

A READER'S COMPANION
for
Rajiv Mohabir's
The Cowherd's Son
Tupelo Press (2017)

Critical praise	2
Biographical notes	3
Introduction to <i>The Cowherd's Son</i> by Rajiv Mohabir	4
Origin Myth	4
The Cowherd and the Poet	5
Exile as Home	6
Four Poems Up Close	6
Ideas for Writing	10
Interview with Joseph Legaspi	11
Links	16

Critical praise for *The Cowherd's Son*

“Languid fire or tumultuous storm, mythic cow herder or drunken Queens teenager — these poems by Rajiv Mohabir will not let up and won’t let you go. Be fierce, dear reader, and join him in celebrating the queer, colored diaspora that begins in the gut and continues in the heart. Hands down: Mohabir is one of the most urgent poets to break into the scene.” —Kimiko Hahn

“In this Kundiman Prize-winning follow-up to 2016’s *The Taxidermist’s Cut*, Mohabir continues to demonstrate an uncanny ability to compose exacting, tactile poems that musically leap off the page. These poems modulate between tales of Hindu deities, recollections of history, and folklore: these are complicated family dynamics, queer intimacy (“My love tasted of sea / and relics”), acts of resistance, and accounts of shifting geographies and displacement. Mohabir’s candid work is steeped in the realities of being a mixed-caste, queer Indian-American; his speaker sings these lived experiences into verse—moving between pleasure, sensuality, hunger, alienation, and injury: “It shocks me to dream my body / as a cut pomegranate.” Mohabir even uses the quarter rest symbol from sheet music in the breaks between sections to make explicit the collection’s musical nature and the poetic silences the work necessitates. Each of the book’s seven sections approaches identity from a different angle, including that of the ancestral grief passed down through the Indian indenture system and chronicles of conquest and empire channeled through the mythical El Dorado. Mohabir offers much to appreciate, and even among the strife he records, there is a yearning for and pursuit of joy: “In this building of shattered whispers // I say your words at night to taste you.” —*Publishers Weekly*

“In *The Taxidermist’s Cut*, winner of the AWP Intro Journal Award and the Four Way Books Intro Prize in Poetry, Mohabir paralleled the hunted animal and the hunted human, whose love for his own gender makes him an outsider within a community that itself has outsider status. In his Kundiman Prize-winning second work, the rift with community remains (“Son, you are fit / only for the greasy smoke / of the body burning on its pyre”), and the poet’s anguish is expressed in an abundance of forceful images (“my palace will torment you / with rubies you bleed / when thorns prick your quick”). Here, though, Mohabir expands his reach, referencing Indian mythology (“the Cowlord rumbles, the sapphire / hurricane of Yaduvansh rumbles”) as he works his way through Indian communities from Guyana to Trinidad to New York. He scathingly surveys the consequences of colonialism (“Brits distilled rum in coolie blood”) while capturing the sorrow of those far from home, often involuntarily (“Every night Sita dreamed an India that / did not want her back.” There are moments, too, of superb tenderness (“I say your words at night to taste you”). VERDICT: Gemlike poems that will reward many readers and surprise not a few.” — Barbara Hoffert, *Library Journal*

Biographical notes

Rajiv Mohabir's first collection *The Taxidermist's Cut* was selected by Brenda Shaughnessy for the 2014 Intro Prize in Poetry and published by Four Way Books in 2016. This book was a finalist for the 2017 Lambda Literary Award in Gay Poetry. His second manuscript, *The Cowherd's Son*, won the 2015 Kundiman Prize and was published by Tupelo Press in 2017. Rajiv was also awarded a 2015 PEN/Heim Translation Fund Grant for his translation of Lalbihari Sharma's book *Holi Songs of Demerara*, originally published in 1916, and his English rendering of this text will be published by Kaya Press in 2018.

Rajiv's chapbook publications include *Thunder in the Courtyard: Kajari Poems* (Finishing Line Press, 2016), *Acoustic Trauma* (Ghostbird Press, 2015), *A Veil You'll Cast Aside* (Anew Print, 2014), *na mash me bone* (Finishing Line Press, 2011), and *na bad-eye me* (Pudding House Press, 2010).

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 Poet's Prize for the University of Hawai'i. His poem "Dove" appears in *Best American Poetry 2015*. Other poems and translations have been featured in the journals *Poetry*, *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*.

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, City University of New York (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). In 2017 he was awarded a PhD by the University of Hawai'i, where his scholarship addressed colonial era anti-sodomy laws, plastic, and humpback whales. He is now assistant professor of literature and creative writing at Auburn University in Alabama.

Introduction to *The Cowherd's Son* by Rajiv Mohabir

Origin Myth

I come from a community of South Asians that suffered indenture under the British from a period of 1838–1917. My ancestors were contracted from their Indian villages in present day Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Punjab, and Tamil Nadu to work the sugar cane fields in Guyana, South America. My earliest ancestor arrived in Georgetown aboard the SS Bern in 1885.

My ancestors from India were not lettered people and lived their lives as indentured servants until granted land parcels in Georgetown and Crabwood Creek. These ancestors brought with them into the Western hemisphere Awadhi, Bhojpuri, and Tamil oral culture, largely unwritten except in the minds of singers and storytellers. *The Cowherd's Son* contains some of these stories—stories that make my body. They are religious, historical, communal, and personal.

As diasporic people, we wend a web of stories. Some of these stories teach us how to be human, how to grow into dignity and concern for the environment, how to treat other people. These stories are not only relegated to the realm of the mythological but carry lessons that erupt from individual experiences, familial legends, histories of communities, and biology. These stories grow wings and legs; they inform our conscious decisions in this world of reason and science.

Some of our myths teach us grace, and some of our myths oppress. One myth that I have learned to resist is the mythology of caste, how it emerged and how it unfolded in the Indian subcontinent and the diaspora.

My ancestors are from many castes: Shudra, Brahmin, Kshatriya, Muslim, and Dalit, and my relationship with caste status is something that I have to mediate every time I travel to India as a tourist who looks like a local.

According to the *Manu Smriti (The Laws of Manu)*, the creator god formed the castes from the primordial man Purusha. From the lips the highest of the castes, the Brahmin priests. From the arms, the warriors or Kshatriya caste. From the thighs, the merchants or Vaishya caste. And from the feet Brahma created the servant caste, the Shudra. And then there were the Dayasu, the disenfranchised. According to the *Manu Smriti* intermarriage between the upper three castes was permissible in several instances, but forbidden with the lower and the outcastes.

When my ancestors boarded their ships as human cargo they broke the laws of caste. They travelled across the sea. They slept with and ate meals prepared by people of all castes. As a result, the caste system as once practiced in India changed.

Diaspora was a new creation story for my ancestors and for my family. We have inherited and have been haunted by these stories for generations, knowing that we, as mixed caste people are unrecognizable in Hindu scripture. So what we did was to reform our religious traditions and myths to fit our new landscape and queernesses. We see the creation of our people as the passage from India to the Caribbean. We descend from survivors and grew into bodies from their songs and stories.

One of the stories that still steeps our memories of self is the story of Lord Krishna and his kin—how a cowherd caste was once a princely one who were stripped of their titles by turning down a father’s request. This is one of the origin stories of ancestors on my father’s side.

The Cowherd and the Poet

Bahut pahile ke baat hai. Ego raja rahal. Long ago there was a king named Yayati who lived with his queen and his four sons. Now this king was very greedy and lustful. He strategically fell in love with a Brahmin woman, the handmaid of his queen, because her father was a very powerful sage and had earned many boons from the Lord Shiva by practicing austerities.

Yayati-raja wanted to live forever. As a dowry for wedding the Brahmin’s daughter, the king asked the bride’s father for immortality. The Brahmin agreed, but since the king’s selfish actions vexed the sage he punished Yayati by turning him into an old man, doomed to hobble the earth for the rest of time.

Yayati begged his new wife to find a way out of this fate. The second queen discovered that if Yayati were able to find someone willing to give the king his or her own youth, the the curse would be lifted. The catch: the giver of youth had to do so willingly.

The queen was overjoyed, sure that someone in Yayati’s vast kingdom, once hearing the fate of the king, would volunteer. A day passed and no one came forward. And another day passed. The king’s despair grew like a bursting dam that begins as a single tear from a small slit which then causes the whole wall to crumble under the weight of the water, inundating the land in the flood.

The king decided that he would ask his eldest son if he would be willing to give away his life for his father. This was the custom back then, when children respected their parents. It’s actually in our shastras: *mata devo bhava, pitra devo bhava. Mother is a devi, Father is a deva.*

So the king asked, *“Beta, dekh. Ham buddhe ho gaili. Hamke tohar jawani chahi. Deba na? Son, look. I have become old and I need your youth. Will you give yours to me?”*

The eldest son, Yadu, refused and said, *“Ham toke deb kaisan? How can I give this to you?”*

Maybe it was because his father had disrespected Yadu’s mother by marrying her handmaid. Maybe it was because he knew his father’s heart was black. Maybe it was because he was greedy himself—how can someone know everything? Yadu refused, and a storm raged in Yayati’s heart.

“Yahan se hat, nimakharamwa! You are no longer my son, have no claim to this kingdom. I strip you of your name and caste.” And with this, Yadu departed the kingdom to live in the forest. He said, *“I will go to the forest, exiled from home—from my own name—and wait for the coming of Krishna.”*

So Yadu left his home, wounded but hopeful, into a diaspora of the heart where he awaited his beloved, Madhav, to be born in his line.

Exile as Home

Fast forward to today.

I am sitting in an airport going to visit my family for a celebration. I haven't spoken to my own father in months—and I have not gifted him with eternity by having sons to carry our name.

My mother sends me a playlist of songs she wants included at the party, because I have become a keeper of traditions of sorts. I know the names of my great great great grandparents. I speak our languages and sing our songs. My brother's children don't eat our foods, don't speak our language, and don't know the taste of sugarcane. They are our new home, tomorrow's ancestors.

And in truth, I myself don't quite fit anywhere, a queer voyager between Orlando, New York, New Delhi, and Honolulu.

These stories all end the same way, with our names changing and our identities shifting like the original story of how caste came to be narrated in English. I could have ended the story by showing some connection to Richmond Hill and Ozone Park—it's no secret that Queens is a new diaspora for Indo-Caribbean people—but this story doesn't end in a place. Someone leaves someplace and has to reform and negotiate identity from the grit of their new context, *forever and ever amen*.

My poetry is a tissue that connects me to these stories, to their language and images of violence, love, and *banbas* (forest exile).

We as a generation are on the cusp of forgetting our stories, ready instead to embrace a narrative constructed by others. On one side, my foot is steadied by tradition and on the other, it is steadied by a continual state of flux. It is not my aim to preserve anything by writing about it, but to show what actually existed once upon a time—*bahut pahile ke baat hai*—and to show that it is still living.

In the United States people see me and think, “You are Indian. Your parents come from India.” But the reality is larger and more complicated than this, filled with “trans-” words: translation, transplanting, and transatlantic.

Four Poems Up Close

The Cowherd's Son

“The Cowherd's Son,” the title piece of this collection, was inspired by two poets from the Indian indenture diaspora. After slavery was abolished, the British reinvented it as indentured labor, which bound South Asians to work five-year contracts in the

sugar-producing colonies. People were shipped off to Fiji, Mauritius, Réunion, Jamaica, Guyana, Suriname, and Trinidad, and they left behind their families and homes. Some of the recruits went willingly, but others were tricked and some were kidnapped. This poem seeks to chart the aspects of that diaspora—the Indian indenture which lasted from 1838–1917—and the particularities that arise from being in the second diaspora of the United States. The speaker of the poem is a descendant of people who survived bonded labor.

The first poet whose work I respond to in this poem is Sudesh Mishra, whose poem “Confessions of a Would Be Brahmin” is irreverent and illustrates the complexities of Indian identity in Fiji. His prayer is a poem to various Hindu gods. I thought about his approach and decided that there is something particularly queer about it, and wanted to write this poem to have a conversation with his. What does it mean for descendants of Indians to be outside of India for over a century. . . . do they morph beyond recognition? What of their cultural identities?

The speaker’s mother is of a supposed high caste and his father is a low caste—together the combination is abhorrent, according to Hindu texts. What about queerness? Can I take Krishna’s flute and make it macabre, inauspicious, and desirable?

The particular god to which the speaker appeals is the flute-playing Krishna. Madhav and Kanhaiya are alternative names for him. This reference is based on the old story that says my father, as someone with an mixed-caste identity with an Ahir ancestor, was descended of the Yadu line. According to this mythology, the father is a relative of Krishna, as is the poem’s speaker. Krishna, the cowherd, was known for his philandering—a metaphor for the human soul’s desire for the Divine. I see this poem as a second generation of Mishra’s “Confessions . . .”

The other parent for my poem was the Indo-Guyanese poet Rooplal Monar’s poem “The Cowherd,” which expresses a mythic thinking that I transpose to a queer child who cavorts with “Hindu twink,” *twink* being a word to describe a young gay man. Caste and caste discrimination is a horrid blight, and its remnants still exist in Indo-Caribbean space.

The speaker does not lament the cultural shift that he undergoes, as his parents are now converts to Christianity. Rather, he wears a history of being “queer-casted” and “queer-countried” as a mantle. The tercets and the assonance is echoic of music, a prayer chant, with the invocation of the deity occurring twice. In my mind this poem takes place in New York City, a place that allows for complications. The word “untouchable” is a hinge that reflects a sense of being outside caste, because of the mixed allegiances of the speaker whose parents have no legitimate claim to “authentic” caste identities, and also alludes to a state that cannot be rivaled. This is a joyous reverie, a *shloka*, a prayer.

Rum and Coca Cola

This poem intentionally echoes the old calypso song—not the Julie Andrews bastardization, but the original by the Lord Invader, which lamented the arrival of the Americans during World War II. They came to Trinidad and brought with them

American consumerism, inflation, and an American objectification of women. I use words and phrases from other calypsos and Caribbean folksongs like “Sanco Boy” and “Mahnin’ Neighbor, Mahnin’” to maintain the musical intertextuality.

I also draw some inspiration from the treatment of Trinidadians by Americans found in V. S. Naipaul’s *Miguel Street*, especially the story “Until the Soldiers Came.” Growing up, I had always heard the way my father and his family adored American culture and wanted so much to create a United States in Guyana. Andy Williams, John Wayne, and Pat Boone were all family favorites as was celebrating Christmas, Easter, and speaking with American accents.

The heart of this poem illustrates the ways that the Caribbean person is regarded by the United States and also by global capitalism, which has in previous generations “thingified” my ancestors and others in the Caribbean, reducing them to objects and labor. In this poem not much has changed. Hopefully the Andrews sisters’ version haunts the reader after encountering this composite of stories.

Temple in the Sea

This is a true story. Once there was a man named Siewdass Sadhu who was not allowed to build any kind of shrine on British land in Trinidad. By piling rocks in the sea he was able to create an island on which he placed his altar to Lord Hanuman. Even though by then Hinduism as practiced on the Caribbean plantation did not have the same rules of caste that held fast in India, and although Hindu nationalism is the cause of many ills today, I cannot help but see this act by Sadhu as an anticolonial resistance.

Sadhu built this temple in 1947, the year that India was finally given independence from Britain. In the old stories, Lord Hanuman was the monkey god who crossed the sea to find Sita, Rama’s wife imprisoned by the king Ravana. This is the story of the *Ramayana*, which has often been used as an allegory for the plight of indentured laborers in the Caribbean. The myth’s plot follows closely that of our history: An evil king (Britain) kidnapped Sita (my ancestors), already exiled from home, and imprisoned her in a forest (the Amazon). The promise of a return to her kingdom (the British were supposed to provide return fare for the laborers who wanted to return) kept Sita alive.

And yet we never returned, but rather made a new home out of the fragments of stories that we learned.

I have been to Trinidad, yet have never worshipped at Sadhu’s temple. What draws me to this story is the fact that my Aja—my paternal grandfather—was named Sewdass, and my last name Mohabir is a name for Lord Hanuman.

Cow Minah: Aji Tells a Story

This prose poem exists in three languages at once: Guyanese Creole, Guyanese Bhojpuri, and an English translation. This story is a familial folktale that was told by Aji, the grandmother, whose life and death in this book transforms the speaker’s

understanding of his own identity. Aji appears in the first section and makes appearances throughout the work.

This story about a cowherd comes in pieces. The consistent narrative form cannot hold the fissures and complexities of such a story, which migrated from three continents and over three oceans. Aji told this story half in song and half in Creole. I wrote this story as a reconstruction of Aji's language—bilingual and disappearing.

I decided to include this poem in the book because it illuminates a mythic thinking that the speaker of the poems inhabits: rife with conflict and family turmoil. It cautions against sorricide and seeking riches by ill means. It also shows the power of truth—the sister, while a disembodied spirit, is avenged through the help of a cowherd. The character of the cowherd throughout this book is threefold: Krishna, the speaker, and the speaker's ancestors, with all of the heaviness of dharma and responsibility that it entails.

Long before it was attached to the page, this piece was oral. In the process of writing the story I overwrote, hoping to come up with the essential bits of narrative that shone through—to discover which parts could be read and understood as aspects of the same story, which elements were necessary in order to understand what was happening in Ramlall's world. I wanted it to be ruptured, filled with holes. I wanted the reader to work at piecing together this narrative as an echo of what understanding myself in my diaporic context is like. As soon as readers think they understand something, the language changes beneath their feet. This shifting heteroglossia is the land I'm from.

By including a multilingual piece I accent loss, a sense of a world on the verge of shift. The speaker laments his cultural distance from Aji, but is grateful for the songs and stories he has learned along the way. As we learn from earlier poems, everyone else in his family has abandoned these stories. When the speaker eventually considers Aji's death, he knows that he inherits her knowledge and must carry this with him wherever he goes. He is forever marked by her songs and stories, and he journeys through various national spaces and identities from Guyana to Trinidad, from Toronto to Orlando, and from Varanasi to New York to Honolulu. He carts this baggage through all of these places. The poem provides an example of how the mythic plays out in the poetic: a background for understanding the speaker's complicated positionality as both filially pious and prodigal.

Ideas for Writing

- 1.** Think of a myth that haunts you. It can be religious, historical, or personal. Remember that the word *myth* does not mean that it's not true; a *myth* is a story that is part of a *mythos* that informs your daily decisions. Does this myth make you a better person or does it teach you to fear and oppress others? Write a prayer-like poem (like "The Cowherd's Son") where you reckon with oppression by adding joy or ecstasy to your present condition. It is through joy of survival that are you able to challenge the mythology that keeps you or your community under duress.
- 2.** Think back to a time when an elder in your family told you an incredible story. Was it incredible because it seems impossible? Was there magic in the story that bewitched you? Write the story down in fragments. Use the voice of the person who told it to you, paying attention to include the particularities of that narrator's voice.
- 3.** Think about your full name. Is there a story to how you got this name? Do the parts of your name represent certain places or stories that have made you what you are? Were there arguments between family members about your name? Who gave you each name? Our names have stories and carry a history. Write the story of your name in sections. Think about what forms would serve each name. Write a sonnet for your first name, a villanelle for your middle name, and a ghazal for your last name. Or feel free to use any form (including free verse or blank verse) to write the "story" of your name.
- 4.** Remember a game that you used to play as a child. Who did you play it with? What were the rules for playing? Who taught you? Were you good at it? Did you ever cheat? Write a poem that describes the game, and include in the lines the rules. Layer the rules and directions with instances of lyric interiority, crafted from memories of playing this game.
- 5.** Imagine that your beloved is the Divine, but the Divine is flawed. Imagine that you know how to love in a way that the Divine does not. Imagine that you are teaching the Divine how to love. Write a poem in ten couplets that either outline your relationship with the Divine or present a problem to the Divine that you need addressed. Think of this kind of epistle as a prayer, but not a formal prayer, the kind of prayer you whisper to a beloved asking them to correct a behavior.

Interview with Joseph Legaspi

Joseph Legaspi: *You begin your book with an epigraph from a Bhojpuri folksong, so I ask, Where does your heart belong? As a poet, a queer person of color, a son?*

Rajiv Mohabir: The folksong that begins this collection sets up a conversation that I intend for the book to have. Drawing from the poetry of Indian Indenture Diasporic poets like Sudesh Mishra, David Dabydeen, and Faizal Deen, I wonder about the actual “location” of the speaker. My heart as a queer person of color, a son, and a poet is rooted in the music that brought me to poems. First they were in a language that I didn’t understand—the Bhojpuri or Caribbean Hindi of my Aji, who was unlettered but the holder of epics in verse. 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. I see this kind of postcolonial identity as what my poetry does too—queer, migratory, and always attempting to see how I fit in North America. Sometimes I find allies, sometimes demons. I think my heart will always belong to the holes between my identities, the slippages, the indefinable—which is to say, “Why poetry?” “Because.”

JL: *I perceive this book as a collection of collisions, the mishmash and mash-up of identities, deities, religions, cultures. Can you speak more about that, and about for you what coheres with this, which what seems to be a contemporary existence?*

RM: I come from a home space that is diverse. My community is a mash-up of religions and identities—a Creolization of identities of sorts. My mother comes from a Hindu family, as does my father. Both are converts to Christianity. My mother has Hindu, Muslim, Tamil, and various casted ancestors. My father has Bhojpuri and Punjabi Hindu ancestry. I have an extended family that is Christian, Hindu, Arya Samaji, Muslim, Buddhist, atheist, and others. They live in the United States, Canada, Britain, Germany, Sri Lanka, the Bahamas, Puerto Rico, Hawai’i, Trinidad, and Guyana. To say that I am not Christian or not Hindu is to deny a lot of my ancestors and to play into the colonizing force of Christianity or the Islamophobia of the Hindu Right. I hope I offend them both as I honor my various communities, or my one diverse community. Religious identity is not necessarily an individual’s choice. Belief may be, but not necessarily community or heritage.

In some way this kind of identity can only exist in Indo-Caribbean spaces. Because of my history with colonization—my ancestors being sugar-slaves to the British Empire—and because of the pressure-pot that was and is the Caribbean, I see this mishmash as fitting the sea-scape of the Antilles, a coolitude that orients itself toward change and adaptation.

On the connection between all these things, I quote Kamau Brathwaite who said, “The unity is sub-marine,” meaning that what bound my ancestors and binds my poems together is a history of survival and creation. I wrote the bulk of *The Cowherd’s Son* while I lived in New York—Queens, Richmond Hill, Jackson Heights, and the Upper West Side—so in some sense, New York binds these poems and identities together.

JL: *How do you see the role of mythology in your writing, and how does myth run parallel with your personal biography?*

RM: Through religious mythology we learn dharma—our right place in the world. What happens where there is no normative “right” place for you? Let’s say you’re mixed caste. Let’s say you’re queer. How do you revolt? How do you celebrate yourself?

I don’t think that I can literally believe that the world is on the back of Kurma (Vishnu-as-turtle), or that the world was created in six days. But this doesn’t mean I can’t be seduced by the poetry of those conceptions. What if the turtle represents some being that is in constant and steady motion—amphibious, able to exist in more than one community at a time. Or what if the world being created in six days is about the human life—awareness that in the first six years our bodies are forming, we absorb the world around us, and we learn how to create a world of joy or despair?

You can see just how these myths work in my mind—not as Joseph Campbell’s archetypes but as guiding principles that are meant to be queered by experience. To make them static is to undo the magic of spirituality.

I was initiated into this life in English, Sanskrit, Bhojpuri, and Arabic. Religious mythology always articulated the things that I couldn’t know or understand—pregnant wonder and oppression. It took me a long while to unlearn the damage of the commandments and tenets of each and re-quilt them into stories that open me up to wonder.

JL: *How do you approach colonial subjects in your work?*

RM: I am drawn to layering poems. Sometimes a word can have a velocity all its own, or sometimes it can be laden with a history. Throughout *The Cowherd’s Son* I use the word “coolie” to show this. It may come from Tamil or Mandarin, meaning something about manual labor. It was the name or epithet 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. But some claim that this was just a re-formation of slavery, as the conditions the South Asians faced were torturous and kept them economically tied to plantations even after their indenture “contracts” were finished. The word “coolie” carries this economic category—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.

This word has that connection throughout time as well—it was something that was and is used by non-South Asian people as a racial slur, something used by contemporary Caribbean American poets today to show contempt for things Indian and social distance from their ways. Yet it is also a word that has been reclaimed by Indo-Caribbean poets and writers such as Rajkumari Singh in her essay “I Am a Coolie” and Gaiutra Bahadur in her book *Coolie Woman: the Odyssey of Indenture*.

There are also ways that this word can be used to articulate a kind of connection between the descendants of bonded labors. *Coolie* was used to locate the Chinese laborer who served the British and Americans. So there are resonances that vibrate across the postcolonial world.

I use this word throughout, so that it has an amalgamation of meanings for the reader by the end of the collection—a kind of definition in action.

JL: *There is a danger of the exotic in works in English that include foreign words, phrases, and objects. How do you successfully maneuver this, hence illuminate otherness?*

RM: First of all, I speak (with varying degrees of fluency) Hindi, Bhojpuri, Urdu, English, Guyanese Creole, and French.

I use the words as they occur in the space of myth or story or in relation to how they are or were related to me. The names and places are actual—I think the danger of ironing out my languages and identities can produce a silencing effect that will stifle my communities, my family, and my ancestors.

In a poetry workshop I was once told to eliminate all of the words and phrases in Bhojpuri from my poems—all of the phrases and expressions that don’t translate into English, all of the terms of relation, even place names.

I think of using words that others might find unfamiliar to be an act of resistance—resisting an English-only approach to the world of American poetry. If people find this exotic, it’s about their own exposure (or lack thereof) to things Caribbean, South Asian, and even American. The delegitimizing of their languages and identities has traumatized my family; this collection begins my multilingual experimentation.

It’s a wonder that I write in English at all. My Aji never spoke English. I refuse to write only in English—and I think this is important for the idea of “America” and what makes “American poetry.”

I resist exotification because I write into these languages, not against them. The speaker of these poems is not an inside informant, but rather someone winding many threads to form one strand of yarn, with which he knits a fabulous sweater! (It’s colder in the U.S. than in the Caribbean, so I think the sweater metaphor very appropriate!)

You can see this in Queens—the most diverse place in the world.

JL: *Since I currently live in Queens, and you lived in Queens, can you speak about how this place enters your work and imagination? Oftentimes I tell people: Queens is one place but every place.*

RM: I like that thought that “Queens is one place but every place.” I think there’s something like 166 different languages that are spoken on the street there. When I lived in Jackson Heights, I would leave my home and not speak English until I got to work. Queens is also the place where my family moved when we first came to the United States. We immigrated to Richmond Hill before it became very Indo-Caribbean and left for Orlando just as more and more Trinidadian and Guyanese immigrants started to arrive.

I have a poem in this collection that pays tribute to this borough as a site of my history. It’s called “Ode to Richmond Hill.” Before I moved to Hawai’i I lived in Richmond Hill and taught high school in Ozone Park at John Adams High School where the student body looked and spoke like me. It was a wonder to teach there since I grew up relatively far away from such a thriving Indo-Caribbean community.

One very big way that Queens has influenced my writing is that I did my MFA in poetry with a crossover in literary translation at Queens College, where I was lucky to work with Nicole Cooley, Kimiko Hahn, Roger Sedarat, and Susan Bernofsky. Their dedication to teaching and mentoring emerging writers has been staggering, and has given me a template to use as I consider teaching poetry and mentoring my own students. The program at Queens College was really a dream. I was encouraged to write multilingual poetry and to experiment with voice, form, and style. A particular outlook that I have taken on is one that Nicole Cooley very strongly advocated. She used to say, “There’s no such thing as writer’s block,” which is very true. She, Kimiko, and Roger gave us many different ways around the mythological “blockage” by looking to outside source materials to build poems from.

JL: *Are poems prayers? Are they voodoo? Acts of conjuring?*

RM: The particular kind of voodoo in Guyana is called “Obeah.” I think, yes, poems are a kind of Obeah, conjuring, and prayer, a way that the human addresses the divine or the unknowable. Poetry allows for space between images and phrases that lead into others, sometimes directly and sometimes associatively. It’s this being led by affect that moves me and that I think is the space of the divine. Sometimes writing poems and listening to music connects me with my ancestors or with ancestral memory coded in song, language, and Imaginaries that I have inherited or unearthed. The act of creation is divine. For me, writing is having my ancestors dance on my shoulders.

JL: *This collection sings. In many voices, dialects, rhythms, languages. When writing how conscious are you about sound?*

RM: Sound is one of the first things I think about. Maybe this comes from my engaging with the oral traditions of my family and home culture. Maybe this comes from the relationship between sign and signified. What I can say is that I am influenced by music. The first acts of poetry that I committed were translations of my Aji's song. (See, you know the word Aji from the context and the amalgamation of uses in this interview!) But I didn't want them to lie limp—I needed for them to sing even though they were stuck to the paper and not rising like perfume from the censer.

When reading poems I look for the texture of the language—how does it feel? How does it taste? There are particularities in English phonology that exist only in English. Same with Hindi. Same with Bhojpuri. Bhojpuri has a particular sing-song, as does Guyanese Creole. English has syllabation that conflicts with Hindi. Like how I think that the discursive and imaginative spaces between myth and experience is productive, I see these linguistic divides as productive as well: a different kind of Sea of Milk that once churned can produce both nectar and poison.

JL: *Living or dead, name three individuals you'd like present at your literary salon.*

RM: Three people I would like at my literary salon would have to include Agha Shahid Ali, the medieval Indian bhakti poet Kabir, and the ancestor who preceded me by five generations and who came from Kolkata to Guyana and rose up against the British planter's sexual exploitation of his common-law wife, Lakshman. I would want him to see what his progeny would one day become in a second diaspora.

Links

Rajiv Mohabir's home website

www.rajivmohabir.com

***The Cowherd's Son* on the Tupelo Press website**

www.tupelopress.org/product/the-cowherds-son/

Poems by Rajiv Mohabir on the Poetry Foundation website

www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/rajiv-mohabir

Interview on the *Speaking of Marvels* site

<https://chapbookinterviews.wordpress.com/2015/04/24/rajiv-mohabir/>

Interview on the Kundiman site

<http://kundiman.org/announcements/2017/3/5/a-conversation-with-previous-poetry-prize-winner-rajiv-mohair>

Poem by Rajiv Mohabir on the Split This Rock site

<http://www.splitthisrock.org/poetry-database/poem/outcry>

“An Actual (South) Asian American Speaks from the Ruins of Best American Poetry,” an essay by Rajiv Mohabir from *Jaggery*

<http://jaggerylit.com/an-actual-south-asian-american-speaks-from-the-ruins-of-best-american-poetry/>

“Why I will Never Celebrate Indian Arrival Day,” an essay by Rajiv Mohabir from *The Margins: Asian American Writers Workshop*

<http://aaww.org/indian-arrival-day/>

“Mini-Syllabus: Poetry of the Caribbean Coolie Diaspora,” essay by Rajiv Mohabir from *Entropy*

<https://entropymag.org/mini-syllabus-poetry-of-the-caribbean-coolie-diaspora/>

“Minority Identity Development Model for an Indo-Caribbean American in Five Stages,” an essay by Rajiv Mohabir from *The Offing*

<https://theoffingmag.com/enumerate/minority-identity-development-model-indo-caribbean-american-five-stages/>

Rajiv Mohabir poem with audio of “Ode to Richmond Hill” from *The Cowherd's Son*, on the Academy of American Poets site

www.poets.org/poetsorg/poet/rajiv-mohabir

Rajiv Mohabir poems from *The Cowherd's Son* on *The Feminist Wire* site

<http://www.thefeministwire.com/2016/07/5-poems-rajiv-mohabir/>