

Aminatou: Hi there! Welcome to the podcast from *On She Goes*, a travel site for all women of color. I'm your host, Aminatou Sow. There are few travel experiences as insane as touring. Trust me, I've been there. You barely enter a city before leaving it, you've got constant performance anxiety, and you're surrounded by the same people all day, every day. But there are perks too, like riders, room service, and getting to know the fans who inspire you to keep doing what you're doing. On today's episode, you're going to hear from touring musicians Thao Nguyen and Michelle Zauner. But first let's talk to a fellow touring podcaster, Crissle West.

[PLANE SOUNDS]

Aminatou: Crissle West hosts one of the most popular podcasts in the world, *The Read*. I love how embarrassed you are.

Crissle: In the world?! [laughs]

Aminatou: It's true! All of my European cousins talk about your podcast.

Crissle: Wow.

Aminatou: It makes me really happy. How many dates on the road have you guys done so far?

Crissle: Oh, I have no idea. What? [laughs] Yeah, right, I don't know. We average maybe one or two live shows a month, and we've been doing them for a couple years. So I would say probably between 25 and 30 shows.

Aminatou: What's on The Read rider for shows?

Crissle: [laughs] We do not have riders; we are not that Hollywood.

Aminatou: What?!

Crissle: Not at all! What?! Never.

Aminatou: It's not about being Hollywood as much as it's . . . there's stuff that you, like, that you want to be consistent.

Crissle: In the dressing room backstage or something?

Aminatou: Yeah! I mean, this is the revelation of the day for me.

Crissle: No, no. It's not like, "No, I must have a bottle of, you know, my favorite champagne and a bunch of pink Starbursts in a bowl." You know? "Make sure I don't have no yellows." Or shit like that.

Aminatou: [laughs]

Crissle: [chuckles] It's not, no.

Aminatou: Or like the Ludacris "so much yogurt" situation. It's, like, how can one man eat so much yogurt?

Crissle: Yeah. No, we don't have riders for The Read shows.

Aminatou: Oh man, The Read's so down to earth.

Crissle: Absolutely! [chuckles] That's why I'm like, "What?! A rider?!" There's no way that I could be like, "Oh, I demand, you know, six white German shepherd puppies."

Aminatou: [laughs]

Crissle: “In a basket, every time I show up.” [chuckles]

Aminatou: In a basket. [laughs]

Crissle: [chuckles] There’s no way we could do that.

Aminatou: Of all the cities that you’ve been to, which have been your favorites?

Crissle: Toronto was fun because I had never been to Canada before, especially. And we got to go to this restaurant called Diner’s Corner, which Drake kinda put us on to. Not directly, but indirectly.

Aminatou: [laughs]

Crissle: It’s Drake’s favorite—

Aminatou: A Drake recommendation?

Crissle: It’s Drake’s favorite Jamaican restaurant in Toronto, and so we went and the food is actually fantastic! So good that I agreed to do another event in Toronto next month, and when my manager e-mailed me about it I was like, “Oh, it’s in Toronto? Yes.” Like, I don’t even need to know any details.

Aminatou: [laughs]

Crissle: ’Cause I’m going back to this restaurant, Diner’s Corner. So Toronto was really cool for that. And London, that was our first time doing a show outside of North America. That was wild, like just being in a whole other place. Like, “We are all the way in England, and these people listen to us!” Like, that just kinda blew my mind, so probably those two stick out more than any other.

Aminatou: You get a lot of fan recommendations with the cities that you go to. Can you tell us, maybe, what the worst recommendation that you've gotten is?

Crissle: You know, I can't think of any that come to mind, but the best one was when we were in London and they told us to go to Nando's.

Aminatou: Yeah.

Crissle: Whatever the chicken place is called. That shit—

Aminatou: [laughs]

Crissle: Sorry, maybe I shouldn't have sworn. That chicken was amazing! It was so good! I did not know London could fry a chicken like that.

Aminatou: The cheeky Nando's. [chuckles]

Crissle: It was so good! [chuckles] It was so good. I got the lemon-pepper wings, of course, had to keep it real. It had to be authentic, fried hard. But I didn't even have to say that, they fried 'em right. It was some really good chicken, so shout-out to y'all for being right about Nando's.

Aminatou: Crissle, I wanted to tell you, I was at your San Francisco show for The Read. I was supposed to catch a flight afterwards, and I had to cancel my flight because I was so hopped up on the energy and how crazy it was in that room.

Crissle: Wow! Thank you, I guess.

Aminatou: Are all of your shows that way? Like, the audience was wild!

Crissle: Yeah, so the audience in the San Francisco show was on another level. Like, it's

rare that the audience is that “turnt up.” I expected people to be way more chill than what they were. That was a lot.

Aminatou: For me, part of the draw going as somebody who lives in San Francisco, [chuckles] and not Oakland, was that, right? Where I was like, “Oh my God, I’m gonna get to be in a room with, like, a thousand black people.”

Crissle: Right.

Aminatou: And I’m, like, not passing that up.

Crissle: [chuckles]

Aminatou: A lot of us were joking. We were like, “Man, this was such a missed recruiting opportunity.” Like, all these people that say they don’t know black people. I’m like, “Hi, they’re all here!”

Crissle: [laughs]

Aminatou: “Like, right on these three city blocks.”

Crissle: Yeah, as we were driving up, I said, “Where are all of the black people?” Like, there’s tons of white people and some Asian people. But I was just so stunned that we were driving through the city, and it just felt like there were zero black people. And we got that sort of feedback a lot, from people who were at the show who said, “This is by far the biggest number of black people I’ve seen in San Francisco in one spot.”

Aminatou: People saying like, “This is a community that I want to be a part of.”

Crissle: Mm-hmm.

Aminatou: And, really, just like, taking the time out of their day to do that. Like, that was a treat to watch.

Crissle: Yeah. These spaces have been almost all white for a long time, and not since Beyoncé came have I seen this many black people. [laughs]

Aminatou: [laughs]

Crissle: In one building, which is sad. But you know, I'll take it; it makes me feel good.

Aminatou: Live shows are really showing the changing face of what the podcast listener looks like. And I think that a lot of your audience that shows up at live shows, like, really reflects that. Like, a lot of the people who think that they're the gatekeepers of podcast would never peg all of those people to show up to that.

Crissle: [chuckles]

Aminatou: You know? Spend, like, cold, hard cash.

Crissle: Right.

Aminatou: And really enjoy themselves.

Crissle: Well, podcasting is changing, and there's more and more shows all the time with people of color and women, and women who are also people of color. And people of all gender identities starting shows, and that sort of thing. And I just think that's great. 'Cause when we started The Read—I've told this story a million times—but I told Kid Fury, "Nobody's gonna listen to this because

podcasts are for white people.” [chuckles] “Nobody is going to listen to it; black people do not listen to podcasts!” So, just seeing how much things have changed in three and a half years is amazing.

Aminatou: Yeah, it turns out black people love podcasts that are 90 minutes long. [laughs]

Crissle: It turns out black people love talking shit about whatever they want. [laughs] And they love to listen to each other do it. So.

Aminatou: That’s perfect.

Crissle: It’s worked out.

Aminatou: That’s so perfect. Thanks so much for joining us today, Crissle.

Crissle: [laughs] Thank you for having me.

Aminatou: That was the amazing Crissle West. You can listen to her great podcast, The Read, on iTunes or wherever else you get your podcasts. Now it’s time for the “three Hs” with Melissa Valle.

[MUSIC PLAYS]

Melissa: When it comes to hair and climate, make sure you do your research. I remember my very first trip to Paris in April. I was excited to have my hair straightened, the fresh blowout, not realizing how humid Paris is during that time of the year. Needless to say, my hair just got progressively bigger over the course of the trip. And so you can tell how far along I was in the trip if you look at the pictures by how big my hair looks. If you’re going somewhere very hot

and humid, like Cartagena, Colombia, you may have to change your routine entirely and go for something low maintenance and sleek. Be aware of your travel destination's weather patterns, and don't let your hair become the focus of your trip.

Aminatou: Thanks, Melissa.

[PLANE SOUNDS]

Aminatou: It's time to catch up with my fab friends Ashley and Rosie. This time they're taking us to Italy.

Ashley: So, just to paint the picture for you, we went to Italy in 2009. I was an undergraduate student at Howard, and Rosie, I think, had graduated from law school at this point. So I'm definitely, like, an undergrad dating an attorney who, like, drives a Bimmer and is like, "Hey, I'm gonna take you to Italy for two weeks." And I'm like, "Sold."

Aminatou: Where in Italy are you?

Ashley: So we went to Florence, Rome, and the Amalfi Coast.

Rosie: Okay, so in Florence, that's where we started. You know, a colleague had gone to Italy, maybe a couple of years before me, and said, "Hey, go to Florence. It's absolutely beautiful, really small city." And he was like, "Oh, man, and you know what? I did this really cool bike tour. And you know, I just was really able to get, you know, just a nice tour of the area. And—

Ashley: I'm gonna tell the part from here.

Aminatou: [laughs]

Rosie: What?

Ashley: I'm gonna tell the part from here, because this is where it gets shady, yes. Rosie comes back to the hotel and is like, "Hey, babe, I signed us up for this bike tour. It's gonna be great. It leaves in two hours." What do I do? I pull on this really cute floral skirt. I'm picturing myself riding through the, you know, Tuscan countryside with loaves of bread in my basket, the whole thing. [laughter] We arrive at our meeting point, and everyone looks like they're about to do the Tour de France. Like, people are in, like—

Aminatou: Lance Armstrong outfits.

Ashley: No, seriously.

Rosie: They had the butt, you know, the bicycle pants that got the pads on the back.

Aminatou: Oh, I know.

Ashley: People are stretching. Like, oh, no, I brought my bike shoes from San Francisco—

Rosie: Like, stretching.

Aminatou: Yeah, you're going on the hilliest bike ride.

Ashley: Yeah, so the guide looked at us and was like, "I think you two should change." And I'm like, "Oh, man, okay." So, like, I go back and throw on some, like,

athletic, you know, clothing. And they let us pick out our bikes. And, like, everyone knows what they're doing with their bike. Like, I grab mine and get on it. But people are, like, adjusting the seat, the gears, like, checking things. And I'm like, "Wow, you guys are, like, really anal for this, like, bike ride through the countryside. But like, okay."

Rosie: Okay.

Ashley: So we get on our bikes, and the guy's like, "Hey, we need one person in the front to flag folks for directions, and, like, one person in the back."

Aminatou: This really is Tour de France.

Ashley: Yes. So I, of course, volunteer to be in the front. I'm like, "Hey, I got it." And he's like, you know, "So when you see me do this, you know, you make sure that other people can see you, and that you are hand-signaling, so that when we're turning, you know, we're doing things safely." So we hit this hill, and this incline, and I was like, "Oh, wait. We're going up the hill?" And he's like, "Yes." And all of a sudden, I fell to, like, the back of the line, got off my bike, and decided I was gonna walk my bike up.

Rosie: So, you know, it's us, as black people, and all white people. And so I was—

Aminatou: So you've got to overperform. [laughter]

Ashley: But I don't care about things like that. Rosie is committed.

Rosie: But I am committed. She doesn't care about that. But I am committed. These

people . . . I was biking my ass off, because I felt like I had to ride for me and her and the rest of the black people in this world.

Aminatou: I can't breathe. [laughter]

Ashley: But you know what? I don't allow myself to feel that weight. I am a free black woman.

Rosie: She didn't. She didn't. She just completely let it go. But I was sweating profusely. I mean, I was putting it in low gear. I was like, "Oh come on, we are going to bike our asses—

Ashley: Rosie is pumping. I'm in the back, and the woman's whispering to Rosie.

Aminatou: You're bringing shame to all of our people. [laughter]

Rosie: Bringing shame to the entire race, okay?

Ashley: I was like, I'm about to undo everything that Kunta had did and everyone else.

Rosie: All that progress we made?

Ashley: I'm about to undo everything right here. And so, the woman's like, "Hey, do you think she's gonna be okay? It's just a couple more miles." Miles!

Rosie: She's whispering to me, "Like, hey, maybe if you go back there and talk to her." I was like, "That's not gonna work for her. Talking to her is not gonna work." And then the guy, and I felt so bad for this guy. I think he was at school, and he had—

Ashley: He had just finished graduating from Yale.

Rosie: Just finished graduating from Yale. And he decides to take it upon himself to go to the back of the line where Ash was walking her bike, and talk her through up the hill.

Ashley: He's like, "You know, when I'm on the crew team—" And I was like, "Dude, I don't care."

Rosie: She literally looked at him and said, "This doesn't move me."

Ashley: So we get up to the hill. We're in this restaurant overlooking, like, all of Florence. We had just found out that Steven Spielberg had been there five minutes before us. So I'm like, okay, like really feeling myself at this point. So then, of course, on the way back, because we're going down, I'm in the front.

Rosie: And loud.

Ashley: You know, flagging everyone, like, "Hey."

Aminatou: Wait, so you made it to the top?

Ashley: So I made it to the top.

Rosie: Oh, it took her forever, but we made it. We made it.

Ashley: I made it. I made it.

Aminatou: I'm so impressed. [laughter]

Ashley: Yes.

Rosie: Yeah. And that's pretty much our MO, right? Ash, you know, she signed us up for a lot of hiking, and you know, it's me and Ash at the back of the pack. And

I'm like, "Bae, you know, we hiking. You can't lay down on the mountain and just . . ." You know? And so that's our MO, and it all started in Italy.

Ashley: But you know what? I like an adventure, and unlike Rosie, I'm not about to let no white folks make me feel like I got to be at the front of the bike line, okay?

[laughter] I'm not—like I said, I have released myself from that kind of pressure.

[MUSIC PLAYS]

Aminatou: I really have to admit, that might be my favorite Ashley and Rosie story.

[MUSIC PLAYS]

Thao: I'm Thao Nguyen from Thao & the Get Down Stay Down. We're in a dubiously ventilated business center.

Aminatou: Completely unventilated.

Thao: Completely.

Aminatou: [laughs] This is an illegal space.

Thao: This entire thing, underventilated computer space in the Empire hotel, which is a very nice hotel. But anyway, we're here because we are on tour, and there is no private space.

Aminatou: I really wanted to ask you about your experience being on tour. What that's like from a travel perspective, like sharing close quarters with people? Is that something you adjust to? Scheduling and just the everyday of that?

Thao: Sure, yeah. I think for better or worse, we started touring so young. I started

touring basically 21, 22, before my brain had fully formed, and I think that's very helpful in adapting to touring conditions. And you don't yet have standards of living, you don't yet understand quality of life, and so that's integral when you're starting out in a band. And yeah, it's incredibly close quarters, and everyone figures out how to configure their own privacy in completely public spaces. [chuckles] And so, a lot of it is just zoning out, because you can't really go. You always have to be somewhere, or you're always waiting for something, so the only place you can really escape is in your mind. And so, no one talks. It's sort of like an unspoken rule; there's not a lot of talking.

Aminatou: What do you do to take care of yourself? Like, practically?

Thao: Oh, I love talking about this because it's such an ongoing experiment. I do believe that I'm, at this point, the healthiest I've ever been in my touring life. I try to meditate every day for a little bit. I try to work out every day. A lot of kale and a lot less drinking, which is probably the number one thing to do. [chuckles]

Aminatou: [laughs]

Thao: To be healthy. But yeah, I'm on more of a routine when I'm on tour than I am when I'm at home. When I'm at home I'm just at a loss and I don't know exactly what to do with myself.

Aminatou: I want to go back to the meditation. Do you have a particular meditation that you like? Or do you have an app that you use? How do you center that?

Thao: I was raised Buddhist and sort of culturally, more ritually, and then I came to the more meditative side on my own. But I have an uncle who has given me some instruction because he's basically as close as you can get to a monk without being a monk. That's my estimation of it, I don't know. That's not an official decree or anything—

Aminatou: [laughs] That works.

Thao: He was raised, basically, in a monastery in Vietnam. So he's given me some tips, and then I have this Insight Timer. That app—it's not a guided meditation, but there's the singing bowls and the chimes and you can just let that keep track of time for you on your phone.

Aminatou: I'm really curious about this—women who choose to put their name on their work.

Thao: Mm-hmm.

Aminatou: You know? And then the band has a different makeup probably than you.
[chuckles]

Thao: Oh yeah.

Aminatou: And I was just wondering if you had thoughts on that specifically.

Thao: I wasn't necessarily making a statement, and—given—all of these decisions were made when I was 22, essentially. But when you marry the band name, that's it. It's bad business to try to change.

Aminatou: Yeah, you're like, "We have good SEO under this name."

Thao: Yeah! [laughs]

Aminatou: Finally. [laughs] Got it.

Thao: [chuckles] See? You know what I mean. And so I just didn't come up with another name in time for the record to come out and all that stuff. And I'm envious of those who have a project separate from their given name so that you can assume it when you need to and shed it when you need to. And you're already giving so much of yourself, and it's such a vulnerable thing to be doing. And also, the fact that I'm using my name . . . when I was a kid, I grew up in suburban DC, so northern Virginia, you know? Falls Church, and I was the only Vietnamese kid in my class, in my elementary school. And I remember in kindergarten, kids teased me so much about my name. They called me "towel," which at that point—well, then I was devastated. Now I understand they were five. But it troubled me a lot.

Aminatou: Yeah.

Thao: It troubled me so much that I went home and I asked my parents, so I could have an American name. You know? Which I don't say, because just the thought of it, just the sound of it, makes me kind of die inside.

Aminatou: Yeah.

Thao: A little. And so, I never changed my name legally. Thao was my name on all the

paperwork, and anyone who knew me outside of school, that was my name. But when I went to school, it was this American name. But now it resonates more clearly with me that it is really important that I claim this name and I work as outright as I can be about what my heritage is and what my identity is.

Aminatou: How do you think the indie rock scene has changed since you started? Do you feel like it's more inclusive? Less inclusive? It's the same?

Thao: I definitely think it's more inclusive and a lot less offensive. [chuckles] And when I was first starting out, one of the first reviews of our record that we got when we released in 2008, they received the record well, it was fine. But the way it was couched, it was unlike anything I would expect. They said that, based on my name, they knew I was Vietnamese and they said, "You know, you might've thought she was hiding in the brush, waiting for the Tet offensive." Something along those lines.

Aminatou: Wow.

Thao: You might have thought she was in a foxhole.

Aminatou: Wow.

Thao: But she's been writing songs. I mean, I've encountered different elements of racism. Some more subtle than others, but this was like, an incredibly overt demonstration. So that doesn't happen anymore [chuckles], and I also think that now my ethnicity is not part of the description of this band. You know? It's no

longer about that.

Aminatou: Yeah.

Thao: Whereas, for the first few years, it was, and I think that's just a matter of establishing enough of a "whatever" so that people can move beyond that. And there is less sexism; there's less blatant sexism. I don't get these weird comments about playing guitar and how well I might play for a woman. Or no, they would always say "for a girl"; you'd never say, "for a woman."

Aminatou: Yeah, never. If only they called us "women," we would be slightly less offended.
[laughs]

Thao: I know, I know! [laughs]

Aminatou: Ever slightly less. [chuckles]

Thao: Those shifts I've noticed, and I'm not "thankful." I'm less disgusted.

Aminatou: Yeah.

Thao: You know? I'm less disheartened. I don't think that this progress is something to celebrate.

Aminatou: Yeah.

Thao: We've been beyond patient and gracious.

Aminatou: I mean, you played a huge part of that. You know? It's like, we just had this name conversation and all this stuff. But putting yourself front and center, you know? Whether you're comfortable saying that or not, that is a trailblazing move,

you know? And that is something that, for a lot of us who listen to music and love listening to women, like seeing somebody who just, like, claims who they are and what they're doing. There is so much power in that, you know? In realizing that things shift because people make those kinds of choices. You know? Whether they make them consciously or unconsciously.

Thao: Thank you very much for saying that. After you've been doing something for ten years, you do consider whether or not to keep—what are the motivations to keep going. And certainly the response is, like, very sincere interactions like this. Where it's not my place to agree with you, but it is my place to say thank you, and that does matter so much, you know? For people to keep going.

Aminatou: I feel like we're having a fan-girl moment right now.

Thao: Mm-hmm.

Aminatou: That I'm really appreciating.

Thao: [laughs] If not for these computers, we'd be holding hands.

Aminatou: [laughs]

[MUSIC PLAYS}

Aminatou: Thank you so much for joining us today. This means a lot. Thank you.

Thao: It was my pleasure. Thank you so much.

[MUSIC PLAYS]

Aminatou: That was Thao Nguyen of Thao & the Get Down Stay Down. And now, it's time

for “Around the World with Nneya.”

[MUSIC PLAYS]

Nneya: Let’s take a trip around the world with Nneya. This week I’m talking about Medellín, Colombia. No city is primed to be the burgeoning cultural capital of Latin America like Medellín, Colombia. It’s the city of eternal spring, and it gets its name from that perfect year-round spring weather. It’s undergoing a major renaissance right now, making it arguably one of the best places to be in Latin America. From an emerging foodie scene to a growing creative class, the people of Medellín have turned their turmoil into much to be proud of. But of course, I’m telling you guys before everyone catches on. So the cost of living is still insanely low. And there’s still incredible room for growth. Go visit and check it out. And while you’re there, here are three things that you should do. Feel like a kid all over again with a trip to Parque Explora, where the goal is to explain science in layman’s terms. Normally, I wouldn’t think to visit an interactive science museum, but I’m thrilled that my guide put it on my itinerary. I stared in awe at the largest freshwater aquarium in Latin America, but the real thing was the “Mind, Open World” interactive neuroscience exhibit. It blew my mind. Have dinner, drinks, and people-watch at the yummy sushi restaurant Envy at the Charlee Hotel. This rooftop restaurant has stunning, sweeping views of the city, which just looks magical at night. And you’ll definitely spy some of Medellín’s

glitterati. In Medellín, the art is not just in the museums or the plazas. There's a thriving street art culture, and one of the best places to see this is the San Javier neighborhood in comuna 13. Once considered among the most violent neighborhoods in the city, and one of the most densely populated, the neighborhood has been revitalized over the past years as a prime example of urban renewal. Street artists, with the support of locals, told the history of the neighborhood and Colombia through beautiful murals. Tons of tourists flock through the area during the day to see the sweeping views of the city from the Metro cable and outdoor escalator. Both were built in order to give the people in this area access to the rest of the city. Here, you'll find the heart of Medellín and totally fall in love.

Aminatou: That was Nneya Richards bringing you "Around the World." Up next, I sit down with musician Michelle Zauner.

[MUSIC PLAYS]

Michelle: My name's Michelle Zauner, I play in a band called Japanese Breakfast, and I am a writer.

Aminatou: Hi, Michelle. Thanks so much for joining us today.

Michelle: Thank you for having me.

Aminatou: You are also touring right now.

Michelle: Yeah, I just came off of a tour. I was, like, on the road for six weeks. I did five

weeks in the US, and then I did a week in the UK. And now I'm off for, like, two weeks, and then I do another five weeks in the US and then three weeks in the UK and Europe.

Aminatou: How many cities was that, total?

Michelle: We played 27 shows, so that was, like, 26 different cities, and then we were on the road for, like, 31 days.

Aminatou: Who was on tour with you?

Michelle: Mitski in the US, and then we were doing, like, a festival and headlining gigs in London.

Aminatou: How would you describe the indie rock scene in terms of gender? Because I feel like you're touring with, maybe, more ladies now.

Michelle: Yeah! I mean this last tour was amazing 'cause it was three Asian American front women. There was two guys and five girls on that tour, but yeah, I mean, it wasn't always like that. I used to play in another band called Little Big League, and that scene was really male dominated. And I was used to being the only girl on a three-band tour. So, like, one to ten or twelve, but I don't know, I think that the landscape is changing a lot in indie rock. I personally pretty much exclusively listen to female writers and musicians. Just 'cause, like, I don't know, it's just like the voice I prefer, I think. So sometimes it just feels like the world that I'm in is really female dominated, which I appreciate.

Aminatou: What's different from touring with, like, hella bros versus, you know, ladies?

Michelle: I don't know! Not much, I think that there's a sense of camaraderie that's nice. We can, like, bitch about the same things. [chuckles] And I don't know. I mean, it's unfortunate 'cause, like, even though there are a lot of female musicians starting to break out, I feel like there's a lot of other rules in touring that are mostly male gendered. So, like, a lot of sound guys, a lot of male staff at clubs, and stuff like that. And in different cities and in different clubs, it's always different. Sometimes it feels very equal, and sometimes it feels really sexist. [laughs] So.

Aminatou: You tweeted this thing that really resonated with a lot of people recently, where you were like, "To those who feel isolated in their experiences, make art and your people will find you."

Michelle: Yeah, this is really new for me, having my music reach a lot of people. Or, like, my art in general reach a lot of people. So you know, I made a really personal record, and I think I tweeted that, like, right as I was finishing a tour in which, like, a lot of kids were coming up to me and telling me how much the record meant to them. And I remember being a kid and feeling like I always knew I wanted to be a creative person and I knew that I wanted to write about my life, and I felt like I would always have to write it from a white voice, in a way. Like, even when I was thinking about writing fiction, I always really gravitated

towards, like, writing from, like, a male, white voice, and I think it was partially because I felt like my personal voice as, like, a half-Korean woman was too niche of a market.

Aminatou: Yeah.

Michelle: And it wasn't like a neutral body that could just, like, be a person. It would have to be, like, an ethnic piece or whatever. It couldn't just, like, the character just happens to be half Asian or whatever.

Aminatou: Yeah, you know, one thing that's so wild about this, and it's something that I just identify with so deeply is—I don't know—it's crazy that you can think of yourself and your creative projects and say, like, "I can write from the perspective of a white man." Right?

Michelle: Mm-hmm.

Aminatou: And you know what that is, because that's the default of the world that you live in.

Michelle: Totally.

Aminatou: But then feel so isolated and marginalized because you know that vice versa it's not true.

Michelle: Mm-hmm.

Aminatou: You know? There's just, like, a complete lack of imagination, specifically from white art, when it comes to dealing with any kind of "other" at this point.

Michelle: Mm-hmm, definitely. I didn't really feel like there was space for me until, like, this year, in a lot of ways.

Aminatou: Wow.

Michelle: It's so crazy—I was talking to my old professor about this, where it was like, "I didn't become a woman of color until, like, this year." I never had been referred to as a woman of color until this year.

Aminatou: Are you enjoying being a woman of color?

Michelle: Yeah! Absolutely, but I think that it was, like, I was always afraid.

Aminatou: Yeah.

Michelle: Like, I personally would have identified with that, but I don't think that anyone would've understood why that was, up until maybe, like, this year. And you know, I was visible in the arts, I guess. Like I played music before for three years in another band with three white guys and, like, I never was asked, like, "How does your Asian American identity affect your music?" until this project. And I don't know if it has something to do with the band name or if I'm just more at the front of this project, 'cause it's more my solo project. Or if it's just, like, the current landscape that it's suddenly an important thing, and I think especially the younger generation, they feel obligated, rightfully so, to make room for new voices. And it's like, you know, the white-guy rock thing is, like, kinda done.
[chuckles]

Aminatou: [chuckles]

Michelle: Like, let's hear from someone else, you know?

Aminatou: Oh my God. Hear, hear. It has, like, really dawned on me that there are people who are very organized and people who are not organized, and I count myself in the not organized space. I'm definitely, like, packing two hours before I have to go on international trips. Do you feel like you have a good packing strategy down? Since you do this for work a lot?

Michelle: Yeah, I'm actually a super-light packer. So I think that the number one thing for me is to just, like, cut it to basics. I think that mentally I really like to shed anything heavy. I don't like to carry too much, and when I try to plan a trip, I'm constantly thinking of how to have the least amount of stuff on my person. So there's this game. It's called the Japanese Desert Game, and this was something that my aunt taught to me. Do you wanna play?

Aminatou: Yeah! Can we play right now?

Michelle: Yeah, we're gonna play right now.

Aminatou: Okay.

[MUSIC PLAYS]

Michelle: So you have five animals. You have a cow, a horse, a lion, a monkey, and a lamb. And you're going on a trip, and there are gonna be four junctures, and at each juncture you're gonna have to get rid of one animal, and you can only keep

one animal at the end.

Aminatou: Oh man.

Michelle: So you're going on this trip, and you reach your first juncture. Which animal do you get rid of first? The cow, the horse, the lion, the monkey, or the lamb?

[MUSIC PLAYS]

Aminatou: Man.

Michelle: There is no man. [laughs]

Aminatou: [laughs] Get rid of the man.

Michelle: I mean, obviously, that would be the first pick. [chuckles]

Aminatou: I know. I don't know, I would probably get rid of the monkey, but I feel like I'm gonna regret that. Or you could also just get rid of the lion 'cause I feel like he's gonna wanna eat everybody. I'm gonna get rid of the lion.

[LION SOUNDS]

Michelle: You got rid of the lion. You've reached your next juncture. What do you get rid of? Are you gonna get rid of the monkey or the lamb, the horse or the cow?

[MUSIC PLAYS]

Aminatou: I'm gonna get rid of the monkey.

[MONKEY SOUNDS]

Michelle: Okay, then you have a horse, a cow, and a lamb.

[MUSIC PLAYS]

Aminatou: I'm gonna get rid of the lamb.

[LAMB SOUNDS]

Michelle: And then you're down to the last two. You have your horse and your cow, and then you get to keep one at the end.

Aminatou: I'm so stressed out!

Michelle: [laughs]

Aminatou: I just don't know what I'm gonna need them for.

Michelle: Yeah.

Aminatou: Ugh, I guess I'll get rid of the cow.

[COW SOUNDS]

Michelle: So each animal is supposed to kind of represent, like, a priority in your life. Like, which priority you value the most.

Aminatou: Whoa!

Michelle: So I brought it up just because, like, for me, I got rid of all the animals I thought were gonna really weigh me down. I kept the lamb and the monkey till the end because I was just like, "They're really small. They're easy to carry." Like, I don't know where I'm going. I might be on a boat; I might be transferring to a train at some point.

Aminatou: I kept the horse 'cause I figured he would take me somewhere.

Michelle: Exactly, yeah. So, like, everyone kind of views this—that's why it's very vague

and ambiguous. You don't know where you're going; you don't know what the trip's like. But for me it's like any trip I take I always want to carry the least amount of stuff. Because I don't know where I'm going, like, I got rid of all the big guys first and then I kept the little ones. But the lion—I had the same theory, that the lion is going to eat all your other animals, so your lion represents your pride. Which is kind of true to life, like your pride kind of eats away at your other priorities 'cause you were never willing to make any kind of sacrifices or negotiations for them. The monkey represents your child.

Aminatou: Definitely got rid of that one! [chuckles]

Michelle: Yeah, yeah. I know, you were like, "I feel like I might regret this," but you're like, "Nah, it's fine, I won't." What did you get rid of next?

Aminatou: The lamb.

Michelle: The lamb is like, love, like, the love in your life.

Aminatou: Perfectly okay. [chuckles]

Michelle: Your cow represents wealth, 'cause it has, like, the most byproducts, like milk and butchering and whatever.

Aminatou: Yeah.

Michelle: And then the horse represents your career, 'cause, like, at the end you can always ride out your career. [laughs]

Aminatou: This is, like, very stressfully kind of accurate.

- Michelle: Yeah, yeah. I felt like mine was super accurate for me too, and, like, the reasons behind certain decisions I made were very—
- Aminatou: So your aunt's, like, playing this game with you when you were a kid? And you're like, "Big life decisions!"
- Michelle: Yeah, no, I was, like, really young when she played that game with me. It was fun. It's like a good first-date game. 'Cause you can be like, "I can read into your subconscious priorities before this goes any further." [chuckles]
- Aminatou: I also think that traveling with a significant other . . . to me, that tells me everything I need to know about them.
- Michelle: Totally.
- Aminatou: I'm just like, if you pack too much, I don't know how I feel about this.
- Michelle: Yeah, that's like a big thing with touring too. It's just, like, you have to respect [chuckles] other people's space so much with what you pack. So like, the first day that people show up and they have, like, two bags and, like, a couple of other things, you just, like, immediately—
- Aminatou: And then they bring, like, a useless thing? You're just like, "Why—"
- Michelle: Oh my God, my drummer brought dumbbells and a football—
- Aminatou: Yeah.
- Michelle: And I swear to God I wanted to murder her, like, [laughs] the entire tour! For some reason that football especially just kept getting in my way. Like, every time

I would open the trunk, somehow the football would just come toppling out. I was trying to move the seat back—it happens to just be the football, and it causes so much resentment. Because you're just like, "You do not respect my space. The more space that you take up [laughs] in this car with your crap is, like, an insult to my person." So yeah, I'm a very light packer because I like to be able to run if I need to.

Aminatou: I'll support that. I'm OCD, and so, for me, if I'm traveling in a group of people, and I see bags that I can't stack one on top of the other, I'm like, "You're the problem child of this trip."

Michelle: Totally. [chuckles]

Aminatou: Everything needs to fit in a neat pile, and if you bring your surfboard, we are not gonna be friends.

Michelle: Yep.

Aminatou: Michelle, where can everybody find your work?

Michelle: On the interweb, on the World Wide Web.

Aminatou: Al Gore's Internet?

Michelle: Yeah. I have a Bandcamp. It's MichelleZauner.bandcamp.com, and then if you just Google "Japanese Breakfast band," a medley of links should arise.

Aminatou: Oh my God, that's exactly what I'm gonna do today.

Michelle: [laughs]

Aminatou: So, I hope you have a wonderful, wonderful day, and thanks so much for joining us.

Michelle: Thank you!

[MUSIC PLAYS]

Aminatou: What a fun finale for this tour. Thanks so much for listening to *On She Goes*, the podcast. Don't forget to check out onshegoes.com for more travel stories, tips, and inspiration. I'm your host, Aminatou Sow. *On She Goes* is produced by me and Bari Finkel for Pineapple Street Media in partnership with Serita Wesley, Lizzy Harris, and Natalie Huizenga for Wieden+Kennedy Publishing. Special thanks to Jenna Weiss-Berman, Max Linsky, Emily Becker, Lindsay Mavis, Sarah Fink, Marmoset, and APM. Bye.

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