EVENT TITLE: Desi Mythpunk: Indian Mythologies in Futurist Writing by South Asian

Moderator: Vidhu Aggarwal
Panelists: Hari Alluri, Bishakh Som, SJ Sindu, Rajiv Mohabir

Event description:
Myths are often viewed as stories from "the past." But a number of recent works shows that they can be used to engage with contemporary sociopolitical questions and imagine futuristic modes of being. This panel explores how and why South Asian authors employ myths in their poetry, graphic novels, and more. Authors discuss the refashioning of myths as a world-making force that may cultivate a sense of cultural heritage, subvert orientalist stereotypes, and bring into being alternative futures.

- How do contemporary Southeast Asian/South Asian writers work with myths and cultural heritage?
- How does this work resist/speak to Hindu fundamentalism?
- How is this contemporary work in conversation with—and in our case, directly subverting—orientalist depictions of the Indian subcontinent?
- How might this work be in conversation with—and also subvert—traditional tropes in American "minority literature"?
- How can mythologies be refashioned into futurist tales? Why do these writers want them to be? What's the importance of this?
- What about this subject matter speaks to, however metaphorically, our contemporary and future concerns?

MODERATOR Vidhu Aggarwal (she/they)

Vidhu Aggarwal's poetry book, *The Trouble with Humpadori* (2016), imagines a cosmic mythological space for marginalized transnational subjects. *Avatara*, a chapbook from Portable @Yo-Yo Labs Press, is situated in a post-apocalyptic gaming world where A.I.s play at being gods. A recent book of hybrid poems and multimedia work *Daughter Isotope* (OS 2021) combines mythologies from nuclear science and devi/goddess culture to create a radioactive devi figure who embodies large timescales and eras and various militarisms.

Defining Desi Futurism

- Afro-futuism has influenced and informed categories of other global futurisms including desi (South Asian) futurism and Latinx futurism. Critic Ytasha L. Womack argues that Afrofuturists redefine culture and notions of blackness for today and the future, when the very notion of a black future has been under threat.
- ***Ryan Arron D'Souza: "*** Desi comes from *des* which means country but does not specify any country. In our articulation of desi, we imagine a homeland that does not exist anymore because South Asia is divided into several countries, and not all of us trace our homeland to a location in South Asia. The diaspora is not dislocated or displaced;

they are home wherever they are located. Nevertheless, we actively imagine this homeland through association with one another. The word desi imagines a homeland with people regardless of borders and waters, but, most importantly, a brutal history – the effects of which we still experience."
•   Not simply fantasy and escapism, according to D'Souza, but about survival given the multiple dislocations of diaspora across continents—Africa, the Americas (Caribbean), Europe (England) in the state of post-coloniality.
•   Kal in Hindi means yesterday and tomorrow, past and future. Collision of timescales much present in South Asian film, art, writing.

When we think of *kal* as both yesterday and tomorrow, we are thinking of an unfolding present as a reference point. Whether we are writing about the past or the future, we are always writing about the now in all the ways that our mythologies are constantly evolving to reflect the impacts of the everyday and ongoing history.

In a panel on desi-myth punk, everyone on this panel has a varying relationship to mythologies of the South Asia via differing migration patterns and histories which allow for multiple iterations of gods, stories and concepts and different forms of impacts and intimacies.

PANELIST S.J. Sindu

Introduction:
- Queer Tamil author, born in Sri Lanka, raised in the US, and currently based in Canada
- Author of 2 novels, Marriage of a Thousand Lies and Blue-Skinned Gods
- And 2 forthcoming graphic novels, Shakti and Tall Water
- And 2 hybrid chapbooks, I Once Met You But You Were Dead, and Dominant Genes

Most of my work uses Hindu mythology and mythos, but like many on this panel, I'm more interested in what that looks like here and now instead of in the past. In other words, I'm interested in how we can bring this mythos into the present and future instead of looking at it as a type of nostalgia.

I'm also concerned with the problematics of the mythos itself, as much as I am with the Orientalizing of desi myth from Western perspectives. I think when we focus too much on how we've been appropriated by the West, both during and after colonial rule, we risk losing sight of how Brahminical patriarchy has rewritten and appropriated Indigenous mythology from South Asia. It's important to consider how casteism, sexism, and homophobia and transphobia has been imported into some of these myths.

Can we even extricate Brahminism from desi myth? And if we do, what are we left with? What do we lose? Would anything even be left to salvage?

These are the particular questions with which I wrestle in my works. In my graphic novel Shakti, I take on the mythos of the goddesses Durga and Kali, rewriting their origin tales to recapture them from the ways in which Brahminical patriarchy has warped them.

In my novel Blue-Skinned Gods, I explore the proliferation of gurus and swamis and the ways in which Hindu spirituality has become a giant money-making machine. The spiritual industrial complex, if you will.

I don't think that in this world of rising Hindu fundamentalism, we can talk about reclaiming progressive ideas of the Hindu mythos without really looking in the mirror and contending with the ways in which we've benefited from and continue to be privileged by the utterly horrendous system of caste oppression.

Even the word desi is problematic, in its erasure of Tamil and other indigenous languages and cultures, its appropriation of non-Sanskrit legacies within the umbrella of India. So I'm interested in how to problematize and complicate even this genre of desi mythpunk.

I will close with a poem from my forthcoming chapbook Dominant Genes, which takes on the Karna story from the Mahabharata. Karna is the tale of the ultimate anti-hero, the fallen man, the illegitimate son of a virginal princess and Surya, the god of the sun. Karna, though the firstborn of the princess, ends up on the wrong side of a war from his half-brothers, the Pandavas, who are portrayed as the heroes and the deserving winners.

<center>Sun God</center>

In the *Mahabharata* Karna the infant
is set afloat in a basket

illegitimate son of a princess
and the sun, raised by a merchant

his real story is one of self-destruction
I try to be an expert on this subject

Karna grows up to be an archer
the finest in the world

until his little half-brother
comes along to best him

Karna finally makes a friend
just his luck it's the villain of our tale

and now he's on the wrong side of a holy war
all the gods get involved

even his mother comes to him
the mother he yearns for

but now she's come and revealed herself
only to ask him not to kill his half-brother

Karna is no Moses
and he will have no redemption

no hordes of followers
no one to pray over him

no, he will be a symbol
of how even the sun will abandon us

of how the wrong birth
is deserving of pity but not hero-hood

and how exactly did the sun
get a woman pregnant

PANELIST Bishakh Som

Bishakh Som is an Indian-American trans femme visual artist and author. Her work has appeared in The New Yorker, Autostraddle, The Strumpet, Black Warrior Review and The Brooklyn Rail, amongst other publications. Her graphic novel Apsara Engine (The Feminist Press) is the winner of a 2021 L.A. Times Book Prize for Best Graphic Novel and a 2021 Lambda Literary Award winner for Best LGBTQ Comics. Her graphic memoir Spellbound (Street Noise Books) was also a 2021 Lambda Literary Award finalist.

Bishakh has illustrated two books about architecture: The Prefab Bathroom: An Architectural History, (McFarland Press) and Cocktails and Conversations: Dialogues on Architectural Design (AIA New York). Bishakh's artwork was featured in solo shows at ArtLexis Gallery and at Jaya Yoga Center and in group shows at The Society of Illustrators in New York, the Bannister Gallery at Rhode Island College, Issyra Gallery, the Grady Alexis Gallery, De Cacaofabriek in the Netherlands and most recently at Art Omi in Ghent, NY.

You can see her work at www.bishakh.com.

PANELIST Hari Alluri

Hari Alluri is the author of The Flayed City (Kaya, 2017), Carving Ashes (CiCAC, 2013) and the chapbook The Promise of Rust (Mouthfeel, 2016). An award-winning poet, educator, and teaching artist, his work appears widely in anthologies, journals and online venues, including Chautauqua, Poetry International and Split This Rock. He is a founding editor at Locked Horn Press, where he has co-edited two anthologies, Gendered & Written: Forums on Poetics and Read America(s): An Anthology. He holds an MFA in Creative Writing from San Diego State

University and, along with the Federico Moramarco Poetry International Teaching Prize, he has received VONA/Voices and Las Dos Brujas fellowships and a National Film Board of Canada grant. Hari immigrated to Vancouver, Coast Salish territories at age twelve, and writes there again.

PANELIST Rajiv Mohabir

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

In 2019 Rajiv Mohabir also received the New Immigrant Writing Award from Restless Books for his memoir Antiman, selected by Terry Hong, Héctor Tobar, and Ilan Stavans (Restless Books, 2021).