

Matt Bowles: My guest today is Dr. Anu Taranath. She is a racial equity consultant, speaker, author, world traveler and professor at the University of Washington in Seattle where she teaches on topics of race, identity, power and belonging. Her scholarship and courses explore multi ethnic literature, diaspora studies, global ethics, transnational feminism, postcolonial and queer studies, and pedagogy all through a global lens. She won the university's Distinguished Teaching Award and has received multiple U.S. Fulbright fellowships to work abroad. As a consultant, she works to deepen conversations on history, harm and healing and has partnered with over 300 clients from national Geographic Society to the Raging Grannies. She is also the author of the award-winning book [Beyond Guilt Trips: Mindful Travel in an Unequal World](#), which in my opinion is the single most important book that I personally recommend to world travelers and digital nomads. It is a Newsweek Future of Travel winner in storytelling and was included in Oprah Magazine's best 26 travel books of all time.

Anu, welcome to the show.

Anu Taranath: Hi Matt. It's so wonderful to be here.

Matt Bowles: It is so wonderful to have you here. Let's just start this off by setting the scene and talking about where we are recording from today. I am actually in the Blue Ridge Mountains of Asheville, North Carolina on the east coast of the United States today. And where are you?

Anu Taranath: I am on the west coast of the United States today in sunny Seattle, Washington. At least it's sunny today.

Matt Bowles: Seattle is an amazing city. I have been there a couple times. Well, I feel like we need to start off by talking about the amazing time that we spent together just a couple months ago in New York City. We hung out in and around the WITS Travel Creators Summit and we need to give a shout out to the WITS Summit and also to [Beth Santos](#) personally because she is the one who originally recommended your book to me on *The Maverick Show*. So, at the end of each episode, I invite my guest to recommend one book that they would recommend that people read. And years ago, when I first interviewed Beth, she recommended your book [Beyond Guilt Trips](#).

And of course, a recommendation from [Beth Santos](#) means I'm going to read it immediately, which I did. And I have now read it more than once. I have the audiobook so I can listen to it as I am walking around the world and traveling in different places. And so, I actually have memories listening to your book in places like Cape Town, South Africa. And I remember actually where I was when I heard different passages of your book. So, it is one of my most recommended travel books for sure. And so, when we finally got to hang out, we've met each other technically twice. We met last year at the WITS Summit, and then this year we got to hang out significantly more, which was super special.

We got to spend an evening walking around Manhattan together and having deep, wonderful conversation, which I will always cherish that night. And then we actually got to spend a really special evening with our mutual friend [Yulia Denisyuk](#), who took us and about six or seven other people to a Kazakh restaurant. Yulia was born in Kazakhstan, and we all got to go with her to that restaurant and spend the evening. So, it was a really special time.

Anu Taranath: I agree. My heart is just bursting with so much gratitude for that whole experience. I love that you're starting us off invoking [Beth Santos](#), because I love her energy, her creativity, her entrepreneurship, and I love the way that she's a connector. Because of her, I've been connected to so many people in the

travel industry. And how wonderful to know that she's sharing [my book](#). We should also share her book [Wander Woman](#), which is a beautiful read and I hope your listeners really take a look at it. That evening that we spent walking around New York is also one of my beautiful memories, not only of the conference, but of kindred spirits coming together and sharing time and space and story that seems so significant to me these days.

Matt Bowles: Absolutely. And you were on a keynote panel at WITS, and I want to ask for your reflections and perspective on this. It was called *The Role of the Travel Creator in The World on Fire*. Maverick Show listeners also know [Yulia Denisyuk](#), who has been interviewed on this podcast. She as well was on the panel with you, as well as Janine Jervis. So, it was an incredibly powerful panel. It was the one panel at the entire conference that got a standing ovation from 600 people. And I'm wondering if you can share a little bit, obviously, most people listening to this were not there at the conference. From your perspective, what the panel was about and why you think it connected so emotionally powerfully with the audience.

Anu Taranath: Our panel invited the three of us, and by extension, everybody who was in community with us that afternoon, to ask, why is it that the mainstream media industry and the travel industry seem to be okay, dehumanizing entire groups of people? Why is it okay that the bedrock of the travel industry is about all these lofty ideals around the power of travel to connect us across difference. And a genocide is unfolding on our watch. How do we hold that? What does that actually mean? How does that make us feel? Incredibly uncomfortable conversations and also incredibly necessary conversations. I think the panel resonated because there was heart. We had skin in the game. We were vulnerable. We shared that. We're not so sure sometimes, and yet our hearts are breaking. We shared our deep love of the region and connections that we have with people across that region and asked; doesn't this also deserve our attention and care and time? Isn't this worthy of our discussion at a travel creator summit like this?

It was an incredible opportunity to present with my two colleagues and friends on that panel. The lead up to that panel took some courage, a lot of vulnerability, and I'm still quite stunned at how people responded. It's one thing for someone to like or not like something that we do, but for the audience to stand, cheer, clap, and many wept. We often don't have containers big enough to hold that kind of emotion. Conferences are fun and we learn tips and we meet people and, you know, that's sort of the realm that it's usually in. But creating containers for us to collectively step in and hold complicated, vulnerable truths about the limits of our humanity and stretching our humanity, I don't see that often. Maybe that's why it resonated. Tell me why it resonated for you.

Matt Bowles: Yeah, I think it was incredibly raw and it was incredibly real about the issues that everyone is feeling. These are the issues that are overshadowing everything. We're all going about our lives. And also, we're in the United States, and the United States government, together with Israel, is committing a genocide. And here we are trying to go about our lives and trying to interact with other people and do things and do our work and do our travel and talk about this and talk about that. And also, there's now a genocide that's happening. And however, many children were murdered over the course of the time that we were in that room at that conference. And that's on everyone's mind and we all know it. And it's an emotional thing.

And so, when you guys were able to just go right at that and speak directly from the heart about that and about the way that we're all trying to deal with that and confront that and hopefully confront that together, I think it hit an exceptionally powerful emotional nerve. And so I know that [Yulia Denisyuk](#) actually recorded the audio from that panel and she published it as a podcast episode on her show *Going Places*. And so, I'm

going to link that up in [the show notes](#) for this episode if anyone would like to go and actually hear the audio of that panel.

Anu, I want to start this conversation off tonight also by giving folks a bit of your backstory. And before we even talk about where you were born and grew up and your journey, can you share a little bit about where your parents are from in India, what their experience was like living there, and then their immigration journey to the U.S.

Anu Taranath: My parents are both from South India, my mother from Bangalore, my father from Mysore, which is a smaller city, both in the state of Karnataka. My parents immigrated to the United States in 1970 and coming to this country was a huge journey for them. They did not know many people in this country. Figuring out how to be immigrants was a full-time occupation. I will say it certainly occupied me as a second-generation person born a year later after their coming to the U.S. I was born in the Chicago area. I was there for about 5ish years and then spent my childhood between the ages of 5 and 18 in Houston, Texas, which at the time was a cesspool of racism, bigotry and mean spiritedness. That's probably not the best way to characterize an entire area, but that's the through line of my young days in that location.

Matt Bowles: Can you talk a little bit more about both the way that you were straddling your Indian identity coming from an immigrant home and your American identity growing up in Houston, as well as the way that you were encountering and trying to navigate through a racist environment and the impact that that had on you?

Anu Taranath: Well, at the time it seemed to me that the United States was a binary racial economy. You are either white or you are black. And to be neither white or black in that context meant we didn't quite know where to fit in, number one. Two, immigrants who are invited to participate in the American dream often easily take on the racism of America to fit in better. And my community is no different. So as a young person, how is it that I was socialized to look up to white folks and look down on Black folks? That's some really disturbing lessons that I don't remember anybody sitting down and saying, Anu, make sure that you do A and make sure that you don't do B. Nobody told me that. And yet I picked it up seamlessly from everything that was around me.

And I knew that even though we were neither white nor black, that my orientation should be this way toward whiteness. I did not have language for any of this until much later in my life. It was confusing, it was contradictory. I didn't quite know how to fit in to the society around me. People around me did not make it easy to fit into the society around me, starting from children in preschool all the way through high school. You know, shitty kids doing shitty things to people who they felt they could bully and be mean to, especially around race and otherness. You know, not only have I wondered as an adult, how did I learn to orient myself in one direction and to shift away from another direction, it makes me curious also, how did young white children know to bully me and other kids of color and that they would somehow consolidate their white identity by doing so? How did they learn that? It's fascinating to me.

Again, nobody sits down and tells us these lessons usually, and yet they are pervasive. I saw the way that people treated my parents out and about when we would go and get pizza or we would go to Sears and buy shoes or wherever we were out and about. I saw the way that people not so often, treated them with care, kindness, respect and dignity, and wondered why that is. It was also hard to not internalize all that I was seeing around me. And again, I had no language at the time. But at some point, I started to successfully internalize all the hate and shame that was floating around. And I would think as a young girl, if only I were

white, things would look so different. If I didn't have that family or didn't come from this culture or didn't eat that kind of food or know whatever, fill in the blank of what self-harm and internalized racist statement we can make.

And only when I started college and started to read the literature of sociology, of cultural studies, of queer studies, did I start to see that the kinds of questions that had plagued me as a young person was not because something was wrong with me or my family. We were just people doing the best we could living in the world, and it had really nothing to do with us. This was about a system. I started to have language that depersonalized what I had experienced and started to see it in a larger framework. Oh, this is what race does. Oh, this is how power is consolidated. This is why hierarchy plays out the way it does. That language was tremendous for me to begin to unravel some of this.

Matt Bowles: What were the dynamics like in terms of the Indian community where you were and the extent to which you and your parents were part of that community?

Anu Taranath: Oh, the Indian community for us, both in Chicago when I was a young baby and young child all the way through my late teens, this was an incredibly important community for us. And we spent quite a lot of our leisure time with people from the same region as us. So, the language that my family and I speak is called Kannada. And so, we spent a lot of time with the Kannada community, the Kannada diaspora, both in Chicago and in Houston. And then when my family moved to Los Angeles, in the LA area as well. And this kind of connection with people who know where you come from, they get it. They literally speak your language was such an important part of my coming up years.

I was incredibly loved, incredibly loved by this community, by my family, given support in the best ways that they knew how. That doesn't necessarily mean it helped me as a young BIPOC child in the late 70s and early 80s, navigating the racism on my school bus. My family had no language for that. I never shared so much of what was happening to me also because I would see the things that were happening to them. We didn't have language to speak about that. And I thought, how will they ever know how to speak about this that's happening in class or things my teacher says, or all of that. But the Kannada community gave us an anchor, an absolute home away from home. Especially in a context where my parents and many of their friends left their families to go 12,000 miles away and start a life. And this was definitely a space that invited them home in some small way.

Matt Bowles: How did you relate to other BIPOC communities during this time, including other immigrant and diaspora communities from other places? For example, I'm curious if the racism that you experienced perhaps pushed you more towards a cultural insularity, or did it may be open up a solidarity framework for deeper connections with other communities that were also experiencing that type of racism?

Anu Taranath: I love this question because it brings up all kinds of uncomfortable feelings in me, which means it's a great question to dig into. I would love to be able to say it's the second that, yes, what happened to me allowed me to create bonds of solidarity across race and class and experience. And my mind and heart opened up, but that's actually not the case at all. I think the ways that I had been socialized into mainstream culture created separation and division much more than solidarity and connection. The fact that we were neither white nor black meant that we were in this category of brownness. And at the time in Texas, perhaps now as well, anti-Latino sentiment was quite rife.

And I remember as an 8, 9, 10-year-old, thinking, I'm brown, but I'm not that kind of brown. Feeling that differentiation deeply and also feeling confused at how that differentiation was playing out. I don't think I was individually mean to other children of color, but my confusion about racial hierarchies and where we fit in and where others fit in, it's definitely colored my covenant peers. And again, without language to help explain our society, we think it's just preference. We think, oh, that's just how it is. It's normalized in all kinds of ways. And yet hierarchy is not normal in the ways that we do it. It's manufactured. It's deliberate.

There are reasons why the systems operate the way they do to place brown folks like me above other kinds of brown folks who I was made to think are unlike me. This isn't my personal failing. It is a systematic success. Actually. The fact that I have unraveled some of this and I have decolonized my brain to some extent, has created an interruption to that successful system. Everything that I was thinking as a child is exactly what I was supposed to think with all the information that I had around me. Deeply unsettling to consider now, but also really honest. And that's how I came up.

Matt Bowles: When you were coming up, I know you went back to India with your family a number of times. Can you talk about those trips and your connection with the homeland and how that impacted your identity as you were coming up in the U.S.

Anu Taranath: I would say that my trips to India, which were every two to three years for probably three months at a time, grounded me and confused me. It grounded me because suddenly I had family. I did not have any other family in the United States at the time. It was just my parents, my brother and I. And every two to three years, when we would go, I would have this huge clan of relatives that claimed me. And yet while I was being claimed, I was being claimed for being, let's say, Saroja's daughter or Taranath's daughter, my mother and my father. But by American-ness, folks didn't quite know what to do with that. I myself didn't quite know what to do with the fact that I was an Indian being raised in the diaspora in the United States I was never American enough and in India I was never Indian enough. And that's a complicated position for a child to be in.

Again, without language to normalize the feelings that were coming up for me on both sides of the ocean, one would think that if I didn't feel home in one place, maybe I could in that other place. But that's not really the case. That's not quite what happened for me. So, navigating this deep sense of connection to the land, to the people, to my relatives, to the food, to our jokes, to the culture that I loved in a lot of ways, navigating that with my disconnection from many of my relatives who thought I was somewhat odd, even if I wasn't doing anything odd. Like we were the only ones who were living away at the time in the 70s and early 80s, nobody else in either my immediate mom's family of 10 siblings or my dad's large family were living abroad. So, we were somewhat the guinea pigs and you know, under a microscope every two to three years when we would go. I don't think it was easy for my mother to take me. She probably felt a whole range of complications that again, we never spoke about then.

Our dynamic, she and I on those trips was terrible. Sometimes it was hard to navigate. I feel sad for that girl that she once was who became a young woman in America and then took her American born children to India. But they didn't quite fit in in the ways that she had hoped they would. I feel sad for her. I feel sad for me as the young child navigating the gum being thrown in my hair in the bus on my way to school and teachers saying dumb crappy things to me in the classroom all the way to not quite knowing how to navigate being a niece or a granddaughter or a cousin in India, the ways that my other cousins were, it did not feel good at the time. But I must say, oh, I'm just so incredibly grateful for these experiences. I never thought that I would be able to come out of it in that way.

But the language of justice, the language of human rights work around the world, the language of decolonization and the language of solidarity that I started to learn and simmer in swim in starting at 18, 19 onward, that language was a lifeline for me. It allowed me to rethink my entire life less from a narcissistic point of view and more from a platform of empowerment, a platform of humility, a platform of acceptance. Of course, I felt the ways that I did. How could I not have felt all that I did? It's not my failing.

Again, it's the system working to make me feel othered in as many ways as possible. And actually, when you and I claim our belonging, I can't think of anything more radical than that. Systems try to create unbelonging as much as they can. And when you and I and anyone that's listening is able to feel pockets of belonging and well-being and care and dignity, that feels astonishing to me. That's the groundwork of justice work. It's the basis, it's the fertile soil that we're looking to cultivate so more of us can lead flourishing, beautiful lives on our own and together in community.

Matt Bowles: So, let's talk about your move to Southern California and your college experience. I was raised in a place where it was mostly all white suburb and we weren't taught very much stuff in schools other than whatever the dominant narrative is. And so, I didn't have a lot of the awareness of the language and all the stuff that you're talking about that you were missing as well to really interpret things. And then for me, one of my breakthroughs that happened in high school is that I got into hip-hop music and I connected very deeply with hip-hop music. I became a hip-hop DJ and I really, really connected with this aspect of African American culture.

And through that, a lot of these hip hop groups that I was listening to were politically conscious groups. And they were talking about Black American history and the Black American liberation struggle. And they were citing people and referencing people. And I started saying, what are these people talking about? Who are these people they're citing? Why have I not heard of them? And so, then I started asking questions and I can remember in high school starting to look into Black American history and to start to read about that on my own and do school projects on that and focus on that, because I was not being taught that and I wanted to learn about that. And I think it started a lot from my connection with hip-hop music, with this aspect of Black American culture.

But then by the time I got to college, I wasn't aware that there were academic fields of study about any of this kind of stuff. And so, I was like, oh, I think I'll major in business and communications and go get a job in something. And then all of a sudden, my first semester of college, I wound up in a Sociology 101 class and my mind was blown. And it's interesting too because this was a white male professor, but he was a feminist, anti-racist, neo-Marxist. I mean, he was a really badass dude and he was hilarious. He was super entertaining as a professor. And we just went through all of this stuff about white supremacy and feminism and patriarchy and class stratification and I was just like, my mouth was just open. I was like, why has no one ever told me any of this stuff? I've never heard this language; I've never heard these things described this way. But all of a sudden, I had now a framework and things that I could go deeper on and learn more about this and learn more about that.

And so, then I just started taking all of these different classes. And for me that was kind of what led me on my political journey. I ended up majoring in sociology in college. And then my advisor was Native American and I took his Native nations class and so on and so forth and my journey sort of began. But going to college and winding up in that class and being able to then start to realize that, oh, people study this, people write about this, there's language for this, and I can start learning more about this was absolutely pivotal for me. And I'm curious for you, when you got to both LA, I'm curious about how LA was different

from Houston, if at all, in terms of the dynamics that you're describing, the racial dynamics and cultural dynamics, and then also how your university experience was being able to explore and process those things that you had experienced.

Anu Taranath: I love the way that you describe that moment of having your mind blown open with the truths of our world that have felt so hidden on purpose. There's a deliberate suppression of honest conversations about identity and power and history and harm, which then makes our healing and resilience and well-being even harder to access. I'm understanding the links between that more and more in my work these days. So, when we have more honest conversations with young people, we are inviting them to participate in their own healing and dignity much sooner in their lives. For me, the class that blew my mind was we were on the quarter system there at UC Riverside at the time.

And my first quarter at UCR was a gay literature class with Dr. Greg Beck, who I appreciated immensely. I don't think I knew anybody gay that I knew of before then. I had no connection to this. Again, that I thought, and here I am, an 18-year-old coming from Houston, suddenly my family is now living in Los Angeles. That's why I'm at UC Riverside and I'm actually so glad I was there. It was a, a tremendous time of deep learning and unlearning. I learned so much, but man, I had to unlearn a ton of stuff, also about myself, about power, about identity, society. And it proved to be an incredibly fertile ground for those conversations to take place.

Southern California felt different than Houston in the late 80s and early 90s. It was much more multiracial conversations about multiculturalism were much more common in the public sphere. Or maybe it's because I sought them out also because my framework had been expanding. The media that I consumed was also different. In this stage of my life, it felt different. The kind of disconnect that I felt in Houston or the constant sense of being watched by white folks, I didn't feel in Los Angeles. I haven't felt in Los Angeles in the same ways since then.

Matt Bowles: Well, I want to ask you about your study abroad experience. You write about this in your book. You chose to go to India and I want to ask if you can talk about the choice. You had already been to India multiple times with your family. You would go back there regularly. Your choice to go there independently, to live there for an extended period of time, to study there. What were you hoping to get out of the trip and how did it turn out?

Anu Taranath: Sometimes in our lives we are able to hear some inner wisdom. Wisdom's always speaking to us, but we're not always able to hear it. And I am so grateful to have been that young and to know somehow that this was the right path for me. I had many Sayers in my life because there was a sense of why would you go somewhere that you've already been to? You already quote, know India. Why not go to France, Germany, England? It's so much more exotic, meeting western, safer, more familiar. And yet that young 20-year-old that I was, I was maybe 19 when I applied for this, something about the extended period, it was a yearlong program and it was to Delhi, which is in north India, a part that I had been to only as a visitor, but I'd never lived in. And I didn't at the time speak Hindi.

So, the unfamiliarity of the north combined with the somewhat familiarity of India really appealed to me. And my soul was trying to work out some stuff. And who's to say that had I gone to France, it wouldn't have worked something out? I'm sure there were some other strands that could have been worked on had I taken that path. But going here for such a long period of time traveling around as I did. I also got very sick in India for a couple of months and was in hospital and lost 30 pounds within a month and a half. So many

things were happening on a physical level which mimics what was happening on a psychic, spiritual level for me. It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, as that very famous quote goes, I'm not quite sure, Matt, what I expected, saying yes to this. My family wasn't in support of this. They were like, why not go to France? Why would you go to north India, which had this kind of sense of fear from my south Indian family. We don't know anyone there. It's big and unfamiliar, big city. Why not go somewhere else? Which is so curious to me that the unfamiliarity of, say, France felt more familiar to them than the unfamiliarity of Delhi in the same country that they were from. But a family friend, a dear family friend of ours from the Kannada community, Pranay Shankar, was a wonderful support and ally to me, and I shared with him I want to do this. And he got me in a really important way at a time in my life where I didn't have a lot of adults get me. And he came and he spoke with my parents and helped move the needle on me being able to go.

Matt Bowles: And what was your experience like once you got there and you were spending the year there and how did it impact you as a person over the course of the year and your identity?

Anu Taranath: I saw my family from a wider lens than I had, and that humbled me immensely. My mom wasn't just the one that I squabbled with. She was part of something much bigger than herself. And that brought me a lot of contexts to my family that I didn't even know that I needed. The experience of being a young woman at that time, traveling by myself across states in different parts of India, sometimes where I spoke the language, sometimes where I didn't, created tremendous opportunities for growth, danger, and a lot of learning. I think about the courageousness that I had as a young person, and I high five that girl. She was awesome. She didn't have a lot of skills, but look at her go. She did all kinds of things. I'm really glad that she couldn't think too far in the future and that she was able to stay in the present very often and put herself in situations that she didn't quite know how to move through.

But in doing so, she learned a lot. I was also unsure of, again, my position in the World. Am I still too American to be Indian? Am I still too Indian to be American? That narrative was playing out for me as a young woman. It was still quite loud in my mind these days it's not loud at all. It's very, very quiet. That story has no legs anymore for me. But it was a foundational story at that point in my life. And so, I was there for about a year and a couple months. That year shifted me in some really important ways.

Matt Bowles: Why does that story no longer have legs in your life? How have you come to think about or reconcile that today?

Anu Taranath: I had imagined when I was young that feeling rooted and feeling a sense of belonging was what I would receive from the eyes of others. If they thought I belonged, then I belonged. And I'm not saying that what others think of us is superfluous or irrelevant to the ways that we imagine ourselves. Certainly, there's an interaction. But I came to understand more deeply that my rootedness and my belonging was less dependent on how others were seeing me and much more dependent on how I was seeing, receiving, and holding myself, how I was caring for my spirit. Beautiful, complicated, not this, not that identity. It ceased to be a liability. And actually, in many ways, I think, has become a superpower for me.

The fact that I have experienced on such a visceral level not feeling enough of this and that, and that has been such a core memory and a core bodily experience for me for so long has meant that my sensitivity around belonging was really honed in. And once I started to depersonalize this, once I started to realize my story is just one of many stories, actually, there's nothing so fantastic or unique about me. I'm just one of many. And actually, what I'm experiencing, so many others experience it. Once I was able to join a

collective and realize that this wasn't just about me, that collective inquiry shifted me and helped me understand that the very things that seemed to push me down earlier in my life were the very things that allowed me to hold space better for more people.

I facilitate conversations, I teach. I do a lot of different things. And being able to read the room and get a sense of different people's connection to, or disconnection to, feeling like they belong. I'm very sensitive to. I don't always get it right. That's not what I'm saying. But it's a core value of mine. And it's something that I'm constantly trying to expand my awareness of and to create wider and larger containers that can hold more people in, whether it's for a class or whether it's for an event or whether it's for a workshop. And I'm not sure how I would have developed that if I hadn't felt so disregarded in a range of ways. It's because of those experiences that have moved through me and have been recast as this sensitivity in me. So, it sounds odd to say I am so grateful for feeling like I didn't belong earlier on, but it is my origin story, and it very much helps give texture to the ways that I try to show up these days in the world.

Matt Bowles: Well, I want to ask a little bit about your teaching journey. I know working with students is such a central and passionate part of your life. So, after you do this study abroad in India, I know you did your PhD in San Diego, and then you land in Seattle to teach at the University of Washington, and you begin teaching there shortly before the September 11 attacks in the United States. And I was curious to ask you about that. First of all, in general, just the transition to Seattle, which is a very different city from Los Angeles or Houston. It's a very white city for people that are not familiar with Seattle. And then the aftermath of the September 11th attacks.

I was in Washington; D.C. and I was doing a lot of organizing work at the time with Arab and Muslim communities around Palestine Solidarity. And then I eventually worked in a professional organizing capacity doing civil liberties organizing work against a lot of the post 9/11 Civil liberties abuses that were happening. So, I was right in the mix of that. And just for people that aren't familiar with that context, it became quite a dangerous place in the United States for Arabs, for Muslims, and for South Asians as well. I believe the first person who was killed in a vigilante hate crime in the United States was neither Arab nor Muslim. He was an Indian Sikh man. And so, it became quite dangerous for these groups. And there you are, you find yourself in a very white city. You're teaching classes with, I assume, majority white students in this environment. And I'm curious for you what that experience was like when you think back to that historical moment.

Anu Taranath: I'm appreciating the invitation to remember what that time was like, though it's not comfortable to remember what that was like. I found my classrooms at the, which is what the University of Washington is often called. I found my classrooms, spaces where my students wanted to grapple with honestly with hard and challenging concepts. I found them to be open, humble, and really courageous. By and large, now and then, I would have somebody disinterested somebody pushing back, somebody angry. Okay, all of that, yes, yes. But rather than focus on a couple of those, I'd rather focus on, frankly, the hundreds of students that I taught in that era who wanted to understand what was happening and how should they feel on a personal level.

I felt fearful for my family, for my family members, especially for the male family members. And I also felt really humble at the fear. It's not comfortable to feel fearful on a personal level. But again, when we're able to plug into something more collective, that personal fear for a few moments helped me understand what it might be like perhaps to be a Black parent and to have a Black boy driving what might that be like? And I am feeling fearful in this particular historical moment that has raised the profile of brown men like my

family men. But the fear and disconnect that so many Black folks have felt throughout the ages, not context specific throughout the ages, the growing awareness of that, it was incredibly meaningful and humbling to be able, in a very small minute way, link my experience with the ways that other people might feel at different moments. I'm not saying what I felt is like anybody's experience. Of course not.

And is my most favorite word. It helps us hold many things at once. So, while I'm not saying this moment after 911 where suddenly South Asians were cast as suspect and were being subject to brutalization, I'm not saying that that suddenly helped me see what it's like to be black in the U.S. and those moments of awareness of what it might be like to be someone else. That awareness only happens in glimmers. It's like a hummingbird in and out of sight. It's there and then it disappears. And you can hear the buzz for a moment longer, but she's nowhere in front of you. And those glimmers into someone else's life to me are some of the most magical moments of connecting with that collective ethos, right. I can only live my life. I only know what I know and what I experience.

Being in the body, speaking this language, presenting as the way that I do. I can only know my life and those brief fleeting glimpses and glimmers of might it be like this for others much longer and much deeper than even what I know. Those are the moments that crumble me, but also rebuild me into a better human. They tear me apart as a human, but they also rebuild me into a better version of what I can be. That's how I think about those years around 911.

Matt Bowles: Well, you have now been teaching at UW for almost 25 years. And I want to ask you about your pedagogy, at the beginning, early on in your book [Beyond Guilt Trips](#), you quote the great Brazilian educator Paulo Freire, who is the author of the [Pedagogy of the Oppressed](#). And I'm wondering maybe specifically how Freire's work has inspired you and your pedagogy, and then how your teaching philosophy and your teaching style has developed and specifically how you've incorporated travel experiences into your teaching.

Anu Taranath: That's a big question because so many things have influenced what plays out in the classroom. For me, I'll just detail a few of these strands. One is certainly reading and engaging with revolutionary educationalists like Freire and so many others. Understanding that education is less what we do to another and more what we invite in together has been key. I think my own disconnect from academia has also played a part in in what I do in the classroom. I'm a person who's one foot in the academy and many tentacles outside is how I often think about it. I appreciate what an academic institution can offer, what it can do, what it houses and how it can resource inquiry. I'm also skeptical of it as the site and the seat of the kind of power that it holds.

I have a somewhat uneasy relationship with that kind of hierarchized knowledge. And I suppose some of that plays into how I invite my students in in the classroom. I'll also say that when I first came to the UW, I didn't find a lot of camaraderie with my colleagues. The university system is also very hierarchical, and not being a tenure track faculty made my position seem very disposable and superfluous to their real work. I was somewhat tangential. They were the real deal. And so, I made colleagues with my students. My first couple of years, my students were my thinking intellectual partners. They were my political partners. I put in a lot of time, effort, love and care into the spaces that I created with them because they were deserving of it and because I didn't have a lot of community outside of the classroom.

So, bringing my whole self and whole heart to the classroom felt very natural at the time. And then once I started to create more community with some colleagues with the wider Seattle area, and I started to find

my way not only with my students, the ways that I was teaching stuck. It just became the way that I teach. I would like to invite anybody who's in my classes to feel deeply knowledgeable when they are stepping in day one, which means valuing the experiences that they have had even before they have come into class, which means honoring their whole selves, honoring their family's wisdom, honoring the hurt and harm and healing that's happened in their own lives. Honoring that as wise wisdom right off the bat helps to create a very different environment than the typical, you know nothing. Here I am sage on stage. Let me tell you, empty vessel, how it's done.

That's never been how I've operated. I've tried to bring my own curiosity to my classroom. I teach a lot of things that I know about. I also teach things that I know less about than other things in order to keep me on my toes, to keep me really fresh, to have me research and dig in. My curriculum looks really different term after term after term because I want to be exposed to many ideas. And I think that that kind of enthusiasm and curiosity comes out in my classes. At least that's what I'm hoping for.

Matt Bowles: And can you also talk about, over those 25 years, how you have chosen to prioritize travel both in your own life and also in terms of your students and you're teaching and your work and the role that travel has played?

Anu Taranath: Travel has been central to the kind of work I've been doing at the university. For 20 years now, I have been shepherding students and other participants to different parts of our globe to introduce to them change makers and human rights defenders in a range of places, mostly in the global South. And how could those experiences not impact the work I do back in the Seattle classroom? It's impacted in a couple of ways. One, certainly through my curriculum, the more that I've understood, for example, West Africa and Ghana, the more texts I incorporate from that region into my classes, because I get exposed to a whole new range of thinkers and vibrant change makers. And I would love for my students to engage with their awesome ideas.

So, in terms of curriculum, things stretch, but also in terms of relationships. So many of the opportunities that I've been able to share with my students abroad are rooted in deep relationship with these change makers and human rights defenders in other parts of our globe. And to be at an R1 institute in the United States and to hold the sometimes-marginalized position I do at the university, but also to hold incredible power at the university, to hold all of that and be in connection with colleagues in different parts of the world. I wanted to share the resources I could in ways that help expand the reach and the learning of my colleagues. So, I've been able to bring so many of my partners in other parts of the world, to Seattle to the UW, to communities that they are also deeply interested in learning about.

Over the last 20 years and for the last few years, a priority of mine has been to create opportunities for my partners in different parts of our globe to participate on my programs and tours in countries that are new to them. So, I was in India this last month on an educational tour. I had a program that I was running and I was able to bring one of my colleagues from Ghana to India so he could participate for 12 days in that experience and surreptitiously and beautifully. Another colleague of mine who I work with on my Mexico program also came to India at the same time.

So, we had me, who is this Indian American? Remember that narrative? Not quite here, not quite that, but feeling really cool about it all now. Leader inviting my students to grapple with big, big questions and meeting so many people in South India alongside my colleague from Mexico and alongside my colleague

from Ghana, all learning together. Oh, it was brilliant, just brilliant. So, these kinds of cross fertilization south collaborations I'm very committed to and wanting to do a lot more of that in my next 10 years.

Matt Bowles: Well, I want to ask you more about West Africa, because that is also one of my very favorite regions. I've probably spent about six months in West Africa through a number of different countries there, Nigeria, Ghana, Senegal, Ivory coast. And I have just completely fallen in love with the region. And I want to ask about your experience there. Accra in Ghana. I know we both have a deep love for what was your experience like there? What were some of the highlights or the moments that most struck you that you remember?

Anu Taranath: On my first visit to Accra, I stay in a family compound that I had found online and the couple lived in a house. And around their house, on their compound, they had small little trailers that they had rented out to tourists, visitors. So, I had rented out a small little trailer for my 10 days in their compound. And on the compound, there was a tailor there at the same time. And what was striking is that for some reason at that time that I was there, all the other people who had rented out rooms were white. I was the only not white person on the compound besides the family living in the house and besides some of the staff members who were Ghanaian. And so, the tailor, who was a Ghanaian man, would look at me very curiously as I was walking to and from the communal loo. And at one point he nodded, I nodded back. The next day he called me over and I am fascinated with cloth and textiles and have long relationships with tailors in India getting clothes made.

And so, the fact that he was a tailor was doubly interesting for me. So, I was eager to talk to him. And he said at the time, you cannot be a foreigner. You are not an Obruni, which is the word for foreigner. And I said, no, no, I'm very much a foreigner. This is my first visit to your country. I know nothing about Ghana, besides a little bit that I've read and a few friends that I have here. I am so new. I am an Obruni. And he was insistent, you cannot be an Obruni. Why? Because your people, my Indian people, are connected to him. We are brother, brother, sister, sister. We have connections in the world much more than that American side of me. He was least interested in that American side, though one might technically say I am much more American because I was born in the U.S. and I'd spent 50 plus years in the U.S. still, he was not interested in that. He wanted to think about the brother, sister part of the fact that India and Ghana are connected. And his insistence on how much I belonged in Ghana was both delightful for me as he and I got to know each other.

And also, a really lovely full circle moment from some of the disconnections that I had felt as a younger person about not belonging anywhere. And I loved that. This was a tailor from Ghana that I had just met insisting that I belonged where? Not in the US or not in India, but in Ghana of all places. I loved it. That was in 2015 or 16. And every trip I have made to Accra since then, he and I spend more and more time together. We peruse the markets; we look at fabric together. He certainly makes me fun outfits. But we spend time together as friends. And even now, once a month, we communicate on WhatsApp saying, good morning, how's the family? Send me a photo. It's the sweetest thing. But his insistence to this day that I am not an Obruni and that I belong in Ghana as one of his people tickles me to no end.

Matt Bowles: That is so nice. I'm also curious about your connection with other folks from the Indian diaspora in other countries. And so, for folks that haven't traveled on the continent to the former British colonies, when you do that, you will find that there are often substantial Indian populations in places like Ghana, in places like Kenya and so forth. And I'm curious for you, whether on the continent or other places you go around the world, have you connected with the Indian communities in those places? And how have

those conversations and those cultural identities and those connections been as Indian diaspora communities? But quite different experiences being Indian American versus Indian in Ghana or any number of other countries. How have those types of connections been for you?

Anu Taranath: Indians are famous for staring at each other long and hard. We are culturally designed to do so, right? So everywhere that I travel outside of India, Indians, we call each other Desis. The Desis that I encounter. We look at each other, we watch one another, we are curious about one another. And earlier in my life, I would never want to make eye contact because in acknowledging others, I am acknowledging my own difference. These days I can't wait to catch the eyes of everybody that I am interacting with, desi and non-Desi, just because I have so much more curiosity and capacity these days for holding these kinds of conversations.

So, I love being able to talk with the diaspora because as you say, it's a very different identity being from different parts of the diaspora. I haven't been to East Africa; I haven't been to that region at all. And I hope to one day. Precisely because of the large population of South Asians that have been there. Not like, let's say Seattle, where you see large populations of Indians and some Bangladeshis and Pakistanis, but mostly Indians who have come over the last, say, 15, 20 years for work populations around the Indian diaspora in, say, East Africa, you know, have been there for 150 years in a really different way. And so being able to connect with those kinds of conversations is something I certainly want to do more of.

Matt Bowles: Yeah, it's been super interesting for me because I try to do that as well. I mean, as you know, I dearly love Indian food and culture. And so, if I'm able to connect with Indian diaspora folks in different places around the world, I'm super interested in doing that. And it has been really interesting. The last time I was in Nairobi, which is also one of my all-time favorite cities, I've spent about two months in Nairobi and I just love the city and there's a substantial Indian population. There's. And what was really interesting to me the last time I was in Nairobi; I went to this Bollywood tribute show. It was a stage show with dancers and I didn't know exactly what to expect. I knew it was a Bollywood tribute show and I was going to it, but I didn't know would this be all Indian dancers who would be performing? How exactly would this go?

And the idea was that behind the stage there was an image that was projected of a body Bollywood star. It was like *Through the Years*. So, you know, like Shah Rukh Khan and like, these different Bollywood stars that were amazingly popular at different periods of Bollywood, and they would put the image of the Bollywood star up, and then they would play a Bollywood number from one of their famous films, and then they would do a Bollywood dance performance. It was a through the years tribute to Bollywood. And one of the really cool things about this particular performance, other than the fact that it was happening in Nairobi, is that I would say at least half, if not more of the performers were Black Kenyans and they had the Bollywood moves down. Anu, can I tell you, I mean, it was, like, completely amazing. And so, it was so cool for me to see the influence of the Indian diaspora community culturally and how impactful that was on these elements of the Black Kenyan community there. I mean, it was just completely amazing.

Anu Taranath: This reminds me of the few times that I'd been to Morocco, walking around large cities like Rabat and Casablanca and Marrakech. People call out to me, oy, Sha Rukh Khan again. A very famous, big Bollywood actor. And I am not Sha Rukh Khan. And yet people calling out to me, Sha Rukh Khan, Sha Rukh Khan, wherever I go. And the first time that this happened, it was very striking, a little confusing. I didn't quite know, is this a. Come on, is it harassment? What is it? And it was absolutely none of that. It was simply deep appreciation, and it was cultural connection. And so many people that I would respond to

positively when they would call me Shahrukh Khan, would then start to sing various versions of some Hindi songs, usually from the 80s or early 90s to me, and tell me about their love of Indian culture through film.

It's a really odd thing for me to have grown up at earlier stages of my life where the culture of the community that I came from was so deeply denigrated to know where different parts of the culture are appreciated by various populations, whether it's the food or whether it's Sha Rukh Khan and Bollywood or music or, you know, to see Bollywood fusion with rap and R and B and jazz and all of that. It's a very curious evolution of what it means to move more and more into the mainstream and how people's perceptions of a community can shift in a relatively short amount of time.

Matt Bowles: Well, I'll tell you another story, Anu. So, one of my very good digital nomad friends is a Kenyan woman. I've actually interviewed her on the podcast [Agnes Nyamwange](#), and she was born and raised in Kenya and went to college in Uganda, and she's now a digital nomad and she's a good friend of mine. And so, when I was planning to go spend a few months in West Africa, I hit her up because she had never been to West Africa and I knew that she wanted to go. So, I said, hey, Agnes, how about we go to West Africa for a few months and we'll do Nigeria and Ghana and Senegal? I said, yeah, absolutely. So, she was with me for the first three months trip that I went through West Africa, and in our first month we were in Lagos, Nigeria.

Now, Agnes is a good friend of mine and we've been traveling together before, but we've never stayed in the same accommodation before. Had the same living room and the same dining room and that kind of stuff. So, we get there, to our place in Lagos, and one of the things I start to notice is that every time Agnes turns on the tv, she is either watching a Bollywood movie or an Indian soap opera. And I was like, Agnes, why are you only watching this stuff 100% of the time when you're watching TV? And she told me I had never known this before this trip, but we'd actually talked about it on the podcast interview that I did with her, because I interviewed her at the end of this trip and we reflected on the trip.

And she was raised in a Gujarati neighborhood in Kenya, and she was like the only Black family in this Gujarati neighborhood. She's like, oh, yeah, when I was five years old, I spoke some Gujarati. We had to know when somebody else's mother was coming and yelling at you. It was amazing. But she's like, oh, yeah. I was at their house and I was eating their food, and that's why I love Indian food so much and all this kind of stuff. And I was like, that is amazing. And so, the other part of this story, of course, though, is we were all about finding the best Indian restaurants in West Africa as we went through West Africa. And it was a super, super special trip.

Anu_Taranath: That is a worthy quest, definitely. And I love that story of your friend [Agnes](#), because, you know, we are actually much more complicated than it seems. Perhaps each and every one of us has trained and experiences that you wouldn't quite imagine. And yet here we are in our complexity.

Matt Bowles: All right, we're going to pause here and call that the end of part one. For direct links to everything we have discussed in this episode, including all the ways to find, follow and connect with Anu and how to get her award-winning book [Beyond Guilt Trips: Mindful Travel in an Unequal World](#). It is my most recommended book to travelers and digital nomads. We're going to link that up in [the show notes](#) as well. It's available in whatever format you like. I have the audio version, which is read by Anu herself, which is fantastic, but you can get the book in any format you like. All of that is going to be linked up in [the show notes](#). So just go to the Maverickshow.com and go to [the show notes](#) for this episode. And be sure to tune in to the next episode to hear the conclusion of my interview with Dr. Anu Taranath. Good night, everybody.