

Episode 4: “I Don’t Want to Be Pretty, But I Do Want to Be Brown”: Anurima Banerji and Jade Da Costa in Conversation about Constructing South Asian Femme-ness through Poetry”

- 00:00:01 [Music: Still Brazen Theme Song]
- 00:00:16 **Andi Schwartz:** Hi, my name is Andi Schwartz you’re listening to Still Brazen: 20 Years of Queering Femininity, a podcast celebrating the 20th anniversary of the publication of the anthology: *Brazen Femme: Queering Femininity*. This podcast was created at the Centre for Feminist Research at York University in Toronto, also known as Tkaronto, an area that is home to many Indigenous communities, and has been care taken by the Anishinabek Nation, the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, and the Huron-Wendat. The current treaty holders are the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation. This territory is subject of the Dish with One Spoon Wampum Belt Covenant, an agreement to peaceably share and care for the Great Lakes region.
- 00:00:57 This week’s episode puts Anurima Banerji and Jade Da Costa in conversation about South Asian femme identity, decolonial politics, and the possibility that poetry can bring it all together. Anurima Banerji is a femme of South Asian Canadian heritage; a writer; a dancer trained in the Odissi tradition; and an associate professor of dance and performance studies at UCLA. Jade Crimson Rose Da Costa is a gender nonbinary queer woman of colour, a PhD candidate at York University, Tkaronto, a community organizer and educator across central Southern Ontario, and a creative writer and poet. Their research, teaching, organizing, and art converge on topics of race and racism, queer and trans belonging, feminism, critical pedagogy, health, and social justice. Two of Anurima’s poems were part of the *Brazen Femme* collection, one called “Summer, or I Want the Rage of Poets to Bleed Guns Speechless with Words” and the other called “ephemera.”
- 00:02:00 In this episode, Anurima and Jade bring these poems into conversation with one of Jade’s pieces of creative non-fiction writing called “Motherland,” which gestures to the long tradition in femme literature of writing about the complex and fraught relationships between femmes and their mothers. I’m thinking Joan Nestle, Amber Hollibaugh, and Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarsinha — all have, like Jade, written very smart, sharp, and thoughtful pieces about their mothers. I learned so much from listening to these two incredible poets, about South Asian identity as a Western construct, about South Asian poetic forms and forms of queerness, and about the power of poetry. So, let’s turn to their conversation now, joining in as Anurima takes us on a deep dive into the context for her poems that were part of the *Brazen Femme* anthology.

00:02:51 [Transition music: Still Brazen Theme Song]

00:03:00 **Anurima Banerji:** There was a whole context for writing these two pieces. They came through because I was very much active on the poetry circuit in Montreal and Toronto, and very much shaped by the group of writers who I was surrounded by as well as activist spaces, and the academic research I was doing. So all of those interests were reflected certainly in my writing, and also at that time just coming into being, as someone who was identifying in various ways as queer, as bisexual, lesbian, pansexual. I was really trying to find a language to articulate desire, to articulate an erotics, and poetry was the space in which I certainly felt the freest to delve into those explorations.

00:03:48 [Transition music: Still Brazen Theme Song]

00:03:55 **Anurima Banerji:** When I was writing "Summer" it was focused very much on articulating a feminist politics from a South Asian framework. And so bringing together reference points that could transform the idea of the body—the, the, the female body—of being an object of violence, but speaking to also reclaiming it and seeing it through an erotic lens, outside of the experience of violence. And so, this idea of "I want the rage of poets to bleed guns speechless with words" was the idea of trying to situate the literary understanding of myself and make sense out of this experience of oppression and to understand how poetry could be a way of answering back to violence. And I did notice a connection to your work, Jade, because in reading "Motherland," I also just read it as poetry. I know it's meant to be creative nonfiction, but I really found it striking how you framed this whole experience and history, and you were so incredibly open and honest. But there was also this extremely interesting writing practice that you are mobilizing there, and that through line of rage is something that I saw connecting my writing in the Brazen Femme piece as well as yours and "Motherland."

00:05:33 **Jade Da Costa:** Yeah, and I think so much of what you said about how you orientated yourself towards poetry, and what "Summer" meant for you as an expression of, of being and and politic in a way that didn't necessarily draw like distinct lines between these two things, really resonate with me and you're putting language to a lot of things that I think now, if I really thought about it, I could articulate it, not as well as you, but in, in that kind of framework. But I think for a very long time I had a lot of those feelings that, that you've named in relation to poetry, but I didn't, I didn't have name for them. And in a lot of ways that was okay because you don't need name for those, those impulses, when you are utilizing poetry as a form of political, personal, spiritual articulation and expression. And I came to poetry, um, well before I was in, in university, and even in any type of before, I was really educated in any uh institutional way. I, I

came to it in high school as someone who was in very underfunded high school and primary educational systems. And who was very much like, systematically denied and targeted by a lot of harms within educational spaces that resulted in me having issues with how I learned, how I write, and in many ways, and I came to poetry, I think, in part because the pressures to perfectly articulate yourself within the confines of English grammar and sentence structure expectations that I wasn't trained in. But then there was also this less of a demand to force my feelings into something that I that I could name when I was unable to name them.

- 00:07:19 And so I remember reading back—Once I, I wrote a poetry collection in high school, while I had major depression—and I remember reading it back when I was, you know, 22 or 21, and I was like, "Oh, my gosh! I was so talented, like there was so much emotion and affect in here." But I was like, "Where did this, where did this come from? How did that, how did this, how did this come into being?" And I was just amazed that I was able to do this without, without training, and without any, really, without foundational literary understanding. And then thinking about it now, in the present, um, as I received training, and I was in, I did get an English degree, but it was very much separate from my education as an activist, as a critical thinker. Um, it was a very traditional education. And how over time I've turned to poetry as, as a, as a, as a mode of combined, like, spiritual, political articulation, that was very much connected to my identity, or is very much connected to my identity, but also beyond it in a very fluid but important way.
- 00:08:26 And even now, when I go to poetry, it almost suspends my... It kind of suspends my training to think about it in contrast when I was younger, where I didn't have this training—sociological, literary, etc. And now I, I do have that; I have a, I'm getting a PhD in sociology I have training in English and literature and creative writing, but when I go to poetry those things are almost suspended. It's, it's not about performing that knowledge, or even utilizing that knowledge as vital as it is, it's about whatever is inside of me, it just kind of comes out. And thinking of my piece of “Motherland,” I had actually wrote that piece—and it is very poetic, I very much agree with that—it is a narrative, or creative nonfiction, but it defaults on my orientation, my poetic orientation as, as my as my habitus, as my place of just existing. And when I wrote that piece, it was right after I had ended my relationship with my mother and had reckoned with the violence that informed our relationship, and I just sat down, and I just wrote it.
- 00:09:33 And thinking that in contrast to how I write academic papers or academic poetry. There's so much pressure and thought and planning that goes into that, and “Motherland” is one of my favourite pieces, and it just came out. It was just there, and it was my politic without me even knowing I was articulating it. And I

think, too, thinking about the connection of rage in relation to "Summer" as well. One of the things I was struck by your piece was, was the rage, but the intimacy of the rage, and how it felt like there was just like the slippage between anger and rage, and ugliness and violence; and then also beauty and sexuality and desire. And it was a slippage where these things were confounded, but also, like they, they interface with one another like we're, as I think as like, queer women we can hold our sexuality, our desire, our gender, especially as like brown women, like it's very complicated, and it, it slips, and it moves between these bounds of violence and intimacy and desire and love and systemic harm. And I felt that so, it was so palpable in, in "Summer," and I also, although my piece isn't necessarily about my sexuality, although there's parts in there, I also felt that was key in that piece, this idea of, of insidious love or intimacy that is also ugly.

00:10:58 And so in your poetry, like just the juxtaposition of words and language that really brought that to the forefront I was... It was so powerful to me, and also like it... Just it doesn't read like a poem that's 20 years old. Like, and I think we had discussed this earlier about, you're like, "oh, I can't believe this is 20 years old," and the, the collection it just it feels so like, fresh, which in a lot of ways is kind of upsetting to think about the fact that they were still in very much in this social world. [laughs] Um, but there was just this vibrancy to your words that brought to life an existence for me that still, still very much ongoing, and exists between these slippages of the intimate and the ugly.

00:11:42 **Anurima Banerji:** I think that's such a wonderful insight, because I wasn't thinking of it that way. But you're right. There's a way in which... It's interesting. Yes, I really wanted to juxtapose those two experiences in that poem, but the way that you put it around this ugliness of intimacy. I love that idea, right, that we have to think about these encounters, which are, in fact, intimate, which we may voluntarily enter into to engage some aspect of ourselves, our histories, and that require this confrontation with this whole multiplicity, um, with this whole sense of violence, with oppression, with systemic and interpersonal violence. So yeah, I'm really struck by that, in your work as well. Because what I was trying to do with "Summer" as well was trying to summon this other history, invoke a, a history of South Asian experiences that could also be brought into the present through the writing. And have, as a set of reference points, ways of articulating that rage through these different cultural frameworks. And one that wasn't necessarily going to be legible to a public that is not necessarily familiar with those reference points. I wanted to actually have that opacity in the work: not translate, not explain, not detail, not nuance, but simply have it reside as a place where those who are reading the work would have to actually educate themselves about those reference points, if they were interested.

00:13:29 And in what you were saying about the experience that you had in terms of educational institutions and access to the work. It's interesting. We were, of course, taught poetry in high school, and I remember responding very fiercely to the experience of reading poetry as opposed to prose. But I chose to educate myself about poetry outside the formal educational sphere, because I felt like it was an important inquiry. It was important to understand a whole history, especially of queer poetry. And again, there was this whole other poetic history that I wanted to explore, because, being of South Asian heritage, having lived for a time in India, and also being brought up in Canada, there was such formative experiences of migration, of trying to understand multiple social worlds and cultural experiences. And one of the ways that I try to inquire into that was also through poetry, through investigating a, a poetic history as well as the history of queer being in a South Asian context.

00:14:36 [Transition music: Still Brazen Theme Song]

00:14:45 **Anurima Banerji:** "Ephemera" was very much a lyrical love poem indebted to the mood of the ghazal. And when I talked about trying to reference the South Asian poetic history, the ghazal is definitely one of the forms that was extremely, extremely formative to my idea of what poetry could do. And the ghazal is a form that originated in West Asia, and then was brought to India in the 13th Century by Amir Khusro, who is a very celebrated, iconic poet. But the ghazal also became a South Asian form. The Ghazal really foregrounds the idea of the beloved and the poet's relationship to this notion of the beloved. And the idea of the beloved can be a spiritual figure, it can be an actual other human figure, it can also be an abstracted idea of freedom or political struggle, or the nation or community. So, to translate the structure of the ghazal wasn't important to me when I started exploring poetry it was more the mood. And in "Ephemera," I wanted to speak to that mood of longing, of desire, of erotic possibility, of really celebrating the beloved, but also it's a very melancholic celebration.

00:16:17 And now, when I was reading it, there are two lines in it that I wrote, that I no longer identify with it. And those lines are: "we believe in each other's beauty, but not our own." And that to me really encapsulates some idea of the ghazal in, in some of its manifestations, but I don't, no longer believe in that second part, "but not our own." And I do now, when I look back on those lines, think that it was a reference to the experience of femininity. There's often this experience of caring for others, and being able to see the beauty within them, so by saying we believe in each other's beauty, but not our own, I was also trying to reject that patriarchal construct, and I think it connects very much to femme-ness, as well. And that's why I don't believe in those lines anymore, because femme-ness in itself does not mean in any way reducing the complexity of one's being and honouring others before oneself. Brazen Femme was so radical because it did

present this idea of a subjectivity that could be engaged on its own terms. And it was a revelation to realize, yes, that femme-ness doesn't have to mean that it's this, kind of, trace of patriarchy, and at the same time it doesn't have to mean that it's something that's only vital in relation to butchness or other kinds of gender expressions; that femme-ness was sufficient unto itself.

00:17:54 **Jade Da Costa:** I think... connecting to a lot of the things that you've just said, is kind of a disruption of... There's like this, this presumed not presumed, but imposed relationality between one's sense of self and how it connects to the other, or beyond the sense of self that can culminate into a fracturing of who we are, what we want, of how we exist, how we exist actually in relation to people, but instead of you know, often understanding our own desires, wants, and existence as relational in a community sense, it often gets reduced or muted to relational in a, in an othered sense, and a measuring who we are against something. And I think that's very common for understanding what femme-ness is, even, even now, and it's also very common for how we understand queerness and transness and, and Brownness and non-whiteness as a whole.

00:18:56 Um, and something I felt when I was reading your work is this refusal to be legible to the, to the Other. Or in this case, as the Other being...um, refusing to be legible to the presumed white gaze. And that was something I actually very... I picked up when I was reading your work, and it reminded me a lot of the work of Vivek Shraya, because she often, I find that she often does that in her work as well. She makes these cultural references that unless you are South Asian or just familiar with these cultural currents, like, you won't actually understand what's being said. I had an experience where I was trying to create work. I didn't actually end up publishing it, but publishing... it was either creative work or poetry, where I used a word that wouldn't been, wouldn't have been known to a white reader, and they asked me to footnote it and explain it, and how I feel like that, often... I've seen that happen quite a bit with you know non-English words, essentially, um, and how Vivek Shraya refuses that in her work, and how you refuse that in your work.

00:19:56 And it reminds me... I have a good friend of mine, Dr. Nadiya Ali, who she writes about intelligibility within Muslim communities. She focuses a lot on Black Muslim and Black... I mean, Black Muslim and Muslim women communities um and Muslim femme communities. Um, but one of the things that always struck me that she wrote is she takes up um Spivak's famous line, "Can the subaltern speak?" And she talks about it, and how applying it in relation to the interpretative... interpretability of Muslim women in a post 9/11 world, and she talks about how Muslim women represent themselves in a world that is designed not to actually understand them as, as human. And what... And she answers this question, "Can the subaltern speak?" And her answer is, "Yes, we can speak. but

it's not always the intent for us to be heard by everybody." And that was something I felt when I was reading your work. This, this "I, I, I can speak; but whether or not you can hear me isn't on me, it's not about that. It's not about my legibility to a wide crowd."

00:21:02 Um, And then it's interesting, too, for me on the flipside, as someone who... I have a very... I do identify as South Asian, but in a very complicated way. I have a white mother. I have a refugee father, um, and he's also Goan, which I find, because we were colonized by Portugal instead of Britain, it's a very particular historical cultural current. Um, and so I don't, I'm not purview, both because of having a white mother because of, you know, the fractured trajectories of being a refugee and being Goan, I'm not purview to a lot of these cul- cultural references. Um, and I think about my positionality as someone who then becomes the person who cannot interpret a, a moniker to which I'm supposed to belong to, and it makes me think about well, actually, the complexities of what it means to be South Asian in a Canadian context, um, and how many things get flattened into that. But then also how that identifier... there's still strong, cultural, or existential, perhaps, need in that language.

00:22:03 And yeah, and so it, it makes me think again about, you know, the fracturing of the self, and how it is relational in a way that's communal. But then also relational. We define ourselves against things and what it means to come in to our own bodies in that kind of space. And I think, thinking back to poetry, it can provide that type of form to explore what that means, and to allow our fractured selves to exist in a kaleidoscopic formation, even if just briefly. At least for me, femme-ness is always type of fr- is always kind of fractured, as someone who is Brown, as someone who is mixed, as someone who is non-binary, as someone who's mixed class, like femme-ness is inherently a fractured relationship for me. And I think it... It's actually like that by design. And it's... its most powerful feature, in my opinion, but it often... it's almost ineffable.

00:23:06 **Anurima Banerji:** It's such a beautiful way. You put it that it's ineffable, because I very much feel the same way. That really resonates with me. It's something really interesting to think about femme-ness as a relic of a heterosexual system in one way. That's how it's conventionally framed, right? But femme-ness has shifted so much, and it's hard to capture what it means, because it has such kind of kaleidoscopic shapes now and always did. But I think to have it as part of a public discourse in a different way now, that's what I really appreciate. I love the way in which femme-ness has transformed, how femme-ness has expanded, how it is now recognized as, as a critical position. I'm thinking of that idea of femme-ness beyond the borders of femininity. Femme-ness is a quality that doesn't have to belong to any single type of body. That's something that I really, really appreciate, and would love to also know more from your experience, Jade,

of how you think femme-ness connects, or not, to your experience of South Asian-ness, because you were mentioning that there's a fraught history there.

00:24:24 I do have a very different experience because my parents were middle class and my father came to Canada for his education. And when my mother married him, then she also came and studied here, and then we went to India. So, my experience of South Asian-ness has this place assigned to it as well. I was able to explore what I consider my, my heritage while living in India and then also understanding how hegemonic our identities were there in terms of class and religion. And having to intentionally construct it in the Canadian context, after having been immersed in it... these are two wildly different experiences. So, when you were talking about having to negotiate that identity, I again understand to some extent, not your personal experience of it, but what it means as a dynamic to have to negotiate and present a self... And, and I'm actually grateful for that. When you're immersed in an experience, and it's being naturalized, your identity is being naturalized, your cultural identity is simply being delivered in a particular way, you may not have as much of an opportunity to critically engage it; but being in Canada as a South Asian person I had to really think about what that meant to me, and negotiate it and construct it in an active way. And I wonder how it is for you in terms of that negotiation between sexuality, heritage, and as reflected in your writing as well.

00:26:01 **Jade Da Costa:** Yeah, I'm. I'm really grateful that you brought that up. I think, for me, South Asian is a very Canadian kind of framework. It—And I mean that in both the geographical and the Nationalist sense of the word. Because I remember, I, I had gone to Goa on a birthright trip a, a couple of years ago, um, and I had no idea that, like Pakistan and India, have intense political conflict and history around that. Um, it was in that moment I was like, "These folks from these co- countries get lumped together as soon as they enter Canada." And those global realities get flattened in a very imperialist framework, a very Western-centred framework. Um, and so for me, it makes sense to claim "South Asian," because it positions what it means for me to be Indian within a complicated notion of diaspora—I, I kind of would identify with the diaspora, kind of not—because what it means for me to be Indian and South Asian and Brown is wholly different from someone who is in India, or even in Goa. And so, yeah, it's a very Canadian label for me and I feel like that's something I can claim, not in the sense that I'm proud of being Canadian, because I'm not, but in the sense that I am, and that is a certain position that locates my Brown-ness, my South Asian-ness, my Indian-ness, my, my identity and my privilege as well.

00:27:28 Um, but it's interesting, because when you asked, how does you know femme-ness come into play with this for me, femme-ness is probably the strongest anchor I have to my Brown or South Asian, or Goan identity. Growing up, I was

very much aware that I was not white, because I grew up in London, Ontario, which is a, to this day, and then famously, like globally, famously, racist, conservative city, and in the 90s like... It's the kind of place where actually like, if you're Portuguese, you're racialized. And so, being a Brown person there... like I was, I was read as, like, overtly not white, and as a problem like, it was very kind of like the old timey racism that we think of, that's very common to London. It's very different from the GTA, where I am now, where I'm read very differently as a result. But in London I was very, very Brown, but no one had that language. There weren't other Brown people there, people didn't talk about, you know, Brown, Black, Asian identities. It was just whiteness, and there, there are there were racialized communities, but they were very fragmented, like the way it was. It's a very segregated city. And my father had a lot of internalized trauma as a refugee, as a kid that came to Toronto in the 1970s when Toronto was still 97% white in that time. And so he never talked about Brownness, and so I didn't have this language of Brownness, but I knew I wasn't white. I knew that I had different colour skin, and that was a problem. Um and so I didn't really understand myself beyond that.

00:28:58 But where I did have a sense of myself, was in relation to my grand— my grandma, my aunt, and my aunties on my dad's side of the family. And they are all feminine, um but they are feminine in what I would say is a quintessential South Asian way. Like they... They are "aunties" like in that, you know? And, and so they were loud, they were assertive, they "tsk"ed, and they did all these things that like I identified with and loved, that made me feel a sense of affectual connection, even if I didn't have language for that. Um, and for me that became what, you know, femme-ness was, was that. And now I very much identify with... I mean whatever that is, and whatever I'm describing or trying to describe, and I would call femme-ness, and it's very much a part of my gender identity. But then I often feel like to be to be South Asian, I have to be femme, and I feel like it's a betrayal of myself as a non-binary person—and I say that knowing that that's inherently transphobic and problematic, but I often feel like to be Brown, I have to be a woman, and to be non-binary I have to be white.

00:30:03 And it's like... For example, if I have very, very long hair, and I've actually tried to grow it out to the point that it's almost like unruly, so it's feminine, but it's not like the appropriate kind of feminine. And I, and I do that because I love my hair, but it's like, I look "Browner" with that, like I look "Browner"— and putting that in scare quotes—when I am being what I identify as femme. But when I do that, I often have this internal fear, I'm like "I will not, I'm not I not legitimate as queer, I'm not legitimate as non-binary." And so that wrestle for me between femme-ness, queerness, and transness, which I intellectually and spiritually understand is inherently interconnected, it gets fractured when I, when I think of myself in the language that I've been a given. And so femme-ness is interesting because it

is my strongest anchor to my sense of myself as a South Asian or Brown person, but it also... in anchoring myself in it, I often feel like I'm, I am not valid as a non-binary person or as a queer person.

- 00:31:02 **Anurima Banerji:** There's so many things you said that I identify with at some level. Um, it's so interesting to hear you talk about all the complexities of the way you experience sexuality and race. When I was thinking about femme-ness, and its connection to South Asian-ness, it's very interesting. When I started to be part of queer communities in an active way, I saw femme-ness as an experience that I was having, but could not name until the language became clear in the discourse. I always feel this pressure to conform to an idea of queer being that never really resonated with me. So, it also seemed like being anti-patriarchal, was a very strong quality of being queer, and one of the ways in which that would be expressed would be through removing or changing characteristics that would be received as normatively feminine. But I felt very comfortable in my femininity, and part of it was a connection to a South Asian-ness.
- 00:32:07 At the same time, my own appearance is not quintessentially South Asian, to go back to the term that you are using, in terms of the popular culture expressions of what ideal femininity represents. So, if I think of Bollywood tropes, then I think of the ways in which femininity was presented, which was: light skinned; there's the long straight hair; there's a certain kind of doe-eyed, large-eyed aesthetic; and then a curviness, but which is still within the framework of what is perceived as slender at a particular historical moment. And then this kind of baroque femininity that's expressed through make-up, through jewelry, through clothing, through ornamentation. There's just a general sense of, you know, bright colours and bling and decoration that's... was, in fact, I realized through my research even considered equivalent to a moral good.
- 00:33:07 So Vidya Dehejia, in a book called *The Body Adorned*, talks about how adornment itself was seen as beautifying the body, and beauty was interpreted as moral goodness. These cultural frameworks were really, um, important for me as a reference point, and then also to be able to critically engage with them, and realize that I wasn't also fulfilling or inhabiting that bodily ideal that was presented as what it meant to be, what it meant to be, right, an ideal woman, and then I could actually critically look at that model of femininity as well, even though it presented an alternative to whiteness, which is what I aspired to, having also grown up in my during my teenage years in Canada. I remember wanting to be white, wanting to have straight hair. I wanted to have a certain type of body. You know, when I was subject to racism often much of it was anti-Black, because I grew up partly in Guelph, Ontario, and that was a primarily, again, white suburb. So, being a small town where there were only a handful, at the time I was growing up, of people of colour, there was no specific

differentiation made between different constituencies of colour. And so because I have curly hair, because I have a certain type of body, then there was no distinction made, right. It wasn't a South Asian-specific racism that I experienced, it was simply that I was not white.

00:34:40 And, like you were saying, that experience of sexuality and race, those intersections were very fraught. Having to again just construct a South Asian history for myself, being told that being queer was something that was outside South Asian-ness. And poetry was one of the ways in which I could, in fact, invoke all those alternative histories that I found of being South Asian as well as of being queer. And queer, also meant something very specific in the Canadian context. It has a history of meaning perverse, abnormal, aberrant. Whereas it was a real revelation to find out that in the South Asian context, it's not that queerness was necessarily celebrated, it was minoritized. It may have been ridiculed and even ostracized, depending on the region and the timeframe that we're looking at, however it was, it was acknowledged. And it wasn't necessarily something that was seen as aberrant.

00:35:39 In fact, at various different points in history, those who identified as Hijra were seen as mediators between the celestial and the terrestrial worlds. Um, they were seen as actually magical subjects or, uh, extraordinary subjects. And so, I really wanted to learn about those different histories as well, and situate myself within that South Asian historical landscape as a way of resisting the ways in which "queer" has been completely consolidated and understood around the Western idea. And then it also works again—against this idea that, "oh, only the Western subject is liberated." So really working against South Asian hegemonies, and working against Western hegemonies, what we called postcolonial at the time—that was a prevailing language—and now I would identify decolonizing approaches more, as a more radical stance. Really, that, that was important, right, to be critically situated against these imposed ideas of identity, whether they were queer, South Asian, Western.

00:36:50 **Jade Da Costa:** Yeah, I think... thinking about it, and you know, different types of hegemonies, I think when I understand myself, my sense of queerness, I actually... I very much begin not with trying to locate my lineage within a broader sense of South Asian-ness, but within, within this white world. Um, like one of the things that struck me is when you were talking about um the hegemonic kind of femme-ness in India. I think I meet a lot of those criterias. And when I had gone to Goa, it was such a bizarre thing because I was, for the first time in my life, I was read as, as Indian, and then I was read as very pretty, and I remember I just kept getting told that how pretty I was, and I remember feeling... it was like, "I don't want to be pretty, but I do want to be Brown." And that sense of wanting to be Brown was more important than anything else, and... but it was just such a

bizarre space to be in. And then I think about it in, you know, my, my living here, and my experiences, and for me, where queerness comes in is that I, I do understand myself as existing in relation to Western hegemony and whiteness. And I think this actually comes back down to the fact that I have a white mother who is narcissistic and racist, and I, and I grew up—until I was 25—in London, Ontario, which was also those things, and I do understand queerness as something that um is, is othered—I can't remember the exact words that you used, but... I'm blanking on the words, but like that is actually how I understand my sense of queerness, but in a way that... I think about it in terms of not taking away, but validating that that's the world that I was embodying, and I often think of bell hooks' notion of "queer-pas-gay" and where queerness isn't necessarily about sexual desire and orientation, but being at odds with everything around you, but then creating a sense of self and politic from that position.

00:38:40 And I understand myself as existing very much in that space. And I think this is what I talked about in “Motherland,” in drawing a connection between my mother and my society, is that I was born as adverse. And that has caused a lot of trauma, but the way I've developed my sense of self as a, as a queer person, as a Brown person is by understanding myself in relation to that, but then also tapping into like what it means to be affectually and spiritually myself, and extending beyond that, but also recognizing that I've existed in this diametrical opposition, in this dialect and honouring that, and validating that, and also re—realizing that my understanding of queerness is very much positioned within Canadian society and within white small towns.

00:39:24 I don't think... I hadn't had this language when I started identifying as queer, I didn't know about "queer-pas-gay," but I remember one of the things thinking about like, like I would identify as bisexual, but really, I'm pansexual, but I like the word "bisexual" because I knew it first, and then also I'm, like, demisexual and asexual, and I'm a survivor, and like I'm all these words, right, and I also... I'm mixed. I'm South Asian, I'm Brown, I'm Goan, and for me queerness was just... it made sense, because I didn't have to say all those words. It was a place where all those words could exist. And then over time, when I was able to access more knowledge, that sense of queerness became "queer-pas-gay." Um, and it, it was meaning, and it's meaningful, meaningful for me now, both as a way of articulating my, my politic, my ethic, but then also understanding that trauma is a part of me institutionally, personally, but also I've extended that, and made it into something both fruitful and beautiful and visceral and real.

00:40:19 **Anurima Banerji:** Yeah, it's really beautifully put, really, beautifully put. And I love the way that queer actually does have that sense of possibility around gathering all the experiences of disjunction and oppositionality. At the same

time, because words matter, you know, when we were talking about before, how all these terms live in these very complex ways. I'm thinking of the ways in which, for instance, there are words that I don't want to translate from certain South Asian languages. So, I speak Hindi and Bengali. And there are words in those languages that when I'm thinking through, don't really have an equivalent in English, so I can describe them in English, but they don't really have one container. So I prefer to use the word in the original language, and often there are also terminologies that queer people in South Asia use for themselves. Like hijra, to me, is very difficult to translate. People try to describe it in various ways, as trans, in the most current formulation. But hijra actually captures a lot more, and it's not as a real equivalent of trans in the ways that it might be understood in a different context, right?

00:41:35 So this idea of trying to maintain the integrity of the terminology is also important to me, and, for me, queer becomes... it, it, at least sometimes becomes this imperialist construct to define all kinds of sexual difference as well as other kinds of difference, just non-normativity that it may not suit and that it also collapses. Like you were saying how “South Asian-ness” also collapses all these experiences of specificity and particularity, I find the same happens, or at least there's a potential for that to happen, with “queerness,” too. Like the adoption of the rainbow flag as the marker of queerness worldwide? That's interesting to me. At one point, again, you know, it allows for pragmatic connection among an international community of people who identify as queer. But it's, again, in a very it's, it's invoking a very specific history. So why is it that the rainbow flag stands for queerness? Why is it that the Pride March, or a term like "coming out" means what it, you know, what it is to be queer? So, for me, actually always putting "queer" into contestation is important then. And trying to understand the localized experience, if you will—or maybe it's a better way to say the pluralized idea of being—what queerness means globally, especially in the Global South, that's a very important project to me as part of a decolonizing agenda.

00:43:06 And, in a way, the writing is where some of these contradictions can live, right? The embrace of queerness as well as the contestation of it. And trying to locate a culturally specific idea of femme-ness, of queerness, while also trying to critically engage what South Asian-ness means. Again, that has been a really important focus in my writing. And expanding the idea of South Asian-ness, so it blurs. Because that regional idea of South Asian-ness is so over identified or over... Well, really, over identified with India. The way in which, especially now, Indian-ness is being equated with Hindu-ness and the raging Islamophobia and caste oppression, and regional politics in India right now. It's so important for me to stay current with those, not only from my professional sense, because that's what I study; I study South Asian performance, but it's so important because of

the ways in which this normativity, this idea of normativity is being intensified, and it... and actually the violence against minoritized subjects is, is increasing, especially on the religious front. So, I think it's really important to ensure through queerness as well, that those multiple paths, aren't being erased. That this homogeneous idea of India that's being invoked by the right wing, always that there's a chorus of voices working against that.

- 00:44:47 **Jade Da Costa:** Yeah, I... I think that's incredibly important, and, and something that it made me think was earlier you had said femme-ness is often understood as a relic of patriarchy, and I think, for me, we could say something similar about queerness. Queerness is a relic of, of white supremacy, of whiteness in a lot of ways, the way it's been constructed. And I think too like femme-ness, queerness has been extended beyond... how femme-ness has extended beyond and pushed beyond femininity, there is something with queerness in my generation, and especially with, um, Zoomers, that it's that same thing is happening with queerness. And I think there's an intimacy there between queerness and femme-ness. And I think there is also a decolonial undercurrent that could be mobilized for that. Um, and it reminds me, too, again, of something else bell hooks said about the difference between identifying as a feminist, and advocating for feminism. And, for me, it always pinpoints the folly of these labels and how... the contestedness of it, and how it's more about the ethic of care that you bring. It's not about being queer, being femme, but what does it actually mean to, to advocate from that space, to exist in that space, and to have the ethic? And what you're describing is, is that ethic. Um, and I think want... desiring, yearning for, advocating, I mean activating, that eth- ethic for me is always been central to my queerness, and then the word is there to identify it.

- 00:46:17 **Anurima Banerji:** And in your writing, you, you talked about this idea of, of, and I'm quoting now from, from “Motherland”: "I couldn't free myself from the land, but I could free myself from my mother." And I was really interested in that construct of not being able to free yourself from the land, and how that sits with your decolonial politics. But I wonder if you could also just talk about that idea of land and this decolonial impulse that you're talking about in your writing, that's really fascinating to me.

- 00:46:51 **Jade Da Costa:** Yeah, I... I'm glad that you picked up on that, for me that line was... because for much of the piece I, I speak of the nation um and my... the violence that I experienced from my white mother as a personal iteration of the white supremacy that is Canada that had come to define my existence within my home, which I think is something a lot of mixed kids with white parents can identify with, where we have this unique experience where white supremacy is in our most intimate space. My friend Dr. Nadiya Ali had described it really well once, she said, "I think white biracial folks have a lot more institutional privilege,

but a deeper psychic wound." So, for me, that piece was really working that out. And at the end, when I said "I couldn't free myself from the land, but I could from my mother," I was trying to be slippery with my language, and to draw a distinction between what it means to exist on Turtle Island as a land that is... been colonized by so-called Canada, and my understanding of my relation to this space, in relation to the nation that actually has exploited and destroyed this land, and my use, my experiences of my mother as a framework of understanding that.

00:48:04 And for me, that is actually... in that line is, is a further separation from my mother and from her whiteness, and recognizing that there's a distinction between this land that I occupy that is alive, and that I have a relationship with, and a indebtedness to, and also responsibility of a combination of, a I would identify as a refugee migrant, a white settler. And so, in making that distinction, that was me recognizing I can— I can't free myself in this land, nor do I want to. I can't, because I am responsible-ized as a settler, as complex as that positionality is, but then also that I don't want to, because I appreciate the value of the land and the land is not my mother, the land is not white supremacist Canada; those are fundamentally different things.

00:48:53 **Anurima Banerji:** And the other thing that really struck me is that you were talking about: "In writing about my mother and my country I've come to start and end with one point. This is the point I've always returned to: their whiteness." At the same time, there's an identification of being biracial, and while I'm not biracial, I do identify as bicultural. And what you were talking about earlier, around not being enough of one thing or another, I have that experience culturally in that, because I was born in Canada, I have all those privileges of being Canadian in that settler sense, and at the other end, even though I have a South Asian heritage and my parents are from India, and I lived there for a sustained period of time. Still, I wasn't positioned as either Canadian enough, because of racism, or Indian enough, because of my diasporic existence. However, internally I felt doubled rather than halved, if that makes sense. I felt like I had access to all of these experiences, and that I could curate for myself what it meant. And I don't want to let the external impositions of identity rule over my own sense of identification.

00:50:10 And again, that relates to queerness as well, and femme-ness. So, I see all of those experiences coalescing where it's a constant exploration that's really made possible through writing, because there are very few other avenues in which we have spaces to come together and work through the complexities of identification. But it's not important that it needs to be, for instance, transparent or legible, to come back to a theme you were talking about earlier, that there's a kind of valuation, right, that we can find in illegibility. But that there's a way to

assert the contradictions, the lack of coherence, the brokenness, to also turn to a theme that I found striking in your writing in “Motherland,” that brokenness being a place of openness, right? But the, the breaking is a way to, to also create a portal. I love that, that idea of not having various types of identification or experiences resolved. And I love that writing can be one way to explore all of that messiness.

- 00:51:22 **Jade Da Costa:** Yeah, I think that's beautifully put and thinking about it, with the one thing you said, instead of seeing yourself as wholes, you see yourself as a combination of things, and, and for me actually identifying as non-white has, has been that, uh, in that, I guess, the, the way I've come to understand it is I understand whiteness as, like, a deep cosmological wound [laughs] on our society, and for so long, not being white meant I was deficient. But now, not being white means that I'm not constrained by the pressures that we put on what it means to be white, and how those are very gender-coded, and not just racially coded, gender-coded, sexually coded. And so I'm not white because I exist from, what I think as you said, I really liked it, this place of brokenness being a possibility. My not whiteness has been that, and so identifying as non-white has allowed me to exist in that space, and I think that's a space that I only ever came to even be able to say the words that I'm saying through poetry. By allowing brokenness to take form, and becoming art and beauty in a page in front of me. And that art, and poetry really allowed me to understand that being halves of something makes you a constellation of everything.
- 00:52:35 **Anurima Banerji:** I think that's a great place to end.
- 00:52:36 [Transition music: Still Brazen Theme Song]
- 00:52:46 **Anurima Banerji:** And Jade, again, what a pleasure to encounter your work! And I hope I get to read more of it, and it's so powerful.
- 00:52:51 **Jade Da Costa:** Thank you. It was amazing getting to talk to you, and just and learn from you, and like I just I feel very gifted by being in your presence, so thank you.
- 00:53:01 [Music: Still Brazen Theme Song]
- 00:53:16 **Andi Schwartz:** This podcast was created at the Centre for Feminist Research at York University, in collaboration with the Media Creation Lab at the Scott Library. It has been produced and recorded by me and edited by Rafia Naz and Maykel Shehata. The podcast is sponsored by a number of departments at York University — the Digital Scholarship Centre at the Scott Library, the Institute for Research in Digital Literacy, the Gender, Feminist, and Women’s Graduate

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