Chapter 4 Transcript - Rujunko Pugh & Marie-Therese Png - A Blue Skies Conversation

Rujunko: What can our personal experiences to a catalytic change within the pandemic and the Black Lives Matter movement? I think that we can approach this by offering catalytic change in terms of how we think about ourselves, in terms of our multiplicities. And how we use how we examine our realities in different spaces and also how we approach our work. Because of our diasporic existences. Right. So, we've talked about this before about decentering whiteness. And one way that decentering whiteness for me is something that I call the Borderfree Paradox.

And it's funny because the Borderfree paradox, what that is, is - and this was before COVID- that you and I both have had legally dominant passport status, so we both have passports, at least before COVID, where we could travel to almost any country in the world. But our bodies are perceived as visually oppressed. You and I, visually, our bodies don't have that same status of being able to cross borders. Right. And we had talked about the centering and the decentering of whiteness in terms of the privilege of the passport is centred in whiteness, but then we decenter the whiteness by having that access, that passport access to these different countries and our bodies being in the different countries. And, with the perception of not necessarily belonging in those spaces, but, you know, who says that we can't travel? And, you know, it's for the world. What sets those perceptions of what should be our perceived limitations?

Marie-Therese: I like that. It's something you put a name to, something that I've been aware of for a long time. Just the, not paradox, paradoxal tension, but just a discrepancy between the privilege of my passport, just the perception of this body, which I feel each time when I go through, yeah, any border. Especially being maybe like ethnically ambiguous and then pulling out this passport and then any question being kind of dissolved by the privilege that the British passport has, which is grounded in histories of colonialism, founded in history's dominant narratives, of yeah, just continuous geopolitical advantaging, often through mechanisms of deep inequalities and geopolitical violence.

So, it's really, really interesting and I'm glad that there's now a name for it. It kind of applies, as you said, to this idea of multiplicity and a recognition of multiplicity, because I think a big part of whiteness is a collapsing of identities, including whiteness, into this one dimensional, reductive and limiting and constraining identity. Blackness in opposition to whiteness, or what one of my friends calls the flatness of blackness. The fact that blackness makes you into this one-dimensional caricature, that can be categorised and dominated and exploited and extracted from, which is what was done during slavery. And that's why I love Toni Morison's work, because it completely ignores the white gaze, it moves away from this essentialist binary that Western thought has. And then it's useful in our own identity, in recognising that we are inherently multiplicitous. So even though we may move through the world and be categorised; when we have to tick the boxes of what ethnicity we are, we can either choose black, we can either choose Asian, or because of the one drop rule, have to be seen as just black. These collapsing forces are kind of dissolved or broken apart when you recognise in your own self, and recognise in others, that we are inherently complex and multiplicitous and we have a deep heterogeneity to our existence. That's why we appreciate the exploration of Afro Asian identity, because even though often these identities are results of colonialism or militarism, Western militarism, actually we can use this position that we have in the world to exist beyond that.

Like, I love being in my different cultures and not really thinking about whiteness, or not seeking to be proximate to whiteness - just by being. And I've loved exploring that identity, even though living in the UK, and speaking English, and having lived in the US, I am still very much grounded - and cannot think of myself as separate from - Western-ness, or whiteness. But that there is so much beyond that, there are so many things and so many existences and realities beyond that. It's really amazing. And I think that's what the violence of whiteness is also. It's the destruction of alterities. You know, whether it be political systems or cultural systems or languages. We talked about the Bandung conference earlier - that's an alterity that could have been. Or, different political systems, or different political leaders like Thomas Sankara in Burkina Faso who presented an alternative political system, but who was then assassinated because of how radically different it was from, well, what Western powers wanted. And then, just so many kinds of more academic theories that summarise this multiplicity and heterogeneity. So, Arturo Escobar talks about designs for the pluriverse - instead of this idea that there is just one world, one universe, and that there are universal laws that guide it, that there is actually a large array of possibilities and existences and worlds. Summarised by the word pluriverse instead of universe. And it's kind of like a radical political proposal that was adopted by the Zapatistas and also presents this framework that can contest antiblack heteropatriarchal and capitalist modernism by putting it in its place as one possibility of many.

And there is also Deleuze and Guattari, who you mentioned whose theories are quite prominent in the art world. The ideas from one of their sub-theories or subframeworks, which have become more popular than maybe they had intended, was rhisomatic philosophy, which explores the in-between and the interstitial, kind of beyond the binary. They discuss the rhizome as "something that has no beginning and no end, is always in the middle, between things, the interbeing, the intermezzo", and also inspired one of my favourite songs by Moses Sumney called also and within that is a spoken word section that says "I insist upon my right to be multiple, even more so I insisted on the recognition of my multiplicity". And so, whether it be through music or through theory or through political leaders, or through geopolitical events, ideas that we are inherently multiplicitous and cannot be collapsed. And then through that alternative political and philosophical orientation, ways of being in the world, and ways of deconstructing the status quo, can kind of emerge from.

And another theory I'd like to mention is the third space theory by Homi Bhabha, maybe I'll put a link somewhere because my section is going on for a long time, but it kind of describes this third space where it's not just the oppressed and the oppressor, but a place where the oppressed and oppressor can come together, "embodied in their particularity" and kind of moving beyond that binary. I think an important thing to also mention, when we talk about multiplicity, it's not just the multiplicity within the human, but also in recognition that the human is also one subsection of the wider world that is possible.

So, you know, the work I do with Rhodes Must Fall - decolonised also decarbonise. Recognising that the extraction of human labour was also in tandem with the extraction of natural resources. And, you know, the Industrial Revolution, both was tied to genocide and also tied to the to the destruction of our ecological systems and that continuation into today's world. So ideas of the treatment of the black body and the Earth, and parallels between, ideas of black liberation ecologies, and beyond the anthropocentric way of seeing the world, I think are essential to the way that we think about colonisation, and think about multiplicity, and think about ways in which we are decentring whiteness or decentring other things through Afro-Asian identity.

Rujunko: Yeah, you covered a lot in terms of multiplicity, and they're all quite relative in terms of our relationship to the world, our experiences, our perceived ethnic identities, how we move through the world, in terms of philosophical aspects, and the theories that are out there, and applying them to, our realities - through literature like Toni Morrison that you mentioned, through music, through our political activism, and through our art as well. And so, for me, I process all of this through my artwork, and I use theory as well. You mentioned Deleuze and Guattari, and they have their theory of repetition and difference. I'm influenced by them, but also by Stuart Hall, and his theory of the ethnic signifier.

And looking to these particular theories, I developed this body of work that I call the Mineral Constructs. I choose images of minerals because they are these are natural resources that are extracted from developing countries by companies in rich countries. And the irony is that the precious minerals can cross borders. But the people who mined these resources can't. So that kind of alludes to the you know, what we were talking about before, about the irony of, you know, our passports and being able to pass the borders.

But looking like people who can't pass the borders. Right. And so, who can't cross over into another country. And so, with this body of work - in each image, there is this construction of two minerals that are found in different countries that do not exist together in nature. And the physical properties of the parent minerals, the physical properties - like hardness and colour lustre, are unchangeable. Now, the juxtaposition of the parent minerals, the two parent separate parent minerals, creates a composite which alters the meaning of the two originals. So, Marie-Therese, you and I can make an analogy between these mineral constructs in our black and Asian bodies, similar to the physical properties passed on by the separate parent. Minerals our black skin tones and Asian eyes from our genetic parents are unchangeable, and we carry around these racial signifiers with us wherever we go.

So, the words that describe and represent our black skin and Asian eyes come up in everyday conversations about race. And in many cultures, black and Asian have two discrete social constructs. And when put together, they generate new meanings. Now, our biological makeup doesn't change. But with each conversation, the words that represent the way we look have the possibility to shift in meaning over time. And throughout Western history. These words, these racial signifiers have been used to categorise and organise people within oppressive structures of hierarchy and power. And so interesting thing about, you know, taking these theories and these ideas is that, you know, black people, black-Asian people like ourselves navigate through these different cultural spaces and our bodies subvert the binary constructs of either/or and they challenge is such a essentialist thinking about our identities. And this perceptual disruption opens the possibility for more nuanced discussions about race and culture.

Marie-Therese: I love that. I love this body of work. I love everything that it's commenting and disentangling and dismantling and also it looks stunning.

Rujunko: Yeah. You know, I love that I can draw upon, you know, our bodies.

Marie-Therese: Yeah, making the analogy.

Rujunko: And you. Yeah. And in the end of that, you know, connection. It does bring up, I guess, you know, a way to analyse our diaspora composites and how we can use that to dismantle these

structures of racism, institutional structures, systemic structures, the generalisations of stereotypes.

Marie-Therese: It reminds me of your work, reminds me of this quote or this description from of blackness from A Billion Black Anthropocene or None by Kathryn Yusoff. And she draws on Dionne Brand's idea of diasporic subjects - she describes diasporic subjects as the ghosts of geology's epistemic and material modes of categorisation and dispossession. So just within that, this idea of geology and material, which I think reflects the work that you're exhibiting in your art. And yeah, I just really value the way in which intellectual work isn't just intellectual work, it is the expanding of political possibility and understanding of our own bodies in the world. So, I really appreciate the way you folded that into your art. I can recognise it in different things I'm reading as well.

Rujunko: Yeah, I love that. I love your reference to the geology aspect of it. That's a wonderful quote. The formation of, you know, minerals happen in some cases because of lava flows that seep through these pockets within the earth's crust. And in those spaces, that in-between space, there's heat and pressure. There's this volatile environment where the mineral is created and exists. And so, I kind of look at that as the space in which a diaspora exists, that between space, where the realities are, you know, kind of violent in some spaces. So, like, if you're a minority diaspora in a host country, situations can be quite stressful - there's a lot of tension. But in those spaces in the earth's crust, minerals do form, and these minerals can be beautiful. Arrestingly beautiful. So, the same thing can happen in these diasporic spaces. Beauty in the form of political protest, progressing the Black Lives Matter movement. Having these discussions, this is beautiful as well. [Laughter]

Marie-Therese: I think so too.

Rujunko: In terms of eliciting change, there is this aspect of decolonising through our practise and technology, my art practise, which I discussed a little bit about. And then also from your efforts, through technology and scholar activism, which I admire greatly.

Marie-Therese: I mean, I can talk about it briefly.

Rujunko: Yeah.

Marie-Therese: Yeah.

Rujunko: Yeah, please do. [Laughter]

Marie-Therese: It's nice because, you know, it kind of dovetails nicely from us talking about geology and ecology, and we both have a background in the biosciences. And that's the initial space of learning that I really loved. So, yeah, just so to start from a beginning. I've always been interested in the sciences. And then came to know early on that, you know, whether it be my interests in genetics was kind of overshadowed by the reality of eugenics, for example, or my interest in in neuroscience, was sometimes overshadowed by realities of phrenology or racialized ideas of intelligence and cognition, which are embedded in the histories of these scientific practises. And, you know, another example within the biosciences would be, you know, in gynecology, a lot of the medical...yeah, not the medical practises, what's the word, well, different methods, I guess.

Rujunko: Methodologies? Sorry.

Marie-Therese: Like methodologies, I forget the word, but were initially tested out on enslaved black women. And so, this is a huge part of the history of gynecology. It was initially experimented on without consent and violently upon black female bodies and the whole field is based on that in the same way that in stem cell research. The one of the most significant breakthroughs have been through the cells taken from Henrietta Lacks and which are called HeLa stem cells. And those were taken without consent from the body of a black woman, again, or the Tuskegee syphilis experiments which were carried out on, which was essentially an experimental study done, which disadvantaged or vitally impacted black men who weren't told that they weren't being given the treatment that they had been promised. And this whole field, I guess would be classified as biopolitics or the politics of medicine, the politics of biology, which I have been really interested in, and this has also led me to be interested in the politics of technology, or the ways in which technologies are designed and deployed and developed and experimented upon marginalised communities and disproportionately benefit those who within a society already have a privileged standing.

And so, for example, nowadays there is a focus on facial recognition or predictive policing, which is kind of the area of AI and machine learning that I'm in now, and seeing how it disproportionately impacts already disadvantaged or marginalised communities - in the US it's African-Americans and in the UK, just non-white communities who are disproportionately policed. And yes, for me, it's this thread of essentially how racism interacts with science, and also fundamental that ideas of race did come from, or were supported by, science - pseudoscientific now, but then considered solid science - that there was such a thing as significant differences between different populations that was also aligned with a justifiable hierarchy, whether it be cultural or cognitive or moral.

So that's kind of my academic background. And then the work I do nowadays, is in more the space of technology, whether it be algorithmic bias or algorithmic racism, the ways in which algorithms and algorithmic systems interact with existing systems of oppression or discrimination and dispossession. And then also more zoomed out to the more international playing field, the ways in which different private corporations deploy technologies in ways that are extractive to developing countries or, you know, use technology or ICTs to, I guess, further embed unequal dynamics between countries and between non-state actors.

And yeah that's kind of my area of research. If that makes sense. Yeah. And so I've done work with at different levels, whether it be community based or activist based organisations like Radical AI or more industry oriented work at DeepMind or more internationally oriented work at the UN, thinking about issues of digital infrastructure, who owns it, ideas of data sovereignty on a macro scale, and then the economic benefits that can come from that. And then on a more micro scale, the more, yeah, micro dynamics between policies and people, between the companies and those who benefit or don't benefit from products. So, for example, Amazon was able to like, not deliver products to specific areas because they were more impoverished than others. And when that is done through an algorithm, like with hiring practises, that's all rendered, you know, uncontestable through an algorithm because there's no human intervention when things like that happen.

So that's sort of the work that I do. And definitely enriched by the more grassroots community organising what I've done with Rhodes Must Fall and learnt more about how the limitations of academic research or like industry-based research actually tangibly translating to harms being avoided by people who are actually experiencing the harms. And so now looking more into how

you could create policies or just understand what the actual issue is within communities and tailor interventions towards that rather than like just basing on theory on your own understanding of how the world works.

Rujunko: Which is great. I think that, you know, the work that you do, makes a direct impact on how people live and the quality of their lives in the minority communities. Yeah, it's, uh, it's really interesting in terms of your relationship with technology as well. I mean, you know, black Asian woman in technology. You know, are you the only one... [Laughter].

Marie-Therese: If someone is home watching here, saying there is me as well

Rujunko: [Laughter] But no, it's rare, you know. Well, women in technology and then also minority women in technology proportional to men, and, you know, in terms of the demographic, it's a small percentage. Right? And so, your being in that space is also, you know, bringing progress, in terms of the work you do. It's really important in terms of, the aspect of technology and how technology is such an important facet in our lives. We use it every day. We use it to communicate, to get information. And we use it for, you know, like you mentioned, with Amazon to purchase things in terms of it, so it affects the economy. We use it throughout...for activism, throughout our social platforms, social media platforms. Right? And so, to understand that there is this aspect where there can be discrimination, kind of embedded racial discrimination, it's really interesting. And I'm glad that you're doing work to bring that to light. And then also what I was trying to, I ineloquently tried to explain earlier that you are not only doing the work, but you're embodying, like you're a body in that space, in that field, brings about change, progressive change, as well.

Marie-Therese: Thanks for the encouragement. And I find it interesting that amongst my peers or those who I admire in the space who are highlighting racial or other forms of discrimination within technology, it is often people of colour and also women of colour or black women who are bringing these up, so like Ria Kalluri or Abeba Birhane or Ruha Benjamin or Safiya Noble, they are all women of color. I get a lot of inspiration from them. And yeah, there is so much work being done around, I guess, for example, data sets that are disproportionately, like image data sets for faces, or facial recognition which are disproportionately Caucasian or European features. This is a problem when you are designing facial recognition software, which will then have high error rates in recognising non-European features. And someone's already either arrested or convicted based on the facial recognition software that incorrectly identified them and they were a black person, and so there are really direct impacts of developing technologies without really questioning embedded systemic issues, first and foremost. Yes. So, everything from micro to the macros, it needs to be really well-thought-out and regulated when it comes to developing these technologies, which are often seen to be more sophisticated than they actually are. Well, given more power or objectivity than they actually have, because they are still you know, they are still products of like human decision making at the end of the day.

Rujunko: Really. That's really interesting. It's in terms of the facial recognition and the bias that is coded into it by the people who code or the people who develop these programmes.

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

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