

Recall This Book  
Episode 114  
Martin Puchner *Culture* (JP, EF)  
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John Plotz:

What exactly is culture? And where does it come from? As children, we're taught about the uncanny power of an original moment of genius, maybe Orpheus, maybe Homer. But instead, perhaps we should be fixated on something very different. The electric chain of transmission, the ultimate green energy, whereby what is not so much new as *new to you* gets retold, retailed, or in fact, renewed. Mediators are not just essential supplements, they're the whole kit and caboodle. It's mediation, transmission, or if you like, appropriation all the way down. Even if you don't like it, it might be appropriation all the way down.

So runs the argument of an utterly fascinating new book *Culture: The Story of Us from Cave Art to K-Pop*. And guess who we've got in the studio to discuss it today? From Brandeis University, welcome to Recall this Book, a podcast dedicated to making sense of contemporary problems by activating writing from the past. And if that sounds weird to you, gimlet-eared listeners, that's because we're activating our very earliest tagline in honor of a professor who's not only our most recent, but also one of our earliest guests. So I'm John Plotz, hello, joined by the more than gimlet-eared, the eagle-eared or owl-eared, Elizabeth Ferry. Hello, Elizabeth.

Elizabeth Ferry:

Hey, John.

John Plotz:

And we are hosting our once and future guest. Hello, Martin.

Martin Puchner:

Hi, John. Thanks for having me back.

John Plotz:

It's so great to welcome Martin Puchner, professor of English and theater at Harvard, editor of more than one Norton anthology and author of many wonderful prize-winning books, among them, *The Written World* and a wonderful family history, *The Language of Thieves*. But he joins us today to discuss his fascinating new book *Culture: The Story of Us*. Okay, Martin, it's great to have you. And as you know, the ordinary Recall This Book format with a new book under discussion is just to invite you to start off by laying out what strike you as the key questions or key claims of the book.

Martin Puchner:

Thanks, John. And the book really started when I—as we all have, I think recently or for a longer time—was sitting around the dinner table bemoaning the decline of the arts and humanities with a lot of hand-wringing, a lot of sadness. And in the middle of that dinner conversation, I suddenly realized that I wasn't even sure what the arts and humanities really were, what the big point of them was, what the big arc of the history of the arts and humanities is. So I suddenly realized that before I start or continue complaining about their decline, I should really ask myself, *What is this thing whose decline we're actually bemoaning all the time?*

So then I went to my study and started to read and think and talk to people, buttonholing everybody, "What do you think the humanities are? What do you think the arts are for?" And I got a great variety of different answers. And at some point in this exercise, I realized that I probably had been asking the wrong question or was after slightly the wrong thing. Really what I wanted to do was tell not so much the history of the humanities as a very specific discipline that started in the Italian Renaissance and was revived in various ways. Really what I wanted to tell was the history of culture as a history of humans as a meaning-making species, as a species that has produced these particular artifacts and practices that don't seem to have any particular utility or sort of immediate purpose and yet seems incredibly important, including for the survival of the species. Because humans, from the earliest records we have, spent an enormous amount of resources on these activities, starting with cave art, all the way to the present. So it's clearly something crucial, this meaning-making activity. But how did this work? What's the logic of it? What's the driving force of its history? So that was really my starting point.

John Plotz:

And your starting point was also cave art.

Martin Puchner:

Exactly. It started with cave art in part because those are among the earliest elaborate artifacts. So my starting point was this question, the dinner table conversation, but then the history I wanted to tell, I wanted to start with cave art, in this case the Chauvet Cave, about 30,000, 35,000 years ago. In part because those are the earliest artifacts, but also because the cave art then ended up encapsulating what I ended up seeing as the important through-lines. First off, that it is a space, the Chauvet Cave, of meaning-making rather than utility because humans never lived in that cave. They never went there for shelter. They only went there to engage in the decoration of this cave over an incredible number of generations, thousands of years of continual work.

It's also clear that it wasn't just painting, it was used for rituals. There is some evidence in other caves that some of the abstract markings identified places from which to sing or make music with particular echo effects. So it was really the sort of all-encompassing special experience that was created there century after century after century.

It encapsulated that, and it encapsulated the question of transmission you mentioned in your introduction. That became, for me, the crucial question of cultural history. Because unlike our biological genes, we don't pass down cultural knowledge or any knowledge automatically. We need to create special storage systems or we have to engage in person-to-person transmission practices. For me, the cave became one such storage technique, so to speak, that allowed the facilitation of creating a kind of cultural tradition from one generation to the next.

John Plotz:

So that's actually a great way of thinking about these chains of transmission and mediation. Because you're right, the way I set it up in the introduction, I was thinking of culture-to-culture transmission. So we could maybe discuss some of your wonderful stories about movement between India and China, and people not only going from one culture to another. But also coming back because it seems as if the revenant move is very important, to go and also return. But your point is that generational transmission, even "*within*" a culture, is itself already a problem of mediation and transmission. Do you want to talk more about how you thought about those together?

Martin Puchner:

Yeah. I really started with the generational transmission. And maybe the last thing I want to say about the Chauvet Cave is what happens when that transmission gets interrupted. Or when the storage systems fail or malfunction, which they do all the time. And the Chauvet Cave, in the Chauvet Cave [it] was an external event. An earthquake shut off the entrance to the cave and no one could enter it for a couple of thousand years. It became a kind of time capsule. I became obsessed with time capsules, became a sort of a minor through-line through the book.

But then a few thousand years later, another earthquake or some landslide opens up a side entrance to the cave and a second group of humans enters the cave. And I started to really identify with that second group of humans: because they were introduced to these artworks that had been produced thousands of years in the past by probably a very different culture, very different groups of human. And they had to try to figure out what this was, and they somehow did. And then they continued that work after that interruption, in their own way. And so bridging that interruption became, for me... The point I'm trying to put this is, is that they were *latecomers*. And I think when it comes to culture, we are all latecomers. We are always confronted with something that we only dimly understand, if at all, but which we try to have to create a kind of attitude, cultivate an attitude towards these fragments and objects that survive. And being a latecomer—I think that's true of all of the episodes in the book.

Elizabeth Ferry:

One of the things I really loved about the book was the way you showed how many things there are that put culture at risk. There's earthquakes and there's wars and there's misunderstandings, and there's things washing overboard. But at the same time, they have this *constantly coming back* quality. Linking that to the way you began, about this sort of mood of what's happening to the humanities or what's going to happen, ultimately I found the book to be very optimistic. In the sense of *well, yeah, it's a big mess, but ultimately these things keep kind of coming back and not necessarily in the way you expect*; there's this kind of irrepressibility of it. So I don't know if you want to say any more about how you approached that.

Martin Puchner:

Yes. Well thank you for putting it that way, Elizabeth. It does resonate with me. And some of the reviews have complained that it's too optimistic, and I get their point. And as you've said, there are lots of stories of destruction

in the book as well. Though it's true, I of course could have also focused on episodes where things just disappear and are gone forever. That would've made not just for a depressing book, but also I think for a more boring one. And yes, it would've acknowledged perhaps yes, things disappear and get lost. And that's maybe true of, I don't know, maybe it's 99% of all artifacts. I think it's actually less because--

Elizabeth Ferry:

And you do mention some. It's not like you never talk about things that have been lost and we have no idea.

Martin Puchner:

Of course, I do mention some. And of course also we don't know what we don't know in many cases. But at the same time, I did start to have the impression that it's actually kind of hard. Even in cases where invading armies try to destroy a culture as the Spaniards did with the Aztecs, for example, they didn't manage actually to destroy everything. It's kind of hard to destroy a culture without a trace. And you are an anthropologist, you know this better than I do. And so I think that's maybe the source actually of my optimism.

John Plotz:

Actually, can of pursue that point? As you were describing the cave that is closed and then open again, I was thinking about the analogy of Gilgamesh getting rediscovered in the 1890s or whatever it is, and also the way that the Renaissance was called the Renaissance, as if it had skipped over. And so part of your argument seems to be that traces and ruins and fragments, which it's easy to think of as purely scholarly interest, you could say, oh yes, we can find traces of "pre-Colombian" culture in North America, but they're only available for scholars. But I think you're saying something different. You're saying that traces and ruins and imperfectly preserved cultural remnants are part of the process of building any generation of culture.

Martin Puchner:

I think that's right. And so I think maybe the way to put this is that ruins aren't just for scholars, they're for everyone. And I was really struck by how deep the recovery of ruins goes in cultural history, including the Chauvet Cave, if you want to call the reentry into the cave, kind of reentry into a, it's not quite a ruin because it was so perfectly preserved, that's the great thing about caves. They are these time capsules.

And this is a side point perhaps, but I was struck by the weird combination of destruction and preservation that I often see. And that is maybe another way of coming back, Elizabeth, to your earlier point, where you have, like the landslide in this cave, or the volcano in Pompeii, you have these moments of destruction, that at the same time you could say that's the worst thing. You have a volcano that kills everybody, including all the artists, all the art making, terrible for culture, fantastic for cultural history because you have that perfectly preserved Roman town. And many of the artifacts that were preserved, including that South Asian statue I talk about, would have disappeared without a trace. And so that happens again and again, that destruction and preservation weirdly go hand in hand.

John Plotz:

But can we pursue that with Gilgamesh though, Martin? Because Gilgamesh is such an interesting example where after the early 20th century, it comes rushing back and the modernists are like, "Awesome. We have this great Enkidu story that we can tell" (which the three of us have discussed before). But it also gets cut out of the loop, so it's missing from Roman culture, it's missing from Greek culture, it's missing from the Middle Ages, it's missing from the early rise of Arabic culture. So how do you think about that?

Martin Puchner:

It's true, and it's such a huge skip. It's skipping 2000 years, although in contrast to the caves, it's a small blip. But I think the Epic of Gilgamesh is a perfect example of that because: how does it get preserved? So first Ashurbanipal this Assyrian king, collects [it] in what's today Mosul. I was there in the fall, it was super moving to see how many of his palaces actually haven't even been excavated.

John Plotz:

We note with pride that you were wearing a *Recall This Book* T-shirt when you were there.

Martin Puchner:

I was. I was.

John Plotz:

That's a very important moment of cultural transmission, I think. Yeah.

Martin Puchner:

So wearing a Recall This Book T-shirt, I was in Ashurbanipal's palaces, some that had just been started to be excavated again. In any case, so he collects these, but then these palaces burn down, moment of destruction. But, they're written on clay tablets, and as we know, clay doesn't burn up, it hardens. And then these tablets were preserved, if you will, because the library burned down and becomes another time capsule until [Austen Henry] Layard discovers it in 1849 or '48.

And then you have this hiatus, this interruption, in this case, a pretty long one, 2000 years. And it's true, you have all these cultures without knowledge of the Epic of Gilgamesh, just as you had all these generations of people living in what's today the south of France without being able to return to the Chauvet Cave. But then you find it again, or the cave opens up again, and then you have to make sense of it, even though it's so long ago. And in the case of Gilgamesh, you don't know the language, you don't know the writing system. It takes decades to decipher. And we are still deciphering and still re-translating, as Elizabeth's father [David Ferry] did. And so, yeah, but that's how cultural history works. I think those are not exceptions. I think that's sort of the conclusion I came to. They're the rule.

John Plotz:

I think that also links to a sort of tripartite model that you propose, which maybe you could say more about, of: 1) person to person transmission, 2) stone memorials and 3) texts. In other words, that there are things that are graven in stone, so they become durable. There are things that are written in something like a library, which are sort of like stone monuments in a way, but also different because they require living curation. And then there's person to person transmission. And I see how they're all related, but they're distinct from one another as well.

Martin Puchner:

They're absolutely distinct. And anthropologists are very good at focusing on the latter. And it's in some ways very hard to get a handle on. And one of the things I became so aware of writing this history is how biased, it's biased in so many ways, but including in ways for cultures and practices that leave sort of hard and durable traces. Though I became very interested in how sometimes writing on stone and oral transmission sort of weirdly complement one another. And one example is this Ashoka pillar. So Ashoka, a

South Asian king inscribes these pillars and stones with his edicts. It's very moving stories of conversion to Buddhism, new ideas of kingship, written in a relatively new script and deliberately on stone. He thinks about that he'll be able to communicate to the future. He also thinks about these stone edicts as ultimately, even though the stone pillars are massive, somehow this will help spread his ideas of kingship abroad to the west and the east, which they do. But then at some point, the script gets abandoned and the inscriptions become illegible. And later travelers report on these pillars, but no one can read them anymore, though there are oral stories that these pillars, because they're so massive, they call attention to themselves, sort of accrue around them.

And so it's very interesting that in some sense, writing on stone, which you might think is the best way if you want to ensure that your message of Buddhism, I mean I'm simplifying here, survives. It sort of works, but it also sort of didn't work. Oral stories preserved some traces of that knowledge for much longer. Until again in the 19th century, the writing, as with the Epic of Gilgamesh cuneiform was deciphered and the message, the stones started to speak again. So writing cultures tend to overestimate the power of writing and don't realize that you actually need a lot of infrastructure.

John Plotz:

Metadata.

Martin Puchner:

Tools. Well, you need an institution of transmission because otherwise it's just marks and stone.

Elizabeth Ferry:

So within anthropology, particularly of the Caribbean, there's a very lively, now maybe 50 or more years old, conversation around the idea of Creolization. I'm of the lineage that takes Creolization not as a kind of apt metaphor for a number of different global processes, but as a very specific, maybe not unique, but quite unusual situation in the Caribbean, where not all the Indigenous people were killed, but a very large majority were, which meant that unlike a lot of other cases, almost everyone who was there was sort of newly there. And also that it was a, and this is less peculiar I think, but such a dramatic difference of power between the different contributors. Which many of your stories have some of that, but maybe not as often. They're



sort of people who see themselves as somewhat lateral to each other, maybe, not exclusively.

But what do you think about that? And I thought about it in terms of the Saint Dominigue story because another dimension, and I thought the way you told the story was great, and the discussion of Toussaint "overshooting" in a sense, these enlightenment ideas and this salon culture in the new world. A Creolization model might ask about things like the role of voodoo in the Haitian revolution as a set of ideas: the announcement of the uprising took place in a voodoo ceremony. It's not a criticism of the way you tell the story, but it's a way of thinking about what about situations where everybody's sort of... In one way, everyone's at the same point where there's this sort of new sense of newness rather than an older tradition and a newer tradition kind of trying to fight it out.

Martin Puchner:

It's very interesting to describe that situation in the Caribbean that way. My immediate, and I want to think more about that, but my immediate answer is that it's true that everyone is maybe newly arrived though under very different circumstances, as you say. But everyone brings something with them. So it's not like they all arrive there and say, "Okay, let's create this tabula rasa." Those are the strange utopia that sort of Europeans projected onto the New World perhaps or some no place island.

Elizabeth Ferry:

Yeah, and in fact, in some sense the kind of miraculous part of that is that even though Africans came with so much less actual stuff and with so much more dislocation, the very great degree of African influence on this novel moment again.

Martin Puchner:

So true. Which just shows the importance once again here of oral, person to person transmission and what can be retained by that. But I think you're absolutely right. You're describing a very specific, and as you say, this particular process of Creolization, very specific to the Caribbean. But I would say similar degree of specificity is true of, in some sense, all of my episodes. Because once I sort of settled on that dynamic, I think my goal was to show as wide an array of different types of hybridization or whatever you want to call it at work. Because I think there's an incredible array of what kind of actors,

what kind of objects, how selective it is. Is it a whole package? As it was with Roman Greece and then with China and Japan. Is it sort of one small thing? What are the relations of power? What are the mediators? Is it an entire invasion? Is it just one translator sort of finding their way across thousands of miles and then coming back with something? Is it a sort of accidental? Is it deliberate? I guess I didn't quite produce a chart with five dimensions.

John Plotz:

That would be a cool chart actually. Seriously, it really would be interesting to think about the different axes there. Because I realized that a lot of my questions are really focused on treating just one of those axes as if it was crucial. So I'll give you an example, because I saw you wince when I mentioned this concept of the *revenant*. So one of the things that I really love, and it relates to your point about the fact that spatial transmission or culture to culture transmission has a kind of analogous relationship to temporal transmission, generation to generation. I love these moments where you have an image of somebody who goes from one culture to another and then chooses to return. In fact, I think you even say about going from China to India that presumably many people went from China to India looking for Buddhist texts or looking for Buddhist enlightenment, but didn't come back. But then you have these few people who did come back. And of course to me, as an academic, as a humanities professor, that's analogous to what we do with the past. We're revenants to the past.

But that's a very special cultural case that you're focusing on there. And I'd just love to hear you say more about how you think about those cases, of people going and returning. I'll add another analogy. It's like Plato's allegory of the cave, because you go out of the cave and then you go back to the cave. Your job is not so much to step out into the sunlight and have the revelation. Your job is to be a mediator, to go back, to have seen that other way of being and return to tell about it.

Martin Puchner:

Yeah, it's interesting, though I didn't wince because I thought it was a bad idea. It was intriguing. I hadn't thought about it in those terms. And listening to you elaborate on it now, John, makes me realize that it's true. I think these people returning are unusual, though for me because I wanted to think about how something gets moved from one place to the next or how it gets translated, in order to be a translator, you first have to sort of learn the other language and then you have to sort of translate it back into your first

language. And I think maybe that must have been the model I had in mind when I followed, for example, the Chinese traveler Xuanzang who goes to India and then translates it, brings back objects, brings back manuscripts, literally bringing back objects, but more importantly, translating texts into Chinese, metaphorically bring them back. Or Ennin, the Japanese monk who does the same thing with China.

And so I think because I had that model, those didn't seem to me the sort of exceptions, but the model, almost what had to happen. Although now that I listened to you, it's true, you could just have someone bringing something to another culture and then settling there. And I'm sure that that also happened a lot, though the mediating figures that sort of pop out, at least popped out to me, were the ones who do both. Xuanzang is sort of a celebrated figure in China, as is Ennin in Japan. So the ones who came back to tell the tale in a certain way.

John Plotz:

Well, can I push that analogy to the Saint-Domingue case, Elizabeth, and see if there's more to be said there? Because maybe if we take the Orlando Patterson paradigm of slavery as social death, there's a kind of normative assumption that entering into the enslaved condition is a sort of cultural suppressor, that you end up over there as labor force. And it's of the nature of the objection and the dehumanization of slavery that things get stripped away. It's like rebooting the disk drive, let's say. Except to your point, both of you were saying, I think, that things don't actually get as stripped away as you might think. So in other words, there's a forced migration of enslaved populations going from Africa to the Caribbean in this case, though we can, I'm sure, think of other cases, where the transmission occurs regardless, even though paradigmatically, sociologically it shouldn't because of the social death.

Elizabeth Ferry:

Yeah. And the Creolization argument as I've described it is at odds with Patterson's conclusions, although not at odds by any means with the description of slavery as a dehumanizing experience. But at least, and I've now thought of my recallable book, which is all about this, a lot of emphasis on, for instance, the ways in which in one of the most kind of violent institutions of the world's history, there's these sort of spaces of negotiation. There are spaces of humanity, not particularly because of the kindness of the plantation owners. For instance, one really telling detail that is described in this book,

which is by Sidney Mintz and Richard Price, and other people as well have talked about it, is the ways in which it's a completely dehumanizing institution, but it also asked enslaved people to do things that only humans can do, like take care of children or supervise complicated mechanical operations.

John Plotz:

Can we think about the topic of the monastic community? I really love your interest in that. And if I understand you, you're not particularly making an argument about genesis in one place and transmission. You're making an independent origin argument, right? There's something structural that would make such communities arise. And if I understood you, one of your points in the case of the Buddhist monastic communities is that they might stand in tension to other sacred spaces. We haven't really talked a lot about religion or theology here, but that Buddhist monastic practice might offer the monastic site of cultural storage in contradistinction to, let's say, a religious belief that prioritizes the family or living in and with the world. So can you say more about how much you're thinking about... Are these sort of paradigmatic differences that you see everywhere or just the monastic function differently in different cases? How do you think about that?

Martin Puchner:

Yeah. So I think, but maybe someone can contradict this, it seems to me that Buddhism is really the first religion or practice, whatever label, they're all problematic, that is really based in its core on the monastic community. You cannot be a Buddhist really unless you are in a way a member of a Buddhist community. Otherwise, you're just a lay, you're sort of an advocate or you're sort of a supporter, you are not a real Buddhist. And that seems to me pretty distinctive about Buddhism and in some sense, the earliest such formation.

It's interesting then to see that idea of the monastic community recur, to use your revenant model, recur, for example, in the Christian context, where the religion is very different. It's not the case that only as a monk or nun can you be a Christian. And it happens later. It's, I think, a little unclear whether there was a... I don't know, and I'm not very invested in saying this is a completely independent reinvention of the monastic idea. I could imagine because Buddhism was so important and had spread to Persia and so on and so forth, that there was some idea that trickled into the Roman Empire.

John Plotz:

Well, yeah, I have a sort of secret ulterior motive for asking it, which is to ask about the status of... If you think about the word monk in English, or monastic, it has the monad in it, so it has the notion of the individual. So there's a monastic tradition in the West, which is *non-cenobitic*: the original desert fathers. And my sense is you're not as interested in that kind of solitary cogitation. You're more interested in the sociable. And I'm wondering if that's a soft or a hard preference. In other words, are those anchoritic just outliers for you who are not that interesting? Or is it more like you just happen to prefer the sociable models?

Martin Puchner:

Well, it's interesting. I would say I focused on the monastic community because that's a crucial institution for the transmission of culture and knowledge.

John Plotz:

Transmission, right.

Martin Puchner:

Which is not the case for the hermits. Though it's true that in the Christian context, it may have started with hermit practices. But I would say that if I am anti-hermit, so are most churches. So a long time ago, 30 years ago, I found myself on Mount Athos, which is all these Greek and Russian Orthodox monasteries. And I was there during a kind of flowering of hermits that had become sort of charismatic, and I was taken to some of them. And then Mount Athos cracked down on the charismatic hermits, and that was that. So they are fascinating figures, but for my story of cultural transmission, they don't seem central.

John Plotz:

I get that. Yeah. Okay, one final wrinkle because I love the monastic community model. In your wonderful colleague Stephen Greenblatt's book, *The Swerve*, he sort of sets up the rediscovery of an Epicurean tradition by way of essentially, as I remember it, passive kind of transmission. The monasteries basically had these texts, but they didn't know what to make of them. So he has a vision of sort of the dark era in which these texts just sat in the monasteries, and then they were brought back into the light in the Renaissance. Does that resonate with your understanding of this monastic transmission?

Martin Puchner:

I love Stephen Greenblatt, and I'm always trying to imitate Stephen Greenblatt and be Stephen Greenblatt. Just let me put that out there. But in this particular point, I don't because I think it's sort of a polemical Renaissance ideology, to use a bad word here. Because, and this goes back to the question of transmission, *just sitting there* doesn't happen. The medieval monasteries were places of reproduction where texts don't just survive, they have to be used, they have to be recopied. It's true that sometimes they were, through palimpsests, they were overwritten. Okay, I can see that. That's sort of more a material recycling of velum, let's say. But even that is fascinating. So I think that it's sort of a dismissal, not just of the Middle Ages as dark ages, but also of other modes of reproduction, preservation and reproduction of knowledge.

It's interesting, I'm right now at the Villa I Tatti and we had a great seminar on Timbuktu, which a scholar here was describing, "Oh, the Arabists are always looking down on Timbuktu, because they see it as oh, they were just copying texts." But the scholar here didn't believe that. But copying texts is actually huge. It costs a lot of money, resources. And how you reproduce them and what kinds of commentaries you write on them, these are very dynamic processes. And so that's why I was so interested in the scriptorium of the medieval, that they were very active places. And it's true, I made a selection to focus on Hildegard von Bingen in part because I think she really pushed the scriptorium in terms of creativity and what you can use that place of reproduction in order to do something new. But I think it let itself be pushed. She could use the scriptorium in that way, and it just showed that it's not just a kind of passive kind of play.

John Plotz:

I kind of wanted to throw out an existential question for you, which is that I feel like partly this book is a love song or paean to mediators, cultural transmitters, and explicators, yes, but also to translators. And I sort of wanted to ask you the existential question, which is about yourself. You're somebody who grew up in one country and one language tradition, and now lives maybe in many. But as I know you, you live in another, let's say, in English. Though it's always a delight to hear you speak German. So I just wanted to ask you personally, how did you think about writing this book and yourself, your own story?

Martin Puchner:

You mentioned that I have written in autobiographical mode before, but actually in this book I was not thinking of myself at all. And someone else a month ago made the same observation, and I was completely surprised. Now I'm somewhat prepared because you're the second or third person who has pointed this out. But it just shows you that what you do, or both in terms of me moving from one country to the next, the person who pointed this out was, I think thinking of my work on anthologies or just the fact that I in some sense identify probably with these figures who I turned into heroes. And that's true. But to my shame or not, I don't know, I did not realize that while I was writing this book at all.

John Plotz:

Elizabeth, do you think this is a good time to pivot to our recallable books? Now that you have one, we can go to you first.

Elizabeth Ferry:

We all have to wait until I have one. So the one I would like to put on the table is in the book called *The Birth of African-American Culture*. I think it was originally published as the *Birth of Afro-American Culture* since it was published in the early '70s, and later renamed in a newer edition, which is by Sidney Mintz and Richard Price, anthropologists of the Caribbean of long standing. And it's really sort of attempting to think about the mechanisms and the infrastructure of the ways in which this new form or this new expression of cultural vitality, and particularly the African contributions to it, since those were, for a long time, were either seen as non-existent or that Black culture in the Americas was kind of a failed attempt at white culture or something like that. So they were really kind of pushing against that idea.

And I'll just say one quick example that really spoke to me and is why your book made me think about it, is about these kind of cultural patterns, and they mentioned as an example that in various cultural contexts on the west coast of Africa and Central Africa, twins, the birth of twins, is an important event that requires certain kinds of ritual responses. Those can be honoring or they can be expelling or sanctioning. But that sort of twins is something that a response to twins or twins as a kind of anomaly, a spiritual anomaly, is sort of a pattern. And they were kind of imagining on a plantation where people don't necessarily speak the same language, they're not from the same place, they're violently disrupted, many have died, and twins are born, and there's kind of a scramble, like something has to be done, but we're not quite sure what. And finding somebody who vaguely remembers from when, often a woman,

although not always, from when she was a girl, what was done and sort of the ways in which things get kind of put back together under those circumstances. And it has a similar kind of an ethos in a way to your work.

Martin Puchner:

Elizabeth, is this the Richard Price who worked on Martinique specifically?

Elizabeth Ferry:

Yes.

Martin Puchner:

I once visited him in Martinique.

Elizabeth Ferry:

Oh, fantastic. Yeah. Yeah.

John Plotz:

It's a scary mark, Elizabeth, of how long you and I have been thinking together that I also had a Richard Price book in mind, which is *First Time: The Historical Vision of an African-American People*, about temporal transmission of the stories of the first arrival in slavery, which is again, a story about the resurgence or the revenants of culture and marked in special sort of temporal units. But I won't do that since you did it.

And so Martin, to give you the last word, I'm going to go next, and I'll say that mine is also a Caribbean book, but it's Afra Behn's *Oroonoko, or the Royal Slave*. And I actually think the oxymoron quality of that subtitle, Royal Slave, actually is very apropos because it's about the way in which, in that novel, for those of you who don't know it's arguably the first novel in English and it tells the story of a slave brought over from West Africa to what is now Suriname, to the English colony there. And it is about his encounters both with the white enslavers and also with the Indigenous population.

And it really hinges not just on transmission and continuity of culture, which Elizabeth, I think you brought out as such a crucial point, but it's also a book written by....Behn was herself a royalist, and she brings out the royal nature of her hero, Oroonoko, also called Caesar, in order to show how regal practices of Africa and regal practices of England basically make the royalty of each country more like one another than the non-royals of the same "race." So



it's a wonderful example of how slippery these categories, cultural categories were in that early era of slavery. And I think it sort of goes to your point, Martin, about the perpetual recombination of these cultural threads, how things get picked up and turned and appropriated in ways, but always building on the ruins of what went before. So we'll have links to all of these in the show notes. And yeah, Martin, over to you.

Martin Puchner:

At first, I was struggling over which book to recall. At first, I thought I would use the occasion to showcase some of the texts that I feel like should be better known in the book, like the *Kebrä Nagast*, the Ethiopian scribal text. But then I thought that would be somehow cheating if I use one of the episodes. And so because I'm in Italy right now, I have been for a couple of weeks, and I've been sort of thinking about the Italian intellectual traditions, I'm going to use an Italian, Roberto Calasso, who died just a few years ago. And he's sort of a slightly younger Umberto Eco, and I think of him as sort of a sidekick to Umberto Eco. That's a totally unfair way of describing him, but he's, as I said, sort of a similar generation. He's a writer and publisher. He ran a publishing house for a long time.

And so he did this unusual thing where he started to write these books. The most well-known of his, I think he was never super famous in the States, it's called *The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony*, where he would use an entire body of myth, in this case Greek and to some extent Roman myth, and sort of retell it in a modern way, while being mythic. So it's a really cool way and quite a unique way of retelling old mythic stories for the modern era. He also wrote about everything that's gone wrong with the modern era. That, and he did the same thing, he tried to do the same thing with Hindu mythology, *The Book of Ka*. It's not quite as successful, I think. So taking a body of ancient legends and myths and trying to retell them for the here and now, he died two years ago, is sort of a cool thing. And it suddenly occurred to me, it is sort of one of the things I talk about in the book. And because I feel like he's not known enough, Roberto Calasso, *The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony*, and other of his books, I'm going to pick him.

John Plotz:

Okay, thanks. And I should say that it's totally fine for you to think of him as a sidekick of Umberto Eco, because we all think of Richard Price as just the dad of Leah Price.

Martin Puchner:

Exactly.

John Plotz:

It's fine. It's an honorable designation. So Martin, this peripatetic conversation has been a real pleasure. Thank you so much. And the same thanks to you, dear listeners at home. If you enjoyed this conversation, please check out the Recall This Book archives at our website. And for all of us at the podcast, thanks for listening and goodbye for now.

Recall This Book is the creation of John Plotz and Elizabeth Ferry. Sound editing is by Khimaya Bagla, and music comes from a song by Eric Chasalow and Barbara Cassidy. We gratefully acknowledge support from Brandeis University and its Mandel Center for the Humanities. We always want to hear from you with your comments, criticisms, or suggestions for future episodes. Finally, if you enjoyed today's show, please forward it to five people or write a review and rate us wherever you get your podcasts. Thanks for listening.