Vauhini Vara: The Immortal King Rao

David Naimon & Vauhini Vara

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The Immortal King Rao is somehow three narratives in one, a historical novel set within a Dalit community in 1950s India, a near-future tech dystopia on the islands of the Puget Sound near Seattle, and an immigration story from the former to the latter. As a technology reporter herself, Vauhini Vara is interested in artificial intelligence in relation to writing and narrative, and she has found an ingenious tech-assisted point of view to tell this story of India and the United States, of caste and capitalism, of corporate governance and the anarchist resistance to it, in the most novel of ways.

This may be the only podcast you listen to this year where *pneumonoultramicroscopicsilicovolcanoconiosis*, the longest word in the dictionary, is spoken. Surely it is the only one that looks at everything from artificial intelligence to anarchism, Ambedkar to Gandhi, global capitalisms to global feminisms, and questions of representation, diversity, and erasure within everything from technology itself to whose stories get published and read.

During today's conversation Vauhini mentions many books by Dalit authors (as well as books about Taoism and anarchism and capitalism) and we've collected many of them in today's Bookshop. Vauhini's contribution to the bonus audio archive is also of note. She reads from and discusses her award-winning essay "Ghosts," which engages with an artificial intelligence called GPT-3. Vara believes it is a technology that could be useful for writers that are having trouble finding the language for something that defies words, much as her engagement with GPT-3 helps her find a way into the grief she felt about losing her sister, something until then she had been unable to write into. This joins bonus audio from so many others: from Viet Thanh Nguyen reading and discussing Maxine Hong Kingston to Ted Chiang reading his essay on why Silicon Valley fears super-intelligent A.I. You can find out more about subscribing to the bonus audio and about the many other potential rewards and benefits of becoming a listener-supporter and joining the Between the Covers community at the show's Patreon page.

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David Naimon: Today's episode is brought to you by The Shehnai Virtuoso: and Other Stories, the best stories of the Gujarati short-story pioneer, the Gujarati Chekhov or Tagore– Dhumketu, and translated by Jenny Bhatt. This is the first ever book-length English translation of his work and the first-ever Gujarati to English translation being published in the United States. Jennifer Croft, the award-winning translator of most recently The Books of Jacob by Olga Tokarczuk says, "Dhumketu is

a wonderfully gripping storyteller . . . Bhatt has certainly done him justice in this excellent selection." The Shehnai Virtuoso is out July 26th from Deep Vellum Books and available for pre-order now. Today's episode is also brought to you by Emma Seckel's The Wild Hunt; a debut novel rich with historical detail, a skillful speculative edge, and a deep imagination. Set on an island off the coast of Scotland, the novel tells the story of a young woman determined to forget the sorrows of the past and the ominous bird-like creatures of Celtic legend that force her to investigate the truth at the island's dark hearts and reveal hidden secrets of their own. Says Brendan Mathews, "Emma Seckel's debut crackles with dark energy, conjuring a world where the skies are full of crows, ghosts walk the moors, and the islanders are haunted by loss. Seckel knows how to write heartache but these pages are also bursting with a fierce love for the living and the dead. The Wild Hunt is a wonder of a novel." The Wild Hunt is out on August 2nd from Tin House and available for pre-order now. Before we begin today's episode with Vauhini Vara, I did want to mention a couple noteworthy things. For one as you will soon learn, Vauhini, prior to being a novelist, and still, is a long-standing tech journalist who's also interested in the intersections of technology and writing, probably most notably in her award-winning essay Ghosts, where she engages with an artificial intelligence called GPT-3 that takes a sample text that you provide and continues the story for you. She wonders if this technology could be useful for writers writing into experiences that seem to defy language, to resist words. Vara herself hadn't and couldn't write into the grief she felt around the loss of her sister until she became progressively more engaged with GPT-3. She talks about this and reads one of the most remarkable sections of this essay for us in the bonus audio archive. This joins many other incredible contributions to the bonus archive, whether Viet Thanh Nguyen talking about the importance of and reading Maxine Hong Kingston, or Myriam Chancy teaching us as she reads from Jamaica Kincaid, to a craft talk by Marlon James, to poet Karthika Naïr talking about the poetic form the canzone and why she would use it particularly for a poem about Kunti from the Mahabharata. Bonus audio is only one of the possible benefits of becoming a listener-supporter. Every listener receives a resource-rich email with each episode with the best things I discovered preparing for the interview and many of the things referenced within the interview; whether the books by Dalit writers we discussed today or Vauhini's essays on everything from Why Doesn't Silicon Valley Hire Black Coders? to The Competitive World of Indian-American Spelling Bee Communities. There are many other possible rewards and gifts too, from back issues of Tin House Magazine to the Tin House featured new release, which has just been updated to the Irish author Paraic O'Donnell's new book The Maker of Swans. But every now and again, a past guest reaches out with something particularly generous and rare, often something available for only one or a small handful of lucky future supporters of the show. Whether that be Nikky Finney's handcrafted box of limited-edition books, to New York Times poetry columnist Elisa Gabbert offering a consultation on a poem. These don't happen very often, so I wanted to mention the latest one from past guest, poet Mary-Kim Arnold, the author of the remarkable collection of linked lyric essays/

memoir about her adoption from Korea, the Litany for the Long Moment, and her equally remarkable poetry collection The Fish & The Dove; a book that engages with the history of occupation and the legacy of The Korean War, and of which she says, "In it, I bear witness to what girlhood, womanhood, and motherhood might mean in the context of family, nation, and history." She joked to me that someone had recently called her a maximalist and her offer for one lucky future supporter is definitely one of maximum generosity. For this person, she's offering signed copies of each of her books, as well as a textile created especially for you, either a Bojagi, a Korean wrapping cloth, or a handmade wall hanging, or another textile work where you will be offered a few choices for personalization in which she will hand stitch. If that were not enough, she will include some special gifts: chapbooks, broadsides, and other ephemera from small presses that she loves. You can check this all out, everything from the Tin House new release to the bonus audio archive, to these grand and generous gifts from past guests, by heading over to patreon.com/betweenthecovers. Now, for today's episode with Vauhini Vara.

These stories are about to get unleashed. They're about the wildness contained in all of us. "I think stories have some magical effect in the world. I think it's really hard to live without stories and if somebody tells you this is the way you're going to end up, you're lucky if you can forget that." "There's me and then there's writer guy me, and then there's me working, which is the absence of me. It's just a story." "I had no idea how to write a novel. I didn't know if it would ever come to fruition. I was working at a vet and lint-rolling puppy hair and cat dander off myself." "They're almost like really shy animals. They will come out of the woods but you have to stay very still and you have to pretend like you're not interested in them." "Artists tend to put their fingers in the wounds in the silences." "I believe in the role of literature as a catalyst for dialogue and new forms of thinking." "All the stuff I'm interested in is thrown into the washing machine that is my brain and it's put on a spin."

David Naimon: Good morning and welcome to Between The Covers. I'm David Naimon, your host. Today's guest, writer journalist and editor Vauhini Vara, studied International Relations (with minors in Economics and Creative Writing) at Stanford University. She was also on the staff of The Stanford Daily having previously interned at Denver Post and STANFORD magazine, and was selected as the first Daniel Pearl Memorial Journalism Intern allowing her to work in the foreign bureau of the Wall Street Journal. Ultimately, she became a staff reporter for that newspaper and remained so for nearly nine years. As an upstart-young reporter, she covered technology companies and was the first reporter there on the Facebook Beat; a company founded the same year she began at the paper. She engaged with Mark Zuckerberg before Facebook was the phenomenon it is today, and other already iconic CEOs like Larry Ellison of Oracle. She ultimately pursued an MFA in writing however at Iowa, where she began the novel we'll be talking about today graduating in 2010. Vara eventually left the Wall Street Journal to launch Currency, the business section of The New Yorker online. She edited the business section for The New Yorker and regularly wrote for

them both on business and politics. She's also been a staff writer at The California Sunday Magazine, a contributing editor for The Atlantic, for The Fuller Project for international reporting, and is an ongoing contributor for WIRED Magazine, writing feature pieces on technology, as well as a story editor for The New York Times Magazine. Her journalism has won the South Asian Journalists Association Award and been recognized by the Asian American Journalists Association, and the International Center for Journalists among many others. Her creative writing can be found in Tin House, Zyzzyva, McSweeney's. Her story I, Buffalo won the O'Henry Award in 2015, and her fiction has garnered her honors from the Rona Jaffe Foundation, Yaddo, and McDowell. Vara is also a mentor at the Lighthouse Writers Workshop's Book Project, the secretary for Periplus, a collective that mentors writers of color, and is on the board of the Krishna D. Vara Foundation which awards an annual scholarship to a graduating high-school student at Mercer Island High School in memory of her sister Krishna who died of cancer in 2001. Vara's engagement with tech-focused journalism and her pursuit of creative writing have sometimes met with fascinating results. Her interest in GPT-3, an artificial intelligence model being trained to write human-like text where you provide it with text and it completes a piece of writing with it, became a way for her to engage with her sister's death in writing; a topic she had long avoided. But the more honest she would be in the sample text, the more interesting stories GPT-3 would generate in response. Vara's resulting essay for The Believer Magazine, Ghosts, was named by Longform and Longreads as one of the best essays of the year. It will be anthologized in Best American Essays 2022, and it was adapted for This American Life episode called The Ghost in the Machine. Vauhini vara's debut novel, 13 years in the making, is also an enticing meeting of her life in the tech world and her creative imaginative work in fiction. The Immortal King Rao is out now in the US, India, and the UK with W. W. Norton, HarperCollins, and Grove respectively. With starred reviews from Booklist and Publishers Weekly, Anjali Enjeti for the Star Tribune says, "At its heart, 'The Immortal King Rao' is a jarring and meticulous critique of how progress is often confused with goodness. Can faster, more efficient and more accurate technology bring about equality? Can code find a way to deepen human beings' connections to one another?" For The New York Times, Justin Taylor calls The Immortal King Rao "a monumental achievement: beautiful and brilliant, heartbreaking and wise." Finally, Karan Mahajan says, "Vara comes out the gate with a masterwork: a book that is three great novels in one–the tale of a thriving and chaotic Dalit clan in the first decades of independent India; an immigrant success story in '80s America; and a dystopian nightmare of the post-Trump future." Welcome to Between The Covers, Vauhini Vara.

Vauhini Vara: Thank you so much for having me, David.

DN: Before we talk about your novel, I just had to mention that as I put together the introduction, the one that I just read, and came across the name of the collective you are part of to mentor writers of color, Periplus, that the name popped up for me a couple of other places as I was researching. One of them was an Oklahoma newspaper that was writing about how, when you were 12, that you lasted longer than

any Oklahoma speller in the history of the National Spelling Bee finishing third in the nation, and that it was this word that bested you. Surely, that's not a coincidence.

VV: Oh, total coincidence, David. Oh my god. [laughter] I've listened to your show for a really long time and so I know how well researched it is. I love that you are the first interviewer I've ever spoken to who's made that connection. I love the word Periplus and also have a complicated relationship with it. When I was in college, my friend Tony Tulathimutte, the writer, I was telling him about being in the spelling bee and about how this was the word I lost on. I don't remember this but apparently I told him that if I ever started a company or something, I was going to call it Periplus as a way to reclaim that name. He remembered that and when along with friends I started this mentorship collective, I wrote to Tony—who is really good with names, he's the person I go to, all of us in our friend group go to, to name our novels—and was like, "Okay, I have a new thing, along with friends, we have this new thing, this collective to mentor writers, what should we call it?" He was like, "Oh, obviously, Periplus. That's what you said you were going to call whatever you started." So yeah, not a coincidence.

DN: I love that. What does it mean?

VV: It's like a document having to do with circumnavigating coastlines. It's like a naval document, so it's totally apt for this collective, mentoring writers of color, immigrant writers.

DN: Three words that you succeeded at: pertinacious, odontoloxia, and ekistics when you were 12. Do you remember the meaning of any of those?

VV: Oh my god. I don't remember the meaning. I do think I remember the spellings which is that.

DN: That's amazing. Well, in your essay for Harper's on spelling bees called Bee-Brained, you asked one young contestant what her favorite word was. She said pneumonoultramicroscopicsilicovolcanoconiosis which is the longest word in the dictionary and it was a word that I was obsessed with when our teacher wrote it on the chalkboard. I repeated it all the time at any opportunity because after Mount St. Helens erupted, the ash carried all the way to Colorado where I was a bored Little League player, exiled the left field where I could do the least harm to my team, and it rained ash on our uniforms from Washington State in Colorado, which made the word really more magical. But I'm curious about the origin story about your interest in technology. Does it relate at all to this deep engagement with spelling where your mom is recording herself saying words and their meanings for you to play when she isn't at home? Does it have some narrative to it at all or was it more random? You were assigned to the technology beat and you simply took to it?

VV: That's such an interesting question. I hadn't thought about the relationship between language and spelling. I love that story by the way, that's so great, moving, and sad. There's definitely a relationship between my interest in language and how words work, and the fact that I became a writer for sure. I'm always surprised that more spelling bee kids don't end up being writers, a lot of them end up in totally unrelated fields like engineering or medicine. There's that connection but for me, in

retrospect, it feels a little random that I ended up first writing about technology and then through that being interested in technology. I went to undergrad at Stanford. I graduated in 2004 and as you said, that was the year that Facebook was founded. Not only that, I had been an undergrad at Stanford which was one of the first schools where they launched. All these companies like Facebook and YouTube were very much like in the zeitgeist when I was finishing college. But then I happened to get a job. I interned at the Wall Street Journal in Paris through that Daniel Pearl Memorial internship before I graduated. Then after I graduated, I had applied for jobs and didn't get any full-time jobs but I got another internship at the Wall Street Journal and that was in the San Francisco Bureau only because that was the nearby bureau. That's the one that made sense and then by virtue of being in the San Francisco Bureau, that was the Wall Street Journal's tech bureau and so I ended up covering tech. Also, because I was the youngest person in the office, I ended up being the person who was writing about these emerging technologies.

DN: Well, what's so interesting about your debut novel is that it's historical fiction set in 1950s India and it is near-future science fiction set in the Puget Sound near Seattle, and it is also the story of the immigration of our main protagonist from the former to the latter. It's an immigration geographically but it feels also like an immigration between historical fiction and near-future science fiction. But even though we are following the rise and fall of this Dalit immigrant turned tech giant, Rao has already fallen when the book opens and Rao isn't telling us the story, but rather, his daughter Athena is. You've talked about how, for many years of the 13 years that this book was in progress, you didn't know who the voice was telling the story. I'm really enamored with your ultimate solution, not just because you're a tech reporter and because of these tech-assisted, self-revealing, emotionally resonant non-fiction pieces you've written, the Ghost for The Believer and also My Decade In Google Searches for The New York Times, but because your solution in fiction and narrative around both who is telling the story and how the story is told is a tech-assisted point-of-view solution or a tech-assisted hack into narrative structure and storytelling tropes. I was hoping we could start there with your solution to how to tell the story which is an unusual solution I think.

VV: Yeah. I knew that I was writing a novel in which a child is born into this Dalit family living and working on a coconut grove in the South of India in the 40s or 50s in my original conception of it after India's independence. I knew that this character was going to grow up and move to the US and become a founder of a tech company in the 70s or so. Those were two of the things I knew. My dad grew up on a coconut grove like this in the South of India in the 1950s. I had studied tech companies founded in the 1970s in the US from having written about them at the Wall Street Journal but I had no direct experience of it myself, as a woman born in Canada, raised there and in the US, Dalit myself through my dad but not having had any direct experience with the kind of caste depression that people growing up in India in the 50s and 60s and 70s had. I felt like those experiences that I wanted to write about felt very distant to

me. At the time, my husband and I were watching the Battlestar Galactica remake from the 2000s. For the listeners who don't know the show, there are these characters in the show called Cylons that are essentially androids I guess who are very humanoid androids but they can read human consciousness with their minds and they can access human's consciousness. I was like, "Oh, well, if I could just use something like that, if the teller of this story of King Rao could have that kind of capability, it would solve this writing problem I have. I could access everything there is to know about King Rao without having to pretend as an author that I'm embodying King Rao himself in the first person or a close third person." There was this writing problem that was solved by the technology and then it occurred to me at some point that it made sense for this technology to have been invented by King Rao. At first, that's all I knew. I was like, "There's some technology that's allowing the story to be told." I was recently looking back at the earliest drafts of the book. In the very first draft, I think it was not clear at all who was telling the story. Then eventually, I hit upon the idea that this was like a software program. In the early versions of the book, there's this computer voice telling the story that lives inside a machine and people would read it and be like, "Wait, who is this voice? Does this voice have a gender? Does this voice have their own identity? Are we meant to think of this voice as having consciousness or sentience themselves?" Initially, I kept being like, "Oh, you don't get it. It doesn't matter. This is like you just need to go with it." But so many people were so confused by this version of the voice. Over time, I just realized that I needed to do more to figure out who this voice was. Later, the voice became a kind of android, like a Cylon that King had built in his workshop. The voice still wasn't human, it was still this invention. Then people would read it and be like, "Well, but the voice sounds pretty human, it doesn't actually sound like some kind of robot," and so that evolved and evolved and evolved over time, it was something that took me a really long time to figure out, and then eventually, I realized like, "Oh, this is actually just King Rao's daughter telling the story."

DN: Yeah. If we were to go to the beginning of the problem as a writer, you want to tell the story about King Rao from a point of view that somehow has access to some of his thoughts that someone outside of him normally wouldn't have. That's where the tech solution comes in. But why didn't you want to tell the story from King Rao's perspective which would have seemed like, at least initially, maybe that would have given you the answer to having access to his thoughts?

VV: There are actually two answers to that question. One is that, again, because I myself had not had personal experience with all these things that I wanted to write about that King lives through in the 50s, 60s, and 70s, I felt that I couldn't credibly and authentically write about that. In this own voice's movement or whatever you want to call it in literature, there's a spectrum like some people believe that you shouldn't write about a perspective that you don't share; if you're a white man, you shouldn't write from the perspective of a black woman. Then others might say, "Well, of course, you can, but you need to do it right, you need to get it right, be authentic, and be accurate." I think I tend to be more in the latter camp but I felt that I couldn't do

it. I felt that I wasn't going to be able to accurately and authentically be King Rao, embody King Rao in the first-person narrator. But the other thing that I just learned that I'd forgotten is I was looking back through these old papers and I found this paper that I wrote in grad school, this little 10-page paper or something about first-person omniscience; the idea that you could have a first-person narrator who knew everything, who knows everything. I had thought that I had just come up with that for the book, this idea of this technologically-connected narrator who can connect to the internet with her mind, can connect to this other character King with her mind, and therefore, be in some ways omniscient while also telling the story in the first person. But I found this paper where I'm talking about Moby-Dick and I'm talking about Junot Díaz's book The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao. In the paper, I write about how these books employ an omniscient first-person narrator and it's so fascinating and so I was going to try to do something like that. I had forgotten about these influences for me but I think I was solving a writing problem and then at the same time, I think there was just something fascinating to me too about the idea that you could have that intimacy of a first-person narrator telling the story but then somehow also have the first-person narrator know everything.

DN: Yeah. It also can't be a coincidence that you name her the daughter Athena who, in mythology, was born motherless right out of her father's forehead. Because really, the person telling the story as you've alluded to is intended to be an extension of her father like no child has ever been and is, in this sense, like no other human who has existed before. But she's weirdly—and I think this is why the book really works and it's compelling—someone who takes our virtual social media lives to both extremes, the ones that we all are experiencing. She's able to conjure infinite information, at any point essentially, and yet has literally no direct analog experience with any real human beings other than her father. She probably should be banned from spelling bees I'm guessing because of her access. [laughter] But it's like this sense of hyper connection and hyper isolation which I feel like is a very relatable storyteller in our age.

VV: Yeah. It was hard to write because all of us do exist in the context of the real world even as we're increasingly pulled into our phones. In early drafts of the book, I think I made a lot of mistakes, like I wrote Athena because I knew that she knew everything, she could access whatever she wanted to online. I had this idea of her as being more knowing in a broader definition of that term than she could actually be. I realized over time that the way to write her—I hope I was successful—had to be that she was basically like a child or a teenager sitting in front of a computer screen all the time and never talking to a human. In one sense, she has a lot of information access, she knows a lot of facts, but she doesn't know anything about the way the world works on a palpable actual flesh-and-blood level.

DN: Well, the opening lines of the book go: "King Rao left this world as the most influential person ever to have lived. He entered it possessing not even a name." If we put aside for now what leads to King Rao's demise, his incredible rise to become the most-prominent tech titan in the world was through helming a company called Coconut

with his wife, a company whose revolution within personal computing tracks in some ways with Apple I think. I'd love to spend a couple moments world building together, because ultimately, he doesn't just invent technology, he also revolutionizes the way we organize ourselves in the socio-political sphere as humans and as citizens. Because this near future is different in some very significant ways from ours—at least still for a moment—talk to us about Shareholder Government, what it is, how it functions, why it's created, and maybe the rhetoric around why it's a good thing according to the people creating it.

VV: Yes. Shareholder Government emerges from a moment in history that I think is like not too dissimilar from the moment in history that we're in right now where institutions, national/international institutions are breaking down, public confidence in government is breaking down, and at the same time, the wealth of a small handful of individuals and companies is rising the political and social power of these companies, and individuals is rising. In the book, what emerges from that is a breakdown essentially in the world order in which corporations end up filling a void. A friend was telling me the other day about reading about how Amazon is going to send employees to get abortions, if they need to, to get an abortion across state lines because their state has banned abortion. When we read news like that, I think we're of two minds, a lot of us are of two minds, it's like on the one hand, isn't it kind of dystopian that a corporation is filling this need like this should be something that's fulfilled by government? Then on the other hand, hooray for good thing Amazon exists though, maybe I should go get a job at Amazon, that's a really great benefit to have, I'm glad they're being forward thinking about this and progressive in their approach. The book takes that notion I think further by saying, "Well, what if companies were to really come together and say, 'You know what, there's been this breakdown. Don't worry, we've got it under control. We're going to start by providing some infrastructure where infrastructure has broken down.' Then, 'Oh, oops, it looks like education systems in some countries are having trouble. We're going to go in and help with that too'?" In the book eventually, there's a gradual but also somehow sudden transition where eventually the world is run by these corporations, and society is okay with it. This system of government is called Shareholder Government, so instead of having like nation states, there's a global system and every citizen becomes a shareholder in the system of government which does mean that you hold shares, like literal financial shares in this economy. But the size of your holdings is predetermined by how wealthy you were in the previous world order. All kinds of other things happen. Instead of being paid in currency, you're paid in something called social capital which is an evolution of money. It's a bit like money as we think about it now, but the amount that you have is also influenced by, for example, whether you've committed crimes or whether you say mean things about corporations on your social media. The amount of social capital you hold is a little bit mysterious even to yourself because all of these kinds of decisions are determined by an algorithm that takes in all these inputs and is meant to make more sophisticated informed decisions than we ourselves can make. I might not know why I have the

social capital I have or why it's suddenly gone up or suddenly gone down because it all happened behind the scenes with the aid of this algorithm. The rhetoric about why this is a good thing has to do with this previous breakdown of national governments. I think the rhetorical question people like King Rao who created the system of government would pose is like, "Well, this is certainly better than the alternative. Remember where we were a decade ago when everything was falling apart? You don't want to go back to that." Also, on average, a lot of things are better. On average, people are living longer lives. On average, people are healthier. But it obscures a more complicated truth which is that there remains a lot of inequality. In fact, inequality has grown. People have less agency, people have less understanding of how their decisions are influencing actual outcomes for themselves. I hope that covers it. There's a lot.

DN: No, that's great. I want to later talk about the shadow that this government casts. But first, one of the things that you mentioned on a lot of interviews is the way the real world caught up to your imagined future world during those 13 years, some of which caused you to re-enter and rewrite text. Climate change the way it has tangibly, visibly, and steadily accelerated in only those 13 years is one thing, but also you mentioned the arrival of Trump. It's easy for me to imagine how, for you to write a believable near-future climate change by necessity, would have to be an actor in it. But tell us about Trump showing up in your world already partially built and how, not that Trump's in your world, but that Trump in the real world shows up and causes you to reevaluate.

VV: Yeah. Around the time that Trump emerged as an early political figure, when he was making false claims about Barack Obama, and then later when he said he was running for president but nobody took him seriously, I think this was around 2014, 2015, I wrote this character, I was like, "Oh, somebody like this is going to represent the demise of traditional institutions, the traditional nation state in my book. This is the kind of figure that needs to emerge. Trump is perfect as a model." So I wrote this like Trumpian president into my book, this Trumpian president who only exists to serve his own interests, is a businessman, has a businessman's mentality about how government should be run. Then Trump was elected president. That Trump-like figure was still in the book and friends would read, and my husband, also a writer, would read the book, would read versions of the book and be like, "I don't understand why you have Trump in the book but it's supposed to be X number of years in the future. Why is Trump who's president now showing up as if he just popped up 15 years from now?" The reason was that when I first wrote the character, obviously, I didn't think Trump would become president, I thought it was a far-fetched idea, and so when Trump became president and I got this feedback from friends, I realized I totally had to recalibrate and account for the fact the important fact of Trump and people like him who had started emerging after I started writing the book. The thing that I imagine leading to breakdown and the emergence of Shareholder Government was in my imagination, it was like the Obama administration when I started writing the book. It was this technocratic time I think when nationalism around the world hadn't

yet emerged as much as it would later emerge. Trump happened, similar Viktor Orbán, all these similar figures started emerging all over the world. The thing that I thought I was making up started to happen in real time and so I had to account for that so I had to make clear in the book that those things happened in the past and then I had to imagine a future that took it a step further. I had to imagine this future-president character who is even more outlandish than Trump and I had to do that with so many things in the book.

DN: Well, one of them was really interesting, one other way that real life caught up to some of your impulses around writing the book is you said that this story of King Rao captivated you, this notion of someone coming from humble origins to literally rule the world partially because of you not seeing any Indian tech CEOs and wanting to write into a real absence of Indian tech CEOs. But since then, there's been a remarkable sea change, the CEO of Microsoft, of Adobe, of IBM, Twitter, Google's parent company Alphabet are just a few of the Indian-born CEOs of American tech giants now. I know in your tech journalism over the years, you regularly engage with questions of representation. You have an article on Microsoft's neurodivergent hiring program as one example, and another that profiles the stories of four Howard University computer science students that looks at Silicon Valley's failure to hire black coders, so you obviously think about these questions in your journalism as well as in your creation of the character of King Rao, the origin being writing into an absence of representation. I was curious if you had thoughts on why seemingly, all of a sudden, there is this wave of Indian tech CEOs in the US.

VV: Yeah. I had not anticipated that. You have had Adrienne Maree Brown on your show, and I'm going to bungle in paraphrasing the way she puts it, but she talks about the way that science fiction can be a space for imagining better futures or imagining alternative utopias as well as dystopias. I think my novel is not trying to do one or the other, but one way in which I was trying to write into a space that I would like to see was in pairing King Rao, who was an Indian-American immigrant, and Margie who he will marry, as his co-founder, a woman in the 1970s to start this company together. It did feel like a subversive movement to show like, "Well, what if this could happen?" I had no idea, even though I'd written about the tech company and tech industry and was following tech companies closely, I could see these Indian-Americans certainly in high level positions, it had not occurred to me that there would be some point in the near future where all of these tech companies would be run by Indian-Americans. Another thing to note though is that King Rao, the protagonist in my book, is Dalit from the oppressed caste group in Indian society, in Hindu society, and none of the existing Indian-American tech CEOs in the US are. Another element of what I meant to do subversively in this novel was to have a Dalit person at the bottom of the caste hierarchy—I should say the false caste hierarchy, the invented caste hierarchy—become the CEO of a company, not only the CEO of a company but the most powerful man in the world. That was all intentional. Even as in reality, Indian-American people

are becoming CEOs of this big company, there still is intense caste oppression and discrimination in India and in the US as well within tech companies.

DN: Yeah. I want to spend some time with both caste and representation within the book. But to go back to spelling just for one more beat, you ask a similar question in your Harper's spelling bee essay, why are so many of the spelling champions Indian-American way beyond their demographic representation. I looked at this year, for instance, and 10 of the 12 finalists in the National Spelling Bee were South Asian, including the winner, so 83%, and amazingly, 21 of the last 23 champions have been South Asian. In your article or essay, you raise this question and you ponder it yourself and ask other people looking at class for instance or how many of the winners have a highly educated stay-at-home parent. I don't think you mentioned this specifically in that article but I think of an extension of immigration policies that favor certain immigrants or migrants from South Asia over others and also the immigration situation often arriving not as refugees but as desired professionals, or as you say, not talking about the spelling bee now but about King Rao's arrival in the US, you say, "There was a name for people like my father, the skilled and educated Chinese, Japanese, and Indian newcomers who, as a result of President Kennedy's Immigration Act, were arriving stateside in the seventies on airplanes, rather than in bekelped boats and windowless vans, and settling on the margins of college comapuses rather than in the tenements and shantytowns peopled by the previous waves of migration. They 'model minorities.' They were, it was said, 'outwhiting the whites.'" That's probably the main place in the book you name this phenomenon outwhite, but do you feel like The Immortal King Rao is engaging with this in a broader sense? It does feel to me like outwhiting the whites is a fair description of King Rao the individual and what he's doing playing by the rules that he encounters and trying to win at them. But I'm curious what you're doing in The Immortal King Rao around the model minority notion and around this notion of success for South-Asian migrant, immigrants.

VV: Yeah. There's this version of immigrant success that has to do I think with buying into and supporting the dominant culture. Another thing about Indians is that India was colonized by the British, and as a result of that, a lot of Indians learn English in school, so that's another element of this for Indians in particular. But I definitely wanted to explore that in the character of King Rao. Some people have said to me, some readers have said to me, "You had this opportunity with King Rao as a Dalit person rising to become the most powerful person in the world, you have this opportunity for him to contend with class and contend with social hierarchies and stratification in a more thoughtful, better way than somebody else might, and why didn't you?" It was very intentional that I didn't. It was very intentional that of all these people, when you're reading about King Rao at the beginning, you're reading about all these different family members and some of them have different political orientations or philosophical orientations, King is an ambitious kid and he's a kid who sees the social structures around him and figures out how he needs to navigate them in order to have individual success. He operates that way within his family and then

within India and then when he moves to the United States, he's operating in that way as well. The culture into which he emerges in the United States is this white patriarchal, heteronormative culture that prizes capitalism, capitalistic ways of thinking. There are other characters on that same coconut grove who view the world differently, through a more socialist lens, for example, or more anarchist lens and I think it's not accidental that those aren't the characters who end up "succeeding" in India and moving to the US and having impressive careers and lives. There's something about the fact that King Rao is the character who does that, that makes it impossible for him to have a stronger sense of class consciousness because if he did, he probably wouldn't have ended up on this path and at the pinnacle of business and political life in the US. I don't know if that might sound tangential to your question but to me that feels like very related to your question because I think in society today, not even in the dystopian world that I've written about in the book, but in society today, there is the stratification among immigrant groups where those who are "successful" are the ones who align with dominant culture and those who aren't are the ones who don't.

DN: Part of the reason why I wanted to bring this up, the Indian tech CEOs and the spelling bee demographics, is because it feels like representation within literature seems to be very different. I was looking around to see what the breakdown of representation within publishing was within Asian-American literature if I could find something by country. I couldn't find anything but I did find an interesting article that analyzed what scholarly attention is paid to various literatures, and 80% of the Asian-American literature to receive substantial critical attention were, in order of prominence, Chinese, Korean, and Japanese, and Indian, Filipino, Vietnamese led the sliver of attention that remains after that 80%. I reached out to the writer, translator, and founder of Desi Books, Jenny Bhatt, to see if she knew of anything that directly looked at literary publication itself. She said she didn't know of anything that did but she brought up the same analysis of scholarly attention and said it was a pretty good proxy for what I was looking for. This is my long way of wondering and wanting to ask you about representation, if we look not at Asian-American literature in its broadest strokes, but at Indian-American literature as well as Indian literature translated into English for American or North American readers. I wonder how it breaks out, or your sense of how it breaks out with regards to Hindu versus Muslim or with regards to caste. I want to spend some time talking about caste in a little bit but as a first step in that direction, as you mentioned, your father's family is Dalit, the people who used to be called untouchables by others. Recently, I came across a tweet by the poet Prageeta Sharma that said, "I want to think about how to unpack Dalit feminist practices and South Asian women's writing & poetics. I'm invested in unpacking Brahmanical patriarchy. Basically, I want to figure out what intersectional approaches in theory advocate for more expansion and writing in poetics." This just added to my curiosity around your sense, if you have a sense of it, of Dalit representation within the sphere of Indian-American publishing. Do you publish this book among a cohort of peers or into an absence, into a void?

VV: That's such a thoughtful question and thanks for all that research that you brought into the question too. There is very little Dalit writing published in the US. Some of my favorite English-language books about contemporary Dalit life are by the writers Yashica Dutt. She has a book called Coming Out as Dalit. Suraj Yengde whose book is called Caste Matters, those are both seminal books about Dalit life and they talk about Dalit life in the US and outside of India in the diaspora. But they have not been published in the US yet. There are these books that you can buy online if you can find them but they don't get published here. The activist Thenmozhi Soundararajan has a memoir coming out this fall. She is a prominent Dalit-American activist who I think especially rose to prominence recently because she was invited to give a talk at Google about caste and caste depression and discrimination. Then some Google employees, some Indian-American Google employees protested saying that her work is inflammatory and she should not be invited and then she was disinvited. This was covered in The Washington Post and elsewhere. It was a big story. Her work is really interesting to me because she is Indian-American like me, she grew up in the US rather than in India. She has this book coming out that explores Dalit Indian-American life here in the US and proposes a framework for thinking about it. I mention these books so that people know about them, but also there aren't many. Another book I'll mention is Ants Among Elephants by the writer Sujatha Gidla, which was published in the US to a lot of critical acclaim actually. That's a book that people who are interested in the US-published book about Dalit life in India and the US can read. Anyway, the reason I mention all these by name is so that people know about them but also I couldn't name 20 more books, there are just very few in the US and I think it's notable that the book that brought the issue of caste into prominence in the US was the book Caste written by Isabel Wilkerson who's an American woman, a Black-American woman who has had her own experience of marginalization, oppression, and discrimination in a different context, but it wasn't a book by a Dalit writer, which I think is notable. There's a huge absence. In India, there's been a revival of a broad interest in Dalit writing in the same way that there's been this reckoning in the US-publishing industry. But it's just now starting. It's long overdue and there's a lot to make up for.

DN: Let's do another round of world building together because a significant portion of the story takes place in 1950s India inspired temporally and geographically by the real coconut grove of your father's family ran when he was growing up, which lends its name to the fictional Coconut tech company biking around the US. In your spelling bee essay again, you say that it was a different time to be Indian-American when you were growing up. There was no Mindy Kaling, Aziz Ansari, Kamala Harris, or Nikki Haley. You say, "When I was growing up I'd tell kids that I was Indian, and they'd assume I meant Native American. Only two Indian Americans had ever won at Scripps, and it seemed unimaginable that twenty years later people would consider spelling a characteristically Indian-American pursuit." But you've also said that you didn't grow up—and maybe this is related if you weren't growing up among many Indian-Americans—but you said you didn't grow up in the US and Canada with much

awareness around caste. Given that you wanted to not only portray India in the 1950s, but also portray a community of Dalit coconut grove workers, how did you go about building the world that portrays King Rao as a child, especially, as you've already mentioned, with your anxiety around inhabiting King Rao's position because of what you didn't feel like you could do? How did you portray this world in a way that you would feel satisfied with it being "authentic"? What was your research process like and what hurdles did you encounter in trying to paint 1950s India on this coconut grove?

VV: I think my journalism background was helpful there. The first thing I did at the very beginning in 2009, 2010 was I was in graduate school at the time so I had access to the University of Iowa Libraries and I checked out a bunch of books about rural society in South India in the 1950s, 60s, and 70s. I checked out books about caste written by Dalit scholars. There were a couple of oral histories I was able to read. My dad actually sent me this almanac almost of what life was like in the district of India where this coconut grove of my father's and of King Rao's family is supposed to be in the 50s, 60s, and 70s. I was able to really consult that and learn a lot. That was the initial phase of my research. Then in 2010 when I was just starting the first draft of the book, I traveled to India and spent time on the coconut grove. It was a place I'd visited a bunch growing up so I had familiarity with it, but I went and visited with a research mindset. With the help of a cousin of mine and an uncle, I interviewed all these family members and asked what life was like at that time and became very aware of my own cultural biases coming into the research process itself. I remember one particular interview with an aunt, one of my dad's sisters where I asked what her favorite foods were when she was growing up and she scoffed at me and was like, "Favorite foods? I don't have and didn't have any favorite foods. We didn't have the luxury of choosing which food we liked. We just ate whatever was put in front of us." I hadn't realized that question itself came with its own cultural assumptions. Even that, the mistakes I made were educational or informative for me. The other thing I did was I interviewed scholars in India. I interviewed especially Dalit scholars, especially people with family roots in the same region that my family was from. I went to this local coconut research station and learned about coconuts and took their pamphlet home with me. I approached it as if I were a journalist trying to write a story, write an article that would be factual and accurate about this time period in Indian history.

DN: When I know little about something in preparing for an interview, I really relish the chance to learn more and do my own research and there are very various points in this book where I feel like the journalist in you steps to the fore. I love those moments. You would sprinkle the 1950s narrative with significant details from Dalit political life. I suspect these details would be known to most people in India, for one, that the architect of the Indian constitution was a Dalit, Ambedkar. I became really captivated and even waylaid through reading about and listening to accounts of all the ideological and strategic battles between Gandhi and Ambedkar; Gandhi insisting that India deal with the British as unified Indians even though that meant being led by men who were all high caste; and Ambedkar wanting to represent the Dalits independently.

The stories of their battles were just amazing to hear retold. Ambedkar's story alone was incredible that he came from a Dalit clan more favored by the British so his father was able to get him into a primary school when 99% of his peers couldn't. Yet he wasn't allowed to sit in chairs, he couldn't drink water from the school. Someone would have to volunteer to pour it into his mouth without touching him. But he nevertheless earns a scholarship to Colombia and New York and then returns as likely the most-educated person in the entire province regardless of caste, and yet, he's still treated the same and no one will rent him a room and he eventually has to rent a room under a false name. Yet he becomes the architect of the Indian Constitution. Before we talk more about caste, he's not a huge figure but he's a figure that pops up here and there briefly in your book, you don't go into all of this history that I just recounted, but was he a figure that loomed large in your family imaginary growing up, or is this stuff, as writing the book, things that you were discovering about your own heritage through the writing process?

VV: As you said, I didn't grow up with any strong sense of caste identity or caste consciousness. My mom is not Dalit, but my parents both rejected the caste system. I think partly as part of that, since my sister and I were being raised in Canada and the US, it wasn't something that got talked a lot about, I think partly as part of that rejection. When I was in my 20s, my dad started talking more about Dr. Ambedkar and about caste. He would send me books to read. It was through that process I would say that I became more aware of who Dr. Ambedkar was. Certainly over the course of researching this book, I thought about him more. It was my dad actually who read an earlier draft of the book in which I mentioned Dr. Ambedkar in passing and said, "I think he needs to be more in the book." Ever since the book has been published, I still keep thinking about these things that I'd like to put in the book or I wish I had decided to put it in the book. As you were describing Dr. Ambedkar's childhood, life, and rise, I was thinking to myself, "Maybe I should have had a longer section about that. It is such a great story." In all three of the timelines of the book, I was struggling with balancing providing information and telling the story. I had that in mind when writing about Ambedkar. But one thing that I was doing was thinking about how the actual characters in the book would be talking about him. In the 1950s and the 1960s, there would be people in a family like King Rao's who talked about Dr. Ambedkar a lot and considered him a hero and there would be other people who were barely aware of him because just like African-American history wasn't well-taught in the US until recently, and even still now is being rejected in a lot of places, Dalit history was not well-taught in India. You could go to Indian schools from kindergarten to the 12th grade and barely know who Dr. Ambedkar was. I wanted all of that reality to be reflected in the book.

DN: Maybe as a connection back to what you were saying before about how someone like King Rao couldn't have had a different political analysis and ended up where he was, but Ambedkar serves as another humble origins to founder of a nation arc with someone with that very different political analysis I think.

VV: Yeah, absolutely. I agree with you.

DN: That story, his story reminds me of the Rao family in the book in the sense that they have to assume Brahman family names themselves. But I also think about how, unlike Ambedkar story, Rao's story doesn't center discrimination against his family. One of the reviews in India of your book highlighted this aspect of the book when they said, "This is not a tale of a poor, persecuted Dalit making it rich in a distant land. The Raos are landowners in a village where, despite the caste hierarchy, many Dalits are well-to-do. One of King Rao's grandfathers runs a school while the other owns a coconut grove where King is raised." Karan Mahajan, the author of The Association of Small Bombs, talked about how your portrayal of Dalit life brings complexity to it, avoiding exploitative portrayals of poverty or have seen them monochromatically through the lens of oppression. I guess I wondered, was this by design and intent, a push back against a simple caste-based stereotyping of something that is far more contradictory and nuanced in real life? Or was this a happy accident of you simply portraying the real-life community of your father's family which happened to grow up in this way?

VV: Yeah. I would say it was both. My father's family "happened" to grow up this way. But the reason my father's family had the background it did was because of the broader socioeconomic and cultural circumstances in India at the time. The 20th Century was a time, in part because of Dr. Ambedkar's influence, in which Dalit people were starting to have opportunities for social mobility. For example, Dalit families were starting to be able to acquire land in small numbers and in modest ways after generations of oppression. But land acquisition was starting to be a thing and so my dad's family and King Rao's family in the book are representative of a broader trend that was taking place. This was true also of access to education. Dalit people were able to get more access to education and affirmative action system was put into place in India, more formally than in the United States, so a formal system of affirmative action in which Dalit people had more access than they previously had to universities and to government jobs, for example. There was all this interesting upward mobility that was happening for Dalits in the 20th Century, and at the same time, there was a serious backlash to that in ways that I think are mirrored in the US, for example, where in the wake of the civil rights movement or in the wake of the abolition of slavery, there was this severe backlash against equal rights and freedom in this country as well. I wanted to show all of that, I wanted to show what the upward mobility looked like, I wanted to show the ways in which oppression and discrimination does continue. There are scenes in the book in which King and his friends learn about violence against Dalit people, Dalit children in a nearby town. Their discrimination continues in subtle forms in the way that local politics work. I wanted to show that when King goes to university, people are constantly whispering or he's hearing whispers in his head about having gotten there only because of the affirmative action system. I think all that nuance exists. I would argue that in the same way that it's not just a portrayal of oppression

and poverty, it's also not just a portrayal of upward mobility because that would be false as well. I was trying to show both.

DN: Could we hear a section of the book?

VV: I'm going to read from this section in which King is growing up in his hometown in India. This is a time of a lot of change in his village and more broadly. I think the only thing that you need to know as I introduce this is that the character called Appayya, who I'm about to mention, is both King's maternal grandfather and his teacher at school.

[Vauhini Vara reads from her debut novel The Immortal King Rao]

DN: We've been listening to Vauhini Vara reading from her debut novel, The Immortal King Rao. Since I mentioned that Indian reviewer, I'm wondering about the Indian reception of the book. You have this interesting vantage point with the book coming out both in the US and India at the same time. Do you feel like the reception has differed in each place or has the book been framed differently, or the questions posed to you, have they been different in ways that have been notable?

VV: An aspect of the Indian reception that I found really interesting honestly is a critical aspect, which is that some of the Indian reviews have described aspects of the book as having an outsider's perspective, not necessarily in the facts that are described but in the way that India is presented and the way that the US is presented and the perspective in the book. I think that's a really interesting and valid criticism of any book by a diasporic writer in general, writing about their ancestral homeland. I think it's probably inevitable that sometimes happens. The reason I find it interesting is that criticism in general is so interesting because as a writer, you publish the book, it's out of your hands and it only exists in the imagination of all these many people who read it and so I feel pretty honored to get to have been reviewed in all these different contexts. I think when Indian reviewers write this way about books by Indian-American authors, I think one thing it reflects in part is the relative lack of representation of works by Indian authors in the US market and a frustration that all these books by Indian-American authors are then inevitably published in India to the Indian audience. I think it's a very valid and worthy criticism and concern. I think there should be more literature from India, especially given that so much Indian literature is in the English language, you wouldn't have to translate them or anything, so there's all this great literature, really cutting-edge innovative literature I think, that's coming out of India that doesn't get published in the US and so I can understand how it could be a source of frustration for an Indian reader or an Indian critic to have to deal with this book published by an Indian-American author who hasn't ever lived in India itself. While that's one of the most interesting aspects of the criticism to me, I think generally, there's been a pretty warm reception of the book. One thing that's been gratifying, given that early concern I had about my ability to write about the coconut grove for example, is that critics seem to feel that those portrayals are accurate, authentic, and realistic.

DN: That sounds really gratifying. Let's leap back into the near future and Shareholder Government and talk a little bit more about the shadow side of it. Because if a potential reader were to only know that the book were about a Dalit leaving his village in rural India coming to America, innovating a society-changing technology, and then becoming more powerful than anyone on earth, you could easily think that this book were a book celebrating the American dream. But one of the ironies of the book is that Shareholder Governance reinscribes social inequalities and this is perhaps partly because of Rao's lack of engagement with these various social questions as an individual. Your epigraph from Thomas Piketty's Capital and Ideology goes, "Once the choice has been made to organize economic, commercial, and property relations at the transnational level, it seems obvious that the only way to transcend capitalism and ownership society is to work out some way of transcending the nation-state. But exactly how can this be done?" But this epigraph seems only to be partially true about Shareholder Governance. It has transcended the nation state. There is even one global-school curriculum translated into 65 languages, for instance. But at least for me, it hasn't transcended capitalism by doing so but rather, enshrines it in a way that makes no nation accountable to its violences. I just wondered what your thoughts were on Shareholder Governance in relationship to this notion of transcending the nation state as a way to transcend capitalism.

VV: Yeah. I think you're right. I think that's such a fascinating question that's posed by Piketty. I think he's someone who is interested in how social goals can be met through government. I think that's the lens through which he seems to be approaching the question given the broader context for the book, which is for the quote which is that book Capital and Ideology which I found fascinating. The avenue that I was interested in exploring in the book was not answering this question of how society could be made better with government, how government could be employed as a more effective tool, but rather how the current breakdown, the breakdown that's described in part by Piketty in that quote could be exploited by those who are already powerful and wealthy. It's hard for me to imagine a future that's something other than just a more capitalistic future, that's a future that seems relatively likely to me. I think there would have to be major change for that to be avoided. That's not to say that I think I'm describing in the book the inevitable future but it's certainly like an eventuality that seems very possible to me. That's because historically, just over time, what has kept happening over and over is an entrenchment of wealth and entrenchment of power. There have definitely been forces working against that. Also, history is made up of change. A trend could start moving in another direction. But capitalism is a really powerful force and it's an institution that we built and we've built this institution that dilutes individual agency. Our agency still exists, it just makes us feel bad, feel that we're not responsible, and so it makes it really easy for this institution for capitalism to keep growing to become more powerful.

DN: I want to link this back to technology the way the Shareholder system works ultimately. It reminds me of a conversation I had with Tice Cin who, like you, also

engages with artificial intelligence and technology in her writing. She was engaging with the preponderance of white coders in one of her projects and wondering what effects that was having behind the scenes, the almost invisibility of that reality, how that might or might not be affecting her and her peers when they're largely artists of color who were doing collaborative art making that was engaging with artificial intelligence, for instance, but they weren't engaging with what's made invisible behind the artificial intelligence, which is this inequity of who's coding the intelligence in the first place. This question about engaging with the code and the coder, not just with the result of the code, is something I think about in your book, in your novel when we talk about the algorithm. Because the algorithm, I think because it is not human, has the veneer of objectivity. It gives the sense of plausible deniability to any bias; that when it produces inequities in access, whether those inequities are inequities of free speech or access to material goods in your imagined future, it's easy to say this isn't prejudice, this is just the algorithm. I wondered if you could just speak into this a little bit, especially because you've written about coding also. Here we have this way, the system can distance itself from the mechanism essentially.

VV: In the tradition of writing about futuristic societies built on technology, I think early in that tradition, there was a lot of concern about technology that would grow too powerful and have a mind of its own and oppress the people who once oppressed it. That's a familiar trope in early sci-fi and dystopian writing. Over the past decade or more, there's been this emerging understanding in technology itself, and I think in some writing about technology, that contends with the fact that technology, in the way it's been deployed thus far, is basically a tool of capitalism. It's something that tends to be built because investors have decided it should be built and put money into hiring programmers and to keeping servers running. The investors put money into it because they want to see their money grow. Because of that, technology is a tool like any other tool but it's been constructed in such a way that it serves capitalism, it serves capitalist interests, business interests. When we think about technology now, the more interesting threat to explore is not whether technology will have a mind of its own and oppress us, but rather, to think about the ways in which our own ills and evils are being embedded into technology itself. That's something that I wanted to show in the book. This algorithm that runs society in the context of the book is, I can't remember how explicitly I say this in the book, but the idea behind this was that its goal is efficiency in a capitalistic system. The algorithm has been taught that the outcomes it should pursue are outcomes that favor efficiency, that favor doing things cheaply and getting positive outcomes in a economic sense. That means that a standardized education curriculum seems like the most favorable approach to education because it's cheap, it's easy, you can get it to a lot of people really quickly without concern for what the new local nuances might be, how things should be taught, and who has access. If there's some tribe in rural India, Australia, or elsewhere where there are only 20 people that speak that language, it's probably not efficient to provide education to those people anyway because it would be too costly to do it under this system; an

algorithm would make a decision like that probably. We use algorithms like this today. I read stories all the time, I've written stories about it as well about the way algorithms make mistakes in policing and education. Those have major societal impacts and so it didn't feel too far-fetched to imagine this algorithm also that's making decisions in a similar way but just in a hypercharged version where everything seems good but it's hiding these problems that don't have anything to do with the algorithm becoming too powerful and wanting to take over the world, but rather just have to do with the ways in which we as humans are crappy and putting our crappiness into the algorithm.

DN: Yeah. Hearing you talk reminds me of something that the writer/photographer Teju Cole who said that the light meter in cameras is calibrated towards white skin. The questions we now have around photography and how things are framed, we always are thinking of the photograph, the result, the person who's looking through the camera and how they're choosing to compose the image, but what happens if the very thing that we see with, before we've pointed it at anything, already has a bias embedded in it? This might seem like a stretch but this does remind me of some of the things that I listen to on my long jogs of Ambedkar and Gandhi and their battles with each other. I wanted to share one aspect of that around this question around addressing the structure. Because one of the podcasts suggested that Ambedkar said that a new India, free of injustice, had to get rid of caste altogether, and that Gandhi on the other hand had more of an elitist view of harmony based on individual duty; that after the British were removed, the Hindus and Muslims, Brahmanas, and Dalits would learn to get along through duty and sacrifice with the individual as the moral agent through praxis; that if the Brahmanas, through their sense of duty, would do service to the Dalit, they would break down the divisions of labor was the notion according to the show I was listening to. But because Gandhi invoked, as the foundation of this argument, Ram Rajya, the utopian notion of good governance with lord Ram, as its best example, he ultimately centers Hinduism and the purpose and structure caste would bring to this future society in a good way; one that would transform from each person themselves transforming themselves. I don't have a deep grasp, this is probably obvious, and I don't know if I'm being fair to Gandhi's position, but this podcast went so far as to say people today who want a Hindu majoritarian country centered on Hindu ideology could actually look back to Gandhi if they wanted to in this regard. It wondered, in this show, if really Ambedkar's face should be held up at the protests against the India of Modi and his vision for India instead of Gandhi's. I was recently in France, I just got back, and I had lunch with a past guest of mine while I was there, the French-Indian poet Karthika Naïr. I ran this by her, like, "What I'm listening to, does this seem like a marginal position?" She felt like it rang true from her perspective about Gandhi. But when I think of the algorithm as a stand-in and fall guy for the problems of society, somehow I also obliquely think of this debate between getting rid of the structure entirely, and with it the algorithm, versus everyone transforming themselves to transform the society but not really ultimately talking about the thing that's embedded in it, or maybe even defending the thing embedded in it. But I guess

I wondered if this sparks anything for you, this isn't really a question but it's just material that I've been thinking over, especially and particularly I think because of the way Gandhi is framed in the United States.

VV: Yes. No, I'm so happy that you're raising this point and bringing it up in this way because it was something that I was thinking about a lot when writing the book. I've noticed that some people, in describing the book, have described it as three stories put together. And it is in a sense. But what I intended for it to also do was talk about the direct line between society in the 1950s and society in the 1970s, the early 2000s and today, and what could come out of all of that because there is a really direct line. One of the ways in which this continuity has been in place is through, you could call it human innovation or the use of human tools, the use of human systems; and caste is one of those systems. Many people think of caste as this like the way we think about a lot of things that have to do with religion as this thing that came down from the gods before we were even here, this thing that's embedded in the superstructure of existence that we just popped into, but caste is a human invention just like anything, just like any aspect of religion, it's a human invention in the same way that the algorithm in my novel, or algorithms in general, are human inventions. I was really conscious of that in writing the book and I'm really glad you're talking about it. I think it's a very apt metaphor to say that human biases, even human evil is embedded into the caste system, a human desire for control, a human desire to oppress others is built into the caste system in the same way that those human desires and human tendencies are built into the algorithm that I invented for the sake of the book. I think one of the questions of the book has to do with the power that these tools have once we create them. It's complicated and really fascinating to me.

DN: I also think of the algorithm when I think of western economic notions of the "free market" and the invisible hand of the free market which seem to rely on this similar distancing from accountability as if this is all magically happening meaningfully. Justin Taylor puts it well in The New York Times about your book. He says, "So-called free markets are always built on acts of dispossession and fueled by institutionalized exploitation. All of this is then narrativized into a fairy tale about invisible hands and 'natural' hierarchies, to make these acts of rapacity and despoliation seem sourceless and inevitable, so that nobody in particular can be held responsible for their perpetration and perpetuation. So too with the Indian caste system, the British Empire, the American empire, the Shareholder Government and the ghoulish pursuit of immortality itself." In that spirit of Justin's review which I really enjoyed, one last time I'd like to do a little bit of world building as we haven't talked about one large part of the book, and that is the society of people who have opted out of Shareholder Government, the Exes who live in the Blanklands. Tell us about them, why have they opted out? What is different about living in the Blanklands and why are they called that?

VV: Yeah. It was like an intellectual desire and also something that came out of the needs of the book itself in a more organic way to show what dissent and civil disobedience might look like in a world like the one that I've created here in the book.

It's a world in which society discourages, does not celebrate dissent or behavior that is not normative. But people have always existed who have pushed against the grain and wanted to protest. In the novel, the Exes are dissidents who have opted out of engaging with any of what Shareholder Government has built. They don't actively use the social media that Shareholder Government essentially requires everyone to use. Even when they protest, they don't spread word of their protests on social media because that would be using the tool created by the oppressor, Shareholder Government. They start that way and they're operating, they're protesting within Shareholder Government, and they're seeing their social capital decline, they're getting thrown in jail, and they're finding it difficult to sustain this way of existence. Then to avoid giving any spoilers, I'll just say that some dramatic events take place and things come to a head, and there's a meeting between Shareholder Government and representatives of this group which call themselves the Exes. They brokered this deal in which the Exes feel like they're getting what they want. They get these islands off the coasts of continental society where they get to live on their own and not be part of Shareholder Government. They can't have access to Shareholder Government services but they also don't have to do all the things that you need to do to be part of Shareholder Government, and so they're allowed to build this alternate society of their own on these islands. People do that, but over time, it becomes clear that the deal that they've gotten isn't entirely beneficial for them, they are living on these islands but because they're exiled to these islands and they don't use technology or social media to spread their message, what the Shareholder Government has effectively done—and on purpose, this wasn't an accident—is exile all signs of dissent from being in public view on Shareholder land. They've also allowed these people to self-exile to these islands that are going to be the first to go when climate change gets worse and worse and coastlines rise. It's a complicated existence but there's a lot that I admire about the Exes after they're self-exiled. They do effectively build an alternate model for governance. They have their own, essentially, unions that protect workers and provide services. Everybody pitches in helping one another. I would say it's less a socialist model than an anarchist model but maybe an anarchist model influenced by socialism if you had to choose a label for it. The islands are trading with one another. They are accepting donations, contributions from sympathetic people on the mainland. You can see this burgeoning idea of an alternate model but the question the book eventually raises is what then happens? Once you've built this alternate model, what do you do with an alternate model that remains marginalized? Can that model become the model of the future? That's some of what I wanted to grapple with.

DN: Yeah. I don't know if this is a stretch but I was thinking also something from the Justin Taylor quote about despoliation, and how it's made to seem sourceless and inevitable is that all the technologies we are developing and that are put forth aesthetically and aesthetically primarily as wireless and clean, they look sleek and white or shiny silver and they require less and less smaller and smaller hardware, but they're really hiding all the wires, the costs, and the despoliation, they're still

there, there are still cables along the bottom of the ocean. We are sinking servers into natural bodies of water to cool them off, Google is signing non-disclosure agreements with local municipalities to buy public water and privatize it, child labor is mining the trace minerals, wage slavery is building the phones, and the mining of these trace minerals is on the short list that in the top five or six reasons we've been at an elevated pandemic risk for the past two decades, the electricity to run the server farms significantly contributes to global warming. There are real substantive material costs beyond the psychological ones of all the social-media technology that's created under this illusion of wirelessness. It feels like it's sold to us as this ethereal elegance and it feels like, I don't know if it's a stretch to connect it to these communities, but these communities are returning to their bodies to the analog world of how are we beholden to wherever we are and to the people who are there with us. I just wondered if that felt like a stretch to you to make a connection between something as disembodied as an algorithm and maybe the impulse that these people who have her trying to pull the plug.

VV: When I first started writing about the Exes, I didn't know what was going to happen with them. I didn't know whether they would successfully pull off some kind of revolution, whether they would take over the global government, or whether they would run themselves into extinction and not be able to survive. I had no idea. I just created these characters. They ended up on these islands. The thing that happened for me in the writing is that I realized—and I think this is where I think this connects with what you were posing earlier—I realized that even if these individual human beings have exiled themselves to these physical islands that are outside of mainstream society, the globe is still a system, whether we want to call it that or not, they still belong to this broader ecosystem. If it's the case that their exile has made protests less visible, dissent less common in mainstream society, if it's the case that the fact that they've decided not to use social media means that their message isn't being heard, can it be argued that they're actually contributing to the problem? Can it be argued that their self-exile makes them feel good about themselves but is actually worsening the problem? I'm not sure how I would answer those questions but I think they engage with some of what you're asking.

DN: Yeah, I do too. I know you read a lot of anarchist philosophy. You read the writings of Emma Goldman as part of creating the world, and anarchism has been a lot on my mind because of the Ursula Le Guin series I'm doing as she's painted several anarchist future worlds in her writing. Several of the Crafting with Ursula episodes lately have focused on this aspect of her writing. But I was also surprised to see you connecting Daoism and anarchism in some of your conversations because this is a connection she makes over and over again or she made over and over again over a half century, which makes me wonder if you're also doing that, if maybe it's part of a lot of people making this connection or whether it's just a coincidence. But what do you see that brings the two together, and in your mind, the Daoist and the anarchist world views?

VV: Yeah. It's funny, I didn't know about Ursula Le Guin's interest in Daoism until after I wrote the book. It might have even been through listening to your podcast honestly, David, that I learned about that connection. It's either possible that I knew about that connection in her work in some subconscious way and it ended up here. As best as I can remember, I first encountered this Daoist text, the ZhuangZi in college or maybe high school through one of these survey courses on philosophy and how various philosophies developed. I remember loving the book then. I re-encountered it through Jenny Odell's book called How to Do Nothing published by Melville House a couple to several years ago, in which she draws on Daoism to present an anti-productivity kind of philosophy. She lives in the Bay Area, she's writing out of the Bay Area, in Silicon Valley. In this book How to Do Nothing, she's making the case for doing nothing essentially but a philosophically-based case for that. Daoism comes into it. If I'm remembering correctly, that was when I re-encountered Daoism and re-read that text, the ZhuangZi, just out of personal interest. But I happened to be writing this novel at the same time and started to think about the ways in which these ideas in Daoism, which are proto-anarchist ideas, connect to some of what was happening in my novel already. The reason I call Daoist ideas proto-anarchist is that in Daoism, these anti-institutional ideas, these ideas that the creation of a tool isn't inherently a good thing, making something easier on yourself or easier on society through use of the tool, isn't necessarily something we should be aiming for. Creating an institution or being a leader of government is not necessarily something that one should aspire to. In fact, maybe a more natural order of things in which we haven't employed tools and created these institutional superstructures is a preferable way of being. I had already been reading in anarchism, in writing these characters who I think earlier I had a version of them who were socialists and then I was like, "No, they actually need to be anarchists," so I've been reading in that tradition and was seeing a lot of resonance between Daoism which I had just picked up again after this long gap and these anarchist ideas. That book, the ZhuangZi, is just really, really beautiful and wise, and then at the same time, sly and funny. It's just a book that I love and I had forgotten about loving.

DN: Your second epigraph is from him, "The superior man oversees all under heaven, there is no better policy than nonaction." I'm going to follow that with another quote from Justin Taylor's review that I thought was great: "How to mediate between the competing interests of autonomy and collectivity, the desire for self-sovereignty and the reality of interdependence, is the major question this novel poses, over and over, at familial, societal and global scale. When the Rao clan votes to decollectivize the coconut farm that they call the Garden, the decision is framed in terms of choice and opportunity. But the establishment of job tiers and wage brackets destroys the social fabric of Garden life; with every nuclear family on the property buying their own groceries, it's impossible to cook and eat together. And, of course, the work that the women do (cooking, cleaning, child care) is not compensated at all. Without that work, the men can't hold their wage-jobs, but if women were to be salaried in proportion to the actual value of their labor, it would break the bank." I'd love to take this

as an entryway into a discussion of gender in the book; a discussion of the great-man narrative as most of these tech moguls surely see themselves within, King Rao included, but how the women in this book undercut this narrative, obviously, first and foremost, our narrator, Athena, who is meant and even designed to be an extension of King Rao's reach but who's clearly her own person, but also the leaders in the Blanklands, King Rao's wife, they all undercut this narrative that, in its broadest sense, is a hero narrative I think. You've talked about this book being about the past, present, and future of global capitalism, but is this also a book about, if not the trajectory of global feminisms, various iterations of global feminisms?

VV: Yes, absolutely. Just as a human, I'm really fascinated by the way in which over time, in various historical contexts and geographical, social, religious, and cultural contexts, women and girls find ways to exert power and exert agency within significant constraints. I think that's sometimes depicted as a state of victimhood, but I was really interested in showing where the power is in that. Sometimes it's effective and sometimes it's not. This isn't a spoiler because it's the beginning of the book, but the novel opens with King Rao's mother, the first active agency that you see her engaging in is stealing a bar of soap that she thinks is really lovely. It's, in some ways, an event that ultimately leads to her death because one thing leads to another, leads to another, leads to another, and by the end of the first chapter, she's dead. But then there are all these other characters like King Rao's wife, Margie, who hasn't studied computer science, has a bit of an arts education but not much of one, has always been disregarded because she speaks in uptalk, wears a sprightly ponytail, and has a long-winded traditionally feminine way of talking. She plays a major role in the establishment of this company with King and it can even be argued, I think very credibly argued, that it's really her idea that she puts into King's mind so that he feels like it's his idea and she attaches herself to it so that she's able to start this company which she wants to do but wouldn't have been able to do in the absence of attaching the idea to King. There are all these wily things I think that women in the book do over and over that the men in the book tend not to notice or tend to disregard, but the women in the novel see it clearly in one another. Margie, for example—so King is raised by his aunt who then becomes his mother after his birth mother dies so I'm going to refer to her here as his mom—but King's wife, Margie, has grown up in very different circumstances from King's mother, Sita, but sees in Sita the way in which these patriarchal constructs around her have shaped the decisions she made and how she tried to exert power in her own life; namely through her son, King, who is male and who's an heir to the Rao family. I think it's fascinating and I think women, and anybody in marginalized positions, have always done this over time. Dalit people, black people, people who are gay and trans, people with disabilities, have always found ways to interestingly exert agency and power. Because the concept of agency is central I think to just what a novel is, like it's a person exerting agency and that generates a plot and then that plot exert some changes on the character themself, that fact about womanhood, the novel feels like a really natural place to explore some of those ideas.

DN: One of the ways I really love you as a writer in the world, in public, is how generous you've been about sharing in essays and in interviews about the journey and its challenges over the 13 years of bringing The Immortal King Rao into the world, setbacks such as your first agent firing you after you sent them a draft or how an editor of yours was asked to stage an intervention when every time you received a manuscript back from them, you wanted to add or you did add more to it, or how you wrote backstories—this is the one I can't believe—how you wrote backstories for 100 of King Rao's relatives and for the longest time refused to remove them, [laughter], but here you are, many, many drafts later, many times thinking it was ready to go, and then life intervening otherwise, having surmounted the hurdles. I know you have a story collection coming out next year, and I would love to hear about that if you have anything you want to say about it, but I also wondered, have these two books taken up all your time more recently or are you working on something else as we await what comes next?

VV: Oh, that's such a generous question. Thank you for saying that. [laughs] It's funny because it happens to just be the truth that there have been all these setbacks along the way like there are for many of us, and hopefully, it's helpful to others to hear about all that. I am working on a story collection. I'm working on edits on this story collection called This is Salvaged, which Norton is putting out next year. That's also a book I've been working on for a really long time. A lot of those are stories that I started in college and in my 20s. At the same time in parallel, I'll mention this because you refer to some of these pieces, I'm trying to put together a collection of essays, like experimental tech-informed essays, like the essay Ghosts that you referred to and the essay about Google searches where I compiled all these Google searches over 10 years. I just find myself really fascinated by I think form in general as a writer and the way in which the tools—again, speaking of tools which we've spoken about a bunch—the way in which the tools that are available to us as writers, as artists can influence the way in which ideas come onto the page in new ways. I'm looking at a collection of essays that deal with that in various different ways.

DN: I love that. Thank you for being on the show today, Vauhini.

VV: Thank you so much for having me. This is really a privilege.

DN: We're talking today to Vauhini Vara, the author of The Immortal King Rao. You've been listening to Between The Covers. I'm David Naimon, your host.

Today's program was recorded at the volunteer-powered, non-commercial, listener-sponsored, full-strength, makeshift home office of me, David Naimon. More of Vauhini Vara's work, for essays, journalism, and much more, can be found at vauhinivara.com. For the bonus audio, Vauhini reads from and discusses her award-winning essay, Ghosts, about finally being able to write about into the grief around the loss of her sister by engaging with the artificial intelligence called GPT-3. This joins bonus audio from everyone from Garth Greenwell, to Miriam Toews, to Ada Limón, to Victoria Chang. You can find out more about subscribing to the bonus audio, and the many other potential benefits of becoming a listener-supporter, at patreon.com/betweenthecovers.

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