Liberation and Contagion in the Music of MIA (with Ronak Kapadia)

[opening music]

00:21 **Juan Llamas-Rodriguez**: Welcome to the Global Media Cultures podcast. I am your host, Juan Llamas-Rodriguez. Today, we're discussing alliance and resistance through sound and the music of MIA. Our guest is Dr. Ronak Kapadia. He's Associate Professor and Director of Graduate Studies in Gender and Women's Studies at the University of Illinois in Chicago, where he is also affiliated faculty in Art History, Global Asian Studies, and Museum and Exhibition Studies. He's an interdisciplinary queer cultural theorist of race, war, security and empire in the late 20th and early 21th century United States. His research is guided by the historical, materialist, and anti-racist thought of Black, Indigenous and third world Marxist feminists and queers and trans people of color. He is the author of *Insurgent Aesthetics: Security and the Queer Life of the Forever War*, published by Duke University Press in 2019, and is at work on a new book about the critical potential of healing justice movements across multiple transnational sites of security, terror, and war, titled *Breathing in the Brown Queer Commons*. He lives and works in Chicago. Ronak, welcome to the Global Media Cultures podcast.

01:35 **Ronak Kapadia**: Thank you very much, Juan. I'm happy to be here.

01:37 **JLR**: I wanna start by asking you about these research interests. What got you excited in them? Why does this topic interest you? Why is it an important area for us to study?

01:48 **RK**: So I would say that all of my scholarship is guided by the idea that contemporary visual and multimedia and expressive culture and art radically transform how we experience and interpret the world, and can uncover intimate forms of feeling and sensation and evidence of state violence that have been repressed by dominant geo-political or military perspectives. So my primary research is motivated by the problem of security, security both as a political tool, constitutive to the genesis of the modern US nation-state and its settler colonial institutions, as well as security as a kind of collective affective state, experienced by racialized and gendered populations who

differentially experienced the brunt of state violence in the name of so-called state security.

02:35 **RK**: And so throughout, I'm inspired by how critical ethnic studies, Asian-American criticism, especially amplified by intersectional feminism and queer of color critique, are crucial to the study of our overlapping contemporary crises, including racist police violence, mass deportations, foreign wars, ecological chaos. And I try to engage these questions in my first book, which was published last year that you mentioned, *Insurgent Aesthetics*. And broadly, this book is about how contemporary visual and performance artists from the Arab, Muslim and South Asian diasporas have contested the violent projects of US empire and the recent global war on terror in the greater Middle East through their art making. So it explores the radical experiments, freedom dreams, and world-making potential of contemporary art and aesthetics in the ongoing context of US war and empire.

03:22 **RK**: And so this piece, this piece about MIA, "Sonic Contagions," was the earliest germination of a lot of that thinking. And one of the major goals of my work is that I'm trying to say that I wanna offer not only a diagnosis of how neoliberal security and permanent war have constrained the dominant life worlds, and accelerated human suffering for people all over the world via the atrocities of war and displacement. But that these artworks also elucidate how we can sense otherwise, how we can offer these kinds of more disobedient and arresting ways of being in the world. And I think that's precisely what MIA is offering us.

04:03 **JLR**: Great. So the article we're discussing today is called "Sonic Contagions: Bird Flu, Bandung, and the Queer Cartographies of MIA." It was published in the *Journal of Popular Music Studies*, Volume 26, in 2014. Can you give us a brief history of how the essay began or the ideas for it, and how did it change in the process of you writing it?

04:26 **RK**: So, as I mentioned, this is the first peer-reviewed journal article I ever wrote and published. And while it finally came out in the summer of 2014, it was first drafted as a seminar paper in my second year of graduate school in the spring of 2008 in a critical race theory seminar taught by my late mentor, José Esteban Muñoz. And so, many iterations and revisions ensued as you can imagine, lots of revisions on that earliest work, and I was informed by post-colonial queer and feminist criticisms and their re-appropriations of the global decolonization struggles of the mid-20th century, including in the work of my other mentor, Gayatri Gopinath, who's recently published a

book about this work that she has called *Unruly Visions*. And the moment of graduate school that I was in was about the transnational turn in American studies, trying to think about the US in the world, trying to develop a more robust engagement with women of color, post-colonial feminists, and queer of color critique. It was also shortly after the 50th anniversary of the Bandung conference in Indonesia, which I talk about in the article.

05:30 **RK**: And so this was a moment of thinking about comparison and relationality. So the idea of comparative ethnic studies, the idea of critical ethnic studies, all the stuff around minor transnationalisms, around South-South exchange, around being what Lisa Lowe calls the "intimacies of four continents." That was really very much at the forefront of my graduate experience. And so that's the context in which this article around MIA was written, and it's also because I had a long-standing interest in thinking about South Asian diasporic culture and cultural production, and so I was searching for interesting instances of that. By now, of course, sound studies, comparative ethnic studies, empire studies, all of these fields are quite vast formations and much has changed in the last decade plus since I first wrote this article. So it's exciting to sort of think about it and reflect back on that moment.

06:22 **JLR**: For sure. And so the artist that you focus on is specifically MIA and all of these questions that you're bringing in, you map onto not only her work, but almost specifically this work on Bird Flu. Can we begin with a brief intro into your interest in MIA? Why was she a fascinating or interesting artist to think through these issues with?

06:47 **RK**: Yeah. So a little bit about MIA, maybe some background. So MIA, Missing In Action... Her actual name is Mathangi Maya Arulpragasam. She was born in London to Sri Lankan Tamil parents, and then quickly moved to Jaffna in northern Sri Lanka when she was six months old. And she spent the first decade of her life marked by the kind of displacement caused by the Sri Lankan civil war, which was a three-decades-long struggle between the dominant Sinhalese Buddhist majority in Sri Lanka and the ethnic Tamil-Hindu minority in Sri Lanka. And so that brutal civil war was eventually officially ended in 2009, but the struggle for sovereignty, for Tamil independence continues to this day.

07:34 **RK**: And so MIA is interesting in the sense that she's this British South Asian figure, Sri Lankan figure. She's a refugee, multiply displaced, first to southern India, and then to the UK, and then displaced again to the United States. She's somebody who first burst on the scene as a visual artist and musician in the era of MySpace in the

mid-2000s, and so those early works were characterized by all of this incredible visual efflorescence. Her early album art was just cotton candy glam and colorful, and I remember, when I was first living in New York around the time of graduate school in the mid-2000s, seeing her perform in Central Park and be like, "Wow. Who is this brown fem figure who is mixing hip-hop and chutney and soca and rap, and all of these sort of musical traditions simultaneously?"

[music: clip from “Galang” (2005)]

08:50 **RK**: So she was an outlier, and she's absolutely an outlier both for American hip-hop and rap, an outlier in the context of British Asian music in particular, which has a rich tradition and something sort of unpack. And then what was interesting to me to think through, like here's this Sri Lankan Tamil... The other thing to know about Sri Lankan Tamils is that about a third of Sri Lankan Tamils live outside of Sri Lanka. So the diaspora in North America is extraordinarily robust and rich, and there's a lot of important political organizing and artistic work that happens within the Sri Lankan diaspora, but what's particularly interesting is that in the context of South Asian diaspora studies, India usually is the hegemon, so we really think about India as the stand-in for South Asia. And one of the things I wanted to do in this article was to say, "Can we think South Asia through Sri Lanka? Can we displace the hegemonic presence of India and actually think about these more peripheral sites within the region, and then their diasporic formations?"

09:50 **RK**: And of course, all the stuff around Tamil militancy, and her father's complicated and vexed relationship to the LTTE, which is the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, and all of those sort of patrilineal links to militant sub-national resistance movements was also interesting to me because this was the moment in which we were living through the Bush “War on Terror” in the United States, and the discourse of terrorism was starting to permutate in interesting ways. And usually when we talk about terrorism in the United States in this moment, it's about Islamic terrorism. It's not about the kinds of ‘terrorism of non-state actors,’ who fall outside of that narrative. And certainly in the context of the LTTE in Sri Lanka, that's another trajectory in which to understand terrorism. And so part of why MIA is fascinating in that moment is that she emerges, she's talking about a kind of terrorist chic energy and insurgency rebellion, but she's relying on a conflation between these different discourses in ways that I wanted to tease out and unpack in the context of this essay.

11:00 **JLR**: In the article, you refer to this relationship with her father's association with Tamil resistance, right? But in talking about MIA, you frame it as a fraught, ever-changing aesthetic relation to Tamil resistance. So what do you see with the potentials and the pitfalls of her sort of evoking this radical resistance in her music?

11:26 **RK**: Yeah. So what I said in the essay is that the artist production team had clearly made a lot out of these kinds of alleged links to militants resistance groups, including the LTTE through the father, and Missing In Action is a reference to that in the first place. But I think that her work expresses this profoundly contradictory way in which diasporic culture producers participate in radical resistance movements in the Global South that by definition exceed the strict confines of the nation-state. So we have all of this scholarship now that has documented the centrality of diasporic affects and affiliations and organizing to the success of multiple mid-century independence movements and wars of operation across the so-called darker nations. So everything from the Ghadar Party in the South Asian context, the Ghadar Party, which was based in San Francisco and on the West Coast of the United States, that was formative for Indian independent struggles in the 1940s, to the way that Black freedom movements have had a global dimension, and Black folks in the United States have been crucial to various solidarity struggles across, around the Third World region.

12:43 **RK**: So I think part of what I wanted to understand is how does MIA's very popular celebrity fit in relationship to that longer, older history of the mid-20th century struggle? And so I also wanted to say, "Can we include the case for the liberation of Tamil Eelam, even though sovereignty had remained suspended and it's still foreclosed to this day?" So the Tamil people in Sri Lanka are not yet free. So I wanted to bracket all of the questions around the violence of the LTTE as this militant sub-nationalist group. I wasn't trying to advocate a pre-critical alliance between MIA and that complex freedom movement, which certainly lots of books have been written about, but I was trying to get at the way that there is this romantic evocation of radical resistance struggles in the Global South by diasporic and refugee subjects, and that that is something worth paying attention to and thinking about it.

13:41 **RK**: And I call it a romantic evocation because I think even a cursory look at her body of work would reveal that there's nothing intrinsically radical or critically left about her affective politics. And she's also come under a lot of controversy and critique from Sri Lankan Tamils in the diaspora in North America who take issue with her calling herself the so-called unequivocal Western spokesperson for the Tamil humanitarian crisis of Sri Lanka. She's really had a lot of frank and at times sort of untidy or sordid

commentaries on the political terrain of her homeland in ways that have infuriated international human rights activists and government officials alike. And so she... And I think it speaks to the fact that there are very few Sri Lankans in the public arena in the west, and there's very limited space for discourse around these questions around Tamil insurgency or even the complexities of Sri Lanka's history. And so I think that MIA is doing this strange thing where she has to walk a fine line between trying to exercise her global platform as a politically informed creative person, and being an advocate for her native country and for Tamil people, but also simultaneously profiting off of a kind of provocateur, sound-bitten, generic rebel outsider appeal.

15:07 **RK**: And so I think that contradiction is interesting, and it's partly why turning to cultural production is so useful, because we can mine those contradictions and tease them out and see and think about even the failure of her critical potentiality as a spokesperson is interesting for us to pay attention to because it speaks to the limited and constrained ways in which in particular, brown, femme, diasporic women get to enter into the public arena.

15:35 **JLR**: Yeah, for sure. So the key concept that you introduce in this article is what you call queer cartographies. Could you explain to us where this concept comes from? What do you see as its significance? Who are you drawing from? Which fields have inspired your thinking there?

15:55 **RK**: So what I say in the essay is that queer cartographies is a theoretical strategy, so it's a reading practice to identify intimacies that connect differently racialized populations across disparate affective sites. So in other words, queer cartographies is a kind of method to do what post-colonial feminist scholar Ella Shohat has diagnosed, or to address what she's diagnosed as "disciplinary and conceptual boundaries that continue to quarantine interconnected fields of inquiry, and instead, to place together often ghettoized histories, geographies and discourses into politically and epistemologically synergetic relation." That's the quote from Shohat that I really love. Putting these things that seem like they don't belong together in conversation and then rubbing them up against each other and seeing what emerges, right? And so part of what I'm doing with queer cartographies is I'm asking what kinds of relational maps of knowledge we need in order to illuminate and make audible these creative interventions that networks of diasporic culture producers have produced within and across national boundaries.

17:02 **RK**: And so the idea behind it, undergirding the notion of queer cartographies is that we should, instead of having these kinds of food groups, of these silos, where we, in ethnic studies in particular, where we have Black Studies over there, and Native studies over here, and Latinx studies and Asian-American Studies, and we think of those as disparate subjects, right? We should instead build scholarly models, methods and frameworks that speak to the way that the world is lived and the kind of relational intimacy across both spatial sites, but also temporal sites as well, Without flattening out the historical or geographical specificity of their contexts. So part of what I'm trying to do with queer cartographies is say that this is about prioritizing an inquiry into cross-racial affiliations and trans-colonial connectivities produced in a time of war, because war produces these unlikely kinds of intimacies as well. And so the scholarship behind this, there's two dynamic strands, I would say, of interdisciplinary scholarship behind queer cartographies. The first is all of the immersion work in post-national interregional, transnational, and oceanic studies that has displaced the modern-nation-state as the primary conceptual apparatus through which to look at the world, right? That's the one... So thinking about circuits of movement and intimacies within, beyond, and below nation-states.

18:27 **RK**: The second idea of queer cartographies is the work in affect studies, which is about prioritizing relational or alternative modes of thinking about how people are connected in the world. So rather than the idea of identity and identity politics, the idea of affect is a little bit looser, and it's about structures of feeling that connect seemingly disparate people together, and that's precisely what I'm trying to get at with the concept of Bird Flu feelings, which also appears in the essay. So queer cartographies is the kind of reading practice and method through which I tried to follow MIA as she moves through time and space, as she catches different kinds of sensibilities, different sounds, different communities, and brings that together in the space of the audio-topic realm of sound in her work.

19:16 **JLR**: Right. And it's interesting because on the one hand, you're developing a method for how to trace the movements, the circulations of the sounds that MIA is pulling from, the way her own music is moving around the world and connecting these different, let's say publics, and mapping the different affective connections across groups, but place remains an interesting aspect too and an important aspect to the kind of work that she's doing. And in the case of the Bird Flu video, there's the... Using the location of the Tamil Nadu fishing town is in itself significant, and as you also think through Oceanic Studies, thinking about the Indian Ocean Rim as a way to think

differently than the nation-state. Can you talk to us more about that? About thinking also about the importance of place and how that factors into your analysis too?

20:11 **RK**: This is so important because otherwise, I think queer cartographies loses any of it's tethering or groundedness. So how do you bring concrete material essence to a concept mapping, like queer cartographies? One of the ways I try to do that is by looking at the music video and trying to read every aspect of the music video. And so in interviews, I learned that the site of the video itself, in Southern India, was not far from the Tamil refugee camps in Chennai where MIA and her family once lived, and many people have trafficked through. And I mention that in order to underscore the material proximities of the kind of affective worlds that I'm discursively conjoining in the context of the essay, but that MIA is doing as well through her music. So the thing about this site in Chennai, this fishing village, partly why I spend so much time in the essay talking about it is because this region experienced the devastating effects of the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami, which was the deadliest tsunami on record. And as a lot of scholars and activists and humanitarians have demonstrated, that tsunami crisis exposed the deep connections between the diverse peoples of the Indian Ocean Rim.

21:31 **RK**: There was this massive displacement of ocean water triggered by a magnitude 9.2 earthquake off the Northern Coast of Sumatra, it killed more than a quarter million people, and it destroyed the livelihoods of untold more across Indonesia, Sri Lanka, India, Thailand, Somalia, Maldives, Malaysia, Burma, Tanzania, Bangladesh, Kenya. All these places that we don't necessarily think of as being connected necessarily, right? But part of what's so compelling about thinking about the Indian Ocean Rim is that there is a centuries-long history of trade, and traffic, and contact of people, and goods, and commodities, and ideas across this region. It's an interregional arena, as Sugata Bose the historian puts it, that speaks both to the kind of shared risks and shared futures of different communities that are brought together by the furious power of the natural world. And so I think it's curious that MIA would select this particularly laden site to record Bird Flu, because it offers us this port of entry into theorizing the sustained conditions of both mutual vulnerability and interregional intimacy for diverse populations that are conjoined by the furious power of the natural world.

22:49 **RK**: And I think this is very much in keeping in lock-step with recent work in post-colonial and feminist and queer scholarship that has brought renewed attention to maritime spaces, to oceanic spaces as allegories for highly unstable confluences of race, and nationality, and class, and sexuality, and gender as a kind of dense

borderland site with cross-currents that transmit historical consciousness across space and time. The notion of borderlands, of course, comes through in the work of scholarship by Paul Gilroy and Gloria Anzaldua in the '90s, to a whole range of new scholars in the 21st century, who've taken up that question, to think about the unique perils and possibilities of ocean water. So part of what I'm trying to say is that, isn't it interesting that MIA has released her present-day Bird Flu sound in those affective worlds that are both ancient and futurial? And the idea of interregional intimacy is not something just about the past, but it's about other ways of being connected in the world in the future.

23:52 **JLR**: Yeah. And these Bird Flu sounds, Bird Flu feelings also do another sort of displacement. So, one-hand, as you mentioned, when you're thinking about South-Asian context, it's usually India that is the hegemon, and you're to move away from that to also think about Sri Lanka. And then in... In thinking about place, there's this focus on land, but moving to the ocean as this unstable borderland is also a way to displace that. But then in thinking about Bird Flu feelings, you're focusing on sound. And so what does focusing on sound do for also thinking about ways to contradict the scopic or ways to think differently about this as you're doing in this article?

24:37 **RK**: Yeah, this is really funny 'cause this was a moment in grad school, I was very deep into sensory studies and sound studies, which was still rather emergent at the moment, and I was really trying to displace the primacy of the visual, and then of course, I went on to write a book about visual culture and visual arts and completely dumped the conversation around sound and MIA for the book. But I think part of what I was trying to get at early on was, can we think about the unique role that sound plays in evoking affective bonds and alternative relational maps that MIA is clearly listening to and making audible in her music?

25:12 **RK**: Sound and music we know plays an extraordinarily important role in radical resistance movements, and global decolonization struggles, and the ways of thinking about transnational solidarities, but that she seems particularly attuned to the uncommon sonic culture that she was creating. And so I thought, "You know what, we need to bracket the visual analysis and develop a kind of sonic analysis." And part of the idea there was also that we could actually get better conceptual clarity about what MIA was doing, why she was particularly contradictory and provocative, if we isolated sound and other modes of affective transmission that circumvent the visual field, that might even contradict the scopic altogether, as you noted. And so part of what I'm saying here is that turning a critical ear to MIA's music... I wanna argue that the sonic

landscapes that she traverses allows us to locate affective signatures of several trans-colonial solidarities left in her wake that we wouldn't get otherwise, and that the visual often is a stand-in that distracts us from some of these other modes of connection and connectivity.

26:18 **JLR**: Yeah, for sure. I think one of the things I like to do in opening a conversation about MIA is, especially with students who have only now first encountered their work, is ask them, "What does this sound to you like, or who does she remind you of? Or what are some connections?" And in the activity, most often than not, it's like different students will latch on to different sounds, or will make connections with other artists that they know, and that's part of what I found so fascinating in that work is she is drawing these connections. And by drawing the connections, it means that wherever you're coming from, you are latching on to some of those aspects, right?

26:57 **RK**: Yeah. And we always think of music as syncretic, all music is syncretic, it's all about collaboration, it's about bringing the very rich traditions in conversation with each other. So the idea of borderlands and music, there's nothing particularly novel about... MIA is not the first person to be doing this kind of thing. But then when you first hear her work too, it's really cacophonous, there's so much clashing of sound. And I think for a lot of people, people who don't like listening to MIA for example, I've tried sharing this with my siblings and friends around the time when I was writing this article, were like, "Yeah, I can't. I can't get with that. I can't get with her music, I'm not down for it. It feels like a headache," right? It's because there's a kind of frenetic quality to her work.

[music: clip from “Bird Flu” (2007)]

28:08 **RK**: What I wanted to do was sort of slow that down and slow down the beat and prioritize a kind of active listening, and think about my own sensory state in relationship to this kind of soundings that she was trying to produce, and then do the backstory to figure out what the research of like, "Why did she dub and record certain songs in the Caribbean versus South Asia versus the United States? What that, her own complicated queer cartography was mapped on to the music?" And so some of that was accidental, some of that was certainly intentional, and I think that's partly what sound studies offers us, and of course, the field of sound studies is huge at this point, but I think another important thing that it offers us, even for those of us who don't write about music or sound, is that it moves the theoretical optic from issues

about representation and signification to perception and affects, to actually prioritize even biological processes of the body in the act of listening.

29:12 **RK**: And to remind us that sound analysis elicits not just representational demands of she is this South Asian diasporic subject and this is what she looks like, and this is what she's offering, but that it also produces physiological questions about the affects of the diverse soundings on the listening agent. And so it's a reminder that there's always a listener, too, and that the listener's sort of affective sensory state is really crucial to experiencing the music and understanding it and theorizing it.

29:38 **JLR**: Yeah, for sure. One of the interesting moves in the article towards the end is that you connect what you've been analyzing in MIA, especially the Bird Flu song, but in her work generally, to the 1955 Asian-African conference in Bandung, and use that moment to reflect back on what that conference has since meant for post-colonial queer and feminist scholars. How do you see the, what ostensibly was, in some ways a failed project from that conference, the re-taking up of that conference in recent work, and then how does that tie into the queer cartographies method that you're trying to develop?

30:23 **RK**: So Bandung conference in 1955 was this major international conference jointly organized by India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Burma and hosted by Indonesia, by Sukarno. It was this gathering of representatives from 29 newly sovereign nations and a lot of people agreed then, as you noted, about the legacy of Bandung International, this idea that there was gonna be a Third World non-aligned structure for these newly decolonized nations that would reject the kind of super-powered division of the global order of the world between the US and the USSR.

31:00 **RK**: So that kind of bipartite structure, there was this third way, and a lot of people from Vijay Prasad to Gary Okihiro to Cynthia Young and Michael Denning and Robert Young have written about the idea of the Third World, it was not a place but an idea. So we think of the Third World as an emancipatory, utopian idea of how to organize human connectivity in the world. And so that is a sort of lost international... Of course, we know that that was a failed project, not only because it was deeply masculinist and elitist, and it was the role of these elite male Third World figures, and we know how the end of the Cold War played out and what we're experiencing the vestiges of now in this renewed Cold War moment that we're experiencing in the 21st century, but those conferences of the Non-Aligned Movement that followed Bandung are often willfully suppressed in historical accounts of the Cold War period.

31:58 **RK**: And I turn to Lisa Lowe, I quote Lisa Lowe, who says that forgetting suggests... “Forgetting this Non-Aligned Movement exemplifies a persistent disinterest in creative forms of multilateral solidarity that refuse to center the priorities of the Global North.” And I think that's such a prescient statement because it's precisely what I think this move towards minor trans-nationalisms, towards South-South exchange, toward all of the work of those of us who are invested in this, even from the belly of the beast, the heart of the empire in the United States are trying to do is to try to resurrect new modes of internationalism for the 21st century in order, both as a abolitionist and de-colonial strategy to address the violences of the nation-state form. The idea of the nation-state is a failed concept, more generally. So I've been informed by queer and feminist post-colonial disidenitifatory embrace, embraces of the Bandung moment, not simply as a failed anachronism, but as an index of a still felt and yearned for project of liberation. And so part of what I'm trying to do in the essay is say that stretching an ear, an ear back to Bandung allows us to hear something different in the sonic trace of MIA, even as we reframe Bandung from past failure to felt futurity.

33:22 **RK**: So catching Bird Flu, my idea of Bird Flu feelings is about this kind of utopian inhabiting of the world in time, a restructuring of a relation to these complex histories in the future so that we can possibly go somewhere that exists only in our imagination, as Robin Kelley beautifully states. So it's a utopian strategy, it's a not yet here in the way of that my mentor José Muñoz talks about, but it's to say that we can actually resurrect these historical archives and do something differently with them in service of the future, if we listen differently, if we situate ourselves differently in relationship to those archives.

33:57 **JLR**: Yeah, and it means that this... This kind of archive is still helpful in just imagining these futures to come.

34:05 **RK**: Right, and failures are helpful. That's the work of Jack Halberstam and other people who say that the queer... *The Queer Art of Failure* is that we can learn a lot from things that didn't work out, that didn't pan out, these kinds of radical experiments, pre-figurative strategies that people have employed over time, that haven't led to the revolution to come, but that point us in different directions. And certainly in this moment, we need to be pointed in better directions, and more hopeful and just directions as well.

34:32 **JLR**: Yeah. Speaking of learning from past archives, one of the things that... Because you are theorizing Bird Flu feelings and it's also, when you write, you connect this to the outbreak of H5N1, and so one of the things that you talk about is this contagion effect, as sort of an affective mode. And you do mention at the time there was very much the contagion effect in terms of thinking about security, thinking about terrorism, and the idea that there would be a contagion from terrorist affiliations, right? Today we're thinking about contagion all over again in the context of the pandemic.

35:16 **RK**: Oh, yes. Oh, yes.

35:16 **JLR**: Our ongoing pandemic. So how would these previous forms of contagion thinking and the critical examination of those forms of contagion thinking, how are they still felt today? How do we still see a potential for queering or rethinking how we think about the logics of contagion today?

35:40 **RK**: And this is a huge question, of course. It is the question of the now, because we're living in such calamitous wild times. And one thing to say is that the idea of the contagion effect, which comes out of Political Science, and I trace it in the essay to some degree, has a very long history, the idea of using biological, somatic, physiological, and epidemiological metaphors of the body to talk about dissonance, difference, violence, has a very rich history. And in fact, there's a new book that's gonna come out soon by a colleague of mine, Anjuli Raza Kolb, called *Epidemic Empire*, that offers an epidemiological... What she calls an epidemiological reading of the relationship between contagion and counterinsurgency, counterterrorism. And so there's lots of rich scholarship that's emerged, and I'm also reminded of the work of Neel Ahuja in *Bioinsecurities* who offered us this really beautiful take on the intimacy of humans and animals in the long 20th century as a way of thinking through security discourses.

36:48 **RK**: So this essay on MIA, it's like I touched on all of that and didn't fully elaborate in the space of 30 pages, certainly, but there's so much work in every direction. And of course now, we can't think about bodily vulnerability, social porousness, embodied interdependence, and the terror contagion in the same ways after the calamitous events of 2020. So what to say about this? I think in some sense, it's like we're living through the resurgence of the most aggressive forms of the nation-state model in the Trumpist Era. Or really in the long 20th century into the 21st century of War on Terror moment, the emergence of the US empire. It's all about the power and totality of the nation-state. And part of what this, the animating impulse

behind this essay was like, "Can we think of things that exist beyond, below, within and adjacent to the nation-states?" And I think we're struggling in this moment too, where we're also seeing the rise of proto-fascist and fascist and authoritarian regimes throughout the global order, in the US, in North America, certainly, but also in Latin America and Asia, that we have fascism and authoritarianism on the one hand, and then we have decolonization and abolition on the other hand. And there's really no middle anymore.

38:11 **RK**: And I think part of why there's... The language of decolonization and abolition are so much on the tongues of so many people today is that we're realizing that we need to de-colonize borders, we need to de-colonize policing infrastructures, we need to de-colonize nation-states, which would mean the end of the US settler colony itself. And that abolition is not just about ending the negative order of all these things, but it's about the co-constitution of new worlds, new worlds that are not structured in violence and harm. And so all those are really old questions, those questions are as old as... Certainly as old as the United States and its founding, but they are also very urgent questions. And I think contagion... We can't just let contagion be the domain of the specter of things that we fear, which is precisely how we are being forced to think about contagion now. Contagion is also the forms of fellow feeling that have produced the kinds of protests that we're seeing all across North America today, right?

39:19 **RK**: And so there is... I wanna hold on to the utopian, radical, and de-colonial visions of contagion, even as we very much deal with and address the material violences that the devastation of natural worlds, which is the reason why we have COVID-19 have produced as well. And so we have to hold on to that contradiction, and I think that's also why we turn to culture and study culture because it's never black and white. It's always about the gray. It's always about this space in between.

39:49 **JLR**: Yeah, for sure. And it points to the standing relevance of these kinds of questions that it's... We might be in a moment, the occurrences of 2020 in some way become a break where people are reflecting on all of these issues, or adopting the decolonization abolition language a lot more, even in mainstream discussions. But these are not new questions. These have been very old questions that have been re-articulated through different moments in different ways, sometimes in failed projects, but learning from them and building on them and refracting them helps in some way make sense of this new moment and possibilities of where we can go from here.

40:34 **RK**: And artists and cultural producers play a really vital role in that struggle. Because talk about artists make the revolution irresistible, but artists also repopulate and bring a lush vision to our political imaginations when our political imaginations are constantly being impoverished by the dominant ways that we're forced to look at the world. And so I think that's why the role of radical art in culture continues to be quite crucial, and it's certainly, it is the topic of my book manuscript, *Insurgent Aesthetics* is very much about the world-making power of minoritarian art and aesthetics, not only as a diagnosis of all the things that are screwed up in the world, but as offering us a road map and designs and visions of future worlds yet to come.

41:22 **JLR**: Right. So you pointed out that in the move from the article to what became the book project, you moved away from sound but you were still thinking about a lot of the same issues in visual cultures. So I was gonna ask how you've built on this work since, and I guess the question is, how did it transform into what became the book project?

41:45 **RK**: Yeah. I realized that the role of vision and visuality is so central to war-making. It is certainly true across the 20th century from the early modern period of war-making around war as cinema, war as a theater or something that can be visually captured and thus dominated and obliterated. I wanted to talk about the complexity of visual epistemologies in the book. And so part of what I did, partly what I do is I turn to a range of visual installation and performance and multi-media artists who were doing interesting work with visuality but then also displacing visuality and attending to these other sensory conditions of touch and tactility and the haptic.

42:34 **RK**: I guess I continue to have this durative interest in the sensory and trying to understand what I call both the sensorial life of the empire in the context of the book, but also the way that artists are manipulating the senses and our sensory states in order to produce forms of dissonance that get us to think differently about how the world is structured. So I think that would be the way, the through line between this standalone article that then didn't find its way directly in the book project itself.

43:08 **JLR**: Anything else you'd like to mention that I haven't asked?

43:10 **RK**: Well, I have to say that I was trying to look up what's MIA been up to recently. I used to be a very frequent watcher and listener to her work back in the day, and I haven't as much recently. But I did discover that she's, the most recent

provocation and controversy is that she's come out as an anti-vaxxer in the context of COVID-19. And that she said, “If I have to choose the vaccine or chip,” I guess talking about computer chips that they're gonna insert in our brain soon, she says, “I’m gonna choose death.” So speaking to her millions of fans on her social media platforms.

43:45 **RK**: And I think it's not not in keeping with her glib take and long-standing paranoia about state surveillance and forms of repression. There are some uneasy bed-fellows or strange bed-fellows, we might say, between anti-vaxxers and people who have a libertarian disposition and people who also have a critique of US state violence and warfare and surveillance. But I think it's a reminder that these pop cultural figures and celebrities even as unique and interesting and singular as MIA continue to produce contradictions that are worth teasing out and mapping, and they offer us plenty of material to think through the now, I would say.

44:39 **JLR**: Ronak, thank you so much for joining us.

44:41 **RK**: Thank you, Juan. It's been quite a pleasure. Thanks for having me and thanks for teaching this work and good luck to all your students in riding the wave of this fall.

[closing credits music]

44:53 **JLR**: This episode of The Global Media Cultures podcast was produced by me and edited by Alan Yu. Opening sound by Podington Bear and closing credits music by Cloud Mouth. This project is supported in part by the School of Arts, Technology, and Emerging Communication at the University of Texas at Dallas. Global Media Cultures podcast introduces media scholarship about the world, to the world. I'm Juan Llamas-Rodriguez. Thank you for listening.