

Ashley (Co-Host): Hi, I'm Ashley Nickels.

Casey (Co-Host): And I'm Casey Boyd-Swan.

Ashley (Co-Host): We're podcasting from Northeast Ohio. This is the Growing Democracy Podcast, a space for citizens, experts, and advocates to create community together. Each week, we invite a guest to talk about civic engagement, governance, and how to grow our democracy.

Ashley (Co-Host): This episode is part of our series, Race and Democracy in Northeast Ohio, a collaboration with the School of Peace and Conflict Studies and the Center for Pan African Culture at Kent State University. The project includes a 10 podcast episode series focused specifically on the intersections of race and democracy. In Northeast Ohio. We are also planning community workshops on the topic of race and democracy and developing online curricular materials like activities, toolkits and concept pages. This series is made possible with funding from Mark Lewine and the John Gray Payntner Program. Check out our website to learn more about our upcoming events and stay up to date on new content. You can find us at www.growingdemocracyoh.org. I'm super excited today to be co-hosting with Dr. Shemariah Arki, and to have with us our guests, Tessa and Suparna. Tessa Xuan is a Connector Facilitator Organizer and Co-Director of OPAWL. She's the oldest daughter of Chinese immigrants, and is motivated to reduce, prevent, and heal from trauma caused by systemic violence.

Some experiences that moved Tessa into organizing work included the death of Emily Olson in 2014 and the resurgence of white nationalism and anti-Muslim bigotry in 2016. Tessa lives in Cleveland with their partner Zed and enjoys experimenting with new recipes. We also have with us Suparna Bhaskaran, who is a non-resident fellow at the Institute on Race, Power, and Political Economy at The New School and a lecturer at The Ohio State University in the department of Women, Gender and Sexuality Studies, where she teaches classes that include: US Immigration and Migration, Health, and Inequality, Gender and Democracy, and Race and Public Policy. Previously as a senior researcher at the Othering and Belonging Institute at the University of California, Berkeley, her work explored the relationship between public health and wealth in post-industrial cities and communities. Her work focused on the city of Detroit and its communities within the context of the restructuring of Detroit's Great Lakes water authority, water inequities, austerity policies in the city's history of systemic racism, and shrinking social safety net programs for its residents. She has also worked for the State of Ohio as a health policy researcher and community educator, particularly in relation to affordable healthcare and safety net programs. We're super excited to have both of these guests with us.

- Ashley (Co-host): So we are super excited to have you both with us today. Today, I have the privilege of co-hosting with Shemariah, and we have with us Suparna and Tessa. And I want to get us started. I know we read your bios in the intro, but it's always really nice to have you all tell your own story in your own voice. So, Suparna, will you tell us a little bit about who you are, and then, Tessa, would you follow after that?
- Suparna Bhaskaran: Absolutely. First of all, I want to thank you both, Ashley and Shemariah, for the invitation. Super excited to be sharing this space with you all, as well as Tessa. A little bit about myself, I've often occupied these kind of, in-between spaces. I occupy in-between spaces as a scholar and an organizer, kind of with a toe in the academy and outside of the academy. As somebody who's an immigrant for instance, to this country. But, currently I am a non-resident fellow at the newly formed Institute on Race, Power, and Political Economy at The New School, where I work on intersectional approaches to wealth inequities, specifically as it relates to communities of color. I'm also a lecturer at The Ohio State University, in the Women's Gender and Sexuality Studies department. I also teach a course at the John Glenn College of Public Affairs. I'm also excited to be here as one of the founding members of OPAWL with Tessa. And OPAWL is a community grassroots organization for Asian American Pacific Islander and Asian Pacific Islander women and non-binary persons. We aspire to be a progressive, radical, feminist, organizing space. And so that's a little bit about myself.
- Ashley (Co-host): That's awesome. Tessa, do you wanna share a little bit about who you are as well?
- Tessa Xuan: Yes, absolutely. So, I'm Tessa, I identify as a connector, a facilitator and community organizer. I've been a longtime volunteer with OPAWL, but became one of the statewide co-directors in 2020. And I'm also Asian American. I identify as a woman of color and specifically someone from the Chinese diaspora. I have a lot of passion for immigration issues, as well as destigmatization, and more understanding of mental illness, as someone whose family has been really impacted by systemic trauma and mental illness, and kind of seeing the connection between those things. So I'm very motivated to work with other folks at OPAWL and, you know, throughout the progressive ecosystem to reduce and prevent that trauma and to build joy and connection and healing together.
- Shemariah (Co-host): Awesome. Thank you so much, to both of you, Suparna and Tessa for joining us. And thank you for sharing a little bit about your story. With that, I want to open our conversation by being really intentional about the language that we're using. So I know that folks of Asian descent may identify various ways, Asian, Asian American, AAPI, APIDA. I'd like to take a little bit of time to hear actually, from both of you, around how you identify and maybe why you choose that specific identity to identify with. Maybe, Tessa you want to. Okay, Suparna, you want to go first?
- Suparna Bhaskaran: Sure. I would say that I use multiple categories of identification and I often remark that when I first came to the US, I immediately became a woman of

color. And before that I was somebody from the Third World. And I had heard grandparents and parents refer to us as we are in relation to the West. We are like the Third World, but also quote-unquote, colored people in the Third World. And so those were all the categories that I was immediately familiar with. I also identify as Indian and Brown and AAPI. And I know the APIDA part with the D also is referencing Desi. That also means different things. It, you know, it could mean native. It could mean from the kind of, South Asia subcontinent, that area. So, I kind of use multiple categories and yeah.

Shemariah (Co-host): Awesome. Thank you. So, building on the conversation around how we specifically identify, I'd like to open it up again to get some responses to what is meant by the concept of social construction. So when we think about our identities and many of the terms that we use are socially constructed so, you know, they're designed by the powers that be, but what do you think, Suparna, what is meant by the concept of social construction?

Suparna Bhaskaran: Yeah. And I'm also kind of linking it to the question that you asked me before, like, how do you identify, I mean, there's APIDA, there's AAPI, et cetera. And, this involves social construction in that sense involves the creation and production of categories, like our social identities. So literally, the building of the production of defining one's place and the power to name and infuse meaning into those categories. And those identities. Now there are many who would say that those with more power and resources have, you know, greater ability to define and lump people together. So something like, for instance, AAPI or APIDA is massive. I mean, it involves so many different communities with so many different histories. Histories of colonization, of militarization, of empire and so on. Across various racial identifications as well.

Suparna Bhaskaran: And so, most recently I had come across legislation in the US going back to like, 1917, where they had literally invented this, Asiatic barred zones. So I was kind of thinking about like, okay, the Asiatics. So like, who are the Asiatics? And here you have through, deliberate policy making the construction of these people. Very much, we're seen as kind of undesirable, in terms of either entry. So, for me, social construction, when that question about social construction has to do with who is doing the constructing under what circumstances under what context for what purpose and what's the impact of that. And since its social construction also implies that it's human made, the purpose of those constructions is important to note. So those with more resources and powers through these social constructions could define who is, for instance, who's American, what it means to be a woman, what it means to be AAPI or Black or Latinx or Indigenous. But it also creates systems of oppression or inequalities. But in the same vein, organizers and activists and so on can, to some degree, engage in this process of also reclaiming the process of naming and infusing it with different values and meanings as we create spaces in the world for us.

Shemariah (Co-host): Yes. Thank you so much for that, really understanding the dynamics, right? The sociopolitical context of where we are. I want to invite Tessa into the

conversation. I want to give you an opportunity to respond to those same prompts around. How do you identify? We know that lots of folks identifying as people of Asian descent may identify as Asian, Asian American, AAPI, APIDA. So, I wanted to ask you, how do you identify, but then really building on that, what is meant by the concept of social construction with our identities?

Tessa Xuan: Yes. So I love the question about how I identify, because I think it's really complex. And for me, it's really changed a lot over time. Growing up in Ohio, basically from the fourth grade until, beginning of high school. I lived in a small town called Sandusky and it was a predominantly white town, predominantly white school. And I think during that period of time where I was really growing into my identity as a teenager, I wanted so badly to be seen as just American. And then, you know, as I grew into my early twenties, that kind of evolved into a claiming of Asian American identity as I started to learn more about Asian American history. And you know, some of that history of activism that started in the 1970s, you know, inspired by the civil rights movement.

Tessa Xuan: But even at that point, I still was like, I'm Asian American, not Asian. And there was this pejorative context to, or connotation to, just being Asian. And, I think, yeah, more recently I've definitely built so many more relationships with people that were not born here and do not strive to be seen as American. You know, people who proudly claim their birth country's heritage and members of my own family. So I think right now, I kind of identify as Asian American as well as Asian, as well as, you know, a member of the Chinese diaspora, which is that specificity of my experience that, even within the Chinese diaspora, there's so many different layers to what that means. And I would also say it's taken me actually more time to identify as Chinese in the Chinese diaspora, surprisingly because in the context of Asian Americans and AAPI organizing space, it's actually people of Chinese descent who are kind of seen as taking up a lot of space within that community.

Tessa Xuan: You know, East Asians and Chinese Americans kind of being the people that are most centered when Asian Americans or AAPIs are being talked about. So, yeah, it was like early 2020 that I found myself for the first time in a space that was just for people of the Chinese diaspora who identified as leftist and progressive, and that was really eye opening. Because I think there is a really important need for spaces that are specific in that way, because there's certain conversations that only we can have. But yeah, other than that, I would say, you know, identify as a child of immigrants. And also as a Muslim, a Muslim person in America, which is kind of more recent. I recently got married and converted to Islam and have had close relationships with Muslims my whole life. So that intersection of like Muslim and Asian identity is also really interesting because Asia is the place where with the largest Muslim population in the world. But it's not always seen that way. And we don't always think about Muslims when we think about Asia.

Ashley (Co-host): Thank you both also for sharing your stories with us and kind of sharing this space and bringing your authentic selves and it's really powerful to hear how our own identities change and evolve as we change and evolve and how we claim

those identities over time. And I wanna go back to something that Suparna said a little bit earlier in terms of thinking about kind of when we think about socially constructing the other; that is usually a framework for someone who looks like me, a white person who creates a group as a way of othering other people. It's built into policy. In my own field, the social construction of other is built into the fabric of how we develop policies, how we implement policies, who has access and we create labels.

Ashley (Co-host): And often in very pejorative ways. But one of the things you mentioned, Suparna, was kind of this reclaiming in the naming of collective identities for power. And, you know, would you? Maybe I'll go to Tessa first. Would you be able to speak to the power of claiming those identities and what that can mean in terms of how we kind of reshape how we understand and socially construct different identities? That was a complicated way of asking that.

Tessa Xuan: Yeah. I think what you're referring to is this kind of age-old playbook of people in power blaming or scapegoating a certain group of people for all of society's problems. And it's a really convenient strategy that has worked over and over again to gain more political power, to convince, you know, masses of people that a minority is responsible for certain issues. But I think in terms of reclaiming identity or othering or groupings, Suparna kind of referred to this. You know, there was a long time where people who looked like me were called Orientals. And that wasn't really, that was not a term that we chose for ourselves. And in the sixties and seventies is when Asian American is like the term that organizers and community activists started to use.

Tessa Xuan: And it was a really political identity label kind of recognizing that, you know, in Asia we wouldn't identify as Asian because there's way more nationalistic or ethnic identities that people claim, but here, we're being impacted by so many of the same forces of white supremacy, immigration policy, of people just literally like thinking that we're all the same. So it was kind of a recognition of a common stake, a common source of oppression, and this desire for solidarity. And I don't think it's a perfect term, but I think just knowing that that's the history of the term Asian American, to me, is really inspiring. Like, I think I'd love to see that history really more widely understood because I think some people today see Asian American as just this kind of organic grouping that always existed. But yeah, and it's evolving. So AAPI, I think could go under a similar kind of metamorphosis of becoming more of a show of political solidarity, rather than just this government assigned label.

Ashley (Co-host): So Suparna, do you want to add anything to that? Any additional contributions/comments?

Suparna Bhaskaran: Sure. I mean, one of the things just to piggyback on what Tessa was saying, is one of the things that struck me; how these terms and categories that are produced via these social constructions are constantly shifting. They change, across time and space. And they're profoundly political. So they're political terms. So they can be political in that it could be used as a tool to marginalize, or

it could be political as a tool for solidarity. It can be a tool for liberation .So it depends on where you're coming from for what purpose. So while AAPI or APIDA, I mean, there's like so much. It's so heterogeneous and there are so many different histories.

Suparna Bhaskaran: It, you know, the term can be tactical or strategic, just like a lot, all other social identities, whether we're talking about Black or African American or Latinx or Hispanic, or, you know, Native or Indigenous, including other identities like Queer or Trans or Woman. I mean, these are all like, you can kind of look at it in time and space for who's doing it for what purpose. Yeah. I mean, I think part of it is, if one does naming things or naming your events, naming things about your reality, it's important in terms of, not only just visibility, but you actually give birth to the reality that one lives in. So concepts and categories can serve that kind of function, and also change the meaning of it because a lot of othering involves creating a hierarchy.

Suparna Bhaskaran: So whether we are talking about, say White and Black or male and female, they set it up in a way. Othering creates hierarchies and these hierarchies are infused with values and those values can either marginalize, or the values that you infuse can generate liberatory potential. And so in that sense I see social identities or social constructions serving both ends of course, very uneven. And that's the role of challenging the kind of established values such as Oriental, for instance.

Tessa Xuan: I wanted to add another example of how these identities are socially constructed is if you look at the differences between the UK and the US and how they label different groups, Asian, when you, when you're talking in the UK, it's really referring to people of South Asian descent. And that's just because of the history of colonialism by the British and also like, that group used to be referred to as Black, you know, historically in the UK. And then, you know, over time, it's shifted to being Asian. And in the UK folks who are, you know, Chinese Vietnamese, there's kind of a different grouping called East and Southeast Asian or ESEA. So yeah, same thing with how Black Caribbean immigrants are categorized differently. It's like, just looking from country to country between the US and Europe, you can tell it's just based on the society that the context we're talking about totally affects vocabulary and identity labels.

Shemariah (Co-host): Totally, because, you know, I tell the story that if I hadn't gotten this education degree, I would've studied linguistics, understanding that words matter, dialects matter, the power to name and rename. As we keep hearing here, today is so important to us as minoritized populations, thinking about the place that we are in and the political solidarity. So we've talked a lot about this concept of othering and the social construction of the other, and we've heard that it can be used as a tool to divide us. To divide and conquer by a common oppressor. But I wanna go back a little bit to something that Suparna mentioned earlier about learning about how to identify after coming here as an immigrant. And you talked about folks wanting to identify you as being Third World. And there's a connection for me as a radical feminist organizer and thinking about the TWWA or the Third

World Women's Alliance and really understanding the political solidarity that comes out of what we refer to today as intersectionality, you know, we can go back to triple jeopardy that was written 40, 50 years ago.

Shemariah (Co-host): So it's not a new concept, just the new name that we're talking about, but I wanted to ask you all a little bit around this conversation around intersectionality, but also in commensurability. So Grace Hong talks about this in a chapter in a book of talks about Asian American and women of color feminisms, and really understanding that our identities have been used to divide us, but when we begin to get together, it becomes this point of incommensurability. So I wanted to ask either one of you, what you thought about that, the relationship around intersectionality and incommensurability

Suparna Bhaskaran: Yeah, I think I'll start with, I think what you were asking about how identities can be used to divide and to the reference to thinking about the Third World. There are times when I see how people don't want to use the term Third World because some consider it as, okay, it's signaling, you know, backwardness and primitiveness and all of that. And I know there's the usage of Global South. There's like the whole Developing versus Developed World concepts as well. And I personally like to use Third World because I mean, for me, it kind of helps me maintain a sense of history. And it's a little easier for me to remember my journey, coming from the Third World to the United States and becoming a person of color, and also understanding US history, like my place with those who are indigenous, those who were enslaved, but also those migrants and immigrants who continue to come as a result of US empire and other empires.

Suparna Bhaskaran: I think part of solidarity is to make those historical connections and that we live in a world with multiple racisms, that they are parallels and there are intersections of those racisms. And whether we are talking about APIDA or AAPI, or amongst different communities of color in the US, those histories are important for me, at least, to understand and keep learning because there's, there's so much that, I often remark in OPAWL circles that AAPI persons and API persons, we need to know each other's histories. We don't know enough about one another. And so hopefully that kind of gets to the tough question that you asked us.

Shemariah (Co-host): Definitely, definitely. And, you know, as an organizer, as someone who identifies as a minoritized population, it's important for us to know one another's history, because there are places where they intersect and it's very clear as day, but then there are also places where they run parallel. So it may not be the exact same thing, but I know I can look over across the way and send you a fist or thumbs up or some love and some encouragement because we have this clarity that the same system that's oppressing people who might identify like me racially are the same people in the same system that's oppressing people who identify like you. And so I think that brings us to the concept of race and racism and the other. So, you know, I want to open it up to Tessa to comment on any of that, thinking about the concepts of race and racism as they intersect with the other. And what does that mean for us as political beings? So really understanding that these terms that we create for ourselves can serve as this political solidarity. And what

does that continue to mean for us as we continue to organize across lines of difference?

Tessa Xuan: Yeah. What immediately comes to mind would be some of the learnings from the disability justice movement that really pinpoint white supremacy and anti-blackness as like the foundation for a lot of other forms of oppression. You know, ableism, sexism, homophobia, all of these different forms of prejudice and discrimination that kind of ostracize and oppress groups that are not seen as normal. So, you know, just looking at what is seen as the dominant, normal way to be human. And I agree that a lot of it stems from anti-blackness, white supremacy. I also think about how, at least in the US context, you know, there's sort of this belief out there that you can transcend racism. If you're a person of color, if you sort of adopt the right behaviors, you know, go into the right career field, speak with the right accent, follow the types of norms that whiteness and patriarchy kind of values over everything else.

Tessa Xuan: And that this idea that you can assimilate and you can really achieve whiteness if you try hard enough. And if you follow the right playbook, follow the American dream. And I think the pandemic has really shown us that that's not really possible and that no level of education or perfecting your accent or, you know, even money. It all gives you more privilege, but it doesn't protect you from white supremacy. It doesn't really give you that ticket to becoming a white person. And yeah, I hope that makes sense. I mean, I just see so many examples of that; people trying to protect themselves, trying to protect their children and their family members through assimilation. But it hasn't really produced a society where people like us are safe from harm, where we're not at risk of being a victim of violence, you know, either interpersonally on the streets or through systemic forms of violence, like deportation or being a target of incarceration.

Tessa Xuan: So, those are some of my thoughts about that question.

Ashley (Co-host): I think that really resonates with me and it really brings me to my next question in terms of thinking about the tendency to use othering, especially in its most pejorative term, as it is systematically used to marginalize as a tool to stop immigration or to extend quote unquote citizenship benefits to only certain types of populations deemed quote unquote worthy. How do you all as organizers and moving in different spaces, how do you kind of work against those tactics and what tactics are you using? So we've talked a lot about solidarity, but, you know, with some specificity too, in terms of like, what does that solidarity work look like in terms of reacting to those types of practices? Suparna, do you want to start?

Suparna Bhaskaran: Sure. I think there's no, just one, silver bullet tactic, that multiple simultaneous tactics and approaches are needed. And I mean, some of the things that I can reflect on some of OPAWL's work as well has been for instance, the immigration justice work, telling people's stories, using visuals. So in many ways to generate a narrative that, this is what we look like. We are here. These are the kinds of things that we aspire for. And that this is not something super unusual, either,

but in some circumstances there are unusual circumstances as well. So I think the immigration justice project has been something that has been something I think very valuable by bringing in stories and bringing in visuals.

Suparna Bhaskaran: But I would say a second goal of that project is to connect different communities. So it was not just AAPI communities that immigrants, for instance, in Ohio, are Black and Brown and come from multiple migrations. And what we are encountering, particularly in the early 21st century are persons, not only from Central America or Mexico, but from the Caribbean and multiple nations in Africa, as well as multiple nations in Asia, for instance. And this is how we connect. These are some of the going back to our parallels and intersections. And how are the stories of immigrants and refugees similar and different? So I think telling stories that are not usually available, providing images, and also cutting across different communities.

Suparna Bhaskaran: Another important thing that would be also helpful to note is how often different groups of immigrants are also kind of pitted against each other, like the more desirables versus the undesirables, the more deserving immigrant versus the undeserving. And that's where issues, our experiences across socioeconomic class, for instance, must be also discussed. And you know, who are the immigrants that suffer? Who are the communities with more undocumented persons who are detained? Who are the persons more surveilled and deported? So those are the kinds of questions that we must ask and we must be there to back. I think those are some of the ways in which I think as organizers, that we've tried to kind of raise the issue in Ohio. And also having conversations.

Suparna Bhaskaran: It's extremely difficult to be in conversation with people. And this is a great opportunity to actually be in conversation with all of you, but it's pretty rare to be able to do that because we live in spaces where other people don't have time or don't want to actually kind of work, you know, really understand. And so we've had those kinds of moments through OPAWL as well. Particularly in relation to violence that's been directed towards API communities during the pandemic. And this is another project where we all decided we will eat together. It was another campaign where during the pandemic over Zoom, across different cities in Ohio, we would literally get takeout preferably from an Asian restaurant, an independent restaurant, and actually be in conversation. And I'm sure Tessa can talk a lot more about these projects as well as several other projects.

Tessa Xuan: Yes, I love all of the projects that you mentioned. The storytelling campaign that Suparna was talking about, we titled the initiative, Love Has No Borders, because it's really about how our immigration system consistently keeps families apart or separates them if they were able to be reunited in the US. And I think it goes back to the conservative movement in the US that has really been able to push this dominant narrative of conservatives are the group that is really pro-family and about conserving the nuclear family, but it's a very coded version of that story because it's really like white, upper middle class family that they're

talking about. Because our immigration system does not, does not value family unity.

Tessa Xuan: And I think dating back to before the country was founded, there were so many laws and practices that attracted immigrants to the US, where their labor was desired. But then their human need to care for their families and build families in the US was completely ignored or opposed. And it's really like seeing certain people as less than human because every single human has this very natural need to live with the people that they love. And during the Chinese Exclusion Act, there were lots of male laborers here in the country that just legally could not bring their wives and their families over to the US. So there was this huge generation of just bachelors that had no ability to raise families, raise children.

Tessa Xuan: So yeah, that was what the storytelling campaign. Really, the common theme of all of the stories, you know, of immigrants from around the world was showing how in these very, seemingly different ways. Their interactions with the legal immigration system and immigration enforcement forced them to be apart from the people that they loved. And trying to show how if we were to build this multiracial solidarity, really go after the flaws and the immigration system, that we could really achieve more healing and justice for a huge group of immigrants, rather than just focusing on H1B visas holders or just focusing on people who've come in through the refugee system or people who have benefited from DACA. Like all of these different groups have suffered through a lot of pain and really stressful, unconscionable experiences. And we need to look at the root cause of the problem.

Shemariah (Co-host): Yes, yes. All of that. I mean, those are examples of this socially constructed other, you know, other as immigrant. We could keep going down this list. It makes me think about a professor, Hasan Jeffries at OSU, was giving a talk, talking about social justice. And he talked about this process of Ellis Island and how for white immigrant families and communities, it's like, oh, well, we came here and we went through Ellis Island. And for some folks there's a landmark, there are actual names, there are actual documents. And then, you know, like we know that, but we don't really talk about it. But let me tell you what really made me think about this in a different way, is there is an Ancestry.com commercial that's highlighting someone, built their family story, their lineage. Yes, everyone needs to know where they come from, but on this Ancestry.com, there's this story about this family coming through Ellis Island. And how many people are they intentionally othering by telling this story, saying that this is an American story?

Shemariah (Co-host): You know, I haven't seen them talk about, you know, anyone else that would be considered an immigrant that hasn't come through Ellis Island. But we think about these things in this theory and this abstract, but then we have to pay attention to how it shows up in pop culture every day. And so there are folks who are experiencing that. And many of us work in classrooms with young people, they're experiencing that. And that's their point of reference as we're talking about these types of things. So I want to ask both of you, as we begin to

wrap up our conversation, what's the most important thing when thinking about the confluence of race and democracy, what do you want to leave with our listeners? Thinking about all the things that we've talked about, some of the tools that you gave thinking about family structures, communicating across lines of difference, but then also storytelling. Storytelling as a practice of freedom, storytelling within our families and within our communities, but then again, also across lines of difference. So what do you see as the most important aspect when thinking about the confluence of race and democracy?

Suparna Bhaskaran: Well, one thing that struck me about what you just said was Ancestry.com is that there is this kind of dominant narrative that America is a land of immigrants, a nation of immigrants. And that could be quite misleading to put it in a mild way. Because it lumps, all migrants and immigrants in the same fashion, number one. It, for instance, does not take into account internal forced migration, like the Trail of Tears, for instance, doesn't take into account the forced migration and movement of enslaved persons from West Africa. Or the forced migrations from the South, referred to as the Great Migrations to the Northeast and Midwest. But it also assumes that settler colonialism is the same as what we see with different kinds of immigration and migration that came afterwards, and all those histories are kind of flattened out.

Suparna Bhaskaran: And so going to your question about what I see as the most important aspect, when thinking about the confluence of race and democracy. One thing that jumps out is the idea of democracy, just like the idea of race, they're both socially made. They're contested, they're contradictory, they're debated. It's elusive. It changes in time and space. If you think about US democracy, when US democracy was being socially made or constructed, it was happening during the time when the majority of us residents were not considered to be Americans or citizens or part of the American polity. Most were either indigenous or enslaved or Chinese or women or poor men or immigrants. And so I see that we use the term democracy, a lot, you know. It's associated with, you know, either forms of government or democracy at our work or in our intimate lives and so on. But its promise and potential for inclusion and for power and resource sharing has been uneven and has not been realized for, for most persons. And as we work towards redefining, revaluing all these, racialized constructions as well, it's important that we continue to struggle and try to claim as much of that inclusion and power sharing.

Tessa Xuan: So I have a few things to add. I would say, I think that a lot of people are still understanding white supremacy, as it is this belief that white people are superior to people of other races, but it is also a real valuing of values and traditions and beliefs and behaviors that are associated with whiteness. It's not just about the color of people's skin or their DNA. But what is our value system? What do we as a society, what is the story that we tell of how we need to live and interact with each other? And in the US, we're obviously very skewed towards a really individualistic mindset of domination, of being completely separate from one another.

- Tessa Xuan: And I think there's a real contradiction between that value system and a healthy functioning democracy. So I would say, in order for our democracy to really live out its intention and purpose we need to shift. We need it to do a drastic shift towards some of the values of indigenous communities, of many communities of color, of many Third World countries, and communities of valuing interdependence and connection with the people who live around us. I know during the pandemic, it's kind of been made more clear that so many people don't have a strong support system. So many people don't have even a friend or a family member that they can call on if they need help, if something happens to them. And that's not the way that humans have survived, you know, throughout centuries and millennia. We've always needed each other. And our democracy only works when people kind of recognize that what impacts one of us impacts all of us.
- Shemariah (Co-host): So I want to wrap us up with this quote. I think that this. I'm going to just read it. I don't have to intro it. I'm going to just read it. It's Frederick Douglas. "Let me give you a word for the philosophy of reforms. The whole history of the progress of human liberty shows that all concessions yet made to her august claims must have been born of earnest struggle. The conflict has been exciting, agitating, all absorbing, and for the time being, putting all other tumults to silence. It must do this, or it does nothing. If there is no struggle, there is no progress. Those who profess to favor freedom and yet deprecate agitation are men who want crops without plowing up the ground. They want rain without thunder and lightning. They want the ocean without the awful roar of its mighty waters. This struggle may be a moral one or it may be a physical one and it may be moral and physical, but it must be a struggle. Power concedes to nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will. Find out just what any people will quietly submit to, and you have found out the exact measure of injustice and wrong which will be imposed upon them. And these will continue 'till they are resisted with either words or blows, or both. The limits of tyrants are prescribed by the endurance of those whom they oppress."
- Shemariah (Co-host): Frederick Douglas coming from his famous speech, "If There is No Struggle, There is No Progress," 1857. So we've been doing this a long time. We have been struggling. We have also been progressing, but we must continue our struggle. Thank you so much. Thank you, Tessa. Thank you, Suparna for joining us. We really appreciate this dialogue. Thank you so much.
- Tessa Xuan: Thank you for inviting us.
- Ashley (Co-Host): Thanks for listening to the Growing Democracy Podcast. I'm Ashley Nickels and my co-host this week was Dr. Shamara Arki. Our podcast is edited by Gheramy Demery at Golden Ox Studio in Cleveland, Ohio. This series is supported by Mark Lewine and the John Gray Paynther Program. If you like our show and want to know more, check out our website, growingdemocracyoh.org. If you want to support the podcast, as well as get access to behind the scenes content, live chat, and swag, featuring designs by Donuts and Coffee, head on over to

patreon.com/growingdemocracyoh. Join us next time, when we continue our conversation about race and democracy in Northeast Ohio.