Loose Can(n)on:

Literary Tradition in Daljit Nagra’s British Museum

This paper considers the ways in which the poet Daljit Nagra engages with concepts of canon and tradition in his most recent collection, British Museum (2017). Throughout the collection, Nagra provides readers with a multifaceted insight into the ways in which a plurality of “cultures” and “traditions” — literary, historical, political, religious — might function within contemporary notions of what it means to be British and to live, as a writer, with both the legacies and consequences of literary heritage. British Museum, this paper argues, explores what it means for Nagra to be connected to and grounded in the canons of English Literature, and how he makes sense of his own position. The discussion, like British Museum itself, is framed by a consideration of what happens when we review canons of culture and their place within an increasingly diverse society. Underlying the inevitable conflicts and dislocation involved in (re-)defining traditions and cultural canons, this paper considers the ways in which Nagra identifies, through plurality, a fundamental desire for the meaningful connection of canonical culture with the diverse 21st century world.

Keywords: Daljit Nagra, British Museum, tradition, English Literature, literary canon

Introduction: Turning Traditions Upside Down

The publication of Daljit Nagra’s first two collections of poetry, Look We Have Coming to Dover! (Nagra, 2005) and Tippoo Sultan’s Incredible White-Man-Eating Tiger Toy-Machine!!! (Nagra, 2011), immediately established him as a writer engaged with what Noel-Tod (2017: 36) terms “the conundrum of national identity”. Nagra’s interest in changing perceptions of culture and in ideas of cultural “ownership” and appropriation has continued. Nagra is increasingly interested in engaging creatively with (re-)readings both of liminal cultures and societies in the process of change (Green, 2020) — even, and perhaps especially, where this requires us to challenge received cultural formations and “roots”. Nagra’s subversive yet sensitive handling of cultural transformations in Ramayana (Nagra, 2013) — by intention a “bastardized” version that draws on a plethora of traditions —
demonstrates his facility in enacting the “translation” of literary and cultural artefacts as they come into contact with other traditions. Green (2020: 3) sees Ramayana as “at the same time an act of ownership and ‘de-ownering’”. In many ways British Museum (2017) is engaged in a similar project. In this case, however, it is the canons of mainstream British culture and attitudes towards them that Nagra brings under his creative microscope.

British Museum explores “the kinds of secondary movement” (Green, 2020: 5) traditions and canons have to make in the process of cultural transition (Clifford, 1997). In negotiating these waters, Nagra provokes his readers to consider whether and in what ways works of art or other cultural productions are ever truly nationally definitive. He considers the significant ways in which reading and interpretation relate to cultural experience, adopting a stance that is both critical and appreciative, or “aesthetic” in Rosenblatt’s sense of the word (1986). In interesting ways this highlights how, for Nagra, modalities of writing and reading are inevitably political activities centred on questions of cultural identity and ownership. As in his previous collections, Nagra remains preoccupied with the politics of language. So British Museum can be read, on one level, as an overtly politicised “conversation” between Nagra and English Literature, addressing directly his position as a British Asian poet — ideas redolent of Bhabha (1994). As well as being a political crucible, however, British Museum also displays Nagra’s deep affection for the British literary tradition. The rifts thus exposed, however, may lie less in the “fact” of literary canon than in orientational disjunctions between readers and texts.

Such issues are brought to the fore in a set of poems addressing cultural storehouse and locations, such as the British Museum, the BBC, Hadrian’s Wall, The Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology in Cambridge, and the Poetry Library at the Southbank Centre. In these poems, Nagra considers how British society publicly presents and understands culture — both British and global — and the complex historical and political relationships this implies. Contrastingly, he also presents us with a number of more intimate cultural locations: the home (“Father of Only Daughters” (2017: 3)), the gurdwara (“Prayer for a Gurdwara” (2017: 5)), trains (“From the Ambient Source” (2017: 26-7)), and the classroom (“The Dream of Mr Bulram’s English” (2017: 36-7)). The counterpoint thus established in the collection between public and private spaces allows Nagra to explore sometimes contradictory
views of what it means for him (and his readership) to live in the “British Museum”. In “Prayer for a Gurdwara” (“017: 5), for example, the contemplative space of the poem culminates in Nagra, “Sikh by birth, secular by nature” (5), posing a subdued but politically explosive question about the Guru Granth Sahib: “when has our holy book ever hurt Britain?”. Readers are left with the troublesome pressure to answer as they try to place this experience within their vision of contemporary Britain and its complex relationship with minority groups and their “books”, which are often perceived as cultural, and even political threats. Similarly, “Naugaja” (2017: 14), a poem that offers a sensitive consideration of the ways in which cultures engage, highlighting the ways in which a generation of Sikh immigrants and their alternative cultural canons have “enriched” the “values of Britain” (14).

Such deft weighing of alternatives and their roles in establishing a British culture for the 21st century is typical of Nagra’s (serious) playfulness. Huizinga (1955: 132) observes that play is a central component of “the structure of creative imagination itself”. There is a strong sense of such creative play throughout British Museum, albeit it this is sometimes an edgy and dangerous game with much at stake. Huizinga’s suggestion that “the writer’s aim, conscious or unconscious, is to create a tension that will ‘enchant’ the reader and hold him spellbound” (132) resonates with the tensions that Nagra’s poetry produces.

The “spell” of British Museum is cast by Nagra’s engagement with the English literary canon. As Gunning (2008) has observed, Bloomian influence (1973) provides lens for reading Nagra’s verse, but there is also a liberal dose of subversive yet celebratory Bakhtinian carnival (1965) at work. Nagra’s ludic engagement with the canon (Huizinga, 1955) effects a playful realignment between his own language and that of the poets (and the other cultural influences) with which he engages — an extension, perhaps, of what Gilmour calls “the disruptive interplay between linguistic systems” (2015: 691).

The paper begins by establishing how Nagra’s British Museum might be seen to challenge traditional notions of culture and cultural expectations, exploring how Nagra adopts — in some senses akin to Shakespeare’s Prospero — a magus-like role whereby he “plays with” and controls cultural icons and understandings of culture in 21st century Britain. It then proceeds to consider ideas of identity and ambiguity in relation to cultural — and especially literary — canons, discussing the
important role of cultural “margins” and the role of these in providing challenges to dominant modes of culture and cultural institutions.

**Prospero’s Book**

Particularly interesting in pursuing Huizinga’s metaphor of the spell is Nagra’s use of the figure of Prospero. *The Tempest* (Shakespeare, 2005) book-ends *British Museum* and Prospero structurally stands astride the collection. He is the first figure invoked in “Broadcasting House” (2017: 6-10), where repeated imagery of ship and island inevitably recalls the play, and “Meditations on the British Museum” (2017: 49-53), the final poem, leaves readers with a reflection on “our fair isle” in which “Prospero’s surveillance hoards our every scripted quip for the island of our interrogation” (49). Prospero is a particularly rich figure Nagra, and the island of the play, he has stated, “in my head always feels like Britain” (Green, 2020: 11).

Nagra is also convinced of “the importance of challenging cultures to see themselves in accepting relation to others, an exercise in harmony and peace through literary craftsmanship” (Green, 2020: 13). *British Museum* seems, in many ways, to be an exercise of literary craftsmanship in the difficult process of cultural harmonisation, and in this, Prospero offers Nagra a rich vein of inspiration. At the end of *The Tempest* (Shakespeare, 2005) the magus steps without the imagined confines of the drama and assumes fellowship with the audience in the “real” space of the theatre, inviting them to participate in the decision about what is to happen next:

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I must be here confined by you
Or sent to Naples. …
Gentle breath of yours my sails
Must fill, or else my project fails,
Which was to please.
(145)
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This conclusion, like *British Museum*, conjures a state of conditionality in which potential meanings and futures are submitted to the reader’s judgement. As Nagra (the Prospero of the piece) draws the collection to an end we are left poised in a space where literary and real
worlds intersect. Unlike Prospero, however, Nagra-as-magus seems to aim to trouble as well as to please.

Nagra’s invocation of Prospero, then, may be seen as self-conscious literary disguise; an act “not only of deploying actions or submitting to one’s fate in an imaginary milieu, but of becoming an illusory character oneself, and of so behaving” (Caillois, 2001: 19). Nagra, like Prospero, creates a manifestly playful literary world self-consciously aware of its own imaginary. In controlling his “actors” and the situations they face, Prospero engages in “authorial” work and “writes” his characters; similarly, Nagra “writes” other authors from the canon of English Literature, making them “actors” within British Museum. Tellingly, as the physical spaces for his visions, Prospero invokes “The cloud-capp’d towers, the gorgeous places, / The solemn temples, the great globe itself” (Shakespeare, 2005: 115) — places with more than a passing resemblance to the cultural institutions Nagra invokes throughout British Museum. These seemingly substantial places, however, do not offer the kinds of permanence and security of legacy that one might imagine. Rather, as Prospero observes, “all which it inherit, shall dissolve / And lie this insubstantial pageant faded” (115). Prospero, the dominant cultural magus of British Museum, ironically brings into question the extent to which accepted bastions of knowledge and culture in fact provide the kinds of security and rootedness that canons imply.

**Canon as Identity**

Canons and traditions of different kinds, and the relationships or conflicts between them, are central to British Museum. The idea of traditions as potentially problematic is established from the very first poem of the collection where, in the intimate space of the familial home, our view of the young daughter is shaped by the persona’s memory and the traditional requirements of his own parents — how he was “forced to remain in wedlock / to uphold the family name” (2017: 2). Now, with his “second-chance life” he encounters the world in a new way, his perspective turned both metaphorically and literally “upside down”.

Such topsy-turvy perspectives are also applied to the literary canon. Gunning (2008), drawing on Bloomian (1973) notions of poetic
influence, offers a reading of Nagra’s early poetry that places him in anxious, even confrontational relation to English Literature. The speaker-poet of “A Black History of the English-Speaking Peoples” (Nagra, 2011: 51) holds a troubled view of the literary canon, fearing that he may be seen as:

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

Nagra’s position in British Museum, extends this earlier position. His engagement with canonical British culture and tradition is no pietistic act of faith in a cultural monolith. His playful reworking of the terms and forms of the literary canon demonstrates a project of forging new and integrative languages — literary, cultural, and political (Chambers, 2010). For Bhanot (2019), the establishment of “voice” in the literary-performative act is a significant process in establishing identity. What is perhaps most striking about British Museum is its multi-voicedness as Nagra engages both with his own evolving literary voice and with the plethora of canonical “voices” that find their place within the fabric of his work. The “ownership” of these voices demonstrates, perhaps, how Nagra continues a direction of travel first identified by Chambers (2010) away from the cultural hyphenation of British-Asian to a more liberating British Asian (Mishra, 1996).

To return to Bhanot’s ideas, however, it is important to consider the extent to which Nagra’s poetic performances in British Museum represent not just surface or presentation, but also depth and interiority. Heidegger (2002: 45), proposes poetry’s capacity to reveal truth through what he refers to as “projective saying”, a form of language that offers the potential for the disclosure of truths by bringing forth articulations which are ordinarily hidden. In Nagra’s work we often encounter what might be termed “double-textedness”: we necessarily read Nagra’s own poetic utterances as projective extensions of his own literary reading. Both Bakhtin (1982) and Barthes (1974) insist that processes of interpretation are affected by the extent to which meaning is perceived as fixed — the extent, in Bruner’s terms (1986), to which readers avail themselves of subjunctivizing space. British Museum systematically engages with the interstitial (subjunctivizing) spaces between the literary canon and Nagra’s own verse. In these spaces, the liberating yet
anarchic functions of Bakhtinian carnival (1965) are never far away. As, for example, in “GET OFF MY POEM WHITEY” (2017: 38-40), a poem that captures Nagra’s relationship with the English literary canon at its most troubled, worrying at the boundaries of canonicity and the idea of poetic “roots”. He has referred to this poem as “a Caliban-like rant” (Green, 2020: 11), this character representing for Nagra the “tortured embodiment of conflict” (11). The conflicting emotions and statements of this poem capture the difficult heart of Bakhtinian carnival.

Ambiguity to the canon

The dilemma of canon in *British Museum* is captured in the figures of Mr Bulram and Mr Kabba, who might be seen as dichotomous “externalisations” of the poet. Nagra admires Bulram’s “attempts to seek dignity and acceptance of the past and his need to find a way for people of colour to lose their embittered attitude” (Green, 2020: 9). “The Dream of Mr Bulram’s English” (2017: 36-7) posits him as an inspirational teacher who hopes “to spin their minds/timeless with Chaucer, Donne, Keats and Byron, /with Tennyson and Browning” and “our tongue Shakespearean” (2017: 36) — a tongue sublimated by allusion to *Hamlet* (Shakespeare, 2013): “this flesh feels too solid” (36). The attraction of canon and its language is captured in Bulram’s striving for “This heartfelt Word evermore, this shared tongue” that is embodied in the King James Bible and those who “grafted the English canon” (37). Bulram’s vision of English teaching, however, is not bound by the conventional canon, as the presence of Martin Luther King and Wordsworth’s desire to possess “a canvas-bound Arabian Nights” (37) attest. Movement beyond the canonical confines of literature is a means of understanding that literature is a force that “springs universal” (37), though we might question whether Nagra feels Bulram has become “too English” and can no longer fully see the problems with the “exotic” tradition that the Arabian Nights and other such texts offered colonialism.

It is both contradictory and apt that this paean to the humane benefits of literature should be succeeded by the stormy Kabba-like literary world of “GET OFF MY POEM WHITEY” (2017: 38-40). Here Nagra vilifies the idea of his poetry as “text-book samples / of the multicultural or the postcolonial” (40). This is literature as contested site
of ownership, limitation and control. The poem resides on the borders of discomfort, making bleak fun, creating discords, violating language. Here there is no space for cleanliness and sanitization, but ideas of “taste” remain, nevertheless, at the poem’s core: “your editors boast they elect by taste / if they like me they think I’m exotic / if they think I’m too English I’m a mimic” — a fear captured in the poet’s invocation of Beecher Stowe’s (1981) “Uncle Tom-ti-Tom-tease” (38). The mocking-ambivalent voice of the poem simultaneously reveres and lambasts canonical English Literature:

is your holy word a Whitey canon
when I drool at your canon
I drool at your lowing herd centuries of verse
(39)

The political past also looms large: “when I think of your canon do I think of your cannons / if I allude to your canon do I soil your canon” (39). The poem with angry — yet also comic and absurd — tone proposes an unvarnished conceptualisation of canon and literary history, however, the poem is ultimately conceived in canonical terms. In his recognition that “now Caliban’s my voice” (40), Nagra recognizes the ties of the literary canon even at the margins.

Culture at the Margins

An ambiguous sense of (non-)belonging is also evident in “Cane” (2017: 11), where Nagra highlights ideas of cultural division, placing the study of literature in contradistinction to the culture of the family home. The imperative “No English talk at home!” (11) stands in sharp contrast to the young man who “steal[s] off to study for an English degree”. The literary classics are a world away from the mother’s “sloppy Bollywood” — the speaker’s patronising use of “Sloppy” and “polly” leave an unpleasantly vindictive note in riposte to the mother’s refusal to accept the son’s education. The uncomfortable counterpoint established here enacts Nagra’s observation that “it’s difficult to take a hard, fast line on hybridity” (Chambers, 2010: 94). British Museum is deeply imbued with the need to displace stereotypes and to explore the ways in which divergent histories and identities function in 21st century
Britain and globally (Clifford, 1997). Nagra is alive to the ways in which cultures (dis)connect, exploring “the imagined unities of tradition” (Gunning, 2008: 97). It is significant, therefore, that throughout British Museum he returns to the idea of borders and boundaries, be they of language, of colour, or of culture.

The “deliberate tension” (Green, 2020: 7) he cultivates capture Nagra’s position as “an outsider, but inside at the same time” — his liminal sensibility. “Hadrian’s Wall” (2017: 15) provides a good example. Written from the edges of an historical empire, this poem embodies ideas of political separation and exclusion. As a physical line of defence, the wall represents a space where canons, cultures and traditions both meet and are separated. This is a wall located at the margins of the cultured Roman world “to keep out the barbarous” (15) — a word troublingly repeated throughout British Museum. It serves as a symbol of the dangers surrounding definitions of canon, with divisive views of what is “in” and what is “out”. These dangers are highlighted in the final lines of the poem: “To keep us / from trespass, will our walls be raised/watchful as the Great Firewall of China?” (2017: 15).

Other important boundaries in the collection include the trenches of World War 1 (“On Your ‘A 1940 Memory’”, 2017: 20-1), the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland (“From the Ambient Source”, 2017: 26-7) and the River Lethe (“Sleeping in Lindau”, 2017: 28-9). This last poem, set “On the borders of Lindau” (28), considers the painful experience of cultures meeting and separating: “whoever can face up to horror / and survive must be held by a vision at root” (29). For Nagra, however, healing is possible, and he upholds:

A primal vision
that firms you to suggest we can eradicate
our own chambers of hate for we are big
people who can forgive.

(29)

In such forgiveness lies the promise of “a berry harvest big as kind dreams” (29). Nagra seeks to transcend borders whilst also honouring the cultural, political, historical and religious pain they represent. These are awkward cultural and political negotiations indeed, but Milosz provides a symbol of overcoming hate and forging commonality.
“On Your ‘A 1940 Memory’” (2017: 20-1) is one of a number of poems in *British Museum* in which there is an overt dialogue with other poets — in this case, Siegfried Sassoon. Liminal spaces (No-man’s land) and margins (the trenches) are important here. The poem recalls the famous incident recounted in *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer* (1974) when, having single-handedly stormed the German line, Sassoon sits alone in an enemy trench reading poetry. His insanely brave action is captured in the anachronistic reference to “kamikaze” (20). In a further act of historical-spatial (dis)location, Nagra also invokes Britain’s colonial past as deaths on the Somme mutate into “an image of Britain, / whose kin made a killing in India” (21) — recalling additionally the fact that Sassoon’s family had made its wealth in the Orient. As in “GET OFF MY POEM WHITEY” (2017: 38-40) Nagra is alive to the literary-historical as well as the homophonic connection between “canon” and “cannon”.

Nagra, however, desires to transcend such liminal spaces and boundaries, seeking a cultural redefinition of Britishness. One of the ways he achieves this is through his use of literary and other (sometimes distinctly “lowerbrow”) cultural references — *Only Fools and Horse* and *Strictly Come Dancing* are good examples. In this respect, *British Museum* continues a trend established in Nagra’s earlier work. As Gilmour has noted, language and the collision of languages has always been at the heart of Nagra’s work. Approaching this from the perspective of Bakhtinan dialogic (1982), Gilmour (2015) considers the overtly heteroglossic and multilingual possibilities of Nagra’s poetry. Her reading of his work emphasizes the inherent “ownership” and “power” that go with language. She sees Nagra’s work as enacted response to a linguistic politics where “monolingual ideology continues to hold sway” (688). His poetic project in *British Museum* challenges a monolingualist perspective with English as “the guarantor of culture, education, social cohesion, economic advancement and moral order” (689).

By drawing upon cultural icons from across the spectrum of taste, Nagra proposes his own alternative “canon” of Britishness. Inevitably, whilst honouring plurality and diversity, this exposes the inherent insecurity (linguistic, social, cultural, political, literary, moral) that silently underpins a monolithic and unitary view of culture and language. Bakhtinian dialogism and carnival apply as Nagra engages in what might be seen as cultural heteroglossia. The celebratory listing of
both “high” and “low” cultural milestones in “Darling and Me!” (Nagra, 2007: 3-4), provides a preview of cultural eclecticism that emerges in more extended ways in British Museum. Nagra’s is a world in which strong transferrable capitals (Bourdieu, 1984) are not only desirable but personally, culturally, societally, and morally necessary.

Talking to the canon

Bakhtinian dialogic functions in two senses in Nagra’s work: firstly in that his poetry consistently inhabits the interstitial creative spaces between poets’ own reading and writing; and secondly, in that it exposes the interface between what poets write and what readers read. These two processes enact Bakhtin’s reflection that “every word is directed towards an answer and cannot escape the profound influence of the answering word that it anticipates” (1982: 280). In British Museum, this “dialogue” is immediately visible through Nagra’s use of epigraphs which function as literary points of departure or as cultural markers to be read simultaneously into and against the poems that follow.

“Vox Populi, Vox Dei” (2017: 4) opens with two lines from Robert Graves’ “A Country Mansion” (2003: 374) — a title that in itself invokes images of English pastoral and patriarchy. The lines, based on an assumption of entitlement and inheritance, provide their own privileged commentary on the poem’s cast-list of heritage figures — Drake, Nelson, Darwin, Brunel, Newton, Clive of India — who delineate canonical, cultural Britishness. However, so far from adopting the kind of assertive tone we might expect, the poem is fundamentally interrogative in mode, questioning the nature and the legacy of these figures and the traditions and canons of history, science and empire they represent. The poem’s opening demand — “Who are we at root?” (4) — captures Nagra’s unease as he explores the cultural relationship between these historical figures — the “they” of the poem — and the inclusive “we” (our 21st century sense of shared identity?). Indeed, Nagra’s use of the first person inhabits a liminal space, as if questioning whether the “I” can ever really be part of the shared “we”. The effect of this is to create an on-going sense of the poems of British Museum as parodies, which provides a rewarding if unsettling lack of closure.

Nagra portrays the quasi-religious power of these historical Establishment figures, envisaging us “chant[ing] our poetic names” (4).
But these incantations do not lead to the kinds of certainty, the kinds of “rooting” we might expect. The poem’s flurry of questions demonstrates the extent to which canons of knowledge are open to legitimate doubt and debate. When Nagra asks “Who else to deepen us?” (4) he invokes wealthy alternative traditions of knowledge — Julian of Norwich, John Barleycorn, the Tolpuddle Martyrs, Obama, Septimus Severus. As in “Father of Only Daughters” (2017: 3), we are left with a vision of a world turned “upside down” — the sense that received wisdom, received history, received politics, science and religion are insufficient to the moment; that “at root” (4) we are more than this and that new versions of canon are needed in order to help us see ourselves (Clifford, 1997).

“The Look of Love” (2017: 34-5) takes its epigraph from the Fourth Book of Thomas Campion’s Bookes of Ayres (2016: 175). Here Nagra plays uncomfortably with the word “Ape”, capturing not only its meaning of mimicry (a pertinent idea in relation to Nagra’s use literary allusion) but also its less salubrious application as racial slur (“I think that I’m the ape in the room” (34)). As Rosenblatt (1986: 123) cautions, “verbal signs carry both public, socially accepted, decontextualised linkages between sign and object, and private, kinaesthetic, affective, cognitive colourings”, and it is this troubled space that Nagra exposes. Another instance is his use of the word “barbarous”. In “The Look of Love” it is employed in relation to ideas of “bloodline”, ethnicity and culture — “Once I was coloured and you were English” (35) — and the persona’s sense of not belonging: “I must not measure myself / by the wealth of your heritage/which will never be imagined as mine” (35). Bloodline proves to be another of the many boundaries that Nagra explores. Such discomfiting concepts are sublimated at the end of the poem, which contemplates the “accruing hints // of dark print” (35). This is a poem where traditional canons and words have the power simultaneously to bring together and to divide, a state of affairs symbolised by the panopticon of stanza VI, the Benthamite (2008) and Foucauldian (1995) overtones of which resonate in the prohibitive “I must not” of stanza VII. Nagra senses that he “remain[s] an Englishman /who lights upon the booty” (35), but that this is a treasure he can never quite own.

Other allusions to the literary canon are equally troublesome. When, for example, in “Prayer for a Gurdwara” (2017: 5) Nagra refers to “my Larkin train-brain”, he captures the fragile and understated
elegiac note of Larkin’s “The Whitsun Weddings” (1964: 21-3), and with it something of the sadness, the nobility and the subdued hope that is a feature of the fledgling marriages of Larkin’s poem, applying these to the emergence of Sikh culture in England. He also employs evocative dualities in a fashion akin to Larkin — brown/white, Asian/British, mainstream/marginal, secular/Sikh — and through these dualities makes a moving plea for tolerance.

Larkin is again a significant presence in “Ode to England” (2017: 30-31) — a yearning poem capturing the desire to understand and to forge personal belonging in a place that shapes its vision of itself via nostalgia. Like Larkin in “Going Going” (2014: 194-5), Nagra piles image upon image of an idyllic England:

your golden days
A brillig of bonbon and sherbet awnings for butcher,
baker, Lipton’s; the lanes wafting Yorkshire puds
with gravy that called home Brownies and Cubs.
(31)

Nagra’s serendipitous use of “brillig” recalls “The Jabberwocky” (Carroll, 2003), suggesting that such visions are both supremely British and also nonsense. The cartoons of the final stanza also help establish the cultural mélange of the poem. Like Strictly Come Dancing, The Archers and Only Fools and Horses they represent an alternative (but equally significant) cultural canon of Britishness.

As this web of allusions suggests, “roots” are very significant in British Museum. “Vox Populi, Vox Dei” (2017: 4) asks “Who are we at root?”, a question redolent of sources and identity, tradition and growth. It also echoes another of Nagra’s poetic inspirations, Seamus Heaney, whose use of roots in “Personal Helicon” (1966: 57) envisions an earthbound form of memory. It is significant, therefore, that the word “root” and other words in the same family appear repeatedly throughout the collection — “rootless” (“Cane” (11)), “uproot” (“Naugaja” (13)), “uprooted yet rooted” (“From the Ambient Source” (6)); elsewhere, Czeslaw Milosz is “held by a vision at root” (“Sleeping in Lindau” (29)). In “The Look of Love” (34), tradition is captured in the image of a “bloodline/at root barbarous”. Finally, the exhibits in “Meditations at the British Museum” (51) “uproot my nice day out”.

These repetitions and variations demonstrate the on-going complexities
of Nagra’s relationship with cultural identity and his sense of his own Britishness. As he has observed:

A lot of white British poets, like Philip Larkin, look backwards as if they’re trying to define their roots by reference to some kind of imagined past because they can’t face or articulate the multiculturalism and the dynamic shifting of Britishness — that seems to me to represent an ossification of British culture. Of course, people need to understand their personal roots, but where roots are idealized and institutionalized to the extent that they can never be challenged — that’s a problem. (Green, 2020: 14)

Nagra has a lively sense of how rootedness and tradition represent significant challenges in the context of cultural transitions and interactions. His evident deep love for the English literary tradition is counterbalanced by a desire to distance himself from it. British Museum both exhibits and debunks what Green (2020: 8) has called “the entrenched monolingualism and political-cultural tunnel vision of English Literature”. Nagra, adopting a different perspective, sees himself as speaking not “from the centre of Britishness” (8), but “from the margins” (8). In his affectionate yet humorous use of the literary canon, Nagra admits to “a sort of modern-day politics of retrograde ‘owning’” (9) through which he makes the words and works of the past function within his own literary “museum”.

Seamus Heaney provides an excellent example of this. “Personal Helicon” (Heaney, 1966: 57), to which we have already referred, likens the roots of personal memory to a form of self-discovery. “From the Ambient Source” (2017: 26-7) draws inspiration from Heaney’s The Haw Lantern (2006). The beauty and clarity of Heaney’s poetry — “his verses starlight” (26) — sits alongside the defiant political reality of “a world where hope stands brave as Stormont” (26). Here poetry has the power both to (dis)comfort and (dis)locate as Nagra envisions us “uprooted, yet rooted, utterly humane” (26) and is entranced by the “mud-haunted rhymes” (26) that capture Heaney’s spirit as a poet whose Irishness places him on the margins of the British literary establishment. In “Meditations on the British Museum” (2017: 49-53), the bog bodies of North (Heaney, 1975) become charged political symbols variously of revolt, oppression and sacrifice. In Nagra’s hands they are “The bodies Heaney delved to evidence a turf of manoeuvre, empathy” (51),
representing a locus for change, a possibility for a new way of viewing historical events.

Nagra’s affinity with Heaney is evident — “When he ploughs his Ireland, I see gourds and grains/sprout over the Raj” (26) — and his words have an uplifting effect on Nagra: “My life is replenished” (26). It is as if the Empire and Britain are brought into a new alignment by the alchemy of poetry (Prospero’s magic?) so that “the texture of empire for nourishing grief with grace” (26) can be allowed to function and a restoration of literary equilibrium becomes possible. Nagra imagines how he might follow Heaney’s example and allow poetry to liberate him from the painful and shameful events of history:

If he becomes my dream mentor, from beyond the tracks,
could he show me the way to dignify what we’ve buried?
That we merely host the train of accusative thought
from the angered outsider within. Could my mentor
guide me into gravitas, so we breach the divide
in ourselves for a shared commemoration:
the famines, the battles, our jurisprudence and chin-up? (26-27)

Nagra also admires Heaney’s resolute and sometimes uncompromising spirit. In “GET OFF MY POEM WHITEY” (2017: 38-40), he alludes to Heaney’s famous lines from An Open Letter (1983), objecting to his inclusion in The Penguin Book of Contemporary British Poetry (Morrison, 1986) and the act of literary-political appropriation that represents. Nagra affirms his spiritual kinship with Heaney adding himself to the list of “the ones won’t stoop before the Union / of our Queen cos their passport’s green” (38).

“He Do the Foreign Voices” (2017: 18-19) explicitly invokes both Dickens, who uses the phrase in Our Mutual Friend (1997), and T.S. Eliot, who employed it as a working title for The Waste Land (2002). It is not surprising, therefore, that here Nagra addresses the idea of literary canon explicitly. The elliptical allusiveness of canon is further embedded in the poem as Nagra inscribes Eliot’s own literary appropriation from Conrad’s Heart of Darkness (2007): “Mistah Kurtz – he dead” (2017: 18). This is an example of what I have referred to previously as Nagra’s “double-textedness”, effecting a powerful literary
realignment as Nagra substantially relocates the black voices that both
Conrad and Eliot had appropriated.

In its turn, Nagra’s reshaping of these voices is thrown into relief
against Kamau Braithwaite. This is no straightforward inversion and
rejection of outmoded literary voices and views, however. Braithwaite
“implied it was the voice / itself, not the words - / the Eliot twang, the
mock English - / that persuaded the empire’s embrace for colonial
verse” (2017: 18). Nagra, on the other hand, makes a powerful case for
the power of the words themselves. We are aware of a double irony
here, in that both Eliot and Conrad adopted and were adopted by the
English literary tradition in further levels of literary and cultural
appropriation and are then re-appropriated for different ends by
Braithwaite and Nagra. This is literature that is simultaneously united
and divided upon the rock of a common language. On such a basis,
Nagra critiques “The pile-up of white males in English anthologies”
(18) and goes on to question the function of poetry in the face of
political power, where “somewhere just now a poet will be pulped / in
a state of terror” (19). What, he seems to be asking, is the cultural and
political function of literature on a global stage? In an act of cultural
grace and healing of the sort he envisages in “Sleeping in Lindau”
(2017: 28-9), he manages to draw the affirming conclusion that literature
has the power to purify and that this healing quality exists outside of
narrow canons, however these may be defined. He recognises that “our
hoard of words must cleanse the world” (19).

“Aubade” (2017: 44-5), another poem of liminal space, sharing its
title both with poems by MacNeice (2002) and Larkin (2003) provides
an apt conclusion to this section. The cultural worlds of Bloomian (1973)
and Eliotian (1999) influence and appropriation are foregrounded as
Nagra observes: “I’m dissolved in a voice / that can’t sever from its
verse” (44). The canon of literature in one sense provides a secure
foundation, yet Nagra’s sense of self is also open to doubt, his poems
considered as “feeble conceits”, and he is left pondering “Am I adrift in
my heritage?” (44).

Institution Poems

Cultural space — whether physical, as in the case of museums and
institutions, or literary — can be problematic, and in British Museum
Nagra attempts to capture his own “spatiality” of literature. In “The Vishnu of Wolverhampton” (2017: 22-4) Sikh culture is considered in relation to British culture. The poem’s emphasis upon skin embodies ideas of self-perception and shifting identity. To extrapolate into broader cultural terms, this may be taken to reflect the relationship between bodies politic (museums, institutions and corporations) and alternative institutions such as Gurdwaras and the transformations that occur when these come into contact with each other.

*British Museum* offers a sequence of poems based upon notable institutions — places that might be taken to represent cultural storehouses of different kinds — Broadcasting House, the British Museum, the Poetry Library, the Cambridge Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology. These institutions, of course, relate interestingly to ideas of canon — not necessarily always in the literary sense, but in terms of culture and tradition more broadly.

“Broadcasting House” (2017: 6-10) presents an array of cultural allusion, as if the works to which Nagra refers are exhibits. It opens by invoking the figures of Prospero and Ariel. Prospero, as explored earlier, is a central figure in *British Museum*. It is as if Nagra conjures Prospero to assert order over the complex maelstrom of troublesome history, culture and politics with which *British Museum* engages. To what extent, the poem seems to ask, does the BBC in fact represent the possibility of “a communal voice” (6)? Does it represent an acceptable and sanctioned canon of broadcastable values? And how does this play out in relation to a global politics where, whatever Britain’s own inflated sense of its own value, the BBC attempts to “bridge what seemed a commerce/between the globe-as-one and our land in tidal retreat” (6).

Nagra’s reference of Eluard (1942) is significant here. “Liberty” was composed in France under the strictures of Nazi occupation, and Nagra’s allusion therefore brings into question the nature of the freedom that the BBC represents. His explanatory gloss (“In the poem, the speaker wishes/freedom/for the magic of night and the white page/and all the things besides” (7)) suggests that freedom lies not in established certainties, but rather in the worlds of “magic”, “night” and the unknown potential of the “white page” — potent and pregnant images.

Passus X of *Piers Plowman* (Langland, 1992) provides another rich allusion, relating both to Broadcasting House’s ship-like architecture
and to the BBC’s role as Noachian cultural “vessel”: “There is a ship of
man / that becomes a ship of the world in Piers Plowman” (9). Sea-
faring imagery signals ideas of inundation and destruction (cultural?
political?) as well as the potential for salvation. Alternative cultural
canons, in this, are again part of Nagra’s cultural semantics. Ambridge,
from the iconic radio drama The Archers, along with “Christmas at Fools
and Horses, / seasonal dance-offs and celebs on sofas” (2017: 8) serve as
potential antidotes to the rantings of “angry callers, or ministers” (2017:
7). “Book at Bedtime” (2017: 8) also proves an unexpectedly anodyne
presence, turning Lawrence’s Lady Chatterley’s Lover (2006) from
scandalous banned book into something that might “ruffle” (2017: 8)
the collective bed sheets of the nation. Perhaps for Nagra “Broadcasting
House” represents a metaphorical ark of culture — a means of both
escape and re-creation. The cultural canons Nagra scrutinizes are under
threat, but are also freighted with the potential to save themselves
through some Prospero-like intervention as embodied in the figure of
“the Plowman who ascends the Hill of Battles with ideals” (2017: 9).

“The Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology in Cambridge”
(2017: 25) captures the idea of poetry in the “service” of culture: “the
dawn of my days as a poet-in-residence” (25). The poem exposes the
awkward truths at the heart of the museum — truths that are be further
exposed in “Meditations of the British Museum” (2017: 49-53). The
museum, a storehouse of sanctioned and permissible views of culture,
serves a “canonizing” function. So we see the Fijian Prime Minister
(“our tyrant” (25)) viewing the sanitized and politically correct version
of his nation’s past that does not display “’cannibal forks” but instead
focuses on acceptable cultural artefacts: “the kava bowl and whale //
teeth”, the whole experience served up with “the sweetest English
apples”. There is a profound discomfort at the heart of this poem as the
museum’s curators write acceptable versions of cultural tradition for
public consumption and for the politic appeasement of the Prime
Minister.

The epigraph to “Meditations on the British Museum” (2017: 48-53),
from MacNeice’s “Museums” (2007: 29), appositely raises philosophical
questions about the nature and function of museums. MacNeice implies
that it is visitors rather than exhibits that ironically become the focus of
the museum. Nagra develops this idea, seeing the museum as a
“canonical” re-writing of British cultural appropriation. The exhibits in
the museum are framed within a uniquely British context: “millennia of
/civilisation and handiwork as conceived by our fair isle” (49). This is world culture as read and represented through British eyes. The museum becomes, like the literary canon with which Nagra engages, a means “to measure / by upheld mirror our own silk goods and grave ills, our ideals”. The exhibits in the British Museum, like the exhibits in the Cambridge Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, are “Cleansed of a barbarous home from which they were bled” (50). The self-assurance of the nation that considers itself as civilized and civilizing in the face of barbarity, glosses over the irony that it has been guilty itself of barbarity in bleeding — both culturally and literally — the peoples of its colonies.

The items on display are explicitly and appropriately connected to the literary tradition that so enchants and troubles Nagra. They form part of an essential continuum in terms of cultural canon that requires him “to read between the lines a Burmese Orwell, / a Woolf in workaday Ceylon and a canon of post-colonialists” (51). In his search for “poetic grounding” (51), however, the meaning Nagra seeks lies not in the lines of the canon (the Orwells and the Woolfs), but between them. Nagra reads the canon not on its own terms but in the interstices between it suggests.

Conclusion

This paper has only begun to touch upon Nagra’s engagement with ideas of canon in British Museum. The list of names it could have addressed goes on — Yeats, Auden, Forster, Frankenstein. Let us, however, return by way of conclusion to the figure of Prospero, the master of the isle. In “Meditations on the British Museum” (2017: 48-53), Nagra observes how “Prospero’s surveillance hoards our every scripted quip for the island/of our interrogation” (52). Let us not forget, however, that the magus’ final act of reconciliation in The Tempest is also an act of renunciation, as he drowns his book. And so Nagra is left to contemplate: “No wonder / I stand in the Reading Room to rebut the gods so I can voice // the best of our house” (53). Perhaps, via the puissant figure of Prospero, Nagra is asking us to re-evaluate the role of the book and the literary canon and to question how our frames of reference might need to change if we are to establish a loose canon that
more aptly reflects the world in which we live — the kind of existential
reconstruction envisaged by Ackroyd (1993).

*British Museum* offers not a slavish attendance upon the literary
canon, but a personally inflected showcase — a thing that is both
beautiful and ugly, ordered and messy, rooted and adrift, traditional
and non-traditional, politically correct and politically abhorrent, known
and unknown. In bringing together these dichotomous positions, Nagra
has curated for us in *British Museum* a collection that moves into a new
realm, a place “where Britain is guardian/of the legacy to ensure
monumental mankind stay immemorial” (53).

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