

Tanya Domi: Hi, this is Tanya Domi. Welcome to The Thought Project, recorded at The Graduate Center of the City University of New York, fostering groundbreaking research and scholarship in the arts, social sciences, and sciences. In this space, we talk with faculty and doctoral students about the big thinking and big ideas generating cutting edge research, informing New Yorkers and the world.

Ammiel Alcalay is a poet, translator, critic, scholar, and activist who teaches at Queens College and The Graduate Center, CUNY. His books include Scrapmetal, Factory School, 2006; from the warring factions, Beyond Baroque, 2002; and a notable translation of Sarajevo Blues. Among his most notable contributions with Anne Waldman and others as an initiator of Poetry Is News Coalition, and he organized with Mike Kelleher, the OlsonNow project.

Most recently, through the PhD Program in English and the Center for the Humanities at The Graduate Center, he launched Lost & Found: The CUNY Poetics Document Initiative, a series of student and guest edited archival texts emerging from the New American Poetry. Welcome to The Thought Project, Ammiel.

Ammiel Alcalay: Thank you for having me.

Tanya Domi: First of all, it is a great honor to welcome you here today, Ammiel. You have packed in a pretty remarkable life as a human being, firstly. You're a poet, a political activist, a writer, a book author, a translator, and a journalist. I would not call you a typical professor stored away into the ivory tower, you are anything but that. What do you have to say about that?

Ammiel Alcalay: Well, thank you for that characterization because it's one of the things that I actually am proud of, in that I haven't taken a very direct path to where I am now. It's not even that I feel like I've arrived somewhere. It's just part of the whole journey.

Tanya Domi: The gestalt.

Ammiel Alcalay: I certainly didn't have a very illustrious academic career. I barely got out of high school because I think, as we've talked about before, my high school years were 1969 to 1973, and I grew up in Boston, and there were a lot more interesting things to do than go to school in those years.

Tanya Domi: Those were tumultuous years.

Ammiel Alcalay: Very tumultuous.

Tanya Domi: I was in high school at the same time.

- Ammiel Alcalay: Yeah. I always felt that that was where I was learning things. That was where I was learning things, and neither did I go to college after high school. I worked, and eventually I started taking some classes. I ended up, of all places, at City College uptown, from which I dropped out at a certain point.
- It's a long kind of circuitous story, but throughout it, I always worked. I did all kinds of work. Dozens of jobs. I have a book called Scrapmetal, which is divided into work interludes, and there are about 30 or 40 of them. When I finished the book, I said, "Well, wait a second. I forgot about the time I was driving a limousine. I forgot about the time I was doing this, I was doing that," and that is a very much a part of who I am, how I was formed, and how I think about work, because this is another form of work that we do.
- Tanya Domi: Your description of your work, because I want the audience to know, is it ran the gamut pretty much from grade school till getting a job at Queens College in 1990. You were a short order cook. You did auto body work, classic car restoration, used car sales, carpentry, construction, painting, museum displays, interstate trucking, furniture moving, laundromat manager, bookstore manager, limousine driver, court room interpreter, translator, journalist, and dozen of other jobs.
- Most of those, the vast majority of those, were really working class. Some of those were high-skilled, but that clearly would enrich your human experience, which is like, I suppose, a fertilization for somebody who emerges as a poet out of those experiences.
- Ammiel Alcalay: Well, it's a bit of an odd situation. I mean, I grew up very solidly middle class, but given that my father was a painter, and income was kind of contingent upon how the paintings were doing. And due to various issues at home, I found myself not wanting to be there a lot, so I started working really young, like really young. Paper routes, snow shoveling, whatever I could get my hands on. And that immediately followed into more skilled things. I went to a high school where we had a manual training building, so I did print shop, and metal shop, and woodworking, and auto mechanics.
- Tanya Domi: A lot of hand doing, yeah.
- Ammiel Alcalay: I like doing that kind of stuff. I have, and I ... a do-it-yourselfer.
- Tanya Domi: Absolutely. You're also the child of immigrants, and that, too, must have definitely shaped your worldview and your experiences. Knowing you a little bit, I know that your parents were from Belgrade since that's part of my research area as a scholar.
- Ammiel Alcalay: Sure. Well, like many other people, they were displaced in the Second World War. They ended up in, circuitously, separately, in Italy where they lived until 1951, and then they came to the States, where I was born.

I've also kind of of that generation that I think has kind of relived the immigrant experience in a weird way. I left the country for quite some time, and then reacclimated to coming back to it. It's a chance operation. I could've been born in Italy. I could've been born in any number of places.

Tanya Domi: Of course, yes.

Ammiel Alcalay: I think there are all kinds of forms of identity that one latches onto in that situation that are not really normal, they're quite exaggerated. It's something that I think takes a lifetime to even begin coming to terms with and trying to figure out.

Tanya Domi: And unpack it.

Ammiel Alcalay: Yeah.

Tanya Domi: From all of that, you graduated, finished your PhD here at The Graduate Center, and you're a highly respected, renowned, comparative literature professor. Some people ... I talked to people about you and your work, and I became familiar with your work here over the last several years. But it would seem that your greatest contribution to the field, and to CUNY itself, and here at The Graduate Center with graduate students, is the launching, a collective launching, but you've played a central role, in establishing Lost & Found: The CUNY Poetics Document Initiative, from which graduate students, and I imagine even scholars, working scholars, can publish original texts by figures, writers, poets, central to and associated with New American poetry.

I'm going to quote somebody who was on your board, the former US Poet Laureate Juan Felipe Herrera, who said, "The Lost & Found project is a place where I go to find myself again. I meet geniuses and early-day friends that I met on the road like Kathy Acker, Diane di Prima, and Adrienne Rich."

Wow.

Ammiel Alcalay: Yeah. Well, let me try to tell you a little bit about Lost & Found and its genesis.

Tanya Domi: Please do.

Ammiel Alcalay: There's a bunch of different strands. One is on the very local level, not that long ago, our students were unfunded. They were taking three courses. They had families. They couldn't possibly dream of doing real research in an extended way, and so we kept trying to figure out ways in which the idea of a publication project could come into a seminar.

And so, I came up with a course that was ostensibly something like contemporary textual scholarship. I'm trained as a medievalist, okay, so I come

into teaching contemporary things with a very different point of view. I often feel that people who are doing contemporary things sometimes lack a little historical perspective.

If one is doing medieval things, you're immediately confronted with all kinds of unknowns. What is the manuscript? Where did it come from? What state was it in? Is it complete? All those kinds of things.

At the same time, being a student of ancient civilizations, both African, Middle Eastern, Indigenous, et cetera, those civilizations lasted many thousands of years. We're talking about a country here that is, as a country, 400 years old.

So one of the things that's foremost in my mind is, how does our memory get transmitted? How does our memory move? How does it get retained? How does it get preserved? Who does that? How does that work? How does that work amongst younger people?

The people who were sitting in Sarajevo when the Oriental Institute was bombed didn't probably think that that might be the first target, or one of the first targets of the war, their archives. Likewise in Iraq, when the archives were ... The oil ministry was guarded, but not the archives.

We are very complacent here. We tend to think, "Well, it's stable. Everything's fine. Our archives, we have buildings," and blah, blah, blah. Well, it's not the case. Things are very precarious, and people in different situations may end up with all their life's work in a dumpster if they end up without money, or all kinds of things.

My feeling was having grown up in this milieu of the work that really follows the Cold War, and being a kind of student of history, I really felt like something very unique went on in that period. Something very unique went on in that period. And having a personal connection to some of the pretty important people in that period, I felt like this is something I'm able to transmit on a personal level, and through my own relationship to these people.

And so, the project was conceived in that way, in which, really, it's a ... The work that goes into a single Lost & Found chapbook is ... I'm somebody who's, I think I've worked with about 60 dissertations at this point, okay? And somebody working on a Lost & Found chapbook is really often doing more meticulous and exact work than in a whole dissertation because they have to get it right. There's no thinking involved. I mean, there's plenty of thinking, but it has to be right. We have to get our facts right-

Tanya Domi: To be accurate.

Ammiel Alcalay: We have to get ... It has to be accurate.

Tanya Domi: Right, right.

Ammiel Alcalay: And there's an accommodation to the people. We're not talking about just pieces of paper. We're talking about families, heirs, all the people who ... And there's so many stories I could tell you.

Tanya Domi: Legacy, legacy, yeah.

Ammiel Alcalay: For instance, Adrienne Rich's archive is closed for 50 years for various reasons that she had.

Tanya Domi: Oh, I didn't know that. Yeah.

Ammiel Alcalay: And so, there's no biography, and there won't be for quite some time. When we began working on her, we realized this might be a problem because how are we going to get permission? So, through a friend, I found out, "Oh, Adrienne's son lives in my building. We're friends."

So I said, "How do I get in touch with him?"

So we start talking. It was not that long after she died. She was somebody who had actually written me a fan letter once, which almost-

Tanya Domi: Wow.

Ammiel Alcalay: I almost collapsed when I got it. But once we started talking, he said, "Oh, it's CUNY. That's great. She would really be proud of it."

Once we started explaining what we were doing, he became completely enthusiastic and supportive, and actually spoke at our launch for that series. And then that went on into a whole series of discovering the pedagogical work of poets who had taught at CUNY, June Jordan-

Tanya Domi: Right, and this is about ... Yeah.

Ammiel Alcalay: ... June Jordan, Audre Lorde, Toni Cade Bambara, and there are many more that we haven't discovered yet.

Tanya Domi: These are giants, yeah, yeah.

Ammiel Alcalay: It's a legacy that people really don't know about.

Tanya Domi: Yeah. You did a series on Adrienne Rich's pedagogy, and her-

Ammiel Alcalay: Yeah, her syllabi, and her exercises, and her memos to the ... Again, during tumultuous times, during open admissions, and all of that.

Tanya Domi: Yes. So speaking of that, your manifesto for Lost & Found is "follow the person."

Ammiel Alcalay: Sure.

Tanya Domi: Given that you are a trained medievalist, I can see why you have a certain perspective because, like you said, things can disappear. Paper doesn't exist. It can be destroyed. It can fade away, the ink can fade. Anyway, so this has become your manifesto and your direction to graduate students. What have you learned from that?

Ammiel Alcalay: Well, what happens is younger people learn about some of these figures. They read an anthology, okay?

Tanya Domi: Right.

Ammiel Alcalay: And so, poet X is ... The poets become like fish. They're in different schools, and they only swim in that school. They don't cross any other water, so they're a New York school, or this school, or that school. So what I do is I bring in a pile of little magazines from the period, and I say, "Spend some time, look at them."

And they go, "What? Why is so-and-so in here with so-and-so?"

And I said, "Well, find out."

And then people begin to realize. They look at correspondence. They look at ... and they say, "What is taking up somebody's attention? Who are they talking about? Who are they interested in? Who are they uninterested in? What is their world picture? Who's in their world?"

And all of those things start to break down. All those things that have been constructed by various ... sometimes for means of efficacy, sometimes academically, whatever. There's all kinds of reasons why those things get constructed.

But we did a project, for instance, on a ... This is very timely because of what's going on in Algeria. We did a project on a poet by the name of Jean Sénac who was a revolutionary poet in Algeria. One of the reasons why we were able to put him in was because he had a radio show. On his radio show, he featured what he thought of as revolutionary American poets, such as Bob Kaufman, Allen Ginsberg, Gregory Corso, et cetera. So it made perfect sense for him to be in this mix that we're creating. The point of following the person is to really create a new map that people wouldn't be able to find.

Tanya Domi: And document the geography.

Ammiel Alcalay: And document the geography of it, and the relationships, really.

Tanya Domi: Interesting. In the process of this, you had fellow collaborators, and it was a collective. You also mentioned your mentors. Just share with us, because you have had mentors and continue to have mentors through your entire adult life, but, certainly, you probably learned a lot from being mentored, and how you've passed that on to your own students.

Ammiel Alcalay: Sure. Well-

Tanya Domi: Particularly in this project, it would seem.

Ammiel Alcalay: Sure, sure. Well, one person who was very important to me is a poet by the name of Vincent Ferrini, who is mostly known because a more famous poet, Charles Olson, who was also a family friend, began his lifework, *The Maximus Poems*, as letters to Vincent because they both lived in the town of Gloucester, Massachusetts.

Vincent is somebody who knew me from birth. I started to be more involved with him when I was a teenager because I was starting to get interested in poetry, write about poetry, showing him my poems, and he was reading them, and we were corresponding, and we were meeting.

Vincent is somebody whose life is, in many ways, quite extraordinary. I didn't know the full extent of it until I did a project on him based on his archive. His parents were immigrant from Italy. He worked in factories in Lynn, Mass. Then he ended up working in the electricians' union at General Electric. He was a Communist for a while. He was hounded by HUAC. Very political.

He left the party. He left Lynn at a certain point, and he moved 8, 10 miles north to Gloucester because he was being persecuted. He actually left before he got his pension, then he opened a tiny little frame shop, which was what he did for the rest of his life. He was a picture framer.

His perspective on things, as somebody who grew up seeing his sister die next to him because the heater blew up from poverty, he was somebody who impressed me greatly with his humanity, his authenticity, his feeling for life, and what he had been through, and how that translated into what the meaning of poetry could be. So he was a very important mentor for me.

Tanya Domi: A seminal figure.

Ammiel Alcalay: Yeah, and many others. I mean, Gilbert Sorrentino was an extraordinary poet, novelist, critic, who I took a few classes from at the New School. He's the one who said, "Stop taking classes with me. Go learn something. You know how to write."

And he said, "Go learn some languages," and that's when I enrolled as a ... There was a trick then, because I don't even think I had ... My SAT scores were

nonexistent. There was a thing called SGS at the time, which was School of General Studies, which was basically night school. So I enrolled in that, knowing the trick was you could take anything. I didn't even have to take night classes. So I'd started studying ancient Greek and Latin at City, which I loved.

Tanya Domi: Which is the foundation of all languages.

Ammiel Alcalay: Which I really loved that, yeah. That was a real basis. We had an extraordinary linguist who taught us Latin who gave us a chart of sound changes. Whatever new vocabulary words came up, he would say, "Well, give me that in Old French. Give me that in Italian. Give me that in ..."

We basically learned all the Romance languages as we learned Latin.

Tanya Domi: Speaking of which, I would argue that also one of your most important contributions to the field is especially your translations of writings. Of course, I'm going to zero right in on from Serbo-Croat into English, as a consequence of the Bosnian War, but also Spanish, and from Hebrew, including the books of Keys to the Garden: New Israeli Writing, which was a co-translation, of Outcast by Shimon Ballas, and also the Neruda Prize recipient José Kozer.

You have also published translations from Latin, Arabic, Italian, and French, and that is substantial. I immediately, of course, thought of Elizabeth Bishop, who did significant translations. That's not something you ordinarily think of when you think about people who are poets, but serious poets and serious writers seem to yield to that.

I would say you truly leveraged your role as a translator in writings in the former Yugoslavia, specifically in Bosnia. You translated Sarajevo: A Journal by Zlatko Dizdarević, who I have happened to know, and The Tenth Circle of Hell, also by camp survivor Rezak Hukanović, and other translations including, I think one of the most famous would be Sarajevo Blues, and the Nine Alexandrias by Bosnian poet Semezdin Mehmedinović. Also, Dinović is a significant Bosnian poet.

You made these writings available to the world, and we were watching this war on CNN. It was the first war to watch in real time. You also did some significant organizing during the siege. Just last week, the 27th anniversary was recognized. You were a key organizer of political and cultural events there, which I can just see.

For/Za Sarajevo, For Sarajevo, which was the first US publication to explore the context of the war with a global view. I mean, that was really a breakout war, unfortunately, for a lot of people. It effected a lot of people. And a lot of people came to the aid of Bosnia, too, in different ways.

Actually, I'm holding a conference tonight at Columbia, and tomorrow, and we're going to take a look at how human rights has evolved in that part of the

world, where we're at, and have we overexamined poor Bosnia? What have the academics done? Have they been ethical or not? You've engaged in, I'm sure, all these conversations and discussions, but I would argue that was a significant part of your contribution.

Ammiel Alcalay: Well, there's so much I can say about that. First of all, one of the other things that I do is I teach translation at the Queens College MFA in Creative Writing and Literary Translation, which is one of only two places in the country that really concentrates on teaching translation in an MFA context. Actually, I had two students in the last few years doing ex-Yugo work-

Tanya Domi: Oh, really?

Ammiel Alcalay: ... which was extraordinary. But, wow, okay, there's so much one can say about this. First of all, I'll just say during the war, the wars of ex-Yugoslavia, I was actually, for almost close to two years, I was the only translator working in this country from Bosnia.

Tanya Domi: Yes, duly noted. Duly noted, yes.

Ammiel Alcalay: And that is kind of crazy.

Tanya Domi: Yes, because all the other translators were working with the international organizations, right?

Ammiel Alcalay: Or they just were not doing ... My work ranged-

Tanya Domi: They were surviving.

Ammiel Alcalay: Yeah, my work ranged from faxes that I was getting from people in villages that were being overrun, to the work of journalists like Zlatko Dizdarević, or the work of a survivor, like Rezak Hukanović, always keeping my on, what are the poets doing?

What I was very conscious of throughout was not to make decisions on my own, but to kind of collectively come to a decision about what people there felt ought to be translated, because I didn't want to be this American swooping in and choosing this or that, you know?

Tanya Domi: Exactly, sure.

Ammiel Alcalay: For instance, with Sarajevo Blues, which you mentioned, I kept asking people, "What is the thing that really expresses what's going on?" and everybody said, "Sarajevo Blues. If you can do that-"

Tanya Domi: That's it. [foreign language 00:26:10].

Ammiel Alcalay: "... that really expresses what we're thinking about."

Tanya Domi: Right, right.

Ammiel Alcalay: Now, curiously, I've been thinking about this a lot the last few days. You mentioned For/Za Sarajevo, which was a journal called Lusitania that a friend of mine named Martin Avillez put together. Originally, it was meant to be a commemorative issue for the 500th anniversary of the expulsion of Jews and Arabs from Spain that I was working on with a Palestinian friend, Kamal Boullata. We started that in 1990, I think, or late '89. And when the siege started, it was clear, "Well, this is actually the story."

So what we did with that issue was about half the issue was material directly from Bosnia, historical and current, and the rest of it were people that I felt needed to be in the same room. This was in a situation where the literary scene that I was seeing in the US was very apartheid-like. It was really divisive, or not even ... It was just completely separate.

I brought people into the room of all types that hadn't been together. And putting them together in relationship to Bosnia was very significant, I thought, as a statement about what that was actually about.

All of my work has really been also about challenging readers here to think about, not that I'm like some savior, bringing this stuff to ... But, actually, when people read Sarajevo Blues when it came out, I was saying, "How about thinking about your own work in relation to what's going on in the world?"

It was very effective. Very, very effective in that way, I think, all those translations that I did.

Tanya Domi: Yes, one reviewer said about this translation, said, "But the final selection," unfortunately, I didn't have a copy of the book, so I want to hear what you have to say about this, "a fascinating interview between Mehmedinović and Ammiel Alcalay, who translated this volume, is a thoughtful, moving analysis of his life as a writer, both in Bosnia and in exile."

Ammiel Alcalay: Mm-hmm (affirmative). Well, another thing that I feel so often translations ... I mean, I've been translating for a long time. I've been translating since the late '70s, really. Because I'm still of that ilk that cut my teeth as a poet on Ezra Pound. And if you do that, you have to translate.

Tanya Domi: I see.

Ammiel Alcalay: I mean, that's like doing your scales if you're a musician.

Tanya Domi: That's like 101. That's poetry 101.

Ammiel Alcalay: Yeah, it's like if you're a musician, you do the scales. If you're a dancer, you do your exercises. If you're a poet, you translate. That's just a given. I feel like the US still has a kind of consumer relationship to translation. It's like, "Oh, now we need Iranian women, now we need this or that."

It's like having-

Tanya Domi: It's utilitarian.

Ammiel Alcalay: It's utilitarian. It's like, "We need cherries in the winter, so we'll get them from ..."

Tanya Domi: Right.

Ammiel Alcalay: What gets lost in that is everything that is not the literary piece. In other words, the polemics, the letters, the biographies, the journals-

Tanya Domi: The color, the color.

Ammiel Alcalay: The whole texture of things, yeah.

Tanya Domi: Right, the texture, yes.

Ammiel Alcalay: So whenever I do a translation, I insist that there be other materials involved, an interview, an essay, something to put a little bit of perspective on this text. Because otherwise what happens is it just kind of reemphasizes the generic preciousness of poetry or a novel, but doesn't really get into what its meaning might be carried over into another cultural context, and political context, obviously, yeah.

Tanya Domi: And political, yes, absolutely. Is there something you'd want to read? Is there something that-

Ammiel Alcalay: Sure.

Tanya Domi: ... appeals to you to read for our audience?

Ammiel Alcalay: Well, since we've talked about translation, I'll read a translation from Sarajevo Blues, and then I'll read a piece of mine from from the warring factions, which is dedicated to the town of Srebrenica.

Tanya Domi: Right, Srebrenica.

Ammiel Alcalay: And I'll talk about that. These are very short. I'll read two pieces by Semezdin Mehmedinović from Sarajevo Blues, published by City Lights. This is called Corpse.

We slowed down at the bridge to watch some dogs tear a corpse apart by the river, and then we went on. Nothing in me has changed. I heard the crunch snow under the tires like teeth biting into an apple, and felt a wild desire to laugh at you because you call this place hell, and you flee from here convinced that death outside Sarajevo does not exist.

Tanya Domi: Boom. Powerful.

Ammiel Alcalay: So that's a poem in which the poet refuses the terms of life goes on.

Tanya Domi: Right.

Ammiel Alcalay: And this is-

Tanya Domi: Moment to moment, life goes on, yes.

Ammiel Alcalay: ... A Martyr's Resting Place.

A body just about to be buried. I see a soldier on his knees, still a kid. His rifle rests in his lap. You can hear the guttural murmur of Arabic. Sorrow gathers in circles under the eyes. The men pass their open palms across their faces.

As the rites continue, I feel the presence of God in everything. When this is over, I will take a pen and make a list of my sins. Now, everything in me resists death. As my tongue passes over my teeth, I can sense the taste of a woman's lipstick. No one is crying. I keep quiet. A cat jumps across the shadow of a minaret.

Which, again, has the typical mix of what Bosnia was, minarets, lipstick, cats.

Tanya Domi: True, true. And death, and death, and death.

Ammiel Alcalay: And death, and death. Now, this is a piece from a section. I'll just say something briefly. I don't know how we're doing on time, but I'll just say something briefly about from the warring factions. from the warring factions is a book length poem, written almost in an epic style.

Other than a very few pieces, I used words that were not my own, but I used them the way a painter would use colors. In other words, I created lists of single words taken from other places.

In the final three poems that is the section that actually deals specifically with the events of Srebrenica, I used words from the poet Shelley's Revolt of Islam because it was the only canonical English work I could think of that has the word "Islam" in it, and I thought it might be useful to think about how his words would work in this context. This is the final poem in that series.

Suddenly, like shapes of living stone clothed in the light of dreams, I tore the veil, the shrouds which wrap the world. The frost of death, the flood of tyranny, a paradise of flowers within which the poor heart loves to keep the earnings of its toil.

A common home stains of inevitable crime, pride built upon oblivion, to rule the ages that survive our remains, violence and wrong, an unreturning stream. The grief of many graves, snow and rain on lifeless things. This is not faith or law, opinion more frail, or life poisoned in its wells that delights in ruin. As endless armies wind in sad procession, the earth springs like an eagle, even as the winds of autumn scatter gold in the dying flame.

We learned to steep the bread of slavery in tears of woe. These faded eyes have survived a ruin wide and deep which can no longer borrow from chance, or change what will come within the homeless future. That gold should lose its power and thrones their glory, that love of which none may bind be free to fill the world like light whose will has power when all beside is gone faint, accents far and lost to sense of outward things.

Some word which none here can gather, yet the world has seen a type of peace, some sweet and moving scene returning to feed on us, as worms devour those years, come and gone like the ship which bears me in this, the winter of the world.

Tanya Domi: This is a moment in the world. I mean, the world has experienced many terrible moments, but actually, that poem really does speak to, really, kind of how I feel at this moment.

But I don't want this podcast to be over before we talk a little bit about the fact that actually both of us grew up in a really tumultuous time. It feels like, and it is very obvious just looking at real social science, that that tumultuous time has once again returned, not only to the United States, but I think into the entire world.

I would argue that this is a moment for poets and writers to return to help us deal with what we're dealing with. And so, the morning after the fifth reelection of the Prime Minister of Israel, many people are very upset about that event. Perhaps he may be facing jail. It's possible. He's under investigation. We shall see what happens. It sounds similar to our own president who's under investigation, has been under investigation, now by the US Congress. This indeed is a tumultuous time. So what does the poet say in you about this, Ammiel?

Ammiel Alcalay: What the poet does ... What I've been doing is I've been writing, probably for the last three years, almost, poems that ... Actually, I shouldn't say this on the air, but I will. I often write these while I drive. I have a long commute, and so I managed to get a notebook on the steering wheel.

Tanya Domi: Wow.

Ammiel Alcalay: All I need is few words to catch the drift.

Tanya Domi: Okay, okay.

Ammiel Alcalay: But they're based on ... There was a beloved poet of mine, Edward Dorn, who during the '80s wrote a series of things called Abhorrences. Those were actually taken up by his very dear friend, Amiri Baraka, who started to write what he called low coups. Not haikus, but low coups.

I've been writing what I call Imperial Abhorrences (& Other Abominations). Essentially, what I'm doing is I'm looking at the contradictions that take place in plain language, and how things that we hear, or things that come across the news to us are so packed with historical significance, and they just go right by you. They just go right by you. Maybe as a way of closing, I might read a couple of those.

Tanya Domi: Let's do that, yes.

Ammiel Alcalay: And again, I feel like these are very short, historical treatises. This one might be based on an extraordinary book called The Politics of Heroin by Alfred McCoy, who's a great historian, and who was originally given to think about these issues through a Freedom of Information Act that the poet Allen Ginsberg opened on the drug trade, the international drug trade.

Consumer Demand. If you think of the United States of America as one huge nostril, a very long arm, or even a voracious mouth reaching down to the Andes and across the fields of Afghanistan, the golden triangle morphing into a shape even Euclid couldn't have imagined, then you're beginning to get the picture.

In an eight minute segment of The Takeaway about African refugees in Israel, hosted by Todd Zwilich on NPR, the word "Palestinian" wasn't mentioned once. I actually heard this. I was on Route 95. It was snowing.

Inflation. As life gets cheaper, bullets don't. When the bad day comes, and the banks collapse, and there's a run on food, who on this good earth would even want to give us humanitarian aid?

The Belt Road Initiative. A new radial tire?

The Democracy in Action. After all this high drama to pick a new supreme, it's quite a relief to see that the lifers and the choicers can all agree on one principle: the absolute necessity of starving, maiming, and killing as many Yemenis as possible, preferably children. I'd call them crapheads, but far be it from me to disparage Noble John, inventor of the crapper.

Literary History. To attend a reception in his honor in 1945, Aimé Césaire had to use the service elevator.

Translation Theory. Maybe some of these people who think they can translate Hafiz or Rumi freely, without even knowing the language, ought to try working Gitmo like my friend Khaled, where he couldn't say a word someone else hadn't already said.

Two more.

Khashoggi or Khashoggi? From an American perspective, perhaps the most notable thing about the case of a Saudi journalist was that for two straight days, no matter where you turned, from NPR to FOX or CNN, they all pronounced his name Khashoggi. It was as if the NSA had installed a pronunciation chip into the collective mind of the MSM.

Exercise. Every day, try and imagine how far you are from Gaza.

March 23, 2019. Over the smoldering ruins, having forgotten or never even known of the achievement of Egyptian stonework in granite and diorite, honed absolutely flat and level to a thousandth of an inch, the lizard men and surviving humanoids collectively paw over one of the 21st century's only artifacts: the highly redacted remains of, yes, the Mueller Report!

Tanya Domi: Well, I want to thank you for being with us today, and we'll have you back because these low coups or these-

Ammiel Alcalay: Abhorrences, yeah.

Tanya Domi: ... Abhorrences are a necessity for some mental relief.

Ammiel Alcalay: Mental relief, exactly.

Tanya Domi: Mental relief, so thank you so much for being with us today.

Ammiel Alcalay: You're welcome. Thank you for having me.

Tanya Domi: Thanks for tuning into The Thought Project, and thanks to today's guest, Professor Ammiel Alcalay.

The Thought Project is brought to you with production engineering and technical assistance by Sarah Fishman. I'm Tanya Domi. Tune in next week.