

Chapter 5 Transcript - Rujunko Pugh & Marie-Therese Png - A Blue Skies Conversation

Rujunko: Your work, and I guess, how the politicisation of technology and scholar activism and how artificial intelligence has bias coded into it and how your, what you do or what, you know, what your work entails, rather, is to point out those biases, bring them to light so people can become aware of the potential pitfalls of, I guess, structural racism kind of being, you know, integrated into these programmes. So that brings me to my work and or that brings us to to me talking about my work. And this is another body of artwork that I have developed. It's an Afro Asian alphabet, and each character is comprised of a black signifier and an Asian signifier. The black signifier is curly hair, like really tight hair curls, and the Asian signifier is a calligraphic stroke. So, the two signifiers are composite to make a new character. And when you put the two characters together, the meaning of the separate signifiers changes. I created a character for each letter in the English alphabet. And so, the code demonstrates that there is a slippage in the meaning of signifier.

Marie-Therese: I love that.

Rujunko: And it's a way for artists, this concept is a way for artist to use as a tool to dismantle racist stereotypes with meanings, if meanings can switch or change or shift? There's a fluidity to the meanings. And as we demonstrated with the mineral constructs, you know, with the racial signifiers, the racial signifiers can evolve over time.

Marie-Therese: You know, it's creating you created new tools through which we can express new tools that kind of embody integrity and grounded in reality that we can express ourselves with and play with and understand and learn and seek to embody new mindsets that I themselves inherently dismantling. Yes, of oppressive structures like I often think about the fact that, you know, my mother tongue is English, and I have this excellence and sometimes. Does wandering or grieving or just imagining what other languages I would speak or grappling with learning my paternal and maternal tongues of my parents. So, we're seeing the Afro Asian code made me so happy. You know, not even something that I can put into words. Just like I really wanted to learn this new language that's came from you and was expressive of an intersection identity that we both share and that lots of other people share too. And I hadn't seen it done before. So, thank you.

Rujunko: You're welcome. Thank you. Thank you for saying what you did because it just gave me an idea. I just created the characters for this alphabet. But there are no sounds yet for each character. Maybe there's nothing that we do. We can collaborate and make sounds.

Marie-Therese: I would love that. I would love that.

Rujunko: Then will be our own. It will be a language, our own language at that point.

Marie-Therese: Wow. Yeah. You know, I am. Yeah. I would love to. I mean I'd love to be able to learn it from you as well. Like how to do the calligraphy. I love doing calligraphy, if it's possible.

Rujunko: We can we can write each other.

Marie-Therese: I would love that.

Rujunko: Sounds like fun. That's OK. So, with this tool, this tool of dismantling racist stereotypes. I decided to look through that lens and draw from Stuart Hall's model of encoding and decoding. And so, Stuart Hall developed this theory when he was looking at media in the UK in the 80s, and he understood that the codes and the messaging in the media, you know, people everyday people would see these messages. And if they understood those messages or if not in. At any rate, they were affected by them and they would talk about them in their everyday lives and have everyday conversations about them. And at the time, in the eighties, there was, it was during the Thatcher years. And from what I understand, right. There was like criminalisation of the black body of blackness. There was a lot of racist rhetoric in terms of the black, of blackness. And so. And then that relates to what Stuart Hall was saying. You know, these messages are encoded in the news broadcasts in, you know, in newspapers and in just media that it's, you know, in the coming from the television sets in everyone's households. It's going to affect the way people talk about racism and about race. It will affect their attitudes and their ideology, their politics.

And so that something similar is happening here in or not here, but in the United States. President Trump is currently conducting rallies. They had the Republican National Convention last night. And I think it's going to happen for another couple of nights. And. Trump, his administration and then all of the politicians and political actors that are associated with him have this national stage. It's not just national, but it's international. And he has. Trump has used his platform to recycle the racist dog whistles in his messaging. And so, when Kamala Harris, Kamala Harris was announced as the vice-presidential candidate, there were words to describe her immediately in the media. She was described as mean and as a bully to reinforce the angry black woman trope. And in the 70s and 80s, Ronald Reagan ran for governor and president. And he also portrayed black women in a certain light. He described them as welfare queens. You know. Collecting government assistance and buying luxury items living a luxury life at the expense of the hardworking white taxpayer. He also described black women as over sexualised. He described black men as violent. big black bucks. So, this is just very dehumanising, racist rhetoric.

And, Trump has also used the slogan Law and Order, which he said in reaction to actually tweeted it in reaction to Black Lives Matter protesters to criminalise Black Lives Matter protesters. Richard Nixon used that slogan, the same exact slogan in 68 to comment on aggressive policing in black communities to satisfy or to address white voters that believed in segregation. There is also Bill Clinton who had a slogan which had the same type of meaning, and he was his slogan was Tough on Crime. And he meant tough on crime in black communities and poor communities. And around the same time, his wife, Hillary, Hillary Clinton used the term "superpredator" to describe black youth who committed crimes. And then the last one that I'll mention is what Trump said recently. He said that there would be an invasion in the suburbs if Biden and Harris were to win this election, if Trump wasn't re-elected, and he was appealing to white housewives, that the suburbs would be invaded. And he's alluding to, you know, the black community. And so, you have these racist stereotypes that are being reinforced in the media, reinforced in a campaign for the president of the United States, which is arguably at this point the most powerful position in the free world.

And I have to mention before I forget the anti-Asian xenophobic rhetoric that is also being amplified. Trump and his administration have made the Chinese U.S. relationship a political campaign platform. And he has said different racist coronavirus labels such as Chinese virus, Kung flu, Wuhan virus, the Chinese plague. And when he, when Trump started using these descriptive, descriptive words, the anti-Asian xenophobia abuse, jokes, racist slurs toward Asian Americans

increased in the United States. And in fact, I think I mentioned earlier the you know, we get the news here in Australia. They watch the news, political news, political events, especially Trump, very closely. And there has been a history of racism toward the Chinese community here. And the racist abuse in public has increased here as well.

So, keeping that in mind in terms of how the media affects. The everyday conversations of people, the everyday attitudes, the perceptions and ideas in terms of race. I want to come back to the Afro Asian alphabet. So, I encode each character with the letter of the English alphabet to shift away the racist meaning and a nonracist meaning. The letter of the alphabet is decoded by the observer. So, this dismantles the stereotypes associated with the racial signifiers. Right. Deep constructs of race can be developed and also deconstructed in a sense. But also, for me, it's a personal way for me to express my grief, to process the, you know, the atrocities that are happening, especially relating to the Black Lives Matter movement. So, when George Floyd was killed, it was something that affected me greatly. And I uploaded it into my font library, and I used it to type out, "I can't breathe." And, you know, it's something that helps me process but also helps me in a way, in my mind, understand that, you know, these events are happening today. And, you know, they filled me with great sadness and hopelessness, but with the tools that we have, the way we, you know, with this discussion, even the way you and I, MT, talk about these issues and we are in the position to come up with potential solutions that could lead to a more positive and more equitable and more just futures.

And so, it you know, this code of personally for me brings me a bit of solace and a bit of hope. It also helps me look at literature that African-American literature in a different light. There have been African American authors in the past that have written things where the vocabulary that they've created has allowed us to talk about and speak about and articulate these concepts in terms of African diaspora, the diaspora condition of the diaspora composite in in very complex ways. And so, I translate quotes with the Afro Asian Alphabet, and there's this one quote by Frantz Fanon and the quote is, describes the diaspora condition. And it reads, ...and the result will be individuals without an anchor, without a horizon, colourless, stateless, rootless, a race of angels." And so, yeah, the Afro Asian Alphabet is something that I need to send to you, I need to send the font library to you, MT and we can send each other emails.

Marie-Therese: I would adore that. And just you reading out this Fanon quote, I'm starting to understand which letters are which and, yeah, starting to learn it just by observing. I've loved, yeah, just a description of your process of developing both the philosophy and the intention behind it. I love also that, because hair was code like status and belonging and culture and stories were encoded into people's hair. And I love that aspect of it as well. And just the overlapping of calligraphy across both of your heritages on Asian sides as well. I love that, too.

Rujunko: And it's the signifiers of hair and the calligraphic strokes are essentialist signifiers in a way, because curly hair is something that can, you know, be very identifiable in terms of Afro, African phenotype, but it's not specific to. Right. It's the same with the Asian calligraphic script in terms of East Asian script or writing. You have that type of style, but there are other parts of Asia that, you know, it's not specific to. So, yeah, it's just it was really interesting to look at the representations and how there are nuances and those nuances are as essentialised, I guess, in like the Western kind of idea of what is black and what Asian.

Marie-Therese: [*Inaudible*]

Rujunko: I think that you and I are going to have a lot of fun with it.

Marie-Therese: So, I'm excited about that.

Rujunko: We're at a point where I think I alluded a bit to the future, about what type of future we can imagine will unfold informed by our Afro Asian identities.

Marie-Therese: Yeah, what futures can we write into reality? Even with the Afro Asian code - that's one thing that comes to mind. But yeah, I love this section. Yeah. Imagined futures informed by Afro Asian identity.

Rujunko Yeah, I like this section, too. Would you like to share with me your ideas?

Marie-Therese: Imagined futures, I mean, I guess it's very broad strokes of what I would like to see in the future and what I kind of orient myself towards with my work and you describe my work so well earlier on. I'm going to re-watch that and summarize. But I'm kind of making visible power dynamics or ways in which harm is being enacted in order for communities and individuals or activists to causally intervene and also seek to redistribute that power, and dismantle harmful structures is something that I would love to see even more of. I'd love to see... Well, I imagine there to be a world in which multiverses and pluriverses can exist and people can be in their multiplicity and not be flattened or reduced by the gaze of power that seeks to reduce and compress in order to control and categorise. I love this idea of, you know, paradox - and actually I heard this somewhere and I wish I could attribute - but that actually it is at the tensions of the paradoxes from which life and vitality can emerge. And that's something that resonates a lot with me.

What else? I'd love to see on a geopolitical level. And it's definitely just in my imagination. I don't see, at least for now, that given international relations that it is possible now, but some sort of Bandung kind of decolonial conference happening between different communities or nations. What else? Oh, yeah. And just like on a community-based level or on a personal level, just, you know, the ability to process trauma and grief and understand our intergenerational inheritance of both trauma but resilience and resistance and listening to what that inheritance is from our ancestors. And, yeah, this process of healing and of developing beloved community. And I feel like that's what we've been able to do. Just two of us for now and definitely more to come. And definitely sitting in our Afro Asian identity and understanding it as a radicaliser, I think has oriented us both politically and philosophically and just definitely digging deeper into that, especially the way that it decenters whiteness and also creates or primes us for transnational solidarity across time, space and people and different causes.

And. What else? I wrote down, not relying on hegemonic structures to define us. I think I already said that in terms of maneuvering away from or being fugitive from the flattening of power structures, but just re-emphasising that and yeah, reclaiming cultural inheritance and accepting the torch from our ancestors and understanding that. I really like the saying like that I heard Oprah Winfrey and Maya Angelou say in a really wonderful discussion that I listen to sometimes - "I come as one but I stand as ten thousand" which I find so amazing. Yeah.

Rujunko: That's beautiful. Yeah. I really love that aspect of the flattening of blackness and us just expanding that, reversing that process, you know. And you mentioned something else in terms of hegemonic structures. And I think that was with the blackness thing. Oh my gosh, I can't

remember, but yeah. Sorry. Everything that you said was just wonderful in terms of the intergenerational aspect as well. And then the last quote that you mentioned, there were so many people before us that have fought for equal rights, who fought for dignity and respect, who have been movers and shakers in terms of, you know, workers' rights and academics. And, you know, for us to be able to be in the world that we are today, for people like Barack Obama and Kamala Harris to, you know, be in the positions they are to be able to influence the world, just, you know, not just by policymaking, but just their bodies being in those positions.

And so, for me, the imagined futures and how my perspective has informed what I envision the imagined futures to be. It has a lot to do for me with policymaking and developing a language. You know, the development of and the continuation of the development of language should talk about aspects of race. And I think that's just so important. So, you introduced Margo Okazawa Rey to me, and she is a Japanese American sociologist, but she's half African-American and half Japanese. And she's in her 70s now, but she was born in Japan and spent the first 10 years of her life there and moved to the United States at 10. But because of her experiences of being of diaspora and also of her Afro Asian-ness, she has spent her life devoted to, or her research is devoted to rather, anti-militarism and then how it affects women and migrants that live around those areas. And so, one thing that I love that she talks about is developing a language. And that's where I got the part of the idea from to talk about these things. Right.

And so, there are different political activists and writers, health care providers in the world that are in the process of continuing to build that foundation of language. And so, you have author Ibrahim X Kendi who's at Boston University. And he wrote a book that was published this year, I believe, titled *How to Be an Anti-racist*. And he does a really good job of creating, developing terminology to categorise, you know, like anti-racism, assimilation, race, racist or anti-black descriptions, I guess. Does that make sense? So, he very simply, you know, creates a structure for racism and it's very accessible. He's at Boston University and he's in charge of or he's the head of the anti-racist research and policymaking department, which is amazing in itself. And then his department also is tracking COVID infection rates amongst minority communities, which there's not a component of that in the CDC at the moment.

Another person I want to mention is Carolyn Randall Williams, and she's a poet. And she just published an opinion piece, an article in *The New York Times*. And it is titled 'I believe You Want a Confederate Monument, My body is a Confederate Monument.' And in that article, she describes her skin as raped coloured skin. And so, this was happening, or she wrote this in reaction to, the pushback of the racist monuments, Confederate monuments in the United States being taken down. And she, you know, visually described that there are walking monuments of Confederacy everywhere you look. So, I thought that was quite beautiful in terms of being able to talk and for people to, you know, for it to be illustrated in that sense. In terms of vocabulary, again, at the American Medical Association, this year has announced that racism is a health care issue. It's a health care issue because it affects the type of care that people of colour or black and brown people, people who are affected by racism. It affects the type of health care that they receive. So, yeah. Providing the vocabulary, it is important to be able to talk about these ideas and to, you know, just take it further.

But my favourite part of *Imagining Futures* is a future that I've had a glimpse of already. That's actually already manifested. And it is with the Bernie Sanders campaign in terms of politics. So, this is with this election cycle. Bernie Sanders had a bunch of surrogates who spoke for him if he could not attend a campaign rally. They spoke in his place and he selected people from many

different nationalities or not nationalities because there are all American but many different ethnicities, religious with religious, different religious backgrounds. So, Cornel West was one, a rap artist named Killer Mike. He's part of Run the Jewels. Nina Turner, who's an African-American, she used to be a senator. And she's unapologetically black. One of the owners from Ben and Jerry's was a surrogate, Michael Moore, Ro Khanna, who is an Indian American or Indian, Southeast Asian Indian or South Asian, sorry, American. And he's a senator at the moment. And I'm trying to think of who else - did I mention? Michael Moore?

Marie-Therese: You mentioned Killer Mike.

Rujunko: Killer Mike. Ilhan Omar has spoken at his rallies. So, yeah, I just thought it was wonderful because it was a representation of what I think the presidential administration should look like, because you have people representing people, what the actual people, the constituents, you know, and the representatives actually look like the constituents, then the policymaking that follows will probably be just policymaking. So, yeah, I think that's how I see, or how I would like to see my imagined future.

And in terms of intergenerational inheritance, it's for me, it's like accepting the torch from the past of all of the people who have fought for civil rights and equality and justice, who demand dignity in the face of a great, great, you know, adversarial odds, violent, deadly odds. Accepting that torch and then doing what I can with it here in the present with the community that we're building and handing it to future generations.

I love that beautiful imagery, and I'm and I'm excited. You know, some it's so easy to feel very hopeless and unimaginative and too tired to imagine what it is. Yeah, I remember something that you mentioned Cornel West, and I don't know if it was from him or if he was quoting James Baldwin, but he said something along the lines of you is not enough to hope, you have to be the hope, hope is action in the same way that love is action to take action. Yeah. So, yeah, the torch bearing from ancestors to present to those who are coming. This is really important and feels like that there is energy to be able to imagine with. And you named so many incredible people. And in terms of talking about future generations, there's a really incredible, something I've not seen before in my lifetime or been aware of, at least. In the UK, despite the fact that there are such low levels of racial literacy in this country is politically in the mainstream.

There's a black, free university that it's being founded by someone called, Melz Owuzu, a black trans man. And I've not seen we're not imagined that it would be like an education establishment that was specifically for black critical political education. So, I'm excited to see what does. I am, I'd love to see that sort of work expanded for black and brown people in general in this country and see what happens from that, because a lot of this has to do with. Yeah. Not only feelings of the helplessness that comes from lack of knowledge, but also. Yeah. Like there needs to be more forums in this country, in the UK at least for a collective conversation that is focused on the lives of black and brown people. And like an energising look, like things can change. And it's not always just survival. It's also seeking to deconstruct and be less polite and get into good, troubled trouble.

Rujunko: Get into good trouble, that's right.

Marie-Therese: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah.

Rujunko: Rest in peace, John Lewis. And you mentioned also our brother, Dr. Cornel West, two men that definitely bring energy and. And. Yeah, I agree. I agree with racial literacy. I think it's important in Australia could use, you know, racial literacy as well and for more discussions. There are lots of discussions here, but it's not as developed. There's a lot of pushback, as we've mentioned earlier in our discussion. So. But, yeah, and you bring me energy, too. You bring me you give me energy, the energy to talk about this stuff. So, I appreciate that. And I appreciate you. And I appreciate this discussion.

Marie-Therese: Yeah. Yeah, me too. The same the same feelings. The same exact feelings. I feel the exact same feelings and I'm really grateful so to, yeah, for this opportunity to have this conversation and that it's one of many. And I'm looking forward to just talking with you being and with other people and I'm very excited. I do feel energised, always travelling between pessimistic and optimistic.

Rujunko: Yeah, I like that. You know, I am pretty pessimistic, too. I have like this always this air of irony sometimes that I can't shake. You know, and when we have our discussions, the irony subsides, the optimism, you know, it's seeps in and gets absorbed. And it's a good thing. And that's I guess that's the wonderful thing about community and having discussions like this. And so, you know, thank you to the International Curators Forum and thank you to Adelaide and Jessica for giving us the opportunity - or being the catalyst, really the catalyst for us to have this inaugural discussion. This is the first of many.

Marie-Therese: Yes. Thank you so much. Adelaide, Jessica and everyone at ICF. I think it can't be underestimated how much joy and how much potential that has been sparked here.

Rujunko: Yes, thank you. And yeah, this was great, MT.

Marie-Therese: Yeah. I really enjoy this completely. I can't believe that we did this.

Rujunko: We did it!

Marie-Therese: Yay!

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

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