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## Review

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## REVIEW

# Conference Report

'Race and Poetry and Poetics in the UK', Bedford Square,  
London, 26–27 February 2016

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The first instalment of (hopefully) a larger series, the Race, Poetry, and Poetics in the UK (RAPAPUK) symposium took place in Bloomsbury. The RAPAPUK international research group was founded by Dorothy Wang of Williams College and Sam Solomon of Sussex University, and this poetry reading and symposium were presented in collaboration between the School of English, Sussex University, and the Poetics Research Centre, Royal Holloway, University of London, organised by Wang, Solomon, Robert Hampson, Nat Raha, and Nisha Ramayya. Developing mainly out of academic discussions of formally experimental poetry, as well as some informal conversation at London poetry events, the organisers wished to address race head-on due to the relative whiteness and lack of concern with questions of race and racism among contemporary UK avant-garde print cultures. RAPAPUK also coincided with the début of the Bare Lit festival, a literary festival dedicated entirely to writers of colour, as well as the event 'Beyond Bounds: Britain Re-Presented in Poetry' at the British Library, and thus benefited from a wave of attendees interested in issues of race and representation, some of whom also attended—or presented at—the other events. This gave the proceedings a feeling of helpful cross-pollination, although my write-up will only encompass the symposium. However, the appearance of three such events in one weekend, all well-attended, is heartening proof that there is a significant intellectual and creative community willing to engage the issue of race in contemporary poetry. I was thrilled to participate in this event, and to present alongside the other contributors to this symposium; however, I urge readers interested in learning more about individual projects summarised here to contact the speakers

directly, as my knowledge is necessarily partial, and indeed, many of the presentations at RAPAPUK came with suggestions for further reading.

The events began on Friday evening, February 26, with a reading at Senate House. Cathy Weedon read selections from *1–50*; Barbican Young Poet Victoria-Anne Bulley read a range of recent work; Talha Ahsan read 'I, Otherstani', 'Sonnet to Theresa May', and 'This be the Answer' (relating to his imprisonment and extradition, which his brother Hamja Ahsan would discuss in a panel the following day); Sandeep Parmar read from *Eidolon*; and Michael Zand closed the night with aplomb, with a performance/reading of a single long poem.

The following day, the symposium continued in Bedford Square. Attendance numbered around fifty, with talks simultaneously broadcast to an overflow room, and with a breakout installation space which held an interactive art installation with streaming video and readings by Elizabeth-Jane Burnett and Sophie Mayer. The organisers noted in their opening remarks that they hope to put on more events in this series for a broad audience, as well as founding a research network on the issue of race and poetics in the UK. We also heard from Dorothy Wang, a member of the research network and an American scholar who collaborated with the *Boston Review* to host the essay series 'Race and the Poetic Avant-garde', who expressed her hope that the conversation around race and poetry can become, and is already becoming, a transnational one.

The range of aesthetic diversity in response to race was frequently invoked (from major-prize-winning poetry such as Sarah Howe's *Loop of Jade*, to spoken word and performance, and the role of poets of colour in the avant-garde), and, indeed, the practitioners and scholars present might not have always run into one another at a typical set of readings. This range of difference—not to do with racial difference *per se*, but rather, with the broad spectrum of ways of invoking and engaging with race and poetics—contributed significantly to the richness of the discussions which arose from the presentations. No one movement or theorisation felt as if it were dominant, and thus speakers were obliged to contextualise their own forms of participation in productive ways. Major themes arising from the symposium that might be picked

up in the future were (1) the social field and the role of institutions (2) knowledge-production and its relationship to race, including the production and definition of 'race' (3) performativity, racialisation and the poetic choices of writers of colour.

The first panel of presentations addressed 'Poetry, Archives, and Decolonization'. In her presentation 'Live Writing: Black British Poetry in Performance. A new archive at the British Library', Hannah Silva, who is producing an archive of 'live poetry' for the British Library as part of her PhD research, discussed her interviews with writers and 'how the voice and the body become part of the poetry'. 'Live writing' is a term drawn from Caroline Bergvall; however, Silva uses it in a slightly different way, not as a 'solid term' or label, but rather a gesture towards the liveness of performance and the bodily presence therein. Silva also brought up the questions of deconstruction, 'erasure' of the self (*écriture blanche*, literally 'white writing'), and the death of the author in relation to oral performance, moving to Barthes' later contributions in *Le plaisir du texte* which describe the material contributions of the voice. However, she noted, Barthes' rich physical descriptions are meant to represent the voice of the reader of the book, rather than its author or performer. Silva emphasised her choice of the word 'writing' rather than 'performance,' because she wanted to underline that performative contributions are a way of creating *meaning* in the text. She showed us clips from several videos within the archive, indicating her methods of notating gestures and intonation in performance, and how these interventions contribute to produce the meaning of the poem.

Clementine Burnley's presentation, 'Archives, Decolonization and Poetics', responded to tacit normative histories of race including: biological ideas of race in her daughters' school textbooks, '*people with a migration history/story*' (the euphemism used in Germany to refer to the 'surprising presence' of people of colour), and the issue of including Black history within the National Curriculum as if it were only debatably part of British history. Burnley largely focused, however, on issues of exhibits and documentation, and the use of discourses of knowledge to maintain racial hierarchies and exclusions, in the process exhibiting their inadequacy as forms of genuine knowledge. One of these exhibits was entitled 'Diversity: Roles of

Africans and their descendants in Renaissance Europe' and included paintings from the sixteenth century which depicted Black Europeans. Ironically, this title gave the impression that the exhibition itself had magically transported Black people into the Renaissance, rather than affirming a history of Europe in which Black people were continually present, which would call into question the very grounds of the perceived homogeneity to which 'diversity' would be a necessary response. Thus, Burnley spoke to a sense in which the racial Other is always 'in question' and subject to *being located*, both physically and through the creation and control of historical narrative. As horrifying example of these processes, Burnley described the 'migrated files' of the administration of thirty-seven former British colonies, files which were returned to Britain or destroyed at independence, with the rationale that upon the termination of the colonial relationship, the newly independent colonies no longer had any claim to the former colonial power's information (and with the curious justification on the part of the British government that the information might be 'misused'). These files documented a number of atrocities, most notably systematic torture in Kenya in the middle of the twentieth century under British rule. Burnley ended with a call to promote a more conscious, shared history rather than falling prey to racist distortions and intentional omission.

Peter Middleton's presentation, 'Legacies of the Race Science of the 1960s', developing out of his work on race science in America, posed the question of race science's role in the UK. He noted that race as an idea (an evolutionary hierarchy among humans with physical characteristics as manifestations of internal qualities) is a distinctly modern one that developed out of the Enlightenment. However, due to the impression that science is reliable and impartial, the implications of an ostensibly 'scientific' position on race that gives credence to the idea that certain people are 'lower' than others can be catastrophic. Middleton noted that concepts of race science haunt ideas of race and ethnicity, and that these 'ghost ideas' are still around: as late as 1964, the American journal *Science* published an article entitled 'Why Do Negroes Riot?', thus treating Black Americans as physical objects whose properties needed to be discovered, similar to machines, bones, cancer or microscopes. Another journal called for eugenics on the grounds that Black Americans had 'substandard'

culture. Middleton observed that in this context, some of Amiri Baraka's descriptions of going against physics might treat physics as a metonym for race science. Middleton also cited the 1968 book *The Biology of the Race Problem* (which was not taken seriously as a scientific publication, but did cite scientists with PhDs and university positions), and the sociological idea of 'structural functionalism,' which saw inequality as a justified component of the social order—criticised by Robert Staples in his book *The Death of White Sociology*. Race science in the UK, like that in America, focussed on IQ, race relations and the idea of progressive evolution. For example, Julian Huxley, J.B.S. Haldane, and Cyril Darlington were all well-connected, influential, and major advocates of eugenics. Their belief was that medicine had permitted 'genetically defective humans' to survive and reproduce. This view was espoused explicitly in Britain as late as 1971.

Middleton pointed to the influence of racial ideation in poetry as well, from Basil Bunting's *Briggflatts*, which depicts a beggar's 'rolling lizard eyes' in Hell (suggesting that he is part of a lower evolutionary stage) and Ted Hughes' 'Crow', who is 'blacker than any negro' and 'Blacker than Ever', speaking to the idea of humanity's animal roots still latent in concepts of race. Middleton exhorted us to be aware of these ghost ideas still haunting critical theory, poetry, sociology, history, philosophy and science.

The next portion of the day was a curated conversation about 'Race and Representation in UK Poetry and Publishing', beginning with an explanation of The Complete Works, a mentorship scheme for BAME poets. When The Complete Works began, initiated by Bernardine Evaristo, the Free Verse report from the Arts Council stated that even less than one percent of poets published in the UK were Black or Asian (today it's about eight percent). Karen McCarthy Woolf and Kayo Chingonyi, both fellows with The Complete Works, discussed their perspectives and experiences alongside Nathalie Teitler, director of the programme. McCarthy Woolf mentioned a range of possibilities for 'race' for writers of colour, from a poetry of witness to a hybrid approach, engaging with the linguistic diversity of other languages and ways of speaking distinct from Standard English, including experimental poetry. Chingonyi spoke to this same question, suggesting that there are those who make

explicit arguments about race in their writing, but also those who by the act of writing are inherently engaging with pre-existing concepts of race—for example, landscape writing from someone who might be chased off the land or interrogated for not ‘belonging’ could be quite transformative without ever articulating race as an explicitly political discourse. He also stated that he had reservations initially around expanding ‘diversity’ in publishing, since it might serve to create a situation where writers were identified solely in terms of cultural identity, but came to feel *The Complete Works* as an affirmation of the reality of embodiment as a non-white poet, in which descriptions of that embodiment would not be automatically marked (the mango as a racially cathected fruit which could not ‘just simply’ exist in a poem for a white audience, for example).

Andrea Brady invoked the sociality of poetry (invitations to attend readings, to read, to publish) and the question of how to build spaces in which bodies of colour would not be out of place participating in these social forms. Describing the Globe Road Festival she helped organise which engaged across lines of segregation, Brady recalled a reading by the Shanghati Literary Society at which none of her white, avant-garde peers were present, and was struck by the Bengali community’s frequent appeals to make others feel welcome in the space, which she found conspicuously absent from avant-garde spaces. She emphasised that hospitality is not the same as redistribution of power, but nevertheless wanted to demonstrate the importance of hospitality and listening and gesture to its absence in certain poetic spaces. This opened up questions of race and difference along multiple different axes—authority and cultural authority, political organising, and lines of expression between people—all of which have their own valence. The discussion, motivated by questions from the audience, turned back to *The Complete Works* and models of diversity—whether the statistical ‘administrative model’ of diversity could genuinely measure or produce parity or participation. The diversity within publishing and writing (small presses, spoken word, the avant-garde, ‘prizewinning’ poetry) inflects these questions of legitimacy as well.

The next set of presentations addressed the topic ‘Poetics of Performativity and Solidarity’. Picking up from his brother Talha Ahsan’s reading the previous day, in

the second panel Hamja Ahsan presented on 'Surviving Extradition and Isolation: Poetry, Solidarity, and War on Terror Prisoner Campaigns'. He discussed the Free Talha Ahsan campaign, as well as the range of poetry written by prisoners, concentrating on maximum-security facilities. Ahsan traced a genealogy of prison poetry, beginning with Albert Woodfox, who was imprisoned for forty-three years due to his involvement with the Black Panther Party; he showed moving clips and excerpts from poems written in prison, and discussed several anthologies of such work, some of which included Talha Ahsan's writing. Ahsan discussed both the personal impacts of his brother's plight on their family and the many different organising strategies practiced by the communities dedicated to freeing Talha and other prisoners. He dwelt on several features of Talha's poetic work, spanning its formal range—including traditional forms such as sonnets and sestinas—as well as its direct address of the British government (in the person of Theresa May); both Talha's reading of Shakespeare while incarcerated and the recitation of Talha's own poems at rallies highlighted the subversive potential of poetry in tension with the carceral state. The presentation emphasised the critical importance of solidarity and support amongst multiple communities in the struggle against racial profiling and the prison-industrial complex. Ahsan also mentioned his current book, *Shy Radicals: The Antisystemic Politics of the Introvert Militant* which deals with a militant, Black-Panther-like party of introverts who fight 'extrovert supremacism'.

In my own talk, 'Eating the Art Piece: Memorisation and Poetry', I discussed my practice of memorisation in poetry. The transmission of textual knowledge through a racial and colonial relationship led to a meaningful adoption of Victorian practices of memorisation by colonial and post-colonial Caribbean writers, one which performed a tension between 'self' and 'other', both arising from and drawing attention to the inherent otherness of language to the individual subject. In terms of racial identity, the 'authentic' and the 'performed' self can be seen not to be contradictory options but rather mutual effects, and this dynamic applies equally to the performance of a memorised poem. Memorisation replaces the ostensible (and fantasised) historical aura of the text with mutual reception between poet and audience. When we take the time to master the words, to make them worthwhile to our labour, we activate



the register of our empathy and our sense for others that allows us to better give the audience something it is capable of receiving (and I note this is not always 'communication', communication is not always the goal). I ended my talk extemporaneously to enact the intersubjective moment that my paper sought to identify.

Srishti Krishnamoorthy closed the panel with her talk, 'Exhuming the Migrant Body in Caroline Bergvall's *Drift*'. Rather than dwelling on the most frequently publicised portions of the text relating to the tenth-century Anglo-Saxon *Seafarer* epic, Krishnamoorthy chose to focus on the less-commonly discussed second section of the book, which depicts the 'Left-to-die' boat of Libyan migrants in 2011, a vessel abandoned by Western countries which Bergvall and Krishnamoorthy use as a prism for understanding white anxiety around the current Syrian refugee crisis. Covering an impressively large range of thematic concerns and critical paradigms including sovereignty, poststructuralist notions of the 'trace', and communication and its breakdown (thematized through echolocation, sonar, and other forms of sonic 'vision'), Krishnamoorthy explored *Drift's* staging of the reading and writing of the migrant body as a form of 'evidence' indigestible by the polity that perceives it.

The final panel of the day was a roundtable discussion on 'The Whiteness of British Poetry' with Sam Solomon, Sandeep Parmar, Dorothy Wang, and Robert Hampson. Parmar discussed her recent article in the L.A. Review of Books which critically reviewed the UK poetry scene's engagement with issues of racial and poetic subjectivity, and the pressure on poets of colour to exoticise themselves. Solomon said that questions of race and poetic production could not be understood without careful scrutiny of the role of institutions, primarily cultural foundations and the academy. Wang gave her perspective on US poetry's relation to race and 'identity', as well as the recent debates surrounding Kenneth Goldsmith and Vanessa Place's racially appropriative works and the discussions arising out of them. Hampson described his involvement with avant-garde poetry as one of the editors of *Alembic*, and the distinction between UK avant-garde poets and those in the US. Contra the US avant-garde, which eventually attained cultural capital, institutional support, and perhaps the ability to 'gatekeep,' the UK avant-garde, after the Arts Council inquiry,

had considerably less support; indeed, there was more funding and mainstream publishing support for 'multiculturalism' than for avant-garde writing in the 70s. Hampson suggested that, at least in the case of *Alembic*, far from trying to create an insular, white, male 'scene', the editors were fully committed to a feminist and anti-racist platform, consciously rejecting sexist and racist writing and seeking to publish, for example, Linton Kwesi Johnson, and that, in comparison to the nearly all-white Language poetry scene, both the *New British Poetry* anthology and *New British Poetries: The Scope of the Possible* (edited by Hampson) include writers of colour and feminist writers. Unfortunately, a promising discussion was artificially truncated by the building's closing hours, so the symposium ended with these brief points, forestalling both general contributions and the planned presentation of the 'LETSPLAY' art installation. While I was disappointed to miss the art installation, which had been gathering materials throughout the symposium for the summing up, this is merely another indication that more events of this sort are greatly desired and would meet an eager and participatory audience; here's looking forward to RAPAPUK II.

## Competing Interests

The author declares that they have no competing interests.

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