

Ajantha Subramanian: There has to be some way of imagining democratic equality that doesn't sidestep historically-derived differences.

Elizabeth Ferry : From Brandeis University, welcome to Recall This Book, a podcast that looks backwards to see into the future. Our idea is to assemble scholars and writers from different disciplines, to make sense of contemporary issues, problems and events, by looking at books that shaped the world we inherited.

Elizabeth: Today the hosts are John Plotz, professor of English from Brandeis. Hello, John.

Elizabeth: And we are joined by Ajantha Subramanian.

Elizabeth: The topic for today will be meritocracy and privilege in higher education. Ajantha is professor of Anthropology and South Asian Studies at Harvard University. Her first book, "Shorelines: Space and Rights in South India," published by 2009 by Stanford University Press, chronicles the struggles for resource rights by Catholic fishers on India's southwestern coast.

Elizabeth: Her new book is called "The Caste of Merit: Engineering Education in India," and it was published in 2019 by Harvard University Press. In it, she studies students and alumni of the Indian Institutes of Technology, focusing on questions of meritocracy and democracy in India, in order to understand the production of merit as a form of caste property and its implication for democratic transformation. So Ajantha, could you start and tell us a little bit about the project, what inspired you to do it, and maybe a little bit what the field work was like.

Ajantha: Sure. I want to say that this project has been in the making for much of my life, because I've been surrounded by engineers for most of my life, many of whom are members of my own family. And I have been told repeatedly, especially by opinionated uncles, that my choice of anthropology was a frivolous one, and I was only able to make it because my father worked in international

development and was able to afford me the luxury of pursuing whims. Right? So, I was always-

Elizabeth: And not a real study like-

Ajantha: And not a real study, yeah.

Elizabeth: I see.

Ajantha: So, implied in that was both that the social sciences weren't real, that they were flimsy.

Elizabeth: That's very familiar to me.

Ajantha: They were flimsy forms of knowledge. But also that I didn't have to think about my bread and butter. Because my father had left India and was a dollar earner, that I didn't have to think in terms of social mobility. Right? I think that this irritation at being dismissed so easily was always with me.

Elizabeth: Would you say this book is retaliation?

Ajantha: Perhaps. But I also think it was just being exposed to an incredibly shrill politics around merit in India, and especially the backlash against expanding affirmative action within the technical sciences. That's something else that I was privy to for decades. Then coming to Harvard, where the language of merit is all around you and there are assumptions about individual talent and desert that totally sidestepped the question of structural inequality and inherited advantages and disadvantages. So, the combination of all of these things led me to the book. I suppose the biggest argument of the book is that claims to merit are expressions of upper-casteness, right? That meritocracy as a politics is an identitarian politics, right? And-

John Plotz: And merit gets marked how in this, in your case study? Is this through IIT, is that the-

Ajantha: Yeah. The site where I did the study was a set of institutions called the Indian Institutes of Technology, which are the cream of

undergraduate education in India and especially undergraduate technical education. They're impossible to get into. There's an annual exam every year where up to a million people take the exam and under 3% get in, so it's an incredibly competitive ordeal.

Elizabeth: I know there are billboards and things listing the winners.

Ajantha: Yeah, exactly. These institutions are a household word. They're a proven means to professional advancement and social mobility. They're also seen as these havens of meritocracy within a national education system which is mediocre, which fails its students, etc. etc. These institutions are seen as holding up the promise of true merit, right?

Elizabeth: And they're public institutions, right?

Ajantha: They're public institutions.

Elizabeth: Which is a big difference with some of the institutions regarded as elite in the United States.

Ajantha: Absolutely, yeah. They're public institutions but highly, highly-selective public institutions, right? So-

John: Are they understood as democratizing? Is there a rhetoric that goes back to the founding of the state, or not that far, that sees them as part of the democratizing project?

Ajantha: In general, technical education is seen as democratizing, right? From the early 20th century on, and especially after independence, you had massive state investment in technical training as a corollary in the education field of this broader commitment to technologically-driven modernization, right?

John: Right.

Ajantha: So, I mean, there's an explosion of institutions post-independence, but interestingly this one set of institutions, the IITs, were always

set apart from this larger impetus to democratize access to higher education. Right?

John: Yeah.

Ajantha: They were seen as exceptional, right? They were set apart as institutions of excellence, and this is actually what they were called, institutions of national excellence. There's this amazing quote from Nehru in the early days when the pros and cons of creating this new hyper-exclusive tier of public institutions was being debated in the parliament. He said, this is a paraphrase but something along the lines of, "Democracy's a good thing but unfortunately it can lead to mediocrity. So, there are certain spaces which should be set apart from the equity mandate, should be set apart as places of excellence." So, these were always seen as exceptional, public but exceptional, public but exclusive.

John: Now, I knew the French example better because I feel like in French-

Ajantha: Right, it's similar.

John: ... it's similar there, they have there the kind of plucked universities, and there's a large state access, like you said, funded by the state, but there are these sites of selection as well.

Elizabeth: Right.

John: But I mean, I'm sure in America we can think of a hundred ways that the parallel plays out too.

Ajantha: Yeah.

John: Think about the earlier tradition of the Ivy Leagues, then there's something like MIT which the technology institute but on the other hand it also somehow exists in that same world of-

Elizabeth: And also the so-called public Ivies, right?

John: Yeah, right.

Ajantha: Right, exactly.

John: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Elizabeth: Yeah.

Ajantha: Yeah. And even within the big public university systems there's always the flagship institution which is seen as more excellent than the rest.

Elizabeth: Yes.

Ajantha: Yes.

Elizabeth: And just to complete the description of your argument, most of the people who end up in the IITs are Brahmin?

Ajantha: Not Brahmin, but upper-caste.

Elizabeth: Okay.

Ajantha: Which is a broader category.

Elizabeth: Right.

Ajantha: Yeah. One of the ways that this set of institutions was set apart from the larger project of equalizing access to education was they were exempted from caste-based affirmative action. So, through the first two decades after their founding there was no affirmative action at all.

John: Whereas there was for other universities?

Ajantha: Whereas there were for even the very next tier of institutions. I mean, the thing I should say is that unlike the next tier of institutions, many of which were regionally-administered so they were administered at the regional level, this set of institutions was centrally-administered so they came under the purview of the federal government-

John: I see.

Ajantha: ... and not the regional state governments.

John: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Ajantha: So, the regional quotas for lower-caste that existed did not apply to this set of institutions. So, they were set apart from affirmative and so you had the obvious result of making the student body overwhelmingly both upper-caste and also upper-middle class, although there were some exceptions. But this, in the 1970s, the central government did introduce one set of quotas for the lowest tier of social groups, so the scheduled caste, who are now called the Dalits, and scheduled tribes. But the overall state of education was such that they rarely filled those quotas. And it was only in the 1990s and 2000s that new quotas were introduced for the intermediate rung of castes.

Elizabeth: Who might in fact be more likely to end actually end up in the-

Ajantha: Yeah, exactly, exactly. Who were actually much more of a threat to upper-caste hegemony of these institutions.

Elizabeth: Yeah.

John: One of my favorite sentences in this awesome book, you say that, "The leveraging of merit must be seen as an expression of upper-caste identitarianism that attempts to forestall progress towards a more egalitarian society, and derives its legitimacy from a larger global politics of ascription." I want to go back to larger global politics because I think that is a really interesting place to think about the US situation. But can you just talk about the leveraging of merit, which I feel like that's a crucial idea for you, and I'd love to hear you say more about that.

Ajantha: Yeah. I mean, this must be familiar to people who are not familiar with India, that merit becomes this way of claiming one's successes, be they educational or professional, as the product of hard work, of hard work, of-

Elizabeth: And talent.

Ajantha: ... individual ability, certain kinds of innate qualities, right?

John: Right.

Ajantha: So, merit becomes a way of bracketing structural considerations altogether, right?

John: Right.

Ajantha: One of the things that's so evident at these institutions, and also in India more generally, is every time there's a claim on a previously exclusive institutional space, whether it's the state, the state bureaucracy or higher educational institutions, the pushback is typically in the language of merit. We have to preserve merit at all costs. That to allow access to new groups, to allow them entry on different grounds, would be to undercut an incredibly important democratic principle. And the democratic principle is the principle of meritocracy.

John: That makes total sense to me, but can you say more about, "The leveraging of merit must be seen as an expression of upper-caste identitarianism."

Ajantha: Yeah.

John: Because, I think naively, I think of identitarianism as deliberately-embraced ascriptive identity.

Elizabeth: As explicit.

John: Yeah, as explicit. Whereas what you're describing sounds to me like it's a-

Ajantha: Yeah, it's a proxy.

John: ... misrecognition or a proxy.

Ajantha: Yeah.

John: Yeah, so-

Ajantha: Yeah. I should say that I don't know what the response to this book is going to be, but I expect that the thing that my interlocutors will hate the most is being called caste subjects. I don't think that they'll care at all about the leveraging part because they believe that the world is one of competition, that groups are in a tussle with other groups and you use whatever means there are at your disposal to get ahead.

John: Yeah, yeah.

Ajantha: That idea I think would be fine with them. What I think they would object to is being seen as expressing cast identity through those forms of leveraging. They do see themselves as a kind of corporate unit, but the corporate identity is an institutional one, right?

Elizabeth: Right.

Ajantha: They see themselves as IIT-ans, or an occupational one, they see themselves as engineers. So, there are all these corporate-

Elizabeth: Brand of IIT-

Ajantha: ... forms of identity that they are completely comfortable with. But caste I think is one that they actively disavow.

Elizabeth: Right.

Ajantha: They don't disavow it as cultures. What I mean by that is if I ask them, "What's your caste background?" I think many of them would say what it is. But to see it as a structural advantage is something that they would strongly object to.

John: Is there a kind of implicit tokenism then, where they will cite an example of some friend of theirs, a fellow ITT-an-

Ajantha: Who didn't get in?

John: No, who's not of their caste. In other words, there's Joe who's a Dalit or



Ajantha: Oh, absolutely.

John: Yeah.

Ajantha: Absolutely, yeah.

John: Because I feel like in America that's-

Elizabeth: That's a very classic move.

John: You know, "My black friend who ..." That's like a sitcom move, right?

Ajantha: Yeah. But here, it's interesting because more than that there's a kind of claim that caste was invisible to them, at least within the space of the institution, and that this is something that again sets the ITTs apart from the rest of bigger society. There's a kind of-

John: You don't see caste while you're in it because we're all engineers.

Ajantha: You don't see caste while you're on campus because we're all just like other people.

Elizabeth: Being smart together.

Ajantha: Right. We're just all being smart together. And that you leave behind all of these unfortunate carryovers from a premodern past. You leave those all behind when you enter the space of the institution and you're remade.

Elizabeth: Is the idea that that makes people on the springboard to global citizenship, like they're-

Ajantha: Well, global but also national.

Elizabeth: Okay. Both, yeah.

Ajantha: There's something really important about a national project of transcending caste.

John: But then how is that identitarianism? I think I still don't get that. I mean, it structurally might legitimate people in upper-caste positions, you benefit from your status.

Ajantha: Yeah.

John: But isn't identitarianism predicated on positively-

Elizabeth: Claiming.

John: Claiming belonging. Yeah.

Ajantha: Stuart Hall has this interesting argument about race not always speaking in its own language, that there are other descriptors, other forms of-

John: Proxy markers.

Ajantha: ... discursive self-marking-

Elizabeth: Idioms of-

Ajantha: ... that stand in for race. And you recognize it as race based on what it is arrayed against. In this instance, this kind of corporate identity is not just leveraged as a means to whatever, accumulation, advancement, etc. It's also pitted against something, and the thing that it's pitted against is lower-caste. It's a kind of disidentification with this other corporate group, and it's that kind of binary formulation of what one is that allows you to see that this is in fact a form of upper-casteness.

John: Right, right.

Ajantha: So, the oppositional framing is super-important.

John: Right.

Ajantha: Right? That's what calls the lie to this as non-identitarian.

John: Right.

Ajantha: They use a universalistic language to describe themselves, but it's also one that's antithetical to certain other groupings, and that's where you see-

Elizabeth: So, it's in the positioning?

Ajantha: It's in the positioning. These are the other groups. Who of course they charge with being identitarian.

John: Right.

Ajantha: Right?

John: Yeah.

Ajantha: And it's a similar thing with-

John: Which is why you think they'll react strongly against this?

Ajantha: Yes.

John: Because you think they will say, "Oh no, that's what my opponents are doing but I am not-"

Ajantha: Yeah. "This is not what we're doing."

John: "That's not what I'm doing."

Ajantha: Yeah, yeah.

John: Yeah.

Ajantha: "In fact, we're against caste."

John: Yeah.

Ajantha: Right?

Elizabeth: Right.

John: Yeah.

Ajantha: "And we're against a politics of caste."

John: Right.

Ajantha: Yeah.

Elizabeth: One of the things that's very exciting about the argument is the way that it mobilizes other kinds of languages about other kinds of categories, maybe especially whiteness.

Ajantha: Yeah.

Elizabeth: You talk about upper-casteness, which I think is your term, right?

Ajantha: It's my awkward neologism-

Elizabeth: Right, but I think it works, right?

Ajantha: ... that is a kind of-

Elizabeth: It's in order to invoke whiteness, right?

Ajantha: Whiteness, exactly.

Elizabeth: And you talk about it as property and as possessive accumulations, drawing on these other conversations about whiteness.

Ajantha: Yeah.

Elizabeth: And this to a non-Indianist, a non-specialist in India, maybe especially an anthropologist but probably more broadly, is really interesting because caste is often thought of as being radically different from race on the one hand and class on the other. And you're showing the complex ways in which its mechanism is the same.

Ajantha: Yeah.

Elizabeth: So, I don't know if you want to say anything about that.

Ajantha: Yeah. I'm certainly not the only one who has done this, lots of people have argued for making caste more obviously comparable to other systems of social stratification. That caste is so often seen as the emblematic marker of Indian cultural difference, something that is so particular that it can't be compared or discussed alongside anything else.

Elizabeth: Or it can only be compared on the basis of its radical difference.

Ajantha: Yes.

Elizabeth: As a kind of foil.

Ajantha: And I teach a course called Race and Caste and it's very interesting. All of the non-Indian, non-South-Asian students in the class, were initially very nervous about the caste literature that we were covering, because they assumed that it would never be familiar to them.

Elizabeth: Right.

Ajantha: And the structure of the course was such that were forced to think them together. So, every module was on a certain topic like the plantation where, okay, you see how the plantation as a technology has produced both caste and race and then the census has produced both caste and race and so-

Elizabeth: Oh, nice. Yeah.

Ajantha: Yeah. Anyway, so-

John: So, in that class, do you have a configuration for the triangle that Elizabeth alluded to, caste-

Ajantha: Class-

John: ... class, yeah, and race? Yeah.

Ajantha: I mean, part of the point of the class is to insist is that one of the reasons caste and race are comparable is because of a history of capitalist transformation. So, caste and class, I mean caste and

race, were instruments for the expansion of an imperial political economy.

John: Yeah.

Ajantha: And so it's important to think about class-

Elizabeth: And a naturalization of difference that smooths that process?

Ajantha: Yeah. But also that one cannot think about class formation outside of these other categories. So, when you think about class formation in a place like India or class formation in the United States, it was always rooted through these so-called ascriptive categories of race and caste. So, class was never something that operated in isolation from ... It's less an argument about intersectionality, because intersectionality still keeps these things as separate structures that then interact.

John: Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah.

Elizabeth: Right.

Ajantha: But I'm saying that class formation is inherently a caste process.

John: Yeah.

Ajantha: Right? You can't think about it outside of caste.

John: Good. I hoped you'd say that because it seems like a good connection to bring up.

Elizabeth: Yeah, this seems like a good moment to introduce our second text, which is really bringing to the forefront these kinds of comparisons.

Ajantha: Yeah.

Elizabeth: The text is by Shamus Khan. It's called "Privilege: The Making of an Adolescent Elite at St. Paul's School," and it was published in 2011 by Princeton. Khan was a student at St. Paul's. He's also a South-Asian American, and he then became a teacher as a

sociologist. So, he was a teacher at St. Paul's but it was understood that he was doing his sociological study of St. Paul's as part of it. He makes a really interesting argument about a shift in the way in which privilege is mobilized over the past ... I can't remember exactly, the few decades, let's say, since probably he was a student.

Ajantha: Yeah. Which isn't even that long.

Elizabeth: No, it's not that long.

John: Right, yeah, yeah.

Ajantha: He's talking about perhaps 20 years if not less.

John: Yeah. I was going to say 30 years seems long to me. I think it might be a lot shorter than that.

Elizabeth: Yeah, it maybe be shorter, yeah.

John: Yeah. Date from the publication of American Psycho or something, yeah.

Elizabeth: Although I think even by the 80s it was starting.

John: Yeah. Greed is good.

Ajantha: Greed is good, yeah.

John: Yeah.

Elizabeth: Well, and I mean specifically this shift from privilege as being marked by the kind of boundaries that you can keep and the way that you can keep people out, from a much more a kind of in some ways immediately, seemingly appealing, mode of privilege. But also maybe more insidious because of that, which is privilege as this ease of being able to go anywhere. Now you don't have to buy stuff from Brooks Brother, you can buy stuff from Target.

Ajantha: Right.

Elizabeth: But it's your ability to buy stuff from Target and Brooks Brothers that marks you as privileged.

John: yeah, yeah. Can I just quote his three lessons of privilege because they seem so-

Ajantha: So great, yeah.

John: Yeah, they're great and yet they're so paradoxical. Okay, so the three lessons are one; hierarchies are natural and can be used to one's advantage, two; experiences matter more than innate or inherited qualities, which is so worth unpacking, and three; the way to signal your elite status is through ease and openness in all social contexts. Inequality is ever-present, but elites now view it as fair.

Ajantha: Yeah.

Elizabeth: Right.

John: Yeah.

Ajantha: Yeah.

Elizabeth: Right.

John: So, ease and openness yes, but not democratic leveling.

Elizabeth: Right, right, exactly.

John: So, you get to go everywhere but you go everywhere across difference.

Elizabeth: Yeah. And there's a differential distribution of the ability to go everywhere.

John: Absolutely.

Ajantha: And he talks about seeing hierarchies as ladders you can climb.

Elizabeth: Right.



Ajantha: Right?

Elizabeth: Yeah.

Ajantha: And this idea that everyone has opportunity stands in for a true commitment to equality. So, opportunity takes the place of equality.

John: Right.

Elizabeth: Right, right.

John: Yeah.

Elizabeth: I mean, to me it seems an extension or it's making the language of merit even more flexible, because it makes it into this traveling quality that isn't just linked to what used to be called breeding or accent or all these kinds of things.

John: I see what you're saying, yeah.

Ajantha: Yeah. That's partly the alibi, right?

Elizabeth: Right.

Ajantha: I mean, as he says, St. Paul's has changed. It looks more like the world, or the nation I suppose, except you scratch the surface and you realize that in terms of class for instance there is still a uniformity to who is able to come, right?

Elizabeth: Right, right.

Ajantha: But it's this idea that the doors are now open and people can come in. And that the new kind of outsiders are the ones from these old elite families. The ones who think that they're simply entitled to St. Paul's because they're legacy admits. I mean, they're the ones who are now seen as not embodying the spirit of the institution, right?

Elizabeth: Yeah, deeply uncool, right.

John: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Elizabeth: But then the other part of it is yes, it may look more like the nation, and there may even be some class diversity, but the experience of St. Paul's is-

Ajantha: Is very different.

Elizabeth: ... radically different for those different students, right?

Ajantha: Absolutely, yeah.

Elizabeth: And the ways in which they are made to feel like they belong or not.

Ajantha: Yeah.

Elizabeth: Yeah.

Ajantha: Yeah. So, by the end, I mean you see that working-class kids and non-white kids aren't able to inhabit that ease in the same way. Right?

Elizabeth: Yeah.

Ajantha: And especially if they insist on keeping their own backgrounds in the foreground, right?

Elizabeth: Right.

Ajantha: They're seen as somehow intransigent.

Elizabeth: Right, right.

Ajantha: Yeah.

Elizabeth: There's an interesting anthropological article about diversity as a resource on college campuses, and it's connected to this. It's like the working-class and students of color who are there, are there partly to be mobilized, not necessarily to mobilize themselves, right?

Ajantha: Right, right.

Elizabeth: So, if they don't play that role effectively then there are costs.

Ajantha: Yeah, yeah.

Elizabeth: Yeah.

Ajantha: This one black girl that he writes about is somewhat friendless because she's so aware of all the people from her neighborhood who aren't at St. Paul's, right?

Elizabeth: Right.

Ajantha: Even as her presence is being celebrated, she's so acutely aware of how exclusionary this space actually is, and no one wants to be reminded of that.

John: Yeah. I think it-

Elizabeth: And that wasn't supposed to be her job coming there, right?

Ajantha: That was not supposed to be her job.

John: I think I plugged this book before but that Anthony Jack book about the privileged poor I think is fascinating about that, just by giving that as sort of more granularity to that way that you can arrive and then serve the purpose of being the diversity for others' benefits.

Ajantha: Yeah.

Elizabeth: Exactly.

Ajantha: Yeah.

John: Yeah.

Elizabeth: Yeah.

John: No, I feel like the insight about access is not the same as quality is the crucial one there.

Ajantha: I guess the difference is that he's really emphasizing this discontinuity between an older cohort and this newer group.

John: Yeah.

Ajantha: I was thinking about whether that applied to the IITs, and I think it does and it doesn't.

Elizabeth: Well, here is where I think the public character of the institution, and its part of being created as part of a national project, makes a difference, right?

Ajantha: Yeah.

Elizabeth: Because that was not what St. Paul's was invented for.

Ajantha: No, no, no, no. But also the majority of IIT-ans-

Elizabeth: It was always supposed to educate the sons of the elite, right?

Ajantha: Right.

Elizabeth: That was what it was for.

Ajantha: Right. But here the majority of IIT-ans are actually, and this is part of their claim to merit, is that they're not from the industrial elite or the business elite, or even necessarily the landed elite. These are the children of civil servants. These are people who really enter the professional class through the state. I mean, they are beneficiaries of state developmentalism, whether in the colonial or the postcolonial period. But they're upper-caste. So, this combination of being upper-caste and middle class I think makes for a different story than the one that Shamus Khan was telling. Right?

Elizabeth: Yeah, I think that's right. Yeah, yeah.

Ajantha: Yeah, yeah.

Elizabeth: Perhaps we should shift to Recallable Books.

John: Yeah, that-

Elizabeth: Does that seem like a good moment?

John: It does, but actually can I just ... I just have one. I have such an inchoate question, so you guys can give a sharp answer to a dumb question. In terms of the temporality of the disjunction here, I'm still trying to think about how this relates to most current raise of ethno-nationalism.

Ajantha: Yes, yeah.

John: I mean, I heard you mentioned Trump really quickly, but I was just thinking about obviously there's a way in which certainly the privileged book fits into the narrative about some of the internal contradictions of neoliberalism, right?

Ajantha: Yeah.

John: That's an account that goes back to the 80s because it's about Regan, and it's about the raise of a kind of global meritocracy that refuses to name its own class status or something like that. But here we are, we're probably 10 years into some different habitus or some different ethos. So, how does the argument fit into that? You talk some about the rise of nationalism in the Indian context. So, can we talk about that, whiteness and upper-caste as-

Ajantha: Yeah, yeah.

John: ... distinctly new I suppose?

Ajantha: Yeah. Part of what I'm trying to do in the book is say that this kind of comfortable way of inhabiting a universal subjectivity, a kind of unmarked status, that the ability to do that is increasingly challenged by oppositional movements. Whether they are low caste movements in India or minority rights movements etc. in the US. So, there's a way that the universal subject is exposed as actually being marked, and being marked by caste or race.

John: Right.

Ajantha: And so what happens when that challenge is posed, right?

John: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Ajantha: I think what happens is that suddenly a commitment to liberal universalism phrase, and there's a retreat into a much more defensive posture and a much more explicit claim to identity.

John: Yeah.

Elizabeth: Right.

Ajantha: So-

Elizabeth: But that does not seem to be what's happening in Khan's book.

Ajantha: I think that this-

Elizabeth: They seem to be doubling down on-

Ajantha: On the liberal individualism.

Elizabeth: Yeah.

John: Yeah.

Ajantha: Yeah.

Elizabeth: It was published in 2011 so let's say the work was 2008, if he wrote it now it'd be different, yeah.

Ajantha: Yeah, I would be curious whether there would be a difference now, right?

Elizabeth: Yeah.

Ajantha: So, I do think that there's been a return to a much more explicit claim to racial or caste superiority.

John: Yeah.

Ajantha: But it's not the old racial or caste superiority, because it's still blended with notions of meritocracy.

John: Yeah.

Elizabeth: Right.

Ajantha: so-

John: And you see that return as a cultural outgrowth of responses to minoritarian movements?

Ajantha: I do, I do.

John: So, it's explicitly provoked by this egalitarian possibility?

Elizabeth: Yeah.

Ajantha: Absolutely.

John: Yeah.

Elizabeth: Yeah.

Ajantha: Yeah. I mean, I think the more they're pushed to share the pie and not just be benevolent patrons, the more they're kind of-

Elizabeth: And to not be the ones who set the terms of how the pie is shared, right?

Ajantha: Yeah.

John: Yeah.

Ajantha: Yeah. The more there's this ... Which begs the question of where is this all heading, right?

John: Yeah, right.

Elizabeth: Right.

Ajantha: But that's the response. Is there any possibility for a shared politics?

John: Yeah.

Ajantha: Which is actually about egalitarianism and not just the recognition of multiple differences or whatever it is.

John: Right.

Ajantha: I don't know. I mean, I do think that there has to be some way of imagining democratic equality that doesn't sidestep historically-derived differences, right?

Elizabeth: Right.

Ajantha: I mean, one has to work through those in order to achieve a proper equality that's not just formal, where it's actually a substantive form of equality. I think one of the reasons why the earlier form of universalism was so hollow is because it was about transcendence of difference and not about working through lived embodied differences in order to come to something that's more equal. Does that make sense?

Elizabeth: Right, right.

John: Actually, maybe that's a good pivot to talk about my Recallable Book, which is basically a book from the guilt moment. The book that I was thinking of Nicholas Lemann's "The Big Test," and I think it's 1999.

Ajantha: Yeah.

John: But it's The Secret History of the American Meritocracy, so it's about the SAT, and it's actually about ... I mean, it's certainly about the privilege accorded to the old Ivies, but also as somebody mentioned earlier, the public Ivies, the way in which places like the University of Michigan or the University of California also had a hyper-porous screening mechanism that could draw people up



into their world without fundamentally deranging the quality of the elite education they were offering.

John: So, it's just a fascinating ... For me, it helped me think about how the American paradigm of how public education has always had these internal differentiations in it. But the thing that I wanted to say, that relates to the guilt point, is that Lemann does do a good job of explaining how this kind of new access into privileged education came out of the postwar American sense that somehow society had to be committed to democratic openness. Even though people weren't willing to allow that process to go completely, at least they had to provide some kind of redemptive narrative.

Ajantha: Yeah.

John: So, I guess in a way it's the case to be made for hypocrisy, that hypocrisy does produce some element of openness. It's a granular account of how these educational systems can change superficially in so many ways without changing behind the scenes.

Elizabeth: Right.

John: It's so worth reading.

Elizabeth: Yeah.

Ajantha: Yeah, yeah. There's another book by this intellectual historian, John Carson, it's called ... I forget the title. "The Measure of Merit." And it's a comparison of France and the US.

John: Oh, I'd love to read that, yeah.

Ajantha: The twist in it is that France is the society I suppose that comes up with IQ test, and the IQ test becomes all the rage in the United States. People pick it up and run with it because it fits so well with ideologies of individualism, this idea of the objective, quantitative measurement of merit. Whereas it falls by the wayside in France where the notion of institutions and expert judgment is so powerful that the test is not allowed to stand in.

John: Interesting. Yeah, yeah.

Ajantha: So, that would be an interesting thing to think with.

John: Yeah, that would be a great comparison, yeah.

Elizabeth: Yeah, yeah. Every time John does not bring up a 19th century novel, I feel that I must.

John: Awesome, great.

Elizabeth: And in this case it is "Phineas Finn," which is written by Anthony Trollope. It's one of the Palliser novels. I thought of it because Phineas Finn is a member of the Irish gentry but he's Catholic and he's Irish, which is also kind of marked. He comes to London and he actually does very well, but there's a lot of conversation about him doing well, the reasons why he's doing well even though he's Catholic and Irish. And there's quite a lot of anti-Irish sentiment throughout Trollope's books.

Elizabeth: It comes down to these questions of breeding, he looks good in a coat, he knows how to hunt, the variety of ways in which he displays his capacity to join his merit. The other part of it that I found interesting and relevant is that this is a time when not tests to enter universities but tests to enter the civil service are being instituted, so that it's not only the children of the aristocracy or the gentry that are entering these things.

Elizabeth: There's a lot of discussion. Trollope is great about bringing up these political questions through the course of his plotting, and one of them is about the ... And he's a little agnostic. He's describing this as a kind of outrage, but there's also a little bit of a feeling that he has a sociological take on it as well, of why the country is going to the dogs, because now this exam is being instituted.

John: Yeah. There's a couple of great recent books, one by Jennifer Ruth and one by Lauren Goodlad, that are both accounts of basically the understanding of the profession and the career as diverging at this moment, because the career is bureaucratically pegged to this

kind of objective test, whereas the profession, and something like doctor or lawyer would be the superb example of that, has this internalized merit account. Like the doctor is doing things on their own and they're somehow away from that quantitative analysis.

Elizabeth: And then the other part of it is proletariat-

John: It's the quality versus the quantity.

Ajantha: Yeah.

Elizabeth: ... who is explicitly understood to not know what the hell he's doing to Trollope, right?

John: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Elizabeth: And to not have any merit. And yet they're elected through these ... what are they called? Rotten boroughs, where it's basically the squire's decision who's going to be elected to parliament, and then they go and they sit there and they don't say anything for years on end.

John: Yeah. Yeah, that's quality.

John: That's ascription, come to think of that. Oh, that's really helpful.

Elizabeth: Yeah.

Ajantha: Yeah.

John: Yeah. Okay.

Elizabeth: Actually, I think it connects to-

John: I'll have to reread Middlemarch with ascription in mind, yeah.

Elizabeth: ... that earlier phase in the St. Paul's book where it's understood that these people are fuck-ups and they-

Ajantha: Yeah, exactly.

Elizabeth: ... don't ever go to class, they have a gentleman's C and they spend all their time getting drunk, and yet that merits in some weird way-

Ajantha: And yet it has no bearing on where they can make it through, yeah.

Elizabeth: That's the thing that we are supposed to be preserving from the hoards that are going to come over the wall.

Ajantha: Yeah.

Elizabeth: So-

Ajantha: Yeah.

John: There's so many campus novels that have that quality. I was actually thinking about Donna Tartt's "Secret History," which is my favorite campus novel.

Elizabeth: That's a great book.

John: That the thing you think you're there for is not the thing you're actually there for, that it's oblique ... The putative, certified reason for coming, and then there's that underneath reason to be there.

Ajantha: Yeah, exactly.

Elizabeth: Yeah, right. And the knowing of that secret is part of your belonging, right?

John: Yeah, yeah, yeah. That's more than nonchalance, that's something other than nonchalance.

Ajantha: And if you actually mistake one for the other-

John: Yeah.

Elizabeth: Yeah.

Ajantha: ... I mean, that's the worst kind of naivete.

John: Yeah.

Elizabeth: Yes.

John: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Ajantha: That's when you really know you don't belong.

John: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Elizabeth: Yeah, exactly.

Ajantha: Where you think what you're there for is the grade.

John: Yeah.

Elizabeth: Yeah, yeah, exactly.

Ajantha: So mine, it's a memoir by a woman named Sujatha Gidla who's actually trained ... She's a Dalit and she's from a Christian Dalit family in South India. She was trained as an engineer. She went to one of these regional engineering colleges, not the top tier but the next tier, and also was a research scholar at IIT Madras for a time. Migrated to the US and now works as a conductor in the New York City Subway.

Elizabeth: Oh wow.

John: Wow.

Ajantha: It's one of these stories which is the story of modern India. The subtitle is *An Untouchable Family and the Making of Modern India*, and the title is "Ants Among Elephants."

John: Wow. That sounds great, yeah.

Ajantha: It's this remarkable story. One could think of it as the story of the post-independence period from the vantage point of a Dalit family's experience and a multi-generational account of a Dalit family's experience.

Ajantha: The two characters that really jump out and that are the stars of the story are her uncle, her maternal uncle, who ends up being this communist radical who is hellbent on organizing the peasantry for revolution. But he's also this incredibly complicated figure who falls in love with an upper-caste girl and is shunned by her. There's nothing one-dimensional about any of these characters.

Ajantha: Her mother is this really interesting character who's forced into an arranged marriage, but is this shining star on the horizon and lines things up in such a way that she's afforded every possible opportunity. But she has this really amazing way of talking about how caste, and especially to be a Dalit, was inescapable. That you couldn't but be a Dalit in India. The aspiration to unmarking wasn't even thinkable, it was not thinkable.

Ajantha: But she also says that it was only when she came to the United States that she thought of her story as a story. I mean, just to give you a taste of it. She starts, "My stories and my family's stories were not stories in India, they were just life. When I left and made new friends in a new country, only then did the things that had happened to my family, things we had done, become stories, stories worth telling, stories worth writing down."

John: It's kind of like Chris' book, right?

Elizabeth: Yes.

John: Yeah.

Ajantha: Each of these is a paragraph. Okay. Then the next one is, "I was born in South India in a town called Kazipet in the state of Andhra Pradesh." Next paragraph. "I was born into a lower middle class family. My parents were college lecturers. I was born an untouchable." Right?

John: Right.

Ajantha: It's a kind of coming to consciousness story, but one where she was always conscious. So, it's quite remarkable and I haven't read anything like it.

John: Wow, that sounds great.

Elizabeth: That's good.

John: Yeah.

Ajantha: There's a whole tradition of the Dalit memoir. There are precursors to this that are in the same vein. But there's something about hers that is almost more compelling because it's so unsentimental and it's transnational which gives it a unique twist.

Elizabeth: Yeah.

Ajantha: Anyway, so that's my recommendation.

Elizabeth: That's great, thank you.

Ajantha: Yeah.

Elizabeth: Okay. With that, we will say goodbye. With that, we will say goodbye to you, Ajantha, for the moment. And thank you very much-

Ajantha: Thank you.

Elizabeth: ... for this conversation, and thank you John.

John: Yes, thank you so much. Yeah.

Elizabeth: Recall This Book is the brainchild of John Plotz and Elizabeth Ferry. It is affiliated with Public Books and is record and edited in the media lab of the Brandeis Library by Plotz, Ferry and a cadre of colleagues here in the Boston area and beyond. Our music comes from a song by Eric Chasalow and Barbara Cassidy, Fly Away.

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