

*Cutlish*

**A Reader's Map**

**Four Way Books (2021)**

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## ABOUT RAJIV MOHABIR

Selected by Brenda Shaughnessy for the 2014 Intro Prize in Poetry by Four Way Books for his book entitled [\*The Taxidermist's Cut\*](#) (Spring 2016), Rajiv Mohabir's first collection was a finalist for the 2017 Lambda Literary Award in Gay Poetry. He received fellowships from Voices of Our Nations Arts Foundation (VONA), Kundiman, The Home School (where he was the Kundiman Fellow), and the American Institute of Indian Studies language program. His second manuscript [\*The Cowherd's Son\*](#) won the 2015 Kundiman Prize (Tupelo Press in May 2017). *Cutlish* (Four Way Books 2021) is his newest poetry collection that blends Indo-Caribbean musics with American poetry. He was also awarded a 2015 PEN/Heim Translation Fund Grant and the 2020 Harold Morton Landon Translation Award from the Academy of American Poets for his translation of Lalbihari Sharma's [\*Even Regret Night: Holi Songs of Demerara\*](#) (Kaya Press 2019), published originally in 1916.

In 2019 Rajiv Mohabir also received the New Immigrant Writing Award from Restless Books for his memoir [\*Antiman: A Hybrid Memoir\*](#) (Restless Books 2021), selected by Terry Hong, Héctor Tobar, and Ilan Stavans.

With Kazim Ali, Mohabir edited the Global Anglophone Indian folio for [\*POETRY Magazine\*](#) in 2019. His poem "Ancestor" was chosen by Philip Metres for the 2015 AWP Intro Journal Award. His poems also received the 2015 Editor's Choice Award from *Bamboo Ridge Journal* and the 2014 Academy of American Poets Prize from the University of Hawai'i. His poem "Dove" appears in *Best American Poetry 2015*. Other poems and translations appear in journals such as *Quarterly West*, *Guernica*, *The Collagist*, *The Journal*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Crab Orchard Review*, *Drunken Boat*, *small axe*, *The Asian American Literary Review*, *Great River Review*, and *PANK*. He has received several Pushcart Prize and Best of the Net nominations.

Winner of the inaugural chapbook prize by Ghostbird Press for [\*Acoustic Trauma\*](#), he is the author of four other multilingual chapbooks: [\*Thunder in the Courtyard: Kajari Poems\*](#), [\*A Veil You'll Cast Aside\*](#), *na mash me bone*, and *na bad-eye me*. Most recently he collaborated with poet [\*Rushi Vyas\*](#) on the chapbook [\*Between Us, Not Half a Saint\*](#) which speaks back to conservative Hindutva politics.

Rajiv holds a BA from the University of Florida in religious studies, an MEd in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages from Long Island University, Brooklyn, and an MFA in poetry and literary translation from Queens College, CUNY, where he was Editor in Chief of *Ozone Park Literary Journal*. While in New York working as a public school teacher, Rajiv also produced the nationally broadcast radio show KAVIhouse on JusPunjabi (2012-2013). He received his PhD in English from the University of Hawai'i and is currently Translations Editor at [\*Waxwing Journal\*](#). He teaches in the BFA/MFA program in the Writing, Literature, and Publishing department at Emerson College.

## A READER'S MAP TO *CUTLISH*

Music can rise up from the most desperate circumstances; so, too, can poetry. In it thrums the voice of protest, lamentation, and praise. In fact, it is through music that I came to poems. This particular book — *Cutlish* from Four Way Books (2021) — is a result of my asking several questions. *What is the transformative power of a poem with firm footing in song? What is the American poetic form through which chutney music can be expressed? What are the ways in which form holds history?*

In response to these inquiries, I held the answers loosely in my head and wrote into the abstractions of what the poems themselves can do — the tension between what I can ask them to do as well as what they are championing to do themselves.

For the longest time, in conversations with other emerging QTBIPOC poets, I was of the firmest belief that all formal constraints represented the political realities of their respective countries of origin. The colonial forms that supplanted our native musics were brandished as *real* and *worthwhile* poems. Our own forms were not poems until taken up by white poets and white institutions and deemed *rigorous* or *poetic*. Here I think of the pantoum or the ghazal and the appropriations and recastings they go through in our present day.

I always wondered *What is the poem in my own home, hiding and scared to come out?* In this search I thought of migrating the chutney song into my new context: what would a chutney song look like written in the US by a brown queer? My answers became poems. And only through the process of considering form through the music of the Caribbean (the Southern Caribbean) did I find a new energy and verve that sustained me. It was the very act of constriction and compression that allowed the poems to do the unexpected for me, to take their own reins and steer their own new course in North America.

The languages that I use are deliberate and newly won for me. While I grew up speaking my Aji's generation's Creolese, I started learning Modern Standard Hindi (Western) while I was pubescent. I didn't start to learn my Aji's Hindustani until much later. I have been writing in and out of her language as much as I can, basing the grammar of this language on the voice recordings of her that I made as well as supplementing the unknown words, phrases, and syntax with alternatives from Indian Bhojpuri (Benarsi Boli) and Modern Standard Hindi. I approach this language as I

would my own elder, with love and concern for its well-being. Writing in it is a defiant act, the way I see it. It presents a challenge for those who are not familiar with it but also hopefully a map back into our languages for those in my ethnic community. It's a risk that I take, and I believe that using this language more and more honors my past and future, be this speech "broken," or incorrect—it is certainly still a relevant language.

In this guide I will show you my thinking through several poems and their relationships to the speaker's references and musics.

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"Cutlish"

The long poem that is sectioned throughout the book's various sections is meant to show the oral narration style that the Aji has and to relate it to the storytelling venture that the speaker attempts. It starts with an expansive definition of the word *cutlish* itself, the rural Guyanese word for *cutlass*—which in the Caribbean refers to the machete. The cutlish was a tool of work for indentured laborers as well as a tool of violence: emblematic of forced migration and its racial, ethnic, homophobic, and misogynist effects. It has such a psychic sway over me as a poet—the object itself complicated by its legacy. The artist and sociologist [Andil Gosine](#) in his "Wardrobes" line casts the silver cutlass into a pendant that I wear about my neck since it is an object that bears our history of surviving the cane field.

We had several in our garage as I was growing up. They represented *back home*, that place where my parents were from, and were the go-to tools for gardening and opening water coconuts. "Cutlish" is written in prose blocks (except for the first section) as a kind of relief from the lineated poem's density. The italics are important in that they show that these words are transcribed from a conversation that my Aji and I had in the early 2000s while she was still alive. The languages that she speaks and mixes are Guyanese Creole — which she called Creolese — and Guyanese Bhojpuri, which she called simply Hindustani.

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### “The Po-Co Kid”

This poem jeers at the misreading and stereotypes that Americans usually have for me as an Indo-Caribbean person. Actually, it’s not just white Americans who participate in this process of erasing me and my community, but also racialized Americans who only think of race and racism in American paradigms. This poem is very much also a nod to the exclusionary practices of academia; even though from the outside it looks like I am well interpellated into the (cis/sys)tem, it’s still a tooth-and-nail fight to be regarded as “enough.”

“Sabu” refers to Sabu Dastagir, the mid-20th-Century Indian actor who became an American citizen and filmstar and whom I first saw in the *Thief of Baghdad* (1940s). Dastagir’s character was an Orientalist fantasy of what brown “Eastern” people were like. He also played Mowgli in *Jungle Book* (1942). He became a caricature in my mind for what people thought of us.

There is also a stereotype of Caribbean society that claims that the Caribbean is the most homophobic place in the world. While there are homophobic terrors that plague Guyana and are dangerous to its democratic values, I could say the same for the United States. This country is no better at protecting queers than other places. I wanted to show how a Guyanese mother embraces her child’s queerness in a way that rings true of my experience later in life.

One last thing is that this poem also celebrates the magical feeling of Jackson Heights when Diwali, Eid, and Christmas happen. The stores sell special items. The street dawns strings of lights. The feelings of festival electrify.

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### “Indo-Queer”

These poems are written with chutney poem restraints: 11-12 syllables on the first line of each couplet and 12-13 syllables to each second line. The inclusion of the mukrda, or chorus, in my Aji’s Hindustani offers an echo of the song this form derived from. Each includes Creolese as well as Standard English.

The poems concern, mostly, what it means to be a queer brown Indo-Caribbean person trying to date in New York City — where people either know of your community or are completely ignorant of where you are from. People mishear “Guyana” as “Ghana” and make all the other mistakes and assumptions that you can imagine. The speaker in these poems dates a man from Grindr, hears about a homophobic attack against a friend (in this particular case it was an attack on Zaman Amin in 2013), begins dating his first Indo-Caribbean partner, sees an Indo-Caribbean drag queen (Sundari the Indian Goddess) for her first performance at the Rajkumari Cultural Center, and finally thinks through his own place in his extended family.

Place in these poems is so important to the fabric of meaning. Queens (Jackson Heights, Richmond Hill, Jamaica) and O’ahu show the speaker’s journey toward self-discovery as he comes to understand that his music — an inheritance of his Aji’s language — is what will eventually save him from his greatest fear. In my mind, this “story,” or emotional arc, needed to happen in the space of five poems.

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“We Come in Planes”

This poem is in conversation with Mahadai Das’s poem “They Came in Ships.” Mahadai Das was a Guyanese poet and one of the first women to be published. She died young but came out with two collections before her passing. The poem “They Came in Ships” narrates the adventure of the indentured laborers who were our ancestors: some deceived into coming, some forced, some departing India willingly. This poem shows that journey to their new lives in Guyana, where they were able to survive despite everything, and is written in the memory of the people.

My echo of this poem was initially written to respond in form and content to the original and in earlier versions was pretty close to Das’s lineation and structure. What I did was add my own spin to the line’s energy. I wanted to update Das’s migration story, and I see this piece as a poetic continuation taken up by the next generation. Here, the speaker addresses a community that experiences, like their forebears, diaspora, but in a different context: this time the community

immigrates to the United States by plane in an intense period of anti-immigrant hatred and anti-Black violence.

“We Come in Planes” is my attempt to use my identity as a method of coalition building instead of trading in the same old racialist categorizations and anti-Black sentiments that I grew up among. I write the poem also through the migration of languages: Hindustani, Creolese, and English, though I provide the English “translation” for the poem on the right-hand column. I thought it was essential to have this language portion since I wanted to increase the literary canon’s inclusion of this delicate and disappearing language.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. The prose blocks that separate sections, all part of one long poem called “Cutlish,” repeatedly refer to and redefine the machete. How does the image of the cutlish (cutlass, machete) feature as a motif and metaphor in the collection?
2. In what ways do the poetic forms (chutney poems, longer free verse, tercets, etc.) convey the content concerns of the speakers in the chutney poems? What about in the non-chutney poems?
3. What is the role of bird imagery and obsession in the poem “Offering?”
4. What is the speaker’s philosophy of the line in the poem “Lyre?” How about “We Come In Planes?” (Note: “philosophy of the line” refers to the poet’s ideas about what the line can do. Is the line defined by rhythm, sonics, image? Is it a complete unit or un/productive fragment?)
5. What is gained and what is lost by imagining Indo-Caribbean music and folk customs as American poetry? What are the unconscious costs of writing in the United States?

## WRITING PROMPTS

1. Take a line or part of a line from a poem in *Cutlish* and use it as the title of a new poem.
2. Perform an English-to-English translation on “The Po-Co Kid.” Allow yourself to be as *deviant* or *unfaithful* as your speaker wants you to be.
3. Perform an erasure of “Coolie Oddity.”
4. Remix “Chutney Mashup” into a new poem.
5. Use the language / diction of outside material to build a poem through excerpts of thoughts, images, and language.
6. Construct a narrative poem in prose that happens when the speaker has a profound realization linking history to the present moment — it doesn’t have to be the first time the speaker realizes their mortality, sameness, interconnectedness.
7. Write a persona poem that imagines the affective life of the Other, and write it as a sonnet.
8. Write your own chutney poem with a chorus in a language other than English in 14 lines. If you need help, think of expanding your idea of what “language” means. Write it in your own voice, or use Google Translate to check against your attempts at the couplet. Is the couplet in windings, symbols, line drawings? Is it in your great grandparents’ language?

## CREATE YOUR OWN FORM

Find a folksong that you have a deep connection with. One that you grew up singing and dancing to, a folksong that your entire family knows. It doesn't have to be in a different language. Maybe it's a murder ballad, maybe it's a religious song — all that matters is that it's meaningful and that the song holds your personal and cultural histories..

Now migrate the formal constraints to your poem. Break the song's lyrics down into lineation, noting how many words and syllables are on each line. Consider which of the folksong's poetic conventions you will keep. Will you keep the same rhyme scheme? Will you keep the same thematic thrusts?

When creating your form based on a folksong, are there any specific English language forms that you want to reference? Perhaps your version of the folksong poem has fourteen lines and echoes the sonnet. Maybe the return and repetition within your song are inescapable, putting it in a direct relationship with the villanelle. Whatever the case may be, this is one way to add another layer to the poetic constraints that you're thinking up.

### **Prompt:**

Now that you've gotten the basics of your new form down, here's a recap and some guiding principles:

1. Consider a folksong that is important to you and your family/cultural inheritance.
2. Count out the syllables of the lyrics to provide a framework for understanding the structure of the song that you're migrating into a poetic form.
3. Write a poem that is based on the structure of this song.
4. Your poem must connect generations for your speaker. This can happen through the inclusion of other languages. Feel free to use them, to invent new words, or to use made up words that are personal to you.
5. You must include layers that show your various dialects in conversation with one another. It would be most helpful if there is a cultural capital imbalance, meaning there is one language that is socially privileged over the other "non-standard" dialect.

6. Your poetic form must bear the weight of history, showing what language attrition and/or what passage of time looks like in poetry and specifically to your speaker.

## INTERVIEW WITH *MISTAKE HOUSE*

**Mistake House:** Much of your writing is imbued with images of migration—images of displacement and replacement, origin and refuge. What is home to you?

**Rajiv Mohabir:** I think home is a series of dislocations—I've learned that to claim a physical place in the United States or the Western Hemisphere as home is to participate in a series of racialized exchanges and settler colonial violences. Home is where Jordan, my partner, is. Home is samosas in Jackson Heights. Home is eating at 'Ai Love Kalo with Anjoli Roy. Home is drinking coffee while Skyping with Corinne Hyde. Home, of course, is my mother's roti and chiding that I should be more responsible. I've just bought a home now and am thinking about the Mvskoke people who lived here before the United States stole their lands. I am thinking of the Black folks who were forced to work for white people here. My home is in witness.

**MH:** Your poetry is an extension of what you have called your “syncretic history”—the work coalesces around your diverse history as the child of Indo-Caribbean immigrants, as a gay man, and as a person who has wrestled with depression. Although you have spoken frequently about the way your poetry syncretizes struggle, will you speak here again about the things that led you to poetry and the way poetry functions, as the poet Gregory Orr put it, “as a means of survival”?

**RM:** Poetry was/is my survival. It allowed a space for me to dream up magic and escape. Not until I started to meaningfully revise my work did I make that connection—that I was able to revise my condition and change the parameters for my visions of line and sound. I am reminded of Audre Lorde's “A Litany for Survivors” and will speak despite my fear of speaking and will live despite the threats posed to bodies that look and queer as mine do.

**MH:** You've spoken about childhood trips to Toronto to visit your Aji—your grandmother—who was “an outsider herself because she refused to assimilate into Canadian society” (González 2016). In another interview you say, “I think about how she lived at the nexus of worlds: the India of her parents and grandparents, the Guyana of her children, the England and Canada of her exile. She was able to speak in all of these spaces with varying capability—or rather, some people could hear her and some people couldn't” (Legaspi 2017). The notion of immigrant assimilation into the dominant culture is a relevant global issue today and one that pervades much of your work. How does your family's personal history as “outsiders” as well as your blending of Bhojpuri, Sanskrit, Arabic, and English (creole)—languages of your familial past and present—allow you to respond to subjective and political notions of “assimilating” in your work?

**RM:** I think this is a question about legibility in the US mainstream. I come from a history that people are astonished by, in that they never thought before of the Indian Labor

Diaspora or that when I say I'm Caribbean or South American people do not believe me. These kinds of identities are all fictions or shortcuts, honestly.

I think of the damaging effects of strategic essentialism—how claiming space in some identity category can provide a moment for coalition while playing into American patterns of racialization and flattening out immigrant experience—and I do and don't do this. On the surface I am Asian American and Caribbean and South Asian—but I'm from a kind of double diaspora, from illiterate farmers and a mother with a PhD from the University of Florida. I don't assimilate into any one category, and I don't know many who do, actually.

I think of assimilation though as something entirely different, where the power dynamic is not in the hands of organizing People of Color, and see the hegemonic violences that stifle. No, I don't ever want my poems to wear their shoes in the house. My poems keep a lotta in the bathroom. My poems don't mind their houses smelling like curry. My poems eat daal and rice with their hands. My poems wine to Soca Reggae.

**MH:** You've said that writing is about making connections between yourself, American culture, India, and the Caribbean; however, these connections in your work are not about "preservation" but "cultural creation in the United States with an Indo-Guyanese accent" (Bahuguna 2017). What is the difference between preserving and creating—through writing and storytelling—culture in a land away from home or places of ancestral cultures? What are some formal and conceptual approaches that allow you to create rather than preserve culture?

**RM:** The difference for me is one that is inherently racialized—or that has historically been racialized to pit groups against one another. Some preservationists in my home community of Indo-Caribbean folks like to look at our culture (food, clothing, music, religions, and racial categories) as "untouched" and pristine. The truth is we are Creolized in time and space, a chutney or achar of people. The concept of Coolitude, I think, reflects this. I like the queer potential of its velocity for allowing nuance and continual redefinition.

V.S. Naipaul famously said in *The Middle Passage* (1962), "History is built around achievement and creation; and nothing was created in the West Indies." I take offense to this kind of anti-black love for the colonial lords. As a result, I believe that my own creative skill has root in my Caribbean history. Fuck the Naipaulian noise.

People say vacuous things like "writing can't be taught" but I balk at this. My ancestors were non-literate and here I teach creative writing in an American university.

Since I'm in love with the music of my home space, I've invented the chutney poem—rather semi-invented the chutney form. It's based on the song "Kaise Bani" by Sundar Popo and has the following constraints: The mukra or chorus must be in Guyanese Hindi, and can be up to fourteen lines, seven couplets, that include Guyanese Creole and American English. The first line of each verse must be 11-12 syllables and the second line of each verse must be 12-13 syllables, following the convention of the song. Rhyme must be assonance or slant.

**Each part responds to my history: the fourteen lines to rhyme with a sonnet, for England and America forcing their strictures on our bodies, the Guyanese Hindi (a coined language—syncretic mix of North Indian languages) language on the doorstep of erasure, the Creole of invention and survival despite hegemonic power of English, and English for my own education. Rhyme can't be direct, I'm diasporic after all.**

**MH:** This is by implication a poetry-as-activism question. How might your concept of poetry as “cultural creation” be pertinent and potentially helpful for other people and other poets in a time in the United States of nationalism, xenophobia, increasing hate crimes, and confrontational political discourse—among other things? Maybe this is a question for you as a professor: how might a white kid from the suburbs who is concerned about social justice participate honestly in a poetry of cultural creation?

**RM:** I think that poetry allows a space for dreaming. In order to make a more just and fair world we must first envision this. We call things into incarnation by thinking and writing them down. Another key part of this is honesty—which is a bad word for writers. Be honest in your intentions. Write the poem that will help people in your own community to change—white kids from suburbia have a culture too. You can do work to change things, things like cultivating empathy in your own work, letting People of Color and marginalized groups write about their own lives, and acknowledging systems of power and disenfranchisement.

**MH:** You have described your process of writing *The Taxidermist's Cut* and *The Comberd's Son* as “first [wading] through the mire of self-loathing to transform my vulnerability into a protective exoskeleton” (Bigos 2018). And you have said that *The Taxidermist's Cut* was your “journey out of [your] body's prisons” (González 2016). Your diction and imagery are of transformation: shaping and reshaping of skin; puncturing and stitching animal hides; the body and the poem as empty, longing vessels; becoming animal. Underlying these images is a sort of psychic violence; biologically, organic transformation from one thing to another requires a complete reconstruction of the body and being. What is the relation between these psychically and physically violent tropes and the capacity to transcend vulnerability? Why is the body a prison?

**RM:** For *The Taxidermist's Cut* I see the literal wearing of the coyote skin in the title poem as a way of blending in/hiding in plain sight. We constantly read one another, placing everyone into a category based on our own, vastly different ways of thinking. For me, violence is being forced into one category: a psychic trauma with physical manifestations. And the speakers in *The Taxidermist's Cut* is so entrenched in the systems of violence around them that they enact it of their own accord. The poems seek to recover the animacy of beings (both the speaker and other animals) and to queer their perspectives whereas taxidermy is bending the body of a being into the taxidermist's reading of that body—fixing its pose in time, subtracting any sovereignty of the creatures fixed in motion. In this way sovereignty is personal albeit vulnerable to the desires of those who would manipulate another's body.

**MH:** In your essay, “Ally is a Verb: A Whale’s Song,” you ask, “Will I ever be whole—be able to speak to my ancestors in a voice they can recognize?” You employ a wide range of given forms—the ghazal and the zuihitsu, for example—and the way you manipulate and collage them is part of your syncretic practice. What are your favorite forms? What is your favorite part of “play” with form within your creative process?

**RM:** My favorite forms are those you mentioned! They both allow for an Asian American poetry that moves me: either the rambling of the zuihitsu or the music of the ghazal. I also love my “chutney” poem form! I am working on a new collection of poems that collects these chutney forms into one volume. It’s called *Cutlish*.

I loved the play of inventing form, the way it frees my mind, that I also invented another form called the whalesong poem. I base the strictures on the patterns of humpback whale song as documented by Roger and Katy Payne and mine the repeats and rhymes they find for formal constraints.

I like this kind of play because it allows me to be reckless with language leading to a freer mind.

**MH:** In an interview with *Kundiman*, you mention that you originally came to poetry to understand “the distance between page and sound” (Santoro 2017). Is this investigation of distance between page and sound a type of metaphor for your investigation of the time and space between people and cultures in your poems? That is, what are the many incarnations of “sound” that you try to reconcile to the page?

**RM:** That’s interesting. I’ve not thought about it like that. I think of it like coming from an oral tradition and finding my way to writing—its abstract quality and lack of literal voice. This comes from my life as a translator, of trying to take folksongs and make poems out of them. A most unnatural act. I try to bring as much music as I can. I think of my poems as an extension of my tradition that’s now being written. How can I bring the dholak and harmonium to my raga?

**MH:** You’ve talked about memory as “messy” and transcending actual, lived experience to include memories from beyond our own phenomenological experience (Bigos 2018). In this interview, you shared that your Aji had a memory of her and her mother being chased by a tiger in the Amazon, then concluded, “There are no tigers in the Amazon but there were people who had the cultural memories deep in their imaginations of the Indian tiger that eats people.” The memory was imprinted on her psyche though she had not actually experienced it in her lifetime. From your use of South Asian and Caribbean references to your use of Hindi and Bhojpuri languages, you draw from your culture and history extensively in your poetry. As you work creatively, do you think of cultural, collective memory as an external entity or an internal and subconscious well? Or, if both, how and why is each useful for the poet?

**RM:** I think these things are deeply subconscious even if collective memory may seem to be external to the poet. Also, I believe everyone draws heavily from their own history and

mythology. Most folks are just so close to the dominant culture that they can't see it. I think of my grandmother's tiger story as one that showed me how she lived: her metaphors were based in the mythology available to her through her parents' stories and religious myths. For me I think it's the same in that I think of this story quite frequently. It's useful to me because with every generation comes a new translation, a new transposition to fit a new context. For the same reason people still read Emily Dickinson and Walt Whitman.

**MH:** As you identify the “politics of literary space” and your inclusion of non-English languages within your texts, a multilingual approach seems to precede, follow, and sometimes arrive in tandem with your subject matter (Bigos 2018). Will you talk about one of your poems in which this multifaceted linguistic play happens—unpack its underlying processes for us?

**RM:** When I start with the chutney poem. Consider my poem “Forced Conversion.” I start with a Guyanese Bhojpuri/Hindi chorus that came to me as I was walking to teach in Ozone Park, Queens at John Adam High School. As I walked down Liberty Avenue under the A train I considered the reasons why my great grandfather was against my grandmother getting a colonial education. In order for anyone to go to school, I was told by my father, people had to convert and take Christian names; people had to learn a new poetics. The chorus or first couplet had to have some English words that have been absorbed into the language in it. This poem responds to those strictures and to language attrition and the self hatred that comes from my father's generation for all things Hindu. This is my kind of speaking against that and reclaiming what was lost, posing a decolonial question as I look at the past.

**MH:** How do you think writers can work to change the literary landscape to be more inclusive of multiple languages in the same way that scientific language is accepted (despite its inaccessibility, at times)? Does this work belongs to both writers and visual artists? To dancers? Musicians?

**RM:** There are so many poets already doing this like Barbara Jane Reyes, Craig Santos Perez, Tarfia Faizullah, Shivane Ramlochan, Layli Long Soldier, Joan Naviyuk Kane, and Sherwin Bitsui to name a few. The success of these poets shows me that people are starting to open up to the idea that the United States is multicultural and multilingual. I think when people say multilingual work is inaccessible, or that the inclusion of languages other than English is too difficult or keeps people out of their work, those same people need to think about the gatekeeping that the white, English-speaking institution has played in keeping People of Color out, literally unable to access knowledge—that is unless someone like Ezra Pound or T.S. Eliot appropriate it first and make it trendy.

**The more people to do this work, the better. Every form of art, I believe, benefits from considering People of Color forms.**

**MH:** You talk about your work as a translator with unmistakable reverence, referring to yourself as “a caretaker” of the work at hand. Generalizing or misrepresenting texts through translation can have “real life implications of cultural erasure” (Congeries, Connotation Press). Considering how

language shapes communal and individual identity, how do you translate a text in a way that transcends cultural boundaries without flattening the original text's vibrancy and content?

**RM:** This is the question that I've been considering now as my translations of Lalbihari Sharma's *I Even Regret Night: Holi Songs of Demerarais* in the production stage over at Kaya Press. As a caretaker part of me is elated that since it will be a bilingual text that I am allowed to poetize the music in a way that shows my artistic decisions.

There will always be a flattening that happens when moving from a periphery's language to the core's language, a violence perpetrated against the original text. But there are also ways for a new kind of vibrancy to be added.

Not many people in my community speak this language anymore, except a few who learned from grandparents. Even my learning is incomplete. I think that as long as this text remains in the thoughts of the people as some place, some text that is ancestral, is a home, then even the clumsiest of work is important.

This text has never sung in the United States before.

What a thrill to one day have someone else come to this text and retranslate it, repoeitize it in their own idiom!

**MH:** You emphasize using writing to heal and decolonize. Your work often addresses white supremacy, insisting that "The 'I' is important because it proves that [you] personally exist, [and you] resist erasure by white hands that pen white narratives" (*Ally is a Verb: a Whale's Song*). Will you expand on the obligations for a writer of conscience? How does your desire to address alienation and inequity inform your creative process? And how do you feel your creative process helps you work through these intersectional oppressions?

**RM:** My need to address inequity in my creative process is about voice—for much of my life I was taught to be quiet, to not have opinions that would be injurious to the white folks around me. As immigrants, my parents were very good at surviving from working undocumented as janitors to naturalizing and moving to Chuluota, Florida (then a hotbed of racism and homophobia). I come from an intersection of forced migration, immigrant status, queerness, and others. I wouldn't know how to separate these things to write only from one so I think my process is one of starting in my center and speaking.

Since I've started speaking, I've tried to heal my throat, atrophied from disuse. My obligation is to myself, my family, my community. If I don't speak for myself then others will continue to appropriate my voice for their own needs. Writing has been my primary mode of intervention.

I gave a reading of my poem "Why Whales Are Back In New York City," in which I have a line about witnessing the news story where black and brown folks topple a confederate statue in Durham, North Carolina. I read with a poet who told a room of black and brown

students to not write about the news, to rather write about things more “universal” and “enduring.” I don’t have the privilege of not noticing the oppressions around me, of growing up rich and ignoring the news. I can’t imagine why anyone would say to black and brown children to write about things that white folks care about other than to be so fully entrenched in racist ideologies, in a white supremacist state that they cannot see how they participate.

**MH:** The concept of internalized oppression arises in your poem, “K\*phr\*,” which originates from institutionalized oppression. You write, “you are an immigrant / to the United States, means / you hate immigrants / you dream you have more in common / with the whites.” In her 1980 essay “Age, Race, Class, and Sex,” Audre Lorde says the “true focus of revolutionary change is never merely the oppressive situations that we seek to escape, but that piece of the oppressor which is planted deep within each of us” (*Sister Outsider* 123). How does your use of perspective and voice in your poems allow you to release and free this internalized oppression?

**RM:** Yes! I love the Audre Lorde quote! It’s true—that’s how oppression and colonization work. We become oppressors and colonizers if we don’t acknowledge our own racisms and bigotries. I’ve been thinking a lot about the anti-black sentiments in my community and how damaging it has been to us in that we have been duped by the British for generations. The British fostered an animosity between black and brown folks in Guyana in order to keep us apart, to prevent us from usurping power. The poet Martin Carver has been a source of inspiration for me now, as I think about how we bring anti-blackness with us into the United States. I find it unacceptable and want people to contend with this as well. I speak from the inside to challenge this.

**MH:** In this issue of *Mistake House* there is a supplement exploring findings from a recent project on the Principia College campus titled, “Moral Discourse in a Post-Truth World.” You’ve noted in the past that myth and metaphor enable “radical possibility” for the poet aiming to connect to his/her/xyr past as well as to connect rather than divide people into different categories (Bahuguna 2017). Can you speak to the role of myth and metaphor in storytelling and its relationship to the notion of truth? How do you engage with truth—and the suggestion of “post-truth”—as a poet in a world distracted by “fake news” and political, social, and moral relativism?

**RM:** Myth and storytelling exist in a world of metaphor that show us how to be in the worlds we live in. Sometimes they need challenging especially when it comes to any stricture or teaching that makes us believe that one person is lesser than another. I think that’s why cultural creatives are born—to rewrite the *Ramayana* that’s anti-caste, anti-misogynist, and anti-nationalist. As soon as the story recommends the oppression of people for the desires of a “god” or people, then it needs to be questioned and revised. This is the hardline.

As for the news and the narrativizing that occurs, what a shameful time for the United States right now to be in a situation that we cannot trust news, or even the democratic process. Did the electoral college actually elect tr\*mp without any kind of Russian influence? To me the answer is clear and treasonous.

**MH:** You have extensive scholarly training, including deep work in critical theory (queer theory, postcolonial theory, etc.) and your poetry is allusive, multidirectional, complex. As a poet, scholar, and teacher, will you talk with us about the relationship between necessary difficulty and accessibility? You've said, "I do not think that by making my work more palatable for American audiences by erasing all South Asian and Caribbean references, or somehow defining them in the poem, will make my poem better" (Bigos 2018). By demanding your readers to do research beyond the page and thereby engage more deeply with your work, do you find that you are engaging in a dialogue with readers? What must readers bring to the table when they read your poetry? Why?

**RM:** I love to hide Easter eggs in my poems for people who may or may not know the obscure references that I make. In my next collection of poems *Cutlish* I have a section at the back that I call "The Poet's Archive" in order to give people more space into the world of tensions that I have learned words for in academia. It's something new that I'm trying as I obsess about what an archive looks like for myself, family, and communities.

I demand that my readers do a lot of research, it's true, because I have had to. I have had to be completely illegible and learn to navigate a vast ocean to find any place to put a foot. I've had to relearn Hindi, Bhojpuri, and Guyanese Bhojpuri/Hindi for myself. I've had to comb the literature on Indian indenture and find in it its queernesses.

I think that in order for readers to get deep into my poem, besides the music of the line and language play, they should have some understanding that diasporas are all around. I imagine that immigrant experiences will resonate from immigrant community to immigrant community as we all have our own particularities and queernesses. Hopefully after reading my work the reader comes away with a better understanding of my own queerness and particularity.

**MH:** Will you talk about your *Coolitude Project*? In an interview with Joseph Legaspi, you discuss an approach to colonial subjects in your work with reference to layering words throughout your poems—words like "coolie" which have complex histories (Source 2017). You explain that the word "coolie" was "given to South Asians from 1838–1917 by the British who indentured my ancestors to work the colonies as sugarcane cutters after slavery was abolished." You note it holds "a kind of identity that was forged through indenture, or the kinship ties that emerged from the boat that transported people of different ethnicities, languages, religions, and castes." You also note that it has been "reclaimed" by IndoCaribbean writers like Rajkumari Singh ("I Am a Coolie"). You are one of these writers, too. What other words, if any, have you reclaimed and/or reshaped by re-contextualizing the narrative in which they are used?

**RM:** This *Coolitude* project seeks to blend two discourses: creative writing and cultural/postcolonial studies in hopes that it will foster a new kind of thinking in creative writing programs. The British took people from 1817-1920 as indentured laborers all over the world: to Mauritius, Reunion, South Africa, the Caribbean, South America, and Fiji after the official abolishment of the African slave trade. They needed cheap labor and since Britain owned India, they thought they also owned its people. In the series that I write for *Jacket2* (<https://jacket2.org/commentary/rajiv-mohabir>) I look at the cultural productions of

people from these areas of the world, in a forgotten diaspora. I have included book reviews, interviews, essays, and writing prompts with Coolitude artists in mind. I wanted it to have archival breadth. The project is a strange beast that straddles a couple of worlds. As I said, I'm currently obsessed with creating an archive to excavate and here is my way of making a platform for people in my diasporic situation.

So much of the scholarship from my diasporic situation erases queerness.

I reclaim the word *Coolie* and also *gandu* and Antiman (a slur for queer men) in my writing. I write from the Coolie Antiman diaspora into a gandu-ship where siblings are queer as fuck and fuck as queers.

**MH:** What projects are you working on now and how are your current projects evoking new transformations for you and in your work?

**RM:** I am currently working on several projects: *Cutlish*, which I mentioned, translations of *I Even Regret Night: Holi Songs of Demerara* (forthcoming 2018 from Kaya Press) (<http://kaya.com/books/even-regret-night-holi-songs-demerara/>) and also a memoir called *ANTIMAN*. This memoir focuses on the years of 2004-2009 when I lived in suburban Central Florida, studied in Varanasi, India, and moved to New York City. Themes that appear in this manuscript include queer love, "coming out," self-harm, language and cultural loss and rediscovery, and music and folk story as a guide to humanity.

**MH:** Do you ever play hooky (we hope you do)? And, if you do, what is your favorite thing to do when you take off suddenly, as in a *dérive*?

**RM:** YES! I play hooky a lot. If it's not binging on Netflix or rewatching "Buffy the Vampire Slayer" for the zillionth time, it's most likely trying to coax Enkidu, my cat, to walk on a leash. I have not had much success, she just likes to lay there with her harness on.

I also love cooking, the longer the process the better. Today I'm making kichari and chicken samosas for my first meal with my own mango pickle!

I like to make short films as well, weird and so incredibly low quality, especially when I'm in a new space or am exploring a new environment! I won't share any of these but I'm sure a YouTube search will reveal some of my best creations.

I used to answer this question with going to the beach— Come summer this will be how I will answer this question again, now that I live someplace with a cold winter and spring.

## LINKS

Website

[www.rajivmohabir.com](http://www.rajivmohabir.com)

*Cutlish* Page

[www.fourwaybooks.com/site/cutlish](http://www.fourwaybooks.com/site/cutlish)

*Antiman: A Hybrid Memoir*

<https://restlessbooks.org/bookstore/antiman>

*I Even Regret Night: Holi Songs of Demerara* by Lalbihari Sharma, translated by Rajiv Mohabir

<https://kaya.com/books/even-regret-night-holi-songs-demerara/>

*The Cowherd's Son* (Winner of the Kundiman Prize)

<https://www.tupelopress.org/product/the-cowherds-son-rajiv-mohabir/>

*The Taxidermist's Cut* (Winner of the Intro to Poetry Prize)

<https://fourwaybooks.com/site/taxidermists-cut/>

*Between Us, Not Half A Saint* (collaborative chapbook with writing prompts with Rushi Vyas)

<https://www.gasherjournal.com/product-page/between-us-not-half-a-saint-print>

Interview with JC Holburn at *Full Stop*

<https://www.full-stop.net/2021/09/14/interviews/jc-holburn/rajiv-mohabir/>

“You Can’t Stop Rivers from Running: Talking with Rajiv Mohabir” with Madhushree Ghosh at *The Rumpus*

<https://therumpus.net/2021/10/the-rumpus-interview-with-rajiv-mohabir-2/>

Poet to Poet Interview: Rajiv Mohabir and Craig Santos Perez

<https://kenyonreview.org/2019/02/poet-to-poet-interview-rajiv-mohabir-and-craig-santos-perez/>

National Book Festival Presents: Poetry Ancestors, How Invention Meets Influence (With Rajiv Mohabir and Kimiko Hahn)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fvdfDumfpSw>

Bengaluru Poetry Festival: The Poet as a Tangle of Selves (With Rajiv Mohabir and Shikha Saklani Malaviya)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AtYtLhywkzs&t=934s>

Amar Ramessar performing “Kabira” in Hindi version written by Rajiv Mohabir:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EfCXJoyaw1g>