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CONFERENCE REPORT

Review of Race Poetry and Poetics UK 2: 26th to 27th October 2018 Queens College Cambridge

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A review of Race Poetry and Poetics UK 2 (26th to 27th October 2018, Queens College Cambridge).

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Michael Schmidt's editorial article in *PN Review* at the beginning of this year displayed everything that is wrong with the current debate about race in poetry today. As a 'white male in the vale of his years', Schmidt bemoaned how he is judged for 'what' he is rather than 'who' he is and in a unwarranted lampooning of Sandeep Parmar, branded all discussions about race in poetry as 'cliché' or 'polemic', a debate that ultimately 'silences whole categories' of the 'individual' (*PN Review* 245, 45: 3). Schmidt wants to return poetry to the discussions of newness and of craft; discussions that aren't racialised, apparently. I wondered if we would always start the new year in poetry with a bitter and fundamentally nonsensical take on race in poetry, a one-way street conversation which essentially misses the point about what others like Parmar have been saying about race and poetry.

2018 was a monumental year for poetry, I think, with fresh publications announcing themselves to a clamour of hot anticipation (a notable tip of the hat to the incredible work at Boiler House Press who brought us Nat Raha's collection *Of Sirens, Body & Faultlines* and to Clinic Press who brought us the collaboration *Threads*), loads of new poetry events sprouting up across the UK and news that poetry sales have reached new heights (*The Guardian*, 21 Jan 2019). Whilst the literary market isn't without its own set of problems, the good news here is that new poetry is circulating

to wider audiences and there is certainly a sense of community and camaraderie building from the grassroots of small presses and reading series. It's something I well aware of in my capacity as a publisher through The 87 Press. Working for the 87 has brought me into contact with many young poets, reviewers, events organisers, pamphleteers, who are not simply wishing for a different poetry culture – one that takes the politics of intersectionality seriously – but are actively doing things to facilitate that change. I am inspired by SPAM (Scotland), Zarf (Scotland), *Poetry Wales*, No Matter (Manchester), Hi Zero (Brighton), Rivet (London), Materials (London), Sad Press (Bristol), Face Press (Oxford), Bitter Lemon (London) and a host of online spaces, *amberflora*, *Datableed*, *Erotoplasty*, the intimate communities that surround them, and a host of other small presses and poetry collectives. It's this energy and enthusiasm for poetry that one hopes continues through and beyond 2019. A rapturous enjoyment of poetry with packed out readings, books/pamphlets that warrant larger print runs, and reviews that are critically sound, stimulating, funny, and supportive that might leave editorials like Schmidt's in the twentieth century where they belong.

So what is the fate of twenty-first century poetry and, by extension, poetics? Are we slowly witnessing the materialisation of something new, different, and exciting which speaks both *to* and *from* our increasingly fraught times? Could this new poetry culture be *the* poetry culture which takes up and renews the call to action initiated by many historical and current conversations about decolonising curriculums, diversifying institutions, representing minorities? Time will tell but for now we should remain positive and hopeful. Race Poetry and Poetics UK (RAPAPUK) is the most important conference happening in the UK right now for precisely this reason. Away from the brouhaha of misinterpretations and the actual silencing of debate represented by Michael Schmidt, RAPAPUK provides a space where at least once a year people from a variety of institutions, universities, places in the world, gather to present their work, to perform, and to enjoy each other's company. RAPAPUK is a place of 'tantric poetics', theorised by co-founder Nisha Ramayya as a place that both 'affirms closeness, relationship, and community, without enforcing touch, agreement,

or commonality' (*Threads*, 37). Conceived by Dorothy Wang and co-founded by Nat Raha, Sam Solomon, Ramayya, and Wang, RAPAPUK is *the* place where we can gather not only to share ideas but a place where 'we can dislike each other without denying each other's possibilities' (Ibid). It is a space that lists the following as their principle organisers: Janani Ambikapathy, Mary Jean Chan, Amy De'Ath, James Goodwin, Edmund Hardy, Nat Raha, Nisha Ramayya, Sophie Seita, Sam Solomon, Siddharth Soni, Laurel Uziell, Dorothy Wang. It is, most importantly, a space that is held for others with care and with love. As heated as debates about race in poetry can get, it's testimony to the success of RAPAPUK that each symposium represents an inclusive, diverse and safe space for open discussion that is politically charged, academically rigorous and creatively intriguing. Some amongst you might think I'm being too sentimental in hindsight as I fondly recall and remember RAPAPUK's second instalment. But we all know that critiques of sentimentality levied against writers of colour are usually founded on prejudgments about race. This is sentimentality that, I hope, strives to move past being considered a racialised assemblage into a space where we can celebrate the achievements of a diverse range of researchers who continue to do the necessary and important work of creating a space for open and honest dialogue about race, poetry and poetics.

RAPAPUK II 'Legacies of Colonialism' consisted of four roundtable discussions, four panels, three poetry readings, and an incredible keynote from Denise Ferreira da Silva. Day One began with a roundtable discussion on 'Decolonising Cambridge' and featured Janani Ambikapathy (Cambridge), Priyamvada Gopal (Cambridge), Chana Morgenstern (Cambridge), and Lola Olufemi (Cambridge/SOAS). It was a fitting way to delve into a persistent debate about diversity in Oxbridge more widely, whilst a perspicacious presentation by Gopal provided some context to decolonisation. It was a lively discussion and a mere taster of what was to come. The first academic panel entitled 'Poetry and Praxis' was chaired by Laurel Uziell (Independent Scholar). David Grundy's (Cambridge) paper 'Zero Hour: D.S Marriott & Simone White' delved into recent collections of poetry from the US and UK that think through anti-blackness and music. Grundy gave an astute reading of Marriott's engagement with Grime in

his *Duppies* (2017) which registers the racial antagonisms unleashed by the Brexit referendum as well as harking back to the 2011 riots triggered by Mark Duggan's murder by the police. In a critical move befitting recent music crossovers between the UK and US, Grundy turned to Simone White's *Dear Angel of Death* (2017) in a discussion about Trap music, gender and race. Grundy ended his paper with a brief foray into the recent censorship of Drill music in the UK, uncovering some speculative lineages that link Marriott, White and the music to which their poetry responds. Walt Hunter's (Clemson University) paper 'Riot of Sound: Claudia Jones's Carceral Poetics' gave a great presentation of archival work and research into the Trinidadian Communist poet. Hunter argued that Jones's poems require a poetic pedagogy of dissent that engages histories and discourses of carcerality, deportation, superexploitation, and multiple forms of global migration. Sumaya Kassim's (Independent Scholar) part-paper part-personal-essay 'On (not) confessing: writing as a Muslim woman' gave a scathing critique of the ways in which the literary industry racialises writing by Muslims. Kassim also explored the role of chance and the unexpected to consider how the process of writing itself is a space of radical dissent and what possibilities confessional writing opens up. Nemequene Tundama's (ANTICONQUISTA) paper 'I Don't Sing for the Love of Singing' explored the revolutionary tradition in Latin American poetry and art from the perspective of the Latin America diaspora in London. Taking its cue from the infamous Chilean singer-songwriter Victor Jara, Tundama traced a long-established tradition of leftist artists from the diaspora whose music, art, and poetry is engaged with building a new and just society.

After lunch, Victoria Ann Bulley (Independent Scholar) and Rachel Long (Independent Scholar) treated the audience to a poetry reading and open discussion about their work with Octavia, a poetry collective for women of colour based at the Southbank Centre. A thread that bound their readings and discussions together was that of intergenerational memory and diaspora experience. As champions of inclusivity and representation, Long and Bulley convened an accessible and thought-provoking roundtable, one that stuck with me for the rest of the conference as with considerable tenderness and honesty, Long and Bulley discussed their archival work at the National Poetry Library and their attempts to trace a poetic lineage to the Caribbean Women's

archive held there. The second panel was chaired by Siddharth Soni (Cambridge). Dorothy Wang (Naropa and Lingnan) gave a talk entitled 'Whither Poetry Studies?' which began with the assertion that poetry studies as it has been conceived of and practiced in the Anglo-American world for over a century is no longer viable today, primarily because of its disregard of issues of race and colonialism, especially as they shaped foundational concepts in poetics. Wang celebrated social media and the conversations among poets of colour about race which have become a counter-current against an increasingly career-driven and professionalised academy. Wang also made a compelling analysis of many schools of avant-garde poetry which had brushed away poets of colour with the putdown of identity politics which limited readings of their work to autobiography. For Wang, much of English poetry criticism had avoided a self-assessment of its racially inflected presumptions about poetry. It was an exceptional work of scholarship, accessible both as an overview of a history of what is going wrong in poetry studies and as an opening up of potentialities that may change poetry studies for the better in our contemporary moment. Nat Raha (Sussex) gave a passionate and insightful paper entitled 'Poetics of the Creopole' which built upon Édouard Glissant's conception of creolisation and the insights of Alberta Whittle that Britain is already a creolised country. Raha wove an argument through readings of Maud Sauter, Vahni Capildeo, Jay Bernard and D.S. Marriott, assessing the ways in which aesthetic innovation and counter-memory resist forms of neoliberal multiculturalism. Edmund Hardy's (Independent Scholar) paper 'The Cover That Uncovers: mixed-race poetics' explored ideas of mixed-race and language through the work of UK poets of mixed race, focusing on translation in a decolonial context, critiques of hybridity and code-switching. Hardy's reading of Will Harris and Derawan Rahmantavy was particularly insightful, opening up a consideration of 'mixedness' within the discussion of race and poetry. Jennifer Wong's (Oxford Brookes) paper 'Now you see me, now you don't: translating racial difference in the works of Hannah Lowe and Sarah Howe' looked at two British-born contemporary women poets. (Howe was born in Hong Kong). Wong argued that their works offer new ways for understanding the portrayal and perception of racial identity and cultural hybridity, particularly in reframing narratives of exclusion and acceptance in poetry.

A small coffee break ensued and was followed by the final panel of the day on 'Radical Black Traditions' chaired by Ronnie McGrath (Imperial College). Matt Martin's (Birkbeck) paper 'Inventing New Ancestors: Kamau Brathwaite at the Poetry of the Americas Conference' attended to a little-known history of a 1975 conference in London that enabled a substantial exchange of ideas between Afro-Caribbean poets and UK poets of the British Poetry Revival. By attending to the ways in which Kamau Brathwaite's radical and immersive talk on the history of slavery and language in the Caribbean afforded new readings of poems previously considered conservative, Martin suggested that Brathwaite's challenge to the internationalism of the Revival remains pertinent when considering what might be lost today through failure to listen across racial and cultural boundaries. Deirdre Osborne's (Goldsmith's) paper 'Didactic Poetics: Critical, Creative, Consequentialist' explored the ways in which poetry can serve an explicitly didactic purpose in educating readers/listeners about racial-cultural exclusion zones through a close reading of Benjamin Zephaniah's twentieth-century school poems ('School's Out', 'Propa Propaganda', 'City Psalms') and Lemn Sissay's 'A Reading in Stansted'. Osborne's generative discussion argued that 'didactic poetics' holds the white-majority culture accountable for the consequences of Britain's imperial past and was a fitting end to the day.

But the day wasn't really over. Following a little break, conference attendees were invited to an evening of poetry and performance in the Judith E. Wilson Drama Studio. After an intense day of thinking, discussing and presenting, one would be forgiven for acknowledging how hard it would be for the poets reading to not only give their energy to a room but to also maintain that energy in others. Fortunately, the four poets had other plans in what was a perfectly balanced set of readings and performances. James Goodwin opened the night with a wonderful set of poems that were evidently meticulously thought out, carefully pressed onto the page, and delivered with a calm that was infectious. Keith Jarret's reading, sometimes from memory, sometimes from laptop screen, was heartfelt and rhythmic. Suhaimah Manzoor-Khan, an alumna from Cambridge herself, had a witty, candid, and politically charged series of poems that dealt with topics as varied as her experiences as a

student at Cambridge to the representation of Muslims in mainstream media. Last on was Ronnie McGrath who, upon walking up to the microphone, began singing a beautiful folksong in Portuguese before belting out a late Amiri Baraka-esque passionate soliloquy. The night ended on a high. I remember walking back to my hotel in an absolute daze, as if my entire perspective on what was possible in poetry and in performance had been remoulded and recalibrated.

Day two began with a roundtable discussion entitled 'Performing Thought: A collective poetics of mourning, (Asian) dislocation and the futurities of antiracism' between Ashwani Sharma (UEL/LCC), Kashif Sharma-Patel (Independent Scholar) and myself (Birkbeck). We gave a three-part poetry performance in which Ashwani used photographs of his family to speak to and through intergenerational memory. All of us spoke out against the fascism that is gripping India at present and the discussion of the futures of anti-racism and avant-garde aesthetics proved lively. Next was another roundtable entitled 'Race and Poetry in Scotland' and featured Nadine Aisha Jassat (Independent Scholar), Alycia Pirmohamed (Edinburgh), Zein Sa'dedin (St. Andrews) and Jay G Ying (Edinburgh). Ying led with the question: how should poets of colour living and working in Scotland respond to national debates of race and decolonisation in poetics? All read poetry that responded to this question in myriad ways, whilst also relaying some personal stories, confrontations, and incidents that had provoked them both individually and collectively to seek possible answers to this question. In keeping with the theme of the intergenerational, Helen Bowell (Independent Scholar) then led a troupe of Foyle Young Poets to the stage. The line-up included: Aisha Mango Borja, Meredith LeMaître, Mukahang Limbu and Cia Mangat. These extremely talented, young, and brave poets read a fantastic series of poems touching on a range of themes from the atrocious deportation and mistreatment of the Windrush generation to dyslexia. It was a wonderful way to pause for thought before we took recess.

We resumed for the final panel 'Indigenous Poetics' chaired by Amy De'Ath (King's College London). Chinelo Ezenwa's (Western University) paper entitled 'Stifling Indigenous Agency through Translation: the Igbo Psalms and a Poetics of

Decolonization' was a detailed, at times funny, and at other times shocking, examination of the negative impact of colonially translated Igbo Psalms on Igbo Christians of Nigeria. Ezenwa located translation at the heart of the colonial encounter and through a thorough re-examining of the history of Igbo Bible translation offered some re-translations of the Igbo Bible to promote indigenous agency. So Mayer's (Independent Scholar) paper 'Sexuality as Survival: First Nations 2SQ Poetics as 'Resurgent Method'' read a contemporary constellation of First Nations 2SQ (two-spirit, queer indigenous) poets which included Billy-Ray Belcourt, Gwen Benaway, Joshua Whitehead, Samantha Nock, and Leanne Simpson. For Mayer, the 2SQ poetics is exemplary of what Simpson (Micho Saagiig Nishnaabeg) has theorised as 'queer Indigenous normativity'. For some in the audience who, like myself, had not read this strand of indigenous poetry before, Mayer's paper was detailed and offered a great insight into the politics of sex and sexuality in 2SQ poetics. Ananya Mishra's (Cambridge) paper 'Mary Tallmountain's Continuum: Reviving American Indian Networks of Intellectual Patronage as a Separation of Indigenous Women's Positionality' looked at indigenous women's critiques of formal institutions of learning which sustain dominant literary traditions and how such critiques forged intellectual practices that function beyond these established structures. Mishra's comparison of the poetry of two American Indian poets Paula Gunn Allen and Mary Tallmountain, allowed her to examine this distinctly gendered form of indigeneity that separates its epistemological positionality from outside the realm of dominantly white, male traditions within universities that propagate a Eurocentric understanding of sovereignty and indigeneity. Sam Weselowski (Kent) delivered the final paper of the day entitled 'Jordan Abel and the Decolonial Praxis of Reading: Spatiality, Sociality, Textuality'. Weselowski argued that Nisga'a poet Jordan Abel's *Injun* (2016) articulates a decolonial reading practice of spatial critique and social pedagogy. Weselowski also addressed issues underlying settler participation in a decolonial critique that manifested in a moving examination of his own subject position in relation to the texts he analysed.

After a short coffee break the packed-out room (as it had been for the entirety of the conference) settled down for the keynote by Denise Ferreira da Silva (University

of British Columbia). The speech entitled 'Speculations on a Transformative Theory of Justice' began with the fear many of us had when looking watchfully at Brazil's elections at that time. It was the eve of the results and Ferreira da Silva was visibly concerned, almost mourning. Listening back with what we now know Bolsonaro's election was unfortunately to be, this keynote resonates as a phenomenal querying of what justice is in the world today and how we should use what we know about climate change to influence how our own energy moves between us in our thoughts, writings, wishes, and how we can cultivate that energy or 'heat' to move towards something better. It was also a passionate speech against the nation-state as the arbiter of justice and a necessary gesture to an international perspective that could truly be transformative. RAPAPUK is itself quite a transformative conference. I don't think any of us left that room with the same perspective on the world. Mijke van der Drift acted as a respondent, and James Goodwin chaired a great discussion afterwards which raised a number of issues about fascism, race, and even critiques of object-oriented ontology. It was a thought-provoking end to the conference and the air hung heavy as rain began to fall. Those of us who didn't have to rush off and catch trains clustered under umbrellas as we made our way to King's Audit Room for the final poetry readings. Mary Jean Chan read poems from her new collection *Flèche* that engaged with her experiences growing up in Hong Kong and being educated in an elite English school, touching on gender identity, sexuality, race, colonialism, and childhood. Will Harris read from his forthcoming collection *Redang* which explores his mixed Anglo-Indonesian heritage. Dorothea Smartt, one of the Black British poets who have opened the way for younger poets of colour today to do the work they do, captivated the room with her dialectical renderings of the Barbadian experience of London and a panorama of migrant life in the UK. That all three poets spoke to their various heritages and experiences of life in poetry seemed the perfect end to RAPAPUK II, which is, after all, a space where all of us gather to share, to listen, and to enjoy each other's perspectives on race, poetry, and poetics. It's a special conference and is attracting more and more of a following each year with an international perspective and a commitment to showcasing some of the best poetry out

there. I remember getting the train back to London late that October evening and feeling really inspired, moved, and motivated to continue to write and to work. A third instalment of RAPAPUK is surely a necessity! Here's hoping it happens sooner rather than later.

Competing Interests

The author declares that they were a panellist at the conference but otherwise has no competing interests.

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