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ARTICLE

## Sin/tax: Grammar and Contemporary Poets of Colour

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This essay interrogates the various imperatives towards syntactical fragmentation and 'radical unintelligibility' that are prevalent among the avant-garde poetic community, arguing that they are insufficient to the adaptive stylistic needs of many contemporary poets of colour. Building upon classic postcolonial theory, it posits that a dialectic of grammatical 'abrogation and appropriation' more fruitfully captures the hybrid style of many poets working at the interface with prose and lyric essay, often for radical political ends. After defining and deconstructing two syntactical 'dogmas' of the avant-garde (respectively, disjunction and 'Total Syntax'), it investigates how the work of three contemporary black poets (M. NourbeSe Philip, Claudia Rankine and Harmony Holiday) demonstrates an ambivalent, self-reflexive relationship with grammatical syntax that suggests varying positions on political questions to do with assimilation, decolonisation and reparations. The final section of the paper explores how this negotiation between grammar and disjunction is starting to define poetry of colour in the British context, ending with a syntactical reading of Vahni Capildeo's *Measures of Expatriation*.

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**Keywords:** poetry; syntax; race; Claudia Rankine; Vahni Capildeo; M NourbeSe Philip; Harmony Holiday

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### Introduction: The limits of radical unintelligibility

In his response to *Boston Review's* 2015 'Race and the Poetic Avant-Garde' colloquium, D.S. Marriott rebukes an experimental literary culture that, for all its aspirations to radical alterity, remains stubbornly hegemonic in certain key respects. Bridling at the 'hermeneutic presumption' that underpins the history of modernism, Marriott critiques a coercive archetype of the avant-garde poet who 'emerges as a figure (invariably male, invariably white) that history and culture no longer need to put into question'.<sup>1</sup> This reflexively gendered and racial figure is guilty of operating within poetic forms that 'can now be so easily decoded or read as avant-garde' that the very distinction between avant-garde practice and what Marriott calls 'the

culture industry' collapses.<sup>2</sup> Justified or not, the pejorative image of the avant-gardist ensconced within his niche in the (academic) culture industry is by now familiar enough, but Marriott deconstructs the political pretensions of such a figure with unusual candour. He is withering in his contempt for a literary culture that will only value black practice that 'imitates the avant-garde's wishful resembling of its own lost discrepancy'.<sup>3</sup> This formula is useful in its articulation of a cultural vanguard lapsing into corrosive nostalgia and self-parody, via the veneration of a (potentially mythic) 'lost discrepancy' – a dissidence or difference within the broader culture – that has been gradually dissolved in the formation of its own institutional success. Nonetheless, the antidote to this situation is by no means political scepticism or, far less, quietism. Marriott invokes the example of Aimé Césaire, a modernist writer who 'was much more radical and expressed his insights into revolutionary black poetry via a language of the unconscious in which syntax rather than lexis, nonsense rather than sense takes precedent'.<sup>4</sup>

This article will be indebted to Marriott's pertinent criticism of an avant-garde that has become ossified in its commitment to linguistic forms (the fragment, the cut-up, the found or exploded text) imbued with waning powers of cultural disruption. That such a dominant and self-defining culture might prove inimical to writers of colour has been argued in depth by Evie Shockley in *Renegade Poetics*, a book that 'addresses not only the exclusions of the African American poetry canon, but also the ways in which African American poets and their poetic engagements with black cultures can be marginalized or find their complexity diminished within the discourse around American avant-garde poetry and poetic innovation'.<sup>5</sup> To redress these exclusions and recover the complexity of innovative poetics of colour, it is necessary, as Shockley urges, to affirm their legitimate diversity:

I propose [writes Shockley] that we think of not 'a black aesthetic' or the Black Aesthetic, but of 'black aesthetics', plural: a multifarious, contingent, non-delimited 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>6</sup>

Within this description of a 'non-delimited complex of strategies' lies the crux of my disagreement with Marriott. By exposing the biases and limitations of one (white, male, avant-garde) type of essentialism, he risks enshrining another in his admiration for a Césaire who mandated that 'the black poet *had to* become a scientist of the marvellous in which radical unintelligibility is not so much the exception as the rule' (italics my own).<sup>7</sup> It is in this 'had to', and Marriott's subsequent valorisation of the modern black poet's 'incessant fidelity to creative negation', that one finds the seeds of this potentially damaging counter-essentialism: on this account, a poet of colour who sought to establish formal strategies beyond 'radical unintelligibility' and 'creative negation' would automatically come under suspicion as insufficiently modern or engaged. Marriott does valuable work in guarding against regressive binaries that have plagued the avant-garde, such as 'the usual modernist dilemma of aesthetics versus politics', but it is unclear whether his plural and resourceful poetics retains any space for artists who seek to move beyond the 'irremedial alienation' encoded in Césaire's work.<sup>8</sup>

Particularly problematic in Marriott's construction of black modernism is the parallelism that conjoins 'syntax' with 'nonsense', in opposition to the twinned concepts of 'lexis' and 'sense'. This severing of syntax from its common-language partner of 'lexis', or semantics, has been a conventional ploy of deconstructive poetics ever since Tristan Tzara's rallying cry – quoted approvingly by Veronica Forrest-Thomson – to dissolve 'the hard cement of an apparently impregnable fortress: syntax'.<sup>9</sup> Deconstructive poetics have for over a century maligned grammar in favour of alternative forms of linguistic organisation. This post-Romantic hostility to normative syntax can be traced, arguably, to Nietzsche's withering dismissal of so-called "Reason in language" ('oh, what a deceptive old woman this is! I am afraid that we have not got rid of God because we still have faith in grammar...')<sup>10</sup> From this fantasy of the unshackled Übermensch derives a constellation of related views and schools of thought, from Tzara's Dadaist provocations, to Italian futurism, to the neo-romantic modernism of Cummings ('who pays any attention/to the syntax of things/will never wholly kiss you') and its darker reifications in Pound.<sup>11</sup> Pound, in particular, suggests how grammatical deconstruction might collude with a programme of political action that would directly harm or

threaten those who had most to lose from an empowered (white) essentialism. In *An ABC of Reading*, he laments that 'A people that grows accustomed to sloppy writing is a people in process of losing grip on its empire and on itself', and goes so far as to prescribe an 'abrupt and disordered syntax' as the natural antidote for this degenerate condition.<sup>12</sup> Today's avant-garde may have long-since repudiated Pound's fascism, but it has thoroughly internalised his syntactical methodology, even repurposing it for diametrically opposed ideological ends, as per Charles Bernstein's characterisation of grammar in 'The Secret of Syntax' as 'An imperial clarity for an imperial world'.<sup>13</sup> By now such rhetoric has become fundamentally aligned to poststructuralist critique, the intellectual method that still dominates the contemporary humanities, shaped by what Elizabeth S. Anker and Rita Felski have labelled a 'suspicious hermeneutics'. Anker and Felski are at the forefront of a nascent twenty-first-century 'post-critique' movement that would question 'the mistrust of ordinary language and thought endemic to critique, as well as the frequent assumption that public' – or, we might add, grammatical – 'speech is invariably reactionary, opportunistic, or commodified'.<sup>14</sup>

In this article, I will attempt to elucidate the diffuse argument about grammar and syntax that is currently playing out, often overtly, among contemporary poets of colour on both sides of the Atlantic. It is my intention to demonstrate that a growing number of such poets, many of them politically and aesthetically radical in numerous ways, are more complexly engaged with questions of syntax, grammar, sense-making and the dynamics of effective communication than Marriott's edict to embrace 'radical unintelligibility' would allow. This is not to claim that a disjunctive poetic practice is illegitimate as a means to pursue a radical politics, but simply to deny that it is the only method. In making this argument, I aspire to uphold Shockley's vision of a plural Black aesthetics, within which poets might elect for predicative, grammatical syntax over the dissonant, fragmentary, non-normative variety urged by Marriott, or even opt for different modes in different contexts, according to the needs of the occasion. Such linguistic hybridity might be understood within the framework of *abrogation and appropriation*, the complementary strategies identified by postcolonial theorists to describe the syncretic practice of writers from the global south who

use (and subvert) the language of imperial power to shape their post-imperial identities. Here are those two concepts, as defined by that classic postcolonial primer *The Empire Writes Back*:

The first, the abrogation or denial of the privilege of 'English' involves a rejection of the metropolitan power over the means of communication. The second, the appropriation and reconstitution of the language of the centre, the process of capturing and remoulding the language to new usages, marks a separation from the site of colonial privilege.<sup>15</sup>

Although many of the poets I examine write as native-born citizens of the metropole (be that the USA or Britain), the postcolonial framework is nevertheless malleable and apt. As exemplified by Bernstein, it is a common rhetorical ploy to speak of grammar itself as an imperium, out of and against which the radical poet must write, however she might wish to be rid of it.

Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin underscore the necessity of upholding both the destructive and (re)constructive sides of this postcolonial linguistic enterprise, arguing that 'without the process of appropriation the moment of abrogation may not extend beyond a reversal of the assumptions of privilege, the "normal", and correct inscription, all of which can be simply taken over and maintained by the new usage'.<sup>16</sup> This, in my view, functions as a precise analogy for the situation in avant-garde poetics, where the persistent abrogation of grammar has resulted in a coercive 'new usage' (the disjunctive fragment) that arrogates much of the privilege blandly enjoyed by grammatical language in common parlance. The poets I examine find critical but usually reciprocal ways of working with Standard English grammar, often reconfiguring – or, indeed, appropriating – it to encompass alternative structures of meaning derived from their understandings of individual affect and the body. Recently, Stephen Clingman has written about how Chomskyan generative linguistics might help to shape our thinking about the generative grammar of postcolonial identity: 'The syntax of the self – its combinatory, unfolding possibilities – is a transitive syntax. It is a function of, and permits, *navigation*' (Clingman's emphasis).<sup>17</sup>

Apart from showing that such combinatory, transitive, grammatical syntaxes exist within writing by contemporary poets of colour, I have a more particular secondary objective in mind: to argue that among poets of colour one's attitude to syntax is often cognate with one's attitude to racial justice, in so far as the outright refusal of orthodox English grammar might reflect one's refusal of a politics of assimilation and incremental progress. Poets of grammatical abrogation *and* appropriation, on the other hand, are (tentatively, critically, and by no means sentimentally) more willing to 'navigate' the 'unfolding possibilities' of a democratic but all too often racist state.<sup>18</sup> With increasing frequency, their experiments operate at the interface between verse and the prose poem or lyric essay and adopt predicative grammar in service of documentary, testimony, narrative or confession, modes of discourse that at least aspire – or dissemble – to make statements of truth about the world.

The remainder of this article will be divided into three sections. In the first, I will explore more fully the rationale behind two avant-garde theories of poetic syntax that are consistent with Marriott's vision of radical unintelligibility; in each case I will try to demonstrate why the respective theory might prove inadequate to the practice of poets of colour. In the second section I will provide a detailed reading of the critical reception and syntactical strategies of Claudia Rankine's *Citizen* in order to argue that the book's ambivalence about grammatical language maps on to a painful uncertainty about the possibilities of political progress for black people in America. From there, I will turn to the work of Harmony Holiday, from whom I adopt the neologistic formula of my title. Holiday is an innovative poet committed to a radical, black liberation politics who nevertheless engages with constructive concepts of grammar and the body in her work. I will conclude with a section that identifies how these arguments about grammar and language are beginning to play out in the poetry of Britain and the British postcolonial diaspora.

## **1 Two avant-garde dogmas of poetic syntax**

Marriott's vision of a syntax that is divorced from lexis, or semantic reference, takes its place in an avant-garde stylistic lineage I will refer to as the 'Total Syntax' tradition, after the book of the same name published by the Language poet Barrett

Watten in 1985. Reading across contemporary trends in conceptual art and experimental poetry, Watten advocated a mode of writing that would swap poetry's traditional, solipsistic obsessions with 'a mind's arrangement with regard to certain objects' (i.e. the associative, individual, semantic plane of meaning) and develop a practice centred on the mind's 'regard for certain arrangements of objects'.<sup>19</sup> For Watten, the most effective and stimulating poetry of the postmodern era is defined by a particular attention to syntactical over semantic meaning, whereby the 'relation *between* things, a situation with its *own* laws, is the point of departure'.<sup>20</sup> This philosophy, prevalent in the wider Language movement, perhaps draws impetus from the deconstructive fiats of Derrida, who wrote in 'Force and Signification' that 'inscription alone [...] has the power of poetry, in other words has the power to arouse speech from its slumber as sign'.<sup>21</sup> In the same passage Derrida speaks of the ideal literary language as constituting a 'game or pure functioning', something in which the ordinary signifying depths are reified in a particular 'engraving, a groove, a relief', or flattened 'to a surface whose essential characteristic is to be infinitely transmissible'.<sup>22</sup> Surface over depth; arrangement over reference: this is the idealised vision of Total Syntax, and it is designed to liberate the speaker from the embarrassing drama of signification, a debacle summarised by Derrida as 'the natural predicament in which everything refers to the disposition of a contingent situation'.<sup>23</sup>

To be liberated from a contingent situation might sound like a noble aspiration, but one's ability to achieve it depends on certain very real freedoms and privileges. For the black body navigating a racist society, such contingency can be deadly, and it isn't clear that trying to sublimate it within a totalised, non-referential syntactical arrangement would represent an adequate literary response. One of the key semantic referents that avant-garde poetry would eliminate is the lyric 'I', that emoting, supposedly stable seat of cognition and identity that Watten alludes to dismissively in his description of 'a mind's arrangement with regard to certain objects'. But where the 'I' in question is under threat of violence or erasure, it might be wishful if not outright irresponsible to demand that the person behind it should collude in that process by denying themselves access to the pronoun that can articulate their own



personal and traumatically 'contingent' situation. Marriott advances a forceful and related argument in 'Signs Taken for Signifiers', an earlier essay that critiques the mechanism by which Language writing seeks 'to empty the linguistic sign of its referential substitute', only to '[replace] representation with a fetishistic substitute, that of the signifier'.<sup>24</sup> Interrogating this so-called 'enigmatic signifier' that lies at the heart of Language writing, Marriott demonstrates how it depends on a host of exclusionary cultural erasures:

[...] rather than making manifest the connotational values of linguistic reference as commodified, the enigmatic signifier reifies cultural signs whilst simultaneously detaching them from the content of social relations, thereby mimetically reproducing the fetishistic attitude required of postwar consumers. The traumatic and symbolic exhaustion described above results from the fact that the enigmatic signifier is de-signified [...] of any mediation between particularities and the state, or any ethical or principled notion of human autonomy [...] this traumatic event results in a reification of representation that is consequently fetishised.<sup>25</sup>

Marriott's vision of a poetic that would better respect the trauma and 'human autonomy' of its subject remains wary of mainstream strategies dependent on 'the narrative lyric, ubiquitous use of first-person pronouns, the affected naturalism of the realist lyric'.<sup>26</sup> In recent years, however, poets of politically and stylistically radical intent have started to encroach more on this previously conservative territory. As Dan Chiasson writes in a review of *Citizen*,

The rectilinear language blocks that make up much of *Citizen* suggest the prose poem, that hand-me-down from the French Symbolists. But another model for these entries is, I suspect, non-literary: the police log, the journal entry, or – a new form familiar to anybody who visits student unions – the confession board papered with anonymous note cards. Rankine's prose representations often border on *pro se* representation, the action of defending oneself in a court of law.<sup>27</sup>

This distillation of 'prose' into a new, alternative etymology has more than just a visual, punning appeal. For Rankine and numerous other hybrid poets, especially those of colour, experimenting with discursive or narrative prose goes hand in hand with the defence of one's right to exist with dignity and freedom in a violent society. Not coincidentally, though far from exclusively, such quasi-legal advocacy often requires a poem to adopt the non-ironic, historically stable 'I' as the subject of its sentences, in order to resist the historical erasure of that subjecthood in the culture at large. (Rankine's distinctive and polyvalent 'you' in *Citizen* and its predecessor, *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*, arguably functions as a synonym for this I, alongside other more ambiguous designations.<sup>28</sup>) For this reason Andrea Brady has written with salutary clarity about the black lyric 'I' as 'a radical invention', one 'whose history belongs with the avant-garde traditions it also corrodes'.<sup>29</sup>

The means by which the black lyric 'I' might be imperilled by Total Syntax are suggested in an essay about the traditionally lyric African-American poet Terrance Hayes by Arnold Klein, who seeks counter-intuitively to reclaim the lyric tradition from the forces of personality and reference. Informed by Watten and the postmodern avant-garde's resistance to the 'contextualized' or 'semantically maximal' poem, Klein objects to Chiasson's praise for Hayes's 'Wigphrastic', a heavily referential poem containing nods to 'Big Booty Judy wigs' and 'the soft radar-streaked music of Klymaxx', among other proper nouns derived from real life.<sup>30</sup> For Klein, any poem that relies on its audience's understanding of such cultural signs risks inertia and redundancy. Moreover, he sees in this referential mode of writing an abandonment of poetry's primary duty to the 'syntactical [...] potentials of language':

A lyric poem [...] is immediate in two conjoined senses: in having within itself all that is needed to apprehend it – in being, that is, self-intelligible – and in being directly apprehensible as constituting one self-complete whole, however complex. Now, only of elements reciprocally determining and determined can a self-complete, self-intelligible poem be made; and these are precisely the syntactic, and not the semantic, potentials of language [...]<sup>31</sup>

Despite his stark separation between syntactically and semantically maximal poems, Klein acknowledges that these two linguistic dimensions are in fact connected; his subsequent claim that 'only by being transformed into syntactic elements by their place and function in the overall pattern of interrelations [...] can semantically referential words be made self-intelligible' admits as much, positioning syntax as the sergeant major of language, so to speak, drilling the individual semantic parts into an 'overall pattern of [...] interrelations'.<sup>32</sup> His mistake, in my view, is to believe that syntactical organisation alone can ever disinfect language from the undesirable, anti-lyric impurity of semantic reference.

Klein provides an example of this putative effect with Hart Crane's 'adagios of islands', a phrase that he claims is 'intelligible without being situational, and beautiful without being pictureable, and is so on the basis of two words being conjoined in a way that their semantic referents could never be'.<sup>33</sup> Perhaps it is plausible to countenance the idea that these two euphonious, alluring words have been rendered 'self-intelligible' by virtue of their syntactical conjunction; evidently the genitive grammar is doing much of the work to produce a surreal composite image that would be unavailable if one were simply to appeal to the common meanings of 'adagio' and 'island'. But does this imply that a deft piece of syntax has absolved these words of semantic reference altogether? In the first place, one might object that, even in surreal conjunction, the phrase triggers appealing thoughts of music and solitude that are very much dependent on the isolated common meanings of 'adagio' and 'island'. But the sleight of hand involved in Klein's fantasy of self-intelligibility becomes more readily apparent if we preserve the syntax precisely as it stands while substituting 'adagios' for 'empires' and 'islands' for 'blood'. Klein might object that 'empires of blood' is a loaded phrase, unsuited to the realm of lyric poetry on account of being inevitably weighed down by semantic baggage – yet that would only serve to prove that the supposed syntactical conjuring trick is an illusion founded on the semantic innocence of 'adagios' and 'islands'. Syntax cannot save a statement from referentiality. Even if it were possible to attain, Klein's preferred mode of lyricism would apparently require poets of colour to cordon off those parts of their vocabulary which allude by necessity to the social experience of exclusion and violence. It is

far from clear how one would begin to construct such a list, certainly while drawing from the same language – English – fundamentally conditioned by its status as the lingua franca of a white supremacist society.

The second dogma I wish to examine is perhaps more diffusely but tenaciously prevalent in the world of avant-garde poetry than Total Syntax. Perhaps its clearest articulation comes in the shape of Peter Quartermain's influential study *Disjunctive Poetics*.<sup>34</sup> If Total Syntax is able to take pleasure in grammatical structure – providing, that is, that it transcends semantic reference – disjunction revels in the brokenness of grammar itself, taking its cues from Charles Olson's pioneering claim that, in the truly modern or 'projective' poem, tenses have to 'be kicked around anew'.<sup>35</sup> Grammar, on Olson's view, is a perversion of physical and emotional reality, therefore disjunction becomes necessary if one wishes to mimic the complexities of the quantum universe. If the poet 'stays inside himself', he writes, turning away from the 'artificial forms' of human grammar, 'if he is contained within his nature as he is participant in the larger force, he will be able to listen, and his hearing through himself will give him secrets objects share'.<sup>36</sup> This view that disjunctive syntax offers a more faithful mimesis of physical or phenomenological reality than grammatical language has proven remarkably, and diversely, popular among postmodern American and British poets, leading Srikanth Reddy to argue that a so-called 'disjunctive fallacy' exists in the dominant discourse surrounding twentieth-century poetry. Taking issue with a famous contention in *Disjunctive Poetics* ('the poem is free to be inarticulate. Even to stutter'), Reddy avers:

[...] exercising one's freedom to stutter may not wholly deliver the personal subject from a poetics of privation. Broken literary speech runs the risk of simply reproducing a fatalistic dialectic whereby poetic enunciation, for the fractured authorial sensibility, 'requires abandoning normative syntax, and even intelligibility' [...]<sup>37</sup>

Quartermain positions this urge to fragment language in terms of emancipation from an oppressive stricture ('the poem is free to be inarticulate'), but in the next breath turns the tables on the original oppressor – articulacy, grammar – by formulating this

freedom as a counter-edict, to the effect that writing poetry in the postmodern era 'requires abandoning normative syntax, and even intelligibility'.<sup>38</sup> For Reddy (a poet and critic of colour, though this is never made to be a component of his argument) there is something self-sabotaging and 'fatalistic' – something that replicates rather than ameliorates the dynamics of 'privation' – in the demand to abandon intelligibility and fracture syntax. In place of disjunction, Reddy posits a parallel canon of postmodern poetry defined by works such as Marianne Moore's 'The Pangolin', in which 'elaborate syntactical, prosodic, and epistemological lattice-work [...] shows how an artful armature of digression may underwrite an alternative sense of literary form in American poetry'.<sup>39</sup> Digressive poetry, so conceived, is important for demonstrating that grammatical transgression is not prerequisite if a poem is to enact resistance to the dominant structures of cultural authority. Assuming Reddy is correct, the moment of '[t]ransition' in a poem's syntax – marked by grammatically permissible, hypotactic connectives rather than agrammatical disjunction – 'may offer a literary tactic for writers who seek to interrogate and evade the imperium of divisive power'.<sup>40</sup>

By naming explicitly this 'imperium of divisive power', and setting grammar apart from it as a legitimate tool of resistance, Reddy rejects the monopoly that disjunction might claim on radical literary action. Before this argument can be upheld, however, one must consider the rejoinder offered by M. NourbeSe Philip's *Zong!*, a collection by a Tobagan poet now resident in Canada who claims direct affinity with the canonical avant-garde.<sup>41</sup> Throughout this volume Philip adapts the text of *Gregson v. Gilbert*, a court decision from 1781 that determined the case of the British slave ship *Zong* after its captain responded to difficulties and errors during the voyage by throwing 150 captive black slaves overboard. In an essay appended to the collection detailing the lengthy and troubled process of its composition, Philip articulates the rationale behind her experiment with *Gregson v. Gilbert*: 'I would lock myself in this text in the same way men, women, and children were locked in the holds of the slave ship *Zong*'.<sup>42</sup> In practice, this act of 'locking in' to the legal text works much as a parasite locks in to the body of its host. The variety of linguistic subversion runs from the relatively legible, if fragmentary, verse of the volume's first book, 'Os':

defend the dead  
 weight of circumstance  
 ground  
 to usual &  
 etc  
 where the ratio of just  
 in less than  
 is necessary  
 to murder [...] <sup>43</sup>

to more extremely denatured verse, where individual words are hacked apart and rearranged in clusters fanned across the page.

Over the course of the compositional journey described in the essay, Philip reveals a progressive deterioration in her relationship with grammar. Starting out, she calls it '*a violent but necessary ordering*' but this sense of pained accommodation gradually darkens, or flattens out, into the more alienated description of grammar as '*the ordering mechanism, the mechanism of force*' (now not a 'necessary', inwardly mandated violence, but contingent and external).<sup>44</sup> The reasoning that leads to the second conclusion reveals the dreadful power that linguistic meaning can exert, even when one tries expressly to avoid it. Philip describes a phase where her compositional strategy was to submit *Gregson v. Gilbert* to as much random pressure as it could take:

*One approach was literally to cut up the text and just pick words randomly, then I would write them down but nothing seemed to yield – this was most similar to the activity of the random picking of African slaves – selected randomly then thrown together, hoping that something would come of it – that they would produce something. Owners did have an interest in them working together, like I do in having words work together.*<sup>45</sup>

The harrowing realisation, for Philip, is that even the most aleatory compositional mode she can devise – the famous 'cut-up' method of Burroughs et al – enlists her

in a discomfortingly similar enterprise to that of a slave-owner; indeed, it places her in the especially damnable position of a cavalier slave owner who throws his slaves together 'randomly [...] hoping that something would come of it', unwilling even to admit to his stake in the enterprise. As Philip points out, with mordant insight, '*Owners did have an interest in them working together, like I do in having words work together*'. Words 'working together', in a manner comparable to indentured labour, is an especially mordant but direct critique of syntax. The linguistic artist will always share at least this much with the slave driver, so her syntactical practice must boil down to a question of how active or conscious a role she accepts in ensuring that the respective parts 'work together'.

For Philip, this analogy between slave-driving and linguistic artifice proves too intimate and ghoulish to countenance. In response she pledges to resist any 'urge to make sense', essentially seeking to override that part of her poetic intelligence (or ordinary cognition) which is complicit in ordering and interpreting the unimaginable predicament of the drowned slaves. But as she has already acknowledged, this is a potentially doomed enterprise, since the ordering mind will not be so easily overridden. When she seeks to describe the effect of her most radically decomposed and denatured lines, Philip maintains that 'every word or word cluster is seeking a space directly above within which to fit itself and in so doing falls into relation with others either above, below, or laterally'.<sup>46</sup> Again, this serves as a description of syntax, albeit one opened up to newly angled vertical and 'lateral' planes of meaning. Philip's key gambit is to disinvent relationality by virtue of grammar – '*the ordering mechanism, the mechanism of force*' – and to rediscover it in these suggestive interstitial 'silences' between words: 'within each silence is the poem, which is revealed only when the text is fragmented and mutilated, mirroring the fragmentation and mutilation that slavery perpetrated on Africans, their customs and ways of life'.<sup>47</sup>

At this point we are back firmly in the realm of Quartermain's disjunctive imperative, with fragmentation being justified – and, more than that, mandated – as the only adequate formal response to the heinous 'mutilation that slavery perpetrated on Africans'. Supposing Reddy was correct to call this imperative a fallacy when applied *tout court* to postmodern poetry, the question then arises whether Philip succeeds

in rehabilitating it as a binding rule for the exceptional case of representing slavery. Much in the manner of the Holocaust in Adorno's famous edict, slavery might be a historical injury so grave and all-encompassing that it serves a moral gag on the practice of the loquacious, digressive, grammatical lyric poet. This is a possibility one should consider with the utmost seriousness before issuing an objection. At the very least *Zong!* enacts the intolerable dilemma of finding one's voice caught between the psychological orderings that protect against 'madness' and the rival order of a colonial tyrant.<sup>48</sup> In this struggle, Philip admits that 'at times, I too approach the irrationality and confusion, if not madness [...] of a system that could enable, encourage even, a man to drown 150 people as a way to maximize profits'.<sup>49</sup> Ultimately it is only by discovering the alternative, subversive order of her exploded lines and the 'silences' they release between the words – an order uncontaminated by the over-determining 'force' of grammar – that Philip escapes this madness. It is a victory, of sorts, but one founded on what seems to be an eternal gesture of refusal, stretching back into the original trauma of slavery and forward again through the centuries of misery inflicted on black communities by its influence: the refusal captured by the fragment, and by the silence encrypted beyond the fragment.

But where does that leave writers of colour who wish to move beyond refusal? As I have argued, the imperative to radical unintelligibility can inflict an onerous, idealistic burden on the adaptive needs of black literary style. In Philip's case the imperative has not been imposed from above but rather internalised, on the strongest possible moral grounds, as a mandatory form of witness to a historical crime. Given the overwhelming centrality of slavery to the Black-Atlantic experience, and the impossibility of ever escaping or erasing its harmful consequences, the logic of Philip's position would appear to require *all* black poets to 'lock in' to the same foundational trauma if they are to avoid pandering to a contemporary system grounded, root and branch, in that originary violence. It is here that one might begin to articulate the objection to such a stark prospectus, starting with a query about the troubling, primitivist assumptions latent in Philip's commentary, towards the end of her essay, about what her exploded lines achieve: 'Words break into sound, return to their initial and originary phonic sound – grunts, plosives,



labials – is this, perhaps, how language might have sounded at the beginning of time?’<sup>50</sup> This vision of retreat, to a prelapsarian moment before language became corrupted by the urge to power, succeeds in erasing not only the English tongue of the oppressor but the complex linguistic communities that would have existed in West Africa at the time of the Zong’s intrusion. With a precise appositional formula (‘the ordering of grammar, the ordering that is the impulse of empire’) Philip implies, erroneously, that colonised peoples had no grammar of their own – an imputation, almost certainly unintentional, that lends unfortunate support to the invalid racial hierarchy on which slavery was founded.<sup>51</sup>

Grammar does not simply reify ‘the impulse of empire’; like most systems, it can be turned to violent ends, but it also offers a framework for shared speech that enables a community to police itself, organise amenities, and transmit a culture.<sup>52</sup> These productive aspects of grammar are all denied in Philip’s critique, and so, in effect, are political responses to the predicament of systematic black oppression that seek viable contemporary solutions, beyond the recursive trauma of history. Tellingly, Philip uses an analogy from the world of dance to describe the style of *Zong!*, comparing it to ‘crumping’, a hip-hop style derived from tribal African roots ‘in which the body is contorted and twisted into intense positions and meanings that often appear beyond human comprehension’.<sup>53</sup> Crumping, with its adversarial moves designed to thwart ‘human comprehension’, represents the polar opposite of assimilationism. In Philip’s description it is fundamentally nihilistic and anti-social, a rejection of the false consolations offered by progressive political dialogue. Hers, in other words, is a politics and linguistic philosophy of outright abrogation. In the next section, I will explore the work of two poets whose work can be understood more in terms of the dialectic between abrogation and appropriation. In doing so, I will analyse how a political ambivalence about assimilation versus refusal manifests through the grammatical diversity of Claudia Rankine’s *Citizen*, before exploring how the vision of an alternative, non-hierarchical grammar emerges in the work of Harmony Holiday – a vision that, if heeded, might offer reparation for the disasters of history.

## 2 Between Assimilation and Assertion: *Citizen* and *Hollywood Forever*

*Citizen's* early critics have been divided on the subject of its syntax. For some, such as Brady, the collection can be summed up quite straightforwardly as a set of 'searing anecdotes of everyday aggression [...] delivered in clear and remarkably restrained prose poems'.<sup>54</sup> Adam Fitzgerald, writing in *The Guardian*, offers another reading that foregrounds clarity of expression, claiming that the book's 'sentences are plain, its syntax normative, its vocabulary mostly workday, vernacular English'.<sup>55</sup> For Fitzgerald, Rankine's linguistic innovation consists in her ability 'To be able to plumb such innocent, overused words and make her readers find, inside their gaps and crevices, a whole world of familiar yet traumatic meanings' – a semantic capacity, in other words, enabled by a strategic use of 'plain' or 'normative' syntax.<sup>56</sup> How, then, should one make sense of Chiasson's analysis of a vignette in *Citizen* that adopts a rather more fraught and non-normative syntax?

Rankine's use of multiple negatives works here, as often in this book, to re-create the bizarre crisis of figuring out how to parse a moment that should never have occurred, a response that 'doesn't include acting like this moment isn't inhabitable'. The moment defies reason and thwarts syntax, reason's trusted viceroy.<sup>57</sup>

Even in a popular forum, 'Bizarro crisis' plays too loosely with an acute moment of alienation and trauma, and one might also put pressure on the claim that multiple negatives serve to '[thwart] syntax' rather than to negotiate an alternative syntax beyond the bounds of conventional grammar. Nevertheless, Chiasson identifies an important element in Rankine's style by showing how on occasion she will torture grammar, the better to convey a moment of psychological crisis.

To date, the most comprehensive critic of *Citizen's* stylistic and linguistic hybridity has been Mary-Jean Chan, who does valuable work situating *Citizen* within a hybrid poetic tradition defined more fully in *American Hybrid Poetics: Gender, Mass Culture, and Form* by Amy Robbins.<sup>58</sup> Chan identifies two broad discursive modes

at work in *Citizen*, the 'essayistic' and the 'lyric'. These are not mutually exclusive, however, since the lyric mode might inhere in the formal bounds of an essay so long as it eschews 'a clear argument and conclusion to be drawn through a process of exposition':

Rather than gesturing towards a foregone conclusion, the lyric allows for complex subjectivity, polyphony and the possibility of intimate address and eventual dialogue. As such, lyric hybridity appears crucial to *Citizen*, since race, racial trauma and racism are subjects that require respectively a making-sense-of, a talking-back-to and a calling-out that can only occur if two bodies are willing to place themselves in proximity to one another: 'Anyway, sit down. Sit here alongside'.<sup>59</sup>

This is a sophisticated account of hybridity encompassing linguistics, psychology and relational dynamics. The 'making-sense-of' component of *Citizen's* language consists in its largely normative grammar being deployed to narrate scenes from a projected life, with a view to naming, exposing and redressing real cultural violence in terms that the perpetrator (or bystander) might readily understand. Chan acknowledges, therefore, the costs involved if the speaker drifts too far from the types of constructive talking 'that can only occur if two bodies are willing to place themselves in proximity to one another'. The ideal for language being described is that of a good conversation, where the participants heed one another's sentences and advance in dialogue, without seeking to achieve any particular end. This delicate, responsive operation can only occur within the framework of normative syntax, and *Citizen* reminds us that the proper sphere of radical action may likewise be collective and consensual.

For all the tentative, progressive optimism of this analysis, however, Chan goes on to acknowledge instances of fragment and disjunction in the grammatical weft of *Citizen*. In common with Chiasson, the examples of syntactical estrangement she focuses on occur at the limits of the speaker's comprehension and emotional tolerance, as per the sentences from 'Stop-and-Frisk': 'Each time it begins in the same way, it doesn't begin the same way, each time it begins it's the same. Flashes,

a siren, the stretched-out roar—'.<sup>60</sup> Chan analyses this volatile combination of contradiction, splice and verbless fragment in familiar mimetic terms, arguing that 'what is said in the wake of trauma requires a form that is syntactically "as complex as thought"'.<sup>61</sup> The traumatised mind resorts to a language that is able to mimic, according to Chan, 'an effect which trauma theorist [Cathy] Caruth describes as a "breach in the mind's experience of time"'.<sup>62</sup> This is an entirely plausible, analogical explanation of the phenomenological experience encoded in these lines – that in computing the grammatical violations of their language we inhabit the violated, erratic cognition of a victim of trauma – but it leaves mysterious certain questions of how and why this rupture arises, and what this might say about grammar itself. What, exactly, happens to the grammatical competence of *Citizen's* calm, collected, dialogic voice in these moments? Is it exposed as that of a phoney, artificial rhetorician – or, more forgivably, a long-suffering actor who slips in the crucial moment to reveal the raw syntax of trauma, a language 'as complex as thought'? Does grammatical language not map onto complex thought in the same way?

One simple answer to these questions would be to say that the grammatical competence of the speaker in *Citizen* changes: that most often they are capable of public speech, delivered within the shared structures of a normative syntax, while occasionally that capacity escapes them due to trauma, anger, fear or confusion. Maybe this fluctuation registers an important truth about African-American experience, which can seem so very nearly integrated in one moment and then thoroughly alien and devalued the next. Nevertheless, one should beware of promoting such instability to the level of fetish by valorising the fragmented, agrammatical and disoriented cry as the authenticator of the surrounding prose, a necessary interruption that proves the fidelity of otherwise sober testimony. There hovers over this discussion the risk of wanting to have things both ways. Might it not be inconsistent to cherish the 'making-sense-of' potentials of Rankine's language – implying that her syntax helps to order and clarify the true nature of things – only to revel, subsequently, in the way that her language tears away from grammatical sense to reveal an underlying psychological reality? Which level of reality takes precedence:

the propositional truth of narrative, or the phenomenological truth of the traumatised lyric fragment? The former mode implies that a shared, artificial language can bridge the distance between the victim of trauma and the bystander or aggressor. The latter deprives language of such a restorative role, or at least heavily compromises it, by asking the reader to follow the speaker into an experience that language alone can never enact. To be clear, this is an ambivalence that Rankine seems consciously to invite. In its final sequence, *Citizen* leaves the reader with an image of the addressee trapped in a thwarted dialectic of fellowship and solitude, negotiating a constant 'displacement of feeling back into the body': 'You smile dumbly at the world because you are still feeling if only the feeling could be known and this brings on the moment you recognize as desire'.<sup>63</sup> This 'desire' is both an inevitable symbol and function of unsuccessful communication – a craving that by definition is yet to be satisfied – and the speaker's enticement to press forward and embark, once again, upon their attempt at public speech.

The dilemma between grammar and the fragment in *Citizen* bears directly on the social function of the text. Put simply, is Rankine attempting to foster understanding and redress between the black community whose experience her 'American Lyric' narrates and the dominant white culture that has subordinated that community? Or is the value of this lyric utterance self-contained, a performance on behalf of the black community, conducted in its voice, with no designs on ameliorating a rotten system? Again, it would be reassuring to say that a programme of emancipatory politics can have it both ways, by counselling black people to assimilate into white supremacist society and redistribute its privilege while dismantling it at the same time. Strategically, one might embark on the former as a means to the latter, but there can be no hybrid politics that encompasses both as equally worthy final goals. Likewise, a poetic syntax cannot fully incorporate grammatical resistance and grammatical consummation, at least not concurrently, and the consequences of electing for one mode over the other at a given moment are serious and real. A hybrid text is not a variegated totality but an alternating sequence of choices and exclusions. At the moment of fragmentary pain, an opportunity for discursive rapprochement is denied. Moreover, if inchoate pain is the speaker's fundamental experience, how,

then, can they return to the realm of grammatical sense-making without being constantly and painfully aware of the trauma that this type of speech elides – the trauma that has not, yet, been remedied or healed?

Rankine herself evaluates the cost of this enterprise, in a starkly disillusioned passage about the duplicity of language:

Words work well as release – well-oiled doors opening and closing between intention, gesture. A pulse in the neck, the shiftiness of the hands, an unconscious blink, the conversations you have with your eyes translate everything and nothing. What will be needed, what goes unfelt, unsaid – what has been duplicated, redacted here, redacted there, altered to hide or disguise – words encoding the bodies they cover. And despite everything the body remains.<sup>64</sup>

Throughout this paragraph mere 'words' are juxtaposed against the authentic, non-verbal language of the body. The duplications, redactions and alterations of social language might serve to 'encod[e] the bodies they cover', but can never disinvent them; eventually, no matter what happens, the articulate speaker will be reduced to their pulse and involuntary muscle movements. This passage describes an experience harrowingly like bodily dysmorphia, with the speaker trapped in a verbal medium that, like the expression they try to convey through their eyes, 'translate[s] everything and nothing' of what it is actually like to be them. Read in this light, the constructive dialogue that happens when 'two bodies are willing to place themselves in proximity to one another' might look like so much futile and exhausting emotional labour. This realisation, in turn, prompts a more severe conclusion than many analyses of *Citizen* have credited: namely, that the book enacts the impossibility of true empathy and redress, through the very failure of its 'normative syntax' to fulfil the dialogic objectives envisioned by Chan.

*Citizen's* unstable syntactical hybridity reflects the social position of its various protagonists, who often speak from settings ordinarily associated with white privilege (a campus café, the queue for Starbucks, a therapist's office, a house viewing with a realtor). At their most grammatical, these speakers are generally on the brink of successfully assimilating into this network, until a (micro-)aggression arrives

to remind them of the precarious status they enjoy in this world and how easily it could be overturned. The essayistic, narrative style functions as a corrective or first response, amending the social record to note that something unacceptable has taken place, while registering this complaint using orderly syntax that upholds existing social norms overall. Taken in isolation, this linguistic approach seems to imply an essential faith in incremental progressive change. It is in the book's latter sections, which enter into closer and closer dialogue with the fatal official violence meted out to black men such as Trayvon Martin and Mark Duggan, that the language becomes more fragmentary and involuted, resulting ultimately in Part VII's broken, agrammatical verse:

I they he she we you turn  
only to discover  
the encounter  
to be alien in this place.<sup>65</sup>

By this point the speaker's illusion of exceptionalism has deserted her. No more can she pretend to be an integrated member of white society, just a few reasonable complaints away from full assimilation. Her assured testimony splinters into the indeterminate, exploded pronoun 'I they he she we you' – a shorthand, perhaps, for all the dead black men and women commemorated on page 134 of the first British edition of *Citizen*, whose misfortune can no longer be safely compartmentalised.<sup>66</sup>

Harmony Holiday is a poet from a younger generation than Rankine; she is a writer deeply engaged with music and art of the black avant-garde and exemplifies a more visual and synesthetic poetic practice. Like Rankine, however, and many other contemporary poets of colour, she confronts the routine toll that American society takes on the black body. In a poem about the tragic decline of the jazz musician Charles Mingus, she presents the following unflinching conditional:

If we look at the human body or form as a kind of unique grammar, the place where rhythm and tone converge turns into an endlessly muted scream and even the screamer can't make it better.<sup>67</sup>

There is nothing wishful or sentimental about this conception of grammar. Here we witness the grammar of Mingus's body – racked by the drugs pushed on him by a largely white showbiz society – expressed in 'an endlessly muted scream' that alleviates none of the sorrow contained in it. At first glance this eternal scream reads like a counsel for despair that would corroborate Philip and her philosophy of abrogation. Holiday even locates Mingus's fundamental misery in 'generations of adrenal trauma' brought about by the black body's history of 'retaining water in the holds of slave ships'.<sup>68</sup> The grammar of the body may be an internal rather than externally imposed tyranny, but it codifies trauma just as mercilessly. One notes, however, a potential escape from this eternal dialectic of injury and terror in the apparently hopeless claim that screaming 'can't make it better'. What, though, if the response was altered? Even in the negative, this formulation opens up the prospect of an alternative politics that did 'make it better', and the denouement of *Hollywood Forever* begins to flesh this out. 'Reparations begin in the body', declares its final page, over a photographic image of a black woman teaching a young black child how to hold a complex balletic pose, far removed from Philip's confrontational crumping style, and verging on – appropriating, we might say – the province of bourgeois white culture.<sup>69</sup> Whether these reparations should be construed as symbolic, psychosomatic or literally financial, Holiday suggests in no uncertain terms that they are the *sine qua non* if America is to atone for the sins of slavery and evolve a new, genuinely 'post-racial' politics. For the African-American poet, reparations promise an additional manumission from the privations of a fragmentary syntax of 'screaming'. Where Rankine's painstaking attempts at assimilationist speech founder on the realisation that 'despite everything the body remains', Holiday begins to imagine a new 'unique grammar' of the black body beyond the otherwise unbearable and ongoing injustice of the past.

This is not to say that her relationship with grammar itself – linguistic grammar, that is, as opposed to the deeply imagined though figurative 'grammar of the body' – is transparent or wholly redemptive. Earlier in *Hollywood Forever*, Holiday outlines an alternative mode of digression grounded not in Reddy's fluent model of 'transition' but confrontational, ecstatic alterity:



Digression will be the most fertile substance. Left. Yes. Our legacy. Yes. Listen to jazz/again. Against what light! Our native language. A sin/tax of digression, of falling apart and coming together with new intentions like the sun's best muscles.

(‘I will not be punished, I will not be tortured, I will not be guilty’)<sup>70</sup>

Cleaving ‘syntax’ into an alternative etymology, Holiday draws out twin valences of the concept that pay tribute to the arduous African-American experience of living in, writing and speaking the colonist’s language, English. The first is ‘sin’, perhaps a gesture to the original violence of slavery, the historical determinant of black Americans speaking English in the first place; the second is ‘tax’, which expresses the ongoing and onerous labour of speaking in this imposed language, and how it is a constant, punctual reminder of one’s original alienation, comparable to a financial levy. This intervention restores one’s sense of grammar as a potentially tyrannous imperium, though the stylistic vision that might oppose it will crucially build up new institutions rather than just negating the old. Holiday declares an unabashedly plural confidence in ‘*Our legacy*’ and ‘*Our native language*’, allusions to a culture that both predates and emerges through colonisation (both now, ironically, reinstated as abstract concepts in the coloniser’s tongue). These possessive formulations are not resistant to the existence of systems or communities in principle, yet nor do they reify ‘legacy’ and ‘language’ into monolithic shibboleths. In Holiday’s syncopated fragments (‘Left. Yes. Our legacy. Yes’) we see that the syntax which might be capable of reasserting black identity is disjunctive as well as digressive, in a manner that harkens back to Quartermain’s imperative while transcending its universalising force. This is disjunction not just as a gesture of abrogation, but of *affirmation* (‘Yes’). The ‘sin/tax’ that it codifies garners strength from alternating patterns of pressure and release – ‘falling apart and coming together’ – that mirror the dialectic of abrogation and appropriation. Eventually this dynamic, communal quest succeeds in fashioning a space where ‘new intentions’ can be formalised and given shape and tone ‘like the sun’s best muscles’. The grammar that results is genuinely hybrid and self-determining, empowered by the discursive potentials of normative syntax but no longer enslaved by them.

### **3 *Measures of Expatriation* and Britain's Post-Imperial Conversation**

At present, African-American and Asian-American poetry is engaged in a moment of great formal experiment and debate.<sup>71</sup> The previous sections of this paper sought to outline a particular linguistic argument arising from this fertile moment for hybrid writing among poets of colour, and to locate it in a reinvigorated 21<sup>st</sup>-century racial politics shaped by the legacies of slavery and white supremacy. Turning to the contemporary British situation, one has to acknowledge, first, that these same legacies are less – or differently – relevant, and, correspondingly, that British poets of colour who have emerged across the first decades of the new millennium are feeling their way into a different set of formal responses to the realities of cultural racism, influenced by the American hybrid paradigm but, to date, less radical in its oppositional politics. Perhaps the reason for this can be located in the differing trajectories of American and British racial politics over recent decades. Where the 1990s marked the advent of the War on Drugs and the mass carceral state in America – a twin assault that, as Michelle Alexander argues, ‘banished [people of colour] to a political and social space not unlike Jim Crow, where discrimination in employment, housing, and access to education was perfectly legal, and where they could be denied the right to vote’ – in Britain, public rhetoric celebrated multiculturalism and inclusion.<sup>72</sup> The young British-Indonesian poet and essayist Will Harris has written with acute irony and anger about New Labour’s false promises about racial justice during this time:

They didn’t want to appear callous, overlooking the needs of ethnic minorities; nor did they want to appear weak, giving in to the demands of identity-based ‘pressure groups’. Multiculturalism gave them the perfect rallying cry and emollient, offending no one by including everyone.<sup>73</sup>

In this final section of the article I will argue that a new generation of British and British-based poets of colour is working to expose the fallacies of an ‘emollient’ British multiculturalism, with a formal and political radicalism that increasingly takes its cues from American hybrid writers such as Rankine and Audre Lorde. In doing so, these poets often deploy the strategies of expository or narrative prose, though

the spectre of broken or 'foreign' grammar is usually looming in the background, whether as a disjunctive assertion of cultural difference, a painstaking expression of trauma and uncertainty, or an ironic critique of the way in which racialised speech is commonly received.

Bhanu Kapil, a thoroughly hybrid British-Indian writer now operating principally in America, has recently defined her poetics in terms of a method that seeks to 'work out the intersection of narrative and non-verbal factors'.<sup>74</sup> One of her key contexts, interrogated in her 2015 work *Ban en Banlieue*, is the 1979 Southall and Hayes race riot, a violent counterexample to the post-war British teleology of multiculturalism. In a statement of poetics collected in the anthology *Atlantic Drift*, Kapil wonders how best to disrupt the 'vortex or loop of traumatic memory' unleashed by this event: 'How to de-loop? How to build a counter-vortex?'<sup>75</sup> Her answer to these questions is less a solution than a series of preferences, but the desired style she describes is not the pure 'vortex' of unintelligibility. Considering various somatic approaches to trauma, including Levine's 'model of discharge', Kapil concludes:

That is why I want a sentence that shakes. A sentence that takes up the cadence of the nervous system as it discharges a fact. To map this sentence, in other words, to the gesture-posture events.<sup>76</sup>

Crucially, in this vision of a new, more responsive syntax, the sentence survives. Though many of the sentences in *Ban en Banlieue* are syntactical fragments, every bit as disruptive as an Olson or Bernstein poem, in this statement of poetics Kapil suggests that broken syntax must be mapped onto the physical experience of the subject to remain valid as a stylistic strategy. Kapil's version of bodily grammar listens intently, without preconception, to the needs of 'the nervous system as it discharges a fact'. That very somatic facticity is itself a rejoinder to the endless aporia of deconstruction. The sentence remains its fundamental mode of transmitting meaning, albeit not a sentence that might be recognised as a finite statement in a top-down, externally coded grammar.

The groundbreaking *Ten* anthology series is perhaps the most reliable gauge of contemporary practice among new British poets of colour, and its three volumes

reveal a landscape shaped largely by mainstream lyric and performance practice, with increasing incursions into the territory of prose or lyric essay.<sup>77</sup> In her editorial introduction to the third volume, Karen McCarthy Woolf describes the contours of this shifting landscape:

Poets with hybrid sensibilities are becoming part of the mainstream and there is opportunity in the multifarious capacities that technology and its platforms bring to the ways in which we read and receive narrative, whether it is on a stage, screen, piece of paper or as a linguistic or grammatical intervention.<sup>78</sup>

Harris is among the poets anthologised in this volume, and one of his showcased poems, 'Self-portrait in front of a small mirror', turns the postmodern titular conceit on its head: not the convex mirror of Ashbery, which allows for endlessly variegated and indeterminate self-projections, but a 'small mirror' that reflects a constrained, racially constructed self, in language analogically delimited by the poem's prosaic syntax:

When I open my mouth in shops, though my voice will shrink into a weird RP, I will swallow the mantra of the colonial elite who, other in blood and colour but English in taste, spend their lives fulfilling Macaulay's dream of a state able to exert soft power by giving a pliable clique the illusion of self-rule.<sup>79</sup>

In this sentence the digressive, hypotactic momentum of the sub-clauses enables Harris to expose the disorienting distensions of scale that mark a mixed-race, post-imperial sensibility, all in language that mimics the carefully formulated utterance of the speaker trying to pass as a native English speaker in the public space; it accelerates, with barely restrained panic, from a moment of alienated self-fashioning in a high street shop to an apprehension of the violent history of such assimilations theorised by Thomas Babington Macaulay in his speeches on empire and Indian education.

A very different, though no less fraught confrontation between the homogenised syntax of 'RP' and a more authentic, or responsive, form of lyric speech comes

in Yomi Sode's 'The Exhibition'. The poem is divided into three separate sections or 'exhibits', A, B and C, each of which consist of a prose paragraph followed by a lineated stanza, or several stanzas, of verse. The paragraph narrates an incident of cultural aggression in the manner of *Citizen* while the verse records the speaker's shocked response in more oblique or fragmented language. In 'Exhibit C', the paragraph relates the story of an unnamed interlocutor who vaunts to the speaker about her 'feminist' daughter's encounter with some black boys on a bus, and '*The appalling way they spoke about women, the rap language they used. Disgusting!*'<sup>80</sup> In the wake of her obviously offensive rant, the speaker describes the experience of watching, revolted, as the interlocutor scrambles to correct herself:

The kettle/still boiling, mimicked my response.  
That precise sound you ended, without a word  
I watched you/swim into each sentence,  
rearranging the letters, the meaning.  
Without a word, just a stare.<sup>81</sup>

These opposing responses – the speaker's outraged, hissing, kettle-like silence; the interlocutor's mortified but still presumptuous attempt to 'swim into each sentence,/rearranging the letters, the meaning' – assume the real and harmful potential of public language. Sode's poetic response requires him, in the first place, to use that grammatical public language to frame the racist incident as it truly happened, in a way that would make sense of it for both speaker and interlocutor. Yet the poem is equally aware of the private languages, shaped by bodily and psychic response, that gather in the interstices of public speech, requiring a different order of syntax. It exemplifies abrogation and appropriation in its very form.

In the world of British poetry, one of the most prominent and accomplished writers to operate within these hybrid forms is Vahni Capildeo, a poet born in Trinidad whose *Measures of Expatriation* – their seventh collection and first for Carcanet, emerging after over a decade of diverse, innovative, lyrical work published by smaller presses – has been widely celebrated for its investigations of a deracinated, 21<sup>st</sup>-century migrant experience. Veering from the rebarbative, experimental,

Cambridge School-inspired verse of 'Counting Sheep', to the autobiographical lyric essay mode of 'Five Measures of Expatriation', the collection deploys a wide array of syntactical resources that reflect the constantly shifting identities required of an international citizen regularly crossing borders. This deep, existential hybridity both augments and destabilises a person's linguistic competence, as depicted in 'Word by Word', a prose account of playing 'that party or family game where each person says the first word that comes to mind, prompted by what the person before has just said'.<sup>82</sup> For the poem's speaker, this harmless bit of fun in fact occasions deep-seated panic about their belonging in the language:

Often the uttered word would summon up another word in a totally inappropriate register or language; more often, several words, at once, in a kind of bee dance; most often, no words at all: sounds and images surged up, and I searched to find something to keep this game going.<sup>83</sup>

Above all, this game exposes the intimate connection between social reference and syntax. By abstracting the natural flow of conversation and reducing it to crude, artificial 'one-word events', the players collaborate on a sequence of language that sacrifices grammatical fluency in favour of maximum semantic coherence. Their play delimits the range of possible responses in a way that precisely maps a monoculture: venture a word from 'a totally inappropriate register or language', and the game will grind to an awkward halt. In response, the multilingual participant might adopt the intransigent stance of Arnold Klein's idealised lyric poet, asserting the 'self-intelligibility' of their utterance and willing the game to continue at a tangent from the parochial linguistic community that began it. But Capildeo's speaker, at this point and throughout the collection, understands the risk and loneliness of this refusal to assimilate. Far from enriching the host culture, their idiosyncratic, hybrid identity leaves them vulnerable to failures of public language that carry genuine, dangerous consequences.<sup>84</sup>

An example of this phenomenon is acted out in 'Too Solid Flesh'. Like Rankine, Capildeo probes at the dichotomy between the linguistic mind and the body that hosts it, a separation that leads the speaker in this poem to feel 'disconnected from

her corporeal self.<sup>85</sup> For the migrant subject this dissociative predicament is particularly acute, since the mind's freedom to roam and self-fashion trips up constantly on the realities of a stubbornly present, politically vexatious foreign body, whose freedom to enter and settle in a country is forever being decided by someone else. This physical body and its legal birthrights are the only aspects of a migrant's selfhood that interest the border police, and it makes the migrant painfully self-conscious of the cumbersome, 'too solid flesh' she carries about with her.

How do I take care of it? Why is it not mine? Might a description get me closer to making it mine, or at least an understanding of why I am at odds with it?<sup>86</sup>

Typical of the precocious, impatient mind to try to adapt the body in terms it can understand, via an exasperated linguistic 'description' – and typical of the body, in its unyielding materiality, to remain 'at odds' with this attempt. 'Too Solid Flesh' admits candidly to the speaker's 'need to acquire weight' which 'followed me north and overseas', a phrasing that captures the ethical demand to recognise the lyric 'I' in a country where its natural dignity is under threat.<sup>87</sup> Gradually the poem narrows into a more and more documentary account of a particular, debilitating illness suffered during an English winter. The speaker struggles to convey to a health worker on the phone that she needs medication, urgently.

The person who answered the phone had an audible conversation with his colleague. *If she doesn't have a number and she hasn't spoken to her GP we don't have to give her the Tamiflu.* I gave the number several times, to two people, in the course of a few minutes. Each time, they seemed not to remember that I had consulted the website and given them an official number.<sup>88</sup>

The precise reportage, conveyed in accurate, grammatical sentences, recalls the evidence one might provide in a tribunal. It is the function of a power imbalance, with the careless and obstructive authorities forcing the speaker to clarify her account to the point of pedantry while accepting minimal responsibility for

the language that *they* are using, since it bears so little consequence for their own wellbeing. The final breakdown in their communication arrives when the woman on the other end of the phone insists – even after being told that there is nobody available to pick up the medication in person – that ‘*I had to have family; friends; co-workers; neighbours...?*’ ‘You seem to have difficulty in understanding that someone might be alone at Christmas’, replies the beleaguered speaker, at the end of her tether with a system that is failing to heed her testimony. Whether negligent or wilful, this obtuseness represents a failure of grammar to perform one of its key tasks, that is, to communicate information efficiently between speakers in a language. Grammatical speech, nevertheless, remains the primary linguistic weapon available to the speaker in her battle to win recognition for her ‘corporeal self’ in its hour of need.

The propaganda of British multiculturalism relies on the assumption that the grievances of colonialism have been subsumed in an open, modern, rights-based society that is capable, in Harris’s words, of ‘offending no one by including everyone’. *Measures of Expatriation* consistently complicates this experience of exile by drawing attention to Britain’s historical and ongoing role as an imperial hegemon, a state and culture that instigated the slave trade, colonised large swathes of the world, and offered a model for the neo-imperialist polity of the USA. In ‘Fire & Darkness: And Also/No Join/Like’, Capildeo addresses the end of British rule in India from the vantage of their home village in Trinidad, where ‘a lunatic reverberation was set up by the 1947 Partition’.<sup>89</sup> As thousands of miles away the British Empire suddenly withdraws its violent imperial superstructure, a settled and peaceful South Asian community on a Caribbean island becomes riven by tribal politics; ‘some third-generation immigrant families briefly fought according to the lines of what had not been a division’, Capildeo reports.<sup>90</sup> The destructive hyperreality of empire – wherein great geographical distances are collapsed by fiat, with little concern for the consequences – is tracked through Capildeo’s meticulous though lyrically hybrid prose, which is able to explain and apportion blame in a way that grammatical disjunction never could. In ‘Too Solid Flesh’ they adumbrate the exact contours of their community’s cultural hybridity, grounding each layer in the strange chemistry of empire:



Our storybooks were English and children in them ran around thousand-year-old castles or two-hundred-year-old vicarages; our myths were Hindu and we were encouraged to imagine many civilizations in a universe cyclically created and destroyed; and our island geography, we were told, had been Arawak and Carib.<sup>91</sup>

A reflexive avant-garde commitment to disjunction might encourage one to represent this cultural cacophony mimetically, using a syntax of exploded, ungovernable fragmentation. Capildeo, however, shows how this hybrid culture is no cacophony at all, but rather structurally determined, with each strand being analysed, classified and coolly synthesised by the power of that most artificial and precise syntactical marker, the semi-colon. The paragraph, in effect, performs a grammarology of empire.

But if the influence of empire is as intractable as that of slavery, and warrants an equally forensic and forceful condemnation, what scope does that leave for reparation? Though *Measures of Expatriation* often depicts the exhausting, debilitating and alienating strain of being always a stranger, like *Hollywood Forever* it suggests how a more productive engagement between the post-imperial host culture and the immigrant in its midst might work:

Let's start a conversation. Ask me where I'm from.  
Where is home, really home. Where my parents were born.  
What to do if I sound more like you than you do.  
Every word an exhalation, a driving out.<sup>92</sup>

This comes from a poem called 'In 2190, Albion's Civil Conflicts Finally Divided Along Norman-Saxon Lines'. In this one title Capildeo apprehends the deep-seated narratives of conquest and tribalism that underlie Britain's inflated, domineering self-image, and how the complacency and inwardness of its present-day politics dates to the ancient squabbles of an island race stratified along axes of geography (north vs. south, England vs. the Celtic nations) and class. In this already fractious theatre of identity the interloping 'foreigner' might struggle to make their voice heard, though

the poem prompts us to consider how our shared language might give space and credence to this vulnerable new presence rather than demean it. 'Let's start a conversation' seems at first blush to traffic in the anodyne argot of multiculturalism, but coming at this point in a collection so rigorously attuned to the ramifications of speech, it 'acquires weight'. At the very least, Capildeo's invitation implies that for it to be worthy of the name, this conversation must be reciprocal, attentive, and couched in a grammar that enables the former subject of empire to talk back to it.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> D.S. Marriott, 'Response to Race and the Poetic Avant-Garde', in *Atlantic Drift: An Anthology of Poetry and Poetics*, ed. James Byrne and Robert Sheppard (Tadmorden: Arc Publications, 2017), 194–195 (194).
- <sup>2</sup> Marriott, 'Response to Race and the Poetic Avant-Garde', *ibid.*
- <sup>3</sup> Marriott, 'Response to Race and the Poetic Avant-Garde', *ibid.*
- <sup>4</sup> Marriott, 'Response to Race and the Poetic Avant-Garde', 195.
- <sup>5</sup> Evie Shockley, *Renegade Poetics: Black Aesthetics and Formal Innovation in African American Poetry* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2011), 10.
- <sup>6</sup> Shockley, *Renegade Poetics*, 9. This essay will follow Shockley in preferring 'innovative' to the more loaded, culturally delimited term 'avant-garde' where possible.
- <sup>7</sup> Marriott, 'Response to Race and the Poetic Avant-Garde', 195.
- <sup>8</sup> Marriott, 'Response to Race and the Poetic Avant-Garde', *ibid.*
- <sup>9</sup> Veronica Forrest-Thomson, *Poetic Artifice: A Theory of Twentieth-Century Poetry*, ed. Gareth Farmer (Bristol: Shearsman Books, 2016), 166.
- <sup>10</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols*, eds. Aaron Ridley and Judith Norman, trans. Judith Norman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 169.
- <sup>11</sup> E.E. Cummings, *Complete Poems 1910–1962*, ed. George James Firmage, vol. 1 (London: Granada, 1981), 291.
- <sup>12</sup> Ezra Pound, *An ABC of Reading* (London: Faber & Faber, 1991), 34.
- <sup>13</sup> Charles Bernstein, *Content's Dream: Essays 1975–1984* (Los Angeles: Sun & Moon Press, 1986), 25.
- <sup>14</sup> *Critique and Postcritique*, eds. Elizabeth S. Anker and Rita Felski (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), 14.
- <sup>15</sup> *The Empire Writes Back*, ed. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (London: Routledge, 2002), 37.
- <sup>16</sup> *The Empire Writes Back*, 37–8.
- <sup>17</sup> Stephen Clingman, *The Grammar of Identity: Transnational Fiction and the Nature of the Boundary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 16.
- <sup>18</sup> Innate pessimism about democratic political possibilities is itself a response that risks reproducing the sterile postures of critique. Anker and Felski argue that critique 'has often encouraged an antagonistic and combative attitude toward the public world; in the wake of poststructuralism, especially, critique has often been synonymous with a pronounced aversion toward norms and an automatic distrust of instrumentality and institutions' (*Critique and Postcritique*, 19).
- <sup>19</sup> Barrett Watten, *Total Syntax* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1985), 88. In this distinction, Watten is attempting to articulate how contemporary conceptual art and

poetry differs from the 'oneiric' practice of surrealism. Nevertheless, in this factional differentiation lies a broader affinity, as seen from the vantage of conventional semantics; as I alluded to in the introduction, Breton was ahead of his time in proposing a mode of writing where the syntactical 'relation *between things*' obviated semantic coherence.

<sup>20</sup> Watten, *Total Syntax*, *ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: U. Chicago Press, 1978), 16.

<sup>22</sup> Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, *ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, *ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> David Marriott, 'Signs Taken for Signifiers: Language Writing, Fetishism and Disavowal', in *Assembling Alternatives: Reading Postmodern Poetries Transnationally*, ed. Romana Huk (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2003), 338–346 (338).

<sup>25</sup> Marriott, 'Signs Taken for Signifiers', 343.

<sup>26</sup> Marriott, 'Signs Taken for Signifiers', 340–341.

<sup>27</sup> Dan Chiasson, 'Colour Codes', review of *Citizen*, by Claudia Rankine, *The New Yorker*, October 27, 2014, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/10/27/color-codes>.

<sup>28</sup> A point made eloquently by Mary-Jean Chan. See Chan, 'Towards a Poetics of Racial Trauma: Lyric Hybridity in Claudia Rankine's *Citizen*' *Journal of American Studies*, 2017, 1–27.

<sup>29</sup> Andrea Brady, 'The White Privilege of British Poetry Is Getting Worse', *The Conversation*, October 8, 2015, <http://theconversation.com/the-white-privilege-of-british-poetry-is-getting-worse-48516>.

<sup>30</sup> Arnold Klein, 'Terrance Hayes, Dan Chiasson and the Syntax of Lyric Poetry', *The Revenant Quarterly*, 1, no. 3/4 (Summer/Fall 2015), <http://revenantquarterly.org/1-2-3/>.

<sup>31</sup> Klein, 'Terrance Hayes, Dan Chiasson and the Syntax of Lyric Poetry'.

<sup>32</sup> Klein, 'Terrance Hayes, Dan Chiasson and the Syntax of Lyric Poetry'.

<sup>33</sup> Klein, 'Terrance Hayes, Dan Chiasson and the Syntax of Lyric Poetry'.

<sup>34</sup> Peter Quartermain, *Disjunctive Poetics: From Gertrude Stein and Louis Zukofsky to Susan Howe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

<sup>35</sup> Charles Olson, *Collected Prose*, eds. Donald Allen and Benjamin Friedlander (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 244.

<sup>36</sup> Olson, *Collected Prose*, 247.

<sup>37</sup> Srikanth Reddy, *Changing Subjects: Digressions in Modern American Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 19.

<sup>38</sup> Here I follow Reddy in italicising Quartermain's unemphasised 'requires'.

<sup>39</sup> Reddy, *Changing Subjects*, 25.

<sup>40</sup> Reddy, *Changing Subjects*, 19.

<sup>41</sup> '... like the language poets I question the assumed transparency of language and, therefore, employ similar strategies to reveal the hidden agendas of language': M. NourbeSe Philip, *Zong!* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2008), 195.

<sup>42</sup> Philip, *Zong!*, 191.

<sup>43</sup> Philip, *Zong!*, 25.

<sup>44</sup> Philip, *Zong!*, 192.

<sup>45</sup> Philip, *Zong!*, 192–3.

<sup>46</sup> Philip, *Zong!*, 203.

<sup>47</sup> Philip, *Zong!*, 195.

<sup>48</sup> In the earlier phases of compositional struggle, at the same time as she refers to grammar as 'a violent but necessary ordering', Philip asserts the fragmentary premise, '*madness outside the box of order*' (*Zong!*, 192).

- <sup>49</sup> Philip, *Zong!*, 195.
- <sup>50</sup> Philip, *Zong!*, 205.
- <sup>51</sup> Philip, *Zong!*, *ibid.*
- <sup>52</sup> For a key theoretical articulation of the 'sociopoetic force' latent in such arrangements, see Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (New York: Autonomedia, 2013).
- <sup>53</sup> Philip, *Zong!*, 205.
- <sup>54</sup> Brady, 'The White Privilege of British Poetry Is Getting Worse'.
- <sup>55</sup> Adam Fitzgerald, "'That's not poetry; it's sociology!'" – in defence of Claudia Rankine's *Citizen*, *The Guardian Online*, October 23, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2015/oct/23/claudia-rankine-citizen-poetry-defence>.
- <sup>56</sup> Fitzgerald, "'That's not poetry; it's sociology!'".
- <sup>57</sup> Chiasson, 'Colour Codes'.
- <sup>58</sup> Chan, 'Towards a Poetics of Racial Trauma', 9.
- <sup>59</sup> Chan, 'Towards a Poetics of Racial Trauma', 5.
- <sup>60</sup> Claudia Rankine, *Citizen* (London: Penguin, 2015), 107.
- <sup>61</sup> Chan, 'Towards a Poetics of Racial Trauma', 20. She is quoting Lyn Hejinian's 'The Rejection of Closure', itself a seminal avant-garde theory of fragmentation and psychological mimesis.
- <sup>62</sup> Chan, *ibid.*
- <sup>63</sup> Rankine, *Citizen*, 153.
- <sup>64</sup> Rankine, *Citizen*, 69.
- <sup>65</sup> Rankine, *Citizen*, 140.
- <sup>66</sup> This is a list that has expanded gradually across successive editions of the book, mapping the unabating urgency of the threat to black lives in America.
- <sup>67</sup> Harmony Holiday, *Hollywood Forever* (Albany: Fence Books, 2017), 74.
- <sup>68</sup> Holiday, *Hollywood Forever*, 74.
- <sup>69</sup> Holiday, *Hollywood Forever*, 93. Holiday is a trained dancer, and experiments with images and figures drawn from choreography throughout her poetic work.
- <sup>70</sup> Holiday, *Hollywood Forever*, 13.
- <sup>71</sup> See the recent *Poetry* magazine special edition (July/August 2017) for a vivid primer of contemporary Asian-American poets.
- <sup>72</sup> Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: The New Press Rev. ed., 2012), 58.
- <sup>73</sup> Will Harris, *Mixed-Race Superman* (London: Peninsula Press, 2018), 17.
- <sup>74</sup> Bhanu Kapil, 'Poetics', in *Atlantic Drift*, 166–168 (166).
- <sup>75</sup> Kapil, 'Poetics', 167.
- <sup>76</sup> Kapil, 'Poetics', *ibid.*
- <sup>77</sup> *Ten: New Poets from Spread the Word*, eds. Bernadine Evaristo and Daljit Nagra (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 2010); *Ten: The New Wave*, ed. Karen McCarthy Woolf (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 2014); *Ten: Poets of the New Generation*, ed. Karen McCarthy Woolf (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 2017).
- <sup>78</sup> *Ten: Poets of the New Generation*, 16–17.
- <sup>79</sup> *Ten: Poets of the New Generation*, 57.
- <sup>80</sup> *Ten: Poets of the New Generation*, 102.
- <sup>81</sup> *Ten: Poets of the New Generation*, 102.
- <sup>82</sup> Vahni Capildeo, *Measures of Expatriation* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2016), 101.
- <sup>83</sup> Capildeo, *Measures of Expatriation*, 101.

<sup>84</sup> In discussing Capildeo's poems and their speakers, I have chosen where possible to use the gender-neutral poems they/them, in accordance with the poet's preference about how they should be referred to in relation to their poetry. My intention here is not to assume any straightforward identity relation between poet and speaker, but simply to avoid the worse presumption of assigning the speaker an arbitrary, binary gender identity. In the case of poems such as 'Too Solid Flesh', however, where the speaker herself elects for the feminine pronoun, I respect that choice throughout my subsequent discussion.

<sup>85</sup> Capildeo, *Measures of Expatriation*, 20.

<sup>86</sup> Capildeo, *Measures of Expatriation*, 20.

<sup>87</sup> Capildeo, *Measures of Expatriation*, 23.

<sup>88</sup> Capildeo, *Measures of Expatriation*, 28.

<sup>89</sup> Capildeo, *Measures of Expatriation*, 14.

<sup>90</sup> Capildeo, *Measures of Expatriation*, 14.

<sup>91</sup> Capildeo, *Measures of Expatriation*, 21.

<sup>92</sup> Capildeo, *Measures of Expatriation*, 85.

## Competing Interests

I have met and corresponded with Sandeep Parmar at various points over recent years – often about the Ledbury Emerging Critics scheme, which is relevant to me in my capacity as Reviews Editor of *Poetry London* – but we have no official personal or professional connection. This article emerged after Parmar approached me in relation to this special issue and invited me to submit work for consideration.

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