

## *Decolonizing the English Lyric through Diasporic Women's Poetry*

*Sandeep Parmar*

British poetry has cohered, and perhaps always will cohere, around a singular expressive lyric subject – aesthetic values associated with universal experience read as White – as well as with the canonicity of the lyric tradition: its form, fields of reference, poetic craft. Although mainstream, mostly lyric, British poetry has become increasingly racially diverse in the past decades, a lyric mode predicated on Whiteness remains largely unchallenged. British poets of color all too often rely on an aesthetic of self-foreignizing, for example by voicing of outsidership or by deploying exoticizing markers of “authenticity.” Their poetry thereby leaves the premise of a White lyric universality intact by pointing always to the specific, the local, the personal as other. As I have written elsewhere “a mostly white poetic establishment prevails over a patronising culture that reflects minority poets as exceptional cases – to be held at arms’ length like colonial curiosities in an otherwise uninterrupted tradition extending back through a pure and rarefied language” (Parmar, “Not a British Subject”). More recently, I have argued that “to speak of transcending the self is to engage with the complex problem of the lyric. Lyric forms a zone of contact or conflict. The body of the poet of colour is made visible in the space of the poem; their voice becomes a lyric phenomenon inseparable from their social and racial positioning” (Parmar, “Still Not a British Subject”). Where does the dominant poetic mode in Britain leave the poet of color? What violence might it do to their voice when set against a reader’s expectations? What shapes the way a reader approaches the lyric “I”? From a pedagogical standpoint, rooted in tertiary education, specifically an English Literature degree, these questions are essential for any teacher of poetry to address both in the classroom and, I would argue, for their own reading practices, their own sense of literary value. One significant sticking point for university teachers like myself is the lack of scholarship on contemporary British poetry and race, a dearth that has only very recently

been addressed in any significant way.<sup>1</sup> This absence of capacious critical frameworks – from academic criticism to representative anthologies – puts considerable obstacles in the path of everything from course design and delivery to wider issues that come to bear on reading practices around the lyric, namely the perception of an authentic speaker and the expectations of form.

A postcolonial reading of British poetry by non-White authors cannot be prevented from the marginalizing force of an imperial, and therefore inherited, bestowed, or enforced language. And yet it is likely that many contemporary British poets whose ethnic relations to former colonies are at a second- or third-generation remove from British subjects of empire do not consider themselves postcolonial subjects. There are complex differences between poets who migrated to Britain and those who were born in the UK, whose ties are perhaps more tenuous, limited to intergenerational memories at a remove, shared bloodline, cultures, or surnames. Where critical studies of poetry by non-White British writers sometimes shows its failures is in a flattening of discourse about race, abetted by terms like postcolonial or transnational or even “world literature.”<sup>2</sup> Each term makes little room for the industrious – indeed, the market and material culture are never far away from literary production – interconnectivity of poets in the present. A backward-looking glance over the previous century marks the rootedness of scholars in inceptive moments but does not account for a rapidly changing landscape, mostly because criticism is most comfortable where it is cumulative and stable. Nor are there enough studies of contemporary poetry and race as they intersect with the UK in ways markedly different from the USA, where such studies abound.<sup>3</sup> Critical framing of UK poetry often ignores the pressures of racism or xenophobia (even when the work at hand responds to it), the shaping of a reader’s perceptions of the poet and her text as one and of the same and from where this cultural construction emerges, as well as the poet’s own determination of themselves as a subject. It is my intention here to interrogate the readerly gesture, its lyric premise of expression and authenticity, in order to reproach national canons and traditions that privilege the well-crafted lyric poem and its supposed universality. Mobilizing a decolonized reading of the lyric – one that dismantles formal features and a reader’s expectations of an expressive and authentic voice – I will offer finally two examples from my own experience teaching the works of Sarah Howe and Bhanu Kapil. To decolonize the lyric form, one that in its contemporary usage relies on a transposition of the reader onto the “I,” is to acknowledge that at its heart lyric and its assumptions of universality and authentic emotional

expression can often be a site of violence and objectification for poets of color. To read lyric poems by non-White poets without an awareness of lyric's tacit agreement of universality is to ignore the ruptures – and reconciliations – that the form allows.

### The Problem of Lyric

The primacy of late twentieth-century British lyric as an expressive mode, offering experience – and from experience some meaningful truth – naturally makes the poem a vehicle for the poet's life. But what objective reality can the lyric provide? Jonathan Culler's analysis of the problem of lyric speech acts viewed as fictions might be recounted thus: if New Critical approaches define the lyric "I" as a fictional speaker rather than the poet speaking, then the design of lyric as assimilated truth, too, becomes the realm of fiction. The privileging of the text over the utterance, in Culler's view, predisposes the reader to a false self, one constructed by language in the moment of lyric's expression (Culler 105–109):

Modern criticism, increasingly cognizant of the problems of treating lyric as the direct and sincere expression of the experience and affect of the poet, has moved toward something of a compromise position, treating lyric as expression of a persona rather than the poet and thus as mimesis of the thought or speech of such a persona created by the poet. (Culler 109)

The dissociation of the poet from the speaker, the primacy of the text over intention by a New Critical model, empties lyric from its formal inception. Culler's investment in the lyric "I" as determined by form, meaning, and address resists the postures of linguistic determination. But what he returns to the lyric – the intimacy of song, of lyric's ritual function as a subjective experience both in its own time and in time immemorial – is poetry's conspicuous dialectic function. A poem needs a reader to give it the force of speech, and the reader is in turn creator of that speaking subject in her listening. It is a mutually constitutive project, more so than in, say, in fiction. But the problem of overidentification between poet and speaker rests lightly on whoever is least conspicuous to a reader. Where there is a disconnect between a perceived reality presented by the lyric subject and its reader, that distance constructs dissonance. This is especially true when the experience conveyed is one that positions itself as other by way of deviating from a transcendent universal subject, which is so often White, middle class, male, even when student readers themselves may not identify as such. Bridging the distance between the speaker's voiced consciousness

and the reader's own inner consciousness is where lyric does its work. But particularities of identity obstruct this connection, complicate a reading that might otherwise be transposition, and turn it into a perception of that distance between, say, the White reader and the non-White body making itself visible in the lyric space. And yet all lyric reading, regardless of the perceived identity of the "I," requires the reader to be aware of the constructedness of the speaker's voice and its seeing (or being seen). Such failed transpositions in the readerly act are among the most challenging to overcome in a teaching context. Before I consider lyric as a poetic mode – the dominant mode, in fact, of poetry taught throughout education for all ages – it is necessary to think more deeply about how British poetry by non-White poets is often framed within critical and educational contexts.

Admittance to the canon of contemporary British poetry for poets of color often comes at a price: legibility, a racial markedness that, for incorporation in an invariably White curriculum, singles itself out as deviating from universality, coded as White. University undergraduate students most often arrive with reading strategies shaped by school and exam syllabi. It is therefore worth briefly noting how inclusive these exams, particularly A-levels, are – and on what terms poets of color are included. Whilst generally in the UK context A-levels are crucial for admittance into undergraduate degrees, there is considerable latitude in options provided by teachers at secondary schools and colleges, and the variations between exam boards mean that there is no one set syllabus. However, what is striking and not altogether surprising is that exam boards' suggested contemporary poems by poets of color tend to foreground racial otherness, longing, thematic concerns presumably taken for granted as the preserve of non-White writers. One example, "The Wedding" by British Pakistani poet Moniza Alvi, dramatizes a metaphorical mismatch between bride and groom as exile from one's homeland, a failed romance with the country of arrival which is in this case England. "I expected a quiet wedding / high above a lost city / a marriage to balance on my head / like a forest of sticks, a pot of water" (Alvi 74–75). The bride's innocence, and indeed ignorance of her betrothed, naturally plays into a cultural stereotype of arranged marriages, one no doubt as familiar to British readers as a rural woman carrying a water jug on her head. The poem's existence, alongside so many others like it on an A-level syllabus, raises the difficult question of what is edifying about lyric's claim to authenticity: to present a genuine voice from a White reader's (and teacher's) perspective that speaks to the longing of the migrant. An even more thorny question might be what does the lyric poem create in its space of personal expression – transmuted through

landscape, sensory detail, experience – that allows for this poem to be written in this way where the poet might be seen to be speaking about the self at a distant remove, a moment of double consciousness? No doubt the poem's place in the classroom is to exemplify the poet's own biographical situation and its wider appeal for those in a similar racial positioning as the poet's presumed cultural background.

A simplistic reading would identify the poet with the speaker, and yet a simplified (what Veronica Forrest-Thomson called in *Poetic Artifice* "bad naturalisation") reading is what is called for in the rooting out of the marriage metaphor and unbelonging. The three "I" statements in the poem – "I expected," "I insisted," "I wanted" – correspond with silent desire, unrealized hope, and disappointment. This disempowered speaker capitulates to the plural "we," and the lyric subject is lost, finally, to interpretations of their situation inscribed on racial tropes that translate in a British context as foreign: bathing buffalo, hennaed hands like "roadmaps." Alvi, who was born in Pakistan but left for Britain as an infant, has spoken about her projected fantasies of a lost homeland standing in for lived experiences (Shamsie). The complexity of her relationship, as a poet, to her own history does not match the rootedness of the lyric subject who is from elsewhere – for Alvi, the marriage here is perhaps an embodiment of duality, of selves married into one, rather than a migrant's dashed hopes. But in the context of teaching this poem, it would be neither right nor possible to draw the author's biography into our reading. The lyric stands alone in its educational purpose as a vehicle for meaning – a meaning predetermined by its being chosen. And the poem's use of language – a heavily crafted translation of faux naïf sentiments into English that mimics a nonnative speaker, as in for example the lines "The time was not ripe / for us to view each other" – confirms such a reading. The British-Cypriot poet Anthony Anaxagorou describes his own experience learning poetry in sixth form as presupposing an ideal (White, middle-class) reader: "To suggest certain poetries are better aligned with certain readers is to reinstate a conservative and violent rhetoric which assumes there is either a singular/correct way to navigate a poem, or that one must first be trained in knowing how to think about the mechanisms central to poetic logic" ("Accessibility"). Yet the constructing of an ideal reader – one whose sensibilities and interactions with the world mimic those of a universal experience coded by a privileged majority – underlies the way we teach poetic value, especially in the well-crafted lyric.

In and outside of an educational context, it is hard to divorce our expectations of "I" statements from the voice that formulates this speech act. To do so requires recognizing that the lyric poem inscribes itself into

a tradition where the “I” may have no referent in the real world; it necessitates a leap toward fictionalizing that genre that we have inherited wholesale as a vehicle for personal experience and emotion. Unless a lyric situates itself within an imagined persona, through dramatic monologue, a reader will, as Fred D’Aguiar writes of Irish Nigerian poet Gabriel Gbadamosi’s typically English poetry, seek the “burying [of] feeling into sensuous detail which collectively should stand for what the poet thinks and feels” (D’Aguiar 67). D’Aguiar’s foundational essay on Black British poetry, “Have You Been Here Long?,” tellingly never offers critical distance between the speaking subject and the poet. Perhaps this is largely because the poets he discusses directly reference experiences of discrimination and migration in a time (his essay focuses on poets of the 1970s and 1980s) when the political marginalization of Black people and racialized poets within the wider canon required a direct speaking back to White readers. There is something beguiling and satisfying about this clear identification of the “I” with the poet – it makes use of the full force of expression that lyric has to offer. His readings of Jackie Kay, Linton Kwesi Johnson, James Berry, Grace Nichols, and Kamau Brathwaite, among others, are distinguished by their deeply knowledgeable, attentive ear for dub, reggae, and dialect-inflected poetics. But, as I have explained above, the danger remains, as D’Aguiar alludes to in the conclusion of his essay, that the centering of racial experience in reading these poets categorizes and marginalizes them, as if to suggest that the English language and English-language poetry had not been changed irrevocably in ways to which we do not often enough attend by the cultural imports of writers from across the world. A fuller understanding of lyric’s ability to communicate difference requires a grounding of lyric’s function of address in a social and historical space. As Culler also writes, “a socially oriented criticism can treat the work as its recurrent coming into being in a social space, which is itself in part the effect of that work and always to be constructed by a reading of one’s own relation to it” (301). In other words, the deferral of a text’s objectivity, a return to the lyric’s force of speech and utterance around a speaker and the society it addresses, opens up political possibilities for the text that are crucial to a decolonized reading of lyric poetry.

### **Reshaping the Syllabus**

The common practice of a slow incorporation of “diverse” poetic voices into reading lists, we can agree, is wholly inadequate. When I began teaching in higher education, as one of two people of color teaching

literature in my department, the task of filling the contemporary poetry course's "Black British Poetry" week fell to me. The course, which I have recently taken on and remade entirely, covered British poetry from 1930 to the present, an odd departure point that scooped up late modernists like Auden, Gascoyne, or Bunting or (American-born) H. D.'s Blitz poems in with fellow poets Ted Hughes, Philip Larkin, and Dylan Thomas. Looking back over that first reading list, I see that one mooted version sandwiched Linton Kwesi Johnson between weeks dedicated to Jeremy Prynne and Geoffrey Hill. A few clear pedagogical problems emerge from the course design I inherited, such as the single-author focus, the absence of national, regional, and historical contexts, a disregard for aesthetic, political, and social factors, and, most obviously, the lack of non-White poets (and indeed the few women poets). What such a course offers is an exemplary list, not just examples of British poets, but those who are either seen as unrivaled or broadly representative of the four nations (and linguistic differences) of Britain across twelve weeks of teaching. Where lyric is concerned, attention on one poet and their work – detached from an understanding of, say, the broadly antimodernist strain of twentieth-century British poetry from Georgian poets to the New Generation Poets – reinforces the voice of the poet against the biographical limitations of an author-focused discussion. Anecdotally, it was my experience that students saw "Black British Poetry" week or a week devoted to a seemingly marginalized poet as optional, unnecessary, and even unfairly imposed on a largely White student body. They were less likely to attend lectures they felt were noncanonical. But surely the very structure of a course that would tokenize writers in this way is sending a subliminal signal already, one that undermines their inclusion on merit alone.

How best to reflect the complexity and variations across the UK as well as aesthetic/poetic modes and complex questions of identity? Structuring a course that takes two main presumptions to task – that British poetry can be spoken of as a national tradition in the present and that this it is distinct from other anglophone poetic cultures – was one solution to this conundrum devised by me and a fellow tutor.<sup>4</sup> Moving away from the use of anthologies, many of which are entirely White or include limited selections of poets of color, was another crucial step. In fact, an opening gambit I enjoyed as part of an introductory lecture was to haul a stack of UK poetry anthologies to class and to scrutinize their tables of contents with students. That, coupled with a selection of poetry magazines from 1930 to the present (and statistical analysis of poetry publishing and poetry reviewing, which remains largely White), prepared our discussions for a critical approach to

what had otherwise seemed stable realities.<sup>5</sup> Practically speaking, lectures and seminars were not apportioned to single authors or groups of authors but divided into three main strands – “nation,” “theory,” and “poetics.” These thematic strands exposed students to issues particular to place, voice, style, and sociohistorical contexts and included race, class, lyric, and antilyric poetics as well as climate crisis and landscape poetry. A natural denaturing of these “strands” occurred: for example, national traditions were exposed as fluid and varied, and race theory supplanted postcolonial approaches and the pedagogical obstacles this analysis presents. Jahan Ramazani acknowledges that postcolonial readings have been seen as “homogenising” and “victim-centred, too colonially-fixated” but maintains that the term postcolonial “continues to be a powerful tool for revealing linkages across regions emerging from colonial rule, even as it avoids dissolving all writers in an undifferentiated globality, heedless of the differentials of power, history, and language” (Ramazani, “Introduction” 2). In the wider project of anglophone poetry written across national borders, diasporas, and former colonies, the rootedness of power, of English-language educational systems as “producing and sustaining structures of domination” (Viswanathan 4), this particular lens is useful. But at the heart of empire, in its hostile environment and its unrelenting Whiteness, an argument could be made that postcolonial literary readings invert the ongoing, persistent domination of linguistic violence. In his book, *A Transnational Poetics*, Ramazani offers a more fluid paradigm for reading poets whose ties to multiple places cannot be easily resolved through national canons but must be seen as in constant relation and, at times, opposition. Considering poetry by Black British writers from McKay to Evaristo, he offers a utopic vision of variety, in-betweenness, of movement that enables “their creolization of Britain and Britain’s creolization of themselves” (Ramazani, *Transnational* 180). Standing in for hybridity, creolization is a cross-cultural term used here to imply a kind of mixing that makes little space for differentials of power (or that, as Ramazani will know, White modernist poets often creolized to shore up that aesthetic dominance). No mode of reading is satisfactory that does not vigorously bring itself up to date – poetry is a fast-changing genre – or face up to present-day social and political realities that shape the contexts in which poetry is produced. The crystallization of critical frameworks and the stasis of the poetry culture they promote can only be avoided by being attentive to change, by seeing the poem not as an isolated event (as the lyric often purports to be) but a line of thinking that points in several directions at once. Would it be possible to teach Linton Kwesi Johnson’s work



without the long lens of radical Black activism that stretches to Jay Bernard's recent book, partly concerning the New Cross Fire, taking into account the archiving of events and of continued experiences of racism, state violence, and police brutality that sit between the two? Yes, but in my view it would not be advisable.

### Decolonizing the Lyric

In the T.S. Eliot Prize's near thirty-year history, only two women of color have won it, Sarah Howe in 2015 for her debut *Loop of Jade* and Bhanu Kapil in 2020 for her sixth full-length collection *How to Wash a Heart*. Prize culture's complex relationship with poetry canons does not in any way guarantee longevity to a book or its author, even if the prize is the most coveted of all, but, like a weather vane, prizes are a useful gauge of present conditions: the direction of public opinion on literary value and its relationship to the empowerment of a (sometimes conservative, sometimes progressive, depending on your sympathies) judging panel. Awarding a prize is never an apolitical gesture. And for teachers of poetry, the visibility of prize-winning books and their sometimes-direct link to educational contexts – with, say, the Forward Prizes for Poetry, which through its foundation disseminates prize poems directly to schools to develop its audiences – makes a critical analysis of their reception in context all the more necessary. It would be foolhardy to offer a rejoinder to lyric reading that ignores its reception in public life and critical culture; such a reading would only reinforce the text's primacy and the subject's assumed universality or marginalization based on the poet's race. Since its publication, I have taught Howe's book as a way to think through lyric and antilyric poetics on undergraduate and postgraduate poetry courses. Her book as well as Kapil's employ lyric subjects but in doing so undermine assumptions innate to dominant forms of lyricism, namely authenticity, personal expression, a suspended just-past moment detailed through anecdote and leading to an epiphanic meaningfulness. Both books also introduce a linguistic difficulty either by introducing extratextual reference and allusion or through formal and syntactical complexity. My reading of Kapil's most recent book is informed by many years of teaching her previous works primarily at postgraduate level. Howe and Kapil offer alternatives to lyric poems that appear to unquestioningly inscribe themselves onto an "I" that coheres around the performance of an "authentic" racial otherness.

In keeping with reading poets in light of their reception as well as their aesthetics, I turn back to Howe's Eliot Prize win. As I have discussed elsewhere and as Mary Jean Chan details in her essay "Journeying Is Hard," Howe's book was almost immediately beset by controversy in the press.<sup>6</sup> Newspaper reviews and interviews – as well as parodies in *Private Eye* and the *TLS* – highlighted Howe's youth, beauty, Oxbridge pedigree, and her foreignness (she is mixed race, born in Hong Kong but raised in England). The furor over her win and the disquiet from mostly White men that ensued quickly overshadowed the enormous range (subject and style) of Howe's collection, reducing it to poems about her and her mother's ethnic background.<sup>7</sup> The book's many poems that fall outside of perceived biographical reference were mostly ignored by these critics. Where might the interstices lie between a lyric self that constructs a legible racial experience and an ironic subject that elsewhere takes apart chinoiserie and race in the literary imagination? How might these impulses be read as mutually constitutive of a rejoinder to lyric violence? I read and teach *Loop of Jade* in light of its determination to decategorize and defamiliarize forms of knowledge, linguistic and material function – where objects and people as much as languages and places disrupt lyric's arrival at meaning, discarding such an impulse as colluding with the very hierarchies of domination that she seeks to dismantle. Radically rethinking lyric from the inside – in poems that look as though they are driven by personal expression and "I" statements – Howe's work opens onto categories foundational to how we think of race, nation, and empire.

A critique of taxonomy in language shapes Howe's book, not least by her quotation and further parody of Jorge Luis Borges's own parodic "certain Chinese encyclopaedia," in which animals are divided into fourteen arbitrary categories. Howe takes each category – from "those that belong to the Emperor" to "that from a long way off look like flies" – and skewers their fabulist definitiveness. In doing so, she calls to mind Foucault's own fascination with Borges's invented text – set within a wider critique of a universal language – and inevitably questions the relation between the self and other in the space of lyric coherence and unity of voice. Purposefully set among these forgeries of sincerity, Howe's "autobiographical" poems must be read similarly as constructions of, and thereby an undermining of, lyric authenticity. In the sonnet "(n) that from a long way off look like flies," the smudge of a dead midge in the binding of an edition of Shakespeare opens onto a father–daughter relationship. The speaker identifies herself as the owner of the book "my undergrad Shakespeare," and

queries whether the fly's blood is her own, but the lyric "I" does not appear until the end of the poem:

At empathy's darkening pane we see  
our own reflected face: how, if that fly  
had a father and mother? On the heath, Lear  
assumes all ragged madmen share  
ungrateful daughters. The way my father,  
in his affable moods, always thinks you  
want a gin and tonic too. I wonder  
if I should scrape her off with a tissue.

(Howe 51)

Its sudden wondering, emphasized by the enjambed line – tellingly rhyming “wonder” with “father,” “share” and “Lear” – solidifies the poem’s voice both inconclusively and after much melding. The fly, its blood, the “we” and “our” gives way to an addressee “you” who may be general or yet another way for the “I” to escape being pinned down in the pages of tragedy.<sup>8</sup> The “affable” father drinks gin and feels his daughter is ungrateful, suggesting of course that the speaker’s father has less affable moments too. This lyric returns at the end of the sonnet, the silent “you” in “tissue” and its thrum in “too” midway through the penultimate line rhythmically separates the fly from the speaker finally in the moment of subject–object distance. But the speaker isn’t “a long way off” from this fly, in all ways she assembles herself and the reader into the same category of animal. Howe is fulfilling Foucault’s own sense here of threatening “with collapse our age-old distinction between the Same and the Other” (Foucault xv). Authenticity, too, is under threat with the constant fluidity of positioning, accomplished by the fast-paced move through pronouns, and the fly is finally gendered as female, removable but not removed. The speaker pauses inconclusively as if scraping her own face from its canonical aberration. This is empathy’s “darkening pane,” the mirror made possible by the dim light of lyric’s intimate situation, the half-light of self-recognition in others. But, as Ruth Ling observes, “in all its opacity, *Loop of Jade* thoroughly denies that any sense of enlightenment or epiphany can be reached through lyric” (Ling 81).

Readers familiar with British-Indian-American poet Bhanu Kapil’s back catalogue, namely her five previous full-length collections, her performances and pamphlets, will note immediately that her sixth book (the first to be published in the UK) looks very dissimilar to anything she has written before. *How to Wash a Heart* is a lyric sequence of five interrelated parts, written in very short lines; the main action is

concerned with a tense and at times hostile imagined guest–host relationship. “It’s exhausting to be a guest / In somebody else’s house / Forever” (Kapil, *Heart* 4). Conversations between the two women (the host is White, the guest is Brown) are interspersed with recollections or narratives that reveal the guest’s past history of migration from the Partition of India onward to the UK (and the USA). *How to Wash a Heart*, as Kapil noted in an interview I conducted last year, is intended to be read quickly – in just enough time for a cup of tea to go cold (Parmar, Interview). Kapil and I have coauthored an essay/poem text on the legacy of Partition and lyricism that was published first as a standalone piece in *Poetry London* (a special issue edited by Sarah Howe) and then as part of *Threads*, a conversation between me, Kapil, and the British Indian avant-garde poet Nisha Ramayya. In *Threads*, Kapil and I imagine a fourth space, a radical site of undoing and becoming, beyond our shared three countries of origin and migration, where the nomadic self as lyric subject can untangle themselves from personal and shared histories: “In the fourth space, the memorised pattern has been tugged loose, the yarn or wool or radical fibres on the floor like water.”<sup>9</sup> Kapil is an expert user of personae: her book *Ban en Banlieue* is the apex of lyric entanglement with another named figure, Ban, who is a character invoked by the speaker to stand in for a self. Recounting her creation of Ban, Kapil writes that a dream “requires me to acknowledge that my creature (Ban) is overwritten by a psychic history that is lucid, astringent, witty. No longer purely mine” (*Ban* 27). A hybrid text written in mainly prose fragments, *Ban* is a site of generic experiment – first a failed novel then a series of autosacrifices, performances, narrations where the speaker and Ban meet and diverge in a history of racist violence. One that is “no longer purely mine,” the text navigates the readership it addresses and one that it is addressed by the very same readers. By comparison with this book and Kapil’s others, *How to Wash a Heart* seems beguilingly straightforward. It begins:

Like this?  
 It’s inky-early outside and I’m wearing my knitted scarf, like  
 John Betjeman, poet of the British past.  
 I like to go outside straight away and stand in the brisk air.  
 Yesterday you vanished into those snowflakes like the ragged beast  
 You are.

(*Heart* 1)

The half-question that sets the poem in motion may be “Do you like this?” or “Is it done like this?” It may indeed be “Is this how you wash a heart?”

Whichever way we read it, the answer depends on external guidance, knowledge, approval from what I imagine is the host, whether this is the nation state or its native population to whom the immigrant is always cautiously beholden. The invocation of John Betjeman, laureate whom my mother's generation read in school, sets up this lyric moment of address – asking if the speaker is starting off in the right way. The heart is both metaphor and a physical object appearing in the poem and in the performance (at the ICA in London) that inspires the book, a melting heart of red ice. Emotively, lyric is a kind of cleansing, a purgatory expression that is momentary and complete. It is a washing of one's heart, a private act made public for an unknown audience. Kapil explains her formal decisions and her use of short lines as a kind of controlled energy. "I'm curious about the forward movement of the sentence when it is curtailed . . . how do you build emotion in a work? The non-verbal elements of the poem are the place where emotion resides. In this book, it is less about commas or semicolons but the ways the lines are cut. I understand that as syntax" (Parmar, Interview).

As lyric goes, Kapil's use of the "I" subject position is not straightforwardly demarcated in the poem's sections describing host–guest interactions. Very often the "I" shifts between the two women so that the acts of violence are reciprocal, and the victim/aggressor dynamic is unified by a desire so intimate that it feels shared, almost erotic. "I want you to touch / my cervix. / I want my dress / Shredded / And my life / Too. [. . .] Whatever you want to do / to me do it" (*Heart* 38). To consider the violence that the lyric space creates for an "I" who does not stand in for universality is to invite intimacy leading to obliteration. What "I want" and "you want" are bound together by an unspoken agreement not to disrupt the balance of power: to want what the host wants is the guest's only hope of fulfillment.

The host–guest chemistry  
 Is inclusive, complex, molecular,  
 Dainty.  
 Google it.  
 Does the host envelop  
 The guest or does the guest  
 Attract diminished forms  
 Of love, like the love  
 A parent has for a child  
 In September

And January, when the child  
 Is at its most vulnerable?  
 Are these questions enough  
 To violate  
 Your desire for art  
 That comes from a foreign  
 Place?  
 What are the limits  
 Of this welcome?  
 After all, I don't feel anything  
 For you.

(Heart 40)

To reconcile the lyric subject in this lengthy passage with the former quotation is to always question who is speaking and what truth is being expressed. Truth, after all, is a preoccupation of the expressive post-Romantic lyric poem. Is it that the “I” feels nothing for the host, or is this the host speaking? More interestingly perhaps, “I don't feel anything” as a standalone line points us back to the host's assumptions that her guest is subhuman, a kind of animal. Or maybe this is the guest's refusal to feel emotion for the “you,” for the reader who voyeuristically awaits the emotional payload. Kapil mimics lyric form but undermines its unspoken contract with this reader who, like the host, transposes its desire on the speaking subject who “comes from a foreign place.”

It is certainly possible to reclaim the lyric from textual, political, and social spaces of Whiteness and violence without denaturing its intended purpose. One need not, as a teacher, bury the student in a textual analysis that shuts out a poem's context, nor should they use a biographical lens to interpret the poem's meanings. Rather, by choosing poets who challenge the primacy and expectations of lyric, we stand to gain strategies of thinking through poetic language on its own terms, to listen afresh for the multiplicity of the self in all forms of speech.

### Notes

1. I was invited to edit a special issue on race and British poetry for the *Journal of British and Irish Innovative Poetry*, which appeared in 2020, the first of its kind in the UK.
2. I have in mind here critics such as Jahan Ramazani, Deirdre Osborne, Kwame Dawes, Elleke Boehmer, and Gemma Robinson, whose critical writing is informed by the lenses of “world literature,” “transnational,” and “postcolonial” poetry, among others.

3. For a few examples, see Wang; Yu; Shockley; Nielsen and Ramey.
4. I am grateful to my colleague Dr. Sam Solnick for his imaginative pedagogical leaps.
5. For data on poetry publishing and poets of color see Coates; Kean; Teitler 2.
6. See “Still Not a British Subject” and Chan 22.
7. When Sarah Howe’s debut collection, *Loop of Jade*, won the 2015 T.S. Eliot Prize, a troubling set of reviews, satire, and interviews appeared in British newspapers and magazines. Kate Kellaway’s 2015 *Observer* round-up predated this but unwittingly set the tone. Kellaway praised the “oriental poise” of Howe’s volume, which had “slipped through [her] net.” After Howe also won the *Sunday Times* Writer of the Year, an interview in the *Times* ran under the headline “Born in the rubbish tip, the greatest poetry today.” The interviewer, Oliver Thring, situates Howe’s book within an extraneous fact (or myth) of her mother’s abandonment as a baby. Howe’s “racial fluidity” as both Chinese and White English is unpicked in the most severe terms, all of which has little bearing on the poems themselves, expressing instead a discomfort with Howe’s unprecedented success. Perhaps not surprisingly, *Private Eye* and the *TLS* both ran conspiracy-ridden pieces expressing shock and sensing a political motivation for awarding Howe the prize.
8. Certainly, one might also hear an echo of Gloucester’s words here on the heath, “As flies to wanton boys, are we to the gods. / They kill us for their sport” (Act IV, scene 1). This may well be the image that suggested Lear to the poet rather than some actual situation.
9. This line is written by Bhanu Kapil but part of our jointly authored piece in *Threads* (20).

#### WORKS CITED

- Alvi, Moniza. *Carrying My Wife*. Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 2000.
- Anaxagorou, Anthony. “On Accessibility and Permission.” 2020. *The Sunday Times Young Writer of the Year Award*. [www.youngwriteraward.com/poetry-accessibility-permission/](http://www.youngwriteraward.com/poetry-accessibility-permission/).
- Chan, Mary Jean. “Journeying Is Hard: Difficulty, Race and Poetics in Sarah Howe’s *Loop of Jade*.” *Journal of British and Irish Innovative Poetry* 12.1 (2020): 1–29. <https://doi.org/10.16995/bip.745>.
- Coates, Dave. “The State of Poetry and Poetry Criticism in the UK,” commissioned report, 2019. [www.liverpool.ac.uk/new-and-international-writing/emerging-critics/](http://www.liverpool.ac.uk/new-and-international-writing/emerging-critics/).
- Culler, Jonathan. *Theory of the Lyric*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015.
- D’Aguiar, Fred. “Have You Been Here Long?” In Robert Hampson and Peter Barry, eds., *New British Poetries: The Scope of the Possible*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993, 51–71.
- Foucault, Michel. “Preface.” In Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things*. New York: Pantheon, 1970, xv.

- Howe, Sarah. *Loop of Jade*. London: Chatto & Windus, 2015.
- Kapil, Bhanu. *Ban en Banlieue*. New York: Nightboat Books, 2015.
- How to Wash a Heart*. Liverpool: Pavilion Press, 2020.
- Kapil, Bhanu, Nishya Ramayya, and Sandeep Parmar. *Threads*. London: Clinic Publishing, 2018.
- Kean, Danuta. "Publishing Opportunities for Black and Asian Poets." Free Verse Report, 2005. [www.spreadtheword.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/Free-Verse-Report.pdf](http://www.spreadtheword.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/Free-Verse-Report.pdf).
- Ling, Ruth. Review of Sarah Howe's *Loop of Jade*. *The Wolf* 33 (2016): 78–82.
- Nielsen, Aldon Lynn and Lauri Ramey. *What I Say: Innovative Poetry by Black Writers in America*. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2015.
- Parmar, Sandeep. Interview with Bhanu Kapil. February 17, 2021. *The Guardian*. [www.theguardian.com/books/2021/feb/17/ts-eliot-winner-bhanu-kapil-its-hard-to-study-something-by-standing-in-front-of-it](http://www.theguardian.com/books/2021/feb/17/ts-eliot-winner-bhanu-kapil-its-hard-to-study-something-by-standing-in-front-of-it).
- "Not a British Subject: Race and UK Poetry." December 6, 2015. *Los Angeles Review of Books*. <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/not-a-british-subject-race-and-poetry-in-the-uk/>.
- "Still Not a British Subject: Race and UK Poetry." *Journal of British and Irish Innovative Poetry* 12.1 (2020). <https://doi.org/10.16995/bip.3384>.
- Ramazani, Jahan. *A Transnational Poetics*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009.
- "Introduction." In Jahan Ramazani, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Postcolonial Poetry*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017, 1–15.
- Shamsie, Muneza. "Exploring Dualities: An Interview with Moniza Alvi." *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 47.2 (2011): 192–98.
- Shockley, Evie. *Renegade Poetics: Black Aesthetics and Formal Innovation in African American Poetry*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2011.
- Teitler, Nathalie. "Diversity in British Poetry 2005–2017." *Free Verse Report* 2017: Diversity in British Poetry 2005–2017. n.p.
- Viswanathan, Gauri. *Masks of Conquest: Literary Study and British Rule in India*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2015.
- Wang, Dorothy. *Thinking Its Presence: Form, Race, and Subjectivity in Contemporary Asian American Poetry*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2014.
- Yu, Timothy. *Race and the Avant-Garde: Experimental and Asian American Poetry Since 1965*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009.