

Chapter 2 Transcript - Rujunko Pugh & Marie-Therese Png - A Blue Skies Conversation

Rujunko: There are two huge events that have coincided - the Black Lives Matter global awareness and then also the COVID-19 pandemic. And it has made things in the United States become very transparent in terms of systemic and institutionalised racism. But systemic racism permeates every mechanism of the U.S. infrastructure in COVID has just made it transparent and has brought to the surface the issues in health care for black, brown and indigenous people and also the most vulnerable. And it has also brought up issues of anti-Asian xenophobia as well. So, in terms of health care, there's low quality health insurance and in resources and the Covid-19, the infection rate is disproportional in these communities. There's a high infection rate in these communities. There is a racial bias and the racial empathy gap in medical treatment. There's climate and environmental changes in these communities as well, like, for example, access to clean water in Flint, Michigan. Black and brown people disproportionately make up the essential workforce. For example, in New York, they make up 75 percent of that workforce. Racial criminalisation plays a role in health disparities as well. An example is black men don't want to wear masks because they're afraid of looking more threatening in neighbourhoods where there's a high racial profiling and overpolicing. And so, you know, people in the United States are experiencing skyrocketing corona virus infections and deaths, unemployment, job loss, homelessness, crushing debt. So, there is fear and anger that's being directed toward the minority and marginalised groups. And again, the anti-Asian discrimination, because since the coronavirus adults in the US have witnessed blaming Asians for the pandemic and they're more likely to express racist or racially insensitive views about Asians. And there are more racial slurs and jokes and even physical abuse targeting Asian-Americans. So, this is a precarious time for. You know, everyone across the board.

Marie-Therese: Yeah. And I remember at the beginning of the pandemic when the disproportionate impacts of COVID-19 on black and brown people kind of surfaced, this language of "racism is also the pandemic". In a way that is so pervasive and so lethal. And there are so many parallels between the US and the U.K. in terms of how much institutional racism exists in all of our institutions. Including healthcare. Yeah. Black and brown people in this country were being disproportionately killed by the virus.

And there was, you know, initially and still huge pushback or resistance to acknowledging that racial discrimination had a role to play in the fact that black people were being disproportionately impacted by the virus, which is just very classic of this country in terms of low literacy around issues, around race. And just, you know, the sense of, I guess, innocence that the country has and this idea that we are multicultural, post-racial society, which is definitely being thrown out the window since the Black Lives Matter protest, when now - you know, you talk about transparency - there was kind of like a lifting of the lid or an un-silencing of, you know, or this unveiling of a reality that white people didn't want to acknowledge in this country, that they still do benefit from the impacts of colonialism, that the United Kingdom could only be great because of the way that it exploited and violently exploited many countries around the world or many peoples around the world, and that white supremacy is a bedrock of British values, essentially. So just kind of contending with that is difficult, if not impossible for many people. And so, within the context of Covid, it wasn't just, you know, it wasn't just Covid. That was the health care issue. I mean, issues of like black maternal death rates were brought up as another example of how institutional racism in the medical system is; like black women in the UK are five times more likely to die during pregnancy and after childbirth compared to white women. I also read a study where - if a black baby or infant is tended to by a white doctor, they are more likely to die than if they were tended

to by a black doctor. And there is no difference in survival outcomes for white babies, irrespective of what ethnicity the doctor is tending to them. And it's this, you know, racial empathy gap that people talk about. It's like a differential level of care and also a very tangible amount of negligence that is delivered by medical practitioners towards people who aren't white or who aren't privileged in the society or seen as of value - to the point where it's completely normal and understood within my family that my mum has to dress nicely when we go to the hospital in order for us to get the care that we want. Or she was very aware that when she was giving birth to us that she had to say that she was an educated woman for her to be given any treatments, it's also to do with, you know, you have to be able to speak... Yeah it's always about how much are you able to approximate yourself to white upper class-ness in order to be seen as legitimate or of value in the society and therefore get any of the care and resources - material or protective resources - that allow you to function in society.

And then with regards to like police brutality, I mean, my mom worked in - she wasn't a police officer, but she worked at a police station and has also worked in schools called PRUs - pupil referral units, where kids who've been thrown out from school - just like the last resort before being put into juvenile detention centres. And just seeing how, yeah, I mean, the criminal justice system in this country is inherently racist and police brutality has historically and is still an issue in this country, even in Oxford. Literally a year ago. Definitely not to the extent of the US because there's a different history of why the police exists or the function of the police between the US and UK - there's that continuity of the police essentially emerging from catching fugitive slaves, essentially, or just the way that criminal justice system is set up in new US, whether it's the prison industrial complex, which is extremely generative of capital. So just different context. But still, police brutality is an issue in this country and there are studies that show that like 1,741 people have died in police custody or following police contact in England and Wales since 1990, which is like a huge amount of time, I think people are still shocked that, you know, people can die in police custody in the UK. That there is that amount of brutality and it is disproportionately non-white people, poor people who are impacted by this. And yeah, it's mostly young black men who are targeted by the police. And it's extremely obvious. At one point in my teen-hood, I was a police cadet and we used to go on patrols and. Yeah, just seeing how. Without even second thought, we would stop and just - the police would essentially just harass young black men who would hang out together, just assuming that it they were gangs. When obviously it was a group of young white men, they would never bat an eyelid or ever assume that they were a gang. And it is kind of this intergenerational inheritance of extremely racist views between, you know, superior officers and their juniors.

And then on top of that, not acknowledging, you know, the historic continuities of racism or just how insidious racism is embedded in our society allows for this ignorance that kind of normalises [the idea] that it is natural that black young men are inherently violent or that they are inherently deviant. And there's no questioning of it and so it's further embedded in reality. Yeah, and then the fact that there is a black on black crime police unit further, just like, legitimises this narrative that black people are violent and without even acknowledging my intergenerational trauma, or the fact that, you know, the way that the education system excludes young black people, the way that our health care system doesn't tend to the mental health of black people Yeah. There's a direct connection between the status of black people in this country and how people are treated or are still considered as less valued and essentially kind of still slaves and subservient and should be grateful to be here. So, yeah, this is quite a, de-humanising environment for non-white people. And again, restating that it's very different than the US. But I still historic connections.

And the two examples that I want to give around the impacts of racist policy or institutional racism in this country on black and brown people - is the Grenfell fire, where 80 plus people were killed when Grenfell Tower caught fire and the fire was rendered far more lethal than it would have been because of the subquality cladding that was used for the building, which was below building regulations. And the people within this building, which was council housing, which is like projects housing, had complained for many years and had stated that it would take a disaster for for the local government or the council to even take notice.

And a reiteration, that it is because it is immigrant and black and brown people living in this building, which was also within a very wealthy neighbourhood, actually. That, you know, it was because of the composition of the population in this building that the council didn't care, which is, again, such a British thing - where, it's only those who have capital or who are considered legitimate in this society should get the care they need. And so. Yeah. Over 80 people died in this fire. And again, the government was very reticent to even acknowledge that institutional racism had a hand in this.

And then the second one was the Windrush deportations, which again, was my grandparent's generation who came from the Caribbean. When they arrived some of their landing cards weren't recorded, but they arrived as British subjects, as British citizens. And under Theresa May's hostile environment policies, which is essentially to make it as difficult as possible for anyone who didn't have indefinite leave to remain to stay here. And so that people would leave voluntarily just because the environment was so difficult to live in, so hostile. So, under that immigration policy, a lot of black Caribbeans, who had come here and were legitimately citizens, but who didn't have essentially evidence that they were because their landing cards were like either misfiled or destroyed. These individuals were wrongly detained and denied of their legal rights and threatened with deportations and in 82 cases were actually deported wrongfully from the UK, even though they were citizens. And those who weren't deported often lost their jobs, lost their homes, were denied medical care benefits. And the government has since allocated, I think, 20 million as compensation, and I think only two percent of that has been given out. And there hasn't really been a proper apology. There hasn't really been at least material apology in supporting those whose lives had been essentially destroyed by this. And again, like a lack of acknowledgement that this was like a very overt a case of racial discrimination. Same thing for COVID. The government didn't really want to release reports around why it was that Black Asian Minority Ethnic people, or black and brown people were being disproportionate, impacted. And it's just really, really tiring and really just distressing that we're still living in this time.

And yeah, just to pick up on anti-Asian xenophobia. It has been East Asians who have, within the pandemic, experienced the most increase of racial slurs been directed at them and xenophobic violence. And that's been especially exacerbated by, I guess, rhetoric delivered by Trump against Asians. So, yeah, there's a lot there. And I definitely talked for a long time.

Rujunko: Yeah - did you say I definitely talked for a long time? Well, see, you know, there's a lot going on. And it is you know, there is a feeling of frustration and helplessness. And, you know, there are things that have been going on for generations in both countries that are coming to a head now. You know, especially in the United States. And people are becoming more aware, you know, and you mentioned it, with the British government not admitting or not taking responsibility, you know, not being truthful. And again, this is a symptom of institutional and systemic racism that permeates the culture. You know, the cultures that are in the United States and in Britain. And because in the United States, things have become transparent. And there are

discussions about the feelings toward the black and brown communities. Right. But people are still having a difficult time acknowledging it and accepting it. It's just too difficult to talk about as well.

But it happens here in Australia, too. There's anti-Asian xenophobia here. It's interesting because, you know, in the United States, there are three hundred and thirty million people living there. Here there are only twenty-five million. But there are higher rates of anti-Asian xenophobia related abuse per capita compared to that in the United States. There's an organisation called the Asian Australian Alliance that has opened up its channels, so Asian Australians can report these abuses. They feel more comfortable reporting to this agency than to the police, even though there's an Anti-Discrimination Act that was passed here in 1977 that states that racial vilification and public and racial discrimination is unlawful. But still, 90 percent of the incidents are still not reported to the police. So, there's also police brutality and anti blackness issues here in Australia. It's significant in the Australian culture. Just recently, the Australian Supreme Court ruled to make the last Black Lives Matter protest illegal. Media outlets reported that the Australian prime minister was appalled at Black Lives Matter for even considering it to break social distancing laws. But at the time, there were still gatherings at football matches, in hotel bars and in shopping centres. But the protests, one of the reasons why the protest was happening is because of the death of David Dungay Jr., in 2015. And it's the same horrific story that we've heard time and time again that David Dungay Junior was a 29-year-old Aboriginal man in prison. And in his cell, the guards, rushed in after they told him to stop eating a biscuit -and to the US audience, that's a cookie. And he was held face down on the floor and then injected with a large dose of sedative, during which he said twelve times he couldn't breathe before he died. And so, you know, this just highlights, or brings up the point of the disproportionate number of indigenous communities or people in jails and juvenile detention centres here. Twenty eight percent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are in Australia's adult prison population. And they only make up three percent of the national population. And it's even higher for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth. Fifty three percent were in detention centres in the June quarter in 2000 and 19. And they only make up six percent of the Australian population. And so, you know, anti blackness and anti-Asian xenophobia are issues that need to be addressed critically and analytically to find solutions to change these conditions that are just devastating to these communities. And I read something the other day. There was a New York Times contributor. Her name is Roxane Gay. And she recently wrote that eventually they'll be like a cure for the corona virus, they'll come up with a vaccine, but black people will still have to wait for the cure for racism.

Marie-Therese: Yeah. And I feel like racism definitely is and can be described as a pandemic and a disease. And, you know, in what ways can we unpick something that is essentially fundamental to the way that our societies function and unstructured, whether it be the way our institutions.

Rujunko: Yeah, I hear what you're saying.

Marie-Therese: Yeah. Racism is essentially... Historically has been the founding bedrock of our global economic system. In a way - whether it be capitalism - people talk about racial capitalism, and obviously inequality isn't always along the lines of racial inequality in the ways that we qualify in the US or the UK, but an interesting way of seeing capitalism as an economic system that subsists on the accumulation of capital, which can only be accumulated by relations of severe inequality between humans. I think to me this is a key way to see why racism has been perpetuated and maintained over centuries. And I think points to the core of what Black Lives Matter is trying to say that black lives have been reduced or devalued, and instrumentalised in that way. You know, slaves were only able to be - or African peoples were only able to be enslaved

and taken to different colonies to be extracted from and worked, because they were seen as less than human. And so, the idea that black people are less than human still pervades to this day in a way that is still supportive of this economic system, that is still in support of the privileging and the well-being of white people.

And so that's why it's been so difficult to unpick because in essence, for racism to be deconstructed or - what's the word that we always use - dismantled - requires for a fundamental shifting of like, not only identities but our systems. And that's where it's so essential for the radical dismantling work of multiple communities around the world against colonial continuities, or against systemic racism or any other form of hierarchy is so essential, but also so difficult, because we also participate in these systems and survival on these systems and have internalised these systems as well.

Which is something that I've been learning a lot from the community organising work I've been doing. Rhodes Must Fall. Like, how do you contest or push back or dismantle sort of ideas of patriarchal capitalist modernity, which is also anthropocentric and destroys the environment, when we also benefit from and participate in these systems? Yeah. Like, you know, I think about how I often say that the UK is not innocent. This country believes it's the country of abolition and not the country of empire. And like abolition was only necessary because it had gone and dominated multiple regions of the world. So, this idea of innocence is like - none of us are innocent. All of us are complicit. But to different degrees and all of us have different roles to play depending on our positionality or our family's histories.

Rujunko: Yeah, I agree. In terms of positionality. Yeah, I think that we are in interesting spaces of positionality, where we're able to, you know, recognise these different structures of hierarchy and power and then use our positions to process, you know, these issues through our practise. And then I know that you are working with politicisation of technology and through scholar activism. And I am using my artwork to address these things as well. And. One of the I guess in context of the state of affairs, in terms of, you know, I guess people like us, people who are of diaspora in a Western dominated country and being of minority diaspora as well. We're affected personally by these institutions, by the effects of structural and institutional racism. Right. And so, one of the things that I look at and how we exist in these spaces is the aspect of the liminal space. Of being in between cultures, being in between countries, you know, being in between ethnicities in that liminal space is where it all converges for us. We exist in both spaces at the same time, simul... Simultaneously. If that makes sense.

But so, say, [laughter] so I look at my Afro Asian heritage and the liminal spaces in terms of my artwork. At first it was to look for Afro Asian representation in Western art history. I was looking for that and I couldn't find any Afro Asian artists. I did find some overlaps in black and Asian culture in artwork. But it's scarce. And so, I decided to make my own. And I started making collage work to investigate my heritage and my background and my ancestors. And in my research leading up to making my work, I came across British art historian Kobena Mercer, and he studied or researched and wrote about extensively contemporary and modern art of the African diaspora. And in his research about a particular artist named Romare Bearden, who was prominent, a prominent collage artist, actually during the Civil Rights Movement in the U.S., Kobena Mercer talked about how collage a good methodology for the diaspora artist because of the diaspora condition being a composite reality.

And so, with my own research, I was drawn to African-American and Japanese photographs that were taken shortly after the invention of the camera. And there were... The African-American photographs were portraits that were made in the late 19th century. And this is when they were freed slaves and free African-Americans, African-Americans that owned their own studios. And so, these images had agency and they could be... African-Americans could present... themselves, their images as they wanted to be seen. And on the flip side of that, in Japan, there were photographs that were made in photography studios there, as well. But there were Western owners of those studios or the studios had Japanese owners that were trained by the Western photographers. But these photographs were that captured a Japanese tradition and culture. And, you know, there was a portraiture, as well, were mainly for tourism. And so, a lot of these images, these photographs were taken back to Europe and cultivated a mythology of the Orient and the exotic and othering. So, they didn't really have the control of the way they wanted to be seen.

And so, you know, I found it interesting and I collaged the black and Asian signifiers of the black signifier being the black skin and the Asian signifier of being the eyes to represent my composite diaspora identity in the collages that I made. And then, you know, because the signifiers were juxtaposed, the meanings of them became transformed. And in them I address, personal issues of transculturation and an existing in that liminal space between in between the cultures. But, you know, after COVID, the COVID pandemic and the George Floyd murder, the collages made me think more about diaspora realities that existed in the 19th century. Those people in the liminal spaces had to navigate and negotiate during that time when white supremacy was constitutional and a part of everyday life in the U.S., at least. So, there's black discrimination in the U.S. and the one event that caught, that I can think of, that I find interesting in terms of, someone who had to exist in a liminal space in the late 19th century was Homer Plessy. And he is known because of the night 1896 Supreme Court case, Plessy versus Ferguson. So, Plessy was a one eighth black man who could pass as white. But he still was a black activist and he traversed between black and white spaces. Right. And one day he illegally sat on a train car reserved for whites in protest. And he was arrested. And his case went all the way to the Supreme Court. And there it was ruled that the descendants of slaves had to be separated from whites. And so, this ruling began the separate but equal mandate at the time and was the origin of the one drop rule that affects Americans to this day. And so, yeah, it's you know, and there are so many different rulings, laws and legislations that affect affected the African-American community. I mean, in the white community as well. All of the communities, because it wasn't just black and white, you know, that existed in the United States. There were also Asians there as well. There was a huge community of Chinese immigrants at that time. There was an influx of Chinese immigrants because of the the gold rush in the United States. But also, here in Australia as well, that in the United States, they also emigrated there because of the work on the transcontinental railroad. And these diaspora communities in both countries were subjected to anti-Chinese institutional and systemic racism because the white workers resented losing the middle-class jobs to low wage working Chinese people. And so, in the United States at that time, there was the rise of, a rising power of white supremacy and that led to the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882, which banned Chinese immigrants and prevented them from becoming U.S. citizens. And in this part of the world, in Australia, the White Australia policy was passed in 1901 forbidding people of non-European ethnic origin, primarily Chinese people, to immigrate to Australia. And that was around until 1966.

Marie-Therese: Wow.

Rujunko: So, you know.

Marie-Therese: The recency is really astounding.

Rujunko: Yeah.

Marie-Therese: And this is not shocking because it's still very much similar to two recent executive orders or recent or just even contemporary narratives of who is a legitimate citizen or not. And it's completely tied to European colonialism. And it's always surprising and not surprising to me that these stories are not forefronts in the way that we, yeah, relate to all societies because it's such a history. And so, the amnesia is both. It is almost, it's almost not a slap in the face, but it is almost audacious because it's not only a - it's like a shared history and, and so many of us are aware that all have been directly impacted in our family lineage. It's really important to know that history and to know those dates and to know that the continuous practise of exclusionary policy that is white supremacist in its nature has apparently got.

Rujunko: Yeah, it's interesting because, you know, there is a long history in the United States, in the U.K. and here in Australia of racism. And it does, you know, it gives you an understanding of the history and knowing, like you said, that the dates and the specific events and the different things that have occurred, the different laws that have been passed, you know, gives you a better understanding of why it's so deep seated, why it is so engrained, because it is a foundation, you know. And there is that amnesia as well. You know, I don't know about the UK and Australia, but, well, maybe in Australia I do know. But in the United States, in terms of U.S. history, you know, it's I was going to say, as we all know, but we don't, a lot of historical events have been altered and left out. And specifically in one aspect, the African-American history, you know, names like W.E.B. Du Bois isn't, well when I grew up, you know, because I'm a generation older than you - but in the 70s, 80s, you know, you didn't learn about W.E.B. Du Bois, or Fannie Lou Hamer or, you know, all of these other people who, you know, were part of the civil rights movement. Were part of the liberation efforts, you know, during slavery. African-American authors, you know, who developed a vocabulary for people to be able to be activists, to be able to, you know, critique these systems of racism and to, you know, progress the effort, the anti-racist effort forward. And so, yeah, it's something that I think is changing, and because of the events that are happening today, these discussions are becoming or are starting to happen and we're starting... It's interesting every day, you know, I see something or read something about our histories that have been, you know, not properly acknowledged, that's just coming out.

Marie-Therese: Yeah, yeah, and I mean, same thing, unsurprisingly, in the UK. For example, black British history has been fully erased from the curriculum and there's been recent calls to parliament for petitions to at least incorporate a more balanced perspective of colonial history. We all, or we learn... And I also went to a French international school, but the same thing applies to the French curriculum. When your only kind of exposure to black or African diaspora, history is around like "black people were slaves" and that's it. To the point where some of my peers would ask me, you know, does "Africa have a history?" You know - and these are people who are and, you know, when we were on 20s, people ask this. And that is just a really quite pernicious symptom of how... Yeah lopsided, our history curriculum is. One example that my mum gives to her students, because she's also an English teacher - and most of her students are black and brown children - that you know, a very celebrated figure in British history is Florence Nightingale, who attended to lots of the British soldiers during World War One [correction: Crimean War] and actually, there was someone else called Mary Seacole, who actually of her own accord went - and who was a black woman - who went to tend to soldiers on the front lines. And she's erased from history. We don't learn about her, even though she was just as impactful and if not more

significant than Florence Nightingale. And actually, I may be wrong, but in what I've learnt about Florence Nightingale is that she at least voiced or contested Mary Seacole's ability to continue her work on the frontlines of the war. So, Florence Nightingale herself was not exempt from racist beliefs.

So, you know, that for me was a sort of a powerful example of like the erasure, depending on your race within this country. And just like yeah, a lack of acknowledgement of contribution basically to our culture, to our history, and to our society, which further supports the idea that non-white people, this country should be grateful to be here. Even though most of us are here because of the economic imbalance that colonialism imprinted upon us in the first place. Like so many times, you know, when we're told to go back to our countries, we're just like, yeah, like it would be great. But, you know, we're here and we need to acknowledge that history of why we're here in the first place.

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

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