



HOME IS WHERE THE FOOD IS:
RECURRENT MOTIFS IN ANGLO-INDIAN SELF-REPRESENTATION

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The recent wave of Anglo-Indian self-representation—on Web sites, in films, and in books such as the anthologies published by Blair and Ellen Williams’ organization CTR, Inc. - has done much to offset both the under-representation and misrepresentation of Anglo-Indians that have too long characterized most colonial and postcolonial literature and scholarship. With an emerging body of work produced by Anglo-Indians (as well as those close enough to the Anglo-Indian Community to understand it from an insider’s perspective), it is finally becoming possible to read and consider simultaneously—to take as a whole, as it were—multiple Anglo-Indian stories, all narrated by Anglo-Indian voices. The diversity of the narratives that emerge reveals the Anglo-Indian Community’s heterogeneity, offering a welcome challenge to the simplistic caricatures and stereotypes that too often emerge from outsiders. At the same time, reading these stories as a collection reveals that certain motifs do recur across narratives and that it is possible to discern a certain thematic cohesiveness in Anglo-Indian writing as a whole.

The field of Anglo-Indian self-representation today is rich with thematic possibilities for exploration. For this essay I will focus on some of the motifs that collectively emerge from CTR’s anthology *The Way We Are: An Anglo Indian Mosaic*—a fluctuating and circular identity; a sometimes vexed sense of belonging that suggest an identity clearly more postcolonial than European; and the importance of food as an identity anchor. The collective Anglo-Indian identity that emerges in this volume—diffuse, often unrooted, and differently understood and expressed by various writers—is clearly neither Indian nor European, but stands alone as something simultaneously both and neither. Accordingly, a good many Anglo-Indians express a sense of displacement that comports with Homi Bhabha’s concept of the “un-homed”

postcolonial subject (in other words, distinctly *not* the experience of the European colonizer). Against this sense of uprootedness and identity characterized by circular motion, Anglo-Indian food repeatedly as a touchstone or anchor—a fixed point around which multiplicitous and contested identities are constantly in motion.

Before turning to my thematic exploration, it is helpful to contextualize the anthology and to explore its intended purpose and audience in light of the many past representations against which it stands. For those who belong to and/or study the Anglo-Indian Community, it is now virtually cliché to observe that when it comes to representation in mainstream narratives, Anglo-Indians are usually either neglected, stereotyped, or both. Though trite, this observation unfortunately still remains pertinent; as Megan Mills points out, “Historical writing on British India usually omits the Anglo-Indians’ colonial administrative role” (Mills 1). Even postcolonial scholars who take cultural hybridity as a central theoretical concept tend to overlook the subject-positions of the Anglo-Indians (Homi Bhabha, Sara Suleri and Gayatri Spivak provide just a few examples). As I discussed in a previous issue of the *IJAIS*, recent films such as *Bow Barracks Forever* continue to perpetuate disparaging caricatures of the Anglo-Indian, and most recently, a 2010 *New York Times* article (reprinted in the *International Herald-Tribune*) hammered the tired old theme of Anglo-Indians who inhabit a “vanishing world,” taking as its exemplars Anglo-Indian women well into their nineties who drink “breakfast tea from a cup and saucer,” read “Agatha Christie murder mysteries and Mills & Boon romances,” style their “delicate hair in a 1940s-style wave,” and order custom-tailored “floral tea dresses” while referring to themselves as “museum pieces.” (A letter I wrote to the *New York Times* objecting to this overwrought, poorly researched, and hardly representative portrayal went unpublished and unanswered.)

Despite critical and artistic neglect and distortion, however, Anglo-Indians long ago collectively stepped out of the metaphorical “shadows” of postcolonial scholarship and literature to take representation of Anglo-Indian identity and experience into their own hands. Thanks to the emergence of the World Wide Web, the burgeoning self-publishing industry, and the emergence of a new generation trained in video production, we are now seeing a new wave of Anglo-Indian self-representation that provides far more compelling insights into contemporary Anglo-Indian lives and

perspectives (this journal, of course, providing just one of many outstanding examples). One of the most notable efforts has been undertaken by Blair and Ellen Williams of New Jersey, who several years ago founded the small publishing company CTR Inc. (standing for “Calcutta Tiljallah Relief”). CTR has now published four multi-author anthologies of writing by and about Anglo-Indians and is in the process of preparing a fifth volume. According to Blair Williams, CTR’s purpose is twofold: to produce published narratives that “provide a balanced view of the Anglo-Indian community for posterity” to counter prevailing “grossly distorted stereotypes” (Williams v); and to use the financial proceeds from book sales to assist impoverished Anglo-Indians who live in the Calcutta slum of Tiljallah.

This endeavor, Williams believes, has been successful. In the foreword to *The Way We Are*, Williams states: “Put to rest are the distorted portrayals of a shiftless people, drifters dependent on the goodwill of a colonial power and uncertain about their place in the world” (Lumb & Van Veldhuizen vii). Yet—while no one in the anthology claims to be “shiftless” or “dependent”—many of the accounts *do* suggest a continuing uncertainty on the part of Anglo-Indians regarding their “place in the world.” Though a cacophony of voices offers divergent responses that put to rest any notion of a singular Anglo-Indian experience, the questions that echo throughout the various accounts are similar: Who are we? Where, and how, do we belong?

However that question might be answered—and there are as many answers as there are Anglo-Indians—it is clear in this volume that today the nature of Anglo-Indian identity is cast much differently than during the colonial era, when—as Peter Moss puts it—“being identified as Eurasian was less a source of pride than a cause for shame” (135). Judging from the accounts in this volume, that shame does appear to be left behind, though some writers express regret regarding Anglo-Indian complicity with the prejudices engendered by colonial hierarchy: “We volunteered to dam one stream of our heritage to give fuller flow to the other,” says Moss (135). More common in this volume are expressions of an identity both fluid and ambiguous and which—despite the Community’s European paternity—evokes the “un-homed” postcolonial (i.e., non-European) subject described by Homi Bhabha (even though Bhabha himself—for all his ostensible promotion of cultural hybridity—largely neglects the actual hybridity of the Anglo-Indian people).

Historically, most communities have viewed the Anglo-Indians as “colonial mimics,” assuming them to be identified with Europe than with India. The historical record, however, demonstrates that the relationship between Anglo-Indians and Europeans has always been dynamic rather than static, fluctuating in accordance with historical contingencies.[1] Furthermore, Anglo-Indian life writing reveals identities that are—and always have been—multifaceted and hybridized rather than solely European-identified. In *The Way We Are*, many who grew up in India during the colonial period reveal what Anglo-Indians themselves have always known: While many Indian communities may have viewed them as mere “lackeys” for the British, the British hardly viewed them as fellow colonizers but as social inferiors. Sylvia Staub, for instance, writes, “Brittania ruled the waves and made mincemeat of . . . colonial subjects who were not *pukka*” (149). Ed Haliburn says, “We were always intended to be mere cogs in the giant wheel . . . the ‘gofers and wheel-tappers’ that ensured that the proverbial train did not come off the rails” (248).

Many Anglo-Indians of the pre-Independence generation, indoctrinated by Eurocentric educations to view themselves as inferior versions of Europeans, found themselves more aware of their Indian-ness after emigrating, often in response to discrimination. Take Haliburn, for instance: “All we were greeted with [in England] was anger, suspicion, and open racial hostility . . . a brown face was a ‘wog,’ no ifs or buts” (249). Sheldon Fernandez writes of his childhood in Canada: “You were called a Paki to be sure, but sensed that you were different from the even more ridiculed [actual] Pakistanis across the street . . . Confused, wide-eyed children of all colours were forever asking, ‘What are you?’” (107) Many Anglo-Indians of the diaspora express similar feelings of displacement, such as Williams himself, who muses: “Do we ever belong? . . . I have never felt that I belonged to anything, at any time, or anywhere” (75).

Bhabha—while not mentioning Anglo-Indians *per se*—nevertheless captures many aspects of Anglo-Indian experience in his description of the “un-homed” postcolonial subject as occupying both a figurative and psychological intermediate space, dwelling in a border zone “as though in parenthesis” (9), “inhabit[ing] the rim of an ‘in-between’ reality” (13). Often represented through “twilight, a descent into night, an invasion of the shadow,” postcolonial “unhomeliness” speaks of “the traumatic

ambivalences of a personal, psychic history to the wider disjunctions of political existence” (11). Such dynamics are readily apparent in Anglo-Indian life writing, with the “traumatic ambivalence” of “unhomeliness” often propelling the subjects on a journey that takes them full circle, sometimes literally, at other times figuratively.

Indeed the process of journeying itself, a sense of circular motion and flux, often emerges as a key aspect of Anglo-Indian identity. Joyce Mitchell, for instance, writes of consciously shifting her identity both inwardly and outwardly whenever she travels between her home in Bellevue, Washington, and her sister’s home in India: “As I board the plane, I take a mental shower and step out of my American skin to assume my Indian skin” (43). Typically, during an Amsterdam stopover Mitchell changes from jeans to a cotton *salwar-kameez*: “But somehow, dressed as I am and even though I speak Hindi, the first question the porter asks is, ‘Where are you coming from, Auntie—America?’” (43) This circularity can flow in both directions. For instance, Chris Francis, who emigrated quite recently from India to New Jersey, writes of the wrenching departure from his Anglo-Indian family in Hyderabad, his sense of displacement upon landing in Newark, and his relief when the taxi driver was a Punjabi who greeted him with “Namaste” (34).

At other points, circularity only occurs in the figurative sense. Gerald Platel, a post-Independence emigrant, praises many aspects of England yet, after immigration, found himself “really missing” aspects of India. He reveals that the tuxedo he had “optimistically” packed when he left India lay for many years “unused in a suitcase” (140) when his social status in England turned out to be lower than he had anticipated. Platel then says, “I had a great attachment to England, but I had some difficulty casting myself as British. Could it be that once an Anglo-Indian, always an Anglo-Indian?” (140) Later he immigrated to Canada, where “the old ‘identity bug’ still lurked in my brain” (141). Today Platel calls himself Canadian, yet insists, “I will always be an Anglo-Indian” (141).

The expression “full circle” emerges repeatedly, even providing the title for a piece by Dolores Chew, who calls herself “part of the post-midnight’s children generation” (239). Chew tells of receiving an “eclectic and ecumenical” education in India at a convent run by nuns of the Irish Loreto order, where morning prayers often included Tagore poems set to music (239). She describes herself as having friends in all

Indian communities—hardly the case, she says, with her parents' generation. While some stereotypes of Anglo-Indians may have worked to her advantage—"Our Anglo-Indian parties were assumed to be more fun"—she found other stereotypes to be less benign—"the presumed, highly sexualized identity of Anglo-Indian women" (240). Once she arrived in Canada, says Chew, her physical appearance led her to be perceived by most Canadians as Indian, and following India's Declaration of Emergency in 1975, Chew became active in "diasporic dissidence." All this, she says, brought her "full circle" from "what began as lived experience, with twinges of unease at certain moments—the whispered 'half-caste,' the man who wanted to date you because he thought you would be an easy lay" (241). Today Chew embraces many Indian aspects of her identity but considers herself as harboring "multiple identities" and says she has grown "accustomed to outsider status in many contexts" (242). Williams, meanwhile, found a way to "steady [his] restlessness" by deciding, "It became less important for me to belong and more important to make a difference" (75)—hence his founding of CTR Inc. which, though he is Christian, Williams calls his *dharma*.

While most Anglo-Indians writing in this volume appear to have come to terms with some sort of identity—however complex, hybridized, or fluctuating—many express frustration with regard to how they are perceived by others. Susan Deefholts, for instance, relates an experience at a school multicultural club when her teacher asked students with "unusual backgrounds" to sign up for presentations. Deefholts wrote, "Anglo-Indian (mixed British and Indian)", and the next day the teacher turned down her proposal, saying, "We already have someone from Britain and someone from India to talk about their cultures. We thought it would make more sense to have a different person from each place who knows about that culture specifically" (96). Deefholts says, "She'd assumed that my background was simply the sum of its British and Indian parts. But it wasn't" (96). Marina Stubbs succinctly elucidates the challenge: "[People] always ask me: 'So is it your mum that's English or your dad?'" (212) Similarly, Deborah Van Veldhuizen says, "People . . . invariably thought that I meant any of the following: (1) One of my parents was English, and one was Indian (2) I was Indian (3) I was English, or (4) I didn't really know what I was. I tried explaining that my ancestry was the result of inter-marriage many generations earlier, which [created] flummox on the part of listeners" (153).

Even when Anglo-Indians feel relatively at ease with their self-identity, some of the narratives reveal that power structures in our society often fail to account for the complex reality of hybrid identities. David McMahon, a sportswriter now based in Melbourne, has come to terms with his own identity—“Who we are is defined by our heart and soul; it doesn’t depend on our postal code” (123). At times, however, he must interact with those who are both more powerful and less informed. Once, while coming through customs at Heathrow, McMahon and his wife were called aside by an officer who could not understand why his wife, whose surname was Welsh, and he, whose surname was Irish, were traveling on Indian passports. “So while the rest of the queue waited,” says McMahon, “we stood there and gave him a potted history of the East India Company, the Raj, and how the Anglo-Indian Community came about” (123). He is not the only one to narrate such experiences; Nancy Rixon Lilly claims she has found herself more able to accept others’ confusion as the years pass: “Every so often, I marvel at strangers’ quizzical looks and preconceived ideas of who I am. I can now laugh at their repeated, ‘No...really, what is your name?’” At the same time, whenever she hears such statements, Lilly admits to praying, “‘Lord, give me patience,’” and says, “To be accepted without a raised eyebrow would be a long-overdue blessing” (117).

With identities often free-floating and “home” a vexed concept, Anglo-Indians often speak of both Indian and Anglo-Indian cuisine so passionately as to suggest food provides an “identity anchor” of sorts. Indeed, the anthology as a whole brings to mind the cultural critic Anne Goldman’s observations regarding “cooking as a metonym for culture” (169), and writing about food as potentially “recuperat[ing] a sense of agency for people who, in traditional political and literary theory, have often been subjects in name only” (192). As Nancy Rixon Lilly puts it in her narrative, whenever “homesickness washed over [her] and threatened to pull [her] under,” she coped by cooking “*our* kind of curry”; whenever she “whipped up a pork vindaloo, or a snake-gourd curry stuffed with ground beef, “all was right with the world” (116). In an amusing anecdote that combines the motif of circular motion with the crucial role of food, Shirley Pritchard speaks of her “desperation” when the Indian grocery near her home in Thousand Oaks, California—ApnaSpiceland—informed her that they were unable to restock her favorite, Bolst’s Pickles, and suggested they switch to Patak’s. When Pritchard’s “private reserve” of Bolst’s ran out, she wrote to the

company in Madras, “obtaining their address off the last precious bottle’s label” (66). She eventually received a reply with contact information for the company representative in England, who put her in touch with the representative in California, who informed her that Bolst’s pickles have become difficult to obtain, suggested they switch to Patak’s, and advised her that she could find them at ApnaSpiceland in Thousand Oaks, California.

Indian pickles emerge as especially potent identity anchors, along with Indian curries, the occasional British staples such as fruitcake or custards, and hybrid foods such as sausage curry. Joy Chase, now American, describes her family from five countries gathering in Australia to celebrate Christmas: “It was important that we were all together, and now the cooking had to start” (186). The menu included “crab curry; vegetable *kormas*; yellow rice; cabbage *foogath*—and dark fruitcake” (187). On noting that American mincemeat is not as delicious as that prepared by the British, Chase notes, “In larger pieces with the addition of a few good mango chunks, [mincemeat makes] a great chutney” (187). The apparent preference of Anglo-Indians for Indian cuisine emerges in the study of social anthropologist Robyn Andrews, who visited St. Joseph’s, a home for elderly Anglo-Indians in Melbourne, Australia. When asked why they chose this particular home, nearly all the residents said they were there “for the sake of the food” (173), since St. Joseph’s prepares curries, rice and *daal* every day. (Perhaps ironically, Andrews notes that when she visited a comparable home for elderly Anglo-Indians in Calcutta, a worker there told her, “An Anglo-Indian will always prefer a Continental dinner” (172)).

The food and drink particular to this community provide a crucial trigger for the memories that emerge in this anthology. Shirley Pritchard is taken back “to balmy nights in India . . . sitting under the stars” as soon as she tastes mango fool, a drink “made from *kutch*a mangoes, boiled in milk with sugar, and served ice cold” (65). Joyce Mitchell devotes an entire chapter to her family’s attempt to re-create the ginger wine that their family made during childhood; she even provides a recipe, though it would be difficult for many westerners to re-create given its use of non-English terms like *tola* and *rasna*, its vague instructions (“add a bottle of rum,” size unspecified), and the sheer quantity of ingredients (50 cinnamon sticks, the juice of 25 limes, a quarter kilo of ginger root). The result? “Different, not like it was in the

past. Too much spice masala? Had we added the rum with too heavy a hand?" (205) Yet still they refilled their glasses, "reliving [their] memories," says Mitchell, "with misty eyes" (205). As expressed by Anglo-Indian descendant Susan Deefholts, "It was only through the idioms, the recipes, and the get-togethers, which often as not ended with a sing-along, that I would . . . glimpse my Anglo-Indian heritage" (92).

Anglo-Indian/Canadian documentary filmmaker Mark Faassen describes Anglo-Indians as "everywhere and nowhere, visible and yet invisible simultaneously" (100). Life writing projects such as *The Way We Are* are helping to weight the scale towards visibility by, as Lionel Lumb puts it, "ensuring that **we**—the Anglo-Indians as opposed to others . . . tell our history as only we can, as only we who lived it can know" (42). What emerges is the collective voice of a people who have been uprooted, displaced and scattered; a paradoxical identity that is at once both ambiguous and self-aware, inflected by both European and Indian cultural heritages; and a shared craving for the foods that in many cases belongs only to them—cuisine that stands metonymically for an identity that draws on both European and Indian elements yet emerges as something altogether different.

Some may dismiss these anthologies as mere "vanity publishing," while some in the scholarly community may attempt to de-legitimize nontraditional avenues of publication. It is important, however, to note that traditional publishing houses are often structurally biased against both newcomers and minority voices/positions. Thus, it only makes sense for those who generally lack access to traditional sources of information dissemination to avail themselves of alternative methods if they desire to alter standard representations in literature and scholarship. Indeed, availing ourselves of such alternatives is even essential given that mainstream sources continue to persist in their pattern of mis-representation fluctuating with neglect. Moreover, by presenting the multifaceted tapestry of Anglo-Indian experience both within India and diasporically, the emerging Anglo-Indian anthologies allow the Anglo-Indian Community to be viewed from a broad rather than narrow vantage point. The engaged reader will notice both the heterogeneous divergences and the thematic continuities; considered together, this richly nuanced portrayal of the Anglo-Indian Community's complexity is more compelling than any of these stories would be if published in isolation. *The Way We Are* (along with the rest of the emerging

body of Anglo-Indian writing) portrays a diverse group of people with a contested yet shared hybrid postcolonial heritage—a people who roam the globe, whether under duress or choice; a people who question what it means to belong; a people who like to eat; and, most of all, a people who refuse to be pinned down by traditional, simplistic national, ethnic or cultural labels.

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NOTES

[1] Several historians have discussed in detail how the relative status of "Eurasians"/Anglo-Indians fluctuated throughout the colonial and postcolonial period in accordance with larger historical developments. See, for example, Frank Anthony, *Britain's Betrayal in India*; Reginald Maher, *These Are the Anglo-Indians*; Herbert Stark, *Hostages to India*; C.J. Hawes, *Poor Relations*; Coralie Younger, *Anglo-Indians: Neglected Children of the Raj*; Gist and Wright, *Marginality and Identity*.