"Fruit of a Mutual Realm": An Analysis of Daljit Nagra's "A Black History of the English-Speaking Peoples"

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Abstract

A difference between British poet Daljit Nagra's earlier collection *Look We Have Coming to Dover* and Tippoo Sultan's *Incredible White-Man-Eating Tiger Toy-Machine!!!*, is how in the latter work the poet's trademark "Punglish" makes room for an increased number of poems voiced in standard or Queen's English. The contrast, however slight, suggests a shift in response to the creative anxieties aired in Nagra's earlier work. These anxieties revolved around the Black British poet's awareness of his own complicity in the publishing world's process of marketing the exotic. The crux of the dilemma was that as a British-born child of Punjabi immigrants Nagra, performing in Punglish, could not avoid playing a minstrel, leading to a guilty self-questioning, in effect a case of Black Skin Black Mask.To illustrate, the expectation or burden resting upon the Black British poet to perform to type is what Kabba, a Punglish-speaking father, means when he addresses his own creator, the author, Nagra.

> So vut di coconut do - too shy to uze
> his voice, he plot me
> as 'funny', or a type, even vurse –
> so hee is uzed in British antologies –(2007 43)

However, in a more recent work, there is a relaxing of such inhibitions as the "coconut," Nagra, increasingly speaks with "the chalk of [his] white inside" [2007 6]. A case in point is the final poem in Tippo Sultan's Incredible White-Man-Eating Tiger Toy-Machine..., "A Black History of the English Speaking Peoples". Versed in standard English, the poem supplies a counter reading to the imperial history found in Winston Churchill's *A History of the English Speaking Peoples*, through a dissection of the imperial tropes embedded in the noble laureate's prose.

I. Introduction: Black Skin, Black Mask

With performance poetry there is, to borrow from Wole Soyinka, no "public hide-and-speak" "(Telephone Conversation"). The poet must face a live audience from a stage. Skin colour is apparent. Concealment is not an option. Non-white skin is enough to provoke the gaze of the white and call into play a whole range of cultural expectations, chief among which is an orientalist curiosity.

By 2007 Daljit Nagra's distinctive use of mimicry in performance, dubbed Punglish, had earned him enormous critical acclaim but his public success had also pushed him perilously close to being available for construal as another Gunga Din, or stage Indian, in other words an artist playing up to latent stereotypes of the Other

in the minds of a 21st century audience smugly convinced of its own enlightenment and distance from the "necessary murder" entailed in the construction of Empire.

The poet's sense of having a black mask imposed on him was an anxiety reflected in the "metafictional" concerns of several poems in the first collection, *Look We Have Coming to Dover!*, in particular, "Booking Khan Singh Kumar" and "Kabba Questions the Ontology of Representation, the Catch 22 for 'Black' Writers…" In these works the performance poet's reflexive meta-musings on the marketing of his work provoke debate on the push-and-pull relations between the creative process and the audience's reception of a poet's work. The two poems foreground the issue of identity as applied to "Black British" poets such as Nagra, whose position with regard to the tradition in English culture is always delineated by their foreign ancestry. In the GCSE English Literature anthology railed at by the titular Kabba in the latter poem, the work of Black British poets is ghettoized as "Poems from Udder Cultures," unable to pollute the core canon of "Eaney, Blake, Clarke,", the white English speaking peoples (2007 42).

It is in response to this type of segregation that The Black British Nagra, the child of Punjabi immigrants to England, uses the critical acclaim conferred on his poetry as a weapon with which to provoke doubt and embarrassment in his audience's mind concerning the sincerity of their applause and the quality of their appreciation.

In "Booking Khan Singh Kumar", Nagra likens the canon to a tree: "Will I flame on the tree that your canon has stoked / Will I thistle at the bole where a bull-dog cocked" (2007 6). The image hints at the irreverence with which the poet surveys the tradition in English poetry. Paradoxically, Nagra's reputation within English literature is well established. He has been the recipient of various plaudits and awards from the literary establishment including the Forward Poetry Prize in 2004 for his poem "Look We Have Coming to Dover!" and in 2007 for his collection of the same name. His work is published by the canonical house of Faber and Faber, a name forever associated with T.S. Eliot, and Nagra has edited collections of poetry and judged poetry awards. His meteoric rise to darling of the cultural establishment surely augurs entry to the canon. However, the canon as represented in the British high school GCSE anthology segregates English literature and Black English literature into the official canon and Poems from Other Cultures and Traditions. For a Black British poet ripe for admission to the literary hall of fame, canonicity is thus an immediate site of contention.

Using a reflexive discourse "Booking Khan Singh Kumar" problematizes the success of the British Asian poet by turning on the audience an assumed voice, that of Khan Singh Kumar (An alias from Nagra's earlier pamphlet, *Oh My Rub!*), which, while ostensibly airing a poet's self-doubt or angst, challenges the audience to examine the motives behind their own appreciation of English poetry written by non-whites. Khan Singh Kumar, the stage name itself a

leveler, questions whether both he and his audience are not complicit in the niche marketing of poetry by non-white writers:

> Did *you* make me for the gap in the market
> Did *I* make me for the gap in the market
>
> (2007 6)

As for critical acclaim, the voice of Khan Singh Kumar is cynical of the motives behind the plaudits. He suggests that the public patronage of Black British writers may itself be some form of public exoneration, a chance for the audience to align itself with progressive social and political trends:

> Do you medal yourselves when you meddle with my type (2007 7)

The poem ends with the most direct question of all:

> More than your shell-like, your clack applause
> What bothers is whether you'll boo me if I balls
>
> Out of Indian!
>
> (2007 7)

Khan Singh Kumar, aka Nagra, asks whether he will only ever be accepted as a "ghetto poet" from an "Udder Culture", as just another novelty to plug the gap in the market for the exotic. In other words, would his work get noticed if it were stripped of all reference to one half of his hyphenated identity, his Punjabi heritage? The audience is at the very least discomfited by such a direct address and at worst, or perhaps at best, conscious of egg on their face. The rhyming of "balls" and "applause" underscores the sly mockery.

While "Booking Khan Singh Kumar" employs standard English, a recurring strategy at work in Nagra's poetics is the donning of masks through which he speaks in "Punglish", a hybrid form of English used in the many dramatic monologues in which Nagra frankly mimics, you might even say minstrelises, the "immigrant" English of his parents' generation. Yet it is often the Punglish speakers who ask the most difficult questions that provoke soul-searching among the poet and his audience. An example is the already mentioned father figure Kabba in "Kabba Questions the Ontology of Representation, the Catch 22 for 'Black' Writers…". The speaker Kabba is at a parent-teacher meeting, complaining about the GCSE English literature "antology" his son is expected to study (2007 42-43). Kabba quibbles over "Part 2" of the anthology which features "*Poems from Udder Cultures and Traditions*" (2007 42). In Kabba's view, poetry by English-speaking peoples

from other cultures is being ghettoized or attached to the English canon as an appendage, thus remaining somewhat peripheral while appearing to be included. In a reflexive movement the voice of Kabba unmasks his son's teacher as Nagra and gives him a tongue-lashing for the questionable practices of his vocation as an English poet:

> Yoo teachers are like
> dis Dalgit-Bulram mickeying
> of me as Kabba. […]
> […] So vut di coconut do – too shy to uze
> his voice, he plot me
> as 'funny', or a type, even vurse –
> so hee is uzed in British antologies –
> he hide in dis whitey 'fantum' English, blacked,
> to make me sound 'poreign'!
> (2007 43)

"Dalgit-Bulram" outs an identification between the poet and his creation Mr Bulram, another of Nagra's masks in several poems. Through Kabba, Nagra is able to reflexively critique his own performance role. As a "coconut", a coloured person with a white inside, the Punglish poet is accused of traducing his Punjabi heritage in order to amuse an English audience and gain admittance into the foothills of the canon as represented by "poems from Udder cultures and Traditions" in "British antologies" (43). The charge of treason echoes doubts already expressed in "Booking Khan Singh Kumar":

> Should I beat on my chest I'm a ghetto poet
> Who discorded his kind as they couldn't know it" (2007 6)

The unusual "discorded" is perhaps an allusion to the use of mimicry and a pun on discarded, a conflation acknowledging the guilt attached to ventriloquising his migrant parents' speech/"broken English".

Kabba accuses Nagra of hiding behind his black masks as if the British-born Punjabi poet were afraid of speaking to his audience without the mask of mimicry or the mark of the Other. The claim echoes "Booking Khan Singh Kumar" where the black poet, Khan Singh Kumar, asks what it would be like if, stripped of his native skin, he was to speak without any Punglish or allusion to his foreign heritage:

> Must I wear only masks that don't sit for a Brit
> Would you blush if I stripped from my native skin
> (2007 6)

Stripped of his Punjabi heritage would the poet still garner the same acclaim? The appreciative audience is wrong-footed and asked to justify its applause. This provokes awareness that their appreciation itself can be a form of strait-jacket, one that limits the poet's creativity, or at least confines its expression to particular channels. It can also make the audience uncomfortably aware of the hierarchy they occupy in relation to the British poet whose ancestry is foreign. Their patronage falls under suspicion of tokenism. Are the audience enabling transmission of the Black poet's work or trammeling him or her into a ghetto where the work can be more easily managed by the curators of culture, in other words inducted into the anthology ghetto of *"Poems from Udder Cultures and Traditions*" (2007 42)?

Such constraints on the poet are open sores in Nagra's early work. The reader is repeatedly addressed in reflexive commentary that queries the epistemology at work in the transmission and reception of poetry by poets from other cultures and traditions. The GCSE "antology's" subtle form of exclusion through inclusion can occlude the fact that English culture is itself composed of other cultures, cultures that are not appendages but integral to English culture itself, just as the history of Empire is inextricable from the cultural artefacts of which English identity is formed, including the tradition in English literature, the canon.

II. Churchill's *History of the English Speaking Peoples*

In the more recent "A Black History of the English-Speaking Peoples" (2011) the same anxiety over the poet's complicity is raised amidst a performance at Samuel Wanamaker's recreation of an Elizabethan public theatre on the banks of the Thames:

> So does the red of Macaulay's map run through
> my blood? Am I a noble scruff who hopes a proud
> academy might canonise
> his poems for their faith in canonical allusions? (51)

Whereas in earlier work questions relating to what has been termed "the burden of representation" (Gunning) are left open, on this occasion the doubt is parlayed with a strident riposte.

> Is my voice phoney over these oft-heard beats?
> Well if my voice feels vexatious, what can I but pray
> that it reign Bolshie
> through puppetry and hypocrisy full of gung-ho fury! (51)

The first line echoes Nagra's earlier dilemma "Would you blush if I stripped from my native skin?" (2007 6). Speaking with "the chalk of [his] white inside" (2007 6) he enquires whether he is discomfiting his auditors? The question is rhetorical as Nagra's "straight voice" arguably his real voice, is assertively deployed. Therefore, just as significant as the emergence of Nagra's "straight voice," is the use he makes of it in lampooning the thinly disguised rhetoric of nineteenth century imperialism, resurgent in the technological spectatorship of war. This historical recurrence should recall the wider sense of canon Macaulay employed in 1835 when he touted English as the language of civilisation:

> [English] abounds with works of imagination not inferior to the noblest which Greece has bequeathed to us, -- with models of every species of eloquence, -- with historical composition,which, considered merely as narratives, have seldom been surpassed [...]with the most profound speculations on metaphysics, morals, government, jurisprudence, trade, --with full and correct information respecting every experimental science [...]

Daljit Nagra's, "A Black History of the English Speaking Peoples" addresses the canon in this wider sense. Of particular relevance is historiography and its role in forging an imperial mindset. If Edward Said is correct that literature at the least reflects if not encodes imperial ideology then any attempt to decolonise must include unpacking the historical narrative imbibed through a British education. Therefore, in "A Black History", just as the literary canon is arraigned, historical discourse in its turn in examined, through the workings of historiography in Winston Churchill's *The History of the English-Speaking Peoples* and what is mirrored there is the gap between truth and narration found on the Elizabethan stage, where "time's frictions courted Shakespeare's corruptions" (2011).

It must be remembered however that "Shakespeare's corruptions" were both necessary and allowable license tied to the unique features of the public outdoor theatre of the Renaissance where the thrust stage, the absence of scenic background and the lack of a proscenium allowed Shakespeare to flout the classical unities set down by Aristotle. Historical dramaturgy, therefore, must be considered a mitigating factor in viewing the discrepancies in Renaissance stage works based on history. However, the same license is not available to the professional historiographer, for instance, Winston Churchill. Although the noble laureate cannot be accused of "double" time schemes or stretching the fabric of the past by altering the ages of historical figures or conflating one person with another, the wartime Prime Minister's narration of history does beg the question: can historiography be just another form of narration, somewhat subjective, but most significantly, with a fixedness determined by its own

historical present? If Churchill's historiographical writing reflects what was conventional historiography in the mid-twentieth century, and his claims went unchallenged then, then how much more enlightened are we now by our own understanding of the past? Isn't it plausible to suggest that anyone in the present suffers myopia when it comes to their own historicity? Consider also how much of what the public consider their knowledge is cognitively mapped by the hi-tech media, a trend parodied by Nagra's figure of the newscaster John Simpsonian in "The 13 O'Clock News" and also "Have I Got Old News For You":

> I'm thrown
>
> to those everyday courtship years in the clouds
> with Guantanamoww, *Eyraaq*, and best
> *Affghanestaan* liberated live
> by our cream of suits:
> John Simpsonian!
>
> (2011 32)

The full title of Nagra's "Black History" is a direct allusion to the World War II English premier Winston Churchill's four volume *A History of the English-Speaking Peoples*, published in the early years of the Cold War and remarkable when read nowadays for an unabashed fervour and jingoism when it comes to lionizing the past. It's language repeats a number of established tropes in the rhetoric of Empire. For instance, the British legal concept of *Terra Nullius* or vacant land open to imperial encroachment is an ideological strain noticeably embedded in the language of *A History of the English-Speaking Peoples*:

> Occupation of the empty lands of the globe was vehemently accelerated by the fall of Napoleon. (79)

This is the opening statement of a section comprising chapters VI and VII in Volume IV dealing with what its author dubs "The Migration of the Peoples", which covers the settlement of Canada, South Africa, and Australasia. Whereas Napoleon's falling star is noted, in the case of one of those "empty" lands, Australia, the existence of indigenous peoples is largely elided. But while an aboriginal presence in Australia is downplayed to a point of non-existence, the Maori in contrast are handled with respect for their martial prowess:

> … the first formidable obstacle to European colonisation,
> a cultured people long in possession of the land,
> independent in spirit and skilled in warfare. (Vol IV 97)

In other words, in the case of the Maori, themselves settlers from Polynesia, and hence kin or rather kind, the concept of *Terra Nullius* did not have the same force. But for mainland Australasia the conditions pertaining to appropriation of the land were fulfilled. Therefore, in Churchill's wrenched account of the settlement of New South Wales reference to aboriginal life is scant as the migrants remain the exclusive focus. It is the epitome of White History writing:

> Driven by post-war distress in Great Britain and attracted by the
> discovery of rich pasture land in the hinterland of New South Wales,
> English-speaking emigrants began to trickle into the empty subcontinent.
> (Vol IV 92)

In turn the non-existence of the indigenous automatically erases their resistance:

> ...the aboriginal inhabitants, few in number, scattered over vast areas,
> and, very primitive, scarce resisted the white settlers... (Vol IV 93)

Thus, Churchill's account is patently a "White" *History of the English-speaking Peoples.* The titular English-speaking Peoples refers to white people of British ancestry, including white Americans, Australians, and New Zealanders. Nagra's addition of "Black" to Churchill's seemingly inclusive title cues a counter-narrative to the lopsided romance of empire, one which incorporates the views of English-speaking peoples of all shades.

A second component of the title of Nagra's poem is its announcement of a "Black History…". "Black" can connote the dark matter of which the history is composed as well as describe the comic vein that runs through the poem. However, perhaps most significantly the word black as in "Black History" also plays against words in the poem such as "sanitized" (53) and "bleached" (52). Where "white" suggests a whitewash or censorship, "black" can mean authentic. So, in one sense the poem is proposing an "authentic", or at least alternative, history to counter the "white" version of history produced for moulding a sense of national belonging.

III. Analysis of "A Black History..."

Nagra's five-part history is set at Wanamaker's Globe on the capital's South Bank which prompts a reverie tracing the influence of Elizabethan theatre in the rise of Empire. The opening line provides an iconic image of an English

monarch, most likely Henry V rallying his troops, from all parts of Britain, before the walls of Agincourt:

> A king's invocations at the Globe Theatre
> spin me from my stand to a time when boyish
> bravado and cannonade
> and plunder were enough to woo the regal seat. (50)

The end of the stanza suggests the seeds of empire were sown in the wooing of the throne, whose suitors, names burnished in legend like Drake and Raleigh, in vying for their queen's favour tried to outdo each other in plundering the globe.

Between the third and fourth stanza the stage theatre is conflated with the lecture theatre where knowledge is disseminated and both linked with the emergence of Empire:

> Between the birth and the fire and rebirth of the Globe
> the visions of Albion led to a Rule Britannia
> of trade-winds-and-Gulf-Stream
> all-conquering fleets that aroused theatres
>
> for lectures on Hottentots and craniology,
> whilst Eden was paraded in Kew. (50)

Here the visions of Albion conjured at the Globe are yoked with the navigation and conquering of the globe. Moreover, the returning fleets fed the growth of the natural sciences with rich flora of the New World transplanted to the Royal Botanical Gardens. At the same time racial science flourished under the paradigm of the age, Darwin. Craniology, for instance, purported to demonstrate a natural racial hierarchy through a favorable comparison of European skull dimensions with those of other races. This "science" was also fed with human specimens from the "all conquering fleets" (50), whose "Hottentot" physiques were exhibited in both types of theatre. In such a manner European science came to underwrite the claims of imperial ideology.

At this point it is well to once more recall Macaulay's Minute of 1835, which lays out in frank terms that the purpose of funding the teaching of English language and literature, was to foster a bilingual class of Indians who could transmit European knowledge by translating English science texts into the vernacular languages of India. The poem reminds us that this bounty of European knowledge included pseudoscience long since discredited. Looked at through the lens of this poem, Macaulay's rhetoric begins to falter. What is specifically undermined in his touting the English language as the best means for education in the Raj is the claim that it contained, "full and correct information respecting every experimental science which tends to preserve the

health, to increase the comfort, or to expand the intellect of man" (12). If the aim was to spread European knowledge, then allusions in the poem point to humiliations in the field of science such as the development of scientific racism.

In stanza 4, inserted by way of parentheses, between the bookends of *Mayflower* and *Windrush,* two migratory vessels pointing in opposite directions, white people fleeing England, and black people accepting an invitation to work there, "necessary murder" is a notorious slip by one of the canon's young gods W.H. Auden. The phrase "necessary murder" was used in Auden's original version of the poem "Spain", at a time when the poet's sympathies were with the Left. However, it was later excised by the author and replaced by "the fact of murder" and the poem retitled "Spain 1937". Auden's original callow phrasing might have been forgotten except it was castigated by none other than George Orwell in his essay "Inside the Whale".

In "A Black History..." sandwiched between the two vessels, the insertion of "necessary murder" is a reminder that the ruthless crushing of dissent, a Stalinist approach, which Orwell claimed was tacitly condoned in Auden's original phrase, was at some level not unlike the colonizer's treatment of the cultures it subjugated**.**

Auden's patent phrase forms the prelude to stanza 5 which evokes violation, and murmurs of atrocities committed by the colonizing power:

> Between *Mayflower* and *Windrush*
> (with each *necessary murder*) the celebrated
>
> embeddings of imperial gusto where jungles
> were surmounted so the light of learning be spread
> to help sobbing suttees
> give the ghost of a husband's funeral pyre. (50)

"[J]ungles were surmounted", "celebrated embeddings", these terms evoke not only familiar tropes in imperial appropriation of the new world but its gendered subjugation. In the rhetoric of Empire, part justification of the civilising mission in the Raj is the stamping out of sati. Spivak has characterized the motif as a narrative convention whereby "white men are saving brown women from brown men" (1985 121). By turning the trope on its head, stanza 5's insertion of "necessary murder" suggests the other side of the coin where the violation of womenhood is condoned by imperial needs and hidden beneath the heroic tale of suppressing "widow-burning" (Churchill). Even today, 21st century narratives of re-colonisation, originating in the West, have continued to make use of this trope.

In the second section of the poem, the noisy present intrudes upon the meditation on the past. The occasion is the May Day protests of 2000 when the

head of Winston Churchill's statue in Hyde Park was defaced with a grassy sod of earth (Griffiths).

> televised clashes repeat the flag of a bookburning
> and May Day's Mohican
> Churchill and all that shock and awe (51)

"Televised clashes" echoes the language of football commentary and points out the media's increasing tendency to blur the lines between sport and war; "shock and awe" alludes to the military doctrine employed in the 2003 invasion of Iraq: sapping a foe's will to fight through immediate overwhelming force. The terminology may be new but the stance invites easy comparison with the sexualized narratives of conquest found in nineteenth-century imperialist writing by the likes of Thomas De Quincey, whose writing on the conquest of Ceylon, forms another "version -- of what was a conventional nineteenth-century attempt to represent imperial conquest and appropriation in terms of a sexualised narrative of the elective affinities of masculine colonisers and feminine colonies" (Barrell 160).

Amid the clamour the speaker returns to Wanamaker's Globe. The actor on stage evokes memories of Paul Robeson, the African-American treated abysmally by sections of the English establishment when he played Othello opposite Peggy Ashcroft at the Savoy in 1930. However, watching "the actor as king, from the cast of masterful Robeson" (51), the mood of the present is buoyant. This onstage hybridity is itself reflected in the make-up of the audience: "The crowd, too, seem a hotchpotch from the pacts / and sects of our ebb and flow" (51). This observation prompts a reflection on his ancestors' role in keeping the empire on an even keel:

> […] My forbears played
> their part for the Empire's quid
> pro quo by assisting the rule and divide of their ilk. (51)

The enjambment of "quid", a colloquial term for sterling, points to mercenary compromise. As for the vocation of poet, the speaker is quick to cast doubts on his own motives, in a quote already mentioned:

> [..] Am I a noble scruff who hopes a proud
> academy might canonise
> his poems for their faith in canonical allusions? (51)

The cynicism is all the more pronounced in that canonicity is an outstanding feature of Nagra's work. As well his colour, do his prolific allusions to the white

tradition in English literature explain his market value? The "proud academy" invokes T.S. Eliot's who spoke of the tradition as an organic whole:

> I think of [literature] not a collection of the writings of individuals, but as 'organic wholes', as systems in relation to which, and only in relation to which, individual literary works of literary art, and the works of individual artists, have their significance. (68)

Not only does Eliot's view explain comparisons of the canon to a tree but it points out the existence of a cabal shaping the heritage of English literature, "gatekeeper[s] of linguistic, educational and cultural capital" (Gilmour 347).

Stanza 4 introduces Macaulay thanks to whom the red swathes of the earth as depicted in colonial era maps not only marked territorial control of the globe but also the reach of a British Education. The reference to the map chimes with the composition of the present audience. Among the crowd there are many hues of English-speaking peoples from all corners of the globe:

> The crowd, too, seem a hotchpotch from the pacts
> and sects of our ebb and flow. (51)

The audience is a hotchpotch of peoples, but drawn by a common heritage, the "king of the canon" (51). But what can the Tradition mean for them, the English-speaking peoples excluded by colour? Does the English language still convey a certain English identity or is it malleable? Can Shakespeare be wrested from tradition and made to speak for all the English Speaking Peoples not just those with a Churchillian pedigree? The ambience of Samuel Wanamaker's Globe seems to suggest yes. Perhaps reflecting sympathy with the May Day marchers in its opening stanza, part II ends on the defiant note already mentioned, where the speaker asserts his right to don the language of the Bard:

> Is my voice phoney over these oft-heard beats?
> Well if my voice feels vexatious, what can I but pray
> that it reign Bolshie
> through puppetry and hypocrisy full of gung-ho fury! (51)

The suggestion of complicity in part II is picked up in the first stanza of part III where the ambivalent speaker cites the Globe's role in manufacturing and disseminating a popular or folk notion of English history:

> The heyday Globe incited brave new verse
> modelled on the past, where time's frictions

courted Shakespeare's corruptions
for tongue's mastery of the pageant subject. (52)

The second stanza asks whether the speaker should be similarly inspired to plant roots in the soil of "my England's good garden" which is "only a state / of mind, where it's easy aligning myself with a 'turncoat'" (52), the last echoing "forbears" complicit in "assisting the rule and divide of their ilk" (51).Whereas stanza 1 introduces the word "corruptions" referring to Shakespeare's use of artistic license in rendering great spans of English history fit for the dimensions of the outdoor thrust stage, the section ends with another type of corruption:

[…] now we're bound to the wheels
of global power, we should tend the manorial
slime – that legacy
offending the outcasts who fringe our circles. (52)

The Empire has evolved into a new form of control, part of a global mechanism. This development necessitates a "weeding of the roots" (52), a cauterizing of the more pungent carbuncles in the canon. The action recalls W.H Auden's expunging "necessary murder". The reason the poet cannot dig in his "English garden", the canon, is that the muck turns up the "manorial slime", or mire, fully rhyming with empire.

In part IV the mood turns confessional:

Who believes a bleached yarn? Would we openly
admit the Livingstone spirit turned Kurtz, our flag
is a union of black and blue
flapping in the anthems of haunted rain …? (52)

Livingstone here stands for the conscience of Empire, the missionary who explored the Dark Continent, whether or not conscious that his surveys of Africa's great waterways would pave the route for colonization. For what ultimately came of Livingstone's pioneering work was the Kurtz spirit, the rubber plantations, the violent enforcement of the colonizer's control and plunder, hinted in "black and blue", the colour of a beating (52).

In the second and last stanza the speaker suggests "Coming clean" (52) or owning up to the fact that history as narrated by tradition has always been a "yarn", bleached to mask the tangled origins of global greatness. The stanza ends with a king "whose suffering ends with him agog at the stars" (52). Who else but Lear after ingrates put him out of house and home? A king who has lost his kingdom marks a sharp contrast with the charismatic Henry V, about to breach the walls of Agincourt, heralding the opening of the poem. With

immigrants tilling their own slice of English Garden (See "The Furtherance of Mr Bulram's Education" (2007)) next door, the Englishman, like Lear, is losing house and home. Napoleon labelled the English a nation of shopkeepers but now the shops are all owned by "shop-wallahs" the question is what does this "ebb and flow" presage for the seat of the English Speaking Peoples?

The final section of the poem is set after the performance ends and the speaker is strolling toward Westminster, ossuary of the great. The setting sun reflected on the River Thames, sinks as ghosts of merchant vessels hover on the water:

> yet softly tonight the waters of Britannia bobble
> with flotillas of tea and white gold
> cotton and sugar and the sweetness-and-light. (53)

With the exception of the last the flotilla of commodities all include trade goods that featured as non-human protagonists in the growth of Empire. In some sense they represent the concrete spoils of global conquest whereas the last item, "sweetness-and-light" is less material and yet more enduring as in Macaulay's "*imperishable empire of our arts*" (51); "sweetness-and-light" was what Matthew Arnold dubbed the beauty and truth inherent in English language and culture the transmission of which was vital to the preservation of civilisation especially in an age of religious doubt provoked by scientific advances. Arnold contended that culture, or "the best which has been thought and said in the world" (*Culture and Anarchy* 5), could provide the necessary "sweetness and light" (52) to stave off anarchy. The source of the best that has been thought and said was of course what the Tradition or Arnold, as a school inspector, deemed the best. Macaulay and Arnold had a shared vision. In its current setting, "sweetness and light" stands for Macaulay's export of English language and culture. "[T]he sweetness and light" is a reminder that there is no avoiding the role of "Eng lit" in the priming of the native mind for assimilation into the fabric of empire (Mnthali). The Thames has been cleaned up. Empire has been recast as friendly. "The waters of Britannia bobble" with the ebb of flow not only of goods but people and cultures. Still, an unlikely place, the canon betrays a whiff from the bilges.

In the second stanza,"bloodlettings" triggers a flood of imagery associated with red. The empire's decline is flagged by "red-faced Suez", gateway to the East, and a face-losing postscript to the loss of India. Suez is apposite as it occurred in 1956-1957, the very years in which Churchill was completing his Four Volume *History of the English speaking Peoples* and receiving the Nobel prize in literature for his history writing. It therefore marks a key year in a Black History. The stark contrast between Churchill's eminence and the demotion of British Empire after Suez, in a historical "clash" in which its interests were eclipsed by those of greater powers, pinpoints a precipitous moment in the decline of Britain's territorial

Empire, The loss of Suez is the signal for a rapid ebbing of Macaulay's map as decolonization enters a stampede/is put into effect. The thin red line, here represented by the "bagpipe clamouring/garrisons" (52), retreats in rapid order. Thus, in shape "A Black History..." is parabolic in that it ends with the decline of Empire.

In the final stanza, "Every man die at his post!" is the rallying call of Sir Henry Lawrence, the British Governor honoured in Tennyson's "The Defence of Lucknow," where the full injunction read, "Never surrender, I charge you, but every man die at his post". The Relief of Lucknow has proved to be a focal point in crafting the imperial account of this period in India's history, a history fictionalized in J.G. Farrell's *The Siege of Krishnapur* (1973) and one which fuels ongoing Raj nostalgia. The displacement of Lucknow, a key event in the imagining of Empire to the sun setting over the 21st century Thames once more inverts the trope regarding Churchill's account of the same history. Indeed, in *The History of the English Speaking Peoples* Churchill is at pains to downplay the significance of the sepoys' revolt, adamant that Indian historians are wrong in characterising the "Mutiny" as a nationalist uprising or War of Independence:

> The scale of the India Mutiny should not be exaggerated [...] It was in no sense a national movement, or, as some later Indian writers have suggested, a patriotic struggle for freedom or a war of independence. The idea and ideal of the inhabitants of the sub-continent forming a single people and state was not to emerge for many years. (Vol IV 70)

So enthused is Churchill about India's debt to England that in narrating a silver lining to the Mutiny, Queen Victoria's officially becoming Empress and replacing the Company, he reaches new heights in analogy:

> Religious toleration and equality before the law were promised to all. Indians for a generation and more were to look back on the Queen's Proclamation of 1858 as a Magna Carta. (70)

High praise indeed. Another trope familiar in imperial historiography is the notion that the British Empire was foisted on a reluctant English government and populace. In narrating the acquisition of the Raj Churchill echoes the received version:

> Of India it has been well said that the British Empire was acquired in a fit of absence of mind" (Vol III 223).

Admittedly, trade was the engine of empire as it was joint stock companies such as the East India company that established inroads in territories that would eventually be absorbed into empire. However, the claim that the Empire came about by

accident, as if there was a reluctance on the part of English governments to endorse the acquisitions of English investors, underpins an exculpatory narrative designed to insulate the core of empire from the mire that characterizes its margins. It is all part of sanitising the past for domestic consumption.

"A Black History" closes with London Eye, the enormous ferris wheel that has joined the Thames skyline, a kinetic tribute to the virtual navel of the English-speaking world, the Thames. Amidst the ghost flotillas of clippers, the buildings of the new form of empire, multinational conglomerates, illuminate the skyline. Ironically, among the predecessors to the London Eye is the Great Wheel built at Earls Court for the 1895 Empire of India Exhibition, itself modeled on the original Chicago Wheel, opened in 1893 for the World's Columbian Exhibition ("The London Eye"). Did the designers of the London Eye think it appropriate to pay homage to the new millennium by reprising rides at events convened for the viewing of the spoils of Empire?

The final section fades with "upbeat lovers" gazing from London Eye, itself a revolving observation deck looming over some of Empire's most important institutions. The lovers are surveying the true inheritors of Empire, the "multinationals lying along the sanitised Thames" (53). They are looking at the same old Thames, source of the Empire, but dressed in new livery, that of 21st century globalism. Spread out beneath them the wealth congregated along the banks of the Thames is centuries old and includes in its coffers the profits of "piracy", slavery, drug-running and other nefarious Kurtz-like trade, old wealth masquerading in the garb of a "new" century.

Now that the racial barriers are down, now that it is no longer a shock to have an African perform the role of king in Shakespeare (51), it is a "sanitised" (53) Thames that meets the gaze. The word "sanitised" does not connote wellness; it suggests whitewash, the cleaning up of past indiscretion, distortion, the application of a respectable veneer. Contrast with "purified", a word with positive connotations. How much is the capital's other history being occluded despite the growing multiracial make-up of the population? This is the question the final section leaves us with.

IV. Conclusion

> Especially with Macaulay in mind, who claimed the passing
> of the imperial sceptre would highlight
> *the imperishable empire of our arts* ... (51)

History is always the winner's tale, no pun intended. However, Macaulay's faith in "the imperishable empire of our arts" can be read against the grain. Literature preserves the evidence of Empire's deeds which, while not atoned for, cannot be quashed as long as the canon, including historical writing, preserves the outlook

of our linguistic ancestors and provides access to their mindscape. Therefore, although in post war Britain, the receding empire enjoyed a rosy reputation evinced in Winston Churchill's *A History of the English-speaking Peoples*, Nagra's "Black History..." offers an antidote to regression through nostalgia. The poem demonstrates that with Churchill's tome, what we are reading is an artefact, and like fossils, artefacts are important sources of historical information. What is most valuable in reading Churchill is not what it tells us about historical truth but what it tells us about the psychology of the coloniser, the white man, the one not wearing a mask.

The iconoclastic approach to British history is ineluctable when inhabiting the plural perspective of English-speaking peoples. What stands out in a Black History are not the moments of pride woven into the national history as per colonial discourse, but the blunders, outright gaffs, embarrassments, betrayals and violence that tell a different story of Britain's rise to global eminence. This other view of the past made recognizable by cameos of figureheads in imperial history entails a perspective on English history that transcends the limitations of Tradition. Low points get the spotlight: Auden and his generation's support for Stalin's Russia, the retreat from Suez, the loot, the great flowering of architecture along the banks of the Thames, a heritage whose very roots were nourished on the proceeds of Empire, slavery and domination.

Nagra's unsettling readings belie Arnold's vision, the idea that the best that man has thought and written be passed down the generations through education and his faith that those texts he selected would offer "sweetness and light". Those texts are not simply Arnold's the best but ambassadors of their times. As they encode the ambience of their times it is necessary any reading interrogates the ideology reflected in the texts whether through representation or omission. The irony of Arnold's use of the term "sweetness and light" is that English culture can be distasteful from the point of view of many English-speaking peoples. Non-white English-speaking peoples who return to the canon often find light but not the kind Arnold anticipated. Instead of beauty and intelligence or sweetness and light, modern examinations of canonical texts have uncovered disturbing links with the ideology of their times.

In his first collection, Nagra confronted his audience asking what would happen if he stripped from his native skin. Would they still listen to him without his colour badge marking him as of immigrant blood? The question is provocative; it bites the very hand that nourishes the poet with acclaim. "A Black History…" demonstrates what can happen when Nagra, the poet typed British-Asian, rations markers of his Punjabi heritage.

For the English-speaking poet whose ancestral roots are in the former Empire, but whose birthplace is Britain, identity remains a contested arena but unlike a Naipaulian mimic keen for admission into the company of the race of Albion, the British-born subject blackened by his ancestral roots is perhaps saying

it is time the very concept of Englishness be broadened and Black British as a term become defunct and English culture assume its de facto hue, neither white nor black.

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