



A REVIEW ESSAY

Anglo-Indian Identity: Past and Present, in India and the Diaspora, eds. Robyn Andrews and Merin Simi Raj, Palgrave Macmillan, 2021.

A FATHER AND DAUGHTER REFLECT ON NEW SCHOLARSHIP ABOUT THEIR ETHNIC IDENTITY

Anthony Mendonça and Penelope Mendonça

It is exhilarating to discover a book which examines something about which you have personal experience, particularly when that lived experience has in the past been ignored, misunderstood or over-simplified within dominant narratives. The name of the book is *Anglo-Indian Identities: Past and Present, in India and the Diaspora* and is edited by Robyn Andrews and Merin Simi Raj. We are reviewing it together, as father and daughter. Tony is eighty-eight years old and identifies as an Anglo-Indian from Karachi. He has spent decades researching his family history and has on numerous occasions participated in academic research. In 1963 he married Gill, a Pakeha (white) New Zealander whom he met in London, England, where they had two sons. Their daughter Penelope was born in Ōtautahi Christchurch following their emigration to Aotearoa New Zealand in 1968. She is an arts academic, a graphic facilitator and cartoonist working on social justice and health inequalities.

This review includes quotes from Tony, recorded as he engaged with the rich and diverse perspectives included in this collection. The book revealed to us new knowledge about a 500-year history, opening our eyes to perspectives from other parts

of the world, and stimulated discussion about the way colonialism, colourism, gender, disability, class and poverty impact upon identity.

I haven't lived in Karachi for near on seventy years, yet I still love the curries and the culture, I read the latest books about partition, watch documentaries and dramas on YouTube. So, identity includes a question about the land of your birth. And let's face it, your traditions, they all come out in what you eat. I am proud of my Anglo-Indian heritage, but I am also open-minded about it. There are times when the Indians hated us, the locals hated us, and the British just used us, didn't take us seriously. Within our community, the darker Anglo-Indians were frowned upon, as were the poorer Anglo-Indians. The assumption was that your father must be white English, and your mother must be Indian, but there are many different kinds of Anglo-Indians. It was my Mum who was fair skinned. She had an English mother and an Anglo-Indian father. My dad was dark. He was Portuguese-Indian. Yet when I did my DNA last year it said that I was 68.4% South Asian, 17.3% Irish, 8.5% Scandinavian and 5.8% Finnish!



Anthony Mendonça holding his baby sister, surrounded by his brothers – Karachi, 1940s



Anthony Mendonça – London, 2019

Organised into five parts, the collection covers: (1) Identities: Historical (2) Identities in Contemporary India; (3) Diasporic Identities; (4) Gendered Identities; and (5) Identities in the Arts, Literature, Film and Performance. This combination of wide-ranging topics reflects a growing passion for Anglo-Indian Studies, and achieves its aim of widening the scope of interdisciplinary and transnational scholarship in this area. Exploring the contributions led to discussion about the fluidity of identity for those who lived through the partition of British India, who migrated across borders and oceans, who chose to remain or found themselves unable to leave.

After partition we still had Muslim friends in school and at parties. We never ever argued about religion because we just respected each other's way of life. But some politicians openly stated that they wanted to make Pakistan an Islamic state, and some educated Indian women were referring to Anglo-Indians as 'lackeys of the British'. Anglos got scared and left. To me it wasn't that easy in the 1950s, even though I spoke English. If you were Anglo and went for a job the chances of getting it was low as they were obliged to give the job to Pakistanis, and by Pakistanis, they meant Muslims. You could still have a good quality of life if you had a good job, but many ended up in menial jobs and were exploited really. Some wanted to leave but couldn't get the money to pay for the passage. A lot were left behind, some of them embraced Islam. We were open to intermarrying. After a while England began to close its

doors and it was harder. I remember Canada would not accept my sister's family because her sons had learning disabilities. They had a hard life in Karachi.

We considered the impact of new lands and new relationships on one's identity, how children and grandchildren engage with increasingly complex family narratives, developing their own perceptions of who they are, and where they are from. 'Diaspora', we reflected, is not necessarily a word used widely within the communities it describes. Our hope is that this collection of writing, the art forms it examines and voices it amplifies, will be shared widely, including in forms accessible beyond the academy, and help advance understandings of and debates around this complex ethnic identity and the world histories it reflects.

The British didn't know who the Anglo-Indians were and the Kiwis were even worse; they just class all Indians as one. 'How come you speak English so well?' they asked. When I first came to New Zealand one of the guys assumed that I must be West Indian, because of a cricket match that had been on. Even to this day if you say you are Anglo-Indian people think: 'What the hell is that?'

From poetry to music, examples of creativity are discussed throughout this book, including a case study looking at country music singer, Terry Morris, but it is especially encouraging to see an entire section devoted to Anglo-Indians and the Arts. Glenn D'Cruz's arts practice-based inquiry highlights the value of visual and performing arts as a means for transforming and challenging conceptions of Anglo-Indian identity. We were inspired to read about Rhett D'Costa's colourful participatory artwork 'Masala Mix' (2019). Here it would have been useful and interesting to have included imagery alongside the creative contributions and methods, offering readers additional opportunities to engage and analyse.

We were particularly interested to see Dolores Chew's work deconstructing representations of Anglo-Indians which led to us to reflect on the risks facing Anglo-Indian women in 1940/50s Karachi, including harassment and violence, both outside of and within the community, and subsequent restrictions and protections afforded them by family members, and church and community leaders. Also of note here, was Carolyn D'Cruz's 'A Queer Encounter with Anglo-Indians: Some Thoughts on National (Non) Belonging', inviting valuable discussion about belonging and unbelonging.

I can believe that it was a very closed society, if you were different, you would soon have a reputation. I knew people of non-conforming gender

at school. We didn't associate with them. One girl rode a motorbike and had a short haircut, I was told she was a 'butch'. A friend came out as gay when we got to London, perhaps it was easier for him there.

This collection opens up diverse and intersectional perspectives including personal experiences and autoethnographic approaches, it represents a tremendous wealth of knowledge and histories, drawing links between contrasting and shared understandings. We considered the way stories of privilege can at times distract from stories of adversity and agency. As such it was refreshing to see Brent Howitt Otto piece 'Which Eurasians May Speak? Elite Politics, the Lower Classes and Contested Eurasian Identity'. Tony, who is quoted in Dorothy McMenamin's chapter on Anglo-Indian Identity in Pakistan, reminds us of the importance of continuing to seek out narratives that may be less visible, in order to reflect regional, cultural and socio-economic contexts, and the way these may shape identity and understandings.

Some Anglos were gifted with a better upbringing, education and houses. They used to have the whiskeys, they danced the night away and carried on like life was great for them. Whereas a lot of poorer Anglo-Indians had to struggle and work for minimum wages. Rich Anglo, Muslim and Hindu families sent their children to private schools, but many couldn't afford it. It was a question of money. Yes, the Catholic Church gave us a free education, but we were expected to raise funds for the church in return, collecting money from a community that was already poor. Yes, the Anglo-Indian Society paid for my sister to do her teaching degree, and our relatives who had these big houses sometimes brought us tins of spam. But we never got any financial assistance; like most Anglos we struggled. Mum had to buy tinned stuff off a cart that might have been rotten. We didn't have money for books and the teachers didn't help. They just sent us home because we didn't have the books. We didn't have school uniforms; we were lucky enough to have clothes. I remember having to wear mum's Women's Auxiliary Corps., India (WAC-I) uniform to school, some of the guys used to call me a 'WAC-I'. I wanted to stay at school, but I had to get a job.

There is a beauty and mystery within identities, languages, cultural practices and physical appearances which do not neatly reflect majority populations. Misunderstandings about Anglo-Indian identities endure and as Anglo-Indians continue to have relationships outside of the community, identities become increasingly complex and colourful. As Tony suggests: "Mixing race has always happened, and it will always happen. It is inevitable." This vital collection offers an impressive variety of lenses and creative responses through which we can view, celebrate and question identity. It preserves and promotes the voices of our elders,

and will stimulate enthusiastic discussion, new research and new art. It is our hope that this book will travel as widely as Anglo-Indians have, finding its way on to mango wood coffee tables, hand painted bookshelves and student reading lists everywhere from Anjuna to the Algarve, from Bangladesh to Battersea, from Mahé to Marseille, from Karachi to Christchurch Ōtautahi.

Anthony Mendonça has extensive knowledge of world history and politics, though his career was in engineering. He loves biryani, grandchildren and Duke Ellington. His favourite films are *High Noon*, *West Side Story* (1961) and *Lagaan*.

Penelope Mendonça has a PhD from Central Saint Martins, University of the Arts London. Tony, Gill and Pen visited family in Karachi together in 1992.