



ANGLO-INDIAN LIFE WRITING: WHY IT MATTERS

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The last time I saw my late father's youngest brother—one of my many Anglo-Indian uncles—we were drinking coffee at a café tucked into the corner of a Sainsbury's Hypermarket in Portsmouth on the south coast of England (where the majority of our family had settled after emigrating from India from the 1950s through the 1970s). It was the summer of 2010, and I had recently presented a paper on Anglo-Indian life writing at a conference in nearby Brighton. I told my uncle that although I'd spoken to the typical whopping academic audience of maybe fifteen (quite substantial for this type of conference, actually), the presentation had gone well; I might pursue a book-length project. "But what possible interest would there be in the subject of Anglo-Indians," my uncle asked, "apart from us? Who besides other Anglo-Indians will care?"

This uncle, the family renegade—the "terror of the lot," as our grandmother used to call him—can routinely be counted on to pose questions that are initially annoying yet nonetheless linger. For though his questions may often be impolitic, they are usually on point, and I've pondered this issue ever since: Why should it matter for those of us with Anglo-Indian heritage to write our lives? Why should it matter for scholars and critics to pay attention to the Anglo-Indian perspective? Does it make a difference that fifteen academics heard what I had to say about recurrent themes in Anglo-Indian life writing? Or should those of us within academia who write about Anglo-Indian experiences be targeting an audience beyond the academy? But does the rest of the world even care?

This question—whether and how Anglo-Indian life writing matters—is one that many who research and write about Anglo-Indian issues have focused on for decades. Among the most prolific and forceful advocates are, of course, Blair and Ellen

Williams, who formed an independent press, CTR Publications, as part of the larger organization Calcutta Tiljallah Relief which they founded to assist indigent Anglo-Indians still living in the Calcutta slum of Tiljallah. As of 2013, CTR has published five anthologies of Anglo-Indian life writing: *Voices on the Verandah*, *The Way We Are*, *The Way We Were*, *Women of Anglo-India*, and *More Voices on the Verandah*. In addition to raising money to help poverty-stricken Anglo-Indians, CTR Publications served the additional purpose of providing a forum for Anglo-Indian voices, as stated by the editors in the preface to the first anthology, *Voices on the Verandah* (2004):

Scholarly studies have not presented the Anglo-Indian Community in a favorable light. . . We are the custodians and purveyors of our Community's history, its culture, and values. And we owe it to ourselves and to our future generations . . . to provide them with source material which goes beyond distortions of fact and derogatory literary stereotypes. Before the last generation of Anglo-Indians born in British India fades away, the need to document our stories and our way of life thus assumes paramount importance. (Deefholts & Staub, 2004, pp. v-vi)

For Blair and Ellen Williams, as well as for the editors and contributors to these anthologies of Anglo-Indian writing, telling our stories in our own voices comprises an obligation to the next generation, a correction to the distorted historical record, and not least of all an end in itself. When *The Way We Are* was published in 2008, CTR Publications and the editors of this volume expressed satisfaction with the impact of the first two anthologies: "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, 2008, p. vii). The latest instalment in the series, *More Voices on the Verandah*, appeared with a Web blurb by Blair Williams (2012) on his blog:

Twelve years ago, CTR books started with the question, "How will posterity remember the Anglo-Indian community?" The answer was not reassuring. Historically the Anglo-Indian community was defined by either English or Indian writers, and most of the descriptions were not complimentary – in fact many created (or reinforced) negative stereotypes of Anglo-Indian men and women. Rather than complain or protest, we decided to publish a series of books, written by members of the community and those that knew them well, to provide a balanced view. Today this vision has been realized, and, with 'More Voices on the Verandah', we have seven books on the Anglo-Indian culture and way of life. These stories and essays provide not just a third

perspective to the British and Indian viewpoints, but also offer readers the deepest and most authentic insight into the lives and mores of the Anglo Indian Community. (Williams, 2012)

From an Anglo-Indian perspective, the publication and charitable ventures spearheaded by the Williams have been successful, not only in terms of assisting impoverished Anglo-Indians in Bengal but in terms of preserving for posterity a range of Anglo-Indian life writing that invokes an Anglo-Indian experience and viewpoint. Yet when it comes to audience, a couple of issues still remain: first, whether Anglo-Indian life writing might appeal to a broader readership, and second, whether appealing to a larger audience even matters and if so, why.

Recently, Anglo-Indian life writing has also expanded beyond the traditional genre of written prose. Just as self-publication ventures have enabled writers to bypass the gatekeepers that have too often had the effect of excluding marginalized voices (including but not limited to the Anglo-Indians), technological developments have made video and filmmaking accessible to those lacking Hollywood budgets. Several filmmakers with interest in Anglo-Indian matters have taken advantage of this opportunity—most notably Paul Harris, whose company GoMore Films has produced the recently released documentary *McCluskieganj: Dreams of a Homeland* (2012), the documentary-in-progress *End of the Raaj* (2009), and several short features (2009) available on YouTube that focus on such issues as Anglo-Indian language patterns and food preferences. The header for the GoMore Films web site (2009) states that its purpose is “to make films about issues and stories that deserve to be told” (Harris, 2009). As with the editors of the CTR anthologies, the filmmakers in charge of such projects believe there is inherent value in telling Anglo-Indian stories. The question that remains, once again, is whether those outside the Anglo-Indian community might find these stories worthwhile, or whether Anglo-Indian life writing is circulating only among those who already care.

Meanwhile, scholarly endeavors with regard to an emerging field of Anglo-Indian studies are finally beginning to proliferate, offering challenges to the considerable body of postcolonial scholarship that addresses cultural hybridity while curiously eliding the Anglo-Indian experience. In July of 2013, for instance, Anglo-Indian scholars Robyn Andrews and Dolores Chew attended a roundtable panel on Anglo-Indian Studies at the University of Calcutta (2013), in conjunction with the

recent opening of the Derozio Anglo-Indian Research Collection at that institution's library. After hearing numerous presentations and discussions, the group agreed that "Anglo-Indian Studies is an existing reality" (Report, 2013, p. 3) and called for a cross-disciplinary Centre of Anglo-Indian Studies to be housed at the University of Calcutta, a logical "home" given the location of the new research collection. A new book, *Out of Bounds: Anglo-Indian Literature and the Geography of Displacement* (Johnson, 2012), was recently released by the University of Hawaii Press, authored by University of Idaho associate professor Alan Johnson. For those of us who research and write about Anglo-Indians, it would appear we have more scholarly resources and networks than ever before. With regard specifically to literary research, searching "Anglo-Indian" on the MLA Bibliography Index reveals 172 entries, more than half of which have appeared since 2000. This explosion in critical and literary output regarding the Anglo-Indian experience renders somewhat moot the frequent earlier lament of many Anglo-Indian scholars and writers (such as Megan Mills [1996] and myself) regarding critical neglect of an Anglo-Indian subjectivity.

Much of this explosion in Anglo-Indian life writing and scholarship is, of course, traceable to the same technological and cultural factors that have facilitated an upsurge in life writing more generally. The proliferation of the World Wide Web with its ever-expanding range of possibilities for representation—blogs, social media, YouTube—has combined with burgeoning and increasingly affordable technology, not to mention more opportunities for and less stigma toward self-publishing and self-produced films. As a result, countless new voices are now empowered to speak, in multiple new forms and venues. Nowadays, a Google search for "Anglo-Indian" results in the expected nine million-plus hits: the expected Wikipedia page, numerous YouTube videos, recipe sites, online scholarly journals, newspaper articles, Facebook pages, blogs, social media sites, reunion announcements, and more

Of course the factors responsible for this new proliferation of Anglo-Indian life writing are clearly not limited to Anglo-Indians; burgeoning technology has shaped global culture so pervasively that nowadays, a Google search producing "only" nine million hits is considered meager, and we are awash in life writing from all corners of the

world. This then begs the question: If *everyone* nowadays is writing their lives, then is *anyone* reaching an audience beyond the niche? Or are all of us who write our lives speaking metaphorically into echo chambers, “preaching to the converted,” circulating reformulations of already known information among the same audiences? In the case of Anglo-Indian life writing, a question arises as to who such stories are being written *for*: those of us who already know a good deal about Anglo-Indians, or might Anglo-Indian life writing matter to a broader audience? To reiterate my uncle’s question: “Why should anyone else care?”

I would argue that Anglo-Indian life writing *does* matter, on a variety of fronts. It matters first in the way that all life writing matters: like all families, Anglo-Indian families care about preserving their stories for future generations, and like all ethnic groups, Anglo-Indians find a sense of belonging and meaning in discovering their sense of “we”; who *we* are, how *we* live (or lived in the past), what defines *us* as a group. Considered on this level, the question of whether Anglo-Indian life writing is read by anyone outside the community becomes irrelevant. At the risk of invoking circular reasoning, telling one’s life story from one’s own perspective *always* matters, even if one is speaking only to a small audience such as a family or ethnic group. It matters because storytelling is a primary human activity; thus none of us ever need to justify telling the stories of our lives any more than we need to justify eating or sleeping. If we end up telling our life stories mostly to ourselves, to our families, to other Anglo-Indians, to preserve them for posterity within a numerically small group, what of it? To narrate our lives in our own voices rather than have the meaning of our lives dictated to us by others—especially in light of the power dynamics inherent in colonialism that for many centuries rendered too many voices silent—is worthy in itself, requiring no further justification. Those who have been marginalized by the power structures of colonialism can and should be encouraged to tell their own stories, from their own perspectives. Anglo-Indian life writing also matters simply because in terms of creating the historical record of both colonial and postcolonial India, completeness and accuracy are just as important here as elsewhere.

Yet another justification for Anglo-Indian life writing lies in a deep-seated ignorance of our community that persists even today. Take, for example, this ill-informed reference found on a blog, the purpose of which was to expose the recent marital

scandal surrounding Dinesh d'Souza (2012): "I have meet [sic] communities of Indians, who call themselves [sic] Anglo-Indian simply because they may have European names or they might have some European blood in their back history, by definition African Americans could claim this as they have 'mixed race heritage [sic], more so than these Indians who will do anything to claim 'whiteness' interracialism [sic] is a big issue in their country, Gandhi would be rolling in his grave at 'Anglo Indians'" (Prince.org, 2012). The only two responses to this ill-informed (and poorly written) comment are: "You could not have said that better," and "I bet you they call themselves Anglo-Indian. Self-hating expression if I ever heard one!" (Prince.org, 2012).

Granted, these are just three comments somewhere on the vast World Wide Web—and the original comment is made by someone clearly ill-informed. Still, the fact that such comments can still be found raises the question of whether it matters to enlighten those outside the Anglo-Indian Community regarding its history, culture, and distinctiveness. Though mixed identities may be more acceptable today in general, racism and bigotry against those of mixed heritage have hardly vanished, and despite the recent surge in both Anglo-Indian life writing and scholarship, it is readily apparent that critical neglect and gross stereotyping both still continue. 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 (Cassity, 2010), and a *New York Times* article by M. Ridge (2010) reprinted in the *International Herald-Tribune* hammered once again the tired old theme of Anglo-Indians as quaint "museum pieces" who inhabit a "vanishing world" (Ridge, 2010, p. A8).

Yet beyond all these points, I would submit that Anglo-Indian life writing can and should matter outside the walls of our own community because it raises a number of issues that resonant beyond its boundaries—questions about multicultural and hybrid identities, about belonging, about the effects of diaspora, about the meaning of "home," about where we place ourselves when previously familiar categories and borders become scrambled and complicated. Our current era is described by scholars with a few too many "post" prefixes—"postmodern," "post-structural," "postcolonial" and so on—but without parsing various definitions of various "posts," it

seems apparent (even to those outside the scholarly community that concerns itself with such things) that our world today is characterized by scrambling of binaries, questioning of borders, blurring of lines, and dismantling of categories. That these features characterize our world (regardless of the label we choose to affix to the present cultural moment) raises questions of identity and belonging for *all* of us, not only for Anglo-Indians. Thus, for those of us who engage in life writing as Anglo-Indians, we may broaden our potential audience by connecting our particular experiences as a culturally hybrid people of mixed ethnic identity, significantly shaped by postcolonial diaspora, to the larger social, cultural and historical contexts that shape life globally in the early twenty-first century.

In my *IJAIS* article “Home is Where the Food Is” (Cassity, 2010), I discussed some of the recurring motifs found in the Anglo-Indian life writing anthology *The Way We Are*: “a fluctuating and circular identity; [and] a sometimes vexed sense of belonging that suggests an identity clearly more postcolonial than European.” Many others, meanwhile, have written about the sense of “shame” that accompanied Anglo-Indian identity all too often in the past, both during the colonial era and in the decades following Independence, within India as well as diasporically in the many other countries to which Anglo-Indians immigrated. As Peter Moss puts it, in the past “being identified as Eurasian was less a source of pride than a cause for shame . . . We volunteered to dam one stream of our heritage to give fuller flow to the other” (Moss, 2008, p. 135). This sense of “shame” would eventually give way to an acceptance of the complexity of mixed ethnicity and hybrid identity—an issue hardly unique to Anglo-Indians, given the growing prevalence mixed-race relationships in an increasingly globalized world.

Anglo-Indian life writing often considers equally salient questions surrounding the meaning of “home,” what it means to belong or not belong, the effects of immigration on the psyche, and more. Dolores Chew, for instance, says she has become “accustomed to outsider status in many contexts” (Chew, 2008, p. 242), while Blair Williams states, “I have never felt that I belonged to anything, at any time, or anywhere” (Williams, 2008, p. 75). All these issues resonate strongly with many of the world’s collective concerns in the early twenty-first century. A conglomeration of factors—increasing globalization, destabilization of the prior world economic and

political order, immigration, technological developments—challenges our supposedly “fixed” notions of identity, ethnicity, nation, belonging, and “home.”

As Williams puts it in the preface to *The Way We Are*, perhaps it makes sense to consider Anglo-Indians more as harbingers of things to come rather than mere relics of the past—“prototypes,” as it were, of a more globalized and ethnically mixed future, rather than the “museum” pieces referred to in the unfortunately outdated *New York Times* article. Here once again, Anglo-Indian life writing may appeal to a much broader audience than we might initially have imagined if we remain mindful of the larger contexts in which we locate our experiences. Paradoxically, perhaps the best way to preserve the distinctiveness of our particular hybrid postcolonial identity and diasporic experience is by paying attention to the ways in which we are not *quite* unique—embracing rather than resisting the notion that our collective experiences, perceptions and identities reflect broader social and cultural realities, rather than simply setting Anglo-Indians “apart” from the rest of the world.

When it comes to the experience of diasporic Anglo-Indians in America (the only context which I am qualified to discuss in terms of personal experience), it seems clear that many Anglo-Indians have a relationship to their identity mirroring that of the larger cultural environment. To use my own family history as an example: My father, an Anglo-Indian from Chennai, was one of the many Anglo-Indians who emigrated after Independence. His father, a police officer, died in September of 1947, and Dad, the eldest of eight children, became responsible—financially and otherwise—for this large and fatherless family. Dad moved first to England, where he received training as an aerospace engineer while working full-time to bring the rest of his family, piece by piece, to England. Because one of my aunts stayed on longer in India for teacher training, only seven of the eight children had arrived in England when Dad left for Canada after finding work in Toronto. Soon a prominent aerospace company in Seattle “came calling” and Dad moved further south and west. After arriving in Seattle, he met the woman who would become my mother. Eventually Dad became American, with American children.

Complex circumstances—too convoluted to dissect in detail here—dictated that I would not meet most of my Anglo-Indian family until adulthood. Nor would I learn much about my Anglo-Indian heritage until many years later—and even then, only

through a conscious and pro-active quest on my part. Part of the problem was that we lived in one of America's narrower religious and cultural communities—one of those where most people harbor a narrow definition of “real Americans,” where recent immigrants and “foreign-ness” are not particularly welcome, where naturalizing as a United States citizen meant my father was expected to “give up” whoever he was prior to taking the oath. In our microcosmic world, “passing” on the part of Anglo-Indians—or indeed, almost *anyone* of mixed ethnic heritage—was motivated so much motivated by “shame” but was simply a necessary survival tactic. I grew up with a sense of something “shameful” lurking in my father's heritage—and, by extension, my own, having absorbed the tacit knowledge that my father's birthplace, ethnic background, and past experience were all best not discussed in public.

This vague cloud of perceived shamefulness, of course, was hardly unique to Anglo-Indians. In mainstream America in the early 1960s, prior to the apex of the civil rights movement, conformity ruled the day, not multiculturalism. How many rising celebrities—singers, actors, athletes—with other-than-Caucasian ethnic roots changed their names to suggest a more Anglicized identity? At least in the United States, fear of difference—and along with that fear, willful ignorance about the complexity of ethnically mixed identities—constituted the cultural climate in which Anglo-Indian identities were either disparaged, stereotyped, or overlooked. With time, of course, things would change, in America as well as elsewhere in the world. Cultural shifts toward multiculturalism, globalization and identity politics in the 1990s made it more acceptable and in many circles highly desirable to explore ethnic identities and histories more fully and accurately—overturning, resisting, and challenging decades of shame associated with identity and heritage, while reconfiguring the implications of what it means to be ethnically mixed and/or culturally hybrid. Along with rejecting the narrow, racist cultural hegemonies of the pre-civil rights era, we witnessed an outpouring of both scholarship and life writing regarding the experiences of those with mixed heritage. At the same time, this decade saw an impressive surge in writing regarding the previously little-discussed Anglo-Indians—a trend that would only intensify after the turn of the twenty-first century.

The Anglo-Indians grappled with mixed-race identity and postcolonial hybridity for years before such terms became “trendy”—not to mention the implications of diaspora and the questions that global displacement raises with regard to such concepts as “home,” “belonging,” and “family.” As such, the Anglo-Indian experience—if narrated with such awareness—might begin to resonate with an audience beyond ourselves. Anglo-Indians have been voicing questions about “belonging” and “home” since the seventeenth century, yet a conglomeration of circumstances—lack of access to traditional publication channels due to limited educational opportunity, small numbers relative to the larger society, lack of intellectual interest in the community on the part of scholars, for example—all limited the extent to which Anglo-Indians as a community have historically vocalized such questions in public forums.

Who are we? Where, and how, do we belong? Those questions have always been pondered by Anglo-Indians, whether verbally or nonverbally, consciously or subconsciously. We began to explore those questions more vocally and explicitly just about the time it seemed that “everybody” began posing them. Paradoxically, then—just as Anglo-Indian “shame” in mixed ethnicity gave way to pride, just as Anglo-Indian silence about one’s multiple roots yielded to voice, just as Anglo-Indian private discomfort about “home” and “belonging” found public expression—these issues became sufficiently ubiquitous in broader culture so as to render the Anglo-Indian experience boringly conventional. Accordingly, the current cultural cache of concepts with which Anglo-Indians grappled for years contains a double-edge: If nowadays more people are posing such questions than not, does that render the Anglo-Indian experience no longer unique?

Sometimes it seems that too many of those of us with Anglo-Indian heritage came to appreciate the distinctiveness of our multifaceted heritage and identity just a little too late—that we often came to value hybridity and multiple perspectives in concert with the rest of the world. As a result, when we bring our own voices to conversations about mixed heritage and hybrid identity, some people respond as though it’s all been heard before. (“Cultural hybridity? Oh, that was kind of *done* in the 1990s,” I was recently told by a scholar I encountered socially; “everybody is ‘culturally hybrid’ now.”)

This is where the specificity, the distinctiveness, and the particular history of the Anglo-Indian people comes into play; while it may be arguable that “everybody” is “culturally hybrid” and some might find more general discussions of mixed identities to be somewhat “played out,” specific stories, specific contexts, and specific experiences still matter. The Anglo-Indian experience is clearly *not* the experience of, for example, someone who grew up in a family with one white and one black parent, or one Asian and one black parent, in a family that is of mixed race due to adoption, and so forth. Nor are the implications of diaspora the same in, for instance, situations such as highly affluent extended families, impoverished refugees, or working-to-middle class families (such as my own) which had some financial resources, albeit meagre. While it is important, then, to note points of resonance between Anglo-Indian experiences and the experiences of others with diaspora and/or hybrid identity, it is also crucial to bear in mind the numerous dissimilarities as well as the effects of variations in relative power.

Did we as Anglo-Indians discover our collective voice and platform regarding both the challenges and opportunities of a mixed ethnic heritage, too little, late? This becomes an especially delicate question in light of the fact that with each passing day, our community is losing more and more of the older Anglo-Indians who lived through colonial India, Independence, Partition, and diaspora (a process that deeply affected not only those Anglo-Indians who left India, but those who remained behind as well). Much more with regard to life writing could have been done—and, arguably, *should* have been done—in the past. Yet until recently, circumstances made it difficult for as many Anglo-Indians to engage in life writing as are doing so now. Ethnically mixed heritage was still stigmatized in too many quarters, and the technological revolution that would make it possible for those lacking status and high-powered connections to disseminate their stories to a broader audience had not yet taken place. Under the circumstances, I would suggest that the Anglo-Indian people did the best they could. Many stories and artefacts were probably not preserved; many stories went untold. Or—given that many stories were disseminated orally in private family settings—perhaps it is more accurate to say they are now unremembered. It is likely that much of value has already been lost. Yet this becomes all the more reason it is vital for the current outpouring of Anglo-Indian life writing to continue.

Fluctuating sense of identity, questions of home and belonging, what it means to come to terms with a hybrid identity, how to cope with a geographically scattered family and with loss of place, how to deal with the ignorance and prejudice often displayed towards those who do not fit comfortably into pre-existing categories: Such issues are hardly unique to Anglo-Indians but resonate with millions of people around the world. Thus, what the Anglo-Indians and their descendants have to say becomes relevant beyond the confines of our own families and even the broader Anglo-Indian community.

As Anglo-Indians, I believe we have important things to say to the world. The challenge is for those of us who write Anglo-Indian lives to find the most effective channels through which we can reach a broader audience and find people who care—while at the same time retaining our stories for prosperity within the Anglo-Indian community and, not least of all, within our own families, the primary place where the questions we struggle with are experienced.

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