In a review of my book *Rethinking the Mahābhārata*, Jim Fitzgerald calls me “a fierce defender of the divine Kṛṣṇa and Kṛṣṇa-bhakti” in the *Mahābhārata* (Fitzgerald 2003, 803). I am fine with “fierce,” and happy to see that being a defender of “the divine Kṛṣṇa” in the *Mahābhārata* places me in the esteemed company of Bimal K. Matilal, whose seminal article “Kṛṣṇa: In Defence of a Devious Divinity” (2002) defends Kṛṣṇa for doing what he could, given that a Hindu god is not omnipotent, and that he was working with humans. But I do not take Matilal to have been defending Kṛṣṇa-bhakti. Of course Kṛṣṇa-bhakti does not need me to defend it, especially as it is enriched in vernacular traditions. But I do think it has been underestimated not only in the *Mahābhārata* but in both Sanskrit epics.

Yet those who see things differently always raise a problem, which I will call the intermittency problem: why do the epics’ explicit *bhakti* signposts appear only intermittently? Following up some hints from my book, Fitzgerald suggests that I would attribute this intermittency to the composers’ “lax process and...[their] love of concealment” (*idem*). That is a good start, but it is possible to be more specific.

Since that discussion, I have carried forward the effort to be more specific under the rubric of “Mapping Bhakti in the Sanskrit Epics,” the lead title of this presentation. With the subtitle “Friendship, Hospitality, and Separation,” I mean to indicate three stepping stones that my mapping project has located. This presentation will treat meanly the third stepping stone, separation, by which I mean of course the *bhakti* idiom of love of God in separation (*viraha*). But to get to that “third step,” we must walk the first two. The leading thought of today’s
presentation is that, while the first two steps help reduce the intermittency problem, the third step explains them all.

A. **Hospitality and Friendship**

Now if one seeks to map *bhakti* in the two epics, what kind of cartography best suits this double terrain? Clearly, it will not just be a matter of mapping *bhakti* terms or even themes, which can always be set off as pericopes in the name of higher criticism. One wants to get into the bones of these works, whose “governing intention”—and on this, I agree with Fitzgerald not only regarding the *Mahābhārata*—was “concerned to provide ideological and narrative grounding for a brahmanical conception of kingly rule and hierarchical society in the wake of the Mauryan empire” (2003, 811). But if a post-Mauryan Brahmanical ideology puts kingship front and center in both epics, and may even be said to be where the poets put their money, this is not, in either text, how they played the game. How society is ordered is one thing. How people get along is another. That was encouraged by invoking hospitality and friendship among the more open and flexible civilizational discourses and practices familiar as custom throughout South Asian Ārya culture under endless local and regional variations. The *dharmasūtras* and *Laws of Manu* both harked back to the Veda in reformulating hospitality and friendship as *dharma*, and so did the epics. But the epics could give them far more nuanced treatment by telling stories, among others, about how God was once among men. In so doing, they could enliven these practices and discourses in narratives that were far more compelling than incessant topheavy reminders that the four social classes were created from Puruṣa. For present purposes, this means that the first two stepping stones, hospitality and friendship, invite us to walk *bhakti* along with *dharma*.

For the most part, the basic vocabularies on hospitality and friendship are shared by the epics and the *dharma* literature. But the epics also innovate and archaize. Let me say a few words about these basic vocabularies.

First, regarding hospitality, *atithi* is the main old word for guest, and *ātithyam* for hospitality, while there is no consistent term for host, that concept being more contextual. In the epics, a host may be found in a house, a sacrifice, a performance, perhaps on a chariot, in a heart, etc. In Paul Younger’s terms, we can recognize that these locations