

Chapter 1 Transcript - Rujunko Pugh & Marie-Therese Png - A Blue Skies Conversation

Rujunko: Hello. Hi, Marie-Therese. So, I'm Rujunko Pugh and I'm here in Sydney, Australia. And with me is Marie-Therese Png and she is in Oxford in the UK. And today we're going to have a conversation about Afro Asian identity, solidarity, decolonisation, and a little bit about our critical work in art and technology during this time of the COVID-19 pandemic and the increasing global awareness of Black Lives Matter. We would like to begin by acknowledging the Gadigal people of the Eora Nation, Traditional Custodians of the land on which this discussion will take place and to pay our respects to their Elders past and present. We extend that respect to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples here today.

So, MT. Yeah.

Marie-Therese: How did this all begin?

Rujunko: Yeah, maybe, you know, we want to begin with how we met out, how we became connected.

Marie-Therese: So, yeah, it started around two years ago, I came across your Transference work on Instagram. I was it was the first time I had seen. Yeah. Afro Asian identity depicted in art in an explicit way, and especially, you know, an Afro Asian woman depicted in your Transference work. And I was really struck by seeing myself and my sisters kind of reflected in an artistic piece. And so, I was so excited, and I showed my sisters and I never thought I would actually meet or connect in person. But I'd like screen shot your work and just, you know, kept it close. And I messaged you to just I think thank you for what you were doing and the way that you were representing Afro Asian narrative, you know, in a visible way on social media. And I think it was later on during the pandemic, when increasingly the sort of Afro Asian identity became salient both in, you know, how there was increasing anti-Asian xenophobia, but then also what was happening in Guangzhou with anti-African policies that the Chinese government was rolling out, or at least the anti-African discrimination that was happening. And us both kind of contending with these tensions between black and Asian ethnic groups in different geographic contexts. And then even more so during Black Lives Matter, at the same time we saw an increase in sort of Afro Asian solidarity, but then also the tensions between a recognition that there has historically been a lot of anti-black sentiment within Asian communities in the West - and globally - but in the West within the context that we had grown up in. And yeah, just, you know, a connection of commonality, even though we have different nationalities and even our ethnic composition within the Afro Asian umbrella are different. There is a sense of, yeah, a peculiar commonality because of this multiplicity underneath the Afro Asian umbrella. And we both have, yeah, this desire for connection and community and the knowledge that we - there is an existing community globally. But we have yet to have found each other, as peoples. And yeah, and also with regards to an increasing ask of, you know, what does it mean to use our positionality politically in this time, us both continuing to have this conversation together, through our activism and our practise, whether it be an art or technology.

Rujunko: Yeah, yeah. Well, when I posted my work on Instagram, you know, for me it was about representation because I'd never seen images like that before. And for you to contact me and for me to learn about your background and the connection that we have in regard to our, you know, Black Asian composition, that was just a thrilling moment. You know, the call out for the

discussion that we're having today, was an excuse for me to have to connect, and for us to be able to talk about these issues more in depth and to get to know each other as well. And so, I'm really thankful that you reached out to me. And then also, you know, that you had a lot of the same ideas and thoughts and critiques about these different issues that revolve around the pandemic and the Black Lives Matter movement. So, I think that our perspectives are unique in terms of individuals, in the sense of, you know, the environments in which we grew up, the spaces in which we navigate in between cultures. And I think this would be a good moment to kind of introduce ourselves a little bit more so that others, you know, will have a better idea of where we're coming from. Do you want me to start or? OK.

And so, we're going to show some photographs about ourselves and our lives. And so, this is a photograph of me when I was a baby. And then the next photograph here is my mom. She's Japanese. I was born to a Japanese mother who lived in Tokyo and to an African-American father who was based in Japan in a military base about an hour outside of Tokyo. We lived there until I was two years old. We moved to the United States partly because my Japanese side of the family, there was a little bit of tension between the Japanese side of the family and my parents, mainly because my father was a black man, but also associated with the U.S. military. But since he was in the military, you know, I was always in an environment that had a lot of kids that were biracial, multiracial from different countries and from a very early age, that space was just very normal to me. My parents always had friends that were in interracial marriages and they had children who were my friends. But when I was seven years old, we moved to North Carolina to be closer to my father's side of the family. And North Carolina is in the South, in the United States. We moved to a small rural community out of population of about 4000. And that was my first exposure to segregation, like visible, apparent, segregation and racism, you know. This town was very small and other only 4000 people. And there were mainly two communities, the black community and the white community. And then here we come, you know, my father with his Japanese wife and, you know, biracial kids. And we were the only ones in that town. And so, it was really interesting having to negotiate not only the environment, but to also, you know, navigate between California to North Carolina.

But, you know, I stayed in North Carolina until my late 20s. I graduated with my undergrad with a bachelors degree there. And then I moved to Hawaii. And in Hawaii, I was back in an international environment - lots of different ethnicities, people from all over the world went to Hawaii as a tourist destination, and the majority of the demographic is Asian. There are immigrants, and also second, third, fourth generation Japanese, Chinese, Vietnamese and Filipino diaspora. And so, while I was there, I was there for 10 years, and while I was there, I got my master's degree in molecular biosciences and bioengineering. At the same university, I became part of a community of PhD students in the political sciences that were candidates in the political science department. And some of those students were Indigenous Hawai'ian. And I made a big switch in careers from science to art and became very involved in the art community. And I worked at the Contemporary Museum of Honolulu. And then my last year of the 10 years that I was there, I met my husband, who's Italian, to make things more interesting. And I started travelling to Italy and I have become part of a community of Italian family and friends. After Hawaii, I relocated to Washington, D.C. and spent four years there. Also, part of the arts community and then part of a printmaking collective as well. After D.C., I moved, relocated here to Sydney, Australia, and continued my involvement in the arts.

I received my Masters in Fine Arts within the six and a half years that I've been here. And I've also become more involved politically, I've become more politically active. And I take part in protests

for different movements like Black Lives Matter, Aboriginal rights and Palestinian rights. And now I'm working at a 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art, and this gallery has the diaspora artist at the centre of their platform. And so, it's a great place for me to be right now and to learn, and to, you know, take what I learnt from there to develop my practise. Yeah. So that's me in a nutshell.

Marie-Therese: Amazing. I love hearing your trajectory and your story. And I know that there's so much in between. So, this is like compressed. Should I go next?

Rujunko: Go for it.

Marie-Therese: So, parenthesis, where you just like looking through your slides and then we're going to insert photos?

Rujunko: I was just looking through my slides. OK.

Marie-Therese: So, yeah, I'm Marie-Therese and I'm going to just show you some pictures of my family. So, here are pictures of my maternal grandparents, Nancy Alexis and Joseph Witney Alexis. They've both unfortunately passed, but I still think of them every day. And this is my grandpa when he was young. And I love these photos of my family.

My family are Black Caribbean British. My mum's side, and these are photos of them in Brixton in the eighties? I don't know. But this is a family celebration, and I just love how there's just so much joy in the home. And this is my grandma holding cake. And, yeah, my family's kind of classic Black British Caribbean in terms of my grandparents arriving in the 60s as part of the Windrush generation, which I'll talk about later. But essentially, post-World War II, the U.K. encouraged people from the Caribbean to come rebuild the country economically and encouraged people to come back to the "motherland", which is what's a lot of my family had, I guess, idealised Great Britain to be. And it wasn't really the case when they arrived, in terms of the amount of, I guess, hostile racism they experienced - and also just terrible weather. And so, these are more photos of my family. And this is a picture of my mom and my uncle when she was younger. And what I love about these photos is that I think I've been surprised how, especially when, for example, in the US, people are surprised that that Black British people such a prominent aspect of British culture or have been around for such a long time. And yet these photos are kind of just affirmations of that. And how much. Yeah. Black British people are such a vital aspect of British culture and British history.

And so now moving on to my dad's side. This is a photo that I love of my great grandparents, and my grandfather is this baby in the middle. And then the single photo is of my great grandmother, Madeline. And my great grandfather was called Peter. Paul. Peter is my grandfather.

And, yeah, they came from China. They came from the Fujian province, they were Teochew people who are an ethnic Chinese minority who moved to Singapore, to the Malay Peninsula. And it was largely people from this region who moved there. I think 70 percent of Chinese Singaporeans are of Teochew heritage. And they moved because of, yeah, poverty and sort of economic constraints. They migrated for, you know, better opportunities. And yeah, my great grandparents were in Singapore during the Japanese invasion, and my [great]grandfather was injured by a Japanese soldier, and after that, was very ill. And so, my grandfather sold pineapples on the side of the road, and from that, kind of built their family.

And this is a picture, the oldest picture that we have of someone in our family - is my great great grandmother. Her name is Maria Low, and I don't know much about her, but I'm very grateful for this photo. And so, yeah, these are photos of my grandparents when they got married. They lived in Malaysia and Singapore. I call them my Ahma and my Akung, which are Teochew words for grandma and grandfather. And these are my parents. Benjamin and Mary, and they met in London. My mom came to the UK when she was three years old after her parents had moved from St Lucia. And my dad came in his 20s to study, which is very typical for the Singaporean population in the UK. And they met at church. And I've observed with Afro Asian couples that there is either a connection with whether it be military or with religion. In terms of both Singaporean and St Lucian colonies, there having been very significant missionary projects to evangelise local populations. And so, my parents' families have been Catholic for multiple generations. And that's how they connected. And I don't think they would have connected just because of racial differences if they didn't have that commonality of religion.

So, this is them when they were younger. And then they had me and I have two sisters. And we grew up in this household that was both Afro Caribbean and Chinese Singaporean. And I grew up listening to my mom speak patwa with her parents and listened to my dad speak Malay, and like Singlish, and a little bit of Chinese. And we went to Chinese Saturday school, which is very typical of Chinese diaspora kids. And I also like grew up in Brixton, well visiting my grandparents in Brixton, because we lived just south in Streatham, which was like the black Caribbean, kind of, centre of London, which has now been really sadly gentrified. Yeah, that was sort of my upbringing being in between these two spaces, which didn't always necessarily overlap. I didn't grow up seeing a lot of interaction between Black British and Asian British communities, which is why when I moved to the US for my master's, I was really shocked to see the sort of interaction and interplay between cultures. I grew up very much knowing and aware of the fact that Asian communities had benefited significantly from Black civil rights work being done, and there not really being necessarily an acknowledgement of it within Asian community, because of, I guess, narratives of model minority. And then like huge pressure, especially within the British context, to assimilate and approximate yourself to whiteness - on both sides.

I grew up going to a French international school, so similar to you Rujunko, kind of in a context where it was a very international context. And yeah, even though it was majority white, French white, and our education was very colonial in terms of the very typical way that the French, in the same way that the British do, kind of, I guess, whitewash or neutralise colonial histories. It was still pretty international in terms of, you know, biracial, multiracial kids or those people who had at least lived in multiple places or were from multiple places. And there was like a huge kind of spectrum of socio-economic background, people who've grown up on council estates to people who were extremely well-to-do, like kids of diplomats. So was also a really interesting space to straddle, having grown up not well off at all, but then being in a context where people from different parts of the world and also like, straddled the whole kind of class spectrum, because our school was also a state school if you had a French passport.

So, yeah. And I from, you know, maybe the age of eleven, twelve, I would be travelling between, in certain summer holidays, between St Lucia, Singapore, Malaysia and meeting my family. And kind of overcoming tensions within my dad's side of the family who weren't necessarily very happy that my dad had married a non-Chinese person let alone a black woman. That caused tensions early on in the relationship. But fortunately, now that has healed over. And then my mum worked in health care, education and law, she worked many jobs. And, you know, was I was exposed from an early age to the inherent just deep, deep brokenness and violence against black and brown bodies

within these different systems under the UK government. And especially in a context where racial literacy is extremely low. People kind of talk about the conversation on race, at least until recently with the Black Lives Matter movement, the conversation around race in the UK was sort of 50 years behind the US. You know, you can't really take classes around, you know, race relations or anti blackness or black intellectualism in the UK. And so just like, you know, hearing stories from my mum around how people were treated in the healthcare system and legal system, the criminal justice system, the education system, just how deeply dehumanising it was very formative to me in terms of how I approach activism today.

And it's also interesting, my dad, never really, as like a Chinese man, never really spoke too much about race. He was definitely more assimilatory than my mum was. Yeah, we didn't really talk about blackness with my dad, which was really odd. But then, yeah, then I went to Oxford for my undergrad, which was an extremely interesting environment to be educated in - in terms of just a very kind of Western hegemonic intellectual canon, which really, you know, you either kind of got drowned in it or you had to push back. So, I became very involved with Afro-Caribbean Society, which kind of was. Yeah. Was key to my survival in terms of maintaining my sense of identity within this upper class white British, cultural hegemony and dominance that, like Oxford is extremely representative of, and has a direct impact on the way that this country is governed, because of the fact that this is basically like a politician factory for this country. And politicians who aren't aware of histories, like colonial continuities, of race hierarchies in this country, of class hierarchies, and how it impacts on people. Even just like, yeah, just a notion of empathy through knowledge, or reduction of empathy through ignorance, which is really kind of what I saw was part of the education here.

So, it actually made me want to learn more about the psychology of racial prejudice and institutional racism, which is what I went to do my master's in - my undergrad was actually in biosciences, so it was a bit of a shift. But my yeah, my interests have always been around the theme of racial inequality, whether it be in the biosciences or in politics or in institutions, or now in technology, and during my time here I've also become involved in political organising with the Rhodes Must Fall movement, anticolonial and anti-racist movements. And I'll talk about that later. But yeah, and there's more photos of just me and my family and me graduating and. Yeah.

Rujunko: It's really interesting to hear your story and your background. And even though, like you mentioned earlier, we come from different countries and grew up in different countries and our ethnicities are different, we have had similar experiences. And I'd like to also mention, you know, we're a different generation as well. So, but even, you know, we've had conversations before today, and even though there are all of these differences, we seem to have a lot of commonalities.

Marie-Therese: Yeah, yeah. It's been unbelievable. Just even in like really tiny details, we can empathise and relate deeply. Yeah. Just feelings, or perspectives on an issue, or how we relate to the world, which seem really particular to my own self, but actually was very deeply shared by both of us. Again, it's like what does it mean to, like, find a people, you know, what does it mean to feel a connection with someone based on an identity that feels pulled apart or feels incongruent, but in fact, it is a very congruent identity that gives a particular perspective or political orientation or like understanding of ourselves in the world, so I really appreciate that.

Disclaimer: Due to disruptions in the audio recording of the conversation there may be slight discrepancies in this transcription.

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