

Recall This Book 43

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Sanjay Krishnan on V. S. Naipaul:

To make the Deformation the Formation

John Plotz:

From Brandeis University, welcome to Recall this Book, where we assemble scholars and writers from different disciplines to make sense of contemporary issues, problems, and events. I'm John Plotz, and my guest today is Sanjay Krishnan, eminent professor of English literature at Boston University and author most recently of *V. S. Naipaul's Journeys: from Periphery to Center*, Columbia University Press 2020.

Who exactly was the Trinidad-born Nobel Laureate Caribbean poet, Derek Walcott called "V S Nightfall," and many other post-colonial subjects have called far worse? Well, he's probably most famous for a comic masterpiece written in his twenties, his 1961 *A House for Mr. Biswas*, but he was also praised and vilified for wide-ranging journalism essays and fiction over the following decades, including a series of works--like *An Area of Darkness*, *A Bend in the River* and *India: A Wounded Civilization*-- works that studied the post-colonial "formations and deformations" (to take Sanjay's language) in ways that assigned blame and credit in distinctly unpopular and to some unforgivable ways.

Sanjay joins us today because his book offers the first post postcolonial reassessment of this complex and maddening writer. Sanjay, thanks so much for joining us on Recall This Book. You know, you have this conception of him thinking of the worlds inside himself as a world--ways that he understands the world out there is through understanding inside himself. So the same argument about critical self-reflection, which is in which the ugliness of all the things that surface like the racism or the forms of ethno-nationalism, you understand them as surfacing as part of his work, rather than being accidental

prejudices. You understand him as working through where those feelings might come from.

Sanjay Krishnan:

Yes. I think that this is something that has been completely missed. People have never been able to grasp this fundamental point about Naipaul's formation that he was in a sense, *the* postcolonial writer. Because the ethno-nationalist wave broke in a particular way in Trinidad, in the 1950s, at a point when making, you know, making arguments that were sort of counter to the standard anti-colonial nationalist argument was actually illegible. And so Naipaul was actually sort of witness to a kind of a social process that was underway. This was the, the second, you know, the decolonization that swept through the system. And now there was something else happening as a consequence of that. And so—

Plotz:

So let me back you up right there, 'cause that's really important. And I want to make sure, because I feel like that's consistent with something you say, which I wanted to ask you about. You said that "he's one of the first post-colonial writers to think about global parallels between different groups of unprotected and exploited peoples. And he's one of the first writers to focus on the experience of decolonization as an interconnected global phenomenon." Okay. So that's a general claim, but you just made a specific claim about Trinidad. So we should say Naipaul is from Trinidad. He grew up in Trinidad, then he left in '50....When did he leave?

Krishnan:

Yeah. Yeah, he grew up, he was born in Trinidad in 1932. He went to school in Trinidad and he won a scholarship that took him to Oxford University in 1950. So he's, he's,

Plotz:

That's the classic, that's the Windrush generation. Isn't it...?

Krishnan:

Before, just a little. So he goes to England in 1950 and then he graduated in 1954 and from Oxford, and then he sort of tries to get started at as a writer in London and he returns to Trinidad for a visit in 1956, shortly after he has completed *Miguel Street*. And it's in 1956 that he comes into direct contact with the kind of racist politics of kind of competing nationalisms, if you like, different groups, having different visions for the society, as it sort of moves towards independence. And he sees how people are being mobilized along ethnic lines.

Plotz:

Speaking ethnically, Trinidad is a slightly distinctive in the Caribbean context because there's a substantial Indian minority, but it's clearly an Afro-Caribbean majority, but a substantial Indian minority. So your point is that this is '56, '57 is very early for the decolonization is really in its early stages, but already you're entering this second wave, which is there's this vacuum. And the question is like, *who are the inheritors?*

Krishnan:

Yeah. And the country is really hasn't become independent yet. That only happens in '62, but the politics that defined post-colonial Trinidad is already becoming apparent by the late 1950s.

Plotz:

So one phrase you have (I'm still thinking about this point, your point about him being an early to notice this) you say on page 16 "it's possible to see what was less clear in the headier days of decolonization that Naipaul's refusal to shy away from discomforting aspects of postcolonial life was not an attempt to blame the victim, but part of a scrupulous, if at times, flawed effort to grapple with the uneven consequences of the global transition into modernity." So we can come back to *flawed* maybe because obviously lots of people say he's flawed in many ways. But can you say more about what it means that he's grappling with the uneven consequences of the transition?

Krishnan:

Well, I think that, you know, Naipaul has a sort of a sense that decolonization is not going to be the smooth process that many people hoped or thought it would be. That there would be problems, but these problems could be overcome. And so I think that, you know, starting in the late 50's, and then he begins writing about this in the 60's, he's actually sort of attending to these kinds of questions through, you know, in different works from *The Mimic Men* to you know, *In a Free State*. And he's actually moving into different places as he talks about this in different ways.

Plotz:

I don't want to oversimplify your argument, but is clearly the fact that he himself belongs to a group that is a racial minority within a postcolonial state where majority versus minority distinctions turn out to matter a lot is important. Do you see that as just a kind of contingent fact about Naipaul or is that crucial? That his crucible is the racialization of a place in which he's part of a minority?

Krishnan:

I think it is crucial. I think this is again a point that's not been picked up on by Naipaul's critics, or most of them. I think that Naipaul, you know, came to understand that a kind of ethnic nationalist politics was going to take over the secular nationalist framework of postcolonial societies.

Plotz:

Yes. And that's why I mentioned the phrase.

Krishnan:

Yeah. And so actually, if you look at a lot, if you look at his writings and I can go through them, the kind of attention he brings to bear on ethnic minorities is extraordinary. I mean, every one of his works is actually interested in the figure of the minority. He never brands it or labels it as such, but this is in fact where his gaze always takes him. In fact, it's actually hard to know if he's

actually even sort of thinking about it in a self-conscious way, but he's always working through the minority question in all of the places he goes to . You know, the opening of *In a Free State*, the conclusion of *In a Free State*, of *Bend in the River*, all of his important works are really concerned with the question of the minority.

Plotz:

So can I read a quote? This is, I think he's writing about Trinidad in '65, roughly this is on your page 22: "We weren't responsible in that way, much had been taken out of our hands. We didn't have backgrounds. If you could"--this is a wonderful image. "If you could look down at us from the sky, you would see us living in our little houses between the sea and the Bush [And I know Naipaul loves that word, the Bush]...we were just there floating." Now I can see how that would irritate a lot of people because he's saying, *No, we didn't have responsibility. We didn't have depth.* So I guess he's arguing against that kind of organicism of Williams, which just says, don't worry, there's always authentic culture to fall back on. He's saying, *no, it's not authentic...*

Krishnan:

I would qualify that somewhat because I think what he's saying to Arthur Calder Marshall, who is the writer he's sort of criticizing, is that whatever claims one might make for the Welsh working class you know, that Williams makes Williams is saying that this the group of people that he's familiar with that is to say that the people in Trinidad in the 1930s were really sort of displaced peasants who had been sort of violently inducted into modern conditions of life, and so were not equipped in the same ways that a working-class which had, which had sort of been inducted into colonial capitalism through a kind of a socially organic process might have been.

Plotz

And you have a line: "the institutions and norms of colonized societies had been deranged by modernity."

Krishnan:

Yeah. I think what Naipaul is saying is you want to be very careful about projecting the kinds of hopes you have for working class revolution in Europe onto a colonial context.

Plotz

Okay, so one thing is--I'm, I'm going to not get this right--but do you remember Derek Walcott's Nobel speech? Cause he talks about attending a ceremony in St. Lucia, in Trinidad. It's a rain festival, right? The launch of arrows...So Walcott's point as I understand it there is *like the derangement is our arrangement*. In other words, there's no organic continuity, but the very syncretic synthesis actually that is our modern formation of our conception. We arise out of that syncretism.

Krishnan;

Yeah. It's very interesting. You know, I haven't, I haven't got a read of that Walcott essay, but it's interesting because actually Naipaul writes about a similar performance called it's called the Ramlila which was sort of the people laborers, indentured laborers from India, performing these performing the Ramayana basically on the edges of the sugarcane plantations. Naipaul actually talks about how he actually got his first sense of theater from these performances, which was sort of done by these peasants. Walcott sort of exoticizes it somewhat, he turns it into a kind of a moment of self-creation, you know. So he doesn't want to historicize these things. For Naipaul it's much more important to sort of historicize the ways in which these performances are taking place. So I think that that's the slight distinction I would make.

I don't want to say too much because I don't exactly remember, but that's the impression I have then, you know, from Walcott I think there is a kind of optimism, obviously that there is a kind of possibility and Naipaul is writing as I think an ethnic minority in the Trinidadian context. And he's also kind of looking at you know the ways in which these performances are taking place within a particular historical formation. And I write about some of this in the book, that some of the kinds of cultural or social practices that emerge out of this context are not necessarily sort of aligned with the forms of the kinds of institutions that, you want to sort of begin to have in place as you move towards, you know, producing a kind of democratic political structures. So, I

think that there was work to be done and that kind of work is what Naipaul is much more interested in sort of teasing out through his writing.

Plotz:

So I said, I wanted to get to Orwell, but I kind of want to do it by way of another analogy came to mind that I just wanted to float with you, which is, is the idea if you think about Naipaul is starting to write in as early as the '50s, another virtual parallel is the literary Naturalism that you see in someone like Armah, *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* or maybe even in Richard Wright's *Native Son*. So I don't know how you think about that. The reason I'm thinking of the parallel is that in both Armah and Wright I think you get this notion that we do live in a deranged modernity. In other words, there's nothing organic or comforting about the social fabric, which is represented in Armah's case. It's just like what it means to live here in my country and then writes case. It means what does it mean to be a Black American, but the point is that they, they, they grapple with a deranged modernity, but in a way that is not, you know...they haven't provoked the kind of strong reactions that Naipaul has because Naipaul provokes reactions, because people see him as judging as well as describing that derangement.

Krishnan:

Yeah. It's hard to improvise an answer to that. Yeah, I, yeah, yeah. I think that, you know, this is one phase of Naipaul's career and I talk about it as the middle phase between 1962 and 1979 and in 1980. And I think what Naipaul is really trying to do at this point is he is trying to write about his own formation, write about the region that he was sort of born in. And then he begins to sort of go to India and, and, he starts to sort of embark, he embarks on a sort of a journey you know, in which he's discovering that the narrative that he has begun to produce about himself and his formation actually turns out to have a lot more in common with other places. And I think he grew up..

Plotz:

That's your point about being one of the first writers to recognize the global aspects of decolonization. Yeah, that's a good, crucial point because I totally agree that. Yeah. The strongest thing, I think Armah sees himself in a

naturalist tradition, Wright sees himself as belonging to a European tradition, but they do, they understand their accounts as particular accounts, but you're saying that Naipaul is seeing this commonality defined by ethno-nationalism or defined by--?

Krishnan:

It defined in part by I think he finds it in different, he finds different things in different places. He writes about different things in different places. You know it's not just the ethnonational dimension when he goes to India, he sort of, he sort of, you know, the thing that, that most upsets in this caste, I mean the way caste functions in India, and he's actually shocked by it because you know, one of the things I say is that he's actually shocked by it. Not because he's contemptuous of it. And he said, he's actually shocked by it because he recognizes in it aspects of his own formation. So there, so it has writing that the bitterness and the kind of rage that you see there is as much self-directed because it's a sort of a self implicating mode it gets into.

Plotz

So can we talk about that self-implication? As I said, one thing is like my favorite line, I think in the book is this notion of the worlds (I want to get it right. The worlds within himself. Shoot. I have a second. Give me a second. Oh yeah) "I defined myself and saw that my subject was not my sensibility, my inward development, but the world I contained within myself, the worlds I lived in." Can you just, I feel like, can you just parse that "my subject was not my inward development, but the worlds I contained within myself, the worlds I lived in."

Krishnan:

Yeah. I think that, you know, this, this speaks to Naipaul's discovery of what he could contribute as a writer. I think his, his artistic vision became a kind of became defined by an understanding that he had absorbed within himself without knowing it different historical trajectories. So there was, there was a South Asian one; there was also the fact that in, in, in the South Asian society that he had come from was also already a fractured society that were Hindus and Muslims. It was a history of Mogul rule that there was a history of British colonialism there. There was also the displacement, the move from India to

the Americas and he coming into contact with an African origin population. And, and then all the Amerindian sort of culture that had been decimated by the time of his arrival.

Yeah. So, so Naipaul sort of wanted to find ways to sort of pull together the different strands that actually gone into his making and his writing was actually a very sort of I don't know what you want to call it, but kind of a slow process of disentangling those threads, if you like. So that became the story of the worlds that he contained within himself. But as he sort of wrote about these worlds, he began to see that there were connections between them both in the present and in the past. So the story that he's sort of that begins to sort of unfold as you read Naipaul's writings is the ways in which he's constantly sort of pairing or sort of making connections between different times in different places, all of which are sort of held together by the prism of his own formation.

Krishnan:

Naipaul doesn't really sort of approach it systematically. I think he's more of an artist or a writer. So he's sort of working with the kinds of materials that he has at his own disposal. And so he is I think sort of finding these connections and these ways of writing, where he sort of sees himself to be connected to the kinds of conditions that he finds himself engaging in, but in different ways in different places. So there isn't really a, I don't know when you say global decolonization, I think of him as sort of, you know, really traveling through decolonized spaces in different ways.

Plotz:

Well, I was just thinking of that line that you had about the notion that he's the "first person to look globally at this decolonization." To "focus on the experience of decolonization as interconnected globally?"

Krishnan:

Yeah. Yeah, he does actually right about yeah, these places. I mean, so, you know, in works like *In a Free State*, he's looking at, you know, he's in Egypt, he

goes to Africa, he's talking about places in Trinidad. And so there's a kind of, he's actually sort of finding parallels through the stories he tells. Those moments, I guess I wouldn't necessarily say they're like self-implicating in the ways that are playing out in, in the travel writing. But I do think that what he is actually sort of tapping into are, and this is a sort of a crude formulation is that, you know, the, the politics of identity, the politics of, of race and ethnicity comes to be a way in which different people in all these different parts of the world are navigating decolonization.

Yeah. So the very fact that Naipaul himself was sort of drawn into these kinds of feelings in the context of Trinidad, the fact that he was able to sort of channel or sort of repeat or echo odious feelings towards black people, is something that he sort of takes as a, sort of an insight where he traveled to other parts of the world. Yeah. So, so it's not like he's sort of trying to sort of then say, well, these people are being you know, racist or, or he's trying to sort of disparage them. I think what he's saying is that these feelings come to be a way that this new sort of social and political condition is being navigated.

Plotz:

So I really take your point that a lot of your intervention is about understanding, like getting beyond the post-colonial studies that say, let's say Rob Nixon account of Naipaul but, but even looking beyond that question to the question of...you are specifying a unique achievement of Naipaul in terms of the earliness of understanding this kind of interconnected, deep colonization and the problem of ethno-nationalism and the status of minorities let's say, and decolonization, do you see the Naipaul account as resonating for where we are now in this post-post-colonial moment, or is what he has to say really specifically, you know, sharp on the 60's and 70's and like the formation of new Third World nationalism.

Krishnan:

I think that it speaks to our moment, you know, in all sorts of ways because you know, the, the question of the minority has become, you know, central in all, in, you know, across, I mean, if you look at South Sudan in Myanmar in India today you know, eh, you know, it's very clear that this is a fundamental

issue that Naipaul put his finger on as early as 1960/61. But so that's one part of it. I think

Plotz:

Does he ever write about Rwanda and Burundi?

Krishnan:

No, he didn't write about Rwanda. I mean, he, wasn't really looking to write about a political crisis. I think, you know, he's, he's, you know, he, when he writes about the Congo, for instance, he's very sort of careful to sort of avoid you know, scenes of like mass violence. And there are very few scenes of mass violence in his whole writing. He's really much more interested in looking at the ways in which society get sort of fixed or set in certain ways, the kinds of narratives that emerged and the kinds of characters that get produced in those contexts. So I do think that, you know, Naipaul is actually sort of trying to equip postcolonial subjects with a kind of a language reflection. You know, it's very important to sort of understand the histories by which you've been produced.

It's very important to sort of engage with the, with the odious feelings that, that, that have given rise to the kinds of histories that we now inhabit, and to find ways to stage those feelings without sort of falling back on, you know, righteous attacks or sort of clear cut sort of positions ideological or otherwise. But I think it's very hard to sort of make that argument work in, in post-colonial studies, given the way in which postcolonial studies has constructed itself very much as a kind of the inheritor of the mantle of anti-colonial nationalism, which always sort of framed itself in highly moral terms--moral rebalancing or correction historically speaking. So, you know, if you think of Frantz Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth*, that's very much the framework that, you know, that we're operating within.

And the Naipaul-ian sort of vision, which I think of as a vision that tries to get into the weeds. And it tries to sort of understand what actually sort of made these societies become sort of formed by certain stories. And certain reflexes is harder to get at because it actually doesn't lend itself to a single sort of

formulation like *Empire Writes Back* and so on. What you really need to do is to sort of work through these stories as, as they sort of reveal themselves in all their unpleasantness, if necessary without sort of saying, *Oh, this you're saying bad things about people who've been colonized*. Because that's the only way you actually going to discover a kind of a capacious and complex enough vocabulary, conceptually, imaginatively to stake on the kinds of struggles that have been sort of sedimented over a long, long period of time. And so I think that's where Naipaul remains very important. But it's hard at this point in the ways in which, you know discussions get framed to sort of get that across because, you know, we always going to the moment where, you know, it appears to be the case that Naipaul is saying something negative and he does say negative things and he is a very problematic figure. But, but the problem with Naipaul is that that sort of that sort of troublesome aspect of Naipaul is also what seems to give rise to these genuine insights into the nature of the social formations.

Plotz

Who do you, where do you see a positive legacy of Naipaul? Do you see writers that he has influenced or other people who have been able to do the same sort of thing...?

Krishnan:

I think many writers journalists just sort of, you know, refer to Naipaul all the time. I don't know, in America, it's George Packer talks about him, you know, people like Hilary Mantel have written about it.

Plotz

I don't just mean who talks about him. I mean, where do you see...?

Krishnan:

I see him in Aravind Adiga, *The White Tiger* for instance, it's very clear that, you know, that work is deeply influenced by Naipaul.

Plotz

Wow. I would not have seen that. Say more.

Krishnan:

Well gosh I don't know, there are passages I remember it as reading, I would just kind of draw a line down the side and I'd write N something like that. You know, like, you know, the ways in which Naipaul you know, this is unfortunate, but you know, the ways in which scenes of urban dereliction are described and the kind of sensibility with which some of those scenes are described I think are Naipaul-ian but you know, I think the same could be said of, you know, other writers. I mean, you know, Marlon James has talked about Naipaul in his book.

Plotz:

What does he say?

Krishnan:

Well, he just basically talks about, he calls him a sort of a sort, I think he calls him "a Coolie writer who said something, some interesting things about Jamaica" and so on. But I think, I think Naipaul's way of writing in a way about some of these spaces to, you know, say, you know, somewhat politically incorrect ways to sort of be willing to go to places that are considered problematic is generally the kind of source for many writers who want to give themselves permission to sort of move in certain ways that are lacking propriety in the usual ways we think of when we write about, when we talk about postcolonial.

Plotz:

On the one hand I hear you're making a defense, which I totally understand and sympathize with of like the right to go there if you want to, as a writer. You could say the thing that seems offensive right now, but maybe in hindsight, will have some resonance. But you're [also] making a more specific point about Naipaul because you're saying that it's the very objectionable things that he says that are actually the moments where he's working the hardest. Because those are the moments where the world in him and the worlds he lived in are kind of aligning. So do you see other writers who've,

who've taken that on, like who've, seen that kind of, I almost want to call it like an autoethnographic resonance or something where their writing benefits from that?

Krishnan:

Yeah, sure. I mean, I think people I, you know, I don't know off the top of my head, I think people like Tayeb Salih for instance in *Season of Migration*.

Plotz:

I was totally going to ask you about him! I'm so glad you said that because when you were describing Brenda, I was like, that sounds like *Season of Migration*. Yeah.

Krishnan:

How so, which scene which part of it is...?

Plotz:

But the, all of that stuff about the strangeness of how sexual desire gets mediated when he's talking about the white woman he will or won't sleep with, you know, that they're there, they're playing out racial roles with one another, which he embraces, but not in a kind of cheap Orientalist way, but more just like kind of who we were to one another was constituted by our difference.

Krishnan:

I think also the ways in which Tayeb Salih writes about the disappointments of postcolonial Sudan, for instance. There is that kind of, there is, you know, I think in the figure of Mustafa Sa'eed, do you know, there is a kind of the, you know, there's a kind of, you know, this is kind of a self-implication going on in the ways, in which Mustafa Sa'eed is complicit with us with this situation. And he's also trying to separate himself from the kinds of conditions that he is in his class, at least. Yeah. It bears a responsibility...

Plotz:

How did you, how did you come to want to write about Naipaul? What's your own journey to Naipaul?

Krishnan:

Gosh, I've had a pretty complex relationship to Naipaul. I think I read him as a, I read him when I was in my teens. I was just very, very taken by the prose. I kind of fell in love with it. And then I remember reading *A House for Mr. Biswas* and I really just loved it. And I just, I couldn't stop laughing when I was reading it as you know, and then as I think it was after I, I finished my undergraduate degree that I began to sort of actually sort of have a desire to write on these kinds of issues that I began to turn against Naipaul. I entered into post-colonial studies and then I, when I did graduate work, I was at Columbia where Said was there and Rob Nixon was there too. So I'm personally very fond of Rob. And so I turned against Naipaul, because I saw in him all the kinds of problems that post-colonial studies that I identified with him.

But then, you know, there was a slow process where I started making my way back. And then I realized that, that he was always sort of someone I had been sort of engaging with in my thought, even though I had sort of pushed him aside or I had dismissed them. And so that forced me to sort of go back to him-

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Plotz:

Say more about what that means that you were always engaging him in your thoughts?

Krishnan:

I was always engaging him, I think in a sense, you know, in a way trying to say that he was wrong maybe, or trying to say that some of the kinds of things, the, the approach that he had sort of taken on or taken up was actually, I don't know well, inadequate politically you know, unacceptable, but then as I sort of began to sort of read him more closely I started to sort of understand that

there was actually a much more organic aspect of the way Naipaul had come, come at these questions.

He was channeling emotions that I had not been willing to acknowledge as very much part of the fabric of postcolonial societies. So I think this is one of the things that it's a sort of a dark secret: when post-colonial people read Naipaul they recognize what he's saying and partly because they recognize what he's saying, they disavow it. So it is complicated because I'm not suggesting that it's merely about repressing or pushing away what you see is in yourself. I think that, you know, that Naipaul is a very problematic figure. So there are many things to object to in what he says, but nevertheless it's not tenable to my mind to sort of simply say that "Naipaul has become an outsider". He's traveled away from the periphery. And I simply wanted to say, recycled the stereotypes about the periphery.

I, you know, many times I met individuals from different parts of the world, who will quote a line from Naipaul, who will sort of reflect on it on a particular scene in a Naipaul novel that speaks, spoke to some aspect of their own formations. So I think it was really trying to get at that, that part of Naipaul and to get at what, how that part of Naipaul spoke to me in ways that were underneath the intellectual carapace, if you like that, I had sort of developed as a thinker. That became the big problem and just sort of try and write about it in a nonacademic way. So you're not really trying to argue in with post-colonial studies anymore. You're really trying to sort of work around some of those questions.

Plotz:

Yeah. I really you've really helped me think about that word *formation*, like in the sense that you just used it and also that notion of *deformation*, like the thing that you might want to disavow, but you nonetheless, under like that thing that you acknowledge, "I acknowledge mine," you know,

Krishnan:

"this thing of darkness." Yeah, exactly.

Plotz:

Yeah. *That area of darkness I acknowledge mine.* I was just thinking that in that Beyonce song called "Formation," it's a great song, but it would be amazing if Beyonce would write a song called "Deformation" too, which would be about the things that you wish you could disavow, but you cannot disavow.

Krishnan:

I think it's one of Naipaul's strengths to make the deformation the formation, and to sort of own it, own it without saying, *Oh, I overcame it. Or I'm filled with self-loathing and so I'm just going to write by myself.* No, it's not that it's really about historicity. It's really about sort of working through something, you know? And so when you, when you accept that, then you're not really trying to sort of overcome it. You're not really trying to move to-- You know, you're not trying to get through catharsis to a point where you are sort of liberated in the Fanonian sort of formulation. It's not that it's really an endless process. *This is it. This is where we are. This is what we need to work through. This is the idiom that we need to sort of work with.*

Plotz:

I'm trying to write about the late Willa Cather right now. And like, she's got an amazing late story called "Two friends" which is basically about the limited resources you have in a small town for social life. And these two guys who are friends, and this is by far the best thing about their lives. And then they just screw up the friendship over essentially nothing. And it's non-reparable. I'm just interested in how Cather by the end of her life... Obviously in her early phase *O Pioneers* or *My Antonia*. She has this kind of optimistic, remaking the world. I mean, it's a colonial vision... But by the end of her life, she's kind of locked in this fact of, you know, even if you're part of the dominant culture, which she is for sure, part of the dominant culture, you are nonetheless caught with these deformations that are inescapable and you... How do you own them?

Krishnan:

That's really interesting. I think we do need to find a more capacious and nuanced way to talk about deformation. Not to sort of say let's celebrate

deformation. I think it's much more about, let's find ways to sort of work through them.

Plotz:

If you were going to celebrate it, it wouldn't be deformation anymore. I mean, that's the point about a song like "Formation," which is like, you can take pride in all of those things and that's great, but what do you do about the things that you *can't* take pride in? And the minute you just say, *Oh, but I also take pride in those--* then that's not deformation. It's just formation.

Krishnan:

I think that's really good. I think that's right. And I think that in a sense is what I found myself, you know to go back to this question about *why did I go back to Naipaul?* I think I found, I found in Naipaul's persistent engagement with that question that I could not find anywhere in postcolonial studies or in any postcolonial theorist. And I feel that in some ways is the well, there's not the, but one of the most important questions for those of us who are interested in cultural criticism you know yeah.

Plotz:

Yeah, that's great. Okay. Well, so I should conclude tonight by saying that Recall This Book is hosted by John Plotz and usually by Elizabeth Ferry, (though not tonight) with music by Eric Chasalow and Barbara Cassidy. Sound editing by Claire Ogden, website design and social media by Kaliska Ross. And as you know, we always want to hear from you with your comments, criticism suggestions for future episodes, or even your favorite Naipaul line. You can email us directly or contact us by a side show media and our website.

If you enjoyed today's show, as you know, we would be extremely happy if part of your formation was to write a review or to rate us on iTunes, Stitcher, or wherever you get your podcasts. And you may be interested in checking out past conversations with Quinn Slobodian on the rise of ethno-nationalism interviews with Cixin Liu, Zadie Smith, Samuel Delaney and Mike Leigh. And so once again, Sanjay, thank you so much for coming. Your book is called *V S*

*Naipaul's Journey: From Periphery to Center* published in 2020, I believe right by Columbia University Press. Totally fascinating book, highly recommend it. And from all of us here at Recall This Book, thank you very much for listening.