

Editorial

Cathy Park Hong's essay 'Delusions of Whiteness in the Avant-Garde' (*Lana Turner Journal*, #7) begins with the bold, inflammatory claim that 'To encounter the history of avant-garde poetry is to encounter a racist tradition.' According to Hong, the racist 'delusion' of the American avant-garde arises from 'the specious belief that renouncing subject and voice is anti-authoritarian, when in fact such wholesale pronouncements are clueless that the disenfranchised need such bourgeois niceties like *voice* to alter conditions forged in history.' She has a point, one that is at risk of being drowned out by the rebarbative cries (by white poets and critics) that they really, genuinely do read and write about poets of colour, or have, at least, in the past. Hong's argument that poets who address race or racial politics are excluded from intellectual coteries of avant-garde or 'innovative' poets is hard to dispute—partly on the basis that you can't be both 'post-racial' (or 'post-identity') and dissolve the poetic subject if you're always read as a poet of colour. What usually follows these sorts of indictments is somewhat present here: the obligatory anthology headcount, the definitions of the historical avant-garde, the anecdotes about exclusion and in-clubs. But in America there are (non-tokenist) examples of Language poets and innovative poets who are non-white (see *Out of Everywhere 2: Linguistically innovative poetry by women in North America & the UK*, forthcoming from Reality Street, as a case in which the race balance falls in favour of American women poets of colour). As a poet of colour who's lived half of her life in the UK and half in the US, I do feel (instinctively, but perhaps not critically enough, some will say) that it's far easier to be pigeonholed as an 'ethnic' writer here in England than it is in, say, California or New York. I'm quite sure this has something to do with the stone-totem lock-jaw that takes hold any time the word 'race' is mentioned here; no such thing happens in the US, where race and racism is as much, if not more, of a contentious issue but is at the very least openly discussed (and often in different registers of understanding nods and sighs). Predictably, Hong is obliged to do the avant-garde/mainstream binary two-step—these categories are of course permeable and indefinite—but I'd argue that so long as the 'innovative' poets and the 'mainstream' poets avoid each other's publishers, magazines, prizes, conferences and anthologies (and, again, there are exceptions for the bold and brave, like this magazine, for instance) then the two 'groups' exist in an uneasy tension. As for racial difference—Hong writes that one is far more likely to read the 'sanitized, easily understood personal lyrics on family and ancestry rather than make sweeping institutional critiques' from poets of colour. And there is, undoubtedly, a publishing culture that rewards a poet handling him or herself like a foreign curiosity for the consumption of a (similarly pigeonholed) white middle-class reader. If anger is a form of critique, which I would argue it is, then, as an Indian-British-American poet I've never been so incensed by the appeasement parade of

breathy, nostalgic, polite ‘other’ poems about chai, green mangoes, dead grandmothers or that hideous non-word ‘curry’. The dirge of multicultural Britain plagued by increasing xenophobia and an enforcement of white ‘Britishness’. Alas, as much as I might wish to write exoticised but palatable accounts of difference—or neutralize the poetic subject into some non-Imperial form of whiteness but, then, whiteness is also a colour—the delusion of whiteness, in Britain, prevents me from fitting into the options available. But having observed the in-clubs at close distance along the Cambridge/London axis, I’m convinced this *dislocation* is the only viable option.

In Fred D’Aguiar’s surprisingly careful, nearly equivocal, introduction to the Black British Poets section of *The New British Poetry* anthology (1988) he writes: ‘It is becoming increasingly difficult to marginalise a poet on the basis of his or her racial origin or thematic concerns.’ However, there are no poets of colour in Eric Mottram’s British avant-garde section of the same anthology, ‘A Treacherous Assault on British Poetry’. Curiously, the section devoted to ‘younger poets’ includes (white) British innovative poet Richard Caddel, whose poem ‘Vers Negre’ begins ‘My black self. Another /’. Perhaps it is not essential that poets of colour retain *voice*, as Hong suggests, but it is certainly not preferable that blackness remain the unchallenged territory onto which the poets project fantasies of otherness and dissolution.

The British Poetic Revival’s ‘assault’ on the white bourgeois Movement was a crucial victory—but it was still launched from a position of privilege. Even its innovation—as a natural or naturalised ‘other’—was still on some level legitimately British, in spite of differences of education or social class or geographical region. Richard Caddel and Peter Quartermain write in their introduction to *Other: British and Irish Poetry Since 1970* (1998): ‘Identity, and the “culture” that goes with it, is conjectural, invented, and inventive, not intrinsic—this is the age of mestizo culture, of mixtures... in any community multiple-identity structures are in play.’ ‘Mestizo’—a word in common use during Spanish colonialism indicating mixed racial caste but widely rejected as racist for its associated anxieties about miscegenation—is a telling choice of words. Now here is an example of an identity that is not conjectural (but measured in drops of blood), one that reminds us that the power of language to dissolve *voice* may in itself be liable to violence.

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