# STUDIES

# Freeing Myth from Reality: India as Subject in Canadian Poetry

by Wanda Campbell

"In Canadian fiction there are more scenes set in India than in Abbotsford" (4), writes Frank Davey in *The Abbotsford Guide to India* (1986). Though both Canadian novelists and poets have written about India, the critical work has focused largely on fiction, from the novels of Sara Jeannette Duncan set in India to the work of contemporary novelists of the Indian diaspora like Rohinton Mistry. According to Lorraine York, critics of place "have perpetuated the hegemony of nineteenth-century literary realism, in particular the assumption that, somehow, the novel gives us place in a more thoroughgoing, analysable form than does any other genre" (324). A fuller picture of how India emerges in the Canadian imagination is established by exploring how the country has been perceived by Canadian poets over the last century.

By closely examining eight temporally diverse poems—Louise Morey Bowman's "Garden in Agra" (1926), F. R. Scott's "The Seed Thrower" (1952), Earle Birney's "The Bear on the Delhi Road" (1958), Irving Layton's "Postscript to Empire" (1968), Eli Mandel's "Fatehpur Sikri: Lost City" (1977), Frank Davey's "Jaipur (You & that Elephant on the Amber Road)" (1986), Himani Bannerji's "In This Fugitive Time" (1991) and Danielle Lagah's "I Tried to Find India in its Poets" (2004)—as well as related poetry and prose we can begin to see how Canadian poets have used their Indian experience to explore the relationship between the divine and the human, culture and nature, myth and reality. The poets have, almost without exception, identified a specific Indian place by name, used an animal as a central image or symbol, and applied a Western, often British, literary filter. While attempting to express an anti-Orientalist gesture, the earlier poets have nonetheless contributed to a (neo-)colonialist discourse by virtue of being, as Birney puts it, "a well-fed western tourist in a world of unimaginable poverty and heat and dusty slaving" (*The Creative Writer* 16). Increasingly, however, there has been an effort to break down binaries, and to engage directly with the human experience that we all share as citizens of a global village in keeping with Lorraine York's statement that

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"[f]or the postmodern poet, the paradoxical oppositions of here and there, of foreign and domestic, need to be deconstructed—not resolved—and their rigidly divisive assumptions rethought" (336). As the Ottawa songwriter Alanis Morissette's "Thank U" (1998) makes clear, India represents a mystic state of mind for the West, but is this merely Orientalism in another guise? It would be folly to generalize from a limited and arbitrary selection of poems, but it is clear that perceptions of India in Canadian poetry provide a complex commentary on cosmology, colonialism, and craft.

## I. Bowman

The Quebec poet Louise Morey Bowman (1882-1944) did not include "Garden in Agra," which first appeared in *Canadian Author's Association Poetry Year Book* 1926-1927, in her final collection *Characters in Cadence* (1938), perhaps because its use of traditional iambic meter and end rhyme seemed like a backward step from the experimental free verse of her earlier collections *Moonlight and Common Day* (1922) and *Dream Tapestries* (1924). The garden setting is Agra, not the Persian inspired Mughal garden surrounding India's most iconic building, the Taj Mahal, but rather a "Cool-blossomed English garden!" (364). The poem opens with the ultimate colonial question: "What wide fate / Set you in burning breathless India?" (364). Though the flora of India is one of the most diverse in the world, boasting over 15,000 species of flowering plants, the British still felt the need to transplant the colours of the Union Jack in red hollyhocks, white lilies, and blue bells to Agra. The wind that rings the flowers commonly known as Canterbury Bells (with all the literary and historical associations of the English cathedral city) is described as a "phantom wind from England" (364), a phrase reminiscent of Charlotte Bronte's use in *Jane Eyre* (1847) of a sweet European wind to bring relief and revelation to Rochester when he is suffering in the tropical heat: "and the air grew pure" (289).

For the westerner, the familiar English flowers and "pink sweet-peas" suggest "how small the world—how sweet" (364). The walled garden provides a sanctuary for the "English Baby-boy, with flaxen hair" and blue eyes, but the cobra charmers are waiting to enter the garden "with that veiled power we do not know" (365). In her poem "Green Apples," Bowman explored the theme of a lost paradise, but the cobra in this garden signals not a fall but an opening for art. The final heroic couplets acknowledge that "only that low stone wall lies between / The cobra charmers, with their

age-old spells, / And chiming of the Canterbury-bells!" (365). This conclusion, which anticipates the "tissue thin" boundary "Between the temple and the cave" (41) in E. J. Pratt's "From Stone to Steel" (1932), implies that there is not much dividing the two worlds. According to Paula Hastings, constructions of India in English-Canadian public discourse began to change after World War I, in which both Canadian and Indian soldiers fought. English Canadians, she writes,

> appropriated British ideas about the "Orient" and certainly participated in the project of "othering" India's peoples, but this project was complicated by Canadian interest in, and affinity for, Indians as a "fellow colony" and "sister-nation" of the Empire. Efforts to locate Indians in colonial and racial hierarchies were consequently rife with contradiction. (6)

The fact that the "crouching" charmers have been "summoned" (364) and that the Ayah (Portuguese for nurse or nannie) is identified by her skin colour rather than her name, indicates the hierarchical relationships at work in this colonized space, and yet those who can control the cobra, associated with the gods (specifically Vishnu and Shiva) and capable of mimesis (a menacing hood with false eyes), have a power at once mysterious and veiled. Through the power of music, movement, and ancient spells, the charmers are artists who free myth from reality in order to offer up their "passing show," the name of both a Broadway revue of the 1920s and a collection of verse plays published in 1903 by Harriet Monroe, the editor of *Poetry* (Chicago) in which Bowman's poems had appeared. In her poem "Darkness," Bowman chafes against the "foregone conclusion" that worshiping "the new gods" in the sunshine means not praying to "the old gods" in the moonlight (343). "What does it matter" (344) she concludes, if one confuses old shrines with new? Eastern spells make music on the European carillon and the mysterious power of synesthesia allows even transplanted bells to ring.

## II. Scott

In the poem "On the Death of Gandhi" (1948), the Montreal poet F.R. Scott (1899-1985) eulogized the father of Indian independence by writing that, although India is weighed down by history, "his spirit / Leaps, in an instant, over the Himalayas" (*Collected Poems* 115). Four years later in 1952, Scott had a chance to visit India on his way to work for the United Nations in Burma. His stay in Burma was cut short by illness, and yet his biographer Sandra Djwa credits his time in the east with widening his philosophical,

political, and poetic horizons "within an international and humanist context" (250). In "The Seed Thrower," Scott offers us a Delhi street scene featuring a man seated on the ground "in the small circle of his skill," undisturbed by "the swirl / Of colour and caste" as he throws a seed into the air for his trained bird to catch (118). The "small green bird" that "Flew for an instant freely overhead, / An age-old anecdote of India" before returning to the man's "waiting hand" (118) recalls the "little green bird" of E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India* (1924). Ronny Heaslop and Adela Quested agree that being able to identify the bird "would somehow have solaced their hearts. But nothing in India is identifiable, the mere asking of a question causes it to disappear or to merge in something else" (Forster 101). Part of Scott's motivation in travelling to the East was to seek respite from his passionate but doomed affair with his fellow poet P.K. Page, who was seventeen years his junior. This personal detail lends poignancy to the final image of the poet as a seed thrower who has "folded both [his] hands away," forcing him to watch his life-giving bird "fading, fading in the sky" (118).

A highlight of Scott's return visit to India in 1960 was an interview with Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru that ended with Scott leaving him to "his task of trying to move 400,000,000 people, mostly illiterate, mostly hungry, mostly sick, all shot through with notions of cast and status, from their present backwardness toward the industrialized democratic socialist society" (Djwa 352). In "To the Poets of India," which responds to the Indian Issue of *Poetry* (Chicago) (January 1959), Scott draws parallels between Canada and India as he did in "On the Death of Gandhi." He does not know the flora celebrated by the poets of India or understand the cry of a baby vulture from a banyan, and yet, he argues, "the image of the image is the same" (116). Here, "over in Caughnawaga / The band of Iroquois broods on what is lost" (116) while the Indian poet Mohammed Iqbal, enroute from Bombay to England in 1905, mourns the disappearance of Arabian culture in Sicily. The true task of the traveler poet, Scott suggests, is to learn from loss and carry that knowledge back to the homeland: "And there let others weep, too, as I lament for you" (Iqbal 234).

### III. Birney

Earle Birney (1904-1995) wrote "The Bear on the Delhi Road" in 1958/59 and was pleased when it appeared in the *New Yorker* in October 1960 (Cameron 407). It remains the most well-known of Canadian poems about India and certainly the one garnering the most criticism. Birney's poem

"Can. Lit." (1962) ends "it's only by our lack of ghosts / we're haunted" but curiously his description of the writing of his Indian poem is laden with images of ghosts, hauntings, and exorcisms. "Bear and men pursued [him] for fourteen months" until he found the leisure, the mood, the "bearish rhythm and the images with which to lay those three ghosts, which were I think also the ghosts of my own multitudinous guilt feelings, as a well-fed western tourist in a world of unimaginable poverty and heat and dusty slaving" (*The Creative Writer*16). His desire to use his "personal spell to raise those ghosts" among his listeners echoes that of Charles Dickens in his Preface to *A Christmas Carol* (1843). Birney wrote from New Delhi: "I'm finding being in the middle of one of the world's largest population bombs to be both exciting and appalling" (qtd. in Cameron 404), and the effort it took to get "these special spectres to stop spooking [him]" was considerable (*The Creative Writer* 16). To his surprise, Birney found poetry the best vehicle to convey "what mattered" in his travels:

> to catch those moments when the strangeness of scene fused with the familiarity of recognition of people, and I suddenly felt as clearly one-and-close-with some human being with whom I couldn't even pass greeting in words, some leaping sympathy out of the common misery and horror and love and mystery of being alive together with them. (qtd. in Cameron 405)

Once again, like Bowman's snake charmers or Scott's seed thrower, the Kashmiri men make their precarious living from "taming" a wild creature but it is "not easy to free / myth from reality / or rear this fellow up" (*Collected Poems* 37). Training a bear to dance is a brutal and uncertain enterprise that makes it difficult to distinguish who is the beast. The men "spindly as locusts" (36) must prance "out of reach of the praying claws" (37). Birney's pun on "preying" again brings to mind Pratt's tissue thin division between "the civil polish of the horn" and "praying finger tips" (Pratt 41).

In his interpretation of Birney's poem in the light of the anthropologist Robin Ridington's discussion of myth and reality, Lionel Kearns argues that the men are involved in the task of "transforming a natural item…into a commercial product" (174) while simultaneously "transforming a real bear into a mythic entity: the trained bear as symbol of man's technical domination of nature" (175). Kearns emphasizes the word "galvanic" in reference to Luigi Galvani's electric cell: "The animation of the men is powered both literally and figuratively by the energy of the bear" (173). The same could be said of the poet and his imagery.

Directly after discussing this poem's genesis in *The Creative Writer*, in a Canadian version of Marianne Moore's "imaginary gardens with real toads in them" (135), Birney describes writing poetry as "a kind of complicated hockey" using "a purely imaginative stick" to "shoot real pucks" (17). Birney's description of poetry as "a kind of intricate and infinite play" (17) invites a postcolonial critique. For Tom Hastings, the contrast between the hasty Eastern experience glimpsed from a passing car and the leisurely Western experience of "tinkering" over the poem on a Mediterranean island encapsulated in Birney's closing epigraph, "Srinagar 1958 / Île des Porquerolles 1959," marks this poem as "completely equivocal" (71). Commodifying the other in order to understand his own identity, Birney "repeats the very Orientalist structures he had intended to place under examination" (Hastings 71). Nonetheless, India had clearly both challenged and changed Birney. As he wrote to Ethel Wilson in 1958, "I don't think anyone could ever be the same person again after a few weeks in India…" (qtd. in Cameron 404).

## IV. Layton

The Montreal poet Irving Layton (1912-2006) expressed strong feelings about India as early as the 1930s while he was at Macdonald College: "I said that England was making a mistake in trying to rule the Indian people against their will…I launched into a tirade against all the black misdeeds of British imperialism" (*Waiting* 165-66). By the time he himself travelled to India in 1968, the country had been independent for two decades, but traces of empire were still visible everywhere. Layton's poems of India appear in *the whole bloody bird* (1969) along with excerpts from a journal that he insisted was not one of those "portentous travel-diaries" in which "a camel's vagina or an ancient Burmese coin would be sensitively described" (*wbb* 9). Aviva Cantor describes Layton as a "mad traveler" on a visit to India:

> Irving insisted that we must live with the natives. We stayed where the untouchables stayed…He'd wander through the most incredible filth and degradation whistling gaily. We'd get on a train and I'd be urging him to look at the scenery. He'd sit there writing and hand me a poem that had already captured the essence of the scene. He really makes up the world as he goes along. He creates his own countries and no one can enter them with him. (qtd. in Cameron 390)

Like Birney, Layton found poetry "a more congenial vehicle" to express his Indian experience (*wbb* 11) in poems like "Taj Mahal" and "At Wenger's, New Delhi."[1] The satiric "Incident at New Delhi" about the "pandemonium" caused by bringing "a polar bear to Connaught Place" (*wbb* 141-42) explores Layton's perennial themes of defying the status quo and desiring women but in "Postscript to Empire" he actually turns his eyes towards India. The poem opens by enumerating examples of colonial influence on India's capital, beginning with Connaught Place (that bastion of British economic and architectural imperialism), streets named for colonial figures such as George Curzon (Viceroy of India from 1899 to 1905), and the widespread evidence of linguistic imperialism that Layton compares to French Canadians addressing him in English back home. He is asked about his Memsahib (a combination of the English "ma'am" and Hindi "master" that is typically used for the wife of a British official), and the editor of the *Times of India* is "a re-incarnation of Steele or Macaulay" (*wbb* 150). Indians who chose a Western lifestyle were disparagingly referred to as "Macaulay's Children" because Thomas Macaulay argued for English as the medium of education in his *Minute on Indian Education* (1835), dismissing both Sanskrit and Persian as vastly inferior.

Despite powerful colonial influences, the pagan still asserts itself in the temples and "old perversities" whispered by dark skinned young men in voices "soft as the tread of pumas" (150). Like Layton's use of "Aryan temple" in the previous stanza, a term surely drenched in irony for a post-Holocaust Jewish poet, the choice of "pumas" which are indigenous to the Americas, is an odd one but in his poem "The Puma's Tooth," Layton associates these predators with truth. As with Bowman, moonlight is the realm of the old gods.

> And the nights, black as India ink,
> are filled with the cries of vanquished conquerors,
> of gods and beasts and men become like beasts.
> (*wbb* 150)

What first seems like a reference to a Hindu pantheon filled with animal deities assumes a Nietzschean context in the final stanza where bicycles wait in the daylight "for the *Wille Zur Macht* to mount them and ride away" (150). In *Thus Spake Zarathustra,* a book Layton valued, Friedrich Nietzsche writes: "Man is a rope stretched between beast and superman—a rope over an abyss…What is great in man is that he is a bridge and not a goal"(8). For Layton, the "crux of the Indian problem" was "the unwillingness of the masses to change their traditional outlook and practice even

when evidence of gainful improvement is crystal clear…." (*wbb* 37-38) or, as Kusum Nair put it, "If an Indian looks to the stars, it is only to worship them, not to pluck them" (*wbb* 38). Layton believed Nietzsche offered an alternative: "What Nietzsche wanted was the assertion of creativity, and therefore of strength and of course one of his important concepts is his will to power by which he means, as far as human nature was concerned, an overwhelming exuberance and effulgence like that of the sun…" (Layton, "Nietzsche" 24). The people of Delhi which at first appeared to Layton as "a huge biological joke that has gotten out of hand" (*wbb* 36) were, he believed, capable of just such exuberance:

> The Darwinian struggle for survival, frenzied and remorseless, not religious passivity is the lesson India's capital offers the onlooker…. Poverty, not misery. More singing and laughter are to be heard in the dirty, crowded, refuse-laden and frenetic streets of Old Delhi than in the sterilized suburbs of Toronto and Montreal…. (*wbb* 37)

In "Postscript to Empire" Layton challenges a post-colonized people to exert their "will to power" and creativity for the purpose of change, a challenge he also extended to Canadians.

## V. Mandel

The Saskatchewan poet Eli Mandel (1922-1992) was first in India in 1977 but the poems he wrote along with a journal entitled "India: The Invisible Country" did not appear until 1981 in *Life Sentence*, which can be read as "yet another Mandel quest, perhaps religious, certainly psychological" (Cooley 265). The author, Mandel writes on his Acknowledgements page, "sees no need for an accurate rendition of reality, but rather he wishes to retain an accurate rendition of his notes" (n.p.) and his poems of India resemble notes in their fragments and leaps. "Parting at Udaipur: the Lake Palace" hops from Calcutta to Gujarat to Bombay to Udaipur. The prose poem "The Gods of India" offers a bestiary that stretches from Agra to Mysore and includes the Hindu monkey god, the Jain bull, green parrots, lolling snakes, rats in mobs, crying camels, hawks, eagles and vultures: "the thunder of the animal gods speaking" (41) leaves the poet feeling disoriented and bereft.

An abandoned sixteenth-century palace-city built near Agra by the Mughal emperor Akbar gives its name to Mandel's poem "Fatehpur Sikri: Lost City" but the poem says very little about the actual place. In *The Family Romance* Mandel describes postmodernism as "a form of literature that

feeds on its own impossibility" (21) and this poem is created out of impossibilities: what the poet has lost, what he no longer believes in, and what myths he thinks are real. The first stanza begins "Having concluded India is impossible […] neither / a country nor a possible poem" and concludes "I write *here* what *there* either is or isn't in India" (31), a possible re-articulation of Northrop Frye's famous question about Canadian identity "Where is here?"

"Here," the poet loses his wallet, along with the Western sense of identity that it represents, but still has the economic power to purchase an elephant hook he cannot use in Toronto and "a slender seductive god" he also loses (31). He refuses "to repeat Forster's words" which he then does repeat at the first temple, first cave, "first dark corner / where a god appears" (31). The reader may at first assume that he means words from *A Passage to India*, perhaps Mrs. Moore's assertion on entering a mosque that "God is here" (42), but in his Indian journal Mandel quotes a Bengali writer quoting Forster: "Only connect," a phrase that appears repeatedly in *Howards End* (1910): "Only connect the prose and the passion, and both will be exalted, and human love will be seen at its height. Live in fragments no longer" (Forster 174-75).

"Here," the poet is told stories of domestic quarrels "in a house that could be in Downsview / though it in fact is in suburban Delhi" where peacocks strut on the roofs of warehouses full of T-shirts to be sold in Toronto (31). "No one believes this poem," not even the poet, and yet "the mad kind in the lost / city of Fatehpur Sikri, or was it somewhere else" (31), is betrayed by those he thought he could count on and cries the whole night in the shape of a camel. He "took an elephant hook to his own / testicles watching the insides of his life / drip away from him, thinking only / the *shunyata* Buddhist worlds create" (31). In his journal, Mandel expands on the principal of emptiness:

> India, as Mahatma Gandhi seems to have known, *is* the unconscious, forever demanding the absence of ego, hence a threat to Western man and a mystery forever. But the unconscious exists, opposing the conscious self. Dreams and hallucinations are real…. I begin to glimpse the "order" I hadn't dared to think of –the dream around us, beyond control, beyond structure. Perhaps some ancient Hindu mystic living his dream of nothingness, knows more of the uncontrollable chaos than any Western mind could ever begin to conceive. (*Life Sentence* 103)

In India myth has become more real than reality. W. H. New, who accompanied Mandel to India in 1977, wrote: "For Eli, everything was allegory.

He reveled in moments of intensity, not in chains of events. Things were processes, as subjective as self…Hurling himself into moments of revelation, Eli came to understand something of the spirit the land occupies" (92-93). The impossible country has been made possible by the poem. Language allows us to connect.

### VI. Davey

Frank Davey (1940-) made his first visit to India in 1982 to conduct workshops on Canadian Literature, believing if he "could go to India [he] could go anywhere" ("Writing a Life"43), and fourteen photographs and almost sixty poems of that journey became *The Abbotsford Guide to India* (1986). Davey has argued that "poetry has become so generally discredited in public culture" that "disguise" may be "the only means for it to continue" ("Notes" 200) and he observes that *The Abbotsford Guide to India* was so effectively "disguised" as a travel guide that several bookstores actually stocked it "in their travel section" ("Notes" 200). Promoted on the cover as "an essential companion" offering "Facts-at-Your-Fingertips" the guide contains maps, but the very detailed one of Abbotsford, BC where Davey grew up includes the Trans-Canada Highway, the Pacific Milk Plant, the CNR line and Bradner Bulbs in sharp contrast to the mere outline of India marked with the primary tourist destinations. The book begins "Abbotsford is the centre of Canada & India is the centre of the world," followed a few lines later by "India is the centre of India & Abbotsford is the centre of the world" (3). According to Katie Trumpener, *The Abbotsford Guide* manifests a "transcolonial" consciousness by "evoking the parallel histories that link these two far-flung outposts of the British Empire" (194). Unlineated poems appear on the page as blocks of prose as if the journal that Layton and Mandel include at the beginning and end of their collections has moved to the centre. The witty second section "Preparing for India" deals with such pragmatic matters as "What to Take." In "Driving" the poet advises "Never drive in India" because "traffic lights are sometimes misunderstood by illiterate drivers who have not been trained in abstract systems of signification" (19), a nod to semiotics developed more fully in "Jaipur (You & that Elephant on the Amber Road)."

Singling out one poem from a collection that some have called a long poem for its characteristic emphasis on process, play, and place, is difficult, but the theoretical and Canadian context including repeated allusions to Birney make "Jaipur (You & that Elephant on the Amber Road)" particularly relevant to this discussion. Critics have noted the influence of Charles

Olson on Davey's work, and certainly Olson's dictum "Art does not seek to describe but to enact" (162) informs the poem's opening stanza. "Try sweating, not imagining" (48). If sweating is "a concrete image," then the elephant blocking the road is "a very concrete image" (48), a play on poetics and the properties of actual concrete. Davey's description of his poems as "both literary texts and theoretical probes" ("Notes" 200) is borne out in the discussion of mimesis that follows; the reader is told the elephant is "not imitating" a tree, a nod perhaps to Ferdinand de Saussure's famous choice of "arbor" to distinguish between sign and signified.

Davey does not refer to cosmology, though the Hindu elephant god Ganesh invites such a connection, but he does explore colonialism, and his use of the second person "you" throughout implicates the reader. "You" want "a photo of a happy elephant" while still keeping your "hands & feet clean" and your "belly smooth" but, despite your best efforts, "you" cannot keep the "predictably-skeletal owner" out of the photo (48). The elephant is the man's living just as Birney's bear is the living of the Kashmiri men. The gap between myth and reality comes crashing closed as the out-held hand reminds the poet that the Maharajahs once had armies of elephants to stomp on the "shy Arab ponies" of the invading Mughal (49). India has always had invaders though now in the guise of the "shy tourist" with his camera and cola.

Davey is referring to Pierre Trudeau's 1969 speech to the National Press Club in Washington when he says, "How not to privilege an Elephant? It's the Canadian question" (49) but he insists "It's the Indian question too" (49). The owner of the elephant insists on entering the frame and being paid because the tourist's lens is "jumbo" which brings to mind the famous circus elephant killed by a train in St. Thomas Ontario. The Indian elephant "pretending a roadsign" has succeeded in blocking traffic and the moment cannot be made "happy." There is no way to escape the imperialism inherent in the economic gap between photographer and photographed here on the Amber road, just as the gap on the Delhi Road could never really be closed. "Sometimes myth cannot be torn from reality" (Davey 49). Significantly, the only photograph of an elephant in *The Abbotsford Guide* is not of a living elephant but rather one of stone.

The final poem in the book is entitled "At Times," perhaps alluding to Mr. Godbole's song in *A Passage to India*: ("*At times* there seemed rhythm, *at times* there was the illusion of a Western melody. But the ear, baffled repeatedly, soon lost any clue, and wandered in a maze of noises" (emphasis mine 95). Davey begins "Ask yourself who you are" (102) and provides a list of things to consider including "the privileges of Western civiliza-

tion," "Mrs. Moore" and "what these people must think of you" (102). Davey manages to find a middle ground between "muddle" and "mystery" (*A Passage to India* 86) in laying bear the illusion that a mere tourist can ever hope to tell the difference.

### VII. Bannerji

Himani Bannerji (1942-) stands out in the group of poets considered here as the only one actually born in India, or more accurately in Bangladesh when it was still part of India. She immigrated to Canada in 1969, and though she is best known for her non-fiction writing on feminism, racism, and multiculturalism, similar themes infuse her poetry. Women diaspora poets must contend with both colonialism and patriarchy (Zhang 118), a double oppression explored in poems such as "doing time," the title poem of Bannerji's 1986 collection, and "Paki, Go Home". The poem "In a Fugitive Time" (1991) anthologized in Cyril Dabydeen's *Another Way to Dance* (1996) is actually set in India. Rather than the tourist settings of Agra and Delhi, Bannerji focuses on Calcutta including the "dereliction of the shacks" (17). The opening line, "Vultures are tearing open a dog's body" (17), signals that there will be nothing romantic about her portrayal. The animals are not myths with veiled power but are themselves victims, just as the poor are victims of the violent rich. Children play on garbage and any green is "anachronistic / in the dead land" (17). The time of day is sunset and the scene is one of decay and upheaval.

One of Mandel's final images of India was of an airport where he is told "No lines connect" (*Life Sentence* 108). The no man's land of an airport is also the scene of Bannerji's poem, made even more desolate by the sirens of war. Like Birney, Bannerji concludes with the time and place her poem was written "(February 1991, Calcutta)", a date that is an important clue to the poem's context. During the Gulf War, India put an end to the re-fuelling of jets for Operation Desert Storm because of long-standing ties to Iraq. Later in 1991 Rajiv Gandhi (who left his job as airline pilot to become Prime Minister after his brother died in a plane crash), would be assassinated like his mother before him in 1984 and Gandhi before her in 1948. This is indeed "a fugitive time" and multiple meanings of flight and exile reverberate through the poem. The world is at war in more ways than one. The poet mentions "the red sea and the gulf" (18) that belong within the geographical confines of the Gulf War but are also symbols of exile through allusions to Exodus and the journey from slavery to freedom.

In this world of disarray that "we could not set right," the persona extends an invitation: "give me your hand / and let us begin to walk" (18). This simple act of collaboration and friendship can lead the fugitives out through the dust and smoke. Paradise may be lost but there is still hope in this gesture of moving hand in hand into the unknown. "The writing of Himani Bannerji is not the writing of celebration. It does not mark the immigrant's triumphant progress from alienation, to settlement, to the culminating point of 'arrival'…. Yet, it is writing that asserts and affirms; reconstructs the deconstructed; centres the decentred" (Shahani 187). Bannerji is harsh in her critique of a Canada that is at once colonial and imperialist, and yet she believes we can learn from the marginalized in our midst:

> The possibilities for constructing a radically different Canada emerge only from those who have been "othered" as the insider-outsiders of the nation. It is their standpoints which, oppositionally politicised, can take us beyond the confines of gender and race and enable us to challenge class through a critical and liberating vision. (Bannerji, *Dark Side* 81)

### VIII. Lagah

Danielle Lagah (1977- ) was born in Canada of Scottish and Punjabi descent and she tells her tale of searching for ancestral roots in a collection of poetry entitled *Father Tongue* (2007). Asked why she chose to tell her story in poetry rather than prose, Lagah responded:

> [F]iction seems too concrete, too linear, somehow too much of an invention. John Hollander once said that "we can reclaim truth from the lies of poetry," and in in this I believe he is correct. My poems are crafted from thick layers of perception and fabrication, but it is my hope that these layers serve to illuminate and protect the truths at their core. These are my truths and my father's truths, and on the page they at last share a common tongue. (qtd. in Dunlop 73)

*Father Tongue,* writes Poonam Bajwa, "will speak to anyone who has struggled to understand not only where they come from, but also, and perhaps more importantly, who has shaped them" (3), and Lagah explores the Indian lives of her father, aunts and uncles, grandparents and great grandparents. In her poem "The Road to Jaipur," Lagah reflects upon a dancing bear which, like Birney, she glimpses from a passing car. "I close my eyes and I am the bear," she writes, and then "I am the man with the whip and

hard mouth," but in the end, "I open my eyes and know / I am neither one… No metaphors / to be found" (94).

In "I Tried to Find India in its Poets," first anthologized in *Red Silk* (2004), Lagah's quest is far more personal than F. R. Scott's a half century before. The East meets West quality of Lagah's life and work is reflected in the three poets she mentions, all of whom were born in India but educated in the west: Eunice de Souza (1940- ) at a university in Wisconsin, Adil Jehangir Jussawalla (1940- ) at Oxford, and A. K. Ramanujan (1929-1993) at Indiana University. "I wanted to see a picture of the Punjab / in words" (74), she begins, but instead she finds only old and new stories of India. The "old stories" are those of Siddhartha the Buddha, Vishnu the supreme god of Hinduism, and Black Kali the goddess of time, change, and death. These deities, two male and one female like the trio of poets, appear only as "dusty statues" with "frozen hair" (74) incapable of bringing her heritage to life. The "new stories" of "grocery chain stores, airports, catbells and cars" are also dissatisfying as obvious symbols of economic imperialism and modernization; catbells may refer to undertaking the dangerous mission (belling the cat) of the Common Admission Tests, an online examination required to get into prestigious institutions such as IMM, Delhi's Institute of Marketing and Management. The poet finds old and new stories but "none in between" (74)—none in the spaces inhabited by her own family history.

She tries to find India in its poets, but "they are too busy / finding themselves" (74) and "too busy finding Canada / in [her]" (75). Where is the word, she asks "that would show me the black faces of monkeys / paws outstretched gripping a red fruit" (75)? Who will show her the grandmother she has never seen, "chrysanthemums the colour of lemon rind / around the hem of her dress / tossing the wash water / out of the door" (75)? She seeks "a poet to tell me / how she looked then" (75) but both she and the reader realize that she herself must become that poet. Largely unpunctuated like the rest of the poems in the collection, this poem does include one question mark, so the absence of another one where we would expect it after the final line "how did she look" invites multiple interpretations. This is not just a question requiring description but an enquiry into modes of perception that requires enactment. Through the magic of craft, the long lost Indian grandmother can look out of her Canadian granddaughter's eyes, continents and decades away. Because of her, she is able to speak through lips red as mangos.

Of Lagah's poetry, Marilyn Bowering has said, "This is not a bridge between cultures, but a palimpsest" (n.p.) and the same could be said of all

eight poets discussed here. In every poem we discover a layering of old stories and new, a tale of lament for a colonial past and longing for a creative future. Each poet is aware of the contrast between Western privilege and Indian privation which any one individual, especially a tourist, can do little to alleviate. As Layton said of Delhi, "Sympathy and concern very quickly seem middle-class sentimentalities bobbing like ridiculous corks on an ocean of unrelievable poverty" (*wbb* 37). And yet, all the poets experience an epiphanic moment of recognition, especially when face to face with those who attempt to harness the mystery in aid of the struggle for survival. This affinity for those who seek to tame the wild, to break down boundaries between culture and nature by insisting all creatures participate in the "tranced dancing" of life on this planet, is evident in poem after poem. "In that country the animals / have the faces of people" (2), wrote Margaret Atwood about the fauna of Europe. Of India, one might say the animals have the faces of gods. Whether it be Bowman's cobra, Scott's bird, Birney's bear, Layton's pumas, Mandel's camel, Davey's elephant, Bannerji's vultures, or Lagah's monkeys, the poets have discovered some echo of themselves in both the creatures and those who "rear" them up.

Ultimately it may be impossible to free myth from reality, but India seems to be one of those "thin" places where it might at least be attempted. "Though we perhaps scarcely recognized it," wrote New of his journey with Mandel, "the India we were seeing represented something both of our past and our future" (90). The crowded weight of India's past and populace demands a kind of emptying of the ego that typifies the west. These encounters with the wild and the divine remind us that Canada's vast space is not as empty as we once believed. Trying to find India in *our* poets reveals a glimpse of what it means to be colonized, to be consecrated, and to be creative. As Wallace Stevens puts it in "A Postcard from the Volcano": "what we said of it became / A part of what it is" (159).

## Notes

1 Layton's poem "Elephant," which is dedicated to Northrop Frye, fits neatly into a discussion of myth and reality but is set in Nepal and thus falls, like Scott's poems about Burma or Michael Ondaatje's poems about Sri Lanka, just outside the perimeters of this discussion.

# 25

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