

Chapter 3 Transcript - Rujunko Pugh & Marie-Therese Png - A Blue Skies Conversation

Rujunko: So, I think now would be a good time to talk about militarism, from a personal and geopolitical level, and how it complicates our narratives, how it attributes to lived tensions and the difficulty of straddling two worlds. And so, for me, the military is significant - it was a big part of my early life and my family was directly affected back then and it still is now. And the positive aspect of growing up in a military family was the exposure to the multicultural, multi-ethnic community. And, you know, when I was a little girl, there were stories about the U.S. military and how it was praised for its role in defeating the Nazis during World War II. But, you know, as an adult, I've come to learn that the military is, can act as a vehicle of white supremacy internationally, due to forces like racial capitalism, institutional capitalism, and institutionalised racism. And, in the US, the economic disparity that is currently happening is partly due to the diverting funding away from public services like health care, education, and economic security in terms of providing aid to people who are unemployed because of the pandemic. And even now, a lot of the money is diverted into the military budget, which feeds into the military industrial complex. Communities of colour are also targeted through recruitment strategies. They go to poor communities and promise access to travel, to leadership training, in return for military service, funding for education. And they find themselves involved in endless wars that are still taking place in countries like Iraq and Afghanistan. And the cycle of this racial capitalism is perpetuated.

When these recruits become soldiers and they go fight these wars and then come back to the United States and look for support and help through the Veterans Administration, and this is another service where money has been diverted away into the military budget. And the Veterans Administration provides health care and mental wellbeing services, which, you know, are of poor quality for veterans. And then there's also that aspect of the surplus of military weapons and equipment and vehicles that are being sold. Well, that surplus is being sold to local police enforcement in the United States. And we can see evidence of this during Black Lives Matter protests when the police force come out, the riot police, and they're dressed in military garb. They have military weapons. They drive military vehicles and then they brutalise these protesters with force and impunity.

Another layer of complexity that COVID-19 adds to, the relationship of U.S. imperialism globally, is in this past June in Okinawa, Japan, there were a large number of confirmed cases of COVID-19 amongst the military personnel. And in contrast there were zero reported cases in Okinawa on the island. The occupation of the U.S. military in Okinawa has been tested and stressed time and time again because of past incidents of accidents and crimes by the individuals in the military. And this brings up the point of the of the U.S. military occupying with its bases, you know, in many different countries around the world. And it's interesting that the security issues of the countries that are so important for these different countries, for the protection by the U.S. military is often not extended to the protection of the communities that live in the proximity of those bases.

So, yeah, so the relationship of the military from a global perspective is one set of issues, but another set of issues is the actual Asian diaspora that is in the military as well. And so, one thing that I'll mention about that is in the past, when during World War II there were Japanese diaspora that actually fought in the U.S. military. So, there were Japanese Americans that fought, and even though they fought in the military, they were still put, you know, families, Japanese families were put into internment camps during that time.

But a positive thing that I will say about this is that in Hawaii, there was a huge and there still is a huge Japanese immigrant community or diaspora community in Hawaii. And so, there were Japanese Americans who were living in Hawaii that fought in the military. And then after World War II, they were given something called the G.I. Bill. And the G.I. Bill was a way that they could afford an education. These, veterans, Japanese American veterans, some of these Japanese American veterans went to New York and to Europe and they studied art. And this was during the era of Modern Art. And they brought back what they learnt to Hawaii. And if you go to visit Hawaii at any time, there are huge public art installations that are mainly Modernist, you know, style mainly in Honolulu. But it is pretty evident the influence that these Japanese American soldiers turned artist, what impact they made on the culture in Hawaii.

Marie-Therese: That's so interesting. I love that story a lot. I mean, it's really unexpected to imagine that the G.I. Bill lent to such a kind of creative and positive impact on the visual landscape in Hawaii. That the G.I. Bill is responsible for someone's art education and artistic expression. Not expected.

Rujunko: Yeah, yeah. There's some irony there, isn't it? There is the irony of the military being such a destructive force. But out of that something, you know, beautiful and creative could exist.

Marie-Therese: Yeah, and so to your point around the militarisation of the police in the US, I've been really kind of heartened to see an increase in more radical activist work from different Asian communities in the US. And also, a response to calls for solidarity with the black community, which is something that I haven't seen in my lifetime. I remember seeing imagery around protests in California around the death of Huey Newton, where East Asian activists were holding signs saying Yellow Peril supports Black Power, which is also a slogan that has re-emerged in this time of Black Lives Matter. And also, in recognition that it is about time for the Asian American community, and also the British Asian community to contend with ideas of model minority, which is a sort of ideology and a role in society imposed by white supremacy. And so, in parallel critiquing the model minority role that has been imposed, and also recognising the anti blackness that exists within Asian communities, and acknowledging a responsibility to be in solidarity, especially with, for example, Peter Liang's role in Akai Gurley's death and Tou Thao's role in George Floyd's death.

And even just personally, I've had one instance in New York when I was with my friends, who are African-American. One of us had jumped one of the turnstiles in the subway, and an Asian-American police officer approached us, and he had his hand on his gun. And he was trembling and very much in fear of this group of black youth. And just to see such a visceral kind of distance between both communities was really jarring. And not that that was a general kind of illustration of what the relations between African-Americans and Asians American was. But it kind of points to me personally, this gulf between both communities and my own belief of how the world could be. That there wasn't really this sense of solidarity or connection or relations between both.

So, it's been really interesting to see within these George Folyd protests and Black Lives Matter protests. That Asian-Americans really voiced solidarity. Like Asians for Black Lives has been a big hashtag. There've been so many public forums where Asian-American and African-American activists have been coming together and also unpacking - whether it be anti-blackness within the Asian communities or lack of communication over the decades. And also celebrating an existing history of solidarity between black people and Asian people not only in the US, but globally.

Rujunko: Yeah, yeah, I love it. I love seeing the solidarity that's happening on the different social media platforms. Especially, one interesting thing. It was the K-pop in solidarity with Black Lives Matter. They somehow took over the Internet. Oh. That's what it was. It was against President Trump.

Marie-Therese: Oh, my gosh. Yes.

Rujunko: Yes. That was it. So, Trump, at the time when rallies were still possible, had a rally. And they had people, I guess, reserve a ticket to get into it. And Trump and his supporters, his campaign managers, were very happy because they saw tens of thousands, or just a just a huge number of people reserve tickets. And when the rally happened, there were hardly any, it was such a small percentage of what they expected. They had to reserve like a huge colosseum. And then they had a spill-over section outside. But it was just, you know, a smattering of people in front of the stage. And most of the seats were empty. And what had happened was the K-pop fans had reserve tickets, like thousands and thousands of tickets. And so, it was like a political resistance through social media.

Marie-Therese: Yeah, amazing story. I remember when saw this online, I thought it was pretty epic to see, and unexpected that that demographic of K-pop fans would be such subversive actors. And it also reminds me of how international Black Lives Matter protests have been - like in South Korea and in just different parts of the world where I never would have expected there to be solidarity from, especially Asian countries.

And then also it sparked a conversation around the ethnic hierarchy in Singapore, for example, like a lot of Singaporean activists kind of drew energy from the Black Lives Matter protests to talk about anti-Malay or anti-Muslim or anti-Indian sentiments and stereotypes and policies existing in Singapore. So, it was amazing to see the ripple effects fall outside of the black/white dichotomy or binary as well.

And also, just like drawing back on histories of Black-Asian solidarity, I've been really interested in this time to see Chinese political scholars or specialists kind of surface and intertwining history between black and Chinese politics.

So not only like the Justice for Huey protests where the Yellow Peril supports Black Power slogan emerged from, but then also interestingly, Mao Zedong's support for African-Americans. And he used the phrase, or he coined sort of the idea of racial struggle as class struggle. And then I was very surprised also to see that W.E.B. Du Bois had a political relationship with Mao Zedong and the Chinese Communist Party in the 60s. And so, histories that aren't very prominent or visible have been kind of dug up in this time. And also, you know, histories of China's interaction with African-American activists during the Cold War, trips to the People's Republic of China made by African-American dissidents and peace activists, black nationalists and internationalists during the 50s and 60s.

And there was even a song by The Coup called Dig It in '93, that illustrated Mao Zedong as a black radical hero amongst the Mau Mau movement and Kwame N'Krumah. And it's just, you know, obviously there are vast complications with that in general, but these kinds of alternative histories, aren't alternative histories, they are existing histories that we just don't think about because of the distance between histories of Asia and histories of the black diaspora. And the last thing that I

wanted to bring up was an anti-colonial movement in the 50s, the crux was the Bandung Conference, which was the first large-scale Asian African or Afro Asian conference in Bandung, Indonesia, in 1955. And it was a meeting of Asian and African states and countries in the Middle East, most who were newly independent from colonial powers - to promote Asian and African cooperation economically and culturally, to oppose colonial and neocolonial powers. So, you know, that's for me a really powerful historic event that does centre this kind of idea that, yeah, an Afro Asian cultural or political alliance that could have spun off a very, very alternate kind of historic progression for our world, but that didn't come to fruition.

Rujunko: Yeah. You know, that meeting seems so huge, and it happened. You know, it was a huge event in history and it's something that's not well known and that attributes to what is taught, and what history is selected to be passed along. You know, the people in power who get to write the history conveniently left that out.

Marie-Therese: Yeah, yeah. It's really amazing. And then it also stands in vast contrast to kind of the geopolitical status between China and the African continent right now. You know, if you compare it to how there were ideas or dreams for Afro Asian economic and cultural cooperation, with the relatively extractive trade policies that are currently being enacted by example, China's One Belt One Road initiative, and then just ideas of sovereignty, of infrastructure, and yeah, unequal power imbalances afforded by the investments that the Chinese government, Chinese companies are putting into different African countries. And also, there is a spectrum of to what extent the relations are extractive or beneficial. But personally, I kind of feel that its net negative for the long-term prosperity or development of different African nations. So. Yeah. And then also just more personally, like direct impacts on, for example, St. Lucia, where lots of Chinese companies are buying up land in St. Lucia, and land being such a central aspect of national identity. It is quite a difficult, I don't know, paradox to hold within myself, being of St. Lucian and Chinese heritage.

Rujunko: Yeah, you know, these dynamics, geopolitical dynamics between black and Asian cultures, black and Asian countries do affect us, you know, on a personal level - or it can. And, you know, one way it affects me, and I've mentioned this before is with the Vietnam War. And you talked about, you know, some historical events in terms of black national solidarity. Well, there was a historical event in the United States around the time of the Vietnam War, and this is the Loving vs. Virginia case. And this was in 1967, it was the Supreme Court case where a white man and a black woman fought to have their interracial marriage legal in the United States, to be able to be married and be legal, because it was illegal at the time. They won their case, and not only could black and white couples legally marry, but this extended to Asian Americans as well. Right. So, you know, the civic movements for black equality, you know, extended to everyone, including Asian-Americans in the U.S. But the reason why I'm bringing this up is because my parents moved to the United States five years after that ruling. So, you know, they could they wouldn't have been able to live there otherwise.

Marie-Therese: Wow.

Rujunko: And some other significant historic black Asian civic movements that I found interesting, well one at least, was the relationship between a prominent Buddhist spiritual leader. His name is Thich Nhat Hanh. He was a Vietnamese peace activist and he had a relationship with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. So Thich Nhat Han in 1965 wrote a letter to Dr. King for his support to end the Vietnam War. Dr. King and Thich Nhat Han met in person. They had conversations and discussions

about peace and U.S. Imperialism and war. And after, Dr. King began speaking out against the Vietnam War. And he also compelled civil rights activists at the time to include Asian-Americans into the movement and to also think about how U.S. imperialism in Asian countries affect affected Asian Americans.

Marie-Therese: Yeah, I love that relationship. I wish it was more a more prominent example of political relationships between cultures. I guess it's kind of unexpected. I draw inspiration from both figures.

Rujunko: So, yeah, you know, I don't think that I would, we would even look at these civic movements or, you know, these collaborations between these prominent people from these communities, if it weren't for what's happening today with COVID and Black Lives Matter, because these issues have always been there. And this history, it's always been there, you know. But it's just become more relevant all of a sudden.

Marie-Therese: And when you say it's become relevant all of a sudden, I think in part because, and this maybe is an obvious thing to say, but that the pandemic and its anti-Asian xenophobia that it solicited or further ingrained or legitimised has only meant that whether it be Asian Americans or British Asians have understood that their status and safety under model minority is actually quite precarious and so is, I don't know what the word is, but incumbent or it is in their interest or more aligned with reality to actually participate more deeply in civil rights movements because just acknowledging that to seek stability or safety under white supremacy is never going to long term be morally or just structurally correct? And I used the word correct not in an imposing way, but you know.

Rujunko: With the model minority aspect, you know, yeah, it's interesting to think about how they're finding a sense of precarity in, you know, what used to be kind of a comfortable position. And this precarity is coming about because of, you know, white supremacy or discrimination. Discrimination, again, being diverted away from the black community or, in the past to Mexicans or to Muslims, which are just very generalised groups of people.

But in terms of, the rise of anti-Asian xenophobia especially toward East Asians, the reason why there was the model minority in the first place was because of discriminating practises. So, this goes back to a historical event of the Immigration Act of 1965. Of East Asian immigration into the US. So, the US needed specific immigrants with specific skills at the time in different areas of industry, including health care, the pharmaceutical industry and aerospace and in telecommunications. And I guess at that time, there weren't many opportunities, you know, in, I guess, in Asia for these skilled workers, and so they immigrated to the US. And with that status in the US, being a skilled worker, they had not only visa availability, but they also were able to take part in chain migration. And once their families immigrated, had well-paid jobs, were able to have access to good education for their families and more able to start at a certain level in the US infrastructure, which developed the mythology of East Asians being high achievers. Naturally good at maths and science. Having cultural values that esteemed education and discipline and hard work. And so that also attributes to, I guess, the idea of "Asian" being East Asian.

Marie-Therese: Yeah, yeah. In the US.

Rujunko: Yeah, in the US.

Marie-Therese: Because like Asian in the UK, I grew up with the understanding - well, I was an East Asian because that was the Asian I was most proximate to - but for example, if something was reported in the newspaper and the word Asian is used, it usually referring to Southeast Asian because that is the dominant Asian population in the UK.

Rujunko: Yeah, it's really interesting. Right. In terms of different countries, we talked about, oh, what black means, but black identity is different, or the perception of what black, is in different countries. And the same goes with the word Asian and what Asian means, which is obvious, I mean it's all nuanced. But these stereotypes and generalisations still persist.

Marie-Therese: Yeah. And fluctuate depending on what is politically expedient to maintain often, within West, like a white supremacist, or at least a white dominant culture, which maintains the political dominance of whiteness. Yeah, it's really interesting, I think also something that I've learnt in this time, well, that's been emphasised is that, you know, the model minority myth is detrimental and also reductive in identifying East Asians as yes, economically prosperous or of higher education, because, you know, the Hmong population is actually one of the most impoverished in the U.S. and often aren't in the discourse of just poverty alleviation. I only learnt about, yeah, that issue when I moved to the US for two years and was more proximate to these discussions, otherwise it is commonly invisible.

Rujunko: Yeah. And, you know, that community is affected disproportionately also in terms of Asian communities by the Covid pandemic with a lot of immigrants illegally in the United States, you know, and there in terms of work. But well before Covid, the Hmong community is one of the most impoverished, right. And so, the Covid pandemic has exacerbated those conditions. And so, it's even worse now, not just in terms of the economic aspect of it, but the health care aspect in terms of, you know, the rate of infection, being able to get health care to. In the US, people avoid seeking medical care because they don't have insurance. And at this point, if you're unemployed or if you're in the country illegally, you just don't have access to health care at all. So.

Marie-Therese: Yeah, yeah. That's a massive privilege that we have in the U.K.

Rujunko: Yeah, and in Australia.

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

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