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ARTICLE

Writing Race Under Capital: Nisha Ramayya, Nat Raha, and Daljit Nagra's 'Ramayana'

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This article surveys the work of three contemporary poets, tracing the writing of race within a post-colonial UK context. Using a methodology, derived from the work of Werner Hamacher, which considers philology to be a political investigative tool for studying language, the diasporic imagination and the works of global capital are delineated in the texture of the poetry considered. The article investigates how race figures in this poetry, and it pursues the idea of a 'second linguistic skin', a corollary to racialisation as a sign of the global, finding it to be a site of projected irreducible difference and attempted de-lexification.

Keywords: Nisha Ramayya; Nat Raha; Daljit Nagra; Race; Philology; Capitalism; Poetry

Introduction

This essay focuses on colonial legacies in the UK, and three poets whose writing bears these historical traces as the poems struggle with ongoing colonial consequences. Race is here a concept of control, primarily, even as it might exceed this context; race appears already as the signs of consciousness *written* on the skin and through the body, seen and written from a self-determining, transparent European colonising self.¹ Colonial regimes racialised speech and language in historically specific ways, and the legacies of this uneven extension of racial concepts continue to exceed theorisations of race – creating lived *facts of race*. These *facts* extend, unevenly, into every context across the globe in which race has been formed and in which it plays out. Counter-ideas – of writing back, of political solidarity, or of post-race, for example –

face a contradiction in which facts of race tend to extend past and encompass such strategies. Into this scene, a twining of race and poetry continues to be contested and retrieved, even as it unravels amidst the determining forces of capital and its founding colonial spatiality which continue to unfold in time.

In the UK, to write of racialisation now is to do so in a country in which the status of a post-colonial present is fractured, suppressed, hidden, or transformed into the asymmetrical hold of racism. This is paralleled by the false freedoms of a so-called post-racial turn which can only be a turn away from social realities.

Addressing the work of three poets writing from and with these conditions, I have begun by focusing on the operation of control as cultural interpretation. It's a negative starting point from which to then ask: where might race be found in these writings, and how might it be virtualised or written *out*? My sense of this question was formed by the idea of a *second skin*, understood as the '[a]nimated relay between epidermal certitude and stylistic vicissitude in the making of racial legibility'.² The second skin is a corollary of, and sometimes a replacement for, the markers of skin colour and the range of signs which have made race the tyranny of and imprisonment within the visible. Creating a racialized, second skin of language was a project of many colonial states; partly, in Sivananden's phrase from a history of Sri Lanka, a colonial regime which 'divided in order to rule what it integrated in order to exploit'.³ The second skin is philological in Werner Hamacher's sense of philology as language calling for more language,⁴ and the gap which that call consists of is that of the second skin before it aligns. The gap is one in which de and re-lexicalisation can take place; that is, the ordering of language and expression which occurred in the domination of colonialism can at least be made legible as the production of an ongoing difference which can't be sublated.

The three poets discussed have pursued different ways to 'delexicalise' the colonial and capitalist worlds – through Nisha Ramayya's Tantric anti-language; Nat Raha's political philology of the broken line; and Daljit Nagra's inauthentic performance of an epic made linguistically from the violent legacies of English as the language of exploitation. To paraphrase Denise Ferreira da Silva,⁵ the context for

considering race as fused with language is one in which the violent deaths of people of colour are both expected – as the outcome of economic and legal exclusion – and also justified by the global regime of capital and the transparent, inwardly determined consciousness which acts to create it, the continued existence of racialized people in this schema being a hold-over of irreducible difference, a context which can only be transcended through obliteration.

Nisha Ramayya

Nisha Ramayya's poetry wonders how to speak when the words are not given. The words are lost, repurposed, colonised, racialized, lexicalised, or unsounded – that is, they're negated at the point of being said. Unable to get through, only a scuttled rendition variously sounds. Speech is scrambled as time is divided and controlled by the divisions of value seamlessly walled out by imperial projects and a global capitalism intrinsically developed with them in the form of globalised rent and construction of exchange rates and markets centred in the US and in metropolises.

There is an outside to what is said which is unactualised and which contains a futurity unknown. Ramayya's poetry looks for a mode of relations which can fold in this knowledge without falsely 'repairing' the damage or providing a cathartic resolution in irreconcilable difference and 'resistance'. 'States of the Body Produced By Love' begins with a meditation on a future tense in Sanskrit:

If you, villain, had not stopped [*prāgrahīṣyaḥ*] my mouth,
Without any implication of time.

Circles of future and desiderative border one another; the one sometimes
expected where the other might be met.⁶

To be caught in a tense is part of learning a language. Ramayya, born in Glasgow, learns Sanskrit as if it might be a good way out of *aporia*: – speaking but not being heard; being but being misread or put in the quotation marks of diaspora or race in a country with an 'undertheorized reading of its own postcolonial condition'.⁷ To be able to speak would be to speak a future, but now every possibility must come from

the dictionary: to decolonise coterminous with a delexicalisation of colonial projects of knowledge. Ramayya scans definitions for hints: a ‘future universe, “victorious banners unlowered”’, a definition of a Buddhist *ever-glorious* future as defined by Sir Monier Monier-Williams in his Sanskrit-English dictionary of 1899.

Ramayya’s debut pamphlet, *Notes on Sanskrit* begins with Monier-Williams:

I can only get to the language by means of the dictionary; Monier-Williams makes the connection, he whispers in my ear as Sanskrit speaks. This is my home but he opens the door to let me in. My knowledge of Sanskrit will never exceed his; my love of Sanskrit will never be separate from him. [...] My name is Sanskrit; I ask Monier-Williams what I mean.⁸

It is as if the hyphen of Monier-Williams is the making of the hyphen of British-Indian – it ‘makes the connection’ just as ‘niśā’ in Monier-Williams’ Sanskrit-English dictionary is ‘night; a vision, dream; turmeric’, related across *nakti*, *nox*, *neht*, *night*, *nacht*, the Indo-European idea *found* in confluence. Both darkness and vision, this is earnest play: the poet doesn’t represent Sanskrit to a reader, but rather looks for a representation of herself in its words. At the same time, she represents herself *to* Sanskrit. The dictionary which Ramayya returns to throughout her work is itself a culminating protocol and book of examples from the lexicalising override of orientalist imperium: but for Ramayya it’s the only way back, forwards, inside, anywhere other than being stuck. Monier-Williams ‘guides me through the language like poetry; I crouch in definitions, dragging lamps’.⁹ It’s a comedy of knowing and of weight, dragging lamps through a lexicography which can’t be exceeded.

Monier-Williams as guide becomes representative of poetry, a Virgil from a formative past in severance: in ‘Sanskrit Syllabary’ (2017), a short film made by Nuzhat Jabinh and Nisha Ramayya, Monier-Williams walks towards the poet, dictionary in hand. Before Monier-Williams was Boden Professor of Sanskrit at Oxford, he taught at the East India Company College for fourteen years, training future administrators – installing the orientalist world-generator of colonial India. What happens, here, as Sanskrit speaks? Language no longer governs the body when the body moves within

it like an antibody ('I crouch in definitions'), the body made small by the limit which is the inability for knowledge of Sanskrit in Ramayya's English to exceed that of Monier-Williams. And his name comes to name the limit of language, of Sanskrit-in-English and vice versa. Beyond it would be 'my home' and 'my love' unbounded by the dictionary, but the effects of these, the first potentially impossible and the second infinite, sound back from beyond the limit to inflect Sanskrit words and their syllables within Ramayya's poems. The relations within Sanskrit bounded by colonial lexicography are not a world, but possess a syntax of a world outside them, beyond the limit; or at least it's a movement which reflects that which can't be directly known. This is Ramayya's 'never exceed his' which already outruns its assertion, carrying the tone of an instruction which could be broken, the movement towards knowing more.

The invocation of both home and love point to the hyphen of British-Indian; to the 12 million people of the Indian diaspora. Within this, the idea of a specifically Hindu diaspora is first riven by *desh* (in Hindi, 'home country') and *videsh* (another country), and historically the dark water (Kala Pani) of the sea which cannot be crossed without losing purity and caste. Vijay Mishra in *The Literature of the Indian Diaspora* posits that the hyphen is present but a site of negotiation or hesitance in diasporic writing:

Diasporas are people who would want to explore the meaning of the hyphen, but perhaps not press the meaning of the hyphen too far for fear that this would lead to massive communal schizophrenia.¹⁰

The hyphen can be read as translocal, post-nation, although writers such as Aihwa Ong see an elision here which has an underlying fact: 'The popular view of diaspora as ethnicity has elided the fact that diaspora is really a political formation seeking its own nation'.¹¹ The hyphen crosses between metropole and former colony; it crosses currency markets. In the absence between real and imagined, the perspective of an ahistorical, infinite past is projected onto the screen of separation. At its most intense, the glories of an ancient civilisation beam back. One of Ramayya's tasks is to create an event in poetry which will break this loop:

words are lotus flowers looped on a wreath
 the familiarity of the image cocoons you
 soft cups possessed by the line
 uphold the agreement made to caprice

(from 'The Lexicographer-Priest' in *Notes on Sanskrit*)

The cocoon of the diasporic image, too often wreathed; the interruption of the too-expected 'caprice' from out the wreath: within, the cocoon seen again as 'soft cups'. Ramayya's diaspora of the dictionary starts in the absence but resists the reaction: first by etymology ('etymology is placing white crowns on confluence', *Notes on Sanskrit*) as a way into devotional rituals, and second through the anti-languages of a potential tantric poetics, the two playing into each other and into a history of colonial legislature and post-Independence communalism and purity in the title poem of *States of the Body Produced By Love*, acknowledging the divisions of metropole and former colony¹² In Spivak's mapping, lexicalisation (*An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalisation*) is the moving of words and rituals into other grammars (perhaps always understood as transitional), so delexicalisation as decolonisation is the struggle to put under erasure concepts and words now captured and distorted by the long diagonal of the colonial override. What is left is a world textured by a sense of fissiparous unity part-emergent, part lost amid the binaries of alterity, colonised and colonizer, one episteme fragmenting another, and the notion of resistance or reclamation in *poetry* left to run up against a global capitalism in acceleration. When the dictionary becomes representative of all these movements, an ideal returns to being a condition of possibility: 'The dictionary becomes an ideal, because where else would 'set,' 'bear', 'para-', and '-ness' sleep in the biggest beds'.¹³

The hyphen also has a double edge in the spectral figure of the native informant who has now become an interpreter of distant cultures from a privileged double-position.¹⁴ Contrary to this, Ramayya's work is a search for relations with the un-lived – a philological access to history through language, and lexicography's creation of parallel continua which could converge with historical time and create new possible futures. For example, in *Notes on Sanskrit*, Ramayya translates and rewrites a hymn

to Vāc from book 8 of the Rig Veda – Vāc meaning speech in Sanskrit, but also a goddess *of* speech. A line which figures speech as a cow is elaborated further: ‘Oh cow, we are possessed by you, speak us into closeness, fold us in milk, that we may voice you’.¹⁵ Ramayya notes that ‘Vedic priests were keen to separate their voices from the voices of the people. They gave one quarter of Vac to humankind for speech, they concealed the rest for their own purposes’.¹⁶ This rewriting depends upon but must make groundlessly transparent its over-determining source:

As a system of thought about the Orient, [Orientalism] always rose from the specifically human detail to the general transhuman one; an observation about a tenth century Arab poet multiplied itself into a policy towards (and about) the Oriental mentality in Egypt, Iraq, or Arabia.¹⁷

This is the process by which a Sanskrit word, set carefully into an idea of Indo-European roots, multiplies into a law, and in which ‘the colonial project presents itself as an act of cultural interpretation’.¹⁸

Sanskrit was another route to India, a key for the Asiatic scholars of empire in India. It enabled the codification of laws and the establishment of a Brahmanic-hegemonic rule: ‘A version of history was gradually established in which the Brahmins were shown to have the same intentions as (thus providing the legitimation for) the codifying British’.¹⁹ In an asymmetry of rule, Sanskrit was repressed within the education system of colonial India, small-scale as that system was in that it educated approximately 2% of the population. This is the *essentialising* force of colonialism, rewriting and reducing the terms of legibility of colonised cultures:

‘It is impossible for us, with our limited means, to attempt to educate the body of the people.’ I have taken their throats to form a class, the first shall be the last, the first seeds last. *Satyameva jayate nāṇṛtam*: ‘By truth is laid out the path leading to the gods by which the sages’, but in English, by which the sages are taking their throats.²⁰

Ramayya pulls at the Indian Education Act of 1835, and Macaulay’s infamous ‘Minute on Indian Education’ which fed into the preceding debate. If language and race came

to seem inextricably tied in the multiracialism of empire, the effect was material. The vision of an agricultural Indian past and of an Edenic Sanskrit source for European languages mirrored the large scale deindustrialisation and then impoverishment which European trade – violently supported by import tariffs, the creation of a large colonial market for Britain to export to, the extraction of raw materials from India to Britain – wrought across the subcontinent. This process of de-industrialisation was a crucible for the development of world capitalism – globalisation as the making of capital's world. The Persianisation of Urdu and Sanskritisation of Hindi would become written into the constitutions of Pakistan and India respectively.

The combination of English-Sanskrit forms a second skin in the fusing of language and race in the configurations of colonialism: 'I read these words, which do not belong to me, in the place of the words that I cannot find. I want to find these words. This desire is inseparable from loss, inseparable from shame'.²¹ Where are the words, as yet unfindable, and what has been founded in their place? It is a linguistic second skin of race which scrambles every register, and changes every utterance, depending on who speaks and who hears and when. In such moments, we encounter 'an intricate and inchoative narrative about how the inorganic dreams itself out of the organic and how the organic fabricates its essence through the body of the inanimate'.²² Less than intractable, the second skin of language is imposed or used as a marker – as in Sri Lanka in May 1958: 'In Colombo and the South, Tamil businesses and properties were looted and set on fire – and Tamil passengers in cars and buses, identified by their inability to read Sinhala or recite a Buddhist *gatha* (hymn), taken out and murdered'²³ – but for writers of the diasporic night such as Ramayya it might also be multiplied to activate 'an animated relay between epidermal certitude and stylistic vicissitude in the making of racial legibility'.²⁴ Ramayya's relay is through the development of a tantric poetics.

Tantra is 'the plucks and glides of your body as you bend between what you want and what you are able to do',²⁵ between your silencing and the syllables that might mark your erasure: 'Your body bleeds objectivity, you must be getting close'.²⁶ Tantra is a force, a practice, a record of writing, a myriad of traces in the history of Hindu and Buddhist thought. Poetry named tantric began to develop a written poetics perhaps

in the eleventh century as a kind of anti-poetry – literature wasn't the point, and language wasn't the medium so much as sound. It's a political tradition because the writing wants you to *do* something. Tantric literature developed concepts such as 'twilight language' and 'inverted language'. Gorakhnath, eleventh century theorist and monastic leader, called the tantric process 'duality-nonduality-nondifference-thesis'. Tantric writing is an alternative semantic universe; it finds an absence in the symbolic order, according to Vijay Mishra.²⁷ For Ramayya the absence is less sublime, more a kind of relationality through and with the impenetrable or the unrepresentable – after Glissant's *échos-monde* where 'Relation scatters from Being, asserts the subject'.²⁸ If it wants you to sense something, it is through its contradictions without coherence. Ramayya writes:

To your brightness, your undistinguishable, your dark
 To your changing accent, your high and low, your irregular speech, variegated
 Irregular, and inseparable as life from death: 'I think about attachment in
 life, or desire and devotion, and detachment from life, or loss, shame, and
 death. Recognising the inseparability of these thoughts, not recognising
 when or where or how to move: this is my dead start'.²⁹

Ramayya returns to redefine Tantra over and over:

Tantra is the war god's weapon, the net cast by Indra to cover his enemies
 in darkness. Tantra is the worship of many bleeding, bloodthirsty goddesses,
 the rag that presages rage, the shroud that foreshadows the death of the
 father.³⁰

A dead start amid a field of singularities – delexicalised – and bringing into its echo-world those echoes of the vernacular polities of which Sanskrit is the trace:

The fact that Sanskrit never sought to conceptualise its own universality is indeed entirely consistent with its historical character as a cultural-political formation, an alternative form of cosmopolitanism in which 'here' was not made 'everywhere', but remained 'nowhere in particular'.³¹

Nat Raha

Nat Raha's trilogy of pamphlet publications, [*of sirens/body & faultlines*], *£/€xtinctions*, and *de/compositions*³² develops a poetry of borders (deportation van, deportation report) riven into every street and every hour (employers legally responsible for reporting immigrants). As Raha puts it in an essay on 'Transfeminine Brokenness, Radical Transfeminism':

This is part of the materialization of the border in the workplace, the border in the home, the border in the school, the border in the university, the border at the Jobcentre Plus, the border in the hospital, the border in the marriage registry, the border in the street.³³

In the poetry, it's close to a queer necropolitics – moving 'through shroudscape/infrastructs'³⁴ – perhaps qualified as a slow necropolitics, slowed down, hour by hour, so that social reproduction – its pressure under capital, or as scaffold – is felt and read, taken into the body, its breath and blood and oxygen, line by line. Jane Ward³⁵ uses the phrase *gender in motion*: the fragmented, part crossed out, indented self-commenting lines in these three pamphlets build an idea and polemic and a performance of racialized genders in slow motion: 'downward/spectral/to the bullet for any black person'.³⁶ Raha's poetry looks for, and calls for, lines of transfeminist/queer solidarity – found with an immense effort, spoken with immense tenderness, salvaged from scattered signs against the logic of commodification.

£/€xtinctions ends on with a future turned geological; the present already a fossil of the future:

exodus, between & the borderfort, deposits
carbon base :: upper classes anoxic/dead organics³⁷

Class-power elitism has taken all the oxygen, rendering Europe *anoxic*, only dead; or worse, not even quite fully alive. An end to the Anthropocene, 'last decline of barrels to the point of wastage'.³⁸ In order to survive, and live out a different prophecy, the first need is the need to keep breathing. The distinctive use of the forward slash is sometimes performed by Raha in readings as a sharp intake of breath. In the super

script, the ampersand suggests occluded scenes – connectives in another layer. To avoid the extinctions – already riven into the sea channel's currency split of £/€ over E – is to work to keep the contradictions of difference alive. Keeping alive, surviving – the punctuations of breath connect the corporeal to the social, as Rosemary Hennessy outlines:

Needs are corporeal -- because they involve keeping the body alive-- but they are not 'natural', because meeting these corporeal needs always takes place through social relationships. In this sense social interaction itself translates into a vital need.³⁹

Within the social, interactions can be deadly and identities held as either deviant or else celebrated and welcomed as consuming subjects. Raha invokes a commonality imbued with a temporal sense of urgency:

the torrent we dream against the
white world
;; we, the trans femmes, the women, the pocs, the queers, we
living genders fabricated from their scorched futures⁴⁰

A dreaming *against*, and a life fabricated from others' futures: a frame not dissimilar to that of Jasbir Puar's *Terrorist Assemblages*: 'This project is thus profoundly impelled by an anticipatory temporality, a modality that seeks to catch a small hold of many futures, to invite futurity even as it refuses to script it'.⁴¹ Solidarity is fabricated in poetry, online, and via messenger, and poetry's anticipatory fire comes to scorch, its resources depleted although there's barely anywhere else to live: living in poetry although its language is torn, cut, ripped, as a writing de/composed:

ripped language neighbourhood/we
never lived a realm of safety/they come
for our skirts & eyeliner repelled
by the glamour of our flesh/weaponise our heels⁴²

The weaponised heels later become ‘communist heels’.⁴³ Put succinctly in another register by Jian Neo Chen: ‘trans women of color and trans of color organizers, cultural workers, and communities living within differentials in power and identity that dispossess them and make them targets of state and interpersonal violence have been working to transform differentials into interdependent relationships and shared resources’.⁴⁴ This is transformative work which Raha is part of as poet and radical transfeminist activist, zine maker, and researcher. The collective called to in the poetry is variously assembled – here ‘they come for our skirts and eyeliner’, oppressively repelled, wishing to pursue the undoing of genders, a move outlined in an essay on film’s representations of transwomen in *Whipping Girl* by Julia Serano: ‘it is their intent to capture trans women in the act of putting on lipstick, dresses, and high heels, thereby giving the audience the impression that the trans woman’s femaleness is an artificial mask or costume’.⁴⁵ There are no masks, only glamour (a word repeated by Raha), a variant of grammar – at root, *grammatica*, learning including enchantment. There are new grammatical signs throughout Raha’s work – the strikethrough-comma-square bracket italicised configuration, for example, or more simply the double comma. The repulsion/attraction is also labour, shoring up the nuclear family, the couple form, the erotics of productivity.

In work which is often commenting on itself, philologically, the forward slash becomes the most used philological sign, moving from concrete to immaterial cut:

minimal

h/ours contracted to the wage⁴⁶

argues that wages are indenture within the word ‘hours’, cut between h and ours, the time which bears its economic value creating capacity cut through with a hoped-for line – the return of that which is ‘ours’ which breaks contracts and the wage form, and returns *minimal* from its negative use (hours or wages) to the concept of work itself and the conditions for a fuller life beyond these borders. Or else it is that which is *minimally ours*, the time of our lives forced into capitalist value extraction as commodified labour time. In ‘£/€xtinctions’ the cut brings a possible deportation van – a textual alert as diasporas dissolve into de-solution, presaging desolation:

literatures of our desolution & movement, break
 ,] suspend victoriana, its streets & casual
 /police van becket st. 10.09am

The alerts throughout the poems in '*£/£xtinctions*' and [*of sirens/body & faultlines*] carry time stamps, foreshadowing extinction and the end of breath while stalking the present:

suspensions in/ordinate 10
 .42pm cut rest GN14DWD 9.22
 am start sirens unmarked new
 cross road follows FT63 NYA⁴⁷

For Puar, events in the assemblage 'foreshadow and stalk each other, loop back recursively, return and relay, and scramble their attendant spatializing effects',⁴⁸ marked by temporal identifications ('the condition of the workforce 6.21pm'⁴⁹). The recursive looping also provides a way to think of Raha's performances in which she uses multiple loop pedals to overlay voice over line, breath into chaos and out – losing the identifications, perhaps, in favour of something closer to the 'queer reverberations... which make possible a cluster of communal identifications' which Jose Esteban Muñoz found in the work of Basquiat.⁵⁰ These reverberations are 'Resonances [which] operate as echoic repetitions of affective responses but do so through correspondences and affinities, Harris' 'depths of mutuality' or 'unfathomable kinships' as Luis Chude-Sokei writes, quoting Wilson Harris.⁵¹

The pressure on life in Raha's poetry is violently present – [*of Sirens/body & faultlines*] being police siren and siren song, locked to the law of 'police reality and capital',⁵² bodies crossing faultlines. Danny Hayward's essay on poetry as self-defence⁵³ considers Raha's poetry in this political category:

defensiveness as a property of poetry intransigently committed to achieving a pre-emptive insight into the scale and the complexity of life that has been broken and cast off and fenced in and that still is not content to view itself as privatively 'under-privileged' or 'deprived' or merely evocatively dead.⁵⁴

Undamaged lie plural solidarities, because they're pushed below the surface – sadness and pain are embedded when bodies entangle in the world, but the dialectic of struggle is 'pushing the work of transformation below the visibility of the surface of neoliberal capitalist society'.⁵⁸

The real subsumption has gone further than the 'mascots' which Aizur names: into the breath, the 'plurality of blood', into love

the
glamour & fracture of such love
scarce/⁵⁹

and getting scarcer. Real subsumption of the body – through sex, Luciana Parisi argues⁶⁰ – involves the decoding of all body information so that it can be exchanged, recombined, and used to produce objects to be circulated. Brokenness here – in the poetry – isn't mimetic of brokenness but *is* recoding as resistance to this drive towards the instrumentalisation of bodies, the thermodynamic means of production in the echoes of unfathomable kinships. If this is a fictional or fantastical conceit of labour, then it still reflects capital's circuits as its logic sinks in and dissipates. Echoes rewrite 'write', turning the page, becoming 'sleepwrite':

//write
this alone : every dayspit
feels a corridor/

A sleep – a slow death intervenes, but after it:

-ments your landscape, sleepwrite
this alone if its
real against the soul

As bodily capture by capital is subtle, multiple, and almost total, so revolt must be too, if life, indissoluble from its conditions, has become persecution – another way

past Hayward's self in preemptive opposition. Raha's poetry incites a revolt against the ideal, newly fused in grammars of disalignment and alignment across spatio-temporal borderings, solidarities and splits felt *textually*: material against capital, 'all of the above a redbloodied cakehole//all revolt against ideals'.⁶¹ The poetry brings scorched futures into view. Or, in the poetry's revolt is found a 'clutch', another repeated word: to close the hand, clutching to and clutching off, as in 'clutch off [...] their fables out of our skins'.⁶² Solidarity and abolition.

Daljit Nagra

Daljit Nagra writes across various synthetic registers of class and Punjabi-in-English vernaculars, most notably a pained and deliberately colourful style which incorporates stereotypes and racist colonial and post-war British voicings of Punjabi and British-Indian communities. Rachael Gilmour breaks down this inauthenticity and reflects on an interview with Nagra in which the relationship between poetry and mimicry is addressed:

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; which are – perhaps even more riskily – connected to, rather than entirely distinct from, those of Sellers et al.⁶³

The intersection of class and race in this language politics seems aimed to be throwaway, and therefore not subject to the masking of class in oppositional dictions, the jargon of authenticity which Adorno saw as overriding avant-garde politics. Nagra's poetry often seems painful, a rejection of multiculturalism's harmonies at one turn, and then an extreme version of multiculturalism's signalling of colour and diversity the next.

Sarah Brouillette charts how money for writing in the New Labour period created literary brands, noting that:

In Nagra's case, the poet's labour is profoundly metapoetic. Made up of all of the aspects of his performance of himself as a writer, including his self-presentation in interviews and profiles, the poems in his 2007 collection *Look We Have Coming to Dover!*, and the packaging and marketing of his work, his labour is self-consciously designed to perform the writer's concern about his alienation from his purported community.⁶⁴

Brouillette alights on the lines, 'Did you make me for the gap in the market | Did I make me for the gap in the market' from 'Booking Khan Singh Kumar'⁶⁵, a name which combines Muslim, Sikh and Hindi names. Retelling the Ramayana extends and expands this development of style – the improbable surname expanded to epic length.

Nagra writes that the Ramayana was there in his childhood – 'I cannot recall a time when I did not know about Ramayana'.⁶⁶ This always-there quality is a common thread in both Indian writing of childhood in general and in Indian diaspora writing: Ramayana as history. Rama is the figure of exile – exiled from the city with a long journey to make, only to be alienated from the long-lost Sita when they are re-united again. Tulsidasa in the popular Hindi version writes:

tāpas beṣa biseṣi udāsī
caūdāhā bārisā rāmu banabāsī

Bereft of goods, as mendicant, as slave
Rama to spend fourteen years in the woods⁶⁷

As slave – das – devotee, votary, slave. For Indians transported to Fiji as indentured labourers, or Mauritius, Kenya, Uganda, by the British imperial project, such lines have had a particular resonance, and even a ghostly, diasporic voicing – the fear that an ancient world will fix itself into place, by distance, across the hyphen. As Aihwa Ong puts it:

In an age of Asian economic emergence, precolonial hauntings about the greatness of Chinese civilization, the glories of Hindustan, or the might of the Ottoman empire have become intensified, especially among elite emigrants relocated to Western metropolitan sites.⁶⁸

Nagra's version doesn't engage in a metapoetic critique or defence of its *Ramayana* project on these grounds; neither does it re-locate or introduce anachronisms. Despite visual play (circles, tails, lines migrating across space), different font sizes and other ludic elements, the text doesn't enter a para-space of class and race which Nagra's other poems do. Instead, a kind of unity from the plural sources is held by the continued use of 'Punglish' or inauthentic Indian English, which must carry the metapoetic charge by itself. One key source for this is the Hobson-Jobson dictionary of Anglo-Indian English, the work of Yule and Burnell published in 1886 – contemporary to the Sanskrit-English dictionary at the centre of Ramayya's research. Nagra has presented a programme on BBC Radio 4 on this dictionary as an inspiration: 'It's a madly unruly and idiosyncratic work', Nagra says cheerfully at one point. 'Not so much an orderly dictionary as a passionate memoir of colonial India. Rather like an eccentric Englishman in glossary form'.⁶⁹ Hobson-Jobson is powerful as a historical corrective to Imperial erasure, as it can track words with familiar usage, such as shampoo or cheetah or pyjamas, back to Indian languages through English India. It can be sensed, ticking over in the background of Nagra's *Ramayana*: 'he said, "How cushy I am Sita! How cushy you are always making me, always my Sita"⁷⁰ – cushy being an Anglo-Indian coinage from Persian. Sita 'always making me' relates the epic's love to diasporic love, in which Sita – lost, but later, in Valmiki's Sanskrit version of the tale, rejected on a point of honour – figures distance; codes recoded or captured by the 'dark waters' of Kala Pani. Sita and the *cushy* of Hobson-Jobson are both, therefore, 'always making me'.

Other linguistic usages oscillate across ancient Greek and Biblical slang ('golly gosh', 'holy moly'), inflecting the text with further textures of diasporic movement. How black is the black of a body?

Raavana's hefty crowns and jewellery
Scattered pell-mell about his black-as-collyrium body⁷¹

The word collyrium is from the Greek kollyrion, an eye-salve, a lotion from a tablet which was kollyra, bread-shaped. But from the clearness of this lotion and salve the meaning reversed to the covering or obscuring or shadowing of eyes: the meaning of black as collyrium depends on how antique you want to go, what 'stretch of time' the reader summons, so that black-as-collyrium is a philological chiasmus, opaque and transparent.

Nagra's book is also the product of research into the plural living archive of Ramayanas, which cross geography, time and language and even religious community, as there are Buddhist, Sikh and Jain versions of the tale as well as Hindu. Valmiki's Sanskrit version unifies and extends earlier materials, and versions in other South Asian languages and vernaculars amplify and change the tale over the centuries: 'The epicization of language, space, and political order through the Mahabharata was shadowed by vernacular Ramayanas, often evincing a different political project'.⁷² As part of this vernacular cosmopolis of the tale have grown multiple associations with puppets, dolls, Javanese shadow plays, TV and cartoon serials, Ram-lila communal theatre, and of course Diwali (secularised globally as a festival of lights). Nagra's text bears his engagement with multiple versions, most notably a section about a monkey king and a buffalo, sourced from a Cambodian retelling. These variants are synthesised – for example a dragon from a Thai sculpture of Ramayana features in the land bridge to Lanka episode, flagged by some Thai names in the text – so that the communal and anti-communal possibilities of the text are unified. A striking, secular, anti-communal version from the UK is detailed by Paula Richman.⁷³ Richman relates a Ram-lila by Southall Black Sisters, an activist feminist group, performed on 19 Oct, 1979. Ravana the demon king was dressed adorned with pictures of Thatcher, Enoch Powell, and the insignia of the riot police, a sign of anti-immigration and racist economic and state policy. The Diwali burning of the mask at the end of the performance turned diasporic longing into political unity.

Nagra activates a more interior tracing – the divine nature of Rama and Sita, framed as Vishnu and Lakshmi. A final prayer, as Sita is reclaimed by the earth, proclaims: ‘Rama, you are Vishnu | but you are more than Vishnu [...] You are the range. The range unbound’.⁷⁴ The Sanskrit version of Valmiki is the first grand statement on the tale and on Sanskrit itself – it is here where gods play the roles of people, and Sanskrit comes to know itself as Sanskrit. Hanuman wonders how to speak to Sita when he finds her in captivity – not in Sanskrit (the language naming itself for the first time, as Sheldon Pollock argues, *samskṛta* as an adjective qualifying speech⁷⁵) as that will alert Ravana. He must speak a more ‘human language’. In a liturgical sense, to write the Ramayana in a different language is to introduce this idea of the purifying grammar in which the actions of the more than human speak and are narrated in a more than human language, now re-spoken.

In a post-colonial context, to do this is also to rework the interiority on which the independence movement under colonial rule had to build its new nation – on customs, rituals, observances, that is, in protecting and projecting back a continuous, suppressed India. After independence, this nationalism became semi-secularised, outwardly politicised. Tithi Bhattacharya relates how the process worked in the East India Company’s city, Calcutta:

Here we can begin to trace the historical process by which the religiosity of Durga began to be steadily replaced by the sociability of her worship. [...] [W]hen I suggest that a language of Hinduism linked private issues to the public sphere, this is not to suggest that there had always existed a pure language of Hinduism available when needed by a Hindu community.⁷⁶

Colonial rule and a suppressed Indian capitalist class would converge with subaltern traditions to create one. For Nagra, the movement of interiority is replayed lightly, against poetry and the erasure of Hobson-Jobson. His Ramayana strives to recover the ‘syllable sacred’; to come to rest and re-hear a repetition hijacked by the Orientalist mock-Orientalism of T. S. Eliot’s mad prince shoring ruins. Nagra’s prayer ends as his ‘Punglish’ idiom over-rides an iconic moment in English modern-

ism, aligning it with both an ironic inhabitation of speech and an inauthentically real one:

Rama by Sita side by side
 unable to move or utter aught
 save all now and evermore praying

Shanti! *Shanti!* *Shanti!*⁷

Coda

Following the animated relay of racialisation's second skin through these three bodies of work, three dialectically positioned strands of poetic argument emerge: anti-language, solidarity, and interiority. Dialectical in their mediations and oppositions, that is, in Ramayya's pained and playful engagements with sacred discontinuities mediated by colonial scholarship set into relation with anti-languages of Tantra; Raha's desire for solidarities to more fully appear in a syntax of new punctuation and broken clauses which move and rewrite sense on the echoing page; and Nagra's unity from plural sources which charge an idiom made from irremediably colonial language to the extent that an interiority comes clear. The work of Ramayya, Raha and Nagra is deliberately caught across temporalities split by diasporas, policed borders and contemporary hierarchies of racialised gender as the ongoing and founding order of capital's settler-colonial development. These temporal splits are felt differently in the syntax and philological strategies found in the poems which, for each writer, are situated in different materials. But these materials, as poetry, are both formed from and bear the traces and breaks of a struggle with the second racialised linguistic skin of colonial control, while the philological work moves to re-form them or move them towards a horizon of abolition. We might call the resultant poetry the sense in movement of queer disalignments amid attempts to demarcate spaces of less confined remembering and more denaturalised, rearticulated and powerful transformations in capital's world, with a view towards that world's eclipse.

Notes

- ¹ This argument about race is developed from Denise Ferreira da Silva, *Towards A Global Idea of Race* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2007).
- ² Anne Anlin Cheng, *Second Skin: Josephine Baker and the Modern Surface*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 172.
- ³ Ambavalaner Sivanandan, *Communities of Resistance: Black struggles for socialism* (London: Verso, 1986).
- ⁴ Werner Hamacher, *Minima philologica* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015).
- ⁵ Da Silva, *Towards A Global Idea of Race*, p. xiv.
- ⁶ Nisha Ramayya, 'States of the Body Produced By Love', *White Review*, Issue 20 (2017).
- ⁷ Vijay Mishra, *The Literature of the Indian Diaspora: Theorizing the Diasporic Imaginary* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007), p. 188.
- ⁸ Nisha Ramayya, *Notes on Sanskrit* (Kings Lynn: Oystercatcher, 2015), unpaginated.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁰ Mishra, *The Literature of the Indian Diaspora*, p. 1.
- ¹¹ Aihwa Ong, 'Cyberpublics and Diaspora Politics Among Transnational Chinese', *Interventions*, 5:1, 82–100.
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- ¹⁴ Gayatri Spivak, *An Aesthetic Education in an Era of Globalization* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013).
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- ¹⁷ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin, 2003), p. 96.
- ¹⁸ Sara Suleri, *The Rhetoric of English India* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 5.
- ¹⁹ Gayatri Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 230.
- ²⁰ Ramayya, 'States of the Body Produced By Love'.
- ²¹ Nisha Ramayya, 'Moving Devotion, Moving Displacement', paper given at *Inside-Outside* conference, University of Glasgow, 2016.
- ²² Cheng, *Second Skin*, p. 12.
- ²³ Sivanandan, *Communities of Resistance*, p. 220.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 172.
- ²⁵ Nisha Ramayya, *Correspondences* (Kings Lynn: Oystercatcher, 2016).
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- ²⁷ Vijay Mishra, *Devotional Poetics and the Indian Sublime* (New York: New York University Press, 2000), p. 113.
- ²⁸ Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), p. 186.
- ²⁹ Ramayya, 'Moving Devotion, Moving Displacement'.
- ³⁰ Nisha Ramayya, manuscript for Poetry London, forthcoming.
- ³¹ Sheldon Pollock, *The Language of the Gods in the World of Men* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2006) p. 571.
- ³² Nat Raha, *[of sirens/body & faultlines]* (London: Veer, 2015), Nat Raha, *£/£xtinctions* (Glasgow: Sociopathic Distro, 2017), and Nat Raha *de/compositions* (Sheffield: Enjoy Your Homes Press, 2017).
- ³³ Nat Raha, 'Transfeminine Brokenness, Radical Transfeminism', *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 116.3.
- ³⁴ Raha, *de/compositions*, unpaginated.

- ³⁵ Jane Ward, 'Gender Labor: Transmen, Femmes, and Collective Work of Transgression', *Sexualities*, vol. 13, 2: pp. 236–254.
- ³⁶ Raha, *[of sirens/body & faultlines]*, unpaginated.
- ³⁷ Raha, *£/€xtinctions*, unpaginated.
- ³⁸ Raha, *£/€xtinctions*, unpaginated.
- ³⁹ Rosemary Hennessy, *Profit and Pleasure: Sexual Identities in Late Capitalism* (New York: Routledge, 2018), p. 210.
- ⁴⁰ Raha, *de/compositions*.
- ⁴¹ Jasbir Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007), p. xix.
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- ⁴³ Raha, *de/compositions*.
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- ⁴⁵ Julia Serano, *Whipping Girl: A Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity* (Berkeley: Seal Press, 2016), p. 34.
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- ⁴⁹ *Ibid.*
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- ⁵³ Danny Hayward, 'Poetry as Self Defence', No Money 2 event zine (London: No Money, 2016).
- ⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 41.
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- ⁵⁷ Gayatri Gopanath, *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2005), p. 11.
- ⁵⁸ Raha, 'Transfeminine Brokenness, Radical Transfeminism'.
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- ⁶⁰ Luciano Parisi, *Abstract Sex: Philosophy, Biotechnology and the Mutations of Desire* (London: Continuum, 2004), p. 139.
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- ⁶³ Rachael Gilmour, 'Punning in Punglish, sounding 'poreign': Daljit Nagra and the politics of language', *Interventions: international journal of postcolonial studies* 17: 5 (2015), pp. 686–705.
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Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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