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'Punning in Punglish, sounding "poreign": Daljit Nagra and the politics of language', *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies* 17:5 (2015), 686-705.

Punning in Punglish, sounding 'poreign': Daljit Nagra and the politics of language

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Abstract

This essay explores Daljit Nagra's poetry (*Look We Have Coming To Dover!* (2007), and *Tippoo Sultan's Incredible White-Man-Eating Tiger-Toy Machine!!!* (2011)) in the context of contemporary British language politics. It argues that Nagra's approach to language – combining heteroglot, multivoiced experimentalism with an etymological attention to the historical constructedness of language – offers a riposte to monolingual ideologies, which also resituates English as a product and residue of colonial history. While Nagra's poems sometimes come close to regarding the histories enfolded within English as a linguistic and poetic impasse, they continue to invest in the notion of resistance and individual agency in language; and specifically, they revel in poetic dramatization of the accommodations and convivialities of everyday multilingual language practice.

Keywords: Daljit Nagra multilingualism poetry politics of language

It is indeed a powerful lesson to those people who claim that Britain is already a just and pluralist society to find how readily 'not speaking English' or 'not speaking English properly' seems to be taken to indicate that an individual is inadequate and in some way inferior.

The Swann Report, *Education for All*, 1985

In terms of wanting people, encouraging people, to be part of British society, they can't do that unless they have more than an understanding of English. If we don't get our resident population with an understanding of English, then they become a sub-class that is virtually unemployable or are stuck in a ghetto. We should not be turning people out of our schools who aren't able to speak English like a native.

Eric Pickles, 9th March 2012

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Just for kicks I was well in with the English race,
my skin matched the beef of their ruddy skin
as one by one a walk-in sing-along of familiar faces
from the lark-about days of school chucked back chunks
of smoke to reveal their manhood, I shouldered the bulk
as they broadened like brick houses to broadly take me in,
we plundered up gulps of golden rounds for the great game,
united at our local, we booed at the mounted screen –
at the face of the anthem'd foreigner when we were at home.
Then we chanted with heart and soul for God and Queen!

I was one of us, at ease, so long as I passed
my voice into theirs -- I didn't *bud-bud ding-ding*
on myself for dropping the asylum side to sign up
for the bigger picture. I wasn't Black or Latin or managed
by a turbaned ghost. No distant land forever
with rights to my name... At an own goal, I pitched up,
caught my mother on the screen, as keeper, in our net
gloving the ball with lard, from the Mutiny, launching it
into my hands, ticking, at the end of the day, as I walked alone
to my wife -- outside on a sideline of frost, kicking off:

D-d-doze err shrubby peeeepall... !!!
D-d-deyy sprayyy all um ourrr valll... !!!
Venn hmmm veee g-go bbackkkk... !!!
Lookk lookk ju nott British ju rrr blackkkk... !!!

Daljit Nagra, "The Man Who Would Be English!"

In March 2012, The British Government's Communities Secretary, Eric Pickles, announced the launch of a new 'integration strategy', 'encouraging' people from ethnic minority communities to speak English 'like a native'. Pickles' pronouncement was couched in a liberal language of inclusion and opportunity; yet his invocation of a 'sub-class', 'unemployable or [...] stuck in a ghetto', resonated uncomfortably – implying minority communities' culpability for their own exclusion, but also how arguments about language often refract, or otherwise make speakable, ideas about race, class, and

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national belonging. Indeed, the initiative may have been new, yet Pickles' announcement sounded strangely familiar, drawn as it was from an established British political lexicon associating 'other' languages -- and specifically, South Asian languages -- with a range of social ills, including 'civil disorder, school underachievement, social segregation, societal burden, isolation, unhappy marriage, poor employment prospects, mental health difficulties, lack of social mobility, and threat to democracy, citizenship and nationhood' (Blackledge 2005: vii).

The lost, monolingual Britain sometimes nostalgically invoked in reactionary pronouncements on language and nationhood is, of course, a chimera. Nevertheless, over the past half century or so, the impact of immigration from Britain's former colonies and elsewhere has increased Britain's linguistic diversity enormously, particularly in urban areas: over 300 languages are currently spoken in greater London alone (Benedictus 2005). British multilingualism, a fact of contemporary life, is also the site of a set of ongoing political and cultural arguments: variously interpreted as a sign of multicultural vivacity, or a threat to be guarded against. None of this is new. The 1985 Swann Report, *Education for All*, highlighted the stigma and racism attached to minority languages in the state education system of 1980s Britain, how languages other than English were taken as markers of inferiority. At the same time, the Swann Report was also a different kind of milestone in British language politics, sounding 'the death knell' for multilingualism in the classroom by recommending that community languages should not be maintained in mainstream schools (Swann 1985; Alladina 1989: 58-9).

Arguments about language hit the headlines periodically: in stories about language mixing (as for example in the often-cited emergence of 'Hinglish' in British cities), in furores over the cost to British taxpayers of interpreter services, or debates over bilingual street signage (Blackledge 2002). Each reveals much about how language politics have helped to shape, and continue to shape, divergent notions of national belonging. When the Office for National Statistics released the most recent census results in January 2013, the multilingual story they told was, for a section of the British press, a story about the English language under threat, multilingualism connected to a willful refusal to

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integrate. The *Daily Express* ran with the headline 'Migrants Shun the English Language' (O'Grady 2013), while *The Sun* led with 'English is a second language for 40% in parts of Britain', and went on with the *non sequitur*: 'it's hard not to conclude that many migrants have no interest in learning English because they simply don't want to integrate' (Wilson 2013). This is a fairly common refrain. Indeed, despite the call, in the Parekh Report (2000), for Britain to be declared a multicultural society, it is remarkable how far monolingual ideology continues to hold sway. English is, importantly, a prerequisite for British citizenship: language testing has been extended and intensified in each new iteration of citizenship legislation over the past few decades. As Adrian Blackledge makes clear, it was in a context of growing stigmatization of South Asian languages in Britain following the riots in Oldham, Bradford and Leeds in 2001 that the British Parliament passed the 2002 *Nationality, Asylum and Immigration Act*, which extended compulsory English language testing as a condition of citizenship across the board, to include the spouses of existing British nationals (Blackledge 2005).¹ In late 2010, this Parliament went further, making proof of English language proficiency a condition for granting entry visas to the partners of British nationals (UKBA 2010). Burgeoning multilingualism notwithstanding, English continues to be widely regarded not just as the sole language of wider communication, but as the guarantor of culture, education, social cohesion, economic advancement, and moral order.

That the poet Daljit Nagra should prove an astringent observer of language politics in Britain is perhaps not surprising. Born in London to Punjabi Indian parents, Nagra grew up in Yiewsley, near Heathrow Airport, on the outskirts of London, before moving to Sheffield in his teens (Chambers 2010: 87). Punjabi was the language of home (Nagra speaks Punjabi but does not write it (Barkham 2007)), while English was the language of school, the public sphere, literary culture, and wider communication. Nagra grew up in the 1970s and 80s – a period in which South Asian languages were stigmatized in the British media and the mainstream education system, while racist mimicry of South Asian Englishes was a staple of prime time comedy. TV comedians like Jim Davidson were renowned for their performance of black and Asian 'characters', while the London Weekend

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Television sitcom 'Mind Your Language' (1977-86) relied for laughs on the malapropisms of an adult education class of predominantly South Asian learners of English. British comedian Peter Sellers' mimicry of South Asian Englishes in films like 'The Millionairess' (1960) and 'The Party' (1968), meanwhile, is so notorious that the British Asian BBC radio and TV comedy series 'Goodness Gracious Me!' (1996-8; 1998-2001), its title taken from the Sellers song of the same name, started out as a stage show called 'Peter Sellers is Dead!'. Of the relationship between his poetry and this kind of mimicry, Nagra has said:

In terms of performance, I wanted to reference the racist television programming I grew up watching. The accent I use when I read is not supposed to be an authentic, representative Indian accent, but an attempt to enrich and reclaim those flat, one-dimensional Peter Sellers-type characters, so there's a backwards and forwards trajectory (Chambers 2010: 92).

This 'backwards and forwards trajectory' gestures to a complex language politics, in which 'reclamation' takes place alongside and through avowedly *inauthentic* poetic voices; and which are – perhaps even more riskily – connected to, rather than entirely distinct from, those of Sellers *et al.* For while Nagra's poetry works to reclaim South Asian Englishes from the stigmas of linguistic racism, it is often haunted by that racism -- as in the '*bud bud ding ding*' of 'The Man Who Would Be English!'. It will be the work of this essay to unpick some of the complexities enfolded within this perspective on language and voice: where resistance and complicity shade into each other, what pasts play out in the present moment of utterance, where the poet's word is both his and not. Along with my opening epigraphs, Arvind Mandair's revealing account of his own upbringing in Britain in the 1980s also serves as a touchstone here – reflecting both the racial politics at work in the drive to cultural and linguistic assimilation, and the for him inescapable 'backwards and forwards' with longer, disavowed histories:

It was something that happened to you at school, necessitating for one's survival either a multiple-consciousness of oneself as South Asian, nonwhite, *and* British, or a form of alienation: either South Asian/nonwhite *or* British. In hindsight, the ways in which

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these complex identifications were negotiated in the school system more than in any other place, including most of all the acquisition and politics of English enunciation, with or without accents and inflections of all sorts, cannot but make one think of a similar scenario that would have been taking place in the so-called Anglo-Vernacular schools in late nineteenth-century colonial India. (Mandair 2009: 21)

Against the stigmas of racist mockery, Nagra reclaims Punjabi Englishes as complex, creative media for poetry; and he asserts them as languages of contemporary Britain. His 2007 collection, *Look We Have Coming to Dover!*, includes a kaleidoscopic cast of poetic personae, predominantly working-class Indian Punjabi Sikhs. While often engaging with English and Anglo-Irish poetic traditions in terms of form, intertext, and allusion, Nagra's poetic 'voices' range from middle-class varieties of 'standard English' to urban vernaculars, to highly stylized phonological representations of various kinds of Punjabi Englishes. Some poems code-switch between English and Punjabi, while others dramatize their own self-translation in which varieties of English are made to stand in for varieties of Punjabi. Thus, the poems subvert notions of both a stable 'language' and a homogeneous 'speech community', instead tracing the complex interplay, variation, flux, and conflict between languages and speech forms, discontinuous across context, caste and class, gender and generation. In 'The Man Who Would be English!', for example, the speaker's would-be assimilationist English is disrupted by the orthographically marked, code-switching Punjabi English of his wife; while in 'The Furtherance of Mr Bulram's Education', the Anglophile English teacher Bulram is full of disdain for the working-class Punjabi 'onion-breath Calibans' next door, whose desire is for 'Queen's / quick 'shop-keeper' English!!!' (Nagra 2007: 38).

Nagra finds all kinds of poetic latitude in the interplay between English and Punjabi, creating linguistic forms which may be ambiguous, unsettling, generous, or generative. In the title of 'Look We Have Coming To Dover!', for example, he uses the mismatch between English and Punjabi tense formations to create an uncertain slippage between past, present and future time. Referencing

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'Dover Beach', Nagra deploys this alternate, disjunct temporality to reroute Arnold's Victorian lament of imperiled Englishness onto an imaginative terrain which splices past, present and future narratives of immigrant arrival. Here and elsewhere, such collisions are profoundly productive, forging new meanings out of the disruptive interplay between linguistic systems. Yet the collision between languages may also be the site of loss, and Nagra's poems also dwell on the intergenerational effects of language stigmatization and attrition. In 'In A White Town', the narrator is ashamed of his mother's 'illiterate body', while she 'duck[s] at my stuttered Punjabi / laughing', and the son realises all too late what is lost in this transit:

Nowadays, when I visit, when she hovers upward,
hobbling towards me to kiss my forehead
as she once used to, I wish I could fall forward. (Nagra 2007: 18-19)

In 'The Man Who Would Be English!', we find the poem's would-be assimilationist narrator watching the football in the pub, eager to belong with the 'familiar faces / from the lark-about days of school' as they cheer on the English national side – sporting loyalty a metonym for national belonging evoking Norman Tebbit's famous 'cricket test'. The speaker's strained Estuary slang is both evocative and awkward: 'Just for kicks I was well in with the English race'. To speak this English is to 'pass my voice into theirs'; an act both of mimicry and of attempted linguistic and racial 'passing'. Yet this is a transient, and ambivalent, moment of acceptance, achieved only by an act of willed amnesia: forgetting both the difficult truth behind the 'lark-about days of school' (from which the phrase '*bud bud ding ding*' surely resonates), and the 'distant land forever / with rights to my name'. As the narrator works at his deliberate forgetting, his efforts are undone by the multiple, enfolded histories which surge through the poem, revealing the covert imbrications of language and race in the imagining of Englishness. Caught in unsteady identification between 'us' and 'them', he internalizes and reiterates the racist playground mimicry of '*bud bud ding ding*' in order to lay claim to a language whose contemporary relationship with British xenophobia is replayed in the word 'asylum': that sign central to what Paul Gilroy calls the 'quietly racialized code' (2002: xxxv) of contemporary discourses

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on immigration, signifying both a safe haven, and a pejorative insult to those who would seek it. Indeed, the multiple betrayals and self-betrayals involved in 'pass[ing] my voice into theirs' threaten to engulf the poem. The history of the empire cannot be evaded: in a hallucinatory moment, the narrator sees his own mother on the TV screen, 'gloving the ball with lard, from the Mutiny', pointing out how his attempt at escaping history is just another 'own goal'. Meanwhile, the attempt at linguistic 'passing' cannot erase the presence of his wife 'on the sidelines'. On the one hand, she is the kind of proletarian, subcontinental spouse legislated against in the 2002 *Nationality, Asylum and Immigration Act*, required to demonstrate 'sufficient knowledge' of English before she might qualify for British citizenship, representing the disavowed, unassimilable linguistic 'other' of his claim on Englishness. On the other, the italicized association between her words and the '*bud bud ding ding*' of the previous stanza, as well as the exaggerated orthographic markedness of her Punjabi-inflected, code-switching speech, invite us to ask whether this is 'her' voice we are hearing, or the narrator's racist mimicry of his own wife. Finally, in an ironic spin on the notion of English as guarantor of national belonging, she is learning the language from the racist graffiti sprayed on her wall; and she has her own comment to make on questions of language, race, and belonging: *'Lookk lookk ju nott British ju rrr blackkk... !!!'*

The poem exposes and worries at the disavowed politics of race which underlie the notion of 'speaking English like a native', and it is in this context that it addresses the risks, the compromises, the complicities involved in adopting a particular 'voice'. Nagra's ambivalent orientation to English combines a playful experimentalism with a focus on language in history, and on language as the site where enfolded histories play out. He defines himself, though not without reservation, as 'an English poet' (Chambers 2010: 91); yet it is also important to note how his assaults on the mythic constructions of English as unitary language are shadowed by the brutal histories of ethnolinguistic nationalisms in South Asia. In the poem 'The Punjab', for example, the contested history of the region plays out in inter- and intralingual conflict between multiple, diasporic voices: 'Yoo say 'Púnjab' vee say Punjaaab' (Nagra 2011: 34). Across Nagra's poetry, the enfolded histories of India

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and Britain, as well as the resonances and repetitions between past and present, reflect mutually upon one another; offering, together, a fine-textured reflection of the dangers and brutalities, as well as the absurdities, inherent in monolingual ideologies. Yet it is English which is his central concern – in particular, how the English language, and the contemporary British multilingualism against which it is often antagonistically pitted, are both products of a shared colonial and imperial history. In 'The Gob-Smacking Taste of Mine Inheritance', xenophobic Brit and immigrant 'Punjabi shop-wallah' are locked together in a shared Larkinian inheritance of misery handed down through the empire, their 'battle for turf' an analogue of the poet's struggles over his own 'inheritance' of 'the English line', 'franchised' through the empire. As 'native poet' – with all the ambivalence conjured by that phrase's double meaning – his claim to ownership is an uncertain one, his task to 'graft my Heathen-word on our old soil'. Yet the poem's conclusion is emphatically assertive, making of shared history a claim to shared ownership: 'Henceforth the stock of the store is the fruit of a mutual realm!' (Nagra 2011: 6).

The glossary to Nagra's second collection makes just such an assertion of historical interconnectedness, revealed through the workings of language. The title, 'Bolly Bhaji', is a play on the Punjabi term 'baar di boli' ((ਬਾਹਰ ਦੀ ਬੋਲੀ, بول دی دی بابر) approximately: 'language from the outside'), referring to the mixed, diasporic varieties of Punjabi spoken in Britain, characterized by grammatical influence and lexical borrowing from English. 'Bhaji', meanwhile, is a 19th-century loanword into English from Hindi, so thoroughly domesticated as to need no gloss. Neither English nor Punjabi, the 'Bolly Bhaji' points out by its title alone, can be conceived of as stable, pristine, or pure. There is a shared history of language contact, mixing and borrowing, between Britain and South Asia, which persists into the present; a history invoked in the glossary's omnivorous entries, which encompass references to Yule and Burnell's 1886 colonial Anglo-Indian glossary *Hobson-Jobson*, alongside 'Yorkshire Punjabi'. But the 'Bolly Bhaji', reveling as it does in linguistic *mélange*, is no anodyne celebration of easy linguistic inclusivity. 'Bhaji' may appear at first sight as innocuous as the closely related chicken tikka masala – the favourite dish of the English, as we are so often told; a cosy

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exemplar of the inclusiveness of English in an age of multiculturalism. Yet Nagra's glossary, with its invocation of Yule and Burnell's *Hobson-Jobson*, restores to it its imperial illocutionary force.²

Hobson-Jobson is an important touchstone for this, Nagra's second collection – a collection which even gives the colonial glossary a poetic speaking voice, in the poem 'This Be The Pukka Verse'. Published in 1886, *Hobson-Jobson* is a compendious glossary of the language spoken by the British in 18th- and 19th-century India, incorporating borrowings from languages across South Asia and elsewhere; and making of this mixed language, 'Anglo-Indian', a defining feature of a particular mode of British colonial identity. It is notable for its delight in language, and in the sounds of words; this was an argument made emphatically by Nagra himself, when he presented a radio programme on *Hobson-Jobson* for the BBC (Nagra 2012). In this sense, as a text which revels in linguistic impropriety as a source of pleasure and creative possibility, *Hobson-Jobson* offers itself up as a model of multilingual poetics. Yet it also, and equally importantly, reveals a kind of language mixing which is anything but innocent – lexical borrowing in the service of, and as metonym for, colonial power. And at the same time, *Hobson-Jobson* is also a fascinatingly anxious text: it worries at the slipperiness of language and the mutability of signs; it reveals, while trying to evade, imagined connections between linguistic and racial hybridity; and it asks itself over and again what the processes of language mixing have to say about the nature of English, and English national identity. Something of this anxiety can be seen in one of its most well-known passages, considering the long-standing impact of Indian languages on the domestic properties of English:

Words of Indian origin have been insinuating themselves into English ever since the end of the reign of Elizabeth and the beginning of that of King James, when such terms as calico, chintz, and gingham had already effected a lodgement in English warehouses and shops, and were lying in wait for entrance into English literature. (Yule and Burnell 1886)

The 'Bolly Bhaji's playful multilingualism – like Yule and Burnell's *Hobson-Jobson* – undermines the

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notion of languages as pure entities. It also uses the glossary form's ostensible synchronicity to imply continuity between anachronistic entries: between

nautch -- 'ballet dance performed by women' (from Hobson Jobson)

on the one hand, and

fettlin' -- (Yorkshire Punjabi) cleanin'

(Nagra 2011: 55)

on the other. These products of language contact and lexical borrowing imply a shared history, a 'backwards and forwards trajectory' between British India and contemporary Punjabi Yorkshire. At the same time, they are fragments which suggest how no one kind of language practice has any self-evident claim to 'an inherent, unchanging politics' (Miller 2011: 276). *Nautch*, on the one hand, is a highly charged word with a complex history: in British India the *nautch* dancer was, as Pramod Nayar puts it, 'after the fakir and the cruel Indian monarch, the key icon of the colonial exotic: mysterious, seductive, tantalizing, and dangerous' (Nayar 2012: 69). In other words, the adoption of *nautch* into Anglo-Indian bespeaks something of the complex linguistic, erotic, and symbolic economies of the Raj; its transformation into 'ballet dance' in *Hobson-Jobson*, something of the concealing power of cultural translation. And if *nautch* opens out into a complex hinterland, the processes by which it has travelled, so too does *fettlin'*: a quotidian loanword suggesting a domestic, largely unregarded (no colonial glossary exists to dignify its translation into standard English with a final 'g') traffic between marginalized language forms in the contemporary north of England. Each gestures to, while neither can fully capture, the complex processes of human interaction of which they are sign and residue.

Linguistic provenance – where words come from, whose words they are, how they come to be appropriated and what that appropriation might mean – is a central theme of much of Nagra's poetry. Scenes of language mixing, code-switching, and linguistic appropriation abound, in which the line between solidarity and mockery, resistance and complicity, is often very hard to call. It is in this context that Nagra's poems sometimes worry at the ethics of voice, of writing and performing in a 'Punglish' that is not his (Gunning 2008: 100), acknowledging the risks involved in a 'backwards and

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forwards trajectory' with other acts of linguistic appropriation. In 'Booking Khan Singh Kumar', the poet-narrator considers how the in-between space, the 'gooey' space between languages and cultures, is also 'the gap in the market': a saleable space where certain codes are available for the poetic expression of manageable kinds of 'otherness'. On the one hand, the poet recognizes the potentially dangerous divide between his work and those it purports to represent:

Should I beat on my chest I'm a ghetto poet
Who discorded his kind as they couldn't know it

On the other, he asks how far his language can travel and still remain marketable to a complacent middle-class readership in search of a discernable but manageable linguistic exoticism:

Do you medal yourselves when you meddle with my type
If I go up di spectrum how far can ju dye.

(Nagra 2007: 7)

The poet's complicity – how readily what looks like radical linguistic hybridity may in fact shade into lazy and reductive parody; how representation blurs into betrayal – is a recurrent theme. In 'Kabba Considers The Ontology of Representation, the Catch-22 for 'Black' Writers...', Nagra has the speaker Kabba rear up out of the poem to indict his creator for linguistic exoticization, for creating a 'whitey 'fantum' English, blacked / to make me sound 'poreign!' (Nagra 2007: 43).³ Yet in a wider sense, such moments of self-accusation form part of a wider view of language as always a site of struggle, in which to seek resolution to these ethical questions of voice is perhaps beside the point: the poet's art is always an act of mimicry, always to a certain degree compromised. As Nagra writes in 'Informant',

whatever voice i put on
i know i'm heading for bother.

(Nagra 2007: 45)

Here Bakhtin's view of language resonates – the 'word in language' always 'half someone else's', the struggle to capture language that

exists in other people's mouths, in other people's contexts, serving other people's intentions:

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it is from there that one must take the word, and make it one's own. (Bakhtin 1981: 293-4)

In 'Darling and Me!', the complex layering of neologism, allusion, malapropism and mimicry works to both exhilarating and discomfoting effect, making attribution of words and voices difficult to decide. The poem is narrated by a male factory worker, recently married and very drunk, in a poetic fabrication of a "learner's English", an interlanguage in which Punjabi operates on English at the level of grammar and syntax. The poem's lexis is characterized by malapropisms and coinage – the noun-into-adjective neologism "pirouetty" in the penultimate stanza -- out of which complex chains of signification are generated. The *Guardian* critic Sarah Crown, in her review of this collection, *Look We Have Coming To Dover!*, focuses on this poem in particular for its linguistic virtuosity, suggesting that the coining of 'pirouetty' 'gives a rapturous lift to the line, its freshness reflecting the startling joy the newly-married couple have discovered in each other' (Crown 2007).

The poem layers intertextual allusion to T S Eliot's *The Waste Land* (the barman's bell ringing, the putting on of a record) with cultural references -- Hilda Ogden berating her husband Stan in 'Coronation Street', Torvill and Dean skating to Ravel's 'Bolero' -- that place it in the Britain of 1984. It is that moment anatomized by Paul Gilroy in *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack*, in which the 'racist television programming' alluded to by Nagra – the joke of the Indian man who can't speak English properly – helps to police the boundaries of a nation conceived of as white, culturally homogeneous, speaking English (Gilroy 2002). It is against this backdrop, then, that Nagra's poem subverts the comedic associations of South Asian English speech forms with racist mockery, demonstrating the creative possibilities of an improper English. At the same time, it stages a recalibration of the language politics of that period, by dramatizing the everyday forces of heteroglossia at work: in language, in food, in music; in the accommodations of the pub and the factory floor.

At the same time, however, the poem's setting in 1984 plots an inescapable backwards-and-forwards

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trajectory between Britain and India. The terrible events of 1984 in India – the storming of the Golden Temple, the assassination of Indira Gandhi, and anti-Sikh riots which left thousands dead – are inextricable from the ethnolinguistic nationalisms which fuelled them. Thus the poem's heteroglossia faces multiple ways at once, assaulting the pieties of English, Hindi, and Punjabi monologisms as the poem's broken-English-speaking Indian Punjabi narrator dances tango and rumba to the soundtrack of *Pakeezah* (a Bollywood film about North Indian Muslims, recorded not in Hindi but in Urdu).⁴

But at the same time, the poem's reference to *Pakeezah's* soundtrack – in Bollywood style, recorded by playback artists, for lipsynching by the film's actors – draws us into questions about voice and provenance which equally lie at the heart of the poem. Nagra's invocation and subversion of racist linguistic stereotyping does not substitute an 'authentic' for an 'inauthentic' Indian voice; instead it forms part of the poem's overlapping network of mimicries – from the allusion to *The Waste Land*, and Eliot's 'doing voices', to the narrator's own impression of Coronation Street's Hilda Ogden. Overlaying mimicry, repetition, and echo, the poem makes us ask whose words, and whose voice, we are hearing.

In the fifth stanza – just after the narrator's Hilda Ogden impression – the poem takes a revealing turn:

We say we could never eat
in publicity like dat, if we did
wife advertisement may need
of solo punch in di smack.

The malapropisms – 'publicity', 'advertisement' – play on the narrator's oscillation between object and consumer of popular culture. And, at a slight angle to English semantic propriety, but making their own kind of perfect sense, they also suggest a process of linguistic appropriation, substitution, and approximation, by which a new learner may not so much learn, as build, a language, assembled

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from heterogeneous, found materials. But when the threat of violence – ‘punch in di smack’ – emerges out of this linguistic freewheeling, the lack of clarity as to who is ‘doing’ whose voice, whose these words are and where they come from, becomes suddenly devastating. Is this a learner, delighted with the sound of his new language, ‘trying out’ a recently-acquired phrase? A phrase which surely evokes the language of casual, violent misogyny so prevalent, like the language of racism, in 1980s Britain, and suggests ‘learning English’ as a kind of contagion. The poem’s other ‘voices’ resonate here too. The queasy combination of working-class comedy with drunken violence recalls Stan and Hilda Ogden’s relationship in *Coronation Street*. We can hear, too, the echoes of Eliot: those moments in *The Waste Land*, in ‘A Game of Chess’, and at the end of ‘The Fire Sermon’, where the vision of relations between the sexes is at its most corrosive. And, in this sudden eruption of violence, we hear echoes too of 1984 in Punjab. Yet, at the same time, the poem also plays on the comedic associations of its poetic voice, making it possible to pass the threat off as a ‘joke’, or – perhaps more pertinently – ‘just words’.

Nagra’s poetry explores an English language which is always already made of mimicry and quotation, words which are freighted with history and ‘populated – overpopulated – with the intentions of others’ (Bakhtin 1981: 294). It is a language, nevertheless, which is susceptible to appropriation and to abrogation, whose pieties may be assaulted; yet linguistic hybridity and transgression are not in and of themselves politically liberating. They, too, may be sites of cruelty as well as conviviality.

In contrast to ‘Darling and Me!’, a poem which delights in the speaker’s linguistic imprecision which is at the same time a source of unease, the narrator of ‘Yobbos!’ is a study in apparently tight linguistic control. The poem is a dense collage of homage, allusion, repetition, and mimicry, starting from the opening epigram, an 1899 Pears soap advert which is itself an appropriation of Kipling:

The first step towards lightening THE WHITE MAN’S burden is through teaching the virtues of cleanliness.

The poem’s narrator opens with a knowingly self-ironizing mimicry of such imperialist discourse:

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A right savage I was -- sozzled
to the nose with sprightly Muldoon, squeezed into the communal

sweat of a Saturday tube home --
I'm up to p. 388 of his sharp lemon-skinned
Collected Poems

(Nagra 2007: 11)

This vernacular Londoner's postcolonial self-mockery as a 'right savage' is overwhelmingly confident – he is, after all, possessed of the kind of cultural capital which allows him to read the collected Paul Muldoon on the London Tube (not something you see very often). Yet this confident self-positioning is set up only to be undone in one Fanonian moment:

when some scruffy looking git pipes to his crew --
Some Paki shit, like,
eee's loookin into!

(Nagra 2007: 11)

The discomfort of this moment of racial overdetermination is played off against a joke at the semi-literate racism of the 'scruffy-looking git', with his northern English long vowels (*'eee's loookin'*), who assumes that a 'Paki' will be reading 'Paki shit', and doesn't recognise the poet's name as Irish (the 'sharp lemon-skinned' yellow Faber edition has Muldoon's name emblazoned in large letters on the cover). Belonging, in other words, cuts two ways here: a claim to ownership of an unquestioned Britishness on grounds of racial whiteness, offset by exclusion from a literary culture defined by region, class, language, and education.

And yet, the narrator has more in common with the 'scruffy looking git' than he knows. Frustrated – as much by Muldoon's multilingual experimentalism, the “Badhbh’ ... ‘Cailidin’ ... ‘Salah-eh-din” of the poem he is reading, ‘Yarrow’, as by the racist's taunting – he silently mimics both of their 'voices' as he protests to himself

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*Well mate, this Paki's more British than that inde-
cipherable, impossibly untranslatable*

sod of a Paddy --

(Nagra 2007: 11)

Couched within a formal pastiche of Muldoon, the break before 'sod of a Paddy' brings it into sharp relief, while the rhyme with 'Paki' restores 'Paddy' to all its racist vitriol. This association is not lost on the narrator, who is shocked into recognition. It should also perhaps make us notice, if we did not do so before, the unacknowledged language of *class* hatred in the poem: the 'yobbos' of the title, the 'scruffy looking git', the narrator's mimicry of his assailant's working-class northern accent. Suddenly overwhelmed by the overdetermined historicity of his 'own' language, the speaker ends the poem in the choked silence of an ellipsis:

I catch my throat gungeing
on its Cromwellian vile, my tongue foaming for soap...

(Nagra 2007: 11)

The English language is, in Nagra's poetry, laden with the legacies of inequality and oppression, particularly (but not uniquely) of empire, which constitute a trap of 'Cromwellian vile' for the unwary. The speaker of 'Yobbos!' mimics the racists who assault him, only to find his own language just as compromised. Sometimes explicitly acknowledged, sometimes not, the English spoken by Nagra's poems is often freighted with histories of prejudice, with 'riverings of blood' (Nagra 2007: 39). Even Kabba, when he accuses his poet-creator of racist 'mickeying', is not immune from this sedimented history (Nagra 2007: 43).

In such an etymological calling-to-account, the poem 'A Black History of the English-Speaking Peoples' casts its titular language (the title itself a reworking of Churchill's *History of the English-Speaking Peoples*) as a dense fabric of lexical borrowing and intertextual allusion that practically

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staggers under the weight of its own history. Its narrator, watching a performance of one of Shakespeare's history plays at the Globe Theatre on London's South Bank, is '[spun] from my stand' into a reflection on the enfolded legacies of the British empire, and their saturation of the discursive systems which sustained and reproduced it:

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.

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 up the ghost of a husband's flaming pyre.

(Nagra 2011: 50)

The English Nagra uses reveals not only its saturation with imperial discourse, but also the mobility and mutability of that discourse across time and to suit new modes of power. The hyphenated connection between 'trade-winds-and-Gulf-Stream' is echoed in semantic chains which link 'sobbing suttees' to 'book burning', and connect Churchill (whose legacies to the English language, lest we forget, include the phrase 'keep Britain white') with 'shock and awe'.

The position of the narrating poet within this linguistic order is an uncertain one. He asks

So does the red of Macaulay's map run through

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my blood? Am I a noble scruff who hopes a proud
academy might canonise
his poems for their faith in canonical allusions?

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!

(Nagra 2011: 51)

Yet the distinction between Macaulayan comprador and 'gung-ho' rebel is blurry -- 'gung-ho' a loanword introduced into English from Mandarin by US marines in world war two in the South Pacific; 'Bolshie' a modified borrowing turned against its Russian original. In section III, the poet-narrator lays out the problem:

Perhaps to aid the succession
of this language of the world,
for the poet weeding the roots, for the debate

in ourselves, 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.

(Nagra 2011: 52)

The poet-as-etymologist is tasked with exposing the 'roots' of the language, digging down and removing corruption in order to facilitate new growth. The 'manorial slime' carries an echo of Derek Walcott's 'On the Ruins of a Great House': 'some slave is rotting in this manorial lake' (Walcott 1986: 20); so too does the poet's ambivalence, torn between love and outrage for the legacies of the English language. In Nagra's poem, any attempt at reconciliation appears almost fatally

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compromised by the sheer density and proliferation of the poem's borrowings and allusions: from Macaulay to US forces in the South Pacific to 'shock and awe', from Tennyson to Churchill to the Rushdie affair, its English words generated by, and reproducing in their reiteration, the operations of imperial and neoimperial power. Yet at the same time, the poem also suggests how struggle in language may effect change. The properties of English poetry carry the influence of Walcott, as well as Kipling. The phrase '*necessary murder*' evokes not only W H Auden's 'Spain', but also Orwell's attack on Auden's use of the phrase in 'Inside the Whale' (Auden 1937; Orwell 1940). In the end, the greatest danger, the poem signals, comes not from the linguistic residues of history, so much as their sanitization and erasure:

And how swiftly the tide removes from the scene
The bagpipe clamouring
Garrisons with the field-wide scarlet soldiery

And the martyr's cry: Every man die at his post!
Till what's ahead are the upbeat lovers who gaze
From the London Eye
At multinationals lying along the sanitized Thames.
(Nagra 2011: 53)

Thus when Nagra's poems insist on an etymological perspective, they do so not only to problematize the 'manorial slime' at the roots of English, but also to underscore the language's historical constructedness and therefore its availability to be reshaped in use. In this attentiveness to the historicity and mutability of language, and its implications for linguistic agency, Nagra's poetic etymologies recall Raymond Williams' insistence in *Keywords* on English not as

a tradition to be learned, nor a consensus to be accepted, nor a set of meanings which, because it is 'our language,' has a natural authority; but as a shaping and reshaping, in real circumstances and from profoundly different and important points of view: a

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vocabulary to use, to find our own ways in, to change as we find it necessary to change it, as we go on making our own language and history. (Williams 1976: 21-2)

Yet Nagra's English, 'franchised' through the empire, belies the isomorphic relationship of language and community implied by Williams, and in it the work of 'shaping and reshaping' must be underpinned not only by the diachronic axis of etymology but also by the synchronic operations of multilingual disruption. In poem 'Tippoo Sultan's Incredible White-Man-Eating Tiger-Toy Machine!!!', for example, the language available to the British Asian poet's use is a 'coolly imperial diction': controlled, orderly, yet never completely his. The OED tells us that 'coolly' means:

Coolly, *adv.*

Unemotionally, dispassionately; deliberately, without haste; calmly, composedly.

Nevertheless, this sense of 'calm' and 'composed' imperial order turns out to be anything but. In a poem focused on the relationship between the empire and the English language, the sign 'coolly' is disrupted by interference from its colonial homophone 'coolie':

Coolie, *n.*

In India and (later also) China: a hired labourer (esp. one employed by a European); a porter (now esp. in a railway station). Hence also: an Asian labourer working abroad (now chiefly *hist.*).

Yet that is not all – the 'Bolly Bhaji' also gives as its Punjabi homonym:

coolly -- loose (morally or materially) (Nagra 2011: 55)

The apparently stable sign becomes unmoored both intralingually and interlingually – 'coolly' / 'coolie' / 'coolly' – the poet's 'imperial diction' slipping to reveal its ongoing indentureship to the history of empire, but also suggesting how Punjabi can fracture English and make it foreign to itself, 'loosening' the binding ties of history.

Nagra's poetry offers an important perspective on the politics of language in contemporary Britain, viewed through a historical lens by which the English language itself, and Britain's postcolonial multilingualism, may be seen as effects and legacies of the imperial past. Deflating of monolithic

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monolingualisms, Nagra's work revels in its heteroglot wordplay, while asking serious ethical questions about the risks and responsibilities inherent in particular kinds of linguistic and poetic practice. His poems reveal and interrogate the imagined connections of language to race and national belonging, but also the imbrication of language with social class, gender, generation, and regional identity. Above all, Nagra's poems privilege everyday multilingualism as a space both of conflict and generation, where – to cite Williams again – the 'making' of 'language and history' takes place. In the poem 'Raju t'Wonder Dog!', 'Yorkshire Punjabi' flourishes in a shop in Huddersfield run by the narrator Avtar and his wife Sapna. Avtar is a welcoming narrator, and in the space of the shop, language too is accommodating: Yorkshire dialect -- "Tha gret wazzock!", "fettlin" – code-switching comfortably with Punjabi 'soofna'. The poem begins:

First good penny I spent in 'uddersfield,
after t'shop, were on a sweet-as-ladoos
alsatian, against me wife, Sapna's wishes.
Reet from t'off there were grief cos Beena,
what's Sapna's friend, were visitin' –
showin' off her reet bonny aubergine sari
t'spit o'Meera Syal. Appen t'cage fer Raju
weren't locked... I were fettlin' stuff
on t'other aisle when I 'eard him skatin'
towards t'till fer Beena!

(Nagra 2011: 18)

The poem exploits the apparent comic potential of this mixed language, splicing two British comedic staples by locating northern working-class slapstick in the setting of the Asian-owned corner-shop; even as it proceeds to confound the expectations engendered by both, in a humane evocation of romantic love and the pain of unwanted childlessness. Avtar translates the couple's loving, multilingual in-jokes by addressing the reader:

By t'way 'soofna' means 'dream' –

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a bit like Sapna in't it? That's why Raju
and me'll stoop and I'll say: *Sapna*,
you're me soofna. Why would I do
owt like to upset me soofna? Chucklin'
she'll add: *Aab Avtar, you're me avatar.*
T'customers'll coo or look reet confused.

(Nagra 2011: 19)

In the confines of Avtar's shop, we see the operations of what Paul Gilroy terms 'conviviality' – an openness and hospitality born of Britain's 'unkempt, unruly, and unplanned multicultural' -- played out in and through language (Gilroy 2004: x). Yet while Gilroy largely privileges London as the laboratory of conviviality, Nagra sets this scene of multilingual generosity and openness in the working-class north of England, where two of Britain's disenfranchised language forms, Yorkshire English and Punjabi, combine in the everyday accommodations of 'Yorkshire Punjabi'.

This is not to suggest any kind of naïve optimism – code switching as linguistic utopia. Avtar's Yorkshire Punjabi is no more straightforwardly 'authentic' than is the language of the speaker of 'Darling and Me!'; and like that poem, this one trades somewhat on the commonplace comedic assumptions accruing to its poetic voice (Raju crashing into a towering 'pink wafer display', the ensuing chaos leaving 'me laffin' too / and t'queue of 'ouse weefs near weein") before giving way to the more humane and melancholy detailed texture of Avtar's relationship with Sapna. Leaving questions of authenticity aside, the poem's staging of conviviality is notably fragile, uneven, and provisional. Some of Avtar's customers 'coo', others look 'reet confused'; all may eventually desert this space of conviviality for the 'bright lights / o'Morrisons'. Avtar and Sapna's 'failing IVFs', meanwhile, as well as the poem's confinement within the space of the shop, perhaps caution against any easy suggestion that the scene might be readily reproduced. Nevertheless, in its refusal of the conventional distinction between endogamous and exogamous, Yorkshire English as 'local', Punjabi as 'exotic', Nagra makes of language what James Procter has called the 'postcolonial everyday', a

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quotidian site where the relationship between 'Asianness' and 'Englishness' becomes 'commonsense' and 'taken-for-granted' (Procter 2006). Speaking English 'like a native' looks very different here.

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¹ It is beyond the scope of this essay to consider the different statuses accorded to so-called 'indigenous' and 'immigrant' languages, but the Act does in fact enshrine both Welsh and Scots Gaelic, alongside English, as alternate languages of national belonging.

² The OED gives the first English usage of 'bhaji' as 1832; by 1888, it had made its way into the *Wife's Help to Indian Cookery: being a practical manual for housekeepers*.

³ On questions of marketing and commodification see in particular Huggan 2001.

⁴ On Hindi as the dominant language of Bollywood see Bose 2006.