

## Trice Forgotten - Below Decks 9 – Everyday Resistance

### Content Warnings

- Slave Trade
- Enslavement
- Colonialism
- Systemic racism
- Erasing identities, inc. renaming of enslaved people
- Dislocation from home environment
- Discussions of: Caste system, loss of language, loss of family and friends
- Mentions of: Eugenics

### [Show Theme - Intro]

#### NEMO

Hello, and welcome to the ninth episode of Below Decks, where we dig into some of the research questions, stories, and generally tangential interesting things that went into making Tri Forgotten. I'm Nemo Martin. My pronouns are of they, them, and I am the creator and lead writer of the series. This episode of Below Decks is coming out after episode nine of the podcast, Raised Aloft and will contain spoilers for that episode. So do be warned. We saw in this last episode that Nani talks briefly about having been brought up in Bengal and then being brought to Sri Lanka by the Dutch. Gammon is revealed to be Governor Graham Peters and the rest of the Netoansom Crew make a rescue attempt. Today on Below Decks, we're going to be talking about everyday resistance, and I'm thrilled to be joined by Nira Wickramasinghe. Nira, would you introduce yourself with your pronouns and tell us a bit about what you do on the show?

**NIRA**

Yes, hello. I'm delighted, to be here. Uh, my pronouns are she and her, and I'm a historian, I'm based in the Netherlands. I've also been very happy to be the historical consultant on Trice Forgotten, at least for some of the episodes. And I've been also interested in many of the topics that this fiction deals with, and of course, writing about them in a, in a more sort of, let's say, scholarly fashion. So I'm looking forward to this conversation.

**NEMO**

Amazing. So jumping straight into something that is maybe quite a hard question, it's quite a complex question. While researching for this podcast, I read your book, which is called *Slave in a Palanquin; Colonial Service and Resistance in Sri Lanka*. And one of the through lines in that research is that even the concept of the word slave is complicated in this geographic and historic location. So you mentioned complications brought about by different imperial powers like the Dutch VOC and British imperial rule, things like voluntary emancipation, repressed memory, difficulties to face the past of enslaved people's, caste systems, burdening of enslavement with only African peoples. Quite a lot of complications to the word slave, will you give our listeners who, like me, hadn't understood a, the complexity of the area, a brief overview of why enslavement is complicated here and in this time period.

**NIRA**

Yes, it is indeed a quite a complicated story [laughs]. So the region actually I'm working on, and I think the, the podcast also, um, you know, speaks about is the Indian Ocean. And the Indian Ocean you know, has been a relatively neglected and unexplored theater of the slave trade, unlike the Atlantic. Some scholars I've even spoken. And you know, about the tyranny of the Atlantic and the silencing of the Indian Ocean slave trade. I think there are a number of factors that explain why it is a, a complicated story. I mean, unlike the, the Atlantic, you know, the, the slave trade in, in the Indian Ocean world was multi-directional. So it went sort of in all kinds of different directions to different places. It changed over time. And then it also included slaves of many different origins in so far as you can really trace the origins in a, in a sort of scientific manner.

The third aspect, I think is that, you know, you don't have a very sort of obvious type of slavery that dominates the enslavement in the Indian Ocean world, you have a variety of slave functions, so you can't sort of imagine the enslaved, you know, in a particular labor situation. He can be, or she can be, you know, in working on a plantation, but could also be, you know, a domestic or could be a crafts person or could be a tailor or all kinds of different things. So it's, it's quite a different way of thinking about enslavement. And I think one of the ways is of course, to avoid definition. I mean, that's also, you know, do you really need to, to define enslavement? And the, you know, some scholars have, have spoken about, um, like a, kind of like a spectrum of bondage rather than, than slavery.

And I mean, in my case, you know, I use the term slavery when the proprietors or the, the state, the colonial state actually qualifies certain groups as slaves and, and have their status codified. So then it's, then it's quite obvious that you

can use the term slavery. In other cases, you can speak about servitude, you can speak about bondage, and you can, rather than look at slavery per se, you sort of look at, you know, the relational aspect between particular groups in society. You try to understand, you know, what are the, the bonds between, between groups. And you look at the hierarchies of dependencies that are very evident. You mentioned cast. So cast is, is, is one aspect, you know, that sort of some ways it subsumes, it overrides slavery. So it's, it is quite a, quite a complex situation. I can give you some other examples, but you might have some questions about more specific issues.

## NEMO

Yeah, I mean, one of the things that you, you mentioned there was the idea that you use the terminology of slavery when proprietors or, or when you've seen it, like written down. And, and that's the terminology given to a group of people. And I was really interested when I was reading your work about this idea you called the "governmentalising form of colonialism", where things like numbers or archives, statistics, census forms, verification certificates become this like colonial toolkit to like determine and control people's rights and their reality. So an example of that was the idea that if you didn't fill out a form, then you couldn't raise a complaint. But then to fill out the form is to then agree that the form is the bureaucratic way to go about things, but if you haven't been educated in a certain way, or like who gets to have the forms and all these kind of things, which I just found so fascinating. Will you tell us like how bureaucracy was used insidiously with things like terminology?

**NIRA**

Yeah, I mean, it's really a interesting question because you find that all these colonial states, you know, the, the reasons they actually survived in spite of, you know, having a very small number of officials ruling them, is that they did not use pure might and force and violence to, to really control the colonized.

So it was done in a, in also, you know, what, what you call this insidious manner, which was, um, a way of categorizing, a way of counting, a way of classifying and creating, you know, what, what one scholar Nicholas Dirks has called it an ethnographic state. So in a way classifying and categorizing, you know, this really vast social world that, that they encountered when they came to these places, it was a way of controlling them.

**NEMO**

Hmm.

**NIRA**

And then it sort of entered into the, the day to day running of the colony. So people were counted, the, you know, forms of censuses were, were introduced. There were first sort of earlier attempts, you know, that were very peculiar and strange in some ways. But then from about the 1870s to the 1880s, you had a much more sort of so-called rational scientific way of, of, of counting people. And, and then what, what happened was that through this kind of objectification, people also began to claim entitlements based on these categories.

**NEMO**

Mm-hmm.

**NIRA**

So if you wanted to receive something, if you wanted to be heard, you had to also, you know, come forward using these, these same categories. Uh, so you had to say, okay, I'm a Burgher you know, or I'm a a Tamil, a Sri Lankan Tamil, or I'm an Indian Tamil, or you had to use these, the categories that, that had been enunciated in order to, to get some kind of redress. So the bureaucracy was yeah, it was one of the central technologies of rule in a sense. You know, it was a way of the one had entrenching these categories, gelling them, making them understandable, making, making this kind of strange world that they encountered legible. And it was a form of control, you know, it was very clearly a form of, of control.

**NEMO**

Mm-hmm. <affirmative>. Yeah. It, it really interests me. I, I feel like the, the kind of version of that we have and Trice Forgotten is that Siva is a map maker, a cartographer, and he's really interested in mapping his local community and creating this, um, resource, which is a map of his island. Only then turns out that information is being used to categorize and to, to stop a revolution and to fortify an area for the British. But I, I did also find it fascinating when, um, you talk about in your book that abolitionists were also using these forms and

census to basically say, if you are someone who holds slaves, you need to write that down so that we can then free those people. Like, in order to free someone, you have to write down that they are a slave.

### **NIRA**

Yeah. I think, I think that's, that's, it's very paradoxical in a sense, you know, that like the whole movement for slavery, abolition, sort of, in a sense made it necessary to have these figures because in order to chart the, the so-called success of these attempts at, um, gradual abolition, and because these, all these things were tried and tested, you know, before 1832. And, and so in all these new crown colonies in Cape, Ceylon, Mauritius, et cetera, so you had these, these sort of new methods, you know, these new ideas that that were being tested on how to gradually abolish slavery. So they had to show, you know, in the British Parliament that it was working in order to show, to, to sort of make their point and have a, a munition, you know, against the, the people who were against abolition, they had to actually show figures. And so, so, so in order to do that, they had to create these slave registers and these registration processes, the census processes, and count people and constantly show, okay, these number of people have been emancipated, these number of children have been emancipated, all these proprietors are agreeing, and they're, they're signing these registers and registry their slaves, et cetera. So yeah, it's, it's, it's interesting how, I mean, a very sort of disciplinary process is, is used for a purpose that, you know, seemingly is, is is is emancipatory, you know, it's ...

### **NEMO**

[laughs], I was gonna say this question to last, but I feel like it flows like really well into that. And like, as part of this kind of like complicated language, you mentioned in your book that it's often quite hard for you as a researcher to get a figure, like a precise demographic of people in an area at the time, because there's like a blurred use of different terms, especially the use of the term black, where black is someone with dark skin, it doesn't matter what their ethnicity is, nationality or culture. And I was kind of like thinking about this research conundrum, which as you say in the book, indexes, inarticulate colour prejudice, while some peoples, like you just mentioned, like Muslim Sri Lankans, were attempting to actually enshrine an ethno-religious identity in order to gain political recognition. So, so saying, yes, actually, we, we should be on the census as this, which plays into the, like, firm uncrossable boundaries of binary races. So on one hand, it's difficult to do research when like taxonomic ideas of race are not written down and are inarticulate and are like black and broad. And yet in the contemporary, we're trying to refuse eugenic ideas of like, you have to be one blood group in order to be categorized in a certain way. Like how have you been balancing these ideas, or like, how do you find these are problems, or how have you been thinking about these kind of ideas?

### **NIRA**

Yeah, I mean, that's basically the, um, the challenge that researchers have when you don't accept, you know, that certain social formations exist in a sort of unproblematic way. I mean, lots of, lot of scholars don't have these issues, you know, you, they sort of just take it for granted that, okay, you have a group called X and another group called Y and, and, and they've always been like that, or they might have, you know, slightly changed, but basically... so I think

what I'm trying to do is I'm trying to understand, you know, how groups, how people on the one hand are racialized or how certain communities are always in the making and how they relate to, to each other. So this kind of, you know, this, there's this scholar Africanist called Pier Larson who wrote on Madagascar, and he had this lovely, I mean, he, the term he used was agility.

You know, this, so this kind of agility that exists when you think about communities, you know, so people are various things, you know, they don't have one single marker, obviously. And so it's this, this is something that the scholar is, is sort of placating on it in order to understand a particular process, you know? So, so I think I always try to keep that in mind that when I'm studying an enslaved person, that this person is, well, one of that person's identity is being enslaved, but she or he might be, is so many other things at the same time, you know? And it's just that my own interest in, in this particular aspect of his or her life is making me privilege this particular identity, but that somebody else might write this person's story, you know, as a member of the fishing community or, you know, something completely different.

**NEMO**

Yeah.

**NIRA**

So, so I think, I think if you keep that in mind, and you are, you are sort of, you don't fall into the trap of being complicit in, in creating groups that are so solidified. And it is quite difficult because then you are, you are sort of floating

in some kind of, you know, constant and, and, and lots of, lots of people who, you know, who read, you say, okay, well, nothing, nothing seems sure, you know, well known. I mean, I don't, I don't think that's really a, a problem. I mean, you are, you are writing about a distant past and you have a very limited amount of information, so you have to just do whatever is possible.

### **NEMO**

Yeah. That's such a good challenge as well, constantly challenging yourself as a researcher and as a writer. I'm, I'm saying you, but I mean me, um, of like remembering that people are like, are complicated. And I feel like that is also part of the reason that I wrote *Trice Forgotten*, and I keep forgetting it, is to complicate some of the narratives that are given to us. That one of the first things you write in your book is that the individual is conspicuously absent from historiographies of the 19th century, unless the subject is royal, heroic or villainous. And I love this and your subsequent attempt throughout the book to find people despite slash because of slash something something, the, the archival record of them. And I'm sure like searching for these people came with research difficulties. Like, how did you find who you did find throughout your book, and like, what problems did you find when you were searching for them?

### **NIRA**

Yes. I mean, I think, you know, in the Indian Ocean world, when you were working on subaltern groups, the turn to to individual stories is kind of inevitable.

**NEMO**

Mm.

**NIRA**

Because, you know, unlike in the Atlantic or, or even the Caribbean, you don't have these, you know, these kind of, um, um, revolutions, these large revolts, these that, that yields so much more, you know, paper, paper sort of testimonies, [laughs]

**NEMO**

mm-hmm, mm-hmm. <affirmative>.

**NIRA**

And because immediately, you know, these become sort of events, you know, so obviously they're gonna be recorded, they're gonna be, so I, I think in, in a sense, the fact that I I turned to individual stories was some somewhat, well, it was a, it was a choice, but it was also something that, you know I couldn't have written about, um, rebellions because there, there weren't any. And so, so I, I tried to write, you know, what I, what I call the, an epic of the ordinary, you know, something that tells that, you know, ordinary lives are also so very interesting and that these are really my heroes.

You know, the fact that they resisted and they challenged, um, the status quo in so many different ways by running away, by, you know, going to, to courts,

by writing petitions or simply by remaining silent, you know, in some cases. And so finding these people, yeah, it was a kind of, I mean, there's a lot of, um, you know, lots of people say historians don't have any methodology, you know, I mean, um, so these are of course not, not historians who, who would admit it, but [laughs], I mean, in some ways there's a lot of, you know, serendipity. You, you sort of go into the archives and then you, you start, you know, sifting through particular types of documents, and, and then you, you may or you may not find something uh, but, but of course there are places where, you know, somebody who has some familiarity with the archive knows where you may find information.

So I looked particularly at, you know, particular records of petitions, and then I went through all these petitions, and then somehow you, you find references.

So it's basically, yeah, there is a certain amount of luck, there is a certain amount of persistence you have to, to be combing the archive. I mean, I, I looked at court cases because during the early 19th century, all these enslaved people appear as, you know, either witnesses or sometimes they're also part of a court case. They, they have been subjected to, to various, you know, acts of violence or et cetera. So they, they appear, or sometimes they've even taken their proprietors to courts, you know, so that's the last case. I think one of my chapters was this, this woman who actually goes to the collector, and then she, she files a case against her, her proprietor, and she says she's being ill-treated, and she's not, she's actually not enslaved at all, and she should not be kept and that kind of thing. And she, she, she wins her freedom. You know, you have to sort of read these texts very, very carefully and look for clues, you know, so it's a bit like a, you're being a kind of a sleuth, a kind of a detective [laughs].

**NEMO**

Mm. I was watching a seminar from one person who was saying that like he was attempting to find an archive for reference, and he had to go into a basement that was like water log that had snakes in it. I was like, God [laughs], that's a very intense search. And, and that was actually because he was having a conversation about archives and like, he was in two minds because it was it won't be easy for me to find where it is, but it was an Indian archive, and he was talking about this idea of like, on one hand he was like, wow, it would be so much easier if it was just in the British Library, and I didn't have to go into this like dark snake invested thing because there was no funding for this archive to actually be archived properly to have the right circumstances.

And yeah, he was in Two Minds, cause he was like, of course I want these archives to be in the country that they are talking about. But also the British Library has air conditioning and like a Cafe [laughs], which yeah. Fits into all this stuff that we've talked about in previous episodes about like, you know, colonization is still impacting how everything [laughs] is researched today. But yeah, what you were talking about with magistrates, the, the example you gave at the end was quite surprising to me because like, I guess I'm used to narratives where an enslaved person could not like win one's freedom through going to courts and magistrates and stuff. And, and something I hadn't consciously thought about when writing Trice Forgotten, but was certainly a huge factor is a question of who these characters can go to to get help. Because as they're still in the present, judicial and enforcement systems are of course set up to protect certain peoples.

And Alestes, Siva, Noor, Baker, they are not the kind of people who are able to go to, you know, who could they go to, the soldiers, like, who are chasing after them? Like they are the people who determine what is justice.

**NIRA**

Yeah.

**NEMO**

And so you were talking about the individuals you researched when they confronted situations that took them to police stations or to law courts, they encountered collectors and magistrates who were probably also slaveholders. Can you talk more about this issue of justice and protection and who, who was able to get protection and what protection means, I guess?

**NIRA**

Hmm. Yeah, that's interesting because obviously the characters that appear in Trice Forgotten might feel quite, um, intimidated to go to a, the type of institution that that appears in, in, in my books. But, you know, there are different types of institutions. So for example, in the Indian Ocean world, when Britain began to think about the abolition of slavery, they introduced certain institutions that are specifically aimed at hearing the complaints of the enslaved against their proprietors. So in South Africa, for example, there was something called the protector of slaves where people could go to complain. I mean, there was no sort of very significant action taken. But in some cases,

you know, when it was like very blatant violence against, um a slave, et cetera, then the, the proprietors were actually taken to task, and, and they had to answer. They've also, I mean, in, in Sri Lanka for example, in the late 1820s, there was a commission of inquiry that was sent, not specifically to look into slaves or slavery, but it was to look at like, the general situation of the island. And this became an occasion where a host of people, you know, wrote to this commission. And I, I mean, those are some of the petitions that, that are used. Well, of course, most of these people were not literate. So they other petition writers, it was actually a, a very lucrative form of employment, you know, where you, you actually wrote the petition in the right form, you know, using all the right formulas, et cetera. And then you translated it into either Dutch or, or English. And then it was put forward to send directly to the governor because lots of people, you know, like, especially subaltern, they felt that, you know, they were at the bottom of the hierarchy, not only in terms of being colonized, but they were also at the bottom of the hierarchy in their own social system. And they would never get redress from the headman or, or whoever was, was there.

So they went directly to the, to the Governor,

### **NEMO**

Ha ha, mm-hmm. <affirmative>.

And it was a way of, you know, sort of overriding the traditional leaders. I found that quite often, you know, they they, they said, okay, we are paying, you know, taxes, we are paying the tax on jewelry, for example, that the colonial government has brought about. So therefore we should get

redress from these colonial government because we are taxpayers, you know, and there were also, of course, the more, you know, structural institutions like the courts of justice, you know, in the, during the Dutch period, the, what is called the Land Raad where there again, you found, you know, even in enslaved people appearing and the British brought, you know, the, well, of course the Supreme Court, but also the district courts, then the courts of the Admiral Courts also.

And then the jury system that was introduced very early in Sri Lanka, in I think the 1816 or so, you know, gave representation to different ethnic groups to sit in the as juries. So I think that also brought some amount of confidence.

People felt there might be some, some redress, because I, I really felt, you know, when I was reading this material that there was, there was a very strong sense of, of what was right and wrong. You know, there was a sense of I'll accept, you know, my condition up to a certain point, and then it's no longer okay. You know, so it's kind of this kind of metaphysical moment, you know, where you say, okay, now this is it. I'm going to try to find redress. So it's not so much, you know, a question of freedom or, or rights it's more a question of justice. And I find I found this idea of justice is really something that is really central to the way people behave and why, why they, at some, some particular moment they decide that they're going to do something about their life and try to change it.

Mm. To move slightly onto a new conversation strand, one of the characters and Trice Forgotten Johana or Nani, she is one of the only characters really that I built specifically from research because of research like yours on workers who are brought from places in India to Sri Lanka to work, again, complicating this idea of slavery and who was enslaved in this kind of area. And you quote

from James Scott who argued that a significant aspect of maintaining relations of domination is a raising the past of a person through renaming and cutting family ties. Hence why her name is Johana. Will you tell us a little bit about what you found with, like, the name of enslaved and serving peoples in this kind of time and geographic area?

### NIRA

Yes. So, so names also really at the same time, they're interesting and, and also disappointing, you know, what you find about [laughs], about names, because as you said, one way of really destroying all kinship ties is precisely by renaming, and it's a way of making the person you know, completely isolated from, from any other social group. But the names I actually used slave registers, you know, the maybe 70 or 80 books that you can find in the National Library National Archives in, in London at Kew. And they have lists of, of names in alphabetical order and the names of the proprietors. So from 1818 to the 1830s. So I, I looked at all these lists and what I, what I found was that only about 10% of the names can be in some way identified to a, a place of origin or some kind of geographical place, whereas all the other names are, are given names.

And, and these of course, you know, typical of, you know, they're not different from any other slave society, you know, so, so these are names of either of the proprietor or names of the month. You know, you have all these January, February, you know, and then you have some Roman Roman names or Greek names or so, which are obviously not, you know, can, can't be in anywhere tied up with any kind of place of origin or, or ethnicity or et cetera. But with the remaining names, I mean, the 10% of, of those names, I did a little exercise. I

mean, it's not very scientific, but I tried to [laughs], I tried to sort of locate you know, where they would have come from. And I asked many of my, you know, colleagues who work on Indonesian languages, and and, and they, they really, they was really helpful because some of them said, oh, this is obviously a, a Bugis name, or this is obviously a name from somebody from Timor, or, you know, that sort of thing.

And then the Indian names were also, you know, very obvious, you know, some of them, of course, then it's, it's difficult to say whether, are they from India, are they from Sri Lanka? You, you don't really know, but you, you do know that there was a, a very substantial number of people who were brought from India to Sri Lanka by the Dutch. So the chance is that they would be from India, and that's the case in, in Sri Lanka in places like South Africa, you know, there's, there's a toponym, so you have things like Isabel von Bengal or somebody von, von Mozambique or, you know, that sort of thing. So you, you can in some way identify where these people come from. And you know, South African scholars have said, okay, out of the 60,000, you know, enslaved people who were brought to to Cape from the 16th to the 18th century, a quarter came from Mozambique a quarter from Southeast Asia, a quarter from India, and, and a quarter from Madagascar, yeah. But of course, it is also a little risky to say this with, with a lot of certitude, because sometimes then the toponym is actually the last port of call.

**NEMO**

Ah.

**NIRA**

So it might be that this person from Colombo or from Bengal is actually from somewhere else.

**NEMO**

Mm.

**NIRA**

So it's, yeah, it's kind of difficult to, to say anything very, very definite about places of origin. And then you find these names. Okay. Apart from registers, you also find them sometimes in baptism certificates. So there you can identify maybe a, you know, person who has converted from I dunno, whatever their origin, it's not, it's not really said what, what religion they were, but generally it's to, you know, Christianity. So then, then their name appears in the, in the certificate. And, and you can identify a name, you know, that looks like a, a slave name. So these are like little yeah, ways of thinking about names. But on the whole, I think colonialism did a very good job at erasing, you know?

**NEMO**

Mm.

**NIRA**

And erasing these traces. I mean, that's, that's one of the reasons why in the Indian Ocean world, you know, you don't have distinct identifiable communities that claim, you know slave inheritance. And I think it's partly that reason, except in South Africa, I suppose the Cape Malays, but other places it's much less visible.

### **NEMO**

Mm-hmm. I had a billion questions that I wanted to ask you, but I'm so aware of time, so I'm like, do I, okay, I'm gonna allow myself to ask two final questions. So one of them hopefully is a shorter one, which is just why were the Dutch bringing people from the Indian subcontinent to Sri Lanka instead of how we usually, typically see slavery to be going to a location and enslaving local or native populations.

### **NIRA**

Yeah, I mean, the Dutch did absolutely that. I mean, they just moved people, you know, from one place to the other. So it was that's, that's actually the fascinating aspect of Dutch slavery. So they never enslaved the people, you know, from the place, and I, perhaps it was security. So you move them, you dislocate them from their environment. So they, so Indonesians were brought to Sri Lanka, and you have, um, many traces of, you know, Indonesian enslaved people, and then they've also taken to Cape, and then Indians were also brought to Sri Lanka. They were also taken to Cape and Sri Lankans were taken to Cape. And then you also find a few of them in Indonesia. And then of course, you, you still had, you know, Portuguese slaves that had been brought

by the Portuguese to places like Goa of African, um, descent who were also sometimes bought by the British and used essentially are used as mercenaries, you know, in the, in the armies and things like that. So, so it was kind of, yeah, all these, all these people moving, you know, and who were moved, forcefully moved from, from place to place. And some of them kept their languages, but others just lost, it was just, languages were just lost, you know?

### NEMO

Mmm. You're losing solidarity or losing solidarity of what land you are on. You are losing the ability to feel local. You're losing like familial friendship ties. But then as we saw people were trying to make their own new communities and trying to communicate with each other. Uh, yeah, err again, want to talk about this forever, going to ask one final question, which is, there is a genre of enslavement narratives. I, from the outset, didn't really want Trice Forgotten to be about, specifically about enslavement. Characters have enslavement in their familial or recent history, but I didn't want it to be a sort of like, story about one person who is enslaved and running away, or, or that, and you have said previously that you wanted to experiment in your book with a story like way of writing about, or narrativizing enslavement. How, how.. <laughs> Hmm, open question. What do we think is the best quote unquote way to narrativize or to do justice to these people's lives? Or, or is there any way to do that? Like, or is it going to be complicated forever?

### NIRA

Yeah, I think it's a, it's a good I mean, come back to your Trice Forgotten, I think it's a good strategy to, to really embed the story of people who have some slave inheritance into a much broader story. And I think, although my book, I mean, the central focus is about people who are enslaved. It's also, it's very much in context, you know, it's not a, it's not a slave narrative which is disconnected from, from everything else that's happening. It's also a way of talking about labor relations, a way of talking about different social setting, like Jaffna and, and the, the caste issues. And so, so I think what I tried to do was write a history through slavery and think through slavery, think through the lives of these individual slaves. And in each story, I was trying to address a very specific question or, or issue that that sort of, I found important for the time.

So is it, is it really the end of slave narratives? You know, I, I think in a, in a way, people can't really do that anymore. I mean, it's the, it's just that, you know, the way we think about the whole, you know, social beings in a, in a, in a, in a different way. You know, you don't, you don't think of them simply as defined by their status, which is an imposed status. I mean, slavery is, it's just a status. It's not who you are really. So I think, I think the way you, you narrate a story must, must also take those things into account. And I tried to, of course, use the, the example of individual lives, because I was, yeah, I was kind of experimenting also with a, a way of writing that is, you know, what Saidiya Hartman says, a storied articulation of ideas, you know, so you're trying to convey a certain idea, but you're also saying it in a, in the story form. I did not try to write fiction. I did not try to invent the end of the story because in many cases, the story does not end, you know, I don't know what happens -

Yeah.

**NIRA**

- at the end. So I have to leave it unfinished. But I think it's, it's good to, to think of other ways of, of writing history nowadays. And, um, I dunno if my publisher would agree though, but [laughs]

**NEMO**

[laughs], I mean, I've been enjoying books like yours and, and I really enjoyed, oh my God, his name, Sujit Sivasunda...

**NIRA**

Oh, yeah, Sujit's book Sujit Sivasundaram, yes,

**NEMO**

His book as well. I really love that as well, because it, it really was the idea of telling stories and didn't seem to me, you know, as someone who, who's not of this heritage or culture, so, you know, empty words, but it didn't seem to me in a kind of like trauma porn kind of way. Like, it's not about centering ideas of like, look upon these poor people and watch them suffer. It was making them feel human again. And I feel like that is an important thing from my perspective. And, you know, they are in archives whether they're allowed to be forgotten, and that's also another huge thing that we can't really, but yeah, I, I

certainly for one, think that there is some space to explore the idea of at least telling what we know of them and putting names to them again, and, and those kind of things, and complicating our contemporary ideas of what enslavement look like. So yeah, who knows? Hopefully, hopefully the, this kind of work like yours will continue to be complicated. Yeah. And I think that's a good thing. So I think that hopefully that's a good place to wrap up this episode of Below Decks. Um, I really wanted to thank you for joining us. If people wanted to hear more from you, where can they find you and, and hopefully buy your book?

### **NIRA**

Yes. Thank, thank you very much. Well, I mean, if, if anyone is interested my book is available with all online book sellers. It's published with Columbia University Press, but it's also available, um, you know, very easily you can find it on-online. And I'm not a very, you know, sort of sophisticated person on social media. But but I have made a few YouTube interventions, so you could, you can also find me, but this is, is of course, more on the contemporary issues in, in Sri Lanka rather than on on slavery.

### **NEMO**

So yes, we will wrap up here. So that's it for me. Thank you so much from you, Nira, and we'll see you next time Below Decks.

**[Show Theme - Outro]**

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