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## Editorial

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## EDITORIAL

# Still Not a British Subject: Race and UK Poetry

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This article aims to create a set of critical and theoretical frameworks for reading race and contemporary UK poetry. By mapping histories of 'innovative' poetry from the twentieth century onwards against aesthetic and political questions of form, content and subjectivity, I argue that race and the racialised subject in poetry are informed by market forces as well as longstanding assumptions about authenticity and otherness. Lyric violence, lyric dread and whiteness inform a reading of the lyric as universally exclusive of non-white poets and any responsibility to the social functions of poetry. Ultimately, in line with the essays in this special issue, the article argues for an expansion of the definition of innovative or avant-garde to account for challenges to the expressive and individual lyric mode posed by poets of colour.

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**Keywords:** Lyric; Race; Poetry; Whiteness

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In a 2015 *Los Angeles Review of Books* essay 'Not a British Subject', I wrote that

In spite of high-profile Black British poets nearing the canon, poetry in the UK wishes to remain largely and exclusively free from the 'identity politics' of race. Mechanisms in place, systematically, reward poets of colour who conform to particular modes of self-foreignizing, leaving the universally white voice of mainstream and avant-garde poetries in the UK in tact and untroubled by the difficult responsibilities attached to both racism and nationalism. A mostly white poetic establishment prevails over a patronising culture that reflects minority poets as exceptional cases – to be held at arms' length like colonial curiosities in an otherwise uninterrupted tradition extending back through a pure and rarefied language.<sup>1</sup>

The essay's title was meant to point not just the little-discussed 'subject' of race in British public life, but also the racialised 'subject'—most especially the lyric subject—in poetry, and the complex relationship of the British subject to the state, whose citizenship was only enshrined in response to decolonisation and a succession of immigration acts from the mid to late twentieth century. Being a subject of (or to, or in) a racial hierarchy formed from centuries of imperialism into a modern day taxonomy of being was exemplified for me by the status of the non-white poet as interloper in a mostly white space. But this essay was written before the election of Donald Trump and before the EU Referendum that would lead a divided country to Brexit. It was conceptualised before the rise in hate crime across both the US and the UK as a result of the former political earthquakes, before ideas of citizenship were once again debated as a way to shore up an ethno-nationalist fantasy or to deport long-settled immigrants from former colonies who had all their lives considered themselves to be British, before revelations of the UK Home Office's Hostile Environment policy under Theresa May who later as Prime Minister infamously claimed at the 2016 Conservative Party Conference that 'to be a citizen of the world is to be a citizen of nowhere'. At the time when I wrote that 'British poetry, like British society, has a serious problem with race', my focus was interrogating canon formation and what I perceived as a self-fetishising poetics, as well as examining how poets of colour are marketed as exotic objects (colonial subjects) rather than equal cultural citizens. It was not as clear then, as it is painfully so now, that a dearth of non-white voices in literary culture and public discourse, an obliviousness to the dynamics of empire from an amnesiac British state and its institutions, a pervasive and unempathetic whiteness, has real, even dangerous, consequences. Literature makes possible a space for *subjectivity*, and for poets of colour that space is always a battleground where expectations of universality (whiteness), authenticity (for whom?), poetic form (lyric or anti-lyric) and voice determine wider subject positions beyond the page. But polemical writing, a call to arms of the kind intended by 'Not a British Subject', and other responsive opinion or editorial pieces on race and poetry will necessarily fall short. Restorative and generative in-depth critical writing about British poetry and race of the kind found in

this special issue, although not unproblematic in its alignment with academia and institutional whiteness, is a requirement for a lasting cultural reckoning in poetry. Where polemic issues a battle cry for urgent change it risks drowning out long histories of steady resistance in the form of writers' collectives, magazines, publishers, organisers and the political activism of poets themselves. Looking back at 'Not a British Subject' and the responses it received—some favourable, others not—I have learned from poets, anthologists, activists and editors of colour at the forefront of black and Asian British poetry, that my essay partly emerged from a generational gap where their own tremendous efforts were not visible to me as a practicing poet and academic working in England from 2002 onwards. I am grateful now to know that history better—and relieved that with the decolonising of university literary studies and an increase in academics and critics of colour the legacy of many moments of resistance will become increasingly difficult to ignore.

The essays in this special issue are a much-needed intervention in recognising not just the poetic innovations of British poets of colour but of the radical communities and audiences who have for the past several decades challenged the whiteness of poetry in the UK.<sup>2</sup> It may seem obvious to say that irreversible change to literary culture within and outside the academy is formulated by an active remembering, revisionist expansions to canons and critical histories that make irrefutable the collective gains of the past. And yet not a single book-length study of race and British poetry exists. Where articles, chapters and editions have appeared in the past, their authors or editors often are not themselves people of colour nor are they working within the UK or inside its poetry or critical communities.<sup>3</sup> This special issue, the first of its kind in the UK, arose from the wish for a more visible race-specific discourse on British poetry, one necessarily informed by critics working globally in postcolonial or race studies but one that also, importantly, foregrounds critics working within UK poetry's social, material and political contexts. Alongside the contributors to this special issue and, crucially, with others within and outside academia, the interconnectedness of discourse about race and poetry in the UK must revise long-held views about what constitute so-called minority and majority subject positions.

In the past terms like 'innovative' or 'experimental' were determined by the practices of almost entirely white and largely male poetic avant-gardes. In seeking to broaden the definition of 'innovative' poetry here beyond the specifics of coterie to a widened aesthetics of newness, it is necessary to briefly consider its formation. During the post-war avant-garde British Poetry Revival as well as the ensuing so-called 'poetry wars' of the 1970s, the Poetry Society and its *Poetry Review* were momentarily taken over by a radically experimental group of (mostly male, white) poets: Eric Mottram, Allen Fisher, Lee Harwood, Barry MacSweeney, and sound/concrete poet Bob Cobbing. These British innovative poets studiously avoided any middle ground between themselves and mainstream poets, and were in dialogue with their modernist predecessors and American experimental counterparts and then, later, the Language poets. They were seen as 'neo-modernists', 'linguistically innovative', radically anti-consumerist or Marxist, and sometimes aligned with London-focused avant-gardes or the Cambridge School poets, aesthetically steered by J.H. Prynne. Fortunately, overlaps do exist today between real or imagined extremes of mainstream and avant-garde coteries, publishing presses, poetry magazines, reading series, prize lists, conferences, academic departments; each share a taste for poetry that challenges the status quo, one that isn't bound by aesthetic allegiance or an overdeveloped sense of its audience. In the US, the poet Cathy Park Hong's defining 2014 essay 'Delusions of Whiteness in the Avant-Garde' argued that the American avant-garde's insistence on 'post-identity' poetics 'is the specious belief that renouncing subject and voice is anti-authoritarian, when in fact such wholesale pronouncements are clueless that the disenfranchised need such bourgeois niceties like *voice* to alter conditions forged in history'.<sup>4</sup> If this purposeful 'anti-identity' linguistic decentring of lyric authority is true about the American avant-garde it was doubly true of UK's innovative poetry coteries, in which there were few, until very recently, prominent non-white poets. Practice, too, as a process supposedly detached from subject positions, has a history of pervasive whiteness in the avant-garde. Denise Riley's 1992 anthology, *Poets on Writing: Britain, 1970–1991* includes no non-white poets. Its framing of the intersection between small press publishing and innovative writing is an uncomfortable reminder of how exclusive assumptions about

aesthetics and subject positions reproduce themselves across related communities whose shared investment in resistance to mainstream markets aligns with an aversion to the commodification of poetic selves. Riley's introduction notes a relative absence of women in her anthology (only 4 out of 36 contributors), citing the 'obstinate sociology of the sexed world', the lack of material support for women poets, etc., as reasons.<sup>5</sup> Where life experience—as a woman poet, for instance—might call into question other contributing male poets in the anthology we find that there are no poets of colour to similarly interrogate the conditions of poetic labour. In his discussion of poetry publishing, Nigel Wheale notes 'the promotion of a new awareness of activity in ethnic-minority cultural forms' within state-funded presses parenthetically but admits, tellingly, that they are not represented in his overview because they 'draw on a different range of publications'.<sup>6</sup> Where race does appear is in an ethnographic literary history of white male poets observing indigenous people from Charles Olson to Ed Dorn. Here we see sufficient hand-wringing, expressed by poets who are all-too-aware of their outsidership, but self-reflexivity on the gaze of whiteness (especially within a discipline founded on imperial power) does not interrogate lines of influence, affinities or deconstruct coteries where such accumulated values underpin their dominant position of seeing.<sup>7</sup>

The material culture of poetry, its field of production—from prizes to reviewing to marketization and commodification of the poet's identity and perceived life experience—remains largely unaddressed in (the few existing) studies of British poetry and race. Scholarly work on poetry culture in North America has engaged with race and gender, specifically, with regards to the increasing professionalization of writer communities. Juliana Spahr and Stephanie Young's extended critique of MFA programs (informed by Mark McGurl's critique) in 'The Program Era and the Mainly White Room' focuses on historical trends that pit a decline in social engagement and (often political, race-based) community collectives against the rising professionalization of writing courses and their homogeneity. Spahr and Young undertake a bold and wide-ranging approach, one that combines demographic data with anecdotal evidence and a particularly striking historical overview of graduate writing programs and the academicisation of creative writing.<sup>8</sup> Following an analysis in which the

cultural and material production of literature relies on a symbolic illusion of value, formed by many hands and institutions, I wish to examine how racial subjectivity is both determined and negotiated through both the text and the (academic, literary, critical, public/popular, publishing) marketplace. The simultaneity of these global forces of production and value driving the exponential rise in published British poets of colour in recent times necessarily argue for a reading of British poetry and race within the wider context of a newfound hypervisibility. Whereas before poets of colour were few and frequently exoticised and exceptional, a recent shift in cultural and political conditions must be mapped across the ways in which these poets are read as well as through the work that they publish. These cultural fields of production vary between the US and the UK, but are increasingly in dialogue due to high profile American poets of colour being published here as well as the predominance of social media networks. And, most definitely, the public discourse on race and its relation to empire inflects these analyses differently in both countries and further afield into writers belonging to or originating in the Commonwealth who have a presence in the UK.

Over the past few years an inevitable focus on identity and belonging, brought about by aforementioned political upheavals, and a subsequent awareness among the poetry establishment of prizes and publishers, as well as the fruition of poetry diversity initiatives like The Complete Works (a vital decade-long mentorship scheme for Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic, or BAME, poets founded by Bernardine Evaristo) have yielded greater numbers of UK poets of colour in the mainstream.<sup>9</sup> More broadly, it seems, race and literary (though not necessarily poetry) culture is becoming a regular feature in public discourse, aided by high-profile writers and cultural commentators like Reni Eddo-Lodge, Afua Hirsch, and Nikesh Shukla, among others, as well as recent milestones like Evaristo's Booker Prize and Roger Robinson's T.S. Eliot Prize wins. Whether this surge of interest in race and identity does enough to deconstruct the terms on which it reclaims Britishness from the margins, whether it dismantles and interrogates the authority of whiteness, remains up for debate. A 2005 Free Verse report commissioned by London-based writers organisation Spread the Word reported that less than 1% of UK poets published were poets of colour; in 2017 that

number was greater than 16% and will have undoubtedly increased since.<sup>10</sup> And yet during that period Faber & Faber, arguably the UK's most prestigious poetry press, has in its over ninety-year history only published four poets of colour, all of them men, and three of those books appeared in the past ten years (Derek Walcott, Daljit Nagra, Ishion Hutchinson and Zaffar Kunial). Faber's first female poet of colour, Mary Jean Chan, was published in 2019, soon followed by the Mojave/Latinx poet Natalie Diaz in 2020. Picador has four poets of colour on its list, Jackie Kay and Jericho Brown who was first published in 2018 as well as Layli Long Soldier, an Oglala Lakota poet, whose *Whereas* was brought out in 2019 two years after its acclaimed US debut. Rachel Long's book appeared just as this article was being completed in 2020. Chatto & Windus's list has notably published a younger generation of poets of colour: Sarah Howe, Kayo Chingonyi, Danez Smith, Romalyn Ante and will soon add Kaveh Akbar and Leo Boix to their list. Both Picador and Chatto have non-white poetry editors on staff. Elsewhere, some smaller poetry presses have also featured a new generation of poets of colour (in many cases debuts) and editors of colour like Ignota books, The 87 Press, Palina Press among others, but editorial staff of presses and poetry magazines across the UK remain by and large white and very often male.<sup>11</sup> Of course, the prevalence of white editors doesn't necessarily lead to biases in publishing, nor does an all-white judging panel always return a winner who is white.<sup>12</sup> But what is clear is that poets of colour are more widely read and published in the UK than ever before—and this prominence has not uniformly been met with enthusiasm or even acceptance. In 2017 Nathalie Teitler, the director of The Complete Works, reflected on the possibility of lasting and meaningful change to UK poetry:

There is definitely evidence of a backlash, with some critics stating that poets of colour are being published and winning prizes as part of a trend of positive affirmation. There are still many publishers, journals and critics who hold to the white male, middle class view of poetry of the last century. Their views are so deeply entrenched that extensive permanent change remains difficult; any drive to excellence through diversity is likely to hit a glass ceiling and reveal the deep schisms in British poetry. The review culture also



requires major work in the lack of reviews of poets of colour, and the tone of those that are published (it is to be hoped that the Ledbury Critics scheme will help). Furthermore, there is a lack of critical methodologies, or indeed critical/academic analysis, of the work of poets of colour and a tendency to expect these poets to write on specific themes in specific forms.<sup>13</sup>

Teitler's awareness of the intersection between editing, prizes, publishing, reviewing and critical readings of the work itself is essential to the longevity of an inclusive poetry culture. To put this into context, in 2005 Faber & Faber's former poetry editor Paul Keegan warned poets of colour against the expression of autobiography thus:

The danger is that you tend to think, especially if you come from a minority ethnic background where there is a complex story of integration and adaptation, that that experience is the most important thing about you. [...] That is only half the story. How you relate to the wider experience is almost equally important, and the more you read then the better you become at what you are trying to communicate.<sup>14</sup>

If we replace Keegan's sense of the 'wider experience' with a universal (white) reader, which is what is implied, we see that the burden for poets of colour to assimilate is coded by how they negotiate difference via a depersonalising of racial positioning. Yet this is common practice, and not just by mainstream publishers with white editors. Conservative and regressive attitudes towards poets of colour and diversity— itself a deeply problematic term but one we are stuck with nonetheless—are still hugely in evidence in spite of an upsurge in publishing. A few years ago, I was the lone person of colour on a 'diversity in poetry publishing' panel at Edinburgh University with three white male editors and critics. I was struck by a revisionist view from the editor of a major UK press who, in comparing the US favourably with the UK, accounted for a lack of British poets of colour by arguing that the UK didn't have an equivalent of the Harlem Renaissance and that in terms of skilled poets of colour here 'educationally, we're not there yet'. Not only is such a view plainly historically

inaccurate, it also draws a line between a perceived knowledge of tradition and aesthetic quality. Let us call this, broadly, the false binary of the 'craft vs. identity politics' debate that shows no sign of going away amid the current backlash against recent gains. Coupled with a discourse about 'authenticity' in poetry by non-white poets (by readers, critics, publishers as well as the poets themselves) we find ourselves in the midst of a re-evaluation that is becoming increasingly divisive.

To step back again to the impetus for this special issue. A call for submissions appeared in 2016 that quoted the poet and critic Andrea Brady's 2015 brief essay in *The Conversation* entitled 'The white privilege of British poetry is getting worse'.<sup>15</sup> Here Brady rightly criticises the white poetry establishment's misreading of poets of colour by arguing that

poems which dare to claim subject and voice, challenging the obsession with technique which characterises much avant-garde writing, are often regarded as naive expressions of "identity politics". Such responses fail to recognise that the black lyric "I" is a radical invention, whose history belongs with the avant-garde traditions it also corrodes.<sup>16</sup>

In a BBC Radio 3 essay earlier that year that I queried the absence of non-white poets in the avant-garde by suggesting that their exclusion is 'because experimental poetics are seen as incompatible with fixed identity politics'.<sup>17</sup> Notably, both Brady and I point to the publication of Claudia Rankine's *Citizen* as the impetus for conversations about race and poetics—a critical point I will develop later. In a highly unusual move, *The Times Literary Supplement* published a critique of the *Journal's* call for papers, authored by the backpage columnist, 'J.C.', the critic James Campbell. As part of a wider discussion of the status of the critic and occasioned by the republication of Nicolas Tredell's 1994 book *Conversations with Critics* Campbell notes with dismay that the 'principal critical guiding stars of our day are gender and race, converging in the politicization of art in general. [...] The tale and the teller's identity were never so indivisible'. He continues by taking aim at the special issue's wish to expand critical frameworks:

A curious aspect of the desire to “reconsider how poets of colour [...] broaden the definition of innovation and the ‘possibilities of language’ in contemporary poetry and practice” is its movement towards a state of literary apartheid; it represents an amalgam of the progressive and the reactionary. One thing about the literary world since Mr Tredell conducted his conversations is hard to deny: identity approval increasingly trumps critical approval.<sup>18</sup>

It is difficult and probably inadvisable to take his extreme views seriously, but one thing is clear from this assessment: ‘identity’ is a threat to critical value, which had before been neutral, and now must become secondary to the politicised position of the teller—who is, incidentally, only subject to those objectionable forces that do not apply to white men. I would argue that far from being a movement towards a new state, progress in critical culture—from canon revision to the on-going re-evaluation of literary taste—is always reactionary. The implication is that literary value is being deformed or relaxed by the incorporation of women and people of colour, which is of course a reactionary, conservative view that others have more recently expressed.<sup>19</sup>

## I. Race and Lyric Authenticity

The complexities of authenticity in poetry are manifold and although it is not my aim to argue for authenticity in the contested and constructed space of poetic language I am particularly interested in how an idea of the ‘authentic’ is applied to writers of colour and by whom. In their joint introduction to *The Racial Imaginary: Writers on Race in the Life of the Mind*, Beth Loffreda and Claudia Rankine explain the term ‘racial imaginary’ to be those characteristics, narratives and behaviours thought to be available to people of different races. On the white imagination, they write that

White writers often begin from a place where transcendence is a given—one already has access to all, one already is permitted to inhabit all, to address all. The crisis comes when one’s access is questioned. For writers of color, transcendence can feel like a distant and elusive thing, because writers of color often begin from the place of being addressed, and accessed. To be a person of color in a racist culture is to be always addressable, and to be

addressable means one is always within stigma's reach. So one's imagination is influenced by the recognition of the need to account for this situation—even in the imagination, one feels accountable, one feels one must counter. So a writer of color may be fueled by the desire to exit that place of addressability. At the same time one may wish to write of race. And again at the same time one may wish to do any or all of these things inside a set of literary institutions that expect and even reward certain predictable performances of race. There can be a comfort, a place to hole up, a place to rest, found in that performance—that is, if that performance conforms. But even if it conforms, the performance returns the writer of color to an addressability that at any moment may become violent rather than safe—may become violent if the performance steps outside or beyond those comforting conformities, or even if the performance stays within them. Because the 'favor' of largely white-run literary institutions is founded on an original, if obscured, amassment of racial power: they can always remind you you're a guest.<sup>20</sup>

Rankine and Loffreda address aesthetic as well as material concerns about publishing and reader reception at the intersection of a literary tradition and its market. At this intersection, where the poet is made visible in literary culture is both violence and danger. On the one hand, violence is inherent to being addressable through language within dominant institutional whiteness. On the other, there exists a danger of over-articulating the personal experience of racial difference and in doing so disregarding the studied, transcendent universality and impersonality of the mainstream lyric mode. The peril here for the poet lies fundamentally in the production of voice that chooses whether or not to conform to the functions of dominant cultural discourse. It is reminiscent of Keegan's warning to poets to communicate a 'wider experience', which is code for a readership whose expectations are prefabricated by a poetic tradition in which they see themselves largely reflected. Keegan's sense of a 'wider experience' aligns with Rankine and Loffreda's 'white-run literary establishments' of 'amassed racial power' specifically in the tradition of lyric poetry, whose violence is enacted at both aesthetic and institutional levels. But what might this

lyric violence be and how, where and by whom is it perpetrated? How do ideas of the lyric shape literariness, and what does this mean for poets of colour in the fields of address, language, and the canon?

As a subject position, the lyric I constitutes a uniquely unnatural authority.<sup>21</sup> It not only consigns a self to the limits of perspective—to intimate or 'authentic' experience—but also both within and above a precise moment. To speak of transcending the self is to engage with the complex problem of the lyric. Lyric forms a zone of contact or conflict. The body of the poet of colour is made visible in the space of the poem; their voice becomes a lyric phenomenon inseparable from their social and racial positioning. Discursiveness may be inherent to the formation of the American citizen and its lyric subject (the American choral lyric voice involves itself in building and challenging a unified national identity from Whitman to Langston Hughes to Charles Olson to Claudia Rankine and Layli Long Soldier). In her poem 'Speculations about "I"', Toi Derricotte engages the discursively produced lyric subject and its remote, spectral doubleness. She writes: 'I deny "I,"/& the closer/I get, the more/"I" keeps receding'.<sup>22</sup> Looking the 'I' in the eye, Derricotte accounts for her subject position as mutually formed both within and outside of lyric space. The lyric space in this way extends into lived reality—it shapes and assembles itself into a dialectical field of being. Nuar Alsadir's book *Fourth Person Singular* responds to real or imagined graffiti reading 'Fuck Lyric' by recalculating her subjective coordinates in the lyric event of anti-lyricism. Via Freud's idea of 'dynamic transference' and the unconscious as a 'space of possibility' she reasons that 'lyric address'

occurs not only between an I and a you, but between separate parts of mind and different states of self. We use our expectations of how people (or versions of ourselves) we've known well have responded in the past as an index when anticipating how the person before us will respond in the present.<sup>23</sup>

Lyric address—whether pronominal (constructed around an I/You) or meditative (an I speaking one's mind to itself in the presence of an absent reader)—relies on a shared set of values about authenticity and sincerity. Myung Mi Kim's invocation of

the choral possibilities of lyric in her book *Commons* presents a speaking self that 'elides multiple sites' that 'fluctuates' and is contingent, that is 'released into our moment, shaped as it is by geographical and cultural displacements, an exponentially hybrid state of nations, cultures and voicings'. This, for her, is the 'meaning of becoming a historical subject'.<sup>24</sup> As Harryette Mullen has written, reflecting on her own practice away from lyric transparency, 'I have avoided a singular style or voice for my poetry in the possibility of including a diverse audience of readers attracted to different poems and different aspects of the work. I try to leave room for unknown readers I can only imagine'.<sup>25</sup> In his writing on black experimental poetry, Anthony Reed offers a similar communal (or as Audre Lorde would have it, erotic) sense of the lyric, one that is 'post-lyric' in its awareness of the limitations of the speaking subject, the I.<sup>26</sup> Such critiques of the supposed homogeneity of lyricism—what Virginia Jackson has called 'lyricization', the canonical backward glance that sees all poetic forms, expressions and modes as lyric—make space for the unique experiments and challenges posed by poets of colour.<sup>27</sup>

In Britain, we encounter a dominant tradition that has not shaken the primacy of the lyric mode in which the individual is uniquely transcendent but solitary, not choral but particular to the self, even if ironically, in the near-past. The totalising power of the lyric 'I' persists, and in spite of attempts at lyric slippage the skin of the 'I' makes it readable against canonical maleness and whiteness. In the UK, celebratory multiculturalism in the face of underlying socio-capitalist monoculturalism, and of art and literature as a mirror to this distorted history, is fixed in a state of (to borrow Paul Gilroy's term) a post-imperial nostalgia or melancholy. This nostalgia extends to the post-colonial subject, the person of colour who is separated and divested from the present as a site of structural social change by rigid cultural hierarchies. The lyric poem that concerns itself with authenticity necessarily comingles with the dangerous subject position as other, and it is from this that lyric violence emerges. But perhaps the problem is not formal or generic, but more broadly rooted in how individual voices are read within national idealisations of the state and its singular or pluralistic cultures. However, to my mind, it is impossible to consider the lyric without fully interrogating its inherent premise of universality, its careful dance between personal

expression and impersonality, all coded by whiteness. Even if the lyric subject writes with rare self-reflexion about the confines of lyricism, its expectations and modes of address, the ironic self feels static, complicit, passive or at best overly comfortable. Denise Riley's poetry and critical writing on lyricism and impersonality convincingly lays out the dilemma for women poets, in particular, at the level of language, identity and authenticity. In writing about lyric subjects, address and the suppositions of identity categories, she takes aim at these classifications which, for her, are like so many arbitrary labelled shelves in a bookshop.

If 'Black writers' and 'Asian writers' are by now bracketed with some attempts at a greater refinement, nevertheless, under these headings, Guyanese and Ghanaian sports journalists may rub shoulders awkwardly as 'Black', and Chinese and Indonesian novelists must coexist unhappily as 'Asian'. Meanwhile the yards of nonethnically designated shelves are, by implication, heavy with the work of nonblack or 'white' writers, who are never thus specified, thereby silently exposing the weakness of the catch-all category of 'Black'. Admittedly all such classifications must be approximate and nowhere near those of the library; the absurd end result of the demand for precise specification would be an individualised classification for each title. For finer and finer subdivisions will arise ad infinitum, yet always obscuring someone else beneath them.<sup>28</sup>

I take Riley's point and it is hard not to wish for a throwing off of labels. She notes that Edith Sitwell would turn in her grave if she found herself sorted among the 'women poets'. Sitwell is a compelling example for many reasons particular to her writing and editorial work and her status then and now, which owes much to feminist revisions of the modernist canon. But it is not appropriate to equate gender here with the complexities of racial identity in the heart of the empire. The classification of 'Asian' or the binary 'catch-all category Black', as both terms of political solidarity and state-defined census super-categories, are made complex by a majority culture whose interests do not lie in knowing the nuances of these terms and who are and

have always been empowered by the divination of these types of difference. In a recent interview Vahni Capildeo summed up the experience of being a poet of colour publishing in the UK:

I found that marketing and identity politics were combining to crush, like in the Star Wars trash compactor, the voice, the voice on the page, the body, the history.[...] You had to choose, you had to be a sort of documentary witness wheeled around and exposing your wounds in the market place.<sup>29</sup>

Robin DiAngelo writes that 'whiteness' is the assumed 'universal reference point' for humanity that goes unchecked. 'White people are just people. Within this construction, whites can represent humanity, while people of color, who are never just people but always most particularly black people, Asian people, etc., can only represent their own racialised experiences'.<sup>30</sup> Dorothy Wang states 'There is no one stable Asian American or Chinese American identity or subjectivity or point of view or poetic practice. The subjectivity of an ethnic American is not a thing or a content'.<sup>31</sup> In her view, such thinking works against the absolute 'inseparability of the aesthetic and the sociopolitical'.<sup>32</sup> However, Timothy Yu argues that although some Asian American poets are now read as 'recognizably "experimental"', Asian American poetry since the 1970s was an avant-garde 'grouping that defined itself not just through race but through bold experiments with form and style in the search for an Asian American aesthetic'.<sup>33</sup> Yu's analysis engages with redefinitions of the avant-garde as white where no such centrality existed from modernism to the present. In these contexts, and particularly in post-imperial Britain where colonial history remains invisible or uninterrogated, many poets continue to carry the weight of their ethnic difference as subjects situated in the minority against a national culture that has not addressed its legacy of systemic violence. Fixity and nostalgia, promulgated by majority and minority cultures, disempower the lyric present and its 'authentic' subject as a site of resistance or structural social change.

Probably subjectivity as content raises a difficult proposition for poets wishing to be read authentically as part of a cultural diaspora. Deploy the agreed-upon marker



of cultural difference and risk becoming embodied by it, your complexity reduced, your familiarity with references in the 'host' culture denied by your otherness. Resisting the stability of authenticity itself is a rejection of the beguiling stabilities of the lyric, of the universality of whiteness. The theorist Rosi Braidotti's figuration of nomadic consciousness redraws the possibilities of subjectivity in ways that provide a rejoinder to the coding of humanism as white and male: 'The point of nomadic subjectivity is to identify lines of flight, that is to say, a creative alternative space of becoming that would fall not between the mobile/immobile, the resident/the foreigner distinction, but within all these categories'.<sup>34</sup> For Braidotti, building on Deleuze and Guattari's thinking on nomadism in *A Thousand Plateaus*, 'The nomad does not stand for homelessness, or compulsive displacement; it is rather a figuration for the kind of subject who has relinquished all idea, desire or nostalgia for fixity'.<sup>35</sup> As certain poetic modes and traditions, its market and readerships, essentialise through othering those poets who assimilate within and refuse to threaten fixed cultural hierarchies and borders, an alternate space of becoming requires a rejection of culture that supersedes the complexity of the individual. To the violence of fixed binaries in the lyric, self and other, nomadic consciousness offers an aesthetic and, in the face of increasing nationalist nostalgia, may also offer a political way out. M. NourbeSe Philip reportedly said at Naropa University in 2013: 'The purpose of avant-garde writing for a writer of color is to prove you are human'.<sup>36</sup> If a resistance to the white 'universality' of lyric as well as to the annihilation of the subject in anti-lyricism could result in a new context for language, voice and self I can think of no better definition of nomadism than as a confirmatory expression of this humanity.

As a critic and a poet of colour, I am also implicated across multiple sites in the phenomenon of lyric violence. I take these social, aesthetic and political questions personally. It is neither possible nor favourable to be wholly objective about lyric subjectivity and race given my own identity as a British-born Punjabi Sikh raised in the United States. I would like to return to the example of a British poet whose work speaks directly to my own racial positioning, namely the work of Daljit Nagra and more specifically his poem 'Singh Song'. Although I admire much of Nagra's poetry as well as his genuine advocacy for poets of colour, I am troubled by the slippages

into stereotype that I suspect much of his readership imbibes uncritically. Nagra's poetry sometimes depicts British Indians through an enthusiastic double consciousness that verges on post-colonial panic while ironizing lyric authenticity through an engagement with canonical English poets (Arnold, Larkin, Kipling). Rachel Gilmour's work on Nagra's irony and deliberate self-foreignising rightly focuses on the work and the poet's intentions within the wider array of postcolonial language play. My reading of Nagra's work focuses specifically on the effect of dramatic monologue as lyric and its generational trauma, for the reader who feels implicated in the expression and experience of racism and shame.<sup>37</sup> 'Singh Song' briefly narrates a scene in which a British Punjabi shopkeeper balances his inherited responsibilities in his grocery store with giving attention to his new wife who lives upstairs.

Ven I return from di tickle ov my bride  
 di shoppers always point and cry:  
*Hey Singh, ver yoo bin?*  
*Di milk is out ov date*  
*and di bread is always stale,*  
*di tings yoo hav on offer hav never got in stock*  
*in di worst Indian shop*  
*on di whole Indian road—<sup>38</sup>*

Questions that arise from Nagra's poem and, importantly its lyric voice, cannot help but be rooted in my own personal experience as the grandchild of Punjabi immigrants who, like Nagra's family, arrived in England in the mid-twentieth century. My grandfather, like many other Asian immigrants, worked in a series of factories and foundries in the Midlands before owning his own small grocery store, which my 11-year old mother (precociously and ambiguously) named 'Oriental and Continental'. As a factory worker in 1960s England, my grandfather was obliged to cut his hair, an act prohibited by his Sikh faith. It was only when he bought his shop he was finally able to put his turban back on. And as Nagra explains in introducing the poem, small businesses gave immigrants a kind of autonomy and a way to surround

themselves with the familiar objects and faces of their lost culture.<sup>39</sup> We might even suggest it gave these voluntary exiles back their identity and a sense of racial authenticity. After all, isn't this what Nagra is celebrating with his invented 'character' Mr. Singh, whose wife is a modern, sexualized, rebellious woman who distracts him from his duties at the cash register whilst also running an online marriage business on the floor above? Mr Singh, who is shamed by his customers for the squalor of his shop, who foregoes being the model immigrant shopkeeper for love or lust? I fear something more troubling is happening here.<sup>40</sup> Nagra's portrayal of Mr Singh re-voices an imperial fantasy of the 'native peasant', an imbecilic inferiority that lives on in the mind of the English. It originates in the lilting nineteenth-century Anglo-Indian imitations of the military or civil service man of the British Raj turned poet (Alfred Comyn Lyall, Rudyard Kipling, David Lester Richardson come to mind). Assimilation anxieties forge racist depictions of Indians on television (sometimes authored as self-parody by Indians themselves) that neglect the political, social divisions and economic precariousness of the lives they distort wishing to re(de?)flect. Nagra's 'Punglish' is not a named dialect by which the Punjabi community self-identifies—it is an imitation of linguistic in-betweenness, a source of embarrassment that speaks painfully through the history of empire, decolonisation and its successive exclusionary immigration acts. Nagra's poem addresses a white audience in the heard (but not spoken) voice of a marginalised community. It does so in the broken English of my late grandfather, also a Mr Singh from Nagra's ancestral city of Jalandhar, and his language makes light of both the marginalization of my ancestors and the deculturation of my own generation who flees from the violence of otherness.<sup>41</sup> His poem's expression of subjectivity, locked in an unchanging image of marginalisation by the lyric moment, is an affective strategy that produces shame. Clearly the double consciousness here is a fascinating symptom of lyric violence. In an interview with Claire Chambers, Nagra addresses the invention of 'punglish':

The accent I use when I read is not supposed to be an authentic, representative Indian accent, but an attempt to enrich and reclaim those flat, one-dimensional Peter Sellers-type characters, so there's a backwards and

forwards trajectory. Although the accent may be deemed offensive, I hope my characters aren't idiotic like those racist caricatures, but rounded.<sup>42</sup>

Comedy, notably on British television, has similarly attempted to turn caricatures of migrant Indians (by British Indian actors) into an indictment on stereotypes. The humour operates because audiences are both ashamed to recognise themselves in the racist drama but also reassured that their anxieties about fundamental differences aren't baseless. In the case of Nagra's poetry, which is not popular comedy but draws from it, it is unclear whether his (mostly white) readership is able to recognise their complicity in satirising and shaming the immigrant's displacement in white British society.<sup>43</sup> A 2014 poem by the English poet Bobby Parker (that he has since renounced) 'Thank you For Swallowing My Cum' sees the lyric speaker exuberantly declare to a 'shy Indian woman in the corner shop': 'Do not be afraid, for she swallowed my cum!'<sup>44</sup> Parker's poem is, it has been argued, innocent enough in its ecstatic crudeness. That we learn very little of the female receptacle for the speaker's bodily fluids, that she swallows just as the garrulous male 'I' makes his mother, the sunset and 'nervous Indian women' receive the ejaculate glee of his confession is not the focus of my own reading here.<sup>45</sup> I am drawn instead to the construction of voice—the Apu-from-the-Simpsons white man voicing in brown face—in the word 'for', which is unnecessary syntactically. There is an officiousness to the English phrasing here, a mocking that Parker would have overheard on television or in poems like Nagra's, that is all-too easy to reproduce. The encounter here between the virile English male and the timid Indian shopkeeper—a historical racial and sexual violence simmering in her rightly 'nervous' mind—is revealed by this inexactness of precision. The layers of offensiveness laid bare by the objectification of a brown woman's body in the poem's space are subtle and likely unintentional. But this is precisely where poetic language should thrive rather than fail; where it ought to discern the inheritance of its force.

Shame, however, is a potent lyric problem that is experiencing an effulgent critical and poetic moment. From Denise Riley's poems and her essay 'Lyric Shame' to Nuar Alsadir's *Fourth Person Singular*, Gillian White's *Lyric Shame* to Sophie Collins'

*small white monkeys*, the construction of the lyric subject around an emotional economy of revelation and recognition is partly a response to late capitalist models of social surveillance and censure, particularly of the female body and the commodification/regulation of female desire in real and virtual spaces. Theorizing shame and the lyric through psychoanalytic theory, Alsadir locates addressability through the self and the other:

Being moved to write lyric poetry is a kind of compulsion to invent explanations as a way of searching for and attempting to master what you fear finding that has already been experienced, an unthought known or a known that has been thought by a version of self that is yet to come, that is confined to catching up without reaching. By the time our perception of ourselves registers, we have already moved on (however slightly) from that particular self and are looking back from a distance (however miniscule), so that the perceived *has become a not-I*. This outside perspective on oneself can provide a basis for shame, which involves looking back at the self through the eyes of another. It also makes of the surrounding *selves*, in the past and future light cones, neighbor selves, who should indeed be loved, but as *whom?* (Lacan points out that most people hate themselves).<sup>46</sup>

This sense of a 'self that is yet to come' who is formalized in the lyric utterance has a special valence with regards to violence and othering. Putting these ideas alongside anthropological and mythological constructs of self, what Wendy Doniger calls 'an escape from pain or an unbearable self' that becomes 'a creative movement toward another self', we might see lyric nomadism as a means of adjudicating undesirable, accretive selves.<sup>47</sup> The Indian Dalit poet and novelist Meena Kandasamy's collection *Ms Militancy*, dedicated to Doniger, refuses to be shamed by the patriarchs of Hindu society, the writers of its mythology: 'Your myths put me in my place. [...] I work to not only get back to you, I actually fight to get back to myself'.<sup>48</sup>

It is up to the poet to write for a reader who may or may not yet exist, one who recognises such boundaries are spectral—it is up to the 'I' to lean away from

rootedness, to be suspicious of authenticity as a pre-determined narrativising of selfhood. Knowing that for poets marginalised by the canon the 'I' can be a radical gesture, I hasten to add that the conditions of language, of presumed lyric universality, are not sufficiently changed by their mere presence. Subjectivities that rely not on fixity or nostalgia but reach away from the deathly lyric I that stands erect and surveys, imperially, in its design must point to alternatives for itself and others. The poet Will Harris writes, responding to an increasingly virulent backlash against poets whose work is dismissed as 'identity politics' that

Writers of colour who display their difference commit two sins: they corrupt the sacred image of the writer-as-white-father, and they show the threads, which should remain *invisible*, between the writer and their work. This second argument comes up more often; the first, more shameful to the touch, simmers angrily beneath the surface.<sup>49</sup>

The 'not-I'—for which lyric reaches and from which lyric descends—is an idealised self whose authentic image disrupts the surface of inherited poetic language.

## II. The Role of the Poetry Critic

Where the critic appears to be especially crucial in redrawing and thereby expanding frameworks for reading poets of colour is in the public field of poetry criticism: reviewing. Statistics drawn up by the critic Dave Coates for a report commissioned by the University of Liverpool shows that between 2011 and 2016 3.7% of poetry reviews in major magazines and newspapers were written by critics of colour, and less than 8% of poets reviewed were non-white.<sup>50</sup> In a recent piece for the trade-focused publication *The Bookseller*, I asked what role reviewing plays in poetry publishing, especially today when poetry reviews appear with less frequency in the national press. The assumption has perhaps always been that the poetry reviewer appears (if they appear at all) at that critical juncture between publication and a hoped-for readership. And whilst a reviewer may make evaluations for a reading public, and this might boost sales or raise a poet's visibility to prize-judging panels, the poetry reviewer has gradually become an endangered species. Poetry magazines, however,

with a specialised audience and lengthier reviews, abound. But the thinning ranks of poetry reviewers in newspapers mean that often the same one or two voices re-appear. Sometimes a lone figure, the paper's designated poetry critic, often a white male, crops up even-handedly to remind us all that (male-authored, white, middle-class) poetry does, indeed, matter.<sup>51</sup>

In a cultural moment when poetry is being sought out more than ever, the diminished role of poetry reviewing in the press seems particularly odd.<sup>52</sup> A healthy and diverse critical culture, one that reflects the urgency of poetry's aesthetics, reception, traditions, innovations must be put back into place. In the life of a book or an author's work, the reviewer arrives first, then the critic or scholar ambles more slowly to place them in some relation to the past and future. Both are necessary (and sometimes one in the same) for a robust and rigorous literary culture. As the poet and critic Kayo Chingonyi states in his 2014 essay 'Worrying the [blood]line of British poetry':

Of course, a critic cannot be objective, but if our critical culture is to be worth anything, critics must engage with what the work is trying to do as well as what they think it should do. Doing so, however, would mean interrogating the structures that allow critics to present subjective judgments as authoritative. The *Guardian*, the *Times* and *Private Eye* have a lot of cultural capital and, like so many literary publications, most of the reviewers that write for them are white and they generally write about books written by white authors with white editors.<sup>53</sup>

It is not enough to simply publish poets of colour and to award them prizes in greater numbers.<sup>54</sup> Prizes should not commodify nor should they replace the sustained attention that a critical confluence of readers' voices bring to a poet's work. In the long-term, a real and meaningful shift in cultural value must come with critics and readers whose first loyalty is to the work at hand, to reading it knowledgeably and with an awareness of the structural power within which works of literature are produced and received.

In 2015, Claudia Rankine's *Citizen* had just been published in the UK; it won the Forward Prize for Poetry and a nomination for the T.S. Eliot prize. The press coverage *Citizen* garnered far outstripped any attention given to books by British poets dealing similarly (though arguably less directly) with racism or state-sanctioned police violence. The intense and voluminous media focus on American racism in Rankine's book, against the backdrop of the Black Lives Matter movement, felt heavily imported and totally oblivious to a comparable British context. Although the majority of Rankine's book engages with racism in the US, one notable exception is 'August 4, 2011, In Memory of Mark Duggan', in which we overhear a conversation between a white English novelist and a black poet about the shooting of Duggan by police officers from Scotland Yard's Operation Trident. Comparing the London riots to the Los Angeles riots twenty years earlier in the wake of the Rodney King beating, the English novelist asks the black poet if she will write about Duggan. The poet replies 'Why don't you?' Fittingly, Rankine prefaces this section with a quotation from James Baldwin: 'The purpose of art is to lay bare the questions hidden by the answers'.<sup>55</sup> In the poem, the English novelist refuses to write about a nationally significant historical moment and, in doing so, refuses to evaluate it critically within his cultivated framework of a national imagination. After all, the LA riots were more than a response to one instance of horrific police brutality. Rankine's *Citizen* asks: 'How difficult is it for one body to feel the injustice wheeled at another? Are the tensions, the recognitions, the disappointments, and the failures that exploded in the riots too foreign?'<sup>56</sup> Like London in 2011, the fissures and violent ruptures in American society emerged suddenly from unaddressed questions, hidden by too-easy assumptions about dominant and assimilated forms of identity, civil rights and citizenship.

In her *Observer* round-up of the 'best books of 2015', Kate Kellaway noted that

Claudia Rankine's *Citizen* occupied a category of its own this year. Her eloquent militancy about racism is arresting; reading sometimes feels like eavesdropping on America. Her collection is a remarkable achievement, not least because poems that set out to be polemical seldom work.<sup>57</sup>



In the realm of reviewing, this type of short and summative (often one or two line) evaluation is a chalice of vagaries thrown at the feet of a book-buying public, a doomed exercise in the hands of most literary journalists or critics. Yet Kellaway's judgements here belie more troubling assumptions: that this surprisingly successful polemic is in a 'category of its own' does not imply that the book is an exceptional achievement but merely that it is *an exception* without any literary precedent. To occupy a category of its own hints at reviewers' anxieties on both sides of the Atlantic that Rankine's lyric essay is not poetry, that its generic hybridity contravenes accepted definitions not of form but content. The searching for a 'category' has wider implications—reflecting the categories of poetry prizes for which *Citizen* was a contender—of taxonomy and hierarchy. Here Rankine's 'militancy', a charge that conjures both the 'angry black woman' stereotype and the Black Panthers in one fell swoop, is 'eloquent' (as opposed to inarticulate or irate) and 'arresting', an image of police power that the reviewer presumably deploys obliviously in light of *Citizen's* subject matter. An aesthetic judgement forms a comfortable distance, dividing the reviewer's *nous* and Rankine's second-person lyric 'You', that protects the covert listener's 'eavesdropping' on private and public acts of racism from any involvement or blame.

When I was asked to review *Citizen* for a British broadsheet, the editor (unsuccessfully) urged me to reflect on Rankine's position as an educated, middle-class university professor, suggesting that this made her transparently multiple-voiced accounts of microaggressions or racial violence somehow less credible—as though the book's unstable lyric 'you' was a subject so volatile that it had to be reined back into the author's own skin. Its accusations, or its confidences, depending on where the reader situates themselves, relinquish lyric coherence with a particularly potent threat aimed at the universality of the white lyric space. Pinning this threat on the singularity of the individual grievance, on an inauthentic authorship, naturally points to its dismissal on conventional lyric grounds. In the introduction to her study of innovative black poetry, *Renegade Poetics*, Evie Shockley writes:

I propose that we think of not a "black aesthetic" or the Black Aesthetic, but of "black aesthetics", plural: a multifarious, contingent, nondelimited

complex of strategies that African American writers may use to negotiate gaps or conflicts between their artistic goals and the operation of race in the production, dissemination, and reception of their writing.<sup>58</sup>

This plurality is essential, for poets and critics of colour and their much needed revisionist histories, if aesthetic justice can in any way address the multiple lived realities of social injustice.

When Sarah Howe's debut collection, *Loop of Jade*, won the 2015 T.S. Eliot Prize, a similarly troubling set of reviews, satire and interviews appeared in British newspapers and magazines. Kate Kellaway's aforementioned round-up pre-dated this, but unwittingly set the tone. Kellaway praised the 'oriental poise' of Howe's volume, which had 'slipped through [her] net'.<sup>59</sup> After Howe also won the *Sunday Times* Writer of the Year, an interview in the *Times* ran under the headline 'Born in the rubbish tip, the greatest poetry today'. The interviewer, Oliver Thring, situates Howe's book within an extraneous fact (or myth) of her mother's abandonment as a baby. Howe's 'racial fluidity' as both Chinese and white English is unpicked in the most severe terms, all of which has little bearing on the poems themselves, expressing instead a discomfort with Howe's unprecedented success. Perhaps not surprisingly, *Private Eye* and the *TLS* both ran conspiracy-ridden pieces expressing shock and sensing a political motivation for awarding Howe the prize. *Private Eye* went as far as to pen an imitation of the orientalisising chinoiserie that Howe herself tackles in her book. Paul McLoughlin's review expresses his discomfort with Howe's perceived entanglement of identity markers:

What is Chinese here comes across largely as the Chinese we in the UK would learn about were we the ones doing the research. This, of course, is the result of Howe's general scrupulousness in approaching the issues embedded in dual-identity. She is and isn't half-Chinese (she's lived in England since she was seven years old), which is, presumably, her point. But the passages involving Chinese letters and pictograms, as fascinating as they may be, are not as compelling as they might have been had someone Chinese been

telling us about them. [...] None of this Chinese-or-not business is Howe's fault. It's how she is. I say this because (as I've observed earlier) whenever her mother features in the poems there is, for me, a powerful and inherently natural authenticity at work which one may miss elsewhere.<sup>60</sup>

One should be alarmed by assumptions being made by critics about authenticity and lived experience in poetry. As Graham Huggan writes of the 'anthropological exotic' projecting a cult of authenticity on non-white literature:

Ethnic autobiography, like ethnicity itself, flourishes under the watchful eye of the dominant culture; both are caught in the dual processes of commodification and surveillance. This might help explain why the work of writers who come from, or are perceived as coming from, ethnic minority backgrounds continues to be marketed so resolutely for a mainstream reading public as 'autobiographical'.<sup>61</sup>

Another review of Howe's book questions the publisher's blurb:

*Loop of Jade* is described as an exploration "of a dual heritage"—Chinese and British—a 'journeying back... in search of her roots'. My heart sank a little. Without diminishing the importance of such endeavours, the intervening three decades of identity politics has also led to, perhaps, a sense of, well, *here we go again*.<sup>62</sup>

The reviewer's response has little to do with Howe's poetry. Rather, it is her publisher who has willingly foregrounded racial heritage as a spectacle of the exotic, a subject discomfited for a mostly white audience by a language foreign to Howe and therefore only illegitimately her own. Certainly there are some poems in Howe's collection that relate to an experience of 'dual heritage', like 'Crossing from Guangdong' and the book's title poem 'Loop of Jade', but these are set within a Borgesian (and, latterly, Foucauldian) conceit of imaginary objects and a critique, ultimately, of fixed taxonomies of word, thing and being. We encounter Ezra Pound's imprisonment in

an Italian cage for treason in 'Stray Dogs'; there are poems elsewhere written after John Ashbery, Cormac McCarthy and Pierre Bonnard. *Loop of Jade* dismantles, more so than it shores up, the epistemologies of home, heritage, roots. As Howe writes in 'Others': 'I think about the meaning of *blood*, which is (simply) a metaphor/and *race*, which has been a terrible pun'.<sup>63</sup>

Elsewhere, white reviewers might retreat to familiar (lyric) territory where cultural value is constant, even reifies itself reassuringly. In 2016, John McAuliffe, a reviewer for the *Irish Times* wrote with palpable relief about W.S. Merwin's final poetry collection, *Garden Time*, completed as the poet was losing his eyesight: 'At a time when insularity and identity politics seem, daily, to be set upon reducing and simplifying the complexity of the world, his new work again shows off the cosmopolitan virtues of this great American poet'.<sup>64</sup> Merwin's canonical whiteness is complex: 'cosmopolitan' accrues cultural value by moving through the world, as opposed to the 'multicultural' identity politics of ethnic or immigrant writer. One might equally choose to read Merwin's considerable oeuvre as insular in its lyric intimacy, where, for instance, concerns about the natural world might be bound by layers of privilege.

Certainly, in terms of poetry, the situation has shifted somewhat in recent years. There are more poets writing now who sit uneasily in either camp and who write for a more international readership than the British consumer of plain-speaking, well-mannered verse. They are, in effect, nomadic subjects across aesthetic, lyric and often national borders. It is also the case that many young British poets are receptive to and influenced by post-Language or conceptual poetry and there's a visible transatlantic conversation happening today at a scale that surpasses previous decades due to sheer effort and sheer interest on the part of editors, anthologists, and poets forming virtual networks on social media in both countries. Aesthetic divides seem less politicised than they were in the 1970s—and this may well be because subsequent generations of poets confront the authenticity prized by their forebears with political cynicism. Self-ironizing humour and effacement signal a turn away from sincerity into a less easily transferable poetry, one that is divested of meaningfulness, but also one that liberates into discursive, dialogic space a specifically urban, modern sensibility. And yet the nostalgia of a post-Romantic lyricism prevails, does violence to, any

subject who steps into its textual space and marketplace. Countless poor examples from critical writing, mostly poetry reviewing, however, can be found—disappointingly—in broadsheet and magazine reviews to demonstrate that progress has been slow. A recent *Guardian* review of poets shortlisted for the Forward Prize lumps UK poets with different ethnic backgrounds into a catch-all category of ‘Anglo-Asian’, a colonial sounding approximation that is both damagingly dismissive and intellectually lazy.<sup>65</sup>

On reading M. NourbeSe Philip and D.S. Marriott’s work side-by-side, the American critic Romana Huk proposes that

an alternative, raced radical framework, existing in a pluralized arena alongside white western postmodernism, might allow not only for less appropriative overlaps in reading avant-garde work, but also for better understanding of the complex projects of a number of black writers in the current generation who are annexed to the ‘mainstream’ simply because they can be more readily categorized (and published) as representatives of the way ‘blackness’ is expected to display itself in British envisionings of pluralized identity.<sup>66</sup>

Huk, whose work on Black British poetry far outstrips other attempts either side of the Atlantic, is especially sensitive to the absence of poets of colour in the ‘British avant-garde’. D.S. Marriott — one in a handful of experimental poets of colour — has written extensively on the very same questions Rankine raises in *Citizen*, notably in his poem ‘The Levees’ after the US government’s failed response to Hurricane Katrina. His critical book, *On Black Men*, includes a haunting afterword about the murder of Stephen Lawrence, addressed, like Rankine’s book, to a ‘You’ who operates in a charged, ambiguous anti-lyric gesture. For Marriott ‘Language writing should be seen as a fetishistic poetics of embodiment, a failed articulation between aesthetic and propositional judgement, and a willing suspension of imaginative adequacy in its disablement of meaning, response and agency’.<sup>67</sup> Marriott’s work is becoming better known in the UK (he teaches at UC Santa Cruz in California). His recent pamphlet, *In Neuter*, printed by the Cambridge-based experimental small press Equipage, and

*Duppies*, published by the small Cambridge-based Materials press (and by the radical Commune Editions in the US), tackles neglected questions about violence, subjecthood, suffering and responsibility in ways that are linguistically and theoretically complex. It is also worth noting that Marriott was at the time the only poet of colour on both presses' lists. Like Aimé Césaire, whom Marriott sees as a revolutionary black modernist falsifying the imitative, hegemonic structure of readymade experimentation, Marriott resists all likely categories. His willingly indefinite allegiance—to all subjects in his work—denudes the self, revealing a poetic convenience not without consequences.

### III. Lyric Dread and Whiteness

The stability and meaningfulness of the lyric 'I' fills me with dread for the present out of which it speaks, of the organic world it claims to know by minimising its complexities. I have used the word dread, which is a kind of apprehension for the future, to describe the continuing Romantic tradition of lyric subjectivity, the self that voices a suspended present or just-past as epiphany, apostrophe, to a listener. But when we speak of the lyric form we don't often concern ourselves with lyric time. Its brevity, tempered to the thinness of human perception and personality, escapes our notice. We are sensitive to narrative time in fiction or the epic poem, where the episode deploys multiple viewpoints in a not always linear fashion. If the lyric is short, or the lyric mode is outside of cosmological time (dealing instead in consciousness, a forever distilled into many 'nows') then does lyric time matter? As a poet and as a reader, I see lyric time as a treacherous presupposition of an unknowable future. If, as in Heidegger, time is 'the true principle of individuation' and being is conceived temporally in relation to the other (and death), then the ecstatic nature of individual being is determined by these relations to time, space and object. The self is never itself alone. Its truth is in flux. The typical lyric conserves its energy through closure and a claim to stable meaning and truth. In this way the lyric is conservative, solipsistic; it keeps time. What is the danger in this and what are the alternatives? Our current historical moment offers little escape from the anxieties of the present or near-future. Without excessively gesturing towards the now by making a case for our

exceptional historical circumstances, Brexit, the Trump era, the global refugee crisis, climate emergency and rising nationalism and xenophobia are being met simultaneously by a culture that naïvely wishes to return to an imaginary golden age (of the Empire 2.0, #MAGA variety). Yet oddly, technology, social media and round the clock news reminds us that the global present is to some extent contingent on our willingness to acknowledge it. And perhaps I have become more acutely aware and critical of the lyric fantasy of personal time—of the private experience recollected—in this new present we live in that urges us, archivally, towards a making of that now. Our power to regard or disregard the present—from collective global panic to cataloguing personal minutiae—has never been more acute. Dread, as a lyric device unique to conservative forms of nationalism and memory, hinges on escaping from the present, on nostalgia and results in a paralysis of its lyric speaker.

Once, the keeping of lyric time may not have been an unethical stance, in the way that writing the 'I' was not automatically a questionably privileged vantage point over the marginalised and oppressed. I have argued above that this universal (white) lyric subjectivity constitutes a kind of violence, but as a function of time (arguably inseparable from the 'I' and its world) I offer an example of a poem that does something quite interesting and troubling with lyric time. In an otherwise laudable and formally varied book invested in ecological ethics, the poem 'Amanita muscaria' by the poet-forager Richard Osmond provides a sense of a paralysis in lyric time. It opens with a description of men in hoodies printed with 'English Defence League' in the shape of St George's cross who attack a suited man on a London underground train. Oddly, they shout 'Nonce, you fucking Nazi prick', even if they are themselves presumably most closely associable with the far right. The indiscernible victim/aggressor—is it the 'Nazi prick' or the EDL—suggests other more fluid binaries of culpability elsewhere in the poem. The lyric 'I' is neither hero nor villain, but bystander:

I did nothing,  
but fixated on a map of the underground  
on which the red typographical daggers  
marked next to certain stations

seemed suddenly brutal and esoteric,  
like burning Templar crosses.

Twenty miles north and three days later,  
a ring of fly agarics disclosed  
themselves to me in a wood of birches,  
and the same hairs on my arm and neck  
stood up like iron filings  
in the presence of a strong magnet.<sup>68</sup>

The line 'I did nothing', its enjambment, its half a line of blank space, typographically reproduces the arrival of dread, of being forced to act. Here we might, as readers, consider whether, in a similar situation, we would intervene or flee. Or we might read this blank space as an opportunity for judgement—against our own inaction, the visual manifestation of nothing representing a familiar helplessness. More interestingly, is how the poem handles chronology. The lyric narrative is swift but precise ('At King's Cross', 'Twenty miles north and three days later') across the poem's three stanzas of similar length. The mirroring of the hooded red-emblazoned fascists and the hooded red-coloured poisonous mushrooms in the final stanza create an ambivalent closure: the self, facing sudden danger, is mapped onto the brutality of both the city/state ('cross/ of St George', 'typographical daggers') and the present/historical landscape ('burning Templar crosses', 'fly agarics'). Space and time fail, partly, to offer the impassive speaker his lyrical retreat into the natural world. Much more could be said here about the subject position, nationality, guilt, even self-recognition—but in terms of time these two phases of the just-past resist accountability. 'I saw' and 'I did' are inaction in the moment of the poem's action. The final stanza shifts away from the 'I': the mushrooms 'disclosed | themselves to me'. How the speaker's body responds in the more recent present is predetermined by the poem's structural use of time so that we are not sure if without the passage of time (and the presence of the landscape) the underlying realisation about nationalism, fascism, the speaker's own likely invisibility as 'English', would have been possible. But the speaker's grasp



on time, being and space within the lyric structure is inherently, and unquestionably, safe. How does the reader who is not so invisible in the cityscape or the landscape respond to this timely retreat, to its ambivalence?

Similarly, the preponderance of lyric dread and nostalgia as a rupture in time—and an inability to move forward—appears in one of Carol Ann Duffy's recent poems, 'Wood'. Where we might expect the pastoral lyric moment to reify the unchanging essence of England, the speaker instead is haunted with the unsatisfactory moment of return: 'I reckoned I'd left behind the little wood | at the back of the houses | when I left all the rest'. She continues:

But the wood

has followed me here.

It must have taken years  
to drag its roots over the fields  
by roads and motorways; knee-deep  
in wheat or oilseed rape; haunted by sheep;  
till I see it tonight, etched on a slate sky,  
at the end of the garden;  
the same slim path to enter it by.

So I go in, reverent on pine needles, acorns,  
to set my foot on a nail,  
still bearing me up; good.  
There was a branch I never could reach,  
but now it's simple; to settle, stay late, ignoring  
the dead woman, stood at her gate,  
who calls me, uselessly, home,  
home from the wood.<sup>69</sup>

Nostalgia and lyric time operate differently in Duffy and Osmond's forests. Encountering a former self, Duffy's speaker easily masters the transported scene of her aban-

doned childhood. The mother, this 'dead woman, stood at her gate' retains the unfillable distance in time, memory and space, leaving the strong ambivalence towards the present, a dread of futurity, in the repeated denial of 'home', the sonic return of 'late'. The specificity of the English countryside, its enclosures and its encroachments through public and private gardens—rife in the English imaginary and possibly drawn here from Duffy's own childhood in Staffordshire—has a long-formed tradition of lyric engagement. The interruption of the wild, or indeed of England's ubiquitous cultivated crops ('wheat', 'oilseed rape') into the personal space of the back garden inscribes itself into a narrative of uneasy change, the denaturalising of mythical Albion. Nature itself, as a tenuous though somehow also unchanging construction in the national imagination, forever harkens back to lyric poetry and has continued to do so with an anxiety that is matched against the influx of foreign bodies of all kinds.<sup>70</sup> Similarly, Hannah Sullivan writes in an essay about returning home to the once feral wildness of London's edgelands:

When I pulled out the pockets of my coat, bright sugared aniseeds were often stuck in the lining: the remnants of birthday parties at big, richly decorated Indian restaurants in Southall. On St Patrick's Day I wore a wet bit of shamrock twisted in silver foil on my school jumper. [...] I can't visualise Horsenden hill as the unbroken countryside of childhood picnics. Only the vanished things are hard-edged and definite: the salted, pulpy texture of the pit after a baby tooth gone, the Filofax I was going to write in, the soft metallic clatter of the BT telephone exchange where my father worked.<sup>71</sup>

Sullivan's T.S. Eliot prize-winning collection *Three Poems* is largely involved in expressing a cosmopolitan urban malaise, itself a strategy for nostalgia and dread of change.<sup>72</sup> In her essay above, the lost childhood tooth and the Filofax, as well as her father's out-dated place of work, all of which signalled the future once, have been replaced by spectral and technological immateriality, where 'only the vanished things are hard-edged and definite'. The obsessive superimposition of the past on the just-past-present is where lyric time and dread formulate the fantasy of an unchanging nation. Where violence asserts itself in the shadow illusion of verisimilitude is the

undercurrent of lost values attached to the socially-active subject whose footprint is unseen but sensed and dreaded.

Digging deeper into dread, to think about its relation to whiteness, to the composition as well as the reading of universalising lyric poetry (I ignore, wittingly, non-lyric here, which may sometimes be a capitulation to or avoidance of dread) I am reminded of where these binaries are found in Glyn Maxwell's critical-lyrical treatise *On Poetry*. Maxwell's book begins with a whiteness and moves onto blackness—not as races but as primal suggestions. In his construction, white is everything but the self, which is black, it is the possibility of the page before it is half-printed by black ink as well as the last hope of the present before the future emerges. Black is inevitable, sound; whiteness is silence, faith; black is unknowable; whiteness is invitation, inspiration in the quasi-Socratic creative writing workshop Maxwell forms as a (satirical) lyric encounter: 'The whiteness in room 777 bristles with thought'.<sup>73</sup> The shadowy fantasy projected onto Maxwell's evolutionary metaphors are of course as indirect as the texts (largely male Romantic poets) he cites throughout the book. His often disarming bathetic jibes at the ageing and increasingly irrelevant self culminate in a lyrical self-satire at the book's end—a section called 'Time': 'They watch their old professor but he's not old, | but he sits alone and nobody thinks he's young'.<sup>74</sup> Placed firmly in the poem's diminishing lyric whiteness, pinned and wriggling on his canonical literary references, Maxwell's 'I' is seized by dread of the end of the line.

In an American context, Rankine's 'Liv's View of Landscape I', provides a useful rejoinder to lyric time and nostalgia at the level of language: 'By landscape we also mean memory—the swept under | covered over. Skin of history. Surfacing blue violence of | true.'<sup>75</sup> The poem's attention to time is striking, how it reshapes the self in space: 'I am all of me feeling I am in constant paraphrase. | loosely, without the fence of time. in time loosing to form | absorbed'.<sup>76</sup> Similarly, Erica Hunt's 'Personal' could be read as an indictment of lyric coherence, its being-in-time as artificially singular.

Logic seeks object to undergo its rigorous eye witness;  
 the rest a test of patience.  
 Objects collected: cloak of visibility,

hypothetical continuity,  
simultaneously independent propositions;  
grammar – a cause.  
No reasonable emotion refused.<sup>77</sup>

The argument between proponents of the lyric and the anti-lyric less often focuses on the sharing of time—the reader's suspension of their own lived time for another's. Juliana Spahr's critical work, *Everybody's Autonomy*, rethinks collective resistance around acts of connective reading. Spahr makes complex the supposed authority of the authored text, its moment, in her reading of poets resisting oppression. Lyric time must concede, as Sharon Cameron has argued in her study of Emily Dickinson, 'the illusion of alone holding sway over the universe'.<sup>78</sup> The 'I' must acknowledge its social relation to temporality, and its ethical responsibility towards the near-future that is the present—it must lean away from its stability, its uprightness, to give voice to another unknown. It must tell all the truth slant, not gradually, as Dickinson concludes, or at a remove, but with the weight of its desire for not-knowing, the eventuality of its not-being. Dickinson's work elsewhere acknowledges that poetry—its claims for truth—could not solely be rendered in the 'hypothetical continuity' of intimate, personal logic. She famously wrote 'If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know *that* is poetry'.<sup>79</sup> At the periphery of self, imagining Mullen's 'unimagined reader', sharing time, resisting reducible language, is where the 'I' must come fully now into being. I would argue that Capildeo's 'Five Measures of Expatriation' enacts nomadic lyricism through form and voice, engaging throughout with the processes and obstacles of migration. The poem's subject arrives finally, having rejected 'immigrant', 'exile', 'refugee', at a state of constant movement: 'Expatriate, I had acquired the confidence to hurtle into having to start over. It was a way of going on'.<sup>80</sup> The circumstances unique to citizens of the British Commonwealth, and particularly descendants of Trinidad's enforced and voluntary migration from Africa and India, are animated differently by dread and nostalgia, futurity, or survival. The expatriate is just one model for nomadic subjectivity that requires physical movement, though this is not a condition of nomadism. The expatriate, in Capildeo's figuration,

expresses volition, whereas the exile, refugee and the immigrant imply conditions of duress.

Perhaps the most disturbing confluences of whiteness and nostalgia are to be found in the conceptualising of otherness, namely in the marketing of immigrant and diaspora poets, those foreigners who forever properly reside 'elsewhere' in the Englishman's imagination. One such troubling framing is the exoticising anthology, *England: Poems from a School*. The poet and teacher Kate Clanchy has not only edited this volume of poems by pupils at the Oxford Spires Academy, she oversaw their development as the school's Writer in Residence. In her introduction, she describes the students as coming 'from striving migrant families', adding that 'several are refugees'. The school is 20% white and over thirty languages are spoken. The poems themselves have considerable formal range from the ghazal to the prose poem. But the content is almost always a lost homeland, longing, displacement. Whilst it is not surprising that loss, belonging, otherness, migration, war and family feature prominently here, they are by and large the only subjects in a book titled 'England' which, according to Clanchy, is 'a country founded on second chances, tolerance, kindness and luck, a country they see in their eccentric, loving, striving school, a country that, whatever the difficulties, these young people already love'.<sup>81</sup> What service are these children being brought into, as exemplars of both survival and displacement, at once foreign but also assimilated by a country that is not (nor has ever been) tolerant or kind towards non-white people? To read and appreciate this book is to be beguiled by the benevolence of whiteness, one that requires an ever-replenishing source of aspirational learners—not just these children, but all poets who are perceived as 'striving'.<sup>82</sup> Given that some of these students are ancestrally linked or were born in former outposts of the British empire, it is worth tempering any such sentimentality with the realities of English as a linguistic and disciplinary tool of colonial domination, especially in light of recent and historic attempts to decolonise the curriculum.<sup>83</sup> I refuse to quote from these young poets' works; their writing, one hopes, will one day depose their teachers' English canons and workshop exercises. But I am drawn to how their poems express a uniformity of suffering, formally, vocally, and in relation

to the expressive expectations of English language lyric, even as they are fetishized by those very linguistic differences. Clanchy's essay, 'The Very Quiet Foreign Girls poetry group', trades in deeply concerning racial stereotypes: 'They were a particularly wildly mixed bunch, as lower sets always are, and Priya, doe-eyed in hijab, just arrived from a bankrupt religious school, was quiet as a shadow among them'.<sup>84</sup> Elsewhere, in her own recent Orwell Prize-winning memoir, Clanchy contrasts her white Scottish students from a mining town with teaching in metropolitan London thus:

My eye was tuned in to the multiracial London pupils I'd taught the year before, who had, by the same age, Somali height or Cypriot bosoms or styled, stiff Japanese hair, or at the very least a different, flamboyant way with the school jumper. These winter-coloured, mouse-haired children, so pale and so freckly, with their muttering, sibilant names—Fraser, Struan, Susan, Fiona, Catriona; I was having difficulty, as Prince Philip said he had with Chinese people, in telling them apart.<sup>85</sup>

I suppose one could try to give Clanchy credit for wryly implying that poor white children are just as homogenous to her as the Chinese are to white racists, but of course both are equally dehumanising. What is striking, again and again, throughout Clanchy's depiction of 'foreign' children is the way they are physically described. It is this fixation on exotic images—of their bodies, their clothes, their hair, their eyes—that feels most writerly but also wholly exploitative and reductive, reminiscent of colonial-era pseudo-scientific taxonomies of race. But to bring this back to poetry and whiteness, bluntly: how do poets of colour negotiate these manifestly dangerous fantasies and fears, ones that pervade every system of society unchecked or even, at times, applauded? What lasting change must occur—in poetry, its forms, its authority, in poetry criticism, marketing, reviewing, prizes, whiteness, racism, education—for poets of colour to be afforded full rights as citizens—to be seen not as objects, not subjects, but afforded agency within a shared poetry culture that is not hostile to or in constant retreat from change?

#### IV. Lines of Flight: Rethinking Innovative Poetry

Each of the essays in this special issue tackles one or more of the questions that concern this introduction and, moreover, presents new ways of thinking, each a unique vector intended to redress the rigid accepted boundaries of innovative poetry in the UK and within its wider largely Anglophone context. Mary Jean Chan considers 'difficulty' in the poetry of Sarah Howe alongside her modernist influences and critical responses to her work. Linguistic hybridity, grammar and radical syntax is the subject of Dai George's reading of Claudia Rankine, Bhanu Kapil, Harmony Holiday, Yomi Sode and Vahni Capildeo's poetry as part of a wider anti-imperial project. Edmund Hardy reads three poets—Nisha Ramayya, Nat Raha and Daljit Nagra—within ideas of global capital, race and language in a postcolonial space. By comparing the works of Patience Agbabi and D.S. Marriott through the post-modern lyric, Romana Huk investigates the premise of the personal and impersonal as it pertains to lyric. Nisha Ramayya's readings of Bhanu Kapil, Maud Sulter, E.A. Markham, D.S. Marriott and John La Rose contextualise racialization and the performance of identity and migration within these poets varied works and aesthetics. Focusing on performance as a process of revision, Hannah Silva analyses Lemn Sissay's live performances as 'performed palimpsests'. Redrawing these constellations of avant-garde and innovative writing in Britain necessarily opens up a much-belated recognition of histories and practices that have remained unacknowledged—radical and experimental works belonging to as well as challenging, at times intersecting, at times parallel, at times divergent, traditions that now must be meaningfully situated alongside one another.

#### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Sandeep Parmar, 'Not a British Subject: Race and UK Poetry', *Los Angeles Review of Books*, December 2015. [<https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/not-a-british-subject-race-and-poetry-in-the-uk/>].
- <sup>2</sup> There have been many literary critical and historical accounts of Black British poetry from the mid-twentieth century onwards, only some of which can be found here: Fred D'Aguiar's chapter 'Have you been here long?' in *New British Poetries: The Scope of the Possible*, ed. by Robert Hampson and Peter Barry (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993), pp. 51–71; Romana Huk's *Assembling Alternatives: Reading Postmodern Poetries Transnationally* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2003); Huk's chapter 'Rewriting "the Lyric" in Innovative Black British Poetry', in *The Cambridge Companion to British Black and Asian Literature (1945–2010)*, ed. by Deirdre Osborne (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 225–40; Robinson, Gemma, 'Postcolonial Poetry of Great Britain', in *The*

*Cambridge Companion to Postcolonial Poetry*, ed. by Jahan Ramazani (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), pp. 110–23; Lauri Ramey's 'Contemporary Black British Poetry' in *Black British Writing* ed. by Victoria Arana and Lauri Ramey (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004); Rachael Gilmour's 'Doing Voices: Reading Language as Craft in Black British Poetry' in *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, vol. 49, no. 3, Sept. 2014, pp. 343–357. It is worth noting that the Race and Poetry and Poetics in the UK academic research group (RAPAPUK) whose latest conference report features in the journal are actively raising the profile of critical discourse within the academy on race and poetry. For further information, see <http://www.rapapuk.com>.

- <sup>3</sup> Jahan Ramazani's special issue of *New Literary History* on Race and Poetry appeared in Autumn 2019. Its coverage of race and British poetry is fairly minimal and (as it mostly speaking from an awareness of American poetics) somewhat inaccurate and out of date.
- <sup>4</sup> Cathy Park Hong, 'Delusions of Whiteness in the Avant-Garde', *Lana Turner #7*, 2014 [reprinted online: <https://arcade.stanford.edu/content/delusions-whiteness-avant-garde>] Hong's recent treatment of the Asian American experience, *Minor Feelings*, develops on these ideas in relation to lyricism but also the work of the experimental Korean-American poet and artist Theresa Hak Kyung Cha.
- <sup>5</sup> Denise Riley, introduction, *Poets on Writing: Britain, 1970–1991* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 1992), p. 2. More recently, Emily Critchley's anticipated follow-up to Maggie O'Sullivan's *Out of Everywhere: Linguistically Innovative Poetry by Women in North America and the UK* (1996), was published in 2015. O'Sullivan's anthology included no British women poets of colour, and out of the 44 experimental women poets in Critchley's book, four are non-white: Sascha Akhtar, Mei-Mei Berssenbrugge, Myung Mi Kim, and Elizabeth-Jane Burnett— a total of two North American and two British writers of colour. Here we see several British women or non-binary poets of colour omitted, many of whom I suspect would not be absent should the anthology appear today—again, a sign of the rapid changes over half a decade. Their exclusion opens onto wider questions of belonging within innovative poetry communities, of a certain aesthetic that is broadly anti-lyric, of a wish to align with publishers that see themselves working against a 'mainstream' market of poetry consumers. Carrie Etter's 2010 anthology *Infinite Difference: Other Poetics by UK Women Poets* includes only one poet of colour out of twenty five, Sascha Akhtar. Etter's introduction makes many nuanced points about women poets and the need for less 'oppositional' language in describing experimental poetics. But race is not mentioned. It would be impossible not to address the whiteness of anthologies now—a sign, again, of how much has changed in such a short time.
- <sup>6</sup> Nigel Wheale, 'Uttering poetry: small-press publication' in Riley, ed., *Poets on Writing*, p. 11.
- <sup>7</sup> Martin Thom, 'The Poet as Ethnographer', in Riley, ed., *Poets on Writing*, pp. 181–201.
- <sup>8</sup> Juliana Spahr and Stephanie Young, 'The Program Era and the Mainly White Room', *Los Angeles Review of Books*, September 2015. [<https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/the-program-era-and-the-mainly-white-room>].
- <sup>9</sup> BAME is a term drawn from the UK census data/Office for National Statistics (ONS) that has fallen out of favour for good reason. My own preferred term is either non-white or poet of colour/person of colour, though no term avoids a default definition against whiteness.
- <sup>10</sup> See the 2005 *Free Verse Report*, ed. by Danuta Kean [<https://www.spreadtheword.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/Free-Verse-Report.pdf>] and the 2017 *Freed Verse Report: Diversity in British Poetry 2005–2017*, written and ed. by Nathalie Teitler, p. 2. No publisher.
- <sup>11</sup> Dave Coates, 'The State of Poetry and Poetry Criticism in the UK', commissioned report, 2019. [<https://www.liverpool.ac.uk/new-and-international-writing/emerging-critics/>].
- <sup>12</sup> An all-white judging panel for the TS Eliot Prize returned a shortlist of 10 poets in 2017, only one



of whom was a poet of colour (Ocean Vuong, who later won). I wrote about this here: <https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2017/oct/20/why-the-ts-eliot-prize-shortlist-hails-a-return-to-the-status-quo>.

- <sup>13</sup> Teitler, p. 4.
- <sup>14</sup> Paul Keegan, *Free Verse Report*, 2005. [<https://www.spreadtheword.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/Free-Verse-Report.pdf>].
- <sup>15</sup> Andrea Brady, 'The White Privilege of British Poetry is Getting Worse', *The Conversation*, 8 October 2015 [<http://theconversation.com/the-white-privilege-of-british-poetry-is-getting-worse-48516>].
- <sup>16</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>17</sup> Sandeep Parmar, 'Diversity in British Poetry', *Free Thinking*, BBC Radio 3, 18 June 2015 [<https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/p02v1cnw>].
- <sup>18</sup> J.C., 'Under Fire', *The Times Literary Supplement*, 2 Dec 2016 [<https://www.the-tls.co.uk/articles/under-fire-2/#>].
- <sup>19</sup> For more on the false pitting of 'identity' against 'craft' see my article on views expressed by the novelist Rose Tremain and the poet/editor Robin Robertson in *The Guardian* 'Is contemporary poetry really in 'a rotten state' – or just a new one?' 22 Nov 2018 [<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/nov/22/is-contemporary-poetry-really-in-a-rotten-state-or-just-a-new-one>] as well as the response by the poet and editor Michael Schmidt in his *PN Review* editorial, Issue 245, Volume 45 Number 3, January–February 2019.
- <sup>20</sup> Claudia Rankine and Beth Loffreda, foreword to *The Racial Imaginary: Writers on Race in the Life of the Mind*, ed. by Rankine, Loffreda and Max King Cap (Albany: Fence Books, 2016) pp. 16–17.
- <sup>21</sup> Some of this material is an expansion on essays published elsewhere, including: 'Lyric Violence, the Nomadic Subject and the Fourth Space', in *Poetry London*, Summer 2017, pp. 29–32 and 'The I, Lyric Time and Slant' in *Oxford Poetry*, XVII.I Summer 2017.
- <sup>22</sup> Toi Derricotte, 'Speculations about "I"', *Poetry* magazine, Chicago, September 2016.
- <sup>23</sup> Nuar Alsadir, *Fourth Person Singular* (Liverpool: Pavilion Poetry, 2017), p. 44.
- <sup>24</sup> Myung Mi Kim, *Commons* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002) p. 108.
- <sup>25</sup> Harryette Mullen, 'Imagining the Unimagined Reader: Writing to the Unborn and Including the Excluded', *boundary 2*, Vol. 26, No. 1, 99 (1999) p. 203.
- <sup>26</sup> Anthony Reed, 'The Erotics of Mourning in Recent Experimental Black Poetry', *The Black Scholar*, 47:1, 23–37. Reed explores 'post-lyric' in his *Freedom time the poetics and politics of black experimental writing* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014). I have not engaged here directly with New Lyric Studies and its proliferation of scholarship, though much of my thinking is of course informed by the work of critics like Virginia Jackson and Yopie Prins.
- <sup>27</sup> Virginia Jackson, *Dickinson's Misery: A Theory of Lyric Reading* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005) pp. 25–26.
- <sup>28</sup> Denise Riley, *The Words of Selves: Identification, Solidarity, Irony* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2000), pp. 102–3.
- <sup>29</sup> Vahni Capildeo, 'Language and Reinvention', *Start of the Week*, BBC Radio 4, 1 Feb 2016. [<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b06z255s>].
- <sup>30</sup> Robin DiAngelo, 'White Fragility', *International Journal of Critical Pedagogy*, Vol. 3, No. 3, (2011) p. 59.
- <sup>31</sup> Dorothy Wang, *Thinking Its Presence: Form, Race, and Subjectivity in Contemporary Asian American Poetry* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014) p. 38.
- <sup>32</sup> Wang, p. 11.
- <sup>33</sup> Timothy Yu, *Race and the Avant-Garde: Experimental and Asian American Poetry Since 1965* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), p. 73.

- <sup>34</sup> Rosi Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011) p. 7.
- <sup>35</sup> Braidotti, p. 57.
- <sup>36</sup> Maw Shein Win interview with Mg Roberts in *The Margins*, "Displacement Is a Moment of Translation" 26 Sept 2016 [<https://aaww.org/mg-roberts-displacement/>].
- <sup>37</sup> Gilmour, Rachel, 'Punning in Punglish, Sounding "Poreign" Daljit Nagra and the Politics of Language', in *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies*, Vol. 17, Issue 5, 2015. Asha Rogers' *State Sponsored Literature: Britain and Cultural Diversity after 1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020) features a discussion of Nagra's work in relation to the National Curriculum, pp. 156–178.
- <sup>38</sup> Daljit Nagra, 'Singh Song', *Look We Have Coming to Dover!* (London: Faber and Faber, 2007), p. 52.
- <sup>39</sup> Daljit Nagra, BBC Teach, 2016 [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nYIDS4Ka7CE>].
- <sup>40</sup> Personal cultural resonances make way for an openly subjective reading—one that to some extent resists the (imagined) objectivity of academic criticism and hopefully disentangles itself from the critic's authority (which is aligned with whiteness). I sent this reading of 'Singh Song' to Daljit Nagra—with whom I am fortunate enough not only to share a cultural background but a community of poets—which initially described Singh's wife as a 'vixen'. He replied in this way: 'The main concern for me was that Singh's wife is described as a "vixen" and it was never my intention to create a sexist character. She has a big tummy, a crew cut, wears a donkey jacket (that symbol of militant Marxism), mocks his father, I'd doubt these descriptors indicate a vixen, I hope they don't anyway. Either at the time of writing, or over time, I've seen the wife as the main character of the poem: she's into contemporary politics, runs an online business, leads the mock-romantic Q&A (perhaps to test out his mettle/wit).' We further discussed the complexities of critiquing poets' works with whom we share community—one that is supportive and that aims collectively to decolonise critical thinking and writing outside of academic institutions, to which Daljit and I both belong. Our conversations are on-going. I am grateful to Daljit for corresponding with me about my reading of his poem and for the generosity of his engagement.
- <sup>41</sup> Singh, as many readers will know, is a surname adopted by devotees of the Sikh faith (traditionally by male followers though now it has been adopted as a family name). This practice originally meant to remove barriers of caste and clan, many of which persisted anyway. What is notable is that both surnames co-exist (Singh often as a middle name) but that Mr. Singh is also himself a kind of Indian everyman.
- <sup>42</sup> Claire Chambers, 'Meddl[ing] with my type: An interview with Daljit Nagra', *Crossings: Journal of Migration & Culture*, Volume 1, Number 1, 1 June 2010, pp. 87–96.
- <sup>43</sup> See Edmund Hardy's article in this special issue, 'Writing Race Under Capital: Nisha Ramayya, Nat Raha, and Daljit Nagra's 'Ramayana', which explores Nagra's racialised voicings more thoroughly.
- <sup>44</sup> Parker's poem was published in *The Best British Poetry 2015*, ed. by Emily Berry, Cromer: Salt Publishing, 2015. The poem originally appeared here: [<https://bodyliterature.com/2014/10/16/bobby-parker-2/>].
- <sup>45</sup> Kathryn Maris's essay on offensiveness is worth consulting. Although I do not share Maris's views on what I see as misogyny in the poem, Maris does pause on the racism briefly without interrogating it further. See 'Transgression and Transcendence: Poetry and Provocation', *The Poetry Review*, 107:2, Summer 2017 [<https://poetrysociety.org.uk/kathryn-maris-transgression-and-transcendence-poetry-and-provocation/>].
- <sup>46</sup> Alsadir, p. 43.

- <sup>47</sup> Wendy Doniger, *Splitting the Difference* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999) p. 86.
- <sup>48</sup> Meena Kandasamy, *Ms Militancy* (New Delhi: Navayana Publishing, 2010) p. 8.
- <sup>49</sup> Will Harris, 'The Ethics of Perspective', *Poetry London*, issue 92, Spring 2019 [<https://poetrylondon.co.uk/the-ethics-of-perspective-by-will-harris/>].
- <sup>50</sup> Dave Coates, 'The State of Poetry and Poetry Criticism in the UK', commissioned report, 2019. [<https://www.liverpool.ac.uk/media/livacuk/centrefornewandinternationalwriting/Longform,post,-,The,State,of,Poetry,and,Poetry,Criticism,in,the,UK,and,Ireland,FINAL.pdf>] The most recent 'The State of Poetry and Poetry Criticism in the UK report' (2020) found similarly that poetry reviewing by non-white critics has more than doubled from 4% to nearly 10% in the past three years. [<https://www.liverpool.ac.uk/media/livacuk/schoolofthearts/documents/english/State,of,Poetry,and,Poetry,Reviewing,2020,Ledbury,Critics,Report,-,final.pdf>].
- <sup>51</sup> Such reviewers who regularly appear in UK papers include: Tristram Fane-Saunders (*Telegraph*), Jeremy Noel Tod (*Sunday Times*), Paul Batchelor (*New Statesman*), Ben Wilkinson (*Guardian*), Sean O'Brien (*Guardian*), Rory Waterman (*TLS*), Alan Jenkins (*TLS*), David Wheatley (*Guardian*).
- <sup>52</sup> Donna Ferguson, 'Poetry sales soar as political millennials search for clarity', *The Guardian*, 21 Jan 2019 [[https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/jan/21/poetry-sales-soar-as-political-millennials-search-for-clarity?CMP=share\\_btn\\_fb&fbclid=IwAR0xz8QFytA9aJAuCrXBeUDack6yVFc6eoxkLHTWXA\\_xgfVh\\_l8FJ44KLk](https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/jan/21/poetry-sales-soar-as-political-millennials-search-for-clarity?CMP=share_btn_fb&fbclid=IwAR0xz8QFytA9aJAuCrXBeUDack6yVFc6eoxkLHTWXA_xgfVh_l8FJ44KLk)].
- <sup>53</sup> Kayo Chingonyi, 'Worrying the [blood]line of British Poetry', in *Swimmers 1*, London, 2016. [online link now defunct].
- <sup>54</sup> It is worth noting here, briefly, that in the past five years more poets of colour have won or been nominated for the Forward and Eliot Prizes than over their entire histories including: Ocean Vuong, Danez Smith, Vahni Capildeo, Shivane Ramlochan, Ishion Hutchinson, Nuar Alsadir, Sarah Howe, Claudia Rankine and Mona Arshi, Malika Booker, Richard George, Nick Makoha, Will Harris, Tracy K Smith, Kaveh Akbar, Mary Jean Chan, Anthony Anaxagorou, Jay Bernard, Roger Robinson, among others.
- <sup>55</sup> Claudia Rankine, *Citizen: An American Lyric* (Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2014) pp. 115–18.
- <sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>57</sup> Kate Kellaway, 'Best Poetry Books 2015', *The Observer*, [<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/dec/08/best-poetry-books-2015-clive-james-claudia-rankine>].
- <sup>58</sup> Evie Shockley, *Renegade Poetics: Black Aesthetics and Formal Innovation in African American Poetry* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2011), p. 9.
- <sup>59</sup> Kellaway, 'Best Poetry Books 2015', *The Observer*.
- <sup>60</sup> Paul McLoughlin, 'Tenuous Moorings', a review of *Loop of Jade* by Sarah Howe, *London Grip*, 2016. [<https://londongrip.co.uk/2016/04/tenuous-moorings-reflections-on-howe/>].
- <sup>61</sup> Graham Huggan, *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins* (London: Routledge, 2001), p. 155.
- <sup>62</sup> Gail Low, 'Loop of Jade (Winner of the 2015 TS Eliot Prize for Poetry)', *Dura*, 2015. [<https://dura-dundee.org.uk/2015/09/08/loop-of-jade/>].
- <sup>63</sup> Sarah Howe, '(I) Others', *Loop of Jade*, (London: Chatto & Windus, 2015), p. 46.
- <sup>64</sup> John McAuliffe, 'Poetry: Edged with nightmares and inspired by troubadours', *Irish Times*, 10 December 2016 [<https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/books/poetry-edged-with-nightmares-and-inspired-by-troubadours-1.2885596?mode=print&ot=example.AjaxPageLayout.ot>].
- <sup>65</sup> Aingeal Clare, 'Four new collections up for the Forward poetry prizes', 2 July 2020, [<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2020/jul/02/four-new-collections-up-for-the-forward-poetry-prizes-review-roundup>].
- <sup>66</sup> Romana Huk, 'In AnOther's Pocket: The Address of the "Pocket Epic" in Postmodern Black British Poetry', *The Yale Journal of Criticism*, Vol. 13, No. 1 (Spring 2000), p. 41.

- <sup>67</sup> David Marriott, 'Signs Taken for Signifiers: Language Writing, Fetishism and Disavowal', in *Assembling Alternatives: Reading Postmodern Poetries Transnationally*, ed. by Romana Huk (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2003), p. 343.
- <sup>68</sup> Richard Osmond, 'Amanita muscaria', *Useful Verses* (London: Picador, 2017), pp. 43–44.
- <sup>69</sup> Carol Ann Duffy, 'Wood', *Sincerity* (London: Picador, 2018), p. 45.
- <sup>70</sup> It seems especially interesting that ecopoetry as a political instrument evades the culture war against identity politics poetry and the denaturalizing of poetic language in the lyric space. A new ecopoetry prize has been launched by the current poet laureate, Simon Armitage, at a time when the UK government's commitments to environmental policies are waning.
- <sup>71</sup> Hannah Sullivan, 'Hannah Sullivan on Hanwell: 'Rural enough for blackberrying; urban enough not to paddle in the river'', *The Guardian*, Dec 2018 [<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/dec/15/hannah-sullivan-made-in-hanwell-london>].
- <sup>72</sup> A fuller critique of Sullivan's *Three Poems* and its centering of a white urban experience might point to the figure of the Indian man who briefly appears in a spectral globalized market 'eating his breakfast of microwaved dal and mini-idlis', 'waiting for your analysis', reading Thoreau, fantasizing about New York under snow who wants to migrate West to 'live deliberately'.
- <sup>73</sup> Glyn Maxwell, *On Poetry* (London: Oberon Books, 2012), p. 40.
- <sup>74</sup> Maxwell, p. 156.
- <sup>75</sup> Claudia Rankine, 'Liv's View of Landscape I' in *What I Say: Innovative Poetry by Black Writers in America*, ed. by Aldon Lynn Nielsen and Lauri Ramey (Tuscaloosa, Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 2015) p. 236.
- <sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>77</sup> Erika Hunt, 'Personal', in *What I Say: Innovative Poetry by Black Writers in America*, ed. by Aldon Lynn Nielsen and Lauri Ramey (Tuscaloosa, Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 2015) p. 67.
- <sup>78</sup> Sharon Cameron, *Lyric Time: Dickinson and the Limits of Genre* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979) p. 119.
- <sup>79</sup> Though it is so well-known its almost apocryphal, one reliable source for this Dickinson quotation appears to be an 1891 article in *The Atlantic* by one of Dickinson's correspondents, Thomas Wentworth Higginson [<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1891/10/emily-dickinsons-letters/306524/>].
- <sup>80</sup> Vahni Capildeo, 'Five Measures of Expatriation', *Measures of Expatriation* (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 2016) p. 99.
- <sup>81</sup> Kate Clanchy, 'Introduction', *England: Poems from a School* (London: Picador, 2018) p. xvii.
- <sup>82</sup> The ennobling of the 'striving' immigrant strikes a familiar chord, one that chimes with the supposed meritocracy of western societies unhampered by structural inequalities. The so-called 'model minority' of the US—Asian Americans—serves a similar purpose: to denigrate those who are perceived as wanting, lazy, reliant on the state rather than self-reliant. Moral judgments made about immigrants—which lead to real policy decisions, sometimes responsive to xenophobia—rely on these images of the hardworking and uncomplaining immigrant family whose wish to assimilate means they are little threat to the prevailing social and racial hierarchies.
- <sup>83</sup> Gauri Vishvanathan's *Masks of Conquest: Literary Study and British Rule in India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989) is a hugely valuable analysis of how British educational systems emerged from colonial rule. As Vishvanathan states in her introduction, 'no serious account of its [English as a discipline] growth and development can afford to ignore the imperial mission of educating and civilizing colonial subjects in the literature and thought of England, a mission that in the long run served to strengthen Western cultural hegemony in enormously complex ways.' p. 3.

<sup>84</sup> Kate Clanchy, 'The Very Quiet Foreign Girls poetry group', *The Guardian*, 14 July 2016 [<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2016/jul/14/very-quiet-foreign-girls-poetry-foyle-young-poets-kate-clanchy>].

<sup>85</sup> Kate Clanchy, *Some Kids I Taught and What They Taught Me* (London: Picador, 2019), pp. 5–6.

## Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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