

Fleche: Poems

and

Towards a Postcolonial Poetics of Relation in Kei Miller's *The Cartographer Tries to Map a Way to Zion* and a Counter-poetics of Difference in Sarah Howe's *Loop of Jade*

submitted by Mary Jean Chan to Royal Holloway, University of London,
Department of English, for the degree of PhD, November 2019

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Declaration of Authorship

I, Mary Jean Chan, hereby declare that this thesis and the work presented in it is entirely my own.
Where I have consulted the work of others, this is always clearly stated.

Signed: MARY JEAN CHAN

Date: 29 November 2019

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Abstract

This thesis consists of two parts. The first part, the creative writing component, is a poetry collection called *Fleche*. The French term *flèche* denotes an offensive technique that is favoured by épéists. As a former competitive fencer, I use this cross-linguistic pun to evoke the queer, racialised body as both vulnerable ‘flesh’ and weaponised ‘*flèche*’. Furthermore, the motif of combat productively embodies the sense of internal and external conflict which I continually experienced as a child and young adult growing up in Hong Kong in the 1990s–2000s in response to racism and homophobia. By dividing my book into three sections (‘Parry’, ‘Riposte’ and ‘Corps-à-Corps’), I seek to trace my creative journey from a defensive and closeted position towards a growing willingness to refute racism and queer shame. Furthermore, I thread through the book an eight-part poetic sequence which sensitively explores my mother’s fragmented memories of political turmoil in 1960s–1970s Shanghai in conjunction with my own recollections from childhood, thereby linking the past and the present, the mother and the child, the collective and the individual.

The second part of this thesis is a critical commentary titled ‘Towards a Postcolonial Poetics of Relation in Kei Miller’s *The Cartographer Tries to Map a Way to Zion* and a Counter-poetics of Difference in Sarah Howe’s *Loop of Jade*’. In examining the most recent poetry collections of Sarah Howe and Kei Miller at the time of writing, I aim to explore what Carrie Noland and Barrett Watten (2009) identify as the ‘tension between a desire for representation (nationalist, nativist, identitarian) and an equally forceful urge towards *détour*, the recognition of the complex layering of identities and thus the need to defer representation, as well as claims for homogeneity, essence, identity and home.’ Chapter 1 will focus on Miller’s engagement with theories of ‘cartographic violence’ and colonial ethnography, and his subsequent critique of neo-colonial depictions of postcolonial Jamaica in his sequence of ‘Place Name’ poems in *The Cartographer Tries to Map a Way to Zion* (Carc Janet, 2014). I will argue that Miller’s work offers us a way to reimagine the concept of ‘the Other’ in postcolonial theory through juxtaposing the dramatic personae of the cartographer and the rastaman, thereby enacting a Glissantian ‘poetics of Relation’. Chapter 2 will examine the critical reception surrounding Howe’s *Loop of Jade* (Chatto & Windus, 2015), and explore how racialised concepts of ‘difficulty’ are countered by Howe’s ability to challenge such superficial readings of her work by conveying the historically contingent, imaginative and fluid nature of her cultural identities and concomitant poetics through her use of intertextuality and deployment of Steinerian forms of literary ‘difficulty’. Ultimately, I will argue that it is only in building upon a postcolonial ‘poetics of Relation’ (premised on a Glissantian ‘opacity’) that one can effectively articulate a BAME ‘counter-poetics of difference’. In the final chapter, I shall conclude this thesis by reflexively examining my creative process of writing *Fleche* (Faber & Faber, 2019) and discussing its relationship to my critical research.

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2 Towards a Postcolonial Poetics of Relation in Kei Miller's *The Cartographer Tries to Map a Way to Zion* and a Counter-poetics of Difference in Sarah Howe's *Loop of Jade*

Introduction

Postcolonial, Queer and BAME: Towards a Racialised Criticism

My creative and critical work stem first and foremost from my identity as a queer, Hong Kong-Chinese woman who was born and raised in the former British colony of Hong Kong, with subsequent higher education in the US and UK. I was seven when Hong Kong assumed its status as a postcolonial city, after being handed back to China in 1997 under the Sino-British Joint Declaration. As such, whilst the poetry submitted for this thesis was written in the UK, my formation and the critical issues it raises were not, in the first instance, those of *British-born* BAME poets. This impacts on my poetry, on my selection of poets to study and on the methodological approach I took in the critical component of my thesis. There is a well-established history of BAME poetry in the UK, most notably spearheaded by esteemed Black British poets whose legacies I shall delve into further. There has also been a younger generation of poets such as Jay Bernard, Kayo Chingonyi, Sarah Howe, Nick Makoha and Karen McCarthy Woolf who have come through the Complete Works programme¹ for advanced BAME poets founded in 2007 by Bernardine Evaristo, who became the first black woman to win the prestigious Man Booker Prize in October 2019.²

While my creative work is certainly in conversation with that of the aforementioned poets, my debut collection necessarily negotiates a complex colonial and postcolonial situation; in addition, through the period of writing and publishing my poems in the UK from 2014 onwards, I have also necessarily had to negotiate my positionality as a BAME poet. Accordingly, the first chapter of my thesis explores a postcolonial ‘poetics of Relation’³ in Kei Miller’s *The Cartographer Tries to Map a Way to Zion* (Carc Janet Press, 2014); the second chapter examines the complexities of writing in the UK as BAME poet through foregrounding the uneven critical reception of Sarah Howe’s *Loop of Jade* (Chatto & Windus, 2015) and theorizing Howe’s attempt at offering a ‘counter-poetics of

¹ In 2005, Bernardine Evaristo urged Arts Council England to investigate the lack of diversity in British poetry, with the resulting report, *Free Verse*, concluding that only 1% of the poetry published by major UK presses was by black and Asian poets in 2007. In response, Evaristo and ACE set up The Complete Works, a national development programme which selected 10 outstanding black and Asian poets on an annual basis and offered them mentoring, seminars and publication in a Bloodaxe anthology. Under the direction of Nathalie Teitler, the programme has since produced award-winning BAME poets and resulted in a seismic shift in British poetry, such that ‘BAME poets now make up between 12–14% of those published by major presses.’ See Nathalie Teitler, ‘Preface’, in *Ten: Poets of the New Generation*, ed. by Karen McCarthy Woolf (Hexham: Bloodaxe Books, 2017), pp. 11–12 (p. 11).

² Bernardine Evaristo, ‘These are unprecedented times for black female writers’, *Guardian* (19 October 2019) <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/oct/19/bernadine-evaristo-what-a-time-to-be-a-black-british-womxn-writer>> [accessed 21 October 2019]

³ Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. by Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1997), p. 29.

difference⁴ through her use of Steinerian forms of difficulty⁵ in her work. Through these chapters, I seek to explore a postcolonial poetics of Relation and to develop a transnational, counter-poetics of difference. My collection of poems, *Flèche* (Faber & Faber, 2019), extends these inquiries further, and presents my own tentative solutions to the issues explored in my critical work.

*Flèche*⁶ is an intersectional exploration of postcolonial identities, queerness, queer relationships, adolescence, familial ties and cultural memory.⁷ The French term *flèche* denotes an offensive technique that is favoured by épéists. As a former competitive fencer, I use this cross-linguistic pun to evoke the queer, racialised body as both vulnerable ‘flesh’ and weaponised ‘*flèche*’. Furthermore, the motif of combat productively embodies the sense of internal and external conflict which I continually experienced as a child and young adult growing up in Hong Kong in the 1990s – 2000s in response to racism and homophobia. By dividing my book into three sections (‘Parry’, ‘Riposte’ and ‘Corps-à-Corps’), I seek to trace my journey from a defensive and closeted position towards a growing willingness to refute racism and queer shame. Furthermore, I thread through the book an eight-part poetic sequence which sensitively explores my mother’s fragmented memories of political turmoil in 1960s–1970s Shanghai in conjunction with my own recollections from childhood, thereby linking the past and the present, the mother and the child, the collective and the individual.

As a postcolonial, queer and BAME poet from Hong Kong who arrived in England at the age of twenty-one, I have often encountered the more insidious fraternal twin of racism, one which works through an apparent acceptance – and celebration of – racial difference. In this context, the words of bell hooks are illuminating: ‘The over-riding fear is that cultural, ethnic, and racial differences will be continually commodified and offered up as new dishes to enhance the white palate – that the Other will be eaten, consumed, and forgotten.’⁸ In light of this, I seek to challenge the monolingual reader with multilingual poems that function as opacities or voids on the page (since Chinese characters are effectively ‘unreadable’ for some), thereby prompting my readership to

⁴ Steven G. Yao, *Foreign Accents: Chinese American Verse from Exclusion to Postethnicity* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 49.

⁵ George Steiner, ‘On Difficulty’, *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 36 (1978), 263–76.

⁶ Mary Jean Chan, *Flèche* (London: Faber & Faber, 2019).

⁷ In defining cultural memory, I wish link it to the notion of trauma, in line with Ann Cvetkovich’s definition of trauma as ‘a central category for looking at the intersections of emotional and social processes along with the intersections of memory and history; it gives rise to what Marita Sturken and others have called “cultural memory.”’ See Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality and Lesbian Public Cultures* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), p. 18. I have also found Marianne Hirsch’s definition of ‘postmemory’ in the wake of the Holocaust as ‘the relationship of the second generation to powerful, often traumatic, experiences that preceded their births but that were nevertheless transmitted to them so deeply as to seem to constitute memories in their own right’ to be deeply instructive. See Marianne Hirsch, ‘The Generation of Postmemory’, *Poetics Today*, 29 (1) (Spring 2008), 103–28 (pp. 103).

⁸ bell hooks, ‘Eating the Other: Desire and Resistance’, in *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992), pp. 21–39 (p. 21).

reflect on issues of cultural hegemony, linguistic hierarchies, and the problematic, yet pervasive desire to ‘know’ the Other.

In line with my creative concerns, the critical component of this thesis arises from my longstanding interest in the work of postcolonial poets of colour who situate their speakers as racialized, gendered and or/queered selves, and whose poetry embodies a pervasive sense of ‘unhomeliness’⁹, coined and defined by Homi Bhabha in *The Location of Culture* (2004) as that which ‘relates the traumatic ambivalences of a personal, psychic history to the wider disjunctions of political existence.’¹⁰ The term ‘postcolonial’ is defined in *The Princeton Encyclopaedia of Poetry and Poetics* (2012) with three intertwined meanings. First, postcolonial poetry can be considered as ‘post-independence poetry written [...] by peoples liberated after the ending of European colonial rule and the establishment of sovereignty over their lands.’¹¹ Second, ‘a broader use of the term [involves] its application to [post-colonization literature].’¹² In addition, ‘postcolonial is sometimes used in a third sense, closer to *anti-colonial*: poems that exemplify or enact the struggle against European colonial rule’ (my italics).¹³ After noting the limitations of each of these definitions, the authors offer the following working definition of ‘postcolonial poetics [as] poetry written by non-European peoples in the shadow of colonialism, both after independence and in the period leading up to it, particularly works that engage, however obliquely, issues of living in the interstices between Western colonial and non-European cultures.’¹⁴ This echoes Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin in *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* (2002), who collectively define postcolonial literatures [as] ‘writing by those peoples formerly colonised by Britain’¹⁵, with the term ‘post-colonial’ being used ‘to cover all the cultures affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonisation to the present day.’¹⁶

At this juncture, I wish to note that while I consider myself to be a postcolonial writer, I also identify as being BAME. As such, I wish to clarify my usages of the terms ‘postcolonial’ and ‘BAME’ in this thesis. As a racial umbrella category, ‘BAME’ refers to Black, Asian, minority ethnic individuals, with the Institute of Race Relations defining ‘BAME or BME [as] the terminology

⁹ Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (Abington: Routledge Classics, 2004), p. 15.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Jahan Ramazani, ‘Postcolonial Poetics’, in *The Princeton Encyclopaedia of Poetry and Poetics (Fourth Edition)*, ed. by Roland Greene, Stephen Cushman, Clare Cavanagh, Jahan Ramazani and Paul Rouzer (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2012), pp. 1092–95 (p. 1092).

¹² Ramazani, *The Princeton Encyclopaedia*, p. 1093.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Postcolonial Literatures (Second Edition)* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2002), p. 1.

¹⁶ Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, p. 2.

normally used in the UK to describe people of non-white descent.¹⁷ In analysing the poetry collections of Howe and Miller in my forthcoming chapters, I wish to focus on two *intertwined* facets of their creative work and identities – the fact that both Howe and Miller were born and – to a certain extent in Howe’s case – raised in former British colonies, but have since made a home in the UK. Both poets are understood to be BAME within a British context. Nevertheless, Howe’s *Loop of Jade* and Miller’s *The Cartographer Tries to Map a Way to Zion* are texts which train a keen eye on colonial legacies and postcolonial realities, albeit through different poetic means. For both Howe and Miller, it appears possible – and indeed necessary – to be understood as *both* postcolonial and BAME, though I by no means wish to suggest that all BAME individuals are postcolonial, or vice versa.

I find the above definitions pertinent, since it is precisely an ongoing need to navigate multiple inheritances (whether racially, culturally and/or linguistically) that animates the work of postcolonial poets whose identities and sense of belonging cannot be confined to their respective countries of origin, partially as a result of the ‘ambiguities of emergent social identities in the wake of decolonization.’¹⁸ As Derek Walcott’s speaker Shabine famously declares in ‘The Schooner Flight’: ‘I had a sound colonial education, / I have Dutch, nigger, and English in me, / and either I’m nobody, or I’m a nation.’¹⁹ Jahan Ramazani rightly observes that ‘this supposed “nobody” is teeming with bodies...the bodies of various national and ethnic literatures incorporated in this literary character.’²⁰ Many BAME writers in the UK face a similar situation. Echoing Walcott’s Shabine, Zuleika, the Black British protagonist in Evaristo’s *The Emperor’s Babe* (2002) asks: ‘Am I a slave or a slave-owner? / Am I a Londinio or a Nubian?’²¹ In Evaristo’s novel-in-verse, Roman-occupied Londonium in AD 211 is astutely depicted as transnational and multilingual, mirroring the city’s multicultural present. More recently, in *Mixed-Race Superman* (2018), the London poet Will Harris eloquently discusses his Anglo Indonesian-Chinese heritage in relation to two mixed-race American icons, Barack Obama and Keanu Reeves, concluding astutely that ‘Identity, like love, should be founded on doubt.’²²

For someone who originates from Hong Kong, there is the additional problem that arises from Hong Kong’s recent postcolonial history and its special relations to China and the UK: that is, the emergence, since 1 July 1997, of a Hong Kong identity. According to a 2019 public opinion poll

¹⁷ The Institute of Race Relations, ‘Definitions’,

<<http://www.irr.org.uk/research/statistics/definitions/>> [accessed 5 May 2019]

¹⁸ Jahan Ramazani, *A Transnational Poetics* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2015), p. 142.

¹⁹ Derek Walcott, ‘The Schooner Flight’, in *Collected Poems: 1948–1984* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1986), p. 346.

²⁰ Ramazani, *A Transnational Poetics*, p. 1.

²¹ Bernardine Evaristo, *The Emperor’s Babe: A Novel* (London: Penguin, 2001), p. 201.

²² Will Harris, *Mixed-Race Superman* (London: Peninsula Press, 2018), p. 61.

conducted by the University of Hong Kong, ‘...of the 1,015 respondents surveyed during July 17 to 20, 53 per cent saw themselves as “Hong Kongers” while only 11 per cent saw themselves as “Chinese”. Another 12 per cent identified themselves as “Chinese in Hong Kong” while 23 per cent saw themselves as “Hong Kongers in China.”’²³ As someone who identifies as Hong Kong-Chinese *and* British²⁴, I have found it difficult to reconcile the emergent identity of ‘the Hong Konger’ (who does not identify as Chinese) with my ongoing desire to be seen as Chinese, especially within a British socio-political context which often marginalises, exoticizes and tokenises both Chinese and British Chinese voices and bodies. This deepening identity crisis amongst the Hong Kong-Chinese stems undeniably from the city’s colonial past, since colonial education appears to have cultivated a sense among some individuals that they are superior to their Chinese counterparts from Mainland China by virtue of having been ‘civilized’ by the British elite.²⁵ This situation of intra-Chinese prejudice is also inextricably linked to institutional racism and microaggressions which non-white and non-Chinese people in Hong Kong currently face on a daily basis.²⁶

As someone who was a part of the racial majority in my home city and part of a racial minority in the US and currently in the UK, I am sensitive to the need to reject and combat racism in all its manifestations across differing cultural contexts. As such, I begin this thesis by insisting upon my racialised subjectivity as a postcolonial, queer *and* BAME writer, thereby rejecting any possibility of a race-free approach to critical analysis. According to Charles Bernstein, ‘for as long as social relations are skewed [...] who speaks in poetry can never be a neutral matter.’²⁷ For British Chinese and Asian American writers, this raises specific issues. Apart from the importance of minority representation in Anglophone poetry, Myung Mi Kim contends that writing in English in the face of multiple global crises requires a language-centred approach which reflects these pressing thematic concerns in ways that implicate the English language itself:

²³ Kinling Lo, ‘The trouble with trying to turn Hong Kong’s young people into “patriotic youth”’, *South China Morning Post* (21 August 2019)

<<https://www.scmp.com/news/china/politics/article/3023606/trouble-trying-turn-hong-kongs-young-people-patriotic-youth>> [accessed 30 August 2019]

²⁴ I became a British citizen in 1993 (along with my parents) under the British Nationality Selection Scheme, which granted to 50,000 people and their families the ability to obtain full British citizenship under the British Nationality (Hong Kong) Act of 1990. As a former Croucher Scholar at Imperial College London in 1983 and Founding President of the Hong Kong Society of Rheumatology in 1987, my father was deemed to fit the selection criteria for this scheme.

²⁵ Kristin Huang, ‘Meet the mainland Chinese who are living in fear in Hong Kong’, *South China Morning Post* (8 October 2019) <<https://www.scmp.com/news/china/society/article/3031883/meet-mainland-chinese-who-are-living-fear-hong-kong>> [accessed 10 October 2019]

²⁶ Rachel Blundy and Christy Leung, ‘“The future of Hong Kong is not ours”: Minority groups feel shut out of one of Asia’s richest cities’, *South China Morning Post* (19 November 2016) <<https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/law-crime/article/2047342/future-hong-kong-not-ours-minority-groups-feel-shut-out-one>> [accessed 10 August 2019]

²⁷ Charles Bernstein, *A Poetics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), p. 5.

What is English now, in the face of mass global migration, ecological degradation, shifts and upheavals in identifications of gender and labor? How can the diction(s), register(s), inflection(s) as well as varying affective stances that have and will continue to filter into “English” be taken into account?²⁸

Jahan Ramazani²⁹, Elleke Boehmer³⁰, Romana Huk³¹, Gemma Robinson³², Priyamvada Gopal³³ and Robert Stilling³⁴ have mapped and explored interlinked themes of globalization, modernity, diaspora, migration, orality, hybridity, aesthetics and much besides in Anglophone postcolonial poetry. Similarly, in relation to race, poetry and poetics, Anthony Reed³⁵, Deirdre Osborne³⁶, Lauri Ramey³⁷, Kwame Dawes³⁸ and Dorothy Wang³⁹ have examined topics as various as the diaspora and the avant-garde in Black British writing, the idea of the reggae lyric, and the poetics and politics of black experimental writing by Afro-Caribbean and African American writers. In this thesis, I seek to add to these rapidly expanding (and at times overlapping) areas of inquiry by close reading and theorizing the work of two contemporary, British-based poets: Miller, a Jamaican poet who was born in Kingston in 1978 and expatriated to Manchester for further studies in his mid-twenties, and Howe, a British Chinese poet who was born in Hong Kong in 1983 and moved to Watford at the age of seven and was educated in the UK and the US respectively. This cross-cultural approach to critical analysis reflects my own reading practice and its history, which is not rooted in a particular literary tradition or national culture, but aims instead at cultivating a postcolonial

²⁸ Myung Mi Kim, *Commons* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), p. 110.

²⁹ Jahan Ramazani, *The Hybrid Muse: Postcolonial Poetry in English*, (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

³⁰ Elleke Boehmer, *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature: Migrant Metaphors* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

³¹ Romana Huk, *Assembling Alternatives: Reading Postmodern Poetries Transnationally* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2003).

³² Gemma Robinson, ‘Postcolonial Poetry of Great Britain’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Postcolonial Poetry*, ed. by Jahan Ramazani (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), p. 110–23.

³³ Priyamvada Gopal, ‘The Limits of Hybridity: Language and Innovation in Anglophone Postcolonial Poetry’, in *The Routledge Companion to Experimental Literature*, ed. by Joe Bray, Alison Gibbons, Brian McHale (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012), p. 182–98.

³⁴ Robert Stilling, *Beginning at the End: Decadence, Modernism, and Postcolonial Poetry* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018).

³⁵ Anthony Reed, *Freedom Time: The Poetics and Politics of Black Experimental Writing* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015).

³⁶ Deirdre Osborne, ‘Introduction’, in *The Cambridge Companion to British Black and Asian Literature (1945–2010)* ed. by Deirdre Osborne (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), p. 1–20.

³⁷ Lauri Ramey, ‘Diaspora and the Avant-Garde in Contemporary Black British Poetry’, in *Diasporic Avant-Gardes: Experimental Poetics and Cultural Displacement*, ed. by Carrie Noland and Barrett Watten (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 189–206.

³⁸ Kwame Dawes, *Natural Mysticism: Towards a New Reggae Aesthetic in Caribbean Writing* (Peepal Tree Press, 1999).

³⁹ Dorothy Wang, *Thinking Its Presence: Form, Race and Subjectivity in Contemporary Asian American Poetry* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014).

solidarity across various cultures and locales.⁴⁰ I concur with Ramazani, who argues that ‘a postcolonial perspective...continues to be a powerful tool for revealing linkages across regions emerging from colonial rule.’⁴¹ Elsewhere, Ramazani emphasises the importance of cultivating a transnational poetics in response to twentieth and twenty-first century poetics, for ‘instead of replicating the centripetal vortex of the nation-state or its dilated counterpart in unitary migrant communities, cross-cultural writing and reading can...evoke non-coercive and non-nativistic forms of transnational imaginative belonging.’⁴² This echoes the way in which my thesis attempts to work its way from a postcolonial poetics of Relation towards a transnational counter-poetics of difference.

As a poet who writes from an intersectional and transnational perspective, I am especially drawn to Boehmer’s articulation of ‘the way[s] in which a piece of postcolonial writing positions and identifies us as part of a particular community or set of experiences...[even as] the text also shifts the reader between and across different worlds, whether cultural, cognitive, or national.’⁴³ My own literary inheritance has in many ways fuelled my embrace of a transnational imaginative belonging. Having grown up with access to two literary canons (Chinese and English), I have found it natural to embrace the work of poets from various continents. As someone who spoke only Cantonese at home but learnt English as the *lingua franca* at an Anglican all-girls school founded by British missionaries in Hong Kong, English Literature provided an emotional safe space within which I could explore my emergent queer identity.⁴⁴ It was whilst studying William Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night* that I experienced my first literary encounter with queerness through a close reading of the homoeroticism between Sebastian and Antonio, as well as Viola/Cesario’s interactions with Orsino and Olivia. At the same time, I was studying classical Chinese poetry written by Li Bai, Du Fu, Li Shang Yin and others, whilst memorising literary texts (involving poetic forms such as the *shi*, *ci* and *qu*) from the Tang, Song and Yuan dynasties.

During my undergraduate studies in the US, I found myself deeply moved and transformed by the work of queer poets of colour including Audre Lorde, Adrienne Rich and Nikki Giovanni, alongside other poets of colour such as Lucille Clifton, Sonia Sanchez, Yusef Komunyakaa, Marilyn Chin, Li-Young Lee and Arthur Sze. My subsequent introduction to British BAME poets upon

⁴⁰ See Elleke Boehmer, *Empire, The National and the Postcolonial, 1890–1920: Resistance in Interaction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004) on postcolonial solidarity between the Irish and Bengalis at the end of the nineteenth century.

⁴¹ Ramazani, ‘Introduction’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Postcolonial Poetry*, ed. By Jahan Ramazani (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), pp.1–15 (p.2).

⁴² Ramazani, *A Transnational Poetics*, p. 31.

⁴³ Elleke Boehmer, *Postcolonial Poetics: 21st-Century Critical Readings* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), p. 9.

⁴⁴ See Mary Jean Chan, ‘Meeting Point: on being a Chinese poet writing in English’, *Wild Court*, (December 2017), <<http://wildcourt.co.uk/features/meeting-point-answering-question-bilingualism/>> [accessed 1 May 2019]

arriving in London in 2014 alerted me to the work of prominent Black British poets including Jackie Kay, Jean ‘Binta’ Breeze, Fred D’Aguiar, John Agard, Benjamin Zephaniah and Grace Nichols, amongst others. I was inspired by these poets’ cogent and passionate engagement with issues of race, diaspora and cultural memory, but experienced a particular affinity upon discovering the poetry of Sarah Howe and Kei Miller in 2014 and 2015. As I read their work alongside one another, I began to notice a recurring theme which animates my own creative and critical concerns: that far from being a putative ‘essence’, ‘identity’ can be construed as a relational, multi-layered and imaginative act in what Glissant eloquently terms a ‘poetics of Relation’.⁴⁵

This nuanced understanding of identity is echoed in Carrie Noland and Barrett Watten’s introduction to *Diasporic Avant-gardes: Experimental Poetics and Cultural Displacement* (2009), in which the authors discuss ‘[the] tension between a desire for representation (nationalist, nativist, identitarian) and an equally forceful urge towards *détour*, the recognition of the complex layering of identities and thus the need to defer representation, as well as claims for homogeneity, essence, identity and home.’⁴⁶ This paradoxical need to see oneself represented within (literary) culture whilst simultaneously desiring a more complex depiction and understanding of one’s intersectional identities is an intellectual preoccupation as well as a lived experience of mine. As a Hong Kong-Chinese poet who is interpellated as BAME in Oxford and London, I experience a simultaneous desire to speak in solidarity with other East Asian and British Chinese poets, and to be recognised as such. However, in the wake of ongoing microaggressions, instances of cultural essentialism and ethnic tokenism, I also feel compelled to examine what being ‘Chinese’ or ‘British Chinese’ means and might mean. For example, I organised a poetry reading in 2017 at Goodenough College and invited three poets – Sarah Howe, Hannah Lowe and Jennifer Wong – to read alongside one another in an event on ‘Chinese Identities, Poetry and Place’. Afterwards, a Chinese student at the College approached me, and asked why I felt that Howe and Lowe could be included under the banner ‘Chinese’, since they both ‘looked white’ and were therefore, in his opinion, ‘not truly Chinese’. This exchange highlighted for me the complexities of representation, which often risks an ethnic or cultural homogeneity. However, I am also mindful of the need for representation, particularly in a country which continues to grapple with institutional racism and racial injustice. For most BAME poets writing in the 1960s–80s, the issue of representation was clearly an urgent and pressing one which foregrounded many of their works, with John Agard’s highly influential poem ‘Listen Mr Oxford Don’⁴⁷ being a case in point. By addressing a fictional ‘Oxford Don’ who

⁴⁵ Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, p. 29.

⁴⁶ Carrie Noland and Barrett Watten, ‘Introduction’, in *Diasporic Avant-Gardes: Experimental Poetics and Cultural Displacement*, ed. by Carrie Noland and Barrett Watten (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 1–30 (p. 9).

⁴⁷ John Agard, *Mangoes and Bullets: Selected and New Poems 1972–1984*, (London: Pluto Press, 1985), p. 44.

‘stands as gatekeeper of linguistic, educational, and cultural capital’⁴⁸, Agard depicts his speaker as being firmly on the outside of a closed and tightly guarded linguistic, cultural and literary community that seeks unabashedly to valorise Standard English (‘de Queen’s English’) whilst rejecting an equally valid English which sits on the creole continuum:

Dem accuse me of assault
on de Oxford dictionary/
imagine a concise peaceful man like me/
dem want me serve time
for inciting rhyme to riot

Here, Agard ‘writes back’ to a white British audience whose racist assumptions about black men as being linked to criminality and social unrest are explicitly mentioned by Agard in order to undermine these very stereotypes, as the speaker describes himself respectively as ‘a simple immigrant’, ‘a man on de run’, and refusing to serve ‘no jail sentence’.⁴⁹ The tone is, of course, ironic: the reader soon realizes that the speaker is in fact a poet and a ‘master of the *techne* of language (“syntax”, “grammar”, “suffix”, “tense”)⁵⁰ who seeks to syntactically and visually disrupt the poetic line, not least through his creative use of slashes on the page. From *Mangoes and Bullets* (Pluto Press, 1985) to *Travel Light, Travel Dark* (Bloodaxe, 2013), Agard continues to subvert his readers’ understandings about what it means to be British through satirical and often humorous verse. Similarly, much of Linton Kwesi Johnson’s poetry sets itself in opposition to an oppressive socio-political order, such as in his 1980 collection, *Inglan is a Bitch*⁵¹. In an interview with Nicholas Wroe, Johnson states that particularly towards the beginning of his career, ‘writing was a political act and poetry was a cultural weapon.’⁵² Deeply influenced by the Caribbean Arts Movement of the 1960s and 1970s – founded in London by Brathwaite, John La Rose, and Andrew Salkey – Johnson’s dub poetry ‘often used [Brathwaite’s] nation language as a means of rendering the localized diasporic experience of the British nation specifically’⁵³, thus creating a poetics by and for Black British poets. Indeed, Johnson’s work continues to trail-blaze a path for Black British poets to follow, most notably in the works of younger BAME poets such as Jay Bernard, whose poem ‘Songbook’⁵⁴ in their debut collection *Surge* (Chatto & Windus, 2019) was directly inspired by

⁴⁸ Rachael Gilmour, ‘Doing Voices: Reading Language as Craft in Black British Poetry’, *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 49 (3) (2014), 343–57 (pp. 347).

⁴⁹ Agard, p. 44.

⁵⁰ Gilmour, p. 348.

⁵¹ Linton Kwesi Johnson, *Inglan is a Bitch* (London: Race Today, 1980).

⁵² Nicholas Wroe, ‘Linton Kwesi Johnson: I did my own thing’, *Guardian* (8 March 2008) <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2008/mar/08/featuresreviews.guardianreview11>> [accessed 10 May 2019]

⁵³ Jordan Musser, ‘The Avant-Garde is in the Audience: On the Popular Avant-Gardism of Linton Kwesi Johnson’s Dub Poetry’, *Twentieth-Century Music*, 16 (3) (2019), 457–99 (pp. 469).

⁵⁴ Bernard, p. 7.

Johnson's poems on what has since become known as the 'New Cross Massacre', involving a fire in New Cross which killed thirteen young people.

In contrast to a poetics that explicitly confronts and bears witness to racism, historical exclusions and social injustices is that adopted by Patience Agbabi, who Kwesi Owusu and R. Victoria Arana have referred to as one of the poets belonging to the 'Black British avant-garde'.⁵⁵ Building on Owusu and Arana's analysis, Lauri Ramey contends that 'the practice of these poets is...forward-looking, and [bears] a less burdened relationship to political exclusions and diasporic roots than the preceding generations.'⁵⁶ Indeed, Agbabi appears to be less preoccupied with the need to represent her particular community or culture as being British, and does not appear to be self-consciously positioning herself as being outside the British literary canon, looking in. Rather, there is a playfulness with which she audaciously rewrites *The Canterbury Tales* in her fourth collection *Telling Tales* (Canongate, 2014). This reveals an exuberance in terms of poetic license, for to boldly rewrite Chaucer – widely known as the Father of English Literature – is to claim (and re-vision) a staple of the British literary canon. In explaining her approach to this project, Agbabi notes in an interview with Charlotte Runcie that 'Chaucer's original is brilliant. It's probably the best work of English literature, in my opinion. So I thought...[what] I can do is what I do best – take an interesting angle and *play around with form and sound and character*, and take it to a different dimension' (my italics).⁵⁷ Somewhat akin to the poetries of Agbabi and that of her contemporaries, Howe and Miller appear less preoccupied with writing back to a (white) British audience, but rather strive to embody, first and foremost, their multi-faceted experiences and identities.

In *The Cartographer Tries to Map a Way to Zion*, Miller initially appears to 'write back' to the white Cartographer, with the reader assuming that the figure of the Rastaman embodies the beliefs and values most closely aligned with Miller's own. It is halfway through the collection that we are made to realise that the Cartographer is also Miller, and that perhaps, from the perspective of a Jamaican audience, Miller is in fact the Cartographer whose accent, attire and mannerisms mirror (in multiple ways) the image of the Westernized intellectual *par excellence*. Indeed in an interview with Eleanor Wachtel, Miller concurs with the following: 'You mentioned that when you read from *The Cartographer*, if you read in England, they assume you're the Rastaman; if you read in Jamaica, they assume you're the Cartographer.'⁵⁸ By placing two complex personae in conversation with one another, Miller enacts a Glissantian poetics of Relation. Glissant writes: 'We "know" that the Other

⁵⁵ Ramey, 'Diaspora and the Avant-Garde in Contemporary Black British Poetry', p. 190.

⁵⁶ Ramey, 'Diaspora and the Avant-Garde in Contemporary Black British Poetry', p. 191.

⁵⁷ Charlotte Runcie, 'Patience Agbabi: Chaucer remixed', *Daily Telegraph* (27 April 2014) <<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/authorinterviews/10788554/Patience-Agbabi-Chaucer-remixed.html>> [accessed 12 May 2019]

⁵⁸ Eleanor Wachtel, 'An Interview with Kei Miller', *Brick: A Literary Journal* (16 October 2018) <<https://brickmag.com/an-interview-with-kei-miller/>> [accessed 18 May 2019]

is within us and affects...the bulk of our conceptions and the development of our sensibility. [...] In spite of ourselves, a sort of “consciousness of consciousness” opens us up and turns each of us into a disconcerted actor in the poetics of Relation.’⁵⁹ The ease with which Miller enacts a postcolonial poetics of Relation (between the neo-colonial Cartographer and the postcolonial Rastaman) is mirrored in Howe’s embodiment of a transnational counter-poetics of difference in *Loop of Jade*, with her bold intermingling of motifs from Renaissance literature alongside depictions of classical Chinese myths such as the legend of *Chang’e*. Howe’s sense of being securely British and Chinese – and her desire to write from a place of belonging (rather than from the perspective of an outsider) – evoke the cast of polyglot speakers in Evaristo’s *The Emperor’s Babe*, with Ramazani observing that ‘the [novel-in-verse’s] heteroglossia is emblematic of ancient and contemporary creolization in the British Isles.’ While Howe and Miller owe much to their literary forebears in the UK and elsewhere, both poets break new ground in terms of the content and form of their writing, which I shall proceed to discuss in the rest of this chapter.

Towards a Counter-poetics of Difference

In the chapters that follow, I aim to explore and produce a counter-poetics of difference. First, however, I want to consider the context in which such a poetics has to operate – and, more specifically, the reception of BAME poetry within mainstream publishing and review culture in the UK. In doing so, I will also demonstrate the need for a racialised criticism. In this section, I seek to explore how contemporary BAME poets in the UK creatively resist attempts made by publishers, critics and readers alike to view them and their work through the lens of a reductive concept of ‘authenticity’, which remains laden with stereotypes. Stereotypes have been defined by Stuart Hall as that which ‘[reduces] people to a few, simple, essential characteristics, which are presented as fixed by nature.’⁶⁰ For example, as an ethnically Han Chinese poet, I am persistently asked by British audiences as to ‘why I write in English’, ‘whether I write in Chinese’, or ‘whether I write first in Chinese, then translate into English’. During microaggressions, I am typically invited by a white member of the audience to ‘perform a poem of mine in Chinese’ during many a Q&A, with the most recent instance of this occurring after a public reading at the University of Liverpool in October 2019. Examples of such (mis-)readings of postcolonial and BAME poets and poetry abound, with a few of Kate Kellaway’s *Guardian* reviews exemplifying such reductive tendencies. For example, a 2015 Observer Books of the Year review round-up by Kellaway states that ‘[Claudia Rankine’s] eloquent militancy about racism is arresting [in *Citizen: An American Lyric*]’, while Sarah

⁵⁹ Glissant, p. 27.

⁶⁰ Stuart Hall, ‘The Spectacle of the “Other”’, in *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, ed. by Stuart Hall (London: SAGE, 1997), pp. 223–90 (p. 257).

Howe's *Loop of Jade* is described as possessing 'oriental poise, reach and artistic precision.'⁶¹ To depict Rankine work as 'militant' draws on racist stereotypes about black Americans being angry or prone to violence, with 'arresting' punning uncomfortably on 'arrest'; whilst to deem Howe's poetry as possessing 'oriental poise' is to view her complex literary work through an uncritical lens of chinoiserie, whilst reinforcing stereotypes of Asian women as being delicate and demure. Within an uneven literary review culture which continues to read white poets for the content *and* form of their work whilst reading BAME poets mostly for their ethnic traits and cultural 'essences', I am keen to explore how poets such as Howe and Miller articulate (through differing means) what Steven Yao productively terms 'a counter-poetics of difference' in their respective creative works. Yao coins the term 'a counter-poetics of difference' in *Foreign Accents: Chinese American Verse from Exclusion to Post-ethnicity* (Oxford University Press, 2010) to contextualize Ezra Pound's *Cathay*. He describes *Cathay* as '[presenting] an instance of "high culture" functioning to articulate a "counter-poetics" of difference in relation to both juridical formulations and more popular treatments of the same general, racialized subjects [such as the Chinese].'⁶² To discuss 'difference', I wish to adopt political theorist Iris Marion Young's use of the term. She defines difference as the 'irreducible particularity of entities, which makes it impossible to reduce them to commonness or bring them into unity without remainder.'⁶³ In discussing *racial* difference in particular, I recognize that race is a social construct, and that it has no basis in biological reality.⁶⁴ Nonetheless, it is clear that racial difference underpins how individuals are interpellated within and across societies, especially in the aftermath of colonialism, slavery and empire. This has also become more pressing with the radical right and white supremacy on the rise across Europe⁶⁵, the United States⁶⁶ and elsewhere. In *Citizen: An American Lyric* (2014), Claudia Rankine links the arbitrary murder of black men in America to the prevalence of institutional racism and white supremacy⁶⁷:

In Memory of Jordan Russell Davis
In Memory of Eric Garner
In Memory of John Crawford
In Memory of Michael Brown

⁶¹ Kate Kellaway, 'The best poetry books of 2015', *Guardian* (8 December 2015) <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/dec/08/best-poetry-books-2015-clive-james-claudia-rankine>> [accessed 18 May 2019]

⁶² Yao, p. 49.

⁶³ Iris Marion Young, 'The Ideal of Community and the Politics of Difference', *Social Theory and Practice*, 12 (1986), 1–26 (pp. 4).

⁶⁴ I shall discuss this notion of race and its social construction (through analysing the concept of 'racial fabrication') in relation to Sarah Howe's *Loop of Jade* in Chapter 2.

⁶⁵ Owen Jones, 'Far-right violence is on the rise. Where is the outrage?', *Guardian* (22 August 2019) <<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/aug/22/far-right-violence-on-rise-where-is-outrage>> [accessed 30 August 2019]

⁶⁶ Luke Darby, 'How white supremacy went mainstream in the US: 8chan, Trump, voter suppression', *Guardian* (11 August 2019) <<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2019/aug/11/el-paso-shooting-white-supremacy-8chan-voter-suppression>> [accessed 30 August 2019]

⁶⁷ Claudia Rankine, *Citizen: An American Lyric* (Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2014), p. 134–35.

In Memory
In Memory
In Memory
...

because white men can't
police their imagination
black men are dying

On this side of the Atlantic, Jay Bernard explores the New Cross Massacre of 1981 in their acclaimed debut collection *Surge* through drawing on their archival research at the George Padmore Institute, 'an archive, library and research centre dedicated to radical black history in Britain.'⁶⁸ In the book's introduction, Bernard notes the clear parallels between the New Cross Fire and that of the Grenfell fire in 2017, stating that 'the most chilling aspect of this [repetition of history] was the lack of closure, the lack of responsibility and the lack of accountability at the centre of both the New Cross Fire and Grenfell.'⁶⁹ In the poem 'Ark'⁷⁰ – which meditates on the need to locate the source of racism and racial injustice in the UK not as residing in the *bodies* of individual racists, but rather, in the institutionally white supremacist *body politic* – Bernard writes:

I take this January morning in my hands and wonder
if it should go under London, England, Britain, British, Black-British –
where to put the burning house, the child made ash, the brick in the back
of the neck, the shit in the letter box and piss up the side of it?

I file it under *fire, corpus, body, house*.

As is evident in Rankine and Bernard's urgent and timely collections, racial difference matters. Indeed, an understanding of racial difference and its articulations is essential to the physical survival of BAME people. Within the field of Anglophone literature, racial difference also crucially impacts upon how the works of BAME writers are perceived and received; as such, it would be futile to deny the existence of racial difference as a poet-critic and to ignore its wide-reaching impact in terms of structuring the literary landscape of Anglophone poetics. The late Toni Morrison expounds on the need for a racialised criticism in her seminal book *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1992), arguing that 'a criticism that needs to insist that literature is not only "universal" but also "race-free" risks lobotomizing that literature [...] for both black and white Americans, in a wholly racialized society, there is no escape from racially inflected language.'⁷¹ I argue that the same logic pertains to the UK, considering how recent progress made by BAME writers has already encountered severe backlash from several quarters; one example being Lionel

⁶⁸ Jay Bernard, *Surge* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2019), p. ix.

⁶⁹ Bernard, p. xi.

⁷⁰ Bernard, p. 3.

⁷¹ Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (New York: Knopf Doubleday, 1993), p.12–13.

Shriver's blithe criticism of Penguin Random House's decision to nurture and publish more BAME writers as mere virtue-signalling to the detriment of quality writing, stating in *The Spectator* that 'we can safely infer... that if an agent submits a manuscript written by a gay transgender Caribbean who dropped out of school at seven and powers around town on a mobility scooter, it will be published, whether or not said manuscript is an incoherent, tedious, meandering and insensible pile of mixed-paper recycling.'⁷² Similarly, a handful of journalists responded to Howe's *Loop of Jade* in a patronizing, sexist and racist manner, particularly in the aftermath of her clinching the 2015 T.S. Eliot Prize, the first time the Eliot had ever been awarded to a debut collection.⁷³ I will contextualise and examine the uneven reception of Howe's *Loop of Jade* in Chapter 2 in greater depth. At this juncture, I simply wish to acknowledge the continuing barriers that BAME poets face in terms of publishing and having their work received properly in the UK. For example, *The London Review of Books* was singled out by the 2019 Ledbury Poetry Critics Report as having 'published 70 articles by 33 different critics [from 2011–2018]. All 33 were white. Those 70 articles reviewed 86 different books. All 86 were by white poets.'⁷⁴ That such a prominent literary journal would omit the voices of BAME poets and critics in such a stark and consistent manner over time ought not remain unnoticed, and surely gestures at the need for ongoing reform within British literary review culture. To insist upon the relevance of racial difference in structuring the field of literary criticism and determining the ways in which the work of BAME poets are read and received is not, however, to perpetuate the problematic notion of 'the racial Other', which Robert Young rightly criticizes as being a concept which 'accepts the discriminatory gesture of social and political othering that it appears to contest.'⁷⁵ Rather, my usage of Yao's 'counter-poetics of difference' in this thesis aims to allow a cogent analysis of how 'minorities [...] [must] represent themselves as they are, in their specific forms of difference, rather than as they are othered.'⁷⁶ Yao returns to his concept of 'a counter-poetics of difference' in relation to the work of other Asian American poets such as Li-Young Lee and Marilyn Chin. However, his emphasis appears to be on how each poet's own 'counter-poetics of difference' varies in relation to their attempts at writing back to hegemonic constructions of Chinese-American subjectivities. As such, I have decided to take certain liberties with this concept, and to use it simply to denote how Howe and Miller use their respective poetics

⁷² Alison Flood, 'Publisher defends diversity drive after Lionel Shriver's attack', *Guardian* (11 June 2018) <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/jun/11/publisher-defends-diversity-drive-after-lionel-shrivers-attack>> [accessed 22 June 2019]

⁷³ Katy Evans-Bush, 'TS Eliot prize row: is winner too young, beautiful – and Chinese?', *Guardian* (23 January 2016) <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/jan/23/deranged-poetess-sarah-howe-ts-eliot-prize-media>> [accessed 22 June 2019]

⁷⁴ Dave Coates and Sandeep Parmar, 'The State of Poetry and Poetry Criticism in the UK and Ireland 2011–2018', commissioned by the University of Liverpool Centre for New and International Writing and The Ledbury Poetry Festival 2019, 6 June 2019, p. 3.

⁷⁵ Robert Young, 'Postcolonial Remains', in *Postcolonial Studies: An Anthology*, ed. by Pramod K. Nayar (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2016), pp. 125–43 (p. 139).

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

to subvert their readers' expectations in fresh and startling ways, which are rooted in their postcolonial, BAME, and transnational experiences.

In addition, I wish to locate a specifically postcolonial queer aesthetic in the work of Howe and Miller, bearing in mind Samir Dayal's observation that queerness goes beyond sexual orientation to a more general 'queering of the pitch, a displacement of colonial, heteronormative, or otherwise hegemonic stratifications, and that a queer perspective constitutes an interrogation, implicitly at least, of the way in which all subjects, not just [LGBTQ] subjects, are interpellated as gendered bodies within a given social space.'⁷⁷ As Eric Keenaghan notes in his analysis of the terms 'LGBT poetry' and 'queer poetry', 'to refer to a form of poetry as "queer", rather than as "LGBT", is to acknowledge how its authors challenge rigid and potentially divisive identity logics so as to forge new connections and alliances between communities and groups.'⁷⁸ As someone who identifies as postcolonial, queer and BAME, I believe it would be reductive to reduce the concept of 'queerness' as only applicable to LGBTQ issues, for to do so would be to ignore the inherent nuances of the term 'queer', which Michael Warner observes has 'the effect of pointing out a wide field of normalization...as the site of violence.'⁷⁹ Thus, drawing on the field of critical white studies and her own personal experience 'of being mixed race, with a white English mother and a Pakistani father'⁸⁰, Sara Ahmed contends that 'race [can be understood as] a rather queer matter'⁸¹ when one considers the fact that 'whiteness is invisible and unmarked, as the absent centre against which [non-white] others appear only as deviants or as lines of deviation.'⁸² To be queer is to refuse the 'straightening device'⁸³ of whiteness, inasmuch as it is refusing to be straight in terms of one's sexuality. In their editorial to *Wasafiri Magazine's* 'Queer Worlds/Global Queer' June 2019 issue, guest editors Dean Atta and Andrew van der Vlies similarly define queer as that which '[plays] on its historical connotations of the counterproductive (not to mention the counterfeit), the antisocial, [and] that which is in all ways aslant (its etymological root) to the normative.'⁸⁴ In articulating a postcolonial poetics of relation (Miller) and exploring counter-poetics of difference (Howe), I contend that both *The Cartographer Tries to Map a Way to Zion* and *Loop of Jade* can be read as 'queer'

⁷⁷ Samir Dayal, 'By Way of an Afterword', in *Postcolonial, Queer: Theoretical Intersections*, ed. by John C. Hawley (New York: State University of New York Press, 2001), pp. 305–25 (p. 305).

⁷⁸ Eric Keenaghan, 'Queer Poetry, Between "As Is" and "As If"', in *The Cambridge Companion to American Gay and Lesbian Literature*, ed. by Scott Herring (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 44–58 (p. 55).

⁷⁹ Michael Warner, *Fear of A Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), p. xxvi.

⁸⁰ Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2006), p. 24.

⁸¹ Ahmed, p. 112.

⁸² Ahmed, p. 121.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴ Dean Atta and Andrew van der Vlies, 'Queer Worlds/Global Queer: Editorial', in *Wasafiri* (Vol. 34, No. 2), guest ed. by Dean Atta and Andrew van der Vlies (Abingdon: Routledge, June 2019), pp. 1–2 (p. 1).

in this extended sense. I will advance this argument further in relation to my own creative work in the final chapter.

On a more granular level, I am curious as to how the textual strategies within Howe and Miller's creative work exemplify a Glissantian 'opacity'⁸⁵. In his chapter on 'Errantry, Exile', Glissant traces his thinking to Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's criticisms of 'the root and, even perhaps, notions of being rooted'⁸⁶, observing that 'the root is unique, a stock taking all upon itself and killing all around it. In opposition to this [Deleuze and Guattari] propose the rhizome, an enmeshed root system, a network spreading either in the ground or in the air [...] The notion of the rhizome maintains, therefore, the idea of rootedness but challenges that of a totalitarian root.'⁸⁷ Accordingly, Glissant declares, 'Rhizomatic thought is the principle behind what I call the Poetics of Relation, in which each and every identity is extended through a relationship with the Other'.⁸⁸ Later, Glissant links monolingualism to the totalitarian root, contending that 'the root is monolingual'⁸⁹; whereas 'Relation, in contrast, is spoken multilingually'⁹⁰. I will argue that Howe's *Loop of Jade* and Miller's *The Cartographer Tries to Map a Way to Zion* are complex poetic works that exemplify Glissant's articulation of a 'poetics of Relation', since both collections feature speakers who resist the impulse of being 'rooted' in a particular locale whilst choosing to speak in multiple tongues and from multiple positionalities. Most crucially, I detect in these collections a resounding articulation of Glissant's 'third stage' of his 'poetics of Relation', during which 'the poet's word leads from periphery to periphery...that is, it makes every periphery into a centre; furthermore, it abolishes the very notion of centre and periphery.'⁹¹

I will show that both Howe and Miller are writing back, not to the metropolitan centre, but to the so-called 'periphery' in their respective works: Howe to Hong Kong, Miller to Jamaica. I, too, attempt to write back to Hong Kong as a 'postcolonial writer, whose gaze is turned in two directions'.⁹² In the following chapters, I will examine how Howe writes back to her Chinese roots via Pound's *Cathay* and *Cantos*; how Miller returns to himself via a European cartographer's encounter with a Rastaman (each of whom draws on different aspects of Miller's identity). In the final chapter, I shall explore how I, too, seek to return to a more opaque and multifaceted identity via the work of poets whose poetry and poetics are not identical to mine, but instead give me crucial permission to draw on multiple canons and textual strategies. This is somewhat akin to how

⁸⁵ Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, p. 111.

⁸⁶ Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, p. 11.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

⁸⁹ Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, p. 15.

⁹⁰ Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, p. 19.

⁹¹ Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, p.29.

⁹² Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, p. 60.

Kamau Brathwaite first came to creolised speech through T.S. Eliot's voice transmitted via radio to Barbados by the British Council, with Brathwaite observing that 'What T.S. Eliot did for Caribbean poetry and Caribbean literature was to introduce the notion of the speaking voice, the conversational tone.'⁹³

In light of the above, Chapter 1 will focus on Miller's engagement with theories of 'cartographic violence'⁹⁴ and his critique of neo-colonial depictions of postcolonial Jamaica in his sequence of 'Place Name' poems. Chapter 1 argues that Miller's work offers us a way to reimagine the concept of the Other in postcolonial theory through juxtaposing the dramatic personae of the Cartographer and the Rastaman. Chapter 2 will examine the critical reception surrounding Howe's *Loop of Jade*, and explore how racialised concepts of 'difficulty' are countered by Howe's ability to challenge such superficial readings of her work by conveying the historically contingent, imaginative and fluid nature of her cultural identities and concomitant poetics through her use of intertextuality and deployment of Steinerian forms of literary 'difficulty'. Ultimately, I seek to argue that it is only in building upon a postcolonial 'poetics of Relation' (premised on a Glissantian 'opacity') that one can effectively articulate a BAME 'counter-poetics of difference' in order to challenge cultural essentialisms (in which the BAME poet is always an 'Other' but never an 'I'), as well as notions of 'difficulty' which are understood as objective, but instead often apply solely to the reception of creative work produced by non-white poets. In the final chapter, I shall conclude this thesis by reflexively examining my creative process of writing *Flèche* (2019) and discussing the book's relationship to my critical research.

Kei Miller's 'Poetics of Relation' and Black British Poetry

As a vital member of the contemporary Black British canon, Miller is humble about being the first BAME poet ever to win the Forward Prize for Best Collection.⁹⁵ In an interview with Andre Bago, Miller observes that 'Derek Walcott should have won [the Best Collection Prize] several times over. I feel weird being the spokesperson...the British poetry landscape has just refused to hear certain voices [until now].'⁹⁶ Whilst acknowledging the deeply political nature of British literary prize

⁹³ Edward Kamau Brathwaite, *History of the Voice: Development of Nation Language in Anglophone Caribbean Poetry* (London: New Beacon Books, 1984), p. 30.

⁹⁴ Mark Neocleous, 'Off the Map: On Violence and Cartography', *European Journal of Social Theory*, 6 (2003), 409–25.

⁹⁵ It is important to note that Kwame Dawes was the first BAME poet to win The Forward Prize for Best First Collection in 1994 for his debut collection *Progeny of Air*, published by Peepal Tree Press. Many BAME poets have subsequently followed in his footsteps, including Tishani Doshi (2006), Daljit Nagra (2007), Mona Arshi (2015), Tiphonie Yanique (2016) and Ocean Vuong (2017). In the wake of Miller's Forward Prize Best Collection win in 2014, other BAME winners in the same category have included Claudia Rankine (2015), Vahni Capildeo (2016) and Danez Smith (2018).

⁹⁶ Andre Bago, 'Walcott should have won before me', *Trinidad and Tobago Newsday* (25 April 2016) <<https://archives.newsday.co.tt/2016/04/25/walcott-should-have-won-before-me/>> [accessed 24 May 2019]

culture given its undeniable biases towards larger publishers and – until recently – its privileging of white (male) voices writing from within a largely Eurocentric canon⁹⁷, one might still note Miller’s 2014 win as marking a turning point for BAME poets in relation to literary prize culture in the UK, since ‘eleven of the fifteen total wins by BAME poets of the T.S. Eliot, Forward Best and First Collection, Costa and Ted Hughes prizes have come since Miller’s Forward Best Collection win in 2014.’⁹⁸ This might indicate that literary prize culture in the UK is slowly changing for the better, and that it has finally begun to recognize the wealth of BAME talent within contemporary British poetry.

Miller certainly owes a debt of influence to his Caribbean predecessors: one can easily locate the Lorna Goodison of *I Am Becoming My Mother* (New Beacon Books, 1986) and *Heartease* (New Beacon Books, 1988) in Miller’s *There is an Anger That Moves* (Carcenet Press, 2007) and *A Light Song of Light* (Carcenet Press, 2010), as well as the polyvocal Walcott of *Omeros* (Faber & Faber, 2002) in *The Cartographer Tries to Map a Way to Zion* (Carcenet Press, 2014). Miller’s work also draws from and expands upon a Black British poetic legacy which Fred D’Aguiar sought to contextualise in the ground-breaking essay collection *New British Poetries: The Scope of the Possible* (1993), arguing in his chapter titled ‘Have you been here long? Black poetry in Britain’ that ‘dub poetry, poetry influenced by calypso, reggae, jazz and blues rhythms, creole language and Standard English articulating for the first time the black experience in British have changed what it means to be British...making it more sophisticated, giving it a new lease of life.’⁹⁹ With his scintillating combination of lyricism, linguistic play and political activism, Miller is a worthy successor of poets such as Grace Nichols, Linton Kwesi Johnson and John Agard. As with all canons, there is a risk of reification of those individual voices who have been deemed as ‘canonical’; even within the Black British literary canon that has developed rapidly over the past few decades, there remains room for newer voices, including Miller and his contemporaries, such as Vahni Capildeo, Malika Booker, Shivane Ramlochan, Ishion Hutchinson and Christian Campbell, to name but a few.

What draws me to Miller’s oeuvre is his profound ability to reject simplistic categories and false binaries¹⁰⁰ as he profoundly explores complex intersectional issues of race, gender, sexuality, class

⁹⁷ ‘Three white poets – Don Paterson (six wins), Seamus Heaney (five) and Sean O’Brien (four) – have won the [T.S. Eliot, Forward Best and First Collection, Costa and Ted Hughes] prizes as often as all BAME poets combined.’ See Dave Coates and Sandeep Parmar, ‘The State of Poetry and Poetry Criticism’, p. 5.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹⁹ Fred D’Aguiar, ‘Have you been here long? Black poetry in Britain’, in *New British Poetries: The Scope of the Possible*, ed. by Robert Hampson and Peter Barry (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993), pp. 51–71 (p. 70).

¹⁰⁰ In Miller’s second collection *There is An Anger That Moves* (2007), a few poems do occasionally lapse into a kind of multicultural othering that I contend Miller has since rejected in his later work. One such poem reads: ‘...And beside Jamaica is Spain / selling large yellow peppers, lemon to squeeze / onto chicken. Beside Spain is Pakistan, then Egypt, / Singapore, the world ...’ (‘The only thing far way’). Despite the cultural essentialism exemplified in the equating of entire cultures with specific food items, the overall

and religion, thus exemplifying what Sarah Phillips Casteel terms ‘a Caribbean poetics of location [...] that confounds the traditional binaries of nature/culture, land/sea, place/exile, nation/diaspora.’¹⁰¹ Joel Connolly similarly notes in his analysis of Miller’s most recent works that ‘the oppositions Miller plays with and against are bewilderingly numerous. [...] Ultimately, these oppositions collapse into a beautiful, jagged relation.’¹⁰² Accordingly, Miller’s work embodies key characteristics of what Kwame Dawes terms ‘the reggae lyric’:

The reggae lyric...with its connection to Rastafarian ideology, is rooted in an ethos and aesthetic space which encourages dialogues between the temporal and the external, between politics, issues of current social interest, sexuality and spirituality. [...] Ultimately...the fundamental dialogue in reggae is that between the artist and the Jamaican people.¹⁰³

The fictive dialogue between two polarised personae – the Rastaman and the Cartographer – maps well onto the aforementioned dialogues observed by Dawes. In *The Cartographer Tries to Map a Way to Zion*, Miller seems particularly interested in that ‘fundamental dialogue’ which Dawes identifies as being ‘between the artist and the Jamaican people.’ In a manifesto commissioned for *The Poetry Review* (Spring 2017), Miller argues for poetry as a communitarian act, one which speaks from – and of – a lyric I that is always aware of its responsibility to the collective. He writes: ‘Black bodies, immigrant bodies, female bodies...are as devalued and despised today as they ever have been. [...] And so this being the time of manifestos, here is mine: that poetry, at its best...speaks on behalf of the Other. It speaks on behalf of community. It speaks the self only in so far as the self is part of something larger. [...] I assert that language belongs to people and must always be returned to them.’¹⁰⁴ I argue that Miller’s poetry is indeed able to dwell on the opacity of the singular self, whilst simultaneously enacting a lyric I (whether it appears under the guise of a persona or speaks from a first person perspective) that is necessarily rooted within wider historical, socio-political and cultural contexts. Miller’s keen awareness of postcolonial history does not come across as a burden

collection still has its merits, particularly insofar as it enabled Miller to begin to develop his thinking about his positionality a postcolonial, gay and BAME poet living in the UK.

¹⁰¹ Sarah Phillips Casteel, ‘The Language of Landscape: A Lexicon of the Caribbean Spatial Imaginary’, in *The Routledge Companion to Anglophone Caribbean Literature*, ed. by Michael A. Bucknor and Alison Donnell (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014), pp. 480–89 (p. 487).

¹⁰² Joel Connolly, ‘Make Us Dance or Christen Us – an Introduction to Kei Miller’, *Wild Court*, (16 November 2015) <<http://wildcourt.co.uk/poetryand/make-us-dance-or-christen-us-an-introduction-to-kei-miller/>> [accessed 18 June 2019]

¹⁰³ Kwame Dawes, *Natural Mysticism: Towards a New Reggae Aesthetic in Caribbean Writing* (Peepal Tree Press, 1999), p. 129.

¹⁰⁴ Kei Miller, ‘And This Being the Time for Manifestos’, in *The Poetry Review*, ed. by Emily Berry (London: The Poetry Society, Spring 2017), pp. 33–35 (p. 33, 35).

on his lyric, dramatic or narrative speakers; rather, his ‘quarrel with history’¹⁰⁵ (to borrow from Glissant’s seminal essay of the same name) is one that appears to reject Glissant’s exhortation that ‘the [Caribbean] writer must contribute to reconstituting [the Caribbean’s] tormented chronology’¹⁰⁶, whilst also refusing Walcott’s belief in ‘The Muse of History’ that the Caribbean writer must treat ‘history [as] fiction’ through developing a ‘contempt for historic time’¹⁰⁷. Rather, Miller offers a clear middle ground, one which effectively offers a ‘new history [which] challenges the Eurocentric historical representations of the Caribbean by speaking to the Caribbean writer’s postcolonial reality.’¹⁰⁸

In *The Cartographer Tries to Map a Way to Zion*, the fictional encounter between the Rastaman and the Cartographer does not reveal a contempt for history; rather, it is the concrete weight of colonial atrocities (as embodied by ‘Rose Hall Great House’¹⁰⁹) that informs the speaker’s subtle indictment of historical amnesia amongst locals and visitors to the Caribbean alike: ‘You see, the rastaman / has always felt uneasy / in the glistening white splendour / of Great Houses; uneasy / with the way others / seem easy inside them.’¹¹⁰ Accordingly, one might locate the ethos of Miller’s latest collection at the time of writing¹¹¹ in a poem from his third collection *A Light Song of Light* (2010):

There was once a law concerning mermaids. My friend thinks it a wondrous thing – that the British Empire was so thorough it had invented a law for everything. And in this law it was decreed: were any to be found in their usual spots, showing off like dolphins...they would no longer belong to themselves.

‘The Law Concerning Mermaids’¹¹²

In contrast to the British empire’s ‘law for everything’, I argue that Miller’s poems ought to be read as postcolonial fables which exemplify Caribbean poetry’s ability to ‘[offer] counter histories, alternative cosmologies and [valorisations of] the indigenous.’¹¹³ Indeed, Miller dedicates his collection ‘to the bredrens and sistrens of “Occupy Pinnacle”, still fighting for Zion, still fighting

¹⁰⁵ Édouard Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays*, trans. by Michael J. Dash (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1989), p. 61–66.

¹⁰⁶ Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*, p. 65.

¹⁰⁷ Derek Walcott, ‘The Muse of History’, in *Is Massa Dead? Black Moods in the Caribbean*, ed. by Orde Coombs (New York: Doubleday, 1974), pp. 1–37 (p. 37).

¹⁰⁸ Dania Dwyer, ‘Re-memembering History: The Aesthetics of Ruins in West Indian Postcolonial Poetry’, in *The Routledge Companion to Anglophone Caribbean Literature*, ed. by Michael A. Bucknor and Alison Donnell (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014), pp. 432–40 (p. 435).

¹⁰⁹ Kei Miller, *The Cartographer Tries to Map a Way to Zion* (Carcenet Press, 2014), p. 32.

¹¹⁰ Miller, *The Cartographer*, p. 33.

¹¹¹ Miller’s latest poetry collection is *In Nearby Bushes* (Carcenet Press, 2019).

¹¹² Kei Miller, *A Light Song of Light* (Carcenet Press, 2010), p. 61.

¹¹³ Dwyer, ‘Re-memembering History’, p. 438–39.

for a rightful portion of land'¹¹⁴, thus grounding his fictional account of the Cartographer journeying through Jamaica with the Rastaman as his guide in a reality of postcolonial resistance. In his use of what Brathwaite terms 'Nation Language'¹¹⁵, Miller mingles Rastafarian ideology with a critique of persistent linguistic hierarchies which continue to elevate Standard English above Jamaican patois and Rastafari speech. Echoing Brathwaite's oft-cited dictum that 'the hurricane does not roar in pentameter'¹¹⁶, Miller writes in one of his most striking concrete poems on the anguish of Quashie, who had no choice but to adapt his 'measure' to that of his colonizers:

But what now
is the length
of Quashie's
verse? He
who can no longer
measure by *kend* or by
chamma or by *ermijja*; he who
knew his poems by how they fit
in earthenware, perfect as water,
words shaping themselves against red
clay grooves. And though no two jars were
precisely like each other – it worked for Quashie –
this "just about" measure – for words are like that –
each one carrying its own distance. Even this, despite
its best shaping efforts, will never quite be a
jar. So what now shall Quashie do – his old
measures outlawed, and him instructed
now in universal forms, perfected by
universal men who look nothing
and sound nothing
like Quashie?¹¹⁷

Reading Miller's work was what first prompted me to begin my own experimentation with representing the Cantonese language (also known as Standard Cantonese¹¹⁸) in my own poetry, since it is my mother tongue, and was the language I used in all aspects of my daily life (apart from school) until I left for the US to pursue my undergraduate studies in 2009. I also found myself deeply drawn to Miller's nuanced depiction of the Rastaman, who is depicted as having written a PhD on 'Identity Reclamation / in Postcolonial Jamaica'¹¹⁹. As a BAME poet who was making her foray into academia in 2014 (the year *The Cartographer Tries to Map a Way to Zion* was published), I was made to realize that I did not need to choose between my Chinese identity and Anglo-

¹¹⁴ Miller, *The Cartographer*, 'Acknowledgments'.

¹¹⁵ Edward Kamau Brathwaite, 'English in the Caribbean', in *Literary Theory: An Anthology* (Second Edition), ed. by Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), pp. 1151–66 (p. 1152).

¹¹⁶ Brathwaite, 'English in the Caribbean', p. 1154.

¹¹⁷ Miller, *The Cartographer*, p. 12.

¹¹⁸ Cantonese is a variety of Chinese predominately spoken in the city of Guangzhou (historically known as Canton) and in the wider province of Guangdong. It is the standard form of Yue Chinese.

¹¹⁹ Miller, *The Cartographer*, p. 34.

American education, and that it would also be naïve to think that one might return to a sense of self untouched by colonial education and Western ideologies. Rather, I could embody both, in ways that felt true to my own creative and critical experiences. In a country where I am still routinely deemed as an Other because of my intersectional identities, Miller's work offers me vital strategies to consider how the different parts of myself (which might often come across as diametrically opposed) might in fact be in productive dialogue with one another. As such, I find it creatively instructive how Miller's dialogic speakers – when taken together – embody Anthony Reed's concept of 'an "I" that is not: an agent of difference that does not resolve into identity.'¹²⁰ I will explore this further in Chapter 1.

Sarah Howe's 'Counter-poetics of Difference' and the Rise of British Chinese Poetry

While Howe has only one published book in contrast to Miller's ten (five of which are poetry collections), her impact on the British Chinese poetry scene has been deeply significant. Specifically, I wish to highlight the paucity of Anglophone poetry written by Chinese-identified people in the UK: at the time of writing, the field of British Chinese poetry remains very small¹²¹, to the extent that one might easily name its dozen or so active practitioners. Indeed, Cosima Bruno observes that 'very little interest is demonstrated in the works written [by Chinese writers] in both Chinese and in English in the UK, and even less has been produced on poets of Chinese descent in London. This absence is perplexing, not just because it is in opposition to what we read is the situation in the United States of America, but because it may point to the danger that the uniqueness of these writers' contribution to English and Chinese letters will be at best under-appreciated, at worst, lost.'¹²²

Nevertheless, recent years have seen the emergence of powerful new voices in British poetry, including Will Harris¹²³, a poet and essayist of mixed Anglo-Indonesian Chinese heritage from London, Theophilus Kwek, a Chinese Singaporean poet, editor and critic, Jennifer Lee Tsai, a British Chinese poet and critic born in Bebington and raised in Liverpool, Nina Mingya Powles, a

¹²⁰ Anthony Reed, 'At the Border – What Remains, Abides: Fragmentation, Nation and the Arrivant', in *The Routledge Companion to Anglophone Caribbean Literature*, ed. by Michael A. Bucknor and Alison Donnell (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014), pp. 517–25 (p. 525).

¹²¹ The first UK Chinese Writers' Network (*Bi'an*) was established in 2015. It remains a small (but growing) community. While there are prominent British Chinese novelists such as Jung Chang and Guo Xiaolu, with newer voices including Susan Barker, Winnie M. Li and Sharlene Teo, the number of British Chinese *poets* remains small. Recently, *Bi'an* lost its Arts Council England funding, meaning that many of its activities will have to be discontinued for the foreseeable future.

¹²² Cosima Bruno, 'Writing in London: Home and Language in the Work of London Poets of Chinese Descent', *Life Writing*, 14 (1) (2017), 37–55 (pp. 39).

¹²³ The importance of Howe's impact on this recent surge of British Chinese talent cannot be understated, with Howe having served as a mentor to Harris on the third iteration of the Complete Works programme being a case in point. See Sarah Howe, 'Will Harris – Comment: Sarah Howe', in *Ten: Poets of the New Generation*, ed. by Karen McCarthy Woolf (Hexham: Bloodaxe Books, 2017), pp. 50–53 (p. 51).

New Zealand writer of mixed Malaysian Chinese heritage, Jay G. Ying, a Chinese-Scottish poet, fiction writer, critic and translator based in Edinburgh, and Sean Wai Keung, a mixed race British Chinese poet based in Glasgow. In his debut pamphlet *you are mistaken* which won the 2016 Rialto Open Pamphlet Competition, Wai Keung highlights the multiple problems that arise with having scant British Chinese representation within the wider field of British poetry, such that most people might only have heard of one name ('what do you think of sarah howe'), or might problematically consider writing from a British Chinese perspective as pointless ('no offence but why bother') in a society that seldom values British Chinese voices and experiences:

what do you think of sarah howe
 sweet
 is that because you feel under pressure to write about that
 that's so needed in this country especially after brexit
 i thought you were going to write about honesty
 no offence but why bother
 have you told your mum
 have you read sarah howe
 you should ask for funding so you can go back to hongkong

'i think i want to write about race'¹²⁴

Anglophone writing by Chinese-identified peoples has a slightly longer history in the US than in the UK. Nevertheless, in his detailed account of the rise of Asian-American verse since the 1970s, Yao observes that 'the general scarcity of published verse in English by racialized people of Asian descent in the United States before the emergence of the Asian American movement attests to their collective (though by no means identical) status as, in Mae Ngai's felicitous phrase, "impossible subjects"'.¹²⁵ In light of the greater scarcity – and, indeed, seeming impossibility – of the Chinese speaking subject in contemporary Anglophone British poetry, Howe's literary output breaks crucial ground for a new generation of British Chinese poets to follow in her footsteps.

At this juncture, I wish to acknowledge an important predecessor within British Chinese poetry: Meiling Jin, a Guyanese poet of Chinese heritage whose sole collection of poetry at the time of writing, *Gifts from My Grandmother*, was published by Sheba Feminist Press in 1985. Jin's work is clear and piercing in terms of its insights into the racism that Chinese people face in the UK, writing in her poem 'Chinese Takeaway': 'Fried lice, / spare ribs, / crazy yellow bastard. / Why can't you be civilised, / just like us (er) British. / (And anyway, / I have to get rid of my hate somehow.)'¹²⁶ The use of 'lice' instead of 'rice' is a subtle nod to the fact that many Chinese people find the 'r' sound in English difficult to pronounce, and thus might slip into an 'l' sound when

¹²⁴ Sean Wai Keung, *you are mistaken* (Aylsham: The Rialto, 2016), p. 18.

¹²⁵ Yao, *Foreign Accents*, p. 97.

¹²⁶ Meiling Jin, *Gifts from My Grandmother* (London: Sheba Feminist Press, 1985), p. 26.

saying words like ‘rice’ (‘lice’). However, the speaker in Jin’s poem is clearly a white person who, far from sympathetically acknowledging what it takes to learn English as one’s second language, is clearly full of spite towards the Chinese: ‘crazy yellow bastard / Why can’t you be civilised’. There is an ingenuity in Jin’s evocation of ‘yellow’ here, as a skin colour and ethnic marker, but also in relation to the cultural symbol of ‘fried [r]ice’, which has a light, yellow hue. It is noteworthy that the Chinese subject is vividly racialised, but the ‘British’ speaker remains unmarked, and is only depicted as ‘civilised’. However, in an aside, the speaker reveals their bitter racism and unfounded prejudice: ‘I have to get rid of my hate somehow’. In most of her poems, Jin positions her speakers firmly on the outside of British culture and speaks from a positionality of cultural marginalization and social alienation. Another example concerns her poem ‘Strangers in a Hostile Landscape’, in which she evokes the profound dislocation of the postcolonial subject in a hostile environment: ‘We were a straggly bunch of immigrants / in a lily-white landscape. / We made our home among strangers, / knowing no one but ourselves.’¹²⁷ As times have gradually changed and more British Chinese voices are finally beginning to be heard, I find Jin’s work to be less instructive than that of Howe’s, which manages to critique racism and the concept of race itself in a historically complex manner from multiple perspectives, as in Howe’s poem ‘Others’ within her central Borges sequence – a poem which I shall close read further in Chapter 2. Furthermore, Jin’s use of language throughout *Gifts from My Grandmother* is rather plainspoken and direct, in contrast with Howe’s ability to employ more experimental modes throughout *Loop of Jade*.

Since 2010, contemporaries of Howe including Hannah Lowe, Jennifer Wong and Ian Humphreys have proven that the British Chinese poetry scene is having a greater impact on British poetry, with Lowe having published two collections, *Chick* (2013) and *Chan* (2016), both with Bloodaxe Books, and Ian Humphreys having recently published his first collection *Zebra* with Nine Arches Press in April 2019. A poet from Hong Kong, Jennifer Wong has published a pamphlet *Diary of a Miu Miu Sales Girl* with Bitter Melon Poetry in September 2019, with her first full UK collection *Letters Home* forthcoming from Nine Arches Press in February 2020¹²⁸. In particular, Hannah Lowe’s first collection *Chick* bears some resemblance to Howe’s *Loop of Jade*, in that both collections depict a complex parent-child relationship through narrative-lyric poems which draw on family histories spanning continents. In *Chick*, Lowe explores the harsh realities of her father’s life as an Afro-Jamaican Chinese gambler in London’s old East End, interwoven with crystalline lyric portraits of her childhood and coming-of-age, as well as meditations on urban life. While I deeply admired the exquisite imagery in *Chick* and its vivid evocations of familial ties, some of Lowe’s verse at times exhibits the kind of cultural essentialism that Miller’s earlier work occasionally indulges in. In one

¹²⁷ Jin, p. 18–19.

¹²⁸ Jennifer Wong has previously published two collections of poetry, *Summer Cicadas* (2006) and *On Goldfish* (2013), both by the Hong Kong publisher Chameleon Press.

such poem, Lowe depicts her mixed-race identity through various cuisines, in a way that works against precisely the kind of interculturalism that the rest of her collection profoundly depicts. In ‘Three Treasures’, Lowe writes: ‘Jamaica frying chicken in the kitchen, / pig-snout in the stewpot, / breakfast pan of salt-fish, akee / China in the won-ton skin, gold songbird on the brittle porcelain, / pink pagoda silk settee / ... / England eating peaches on the patio...’¹²⁹ Despite these being relatable cultural and ethnic signifiers, as in the description of the Caribbean dish in Merle Collins’s ‘Callaloo’¹³⁰ – by presenting Jamaica, China and England as discrete items on a plate – Lowe risks exoticizing her complex identity and reducing it to well-worn stereotypes.

Alongside Lowe’s poetry, I have found it insightful to read the work of Hong Kong poet Nicholas Wong, who won the Lambda Literary Award for Gay Poetry in 2016 for his second collection *Crevasse* (Kaya Press, 2015) which explores intercultural identities in fresh and startling ways: fellow Hong Kong citizens are depicted in 1997 (the year Hong Kong was handed back to China by Britain) as ‘...bilingual centaurs spreading swine flu / at the turn of the century’ (‘Postcolonial Zoology’)¹³¹; a gay lover is informed that ‘he is confusing like an ATM operated in a foreign language’ (‘How to Refund Your Identity’)¹³²; internalised racism is explored with a hint of bathos and resignation – ‘how the reverse of white is return’ (‘I Love to be Your Witness’)¹³³. In a book which explores themes as various as the gay male body, queer desire, bilingualism, cultural identities and postcolonialism, Wong displays a penchant for unexpected metaphors. However, since Wong has been published in the US by Kaya Press, an indie publisher which focuses on writers of the Asian and Pacific Islander diaspora, *Crevasse* has mostly been in circulation between Hong Kong, Taiwan and the US, and has thus received less attention from British audiences, despite Wong having been profiled in *Oxford Poetry*¹³⁴ and published in a Special Issue on Hong Kong in *Wasafiri*¹³⁵, with an interview by Sarah Howe in the same issue.¹³⁶

I contend that Howe’s work can also be read productively alongside Wong’s, owing to their respective ties to Hong Kong, and because their books explore in part what it means to live as individuals with intersectional identities at the interstices of two cultures in a postcolonial era.

¹²⁹ Hannah Lowe, *Chick* (Hexham: Bloodaxe Books, 2013), p. 46.

¹³⁰ Merle Collins, ‘Callaloo’, *Callaloo: A Journal of African Diaspora Arts and Letters*, 30 (1) (2007), 238–41.

¹³¹ Nicholas Wong, *Crevasse* (New York: Kaya Press, 2015), p. 19.

¹³² Wong, p. 71.

¹³³ Wong, p. 49.

¹³⁴ Mary Jean Chan, ‘Interview: Nicholas Wong’, *Oxford Poetry*, XVI.III (Winter 2016–17), 38–42.

¹³⁵ Nicholas Wong, ‘Love Letter from Crises; Proof 1: Hit Man Gurung, I Have To Feed Myself, My Family and My Country (2013, acrylic on printed canvas); Proof 3: Sun Yuan & Peng Yu, Hong Kong Intervention (2009/ 2016, digital prints on paper)’, *Wasafiri* (Vol. 32, No. 3), guest ed. by Jeffrey Mather and Florian Stadler (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017), pp. 38–40.

¹³⁶ Sarah Howe interviews Nicholas Wong, ‘Sarah Howe in Conversation with Nicholas Wong’, *Wasafiri* (Vol. 32, No. 3), guest ed. by Jeffrey Mather and Florian Stadler (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017), pp. 32–37.

Ultimately, even more important than Howe's presence and activism¹³⁷ within the British Chinese poetry community is the literary accomplishment that is *Loop of Jade*. Whilst it is a debut collection, it already is a highly mature piece of work, with its effective co-mingling of multiple poetic forms such as the lyric, narrative and prose poetry, and its singular ability to combine striking visual imagery, experimentation (in terms of syntax, diction and voice) with multi-layered and cross-cultural intertextuality. Through close reading *Loop of Jade* in Chapter 2, I relish witnessing Howe draw from her wide breadth of literary knowledge – ranging from Horace to William Shakespeare to Ezra Pound to Jorge Luis Borges to Li Po – in order to illustrate the complexity of her own mind. In an interview with Mark Reynolds, Howe reveals that her literary influences are indeed cross-cultural:

...[Sylvia] Plath and [W.B.] Yeats – and [...] T.S. Eliot...I became very interested in American poetry...partly because the year I started writing seriously in earnest at about 21 I was living in America...so the first poets I really knew as I was writing myself were...Jorie Graham, John Ashbery...William Carlos Williams, [and] Elizabeth Bishop. That year was also the first time I'd ever read the classical Chinese poets...like Li Po and Du Fu.¹³⁸

In Chapter 2, I turn to a critical analysis of Howe's *Loop of Jade* vis-à-vis the ways in which BAME poets are currently theorized in relation to 'innovative' versus 'mainstream' traditions in British poetry and practice. Specifically, I will explore how critics and lay readers alike might approach racialized notions of 'difficulty' when reading a literary text written by a BAME poet, amid the pervasive under-theorization of BAME writers and the structural inequalities that persist within the field of British poetry. I aim to address these questions through the use of reception studies (in my examinations of Ben Wilkinson and Oliver Thring's critical responses to Howe's work in the broadsheets); the application of literary theory (in my discussion of George Steiner's conceptualization of literary 'difficulty') and postcolonial theory (in Robert Young's discussions of the problematic notion of 'the Other'); alongside close readings of several poems from Howe's central Borges sequence. My decision to focus on the Borges sequence stems from Howe's own preference for this particular set of poems, as well as the crucial ways in which these poems engage with Pound's deeply problematic yet culturally significant *Cathay* and *Cantos*, which in turn provide a crucial means through which Howe explores her relationship to Chineseness. In an interview with the Forward Arts Foundation, Howe observes: 'If I had to choose, the fourteen poems

¹³⁷ Howe is a co-founder of the Ledbury Emerging Poetry Critics programme in 2017, along with Sandeep Parmar.

¹³⁸ Mark Reynolds interviews Sarah Howe, 'Sarah Howe: Remaking memory', *Bookanista* (2015), <<http://bookanista.com/sarah-howe/>> [accessed 20 June 2019]

belonging to the Borges-inspired sequence that threads through the book are probably the ones I'm proudest of. [...] I loved working out how their fragments could also sing a larger, partially submerged story through leitmotif and echo.¹³⁹

Amidst a growing consensus amongst critics that a discussion on race and white privilege in British poetry is long overdue, few have theorized on race and racism in relation to contemporary British BAME poets and their concomitant poetics.¹⁴⁰ Review culture in the UK largely continues to perpetuate problematic expectations that the BAME poet either portray herself as 'authentically' traumatized as the suffering Other, or else come across as the perfectly assimilated migrant who is defiant yet empowered. In being attentive to how BAME poets continue to be routinely othered by various critics, I wish to reflect upon my positionality as a BAME poet-critic who considers literary criticism to be a crucial means to respond to exemplary work being produced by contemporary British BAME poets, with the aim of disseminating BAME poetry in forums which are less welcoming to non-white or non-Eurocentric voices and perspectives. Bearing in mind Wang's observation that 'the occlusion or ignoring of race by critics and poets at the avant-garde end of the critical spectrum is equally as disturbing as the fetishization of racial and ethnic content and identity by more mainstream poetry critics'¹⁴¹, I offer a textual analysis of Howe's collection with due attention to her identity, cultural influences *and* poetics, and aim to reveal how *Loop of Jade* has broadened the definition of linguistic innovation in contemporary British poetry and practice through its scintillating use of hybrid poetics. Ultimately, I seek to explore in the following chapters how the postcolonial concept of 'the Other' and racialised notions of 'difficulty' are skilfully negotiated, interrogated and subverted by Miller and Howe in their respective works, and will conclude this thesis by exploring the influences of their poetry and poetics on my debut collection *Fleche*.

¹³⁹ The Forward Arts Foundation interviews Sarah Howe, 'The Forward Arts Foundation in Conversation with Sarah Howe', *The Forward Prizes* (2015), <<http://www.forwardartsfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/Sarah-Howe-Forward-Prizes-Interview.pdf>> [accessed 20 June 2019]

¹⁴⁰ See Sandeep Parmar, 'Not a British Subject: Race and Poetry in the UK', *The Los Angeles Review of Books* (December 2015), <<https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/not-a-british-subject-race-and-poetry-in-the-uk/>> [accessed 5 July 2019]

¹⁴¹ Wang, p. 30–31.

1 Towards a Postcolonial Poetics of Relation in *The Cartographer Tries to Map a Way to Zion*

Jamaican Land Histories: 'Cartographic Violence' and Miller's Poetic Sequence 'Place Name'

In this chapter, I shall examine how Kei Miller creates a postcolonial 'poetics of Relation'¹⁴² at the interface of two cultures, as a poet who was born and raised in Jamaica, but subsequently moved to the UK as an expatriate in 2004. In *The Cartographer Tries to Map a Way to Zion* (Carcanet, 2014), Miller refashions a longstanding novelistic tradition and renders it in poetic form. According to Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, 'the journey of the European interloper through unfamiliar landscape with a native guide is a feature of texts as wide-ranging as Wilson Harris' *Palace of the Peacock* (Guyana), Patrick White's *Voss* (Australia), and Camara Laye's *The Radiance of the King* (Guinea).'¹⁴³ This notion of the European traveller exploring distant lands and encountering indigenous peoples also recalls Edward Said's pioneering concept of 'orientalism' and his concomitant depiction of the Orient 'as primitivity, as the age-old antetype of Europe, as a fecund night out of which European rationality developed.'¹⁴⁴ Similarly, Miller acknowledges the persistence of problematic literary tropes which depict various Caribbean landscape ideals 'ranging from the colonial picturesque (Casid 2005) or colonial pastoral (Casteel 2007) to the colonial gothic (Paravisioni-Gebert 2002)'¹⁴⁵ – all of which Miller subverts through creating a narrative work of poetry which features variations on the same theme: that of our inability to truly comprehend a particular landscape through the lens of a single, monolithic system of thought. In his opening poem 'Groundation'¹⁴⁶, Miller writes:

So begin this thing
with *Abu ye! Abu ye! Abu ye!*
A heartbless. Step out
from the case of your sandals,
stand shoeless. Allow your knees
and then your forehead an intimacy
with stone; know your ground.

Here, Miller exhorts the reader to 'know your ground', thus signalling the need for a keen attentiveness to the particularities of the Jamaican landscape. According to Sarah Phillips Casteel,

¹⁴² Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. by Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1997), p. 29.

¹⁴³ Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Postcolonial Literatures (Second Edition)* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2002), p. 27.

¹⁴⁴ Edward W. Said, 'Orientalism Reconsidered', *Cultural Critique*, 1 (1985), 89–107 (pp. 94).

¹⁴⁵ Sarah Phillips Casteel, 'The Language of Landscape: A Lexicon of the Caribbean Spatial Imaginary', in *The Routledge Companion to Anglophone Caribbean Literature*, ed. by Michael A. Bucknor and Alison Donnell (London and New York: Routledge, 2014), pp. 480–89 (p. 481).

¹⁴⁶ Miller, *The Cartographer*, p. 9.

‘if the generation of writers that established Caribbean literature in the 1950s struggled to assert a sense of location in the face of a colonial complex that universalized the metropolitan perspective, the challenge now may be to prevent the Caribbean from itself becoming generalized as an emblem of the global deterritorialization of cultures.’¹⁴⁷ Miller’s bold poetic treatise on Rastafarianism through the lens of colonial cartography seeks precisely to train a keen eye on neo-colonial injustice in the Caribbean, which are concretized in the ongoing Rastafari struggle for land rights in Jamaica. As such, I reject the term ‘hybridity’ in contextualizing Miller’s work, in accordance with Lincoln Z. Shlensky’s contention that ‘creolization, the most influential of [hybridity’s] articulations [in the postcolonial Caribbean], has been so widely and diffusely disseminated [...] that it is by now close to becoming just another universalist theory of hybridity lacking any specific cultural attributes or historical implications.’¹⁴⁸ Furthermore, the difficulty with the concept of ‘hybridity’ is that it threatens to ‘create a false impression of symmetry between unequal terms, cultures, or nations, distorting and diluting the persistent power struggle between colonizer and colonized.’¹⁴⁹ Elsewhere, Ella Shohat echoes this in her contention that ‘a celebration of syncretism and hybridity *per se* if not articulated in conjunction with questions of hegemony and neo-colonial power relations, runs the risk of appearing to sanctify the *fait accompli* of colonial violence.’¹⁵⁰ Rather, Miller’s poems insist on being read ‘contrapuntally’ from both the perspectives of the postcolonial and neo-colonial personae, with an acute ‘awareness both of the metropolitan history that is narrated and of those other histories against which (and together with which) the dominating discourse acts.’¹⁵¹

In portraying a European cartographer *qua* ethnographer who ‘informs the rastaman he is now plotting / a way to Zion’¹⁵² in postcolonial Jamaica, Miller evokes ‘the origins of European anthropology and ethnography [which] were constituted out of [a] radical difference’¹⁵³ between European and non-European peoples, places and cultures, which sought to cast Europe as the imperial centre and the rest of the globe as its periphery. According to Laura Nader:

At the outset, in Anglo-American anthropology, participant observation in a non-Western society was justified as a practice in defamiliarization. According to this scenario, anthropologists move to a place removed from their own culture with the idea that the newness and unfamiliarity they confront will allow them to discover or figure out something about the people they visit that would

¹⁴⁷ Casteel, ‘The Language of Landscape’, p. 481.

¹⁴⁸ Lincoln Z. Shlensky, ‘Hybridity and Subalternity in the Postcolonial Caribbean: Splitting the Difference’, in *The Routledge Companion to Anglophone Caribbean Literature*, ed. by Michael A. Bucknor and Alison Donnell (London and New York: Routledge, 2014), pp. 304–13 (p. 307).

¹⁴⁹ Jahan Ramazani, *The Hybrid Muse: Postcolonial Poetry in English* (London and Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), p. 180.

¹⁵⁰ Ella Shohat, ‘Notes on the “Post-Colonial”’, *Social Text*, 31/32 (1992), 99–113 (pp. 109).

¹⁵¹ Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1993), p. 59.

¹⁵² Miller, *The Cartographer*, p. 62.

¹⁵³ Said, ‘Orientalism Reconsidered’, p. 94.

be a contribution to anthropology as “the science of man”.¹⁵⁴

In critiquing this hegemonic practice of Anglo-American anthropology, Miller draws on the European historiography of cartography and seeks to demystify its seemingly apolitical aims. This link between colonial rule and cartography is one which transcends regional divides, as noted by Jeffrey C. Stone in ‘Imperialism, Colonialism and Cartography’, which depicts an individual somewhat akin to Miller’s cartographer, albeit in a different national context:

An archetypal example of a traveller in the imperialist mould is Alfred Bertrand, a Swiss army captain who was one of a four-man expedition of exploration to north-west Rhodesia in 1895. Bertrand was to become President of the Geographical Society of Geneva and a Vice-President of the Ninth International Geographical Congress in Geneva. He was a member of ten European geographical societies [...] including the Royal Geographical Society.¹⁵⁵

In one of his central poetic sequences titled ‘The cartographer Tries to Map a Way to Zion’, Miller’s depiction of the cartographer’s neo-colonial attitudes serves to deconstruct the ostensibly scientific project of colonial map-making.¹⁵⁶ According to Mark Neocleous, ‘maps are [...] a means of both physical colonization and conceptual control, involving both a cognitive paradigm as well as a practical means of political administration.’¹⁵⁷ A map serves to naturalize and make self-evident what is instead determined by historical and political forces, thus obfuscating that which is often produced through bloodshed and structural violence. In examining the erasure of Jamaican land histories, B.W. Higman and B.J. Hudson note that ‘place names, rather than giving explicit clues to the origins of the Jamaican people, reflect much more strongly the origins of the name-giving population. Economic and political power went together with the domination of land and people, and the power to give names to places.’¹⁵⁸ Furthermore, they observe that ‘the British naming of the land left little trace of what had gone before’, particularly in the wake of prior colonization by the Spanish, who ‘quickly decimated the Taino population and had no great respect for aboriginal names.’¹⁵⁹ Apart from the colonial legacy of place names (which I shall address later through close reading Miller’s poetic sequence ‘Place Name’), various forms of ‘cartographic violence’¹⁶⁰ persist

¹⁵⁴ Laura Nader, ‘Ethnography as Theory’, *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory*, 1 (2011), 211–19 (pp. 212–13).

¹⁵⁵ Jeffrey C. Stone, ‘Imperialism, Colonialism and Cartography’, *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 13 (1988), 57–64 (pp. 59).

¹⁵⁶ See Matthew H. Edney, *Mapping an Empire: The Geographical Construction of British India, 1765–1843* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997).

¹⁵⁷ Mark Neocleous, ‘Off the Map: On Violence and Cartography’, *European Journal of Social Theory*, 6 (2003), 409–25 (pp. 419).

¹⁵⁸ B.W. Higman and B.J. Hudson, *Jamaican Place Names* (Jamaica, Barbados and Trinidad and Tobago: University of the West Indies Press, 2009), p. 21.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 22–23.

¹⁶⁰ Neocleous, p. 409.

in postcolonial Jamaica, a fact which Miller highlights in his poem 'xi. in which the cartographer asks for directions'¹⁶¹:

Lady Musgrave's Road was laid
in its serpentine way
so that Miss Musgrave
on her carriage ride home

would not have to see
a nayga man's property
so much bigger than her husband's
own, she did not want to feel
the carriage slow and know
her driver had just then turned

his face to Devon House,
a thing wet like pride in his eyes,
and nodding to himself *yes*,
is Miss Stiebel build dat. And to think
that such spite should pass
down even to the present

generation – should dictate
the thoughtless,
ungridded shape of our city,
the slowness of traffic each evening –
to think that one woman's pride
should add so much to our daily

commute – this is something
the cartographer does not wish
to contemplate.

As the former residence of Jamaica's first black millionaire George Stiebel, Devon House was constructed in 1891 and continues to impress visitors as a historic Georgian-style property with its stunning 'collection of 19th century antiques from [...] the Caribbean region.'¹⁶² However, Stiebel's financial success in the 1890s incurred the wrath of the former Jamaican governor's wife, Lady Musgrave. Since she reportedly 'took very strong exception to having to drive past such an upscale residence which was most likely far superior to the house which she and [Lord Anthony] Musgrave occupied'¹⁶³, the present Lady Musgrave Road was constructed so that she could drive home without '[having] to see / a nayga man's property / so much bigger than her husband's / own.'¹⁶⁴ In a series of staggered couplets (themselves formally unwieldy on the page in order to

¹⁶¹ Miller, *The Cartographer*, p. 28–29.

¹⁶² Devon House Development, 'Welcome to Devon House Jamaica', <<https://www.devonhouseja.com/>> [accessed 19 July 2018]

¹⁶³ Derryck M. Penso, 'Rename Lady Musgrave Road', *The Gleaner* (May 2011) <<http://jamaica-gleaner.com/gleaner/20110509/letters/letters3.html/>> [accessed 28 August 2018]

¹⁶⁴ Miller, *The Cartographer*, p. 28.

mimic the ‘serpentine’ nature of Lady Musgrave Road), Miller reveals the spiteful legacies of colonial urban planning. By observing that the great inconvenience caused by the construction of Lady Musgrave Road ‘is something / the cartographer does not wish / to contemplate’¹⁶⁵, the narrator reveals the wilful blinkering of the cartographer’s perspective on postcolonial Jamaica. What the cartographer is unwilling to contemplate is the very fact that colonial cartography is a political act, one with significance and concrete ramifications beyond cultural discourse and visual representation of physical topography.

Apart from levelling criticism at the despicable legacy of colonial cartography in postcolonial Jamaica, the aforementioned poem is also suggestive in terms of its textual strategies. The poem’s point of view involves an omniscient narrator observing and narrating the indigene’s experience of encountering Lady Musgrave Road on a day-to-day basis: ‘to think that one woman’s pride / should add so much to our daily / commute’.¹⁶⁶ By referring to the roads of Jamaica as ‘our roads’, the narrator asserts a right to claim that land as his own. In this instance, the cartographer is portrayed as wilfully ignorant of Jamaican history, since it is the narrator who possesses important local knowledge which the cartographer is ideologically preconditioned not to contemplate. This recalls the cartographer’s stance in an earlier poem in the collection, in which he boasts about his universalizing approach to cartography, stating: ‘What I do is science. I show / the earth as it is, without bias.’¹⁶⁷ This illusion of cartography as objective science is addressed in the poem ‘Establishing the Metre’, which depicts two French Cartographers, Pierre Mechain and Jean-Baptiste Delambre, who, ‘in order to establish the metric system [...] set out on a seven-year expedition to measure the earth.’¹⁶⁸ Miller writes:

They did not call it inches, miles or chains –
 this distance which as yet had no clear name.
 Between France and Spain they dared to stretch
 uncalibrated measuring tapes. And foot,
 by weary foot, they found a rhythm
 the measure that exists in everything.¹⁶⁹

Here, Miller links the act of cartography explicitly to colonialism, using synecdoche (‘the measure’) to symbolize the quintessential poetic ‘measure’ of English poetry – i.e. ‘the system of organization in a poem or the units that comprise that system’¹⁷⁰ – of the iambic pentameter. In the above

¹⁶⁵ Miller, *The Cartographer*, p. 29.

¹⁶⁶ Miller, *The Cartographer*, p. 28–29.

¹⁶⁷ Miller, *The Cartographer*, p. 16.

¹⁶⁸ Miller, *The Cartographer*, p. 71.

¹⁶⁹ Miller, *The Cartographer*, p. 11.

¹⁷⁰ Stephen Cushman, ‘Measure’, in *The Princeton Encyclopaedia of Poetry and Poetics (Fourth Edition)*, ed. by Roland Greene, Stephen Cushman, Clare Cavanagh, Jahan Ramazani and Paul Rouzer (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2012), pp. 851.

excerpt, Miller also formally mimics the Shakespearean sonnet, with each line of the poem consisting of roughly ten syllables. In rhyming ‘chains’ and ‘name’, Miller also recalls the final rhyming couplet in Shakespeare’s sonnets. Since the rhyming couplet occurs before the end of the poem, Miller hints at colonial cartography as an enactment of foregone conclusions. Despite not knowing exactly what they were looking for (‘this distance which as yet had no clear name’), the French cartographers (as agents within a wider network of cultural imperialism) had already decided at the outset of their journey that theirs would eventually be ‘the measure that exists in everything.’ Miller critiques this ‘measure’ as a way of standardizing knowledge and imposing a hegemonic Western perspective onto societies which function according to different ‘maps’, including Jamaican manifestations of indigenous spirituality such as ‘the haphazard / dance of bees returning / to their hives’¹⁷¹ and ‘Jah-Jah’s firmament / full of light and livity.’¹⁷² In another poem from the same poetic sequence titled ‘xii. in which the rastaman begins to feel uncomfortable’¹⁷³, Miller contends that those who view history from an ‘objective’ perspective might easily become complicit in the obfuscation of colonial history, since the exploitation, violence and bloodshed which made colonialism possible in the first place is entirely forgotten:

You see, the rastaman
has always felt uneasy
in the glistening white splendour
of Great Houses; uneasy
with the way others
seem easy inside them,
their eyes that smoothly scan the green cane fields
like sonnets,
as if they’d found
a measure of peace
in the brutal
architecture of history.

Here, the repetition of the word ‘measure’ echoes the prior ‘measure’ of the French cartographers. That the rastaman cannot accept this ‘measure of peace’ that is readily available to modern-day (Western) tourists in Jamaica attests to his unwillingness to partake in historical amnesia, with the rastaman observing ‘the brutal / architecture of history’ in the form of Great Houses which were ‘once viable monuments of labour, oppression and European affluence gained at the expense of those enslaved.’¹⁷⁴ The rastaman’s unease with ‘eyes that smoothly scan the green canefields / like sonnets’ suggests the interminably complex relationship between language, literature and history,

¹⁷¹ Miller, *The Cartographer*, p. 22.

¹⁷² Miller, *The Cartographer*, p. 23.

¹⁷³ Miller, *The Cartographer*, p. 33.

¹⁷⁴ Dania Dwyer, ‘Re-membering History: The Aesthetics of Ruins in West Indian Postcolonial Poetry’, in *The Routledge Companion to Anglophone Caribbean Literature*, ed. by Michael A. Bucknor and Alison Donnell (London and New York: Routledge, 2014), pp. 432–40 (p. 434).

for to read a canefield in the postcolonial present as one would a sonnet (which is often taken as a symbol of Western linguistic and cultural hegemony) would be to read and understand history through a distorted lens which ignores the lived realities of former slaves whose languages, cultures and lives were often destroyed and erased by their slaveowners. Linguistically, the words ‘scan’ and ‘sonnet’ in the above poem hint further at the problematic hegemony of the iambic pentameter in English verse: a prescriptive pulse that was never meant to encapsulate the multiple speech rhythms (let alone lived experiences and bodily truths) of the British Empire’s formerly colonized peoples. As such, those ‘eyes that smoothly scan the green canefields / like sonnets’ inevitably belong to those who are complicit in the obfuscation of colonial history and concomitant elevation of Standard International English above regional and local languages in postcolonial societies.

In his poem ‘Fitzy and the Revolution’, the Jamaican poet Ishion Hutchinson recalls the horrific history of ‘bare-backed men, bent kissing / the earth, so to slash away the roots of the canes; / every year the same men, different cane, and when different / men, / the same cane: the cane they cannot kill.’¹⁷⁵ To deny the blood, sweat and tears of these men (and women) – many of whom lost their lives in the canefields of Jamaica – is to commit an act of historical erasure. As such, the rastaman insists on revealing his discomfiture at the splendour of the Great Houses in the presence of the cartographer . In a previous poem, even the most obvious reminder of the horrors of slavery eludes the cartographer , for instead of associating the Caribbean Sea with the atrocities of the Middle Passage, he observes how from ‘flung-open windows / of Rose Hall Great House [...] / the sea becomes / a glittering parabola, / an arc / of shining measure.’¹⁷⁶ Once again, this concept of a universal ‘measure’ reverberates across Miller’s poems with all its complex connotations. Ironically, while this ‘arc’ brings to mind a quote from Theodore Parker, a Unitarian reformer and abolitionist who first coined the phrase ‘the arc [of the moral universe] [...] bends toward justice’¹⁷⁷ – which was subsequently paraphrased and adopted by those such as Martin Luther King Jr. and Barack Obama – one senses that the cartographer is not so much concerned with justice for those countless slaves who died during the Middle Passage as with mapping out the sea’s vastness in a superficial manner, such that it ‘becomes / a glittering parabola’, its tragic depths reduced to a perfectly measured line on the page.

The cartographer’s unwillingness to face up to colonial history and the long-lasting impacts of cartographic violence are opposed by the collection’s second poetic sequence titled ‘Place Name’: a series of vignettes told from the perspective of the omniscient narrator and interwoven into the

¹⁷⁵ Ishion Hutchinson, *House of Lords and Commons* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 2016), p. 6.

¹⁷⁶ Miller, *The Cartographer*, p. 32.

¹⁷⁷ Mychal Denzel Smith, “The Truth About “The Arc of The Moral Universe””, *Huffington Post* (January 2018) <https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/opinion-smith-obama-king_us_5a5903e0e4b04f3c55a252a4/> [accessed 12 August 2018]

dramatic dialogue between the cartographer and the Rastaman. In each 'Place Name' poem, Miller presents the reader with a different landmark in Jamaica, then proceeds to explain how it acquired its name under colonial rule. In each instance, Miller excavates the history behind a specific place name to reveal the oppressive colonial legacies which persist in Jamaica. In the first poem titled 'Place Name: Me-No-Sen-You-No-Come'¹⁷⁸, Miller writes:

Me-No-Sen-You-No-Come. In plain english: do not enter without invitation. For consider the once-upon-a-time adventures of rude pickney answering to name Goldilocks – nuff-gyal, self-invited into house of bears, assumed at once her colonial right to porridge, to beds and to chairs. The baff-hand child went in just so, not even a token offering of honey, and just like that proceeded to buck up things. If only she had pennied the secret names of places. Me-no-sen-you-no-come: without invitation, you're not welcome. Or else, come in as you please – just know that this ground, these bushes, these trees observe you with suspicion many centuries deep.

The poem opens with a caustic warning: 'In plain english: do not enter/without invitation.' The narrator is exasperated at having to explain himself in language that is functionally less rich and complex than the varieties of English which feature on the 'Creole continuum in the polyglossic communities of the Caribbean.'¹⁷⁹ The narrator is fully capable of wielding Standard English as a medium of communication and linguistic laceration, yet he does not feel the need to elevate Standard English above Creolized speech. Strikingly, the word English is rendered in its decapitalized form in the first line: 'english', thus clarifying that the narrator is not in an inferior position to the cartographer when it comes to linguistic truth. The poem is also suffused with Jamaican patois, including terms such as 'pickney' ('a child'), 'nuff-gyal' ('many girls'), and 'baff-hand' ('a cripple'), 'buck up' ('to gain or win by luck'), 'pennied' ('paid attention to') – words which Miller intentionally leaves unglossed. Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin argue that 'the choice of leaving words untranslated in postcolonial texts is a political act, because while translation is not inadmissible in itself, glossing gives the translated word, and thus the "receptor" culture, the higher status.'¹⁸⁰

In this poem, the speaker cites a variant of the familiar British fairy-tale of *Goldilocks and the Three Bears* (one that is immediately familiar to those from former British colonies), and proceeds to subvert it into a tale of colonial exploitation. Rather than being depicted as the civilized character (in contrast to the local barbarians), Goldilocks is chastised and demeaned as being 'rude' and 'self-

¹⁷⁸ Miller, *The Cartographer*, p. 26.

¹⁷⁹ Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back*, p. 43.

¹⁸⁰ Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back*, p. 65.

invited’, a child who ‘went in just so, not / even a token offering of honey.’ Her arrival is clearly unwelcome, for she is an intruder in the house of bears. The narrator’s most damning line: ‘[Goldilocks] assumed at once her colonial right to porridge, to beds / and to chairs.’ There is a genuinely felt anger here that cannot be written off as mere poetic conceit; rather, the narrator reveals a deep resentment at the normalization of colonial acts of plunder and pilferage that are to be found embedded even in the most innocent of British fairy-tales. In light of Miller’s re-rendering of *Goldilocks and the Three Bears* from a postcolonial perspective, one notices that Goldilocks is often mischaracterized in white-washed retellings of the fairy-tale as the potential victim in the house of bears, even though it is in fact she who is the culprit, thief and miscreant.

As the first in the sequence of ‘Place Name’ poems, ‘Me-No-Sen-You-No-Come’ links cultural politics to current realities in the Jamaican landscape, particularly to place names. The narrator laments: ‘If only [Goldilocks] had pennied / the secret names of places. Me-no-sen-you-no-come: / without invitation, you’re not welcome. Or else, come / in as you please – just know that this ground, these / bushes, these trees observe you with suspicion many / centuries deep.’ Here, the ground, bushes and trees of Jamaica are personified and rendered as allies in the narrator’s postcolonial treatise. As Casteel notes, ‘[the Caribbean] landscape often registers histories that have been occluded by the official historical record.’¹⁸¹ In another ‘Place Name’ poem titled ‘Shotover’¹⁸², Miller recalls a Jamaican landscape seeped in physical abuse during a time of slavery:

Shotover – so named because our people, little acquainted with French, could make no sense of Château Vert. And talk truth, Mr. Backra, dat was too stoosh a name for your house. ‘Green and fresh’, you said. No – it did just mildrew and old; a house which, like yourself, has since returned to the fold of Portland’s earth. But oh Mr Backra, if through the muffle of mud you should hear us traipsing on your ground, one of us asking – how it come about, the name? You will discover that when victims live long enough they get their say in history: Well sah (an old man answers), in dem dere backra days, bucky-master had was to catch back the runaway slaves, so him would draw for him long musket and buss gunshot over dere, and gunshot over dere, shot dissa fly pashie! Pashie! All bout de place. And so comes we get de name.

The narrator begins his tale with dark humour, stating that ‘Shotover’ was so named because it was the closest phonetically to the French for ‘green castle’ (‘Château Vert’) in Jamaican patois. The poem soon takes a more sinister turn as the narrator addresses the former owner of ‘Shotover’ as ‘Mr. Backra’ – which literally translates from Jamaican patois into Standard English as ‘slave

¹⁸¹ Casteel, ‘The Language of Landscape’, p. 482.

¹⁸² Miller, *The Cartographer*, p. 41.

master', but is also used to describe any white person in a position of relative authority. The former slave owner is dead and gone, but the descendants of his former slaves have come back to haunt his grave: 'Backra, if through the muffle of mud you should hear us / traipsing on your ground.' Miller's poem resurrects the dead slaves through the footsteps of their descendants and allows them 'their say in history' as testament to the brutality and ruthlessness of colonialism: 'in dem dere backra days, bucky-master had / was to catch back the runaway slaves, so him would draw for / him long musket and buss gunshot over dere, and gunshot over / dere, shot dissa fly pashie!' The reader is left to ponder this painful revelation: the words 'gunshot over' morphing into 'shotover', since any slave who dared to flee the colonial plantation was routinely gunned down. The brutality common to the plantation is dramatized further in another 'Place Name' poem, ominously titled 'Flog Man'¹⁸³:

Flog Man, for them days when man could get nine-and-thirty,
 just cause he hold his head high that Missus call him
 uppity. Nigger man admit he sometimes feel the curl of
 whips, their stinging S's – tips soaked in horse piss –
 more than he feel sun on his skin. Flogging was so
 common it was odd that they call this place Flog Man,
 why not rename the whole damn country Flog Island?
 But it had one beating so brutal, no one could cork their
 ears from it, both black and white man fail in the long
 practice of deafness; years pass like salve but they was still
 hearing it, the cow whip flicking up flecks of skin, and
 this Mandingo man who they did think was too big, too
 proud to ever let eye water grace him eye was bawling
 out a bruck-spirit sound even larger than the barrel of
 him chest. Blood did sprinkle the ground like anointing
 and now people walk by and cringe as memory curl like
 S and lash them owna skin.

Miller's intimate focus on the flogging of one individual is noteworthy, since he locates the entire landscape of slavery firmly in the black male body: 'this Mandingo man who they did think was too big, too / proud to ever let eye water grace him eye was bawling / out a bruck-spirit sound even larger than the barrel of / him chest.' One animal's skin meets that of another in this cruel, historical episode – the cow whip drawing blood from that of a fellow mammal ('their stinging S's – tips soaked in horse piss –'), both at the behest of the white slave owner who distances himself from his fellow creatures through a twisted act of touch as the whip morphs into an extension of a human hand 'flicking up flecks of skin.' This notion of touch is accentuated as Miller plays on sexual innuendos embedded in his choice of Jamaican patois, with the word 'Mandingo' containing multiple resonances, connoting at once 'a member of a people of western Africa in or near the upper Niger valley' and 'a black man with large genitalia' in contemporary English slang. Here, the

¹⁸³ Miller, *The Cartographer*, p. 65.

Freudian drives of sex and death merge in a climax of brutality, as the slave body can no longer contain what Édouard Glissant calls ‘the explosive scream’.¹⁸⁴ According to Michael Dash, ‘in linking the freed body [of the slave who was once deprived of language] and the frenzied scream, Glissant underlines the inextricable bonds between psychic and physical self-assertion.’¹⁸⁵ Here, the narrator astutely dwells on the precise moment of physical torture, that instant when, for ‘the alienated body of the slave [...] self-expression is not only forbidden, but impossible to envisage’¹⁸⁶, then juxtaposes it with a moment in the postcolonial present wherein all who visit ‘Flog Man’ must consciously confront the legacies of colonialism ‘as memory curl like / S and lash them own skin.’

‘I Will Draw a Map of What You Never See’: The Rastaman and His Sermons

In contrast to the cartographer’s neo-colonial desires and unwavering belief in the ‘objectivity’ of cartography, the rastaman offers an entirely different approach to knowing a place. While the rastaman has been featured in Caribbean Anglophone poetry for decades, his image has not always been a wholly positive one. In his seminal collection *Rights of Passage* (1967), Kamau Brathwaite depicts the rastaman as a downtrodden and oppressed figure¹⁸⁷:

Brother Man the Rasta
 man, beard full of lichens
 brain full of lice
 watched the mice
 come up through the floorboards
 of his downtown,
 shanty-town kitchen
 and smiled. Blessed are the poor
 in health, he mumbled
 that they should inherit this
 wealth. Blessed are the meek
 hearted, he grumbled
 for theirs is this stealth.

According to Velma Pollard, ‘social reality [...] placed the poor black man at the bottom of [Jamaican] society. The intention of the [Rastafari] movement was to allow that man to examine his past and to find pride in himself, his race and his “livity”’.¹⁸⁸ In an essay titled ‘Recognizing the Spirit: Indigenous Spirituality and Caribbean Literature’, Miller observes how Caribbean writers (including himself) have ‘felt the need to offer [...] affirming examples of local religious practice

¹⁸⁴ Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*, p. 122–23.

¹⁸⁵ Michael Dash, ‘Writing the Body: Edouard Glissant’s Poetics of Re-membering’, *World Literature Today*, 63 (1989), 609–12 (pp. 610).

¹⁸⁶ Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*, p. 122–23.

¹⁸⁷ Edward Kamau Brathwaite, *Rights of Passage* (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 41.

¹⁸⁸ Velma Pollard, ‘Language and the Downpressed: The Rasta Man in Jamaican Creative Writing’, in *The Routledge Companion to Anglophone Caribbean Literature*, ed. by Michael A. Bucknor and Alison Donnell (London and New York: Routledge, 2014), pp. 460–69 (p. 461).

as a counter-discourse to colonial narratives that had previously painted them as primitive.¹⁸⁹ As such, Miller's opening poem 'Groundation' portrays the spiritual beginning for the Rastafarian community in Jamaica, when His Majesty Haile Selassie, then Emperor of Ethiopia, landed in Kingston on 21st April, 1966. The Rastafarians consider him to be their God ('Jah') incarnate, who has 'appeared in the flesh for the redemption of all Blacks exiled in the world of white oppressors.'¹⁹⁰ According to Leonard E. Barrett, Rastafarians believe that they will one day be repatriated as a people to the promised land of Ethiopia, since they view 'Jamaica as a land of oppression [also known as] Babylon.'¹⁹¹

In 'Groundation', the reader immediately encounters what Pollard terms 'Dread Talk', including words such as 'groundation', 'abu ye' and 'heartbless'¹⁹² – linguistic constructions that serve to distinguish Rastafari speech by its lexical changes [...] [which alter] Jamaican Creole as well as Standard Jamaican English.¹⁹³ It is noteworthy that Miller's rastaman is able to navigate Standard English as well as Dread Talk, and is depicted by Miller as being completely at ease on the 'Creole continuum.'¹⁹⁴ In an essay (which takes the form of a previously unpublished interview), Miller discusses his ease with multiple Englishes, stating that 'the English language is [...] a wide scale along which I can slide.'¹⁹⁵ In another poem titled 'viii. in which the rastaman offers an invitation', the rastaman depicts his understanding of cartography as being linked to the creation of the universe by 'Jah', declaring: 'I&I overstand, for is true that I-man / also look to maps drawn by Jah's large hands.'¹⁹⁶ Here, the rastaman's distinctive use of diction – with words such as 'I&I' and 'I-man' – is explained by Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin as stemming from a specific understanding of the words 'me' and 'we' 'as objects of the sentence [...] always dominated or "governed" by the subject, [...] the way in which white Europeans governed [their] slaves.'¹⁹⁷ According to Joseph Owens, 'the pronoun "I" has a special importance to Rastas and is expressly opposed to the servile "me" [...] [hence] the use of this pronoun identifies the Rasta as an individual [who is not enslaved].'¹⁹⁸ Furthermore, Pollard notes that 'there is power in what the rastaman speaks of as "word sounds" [...] for example eye, the organ of sight, has the same sound as "I" [...] and both are of equally high importance in the [Rastafarian] hierarchy of meaning.'¹⁹⁹

¹⁸⁹ Kei Miller, 'Recognizing the Spirit: Indigenous Spirituality and Caribbean Literature', in *The Routledge Companion to Anglophone Caribbean Literature*, ed. by Michael A. Bucknor and Alison Donnell (London and New York: Routledge, 2014), pp. 450–59 (p. 451).

¹⁹⁰ Leonard E. Barrett, Sr., *The Rastafarians* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1997), p. 1.

¹⁹¹ Barrett, *The Rastafarians*, p. 3.

¹⁹² Miller, *The Cartographer*, p. 9.

¹⁹³ Pollard, 'Language and the Downpressed', p. 464.

¹⁹⁴ Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back*, p. 45.

¹⁹⁵ Kei Miller, *Writing Down the Vision: Essays and Prophecies* (Leeds: Peepal Tree Press, 2013), p. 125.

¹⁹⁶ Miller, *The Cartographer*, p. 23.

¹⁹⁷ Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back*, p. 48.

¹⁹⁸ Joseph Owens, *Dread: The Rastafarians of Jamaica* (London: Heinemann, 1976), p. 65–66.

¹⁹⁹ Pollard, 'Language and the Downpressed', p. 464.

Miller enacts these complex and multi-layered meanings inherent in Rastafari speech in the aforementioned poem, with the rastaman noting how, in ‘the cosmic blueprint / of I&I freedom, is Jah who point our eyes / to well-bottom an say *blink and blink until / you see again the spread of guiding galaxies*.²⁰⁰ Here, the visual rhyme between the Rastafari ‘I’ and ‘eye’ is poignantly illustrated, such that colonial hierarchies in the English language are contested and momentarily displaced. Furthermore, Eric Doumerc contends that Rastafari speech functions in linguistically innovative ways, since ‘words [are] tailored to achieve a greater adequacy between signifier and signified. [...] For instance, the word “oppressor” is said to fail to convey the negative connotations of its meaning because of the positive associations of the syllable “op”. Thus its opposite, “down”, is substituted and the end product is “downpressor.”’²⁰¹ Here, the ‘op’ sound possibly draws on a folk etymology that associates ‘op’ with the word ‘up’. Miller evokes this linguistic trope on multiple occasions, most notably when the rastaman – in the collection’s final poems – gives a sermon and a benediction, during which he wishes the cartographer ‘upfullness’²⁰², a word which conveys more precisely through the ‘word sounds’ of ‘up’ and ‘full’ the positivity of the rastaman’s blessing. Apart from his subtle and subversive use of language, the rastaman is also unafraid to straightforwardly rebuke the cartographer, especially when the cartographer ‘informs the rastaman he is now plotting a way to Zion.’²⁰³ In a withering response, the rastaman says: ‘always this is the way with you people. My bredda, / you cannot *plot* your way to Zion.’²⁰⁴ Later, the rastaman adds, ‘Neither low nor high science will get you through / Jah’s impressive door.’²⁰⁵ This spiritual outlook is one which is consistently espoused by the rastaman, who invites the cartographer to contemplate the possibility of a spiritual place – Zion – that can neither be conquered nor colonized, and thus does not lend itself readily to the exigencies of cartography.

Reimagining the Other: Towards a Glissantian Opacity

In juxtaposing the views of the rastaman and the cartographer, Miller invites the reader to ponder an underlying question: who, in fact, is the Other? In his influential essay ‘Postcolonial Remains’, Robert Young argues that the concept of the Other should be rendered obsolete if it is not significantly rethought and reimagined by postcolonial theorists, since ‘the idea that there is a category of people, implicitly third-world, visibly different to the casual eye, essentially different, and “other”, is itself a product of racial theory, its presuppositions drawn from the discriminatory

²⁰⁰ Miller, *The Cartographer*, p. 23.

²⁰¹ Eric Doumerc, ‘Rastafarians in Post-Independence Caribbean Poetry in English (the 1960s and the 1970s): from Pariahs to Cultural Creators’, *Miranda*, 4 (2011), 1–13 (pp. 7).

²⁰² Miller, *The Cartographer*, p. 68–70.

²⁰³ Miller, *The Cartographer*, p. 62.

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

foundations of modernity.²⁰⁶ Young takes issue not with the Hegelian notion of the Other as a philosophical concept, but with the persistence of ‘the category of whole cultural or ethnic groups as “other”, which has been the product, as well as object of, anthropological enquiry.’²⁰⁷ Indeed, many scholars have attested to the social construction of race and its role in othering entire populations, with Dorothy E. Roberts stating that ‘scientific racism [...] understands racial variation as a biological distinction that determines superiority and inferiority. [...] For example, the racial myth asserted that nature had perfectly adapted Africans’ bodies to the heavy agricultural labour needed in the [American] South, and fitted their minds to bondage.’²⁰⁸ Young also locates this problematic concept of the Other at the inception of the field of postcolonial studies, since ‘the founding conference of the field [...] in 1984 was programmatically called “Europe and its Others.”’²⁰⁹ Miller seeks to critique this notion of the Other not by dismissing it entirely, but rather through rethinking prevailing conceptions of the Other in ways already proposed by Young, who rightly maintains that ‘alterity is not something produced as a form of exclusion but fundamental to being itself, which must always involve “being singular plural” from the very first.’²¹⁰

What prevents Miller’s collection from becoming a mere polemic is its ability to juxtapose and meditate upon two differing conceptions of history – Eurocentric history as linear genealogy perpetuated by the West, versus a ‘fragmented historical sensibility’²¹¹ arising from a postcolonial perspective in the aftermath of colonial trauma. While the cartographer and the rastaman engage in an epic debate throughout the collection, the narrator intrudes repeatedly into this dialogue with facts and anecdotes on indigenous spirituality and place names. At the same time, Miller crucially negotiates the potential pitfalls of orientalising or speaking on behalf of the Rastafarians (who are easily othered owing to their socio-economic position in Jamaican society, alongside their racial and spiritual identity in contrast with the presumably white, secular, European cartographer) by creating a polyphony of voices – that of the rastaman, the cartographer and the narrator – alongside a Jamaican landscape suffused with indigenous spirituality and personified creatures to create a complex narrative which provides a ‘new history [that] challenges the Eurocentric historical representations of the Caribbean by speaking to the Caribbean writer’s postcolonial reality.’²¹²

Such an approach is consistent with Miller’s disavowal of possessing a simplistic notion of ‘the Other’ in his article ‘But in Glasgow, There Are Plantains’. When asked by friends and relatives from Jamaica to confirm the celebrated multicultural diversity of Glasgow, a city where Miller had

²⁰⁶ Young, ‘Postcolonial Remains’, p. 139.

²⁰⁷ Ibid.

²⁰⁸ Dorothy E. Roberts, ‘The Genetic Tie’, in *Critical White Studies: Looking Behind the Mirror*, ed. by Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997), pp. 186–89 (p. 186).

²⁰⁹ Young, ‘Postcolonial Remains’, p. 139.

²¹⁰ Young, ‘Postcolonial Remains’, p. 140.

²¹¹ Dwyer, ‘Re-membering History: The Aesthetics of Ruins in West Indian Postcolonial Poetry’, p. 432.

²¹² Dwyer, ‘Re-membering History: The Aesthetics of Ruins in West Indian Postcolonial Poetry’, p. 435.

lived and worked in for several years, Miller writes: ‘I realize that the Other doesn’t really look for diversity – he is only looking for himself.’²¹³ What Miller is gesturing at is a way to articulate difference that does not, in the act of attempting to identify difference, re-inscribe the act of othering. As I have already explored in the previous sections, the rastaman and the cartographer embody two diametrically opposed forces, each representing a different system of knowledge, with neither appearing to have a monopoly on truth. This in turn allows Miller to avoid the trap of replicating the usual ‘us’ versus ‘them’ distinctions between colonial and postcolonial subjects. According to Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, ‘the postcolonial writer, whose gaze is turned in two directions, stands already in that position which will come to be occupied by an interpretation, for he/she is not the object of an interpretation, but the first interpreter.’²¹⁴ In juxtaposing the rastaman and the cartographer’s views (mediated by the narrator), Miller seeks to offer his unique interpretation of the complex relationality which links the multiple – and at times conflicting – facets of his own self. In *Writing Down the Vision: Essays and Prophecies*, Miller states: ‘I hold dual [...] even multiple citizenship. I belong both to a traditionally oppressed race, and to a privileged class.’²¹⁵ Apart from being someone who is racially othered yet has access to class privilege, Miller also considers himself to be a member of the Caribbean diaspora in the UK. However, he no longer wishes to consider the UK as the centre and the Caribbean as the periphery, according to the old logic of colonialism. As such, Miller argues:

It is time to re-conceive [...] the centre. The centre for me is no longer Britain. I live in Britain and for me that means I live on the periphery. Isn’t that essentially what a diaspora is – a group of people that have dispersed from the centre? The centre for me is now the Caribbean. If I am writing back to anyone that is who I am writing back to.²¹⁶

I find this observation worthy of closer scrutiny, since it reveals something about Miller’s poetic aims in this collection and his entire oeuvre more generally. One of the key texts in postcolonial literary studies is *The Empire Writes Back*, first published in 1989, and subsequently reissued in 2002. In the book’s introduction, its authors are concerned with depicting postcolonial literatures that have written back to Empire, particularly in light of what Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin have termed ‘a “privileging norm” [which] was enthroned at the heart of the formation of English Studies as a template for the denial of the value of the “peripheral”, the “marginal”, the

²¹³ Kei Miller, ‘But in Glasgow, There are Plantains’, *International Journal of Scottish Literature*, 4 (2008), 1–6 (pp. 2).

²¹⁴ Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back*, p. 60.

²¹⁵ Miller, *Writing Down the Vision*, p. 93.

²¹⁶ Miller, *Writing Down the Vision*, p. 118.

“uncanonized”²¹⁷ During and in the wake of decolonization across the globe, postcolonial writers have had to negotiate the tensions and traumas which stem from being partially or wholly incorporated by the imperial centre via a process of ‘colonial mimicry’, which Homi K. Bhabha defines as ‘the [colonial] desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a subject of difference that is almost the same, but not quite.’²¹⁸ In contrast, Miller challenges and reconfigures this very notion of ‘the imperial centre’ in his creative work, as evidenced by his situating *The Cartographer Tries to Map a Way to Zion* in postcolonial Jamaica, which the European cartographer has to negotiate at every turn as an outsider. In stating that ‘the centre for me is no longer Britain’, and that he is consciously ‘writing back to [the Caribbean]’, Miller is enacting a postcolonial, Glissantian ‘poetics of Relation’: one which conceives of the postcolonial writer *not* as the self-conscious ‘reformed, recognizable Other’, but rather as someone who feels able to write back to his chosen audience, which may be located in Jamaica, the UK, and indeed, elsewhere.

This re-visioning of the notions of centre and periphery whereby Britain is marginalized in the postcolonial poet’s work is evident in Miller’s textual treatment of his personae in this collection. Through a series of lyric meditations on the nature of cartography, the existence of spiritual maps drawn by Jah, and how one can never plot one’s way to Zion, the rastaman takes on the role of the postcolonial critic who disagrees nearly at every turn with the neo-colonial cartographer. Strikingly, it is the rastaman who has the last word, as evidenced by the concluding poems respectively titled ‘in which the rastaman gives a sermon’ and ‘in which the rastaman says a benediction.’ It is also noteworthy that the narrator functions primarily to elevate the rastaman’s views, most obviously in the sequence of ‘Place Name’ prose poems which display the narrator’s intimate knowledge of the Jamaican landscape in service of a scathing commentary on colonialism. Miller’s decision to overtly tip the power balance in favour of the rastaman vis-à-vis the cartographer reveals his political and poetical aims, for he states in an interview with Maya Catherine Popa that ‘*The Cartographer Tries to Map a Way to Zion* [...] doesn’t apologize for its politics or try to make those politics too subtle. I think a lot of writing by black postcolonial subjects – in order to be taken seriously – have to hide their politics under subtlety. [...] But this book isn’t so much interested in burying. Instead it bears witness.’²¹⁹ Indeed, Miller makes no attempt to dilute or ignore power asymmetries which persist in Jamaica, as evidenced by his dedicating the collection ‘to the bredrens and sistrens of “Occupy Pinnacle”’.²²⁰ At the time of the collection’s publication in the UK, Rastafarians were in the midst of occupying a hilltop called The Pinnacle, west of the

²¹⁷ Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back*, p. 3.

²¹⁸ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (Abingdon: Routledge Classics, 2004), p. 122.

²¹⁹ Kei Miller, ‘Spotlight on the Author: An Interview with Kei Miller’, *Carcanet Blog* (July 2014) <<https://carcanetblog.blogspot.com/2014/07/spotlight-on-author-interview-with-kei.html/>> [accessed 12 April 2018]

²²⁰ Miller, *The Cartographer*, ‘Acknowledgements’.

Jamaican capital, Kingston. This represented a concerted attempt to preserve a historic piece of land which Rastafarians insist belong to the Howell family, with Leonard P. Howell being credited with establishing the first branch of the Rastafarian movement in Jamaica in 1935. According to some of Howell's descendants, 'papers proving the family's ownership of the land were destroyed in the 1930s and 1940s [...] because the island's then-colonial authorities thought it "presumptuous for [a black Jamaican] to own [such impressive property]."'²²¹

As a poet from Jamaica who is deeply sympathetic to the Rastafarian struggle over land rights, and as a Westernized intellectual *par excellence*, Miller emphasizes the specificities of the individual whose own borders and boundaries are porous and prone to change. Interestingly, it is the cartographer who rebukes the rastaman on this issue, stating that 'every language, even yours, / is a partial map of this world – / We speak to navigate ourselves / away from dark corners and we become, / each one of us, cartographers.'²²² As a postcolonial poet, Miller considers himself as being 'blessed with a kind of double vision'²²³ in light of his upbringing in Kingston, Jamaica, and his eventual expatriation to the UK. As a citizen of the Commonwealth, Miller is a beneficiary of the privileges afforded by such membership, despite it being inextricably linked to colonialism in the Caribbean. The production of postcolonial critiques by Anglophone Caribbean poets such as Miller offer British and Caribbean audiences alike a glimpse into the enduring nature of colonial legacies, an issue that has been highlighted by the 2016 'Rhodes Must Fall' campaign at the University of Oxford, with the movement's campaigners seeking to decolonize higher education by denouncing the white supremacist legacy of Cecil Rhodes. Despite the Rhodes Trust's willingness to fund postcolonial projects such as Miller's latest collection at the time of writing, with Miller noting that 'the writing of this collection was largely made possible thanks to the Caribbean Rhodes Trust and, specifically, the Rex Nettleford Fellowship in Cultural Studies which the trust awarded me'²²⁴, there appears to be a continual reluctance on the part of the Trust's donors and supporters to fundamentally interrogate Cecil Rhodes as a powerful symbol of colonial nostalgia in the postcolonial present.

By having the rastaman and the cartographer disagree with one another, Miller is able to accentuate the tensions that arise as a result of his multiple identities and positionality as a Westernized scholar from Jamaica who has arguably benefited in multiple ways from having received a colonial education, yet also espouses a postcolonial politics, a fact which Miller reflexively brings to the reader's attention in the following poem:

²²¹ News from Elsewhere, 'Jamaica: Row over status of first Rasta village', *BBC News* (February 2014) <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/blogs-news-from-elsewhere-26016900/>> [accessed 24 May 2018]

²²² Miller, *The Cartographer*, p. 45.

²²³ Miller, *Writing Down the Vision*, p. 18.

²²⁴ Miller, *The Cartographer*, 'Acknowledgements'.

But the cartographer, it is true,
dismisses too easily the rastaman's view,
has never read his provocative dissertation –
'Kepture Land' as Identity Reclamation
in Postcolonial Jamaica. Hell!

The cartographer did not even know
the rastaman had a PhD (from Glasgow
no less) in which, amongst other things, he cites
Sylvia Wynter's most cryptic essay: *On How*
We Mistook the Map for the Territory,
and Reimprisoned Ourselves in
*an Unbearable Wrongness of Being...*²²⁵

The rastaman's creative citation of Sylvia Wynter's work is Miller's subtle nod to the Jamaican novelist, dramatist and essayist who was awarded the Order of Jamaica in 2010 for her enduring services to the island's education, history and culture. Wynter's thesis in the cited article is primarily that continual efforts at exoticizing Western thought itself should be recognized as 'functioning [...] to relativize [the white] *Man* [...] [by challenging] its over-representation [...] as "the Man"'.²²⁶ Miller's direct inclusion of Wynter's work serves a dual function here. First, it allows the reader a glimpse into the rastaman's political beliefs; second, it serves to undercut the authority of the cartographer, whose 'over-representation' in official texts and popular culture is subtly derided by the rastaman. Furthermore, Miller performs a clever inversion in this scenario whereby the cartographer is caught out in his prejudice – for he cannot fathom an educated rastaman: 'Hell! / The cartographer did not even know / the rastaman had a PhD (from Glasgow / no less).' In revealing the ease with which the cartographer deems the rastaman as an Other (i.e. as a black, poor, and uneducated man from a former British colony), and his surprise at being proven wrong ('the cartographer, it is true, / dismisses too easily the rastaman's view'), Miller invites his readers to question their own racial prejudices.

In lieu of an idealized hybridity, Miller invites the reader to contemplate the possibility of a Glissantian 'opacity' in which one's desire to know the Other becomes obsolete. Writing against the Negritude movement championed by Aimé Césaire and others, Glissant offers instead a notion of relationality which encompasses the intuitive and dynamic linkages that can be formed between all sentient and non-sentient beings within the 'one world' (*tout-monde*), a vision of humanity that is encapsulated in his epigraphs in *Poetics of Relation* (1997), which include Walcott's 'Sea is History' and Brathwaite's 'The unity is submarine.' Rather than embracing binary oppositions and systems

²²⁵ Miller, *The Cartographer*, p. 34.

²²⁶ Sylvia Wynter, 'On How We Mistook the Map for the Territory, and Re-imprisoned Ourselves in Our Unbearable Wrongness of Being, of *Desêtre*: Black Studies Toward the Human Project', in *Not Only the Master's Tools: African American Studies in Theory and Practice*, ed. by Lewis R. Gordon and Jane Anna Gordon (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006), pp. 107–69 (p. 161).

of thought which promote ideological discovery and conquest, Glissant proposes the need for a movement towards ‘opacity’²²⁷, which he celebrates in a postcolonial era wherein ‘transparency no longer seems like the bottom of the mirror in which Western humanity reflected the world in its own image.’²²⁸ According to Glissant, one avenue through which such opacity has been explored and unearthed is the literary text, which ‘plays the contradictory role of a producer of opacity [...] because the writer, entering the dense mass of his writings, renounces an absolute [...] [and] renders it opaque by realizing it in language.’²²⁹ Such opacity in the literary text is a distinctive feature of contemporary Caribbean poetry, and is particularly evident within Miller’s work, with his personae in *The Cartographer Tries to Map a Way to Zion* evoking a multiplicity of voices and languages, at times inter-mingling Standard English, Jamaican Creole, and Rastafarian speech in an ‘implicit renunciation of an arrogant, monolingual separateness.’²³⁰

In particular, Miller’s collection evokes a Glissantian ‘opacity’ through preventing the possibility of any direct equivalences being drawn between his speakers and himself as Miller *qua* poet. In ‘Rewriting “the Lyric” in Innovative Black British Poetry’, Romana Huk contends that ‘[performance poetry] fixed a far too narrow, conventional and confining image of the black poet “for a long time”, [namely, as Kwame] Dawes writes, “that of the immigrant author whose very presence was defined by the idea of otherness, where otherness represented alien and foreign.”’²³¹ As a poet who ‘admit[s] to having become the ultimate performance poet – for many times I have approached lecterns with blank white pages which I pretend to read from’²³², Miller understands that his eloquence stems not from arbitrary distinctions between ‘page’ versus ‘stage’, but rather his ability to deconstruct and subvert these very categories: Self/Other, colonizer/colonized, performance/page.

In sum, Miller enacts a postcolonial ‘poetics of Relation’ through insisting on his highly complex and dialogic personae’s ‘right to opacity’²³³. By adopting textual strategies such as multilingualism (through a co-mingling of Standard English, Jamaican patois and Rastafari speech) and subverting a quintessentially Western poetic form (the dramatic monologue) in order to call into question the hegemony of the iambic pentameter and the English ‘measure’, Miller offers a poetic voice that embodies the complexity of his subject matter. In *The Cartographer Tries to Map a Way to Zion*, Miller’s creative approach to critiquing the structural violence wrought by colonial legacies in Jamaica has

²²⁷ Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2010), p. 111.

²²⁸ Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, p. 111.

²²⁹ Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, p. 115.

²³⁰ Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, p. 118.

²³¹ Romana Huk, ‘Rewriting “the Lyric” in Innovative Black British Poetry’ in *The Cambridge Companion to British Black and Asian Literature (1945–2010)*, ed. by Deirdre Osborne (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 225–40 (p. 226).

²³² Miller, *Writing Down the Vision*, p. 147.

²³³ Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, p. 189.

been to revel in a series of dramatic monologues by the rastaman and the cartographer as they slowly come to terms with one another's point of view. Despite their polarized politics, there is never a sense that either speaker has a monopoly on truth. Furthermore, the 'Place Name' poetic sequence as recounted by the narrator offers a profound reminder of the persistence of colonial traumas in postcolonial Jamaica. Through his dramatic personae, Miller offers a polyphonic 'I' that embodies a Glissantian opacity, one in which 'every Other is a citizen and no longer a barbarian.'²³⁴

²³⁴ Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, p. 190.

2 Journeying is Hard¹: Difficulty, Race and Poetics in Sarah Howe's *Loop of Jade*

In Praise of Difficulty: 'It seemed perfectly right that words should be things you have to digest'

In this chapter, I wish to consider the complexities surrounding the critical reception of *Loop of Jade*, a debut collection by the British-Chinese poet Sarah Howe. Published in 2015, Howe's *Loop of Jade* (Chatto & Windus) has largely been celebrated by the British literary establishment, winning both the 2015 T.S. Eliot Prize and the 2015 *Sunday Times* / Peters Fraser and Dunlop Young Writer of The Year Award. More recently, Howe was elected Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature through its '40 Under 40' initiative, which seeks to 'welcome a new generation of writers into the RSL, and to celebrate the talent and diversity of Britain's younger writers.'² However, these accolades have played an inadvertent role in fostering controversy among several (white, male) critics in the UK, which led in turn to a media backlash from female poets who – in response to a disparaging Twitter comment by the journalist Oliver Thring – coined the hashtag #derangedpoetess to express the fury they felt in the wake of Howe's perceived mistreatment by the press.³

I raise these literary controversies not to detract from Howe's poetry and poetics, but rather to begin the work of reflecting critically on how BAME (Black, Asian and minority ethnic) poets in the UK are rarely afforded the privilege of having their work critiqued in a manner which does not, in the words of Dorothy Wang, 'explicitly oppose political and social "content" (including racial identity) against formal literary concerns.'⁴ In spite of the uneasy relationship between transnational readings and nation-focused critical arenas, markets and canons, Wang's contention that poets of colour remain read either for their 'race' or for their 'poetics' certainly pertains to the ongoing discussions on race and review culture in the UK. During a panel on the role of the poetry critic at the 2018 Ledbury Poetry Festival, Ledbury Poetry Critic Sarala Estruch astutely observed that 'when faced with reviewing the work of a BAME poet, the critic today too often falls into the trap of focusing on the cultural origin of the poet rather than the work itself.'⁵ Indeed, Howe's work

¹ Sarah Howe, *Loop of Jade* (Chatto & Windus, 2015), p. 59.

² Royal Society of Literature, '40 Under 40', *RSL Fellows* (August 2017) <<https://rsliterature.org/fellows/40-under-40/>> [accessed 24 August 2018]

³ Katy Evans-Bush, 'TS Eliot Prize Row: Is Winner Too Young, Beautiful – and Chinese?', *Guardian* (January 2016) <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/jan/23/deranged-poetess-sarah-howe-ts-eliot-prize-media/>> [accessed 12 February 2018]

⁴ Dorothy Wang, *Thinking Its Presence: Form, Race, and Subjectivity in Contemporary Asian American Poetry* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014), p. 31.

⁵ Sarala Estruch, 'Training Our Noticing', *Poetry News*, Spring (2019), 1–16 (pp. 9).

has been odiously applauded for its ‘oriental poise’,⁶ while simultaneously attracting derision from a handful of critics who (mis-)read Howe’s skilful use of intertextuality and linguistically innovative forms throughout her collection as being symptomatic of an ‘intellectually abstruse’ poetics.⁷

Such notions of (un-)readability and difficulty are often deeply racialized, particularly when one considers, in the words of Kayo Chingonyi, how a ‘structurally racist literary culture might influence a myopic reading of work by BAME poets.’⁸ In response to those critics who insist that Howe ought to ‘[work] harder to write with the difficult clarity and complex simplicity of which she is capable’,⁹ I wish to note that some poets do not consider ‘clarity’ or ‘simplicity’ to be necessary traits of their work, particularly those who draw inspiration from an avant-garde poetic tradition. Simultaneously embedded in this clarion call to ‘simplicity’ is a veiled demand that a BAME poet’s work come across as ‘authentic’, which is reflected in Ben Wilkinson’s analysis of Howe’s work, as he observes how ‘the Hong Kong of Howe’s early years is a fecund territory for a poet seeking to reconcile a quintessentially English life with a starkly contrasting Eastern heritage.’¹⁰ While aptly acknowledging Howe’s multiple heritages, such commentary brings to mind ‘one key criticism often levelled against the notion of cultural hybridity, [which] is that it assumes the prior existence of whole cultures, a vision of culture much discredited in contemporary anthropology.’¹¹ There is also the problem of Howe being orientalist as the ‘native informant’ who is presumed to have unfettered access to an ‘authentic’ Eastern heritage by virtue of having been born in Hong Kong, yet it perhaps escapes the inattentive critic that Howe comes to her Chineseness in *Loop of Jade* not through accessing primary Chinese texts (be it classical or contemporary), but rather via Ezra Pound’s *Cathay* and *the Cantos*: that is, through Anglophone (Poundian) imitations of classical Chinese poetry, since English is in fact Howe’s sole mother tongue. In an interview with Lily Blacksell for the *Boston Review*, Howe recalls that during her year abroad at Harvard University after graduating from the University of Cambridge (where she read

⁶ Kate Kellaway, ‘The Best Poetry Books of 2015’, *Guardian* (December 2015) <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/dec/08/best-poetry-books-2015-clive-james-claudia-rankine/>> [accessed 15 February 2018] Writing in the *Boston Review* on the 2015 T.S. Eliot Prize shortlist, poet and critic Dai George observes that “‘New writer’s voyage into Chinese family history’” has proved too alluring a spin for some critics, inviting the sort of pat generalization that Howe’s exquisite, accurate poetry explodes.’

⁷ Ben Wilkinson, ‘*Loop of Jade* by Sarah Howe Review – the Winner of the TS Eliot Prize’, *Guardian* (January 2016) <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/jan/12/loop-of-jade-sarah-howe-poetry-winner-ts-eliot-prize/>> [accessed 20 February 2018]

⁸ Kayo Chingonyi, ‘Worrying the [Blood]line of British Poetry: Notes on Inheritance and Alterity’, *Swimmers*, 1 (2016), 1–11 (pp. 5).

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Pnina Werbner, ‘The Limits of Cultural Hybridity: On Ritual Monsters, Poetic Licence and Contested Postcolonial Purifications’, in *Postcolonial Studies: An Anthology*, ed. by Pramod K. Nayar (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2016), pp. 438–56 (p. 438).

English): ‘I spent hours translating Virgil, but hadn’t yet thought to study Chinese.’¹² Having moved from Hong Kong, China, to Watford, England, at the age of seven, Howe has been vocal about her fraught relationship to language:

‘Voice’ isn’t a straightforward thing for me: neither my physical voice, nor the unique and unified poetic voice we’re all supposed to be trying to find within ourselves. A couple of years after we moved from Hong Kong to England...my mum came with me to parents’ evening. She listened as the teacher told her to take me to...places where I could hear English, because it was important for non-native speakers to get extra exposure...I could tell my mum was quietly furious: English was my first and only language.¹³

Such microaggressions are often sublimated into subtler manifestations within the field of English literature and poetry studies. Thring observes disparagingly in his review for the *Sunday Times* that “‘Lacunae” is a very Howean word. To interview this Cambridge English don, whose PhD, she says, was on “visual imagination and visual vividness in language”, is to undergo a tutorial sprinkled with wordy phrases: “hyperreality”, “double input”, “multi-layeredness”, “interleavings””.¹⁴ It is curious as to why Howe’s usage of standard vocabulary within literary criticism has been identified by Thring as problematic, considering that certain discourses are demanded by academia, and Howe is indeed an accomplished Renaissance scholar (no scare quotes necessary). Accusations of racism and sexism aside, might this have something to do with the (white) critic’s fundamental inability to reconcile the BAME poet’s erudition with her racial background? Aside from persistent structural inequalities within British higher education¹⁵, Thring’s issue with Howe’s work might also stem from the fact that BAME poets are often praised by critics for portraying a narrow and stereotypical version of ‘authenticity’, one which requires them to perform a kind of ‘angry and defiant writing’¹⁶, which Wilkinson praises Chingonyi’s *Kumukanda* (Chatto & Windus) for, as he notes how Chingonyi’s collection is ‘an authentic and convincing book [...] in its many nuanced

¹² Sarah Howe, ‘The Sound of Her Voice: Sarah Howe Interviewed by Lily Blacksell’, *Boston Review* (July 2016) <<http://bostonreview.net/poetry/sarah-howe-interviewed-lily-blacksell/>> [accessed 30 February 2018]

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Oliver Thring, ‘Born in the Rubbish Tip, the Greatest Poetry of Today’, *Sunday Times* (January 2016) <<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/born-in-the-rubbish-tip-the-greatest-poetry-of-today-xx6mq3rlvf/>> [accessed 25 February 2018]

¹⁵ Richard Adams, ‘British universities employ no black academics in top roles, figures show’, *Guardian* (January 2017) < <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2017/jan/19/british-universities-employ-no-black-academics-in-top-roles-figures-show/>> [accessed 12 March 2018]

¹⁶ Ben Wilkinson, ‘*Kumukanda* by Kayo Chingonyi Review – Unflinching Reflections’, *Guardian* (January 2016) <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/jan/12/loop-of-jade-sarah-howe-poetry-winner-tseliot-prize/>> [accessed 20 February 2018]

portrayals and unflinching reflections.¹⁷ When confronted with a BAME poet whose racial identity defies conventional expectations because it does not (and need not) map directly onto an autobiographical lyric ‘I’ which conforms to racial stereotypes, critics have tended to react in frustration at being unable to, in the words of Howe, ‘read [...] poems by women, and especially ones from racial minorities, as artlessly autobiographical – as unmediated expressions of lived experience.’¹⁸ This seeming incongruence between one’s poetics and race is in turn grossly (mis-)interpreted by critics as a kind of ‘difficulty’ that requires fixing. Here, I shall now pivot towards a critical discussion of what I consider to be a more valid and important kind of ‘difficulty’ in Howe’s work.

In his seminal article ‘On Difficulty’, George Steiner contends that any mention of ‘difficulty’ arising from a literary text can be classified ‘into contingent, modal, tactical and ontological difficulties [...] [with] manifold combinations between them.’¹⁹ According to Steiner’s classification, ‘contingent’ difficulties concern words or phrases that are not immediately intelligible to the reader, and therefore require the act of ‘look[ing] up’ a particular reference²⁰; ‘modal’ difficulties arise when the reader encounters ‘something palpably unsettling, even repellent, about the movement and lunge of the whole poem’²¹; ‘tactical’ difficulties concern instances when the poet may choose to be obscure in order to achieve certain specific stylistic effects, or when one is ‘compelled towards obliquity and cloture by political circumstances’²²; ‘ontological’ difficulties entail mystery over comprehension, in rejection of a Homeric tradition of ‘linear, narrative, realistic, [and] publicly-focused [writing].’²³ *Loop of Jade* contains various instances and combinations of such literary ‘difficulties’, all of which ought to be approached with at least some understanding as to their intents and purposes.

From a historical perspective, I find resonances between Howe’s predicament and the reception of the Chinese-American poet John Yau, who initially found himself on the fringes of various poetry circles during the late 1970s and 1980s in the United States, only to be resurrected by John Ashbery, a former mentor, who chose ‘[Yau’s] *Corpse and Mirror* (1983) as a National Poetry Series selection.’²⁴ I mention Yau not to draw hasty equivalences between two poets who happen to both identify as Chinese; rather, Howe and Yau can be spoken about in the same breath because they

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ George Steiner, ‘On Difficulty’, *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 36 (1978), 263-76 (pp. 276).

²⁰ Ibid., pp. 264.

²¹ Ibid., pp. 269.

²² Ibid., pp. 270.

²³ Ibid., pp. 274.

²⁴ Dorothy Wang, *Thinking Its Presence: Form, Race, and Subjectivity in Contemporary Asian American Poetry* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014), p. 167.

employ similar poetic strategies in their work, specifically ‘by use of repetition, circularity, narrative fragmentation, parataxis [...] [as well as] parody.’²⁵ Furthermore, both Yau and Howe cite Ezra Pound as a formative influence on their poetic imagination and textual strategies, with Yau acknowledging in an interview with Edward Foster that ‘Pound’s Chinese poets were very, very meaningful to me [...] they were about being Chinese, about some kind of identity.’²⁶ Similarly, Howe writes in her interview with the Forward Prizes that ‘An interest in image [...] first took me to Pound, though he [has] since found other routes into *Loop of Jade*, through both *Cathay* and *the Cantos*.’²⁷ At this juncture, I wish to concur with Steven Yao, who contends in his seminal text *Foreign Accents: Chinese American Verse from Exclusion to Postethnicity* (2010) that an acknowledgement of ‘[Pound’s] complicity with and even active participation in the long and troubling history of dominant Anglo-American Orientalism’²⁸ ought not negate the fact that ‘the Orientalist efforts of [...] many Anglo-American modernists set the prevailing formal terms for virtually the entire subsequent development of [...] verse by writers of Asian descent [within an Anglo-American context].’²⁹ Suffice to say, I shall return to this issue during my subsequent close readings of Howe’s poems.

In her influential book *Thinking Its Presence: Form, Race, and Subjectivity in Contemporary Asian American Poetry* (2014), Wang observes that ‘for decades, Yau never quite fit any poetry category – Language, avant-garde, cultural nationalist, ethnic, postmodernist, conceptual, among others – and, to some extent, still does not.’³⁰ I argue that Howe is similarly a poet whose work refuses easy categorization, with Sandeep Parmar concurring in the *LA Review of Books* that ‘Howe’s [*Loop of Jade*] moves between lyric and experimental modes, and dodges the uneasy limits of poetic subjectivity.’³¹ It is clear from current academic and literary debates concerning avant-garde poetics in the UK that ‘while the relationship between “experimental” or “difficult” poetry and capitalism has been the subject of much compelling critical writing in the UK, little attention has been given to poetry’s relationship to race, racism, and the legacies of colonialism’³², a situation which the international research group RAPAPUK (Race and Poetry and Poetics in the UK) has sought to rectify. In

²⁵ Ibid., pp. 170.

²⁶ Ibid., pp. 177.

²⁷ Sarah Howe, ‘Forward Arts Foundation in Conversation with Sarah Howe’, *Forward Prizes for Poetry* (June 2015) <<http://www.forwardartsfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/Sarah-Howe-Forward-Prizes-Interview.pdf>> [accessed 12 June 2018]

²⁸ Steven G. Yao, *Foreign Accents: Chinese American Verse from Exclusion to Postethnicity* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 39.

²⁹ Ibid., pp. 40.

³⁰ Wang, *Thinking Its Presence*, p. 166.

³¹ Parmar, ‘Not a British Subject’, *LA Review of Books*.

³² Janani Ambikapathy and others, ‘Race and Poetics and Poetry in the UK: Legacies of Colonialism’, *RAPAPUK* (July 2018) <<http://www.rapapuk.com/october-2018.html>> [accessed 15 July 2018]

recent debates surrounding the lyric I's uses and problematics, Gillian White acknowledges in her conclusion of *Lyric Shame: The 'Lyric' Subject of Contemporary American Poetry* (2014) that 'questions about authorial identity, identification and the legibility of non-white "lyric" subjects would add [a] significant dimension to my account of lyric shame [...] as the beginnings of the lyric shame situation I seek to historicize are in fact located in forms of entitlement bound up with histories of minority oppression and white privilege. Among such forms of entitlement are Mill's and Eliot's assumption of the poet's warrant to speak and expectation to be broadly relevant to and understood by "all."' ³³ Responding to White's analysis, Parmar argues in her *Threads* essay on 'Lyric Violence, the Nomadic Subject and the Fourth Space' that 'it is impossible to consider the lyric without fully interrogating its inherent premise of universality, its coded whiteness.' ³⁴ At the same time, Parmar aptly recognizes that 'anti-lyric poetics that emerge from post-structuralism undermine the coherence of a lyric subject [...] but to not need to recognize oneself, to render oneself without a voice, is only appealing or possible for those who have not been screened out, marginalised, silenced by the powers inherent in language itself.' ³⁵

In light of these debates, I shall turn to a brief discussion about race and innovative women's poetry in the UK since the 1970s, in order to explore some of the limitations within current discussions on avant-garde poetics, which shall in turn inform my close reading of Howe's Borges sequence. Rather than place any firm poetic label on Howe's work, my aim for the rest of this chapter is to ascertain how *Loop of Jade* is currently being (mis-)read by certain critics in relation to notions of difficulty, race and contemporary poetics within a British context. I contend that *Loop of Jade* is a richly complex collection which claims multiple allegiances and influences, including that of Jorge Louis Borges, William Shakespeare, Philip Sidney, Horace, Ezra Pound, William Carlos Williams, John Ashbery, Robert Hass, Jorie Graham, Li Po and Du Fu. As is evident from this wide-ranging list, Howe draws inspiration from American, European and East Asian literary traditions across various schools of poetic thought and time periods, even as her work is indelibly shaped by her experiences of being racially interpellated in the UK as a mixed-race female poet.

Whither the Diasporic Avant-garde?: Race and Innovative Women's Poetry in the UK since the 1970s

In exploring the British poetic avant-garde since the British Poetry Revival of the 1970s, an increasing number of articles and publications have focused on the issue of 'innovative women's

³³ Gillian White, *Lyric Shame: The 'Lyric' Subject of Contemporary American Poetry* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2014), p. 268.

³⁴ Sandeep Parmar, 'Lyric Violence, the Nomadic Subject and the Fourth Space', in *Threads*, ed. by Sandeep Parmar, Nisha Ramayya and Bhanu Kapil (London: Clinic Publishing, 2018), pp. 7–27 (p. 11).

³⁵ *Ibid.*

poetry in the United Kingdom³⁶, to quote the title of an article by Stephen Mooney published in *Women: A Cultural Review* (2015). An earlier article by Linda A. Kinnahan (1996) discusses ‘experimental poetics and the lyric in British women’s poetry’³⁷, with a specific focus on the works of Geraldine Monk, Wendy Mulford and Denise Riley. Going back to the 1970s, Ken Edwards and Robert Hampson map out ‘an exercise in collective remembering’³⁸ which examines the London avant-garde poetry community during the 1970s and ‘how some of the debates and actions of the 1970s played out [in the 1980s].’ In his chapter in *Clasp: Late Modernist Poetry in London in the 1970s*, Hampson notes how ‘the fact that “British Poetry” [was] represented almost exclusively by white men at both the 1974 and 1977 [avant-garde] conferences reflects the dominance of this group in experimental poetry in this period.’³⁹ By the 1980s, Lauri Ramey cites Kewsi Owusu in observing the emergence of a ‘new Black British avant-garde’⁴⁰ which included Linton Kwesi Johnson, Jean “Binta” Breeze, Benjamin Zephaniah, and Lemn Sissay as some of the movement’s key members. It is noteworthy that ‘Owusu cites performance poetry as a central formal manifestation of the experimentation employed by this avant-garde movement’⁴¹; at the same time, Ramey rightly contends that ‘orality and performance can only be read as “experimental” and “new” in relation to the British literary canon – not in the context of African diasporic traditions.’⁴²

It is indeed worth questioning which poetic practices are avant-garde in relation to which literary canons, and why one ought to privilege Western and European textual forms as the main point of comparative interest against which all other literary traditions are compared. Perhaps the root of this issue lies with colonial attitudes which entirely privileged Western literatures over non-Western ones, as epitomized by Vahni Capildeo’s essay in the *White Review*, which was commissioned by the ‘Citizens of Everywhere’ project at the University of Liverpool in the aftermath of the Brexit referendum. In her powerful essay, Capildeo urges her readers to resist the lure of colonial nostalgia, and suggests ‘reciprocity’ as a way forward:

³⁶ Stephen Mooney, ‘Innovative Women’s Poetry in the United Kingdom’, *Women: A Cultural Review*, 26 (2015), 237–253 (pp. 237).

³⁷ Linda A. Kinnahan, ‘Experimental Poetics and the Lyric in British Women’s Poetry: Geraldine Monk, Wendy Mulford, and Denise Riley’, *Contemporary Literature*, 37 (1996), 620–70 (pp. 620).

³⁸ Robert Hampson, ‘Introduction’, in *Clasp: Late Modernist Poetry in London in the 1970s*, ed. by Robert Hampson and Ken Edwards (Bristol: Shearsman Books, 2016), pp. 7–14 (p. 7).

³⁹ Robert Hampson, ‘King’s College and the PCL Poetry Conferences’, in *Clasp: Late Modernist Poetry in London in the 1970s*, ed. by Robert Hampson and Ken Edwards (Bristol: Shearsman Books, 2016), pp. 70–74 (p. 73).

⁴⁰ Lauri Ramey, ‘Diaspora and the Avant-Garde in Contemporary Black British Poetry’, in *Diasporic Avant-gardes: Experimental Poetics and Cultural Displacement*, ed. by Carrie Noland and Barrett Watten (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 189–206 (p. 191).

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 192.

⁴² *Ibid.*

For millions worldwide, the alien English graft became natural. We are also you. But you, alas, are not us. That would require reciprocity. You would want to learn the Shakespeares and Wordsworths of the civilizations whose descendants are arriving as survivors. You would need to look at Cornwall and see Phoenicia; to look at the Scottish Borders and see Septimius Severus, Rome and Libya; to look at Bristol and see Caribbean sugar [...] to know your streets and palaces as built with borrowings and plunder; read your history, and count up as British values the adulteries, rapes, and love affairs in your never-isolate blood.⁴³

By the 1980s and 1990s, certain individuals and publications had begun challenging the overwhelmingly Eurocentric nature of the British poetic avant-garde. Writing in the anthology *New British Poetries: The Scope of the Possible* (1993), Fred D'Aguiar sought to contextualize the history of Black British writing since the 1970s, whilst close reading the work of poets including Linton Kwesi Johnson, James Berry, Jackie Kay, Grace Nichols and John Agard. He concludes with the argument that 'dub poetry, poetry influenced by calypso, reggae, jazz and blues rhythm, creole language and Standard English articulating for the first time the black experience in Britain have changed what it means to be British; deepened it in fact, making it more sophisticated, giving it a new lease of life.'⁴⁴ *The New British Poetry: 1968–88* had a similar effect on broadening the boundaries of British (innovative) verse. Published in 1988 by Grafton Books as part of its Paladin series, jointly edited by Gillian Allnutt, Fred D'Aguiar, Ken Edwards and Eric Mottram, it offered a diverse group of differentially affiliated poets and editors who each brought their own concerns regarding feminism, Black British poetry and linguistically innovative verse to bear on the anthology. Had it not been for the book's general editor John Muckle who commissioned the anthology with the precise aim to unite these different editors, it is likely that these four poets (Allnutt, D'Aguiar, Edwards and Mottram) might not have otherwise collaborated on a joint project to reflect their largely divergent aims and ambitions on the development of British poetry and poetics.

In the late 1990s, the ground-breaking anthology titled *Out of Everywhere: Linguistically Innovative Poetry by Women in North America & the UK* (1996) was published by Reality Street. By the 2000s, a major event on innovative women's writing took place at the Contemporary Experimental Women's Poetry Festival in Cambridge in 2006, organized by Emily Critchley, who also co-organized the Women's Innovative Poetry and Cross-Genre Festival in Greenwich alongside Carol Watts in 2010.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Fred D'Aguiar, 'Have You Been Here Long?: Black Poetry in Britain', in *New British Poetries: The Scope of the Possible*, ed. by Robert Hampson and Peter Barry (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1993), pp. 51–71 (p. 70).

Two more anthologies followed: *Infinite Difference: Other Poetries by UK Women Poets* (2010), edited by Carrie Etter, and the second instalment of the *Out of Everywhere* anthology, titled *Out of Everywhere 2: Linguistically Innovative Poetry by Women in North America & the UK* (2015), edited by Critchley and featuring a new generation of female experimental writers from both sides of the Atlantic, including those such as Amy De'Ath, Mei-mei Berssenbrugge, Andrea Brady, Lee Ann Brown and Elizabeth-Jane Burnett (with Berssenbrugge and Burnett duly recognized as pioneers within the BAME avant-garde). However, there remains a glaring lacuna in these laudable efforts to render the field of British avant-garde poetry more inclusive, with theorizations on the intersections between British BAME poetry and the avant-garde being produced largely by American critics, such as Lauri Ramey (2009) who writes compellingly on Patience Agbabi and Anthony Joseph in her chapter titled 'Diaspora and the Avant-Garde in Contemporary Black British Poetry'. Bearing in mind that 'while the American and British situations cannot be fully collapsed, [...] the greater openness of American universities and critical establishments to [...] formal and linguistic experimentation, and to the ideological and gendered shapings of poetic conventions have a bearing upon experimental writing in England both in actual practice and in shared theoretical contexts'⁴⁵, I shall proceed in my close readings of Howe's *Loop of Jade*.

Loop of Jade's Borges Sequence: Race and Steiner's 'Difficulties'

I wish to consider Howe's *Loop of Jade*, above all, as a powerful and necessary critique of the very idea of race as a stable category and biological reality, starting with an examination of the book's epigraph by Jorge Louis Borges, who wrote a fictive Chinese encyclopaedia titled *The Celestial Emporium of Benevolent Knowledge*. In it, Borges writes:

These ambiguities, redundancies, and deficiencies recall those attributed by Dr Franz Kuhn to a certain Chinese encyclopaedia...On those remote pages it is written that animals are divided into: (a) belonging to the emperor, (b) embalmed, (c) tame, (d) sucking pigs, (e) sirens, (f) fabulous, (g) stray dogs, (h) included in the present classification, (i) frenzied, (j) innumerable, (k) drawn with a very fine camelhair brush, (l) others, (m) having just broken the water pitcher, (n) that from a long way off look like flies.

These arbitrary categories consisting of nouns, verbs and adjectives structure and permeate *Loop of Jade*, with each category constituting a stand-alone poem. I wish to begin by offering a close reading of this epigraph, since it is through Howe's citation of Borges that the reader is first alerted to the

⁴⁵ Kinnahan, p. 629.

multiple elements at play. First, the epigraph is a translated version from Spanish (Borges) into French (Foucault) into English, thus bringing multilingualism to the fore. Howe states in the ‘Notes’ section of her collection that the translated version of this epigraph appears in Michel Foucault’s *The Order of Things*, a book which reveals the ways in which knowledge, conceptions of truth and socio-scientific categories are heavily contingent upon historical circumstances, and thus tend to evolve over time. By alluding to the unstable nature of such categorizes, Howe encourages the reader to anticipate similar moves within her poems.

Second, it is noteworthy that the reader first encounters Chinese culture in this collection not through Howe’s speakers, but through the mediated gaze of the white critic (i.e. Borges and Foucault). Once again, Howe foreshadows a crucial theme in her work – the ways in which her own relationship to race and poetic voice is not entirely straightforward. Third, this epigraph serves to hint at the central importance of intertextual tropes such as translation, allusion and parody to Howe’s poetic project, thus effectively foreshadowing the multi-layered nature of *Loop of Jade* as a collection which insists on inhabiting its situatedness between *and* within cultures, both in light of Howe’s mixed-race background, and given Hong Kong’s former status as a Chinese city colonized by Britain in the aftermath of the Opium Wars. For Wilkinson to state that ‘Howe’s early years is a fecund territory for a poet seeking to reconcile a *quintessentially English life*⁴⁶ with a *starkly contrasting eastern heritage*⁴⁷ (my italics) is to offer too naïve an understanding of political history, for in the aftermath of Empire and colonialism, one can hardly refer to peoples, cultures and cities as being ‘purely’ one thing or another, a fact which Howe poignantly observes:

The Chinese term for people like me [is] 混血 [儿] (*Hùnxuè’ér*) [...] meaning literally “mixed blood”, but with just a hint of “muddled” or “confused blood”. In early twentieth-century colonial Hong Kong, people like me were a taboo [...] and even fetishized subgroup: an unpleasant reminder of what ensued when the Empire’s implicit racial hierarchies were transgressed.⁴⁸

Howe explores the deeply contingent nature of racial identity throughout *Loop of Jade*, particularly through her pervasive use of intertextuality in conveying the ‘rivenness of subjectivity wrought by

⁴⁶ I also wish to take issue here with Wilkinson’s notion of a ‘quintessentially English life’, since this seems to suggest a very narrow sense of ‘Englishness’ (i.e. that of the white British person who drinks ‘normal tea’ and consumes marmite) to the exclusion of other ethnicities, religions and cultures which make up the multicultural fabric of contemporary British society.

⁴⁷ Wilkinson, ‘*Loop of Jade* by Sarah Howe Review’, *Guardian*.

⁴⁸ Sarah Howe, ‘Sarah Howe interviewed by Patricia McCarthy’, *Agenda* (November 2016) <<http://www.agendapoetry.co.uk/documents/NGPissueNotesforBroadsheetPoets.pdf/>> [accessed 28 September 2017]

immigration, diaspora [and] the violence of assimilation.⁴⁹ Even for those who are not mixed-race, the shadow of Empire and the enduring complexities of being a postcolonial invariably inform one's approach towards race, language and culture – none of which are static or ossified entities. Critical race theorists and scientists have long dispelled the notion that race is biological reality, with Ian F. Haney Lopez observing that 'race must be viewed as a social construction'⁵⁰, while proposing the term 'racial fabrication [in lieu of] racial formation'⁵¹ to denote how 'humans rather than abstract social forces produce races.'⁵² This is borne out in a recent poem by Anthony Anaxagorou, who intersperses his poem 'After the Formalities', first published in the *Poetry Review*, with factual statements on race: 'In 1481, the word "race" first appears in Jacques de Brézé's poem "The Hunt". De Brézé uses the word to distinguish between different groups of dogs.'⁵³ Later, Anaxagorou writes: 'In his 1684 essay "A New Division of the Earth", French physician François Bernier became the first popular classifier to put all humans into races using phenotypic characteristics.'⁵⁴ Towards the end of the poem, Anaxagorou adds: 'In 2001, philosopher Robert Bernasconi wrote "The construct of race was a way for white people to define those who they regarded as other."⁵⁵ In her poem '(l) Others'⁵⁶, Howe writes:

I think about the meaning of *blood*, which is (simply) a metaphor
and *race*, which has been a terrible pun.

[...]

*

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 spiralling path from Γένεσις to genetics. Language revolves like a ream of stars.

*

A different generation: *They wouldn't escape by the Mischlinge Laws.*
I wonder if they'll have your blue eyes.

⁴⁹ Wang, p. 117–118.

⁵⁰ Ian F. Haney Lopez, 'The Social Construction of Race', in *Literary Theory: An Anthology* (Second Edition), ed. by Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), pp. 964–74 (p. 968).

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 969.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ Anthony Anaxagorou, 'After the Formalities', *Poetry Review*, Spring (2018), 69–73 (pp. 69).

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 73.

⁵⁶ Howe, *Loop of Jade*, p. 46.

In these fragments, Howe meditates on the complexities surrounding ancestry, race and ethnicity to reveal their historically determined and socially constructed nature as categories which ‘have been, and are being, evolved.’ Language itself is placed under scrutiny: the first couplet questions the deep attachment we have as a society (across cultures) to the meaning of ‘blood’, which, the speaker reminds us, ‘is (simply) a metaphor’, rather than being a biological trait which differs across races and ethnicities. However, the use of brackets around the word ‘simply’ alerts the reader to the speaker’s self-conscious deployment of this notion of simplicity, since ‘blood’ *qua* metaphor powerfully dictates the ways in which one is perceived and categorized in a world of nation-states, many of which continue to grant citizenship through the principle of *jus sanguinis* (‘right of blood’), under which persons born to one or both parents of a particular country are granted automatic citizenship, as opposed to the principle of *jus soli* (‘right of the soil’), which confers the rights of citizenship to anyone born within a (nation-)state’s territory. Apart from the practicalities of citizenship, ‘blood’ continues to play a crucial role in determining our self-identity, with Derek Walcott’s poem ‘A Far Cry from Africa’ evoking precisely this metaphor: ‘I who am poisoned with the blood of both, / where shall I turn, divided to the vein?’⁵⁷

Howe understands the paradoxical and anguished nature of Walcott’s lament, noting that ‘[the metaphor’s] literal impossibility underlines the slipperiness of race: how [does one] separate out the “white” capillaries from the “black” ones?’⁵⁸ In *Troublesome Science: The Misuse of Genetics and Genomics in Understanding Race* (2018), Rob DeSalle and Ian Tattersall contend that according to the strict rules of taxonomy, and based on the application of modern genetic tools in examining human variety, there can only be one logical conclusion: that the notion of discrete ‘races’ is merely the product of ideology, myth and human imagination, for we are all biologically part of the same human race.⁵⁹ That race is socially constructed does not, however, entail that it is irrelevant to the interpellation of individuals across and within cultures and societies. Rather, race is indeed ‘a terrible pun’, since the fact that people of different ‘races’ are locked in an unequal ‘race’ against one another is borne out daily across the world, particularly within capitalist democracies where racial hierarchies often remain systemic and deeply institutionalised.⁶⁰

⁵⁷ Derek Walcott, ‘The Schooner Flight’, in *Collected Poems: 1948–1984* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1986), p. 346.

⁵⁸ Howe, ‘Sarah Howe interviewed by Patricia McCarthy’, *Agenda*.

⁵⁹ Rob DeSalle and Ian Tattersall, *Troublesome Science: The Misuse of Genetics and Genomics in Understanding Race (Race, Inequality, and Health)* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018).

⁶⁰ Francis Elliott and Matt Chorley, ‘Embattled Theresa May delays “explosive” report on race’, *The Times* (July 2017) <<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/embattled-theresa-may-delays-explosive-report-on-race-xptk60rl7/>> [accessed 28 September 2017]

The next couplet which appears later in the same poem reveals a ‘contingent’ difficulty, since words such as ‘Babel’, ‘Mendel’, or even *‘Quadroon’* might require some effort from the reader in terms of research, but the internet is quick to yield such definitions. In offering a racialized perspective on looking up difficult words in a poem, I recall a time during secondary school in Hong Kong when almost every other phrase in a literary text required extensive research, since none of the cultural references came intuitively to me, and few of the metaphors used by the ‘canonical’ British poets were familiar territory for a Chinese reader. Chinese poetry, on the other hand, referenced myths and legends that I had grown up with, and there were social codes, historical allusions and cultural metaphors which I could instantly recognize from classical texts. As I read Howe’s *Loop of Jade* almost a decade later, I find myself relishing rare moments of ease – instances when the Chinese myths referenced by Howe in the title poem ‘Loop of Jade’ make obvious sense; how descriptions of Hong Kong’s Mid-Levels and Victoria Harbour are so vivid in ‘Crossing from Guangdong’ that I can almost trick my mind into thinking that I am standing at the harbour’s edge, staring from Hong Kong Island across to Kowloon. All this to say – is there not a compelling case to be made for readers to try harder at comprehending what various and multiple sources of inspiration a British-Chinese poet might find herself drawing from? Is there not a strong case to be made for a British audience willing to meet Howe halfway in attempting to understand her version of Hong Kong and Mainland China through the specificity of her eyes, rather than expecting the BAME poet to offer a tamed and reductive version of ‘the Far East’ for one’s easy and convenient consumption?

Loop of Jade asks much of its readers, but only because Howe’s keen intellect is multicultural and multi-faceted. In calling herself ‘a personal Babel’, Howe’s speaker evokes the confusion of multiple voices speaking through her, and asks if this is indeed ‘a muddle’ (recalling Howe’s earlier reference to the notion of ‘muddled blood’), or is this ‘a Mendel’? Once again, brief research will alert the reader that a reference is being made to Gregor Mendel, the father of modern genetics, who developed the laws of Mendelian inheritance. Here, Howe allows sonic reverberations of meaning to occur through the use of imperfect rhyme (‘muddle’ and ‘Mendel’) – thus challenging us to ponder how ‘muddled’ we all are, since we are inevitably products of varying genetic combinations passed down from one generation to the next. The unpredictability of genetic inheritance is underscored with Howe’s question later on in the poem, where she writes: ‘I wonder if they’ll have your blue eyes’ – a line addressed to the speaker’s Jewish lover and referencing her future children, who would have been deemed as people of ‘mixed-blood’ under Nazi Germany’s racist ‘Mischling Laws’, which were used to determine whether a person was a ‘Jew’ or a ‘Mischling’ (someone of ‘Aryan’ and Jewish ancestry). The aural pun on ‘I’ and ‘eyes’ (a plural ‘I’) also gestures

at Howe's ability to destabilize an ostensibly unified subjectivity as espoused by a stable lyric 'I': one who is often deemed as 'universal' (i.e. white). The experimental form of this poem bears the hallmarks of avant-garde poetry with its use of allusion, collage, fragmentation, understatement and parataxis, thus offering an additional layer to the oft-cited lyricism of Howe's work.

In an interview with Patricia McCarthy, Howe observes that 'there's a scholarly, hyper-referential tone that I was conscious of letting some of the later poems inhabit, playfully licensed by their connection to the book's Borges epigraph [...] to leave out such a strain altogether [...] wouldn't offer a true portrait of how my mind works or the cultures that formed it.'⁶¹ I find this quote illuminating when pondering the poem's other conspicuous pun: 'The spiralling path from [Genesis] to genetics', which evokes how our understanding of the human race is based not on objective facts, but is rather derived from an amalgamation of political, religious, cultural, social and scientific narratives that are in turn rooted in language. In '(d) *Sucking pigs*'⁶², Howe injects a humorous tone to explore – in a lyric mode – related themes of cultural origins, as well as the arbitrariness of cultural symbols:

Between choosing canapes and favours I read
how the groom's family by Chinese tradition
should gift to her kinsmen a piglet, milk-fed,
just a moon at the teat, crisped to perfection,

when quite satisfied the bride's still intact.
I imagine your mother cranking the spit.
Crackling's coy, brittle russet then succulent fat –
that atavistic aroma makes me salivate,

you physically sick. So as pet names go, *Shikse's*
not a bad fit. (I did play your Circean temptress...)

This poem appears (once again) to present a series of literary 'difficulties' (see Steiner), but I shall persist with the act of close reading in order to illuminate the poem's hard-won complexity. Here, the roasted piglet (which symbolizes a bride's virginity within a Cantonese tradition in China) is viewed through a dual and deeply polarized lens: that of 'reverence' and 'disgust'. The speaker (who salivates at the thought of the roasted pig's fragrant aroma) imagines her Jewish husband's mother cooking the piglet (an impossible scenario), since Jewish people consider pigs to be 'unkosher', with some even refraining from saying the animal's name for fear of invoking God's wrath. The irony that a type of food can symbolize purity for a particular ethnic group (the Cantonese) and

⁶¹ Howe, 'Sarah Howe interviewed by Patricia McCarthy', *Agenda*.

⁶² Howe, *Loop of Jade*, p. 22.

filth for another (the Jews) is epitomized in the line: ‘that atavistic aroma makes me salivate, / you physically sick.’ In light of this clash of cultural symbols (reminiscent of Samuel P. Huntington’s controversial 1993 *Foreign Affairs* essay titled ‘*The Clash of Civilizations?*’), the speaker muses on her pet name ‘Shikse’, which is a Yiddish insult used by observant Jews to denote other women who are not Jewish, thus suggesting that those women are, in a deeply derogatory sense, not one of *ours*. The imperfect rhyme between ‘sick’ and ‘Shikse’ hints at the name’s offensive tone, particularly in light of it being a ‘pet name’, which is usually meant to be a form of endearment rather than a source of alienation. The speaker then states in an aside: ‘I did play your Circean temptress’, alluding to the figure of Circe in Greek mythology, who infamously used her powers to transform Odysseus’ men into swine. Here, the juxtaposition of Circe’s pigs and the prized Cantonese pig that is in turn abhorred by the speaker’s Jewish husband and mother-in-law suggests how arbitrary cultural symbols are despite their ability to evoke deeply held beliefs and sentiment across time and space. Towards the end of the poem, Howe juxtaposes the Jewish mandate *not* to consume pork and a Cantonese take on the matter to great comic effect through the use of parataxis, quotation and collage:

Wikipedia says it comes down from Leviticus,
how your God labelled creatures unclean to ingest;

but then, disgust seems to blur into reverence*

*Cf. Xu Bing, *A Case Study of Transference*⁶³

At first glance, the end rhyme between ‘reference’ and ‘transference’ suggests a link between religiosity and psychoanalysis; yet the act of ‘looking up’ *A Case Study of Transference* yields deeply surprising results. Rather than presenting a psychoanalytic case study on transference between psychotherapist and client, Xu Bing (an artist) offers a controversial conceptual artwork titled ‘A Case Study of Transference’, which consists of a 1994 video performance piece in which two pigs (both imprinted with nonsensical words, one in Simplified Chinese and the other in English) copulate before a live audience, intended by the artist as ‘a satirical take on the collision of East and West.’⁶⁴ If both cultures (East and West) are equally represented by the image of the pig in Xu’s provocative performance art, there appears to be no reason to consider one culture to be more ‘legitimate’ than the other. Furthermore, if one examines the issue of pork’s symbolic meaning(s) from a Jewish versus Cantonese perspective, it appears that both attitudes could be equally repugnant or equally savoury, depending on one’s personal allegiances and ideologies.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Barbara Pollack, ‘Controversial Xu Bing Work Enters the Guggenheim Museum’s Collection’, *New York Times* (March 2018) <<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/13/arts/design/xu-bing-guggenheim-museum-collection.html/>> [accessed 10 July 2018]

Furthermore, Xu seems to imply that the mating of the two pigs (one imprinted with nonsensical English words and the other with senseless Chinese characters) will logically produce piglets free from blemish (since those ink stains are not genetically inherent to the pigs and have only been added onto their skin artificially by the artist). Is Howe therefore suggesting that aspects we might often consider to be inherent to a culture (e.g. hatred of pork, or even language itself) are a result of ‘nurture’ rather than ‘nature’, and thus are less inevitable or ingrained than we might presume? Ultimately, Howe leaves her reader to ponder a more ‘open text’ than the poem’s lyric form might suggest, which, according to Lyn Hejinian, ‘invites participation, rejects the authority of the writer over the reader and [...] speaks for writing that is generative rather than directive.’⁶⁵ While select critics have shown an appreciation of Howe’s experimentation with form⁶⁶, Howe observes in a conversation with the author of this thesis that her experiences of reading ‘(d) *Sucking pigs*’ aloud to various audiences around the UK have not been met with the expected response: ‘I’ve stopped reading those poems in the collection that are perhaps a bit “out there” [...] the poem “Sucking pigs” was supposed to be funny, but people never laugh.’ With such ‘difficult’ poems, Howe faces a conundrum – to read or not to read these aloud to audiences seemingly less receptive to work which seek to complicate notions of race, culture and poetic voice? Here, I wish to consider the following observation made by Hampson in puncturing the illusion of a homogenous readership:

The reader of *fragmente* or *Talus* has quite different literary expectations from the person who reads poems in the *TLS* or the *London Review of Books*. There is, then, the paradox [...] that, if this tradition of the new is defined in terms of “countering formal expectations”, it produces poetry which, in practice, is sought out by readers who would expect “challenging” texts, whereas those readers who would really be challenged by these texts are unlikely to engage with them.⁶⁷

While Hampson seeks to describe the problematics of avant-garde poetics as pure formalist play, I wish to adapt his observation to note that the BAME poet who wishes to adopt an innovative poetics in her writing yet 1) does not claim to be an avant-garde poet, 2) is not read as such by

⁶⁵ Lyn Hejinian, ‘The Rejection of Closure’, *Poetry Foundation* (October 2009)

<<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/69401/the-rejection-of-closure>> [accessed 8 June 2018]

⁶⁶ The 2015 T.S. Eliot Prize Chair of Judges Pascale Petit notes in her comments that ‘Sarah Howe’s *Loop of Jade* shone with its startling exploration of gender and injustice through place and identity, its erudition, and powerful imagery as well as her daring experiment with form.’ See ‘Poet Sarah Howe wins TS Eliot prize’, *BBC News* (January 2016) <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-35284016>> [accessed 10 October 2019]

⁶⁷ Robert Hampson, ‘Producing the Unknown: Language and Ideology in Contemporary Poetry’, in *New British Poetries: The Scope of the Possible*, ed. by Robert Hampson and Peter Barry (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1993), pp. 134–55 (p. 135).

literary critics who would rather Howe write more 'lyric' poetry than resort to 'linguistic excess' and 3) is a pioneer in terms of writing poetry in the UK from a positionality of Chineseness faces the profound difficulty of knowing precisely which 'formal expectations' to counter in her work.

In order to fully appreciate some of the specific cultural politics of verse which impact upon works written by Chinese poets in an Anglophone literary context, I have found Steven Yao's *Foreign Accents: Chinese American Verse from Exclusion to Postethnicity* (2010) to be deeply illuminating. In one of his chapters, he considers Pound's relationship to a 'poetics of Chineseness'⁶⁸ in the United States, and argues how, in the wake of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 and concomitant discourses on the 'Yellow Peril' since the mid-19th century which depicted the Chinese coolie as possessing a remarkable 'nervelessness'⁶⁹ given his seemingly endless capacity for labour amid inhuman work conditions, Pound's *Cathay* gives a comparatively sympathetic portrayal to a series of individual speaking Chinese subjects, each of whom displays an intense, if stylistically understated, emotionalism.' This marked the first time East Asians in the United States were introduced as speaking subjects within English literary verse, which opposed the prevailing xenophobic and racist attitudes towards the Chinese at the time. Despite its Orientalist tropes (i.e. conflating Chinese and Japanese as if they were indistinct languages, presenting Chinese culture as reified and timeless, and depicting a 'generic Oriental tonality in English'⁷⁰ that would contribute to stereotypes regarding what a Chinese poem ought to sound like on the page), Yao argues that *Cathay* present[ed] a rare instance of "high culture" functioning to articulate a "counter-poetics" of difference⁷¹ in depicting the Chinese as a racialized subject in America. One ought to bear this in mind when appreciating Howe's use of parody in this next poem, titled '(k) *Drawn with a very fine camelhair brush*', which evokes Pound's *Cathay* even as it offers a clear critique of its Chinoiseries. I find Howe's reflections on her relationship to Pound useful in thinking through the poem's subtleties:

I found *Cathay's* intuitively brilliant but sometimes linguistically ill-founded moves as a "translation" from the Chinese oddly enabling, not least as a way of navigating what sort of cultural space I might inhabit as a half-Chinese person who grew up not speaking Chinese: is it possible to recuperate a Chinoiserie-like "inauthenticity" – that being the way I sometimes think of myself and my Western reference points – at the same time as critiquing it?

⁶⁸ Yao, p. 39.

⁶⁹ Ibid., pp. 47.

⁷⁰ Yao, p. 51.

⁷¹ Ibid., pp. 49.

Howe's use of the word 'inauthenticity' speaks to her awareness of the false conundrum which troubles the BAME poet: how to appear 'authentic' on the page, if such a thing even exists? The assumption is often that one needs to have access to a certain language and cultural heritage in order to speak 'authentically' from a racialized perspective, but this once again reinforces the problematic notion of a pure 'cultural essence' which certain individuals possess while others do not. In the above quote, Howe suggests that to attempt to explore her Chineseness as someone who does not speak Chinese is to enact a Poundian form of Chinoiserie, even as she reflexively critiques this poetic (and personal) gesture via a parody of Pound's *Cathay*, as seen in the excerpt below:

Late spring. A scholar sits in his study.
After much contemplation
he lends his brush the ideal pressure –
leaves his mind there, on the paper.

[...]

A hand, a brush, its inclination –
so involved in an anchoring of sign to thing
so artful that we, like the Jesuits, might forget

words' tenuous moorings

[...]

Our scholar reclines, as the sun burns out
over shaded water; greets the moon
with a flask of clear, sweet wine –
drinks her health – and falls asleep
reflecting how he must write a poem
about the dragonflies, their perfect
ligature of colour and motion – to wake
hours later, cheek wet with morning,
to discover his badly knotted skiff

had disappeared downstream⁷²

While those wary of 'Re-Orientalism'⁷³ might be loath to risk re-inscribing an ahistorical and timeless Chinese landscape, I argue that we must once again be attentive to the poem's productive 'difficulties'. In this poem, the speaker is an omniscient narrator who includes the reader in his tale with the use of the pronoun 'we', akin to Pound's speaker in one of his most famous *Cathay* poems,

⁷² Howe, *Loop of Jade*, p. 39–41.

⁷³ Lisa Lau, 'Re-Orientalism: The Perpetration and Development of Orientalism by Orientals', in *Postcolonial Studies: An Anthology*, ed. by Pramod K. Nayar (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2016), pp. 110–24 (p. 110).

‘Song of the Bowmen of Shu’, whose speaker observes: ‘Here we are, picking the first fern-shoots / And saying: When shall we get back to our country?’⁷⁴ It is noteworthy that in the case of Pound’s poem, the ‘we’ gestures at a homogenous ethnic group, presumably the Chinese, while Howe’s use of the collective ‘we’ appears to be more racially inclusive: ‘that we, like the Jesuits, might forget / words’ tenuous moorings.’ Furthermore, Howe’s careful positioning of her scholar vis-à-vis the narrator is necessary for her critique of language’s perceived ability to deduce (and reduce) the world to a state of transparency, as she writes: ‘A hand, a brush, its inclination – / so involved in an anchoring of sign to thing / so artful that we, like the Jesuits, might forget / words’ tenuous moorings.’ Howe is eager for us to question this call to a simplistic, knowable, and ‘authentic’ identity. As such, she invites us to interrogate this presumed link between ‘sign’ and ‘thing’ through allowing misfortune to befall her self-satisfied scholar, who eventually ‘falls asleep / reflecting how he must write a poem / about the dragonflies’ (in a subtle nod to Robert Hass’ ‘Dragonflies Mating’, one of Howe’s favourite poems), and subsequently awakens ‘to discover his badly knotted skiff / had disappeared downstream.’ Here, the scholar’s lost ‘skiff’ is a playful metaphor and pun on the aforementioned ‘tenuous [mooring]’ between ‘sign’ and ‘thing’, easily untethered, quickly lost to the relentless flow of water, which – in *Loop of Jade* – stands for that which simultaneously divides and connects cultures, peoples and places. Also, while the poem begins with what might appear to be a stereotypical Chinese scholar from ancient China, I wish to note that the scholar’s contemplation of (Hass’) dragonflies could hint at the possibility of a mixed-raced scholar, somewhat akin to Howe.

To return to Steiner’s various modes of literary ‘difficulty’, the poem ‘(g) *Stray dogs*’ presents another instance of ‘contingent difficulty’, since not many readers are necessarily familiar with or well-versed in Pound’s *Cantos*. Pound’s autobiographical background presents itself as a kind of ‘modal difficulty’ which the reader must also contend with – how is one to approach a poem which, in some ways, elicits sympathy for a distinguished poet-cum-Fascist sympathizer? Once again, Howe relies on the reader to ensure ‘that one’s homework is done’⁷⁵, dropping us *in medias res*: ‘To think again of Pound, bared to the sky at Pisa. / The traitor’s cage they built for him specially. 6x6 ft / of airstrip mesh & dust.’⁷⁶ Historically, Pound suffered from a mental breakdown whilst housed in a 6x6 foot outdoor steel cage, in which he was kept for weeks by the US military on charges of treason. The form of Howe’s poem resembles this cage – a block of dense, rectangular prose poetry in which language itself becomes highly compressed in a situation mimetic of Pound’s predicament:

⁷⁴ Ezra Pound, *Cathay* (New York: New Directions, 2016), p. 18.

⁷⁵ Steiner, p. 265.

⁷⁶ Howe, *Loop of Jade*, p. 29.

words such as ‘regulations’ become ‘reg’lations’⁷⁷, while the conjunction ‘and’ is replaced throughout by ampersands. Both historically and within the realm of the poem, Pound’s only salvation is ‘his dog-eared / Confucius: he’d slipped it in his slacks’ side pocket / that day at the house, a rifle butt pounding the door. / As he flicks through the *Analects*, his hand starts to / tremble.’⁷⁸

This poem is particularly complex because it takes poetic and political risks by ‘ventriloquizing Pound, who was ventriloquizing Li Po.’⁷⁹ Writing in the *New Yorker*, Louis Menand notes the dangers of having a parody lost on its intended audience: ‘Not everyone gets the joke: if you don’t already know about the peach, you won’t laugh at the prune.’⁸⁰ In this poem, Howe’s speaker parodies Pound’s relationship to Confucius: Pound’s recollection of ‘Kung’ (Confucius) standing at the city gate and being mocked by strangers is akin to the speaker conjuring Pound up in her mind’s eye and wondering at his predicament, seemingly out of nowhere: ‘To think again of Pound, bared to the sky at Pisa.’ The action is multi-layered, such that the reader stands firmly outside the text, looking in on the speaker who is in turn looking into her mind’s eye at an imagined Pound who is conjuring up Confucius in his mind’s eye. This tunnelling effect has the potential to alienate a less patient reader; however, this ‘ontological difficulty’ presented by a non-linear narrative which spans multiple cultures and centuries reflects yet again Howe’s claim to a complex poetic lineage. Toward the end of the poem, the image of a pitiful Pound reading Confucius whilst ‘[squatting] at his crate-cum-desk’⁸¹ given to him by a black man and writing the words: ‘*Pull down thy vanity*’⁸² (Canto LXXXI) is disconcerting to the reader, who is invited to view Pound as an anti-Semitic yet tragi-comic figure. Once again, Howe is careful to situate Pound within a specific historical context, suggesting perhaps that the *Cantos* (for all its faults and limitations) ought to be read in a contextualized manner when one assesses its impact and legacy on Anglo-American verse. The metaphor of Pound as a ‘beaten dog’ (taken from the epigraph of Howe’s poem, where she quotes Pound’s Canto LXXXI: ‘*Thou art a beaten dog beneath the hail*’) resurfaces towards the end of the poem, a slur which Kung Fu-tzu (Confucius) receives (in the speaker’s version of Pound’s mind) with serenity: ‘Look at this man here, he has a face like a lost dog!’⁸³ While Pound’s imagined Confucius does not object to such racist speech, the reader is left to wonder whether Confucius’

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Howe, ‘The Sound of Her Voice: Sarah Howe Interviewed by Lily Blacksell’, *Boston Review*.

⁸⁰ Louis Menand, ‘Parodies Lost’, *New Yorker* (2010)

<<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2010/09/20/parodies-lost>> [accessed 30 September 2017].

⁸¹ Howe, *Loop of Jade*, p. 29.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid.

virtuosity inspired Pound to reflect upon his fascist ways ('No longer blithely ranting on Rothschilds as in his radio days'⁸⁴)? Here, the speaker offers no additional social commentary; she merely stands outside the historical drama and allows Confucius to have the last word ('yes, that's quite correct'⁸⁵). In contrast to the conventional lyric which tends towards epiphany, Howe's prose poem effectively draws the polyphonic voices of Pound and Confucius together across time and space through her use of allusion, juxtaposition and collage, which in turn allows for what Capildeo terms 'a poetics of reverberation and minor noise.'⁸⁶

'Those tender quills wrote of their mystery'

Howe's skilful use of various modes of intertextuality throughout *Loop of Jade* allows her speakers to effectively interrogate complex subjects such as language, culture and identity in a manner which does not settle for the false compromises of 'authenticity' or 'readability'. Instead, Howe's speakers resist being typecast as the effeminate or suffering Other by embodying a decidedly complex subjectivity at every turn. In the hands of a lesser poet, many of the poetic and political risks which Howe's poems attempt might have come across as forced or clichéd; in *Loop of Jade*, the reader is masterfully offered a 'difficult' yet necessary depiction of what it means to be British-Chinese in the aftermath of Empire. Through close reading a few key poems from Howe's central Borges sequence, I have demonstrated Howe's ability to juxtapose unlikely subjects and images in order to complicate existing cultural representations of non-Western identities and cultures within contemporary British poetry. Howe's lyricism needs no defence (the poems 'Loop of Jade', 'Crossing from Guangdong' and 'Islands' have all received much deserved critical praise); as such, I have sought instead to use this chapter to highlight Howe's more linguistically innovative approaches through the use of allusion, collage, understatement, parataxis and parody. Criticisms of 'the lyric' made by avant-garde poets remain largely inattentive to the complications faced by marginalised poets (in terms of race, gender, sexuality, class and disability), many of whom face the harsh reality of not being seen as part of the 'all' of citizenry which White gestures at, let alone being 'understood by "all"' within the field of English literature, which has historically been rife with unspoken exclusions. What is equally undesirable, however, is the current phenomenon of literary critics privileging 'a mainstream lyric mode that normalizes difference by fetishizing and orientaling BAME poets for a "universal reader"'⁸⁷ who is often presumed to be white. This latter problem is precisely what I sought to highlight at the beginning of this chapter: how literary review

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Vahni Capildeo, 'Letter Not from Trinidad', *PN Review*, 221 (2015), 5–6 (pp. 6).

⁸⁷ Parmar, 'Not a British Subject', *LA Review of Books*.

culture in the UK continues to perpetuate problematic expectations that the BAME poet either portray herself as ‘authentically’ traumatized as the suffering Other, or else come across as the perfectly assimilated migrant who is defiant yet empowered.

It is clear that Howe’s work does not fall entirely into the avant-garde, nor does it read strictly as a collection of lyric poems. Rather, *Loop of Jade* bears testament to the fact that to construct a complex subjectivity as a BAME poet can and should be construed as a radical and innovative act, particularly if we consider how Howe remains the first British-Chinese poet to attain a level of literary success unprecedented across both mainstream and avant-garde poetic camps in the UK. In terms of Howe’s renderings of identity, culture and place throughout *Loop of Jade*, I concur with Capildeo, who states in an interview with Parmar that ‘I admire Sarah Howe [...] for being able to mention things that of course are there, mixed into home. [She] reclaim[s] “exotica” as the quotidian.’⁸⁸ Ultimately, I contend that the complex reception surrounding Howe’s work after *Loop of Jade* won the 2015 T.S. Eliot Prize reflects the (white, male) critic’s persistence in ‘[reading such] work through a hermeneutic of authenticity [...] [thereby performing] a *de facto* reification of the categories [of] “ethnicity”, “identity” and “experience”, which ought to be resisted by poets and critics alike. Rather than providing the reader with ‘ready legibility [...] and the presumption to linguistic transparency’⁸⁹, *Loop of Jade* charts new territory within British contemporary poetry by enacting Carrie Noland and Barrett Watten’s rejection of ‘a single cultural logic’⁹⁰ within the poetic avant-garde, for ‘in an emerging global culture, it is obvious that a radical innovative poetics must significantly reflect on its cultural location and address rather than rely solely on what Charles Olson termed “radical formal means”’.⁹¹ I also concur with Lisa Lowe, who rightly contends that ‘how ethnicity is imagined, practiced, [and] continued is worked out as much between ourselves and our communities as it is transmitted from one generation to another.’⁹² In *Loop of Jade*, Howe’s skilful deployment of various Steinerian forms of literary ‘difficulty’ allows her to successfully convey the historically contingent, imaginative and fluid nature of her cultural identities and concomitant poetics.

⁸⁸ Sandeep Parmar, ‘The Wolf Interview: Vahni Capildeo’, *The Wolf*, 34 (2010), 54–61.

⁸⁹ Yao, p. 263.

⁹⁰ Carrie Noland and Barrett Watten, ‘Introduction’, in *Diasporic Avant-Gardes: Experimental Poetics and Cultural Displacement*, ed. by Carrie Noland and Barrett Watten (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 1–30 (p. 14).

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Lisa Lowe, ‘Heterogeneity, Hybridity, Multiplicity: Marking Asian American Differences’, in *Literary Theory: An Anthology (Second Edition)*, ed. by Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), pp. 1031–50 (p. 1034).

Conclusion

My Mother's Fables': Memory, Fragments and Myth

In this final chapter, I will turn to an examination of my own debut collection – *Flèche* – which was written concurrently as this critical thesis was being produced. There are several key strands to my creative work that I wish to highlight in relation to the poetry of Howe, Miller, and a few other queer poets within the Chinese diaspora, particularly in terms of my creative exploration of my mother's experience of the Cultural Revolution, which took place in China during the 1960s–70s; my complex relationship to the English language as a bilingual speaker of English and various Chinese languages (Cantonese, Mandarin Chinese and Shanghainese) who writes poetry and literary criticism solely in English; and my ongoing experiences of homophobia and racism as a queer, BAME poet who has lived for ten years in the US and the UK respectively, and who currently calls both London and Hong Kong home. In 'Cultural Identity and Diaspora', Stuart Hall observes that 'the past continues to speak to us. But it no longer addresses us as a simple, factual "past", since our relation to it, like the child's relation to the mother, is always already "after the break". It is always constructed through memory, fantasy, narrative and myth.'¹ In an interview with Claire Tyrrell-Morin, Howe reflects similarly on the difficulties of accessing her mother's past through any means other than her creative imagination:

If [*Loop of Jade*] has any message, it's that the reality behind these things is hard to access, even when you go back to the place [where certain events occurred]. There's always this overlaying of imagination and memory, and distortion. And that's why these needed to be poems rather than memoir, say, because in my family history, there is so much uncertainty and blankness, and a point beyond which I just can't go back. Into that gap flooded Chinese history and myth, and the folk tales that I tell in the poems, which get mixed up and bound up with my mum's past.²

Reading *Loop of Jade* in 2015 allowed me to begin the complex journey of accessing my mother's past (and in many ways, my own) through writing poems which stem from a confluence of Hall's notion of 'memory, fantasy, narrative and myth', specifically by recalling the multiple stories which

¹ Stuart Hall, 'Cultural Identity and Diaspora', in *Colonial Discourse and Postcolonial Theory: A Reader*, ed. by Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), pp. 227–37 (p. 226).

² Claire Tyrrell-Morin, 'Prize-winning Hong Kong-born Poet Sarah Howe Makes Verse of City's Basic Law', *South China Morning Post Magazine* (July 2016) <<https://www.radcliffe.harvard.edu/news/in-news/prize-winning-hong-kong-born-poet-sarah-howe-makes-verse-citys-basic-law/>> [accessed 24 May 2018]

my mother had told me about growing up in Shanghai during my own childhood. These are narratives which I have rendered creatively from memory as poetry, from the perspective of an adult who acknowledges both the recollections she is able to muster, as well as the inevitable gaps, ambivalences and silences that remain. In my debut collection's central poetic sequence, I write about my mother's experience of fleeing from Shanghai to Hong Kong (a former British colony until 1997) in her early twenties following the upheavals of the Cultural Revolution, and how her relationship to history, loss and cultural identity has since led me – as a poet – to reckon with intergenerational trauma and its myriad of attendant griefs.

In an essay titled 'Making Space for Grief', Miller writes: 'I thought about my mother, but there was no narrative – no story. There was just the overwhelm.'³ Later, he observes, 'we [writers] are in the business of creating spaces for grief. There are not many people who do this kind of work, who are willing to face such bleak visions and write it down, and so we must.'⁴ I learnt about my mother's traumatic experiences through the tales she told me, except that these were not neat narratives, but rather, fragmented versions of Miller's 'overwhelm' that she would repeat to me over breakfast, lunch or dinner, or late at night in a Kafkaesque version of a bedtime storytelling. Trauma theory and medical research elucidates what the living do with the wars and conflicts they have endured; in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (1995), Cathy Caruth contends that 'to be traumatized is [...] to be possessed by an image or event'⁵, an argument echoed in Bessel Van Der Kolk's seminal book *The Body Keeps the Score* (2015), in which he observes how 'people with PTSD are unable to put the actual event, the source of those memories, behind them [...] the sensations, thoughts and emotions of the trauma [are] stored separately as frozen, barely comprehensible fragments.'⁶

Van Der Kolk goes on to note that what often results from such trauma is 'the compulsion to repeat'⁷ – either through actions or verbalization – and I found this to be true of my mother, specifically through her repetitive telling of specific traumatic incidents relating to her childhood and teenage years. On a linguistic note, I was often told these stories in an intermingling of Cantonese, Mandarin Chinese and Shanghainese, since these are the Chinese languages which my mother (and I) both speak. As such, the creative challenge I faced during the process of writing my collection was the need to translate my mother's experiences into my chosen language as a poet: English. In my collection's opening poem, I drew inspiration from two poems in particular from

³ Kei Miller, *Writing Down the Vision: Essays & Prophecies* (Leeds: Peepal Tree Press, 2013), p. 70.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Cathy Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1995), p. 5.

⁶ Bessel Van Der Kolk, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (New York: Penguin Books, 2015), p. 182.

⁷ Ibid., pp. 32.

Howe's *Loop of Jade*: 'Embalmed', from her central Borges sequence, which features tercets in the form of a prose poem, a form which I also adopt in my poem, and her title poem 'Loop of Jade', a fragmented prose poem in which Howe recalls what her mother used to narrate on certain nights 'without / prelude or warning, about her growing up. Then her words / feel pulled up from a dark and unreflective well – willed and unwilling.'⁸ Through drawing formally and thematically from Howe's work, I wrote the following stanzas, excerpted from the poem titled 'My Mother's Fables'⁹:

In Love and in War

There was a boy who loved my mother so much he hid his steamed bun in the haystack, told her to eat while he did her share of hard labour, urged sleep when the sun hung high at noon. She called him *Pumpkin* since she missed the gourd's reassuring weight, the land as starved as she was.

Red Night

Animals crowded the bathtub, which became God's ark, the night the flood came. The Guards took everything deemed *bourgeois*: a ceramic teapot, a mechanical watch, and my grandfather, who refused to be saved. My grandmother believed in God: she forgave their fists, called them *sons*.

My Grandfather's Heart

A beating thing. A delicate muscle stops its cyclical motion, crushed by too much terror. He was only admitted to the workers' hospital after a former employee lied, claimed him as one of their own. An eleven-year-old sprints towards her father in a blood-lit *mise en scène*: a scripted tragedy.

That Child is My Mother

Listen: there is no measure for the tempo of grief. My mother would raid the fridge at midnight for a salted egg, some pickled carrots. I didn't know we were now safe in a different city, a different year. Once, during a bedtime storytelling, she sobbed till I cried for help, but father was asleep.

For this poem, I also drew inspiration from Miller's depiction of the Jamaican landscape in the aftermath of colonialism and slavery: how an articulation of trauma can nonetheless be suffused with natural imagery that does not relinquish its ties to beauty, as in his poem xviii. in *The Cartographer Tries to Map a Way to Zion*: 'how a woman stumbles through the hurting / night, blade wedged into her back; how birds / and bullets pack the purple band of evening / and sing the sky

⁸ Howe, *Loop of Jade*, p. 13.

⁹ Mary Jean Chan, *Fleche* (London: Faber & Faber, 2019), p. 3.

to black.¹⁰ In the second poem in my collection, I drew on Miller's brilliant use of dramatic monologue to explore the grief of a woman whom I have never met or known, but who profoundly affected my mother's life as a child. The key aspect of this poem which I struggled with the most was deciding on the point of view, since the memory I wish to depict is not mine, but my mother's. From an intergenerational perspective, my understanding of what happened on this particular day in 1953 is, in Howe's words, something 'unreachable across / the water, as planets circling in the night.'¹¹ In my poem titled 'Wet Nurse'¹², my speaker embodies the imagined perspective of a woman who lovingly raised my mother for over a decade, all the while suffering from her tragic decision to abandon her own daughter so as to gain employment as a wet nurse in Shanghai:

[...] The baby sees no problem with
two mothers. The father adores her at
a distance. Sixth child, third daughter,
beloved one. Some nights, I long for
a landslide in the mind, so I might bury
the moment I abandoned my daughter
at the station the morning of her birth,
weak from blood loss and fearful that
a wet nurse with child will never find work.
Now, when the baby smiles up at me,
another brushes my breast with its lips.

Written in a Historically White Space': Race, Language and Poetics

As a Chinese poet writing solely in English, I am concerned with depicting my complex relationship to a language which I diligently learnt at school but never used at home, partially as a result of the enduring legacy of colonial education in Hong Kong. As such, I am fascinated by Miller's rastaman, who offers the European cartographer 'a nyabinghi beat', which the rastaman calls 'a heartbeat riddim', as opposed to the Western iambic pentameter which the 'mapmaker's heart is / familiar with'¹³. As the rastaman drums on, he wonders:

Is dis the outlawed measure –
DUP-DUP-dudududu-DUP-DUP
the riddim of cutlass and cane
DUP-DUP-dudududu-DUP-DUP
the terrible measure of hurricanes?¹⁴

(xvii. in which every song is singing Zion')

¹⁰ Miller, *The Cartographer*, p. 43.

¹¹ Howe, *Loop of Jade*, p. 58.

¹² Chan, *Flèche*, p. 5.

¹³ Miller, *The Cartographer*, p. 40.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

The phrase ‘terrible measure of hurricanes’ recalls Braithwaite’s oft-cited dictum that ‘the hurricane does not roar in pentameter’¹⁵, an acute and poignant observation which galvanized me to scrutinize my received notions of the English language back in 2014, having been told on multiple occasions by esteemed white British poets that the iambic pentameter provides a rhythm which perfectly mirrors the human heartbeat. In addition to being increasingly sceptical of such Eurocentric beliefs, I have also become aware of some of the prejudiced views which Hong Kong-Chinese people have inherited from their former colonizers, such that the Queen’s English is routinely revered above our local language (i.e. Cantonese), which has a rich linguistic history dating back to dynastic times. In my poem ‘let them know’¹⁶, I lament the fact that intra-Chinese prejudice is a postcolonial legacy which continues to affect Hong Kong, and that my mother (as someone who was born and raised in Mainland Chinese) has been a victim of microaggressions meted out by those Hong Kong citizens who see no problem in adhering to colonial linguistic hierarchies:

[...]

how you left a decade later
for the colonized city

where even the tap water
was ceaselessly cold
and the citizens racist
your Shanghainese accent not fit
for those enamoured
of the Queen’s English

Through researching and writing this critical thesis, I have become more deeply attuned to the contours and characteristics of colonial education, which often includes the proselytizing of Christianity and conservative colonial-era ideologies (such as homophobia and transphobia disguised as objective ‘standards’ of morality).¹⁷ Having attended an Anglican school founded by British missionaries in 1860, I address the traumas of growing up in an oppressive educational environment in my prose poem ‘Dress’¹⁸:

¹⁵ Edward Kamau Braithwaite, ‘English in the Caribbean’, in *Literary Theory: An Anthology* (Second Edition), ed. by Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), pp. 1151–66 (p. 1152).

¹⁶ Chan, *Fleche*, p. 51–52.

¹⁷ Pippa Crerar, ‘Theresa May Says She Deeply Regrets Britain’s Legacy of Anti-gay Laws’, *Guardian* (April 2018) <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/apr/17/theresa-may-deeply-regrets-britain-legacy-anti-gay-laws-commonwealth-nations-urged-overhaul-legislation/>> [accessed 21 June 2018]

¹⁸ Chan, *Fleche*, p. 10.

The same uniform for twelve years. A white skirt, blue collar, blue belt, blue hem. A dark, no-nonsense kind of blue. White as snowfall in Eden. You washed it every single day, made sure you ate in small bites, always wore an extra pad so none of the blood could seep through. You began wearing that dress at the age of six, your skin haunted by the British flag, so you could be *Chinese with English characteristics*. Each time you wore it, you shut your body up.

Elsewhere, I turn my attention to the complicities of adults who often encourage their children to master the English language at all costs, in order that their offspring might learn the ‘civilized’ ways and impeccable ‘manners’ of the (white) British elite.¹⁹ In my poem ‘Rules for a Chinese Child Buying Stationery in a London Bookshop’²⁰, I imagine a Hong Kong-Chinese adult going to great lengths to teach their children the ways of ‘the good immigrant’²¹:

Speak to the white
elderly man at the counter.
There will be many

more of them
in your life, but start
with him. Recall those syllables

you’ve whispered over and
over like some version
of the Lord’s Prayer:

*Our Father who art
in heaven and is
white and beyond skin.*

This pervasive myth of the perfectibility of the white, British persona among Hong Kong citizens can be viewed as an entrenchment of common colonial attitudes that were encouraged and made prevalent throughout the former British Empire. It bears repeating that Thomas Babington Macaulay, a revered British historian, politician and essayist, once wrote: ‘I have no knowledge of either Sanskrit or Arabic. But I have done what I could to form a correct estimate of their value. [...] I have never found one among them who could deny that a single shelf of a good European

¹⁹ Peter Foster, ‘Eton and Harrow Biggest Draw for Chinese Millionaires’, *Telegraph* (April 2018) <<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/china/8594329/Eton-and-Harrow-biggest-draw-for-Chinese-millionaires.html/>> [accessed 21 June 2018]

²⁰ Chan, *Flèche*, p. 13.

²¹ *The Good Immigrant*, ed. by Nikesh Shukla (London: Unbound, 2016).

library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia.’²² Such attitudes are often internalized by postcolonial people who, in the face of microaggressions and racism (both at home and abroad), are eager to prove their white peers wrong by excelling precisely in the areas of study or work which are stereotypically deemed as less welcoming to non-white peoples. In her interview with Tyrrell-Morin, Howe observes that her embracing of her ‘English side’ upon moving from Hong Kong to Watford at the age of seven was largely in response to racist bullying endured during her school years in England:

[Reading English at Cambridge] was a continuation of that path [towards assimilation], of wanting to master the English canon and wanting to be so unimpeachably on top of English literary tradition that no one could ever question my credentials. [...] Which, I guess, is a pattern you see in the work of Derek Walcott and other postcolonial writers; the nature of their grappling with English colonialism.²³

The need to attain mastery over the English language is one which I continue to grapple with as a postcolonial poet-critic whose Chinese ethnicity (or Chinese surname) is invariably the first thing which introduces me to an audience or a particular reader. Like Howe, I have often felt the need to prove that my level of written and spoken English is impeccable *in spite of* the colour of my skin. In terms of critical reception within a literary sphere – when one’s English isn’t under scrutiny – other conditions apply. Having noted in my previous chapter that certain white critics appear prone to adhering to the deeply problematic concept of ‘authenticity’ in their readings of works by BAME poets, I am aware that my own poetry might be at risk of being read in similar ways. Despite the encouraging phenomenon of BAME poets reaching the highest echelons of Anglophone poetry in recent years – particularly in the case of Black British poets – I wish to note that such gains in representation might come with a more insidious and subtle consequence in the form of a renewed fetishization of the racial ‘Other’. In her essay ‘Eating the Other: Desire and Resistance’, bell hooks argues that ‘within current debates about race and difference, mass culture is the contemporary location that both publicly declares and perpetuates the idea that there is pleasure to be found in the acknowledgement and enjoyment of racial difference. [...] In many ways it is a contemporary

²² Thomas Babington Macaulay, ‘Minute on Indian Education’, *Bureau of Education* (February 1835) <http://www.columbia.edu/itc/mealc/pritchett/00generallinks/macaulay/txt_minute_education_1835.html/> [accessed 20 April 2018]

²³ Tyrrell-Morin, ‘Prize-winning Hong Kong-born Poet Sarah Howe Makes Verse of City’s Basic Law’.

revival of interest in the “primitive”, with a distinctly postmodern slant.²⁴ hooks’ observation brings to mind a dilemma familiar to many BAME poets who often wish to pre-empt this problematic of lending one’s work to easy commodification and consumption, one which I had a chance to discuss on the Lunar Poetry Podcast with my host, David Turner:

Being a writer of colour [...] how do you resist being exoticized or exoticizing yourself, but also [try] to tell the story of who you are? [Poets of colour] even have these debates about whether or not you should ever mention rice in a poem. You have poets who fall on completely different sides. You’ve got people saying never mention mango or rice because you’re giving people an excuse to exotify you. Then I think: I do eat rice all the time. We would never put that much pressure on someone’s piece of bread because that’s what they eat every morning, but because we’re writers in a world that is not equal, our bowl of rice gets so laden with symbolism [...] I do still include tea and rice [in my poems], even though I know that’s a [racial] label, but because I drink green tea all the time and I eat rice every day, that is the truth for me.²⁵

The importance of being able to enjoy the liberty of writing about what is already there in one’s life (in my case, tea and rice) whilst being aware that such racialised items inevitably invite (unwanted) attention from the white gaze is a balancing act that all BAME writers must constantly navigate. I believe that my poems, when read together as a collection, provide sufficient context and self-reflexive critique of the hegemony of the English language, (post-)colonial legacies and what Adrienne Rich called ‘compulsory heterosexuality’²⁶ to mitigate against bell hooks’ worry over a ‘renewed fetishization of the racial “Other”’²⁷. Despite these efforts, there will be those who choose to read my work out of context, or to read my poetry through the lens of racial stereotypes which confirm their orientalist and racist beliefs; all this lies beyond my remit as a poet. However, there were key decisions taken during the preparation of my Faber manuscript which I hoped would help challenge certain assumptions and beliefs about what British-Chinese poetry is and might be. For instance, my decision to title my collection *Flèche* (a French word meaning ‘arrow’, and in competitive fencing parlance, an attack used by épéeists) resulted from my realisation that there were those who were expecting a racialised title which evoked an authentic and legible

²⁴ bell hooks, ‘Eating the Other: Desire and Resistance’, in *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992), pp. 21–39 (p. 21).

²⁵ David Turner, ‘Ep.112: Mary Jean Chan; Sandeep K Parmar (Transcript)’, *Lunar Poetry Podcasts* (2018), <<https://lunarpoetrypodcasts.files.wordpress.com/2018/07/ep112-mary-jean-chan-sandeep-k-parmar.pdf>> [accessed 10 March 2019]

²⁶ Adrienne Rich, ‘Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence’, *Signs*, 5 (4) (1980), 631–660.

²⁷ hooks, ‘Eating the Other: Desire and Resistance’, p. 21.

‘Chineseness’, perfect for consumption by the white gaze. This prompted me to advocate firmly for a collection title which I felt would best capture the complexity – and indeed, the Glissantian ‘opacity’²⁸ – of my intersectional identities. I also believed that structuring my collection around the theme of fencing – with its multiple motifs (i.e. masks, uniforms, conflict) – would allow me to frame the book in a way that invited my readership to consider the multilingual, cross-cultural and inherently irreducible nature of my creative work. In one of the concluding poems in *Fleche*, I write:

if you looked within me now, you’d see
that my languages are like roots
gnarled in soil, one and indivisible
except the world divides me endlessly

(‘Wish’²⁹)

In the epilogue to her influential book *Thinking Its Presence: Form, Race, and Subjectivity in Contemporary Asian American Poetry* (2014), Dorothy Wang looks forward to a time when BAME poets will no longer [have] to prove that their writing is “as good as” that of “racially unmarked” writers by erasing race in their writing or having to always be read through the scrim of their physiognomy and putative “essences”.³⁰ While Wang’s clarion call for change is deeply necessarily and continues to reverberate on both sides of the Atlantic, I contend that both collections by Howe and Miller which I have examined in my previous chapters have achieved (to a large extent) Wang’s vision of a racialised poetics that is unapologetic about one’s positionality and intersectional identities, whilst achieving an indisputable formal literary excellence within contemporary Anglophone poetry. Accordingly, I have gleaned much insight from the formal approaches of Miller and Howe in their respective collections, and have sought to emulate these in my creative work.

In particular, I find an admirable insistence in Howe and Miller’s work on the local languages, myths and landscapes that ring true to their respective positionalities and lived experiences. Having grown up in Hong Kong, Howe evokes the names of the city’s many outlying islands in her narrative poem ‘Islands’, listing them for the reader to savour aurally: ‘Ping Chau’, ‘Cheung Chau’, ‘Lantau’, ‘Lamma’; as a Jamaican poet, Miller dedicates a central poetic sequence in his collection to excavating the meaning behind various place names such as ‘Me-No-Sen-You-No-Come’, ‘Wait-A-Bit’, ‘Shotover’, ‘Bloody Bay’ and ‘Try See’. This act of naming is crucial in asserting a cultural specificity to what might easily be dismissed as ‘Other’; what is deemed as

²⁸ Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, p. 189.

²⁹ Chan, *Fleche*, p. 64.

³⁰ Dorothy Wang, *Thinking Its Presence: Form, Race and Subjectivity in Contemporary Asian American Poetry* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014), p. 305.

exotic or distant by a reader may in fact be home for another. As such, I have sought throughout my collection to dwell on specificities, such as in my poem ‘The Horse and the Monkey’, which humorously reflects on the Chinese zodiac and the socio-cultural obstacles a queer couple struggles to overcome: ‘I tell you that I am a horse, you / a monkey, fated by the Chinese / zodiac to remain together *as long / as both partners practise the art / of compromise*.’³¹ In another poem titled ‘speaking in tongues’³², I craft a bilingual lyric in which unglossed traditional Chinese characters rhyme phonetically with English words, inspired by Howe’s creative use of traditional Chinese characters in *Loop of Jade*.

My decision to leave my Chinese characters unglossed also echo Miller’s decision to leave his multilingual use of Rastafari speech, Jamaican creole and Standard English unglossed throughout *The Cartographer Tries to Map a Way to Zion*. According to Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, such language use by Rastafarians are [attempts] to “deconstruct” what they see as the power structures of English grammar, structures in themselves metonymic of the hegemonic controls exercised by the British on black peoples throughout Caribbean and African history.³³ By refusing to gloss these words, Miller is refusing to fill a gap that could cause some monolingual readers discomfort. Instead, he productively ‘forces the reader into an active engagement with the horizons of the culture in which these terms [already] have meaning. The reader gets some idea about the meaning of these words from the subsequent conversation, but further understanding will require the reader’s own expansion of the cultural situation beyond the text.’³⁴ In my poem ‘Written in a Historically White Space (I)’³⁵, I leave it to my readers to work their way through the poem, either by using translation tools, or simply by visually admiring the Chinese characters without the need to comprehend precisely what they mean. Furthermore, rather than placing my Chinese characters in the margins of the text (as Howe does), I have chosen in this instance to place them *within the body of the poem*, so as to insist on the equivalence between English and Chinese in terms of their social, cultural and literary value:

The reader stares at my 皮膚 and asks: why don’t you write in 中文? I tell them: 殖民主義 meant that I was brought up in your image. Let us be honest – had I not learnt 英語 and come to your shores, you wouldn’t be reading this poem at all. Did you think it was an accident that I learnt your 語言 for

³¹ Chan, *Fleche*, p. 36.

³² Chan, *Fleche*, p. 68.

³³ Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back*, p. 47.

³⁴ Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back*, p. 64.

³⁵ Chan, *Fleche*, p. 43.

decades, until I knew it better than the 母語 I dreamt
in? Is anything an accident these days?

'Yellow Blooms of Ache': Towards a Queer Poetics

I wish to begin to read as 'queer' the ways in which Howe and Miller's work exemplify aspects of Glissant's notion of 'identity as a system of relation'³⁶ in contrast with his concept of 'root identity'³⁷, which Glissant associates with a nationalist and colonizing impulse that is at once totalitarian and violent. Indeed, Alexis Shotwell provocatively argues that 'markers of racial purity are in turn entangled and co-constituted with biopolitical practices aiming to reduce or eliminate disability...and queerness at the population level. To be against purity...is to be against the rhetorical or conceptual attempt to delineate and delimit the world into something separable, disentangled, and homogenous.'³⁸ By resisting 'purities' of all forms (i.e. racial, linguistic, cultural), Miller embodies a relational approach to identity by placing the cartographer and the rastaman in dialogue with one another, and by introducing an omniscient narrator who is able to offer an additional (mediating) perspective alongside these polarized personae. In *Loop of Jade*, Howe illustrates through her central Borges poetic sequence that our understandings of identity and culture are necessarily mediated and impure; in her case, it is Pound's *Cathay* and *Cantos* which provide a way for her to grapple with her relationship to the Chinese language, since English is her only mother tongue, and she has only begun to read, write and speak Mandarin Chinese as an adult. Building on this relational approach to identity as being inherently queer, I use the motif of fencing (as a former competitive fencer) as a means to examine the relationality between two female bodies in combat, and the 'ache' that emerges during one's realisation that one is 'non-normative' in a 'heteronormative' world, in line with Jack Halberstam's argument that 'the social and symbolic systems that tether queerness to loss and failure cannot be wished away; some would say, nor should they be. As Lee Edelman, Heather Love, and others have argued, to simply repudiate the connections between queerness and negativity is to commit to an unbearably positivist and progressive understanding of the queer.'³⁹

In my poem 'Practice'⁴⁰, my speaker grapples with the physical hurt of being stabbed in the chest, and also reels from the symbolic 'ache' of not being able to admit to a budding same-sex attraction: 'I would feel yellow / blooms of ache where the girl I thought was beautiful / had pierced my

³⁶ Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, p. 142.

³⁷ Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, p. 143.

³⁸ Alexis Shotwell, *Against Purity: Living Ethically in Compromised Times* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), p. 15.

³⁹ Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), p. 97–98.

⁴⁰ Chan, *Flèche*, p. 11.

heart.’ In my collection’s title poem, I write about ‘the *fleche*’, an aggressive and offensive technique in foil and *épée* which, due to its reliance on speed, often results in physical collision between the two fencers: ‘We were practicing the *fleche* – inevitably, I collided into her – a blur of entangled blades. I glimpsed her expression through our masks’ steel mesh: her gleaming, smiling upper lip.’⁴¹ This split-second collision – both willed and unwilling – is captured as a moment of realisation, as the speaker glimpses her female opponent’s facial expression through the darkened mesh of her own mask and learns something about herself, thus evoking Halberstam’s ‘idea of a queer darkness, a strategy of reading as well as a way of being in the world.’⁴² Here, I also allude to the idea of a closeted self through evoking the ways in which fencers are suited up for a match in masks, chest protectors, uniforms and gloves till not an inch of flesh is left exposed. While this ‘armour’ is for the fencer’s own safety, there can also be an oppressiveness to being ‘safe’ and thereby unexposed to risk (and possibility). In my poem ‘A Hurry of English’⁴³, I extend the metaphor of the ‘mask’ to depicting my complex relationship to English, once a crucial means of linguistically camouflaging my nascent queerness in a Chinese-speaking household:

What isn’t obvious isn’t obvious because I intend to
obfuscate. O chews its own tail like a rabid dog.
What does it say about me, this obsession written in
a language I never chose? My desires dressed
themselves in a hurry of English to avoid my
mother’s gaze. How I typed ‘Shakespeare’, then
‘homoeroticism + Shakespeare’ into Google, over
and over. My mother did not understand the
difference between English words, so she let me be.

‘Be the Rainbow that Leaps’: Conclusions and Possibilities

In his *n+1* essay titled ‘Ethnicity as Counterculture’ (2019), Asian American poet-critic Ken Chen writes: ‘We typically think of an artist or writer as someone who has created an oeuvre, someone who has constructed beautiful objects or created discrete books. But creativity is social, informed by friends and mentors, one’s coordinates of class, race, and gender, and by the audiences and critics we’ve internalized in our heads.’⁴⁴ As a critical foil to my creative work, this thesis has been an exploration of how Miller enacts a postcolonial ‘poetics of Relation’ in his fourth collection *The Cartographer Tries to Map a Way to Zion*, alongside an attempt at delineating the ways in which Howe’s

⁴¹ Chan, *Fleche*, p. 57.

⁴² Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, p. 98.

⁴³ Chan, *Fleche*, p. 12.

⁴⁴ Ken Chen, ‘Ethnicity as Counterculture: Counterculture is a Praxis’, *n+1 Magazine* (17 October 2019), <<https://nplusonemag.com/online-only/paper-monument/ethnicity-as-counterculture/>> [accessed 18 October 2019]

harnesses a Glissantian opacity to produce a BAME ‘counter-poetics of difference’ in her debut collection *Loop of Jade*. Having posited at the outset of this thesis an ongoing dilemma within my creative work between ‘a desire for representation...and an equally forceful urge towards *détour*’⁴⁵, I have close read *Loop of Jade* and *The Cartographer Tries to Map a Way to* to identify creative strategies through which my chosen poets have embraced a quality of ‘*détour*’ (or, in Glissantian terms, ‘errantry’) without relinquishing their right to re-vision and re-present the lyric I in their own image. In her essay on ‘Postcolonial Poetry and Form’, Stephanie Burt observes how postcolonial poets such as Walcott and Brathwaite work, ‘as Homi Bhabha suggested they could, “to go beyond...binaries of power” (and powerlessness) in order to ascribe, to a range of formerly disempowered speaking positions, a “right to signify.”’⁴⁶ Both Howe and Miller draw from a rich amalgamation of literary traditions (cross-culturally and transnationally) to speak, signify, and render their own, hybridized poetic forms out of existing, recognizable forms. In *Flèche*, I have worked towards achieving a unique poetic voice born out of recognizable forms – the sonnet, the prose poem, the lyric (with undertones of classical Chinese poetic forms such as the Tang *shi*, Song *ci* and Yuan *qu*) – all the while asserting my ‘right to signify’ as a Hong Kong-Chinese, postcolonial, queer and BAME poet in the UK. As I work towards a ‘queer poetics of failure’ in my newer work, I have also gained solace and solidarity from reading and positioning my poetry alongside queer Asian-American poets such as Chen Chen and Yanyi, as well as East Asian poets from Singapore (e.g. Cyril Wong⁴⁷) and Hong Kong (e.g. Nicholas Wong). In his lauded debut collection *When I Grow Up I Want to Be a List of Further Possibilities* (BOA Editions, 2017), Chen speaks from a position of multiplicity and multilingualism – spanning English, French and Mandarin Chinese – to ask how one might find humour and joy amid the tensions that arise from conflicting loyalties. Queer, Asian-American and immigrant experiences collide in Chen’s work: ‘I’m not certain which is the correct version, but what stays with me / is the leaving, the cry, the country splintering. / [...] / First & deepest severance that should have / prepared me for all others’ (‘First Light’)⁴⁸. In the final months of preparing my debut collection for publication, Chen’s tender debut reminded me that all relationships are ‘a feat of engineering’⁴⁹, whether with one’s country, one’s family, or

⁴⁵ Carrie Noland and Barrett Watten, ‘Introduction’, in *Diasporic Avant-Gardes: Experimental Poetics and Cultural Displacement*, ed. by Carrie Noland and Barrett Watten (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 1–30 (p. 9).

⁴⁶ Stephanie Burt, ‘Postcolonial Poetry and Form’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Postcolonial Poetry*, ed. by Jahan Ramazani (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), pp. 139–52 (p. 142).

⁴⁷ I recall being inspired by the poetry of Cyril Wong, a well-known gay poet in Singapore, whose collection *Tilting Our Plates to Catch the Light* (Math Paper Press, 2012) reflects on a gay couple living with HIV/AIDS, but is uniquely depicted through a (queer) lens of the Hindu deities Shiva and Vishnu – whose female avatar, Mohini, was desired by Shiva. Seeing a gay couple’s life depicted without shame in a poetry collection published by a respected Asian literary press gave me crucial permission to begin to write about queerness.

⁴⁸ Chen Chen, *When I Grow Up I Want to Be a List of Further Possibilities* (Rochester: BOA, 2017), p. 27.

⁴⁹ Chen, *When I Grow Up*, p. 45.

oneself. Similarly, Yanyi, a trans, Asian-American poet writes movingly in his debut collection about gender policing by his conservative Chinese mother in a series of untitled prose poems:

I owned a small collection of Oxfords, undoubtedly masculine. Before she came, I hid them in a bag that I didn't move to my new apartment because I knew she would find them there. For two days, I wore shoes with no arch support. On the third day, I wore my brown shoes to be comfortable. [...] ...we were at the museum and all she could talk about was my shoes. [...] She threw away my shoes and then we had dinner. When I did the dishes, I had to empty the rice onto my shoes and I never saw them again.⁵⁰

This poem and others by Yanyi helped inspire some of the newer poems in *Flèche*. After being repeatedly misgendered in public spaces in the UK, I wrote about the difficulty of being seen *just as one is*, without having to fit into prevailing gender norms or binary expectations: ‘...so when I am greeted with / *Sir / Sir / Sir* / on the streets of London / in the café / of the British Library / I blame myself / blame the clothes I chose / ... / can hear my mother's voice / *it's your fault / they've mistaken you / for a boy* / but I love my riot of black spikes / love these shoes / I allow myself to wear / in a country far / from home’ (‘Names II’)⁵¹.

Other queer, postcolonial and /or BAME poets in the UK whose work I hope to be in continual conversation with include Jay Bernard, Dean Atta and Keith Jarrett. In Bernard's acclaimed debut collection *Surge*, queerness (in terms of gender *and* sexuality) is depicted as inextricably intertwined with what it means to be a Black British person in the UK today. According to the Ledbury Poetry Critic Victoria Adukwei Bulley, ‘While the Grenfell and New Cross fires are foregrounded across [Bernard's] collection, there is all the while a wealth in how Bernard's poetry centres queerness. The ghostly figures in the poems – voices who transcend notions of presence as contingent upon the physical body – make it easier to read *Surge* as continually rejecting binaries, whether these are *alive or dead, male or female, and here or there*.⁵² Reading, learning and writing alongside queer, postcolonial and BAME contemporaries of mine such as Bernard⁵³, I am reminded of Ken Chen's argument that ‘[we] do not need to choose between the white avant-gardist and the authentic person of colour, since we can understand the artist of colour as already an experimental and

⁵⁰ Yanyi, *The Year of Blue Water* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018), p. 26.

⁵¹ Chan, *Flèche*, p. 63.

⁵² Victoria Adukwei Bulley, ‘Ledbury Emerging Poetry Critic Review: ‘Surge’ by Jay Bernard’, *The Poetry School: Reviews* (September 2019), <<https://poetryschool.com/reviews/ledbury-emerging-poetry-critic-review-surge-by-jay-bernard/>> [accessed 10 October 2019]

⁵³ In a signed dedication copy of *Surge* given to the author of this thesis, Bernard writes, ‘...Let's see how far we little queer post-colonials can push this English thing :)’.

politicized being.⁵⁴ In the accomplished works of Howe, Miller, and so many others, I have found thematically and formally what I needed to write my debut poetry collection *Fleche*. In my future creative work, I will continue to draw inspiration, solace and strength from these aforementioned poets, all the while bearing in mind Glissant's concept of 'opacity' in his seminal *Poetics of Relation*, in which he writes: 'As far as my identity is concerned, I will take care of it myself. That is, I shall not allow it to become cornered in any essence...we clamour for the right to opacity for everyone.'⁵⁵

⁵⁴ Chen, 'Ethnicity as Counterculture' (October 2019).

⁵⁵ Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, p. 192–194.

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