Brown Girls, White Feminism, and the Necropolitics of War (with Moon Charania)

[opening music]

Dr. Juan Llamas-Rodriguez (JLR): Welcome to the Global Media Cultures podcast. I am your host, Juan Llamas-Rodriguez. Today we are discussing white womanhood, war media and the death drive. Our guest is, Dr. Moon Charania, Assistant Professor in International Studies at Spelman College, an affiliate faculty in Comparative Women's Studies. Charania researches and teaches in the area of transnational feminism, queer of color critique and psychoanalysis. Her first book, *Will the Real Pakistani Woman Please Stand Up?: Empire, Visual Culture and the Brown Female Body*, offers a detailed analysis of multiple figures of Pakistani women that currently travel in transnational media, books and film. And interrogates the ways in which these figures are used to sustain imperial project of war, militarization, and global Islamophobia. Dr. Charania has also published widely on race and critical theory, queer of color critique and transnational feminist theory. She's currently working on a second book manuscript, *Archive of Tongues*, a multi-genre project that investigates an archive of brownness through the provocation of the maternal. Moon, welcome to the Global Media Cultures podcast.

Dr. Moon Charania (MC): Thank you so much. It's nice to be here, Juan. I appreciate you inviting me.

JLR: I want to start by asking you, can you talk more about your work? What do you see as its importance and its implications? Why is it an important area for us to study?

MC: Yes. I'll begin by saying that I am a US-based feminist and queer theorist. My research primarily explores the intersections of sexuality, race, trauma, and geopolitics. And I work with women of color, feminist theories, literary criticism, queer theory, and psychoanalysis to address how race, sex, and gender produce ways of being and ways of knowing. What is often called, in the academy, Global South epistemologies, and this word is actually also traveled into activist circles as well. So depending on the field I'm looking at in any given project, political economies of violence and visual economies of representation or intimate economies of everyday life, the questions I raise in my work mark and effort to understand how relations of power and subjugation and violence work at the level of psychic formation, at the level of epistemology, and at the level of ontology.

JLR: Today we're discussing your article, “Ethical Whiteness and the Death Drive: White Women as the New War Hero,” which was published in *Camera Obscura*, in 2020.

MC: Yes.

JLR: Could you give us a brief history of this particular essay when you began working on it? How did the ideas originate and then how did they change in the process of research and writing?

MC: Yeah. Thank you for that question. Like I said, it was very exciting to see this piece come out in *Camera* last year. I'm a feminist scholar interested in the relationship between gender and power. And you mentioned my first book, *Will the Real Pakistani Woman Please Stand Up?: Empire, Visual Culture and the Brown Female Body*. In that book, my object of analysis were representations of brown women in the post 9/11 context. By which I mean, there was this increased traffic, proliferation and fascination with the photographed and filmed Muslim woman. And I wanted to analyze how brown women were visually and discursively produced through both violent Orientalism and through violent patriarchies. So having spent so much time with images of brownness, human rights photographs, Hollywood films, news magazines, such as *Time* and *Newsweek* and *National Geographic*, NGO and so-called feminist documentaries, and just an absolute litany of war images.

What became more and more apparent to me was that the foil to the brown body is this white subject, right? And we know historically this has been a white male subject. And this seems somewhat obvious to say, because we know that the category of the non-Western is almost always used to confirm the Western self. So it makes sense to say, well, the way in which we produce brown women is, it has to be almost antithetical anathema to how we imagine whiteness. But what was becoming interesting to me was, particularly in film and what we saw in a new trend in Hollywood, was that this movement from the historically white actor as the lead character in war films was now increasingly a white woman. And number two, how this filmic maneuver instrumentalized a feminism where feminism was really about recruiting particular women into a system of achievement, a mastery over self and over the other, and not really a radical, if at all, political subjectivity.

JLR: Right.

MC: So broadly, I'm thinking here of films like, *Sex in the City 2*, which I write about quite extensively in my first book. And then moving onto this serious sober war dramas and television such as, *Zero Dark Thirty*, television shows like, *Homeland, Madam Secretary, Honorable*

Woman, and so many others, too many to name, frankly. But all of these were visual narratives that starred white women making necropolitical decisions about brown life. Films like *Eye in the Sky* and *Whiskey Tango Foxtrot*, two very different films, one a sobering film on the ethics of drone warfare and the other a slapstick rom-com based on one woman's self discovery during war. They caught my attention because they appear to be both profoundly anti-masculine and inaugurate an anti-racist white subject, even as both films are driven by and indeed obsessed with the violent archive of 21st century racial struggles.

And the differences also, I'll add here, in both the films' tone, their style, the plot, and even more fundamentally the differences in the two leading actresses, Helen Mirren and Tina Fey. One is serious and the other is comedic, one self-confident, the other self-loathing, one is deferent and the other one is flippant and glib. One is cautious and the other is hasty. One slowly is thinking and contemplating death and the other one is using humor to avoid the death around her. So all of these secure, what I call a diverse field of whiteness beholden to the ethics of being good and doing good. And so while we know that historically ethical indifference has always been the engine of white supremacy, these films revealed to me that whiteness now relies on a particular ethical formation that softens the necro-political through the use of white women. And I wanted to spend some time with this idea. And so that's what really resulted in this paper.

JLR: One of the tropes that you analyze in this article is the trope with a white liberal feminist woman. And you position her or this trope as the new American hero, as something that is new to popular media about war. How do these characters that you find in all these different media that you mentioned promote a liberal perspective on gender relations, as well as speak to different war realities?

MC: Yeah, absolutely. I do think that the use of white women as key players in the global war is worthy of our attention. And so there are aspects that we're seeing map out in cinema and film and television that are also very much reflected in global geopolitics. We know for example, that it's common for white women to play lead roles in military operations involving rendition and torture. Some of the more obvious examples, Lynndie England, who was the infamous picture from Abu Ghraib, the white soldier whose picture circulated because of her participation in the torture, including sexual torture, of Muslim men. Gina Haspel, who was known as "the queen of torture" during the Bush Administration, who then was appointed as CIA director by Trump.

We see this really map itself out and then reflected in cinema. And also I would say, in a very different moment of critique so much has been said now versus I think even five years ago

when I began thinking about this paper in 2016, about this figure of the liberal white woman. And in a world reeling from Trump and the pandemic, we've also seen how the terrain of whiteness has shifted tremendously. The somewhat newly circulating phrase of white feminism, which I personally find very useful, the figure of the Karen or the Becky that we see hashtag everywhere, that has also shed light on this figure. The increasing research, I think, academic research in particular around the role white women played during slavery.

JLR: Right. Part of what I find really interesting in the argument that you're making is both, this is something that you're seeing in popular media right in *Eye in the Sky* or *Whiskey Tango Foxtrot*, as popular Hollywood films. But it speaks to, as you pointed out, realities on the ground, in terms of voting patterns, in terms of recent administrations and the mobilization of white women feminism to promote particular people in cabinet positions or in positions of power and how their decisions were clouded by speaking to this feminist ideal without interrogating them.

MC: Yeah. And the cost of this inclusion, whether it's inclusion of women, whether it's inclusion of gay, lesbians and trans people in the military, this is also, we saw this debate emerge and flat line, emerge and flat line, throughout Trump's time. It really is, we need to understand that inclusion is sometimes a violent set of exchange. What are we really fighting for when we're fighting for inclusion? Is, I think, a very different question than just “add and stir” model of liberation.

JLR: Right. Exactly. On the flip side of that, if the two protagonists of these films that you're talking about are the white women who consider themselves liberal feminists. Another figure that is prominent, especially in *Eye in the Sky*, is the disenfranchised brown girl. Right?

MC: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

JLR: And you also talk about this as a trope, a specific trope in popular culture. I think you mentioned, "by her mere presence" she represents both the effects of war, disorganizing effects of war, but also the potentialities of late capitalism itself.

MC: Yeah.

JLR: Could you explain a little bit about what you mean by that and how do you see these examples of this trope in popular culture?

MC: Yeah, absolutely. The disenfranchised brown girl has certainly taken center stage in the global political theater, is what I would argue. Again, I do this just a touch in my first book talking about Malala, as her film and the Nobel Peace Prize that she was awarded had just been announced when I was finishing up that book. In 2012, two days after Malala Yousafzai was shot in the head by members of the Taliban, the United Nations declared it was Year of the Girl. That was in 2012. And then less than a year later, a number of developments were catalyzed. The UN Foundation's Data2X initiative, which collects under-reported data on girls for development programs. The Clinton Foundation No Ceilings report, which is also aimed at getting hard evidence of how girls are being held back. Malala's campaign for girls' education and Michelle Obama's global girl's education initiative, Let Girls Learn. And this is just, I'm naming a few out of the 20, 25 plus programs that proliferated across the globe.

JLR: Right.

MC: Now what I thought was interesting about these programs is that they produce girls as a specifically oppressed group, disenfranchised and without access to core human rights. And what's even more striking about these programs and the very discursive construction of, the Year of the Girl, is the overt investment in girls from the Global South, always and already brown or black, often Muslim and never white. At the level of global representation, every image of the Year of the Girl is this very racialized and class image. So think about the quintessential poster you might see if you're walking down an airport, this brown girl in tattered clothing, riding a bike or reading a book. It's such a salient visual image that we're just so used to seeing it.

And so this at-risk brown girl of another society is, as we might guess, as equal parts fantastic idea and empirical fact, and does represent the possibilities of neoliberal and neo-colonial futures just as she also hints at the violent colonial past that can be recuperated by recuperating her. And so often again, going back to that image, we might see the backdrop of the girl trying to ride a bike or read a book, is usually this society in shambles, right? This dilapidated, I mean, a body politic without civil society that you see, that's the architecture that's usually that she set against. The way in which brown girls in the Global South become interesting to the West and the North is often through surviving violence done to her through this public claim to social injury. This is certainly the case with Malala. And this notoriety and intrigue, we should know, is not extended to, say, black girls who survive white U.S violence.

JLR: Right.

MC: And I think this is very important.

JLR: Right. For sure. And I think this is where there's two intersecting aspects here. The disenfranchised brown girl is an important trope to think about in terms of how she's brown and in terms of how she's a girl.

MC: Absolutely. Yeah.

JLR: To what you just mentioned about how this is not extended to black girls, I think one of the things that you point out is you're specifically thinking about the brown girl and thinking about brownness as this porous flexible category, following Hiram Perez's definition. So why is it important to talk about brownness in the case of the films that you're talking about? And to think through this category as something that is not easily contained, as something that is flexible and porous?

MC: Yeah. I want to thank you for this question because I've been thinking so much about brownness and as you mentioned, in my bio, I'm actually working on, completing a second book project, which offers a serious investigation of brownness through the figure of the brown maternal which is why I'm using a reference to tongues. *Archive of Tongues* is the tentative title of the book right now.

JLR: Right.

MC: I think what's become more and more clear to me and more and more important in the process of writing this book and writing these series of papers, is that we do need to think more directly about the stakes of brownness in the global field of race and racism, about what is gained politically, intellectually, affectively by deploying the term brown. And what emerges when brown is used as an analytic? What emerges when it's used as a descriptor?

JLR: Right.

MC: And so I draw from Perez's definition. I find Perez's definition really useful because it underscores the tensions and possibilities of thinking about brownness. It highlights brownness's slipperiness, it's amorphousness, it's lack of a central identity or clear racial genealogy. It also touches on the ways in which brownness signifies criminality and/or terror, drug and sex trafficking wars, racialized Islam, but also the immigration refugee and mobility crisis. So it really points to all of these things. I think what does get left out, having moved away from this paper and into a project that's more directly about brownness, one of the things that's

become important to me and what I'm not seeing directly analyzed or taken up by scholars is how black and brown are intersubjective racial formations.

I would take the position that both blackness and brownness are an extension of historical state violence. Both are often, even if differently, over determined by a debt script. Both are the result of global capitalism and its violent machinations of disappearance, the severing of the mother tie, moving bodies, destroying kin and exploiting bodies. So while I draw these lines of connection and inter-subjectivity, I do want to very clearly say that my goal is not to de-center blackness nor in any way further provincialize blackness. And I actually note this in the paper as well in my decision to describe the little girl, the Muslim girl in *Eye*, as brown.

And so I understand, and I'm deeply aware of how the brown body's at once a register of oppression, but can also be a site of diasporic anti-blackness. So I think these contradictions, these tension, these crisscrossing co-formations are really important to acknowledge. And so having moved away from that particular paper and into the project I'm working on now, I define brownness as a racial formation trapped in its own shifting specificities, even as it touches, slides into, converges with, remains a loop to, and diverges from the global and diasporic field of blackness.

JLR: As you said, thinking of brownness, not only an identifier, but as an analytic to think about the connections with and alongside blackness, right?

MC: Yeah. And my choice in the paper to refer to, I struggle with this and I let the reader into my struggle, because we know brown is capacious enough that it includes Latin Americans, it includes Middle Eastern folks. It includes South Asian folks, and indeed it also includes East African people. And in all of these geographical locations, people are both referred to as brown and refer to themselves as brown. And there's also a resistance. Brown is not just eyes-closed embraced. It's an embattled field of racialization that can be pejorative and that can also perhaps offer an opening.

JLR: Right. For sure. Yeah. So on the one hand, thinking about the disenfranchised brown girl is thinking about brownness. And the complications of that category, the flexibility, the resistance to it, but also the potentiality for thinking through it.

MC: Right.

JLR: The other part of that is thinking about the girl, or in particular, the girl as a child.

MC: Yeah.

JLR: So what work does the figure of the child do in these discourses that you're talking about, at the intersection of thinking about human rights and ethical whiteness in this analysis?

MC: Yeah. So I use basically bring up Lee Edelman who's known for his theorization of the child in his book, *No Future*. Basically, I bring up Lee Edelman only to offer a critique. I see Edelman, and a number of other white queer thinkers, as part of what I would call white queer theory. They're the white queer daddies of queer theory. And so there's a lot of stuff that's being thrown out, dismissed, not looked at when we don't analyze and get our hands dirty with the authorization they're doing. So I'll briefly say, Edelman argues that the figure of the child stands in for U.S futurity.

In Edelman's conception, the child serves as the telos of the social order, this phantasmic beneficiary of politics with a capital P. And by no means, am I the only one, a number of scholars have shown how the very architecture of Edelman's argument is racist. One, because the child in his conception is a disavowed white child, never named as white. Number two, Edelman refuses to see how racialized children never stood for the future. And three, how U.S futurity relies on a number of, what I call necro-pedophiliac practices of white supremacy directed towards children of color. Caged immigrant children in the border camps, dead Syrian children washing up on shores. And most recently, I'll point to Nadera Shalhoub's work that demonstrates that children are not one of the main targets of the Israeli state.

So we know that there are ways that Edelman's argument has these major flaws in it. And so in, *Eye in the Sky*, the figure of the child is important work. She occupies the not-yet subject. She appears to enable a Muslim futurity that is kind and earnest, which is a deeply gender technology in contrast to this hegemonically accepted perception of Muslim boys who are often seen as already angry, with possible adult political emotions. The girl is innocent and that innocence is vital to the primal scene. So too, as you noted, is her girlhood. And I think the girlhood aspect is really important because the use of the feminine perverts the terrorist further, which follows this common line of reasoning that Muslim terrorist are particularly dangerous to women and girls, even though the little girl's fate is most directly in the hands of another woman, Helen Mirren, who plays Colonel Powell.

So I argue in the paper that the little brown girl is a fetish object central to the story. In fetishizing the little girl, the film comes to plead for empathy by asking whites to read their death driven investment in life as a pedagogy that aggresses only when necessary and by which whites, as in white people, and whiteness survives.

JLR: Right.

MC: And I'll say a little bit more is that the little Muslim girl injects a little bit of eros into this culture of death, a little bit of love, a little bit of a adorability into this culture of death and that advocation on one hand, the U.S, UK military dilemma against the primitive adorable girl allows the film to succeed at the level of anti-violence, assuring the audience that we are all conflicted, even as the audience is left with the final image of the adorable succumbing to the death drive.

JLR: Right. So in some ways, choosing *Eye in the Sky* becomes this perfect text because it encapsulates so many of the aspects that you're pointing to, are broadly in popular culture, are in the geopolitics of how different societies uphold young brown girls and at the same time in order to perpetuate all of this war and necro-politics worldwide?

MC: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

JLR: But one of the key terms that you mentioned, which you just mentioned now is the death drive. It becomes this way of thinking through the different formulations of life and death as you see them being formulated in this film. So can you give us a brief take on the death drive? It comes from Freud. So what was Freud's original take? But then, how does this help your argument, or how do you mobilize it in your work?

MC: Feminist scholars who work with psycho analytic concepts, there's always this tension because Freud's psychoanalysis can be deeply unfulfilling. And also, as we know, deeply misogynistic. So having said that, I do think that there are particular aspects of Freud's conceptualizations that are very, very fascinating to me as a feminist scholar. The death drive is one of them. Okay. Freud posited that the death drive is a necessary component of the human psyche shaped by a compulsion to repeat and by self-destructiveness, by death wishes, by self-inflicted suffering. As a key element of the psyche, the death drive as Freud conceptualized it, is the interiorization of aggression. So internally directed self-harm, death and destruction ideation.

JLR: Right.

MC: Yes, the death drive can be something that stands on its own interior compulsion, but what, Freud, doesn't take into account is external or exteriorized violence, which is a key aspect of colonial modernity, even as Freud's development of this concept is inextricably linked to the violence of modern coloniality, which is the time in which he's writing. And is embedded in

racial sociogenomics, even though his work never acknowledges this, alongside so many other things his work doesn't acknowledge.

I take up Freud's concept of the death drive to put pressure on what I see as the whiteness undergirding the death drive. And I'll point to just a few moments, I think, in the films where I see this take shape. So one of the moments that I think is, and we see this in so many genre of terrorist films, is this visual juxtaposition between rationalized death making and irrational death ritual.

In *Eye in the Sky*, you have the scene where the Somalian terrorists are slowly and ritualistically preparing for a suicide mission. And it's a drone, a little beetle that is capturing all of this footage. One member is slowly dressing the other in a suicide vest, versus the other scenes in the film where you have a boardroom in London, and you have these four dismayed white, suited British officials, one woman in there as well, including the leading Lieutenant played by Alan Rickman. And they're watching on this flat screen monitor the close-up displays of the young girl laying her bread loaf by loaf on the table. And so you have this very sophisticated, conflicted white people in relationship to technology versus this embodied ritualized brown folks.

And this becomes a key rationalization for ethical whiteness. The visual performance of the death drive as ritual erases, in fact I would say wipes clean, the visual reality of the death drive as rational, as a decision we make rationally. The other aspect I would say is a key aspect of the death drive is the compulsion to repeat and destroy. And in the film, *Eye in the Sky*, the white racial state omnipotently masters this reproduction, because it despairs its death drive, even as it relies on its inevitable technology of repetition and seriality.

What I'm referring to here is this nervous drone pilot, who is this young white man. And he appears very ethical because he refuses to shoot the missile. He refuses his superiors' orders to shoot the drone. And in fact, rebels against her and in that moment of rebellion appears to have saved the girl, even if momentarily, but eventually as we know in the film, he does shoot the missile and the little girl does die. And at the end of the film, when he's leaving, he is congratulated by his superiors and told that he has done a job well done, and we'll see you tomorrow. And so what fundamentally, even this is the capitalist logic of work: well, it's my job. My job is that brown death is on repeat.

JLR: Also you mentioned, the film *Eye in the Sky* ends with, "And we'll see you tomorrow." So there is that quick allusion to repetition that we'll continue to be some of these killings, even as

the entire plot of the film, is to focus on the one moment, and to make this the grand site for thinking about the politics of all of this. Right?

MC: Yeah. U.S exceptionalism is never far behind. And this is with them to create the whole film only to say, "Well, see you tomorrow," it does both the work that U.S exceptionalism is notorious for, and that has been widely critiqued, including its practices of inclusion. Now U.S exceptionalism lies and is embodied in white women. But also that it's just another day in the war on terror. It's just another day in the global war.

JLR: Right. And in this particular case, the narrative that they construct around this as you point out in relation to white women, it's not just the Helen Mirren character, who's the General? Lieutenant?

MC: Colonel.

JLR: Colonel?

MC: Yeah.

JLR: One of those titles.

MC: Exactly. I normally would not have known the right answer.

JLR: It's not just her doing the work of white womanhood as standing in for the state, but the *Eye in the Sky*, in particular presents then, the radicalized white English woman who's the person that they're sending the drone strike for, and that is causing this adorable brown girl to be the collateral.

MC: Right.

JLR: It is presenting a very specific formulation of the massive and continuous drone killing that happens, again, day after day after day.

MC: What I will say is that we know racial presence is necessary to the expansion, development and implementation of an Imperial Order. And, *Eye* complicates this idea, because when we think of racial presence, we're thinking of black and brownness, we're thinking of Asianness, we're thinking of nativeness, we're not thinking about whiteness. Race is the other of whiteness. Right. So, *Eye* does complicate this idea by making the target in English, a white

English woman, now radicalized. The film appears to aim for a racial destabilization, or at least at momentarily provide an opportunity for viewers to visualize more complex racial and national identifications. But what I'll say to that is that terrorist monitoring is racial monitoring. And at that the state machine is a racializing machine. And there's really no getting around that.

Yet, this is effaced the film. The simple addition of an Anglo-English woman grants authority to the filmic empiricism, and thus to the filmic imperative to kill, but it does so by writing a new racial romance. And so in the paper, I ask a few questions and then I'll try to play with that in answering them. I ask, what gender dynamics are revealed in setting up two white women against each other and an antagonism that sanctions the brown girl's death? Why symbolically preserve the little brown girl, if only to bury her? Moreover, what racial formations are relinquished in revealing Powell's crusade against a radicalized English woman whose face we see for less than 30 seconds in the film and for whom the young girl must die? And so some of these questions I'm asking also echo what you just pointed to.

The use of the white English woman, we know cleverly, masks the death instinct with this colorblind democratic order. We're not killing brown people. It's not a genocide, it's not a targeted black or brown, we're killing terrorists, and terrorists come in all shapes, colors and sizes. With Ayesha Al-Hady, who is formerly known as Susan Helen Danford, the character in the *Eye in the Sky*, what we learn about her is that she had a troubled childhood. She converted at the age of 15, was radicalized in a West London mosque, where she met and married her Muslim husband. And together, her and her Muslim husband are number four and five on the East Africa most wanted list. While certainly the audience isn't supposed to feel sorry for her, the framing of her terroristic turn, Ayesha's terroristic turn, vis-a-vis this troubling childhood logic and the cinematic decision to keep Ayesha literally hidden for the majority of the film.

And in a film where we see everything, except her, reveal something about both white terrorist's life and death versus life and death of the racial other. Black and brown death is visually so available as to be completely normalized. And I do think that it's a very disturbing fact of the visual culture that we consume. And so the cleverness of a white woman as a target who is literally visually unavailable against and alongside brown death-making that is always visually available, imposes an interesting epistemic frame, but also one that is ontologically presumptuous.

JLR: Yeah.

MC: And so, I would take the position that what *Eye* is doing in terms of this characterization and in terms of these varying missing scenes of life and death, this is not inconsequential to the geopolitics of race and gender in the globalized world.

JLR: Yeah. For sure. And to your point, I think one of the most telling narrative decisions of the film is to create this entire plot around, we have a drone strike to kill the radicalized white English woman, but we're not going to focus on showing the radicalized white English woman. The showing, the visual spectacle part of the film is showing the brown girl who is also going to die. Collaterally, but it's also going to die. So as you pointed out, and a lot of scholars talk about this, but it's that brown and black death is visual spectacle, is something that we in society keep repeating and, even when we frame it around, this is about creating empathy or about learning or any of that. We're still fetishizing that spectacle as opposed to two white deaths.

Yeah. So both films, *Eye in the Sky* certainly, the whole idea is in the eye, and it is about a drone strike. But then even as you point out, *Whiskey Tango Foxtrot*, which is about the reporter and bringing the camera, both of them are very interested in this idea of the visual and the gaze. And in some ways, the mediating technology of the camera. So can you talk a little bit about that connection between both films and how they're using the camera to promote particular assumptions about war and visuality?

MC: Yeah. Absolutely. I take the argument that parallel to gender is the mediating technology of the camera. So in both films, the camera is a central and paranoid actor. And specific expectations of seeing are at stake for both Baker, Tina Fey, and Powell, Helen Mirren. And what I think is interesting, and I referenced this in the paper, is that the two historically distinct functions of the camera conceptualized by Susan Sontag and John Berger, defined as an instrument of state surveillance, as a means of private pleasure, as a mode of rendering spectacle. All three of these collide in the drone drama and *Whiskey Tango Foxtrot*. And *Eye* specifically, the camera is not just mediating the audience and the plot, but is literally, like you said, a character. The beetle that is the drone is a character in and of itself, I would say.

What it does in both *Eye* and *Whiskey* is the camera brings the war into the living room. Brings the war into its emotional immediacy, its violent urgency. The camera gives it a sense that it's happening in real time. It gives us a sense that it's happening right in front of us. It appears also to unedit the war. So what we're seeing is, again, the camera in real time as it's happening, rather than edited. We are following the camera, we might as well be holding the camera in both films. And I think this is also an important technique of bringing the audience and producing the war as this unedited rubble, versus something that is coming to you hours later or days later, after the event.

And also, I think, effectively erases how the camera is a mechanism of intrusion of surveillance and a means through which the death of the other is made easier, more accessible and more of a spectacle. In *Whiskey*, a specific thing that I think about is, Tina Fey, Barker and her camera stumbled through the harrowing war zones in a very funny way. She's awkward and clumsy and a little ditzy and certainly has no cultural cachet whatsoever. But again, the necro-political irony of the camera as a democratic information technology, which is what it's supposed to be for photojournalists alongside this amnesty of satire as claimed by Fey in producing *Whiskey*, exposes to me, that flippancy and glibness as affects of ethical whiteness, like the camera itself erases the violence that it seeks to reveal.

JLR: Yeah. It's fascinating when you put these two films together as you have, is that they're both working in very different genres, create very different situations, but yet they are able to speak to these topics in very similar ways and using very similar tropes through their protagonists, and through the use of the camera by their protagonists as well.

MC: Yeah. And they succeed in very similar ideological agendas.

JLR: Right. For sure. So one of the things that you mentioned is that both of these films attempt to transcend whiteness and they use that through the female protagonists. They transcend whiteness through gender. Can you tell us more about what you mean by that?

MC: Yeah. What I will say is, I think, my approach to thinking about whiteness here is not just whiteness as a skin or identity, but whiteness as that which one ascends to. It's a kind of ascendant, aspirational subjectivity. And I mentioned this earlier that whiteness is a mastery of self and a mastery of the other. And so in using ethical whiteness and developing this frame of ethical whiteness, I'm thinking about, What does it look like to generate an account of white violence? In this case of the films, I'm working at brown people globally as reliant on a persistent form of white empathy that emerges from this white woman subject now spearheading the war. And so I think that is really important to line up the affect of empathy and deliberation, confusion, bafflement alongside...

What's interesting actually, let me backpedal is, in *Eye in the Sky*, the only one who's not baffled is actually the white woman. Helen Mirren, is the most confident and really the most at ease in shooting the missile, whereas everybody else is, goodness, this is going to sit on my conscience and she seems to not have one at all. So she operates in many ways, like what Angela McRobbie, calls a phallic girl. Basically, what McRobbie is referring to is the ways in which this post-feminist field women are able to adopt aggressive individualism, a masculinist set of

behaviors and desires without punishment. And in fact, might even be celebrated because of that.

So I think bio-politics is white ascendancy. The more we perfect our own bio-political, selfhood subjectivities, that includes folks like you and I. We can think about how we might also, depending on what citizenship and what subjectivity we put out in the world, how we might also embody imperial power, despite or in spite of the fact that we are also people of color. So I think the ascendancy of whiteness is really about understanding how whiteness operates, not just as racial, as signifier of skin or identity, which it also does, but that it is also a kind of ascendancy to a particular citizenship that has mastered the self and the other. And we are increasingly seeing this with white women, for sure, but also, we can give the example of Kamala Harris, and we'll see where this takes us. But I think we've already gotten a bit of a glimpse, right?

JLR: Yeah.

MC: Just in some of the news that we're recently hearing and seeing.

JLR: Right. And I think that's one of the crucial aspects to not only think of whiteness at the level of skin color, or our visual, even if the visual is such a clear component of this bio-political whiteness, because then it's easy to do a reductive thinking in terms of identity of, well, if the skin color doesn't match, then they can't aspire to this position of whiteness, to this different level of citizenship. But in fact, as you point out, a lot of people do, and mobilize that for specific purposes, whether it's in the political arena or whether it's in popular culture.

MC: These moments really laid bare how whiteness is that, which we ascend to rather than, as you mentioned, this reductive skin or identity, which it may also be that.

JLR: It can be both and.

MC: Yeah. Absolutely.

JLR: Yeah. I guess we've been touching on this throughout, but the key concept or idea that you're linking all of these different tropes, all of these different theories to, is ethical whiteness. If we were to have the short, condensed version of, what do we mean by ethical whiteness, in terms of how does it connect to things like empathy? How does it connect to things like the death drive and visuality? How would you give us the short pitch?

MC: That's so hard. I've never been good at short pitches, but I'll say a couple of things. So I developed ethical whiteness as a theoretical intervention to generate an account of white violence against brown people globally, as one that was reliant on a few key factors. One of that I'll point to, is white empathy. The second one I'll point to is this slow, deliberate, conflicted, baffled contemplation. And the third, I would say is a very deliberate not seeing below the surface, which is very ironic because where whiteness is embodied in empire as a technologically superior and hegemonic formation literally sees everything. These three prongs of ethical whiteness, this unseeing ethics of not seeing below the surface, a white empathy and a white bafflement. And see how those three often are at play in the field of black and brown death. And I think that there's probably some room to think about how this maps out even in the U.S context.

JLR: I think one of the contributions people are thinking about the Global South, but this conception of the Global South and the Global North allows us to think beyond the legalistic notion of nations and realize that a lot of the imperial processes happen both abroad, but also within the nation as a way to segment different portions of a population as well.

MC: Yeah, absolutely. And that's how, I think, beyond the article, the framework of ethical whiteness might be useful, if we think about these varying, what are the constituents of ethical whiteness? How does it map itself out? And when we look at those affective terrains, those epistemological terrains, we can see it in moments of violence against black people in the U.S. We can see it at the border with the caging of children. We see it across oceans and across land.

JLR: Yeah. For sure. So how have you built on this work since its publication?

MC: This piece was actually part of a series of questions I was asking about white women in biopolitics. And it actually led to three different publications. One is this ethical whiteness piece, looking at war films. I also co-authored an article, and I mentioned this a bit earlier, on the so-called feminism of the New Disney, and this was a co-authored article called, “Single, White, Female: Feminist Melancholia and Queer Trauma in the New Disney.” And that was a fun piece to write. And then another one, looking actually very specifically and closely at *50 Shades of Grey*, at the time that it became this erotic bestseller and when the film came out. So just the first film.

And I argued in that piece that *50 Shades of Grey* is haunted by a master narrative of white racism and heterosexual compulsion. And that, while it appears to seduce viewers through this promise of explicit sex, which is actually really bad sex, and wealth, the films too, offering is much more simple, the promise of whiteness. And so that piece is actually called, “The Promise

of Whiteness: *50 Shades of Grey* as White Racial Archive." So those are some of the pieces that allowed me to really flesh out how I was thinking about whiteness.

In my current book, I also have a chapter where I'm thinking about black, brown and white relations within intimate economies of everyday life in the figure of the brown mother. And this is the book I'm working on right now. And this is just to say that the theme of whiteness doesn't go away, the analysis of whiteness, the scrutiny, the really deliberate, critical gaze on whiteness, hasn't by any means left my work, but where it's really explicitly being taken on is in these particular pieces.

JLR: Right. Are there any recent developments in the world and other scholarship that have added or changed to these initial arguments that you had in the piece, or as you're working through the subsequent piece of this from it?

MC: I'll just point to things that I'm keeping my eye on and that I know other scholars who I work with and whose work I respect are keeping their eye on and how important it is for us to keep our eye on these things. And how that field of whiteness as both aspirational ascendant position has been strengthened by this moment. We can look at a number of things, the perpetual border discourse that suffuses this moment. The inventory of cacotopic governments of the worst kind: Modi in India, Johnson in Britain, Macron in France, Bolsonaro in Brazil, strengthened by the global pandemic and armed with unprecedented surveillance mechanisms. I also think about how in India, reading these stories where the wealthy are hoarding oxygen tanks and the poor, the working class are dying, and Modi is suppressing the death count.

Speaking of Modi, we also know in Kashmir genocidal violence against Muslim citizens is condoned under this military lockdown, when Article 370 of the Indian constitution, which granted autonomy to the region, was revoked by Modi. Kashmir men are being systematically blinded by pellets. The *New York Times* called this an epidemic of dead eyes. And misogyny, never too far behind, partners with maiming as, "marrying a Kashmiri woman now" becomes the number one search phrase in India within five days of the revocation of Article 370. I can say a little bit more. We're not talking about Syria anymore, but we should, because while it's receded from international public and media culture, regional and global powers continue to quietly exploit Syria for their own advantage and portion out its territory for repeated bombing.

And at this point, Syria has been bombed by the Assad Regime, the United States, Great Britain, France, Russia, Iran, Turkey, Israel, Saudi, Jordan, Bahrain, and the UAE. This is just absolutely baffling. And the 2017 mass rapings of Rohingya Muslim women by Buddhists soldiers, no one's talking about this anymore. So there is a way in which I think in international media cultures,

things rise and cede and fall that take our attention away from things that are still happening. They're still urgent. They're still prescient. There's still daily violence, and we're not talking about it anymore. So I think each of these imperial and genocidal strains of misogynistic racism and global Islamophobia, they constellate together and we need to keep our eyes and our analysis on this.

JLR: It's always good to end on a downer just to...remind everyone.

MC: That was a lot. Sorry, I apologize. I had to end on such a necropolitical note. These papers are about necropolitics. And my work is on the coterminus realities of sex and violence.

JLR: Yeah.

MC: That's where I always end up. I try to go to happier places, I promise.

JLR: Yeah. But it would be disingenuous to try and end with a happy note when there is all of this still going on.

MC: Yeah.

JLR: It would be the fake Hollywood ending of saying, "Good job. You did a good job today talking about these things." But these things are still ongoing and they still are affecting people in a very real way.

MC: Yeah. Absolutely.

JLR: Moon, thank you so much for joining us.

MC: Thank you. Thank you for reading and thank you for inviting me to this podcast. And for your really provocative and thorough questions.

[closing credits music]

JLR: This episode of the Global Media Cultures podcast was produced by me and edited by Alan Yu, 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.