justice, how does that seem radical?"

- Ananya Chatterjea

Additionally, Ananya Chatterjea pointed out that access to healthcare and not being killed in the streets should not be "radical" goals for BIPOC. These basic rights are only framed as "radical" because of the United States' foundations in capitalist white supremacy, which normalizes and even rewards the exploitation and disposability of Black people, Indigenous people, and People of Color. To challenge the notion that Black and Brown bodies are not disposable and deserve the same dignity as anyone else disrupts the status quo and is therefore regarded as "radical."



Toxic Normalcy

At the beginning of the webinar, CAAL youth fellows shared reflections on the rapid changes to life due to COVID-19 and their visions and aspirations for the world they were born into. A common theme in these reflections is that we must not return to normal because “normal” was not inclusive or safe for everyone.

Scot Nakagawa reminded us that white supremacy is the form that capitalism took in the United States. While regulation and civil society were able to mitigate some of these systems' worst effects over time, it was not nearly enough. Further, neoliberalism—the move to privatize markets and services—severely hindered the institutions that could limit some of the most vicious greed and rapacity of capitalism. The COVID-19 pandemic has shown both the need for and the gaps in the public infrastructure.

Imagination and Activation

Imagining a better world can be daunting in no small part because, just as white supremacy and capitalism hinder and hurt everyone in different ways, it is the system we live in and so we also benefit from it in small ways. The panelists all echoed that any re-imagination of the future should center the safety and well-being of our most vulnerable community members.

Nakagawa urged us to look to our past to inform our future, pointing out that any move toward nationalism by an ethnic majority in a multi-ethnic state has always resulted in the collapse of the state while moving ethnic minorities further toward authoritarianism in the interest of safety. He pointed out that, while an anti-authoritarian majority always exists, distinct communities may not intuitively see their solidarity with one another because of capitalist-rooted barriers and a false narrative of scarcity. Nakagawa challenged us to re-imagine our notions of “safety” as something other than the absence of fear, pointing out that we still need to coexist with the 74 million people who voted for Trump/Pence. With this in mind, we are called to reimagine utopia not as a place but as a new way of relating to each other.

“We need to think outside of the box and start to reimagine, ‘What does it mean to be a diverse and inclusive democracy?’ from the ground up.”
- Scot Nakagawa

Chatterjea described inclusion as an ensemble dance where everyone learns the same movements but recognizes that each movement impacts every body differently. Further, she encouraged us to examine why we value traditional dances as many of them contain signals of oppression; do we do these because they are beautiful in their meaning or because they are traditional?

Chatterjea lifted up that our bodies carry our trauma, both personal and historical, and, even on good days, these take up energy. Her aspiration for the future is a world where we could utilize all of our energy toward the things we truly care about. Hussain echoed this by expressing the desire for everyone to be able to unapologetically be themselves.

Action

Aspiring to change centuries old institutions built on racism and white supremacy can feel like a heavy lift and, often, it can be difficult to turn imagination into meaningful action. Yet effecting meaningful change is not impossible.

Act local.

Engage in local politics to help your community get a foothold at every level of policy making. Nakagawa lifted up the importance of building inclusive coalitions that engage the center-right as well as progressives. He noted that the center will always take care of itself, so organizers with progressive values must maintain their own interests and identities within these coalitions. As an example, he pointed to the coalitions built and led largely by Black women in the 2020 elections that crossed political divides without sacrificing community interest. All of the speakers encouraged us to engage with people in our lives and locales that we may not always agree with to build collective power.

Hussain talked about how Reviving the Islamic Sisterhood for Empowerment began in 2016 as a way for local Muslim women in her community to more deeply engage in the political process. Though the 2016 election felt like a defeat, it also helped to galvanize the community and further coalition building with other communities with shared interests. This example highlighted Nakagawa's point that democracy requires a "constituent we" to be viable and can only be truly effective when it builds from the bottom up.

In approaching these local conversations, it is important to distinguish politics and philosophy and remember that representative democracy is only a tool, not an end goal. The people must always be the foundation of our institutions.

Act really local.

Start at home or with those closest to you. Consider how your daily actions may impact the global population for better and for worse. Consider why you do what you do and what biases your actions create, reinforce, or dismantle. Celebrate differences as much as we celebrate commonalities. Our connection to and faith in each other builds strong communities and solidarity.

To begin this, Hussain called on us to pick an issue that affects us personally or physically and to work on it at the local level. Illustrating the links between individual experience and systemic issues, Chatterjea and Nakagawa both cited that domestic violence/intimate partner violence is often connected to state-inflicted violence and must be addressed to build and maintain a healthy democracy. In changing how we relate to one another with our neighborhoods and homes, we can re-center both individual and collective safety in new ways that can grow into more thoughtful and inclusive policies.

Act really, really local.

Learn your history. What is the story of your name? What is the legacy of your community? Own your narrative and build power. Think about your personal biases and internalized oppression. How do these manifest in your personality?

"I truly believe that the work is in solidarity with each other in order to have a future where all of us are loved and respected and can live dignified lives."

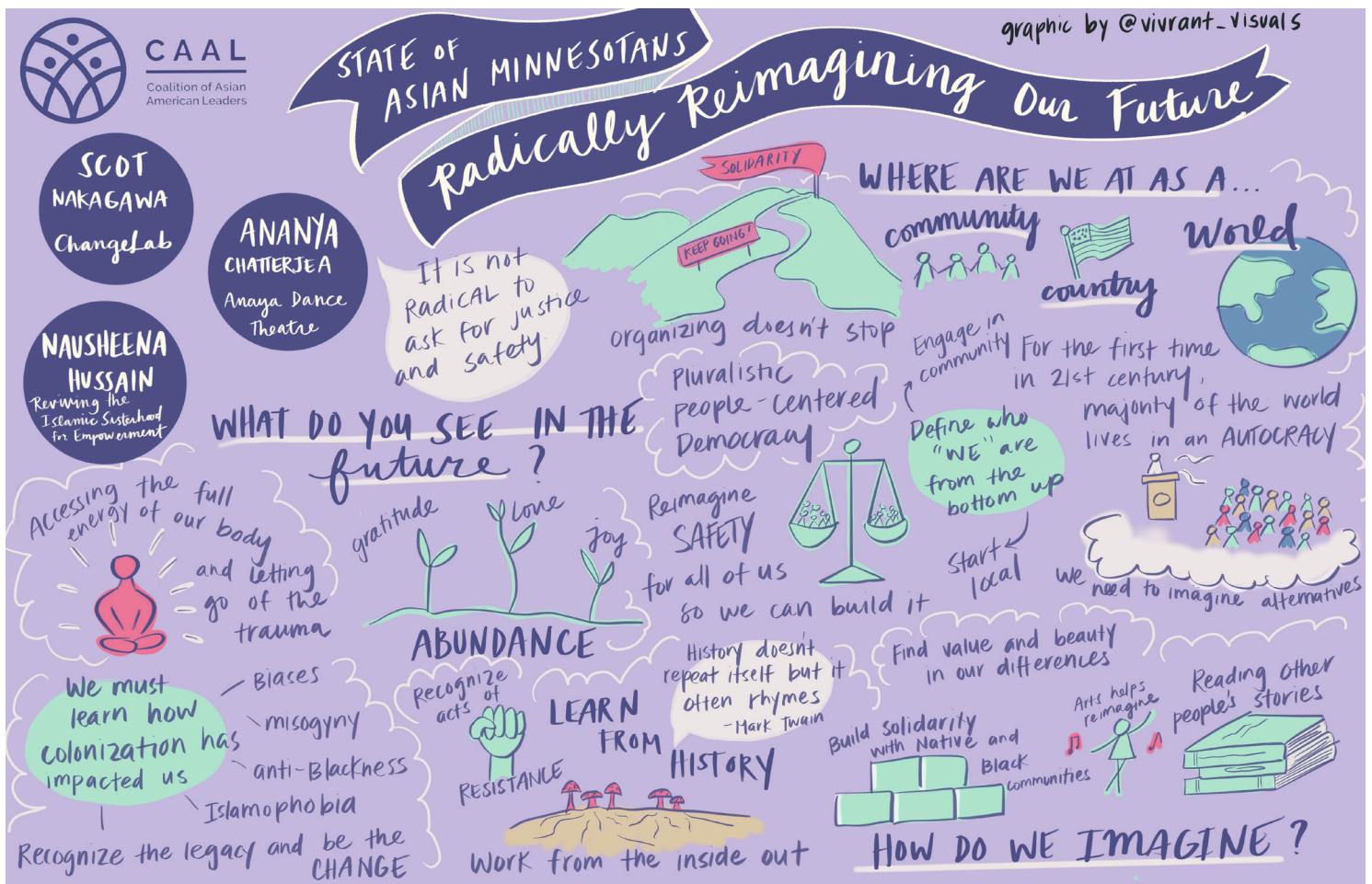
- Nausheena Hussain

Both Chatterjea and Hussain talked about their relationships to their "Asianness" and how, as Indians, they often see their stories overlooked. In reinvestigating and claiming their whole selves and stories as Bengali and Hyderabad Muslim, respectively, they can better access their whole selves. Chatterjea noted that standing up unapologetically takes practice.

Chatterjea encouraged us to find our stories "within the larger mosaic story" of humanity. She used the metaphor of fractals, saying, "when light shines on one area of justice in one place, if we can keep focusing on that, maybe it will grow throughout the world."

Engaging with our whole selves can be scary to think about since no one person can be wholly good, and it can be difficult to realize past harm caused. Still, facing these difficult parts of ourselves makes us stronger, more empathetic individuals, able to work across communities to build the caring, democratic future we envision.

Act. We make the road by walking.



Graphic Recording by Jayda Shuavarnnasri @vibrant_visuals

FUTURE CONSIDERATIONS

Across the panelists' conversation on what radically reimagining our future requires and entails, the themes they touched on raise the following questions for deeper exploration and discussion:

1. Panelists acknowledged that the desire to feel safe is a basic human impulse and an important facet of the future we reimagine and deserve; yet at the same time, when a plural democracy feels dangerous, the desire for safety can lead communities to choose authoritarianism with its promise of stability.

As individuals within communities reimagine safety, how do we honor both the need for and differences between individual safety and community stability, without losing our commitment to a people-centered, equitable democracy?

2. The conversation between panelists happened when, anticipating a change in presidential administration, communities were immersed in discussions of new possibilities. How do we balance, negotiate, or embed visionary/aspirational values for a new, more inclusive and equitable world with the urgent, day-to-day work of ensuring that the immediate needs of the community are met?
3. Speakers referenced creative practices and arts as methods that help them reimagine, highlighting the importance and role that artists, cultural work and cultural strategy play in radically reimagining the future.

How can we invest in and uplift this work as equally important to and intimately intertwined with community organizing and political power-building?



Summary by Jon F. Jee

REFLECTION

by Hedy Tripp

As we leave the traumas of 2020 behind and move forward into 2021 and beyond, the speakers offered inspiration that we can and must take opportunities now to make new history and herstory. The highlight for me was the Youtube recording of CAAL's youth fellows on their vision of reimagining the future. I appreciated the young people emphasizing that they cannot return to what has been "normal" because it does not work. They pointed out the need for intersectional inclusion.

This was a recurring theme with the other speakers who added to this vision of the future the concepts of building solidarity and radical social justice. These speakers represented leaders from different Asian American sectors that created a holistic aura to the webinar. For example, the arts as tools for educating was clearly presented. I liked how solidarity was likened to ensemble work, where each body interprets differently around a theme. Another speaker pointed out that Islamophobia will not disappear anytime soon, and that is true. Still did not dwell on what should not be but instead gave suggestions to strategize for workable solutions. Radically imagining a new future built on what we know to what we want it to be was my main takeaway from this webinar.

I was able to further share the voices of CAAL's youth fellows in a presentation for the St. Cloud Technical and Community College's webinar "Voice, Healing and Power" in November. The participants in my workshop, on the "Double impact of systemic racism and COVID-19 on the Asian American community," were touched by the young people's courageous perspectives and passion.

This is a strange time in America's history, and if our young people and our Asian American leaders can keep working to make their vision of a new America into reality, we have much to hope for.



Coalition of Asian American Leaders
941 Lafond Avenue, Suite 205, Saint Paul, MN 55104
(651) 756-7210 | info@caalmn.org