

Recall This Book 80
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Rajiv Mohabir (JP, UA)

Transcript:

John Plotz: Hello, 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. Today I'm delighted to be joined in hosting duties by my English department colleague, Ulka Anjaria, scholar of South Asian Literature and film, author of three wonderful scholarly books and many articles, and to top it all off, head of the Mandel Humanities Center. Ulka, hi.

Ulka Anjaria: Hello.

John Plotz: Hello, so both of us are lucky enough to be talking today with Rajiv Mohabir, a poet who seems to learn a new language every day before breakfast, publish at the rate of two books a year and then translate a forgotten century old memoir about mass involuntary migration before lunch. Yeah, he actually did that. Rajiv, you're a triple threat. You make us all look bad, but that's OK. Hello, and welcome to *Recall this Book*.

Rajiv Mohabir: Thank you, it's so wonderful to be here and y'all look really good.

John Plotz: So, Rajiv, I think we're going to get into your linguistic crossovers later and I'll just say quickly alongside your work in Bhojpuri, Hindi and various Caribbean creoles, you also work with Guyanese Hindi, which I'd love to hear more about and you really have way too many publications to tell listeners about in the time allotted.

So I'm going to encourage them to look you up on our website or on your website, but let me at least get the ball

rolling by saying that in 2021 alongside his collaborative book *Between Us: Not Half a Saint*, which I just hold in my hand for the first time today, he published both a collection of poems *Cutlish*, which we're going to be talking about a lot, and also *Antiman: a hybrid memoir*. So, if you're following along at home, that means he actually publishes 3 books a year, not 2 books a year. So just to give you an idea of Rajiv's wonderfully witty linguistic facility, in that title he takes a word that is a Caribbean slur for *queer man* and activates at least three mishearings: anti-man: against man, ante-man: before mankind, and also auntie-man, I guess we would say aunty-man for the kind of older relative that he wants to be to his own beloved niblings. And I learned that word also from you Rajiv. So, if that gives you a craving to hear more about the neological exuberance of his writing, you've definitely come to the right podcast.

This conversation could go 1000 different ways and I think it probably will, but you've generously agreed to kick us off by reading a poem. And then maybe coming back with a couple later on, either read or sung. So can I just sort of hand the mic to you metaphorically so that we can get your own wonderful words rolling through our ears.

Rajiv Mohabir: Sure, thank you. Thank you for the introduction as well. It's I'm just like I said, I'm so grateful to be here and honored as well. It's lovely to be in person in this recording studio with you both. I'm going to start with reading "The Po-Co Kid" which is one of the first poems in the collection *Cutlish*. Now a little bit about the title *Cutlish* is that it's a Barbadian recasting of the word cutlass, which in the Caribbean, refers to the machete.

The Po-Co Kid (as in the postcolonial kid)

*maatahet logan bol no sake hai
darsana nahin maral, murjhaake*

Let's get one thing queer—I'm no Sabu-like sidekick.

I'm the main drag Ram Ram in a sari; salaam

on the street. I don't speak Hindu, Paki, or Indian,
can't control minds, have no psychic powers.

I clip my yellow nails at dusk; on Saturday nights
I shave my head. Forgive me Shiva,

forgive me Saturn, I'm Coolie on Liberty Ave, desi
in Jackson Heights—where lights spell *Seasons Greetings*

to cover Christmas, Diwali and Eid—
where white folks in ethnic aisles ask, *Will your parents*

arrange your bride? While Ma and I scope out Fags,
gyaff, and laugh while aunties thread our eyebrows.

*The subaltern cannot speak.
Representation has not withered away.*

OK, and so this is a in a form that I'm calling a chutney poem that's like based off of, you know, a 1960s song by Sundar Popo, two 1960s songs by Sundar Popo, Kaise Bani and Scorpion Gil and one of the main features of you know, Chutney in that generation was that it stood at a crossroads of different languages. Mixing and there would always be a chorus that would be in Caribbean, Hindustani or Trinidadian Bhojpuri, Guyanese Bhojpuri, Guianese Hindustani and this happens to be in Guianese Hindi, or Guianese Hindustani which is a descendant of Bhojpuri. I think about Caribbean Hindustani as like this umbrella term for all of the South Asian languages spoken in the Caribbean. And from that become like our, you know, branch out. The various tendrils of other languages so Trinidadian Bhojpuri, Guianese Bhojpuri this kind of thing and so the chorus is in this language and the chorus you know, (and I'm using these scare quotes air quotes I haven't

figured out which one they are yet) that I read at the very end as a kind of repetition that closes out the poem. And that repetition is kind of an Easter egg for me, or for anybody else who can make heads and tails of the language. And this one specifically is from Gayatri Spivak's famous essay, *Can the Subaltern Speak*, and I thought it would be a real cheeky way to begin the book. You know, "let's get one thing queer". I was really excited about that beginning.

Ulka Anjaria: But the original epigraph is, I mean, what you've done. You've also reversed the hierarchy. As of course, postcolonial theory is all written in English, despite its claim to kind of alterity, and so by writing by translating trans, creating her line into Guianese Hindustani, and then writing it at the end in English. You're also that's another cheeky refusal of that claim to alterity in a sense.

Rajiv Mohabir: Yeah, thank you, like the whole idea about how we make meaning available to people. It was really important to me and thinking about how in this book specifically, the Guianese Bhojpuri here has a meaning that's occluded to most of the readers, whereas once upon a time this would have been in my family, the first access that we would have. So thank you for noticing that.

Ulka Anjaria: Spivak gets all the credit for translating Derrida into English. You get the credit for translating her into...

Rajiv Mohabir: I wonder what she would think she'd probably say *you got this wrong, this is not what I meant*. Thank you. Oh, another Easter egg in here is all of the things that I claim to do and not to do are inauspicious. So for example: you know, clipping my nails at dusk? You're not supposed to cut your nails at night. It's like a really bad luck. And shaving your head on a Saturday? That's miserable.

John Plotz: Can you talk about the writing process? Do you write

the poems and then figure out where they go in the book? Or was this book written all of a piece?

Rajiv Mohabir: I had actually been working on this collection for about a decade, in which I would write the pieces individually and to see where they were and where I was going with how the choruses would occur to me first. So the Bhojpuri chorus would come to me as I was walking, as I was on the train, as I was like doing menial tasks thinking about music, thinking about words that I had heard in songs that I wanted to put to use. And so the poems are like constructed from those, and so then to put the poems all together, now that was a task that took a really, really long time. I had to amass all of these individual pieces and to see what could fit and what couldn't fit. There are so many poems that did not make this collection and I wanted to kind of toggle back and forth between the past and the present for the speaker. So, as we see the speaker's present we get into the past and part of it is that it's narrated. There's an overarching Poem where the *aji* character or the grandmother narrates where we are from or the speaker is from that hopefully feels a little bit like storytelling, but it was a mess. Like Oh my God, like how many different versions of this book had come out and like thinking about the ordering. You know it was something that took me and some a lot of my friends a lot of time to kind of piece together. I wanted to have things not really be *I'm going to hit you over the head with a hammer*, although some of them absolutely do hit you over the head with a hammer, and especially with the organization of you know the *kalapani* poems like later in the collection that with a lot of thanks to my editors at Four Way Books, you know, I was able to come up with this kind of crescendo.

Ulka Anjaria: And were you running at the same time as *Antiman*? Because it's interesting that the two books come out same time. One is a memoir, so you would think it would have a more coherent or clearly obvious linearity, but actually we've talked about how the memoir also toggles

back and forth in time. So was it two projects you're working at the same time? Were you thinking about time in both texts in relation to each other, or was one after the other?

Rajiv Mohabir: Yeah, I mean, that's a great. That's a great question too, because I like to say that the speaker of *Cutlish* is in the last section of *Antiman*. This is who that Rajiv becomes when he's living in New York. The single life. But yeah, I began writing *Antiman* in 2015, in 2014 excuse me, as a way to position my poetry on the continental United States as I lived in Hawaii.

I had a lot of projects kind of brewing. A lot of writing things happening that you know were amorphous. So yeah, there's a lot of I would say subconscious connection between the two projects for sure. I guess it's a bad thing to call my books a project. I mean, Dorothea Lasky would probably be really angry about that. You know she wrote this wonderful chapbook essay, [Poetry is not a Project](#), something that I love to teach in my graduate class. You know, to get folks out of this idea of OK, well, you know this is going to be a project that you're working on. But like really, truly?

Cutlish began as what was an MFA thesis. So, the idea of the form of a poem and creating that was the MFA thesis. So, in my mind like you know it, it fit into this idea of the project and to have these projects intersect like this, there's a lot of give and take. I would imagine it to be kind of like a root structure of like two separate trees that share nutrients and resources so.

Ulka Anjaria: That's helpful, I was thinking of it as a larger project of which these were two expressions. In other words, like there, there seems to be something when you read them together, something that you're trying to do with, and we'll talk about it, but with language and with history with brokenness and with coolitude and all of these things, and then you express it in these two waves that

work. Complementary, but it also makes you feel publish more and you know express it in other ways. They're all kind of experiment or both experiments with expressing this larger project, was how I was reading it, but I like your take too.

Rajiv Mohabir: Well, thank you for that. You know it's funny. You're right about that about how these are different avatars of coolitude expression. Thinking about the container for story or poem and thinking about how the different kinds of faces that it can have represents a, let's say constant evolution. That's a great thing to think, so thank you for that.

Ulka Anjaria: And these are two written forms, but of course there's no way that project could be expressed only in written form. It has to have oral components, so whether it's reading from it which you are doing here or I don't know other kinds of performances, but there's no way it can end this project. And with the written word: in the midst of *Cutlish* are pages in which the Hindi alphabet is printed and appears several times with some changes. Kind of each time, but that to me stands as a reminder of the Sonic nature of the project, which you can't. I mean, I can't, especially since Hindi has a phonetic alphabet. So when you see it, you see sound not names of letters, so you can't read this book of poetry through and not be reminded of that Sonic element.

Rajiv Mohabir: Thank you and that's hugely epistemological, I think because of the fact that, like I said before, literacy is relatively new to my family and so all of our stories and all of our songs were coded in our bodies in different ways before they were brought to the page. What it means for me to be so influenced by this archive of sound and bringing it to the word in the United States means a whole different kind of orientation and thinking through the discursive space of that performance, which is the white page with black letters on it, which you know. You know to the expression in Hindi, *there's no difference between the*

written word and a Buffalo, so you know it's arbitrary, right? But you're right about that, that performance and so actually when I do read these poems and read these stories, I often sing.

John Plotz: Is that a good cue to ask you if you would like, sing, sing a poem for us.

Rajiv Mohabir: Sure, sure, yeah, thank you. I will sing. There is in *Antiman* so has its constructed and woven of transcriptions, translations, hypothetical situations, poems and linear narratives. A personal essay. And so what I'll do is I will sing a song that my grandmother taught me and it is going to be called, what I'll do is I'll sing it first and then I'll read it in Bhojpuri, in Creole, and then in English translation. And this is called:

Aji Recording: How will I go?

dulhin rowe rowe piya ke ghar jana
kaheki rowe piya ke ghar jana

piya ke ghar jana, piya ke ghar jana
kaheki rowe piya ke ghar jana

sasur mare mare baans danda leke
sasur mare mare nanad gari aawe

sasur mare mare baans danda leke
saiya mare gale mein bahi dalke

kaise ham chipao
chuniri mein lagal daag

Dulahin cry fe go a 'e husban' house
'e cry an' cry

Faddah-in-law an' muddah-in-law does beat me

Sistah-in-law does send insult

me husban' does gimme lash wid one piece bamboo
me husban' does beat me afta 'e grabbloe me t'roat

mow me go go a me faddah-in-law,
me orhni get one stain—

mow me go hide 'am,
me orhni get one stain—

The bride cries, she must go to her lover's—
she cries because she must go.

My in-laws will beat me,
my sister-in-law will curse me out.

My love will hold my neck
and beat me with a bamboo rod.

How will I go to my in-laws
with a stained veil—

how will I hide it,
the stain in my veil—

John Plotz: Yeah, thank you. That's amazing, can you? Can you talk us through the genealogy? Like is the song itself a song that you learned?

Rajiv Mohabir: Yeah, thank you. So yeah, you know it's funny. So a lot of this song. Actually I learned in the three days leading up to my brother's wedding, which happened in my parent's house. But my brother was married at 23 to an American woman, they had a like a ceremony in a flower garden and

not an actual like big affair, let's just say they had to get married relatively quickly, if you know what I mean?

John Plotz: I have *no* idea what you mean!

Rajiv Mohabir: And so, you know my grandmother was there, and so like I would I sat with her, and that was when I could feel the lamentation of her being kind of like away from her community like my grandmother was, one of those women that people would call to your wedding to sing these songs specifically. And I was like, you know, *Aji, you know what kinds of songs would you be singing today?* and so she walked me through singing all of these songs. Now this one in particular has some interesting valences there is the idea of the woman leaving her birth home to go to her in-laws and that means like a whole new culture or a whole new way of folks interacting with one another. A whole different kind of sexual economy in the house where you know she sometimes falls victim to the whims of the men of this new patriarchal line. She's like joining and so my grandmother sang this song and in it I could also hear echoes of diaspora, like thinking about what does it mean for our ancestors to have left and come into the Western Hemisphere, not knowing what the culture would be, not knowing what kind of abuses they would suffer. And then the end of it. She had this kind of switch and this is like, you know, every time she would sing it the words will change just a little bit at a time. The tunes would stay the same. The words would change, and in this one particular iteration I was so interested in the way that she brought up *kaise ham chipao sa surel*. "How will I go to my in-laws house? I have a stain on my veil." And this is also like one of those poetics actually of what it means to leave this body and go to the next world. So then that's another layer of that of that leaving, and so you know the sad part of my learning this song is I didn't ever learn it in community where women would be repeating these lines to each other and kind of building on one another with my grandmother at the lead. I wish I could

have been there in the what would that have been, the 1930s, 1940s? that would have been amazing.

John Plotz: This is a dumb linguistic question, but Creole, you said Creole like sort of unmodified. Does that mean it could be one of many creoles?

Rajiv Mohabir: So yeah, thank you for that. Creole is really a language that derives from a pidgin after the pidgin becomes regularized and dexterous, able to express like future and conditionals and people like are like when it becomes a first language. Well that's true but not true because creole wasn't my grandmother's first language. It was, I would say, one of her first languages, so they it existed together. Her parents spoke a pidgin and my grandmother then spoke let's call it Creole with 1 after that, Creole changed as it became more and more used widely as a first language, and Bhajpuri fell out of usage. So yeah, my grandmother did speak Guyanese Creole. She called it Creolese. Uhm, so there is that part of the Creole, and so the Creole that I grew up speaking and knowing was my parents cradle. But I would only ever speak it to my grandmother, so I would be speaking in her Creole1.

John Plotz: Yeah, got it.

Rajiv Mohabir: Which was just very closely related to the pidgin, whereas you know people in my generation would. That would be 3rd or 4th generation Creolese or Creole that they're speaking. In Guyana and its part in, particularly in the place where my grandmother was from, the Creole was kind of specific to that area. So to say Guyanese Creole. It's a shortcut, the Creole that my mom's family all spoke was completely different. They have different names for things. My mom's family was from the city and my dad's family was from the country and so being in the city, my Nana, so my mom's parents, had a lot of access. To you know, international people and more and more things happening, way more things than my father's did.

John Plotz: I mean I just love that it exists in these three versions and I'm trying to think about how they relate to each other. And that that point about the multiplicity of creoles only kind of deepens the complexity of it, and the decision that you made, I mean, hich presumably many people who have Creole as one of their languages make that you can sometimes write things in it, but you're always gonna have an English version, or you will often have an English version, 'cause that's more what standard or legitimated.

Ulka Anjaria: Well, it relates to the question of community too. Because you. Feel like I don't. I didn't see it as an accident that you read the three in that order because each one gets more displaced from community and I think loses some meaning in that. So when you hear the wedding song, not only is it performed in a community and learned in a community as you said, but it's also a ritual song. About the bride leaving the parents' house. It's not actually about how the bride feels. It's a ritual wedding song. Then when you get it in the in the Creole version you can see some of that in the English version. It just sounds like a song about people beating their daughter in law, which like takes all of that community out of it and becomes kind of tragic, but when you sing it I don't see it as tragic. Even though the story is still about beating their daughter in law because it feels ritualized and community ties. And when you read the last one, it makes me sad in a way that the first one didn't, so I don't know if that. It's part of the what happens in what you know, cultures translation, but transcreation it becomes something else as it loses that connection.

Rajiv Mohabir: It becomes lonelier, right?

Ulka Anjaria: It becomes lonelier.

Rajiv Mohabir: Yeah, I feel that too and like so part of like my act as a

translator is then also to have another leaving right? I mean it's kind of like it kind of is like also propelled through time, unfortunately with the deterioration or the lessening of the poetry into the English.

Ulka Anjaria: Yeah it is. It's like a commentary on. And on that loss of leaving and when it when it strips away. So when it becomes in the English is such a. You read it even sadder. You read it as a sad poem when you read it in English. I didn't read it. Yeah, I didn't hear you read it as a sad poem in the 1st 2 languages, so I'm just I wonder, like and maybe that is. That's a maybe it is a commentary on all that is lost when something when everything gets. Put into this standard English where you just. You just can read it as sad rather than the different kinds of meanings and balances that were coming. Into it earlier.

John Plotz: There's a line from *Cutlish* that has just been resonating for me, which is you say "I am an expert at amnesia/ New Moon faced. I have my own mantra" and I was I need to ask him about that because that I can't be you because like in a weird way, you're an expert at amnesia, but you're an expert at amnesia by undoing it. I mean, you're an expert at genealogy or lamination or layers..

Rajiv Mohabir: Thank you, thank you.

John Plotz: Yeah, like I don't see you very amnesiac. You don't seem to be a very amnesiac.

Rajiv Mohabir: Yeah, that so that poem, *Hiranyagarbha*, this poem is, you know dedicated to that traveler who left India who was *hijra* or you know of what in India now they call them people of the third gender, which I think is also a little bit of a problem. As soon as the state locates you then. All of a sudden you have rights, but then you have so many fewer rights because of it, but it's a queer traveler. And what did what it meant for them to have to come across the sea? You know, and to be checked by the ship surgeons, you know to

make sure all of the anatomy and everything was healthy and right according to what the Britishers thought. But there's also like that. That part of me and that part of my story where you know, I was expert at amnesia. In that, like I didn't know what was. Lying latent in me until I started to dig away. And so there's this whole new kind of madness that has like stalked into life because of that. Like, you know, just like dusting the ground just a little bit to see what the what it would bear for me. So, but thank you for that. I mean if I could go back and look at the, you know the 15-year-old Rajiv and be like one day you'll know enough about where you're from and who you are at that it would feel like. You know you will have this kind of sense of wholeness without fracture. Then I would be like astonished. I'd be like, yeah, right? I wouldn't believe that.

Ulka Anjaria:

Well, is it truly a beautiful story; your Grandmother's story and she, her grandparents came over. Uhm, her father, I guess was born on the ship. Uhm, so she's the, you know she comes over and then she has. She brings with her, even though she wasn't born there brings with her these songs, she's like a repository of this this beauty and this these stories. And then. You know has children who basically into different degrees just don't want to be part of that story anymore, and then you said she had 42 grandchildren; and you know, you were one of those 42 and was able to connect with her in this way, and through that activate this *Cultivated amnesia*.

So it's not just physical distance. And of course the you know the amnesia of leaving a place of not knowing where you're going, the violence and the brutality of it. The new place I'll let it alone those conditions. But then the kind of cultivated forgetting that happened in that generation and then you were able to kind of I don't know it, just it it's very moving and it's beautifully told in *Antiman*. But I don't know if you want to talk. More about like how that happened, how that you know you. Your 15-year-old Rajiv didn't know that

was going to happen. So how did something? So magical happen in real life.

Rajiv Mohabir: Thank you, I think it's the *pharmakon* of western education...

John Plotz: That should be the motto of our universe. Pharmakon is us. Pick your poison!

Rajiv Mohabir: In which you know it, it kind of drove my parents generation to issue everything that was, you know, the backwards Coolie Hindu waves of ways of doing things where as an undergraduate student at University of Florida. I studied religious studies and all of a sudden I was interested in folk iterations. I was lucky in that you know the director of my undergraduate. Thesis, Dr. Vasudha Narayanan is really interested in the vernacular. What that meant would mean the iterations of Ramayan that would be told in my family and who would know that But my grandmother and so going back to her and being like, *Oh my God, you know all of this stuff.*

I'd been studying Hindi for a while. At that point I was able to like translate some of her songs. Rudimentarily into, you know, talking about the wedding ritual in our family, family history. And that's how this all kind of started. And I didn't think that this was creative writing at all. I didn't imagine it to be like an important task, it was just I was, you know, scratching an itch that I wanted to know. Because like in my mind at that time, without doing the research without having gone to India, I was like *oh everybody knows this story; there's one story, right?* I mean, but that's not true as we know there are as many. Stories and iterations of Ramayana as there are people. So, this is how that all began. I didn't think that it would have much of a place in the world, and in fact, when I put together a rudimentary. The translation in collection of my grandmother's stories and sent it to folks to look at people were like, oh, this is like this belongs in a museum. This isn't

actually literary, and what I was hearing was, oh, you know, *we don't appreciate oral culture*, so it was like.

Ulka Anjaria: Folklore or something?

Rajiv Mohabir: Yeah, this is not the standard version. *Can you give me the biography of the person who wrote this and then I'll validate it?* So, and that that has been kind of the thing. How can I have been so incredibly inspired by this oral tradition and all of this oral literature, I guess. And bring that into American letters. It's something that baffles me. Still, I feel like I have to explain XY and Z just because I have this feeling that people aren't ready for the oral history of this. All the history of orality of it all.

Ulka Anjaria: It's not helped by being the Po-co kid who is told that the subaltern cannot speak.

Rajiv Mohabir: Right, how that reifies the silence and the silencing.

Ulka Anjaria: That's not what was intended, obviously by the statement, but I don't know if this starts out your book, it feels like it must. I'm thinking about it from the perspective you're describing, and it could feel like an kind of injunction or refusal of that attempt to do it because it's an impossible task to ever recover that voice so. So that's where it builds. That's where it does become a contribution to American letters, because you're giving the voice. You're not. You're refusing the refusal.

John Plotz: But sort of. Going along with the difficulty of it, the exhaustion of it and which I hear you saying that--even though I still notice you published 3 books a year!--I do hear. You saying that? Do you know this account of Irish literature I want to say it's Seamus Malin maybe, but it's *silence or eloquence* and he says that to be Irish and to be kind of, you know, marginalized vis-à-vis English literature you have these two responses.

One is to sink into silence and he kind of locates Beckett there and the other is profuse almost logorrheic eloquence. Like in other words, in order to be able to speak at all, you have to be able to over speak, so which would be swift or Joyce or a lot of other writers, but you know the gift of the gab, which actually has a kind of postcolonial jab to it the notion that if you're Irish and speaking at all, you're. Speaking too much or you're flowing, you know, does that? I don't know. Does that resonate it?

Rajiv Mohabir: That is profoundly resonant. Yeah, totally.

John Plotz: Hey, do you feel like reading that other poem we talked about *Kalapani*?

Rajiv Mohabir: Oh yeah, I would love to thank you so *Kalapani* is an idea, is a kind of rhetoric, I would say, that governs relationship of person to land and person to person to community. "Kalapani" literally means Blackwater. It was thought and believed that crossing the Blackwater, crossing the ocean into a new world would erase you of caste and kin where you would be nothing and no one and ritually contaminated and polluted but like to hell with you anyway, 'cause you had crossed away and kalapani is something that haunts the story of Indian indenture and migration across the world and thinking about it as, thinking about the darkness of the water as not being an ill but thinking about it as being that space of infinite creativity. That's kind of where I see this poem, happening in this in this book. So it goes, my poem is:

Kalapani

means waters black
means sea crossers, means
to forget secrets and rituals, means
conversion, means cloud cover,
means night means
sunset, means loss, means
water in the breath,

means to mislay
your name, means orphaning,
means taking the name
Coolie, means breaking
under bundles of cane stalk,
means Guyana, means
migration, means America, means
voyage, means to remain
living, means planting
seeds in your ancestors sweat,
means salt and sea-
change, means a story's new
lea, means a yield
of fruit, means
to generate, means
to rise as the sun

Ulka Anjaria: I was thinking of that theme throughout *Cutlish* and the memoir because there's along with *kalapani*, there's the theme of being broken. That's a theme that comes up, so it's like, obviously. Bhojpuri is broken, Hindi Creole is broken English, and the families and lineages and possibilities broken by indentured labour. But there's a claim just like there's a claim in that poem to the creativity of *kalapani* there's a claim, I think, to the creativity of being broken. I mean maybe you move back and forth a little bit 'cause you want, you seek, your persona, your narrator, your narrators seek wholeness at times and you see why being broken is painful, but there's also, I don't know, there's also a value, something that emerges in that brokenness that's quite beautiful. I don't know how you how you see it, if or if that's something the project continuously questions the need and desire to be whole and the also the reality that being broken can be beautiful.

Rajiv Mohabir: I wonder if I will ever feel any of those things 100% of the time, like I'd still feel quite fractured and fragmented often and I feel whole as well. So maybe it's that ambivalence that

is like coming through, but what you're saying is that there's beauty in that brokenness, and I totally see that. It's like, you know, Naipaul famously saying nothing good was ever created in the West Indies and I want to say *bullshit* to that. I mean what was created was beautiful and like still being created.

John Plotz: Isn't that why Derek Walcott called him VS Nightfall?

Ulka Anjaria: Yeah, I mean your story is incredible because there's more conversation now about kind of hyphenated identities in the US, which is great and important, but yours is like a doubly hyphenated. You know, you talk about how, going to India and you don't fit in in India because you have this story that is kind of untold that disappeared. The people who left, the disappeared. And then you talk about in the US, you know, people just think you're Indian or South Asian, which is not totally wrong, but it's not *correct*. And I mean Guyana itself, I love. The poem that you called Guyana, where you say Guinea New Guinea. Ghatido I mean like what is the... It's not a thing that most Americans have even heard of. So even if you were to try to explain to, the open-minded listener yeah.

John Plotz: Guadeloupe, Guatemala, Gucci, Guelph...

Ulka Anjaria: Even if you were trying to explain and say this is where my story is, it would be best so, I mean, but then, but then I think about it and I'm like, but *yours is the whole story*. All these other ones that fetishize the closeness of identity and place, they're the ones missing out. The transit is, I know this is a theme in Caribbean, you know, literature and intellectual thought, but I found this so powerful. I wanted, I want your story to be the whole story, and I want all these other ones to be the fragments I guess. That was my investment in wanting to rewrite all of the stories of people to focus on transit and creativity, and to marginalize staying in one place.

Rajiv Mohabir: Yeah, thank you. I mean because it's so funny in the United States we have this idea that, you know, we were here forever and like our institutions are so great and we're descendants of classical culture. That's not true. You know, like, I mean we are, uh, settler colony you know that's extractive. There was such a huge break between any kind of in any like you know, European knowledge-creation-system that wasn't that that wasn't routed through Arabic learning that we forget that the Western knowledge institution isn't this like huge timeless thing?

But thank you for that. It's funny because after writing *Antiman* and publish and hearing people talk I, I see that there are a lot of folks out there who are winding together the disparate threads of you know their belonging or belongings multiple belongings. There are so many people in the world who speak in going back to Spivak, you know these strategic essentialism so that they can be understood in whatever time and place you know. And that's not always wonderful, but maybe it accomplishes something initially to like clear some space for something to get done.

But to the point about Guyana, and this is one thing that I have refused to write about, but after actually the Zac Efron movie comes out. I'm going to have to like start saying OK, this is the thing when people. Are like what's Guyana like? Jim Jones and then people. Are like oh. *Drinking the Kool aid, yes*. One off the things that I have to like kind of divorce myself from writing about right now doesn't mean that I won't. And it's funny. My brother-in-law is named Jones, last name Jones and my sisters name Jones now and it's funny because he was like 'cause he's his family is also Guyanese. And he was like, well, why aren't you reading anything about? You know Jim Jones, and I was like, oh man. OK, OK, I'll write you a poem about, you know, this connection to Guyana because I don't know. And you know, it was in the manuscript for a moment. And then I was like if it's in the manuscript, it means. Like I'm going to have to

build around it too, and I'm like I'm not ready for that emotionally. But maybe I will be.

John Plotz: Can I ask you a question which basically it's a one word question and the one word version is "Hawaii?" But like I could spin it out a bit more, which would be about the point you're making about, you know destinations and authentic or leveraged identities and essentialism and you know, conglomerated places like the United States of America and then places like Hawaii, which is an island its own lineages as its own monarchy and long genealogy and it. I guess it's uh, I guess the question is whether being in Hawaii (you did your PhD there right) Was that an important? Space for you to think about those third spaces, or those elbows like the ways continental logic is a little short sometimes.

Rajiv Mohabir: Absolutely, and especially around my own kind of understanding of the settler colony and what it means to have to be an American. And, you know, be an American presence in the world. You know, as I was a graduate student employed by the university, which is, you know, a project. Of the United States of America in Hawaii was really eye opening. I call it like a political education on the run where seeing what was happening at the time was life changing for me I. There's so many, there's so many ways to go to dive into this, but I'll say that Hawaii has had a history of indentured labor as well, drawing from Asia and it was really, really cool for me to go to this other space and to see the way indentured labor had formed a pidgin and a Creole. And like how folks were living in identities there

There was this book that was written, an academic text called *Voices of the Cane Field* and it was like Japanese songs from indentured laborers. And I was like, *Oh my God, I feel like this rhymes a lot with like what I'm trying to do.* But there in in in Hawaii, another thing that I like I was open to was that you know my friends were sovereignty activists and to see like indigenous struggle there really changed the ways that I was thinking about my own entanglements with

empire. What does it mean to be a graduate student? You know? Have this kind of privileged identity in a place where people are dispossessed of their homes and their lands. How I then can be like, oh, how can I be here ethically? You know what does that mean for me as somebody who has this postcolonial experience? How can I resonate that with folks around me and actually you know, fight for the same things that my friends were putting their lives on the line for, right? And nothing short of like land back, which is, you know, definitely the politics of a lot of the sovereignty activists in Hawaii.

John Plotz: I feel like we're sort of rounding the corner to home here, but Ulka, do you have like a final thought or question that you? Want to round things out?

Ulka Anjaria: Just how do you stay so happy? There's some of the things you describe in both of these texts are incredibly painful and some of them are violent. I mean, there's course your relationship with your father, but like the persistent homophobia and racism that you encounter and. And that the writing remains, so I don't know how do you not fall into bitterness? I mean, we mentioned Naipaul already. Who's my paragon for turning these feelings into, I guess bitterness or maybe even worse. You know what's bitterness when it's projected outwards to other people? contempt yeah. " set up you say may each face whoever said speak English, find their own tongue fettered and split. My mixed blood hardening their faces."

There's anger, and there is, and it's just you feel it viscerally. It's very visceral. It's anger and frustration and yet, and there's so much there is so much joy in it and there's so much love. And so I just. And how do you? It's so wonderful because. I'm invested in wanting those two things to exist and I go back myself between those poles, how do you as a as a creator, as a writer as a poet, how do you think about the relationship or as a human honestly,

how do you think about the relationship between those things?

Rajiv Mohabir: I mean, it's pretty dark, like what I write about is very dark. And it is, uh, it is sad, but I will say part of the joy that I feel is that I'm dreaming up a Coolie future through the writing using the languages and the tools that I already have. And another thing that's really cool that, like always like, makes me feel like I'm doing the work of my ancestors. Or I wish that my aji could see this: I go to universities across the United States. I'm in the Library of Congress. I go to these places and I speak our broken language is in the heart of empire that thinks it swallowed us, but we are not digested. And so that's why you know that that fills me with this kind of Krantikari postcolonial joy that.

Ulka Anjaria: That's lovely and it's powerful. It's not just symbolic, it means something to have those words and all of them, it's their broken forms on the page poetry. It's beautiful. It's lyric. It's song. It's joy. I don't think it's a small thing, so I really appreciate that about your writing. I think it gives other people joy as well; so thank you for that.

John Plotz: OK, so before we descend into the darkness again. That's probably a great place to wrap up. So, Rajiv, this has been a real pleasure. I just want to say, Ulka, thank you for hosting with me. I hope not for the not for the last time.

Ulka Anjaria: Thank you for inviting me.

John Plotz: Yeah, and if you enjoyed this and you enjoy thinking about poetry, dear listeners, I think you may also want to head to our recall this book archive via the New Books Network, or at recallthisbook.org and listen to earlier conversations with, for example, George Kalogeris, which is RTB 74 or Sean Hill RTB 75 and also coming up in 2 weeks, a rebroadcast of our wonderful conversation between Roger

Reeves and David Ferry. And if this conversation instead has made you want to hear more about Caribbean culture and politics, I think you might enjoy our conversation with historian Vince Brown about his amazing and now prize-winning book *Tacky's Revolt: The Story of an Atlantic Slave War*, and that was RTB. 34. Oh Rajiv, in conclusion, thank you so much for today's conversation.

Rajiv Mohabir: Oh, thank you. This was such a joy and I'm so grateful for the space that you've given to me.

John Plotz: Well, we are grateful to you especially for re-christening our recording studio, so thanks for that.

Ulka Anjaria: It's been wonderful. Thank you, thanks.

John Plotz: *Recall this Book* was founded by Elizabeth Ferry and me, John Plotz. It is sponsored by Brandeis and the Mandel Humanity Center. Sound editing is by Naomi Cohen, website design and social media by Miranda Peery of the English department. We're eager to hear your comments, criticisms, and thoughts. If you like what you hear, please subscribe, rate and review us on Apple Podcasts or wherever you get your podcasts. From all of us here at RTB, thanks for listening.