

SLF Portolan Project

Interview with Minal Hajratwala

Locus Awards, Seattle, June 2019

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Hey everybody, this is Mary Anne Mohanraj, prototyping a podcast that I'm hoping that Ben Rosenbaum and I will be able to do going forward. We don't really have a focus yet. We are thinking it could be somewhere in the culture and speculative fiction realm. It may be pretty wide ranging, because Ben and I often talk about politics and religion, and family; science, technology, cities; whatever strikes our fancy, and we get into good conversations. But Ben isn't with us today. Today, I'm in Seattle. I have come here for the Locus Award ceremony and conveniently was able to set up an interview with Minal Hajratwala (Did I say that right? I did, okay) – who is here as a Clarion student, which really startled me because I know her as a very accomplished writer. She did this book *Leaving India*, which is a history of the Indian diaspora, but it's also a memoir about her family that ended up in six different countries? Yes?

Minal Hajratwala: Nine!

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Nine different countries. I get this wrong every time! Nine different countries –

Minal Hajratwala: It's a lot of countries to keep track of.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: It's a lot of countries. Nine different countries. But it's a book that I teach in my postcolonial lit class. But she's now made a turn to science fiction. And she's here, so – say hi!

Minal Hajratwala: Hi!

Mary Anne Mojanraj: Do you want to introduce yourself?

Minal Hajratwala: Here we are, yes, I'm Minal Hajratwala, here we are in J'aime Les Crepe House in Seattle. And I am really, really excited to be here for the Clarion West workshop. So we just finished week one out of six. And I am already feeling very full and very excited and really kind of high on just writing so much and talking about writing so much and also not sleeping very much. So all those things have contributed to a very effervescent mood.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Nice, nice. So, I'm gonna ask you to talk about that a little bit more. And this is sort of continuing a conversation we were having earlier. I did Clarion West in '97, as a student, and then I taught at Clarion in 2009. I know that Minal, like myself, both of us work in multiple genres, nonfiction, Minal writes unicorn poetry, among other things, but is now making a turn to fiction. So maybe if you could talk a little bit about, here at Clarion, what have you learned, what is translated over from the nonfiction experience? And what is new as you're coming into fiction?

Minal Hajratwala: Yeah, I feel like I've always written in a lot of genres. So it's not that I haven't written fiction. It's just that I've haven't written publishable fiction. Or that I've started a lot of short fiction and not been able to find my way all the way through till the end. So, what has happened to me mostly with short stories is that there are a handful that have just come out as-is, which are those, you know, those little gift pieces of writing, which are fantastic, and also don't teach you anything and are not replicable. They're just sort of all one thing. So, that's lovely and happens every, you know, seven years or so, with a sort of flash fiction kind of story.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: It's funny, I – do you know how there are all these painters of the old days who are like, waiting for the Muse to descend and visit them. And I remember sort of laughing at that when I was a baby writer and thinking like, well, that's ridiculous. And these days, I'm like, oh, no, that has actually happened. There have been moments right? Where like, something just comes sort of fully formed. You're in the right moment. All the stuff that's happened in the back of your brain comes together and something smarter than you can, like – or something, something you've been subconsciously thinking for a long time, right, kind of coalesces into a perfect story. And then you're just like, “Okay, I'm just channeling.” Right?

Minal Hajratwala: Yeah. And it's not that there's no craft in that. There's, you know, there's a craft of waiting. And there's a craft of following the right directions and not, sort of, getting distracted in the wrong way.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: But I think, I feel like that is in some ways a luxury that was only afforded to independently wealthy white men for a long time, right? Of like, “No, I'm gonna sit around and wait for the muse to descend. Because this is not my job,” right? Or, it's

not a job I need to support myself. And so I will go to cafes and drink and talk with my friends and feed the muse. And I actually think it's really important to feed the muse, you know, going to museums or walking in the park or going to the beach. But it's so hard to make the space for that in everyday life. If you do have a job and family responsibilities, right?

Minal Hajratwala: Yes. And that's what's really beautiful about being immersed in a long workshop like this, because it is – I love that we're talking about the Muses, because I'm actually – the story that I've been walking around with this week is in part about the Muses, the Nine Muses, as this –

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Oh really, that's hilarious! I didn't know that.

Minal Hajratwala: – as this girl gang in Hollywood, who are sort of preying on all the ambitious, talented people.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Yeah, I think there's like this, you know, for a long time, I felt like, well, I studied right? I'm South Asian, we want to do something, we go to school, right? Like, this is the, the cultural training, right? Anytime I don't know what to do, I'm like, "Maybe I should go back and get another degree!" So I did an MFA and I did a PhD in writing, and I went to Clarion. And all of that, I think, gave me a lot of tools. And those are super useful for being able to get through stories when the Muse is not visiting, right, and still do a good job. Not just working on, like, pedestrian things, but [to] be able to craft something strong. Do you feel like there's still a difference between those pieces and the inspired pieces?

Minal Hajratwala: You know, I feel like, with my poetry. I've worked on it enough, where – and it's a different form, it's shorter, of course. But I feel like I've worked on it enough where the quality and the experience of the crafted pieces and the kind of – what I think of as like the received pieces – is similar. That they – I don't feel a big gap and often, later when I look at them, I can't necessarily remember how, you know, which way I went about [it] unless I really sit and think about it. And you know, you studied Creative Writing – I never did. I'm very self-taught as a creative writer. I took journalism, I studied journalism, and I think that that really taught me certain aspects of the craft like, first of all, just being a really clear writer, not, not getting too, you know, messy with the writing. And I've been an editor for a long time. So I'm good at working with people's stories.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Because you work as a writing coach, you have an entire business, right?

Minal Hajratwala: Yes, I do. And I can really see what to do with other people's stories, even fiction. I can, I can work with it. And I – it's very clear to me. And then I think it's like anything else. Each thing has its own craft. So I've taken courses. And in poetry, I've had some really amazing teachers who really broke things down. And I think what I'm learning now in Clarion West is both some of the nuts and bolts of stories and also specifically being steeped in a speculative fiction world with the teachers. So the first week we had Elizabeth Hand who is amazing. This coming week, we'll have Stephen Graham Jones, who is [in] a completely different vein, with his Native American horror, and stories, which are also amazing. And so I think it's, really it's such a gift to learn from all of these very different writers whose work is different, whose methods are different. And at the same time not to learn in the abstract – like, here I am reading a craft book – but to learn on our actual stories – here I am producing a story every week. And I have this story and it's got a problem. And then here's my teacher, who's saying “Here are some things that you can do about that problem.” And I sit in class and I go, oh, okay, then draw a direct line from, you know, my problem in my story to the solutions and see which one is working. And I think that kind of like, laboratory experience is really precious, especially for someone like me, who doesn't, I never did an MFA or anything like that.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Right. Well, and a lot of MFAs are not very rigorous in that way. Right?

Minal Hajratwala: Yeah.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: So I think there's a lot of chance in how creative writing gets taught.

Minal Hajratwala: And a lot of times it's at the sentence level, which I, I feel like I have a grasp of. And that's the part that I think really serves me from, you know – my experience in writing is that I know that even if my stories that I'm writing in one week are messy, or, you know, there's clunky wording, or whatever, I know I'll be able to clean them up and I can make them pretty, and,

you know, to make the language do what I wanted to do. It's really the shape.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: I started as a poet, actually. So like, I did poetry for years, and then –

Minal Hajratwala: It's fantastic when poets turn to prose, because then it's –

Mary Ann Mohanraj: Yeah, I'm not worried at the sentence level.

Minal Hajratwala: Yeah, yeah.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: I think, you know, [I'm] trying to figure out how to phrase this, this is a little bit tricky. Do you feel like there is a difference in the South Asian approach to fiction, and storytelling, and, you know, is that inflected in how you work in the classroom? I know at this Clarion you've got three South Asian writers and a couple other Asian writers and I know Clarion is making a big effort to kind of push diversity, which is great. And other organizations like the Carl Brandon Society with their Octavia Butler grants; Con or Bust, which helps fans of color get to conventions – there's been a real encouragement happening. But I'm wondering, on a story – craft – reception level, whether – and maybe – you guys haven't started critiquing yet so maybe you don't really know, but whether you feel like there are differences in your storytelling that are heritage based. I don't know if that made sense.

Minal Hajratwala: Hmm. That's interesting. Well, I appreciate that Clarion West is really, from what I can tell right now as a student, it seems like they're really taking to heart some of the lessons of the past and creating a safe container. So, everyone gets a copy of *Writing the Other*, which is great. Everyone gets an essay by Nalo Hopkinson, that's about sort of the dynamics within the workshop and recent criticism and how that plays in. So I feel like they've really, really created a very constructive and fertile space –

Mary Anne Mohanraj: That's fascinating

Minal Hajratwala: – for workshopping and creating diverse stories. And I think that the class is, you know, there's, with diversity, there's this kind of critical mass that has to accrue. And I think that one third, which is what it is right now, is about right for the point when – I used to do diversity training. So that's about the

point where people can start to be themselves and not just representatives of their background.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Although I have to admit – I would agree with that, and yet, I would say like, it would be kind of amazing to see a Clarion class that was nine tenths people of color and one tenth white. Like what would that look like?

Minal Hajratwala: There are other things that happen when you cross the majority line. So, you know, so we're not quite there. But with South Asian work in particular, it's interesting because I feel like it's very much, it's very formative in one way, as a field as an – maybe formative is not the right word, or the right declension of that word. It's still forming, a modern South Asian science fiction sensibility, if there is one, is still forming. And of course, I mean, we've talked about this, how diverse South Asia is, so many different strands. So whether you can even say there is “a South Asian sensibility” is disputable. But at the same time, I do think that South Asian countries have this deep wellspring of myth, which – and religion, which is nothing if not speculative. Like, that's, to me, that's the definition. It's like we don't know things; therefore, we will speculate about how reality is constructed. And so drawing from that is this really fertile ground that I think people are still just beginning to tap into.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: That's really interesting. I think – I would agree. I was just at the Wing Luke Museum of Asian American Experience here in Seattle, which I hadn't been to before. I had a very tight schedule, but I squeezed out time to go because I was super excited about their Expanding – it's called the Expanding Universe exhibit, about Asian American futurism, essentially. And it was terrific. And I would recommend anyone in Seattle to go; if you're coming to town. If you are an Asian American working in speculative fiction, consider making a trip, the exhibit runs till September. And it brings together people from East Asia, Southeast Asia and South Asia. I would say one thing that, made me – I think they did a terrific job with the exhibit itself. And they couldn't have done anything about this. But one thing that did make me a little sad is that it was so dominated by East Asian creators. And I just think that there, there aren't that many, and whether we're talking about South Asian or South Asian American, it is very much emerging. Right? And they had in the exhibit some discussion of silk

punk as a variant of steampunk that is not as colonialist and racist, right?

And I recently was having conversations with Yudhanjaya Wijeratne who is the first Sri Lankan Nebula nominee. He was just at the awards ceremony and I was really glad to get to spend some time with him when I was in Sri Lanka a few months ago. I met him and I met [unclear name] Wijeratne, Mandy Jayatissa, Suchetha Wijenayake – a bunch of local South Asian – Sri Lankan science, speculative fiction authors. And they're very young for the most part. And it was just really great to see their excitement. They go to the Sri Lankan Comic Con. And just to see that emerging conversation and what they are doing with giant robots in the South Asian context, zombies in Colombo, you know, robot slum children, is fascinating. It's really, really new visionings and I think we are going to see an explosion, I guess, is what I think and some of them are drawing on the mythology. Some of them are drawing on history. And you know, in my own work these days, I've been doing a lot of stuff that is either South Asians in space, in my Jump Space universe, or Sigiriya, which is based on Sri Lankan fifth century history in a video game context, but – yeah, I don't know. Now I'm just babbling, I feel like – I'm just excited about it!

Minal Hajratwala: Yeah, it is exciting. For me one of the real joys of living in Bangalore for six years recently was meeting and reading a lot of Indian writers who – their work, you know, really sadly doesn't make it across the ocean. But some of it is –

Mary Ann Mohanraj: Right. But can I ask, are they writing in English or Bengali – ?

Minal Hajratwala: They're writing in English, yeah, I'm not fluent enough to read in another language. So everything I'm reading is in English and they're writing in English, it's not translation. So, two people that I was the most excited about. One is Samit Basu who has this amazing trilogy called the Simoqin Prophecies. And his work is really huge scale and epic and, you know, takes place over many many, you know, hundreds of years, thousands of years – cosmic cycles, that kind of thing and he's such a, he's a really sweet guy, too. And his work is popular, he writes for a general audience.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: And he does some anthology work, am I remembering right?

Minal Hajratwala: He does some anthology work, which I can't remember exactly, and he has some –

Mary Anne Mohanraj: He's been on my radar, I haven't read him yet.

Minal Hajratwala: He has some young adult books as well. So it's –

Mary Anne Mohanraj: And it's popular in India, but hasn't crossed over??

Minal Hajratwala: It's popular in India. It's not, it's not like mainstream like pulp popular. But it's literary popular and it's genre popular for sure. Yeah, I think his books do well. And then sort of on the other end aesthetically, of the spectrum, is Kuzhali Manickavel, who writes these, you know, what I would maybe call weird fiction, who writes these gorgeous, literary, super strange, surreal stories that, you know, you might call flash fiction, but they're so much better than most *[laughter]* most of flash fiction, including, you know, my own attempts. Yeah, so, so those are both people who I feel like I've been really influenced by and excited to read and, and hope that their work gets out more. And I, and also whose work is I think read and influenced by global culture now, because there's so much access to things like Comic Con. And even if you don't go in person, you can read about it on the internet, and you can read the literary magazines and science fiction magazines. And so I think that people in South Asia are drawing from a global culture, and a really rich base, in a way that actually American authors aren't really drawing from yet because our country, our literary borders are not as porous.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: That's really fascinating. And I think, yeah, I think that is undoubtedly true. When I think about, you know, I've had 25 years of working as a writer in the field and I'm almost 48 so 40 years of being an SF fan, right? But I was almost entirely consuming American writing, right? I mean –

Minal Hajratwala: Yeah. And occasionally some British, something might slip in –

Mary Anne Mohanraj: A little bit of British stuff. You know, in speculative fiction maybe, you know, I read Stanislaw Lem and, you know, a few other things. It was only recently that I started to try to read – maybe 10 years ago, as an academic trying to read more broadly – anthologies like *Cosmos Latinos*, or –

Minal Hajratwala: And it's fairly recently that I think science fiction from China and Japan has been translated and widely available.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Well, Ken Liu deserves a lot of credit for the work he's been doing. And I read *Folding Beijing*, which I think won a Hugo Award that year, that he, I think he had translated. It was just brilliant. It blew me away. It was a completely different way of approaching class issues and the city and politics and a very different political structure. Another one that I really loved, and I forget the title of it. It is – It's a novel. Oh, I was raving about it last year! It, it'll come back to me, but it was a novel set in China a few decades from now exploring the consequences of the one child policy. And it is, it opens with this woman who is already married to two men.

Minal Hajratwala: Yeah, yeah. I also read that book.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: And, and then they're deciding whether to take on a third. But the Chinese government is actually encouraging this as sort of, you know, sort of your cultural duty, because unattached men are a problem –

Minal Hajratwala: Is it *Never Let Me Go*?

Mary Anne Mohanraj: No, *Never Let Me Go* is the Kazuo Ishiguro, the cloning the – it's something with kings in the title? I'm gonna say – three words –

Minal Hajratwala: Yeah, I can't remember, I also – can't get it.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: It'll come back. But I was just – I was – I thought it was a fascinating cultural extrapolation. And it, with like sort of poly elements. Government mandated poly is a new thing, right? But you know that the consequences of the one child policy are, like, hitting us now, right, and the sex selection for men, for boys.

Minal Hajratwala: Yeah. And in a way it's super interesting because the post-colonial period was this very experimental period in government and how societies should govern themselves and China went one way, India went the other way. And so it's really interesting to see like here on the one hand, you have the one child policy and what came out of that, and then you have absolutely no restriction on population. And what has come of that is sort of dystopian in many places, like –

Mary Anne Mohanraj: But also having the sex selection –

Minal Hajratwala: – Chennai running out of water. But yes, exactly. Sex selection. And there was a film actually, what was that film out of Delhi? That was like “the last woman on earth?”

Mary Anne Mohanraj: I don’t think I know that one.

Minal Hajratwala: Because of sex selection. There was only one woman left. And yeah, so –

Mary Anne Mohanraj: So I looked it up. It's – King is the author's name, Maggie Shen King, and the title of the book was *An Excess Male*. It was excellent. I strongly recommend it. So, okay, I feel like we we've been all over the place I will, I will come back and one thing I meant to say earlier was that, you know, I did seek out South Asian American writers in the field when I was starting out and there were so few, right, there's Vandana Singh and I'm going blank on the other names, because I have no brain these days.

Minal Hajratwala: I don't think I even know any.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: There are a few but oh, you should totally look up Vandana Singh, you would love her. She's got this one short story, *The Woman Who Thought She was a Planet*, about a woman in –

Minal Hajratwala: Oh, yeah, I’ve read that, that’s beautiful.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Yeah, that's a great piece.

Minal Hajratwala: Well, Suniti Namjoshi was the first one that I read. And she was amazing.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Oh! See, I know her as a poet, does she also write fiction?

Minal Hajratwala: Yeah, yeah, she writes this amazing like, well, she has a feminist fables series. And then she also writes – she has a book called *The Mothers of Maya Diip*, which is sort of this feminist utopia, which turns out not to be a utopia because basically, well, spoiler alert, because they're basically killing off the boys. And then the boys sort of start to rescue each other. And then they form this kind of alternative utopia of their own, which turns out not to also be a utopia. And then there's

kind of this other third place, which is like this kind of asexual paradise, which also turns out not to be a utopia. So it's a super interesting novel that – and she has a really light, humorous voice, and also this deep kind of philosophy and exploration of possibilities with gender and how to really create a world free of patriarchy. So there's that book, and then there's one of the first feminist utopiaists was Roksanna – I think Hossein is her last name? – a Bangladeshi feminist who wrote – what is it called? – I had it, on the tip of my tongue and now I've blanked –

Mary Anne Mohanraj: It'll come back.

Minal Hajratwala: But her book – oh, *Sultana's Dream*!

Mary Anne Mohanraj: *Sultana's Dream*. Yeah.

Minal Hajratwala: Yes. Which is, you know –

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Yes, I've heard about this one!

Minal Hajratwala: – sort of imagining purdah society but opposite, with men in veils, and in seclusion, and women free.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Nice! You know, clearly, Minal and I, our memories are not so great, necessarily, for names and titles.

Minal Hajratwala: Yes! We're the same age exactly.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: But I do want to mention if you want to pull up some of this material, Monandita, Mimi Mondal, did a great set of essays on Tor.com, *A Short History of South Asian Speculative Fiction*, that kind of chronicles a lot of these writers and the pieces and talks about them. So if you want to learn more about all of these guys, then I would, I would definitely look them up. And some of the other contemporary writers are [Vadraj Indrasekara – *name uncertain*], who's of Sri Lankan descent. Usman Tanveer Malik from out of Pakistan is doing great horror work; Indrapramit Das is a big name. Anil Menon, he's, he and Vandana were really the two that I knew before me. Those were the sort of first significant Asian American ones. And of course Ashok Banker did this Ramayanas retelling. I don't know what you think of –

Minal Hajratwala: I just read a story of his, a short story in – Victor LaValle has this anthology *A People's Future of the United States* which is great.

Mary Anne Mojanraj: I haven't read that one yet. Is it really?

Minal Hajratwala: – really, really great. You know, anthologies can be hit or miss, but this one I'm about halfway and everything in it is bang-on. And Ashok Banker, actually, has a really good –

Mary Anne Mohanraj: I'm gonna make a note, 'cause I'll forget. So, *A People's History of the United States* and then also Nisi Shawl just did that *New Suns* anthology that I've been meaning to pick up. So okay, sorry.

Minal Hajratwala: So Ashok Banker's story in that is really great, like miles above his other work in my opinion.

Mary Anne Mojanraj: Oh, interesting!

Minal Hajratwala: His other work? Is – you know, it's okay. It's fine.

Mary Anne Mojanraj: Because his Ramayana thing I did not love. So I was a little frustrated.

Minal Hajratwala: I think it's – there is some work, him and – Ashwin Sanghi I think is his name – there are a few people who are doing sort of retelling of Indian myths in popular kind of contemporary terms. I think that's, it's very popular in India. It's designed for a mass audience that is already familiar with those stories. And that is not fussy about the quality of sentences and the, you know, repetition and cliches and all of that, that are really just reading it as popular fiction for the plot.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Minal Hajratwala: And for curiosity about how to re envision the plot and modernize the plot. But you know, but there is a very good anthology of speculative stories about the Ramayana which came out a few years ago.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Oh, yeah, I was in that!

Minal Hajratwala: Yeah.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Did you edit that? No, no that was –

Minal Hajratwala: No, I was rejected.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Oh I'm so sorry!

Minal Hajratwala: More proof that I need Clarion West teach me how to write a story.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: I'm gonna – oh God, what was the title of that? I can't believe I'm forgetting, because I was in it. But it's interesting. The piece that I had in there was a book, a story from *Bodies in Motion*. So it's almost not a speculative piece. It's a mainstream lit piece. But it is a woman who is, you know, a woman in America in the 1970s or so, I want to say, Sri Lankan American, who keeps imagining herself as Sita as she is working through the issues in her marriage and her husband who has cheated on her and so on. And so –

Minal Hajratwala: Neela Banerji has a great story in that, her work is really interesting. She also has a really interesting poem sequence in which she imagines Radha who was the, you know, sort of milk maid –

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Yeah.

Minal Hajratwala: – who was in love with Krishna, and Calamity Jane, who was a cowgirl, having a conversation. So it's like, oh, cow –

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Oh, nice, oh that's hilarious! I love that! The cow connection. That's awesome.

Minal Hajratwala: The cow connection! Yeah, it's really good.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: We will save our cultures with cows.

Minal Hajratwala: And there's a book that I'm looking forward to that I haven't gotten to yet called *Clone* by Priya Sarukkai who is a very established Indian poet. And this is a novel.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: You know, what I really want to do is I want to whisk you away to Sri Lanka for like three months, we'll bring all the books and we'll just read and talk and read and talk and like –

Minal Hajratwala: That sounds great, let's do it!

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Right? I'm trying to set up this, like, writing retreat in Sri Lanka for summer 2020. We'll see if we can make it happen, although it will not be three months, sadly. And this actually kind of connects back to the whole, what we were talking about at the beginning about the muse, right?

Minal Hajratwala: I think it's really important to design ways to create these connections and also to create access for Indian writers, like one of the things that I would – and out beyond India, also in the rest of South Asia, to create access for writers because there's not, you know, in North America, we have these very established structures now, organizations and MFA programs and there are a lot of ways to meet other writers and to learn the craft. And over there, there's really very little, it's hard.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Okay, so I have a question for you, then, based on that –

Minal Hajratwala: People just sort of, you know, muddle along and teach themselves.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: So, last – a few months ago, I would say, as Yudha was getting ready to come for the Nebulas, there was a little bit of a conflict that happened online around that, and – not to sidetrack into that in detail. But I think one of the things that was interesting is there is, some of it had to do with the indie publishing scene in the rest of the world. And a real perception I think, from talking to the Sri Lankan authors that I met last November, that they felt really locked out of American publishing. Right, that they did not have access to it. Which honestly – and this is my, you know, narrow vision – had not occurred to me, like I hadn't really thought about that problem before.

Minal Hajratwala: It's not necessarily that people don't want their stories, but they may not know, you know, there are protocols around things like how to write your cover letter, or how to write your bio, like all of those are things that we have learned from other people over the years.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: And I think also, if you're in the American science fiction field, and you're going to conventions, you know, one of the things that you get is you get a reflection of like, how much rejection to expect. And so, you know, when you start sending things out, and you're getting rejections, there's lots of people who

will be telling you “Yeah, that's totally normal. That's typical. Don't let it get you down.” You know, “I papered my wall with rejections until I sold my first story.” And I think if you are elsewhere, and you don't have that kind of writer community, I think it's sort of easy to like, send out a story five times, get five rejections, and then think like, “Oh, well, you know, America is never going to publish me” and just stop and like self-select away. There's a, there's an –

Minal Hajratwala: Or even within the region to just say, “Okay, maybe I don't have what it takes,” because there isn't a track for learning or even like the idea of writers groups and people getting together it, you know, it happens, it has happened but –

Mary Anne Mohanraj: There isn't a model for the structure.

Minal Hajratwala: Yeah, it's rare. It's a, it's a precious thing that we have. And one of the reasons that we started The (Great) Indian Poetry Collective as a mentorship, a peer mentorship publishing collective, was because we really saw this gap for poets where we had, as American poets, all this access and all these ways that we, you know, could work with – work together and work with different small presses, and in India that were very few outlets for poetry. And so, actually one of the books we published is a pretty speculative novel, a set of linked poems by Vidhu Aggarwal who's in Florida, and it's called *The Trouble with Humpadori*. And all the poems are around this character, this sort of monstrous, grotesque, hilarious character named Humpadori.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Okay. That sounds awesome.

Minal Hajratwala: Yeah. It's kind of great. Yeah.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: I think that – okay, actually, I didn't get to my, my question, which was –

Minal Hajratwala: Sorry, I interrupted you on your way to a question!

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Well, no, no, no, no, no! I was, well, this is the way things go. And I love it. But now I have to look up Vidhu Aggarwal. So, but the question I had was, so these authors kind of presented this problem to me and I am very much a –

Minal Hajratwala: You're a problem solver!

Mary Anne Mohanraj: I'm a problem solver. I'm sort of like the classic guy, I'm like, "Oh, you know, no, I don't want to just like hear and sympathize with you. I will solve this for you." So! Which isn't necessarily the right thing.

Minal Hajratwala: Yes, I remember, I came to you – I was just randomly staying in your house, I think. And I was like, "Oh, yeah, I got to do a website" and then you're like, "Okay, let's do it!" And then two hours later you had made a website for me, my first website.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: You know, this is part of the thing –

Minal Hajratwala: Probably not even two hours, it was probably, like, 45 minutes.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: – there are so many things that seem impossibly difficult until – because you have no access to it. You don't have familiarity with it. You don't have a sense of, like, how hard it is. And some things are genuinely hard. And some things are actually like super easy if you know what you're doing, right. And so, things like a website, I've been hand coding my own HTML, since 19– Oh, God. My blog is the third oldest on the internet. So it was a really long time ago. 19 – 1991 or so was when I think I started blogging. Wait, is that right? No. '93, '95 – '95. 1995. So I was I was doing my HTML then. So, so for me, WordPress is a breeze to like, throw up a basic website, right. But for someone who's never done it, it's very intimidating. And, to take it back to writing, I think breaking into what is still very much the dominant American publishing scene – I mean, India has its own publishing industry, but –

Minal Hajratwala: And other countries in the region also have their own, but they're even smaller than the one India has.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: They're even smaller, right. Sri Lanka, you know, has, has various presses and Perera Hussein specializes in English language. But still, they're small and their resources are small. In fact, like, they wanted – when HarperCollins did my book *Bodies in Motion*, they were selling foreign rights to various countries. And Perera Hussein was interested in bringing it out in Sri Lanka and HarperCollins asked for, I think it was \$600 which was much less than, you know, I think Germany paid \$10,000, right. So it was much less than that. But given global exchange rates, it was an immense, it would have been an

immense piece of their budget. It was completely impossible. And if I could go back in time, I would take it out of my advance and just pay for it myself. But I just didn't realize.

So, in fact, and that's, that's a whole 'nother thing that I would love to get into about global exchange rates and what that does for people coming to conferences. If you go, you know, I recently went to this Plurality University conference in Paris, and they did a great job of flying in people from all over the world. They were trying to create a really plural futures conversation, which I love, and I owe them things that I need to, to work on that. But! One thing that they had not taken into account, I think, is that if you are coming from Sri Lanka, or Africa, [or] from various countries with a really terrible exchange rate, even if your flight and your hotel is covered, the cost of getting a Lyft or an Uber from the hotel to where everyone's having dinner, may cost you 10 times what it costs everybody else. The cost of having a, you know, 20 franc dinner is the equivalent of 200 somethings for you. And it makes it almost impossible to socialize and as socializing is such an inherent, an important piece of the publishing industry. And this is, I feel like, this is kind of –

Minal Hajratwala:

And even on the smallest scale that is where, you know, business gets done. I watched you yesterday at the conference and within, you know – I was probably standing next to you for about 20 minutes. And within that time, you'd like booked some podcasts, and you, you know, solicited for your anthology, and you told someone you would set up a reading for them in Chicago or invited them to do – to be part of your reading series. Like, there were like seven different things, really, that you did. And that was just a tiny portion of your, you know, that social moment. And I do think that that's really important – like, really thinking about what is the access that we can create.

Mary Anne Mohanraj:

And so this is the question, right? So I asked these writers – So let's say we want to foster more international conversation, access, around speculative fiction. What is the best – where's the best place to throw money at the problem? Right? And it was interesting because their response was essentially translation. They really thought that there was, even though they were all writing in English, but they were frustrated because they read in Sinhalese or Hindi or wherever other language, and they knew authors who were only writing in

those languages, who they wanted to see brought into the English conversation. So I absolutely think that's valuable. And we're trying to figure out at the Speculative Literature Foundation what we can do to facilitate that.

One idea I had – you could tell me when you think about this – is do it country by country or possibly language by language, and I can just solicit a – so, for example, I have a potential donor I've been talking to who is Russian. And I'm supposed to get him an estimate of what it would cost annually, to put together a jury to look at what's being published in Russian short fiction, speculative fiction, select three to five pieces, translate them, and then make them publicly available, right? And I have not put together the budget yet. But translation isn't cheap. So I'm thinking it's gonna be at least \$3,000 a year to do this, and maybe more like five, right? And so then, if I'm doing that for Hindi, if I'm doing that for various countries, it's going to, it's going to be kind of a big long term project, but I'm excited about it. I think this is going to be a good model. And maybe we can get some universities or other groups behind it. If you're listening to this podcast and you have ideas of how to fund this, come talk to me! I'm director at speculativeliterature.com – or maybe it's dot org, maybe –

Minal Hajratwala: It's org.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: It's dot org. Sorry. Director@SpeculativeLiterature.org!

But the thing that they were sort of discounting was the convention value, right? And the – how much you get – because I had sort of thought like, well, the best thing you can do is sort of expand what Con or Bust does, and help bring people to conventions in the US, in, you know, WorldCon is in Dublin this year, in New Zealand next year, but especially for professional writers, I would say World Fantasy and the Nebulas are actually, like – people who are aspiring to be professionals – those are probably the two conventions that I would say are the best places to make connections.

Minal Hajratwala: I think that if you do that, you need to have someone who is like a fixer, or a guide or, you know, a buddy or whatever. Because it's really hard to show up somewhere, and especially in a new country. Most writers, frankly, are introverts. We don't know how to talk to people, even in our own comfort zone, let alone across the world. And so it's very,

I can imagine that it would be very possible for someone to get flown somewhere and be really uncomfortable and not get as much out of it as they possibly could. And, you know, you're very good at that. And there are people in the communities who are good at it, who can just be like, "Here, this is so and so, this is what they do, this is how they're amazing."

Mary Anne Mohanraj: I think I can find some volunteers to –

Minal Hajratwala: "And here's who you should meet here," instead of like you are alone and you walk into this room of 500 people.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: There is a model for this already. And I don't know if you're familiar with the Salam Award for imaginative fiction. So this is very new. It's a tribute to Dr. Abdus Salam and an effort to promote science fiction writing in Pakistan. And I think was – I want to say it was primarily organized by Usman Tanveer Malik, who is, who I mentioned earlier, and they've given it out twice. I'm going to be on the jury for next year, which I'm really looking forward to reading this material. But I met the winner, Akbar Shahzad, at ICFA, because what they did in addition to giving him the award, is they flew him to ICFA, which is the International Conference on the Fantastic in the Arts, where you get a mix of academics and writers, primarily. And we were able to have some really interesting conversations about Pakistani science fiction, his own work, etc, and introduce him to other POC writers in the field, and also just other writers in the field, and make some connections for him. So I think that kind of, like, two-pronged approach of like, here is an award or a grant or something that, that raises up a couple voices, translates them if, you know, if necessary, but then as a piece of it, maybe you allocate \$1,000 or \$2,000 to bring them to an event. And, and then, as you say, have someone on hand to be their guide. I mean, Usman I think really served as local guide for Akbar and took him around and introduced him to everyone. And I thought that worked well. I think – he said he had a great time. I think it worked really well.

Minal Hajratwala: And I also love the translation idea, because I do think there is so much amazing work happening in the smaller languages.

- Mary Anne Mohanraj: I mean, maybe we can do both, like, this is already published in English. This is a piece in translation, maybe we bring two people –
- Minal Hajratwala: Or you, you know, you have some process where it's the people who are there, who are really familiar choosing – or like, this year's winner chooses the next year or something like that.
- Mary Anne Mohanraj: That's an interesting thought, yeah.
- Minal Hajratwala: And then, like, the question of literary translators and the quality of that, and maybe there needs to be some, in some cases, I think, it's helpful to have a pair where there's, you know, one, a native speaker of one language and a native speaker of English and then they work together.
- Mary Anne Mohanraj: Really, okay, I don't know a lot about translation. I was figuring I would – I know there are societies of translators, and I was figuring, I could reach out at that point. But if you have thoughts – watch that I'm about to draft Minal Hajratwala onto being on the board for this!
- Minal Hajratwala: And some of the MFA programs have pretty rigorous translation stuff as part of – as a track.
- Mary Anne Mohanraj: As a track. That's right. So I think, I'm kind of excited about this possibility. So it's a mostly it's a question of like, finding funding and then like, working out the details, but I think we can do more to promote this. And, you know, it's funny, Jed and I – so Jed Hartman, who is my sweetie but is – also spent 12 years as senior fiction editor at *Strange Horizons*, which is one of the – I just assume everybody knows all these things – but he's, it's one of the major online pro zines in the field. He and I were talking yesterday, after going to the Locus Awards, about awards in general and, you know, he has a certain, I think, perspective –
- Minal Hajratwala: Congratulations on your Locus, by the way!
- Mary Anne Mohanraj: Thank you. Thank you. I'm super excited. It's, it's the first award I've won in the field. So I'm actually, like, over the moon thrilled about it. So, um, so thank you, *Locus*! Thanks! It's nice to be appreciated. Um, but the – what we were talking about, you know, we have sat through many award ceremonies at

this point, *Strange Horizons* has been up for the Hugo first for best website, and then for best semi-pro zine, I think, year after year after year after year. And sometimes we've come in second, and so far, we've never won, which is a little maddening for both of us. But there's a lot of great magazines in the field. So that's, that's partly just how it goes. But one of the things that came out of that, I think, is, I don't know, a sort of question of like, you know, you have this process where you pick like five novels. Whether it's a juried process or a popular vote. There are advantages to both, etc. We're not gonna go down the rabbit hole right now, but, and then one of them gets chosen as the winner. Everyone else is terribly disappointed. I think Jed was feeling really frustrated with that. It's like, is this really a useful method of figuring out what is good this year? Right? Like, there's so much individual taste that goes into it. There is so much –

Minal Hajratwala: It's a very self-selecting voter field.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: It's very, it's a self-selecting voter field. It is unfortunately a popularity contest in a lot of ways because that's human nature, right? It's not –

Minal Hajratwala: – and because it's a tight community.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: It's a tight community, people know each other well, who go to conventions.

Minal Hajratwala: We judge the personalities.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: And like, and if you have a popular blog, if you've got, you know, I would say, I love John Scalzi. I think he is amazing in many ways. But I think a lot of his success as a fiction writer initially came not just from his fiction, but because he had this incredibly good blog, *Whatever*, that was more of a general politics, conversation blog. And that really was –

Minal Hajratwala: That was funny, 'cause I thought you were like, "He had this incredibly great blog, whatever!"

Mary Anne Mohanraj: No, that's a title. That's the title of his blog! And, and I read it, and I really enjoyed it. And it you know, he self-published his first novel. And that blog, I think, helped. And it was in the very early days of indie publishing. So that blog is what I think led

to it getting bought and read enough that it got picked up by a mainstream house.

Minal Hajratwala: And I imagine he would say the same because it's, you know, that whole platform thing is something that all writers, even brand new writers now, struggle with, because publishers have learned to ask us for our platforms. Whereas when I sold my first book, nobody had a platform. Your book was going to be your platform.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: When I wrote this cookbook that – my new cookbook, I thought, well, I'm going to try traditional publishing at first and I, you know, like, I know how to do this. And I sent out proposals and cover letters and I reached out to contacts and I got many editors to actually look at it, which is in itself a feat to do without an agent. And (because my agent does not represent cookbooks), and I got really positive rejections where they liked the book, but it didn't have a platform. They were like, "We really just mostly do cookbooks for people who already have restaurants or YouTube channels with a million subscribers," right. Like, and I was like, Oh, right, like –

Minal Hajratwala: Which is not the way cookbooks used to be at all.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: No, well, but I mean, and to be fair, I almost never buy cookbooks anymore, because there's so many great recipes on the internet for free. Right. So I mean, it's not, I'm not blaming them for not wanting to take a risk on my book, but I think it's, it is symptomatic of this larger platforming problem, right. And if you are not someone who is comfortable on social media, if you are not someone who's comfortable at conventions, networking, and so on, it does get in the way, right.

Minal Hajratwala: And it's awkward because it's a different skill, like the people who are great at some things are not so great at others.

Mary Ann Mohanraj: You can still write brilliant books.

Minal Hajratwala: Yeah, but yeah, that I mean – that's a systemic issue. And I think it's just, it's not even just publishing, right? It's just information. There's so much. There's so much available. Nobody out there is dying to be like, what can I read next? What can I spend my time on next? We're all just besieged with things to consume.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: We are, we are, there's a mass of entertainment out there. And here I am doing a podcast and I know part of what I'm doing and what you're doing is we're mentioning authors we love and texts we love and raising them up, right, and trying to make them more visible. And so that's – I was talking to Liza Groen Trombi, the editor of *Locus*, not actually this weekend, but maybe it was at the Nebula Awards, or I think was ICFA actually – because this is how these things work. You go to conventions and you have these conversations, right? So, so we – I was having a conversation with her over, I believe, a margarita by the pool, so it's, it can be quite enjoyable doing this kind of work! And asking her, you know, why doesn't *Locus* represent more of what's being published internationally? And she was like, well, it's hard for us to access that information. Right? So first of all, people in those countries need to be sending us the info, there's a submit, you know, you can submit on the *Locus* website, like, here's this stuff, you might want to run a piece about it. And I've actually been terrible about, even for the SLF, like when we have a reading series or we have a grant we don't always – we don't have a good publicity machine set up yet, I'm working on it – to make sure that gets sent to *Locus* and all the other review vendors.

Minal Hajratwala: Right. And it's also chicken and egg, it's like, okay, you know, someone has to create the content, but then you don't really have a platform for it, then it's like, oh, who am I creating content for? And then, you know, it's, it's sort of a little – among the many things to do, certain things fall off.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: It is, I know, but I do think like if – I was – my big revelation of the spring is that I have under-publicized everything I've done in my entire writing career, right, like, some by little bit, some by a massive amount. And so. So anyway, so Liza was saying that you should send things, that these people in these countries should just at least send the notices in to *Locus*. And she, she did say that some countries send far more than other countries, right. So there are people for whom *Locus* is on their radar. And I don't want to say which ones because I'm not sure I'm remembering right. And I don't want to misrepresent. But I'm pretty sure that India is not sending a lot over. And so, so it doesn't get covered. It doesn't get promoted in the professional science – professional magazine of the field.

Minal Hajratwala: I mean, I think another thing that SLF can do is, is start to designate chapters and, and/or content people in different countries and just have, you know, I don't know, like ambassadors or something.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: No, I think so.

Minal Hajratwala: So that there is a clearing house. Because I think that there are also, not just writers, but also fans, who really love the work and who know exactly what's happening in their own country. And would be great to sort of start, you know, collating and compiling this stuff.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: I love that idea! That had not actually occurred to me, like we had a – we did a survey last year of like, what would people most like the SLF to do and the main thing that people wanted was local chapters. But I was honestly only thinking within the US, I like put it, you know, because I – and so now I'm like, Oh, right, we should have a Delhi chapter and it should be for fans as well as writers and just bringing these people together to put on a reading series or whatever else that they want to do. Or one of –

Minal Hajratwala: Most cities, at least in India now have their own reading series. So I can imagine the people there would be able to say, oh, okay, like maybe once a year, or once a quarter, we make that reading series speculative and we invite some – you know, into like an existing thing that a bookstore or somebody's already doing.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Oh, I love that! Yeah, no, that sounds really great. I think another thing that would, that those chapters could do if we had them. One thing Akbar actually mentioned that what was difficult for writers in Pakistan was the cost of books. Not everything is available in ebook, even if it's available in ebook, the American ebook price is expensive, right, for going elsewhere. And so I was like, "Well, I can give you some books." And he was like, "That would be amazing." So I gave him some books. But then I was like, you know, I'm pretty sure that we could get people to ship books to other countries, right? I mean, shipping costs are expensive, but the publishers are often willing to give away books to extend the reach. And if we could get –

Minal Hajratwala: And also people travel.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: And people do travel, right.

Minal Hajratwala: I actually run a book club, that is reading Dalit authors, and, so there's a book that we want to read that hasn't been published yet in the U.S. So somebody who's there in India right now is bringing back 20 books. And, you know, and I think that it's possible – I mean a lot of people don't have the extra luggage allowance, but some people do, people who travel frequently and are just, you know, going to visit family and don't need to take or bring back a lot of stuff. I think there's a way to organize it.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: That's a great idea. Well, and I was, I got a little hung up on the logistics of organizing it. I was thinking, like, maybe it would be a Sister Cities program, where you know, like, Chicago would pick a city, you know?

Minal Hajratwala: That's a good idea. Yeah, Chicago's already picked a city, I mean, those programs already exist, so I'd think it would be possible to tap into that and see if the government to government relationships, if they want to do book exchange –

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Maybe. So, I wonder if it's the same sister cities but yeah –

Minal Hajratwala: Libraries –

Mary Anne Mohanraj: I know, there is like the larger Sister Cities program.

Minal Hajratwala: As a library board member – so you could have a library to library relationship.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: I could have a library to library relationship! So that's one thing that I think we could explore with the local chapters. But I guess to go back to the convention networking aspect, I do think that, that is, you know, sort of undervalued by people outside the US who are not familiar with Con culture and so on. Oh, and I know –

Minal Hajratwala: In India, I can say that, you know, there are, it's just maybe not familiar because what they, what we have in India is literary festivals. And those are a completely different beast and –

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Right, the Jaipur Lit Fest I hear is massive –

Minal Hajratwala: Yeah, they're massive and they are –

Mary Anne Mohanraj: But is that more catering to the readers?

Minal Hajratwala: They're all about the readers. Yes.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: And selling, right?

Minal Hajratwala: Yeah. and selling and they're often quite celebrity focused, you know, they have their own issues. So sometimes, you know, and people, people end up feeling marginalized, especially, I think the regional language writers who go to those things. So, and so there's, you know, there's definitely all the hierarchies of Indian society are replicated in the, in every event.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: That's really interesting. I was invited to the Galle Literary Festival in Sri Lanka. But it was –

Minal Hajratwala: Yeah, I would love to go to that. But then it closed, right?

Mary Anne Mohanraj: No, I think it's still happening. But the year they invited me I was, I think, seven months pregnant or something like that. I could not – I was not legally allowed to fly at a time that I would have had to.

But, but what I wanted to say is – Sorry, I think I missed the bit where I was talking to Liza. And she said, not only should people send things in, but it would really help if there was a prize, if there was a prize for Indian speculative fiction, that would be something that they could cover in a bigger way. They could run a photo spread, they would do like a nice piece about it. And it would, it would sort of give – and lots of other people would pick that up. And so I hear what Jed is saying about the artificiality and like maybe this isn't really is a good measure of overall, everything that's being done in the field, having these, having the Hugo Award and Nebula Award and so on. But they're so useful for visibility. And as you were saying, right, there's such a clamoring for people's attention right now.

Minal Hajratwala: There is. And it, you know, as a reader, it is helpful actually, to, you know, when you're looking at titles to just go “Oh, okay. You know, there are 17 books I could read. Or I could go to

the Hugo and Locus shortlist and read those five books in this category.”

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Right, right. Right. And even that I don't necessarily get to, right, there's so much, but just having it on the list makes it, gives it a bigger presence and more part of the conversation. And you know, if someone shows up on the list a couple times, over a few years, you're like, I better check this author out. They're clearly doing something interesting, right?

Minal Hajratwala: Yeah. I mean, I think it would be interesting also for these organizations to think about like, oh, okay, maybe as, you know, as the Hugo Awards as the Nebula Awards as the Locus Awards, maybe we create the prize, maybe we go, oh, we're gonna pick one Best International Short Story a year and then maybe suddenly, magically, international short story writers will start sending you their short stories. And your whole submissions pool will become more diverse.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: That's really – you're saying like a magazine to do that, right?

Minal Hajratwala: A magazine could do that. *Strange Horizons* could.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: That's so interesting. *Strange Horizons* could do that. So. Hmm. Well, perhaps the editors will listen to this and they'll have to think about it. So alright, we've been talking for pretty close to an hour and I could talk to Minal Hajratwala forever. But maybe I'll, we'll start wrapping this up with, so, is there anything that we didn't get to that you'd love to talk about?

Minal Hajratwala: Well, one thing that I was thinking about at the beginning of the conversation we were talking about, you know, sort of the different wells that South Asian writers might be able to tap versus people from other places. And so that made me want to talk about the unicorns and I don't even know if I have talked to you about the unicorns.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Tell me about the unicorns!

Minal Hajratwala: So I started this unicorn obsession, after I finished my first book, which was a torturous process. I thought it would take me a year to write and a year to – a year to research and a year to write. And in fact, it took me seven years, I blew past every deadline that I had, and I was very blocked. And I had

like, lots of, you know, I'd had a lot of therapy [laughter] and worked out a lot of things. So.

So when I finished it, I was super burned out, and I turned it in and then I had a year, as you know, from your manuscript being finished to when it comes out. So there was this kind of empty year, I could not possibly imagine starting another book. But I didn't want to just not write. And so someone said, you should just only write about things that you really love. Then I was like, "Oh, what do I love? I can't even think of anything. I hate everything right now." [laughter] But I started thinking about what was I really into as a kid? And what did I love? And there were, you know, a handful of things. So I started writing little poems.

And I went to Hedgebrook actually, up here on Whidbey Island. And I had just a couple of weeks there because it was an alumni stay. And I, some of what I did there was I started writing these poems about unicorns, and they became a little set, maybe eight poems or so. And we used to do this thing after dinner, sometimes people would share what they've been writing. So I read this little set of poems out to the group and, you know, I sort of thought that was gonna be it. And in fact, they were like, No, no, no, you're not done because we want to know this about the unicorns and we want to know that about the unicorns, you need to go do some research.

And so I went and at that time, there was one place on the entire property that had a hardwired internet hookup. So I went to the little internet shack and I got online that night. And I started Googling various things like unicorns and you know, history, unicorn, whatever, unicorns in sets, unicorns in this, unicorns in that. And at some point I put in unicorns, India, and all this stuff came up. And I was like, "What?" And then that was when I learned that actually, the first unicorn images in the world are from South Asia. They're from the Harappa civilization, the Indus Valley Civilization. So which is now the border of India and Pakistan. And so then I was like, "Oh my god, I just finished this huge project about identity, like, this is the last thing I want to write about!" So one side of my brain was saying that and then the other side was like, "It's destiny! I'm supposed to write about the unicorns they are channeling through me!"

Mary Anne Mohanraj: That is awesome!

Minal Hajratwala: Yeah, so. So that's where that started. And then it sort of has gone in many, many different directions. But the sequence that I'm – one of the sequences that I'm – things that have come up of it is a sequence of work that is, that is speculative. And that is this kind of technological era narrative, where these, where there's this sort of covert, possibly government or corporate operation called Operation Unicorn that is trying to hunt down the last remaining unicorns. And so, so one of those poems is on Granta.com. And then there are a couple that were in the Chicago Quarterly Review that did a South Asian issue edited by Moazzam – what's his last name?

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Sheikh?

Minal Hajratwala: Sheikh? Yes, of course.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Yes.

Minal Hajratwala: Yeah. So it's been really fun to work with that. And Vidhu is the faculty advisor for a magazine out of Florida called *SPECS* which published some of them in a whole unicorn issue that they did because they got excited about it.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: That's really interesting. For myself, I started working on this fifth century Sri Lanka material just because – I don't know I love Sigiriya, just the idea of this palace built on a hill –

Minal Hajratwala: You're making a game, right?

Mary Anne Mohanraj: I'm making a video game, with Rad Magpie, which is a new studio, game design studio run by Kel Bachus, who originally I met in part because – I actually can't remember how we met. But we published a wonderful story *Miss Parker Down the Bung* in *Strange Horizons* like two decades ago. But Kel now is doing, is teaching video game design, or game design generally, at Champlain College, and this studio has come out of that. They've done one board game, card game, *Querent*, which is a tarot card game, and are now developing this video game for me, but in the process, I've been talking to my Sri Lankan friends who have kindly been serving as resources for me and like, because as a diaspora person I get anxious.

Like, here are these white people working on a Sri Lankan game with me as the Visioneer, they call me – the narrative –

I'm essentially the narrative designer of the game. And I'm checking all the writing and checking all the art but then I have this tremendous anxiety of like, what if I get it wrong? I left Sri Lanka when I was two years old, I don't go back as often as I would like because airplanes are, air flights are expensive so – and I have small children, so – I'm trying to, hopefully now to go back every two years going forward but the – but as they were checking it for me, they introduced me to Angampora, which is this Sri Lankan martial art with magic that like, there's this entire massive tradition, women learned it too. And I was like, I have no idea! There's like swords and magic and, you know, spells against your opponents to confuse them. There is meditative aspect to it. And it's just fabulous. And so being able to incorporate all of that into the world has been very exciting to me. And it's something I didn't know about and, you know, a year ago, right. So I think there's a lot of exciting richness emerging.

So we're working in a café, we're recording here. I'm going to run off to the airport in a moment, but I wanted to close this off. In just a few minutes. I wanted to do a few things before we left. Oh, the cafe has very kindly turned the music off for us! So the main things that I want to do is I actually wanted to ask Minal if she would read you one of her unicorn poems to finish this off. So this was published in *Granta* and I will just turn it over to her.

Minal Hajratwala:

Okay, so um, sorry. Okay. Um, so this was published in *Granta* in 2015 as part of the online sort of supplement to a special issue on India that they did, which is also a really beautiful issue. It's called “Operation Unicorn: Field Report.”

The unicorns are a technology
we cannot yet approximate.

Each silv'ry filament's
worth a trillion fiber optics–

sensitive, intelligent, dense
with data, light as pi.

The natives name them rainbow-made
rapid-streaming over four dimensional landscapes

wet with dawn. We observe

dappled midnight & moonlight,

sterling indigo ripples
of energy, some silk

our instruments cannot yet measure.
They say from time to time a virgin

finds a gemstone tooth, a hoof of sapphire.
Upon inquiry, however, no such objects could be produced.

One operative following a lead
has disappeared, sending

two chaste missives in six months
scratched in bark:

1. The years are arbitrary scrawls
2. I have conquered the subterranean stairs

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Thank you. So –

Minal Hajratwala: Thank you! Always so amazing to talk with you, Mary Anne. I feel like we meet each other, like, every couple years in some random other city.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Well, now that you're writing speculative fiction, I'm going to see you much more often, because you're going to come to all the conventions, or, well, as many of them as we can, we can get both of us to. Because, as we have emphasized in this episode, this, you know, this – I feel like, I think when I was in school, I thought of networking as like a bad thing. Like, you know, at 20-something I was like, “Oh, my work should be strong enough to stand on its own merit.” Right. And your work should be strong, but there's so much luck involved in publishing and there's so much, just chance and whose eyes see what.

Minal Hajratwala: And I think another big difference is that South Asian cultures actually, South Asian people are much more relational. So we get a lot done through our, you know, kinship or constructed kin networks. And I feel like Con culture is a little bit like that too, that there's a –

Mary Anne Mohanraj: There's the whole found family idea, right, of like, this is – these are your people, you found your tribe, right, and then we want to help each other.

Minal Hajratwala: And then I wanted to – or just talk about two other anthologies. One is called *How to Live on Other Planets*. Which is amazing. And the other is about to come out, called *Fiolet and Wing*.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Oh, I don't know that one at all. How do you spell the first word?

Minal Hajratwala: *A domestic* – F – I don't even know if that's how you say it. It's like violet but with an F –

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Okay, Fiolet, got it.

Minal Hajratwala: *F – I – O – L – E – T and Wing, a Domestic Fabulisms Poetry Anthology*. So you will find my unicorn work in both of those, and, thanks to some very kind editors. And I'm excited about *Fiolet and Wing* because I'm excited to find out what domestic fabulism is. I don't think I know. [*laughter*]

Mary Anne Mohanraj: I think that's awesome. And I'm looking forward to that as well. So, so thank you. This is Minal Hajratwala and Mary Anne Mohanraj in conversation on a sort of proto-podcast about speculative literature and culture, maybe.

Minal Hajratwala: Does your podcast have a name?

Mary Anne Mohanraj: It doesn't have a name, because we don't really know what it's going to be about yet. We sort of thought, well, we need to figure that out. So we'll see how it goes from here. So, do you have, do you have a name suggestion for us?

Minal Hajratwala: Maybe it's gonna be something like “Speculate with Mary Anne.”

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Maybe. Yeah, I mean, I think it depends a little on how much I can manage to record with Ben, going forward, because, you know, there was a little while that it was like –

Minal Hajratwala: Oh, and Ben is going to be – Hi Ben!

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Hello Ben! He's not here this time, but –

Minal Hajratwala: I feel like it's, it's a futurist act to be like, "Hello, Ben, sometime in the future, you will hear us."

Mary Anne Mohanraj: That's right. Ben Rosenbaum will hopefully be joining me. And I imagine also many other people will join us.

Minal Hajratwala: And Ben has a game, right?

Mary Anne Mohanraj: And Ben has a game. Ben has a game, *Dreams Apart*, which is an RPG taking place in a shtetl. So, very cool. And he's got his first novel coming out from Liz Gorinsky's new Erewhon Press, and I'm gonna blank on the title of it, but it is amazing. If you liked *Ancillary Justice* and what Ann Leckie did with gender –

Minal Hajratwala: She's coming to teach us!

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Yes, she is, you're gonna, it's gonna be great. But Ben's novel does incredible things with gender. I read early drafts of it, and I'm really looking forward to reading the final version. Like really, really blew my mind in a variety of ways. So anyway, so. We talked about calling it "The Mary Anne and Ben Show" but it may go in a different direction. We'll see. We'll see where it goes once we have an actual title and a concept.

Minal Hajratwala: So, my niece recently ran for student council with another second generation Indian-American girl. And so their poster platform was, their poster said "Hajratwala, Vandyapagay, unpronounceable, inimitable" something like that, I was like wow, the future is here. So, you know, "Mohanraj, Rosenbaum."

Mary Anne Mohanraj: "Rosenbaum, Mohanraj." Perhaps. So I say, well, Ben and I will have to, like, fight with our fictional characters for who gets top billing. So all right. Thank you. We're gonna close off. Thanks, everyone. Hope you enjoyed! Bye!

Minal Hajratwala: Bye!