

CAAM

CENTER FOR ASIAN AMERICAN MEDIA



COMPLICATING NARRATIVES:  
**ASIAN AMERICAN  
STORYTELLERS  
IN THE SOUTH**

Self-portrait by filmmaker Saleem Reshamwala.



Participants gather at the “Beyond Borders: Diverse Voices of the American South” convening at the UNC-TV studios in Raleigh-Durham, North Carolina.

# CONTENTS

About the Center for Asian American Media .....	2
Foreword .....	3
Introduction .....	4
A Demographic Overview of Southern Asian Americans .....	8
Beyond the Numbers: Southern Asian Americans Speak Out .....	16
The Southern Lens: Southern Filmmaker Perspectives .....	22
It Takes a Village: Regional Media Arts Organizations Nurturing Makers .....	26
Brainstorming Solutions .....	32
Conclusion .....	38
• Partners .....	42
• Participants & Credits .....	43



## ABOUT THE CENTER FOR ASIAN AMERICAN MEDIA

### MISSION STATEMENT

The Center for Asian American Media (CAAM) is a nonprofit organization dedicated to presenting stories that convey the richness and diversity of Asian American experiences to the broadest audience possible. We do this by funding, producing, distributing and exhibiting works in film, television and digital media. For 39 years, CAAM has exposed audiences to new voices and communities, advancing our collective understanding of the American experience through programs specifically designed to engage the Asian American community and the public at large.

### IMPACT

For nearly four decades, CAAM has created opportunities for Americans and people around the globe to understand the diverse stories and experiences of Asian Americans through:

- **Careers.** CAAM empowers filmmakers to achieve their full potential by providing training, funding, distribution, and access to professional networks.
- **Community.** Connecting filmmakers and their stories to people and communities in schools, community centers, theaters and neighborhoods, bridging conversations about inclusiveness and social equity.
- **Perspective.** CAAM-supported work changes the way audiences see the world, changing hearts and minds, inspiring empathy and meaningful social action.

### PUBLIC MEDIA

CAAM presents innovative, engaging Asian American works on public television through our dynamic documentary programs. CAAM's award-winning public TV programs are seen by over 5 million Americans, including 47 documentary shows in the last four years and more than 200 films since 1982. Since launching the groundbreaking Asian American anthology series *Silk Screen* (1982-1987) on the Public Broadcast Service (PBS), CAAM has provided timely and relevant works to viewers nationwide. CAAM is a member of the National Minority Consortia (NMC), designated by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB) to provide diverse programming to public media outlets such as the American Public Television (APT), National Educational Telecommunications Association (NETA) and PBS.

### CAAMFEST

CAAM presents CAAMFest (formerly the San Francisco International Asian American Film Festival) in May, the world's largest showcase for new Asian American and Asian film, food and music programs, annually presenting over 100 works in San Francisco and Oakland. Since 1982, our film festival has been an important launching point for Asian American independent filmmakers as well as a vital source for new Asian cinema.

### MEDIA FUND

CAAM provides funding and support for provocative and timely Asian American film and media projects from independent producers. CAAM awards production and completion funds for projects intended for public television broadcast. Since 1990, more than \$5 million has been granted to over 150 projects. Funding is made possible with support from the CPB.

### EDUCATIONAL DISTRIBUTION

CAAM's catalog includes more than 250 titles, constituting the country's largest collection of Asian American films and videos for educational distribution. Our award-winning documentaries, personal stories, dramas and experimental works reflect the rich history and diversity of Asian people in the U.S. and global diaspora.

### CAAM FELLOWSHIP

Furthering CAAM's work to nurture Asian American media professionals and advance the field of Asian American media, the CAAM Fellowship Program connects talented and dedicated individuals with leading professionals in the field. The CAAM Fellowship Program is unique in its field-wide approach seeking to develop the talents and skills of a range of media professions including producers, directors, and executives.

# FOREWORD

Like many of my colleagues in the public and independent media spheres, the 2016 Presidential elections precipitated a time of deep reflection on the work we have done in social issue and culturally specific media making and presentation, and whether these efforts, and the strategies that guide them, needed to be re-thought.

As someone who has spent decades surfacing diverse narratives so as to create empathy for communities left behind, or left invisible to history, it was deeply troubling that we seemed to be driven further apart from one another, that we were speaking to the converted, and reinforcing simplifying narratives rather than those more complex and compelling.

The elections revealed a deeply polarized America: a country not simply split between political parties or liberal and conservative ideologies, but by deeply rooted cultural and regional identities. The clear and present danger is that the gulf between our geographic and cultural sectors is widening, and we are losing the ability to find common ground.

With respect to the Asian American voice in media, the reflection also brought concern that we were in our own Asian American bubble primarily on the East and West coasts, and largely from urban communities. Yet we know that Asian Americans live in every region and state, and in every type of community (urban, suburban and rural) and that there is a richness and compelling need for more diverse stories brought to light. We need to embrace and bring out the complexities

that is contemporary America, especially in regions marginalized in mainstream media. Identifying underserved Asian American communities and increasing their capacities in the South is more crucial than ever. The South is particularly important to America's multicultural future because it is a region for which mainstream (bi-coastal) media has frequently oversimplified the cultural and racial narrative.

All of CAAM's work is about surfacing stories. We understand and believe that the Asian American stories deserve to be and need to be a part of the national conversation. In CAAM's almost 40-year history, we have supported filmmakers and films from all parts of the country, including the South – like *Oklahoma Home* in our series *Searching for Asian America*, *Relocation Arkansas* and *A Village Called Versailles*. However, our goal through this initiative, is to develop a deeper network of diverse storytellers who are bringing new perspectives into the most pressing cultural debates of our time. The narrative changes we seek are not only within the region itself, but for all Americans.



Stephen Gong  
Executive Director

# INTRODUCTION

Although the South is not thought of as a region with a significant Asian American population, the reality is very different. Asian Americans have been in the South since before the United States was founded, and the region contains key Asian American communities with deep ties, such as the Mississippi Delta Chinese and, more recently, the Vietnamese American communities of New Orleans and the Gulf Coast or the South Asians and Southeast Asians that have migrated in large numbers all over the region. Asian Americans are the fastest growing racial group in the nation, and it is clear that this growth is not confined to the East and West Coasts. Yet the voices and stories of both Asian American communities and filmmakers in the South remain acutely underrepresented and under supported.

Motivated by the desire to more completely represent the stories of a new America including a more nuanced and deeper perspective of the South, the Center for Asian American Media (CAAM), supported by Ford Foundation's JustFilms and the National Endowment for the Arts, embarked on an ambitious multi-year initiative to address this deficit. The objective of the project is to build a network and strategic infrastructure for the Asian American documentary filmmaking community working in the American South, and to connect this network to Asian American and other social justice, independent documentary, and cultural organizations in the region and nationally. CAAM believes that building these networks and resourcing an infrastructure will result in a breadth of work in film and media that more authentically reflects the changing landscape of the region.

The South project began in the Fall of 2017, first by commissioning demographic research on Asian Americans in the South, along with outreach to Southern filmmakers, and cultural and media organizations with a demonstrated commitment to social justice and diversity. In February 2018, this initial work culminated in a Durham, North Carolina convening of Southern Asian American documentary filmmakers titled, "Beyond Borders: Diverse Voices of the American South."

The unprecedented gathering generated a great deal of energy and conversation; to continue the momentum, CAAM invited selected convening participants to attend CAAMFest in May 2018 in San Francisco. CAAMFest is our film festival which also happens to be the country's largest Asian American film festival. At CAAMFest 2018, we highlighted issues affecting makers from the Southern region and organized networking opportunities with the larger Asian American filmmaking community. In mid-September, CAAM along with the Asian American Documentary Network (A-Doc) supported several Asian American makers from around the country and especially the South to attend the International Documentary Association (IDA)'s non-fiction filmmaking convening Getting Real in Los Angeles. Finally, in October 2018, CAAM worked with local and national partners to curate several events during the New Orleans Film Festival (NOFF) to highlight conversations around Southern Asian American filmmaking as both a unique cultural expression and as it contributes to the craft of story-telling in the U.S.

Over the course of about a year, CAAM has strengthened our collaboration with media arts organizations in the region, namely, the Southern Documentary Fund (SDF), public television entities in the region such as UNC-TV, filmmaker service organizations like NOVAC, Working Films, the Center for Rural Strategies, and the New Orleans Film Society in supporting and highlighting the work of Asian American makers in the South.

This report details the ideas, inquiries, and needs and continuation of the discussion as Southern makers join national networks to highlight their specific issues. Many of these ideas were seeded at the Beyond Borders convening early in 2018, centering discussion around Asian American communities and filmmakers. This report also proposes preliminary next steps that will continue the momentum generated over this year and build towards a robust and sustainable creative community infrastructure.

## THE BEYOND BORDERS CONVENING: DIVERSE VOICES IN THE AMERICAN SOUTH 2018 Southern Asian American Documentary Filmmakers Convening

On February 20, 2018, CAAM joined with the Southern Documentary Fund (SDF) and Public Media North Carolina (UNC-TV) to host "Beyond Borders: Diverse Voices of the American South"—a historic convening of Southern Asian American documentary filmmakers. The more than 65 attendees hailed from Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and Washington D.C., as well as California and New York. The convening gathered together storytellers, community organizers, funders, scholars, and representatives from local and national arts organizations to discuss the state of the American South for Asian American filmmakers, with the goal of seeding conversations, sourcing challenges, building connections, and exploring future strategic opportunities together.

Many of the filmmakers in the room were local to North Carolina coming from the many universities in the state such as the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill, Duke University, the University of North Carolina at Greensboro and others. These local makers were mostly emerging, either just graduated or in their first few years

working as filmmakers with the exception of a few experienced makers such as Saleem Reshamwala and Ligaiya Romero who were recommended by partner organization SDF.

Other media artists that CAAM invited outside Raleigh-Durham were more mid-career such as Hanul Bahm from Atlanta, Georgia, Steve Haruch from Nashville, Tennessee, and Anita Holsapple from rural Louisiana. There were several participants from the New Orleans area like maker Kiyoko McCrae and representatives from institutions such as NOVAC, the New Orleans Film Society and Firelight Media. We also had Tim Tsai from Austin, Texas which is sometimes not considered part of the South at least in terms of the allocation of resources from the media arts entities like SDF.

Other participants included Matthew Hashiguchi from Savannah, Georgia, Leena Jayaswal and Yi Chen from Washington D.C. Non-filmmakers in attendance were performance artist and puppeteer Kimi Maeda from Columbia, South Carolina and many North Carolina Asian American activists and community organizers.



Filmmakers, community organizers and media arts professionals connect at the "Beyond Borders: Diverse Voices of the American South" convening.



Filmmaker Thomas Allen Harris presents his transmedia project *Digital Diaspora Family Reunion*.

Other institutions in the region that were not in the room were film festivals like IndieGrits, Full Frame, organizations like the Southern Circuit, SIPP Culture, Austin Film Society, and Working Films to name just a few.

CAAM's public media partner UNC-TV is a crucial collaborator and we had reached out to other PBS stations in the region to attend but they were unable to. CAAM considers the Southern network of PBS stations an important ally in our work to cultivate and connect Asian American and other filmmakers of color in the region to public media and each other. The Southern Foodways Alliance at the University of Mississippi is another partner that we had been in conversation with but that were unable to attend.

The convening kicked off with an inspiring demonstration of attendees' diverse perspectives, stories, and backgrounds. Filmmaker Thomas Allen Harris presented his transmedia project *Digital Diaspora Family Reunion*, and led the group in sharing family photographs. The attendees shared images and stories of chosen families and extended families, adopted families and multiracial families, families near and far. It was a fitting start to the day, highlighting both the connections between people as well as their abundance of unique perspectives.

The event continued with a keynote speech by Dee Davis, President of the Center for Rural Strategies, helping the participants gain some context on the long road already created by

pioneers in the region like Appalshop where Davis worked in the 1970s and 80s.

He recalled, "We were making films about our community, about coal miners and chair makers and basket weavers [...] we were trying to make the case that this was part of the American story." He described the uphill struggle to convince national arts and media organizations that Appalachian stories were abundant, important, and worthy of support and distribution on a national level, and the early coalitions of media makers who advocated for more inclusive storytelling.

While some things have changed, Davis said, "In the sense of what's important for the country, where the messages have to go, who's not getting these stories, it's not so different from now."

Davis's point about trying to convince the powers that be that stories about Appalachian communities were important resonates for the Asian American community. CAAM has been in that room arguing for resources and bandwidth for a demographic that is relatively small.

Mainstream America has been content with crude stereotypes of both Appalachians and Asian Americans, many of those portrayals center on our communities being one dimensional and for Asian Americans - always foreign. With the election of the country's first Black President Barack Obama - communities of color were hopeful that stories of diverse Americans may finally become a part of what it means to be American.

But when Donald Trump was elected in 2016, there seemed to be a national soul searching that pointed towards a rural White America that was pushing back against this idea of a diverse country and a yearning to return to a time when being American largely meant being White.

"(...) if you think about the American enterprise and where we are now, the things, particularly in the South that don't lose their value are resentment and good storytelling. I mean, that's basically it. If you wanna know like, why did Trump get elected president? Go right there, resentment and storytelling."

Dee ended his speech with a call to collaboration, "We're the same group. We got the same kind of hopes. We're witnesses to these stories. We're part of 'em. This is our chance again as it happens over and over to come together, to come together and figure out how we can help each other, tell these stories, get these stories out, find people who can listen and change, improve things for each other."

To steer the conversation back to being Asian in the South, Professor Jennifer Ho from the Department of English and Comparative Literature, UNC Chapel Hill, began her speech by observing something all Asians in the South are familiar with.

"It is completely thrilling to look out and realize I am not the only Asian American person in the room, in the U.S. South [...] because so many of

us know that experience." While this isolation and alienation can be daunting, Ho emphasized the power of AAPI voices in the South:

**"It is powerful to be an Asian American person talking about anti-racism, White privilege, and White supremacy in a location that has understood race along a binary of White and Black. [...] Asian Americans have been in the States a long time. We've contributed to the culture, so I think we have to feel safe talking about our own narrative, versus being commentators along the White and Black binary."**

Attendees would discuss this Black and White binary - and many other challenges, questions, and strategies throughout the day. The event continued with sessions on Asian American community in the South, Southern AAPI filmmakers, and media arts organizations, and concluded with breakout sessions in which attendees brainstormed and shared ideas for solutions and goals.

This report details the ideas, inquiries, and needs that emerged from the convening but also touches on events that highlighted Southern AAPI makers at CAAMFest and the New Orleans Film Festival. This document also proposes preliminary next steps that will continue the momentum generated by CAAM's South initiative, and build towards a robust and sustainable creative and community infrastructure.



Participants from left: Ricky Leung, Professor Jennifer Ho, Saleem Reshamwala, Chavi Koneru, Anjanette Levert & Czarina Garcia.

# A DEMOGRAPHIC OVERVIEW OF SOUTHERN ASIAN AMERICANS

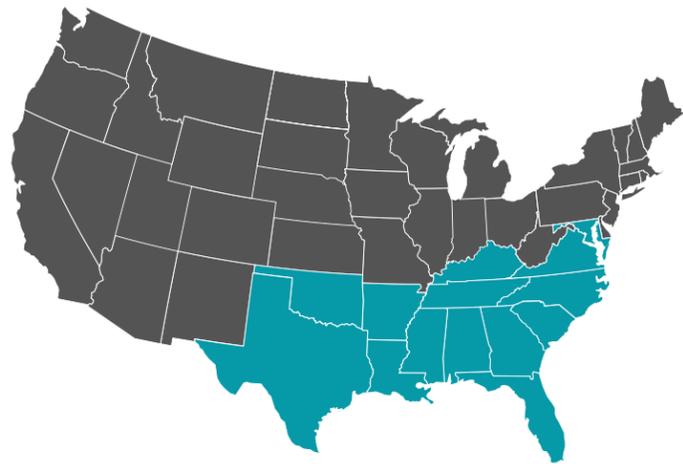


Asian American Pacific Islanders (AAPIs) are one of the fastest growing demographic groups in the United States, and their numbers in the South are skyrocketing.

We asked Tom K. Wong, Assistant Professor of Political Science at the University of California, San Diego, and Director of the International Migration Studies Program Minor, to provide a demographic overview of AAPIs in the region. Research Assistant Jeremiah Cha also contributed to this research. Their research, culled from U.S. Census, regional, and state data, is excerpted below. This data provides a baseline for understanding not only where Asian American communities are in the South, but also who they are, where their ancestry lies, and how they are growing.

## How Many AAPIs Are There in the American South and Where Do They Live?

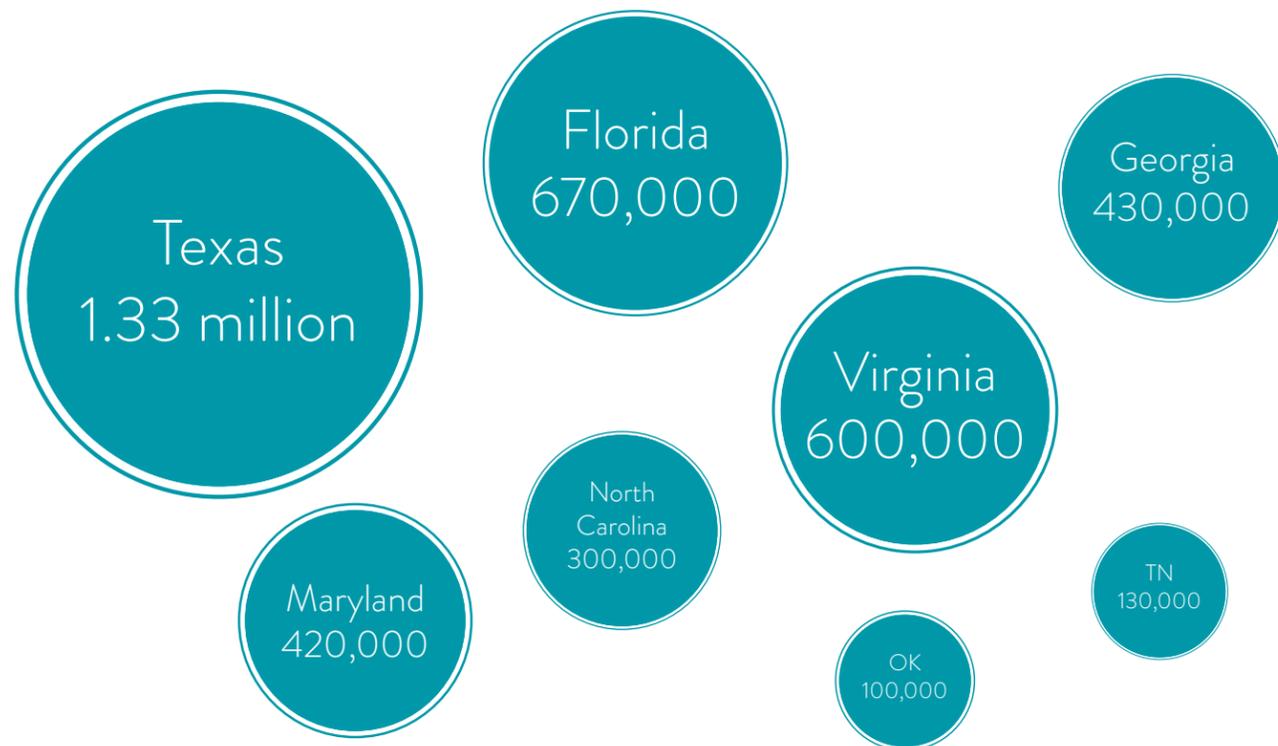
For the purposes of the study, the American South is defined as the states of the Southern Confederacy: Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Florida, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, Texas, Arkansas, Tennessee, and with Oklahoma, Kentucky and Maryland.



**4.52 million**

AAPIs call the American South home, which accounts for 22.6% of the total AAPI population in the United States.

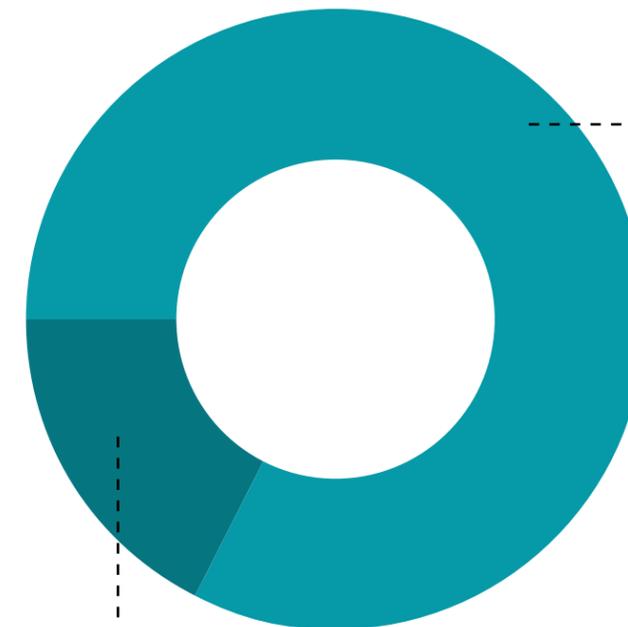
Southern states with the largest AAPI populations are Texas (1.33 million), Florida (670,000), Virginia (600,000), Georgia (430,000), Maryland (420,000), North Carolina (300,000), Tennessee (130,000), and Oklahoma (100,000).



## The Diversity of AAPIs in the American South



AAPIs in the American South self-identify with over **100** distinct racial, ethnic, and cultural groups, and speak at least **108** different languages.



**82.7%**

of AAPIs in the American South self-identify with one racial identity group. Among these individuals, there are at least thirty-eight racial identity groups represented.

The most common are Asian Indian (950,000), Chinese (610,000), Vietnamese (590,000), Filipino (450,000), Korean (350,000), Pakistani (160,000), Japanese (89,000), Thai (54,000), and Laotian (54,000).

**17.3%**

of AAPIs in the American South are “multi-race AAPIs” – they self-identify with more than one racial identity group. Among these individuals, there are at least sixty-eight different multi-racial identity groups represented.



**63.0%**

of AAPIs in the American South, or 2.85 million, were born outside of the United States; these individuals come from at least 148 different countries and territories.

## AAPIs and the Southern Economy



AAPIs in the American South earn a combined **\$112.7 billion** annually in pre-tax wages and salary income.



The main jobs that AAPIs in the American South work in are **Software Developers** (more than 50,000), **Applications and Systems Software** (83,000), **Personal Care Workers** (75,000), **Cashiers** (72,000), **Registered Nurses** (67,000), **Managers** (60,000), **Retail Supervisors** (67,000), **Postsecondary Teachers** (57,000), and **Physicians and Surgeons** (53,000).



**52.2%** of AAPIs in the American South who are 25 or older have a bachelor's degree or higher.

## Labor Stats, STEM vs NON-STEM

AAPIs in the southern workforce are a diverse community. With a number of different skills and occupations, it is important to identify the demographics of this population. Contrary to what may be widely perceived most AAPIs in the U.S. in general and in the South in particular are not in STEM jobs.

There are currently 2,451,128 AAPIs in the United States workforce that are in STEM occupations. This makes up about 23.5% of the entire AAPI workforce. Conversely, there are 7,958,666 AAPIs that are in non-STEM occupations, making up about 76.5% of the AAPI workforce.

In the South, there are about 620,671 AAPIs in the workforce that are in STEM occupations. This makes up about 26.1% of the southern AAPI workforce. Conversely, there are 1,756,931 AAPIs that are in non-STEM occupations, making up about 73.9% of the southern AAPI workforce.

## AAPIs in ARTS and HUMANITIES

AAPIs also make up a sizable community within the arts and humanities. Throughout the nation, there are 233,714 in occupations that are considered arts and humanities. This amounts to 6.7% of all individuals in the arts and humanities throughout the nation. AAPIs make up 6.4% of the United States and 6.5% of the workforce. In terms of participation in the arts and humanities, AAPIs reflect rates similar to the rest of the nation.

In the South, there are 43,383 AAPIs in the arts and humanities. This amounts to 0.7% of the AAPI workforce in the South. Moreover, AAPIs in the South only represent about 4% of all individuals in the arts and humanities in the South. Compared to national statistics, participation of AAPIs in these professions are lower in the southern states.

## Disaggregation and Income



Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders have called for disaggregation, as different groups have different outcomes. When investigating these numbers, AAPI groups have different levels of economic outcomes but overall, Asian Indians in the region had the highest median income followed by Chinese, Vietnamese, Filipino and Korean while the lowest median income groups were Taiwanese, mixed race Vietnamese and White, Hmong and mixed-race Black, White and Asian.

## Citizen Voting

As the AAPI population in the South grows, campaigns, elected officials, and bureaucratic institutions need to account for the demographics and needs of this often overlooked population. Despite the foreign origin of a majority of the AAPI population in the South, nearly 65.3% of the AAPI population over the age of eighteen are eligible to vote. This group of 2,238,890 naturalized and native-born citizens are an important voting bloc in certain areas and could potentially swing key elections in the future.



## Registration & Turnout

AAPIs nationally are registered at a rate of 72.4%, while AAPIs in the South registered at a rate of 71.3%. AAPIs turnout at a rate of 84.6% nationally and 80.7% in the South. The trends point to the fact that when AAPIs are registered, they are more likely to cast a ballot than not.

The rate of registration and turnout in the South may not be significantly different, but the lower rates of both registration and turnout should be noted.



## Citizen Voting Age Population by State

Table 1 details the citizen voting age population of each of the states in the American South. From 2000 to 2016, the AAPI CVAP increased by almost triple in certain states, such as Texas. Table 2 illustrates the citizen voting age population by state in the South in the year 2000. The increase in the AAPI CVAP demonstrates the expansion of AAPI influence in key elections. In the states with the largest populations, the growth was the most profound – states such as Texas, Florida and Virginia for example.

Table 1: CVAP by State in 2016

STATE	AAPI CVAP
TEXAS	658,445
FLORIDA	361,312
VIRGINIA	305,490
GEORGIA	198,293
MARYLAND	224,371
NORTH CAROLINA	137,823
TENNESSEE	61,753
OKLAHOMA	47,984
LOUISIANA	46,259
SOUTH CAROLINA	44,419
ALABAMA	35,062
KENTUCKY	30,512
ARKANSAS	23,490
DELAWARE	17,161
DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA	19,291
MISSISSIPPI	17,517
WEST VIRGINIA	9,708

Table 2: CVAP by State in 2000

STATE	AAPI CVAP
TEXAS	278,816
FLORIDA	165,317
VIRGINIA	165,317
MARYLAND	110,014
GEORGIA	80,736
NORTH CAROLINA	54,768
LOUISIANA	30,575
TENNESSEE	29,552
OKLAHOMA	26,930
SOUTH CAROLINA	20,379
ALABAMA	18,719
KENTUCKY	14,877
ARKANSAS	11,496
MISSISSIPPI	10,268
DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA	8,886
DELAWARE	8,042
WEST VIRGINIA	6,491

## Multi-racial AAPIs

Unlike those who identify as solely Asian American or Pacific Islander, multi-racial AAPIs are those individuals that identify as more than one race. There are differences between these multi-racial AAPIs and mono-racial AAPIs in terms of their political, economic, and social integration. Moreover, these differences are pronounced by the geographic area inhabited by these multi-racial AAPIs. Analysis that focuses on AAPIs as a monolith may miss key nuances of this population, who do not identify as just Asian American or just Pacific Islanders. In this section, the data will outline the distinctive political, economic, and social outcomes of these multi-racial AAPIs.

## Political Participation

Multi-racial AAPIs in the South are made up of a total of 821,783 individuals, which accounts for 17.5% of the total AAPI population in the South. Although this makes up a minority share of this population, the differences in political participation demonstrate the overlooked nature of this population. Multi-racial AAPIs are registered nationally at a rate of 79.8%. Looking to the south in particular, the rate of voter registration is around 79.4%, which is comparable to that of both the 79.8% nationally and 80.3% in the west.

Of those registered, nearly 83.5% of registered multi-racial AAPIs turned out in the 2016 November election. In the south and west respectively, 76.6% and 80.5% of the registered population casted a ballot. Turnout is relatively comparable to the AAPI population as well as the nation at large. However, multi-racial AAPIs often have outcomes that differ from their counterparts, in regards to economic and social integration.

## Economic Integration

Multi-racial AAPIs also experience stark differences in both average income and employment rates, regardless of region. Nationally, multi-racial AAPIs have a median income of \$30,000, while southern and western multi-racial AAPIs earn \$29,164 and \$30,379 respectively. Compare this to AAPIs at large and in these regions. AAPIs in the South have a median income of \$35,542, which marks a 15% difference in total income.

Multi-racial AAPIs in the south are unemployed at a rate of 7%, while multi-racial AAPIs in the west are unemployed at a rate of 8.6%. AAPIs in the south, on the other hand, have an unemployment rate of 5.3%, which again represents another economic indicator of the disadvantages experienced by multi-racial AAPIs.

The median income of the multi-racial AAPI population in the South varies between different racial identifications. Table 3 identifies the median incomes of the top ten most populated multi-racial AAPI groups.

Table 3: Median Income of Top Ten Groups

RACIAL IDENTIFICATION	POPULATION	MEDIAN INCOME
WHITE AND FILIPINO	116,069	\$25,345
WHITE AND OTHER ASIAN	112,656	\$28,354
WHITE AND KOREAN	65,472	\$35,442
WHITE AND JAPANESE	65,246	\$35,889
WHITE AND CHINESE	55,625	\$30,414
WHITE AND ASIAN INDIAN	33,089	\$33,000
WRITE IN ASIAN AND OTHER RACE	32,396	\$37,633
WHITE AND VIETNAMESE	29,174	\$25,000
WHITE BLACK AND ASIAN	22,740	\$30,379
WHITE, ASIAN, PACIFIC ISLANDER, AND OTHER	18,931	\$30,379

# BEYOND THE NUMBERS: SOUTHERN ASIAN AMERICANS SPEAK OUT



Community organizers from left: Chavi Koneru, M'Abigail Mlo, and Cat Bao Le.

*As demonstrated in the demographic statistics culled by Professor Wong*

in the previous section, the AAPIs are the fastest growing racial group in the American South. The convening's panel on the Asian American community brought together a group of Southern AAPI community organizers to explore the questions: Who are the Asian Americans in the South? What are the community issues and how do they figure in the larger political context of the South? What are the stories of Asian Americans in North Carolina and in the South?

A subsequent panel of Asian American filmmakers working in the South also weighed in. What emerged from their discussion is a picture of a Southern Asian American community that is not only growing, but also increasingly politically active, and more engaged with issues of race, identity, and community.

The activism in the North Carolina Asian American community is in a period of transition as observed by Chavi Koneru and Ricky Leung of North Carolina Asian Americans Together (NCAAT) – there are enough Asian Americans that people are starting to gather in their own ethnic enclaves. NCAAT was established in 2016 in an effort to bring Asians of various groupings together in a pan-Asian collective.



Panelists from left: CAAM Board member Christine Chen, Ricky Leung, Chavi Koneru, M'Abigail Mlo, Manju Rajendran, and Cat Bao Le

## SOUTHERN AAPI POPULATION AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

The AAPI population growth in North Carolina is the third fastest in the country, and the state's Asian Americans are voting in record numbers. Driven by immigration, naturalization, and voter participation, more Asian Americans are also beginning to run for office in the South.

As also noted during the November 2018 midterm elections, AAPIs are coming out to vote in record numbers in areas that have historically not seen such high AAPI populations in the midwest and South.

Many of the filmmakers on the panel are exploring this growing AAPI political engagement in their projects, including Yi Chen's film about Chinese immigrant voters living in North Carolina and Ohio, and Matthew Hashiguchi's work following undocumented AAPI student activists in Georgia.

Koneru noted that data reflecting growing AAPI political power is "causing other people

to recognize the importance of the Asian American vote, and the Asian American voice, and that means they're often more willing to hear our stories and our concerns."

NCAAT released an analysis with the headline: *How Asian American Voters are Changing N.C.* that outlined many of the unique characteristics of the Asian American population in the state such as their lack of political party affiliation, the diversity of language and cultural practices in the community that served as barriers to vote. However, the report demonstrates the high numbers of Asian American voters and what an active voting base would mean for politics in the state.

More work is still needed on gathering accurate census information, as current U.S. Census methodology fails to accurately capture the size and diversity of the Southern AAPI population and questions about documentation status could complicate future Census data even further.

## AAPI COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS IN THE SOUTH

Asian American population growth in the South has spurred the parallel growth of AAPI community organizations working on a wide range of issues. Many of the groups represented on the panel focus on civic engagement, encouraging Asian Americans to vote and possibly run for office. Along with a political presence, these community organizations are also working in ways to create a cultural shift.

AAPI organizations work on issues that continue to marginalize their communities including police accountability, Southeast Asian deportation, Islamophobia, anti-racism, and anti-oppression. They organize workshops, protests, demographic research, and youth mentoring programs.

H'Abigail Mlo, an undergraduate student at UNC Chapel Hill, discussed ongoing advocacy for the creation of an Asian American Studies department at the university (11% of UNC undergraduates, including 16% of freshmen, identify as AAPI).

While there is a sense of excitement and dynamism around the growth of Asian American community organizations, panelists stressed that overall, infrastructure and resources are still lacking. Many pointed out that their organizations are primarily volunteer-based, unlike Asian American nonprofits in California or New York with full-time staff.

While working together in this isolated and challenging environment has resulted in a strong sense of kinship among Southern AAPI organizations, Cat Bao Le of the Southeast Asian Coalition (SEAC) stressed, "We're in the really nascent stages if you just talk about the landscape for Asian American organizations or official 501C3's. [...] It's not easy out here."

One of the grassroots methods community organizers in the South have gathered around is by opening their homes to create a sense of family and belonging. Bao Le of SEAC is used to hosting these gatherings. Manju Rajendran of the Anti-Oppression Research and Training Alliance or AORTA, brought up what these gatherings have meant for people,

“ I want to ask our Asian communities that are organizing, how can we create more spaces like that, that feel like home.

***That invoke a sense of belonging in a cultural context that treats us as permanently foreign.*** ”

## PAN-ASIAN IDENTITY: HOPES AND CHALLENGES

AAPJ individuals, communities, and organizations in the South are also navigating what it means to be Asian American. Several panelists shared their hope for a pan-Asian consciousness, in which diverse AAPJ intermingle rather than clustering in ethnic enclaves, and explicitly support other communities of color. However, they also discussed the challenges of making this a reality.

Koneru pointed out, “This idea of seeing ourselves as AAPJs is very new, and I think one of the issues with creating that sort of pan-Asian community [...] is that a lot of people don’t identify as AAPJ. They don’t identify as Asian at all, actually.” She added that South Asians in particular often do not view themselves as Asian, while many other Asian Americans do not identify as people of color.

Asian Americans are an enormously diverse group, with different geographic and ethnic origins, religions, languages, socioeconomic status, immigration status, and vastly different experiences of privilege and racism. These are questions a pan-Asian American national constituency has always grappled with.

At the Beyond Borders convening, the panelists, organizers and filmmakers shared the conviction that filmmaking and other forms of storytelling have a central role to play. Films and other media can often amplify the work of community organizations, promote civic engagement, bring attention to social justice issues, and explore what it means to be Asian American. And by telling the stories of these diverse Asian American experiences and communities, media makers can share a new vision of the American South and the American narrative.

## NAVIGATING THE BLACK AND WHITE BINARY IN THE SOUTH

One frequently mentioned challenge, for both the community organizers and the filmmakers, was how to navigate the Black and White binary that dominates discussions of race in America. This is especially deeply rooted in the South, where the legacies of slavery, the Civil War, and generations of subsequent oppression are particularly visible and fraught.

As Professor Ho observed in her keynote about the space Asian Americans occupy in the race dialogue especially in the South:

“White people do not seem to grasp the concept that I am a U.S. citizen and I am an American. Black people think of me as a type of White person, that when I have identified as a person of color, I have had African American allies and friends express surprise because they had never heard an Asian American ever self-identify as a person of color, and because they were told growing up that Asians were essentially a type of White person.

*No one understands the difference between being Asian and being Asian American. I get this again and again and again.”*



Participants getting to know one another at the convening.  
From left: Rachel Raney, Saleem Reshamwala,  
Ricky Leung and Professor Jennifer Ho.

The general sense from the convening is that the Asian American experience is not necessarily visible or seen as important to either the Black or White communities. But there are Southern specific narratives like the ones seen in the documentary *Relocation Arkansas* for example where Japanese were allowed to attend the White schools after they were released from internment camps and therefore began to be seen as Whites. This seems true for the Chinese communities in Mississippi as well.

Other narratives are of the more recent Southeast Asian immigrants along the coastal cities such as the Vietnamese of New Orleans who have been more visible because of their attempts to work in fisheries previously only run by Whites and therefore causing some friction.

There are additional narratives slowly emerging as the Asian American populations grow significantly as Ricky Leung and Chavi Koneru of NCAAT stated in their presentation. Some of these stories are of hate crimes against Asian Americans because they are more visible. But with growing numbers, Asian Americans are joining other communities of color to fight police brutality and other forms of discrimination.

For many of the panelists, the way forward lies in connecting with other marginalized communities in the South, and identifying common ground and ways to support one another.

Rajendran of AORTA observed, “**There’s a reckoning that I see Asian American people and Asian immigrants doing in terms of not just how we are experiencing oppression in our communities, but also how we are placing our allegiances, [...] where we’re going to align ourselves.**”

As Bao Le summed up, “**This is not just us, and this is systemic, and what are we going to do about it together?**”

Many films and artistic expressions from makers in the region grapple with being invisible. Even in areas with historic Asian American communities like the Vietnamese of New Orleans, there is a sense of otherness, of being foreign, no matter how many generations have been in Louisiana.

On the filmmakers’ panel, Leena Jayaswal spoke to the personal challenges of navigating the binary as a parent of mixed-race children, a topic she explores in her documentary *Mixed*. The experience of being mixed-race is underexplored and underrepresented, and those outside the Black and White binary can feel lost, invisible, and silenced. She found that the lack of mixed-race representation stems partly from Americans’ overall discomfort with the topic and the historical role of White supremacy in mixed race ancestry:

“People are scared to fund it, they are scared to be a part of it, because we’re talking about things that ultimately make them feel really uncomfortable in their own history.”

# THE SOUTHERN LENS: SOUTHERN FILMMAKER PERSPECTIVE



Filmmaker Leena Jayaswal talks about her documentary *Mixed*.

CAAM selected a number of Southern filmmakers and projects to highlight during the convening.

Selected works portray the breadth and diversity of not just the makers but also of subjects, styles and platforms that creatives are using.

# WHITMAN, ALABAMA

BY JENNIFER CRANDALL



This is an experiment in using documentary and poetry to reveal the threads that tie us together—as people, as states, and as a nation. For two years, filmmaker Jennifer Crandall has crisscrossed this deep Southern state, inviting people to look into a camera and share a part of themselves through the words of Walt Whitman.

# AMERICAN DREAMING

BY MATTHEW HASHIGUCHI

With no guarantees of employment or opportunity, undocumented immigrants strive to obtain a college degree in the state of Georgia, where they are barred from enrolling in its most selected colleges and universities.



American Dreaming trailer

More from Matthew Hashiguchi

# MIXED DOCUMENTARY

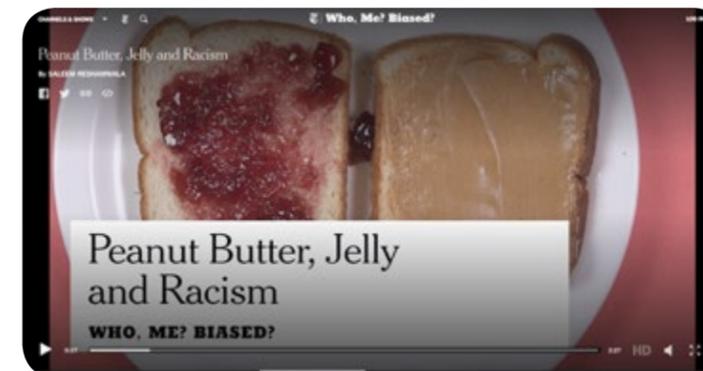
BY LEENA JAYASWAL & CATY BORUM CHATTOO

Fifty years after the landmark Loving v. Virginia U.S. Supreme Court case ended legal persecution of interracial marriage in America, two mothers – one brown, one white set off on a journey to explore what it means to be a bi-racial child living in a mixed-race family in so-called “post-racial America,” the perspectives of their own families and others, and America’s deep cultural ambivalence about its rapidly-changing mixed-race reality.



# IMPLICIT BIAS

BY SALEEM RESHAMWALA



for Race/Related, POV/ The New York Times 2016

What is implicit bias? NYT/POV’s Saleem Reshamwala unscrews the lid on the unfair effects of our subconscious.

# THE ARGUS PROJECT

BY LIGAIYA ROMERO



The Argus Project is a performance intervention, video installation and wearable sculpture which directly intersects the current debate over police accountability and state surveillance, creating a space to bring together the many points of view required to have a real conversation on police violence - one that our country desperately needs.

# FIRST VOTE

BY YI CHEN

The film explores the political awakening of a new generation of Chinese immigrants, now the largest single group of arrivals each year into the United States. Featuring new American voters living in battleground states in the South and Rustbelt, the film chronicles their unexpected political journeys as they embrace democracy and freedom of speech in a divided America.



# IT TAKES A VILLAGE: REGIONAL MEDIA ARTS ORGANIZATIONS NURTURING MAKERS



Panelists from regional media arts organizations, from left: Mimi Pickering, Anjanette Levert, Darcy McKinnon, Clint Bowie, and Chloe Walters-Wallace talk about their experience.

At a glance, many states in the South that may not have a robust media arts infrastructure have universities that seem to function as cultural and media hubs. In North Carolina, the Center for Documentary Studies at Duke University is a leader in the field not just in the region. UNC Chapel Hill, Wakefield and Greensboro have thriving documentary and media arts programs. The University of Mississippi which is home to the Southern Foodways Alliance serves as a hub for the vibrant food culture in the region. The Alabama Media Group is also an active player in the region, they commissioned Jennifer Crandall's project *Whitman, Alabama*.

Austin, New Orleans and Atlanta are all industry hubs with thriving universities and also cultural arts institutions such as the Austin Film Society, the New Orleans Film Society, and the Atlanta Film Society respectively.

In cities such as Atlanta, Austin, Miami and Nashville, the commercial film and television industry is thriving. But, this does not necessarily mean that the entire ecosystem of media—specifically independent media—is thriving, although some independent documentary makers have found crew positions in the commercial industry.

A few of the Southern filmmakers that showcased their work at the convening particularly those from more robust cultural geographies such as Durham, North Carolina and New Orleans, Louisiana have local and regional organizations that provide needed resources and networks. However, many of the attendees at the convening expressed frustration with both limited resources and limited representation in the South from national arts organizations.

During the convening’s media arts organization panel, representatives of Southern arts institutions discussed questions including:

### *What can we do to further support and create better opportunities for filmmakers/media makers to thrive?*

#### *How do we strategically build a stronger network of media arts and community organizations, and filmmakers to achieve deeper and broader impact – including partnerships, projects and funding?*

The panelists discussed the role of collaboration, the importance of local communities being able to tell their own stories, the challenges of funding and sustainability, and the need for greater organizational outreach to AAPI filmmakers. Their conversation touched on a number of strategies towards developing a robust, intersectional media arts ecosystem in the region.

This discussion around resources for the media arts is one that is often a touch point at many industry gatherings and at CAAMFest in May 2018, we hosted a one centering on Southern media arts, organizations and resources. This thread was also carried through at the South Summit hosted by the New Orleans Film Festival in October 2018 when a larger group of cultural entities across the South gathered there.

A point that resonated with filmmakers, local and regional arts organizations made by Nick Price from UNC-TV in Durham is the approach to representation, especially from national bodies, whether funders or broadcasters, that see it as often token.

**The notion that once gatekeepers have supported one project, one maker or one perspective that the story of an entire region, an ethnic group or community has been represented.**

CAAM’s Executive Director, Stephen Gong views this as a misunderstanding of the word “diversity”. “Diversity has been so misused, it’s seen as an unwieldy category, a burden or a problem that needs solving - whether it’s rural and urban, Black and White.”

Gong says, “Diversity is really a unique value add to complicating a narrative and getting closer to hitting real points. This is why every voice matters and we must embrace complexity and seek deeper collaboration, representation across a number of different borders – geographic, ethnic, and cultural.”

## COLLABORATION STRATEGIES

Many of the panelists were eager to discuss how to become better collaborators, and how to navigate the challenges of collaboration. For example, several panelists mentioned the limited funding pool in the South, and for Southern organizations. It can be tempting to fall into a competitive mindset—after all, there is only so much money to go around—but Clint Bowie of the New Orleans Film Society stressed that, “What we’ve learned is, we’re only better together and we’re only stronger together—our reach, our impact, and also our fundability. That’s just a lesson that we’ve all had to learn.” He suggested partnering with other organizations to approach larger funders together, and pitching collaborative projects where each organization focuses on their areas of interest and expertise.

Chloe Walters-Wallace of Firelight Media noted the importance of having a strong organizational mission and identity when participating in collaborations: “Firelight is very committed to the stories of filmmakers of color and the career of filmmakers of color. Not all partners get that. [...] Being steadfast in who we are as an organization has kept us going and made those partners that might be bad partnerships good partnerships when they realize we’re not going to budge.” Other panelists discussed remembering to keep in touch to prevent silo-ing, and investing in strong, long-lasting relationships with partner organizations.

## GOALS AND CHALLENGES

When asked about their vision of success, the panelists emphasized their shared goal of empowering local communities to tell their own stories. **Darcy McKinnon described NOVAC’s mission is to “ensure that when people tell Southern stories, they are paying Southern storytellers to tell them.”** Rising interest in the region has unfortunately led to a great deal of parachute journalism, poverty porn, and patronizing stories about Trump Country, according to the panelists. They discussed their efforts to provide local creators with professional, economic, and technical support, and to connect them to job opportunities when national news attention turns to the region.

Mimi Pickering also underscored the importance of creating jobs in rural communities, saying, “Appalshop is in a town of 1,500 people. [...] We’ve really tried to create jobs within our organization for media makers, because really, there are no day jobs.”

Another major theme was sustainability and investing in long-term infrastructure. **Several panelists mentioned their concerns about the perception of the South “having a moment,” because a moment is temporary—whereas the need for arts resources in the region is not.**

They also stressed that while the media ecosystem is growing in parts of the South, many areas still lack the infrastructure to support local filmmakers. Many expressed a hope for more dependable funding for regional institutions, although they also shared concerns about the current funding landscape. Mimi Pickering noted, “There is a lot less infrastructure than there used to be. [...] We’ve lost a lot of state public arts and humanities funding, and we’ve lost it on the national level.”

Other panelists discussed the need for increased staff capacity at their organizations, and the challenges of program-driven and program-specific funding that leaves little time or money to work on new projects or broader development goals. Another issue is the shifting language used in discussions of race: Bowie recalled that when New Orleans Film Society launched a program for “filmmakers of color,” many potential applicants expressed confusion about what the phrase meant, and who was eligible.

Rachel Raney of UNC-TV reflected, “The way we label things and the way we talk about things matters, especially if we are wanting to appeal to more diverse makers. They don’t always use the same titles that we’re used to throwing around.”

## CONNECTING ORGANIZATIONS AND CREATORS

Across the board, the panelists emphasized their desire to meet more makers in the region, and lamented that when CAAM approached them for suggestions of Southern AAPI filmmakers to invite to the convening, they had few names to offer. Anjanette Levert of the Stonehouse Residency recalled,

“When I looked at my network, it was painful, painful, painful to say that I didn’t know that many filmmakers of Asian descent.”

McKinnon described the convening as a wake-up call: “Given the demographic makeup of where we live, where we have a really thriving Vietnamese community and a huge Pakistani community and a small Cambodian community [...] the fact that I’m not familiar with them means that I have a job to do. That was just revelatory to me that we’re clearly not doing our job in that community.”

In fact, each of the panelists did know at least one or two Asian American filmmakers working in the South, and these filmmakers each knew a few more people. Raney also noted the integral role of the National Minority Consortia (NMC) in elevating diverse creators and stories: “What success would look like for Reel South is half, if not more, of our films came to us from the various minority consortia.” The NMC is made up of five organizations that are funded by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB) to nurture media makers from ethnic groups namely African American, Asian American, Native, Latino and Pacific Islander. CAAM is an NMC member and serves the Asian American community.

While there is plenty of work to be done in terms of outreach, infrastructure, and community building, the narrative of isolation and scarcity is perhaps misleading. Both organizers and filmmakers may have felt that they did not know, or know of, any Southern AAPI creators, but some connections do already exist. By reinforcing these relationships, linking together small groups that have been siloed in the past, fostering collaboration, and creating spaces for discussion, this nascent network can grow into a robust community. The convening represented an important beginning step towards this goal.

“Diversity is really a unique value add to complicating a narrative and getting closer to hitting real points. This is why every voice matters and we must embrace complexity and seek deeper collaboration, representation across a number of different borders – geographic, ethnic, and cultural.”

# BRAINSTORMING SOLUTIONS



Filmmaker Ligaya Romero talks to Chloe Walters-Wallace and Darcy McKinnon.

Throughout the convening, there was a palpable sense of enthusiasm and a desire to keep the momentum going.

At the final session of the day, attendees were asked to strategize around specific goals and solutions:

*Given the diversity of challenges for the Asian American communities in the region, the unique challenges of filmmakers, and the positioning of the media arts organizations, what are solutions to work towards? What would the proper environment we need to create look like in the next five years, that moves the narrative, changes the narrative, and that includes Asian Americans in the South?*

Presented with this prompt, attendees envisioned a near future with stronger regional networks, greater funding opportunities, and a more authentic, expansive, and robust landscape for Asian American stories to be seen and shared.

# STRONGER NETWORKS & PARTNERSHIPS

Every group of attendees identified a pressing need for stronger Asian American and Southern networks for media makers. These networks would provide greater opportunities for mentorship, peer-to-peer support and resource sharing, and overall greater engagement with, and awareness of, AAPI stories and projects. In particular, attendees highlighted the difficulty of sourcing culture and community-specific feedback on their works in progress: for example, constructive criticism that comes from within the community being depicted, and feedback from native speakers on cuts that have not yet been subtitled. These challenges stem from the lack of robust regional networks—many attendees were unaware of the other AAPI filmmakers or projects in their areas. One group suggested strategically using social media to introduce Asian American filmmakers to each other, such as a social media account featuring rotating Southern AAPI filmmakers.

Attendees also spoke to the need for these networks to grow in a way that is intersectional and inclusive. Within the AAPI community, they discussed the importance of supporting a wide range of voices, from different economic

backgrounds, disability perspectives, and age ranges; some older attendees shared that they felt overlooked and unsupported in a media economy that often prioritizes new and young voices. Intersectional coalition building with other communities of color, as well as non-media-centric community organizations, was also a priority. One proposed idea was to create swap blocks among culturally specific film festivals—for example, an AAPI film festival featuring a section on African American filmmakers, curated around shared experiences and struggles.

Working across difference is a thread that has percolated in spaces that are predominantly occupied by people of color.

**The important difference from mainstream film festivals being “ethnic” film festivals have always operated from the position that centers diversity as the given rather than the anomaly. This is key for communities that have often been marginalized whether it is because of race, geography, economics or ability.**

CAAM invited Clint Bowie, Artistic Director of the New Orleans Film Festival (NOFF), to attend CAAMFest 2018 in May. NOFF is technically a mainstream venue but geographically located in a region outside the coastal hubs of culture. Bowie attributes his participation at CAAMFest leading to the NOFF2018 program lineup including a record number of Asian and Asian American films and filmmakers.

During NOFF 2018, CAAM worked with Bowie as well as Darcy McKinnon of NOVAC and Minh Nguyen of VAYLA, a multi-issue youth organizing group that has deep roots in East New Orleans, a predominantly Vietnamese community. We reached out to the Vietnamese community in New Orleans to attend the screening of *Nailed It*, a CAAM funded Vietnamese American film about the nail industry in America. We worked with NOVAC and VAYLA to host a reception afterwards for the community to meet and mingle with the filmmaker and her team. In the future, CAAM hopes to work with local organizations to meet communities in similar ways and deepen our work through workshops and other engagement strategies that provide

opportunities for Asian American communities to participate in and create their own media.

It’s been really interesting to talk to various arts organizations in the region and listen to their strategies. Organizations like IndieGrits seem to not separate filmmakers from other artists and approach supporting this community of creatives under one umbrella. This creates what seems to be an opportunity for filmmakers or visual artists to develop and think about their work without many of the constraints media arts organizations sometimes impose on their makers. This seems to nurture “artists” who are free to create in any form necessary, sometimes in film and sometimes in another form. Perhaps this approach is a result of not having as many artists in a place and bringing creatives of all types together creating a type of multi-disciplinary artist space.

In addition to collaborations that have already started, CAAM is planning to partner with all the convening participants in an effort to deepen our impact in areas that these local and regional entities are already experts in.



Rachel Raney, UNC-TV's Director of National Productions.



Participants Jennifer Crandall, Parker Glick, and Kimi Maeda.



Participant Ricky Leung sharing an image as Professor Jennifer Ho listens intently.



The “ethnicity meter” from Saleem Reshamwala’s piece on implicit bias.



Chi-hui Yang, Program Officer at the Ford Foundation, presenting at the convening.

## FUNDING

Attendees shared ideas for a more sustainable and supportive funding ecosystem, not only for AAPI filmmakers but for the South as a region. They stressed the need to push for more Asian American gatekeepers at existing funding institutions, as well as the need to identify new AAPI funders. Asian Americans have relatively low philanthropy levels, but their financial power is only increasing—how can we encourage AAPI individuals and institutions to invest in the community’s stories? Several groups also emphasized the importance of long-term support, rather than short-term results-oriented investments. This is particularly important in rural and marginalized communities, where longitudinal approaches are key to both organizing and media making.

Some attendees suggested looking to alternate funding models that draw on culturally specific practices and frameworks; for example, the widespread practice of savings groups within immigrant communities, in which a group of people contribute money into a fund and each take turns receiving the pooled money. Another suggested goal was the establishment of an emergency fund for filmmakers in the region.

As a gatekeeper of arts, CAAM is already looking to highlight filmmakers from the South as well as other underrepresented geographic regions. At CAAMFest 2019, we are organizing a pitch forum initially for CAAM Fellows and we are already in conversation with Asian American donors and financiers interested in funding non-fiction film. We hope to be a conduit to match

funders with projects and provide the necessary context on both sides for a potential collaboration. As a longtime recipient of federal funding in the form of support from the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB) we are both grateful for the funds but also are limited by what is seen as a quota for our community. CAAM has been doing the heavy lifting of reaching out to our community in terms of corporate funds as well as to the foundation world for grant funding.

**It has been clear that we need to provide more resources to our filmmakers from underrepresented regions such as the South but what the Beyond Borders convening underlines is the need to commit to deepening that support by seeding networks and environments that nurture makers as well as sustain them.** We hope to be able to create a fund specifically targeting Southern makers doing Southern content from an Asian American perspective and take them from development all the way through to distribution.

Some of the future work we hope to do in addition to creating new funding streams are trainings and filmmaker development. We hope to potentially partner with Southern regional public media broadcasters to host a Producers Lab for Southern makers to increase the number of diverse filmmakers that work with local public media stations. At the same time, we hope to partner with organizations like NOVAC to create a series of workshops for Vietnamese and other Asian American youth in New Orleans and support their launch towards a career in film and media arts.

## ELEVATING ASIAN AMERICAN NARRATIVES

Foremost in many attendees’ minds was the urgency to tell AAPI stories, particularly in the current political climate. They shared their frustration about White filmmakers producing and directing high-profile projects about Asian American communities, and stressed the importance of empowering AAPI filmmakers and communities to tell their own stories. Several groups also discussed the need to disrupt stereotypical narratives about Asian Americans, including the model minority myth. The collective desire to speak up and speak out, and the distinctly politicized discourse throughout the convening, also challenged the stereotype of Asians as passive and non-confrontational.

One proposed step towards elevating Asian American voices and representation was to create AAPI-centric media platforms that would facilitate both visibility and distribution. Many attendees shared the experience of hearing references to Asian American projects that they did not know about, and had no opportunity to see. Another suggestion was to research and publish a comprehensive report of quantitative

data on Asian Americans in the film industry, looking at demographic breakdowns of funding, distribution, award nominations, and other categories. A fuller picture of the state of AAPI filmmaking would offer specific data and areas of improvement to organize around.

As a national Asian American media arts organization, CAAM is ideally poised to curate and host an Asian American canon particularly for the film community but also for a general audience. We are currently developing a proposal and exploring potential partners, potentially looking at the Smithsonian Museum and other museum entities. We are looking to find underwriters who may be interested in partnering with CAAM on this endeavor.

From discussions at the Beyond Borders convening and CAAMFest as well as NOFF, there are a number of content streams we are interested in developing and seeding through various distribution outlets and hope to work on in a phase two for this initiative.



Filmmakers from left: Yi Chen, Jennifer Crandall, Matthew Hashiguchi, Ligaiya Romero, Leena Jayaswal, and Saleem Reshamwala.

# CONCLUSION



Matthew Hashiguchi shares an image with his table mate, Kiyoko McCrae.

The convening, and ensuing conversations, confirmed first and foremost that this initiative is profoundly necessary and timely.

Among attendees, there was an intense hunger for visibility, kinship, and support; a need to share their stories and to connect with like-minded communities.

*The gathering exemplified the South as we envision it:  
**deeply multicultural and intersectional, with  
a wealth of experiences, stories, and shared  
connections to be explored.***

The gathering was a monumental first step in solidifying the connections between organizations and creators in the South with the larger Asian American media making communities in the country. The convening has already created connections and opportunities in these past few months.

For example, Hanul Bahm and Saleem Reshamwala both attended the convening and met Clint Bowie who selected them to participate in the Southern Producers Lab, created by the New Orleans Film Society. Another connection is Tim Tsai meeting Firelight Media's Chloe Walters-Wallace and Tsai is now a Firelight Media Fellow. CAAMFest invited several Southern makers and organizational partners to attend CAAMFest 2018's Filmmaker Summit and paved networking opportunities for both makers to connect with the Asian American documentary community and also for Southern arts entities to find Asian American makers.

While the event inspired palpable energy and enthusiasm, centered on the powerful sense of community, vibrant creativity, and rich possibilities that were shared during the day, the true success of the convening was exemplified by the most voiced wish from attendees that the gathering had been longer.

Attendees wanted more; more sessions, more topics discussed, and more opportunities to connect with other attendees. Clearly, the convening is only the beginning of our efforts to address the challenges for Southern filmmakers and regional infrastructure.

## TAKEAWAYS

While the convening presented us with many questions and challenges to continue discussing and pondering, we were struck by these initial takeaways:

We as Asian Americans need to speak our own truths in a way that is respectful to the history of oppression that African Americans and Native Americans in particular have undergone. This must be done with an intersectional approach that embraces diversity in all its complexities.

Documentary is an inherently collaborative medium, and we must embrace the need to continue thinking creatively about potential partnerships. Also, the necessity of listening to home grown voices when it comes to covering stories from the South.

## NEXT STEPS

CAAM is deeply committed to continuing to invest in this project, with the goal of increasing the visibility of Asian American filmmakers in the South, supporting relevant and important regional work, providing funding and leadership opportunities for filmmakers, and fostering unique partnerships that will elevate their storytelling and expand distribution of their work. At the same time, connecting Asian American voices to the broader network of social and cultural activist organizations in the region will serve to mutually enhance and deepen the work of each participating community. We hope to use this initiative as a blueprint for not only Asian American communities, but any media organizations working in intersectional communities.

With these aims in mind, here are a few of our planned next steps to carry forward the momentum, discourse, and connections that have been generated by the project so far:

- **Create** a variety of opportunities to network filmmakers and funders;
- **Connect** with targeted non-Asian American POC organizations and communities and to Asian American creatives from other disciplines;
- **Provide** more resources such as funding and fellowships for Southern Asian Americans and raise awareness among Southern Asian Americans of existing resources.

The convening was a historic gathering of diverse Southern voices, and a testament to the rich stories, communities, and creative perspectives the region has to offer. We hope it will act as an inflection point to catalyze energy towards imagining and creating a new infrastructure for Asian American filmmakers, cultural organizations, and communities in the American South.

Developing this new structure will not only benefit the underserved Southern Asian American documentary community, but could also positively influence the equally underserved overall documentary community in the region.

*Finally, we believe that bringing Southern Asian American documentary filmmakers' stories to light, and highlighting a perspective of diversity in the South, **will lead to transformative change in rethinking the American South and defining a new intersectional and authentic American narrative in all its complexity.***

# PARTNERS

[A-DOC \(Asian American Documentary Network\)](#)  
[Appalshop](#)  
[AORTA \(Anti-Oppression Resource & Training Alliance\)](#)  
[Asian Americans Advancing Justice \(AAAJ\)](#)  
[Asian and Pacific Islander American Vote \(APIAVote\)](#)  
[Center for Rural Strategies \(CRS\)](#)  
[Corporation for Public Broadcasting \(CPB\)](#)  
[Firelight Media](#)  
[Ford Foundation/JustFilms](#)  
[Independent Television Service \(ITVS\)](#)  
[The Institute for Southern Studies](#)  
[The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation](#)  
[National Endowment for the Arts \(NEA\)](#)  
[National Minority Consortia \(NMC\)](#)  
[Black Public Media \(BPM\)](#)  
[Latino Public Broadcasting \(LPB\)](#)  
[Vision Maker Media](#)  
[Pacific Islanders in Communications \(PIC\)](#)  
[New Orleans Film Society](#)  
[North Carolina Asian Americans Together \(NCAAT\)](#)  
[NOVAC \(New Orleans Video Access Project\)](#)  
[South Arts](#)  
[Southeast Asian Coalition \(SEAC\)](#)  
[Southern Documentary Fund](#)  
[Stonehouse Residency](#)  
[UNC-TV](#)  
[VAYLA New Orleans](#)  
[Vimala's Curry Blossom Cafe](#)

*Additional Resources and PDF of this report available at <https://caamedia.org/diverse-south/>*

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## FUNDED BY

**JustFilms**  
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**ENDOWMENT** for the **ARTS**  
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Filmmakers, community organizers and media arts professionals at the “Beyond Borders: Diverse Voices of the American South” convening at the UNC-TV studios in Raleigh-Durham, North Carolina.

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