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INTERVIEW

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Brexit, the pandemic and the battle with language: An interview with Daljit Nagra

ABSTRACT

This interview with the well-known poet Daljit Nagra was conducted in summer 2022 by Claire Chambers, with Rachael Gilmour providing questions in absentia due to a bout of coronavirus. In it, the three discuss such issues as 'refugee tales', poetic ethics and voice, the Brexit referendum's emboldening of the far right and, of course, the COVID-19 pandemic. Above all, the conversation turns to Nagra's bending of language via his use of 'babu English', his interpolation of Hindi and Punjabi words and his influences from such authors as William Shakespeare, John Milton and Nissim Ezekiel. Nagra looks in particular towards his fifth, forthcoming collection Indiom. *In these ways, the interview develops on and updates Chambers's 2010 interview with Nagra for* Crossings *and Gilmour's (2020) chapter on language and voice in Nagra's first three collections.*

KEYWORDS

conversation
multiculturalism
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pandemic

The son of Indian Punjabi immigrants who moved to Britain in the 1950s and 1960s, Daljit Nagra is arguably one of the most well-known poets writing in

Britain today. Since 2007, he has published four poetry collections with Faber & Faber: *Look We Have Coming to Dover!* (2007), *Tippoo Sultan's Incredible White-Man-Eating Tiger Toy-Machine!!!* (2011), *Ramayana* (2013) and *British Museum* (2017). He is currently working on his fifth book, *Indiom*, which will be published in 2023. Nagra's poetry is often exuberantly linguistically experimental and formally wide-ranging. What is more, the work is insistently concerned – from his 'Punglish' voice poetry to the reimagining of the epic *Ramayana* – with the fraught relationship between inheritance and invention. All the while, Nagra keeps a sceptical eye on demands for purity or 'authenticity'. As a poet distinctively focused on questions of language, he dramatizes the ceaseless creative dynamism of language in use alongside the legacies of violence and residues of Empire that play out both in language and our ideas about language. His work has won numerous awards, including the Forward Prize for Best Individual Poem and Best First Book, the South Bank Show Decibel Award and the Cholmondeley Award, and was shortlisted for the Costa Prize and twice for the T. S. Eliot Prize. Nagra's poetry has been included in the *Norton Anthology of World Poetry* (Ramazani 2018; see Khair 2019) and – interestingly, for someone who has interrogated and parodied the logic of the GCSE exam anthologies in his poetry – in two successive iterations of the AQA board's GCSE poetry syllabus. Having worked as a secondary school English teacher for two decades, Nagra is now a professor of creative writing at Brunel University, as well as serving as current chair of the Royal Society of Literature. The inaugural Poet-in-Residence for Radio 4 and 4 Extra, he also presents the weekly *Poetry Extra*. These institutional contexts are among the questions explored in this interview.

Nagra's first major print interview was conducted by Claire Chambers back in 2009 and published in the inaugural issue of *Crossings* in 2010. Taking place not long after the publication of his best-selling first collection, this interview addressed questions of voice, language and form in conjunction with the themes of culture and migration, which are so central both to his work and to *Crossings*' project as a journal. In July 2022, Claire interviewed Daljit again at the *English: Shared Futures* conference,[1] in the context of long-awaited, pandemic-postponed conversations about literature and the future of the discipline of English studies. Claire asked her own questions alongside those devised by Rachael Gilmour, a long-time friend and collaborator who has also written about Nagra's poetry. In her monograph, *Bad English*, Rachael investigated linguistic politics in multicultural Britain. Her fourth chapter, titled 'Passing my voice into theirs', examined in depth the complex negotiations of language, voice, ethnicity and Britishness in Daljit's first two collections. For this interview, though, Rachael was recovering from COVID-19 and unable to conduct the interview herself. The coronavirus pandemic was, naturally, another important topic for conversation.

As a collective endeavour, this was an opportunity for Claire, Rachael and Daljit to revisit some of the themes of that first interview and to reflect on much that has happened since. We considered issues around Britishness, migrancy and belonging, returning to questions of language and voice in relation to Nagra's more recent work. This was carried out in the context of current pressing and inescapable matters, including the treatment of refugees in Britain, Brexit and the pandemic, and threats to English studies and the humanities in the United Kingdom and beyond.

Claire Chambers (CC) and Rachael Gilmour (RG): You have just written one of the new tales for the *Refugee Tales* project, which uses literary collaborations between established writers and people with direct experience of the

1. Held at Manchester Metropolitan University in collaboration with the Universities of Manchester and Salford, the conference's organizers were Eleanor Beal, Robert Eaglestone and Gail Marshall, to whom, along with the English Association and University English, we extend our warm thanks.

asylum system to call for an end to indefinite detention in the UK (see Herd and Pincus 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019). Can you tell us about this piece, entitled 'The Tale of the Person Seeking Asylum'?

Daljit Nagra (DN): I worked with a Kurdish migrant who's from Iran. His crime was that he got his degree in Iran, studying politics and getting high marks. He went on to an MA even though the authorities kept putting him off from doing research. He was seen as a threat and was being taken out his house and beaten, because the Revolutionary Guards were worried about him as a subversive. In the end, he fled. He's been in Britain for about sixteen months, and he's yet to have his first interview. So he's a citizen of nowhere. And he's been getting just eight pounds a week. Plus he has lunch provided, which I've seen and it's basically a white bread sandwich with plastic cheese, and sometimes a bag of crisps. He's supposed to live on that.

He had ended up on the outskirts of Calais, not knowing where in France he was. His family paid for him to cross from France and so he was put on a dinghy. This managed to get halfway across the Channel before the boat's passengers were rescued. He's still traumatized by it, because he said the water was up to his face the whole time. He couldn't breathe in the dark, for hour after hour, and he thought he wouldn't make it. Then he wanted to die, but he couldn't. The situation was horrific. Next he was put in a detention centre and given oversized clothes, which looked idiotic and made him feel shamed.

It's not the sort of poem I normally write. But I wanted to focus on and use lots of synaesthetic images to see if poetry could compensate in some way for this utterly deprived life. The hostel authorities where he's staying at the moment have a key to his room. They can walk into his room at any time, and they have done; they just look to see if they can take anything.

For me this also brings up memories from my own childhood. My relatives came as migrants to Britain from the late 1950s onwards. I remember when I was younger, one of my uncles was arrested because somebody from the factory dobbed him in. So the police came round with immigration officers and they dragged him out. He tried to fight back and he was going to run out of the back garden. But they took him, and later he was sent back to India. He didn't give up, because then he went to Canada where he set up his own lorry company. He's made his fortune in Canada, but Britain could have benefitted from him because he's very bright and business-minded.

CC and RG: What does it mean to work collaboratively with someone else? With the Kurdish-Iranian migrant, you were giving poetic voice to the experiences of a person who is seeking asylum.

DN: Collaborating is always a peculiar sensation. In a sense you're always collaborating because you do research, which is a form of collaboration. However, working with someone who wants to justify what they're saying is quite tricky. It's in opposition to your desire as a poet to play, to think about your formal techniques, and how you can disrupt things. Yet, here you are, trying to represent somebody's identity.

I've made it clear I'm fictionalizing and adding bits that weren't aspects of his life. Some of the essential details I've put in were invented. You steal from people anyway, but this is taking someone's life: appropriation is strange and disturbing. In the poem I partly talk about how he's speaking, but it isn't his voice. Because that is really unsettling and feels like an imperial imposition. It's like an act of benevolence: 'Oh look, I did good for you, because you can't

do good for yourself'. It has all those dubious politics behind it when you try to write on someone else's behalf whether they want it or not. I mean, obviously, he agreed to it, but I suspect he's not in a position to say yes or no when he's just looking to find any way of having attention drawn to his plight. So it's a very complicated area.

CC and RG: It opens up into bigger questions about voice and how that has worked in your other poetry. We know it's an obvious question to ask, given how much attention has been accorded to voice in your work, but it *is* distinctive. We're thinking here not just of the Punglish voice that you've become known for, but also the often exclamatory, expressive tonal palette; your use of nouns as verbs; inventive creation of portmanteau words; incongruously sophisticated or old-fashioned diction; and so on. Just as importantly, your work is often connected to giving voices to all sorts of things, like the *Hobson-Jobson* voice of 'This Be the Pukka Verse'.[2]

DN: I think it's necessary in writing to try not to overanalyse your work. There's a fine line in that you can overdo the thinking and lose the magic. But yeah, voice always felt important to me. When I started out with poetry, I was trying to write first-person pieces. I thought maybe I could present people from my background in the full gusto of their own voices and capture their rough and ruddy states. I guess that was inspired by Shakespeare from those comedic characters he has. I really liked the idea of putting them in a dramatic context, so things become rich all of a sudden. If somebody's in a room and has something to say about an event that's happened, you've got dynamics. In the early works I was trying to create more and more of this within the poems. After a while I came to the point where I wanted the reader to meet me halfway so that the poems were about co-creation. With this new approach the aim is to include less in there, so that I didn't know what would happen to the characters, or what their previous lives looked like, or what they'd do next.

My next book, coming out in 2023, will be called *Indiom*. I'm very pleased with this title! *Indiom* is a whole verse novel written in babu English, that nineteenth-century educated Indian English.[3] I've consciously tried to be funny. I started writing it during lockdown when I wanted to make myself laugh. To say that I had a productive time in lockdown feels weird, but I enjoyed writing this book, which wrote itself quickly. There are loads of characters, and they're talking about the viability of an eccentric English.

In the nineteenth century the British created a class of administrators to run Indian admin. They picked these highly educated and super-bright Indians, but only allowed them to do certain jobs. The administrators then learnt English, reading Virgil, Milton and Shakespeare, but they didn't use English as part of their daily colloquial speech. So you ended up with this really highfalutin English, slightly eccentric, almost written–verbal English. There's one poem by Nissim Ezekiel, in particular, 'Goodbye Party for Miss Pushpa T. S.' (Ezekiel 1989), that reflects this style of speech. This way of speaking is also central in my collection. I try to do an authentic babu voice, using it as a licence to speak in a very high and eccentric way, and have different types of babu. I'll try out four or five different speakers using different types of English and then add in a couple of sound effects, sound poems, things like that. Using those different voices, you can try and see how far you can pull in different Englishes to create different effects.

2. Nagra (2011: 16–17). On the poem's '*Hobson-Jobson* voice', see Gilmour (2020: 151).

3. On 'babu English', see Kachru (1978: 477–552). Kachru refers to a note on 'babu English' in Yule and Burnell's *Hobson-Jobson*, the Anglo-Indian glossary which has made its way into Nagra's poetry (see Gilmour 2020: 149–51) and which was the subject of a programme he made for the BBC in 2012. On the loaded ascription of 'babu English' to Indian writers, see Khair (2005) and Srivastava (2007).

Underneath it, for me the person I always come back to is John Milton in *Paradise Lost* ([1667] 2004). He invented it all, like using a heavy metal sound for the first time. But then the English completely forgot about it; nobody was ever influenced by Milton or followed his lead. Anyway, what he showed to us is, if you take parts of language from the toolkit, you can create a certain sound effect that is really quite remarkable and you can mess with syntax. That's an invitation to everyone to find their own little toolboxes of language and try out different things. Each book or every poem or even just a single note: what we'll do is push it *beyond*. In my head, Milton's *Paradise Lost* is always there, and Milton's laughing at my poem, telling me it's rubbish. Or Shakespeare, that kind of eccentric English. I'm not a specialist in either, but it doesn't matter. What matters is that something goes in, fires you up, and excites you enough to want to create a music. I find that music in *Paradise Lost*; I absolutely love it, find it really transcendent. Probably I've never heard anything better on Planet Earth than the sounds he created.

CC and RG: Also striking is the way in which voice in your poetry is often self-revealing. Many of your voices can't be trusted, or don't trust themselves, or seem to be doing one thing while actually doing another. We recall poems like 'He Do the Foreign Voices' (Nagra 2017: 18–19) and your own self-critique, but also your criticism of the critics. This is a long-winded way of asking you about voice and how you think about it in your work. How do you feel your poetic voice has shifted over time as well?

DN: More and more I'm aware that I had this anxiety that I want to do eccentric English. That means I want to stay outside or leap out of the *OED* as much as I can. But I keep finding that too many poems want to be earnest and sincere, and they push me to go back to standard English. It's this battle in the back in my head that wants to reinstate the hierarchies of English. Standard English must prevail! I have this big fight in me that I want to do these voices which are comic but politicized and complex, so they don't just become haha or silly or throwaway.

Indiom is addressed to that issue, but then I started working on another book. The new work is a dialogue with lyric voice and, again, trying to use a different palette of mixed-up English, and asking, 'Can I sustain a period of really hybrid English that justifies its existence as a normative form of address, and not find that I'm going backwards?' By trying to have my battle with standard English, I've also stopped writing small poems. *Indiom* is quite long. And the one I'm working on now is also a long verse, a novelistic poem. So maybe that's the way I'm going to fight my battle with standard English. And I love that battle, because I can feel myself saying, 'Why don't you write a poem in standard English?' And it sounds really nice, but I think, 'No, I hate that. That's not me. I don't want to do it any more. I've already done it'.

I think I did this quite a bit in *British Museum*. Its poems are quieter and trying to go through to a more sustained standard English pattern. I wanted to see how that felt. Now I've done it, I'm eager to get back to what I really enjoy. In my first book, *Look We Have Coming to Dover!*, and the second one, *Tippoo Sultan's Incredible White-Man-Eating Tiger Toy-Machine!!!*, I only wrote about four standard English pieces for each book, just to give the reader a break from the eccentric voices. That said, the voice poems are often the ones I read aloud, and a couple of them are taught on the curriculum.

It's just my sensibility. I feel it's more me to write mixed-up English, pulling English away and stripping it and putting in prefixes, suffixes, making up words, doing neologisms, turning verbs into nouns, etcetera. Just so the whole language feels as though it's in motion. I think everybody feels their lives in motion: you're not settled. And we don't want to feel settled. We want to celebrate fluctuation. I think language is the material that allows us to do that as a substance almost. Maybe standard English doesn't build my substance: it's not something I would eat!

CC and RG: I'm glad that you're talking about standardization and hierarchies, because my next question is about education. Your poetry is strewn with scenes of teaching: direct pedagogy, but also other kinds of learning. You were of course a teacher, and we talked about that work when I originally interviewed you in 2009 for *Crossings* (Chambers 2010). At that time you were still working at the JFS School in West London. Some of your poems are infused with the classroom's Multicultural London English or MLE, the diversity of the student body, and the sense of high school students chafing against canons or the metaphorical cannons of state violence. What are your thoughts about education, pedagogy and learning, and how these issues filter into your poems? Moreover, with this poetry now being taught on the high school curriculum you've joined the ranks of Black British poets who I know have been an influence on you, people like John Agard and Grace Nichols. So we also want to know: what it's like to be a GCSE poet?

DN: Having taught English for nearly twenty years, and now teaching creative writing at Brunel University, it teaches you about audience. By working with students I've learnt how to think about audiences, always keeping aware of what they're picking up and how they're receiving information. On one level, what appeals to me is being eccentric but also accessible in order to manipulate the reader into different interpretations. Anybody can tell a story, but the hard thing is how to keep the audience on board. That's one of the skills I've picked up from teaching.

Teaching the canon, for a long time it was largely white male poets. That becomes a frustration and limitation because you feel your students aren't really enjoying it. You need something that relates to their lives as well. You know, just seeing names like yours or characters that relate to your life is a powerful thing. I've yet to see a Daljit anywhere in fiction. In my next book, I might create a dog called Daljit for a poem! The only Daljits I've ever met are female, in fact, because Sikh names are interchangeable, male–female. Although we're heavily gendered in language and culture, Punjabi names are weirdly asexual!

Obviously, having my poems taught is a great privilege and honour. But I see it as more of an activist role. I go into schools, or into other kinds of offsite projects where I get to talk to young people. I see the GCSE and A-levels as a passport in, where you suddenly have a bit of glamour about you. You can go in and say, 'Hold on, I come from these roots, and I can be successful, so can you. There was nothing at home, really, no books, and loads of us lived in the same house, but at the same time you can make it!' And also just be a brown voice that speaks and makes that normal. Or I can help get other authors to come in: the Royal Society of Literature and Poetry by Heart are really interested in us working with school kids. I'm not sure if I'm that bothered about the vanity of these thing. But education work is important to me,

and the curriculum is a route through which you can do some really positive work. It's been an amazing last few years in that way.

I get them to break down all the different types of English. For example, sometimes I ask them to write as many slang words as they can think of in two minutes: rude words, street words, words from sports or from food. Then I get them to rewrite a section from one of my poems, or just to write about somebody loving themselves walking down the road in new clothes. And their work is sensational. They're laughing their heads off and bringing in words from computer gaming, football words: just really going for it and producing truly hybrid stuff. I find that inspirational because it updates me. They're writing in young people's language. This gives them an insight into the wealth that's in their brains.

CC and RG: Do you think spoken word has made poetry fashionable again?

DN: Yes, I do. I think universities should try to make sure students understand that social media, written poetry and spoken word all have equal status. They're just different art forms, aren't they? You have to understand that one is not better than the other. A lot of kids are writing social media poetry, and that seems to be their entry into it. I encourage them if they're interested to create a portfolio, and then social media can help them create the target group they're going to test their work on to see if it hits the audience in the right way. Then they can go on to adapt and develop it, and then hopefully go into the commercial world. I'm hoping one of my students one day will be a famous Instagram poet.

CC and RG: You've been talking about how you taught English, and before that you did an English degree. So what is the ideal future and the worst nightmare for English as a discipline? In ten, twenty or thirty years' time, what would the English literary studies utopia and its flipside, the dystopia, look like?

DN: One thing I'd like is for people in all their otherness to be really taken on board and appreciated for what their lives are. Poetry has that singular way of getting to a mass national audience and hopefully, through school systems, through education in school or university, we can reach out and bring in a greater understanding of different people. Too much of this work can be tokenistic, where movements such as Black Lives Matter are reduced to a slogan: a dead term, almost. I hear it in my area, West London, as a tick-box exercise. I don't feel people have really made the leap to try to understand those lives. My life is that of a brown person. Hopefully, literature and art can help people to make that effort to understand. It's not just about the poetry being published, it's about us going out there and talking around the poetry that can effect that change. That's what I'd like, for the shared future to be properly shared. I can understand what it is to be white; it's easy because of my education. But I'd like white people to understand what it feels like to be brown or black a bit more. And I think literature's one of the ways to do that.

CC and RG: Moving outwards from the discipline to a broader societal perspective, let's also talk about the dystopia. Your collection *British Museum* was published in 2017, and a lot of the poems resonate with Brexit. For instance, you write about walls and Englishness, especially in the poems 'Vox Populi, Vox Dei' and 'Hadrian's Wall'. Could you talk about that, and also the

more recent dystopia of the pandemic? You've said it was a productive time for you. But have you written, or will you write, any poems about the last two disastrous years?

DN: My latest collection *Indiom* has got some pandemic stuff in there, so I've been thinking ideas through. Brexit, meanwhile, I think is taking us backwards in terms of appreciating people from different cultures. My family got a lockdown puppy, and we walk it around the park with other, largely older white people who mostly read the *Daily Mail*. We live in the country just in Harrow, on the plains not on the hill, but the *Daily Mail* seems to be really popular, I don't know why. These people talk about 'woke' people and their politics. It's quite hard to keep quiet, because arguing with them would shut down the conversation, and it's interesting to hear these views from some older people. There's a feeling of being threatened again, as with 9/11, or with longer histories of perceived threat, like when trade unions protested against black workers coming in. I worry about this sort of thing.

It also damages science and the arts. I'm involved with a European alliance of academics and arts organizations, who organize projects. I got involved with them a couple of years ago in the first lockdown. I can do certain things with them, but loads of stuff I can't do because Brexit means no access to EU funding. It's tragic, because I'd like to bring European authors over to do work here: I could bring into British schools a Hungarian novelist or a poet from Belgium. But I can't do that at the moment. I find it frustrating that we've ceased these projects, for the time being at least. I suppose there'll be a generation deprived of those wonderful things.

It's also the ahistorical perspective that troubles me. I think I tried to pick this up in *British Museum*. There's a dying off of free speech in certain aspects of our cultural life. In Britain people talk about how far back you want to go – the point being that perhaps we shouldn't look at difficult aspects of the past. But I mean, if you want the truth, you have to go as far back as the truth needs to take you back. But there's that shutting down of truth all the time. And in *British Museum*, I was trying to explore that. Things have only got worse since I wrote those poems about five years ago: that was the early stages of it with Brexit and the whole divisive dialogue. Now we seem to be in a much worse position.

CC and RG: In the collection *British Museum* and across your work, there is a lot of material about the relationship with institutions, some of them the bastions of English culture. Obviously you write about the British Museum in the titular poem, and there's also discussion of BBC Radio 4, in the poem 'Broadcasting House', which concerns being a poet in residence. What's more, your earlier 'A Black History of the English-Speaking Peoples' is set at Shakespeare's Globe (Nagra 2011: 50–53). So what kind of relationship do you see between institutions and your poetry?

DN: I think a lot of these ideas come from the trajectory of language again. As a writer, you want to explore certain languages. I'm deeply interested in that Shakespearean English, that classic English, and also the 'we' and 'us' voice. In this book, I was trying to use 'we' or 'us' quite often. I was trying to position these pronouns somewhere between pastiche – as imitation – and parody, with that slightly humorous element it has. The parody was about how far the outsider can be a 'we' and 'us', and how far that person can speak on behalf

of the nation. So I think institutions need to be written about. The poems in *British Museum* are state-of-the-nation pieces. And so is the long poem about the Globe Theatre in my second book.

And there's one about the BBC and about what a British voice is. I guess I was thinking about whether you can really have a unified voice. I thought of David Cameron asking what constitutes British identity (Cameron 2011). The UK ended up with really bland statements like, 'Well, we we're for decency'. Isn't every country for decency, you know? You end up in cul-de-sacs with such phrases.

In relation to Radio 4, my *Poetry Extra* has been broadcast every week on Sundays at noon and five o'clock for getting on for seven years now. I write my own scripts and work with the team to pick the programme, because I want to have a say in it. I want to think about diversity. The kind of thing I'm reacting to is a *Poetry Please* episode about Philip Larkin from 2017 (McGough 2017). The five people talking about Larkin on the programme were all straight white men, as were the two people reading the poems. This was only five years ago; they could have had one woman on! Radio 4 are still doing this sort of thing. Even though to my mind Carol Ann Duffy seems really influenced by Larkin, and so it would have been easy to get in other voices. I bumped into one of those dog walkers recently, who was outraged by the fact that some poet called Larkin has been taken off the school syllabus – for now at least. But you know, when he was Education Secretary not long ago Nadhim Zahawi said, 'I learned about Britishness from Larkin' (quoted in Adams 2022). I mean, what did you learn: not to have children, not to get married, to be a bigot?!

When it comes to the poem 'British Museum', I wasn't really interested in thinking through the role of the British Museum and what objects should or should not be kept there. That wasn't really my area of interest. It was more about what a museum is for. We go there for pleasure, but can it edify us or educate us? What's more, I was trying to test out poetry, and how its relation with artefacts can educate us about the politics of the world. I was thinking about Britain's soft power in the world and what good soft power can do for the nation. Especially at the time of Brexit: can soft power fight back against the hard, brutal politics of the language as it's being corrupted and soiled? A lot of the English language was being damaged and harmed, because it took on these politicized perspectives one way or the other. Can poetry find a way through all this? I'm not sure if poetry or art can save language though; or if it can, then it takes a while.

One of the programmes in *Poetry Extra* was about East Berlin (Nagra 2016). The East German state was allowing poems to be translated, because they didn't think poets would be a threat to the regime. The main ones who were being translated were Shakespeare, John Keats and Dylan Thomas. Apparently, young people found their poems really liberating. The post-Second World War state was partly embarking on these translations to see if they could cleanse the German language of the violation of Nazism. Poetry was seen as a possible route to achieve that. But what happened instead was that young people reading poets like Dylan Thomas thought, 'Hold on, these people can think really freely. Why can't we think freely? Why are we being oppressed?' Poetry had this impact on people on the ground to liberate them to some degree. But I don't know if poetry can or should cleanse.

This is an important issue, which is still here. Think of the current government and the way language has been corrupted. Can art save it, or will it be

a decade or more before language can get its gravity and gravitas back again? I'm not even sure if political speech can sound genuine any more. Everything's gone to extremes.

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