

Worrying the [blood]line of British Poetry: notes on inheritance and alterity

(An expanded and revised version of a talk first delivered at
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In the introduction to his book, *When Blackness Rhymes with Blackness*, the poet-critic Rowan Ricardo Phillips begins by interrogating the idea of ‘African-American Poetry’. This term, Phillips argues, foregrounds a poet’s racial otherness – relative to normative whiteness – rather than highlighting any qualities of the poems themselves. Phillips uses the example of Phillis Wheatley to expand on his point. Wheatley – who with the publication of her book *Poems on Various Subjects* (1773) became the first African American Woman to be published – is not often written about based on her work. Most of the critical material written about Wheatley at the time of her publication focused on validating her authorship. The original edition came with a prefatory note, signed by eighteen men considered the most respectable in Boston, affirming Wheatley as the book’s

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true author. It did not matter what Phillis Wheatley had written; it was considered extraordinary that she had written anything at all.

This tendency to foreground the racial identity of non-white poets, subordinating the substance of their writing, is still worryingly common in literary criticism. The most troublesome consequence of this is that it preserves a literary culture in which poets of colour face a double bind: either they imitate the - predominantly white - canonical writers of the literary establishment, doing a violence to a part of themselves, or they write into or through their heritage and encourage a critical reading that privileges their identity. Another option might be to practice the kind of self-effacement that has become fashionable in some corners of British Poetry, borrowing from a style in US poetry that Stephen Burt calls 'Ellipticism':

Elliptical poets try to manifest a person-who speaks the poem and reflects the poet-while using all the verbal gizmos developed over the last few decades to undermine the coherence of speaking selves (Burt, Boston Review)

This kind of self-effacement is not really an option for poets of colour in the post-social media world where author photos, biographies, and video recordings are a part of identifying as a poet. It has never been easier for readers to read a poet's race into a poem.

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For a sense of how this affects contemporary British Poetry, we might consider the critical response to Sarah Howe's book *Loop of Jade* — a book that made history by becoming the first debut to be awarded the T S Eliot Prize. Though *Loop of Jade* shows a formal and thematic range that is unusual in any poetry book, most of the writing about the book has been concerned with reading Howe's mixed race heritage into the poems. A charitable view of this would be that the book accommodates such a reading, but there is so much more to the book than that. One of the few nuanced responses to the book — from the poet-critic Ben Wilkinson, writing in *The Guardian* — describes Howe as 'seeking' in her poems 'to reconcile a quintessentially English life with a starkly contrasting eastern heritage'. This assessment seems innocuous but the aesthetic standards by which Wilkinson evaluates the book are only from the 'quintessentially English' side of that dichotomy. Having enumerated the book's successes (the review is not a hatchet job by any means) the critic shares some of his reservations:

It is a shame, then, that too often Howe opts for an unconvincingly heightened and florid register — in "Pythagoras's Curtain", "cicadas ... cadenza the acousmatic dusk"; "A Painting" lays it on thick with "the oyster-crust ... of an unscraped palette — chewy rainbows, blistered jewels" — instead of working harder to write with the difficult clarity and complex simplicity of which she is capable.

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While this passage cites examples to back up the critic's claims, there is no explanation given as to why a poem should be plainspoken. Of course, a critic will not always share the aesthetic values of the work they comment on – nor should they – but the tone here presents a certain post-Movement poetic mode, one that favours social realism and a plain style, as the real thing. This mode finds its best expression in the poems Philip Larkin published in his lifetime, which in their adherence to a plain diction have come to represent a stereotypical idea of Englishness as restraint. If Howe would just '[work] harder', Wilkinson patronisingly suggests, she might achieve the kind of synthesis – 'of which she is capable' – suggested by the phrases 'difficult clarity' and 'complex simplicity'. By figuring a plain style as the aspirational mode, Wilkinson invokes the mocking tone of recent pieces by *Private Eye* and *The Sunday Times*, which, in their own ways, argued in favour of a poetic mode predominantly employed by white poets. The fact that Howe might not be aiming for plainness or clarity in her work does not seem to matter in this light but it does, in fact, matter. Of course, a critic cannot be objective, but if our critical culture is to be worth anything, critics must engage with what the work is trying to do as well as what they think it should do. Doing so, however, would mean interrogating the structures that allow critics to present subjective judgements as authoritative. *The Guardian*, *The Times*, and *Private Eye* have a lot of cultural capital and, like so many literary publications, most of the reviewers that write for them are white and they generally write about books written

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by white authors with white editors. While Wilkinson's review is thorough, and it does talk about the work, it fails to account for how a structurally racist literary culture might influence a myopic reading of work by BAME poets.

For a poet such as myself, for whom English is a second language and these isles a second home, the rejection of a 'plain style' in Howe's work mirrors the feeling of being caught between cultures. Even when the poems are 'about' identity the rhetorical shifts Howe employs recall techniques from visual and sonic art forms, complicating the idea of a stable - we could use the word 'convincing' - representation of reality. For persons of colour this disjunction is a part of everyday life. The poem 'Others' is a good example of this:

A personal Babel: a muddle. A Mendel?
Some words die out while others survive. Crossbreed.
Halfcaste. Quadroon.

*

Spun thread of a sentence: . . . *have been, and are being, evolved.*

The spiraling path from ΓΈΝΕΣΙΣ to genetics.
Language revolves like a ream of stars. ('Others',
Loop of Jade)

The register is continually shifting, mirroring the process of adapting your demeanour, idiolect etc. to fit-in to a dominant culture that denies you bodily sovereignty

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through the violence of language. There is a sense of that violence in the repetition of injurious names in the above passage. What is particularly striking is the way that these - seemingly obsolete - words call up newer epithets that appear 'politically correct' but amount to the same othering of persons of colour. The fact that this passage describes a 'personal Babel' adds to the sense of such disjunction as 'everyday'. Synthesising these processes into a readily understandable idiom would not do justice to a lived experience in which the self is an always-fractured thing.

When I started taking poetry seriously, the main influences on the poems I wrote were TS Eliot and Douglas Dunn. I had been introduced to 'Prufrock' while studying for an A level in English Literature, and something about the poem's haunting unfixed quality struck me as exciting. Later I came across a second-hand copy of Douglas Dunn's *Selected Poems* and fell in love with the first poem I read upon flicking through, a poem called 'In the Small Hotel'. However, at this time, I was also obsessed with Hip Hop lyricism; Dunn and Eliot shared space with the other stars of my literary firmament: Mobb Deep, Nas, Jehst, and Chester P. It was only natural, then, that my first involvement with poetry was through the performance poetry scene — as it was then called. Here, I could perform my rap lyrics accapella and the audience accepted that as a poem; I was encouraged to see commonalities between poetries that others considered mutually exclusive. Because of this openness, I saw little difference between the reportage of a young Nasir Jones

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surveying the sprawling housing project of Queensbridge, New York and Douglas Dunn's evocations of working class life in Hull:

Broken glass in the hallway, bloodstained floors
neighbours look at every bag you bring through your
doors
lock the top lock, mama shoulda cuffed me to the
radiator,
why not? It might've saved me later from my block
N.Y. cops [...] (Nas, 'NY State of Mind Pt.2')

A man rots in his snoring.
On quiet feet, policemen test doors.
Footsteps become people under streetlamps.
Drunks return from parties,
Sounding of empty bottles and old songs. (Dunn,
'From the Night-Window')

Outside the world of performance poetry, though, standards of taste hinged on the fact of these two worlds remaining separate. I remember arguing with a tutor at university who was convinced that the poem's truest form was the printed page rather than the speaking voice. This turned out to be something of a common view in literary studies, which traditionally holds the poem as a cerebral thing; the site of communion between reader and poet not a thing to be experienced publicly like a rap lyric. I should say that rap was

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not too friendly with its printed cousin either (the emcee and producer Evidence from the Hip Hop group Dilated Peoples summarises this dislike with a line that runs: 'emcees without a voice should write a book'). I have always believed in the possibilities of the space between but the two scenes I became part of wanted me to pick a side.

For a while, this feeling of liminality was a source of frustration that fed the work. There are folders in an attic somewhere overflowing with angry and defensive poems in which I entreat the reader to allow me to be more than their image of me. With a few exceptions, I cannot help thinking of these poems as failures. Not only because the writing was mawkish but also because much of this writing reaffirms what it seeks to combat. In these poems my identity, and in particular my otherness, is foregrounded in a manner that makes the matter of my identity the main propositional content of the poem. Moreover, such an approach centres whiteness as the norm even as it seeks to challenge that notion. The main thing the poems have to say is 'I am complex'. At the time, saying it was an important thing because I felt like an interloper when I tried to access certain literary spaces. Once, in the development of new work for broadcast, a radio producer asked me to speak a section of my poem 'in an African accent', on another occasion a very influential poetry editor told me, almost as a warning, that their publication didn't consider performance poetry because it doesn't work on the page. In his book *Looking for Leroy*, the scholar Mark Anthony Neal uses the analogy of reading

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to describe this phenomenon; showing us how certain modes of being are accepted by white people as 'legible' black masculine identities and others are not. In her essay, 'Not a British Subject', Sandeep Parmar illustrates how the foregrounding of racial otherness places certain expectations on BAME poets:

Mechanisms in place systematically reward poets of color who conform to particular modes of self-foreignizing, leaving the white voice of mainstream and avant-garde poetries in the United Kingdom intact and untroubled by the difficult responsibilities attached to both racism and nationalism.

We can infer that by 'mechanisms' Parmar means poetry publishing and poetry prize culture as well as its attendant infrastructure. Conforming to certain 'legible' aspects of their identity seems to be the only way that poets of colour can 'progress' in mainstream poetry. Even in avant-garde poetries, some of which, as Andrea Brady suggests in her article 'The white privilege of British Poetry is getting worse', hinge on self-effacement, poets of colour must limit themselves to be considered credible.

Much of the recent work towards equity in British Poetry comes off the back of the Free Verse report, published by Spread the Word. The report, published in 2007, found that 'less than 1% of poetry published by major presses in the UK is by black and Asian poets' in spite of the fact that black

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and Asian poets featured regularly at live poetry events. The reasons offered are manifold but the responses from the publishers surveyed for the report are telling. Many of these publishers said that they publish based on ‘merit and merit alone’ and ‘[i]f Black and Asian people are poorly represented on their list, it is because either they are not submitting their work or it is not good enough to make the cut’. How are we to believe it possible for gatekeepers to judge work ‘on merit’ if this group of - mostly white - editors think race does not influence their thinking at all? Once again, whiteness is occupying a supposedly objective position, a position of tremendous, often unacknowledged, privilege. Such woeful figures demanded a response and The Complete Works, a development scheme for BAME poets, was created by Spread the Word and Arts Council England in an attempt to change the landscape of British Poetry. As I write, several Complete Works fellows have gone on to publish collections with so-called ‘major’ presses and a number have won or been shortlisted for prizes. Newer research, conducted by the director of the Complete Works Dr. Nathalie Teitler, states that 8% of the poetry published by major presses is by BAME poets. Nevertheless, how do we go beyond publications and prizes into a genuine paradigm shift? Well, for a start, we must keep challenging unacknowledged privilege where we find it, and as TY says, ‘break the lock, if door’s not open’.

This essay has been extracted from Pamphlet Issue One,
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