TABISH KHAIR

The Nortoning of Nagra

One would imagine that a new edition of something like the *Norton Anthology of English Literature* would come out once in a decade or even two. But, these days, it (henceforth referred to as the *Norton English*) comes out every sixth year. The 2012 edition has been replaced this year, forcing our students to stop recycling the old anthologies and purchase this brand-new edition.

Of course, the editors and publishers might convince themselves that so much is happening in the literary world today that the *Norton English* needs to be updated every five years. I suspect their marketing people do the convincing. Marketing people tend to be very convincing these days. Because, honestly, there are not that many differences between the 2012 and 2018 editions. A few texts dropped, a few texts added; the additions—despite what any editor can do—by no means sufficient to compensate for the vast number of equivalent texts by equivalent authors perforce left out. Despite the superficial tinkering, which, as suggested, is justified by a marketing rationale rather than a literary one, what lingers on is the general incapacity of the *Norton English* to really step out of mainstream Anglo-American critical paradigms. This has nothing to do with the capabilities of its editors, who are among the best scholars in the world: the series editor being none other than the great Stephen Greenblatt, and the editor of the volume I will refer to below being a major scholar of recent writing and poetry, Jahan Ramazani.

The problem is not with the editors, but with the format and tradition of mainstream anthologizing into which they have been inserted. Such "anthologizing" suffers from three major flaws, as noted by an American scholar in informal commentary: 1) inevitably unrepresentative selection that nevertheless has a canonical impact on the material "out there"; 2) headnote foreclosure and preemption; 3) "neutral" notes that obscure or slant by glossing the wrong things rightly. Let me illustrate these with reference to just one text that has been added to Volume F—"The Twentieth and Twenty-First Century"—of the *Norton English* anthologies. It is a welcome addition, as it drags into the cozy warmth

of the *Norton* a rising star of Black British—or postcolonial—poetry. The text is Daljit Nagra's 2011 poem, "A Black History of the English-speaking Peoples."

The *Norton English* headnote introductions to its selected texts are always precise and very helpful along mainstream lines, the lines that most students are still supposed to imbibe in departments of English. What can be said in them seems to be largely determined by the format of the *Norton*, which permits mainstream annotating, not tangential or against-the-stream criticism or extensive contextualization. Polemical headnotes and footnotes are—rightly from an academic perspective—not allowed, which is a mixed blessing, especially in evolving fields of literature, where polemics can sometimes illuminate more than the assumption of neutrality. This headnote introduction is no exception. The first line tells us that *Look, We Have Coming to Dover* (2007) is Daljit Nagra's first, Forward Prize–winning collection of poems, its title "alluding to Matthew Arnold and W. H. Auden and inflecting an iconic British site with Indianized English" (896). Then follows a description of Nagra as the child of Sikh Punjabi immigrants, a mention of him growing up "in Britain between Punjabi and English cultures," and a list of his books that weave together "his disparate inheritances." This is all in the first paragraph of the introduction.

The second and last paragraph of the introduction brings up, as it would, Winston Churchill's "monumental *History of the English-speaking Peoples*" and provides a brisk intertextual summary of Nagra's poem, listing "Shakespeare, Tennyson, Walcott and Auden." It also adds this bit of information: "Although some of Nagra's poetry is an ebulliently performative Indian English, this poem and others are written in Standard English richly threaded with literary allusions."

Now, as an Indian who speaks a kind of English that often differs from the English that many other Indians speak, I have always found the notion of "Indian English"—so freely applied in the West to the writing of authors, like Nagra or Salman Rushdie, who have basically grown up in England or the USA—very difficult to comprehend. But let that matter drop: even editors of postcolonial studies evidently hear something singular called "Indian English" far more clearly than I do, and perhaps it has to do with my hearing impairment!

Let us accept this "Indian English" and look at the poem again. For one, as the editors correctly note, the poem is not in "Indian English," unless of course you object that many Indians do, actually,

write versions of "standard" English. But even if you raise no such objection, was there a pressing need to highlight the fact that many other poems by Nagra—not to mention the title of his most famous collection—are in "ebulliently performative Indian English?" Perhaps there was, you might say, for an anthology like this presents just a slice of meat from the author, and if the slice presented is hock, then, obviously, it is necessary for the reader to learn that much of the rest of that particular animal is ham. In short, even the piece selected from an author's oeuvre might not be "representative," let alone the more complicated matter of the author represented.

Now, reading Nagra's poem, the suspicion also crosses my mind that a similar rider might not be attached to Tony Harrison—if one of his more classical poems, and not, say, *V*, was extracted from—or to Blake Morrison or, in fiction, someone like James Kelman. So, I go looking for all three in the *Norton English*, but, alas, they are not there. This brings up the larger aspect of representation: for example, it suggests that much of so-called postcolonial writing (very accomplished and deserving texts, usually written by highly educated, middle-class authors of color in the West), when included in mainstream anthologies like the *Norton English*, might serve to occlude not just postcolonial voices from elsewhere but also vestiges of working-class voices from within Britain. I am not claiming that Morrison or Harrison are "working class"—no more than I am working class just because I was born and educated in India. And yet: there seems to be a dearth of writers from elsewhere in the *Norton English*—because there are too many writers from somewhere presented as coming from elsewhere. Honestly, the absence of Harrison in particular leaves me shaken. Even the well-deserved presence of a Linton Kwesi Johnson or Ngugi wa Thiong'o appears to be something of a smokescreen when one notices the absence of writers like Harrison, and I am not even talking of "colored" writers here. Anyway, the omission deprives me of a chance to verify whether an English author known to have written powerfully in "dialect" would be identified as mostly ham even when the Norton English presented us with hock.

But let us return to the introduction to Nagra's poem. I am not even convinced that the only significant literary ghosts behind the title of Nagra's Forward Prize–winning book are Matthew Arnold and W. H. Auden, as the Norton paratext states. Those two connections are obvious enough, and any good scholar would spot them. But given

where Nagra is coming from, one could think of other allusions too. For instance, the Jamaican writer Mervyn Morris's not uninfluential essay, "Feeling, Affection, Respect" (1965), in which he recalls his first visit to England. Approaching the cliffs of Dover, Mervyn is surprised by the excitement of the Englishmen on board at the sight of what appears to be "ordinary cliffs" to his Caribbean eyes. He goes on to note, "I realized that of course the cliffs are not cliffs: to the Englishmen they are a symbol of something greater, of the return from a land of strangers, of the return home" (26).

I would not be surprised if Nagra was aware of this essay when he wrote his book, but even if he wasn't, it makes no difference. The irony—stressed rather heavy-handedly in my view by concocting an "Indian English" grammar—of Nagra's book title (and the title poem) should lead the reader to Mervyn. After all, unlike the case of Arnold and Auden, the line—"Look, We Have Coming to Dover"—is spoken by Indian immigrants, reaching a "national" British landmark that must have appeared to them, coming from a land of rivers, cliffs, and mountains, at least as "ordinary" as it did to the Jamaican Mervyn. They have reached England, true, but, unlike the excited Englishmen of Mervyn's account, they have not reached "home," and, like Mervyn, they are about to enter a land of strangers. The layers of irony—and the title's almost Bhabhian interrogation of "home"—should lead the reader to Mervyn. But it won't. Even the editors stopped with Arnold and Auden.

Evidently, no matter what the text of Nagra's poem does or does not do, what the editorial paratext unwittingly does is simple, and it is the determining aspect of mainstream appropriations of the postcolonial: it makes Europe central to the postcolonial bridge. Nagra's poem stands almost solely on the shoulders of European—British—mainstream literature in this annotated version. This is true of postcolonialism in general, which, even in most courses on postcolonial literature in the West, treads heavily on the European, mostly British, bridge. Texts and authors refusing to tromp over this bridge—by being conveniently located in the West, by employing "Indian English," by addressing themes of historical "validity" to the West (such as "empire" or "Raj"), by narrating British or American multiculturalism, by alluding to mainstream European or American texts and cultural aspects, etcetera.—seldom feature in such postcolonial accounts, or are given much less space. While postcolonialism is defined as a writing back by the other, it is actually—

more often than not—a writing back by the other about the contentious centrality to it of the European self. It restores the European self to its colonial self-importance, if only by proxy! All other connections are dropped or downgraded. Britain makes the postcolonial world possible, as if Africans and Asians never met, traded, and even fought together, as if the Maoris went to New Zealand from London, or at least following British-U.S. navigational guidebooks! Hence, Mervyn disappears from under Nagra's feet; Auden and Arnold remain there to sustain the "postcolonial" Nagra. Unlike in postcolonial courses in the West, which do allow some leeway, headnote foreclosure in anthologies like the Norton makes this the only and the most "natural" option.

But let us proceed to the poem and its footnotes.

The poem is not written, as the editors correctly note, in "an ebulliently performative Indian English"—unlike the poems Nagra is often better known for—but in "a Standard English richly threaded by literary allusions." Actually, I would call it an ebulliently performative Standard English, in which Nagra not only hits all the standard literary signposts but also strikes a poker-faced pose that exaggeratedly mimics the density of Shakespearean and Elizabethan dramatic poetry. The echoes from Shakespeare are not incidental, but even without them, Nagra's lines are crammed with references and images in a way that reminds the reader of Shakespeare—though the language remains contemporary and "standard." To quote Virginia Woolf out of context, the narrator of this poem—or the poet—is "talking with a gesticulation like the swing of Shakespeare's words" (Woolf 89).

What does one make of this swinging register? It is obviously a kind of mimicry—and Nagra is very aware of this:

> Am I a noble scruff who hopes a proud academy might canonize
> his poems for their faith in canonical allusions? (Nagra 898)

But what neither the tenor of the poem, nor its register, nor the allusions, nor its interrogation of empire help us easily decipher is the nature of this mimicry. Nagra has written how his ancestors were complicit in the British policy of divide and rule. (The fact that he turns around this phrase and writes it as "rule and divide" is not inconsequential, for it suggests that the British did not divide to rule but divided because they ruled and, thus, shifts the phrase from functionality to ethics.) And he has written that he suspects himself of being "noble scruff" out to get postimperial patronage. But is his mimicry

more than that? Is it subversive too, and not just by being mimicry, as some readings of Homi K. Bhabha would suggest?

Despite a flurry of footnotes, the editors, far more knowledgeable than me, do not provide us with a handle on this—largely because a mainstream anthology like the *Norton English* does not allow space for that kind of positioned intervention. Actually, if you just read the poem, with the help of the notes, you get the feeling that Nagra is simply asserting the presence of "Black History" in Empire, while largely waving the standard imperial flags with a grimace or a grin. But is that so?

Take, for instance, the title of the poem, which the editors correctly inform us "recalls Winston Churchill's monumental *History of the English-Speaking Peoples*." What does Nagra gain—apart from incidental me-tooism—by prefacing that colonial book title with "A Black" in order to fashion the title of his poem? The answer to this has to come at two levels: textual and contextual. One has to highlight facts like these: what are the countries Churchill writes about and what is the reputation of Churchill in critical postcolonial circles?

Churchill's reputation in postcolonial countries is fraught, to say the least: he is considered responsible for at least two million unnecessary deaths in India and of condoning, even encouraging, the use of gunfire on unarmed Africans. Churchill's book is considered a "great history," and it might well be: I have only looked at some pages of it. But what comes through is a double impetus. First, covering the period from Caesar's invasions of Britain to the beginning of World War I, this is a book that reinforces the central Eurocentric myths of civilization, tying them closely to a kind of incipient linguistic imperialism and racism. Second, in its largely incidental references to the so-called Commonwealth, it basically looks at white settler nations: the USA, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa. Bear in mind that the South Africa of Churchill's time was far more "white" than it is today. Hence, the insertion of "A Black" by Nagra does not say, "Bwana, me was there too." It says, from the postcolonial perspective, "What the heck were you talking about?"

This is never brought out in the critical commentary on Nagra's poem, given the nonpolemical "neutrality" of its notes, but it is there in the text. For example, take this stanza from section IV (Nagra's poem is divided into five sections):

> Who believes a bleached yarn? Would we openly
> Admit the Livingstone spirit turned Kurtz, our flag is a union of
> black and blue
> Flapping in the anthems of haunted rain…? (Nagra, 899)

The editors have footnoted two words in this stanza: Livingstone (Footnote: "David Livingstone [1813–1873], Scottish medical missionary and explorer in Africa.") and Kurtz (Footnote: "Fictional European ivory trader who rules a society of central African natives as a demigod in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*."). These are "words" that are easy to look up, and the editorial footnotes do not give us more than an online search would. And they do not even hint at a postcolonial perspective, let alone a contentious one, which is clearly in Nagra's mind when he speaks of "bleached yarn," words that actually could have done with a footnote, had more positioned footnotes been allowed.

What is a "bleached yarn" in the context of Livingstone and Kurtz? An entire book might not exhaust this answer, but I will post the salient features as crisply as I can. The bleached yarn behind Livingstone is H. M. Stanley. Sven Lindqvist, the Swedish historian, gives a short but gripping account of one of Stanley's bleached yarns—even if we do not raise an eyebrow at the popular myth of "Dr. Livingstone, I presume?"—in his book *Exterminate All the Brutes*. Ostensibly an attempt to trace the origins of the last words in Kurtz's great "study"—which ends in gibberish—Lindqvist's book provides an account of various texts that are known to or might have influenced Conrad's writing of his great novella, *Heart of Darkness*. Stanley's yarns—with which Conrad was familiar—are among them. But Lindqvist goes beyond the mainstream version of these yarns, looking at what really happened. For instance, he traces the "great world event of the autumn of 1889": Stanley's return after a three-year expedition into the interior of Africa, during which he rescued Emin Pasha from the Dervishes and brought him to Bagamoyo to much media applause.

Looking at the facts, Lindqvist discovers a frustrated, fever-racked, starving Stanley, lost in the jungle, murdering natives for food, executing his bearer on suspicion of deserting, actually being rescued by Emin, who is "wearing a dazzling white uniform," and is in good health, and comes to Stanley bearing food and provision. "Just who is rescuing whom?" Lindqvist correct asks (Lindqvist 36–38). The narrative continues, finally, ending in Emin—who was rescued against

his will, made to abandon troops loyal to him—refusing to cooperate with Stanley in Bagamoyo and accompany him any farther. While Stanley runs off to Brussels and London to be feted as Emin's savior, the ailing Emin slips out of his hospital and sneaks back into Africa but is unable to regain authority. Two years later, he is murdered by the Dervishes. Stanley's account—surely a bleached yarn—goes on to become famous, but it is by no means Emin's truth.

And, of course, the bleached yarn behind Kurtz: who can forget that? This would require another book, but I will illustrate just a few aspects. In the words of Patrick Brantlinger, "In *Heart of Darkness*, Marlow describes Kurtz as an eloquent voice, though uttering emptiness, 'the horror, the horror." (Brantlinger 247). Other critics have also noted that the great reputation of Kurtz among whites is never sustained by any evidence. It seems to be more an expectation on the part of the reporter, so that a musician sees him as the greatest of musicians, a writer as the greatest of writers, and so on. Today we might see Kurtz—and his inevitable and easy "greatness," which required no hard evidence—as the epitome of "white privilege."

Even Kurtz's greatness in the jungle—his empire of human skulls and ivory—is it also a kind of bleached yarn? One does not know with Conrad, for between the lines of his novella (writing enabled only by the discourses of the age, which is the way with any writing), in between what his narrators and characters say and what happens, there is often a dichotomy, a gap or loud silence. This even comes to the fore when the trope of "cannibalism"—essential to European accounts of Africa in the period—is employed. The Africans on Marlow's ship are described as cannibals, but Marlow does not understand their restraint, even in the face of starvation and suffering. Conrad inevitably has to employ the yarn of cannibalism in order to narrate Africa "convincingly" to his (white and "civilized") readers, Marlow's observation about restraint makes us question at least what the word really meant, and how (if in any way), it was applicable to Africans who claimed to be "cannibals," as the Africans in *Heart of Darkness* are unfortunately made to do.

Finally, who can overlook the "bleached yarn" with which Marlow is forced to narrate Kurtz's end. You will remember the scene from the novella. Marlow has left the continent of "darkness"—though actually the darkness in Marlow's narrative mostly hovers over Europe, and in particular London—and returned to "enlightened" Europe. When

he goes to visit Kurtz's betrothed, the text has already warned us "I know that the sunlight can be made to lie too" (Conrad 244). Kurtz's betrothed insists on being told Kurtz's last words (which are the infamous "[t]he horror, the horror!" as he dies in the jungle, having tried to escape being "rescued" by Marlow). Marlow is too "civilized" a person to come up with this stark truth. He tries to avoid the issue. But she insists . . .

> I was on the point of crying to her, "Don't you hear them?" The dusk was repeating them in a persistent whisper all around us, in a whisper that seemed to swell menacingly like the first whisper of a rising wind. "The horror, the horror!"
>
> "His last words—to live with," she insisted. "Don't you understand I loved him—I loved him—I loved him!"
>
> I pulled myself together and spoke slowly.
>
> "The last word he pronounced was—your name." (Conrad, 51)

The betrothed responds with predictable relief—"I knew it—I was sure!"—but what has Marlow brought home but the bleached yarn of civilization? What, Conrad seems to suggest, can he bring back from the colonies but bleached yarns—a "civilized" lie, the lie that enables civilization to avoid seeing its brute image in the mirror?

Given these bleached yarns, given the gaps between what the language of the novella says and what it depicts (or, in some cases, refuses to depict), given all this and more, is the "neutral" footnote about Kurtz the best way to connect that fictional character to Nagra's poem? Does it not, actually, reiterate a colonial fantasy, a colonial "yarn"—dubious in the context of both Nagra's poem and, perhaps even more so, Conrad's great novella?

I had noted that "bleached yarn" probably needed a footnote more than Livingstone and Kurtz, and now I've gone on to illustrate how difficult it would be to keep such a footnote short. Evidently, a generalized format—which in terms of space permits or at least privileges mainstream editorial annotations—prevents such an extensive footnote. However, space is not the only problem. Another phrase in the above extract demonstrates this. "[A] union of black and blue" could have been briskly footnoted thus: "Reference to *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack* by Paul Gilroy." Evidently, there is a kind of restraint in operation: the footnotes need to be neutral and mainstream in order to be accepted as sound scholarship. But can "neutral" footnotes

suffice to illustrate texts that are deeply aware of how biased both neutrality and the mainstream can be?

Of course, though it is unlikely, Nagra might not have been aware of Gilroy's foundational study, or the lyrics that give it its title. But that does not matter, for the simple reason that we are surely beyond the intentional fallacy, even though we might have reason to posit a ghostly afterlife for the author after his much-proclaimed Barthesian death. We can simply talk of what the text does in this case. And despite its basic ambivalence toward empire, Nagra's poem does more than just annotate a "great" British historian (and leader), two "great" British poets, and the "greatest" of British writers—I have left Shakespeare out of my discussion, as that would have required a few pages of its own—with a feeble, "Ex-Bwana, I was there too. And look, I can write flamboyantly in Standard English now."

The lack of such footnotes is again to be attributed to the format of a general compilation, which is what the *Norton Anthology of English Literature* is. It is not the fault of the editors, but an imposition of the mainstream format of the anthology, which not only denies space for intricate footnotes but also prevents a positioned editorial response in most cases. One can see that the current edition of the *Norton Anthology of American Literature* avoids this limitation in at least some major cases, because it is a more specific compilation of literary texts. For instance, Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is followed by extracts from opposed essays on the purported racism of the author or his text by Alan Gribben (who edited the 'n' word out of the novel) and Michiko Kakutani, who responded in the *New York Times* with some genuine objections (for instance, the fallacy of trying to sanitize literature) and some lame ones (for instance, by pointing out that the 'n' word is used by many rappers). It is also accompanied by other extracts, including one from a very complex and perceptive introduction that Toni Morrison wrote to an edition of Twain's novel.

What I am trying to say is that if Norton and similar anthology publishers, as well as the editors associated with them, are really serious about literature, then it is time for them to bring out something like the *Norton Anthology of Postcolonial Literature*. There can always be an overlap between such a positioned anthology and a general one, just as T. S. Eliot appears in both the *Norton Anthology of English Literature* and the *Norton Anthology of American Literature*. But the existence of a *Norton Anthology of Postcolonial Litera*ture will enable those of us who do not

want to keep trekking on the bloody colonial bridge and repeating mainstream critical pieties to do something useful in our classes. I say this with a pang of regret though, because, like many writers and critics coming from places like India and Nigeria, I consider "postcolonialism" a very limited and often limiting, but, unfortunately (given global economics and power equations that undergird reading and education), an irreplaceable term.

WORKS CITED

Brantlinger, Patrick. *Rule of Darkness: British Literature and Imperialism, 1830–1914*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1988.

Conrad, Joseph. *Heart of Darkness and Other Tales*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990. [*Heart of Darkness* was first published in 1899]

Lindqvist, Sven. *"Exterminate the Brutes."* Translated by Joan Tate. London: Granta Books, 2002 (1997).

Morris, Mervyn. "Feeling, Affection, Respect," in *Disappointed Guests: Essays by African, Asian and West Indian Students*, ed. H. Tajfel and J. L. Dawson. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965, 5–26.

Nagra, Daljit. "A Black History of the English-speaking Peoples." *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt, Jahan Ramazani, et al. New York and London: W. W. Norton and Company, 2018, 896–899.

Woolf, Virginia. *A Room of One's Own*. London: Penguin, 2000 (1928).