

# Loose Can(n)on: Literary tradition in Daljit Nagra's *British Museum*

Andrew Green

To cite this article: Andrew Green (2021): Loose Can(n)on: Literary tradition in Daljit Nagra's *British Museum*, English in Education, DOI: [10.1080/04250494.2021.2006575](https://doi.org/10.1080/04250494.2021.2006575)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/04250494.2021.2006575>



© 2021 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.



Published online: 19 Dec 2021.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 85



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

## Loose Can(n)on: Literary tradition in Daljit Nagra's *British Museum*

Andrew Green

Brunel University London, Middlesex, UK

### ABSTRACT

This paper considers Daljit Nagra's engagement with concepts of canon and tradition in *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 — inform contemporary notions of Britishness and shape his work as a writer living with the legacies of literary heritage. *British Museum*, this paper argues, explores how Nagra's work relates to canons of English Literature, and how he makes sense of his own position. The discussion 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.

### ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 1 September 2021  
Accepted 10 November 2021

### 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 2007) 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, challenging received cultural formations and "roots", and engaging creatively with (re-)readings both of liminal cultures and societies in the process of change (Green 2020). In his retelling of the Indian epic *Ramayana* – an intentionally "bastardised" version drawing on a plethora of traditions – Nagra demonstrates his subversive yet sensitive ability to translate 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-owning"', and *British Museum* (2017) engages in a similar project in response to the canons of mainstream British culture.

**CONTACT** Andrew Green  [andrew.green@brunel.ac.uk](mailto:andrew.green@brunel.ac.uk)  Brunel University London, Gaskell 051, Kingston Lane, Uxbridge, Middlesex UB8 3PH

© 2021 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.  
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way.

In *British Museum*, Nagra explores “the kinds of secondary movement” (Green 2020, 5) traditions and canons have to make in the process of cultural transition (Clifford 1997), challenging the view that works of art are ever truly nationally definitive. He considers how reading and interpretation relate to cultural experience, adopting a stance that is both critical and appreciative (Rosenblatt 1986). This highlights how, for Nagra, modalities of writing and reading are political activities centred on questions of cultural identity and ownership. Nagra is preoccupied with the politics of language, and *British Museum* is an overtly politicised “conversation” between Nagra and English literature. As well as being a political crucible, however, *British Museum* also displays Nagra’s deep affection for the British literary tradition.

In a series of poems dealing with major cultural 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, 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 explores more intimate cultural locations: the home (“Father of Only Daughters”), the gurdwara (“Prayer for a Gurdwara”), trains (“From the Ambient Source”), and the classroom (“The Dream of Mr Bulram’s English”). Nagra thus establishes a counterpoint between public and private spaces, exploring what it means for him to live in the “British Museum”. In “Prayer for a Gurdwara”, for example, the contemplative space of the poem culminates in Nagra, “Sikh by birth, secular by nature” (5), posing a politically explosive question about the Sikh religious text the Guru Granth Sahib: “when has our holy book ever hurt Britain?” (5). Readers are left with the troublesome pressure to account for contemporary Britain and its complex relationship with minority groups and their “books”, which are often perceived as cultural and political threats. On a similar theme, “Naugaja” sensitively highlights 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 relation to 21st century British culture is typical of Nagra’s playful verse. Huizinga (1955, 132) observes that play is a central component of “the structure of creative imagination itself”, and as such creative play functions as an edgy and high-stakes “game” throughout *British Museum*. Huizinga’s suggestion that “the writer’s aim, conscious or unconscious, is to create a tension that will ‘enchant’ the reader and hold him [sic] spellbound” (132) resonates with the tensions of Nagra’s poetry.

A significant element of the “spell” of *British Museum* is Nagra’s use of the literary canon. As Gunning (2008) has observed, Nagra’s verse can be read in the light of Harold Bloom’s (1973) view of poets’ ambiguous relationship with their precursors, 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 other cultural influences) with which he engages – an extension, perhaps, of what Gilmour calls “the disruptive interplay between linguistic systems” (2015:691).

## Prospero’s book

*The Tempest* (Shakespeare 2005) book-ends *British Museum*. Prospero stands astride the collection. He is the first figure invoked in “Broadcasting House”, where repeated imagery of ship and Island inevitably recalls *The Tempest*, and “Meditations on the

British Museum” leaves readers with a reflection on “our fair isle” (49) in which “Prospero’s surveillance hoards our every scripted quip for the Island of our interrogation” (49). Prospero is a particularly significant figure for Nagra. *British Museum* is literature working at the difficult process of cultural harmonisation. And in this, Prospero offers Nagra a rich vein of inspiration. At the end of *The Tempest* the magus steps outside 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:

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)

Like *British Museum*, this conjures a state of conditionality in which potential meanings and futures are submitted to the reader’s judgement. As Nagra-Prospero draws the collection to an end we are left poised in a space where literary and real worlds intersect.

Nagra’s invocation of Prospero 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 1958/2001, 19). Nagra creates a manifestly self-reflexive literary world. 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 literary canon, making them “actors” within *British Museum*. As Prospero invokes “The cloud-capp’d towers, the gorgeous places,/The solemn temples, the great globe itself” (Shakespeare 2005, 115), so Nagra calls upon the cultural institutions of *British Museum*. These seemingly substantial places, however, do not offer the kinds of permanence and security of legacy that one might imagine. Prospero’s conclusion that “all which it inherit, shall dissolve” (115) ironically interrogates how far accepted bastions of knowledge and culture in fact provide canonical security and rootedness.

### Canon as identity

The potentially problematic relationship between different canons and traditions is established from the very first poem of *British Museum*, in which our view of the daughter is shaped by her father’s memory and the traditional requirements of his own parents – how he was “forced to remain in wedlock/to uphold the family name” (2). His daughter is the fruit of his “second-chance life” and allows him to encounter the world in new ways, turning his perspective both metaphorically and literally “upside down”.

Such topsy-turvy perspectives are also applied to the literary canon. Gunning (2008) places Nagra’s early poetry in anxious, even confrontational relation to English literature. The poet of “A Black History of the English-Speaking Peoples” (Nagra 2011) is troubled by the literary canon. Might he be seen as:

a noble scruff who hopes a proud

academy might canonise  
his poems for their faith in canonical allusions? (51)

In *British Museum*, Nagra's 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 forges 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, and in *British Museum* Nagra engages with a plethora of canonical and non-canonical “voices”. The owning of these voices demonstrates Nagra's move away from the cultural hyphenation of British-Asian to a more liberating British Asian (Chambers 2010; Mishra 1996).

To return to Bhanot's ideas, it is important to consider the extent to which Nagra's poetic performances in *British Museum* move beyond surface or presentation to achieve real depth and interiority. In this collection, we encounter what might be termed “double-textedness”: Nagra's own poetic utterances are projective extensions (Heidegger 2002) 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, and Bruner (1986) explores how readers may avail themselves of subjunctivising, meaning-making space. *British Museum* systematically engages with the interstitial spaces between the literary canon and Nagra's own verse. In these spaces, the liberating yet anarchic functions of carnival (Bakhtin 1965) are never far away. “GET OFF MY POEM WHITEY”, a poem that Nagra has referred to as “a Caliban-like rant” (Green 2020, 11), captures the poet's dialogic relationship with the English literary canon at its most troubled.

The dilemma of canon 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 (Green 2020). In “The Dream of Mr Bulram's English” he is an inspirational teacher who hopes “to spin their minds/timeless with Chaucer, Donne, Keats and Byron,/with Tennyson and Browning” and “our tongue Shakespearean” (36). Bulram's vision of English teaching, however, is not bound by the conventional canon, as attested by the presence of Martin Luther King and Wordsworth's desire to possess “a canvas-bound *Arabian Nights*” (37).

It is both jarring and apt that this paean to the humane benefits of literature is followed by the stormy Kabba-like literary world of “GET OFF MY POEM WHITEY”. 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, discord and violation. Literary taste and its problematic relation to ideas of canon are 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”. 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’s strident tone proposes an unvarnished conceptualisation of canon and literary history. Significantly, however, the poem still finds a literary locus for itself in its disconcerting recognition that “now Caliban’s my voice” (40).

### Culture at the margins

“Cane” highlights ideas of cultural division, placing the study of literature in contrast 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 what the son calls his mother’s “sloppy Pollywood” and Nagra creates an uneasy counterpoint between stereotypes, divergent histories and identities in 21st century Britain (Clifford 1997). “Cane” problematises what Gunning calls “the imagined unities of tradition” (2008: 97). It is significant, therefore, that throughout *British Museum* Nagra returns to the idea of borders and boundaries.

Liminal spaces are important for Nagra, capturing his sense that he feels simultaneously an “insider” and an “outsider” in relation to British culture (Green 2020). “Hadrian’s Wall” provides a good example. Written from the edges of an historical empire, this poem embodies notions of political separation and exclusion. As a physical line, the wall represents a space where canons, cultures and traditions both meet and are separated. Located at the margins of the cultured Roman world, the wall serves “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?” (15).

Other important boundaries in the collection include the trenches of World War 1 (“On Your ‘A 1940 Memory’”), the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland (“From the Ambient Source”) and the River Lethe (“Sleeping in Lindau”). 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 contentious cultural and political negotiations indeed, but Milosz provides a symbol of overcoming hate and forging commonality.

Liminal spaces (No-man’s land) and margins (the trenches) are important in “On Your ‘A 1940 Memory’”. The poem recalls the famous incident from *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer* (1974) when, having single-handedly stormed the German line, Sassoon sits in the 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 (and Sassoon’s family’s) colonial past as he and his deadly act mutate into “an image of Britain, whose kin made a killing in India” (21).

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 “lower brow” cultural references, such as *Only Fools and Horse* and *Strictly Come Dancing*. Approaching this aspect of Nagra’s work from the perspective of Bakhtinian dialogic (1982), Gilmour (2015) considers the overtly heteroglossic and multi-lingual possibilities of his verse. Her reading of his poetry emphasises the inherent “ownership” and “power” of language, seeing it 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 cultural spectrum, Nagra proposes his own alternative canon of Britishness. Inevitably, whilst honouring plurality and diversity, this exposes the inherent insecurity that underpins a monolithic and unitary view of culture and language. The celebratory listing of both “high” and “low” cultural milestones in “Darling and Me!” (Nagra 2007) 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, socially, 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” opens with two lines from “A Country Mansion” (2003) – Robert Graves’ title itself invoking 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 canonical British heritage figures – Drake, Nelson, Darwin, Brunel, Newton, Clive of India. 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?).

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”, 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 humans need more than this and that new versions of canon are needed in order to help us see ourselves (Clifford 1997).

“The Look of Love” takes its epigraph from the Fourth Book of Thomas Campion’s *Bookes of Ayres* (2016). Here, Nagra plays uncomfortably with the word “Ape”, capturing not only its meaning of mimicry (a pertinent idea in relation to Nagra’s use of 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 emerges as another of the many boundaries that Nagra explores in *British Museum*. Such discomfiting concepts are sublimated at the end of the poem, which contemplates ambiguous “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 treasure is uncertain.

Other allusions to the literary canon are equally troublesome. When, in “Prayer for a Gurdwara” Nagra refers to “my Larkin train-brain” (5), he captures the fragile, elegiac note of Larkin’s “The Whitsun Weddings” (1964). Something of the sadness, the nobility and the subdued hope that is a feature of the poem’s fledgling marriages applies 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”, 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), Nagra piles up images 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" recalling Lewis Carroll's "The Jabberwocky", suggests that such visions are both supremely British and also nonsense. The cartoons of the final stanza also contribute to 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 "Vox Populi, Vox Dei" makes evident, "roots" are redolent of sources and identity, tradition and growth. Such notions echo another of Nagra's poetic inspirations, Seamus Heaney. "Root" and other related words appear repeatedly throughout the collection – "rootless" ("Cane"), "uproot" ("Naugaja"), "uprooted yet rooted" ("From the Ambient Source"); the poet Czeslaw Miłosz is "held by a vision at root" ("Sleeping in Lindau"), and in "The Look of Love" (34) tradition is captured in the image of a "bloodline/at root barbarous" (34). Finally, the exhibits in "Meditations at the British Museum" "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. By engaging with the canonical roots of English literature, Nagra finds a personal way of challenging idealised and institutionalised visions of culture (Green 2020). He has a lively sense of how rootedness and tradition can create barriers to cultural transition and interaction. His evident deep love for the English literary tradition is held in tension 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". By so placing himself in relation to the literary canon, Nagra finds a vantage point from which to effect a modern-day politics of retrograde "owning"; a means of making the words and works of the past function within his own literary "museum".

An excellent example is found in "From the Ambient Source", which 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), entranced by Heaney's "mud-haunted rhymes" (26). In "Meditations on the British Museum", 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 and personal identity.

Nagra's affinity with Heaney is evident – "When he ploughs his Ireland, I see gourds and grains/sprout over the Raj" (26) – and he finds his life "replenished" (26) by the literary encounter. 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 function to restore literary equilibrium. 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", he alludes to Heaney's famous lines from *An Open Letter* (1983), objecting to the literary-political appropriation of his work into *The Penguin Book of Contemporary British Poetry* (Morrison 1986). 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" invokes Dickens' famous phrase ("He do the Police in different voices") from *Our Mutual Friend* (1997). The same phrase was also at one point T. S. Eliot's working title for *The Waste Land* (2002). The elliptical allusiveness of canon is still more deeply embedded in the poem as Nagra incorporates Eliot's appropriation from Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*: "Mistah Kurtz – he dead" (2007: 18). This double-textedness effects a powerful literary realignment as Nagra substantially relocates the black voices that both Conrad and Eliot had appropriated.

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. 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" (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: Eliot and Conrad, who both adopted and were adopted by the English literary tradition, are in their turn re-appropriated for different ends by Braithwaite and Nagra. The literary text is simultaneously united and divided upon the rock of a common language. On such a basis, Nagra 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 the global stage? In an act of cultural grace and healing of the sort he envisages in "Sleeping in Lindau", he comes to the affirming recognition that "our hoard of words must cleanse the world" (19).

"Aubade", 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 or literary, can be problematic. In *British Museum* Nagra attempts to capture his own "spatiality" of literature. Skin is used in "The Vishnu of Wolverhampton" to embody ideas of self-perception and shifting identity as Nagra considers Sikh and British culture. The spiritual world of the gurdwara is perceived in transformative relationship to the secular institutions of museums, libraries and corporations. *British Museum* offers a sequence of poems based upon notable cultural institutions. These institutions, of course, relate interestingly to ideas of cultural canon, appropriation and ownership.

“Broadcasting House” incorporates a wide array of cultural allusion, as if the works to which Nagra refers are exhibits. It opens by invoking the figures of Prospero and Ariel, as if Nagra conjures them 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 liberty lies not in established certainties, but rather in the worlds of “magic”, “night” and the unknown potential of the “white page”.

Passus X of *Piers Ploughman* (Langland 1992) provides another rich source, 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 as well as the potential for salvation. Alternative cultural canons, in this, are again part of Nagra’s cultural semantics. Ambridge from *The Archers*, along with “Christmas at Fools and Horses,/seasonal dance-offs and celebs on sofas” (8) serve as potential antidotes to the rantings of “angry callers, or ministers” (7). “Book at Bedtime” (8) also proves an unexpectedly anodyne presence, converting Lawrence’s *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* (2006) from scandalous banned book into something that might “ruffle” (8) the collective bedsheets of the nation. For Nagra “Broadcasting House” represents a metaphorical ark of culture – a means of both escape and re-creation. The cultural canons he scrutinises are under threat, but are also freighted with the potential to save themselves through the figure of “the Plowman who ascends the Hill of Battles with ideals” (2017:9).

“The Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology in Cambridge”, written at “the dawn of my days as a poet-in-residence” (25), exposes the awkward politics of museums. As storehouses of sanctioned and permissible views of culture, they serve a canonising function. So, we see the Fijian Prime Minister (“our tyrant” (25)) viewing the sanitised 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”) served up with “the sweetest English apples” (25). 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”, from MacNeice’s “Museums” (2007), 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 are “Cleansed of a barbarous home from which they were bled” (50). The self-assurance of the nation that considers itself as civilised and civilising 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 former 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 in the interstices between them.

## Conclusion

This paper has begun to touch upon Nagra’s engagement with ideas of canon in *British Museum*. In “Meditations on the British Museum”, Nagra observes how “Prospero’s surveillance hoards our every scripted quip for the Island/of our interrogation” (52). However, 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 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.

*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).

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Notes on contributor

**Andrew Green** is currently the Deputy Director of the Global Lives Research Centre at Brunel University London. His research interests include Golden Age detective fiction, English education, creative writing and Literature and Education. His most recent publications are *The New Newbolt Report: One Hundred Years of the Teaching of English in England* (Routledge) ‘Newbolt and the Construction of Subject English’ (English in Education), ‘Moving world, moving voices: a discussion with Daljit Nagra’ (Journal of Commonwealth Literature), ‘Death in a Literary Context’ (Clues: a Journal of Detection) and ‘Playing at Murder: The collaborative works of members of the Detection

Club' (Crime Fiction Studies). With David Aldridge, he is General Editor of the Routledge Literature and Education book series.

## References

- Bakhtin, M. M. 1965. *Rabelais and His World*, trans. H. Iswolsky. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Bakhtin, M. M. 1982. *The Dialogic Imagination*. trans M. Holquist and C. Emerson, ed. M. Holquist. Austin, TE: University of Texas Press.
- Barthes, R. 1974. *S/Z*, trans R. Miller. New York, NY: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, .
- Bentham, J. 2008. *Panopticon; Or, the Inspection House*. London: Dodo Press.
- Bhanot, K. 2019. "A Decolonial Reading of the Punjabi (M)other in British Asian Literature." *Third World Thematics* 4 (4–5): 377–394. doi:10.1080/23802014.2019.1698976.
- Bloom, H. 1973. *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Bourdieu, P. 1984. *Distinction*, trans. R. Nice. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Bruner, J. 1986. *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Caillois, R. 1958/2001. *Man, Play and Games*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press.
- Campion, T. 2016. *The Works of Thomas Campion*. London: Wentworth Press.
- Chambers, C. 2010. "Meddling with My Type: An Interview with Daljit Nagra". *Crossings: Journal of Migration and Culture* 1 (1): 87–96.
- Clifford, J. 1997. *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Conrad, J. 2007. *Heart of Darkness*. London: Penguin.
- Dickens, C. 1997. *Our Mutual Friend*. London: Penguin.
- Eliot, T. S. 1999. *Selected Essays*. London: Faber.
- Eliot, T. S. 2002. *The Waste Land and Other Poems*. London: Faber.
- Eluward, P. 1942. *Poésie et Verité*. Paris: Roger Lacourrière.
- Foucault, M. 1995. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. New York: Random House.
- Gilmour, R. 2015. "Punning in Punglish, Sounding "Poreign"." *interventions* 17 (5): 686–705. doi:10.1080/1369801X.2014.950312.
- Graves, R. 2003. *The Complete Poems*. London: Penguin.
- Green, A. 2020. "Moving World, Moving Voices: An Interview with Daljit Nagra." *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*: 002198942091183. ID: JCL-19-0005.R2. doi:10.1177/0021989420911836.
- Gunning, D. 2008. "Daljit Nagra, Faber Poet: Burdens of Representation and Anxieties of Influence." *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 43 (3): 95–108. doi:10.1177/0021989408095240.
- Heaney, S. 1975. *North*. London: Faber & Faber.
- Heaney, S. 1983. *An Open Letter*. Dublin: Field Day Publications.
- Heaney, S. 2006. *Haw Lantern, The*. London: Faber & Faber.
- Heidegger, M. 2002. "The Origin of Work of Art." In *Off the Beaten Track*, edited by J. Young and K. Haynes. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Huizinga, J. 1955. *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.
- Langland, W. 1992. *Piers Plowman*. Oxford: Oxford World Classics.
- Larkin, P. 1964. *The Whitsun Weddings*. London: Faber & Faber.
- Larkin, P. 2003. *Collected Poems*. London: Faber & Faber.
- Larkin, P. 2014. *The Complete Poems*. London: Faber & Faber.
- Lawrence, D. H. 2006. *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. London: Penguin.
- MacNeice, L. 2007. *Collected Poems*. London: Faber and Faber.
- Mishra, V. 1996. "The Diasporic Imaginary: Theorizing the Indian Diaspora." *Textual Practice* 10 (3): 421–447. doi:10.1080/09502369608582254.
- Morrison, B., ed. 1986. *The Penguin Book of Contemporary British Poetry*. London: Penguin.
- Nagra, D. 2007. *Look We Have Coming to Dover*. London: Faber & Faber.

- Nagra, D. 2011. *Tippoo Sultan's Incredible White-Man-Eating Tiger Toy-Machine!!!* London: Faber & Faber.
- Nagra, D. 2013. *Ramayana*. London: Faber & Faber.
- Nagra, D. 2017. *British Museum*. London: Faber & Faber.
- Noel-Tod, J. (2017) "Poetry that Provokes". In Culture Features, *The Sunday Times* June 4 2017, p.36.
- Rosenblatt, L. 1986. "The Aesthetic Transaction". *The Journal of Aesthetic Education* 20 (4): 122–128. 20th Anniversary Issue (Winter, 1986). doi:[10.2307/3332615](https://doi.org/10.2307/3332615).
- Sassoon, S. 1974. *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer*. London: Faber & Faber.
- Shakespeare, W. 2005. *The Tempest*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.