CHAPTER 4

Canons, Publishing, and Publics
Bernardine Evaristo, Lemn Sissay, and Daljit Nagra

Introduction

The previous chapters of this book have focused on particular genres and subgenres of poetry through which poets invent different personae that take on a range of political postures and stances to mediate social transformations in race and Britishness. For LKJ, the incendiary genre of dub poetry fuels his poetics of resistance to address anti-Black violence, policing, and social unrest in the 1970s and early 1980s. The dramatic monologue's tendency towards a politics of dissent enables Bloom, Breeze, and Johnson to conduct social commentary regarding the double exclusions of race and gender distinguishing the experiences of "Black women" in the 1980s and 1990s, even as their monologues voice forms of solidarity premised in irrepressible difference. As we have seen in my discussion of Sulter and Dabydeen, by the 1990s and early 2000s the cultural field shifts as poets of color – who had previously worked with radical Black presses and small galleries – gain greater recognition by cultural institutions promoting the politics of representation through programs advancing diversity and multiculturalism. Sulter and Dabydeen extend and reinvent the subgenre of ekphrasis to foreground the centrality of otherwise invisible or occluded Black figures in British culture and art histories even as their ekphrastic experimentations pattern forms of Blackness beyond recognition, in ways that remain opaque and unknown.

This chapter switches focus from a genre-based discussion to poetry's broader interrelation with canon formations, publishing, and cultural institutions, especially once British Black and Asian poets and writers begin to occupy a central position in British culture in the early twenty-first century. Here, I profile now prominent authors, including Bernardine Evaristo (b. 1959), Lemn Sissay (b. 1967), and Daljit Nagra (b. 1966). Each of these artists, in different ways, initially began at the "margins" yet have come to gain "insider" status within British Black and Asian literature and

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British poetry more widely. They have worked directly and indirectly with prominent institutions, including museums, universities, public broadcasts, and, for Sissay, even the 2012 London Olympics. They have also been instrumental in mentoring, promoting, and anthologizing younger generations of poets. In the process, they – along with many other artists, including Patience Agbabi, Anthony Joseph, and Kadija Sesay, to name only a few – have conducted significant work by confronting the highly unequal domain of British poetry and by seeking to expand the cultural field for new voices to be heard as part of the process of intervening in public debates over Britishness. In this way, the writers here connect by investing their cultural works with a progressive politics of excavating, revising, and potentially transforming discursive forms of national and cross-cultural belonging better suited for an increasingly intermixed and unequal twenty-first-century Britain.

Since the early 2000s, scholars have extensively debated canons and canonicity for artists of color, from the landmark collection *A Black British Canon?* (2006) and extending to *The Cambridge Companion to British Black and Asian Literature* (2016) and *The Cambridge History of Black and Asian British Writing* (2020). In one sense, it seems indisputable to claim that there has been an expansion of canon formations. For instance, Bénédicte Ledent describes the period from the mid 1990s to near or around 2007 as a period of "optimism," especially as authors such as Salman Rushdie, V. S. Naipaul, and later Zadie Smith, Monica Ali, Caryl Phillips, and others gained greater access to British fiction (242). These years also coincided, not coincidentally, with the establishment of "official" multiculturalism under New Labour (1997–2010) through various schemes promoting diversity and inclusion in the creative industries and the publishing world, many of which were sponsored by the Arts Council and the British Council. Ledent points to the 2007 bicentenary of the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act as a culminating moment, which showcased the work of several authors including Andrea Levy, Phillips, and Sissay (242). As I noted in the Introduction, the field also saw a growing number of scholarly monographs devoted to British Black and Asian writing between the early 2000s and mid 2010s.[1] And there have been public and private commissions for minority authors, numerous conferences and festivals, and national and international prizes, such as the Jhalak Prize to recognize the best writing in any genre – founded in 2016 by Sunny Singh, Nikesh Shukla, and Media Diversified – or the annual Brunel International African Poetry Prize, initiated by Evaristo in 2013.

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And yet, during this same period, what appeared to be an initial expansion was, in reality, a continuing contraction in the publishing world and creative industries – especially concerning race and poetry.[2] Since the mid 2000s, Spread the Word (directed by Ruth Harrison) has been one of the key organizations for developing new writers and profiling diversity in the UK publishing industry. Their 2005 Free Verse Report, edited by Danuta Kean and sponsored by the Arts Council England, focused especially on the lack of publishing opportunities for Black and Asian poets in both small presses and major/independent publishers (Kean, 1–5). Since then, Spread the Word has launched a series of projects including development schemes providing funding and mentoring, organizing workshops and readings, publishing "The Complete Works" anthology series, *Ten* (2010, 2014, 2017), and establishing the Young People's Laureate for London. Still, in the decade after the publication of the "Free Verse" report, Danuta Kean and Mel Larsen conducted further research on diversity in the publishing industry, which appeared in *Writing the Future: Black and Asian Writers and Publishers in the UK Market Place* (2015). There, Kean and Larsen observe that transformations in the UK book industry – including decreasing profit margins, the expenses of marketing and publicity, and changes in copyright due to electronic publication and open access – have further negatively impacted cultural diversity, both for those working within publishing houses and in book lists of authors of color (2).

While *Writing the Future* concentrates on fiction, some of the findings apply to the poetry world during the 2010s. For instance, Kean and Larsen note that authors of color tend to be "better represented in the smaller, less lucrative literary genres rather than higher selling genres that reap the greatest financial reward and publication longevity" (3). Relatively smaller presses such as Peepal Tree, Canongate, Carcanet, and especially Bloodaxe have had a longstanding commitment to publishing a host of poets, including Dabydeen, Agbabi, Sissay, Kei Miller, and Vahni Capildeo, to name only a few. And while major houses have not historically picked up poets of color, Faber, Penguin, and Chatto & Windus have also become important venues for Nagra, Evaristo, Fred D'Aguiar, and Kayo Chingonyi, respectively. Another finding in the report concerns the demands placed upon authors to invoke "authenticity" by including subject material on race and otherness on the one hand and, on the other, to appeal to "literary criteria" by invoking perceived standards of aesthetic taste as they are reinforced through the hierarchies of cultural capital (14–15). *Writing the Future* makes clear how problems over cultural diversity in the publishing world prove inseparable from the divisions of class, particularly when

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the publishing industry "remains dominated by White, public school educated, 'Oxbridge' graduates, even though this group represent a tiny fragment of the overall UK population" (22–23). Similarly, concerning Black British canon formations, Ledant argues that if certain authors have come to be perceived as "more British than others," this is primarily due to their class, combined with their political attitudes and their position within the British literary field: These factors significantly shape questions over canonicity, perhaps even more so than matters of identity or the purported quality of their writing (243). The unevenness of the publishing world, then, significantly shapes contentious debates of canonicity and canon formation in British Black and Asian literature generally, and in poetry in particular. The Conclusion to this book expands upon some of the welcome changes that have occurred for the publishing, reviewing, and prizing of poets of color, especially since 2015. My focus in this chapter, though, concerns the period prior to Black and Asian poetry's recent ascendency in British letters, what I would describe as a period of fractious unevenness between 2001–2017 as the field questioned its self-definition and mobilized for its broader cultural position.

My own approach to critical questions over canon formations and the complex entanglements between aesthetic and social formations is informed by the scholarship of Alison Donnell and Gail Low. For instance, Donnell reconceives canonicity as "an agent of cultural interrogation and dialogue rather than authority and closure" (190). For Donnell, canon formations are necessarily dynamic and capable of "generating difference, debate and even conflict" (191). In proposing "a diverse, contingent, and renewable canon," Donnell calls upon scholars to make explicit the "motivations" of selection and to clarify how certain texts are put to use, particularly concerning matters of national identity formation and the politics of race (196). Similarly, Low argues that the cross-cultural energies animating literary production need to be locally situated, contextualized, and historicized to explain the specific conditions that give rise to aesthetic representations of transnationalism (184). In doing so, scholars can clarify the material underpinnings and local contexts in which authors, publications, networks, and art collectives operate, even as they often address concerns and readerships far beyond Britain's borders. Relatedly, Low maintains that scholars need to attend to the publishing histories, institutional contexts, and discursive frameworks that shape the production of cultural texts, here conceived as "rhetorical and performative speech acts" (185). Understood in this way, texts do not just passively reflect but actively constitute their readerly publics (169–70). Low's approach, then,

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has the advantage of asking how, why, and in whose names a text becomes deployed in mobilizing canon formations – or, as Low puts it, "black British for whom?" (169).

In an early twenty-first-century context, I would take this one step further. This chapter aims to look into the aesthetic strategies that poets and poems adopt to mediate the contradictions of operating within – and yet often seeking to challenge and critique – cultural institutions advancing "diversity and inclusion" within highly restrictive publishing sectors, even as artists of color bear a keen awareness of ongoing forms of systemic oppression in the social and political spheres. By reading the aesthetic and the social in tandem, my line of inquiry hopes to "build even more bridges," in the words of Roy Sommer, "between literary theory and cultural history in order to yield more coherent insights into the emergence of 'black' Britain as both a social and a political reality and a discursive formation which is reconfiguring traditional notions of Englishness" (245). In what ways, then, have early twenty-first-century British poets of color negotiated the nonidentity – that is, the gap or split – demarcating their poetry's increasing absorption in a cultural field that their works would potentially seek to transform in the name of more inclusive and expansive conceptions of Britishness and, conversely, the nagging, irreparable realities of struggle, violence, and inequality as they are encoded – and canonized – in poetic form? The mobilization of transformation, improvement, inclusivity, and expansiveness in the face of structural inequalities is a hallmark of progressive political discourses.

My discussion begins with Evaristo's novel in verse, *The Emperor's Babe* (2001), which she researched during a residency at the Museum of London in 1999. In my reading, the transformation of the central figure of Zuleika across the poem opens onto the ways in which Evaristo queers the presumed authority of the canon through what I perceive as the text's literary masochism. Through the persona of Zuleika, Evaristo further conducts metacommentary on the hierarchies confronting artists of color within a delimited cultural field. In contrast, Sissay has been commissioned to produce several "landmark poems" that appear in public spaces across the UK. Here, I profile two of his most significant landmark poems: "The Gilt of Cain" (2008), located in Fen Court, London, and created to commemorate the bicentennial of the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act in 1807 and William Wilberforce's twenty-year campaign in Parliament to abolish the slave trade; and "The Spark Catchers" (2012), located in Olympic Park and commissioned for the "Cultural Olympiad" of the 2012 London Olympics. As I discuss, Sissay's landmark poems both demonstrate the

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material, concrete challenges artists confront when they are commissioned by corporate-sponsored cultural institutions promoting diversity and inclusion under neoliberal multiculturalism *and* mark the boundaries of those voices, histories, and experiences inevitably left out or overdeveloped. In his collection *British Museum* (2017), Nagra adopts an inquisitive, interrogatory persona to question his writing's enmeshment in neocolonial cultural institutions and the violence of Britain's geopolitics. Here, I examine the ways in which the title poem self-reflects upon his writing's vexed relation to the British Museum's colonial history and twenty-first-century funding by British Petroleum (BP). Even as Nagra's art risks perpetuating the very inequalities the museum and, by extension, his poetry would seek to rectify, he further imagines a form of collectivity through the profusion of differences distinguishing diverse and highly uneven cultural practices in global Britain. Although operating in different contexts, institutions, and mediums, Evaristo, Sissay, and Nagra have invested their poetry with a public role in uncovering forgotten histories and countermemories – particularly the voices and experiences of the marginalized and the precarious – as part of the process of transforming reigning discourses over race, belonging, and Britishness.

Queering Authority? Literary Masochism in Evaristo's *The Emperor's Babe*

Evaristo has widely described her aesthetic project as conducting "literary archaeology," excavating unacknowledged histories, particularly those that recall Britain's African and cross-cultural constitution ("On the Road," 4). Her own multiethnic background (born to an English mother of Irish ancestry and a Nigerian father), combined with growing up in the racially charged decades of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, significantly informs her writing's overarching preoccupations with cross-racial relations, gender and sexuality, interconnected transnational histories, and structures of power and legacies of conquest. The archaeological impulses of her writing appear from her first, semi-autobiographical novel in verse *Lara* (1997) through her later works of fiction, such as *Mr. Loverman* (2013) and Booker Prize winning *Girl, Woman, Other* (2019).

Evaristo's now much celebrated novel in verse, *The Emperor's Babe* (2001), forms the focus of my discussion here. Set in 211 CE during the Roman Empire and taking a Nubian, London-born adolescent girl, Zuleika, as its central figure, *The Emperor's Babe* brings into relief the knotted entanglements of canons, publishing, and poetry's public

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roles, particularly for a relatively lesser-known but up-and-coming Black British woman poet at that time in her career. Before being picked up by Penguin, Evaristo describes the work of self-promotion during her early years when she was advertising her own books, printing leaflets for her readings, and approaching the British Council to conduct international reading tours after the publication of *Lara*. As she says, "I just did the hustle" ("Putting History," 446). Across the poem, Zuleika similarly does the hustle in her pursuit of self-possession by aspiring to subvert numerous forms of authority. Reading for Zuleika's subjectivity – especially as it takes shape through her dual relations to Septimius Severus (often referred to as Rome's "African emperor") and to her poetic education – uncovers the poem's internal commentary upon the limitations and inequalities she confronts in seeking personal, sexual, and poetic autonomy. What's more, reading for the tensions comprising Zuleika's subjectivity in Roman London opens onto the poem's metacommentary concerning the divisions facing twenty-first-century Black British women artists, the hierarchies structuring canons of taste, and the kinds of personae artists can adopt (or not) in a restricted cultural field.

When she began working on *The Emperor's Babe* through a Poetry Society residency at the Museum of London in 1999, Evaristo describes having been met with deep skepticism by the curators concerning the premise of her book. In a 2004 interview, she states, "when I first went to talk to the curators about the idea of a black presence in Roman London, they didn't agree. … They said no, it would not have been possible" ("Alaistair Niven," 18). She had already read several sources on the roles of African peoples in European and American history, including J. A. Rogers's three-volume series on cross-racial mixing in *Sex and Race* (1940–44), historian Ivan Van Sertima's *African Presence in Early Europe* (1985), and especially Peter Fryer's *Staying Power: The History of Black People in Britain* (1984) (15). Fryer briefly mentions Severus and further notes the legion of Moors stationed at Hadrian's Wall in the third century CE. Fryer's opening sentence – "There were Africans in Britain before the English came here" (1) – inspired Evaristo to imagine Zuleika, a London-born girl whose parents migrated from ancient Nubia, traveling by boat along the Nile, then crossing Europe and settling in Londinium (*EB*, 3). Once the book was published to significant acclaim, she says the curators "opened their imaginations" and eventually included a Black Roman London merchant figure as a tour guide. Despite the lack of archaeological evidence, Evaristo hoped, at the time, that her creative work would inspire further scientific research into Britain's deep African histories ("Alistair," 18).

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Evaristo's decision to reach back to Roman London seems less a matter of "justifying" the presence of minority peoples in Britain than of inventing more expansive models of historical consciousness that would challenge both imperial discourses linking Britishness with whiteness and prevailing postcolonial narratives privileging the 1948 *Windrush* as the watershed moment of Black British history ("On the Road," 10). Because she did not attend university to study English literature, she describes having "circumnavigated" the problem of feeling daunted by a "canon" that needs to be mastered and overthrown ("Putting History," 435–36). Her flexible relation to hierarchies of taste and language appears across *The Emperor's Babe*, as when she switches rapidly between allusions to high art (Horace, Ovid, Dante, T. S. Eliot) and popular culture (*Coronation Street*, *Sex and the City*, WWE professional wrestling), or when she infuses her iambic, unrhymed couplets mostly written in "standard English" with Latin puns, Scots pidgin, Cockney rhymes, and vulgar slang. Katharine Burkitt has described the "fractured nature" of *The Emperor's Babe* as paradigmatic of a "post-epic" text (72). For Burkitt, Evaristo's emphasis on migration, diaspora, transnationalism, and feminine sexuality disrupts the reigning narratives of British imperialism, nationhood, and an unbroken genealogy of identity, which are themselves already "ruptured," "splintered, cracked, and peppered with incongruities," especially through the poem's focus on the "polyglot nature of the society it represents" (72). The hybrid form of the novel in verse further gives expression to the unevenly mixed and densely layered texture of Britain's history, particularly for those voices that have been silenced by dominant narratives but that require excavation ("Interview," Muñoz-Valdivieso, 13).

What's more, Evaristo's initial background in theater in the 1980s, where she wrote "choreopoems, dramatic poems" for Theatre of Black Women (1982–1988), contributes to the ways in which *The Emperor's Babe* becomes mediated through the dramatic monologues and persona of Zuleika ("Alastair Niven," 17). By combining historical excavation ("what was") with literary invention ("what might be"), her writing intervenes in public discourses concerning race and politics in Britain, advancing a progressive politics for the sake of attesting to the crossings of cultures, peoples, and languages over the *longue durée* and thereby contributing to the discursive and ideological makings of British subjectivities, in their multiplicity and inequality. This process is, however, not without conflict.

Throughout *The Emperor's Babe*, Evaristo goes to great lengths to demonstrate the social construction and linguistic composition of Zuleika's subjectivity: "what had I become but a composite," she queries late in the

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poem (204). In the "Prologue," she expresses her true dream of "creating mosaics, / of remaking my town with bright stones and glass" (5). Zuleika's desire to "remake" her town through a shimmering aesthetics of mosaic or bricolage comprises one of the core tensions in her subjectivity and, by extension, in Evaristo's revisionist project: She aspires towards fulfilling a fantasy of self-completion by recombining the fragments into new wholes and filling in that which has been lacking in dominant, postimperial accounts of Britishness and British poetry; and yet she does so with an acute awareness that her writing risks reinscribing the very exclusions and negations that she would aspire to subvert, if not transform. As Dave Gunning similarly argues, the text "demonstrates the varying pressures that are exerted upon [Zuleika] and, through to its tragic ending, shows how the hybridity of the city may not be sufficient to liberate the individual from extant constructions of domination" ("Cosmopolitanism," 167).

The contradictions comprising the composition of her subjectivity across the text appear through an overarching tension between, on the one hand, Zuleika's desire for self-possession by working within and seeking to overcome the numerous hierarchies that imprison her (racial, gendered, sexual, political, economic, and aesthetic) and, on the other, the ways in which the composition of her subjectivity becomes enmeshed in, and to a significant degree determined by, forces beyond her control, rendering her dispossessed and undone. What's more, Zuleika's divided subjectivity – and *The Emperor's Babe*'s emphasis on Roman London's excesses and decadence as a whole – connect to Evaristo's queer subversion of the canon. As Robert Stilling argues, "references to queer and effeminate figures are inextricable from the text's depiction of third-century Roman Londinium as a burgeoning metropolis rife with perversion and corruption. And yet such references are also inextricable from the text's embrace of queerness as a positive mode of identity in twenty-first-century Britain" (189).

In my reading, we can further see the subversive queering of authority in *The Emperor's Babe* through its patterning of "literary masochism," one akin to that theorized by Gilles Deleuze in *Masochism: Coldness and Cruelty* (1967). In his reading of Leopold von Sacher-Masoch's novel *Venus in Furs* (1870), Deleuze delineates the ways in which masochism is far more complex than a subject's sexual gratification through pain and humiliation, although this is certainly part of the picture. The content of masochism often includes a masculine figure who assumes the role of a submissive slave (through the character of Severin) before a cold, domineering woman draped in furs and brandishing a whip (through the figure of Wanda/Venus). The masochist shapes the woman into a work of art that he both

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submits to and seeks to master by fashioning her, educating her, and inciting her cold invectives and cruel orders (22).

Literary masochism, for Deleuze, however, also involves specific aesthetic features to reconfigure normative arrangements of power through domination and submission. These features include Masoch's recurrent language of "persuasion" and of "contracts," whose goal is education (20). Here, the masochist seeks out a woman whom he must persuade and indeed educate through advertisements, alliances, and contracts (20). In Masoch, "the [male] victim speaks the language of the torturer he is to himself" (17). In contrast, "the woman, although persuaded, is still basically doubting, as though she were afraid: she is forced to commit herself to a role to which she may prove inadequate, either by overplaying or by falling short of expectations" (21). For Deleuze, literary masochism involves intersubjective arrangements constantly under negotiation through back-and-forth power dynamics of language and education. Masochist aesthetics further features instances of "supersensualism," which refers to the process of violently transmuting the lived reality of the human and natural world into replicas of works of art (69). As a result, the perceived world takes on plastic, frozen, and immobile qualities held in suspension, of "arrested movement" (70). Supersensual frozenness and arrested movement contribute to temporalities of waiting and delay, which appear across Masoch's writing. As Deleuze explains, the suspended time of delay – even more than the commingling of pain and pleasure or the thematizing of humiliation, subjection, and punishment – is at the center of Masoch's aesthetics, as the masochistic subject splits and divides between "an indefinite waiting of pleasure and an intense expectation of pain" (71).

There is one last point I'd like to highlight regarding Deleuze's theory of masochism before returning to Evaristo. Deleuze links masochism to Freudian fetishism and "disavowal," which functions not so much as negation but instead as a strategy of "radically contesting the validity of that which is: it suspends belief in and neutralizes the given in such a way that a new horizon opens up beyond the given and in place of it" (31). Fetishism, then, becomes the formal mechanism for the subject to suspend belief – surely there must have been Africans in ancient Britain, right? Of course, Zuleika will become the new Roman empress through her affair with Severus and assume her rightful role as poet laureate through her poetic education – and invent an imaginative fantasy of creating new sexual and political horizons. "It represents the last point at which it was still possible to believe" as a way of gaining sexual pleasure on one's own terms and in protest of the reality of what is: namely, the subject's weakness,

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brokenness, and radical vulnerability before forms of power and domination entirely out of their own control (31, 33). Crucially for Deleuze, the masochistic subject is aware of their broken reality but nonetheless clings to idealization as a protective shield, suspending reality through fantasy and constructing idealized fictions through suspense, postponement, and delay (33). In this way, the subject gains agency over realities of exploitation even as the subject experiences the intermingling of pleasure and pain, awaiting the moment of inventing new forms of intersubjective attachment within and beyond existing structures.

The language of persuasion and education, the issuing of contractual alliances, instances of supersensualism and temporal delay, fetishistic fantasies of wholeness and completion, and aspirations for alternative forms of sexual and political attachment – these aesthetic features of masochism all figure prominently throughout *The Emperor's Babe*. It is through Zuleika's divided subjectivity that Evaristo's literary masochism comes into stark relief and performs the text's central commentary on power and authority. In certain regards, Zuleika resembles Masoch's Venus, in so far as she becomes ensnared in contractual alliances and dominating forces of patriarchal, imperial power over which she has little say. In the early sections of the text, Zuleika experiences her initial freedom to wander the city with her best friend, Alba, before becoming constrained across multiple levels of power. At the age of eleven, her father, Anlamani, effectively sells her into an arranged marriage with the Roman Senator Lucius Aurelius Felix. In exchange, her father receives Felix's "patronage" for his business of small grocery shops, which become increasingly lucrative (27). Her mother, Qalhata, accedes to Zuleika's subordination, reasoning, "*I have suffer so too you will have suffer*" (20), while her younger brother, Catullus, receives a public school education to prepare him to become a military officer (82). Felix, a figure for Zuleika of "utter imperium" (19), seeks a submissive wife, a "simplex, quiet, fidelis girl" who is not of the "hedonistic breed" and does not interfere or argue in "politics, world affairs and the arts" (16). On their wedding night, Felix rapes the eleven-year-old Zuleika, rendering her infertile and temporarily preventing her from experiencing sexual desire (29). Thereafter, Zuleika remains a kept woman in Felix's "gilded cage" of a villa (155), where she receives "decorum classes" from "a snooty Roman bitch // called Clarissa" (4). As much as Felix seeks to mold Zuleika into a submissive, refined woman and rid her of her "second-generation plebby Creole" (4), Zuleika is repeatedly reminded of her marginal status. For instance, Felix's younger sister, Antistia, dubs Zuleika "*Illa Bella Negreeta*" and pronounces: "You will never be one of us … A real Roman is born

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and bred" (52, 53). Zuleika reflects that her "tongue became wood" and "My words revealed me, their ornate diction was a mask" (53). Although Zuleika's name literally translates to "The Magnificent One" (117), she becomes defined through her forced submission to the hierarchies of her social world.

Indeed, it is by virtue of her object status – and the numerous ways that her autonomy is stolen from her and given over to the pleasure of others against her will – that Zuleika subsequently seeks mastery over, and recognition from, the very forces that constrain her by subverting the rules of decorum and pursuing the taboo. Throughout the latter half of the text, Evaristo intertwines Zuleika's torrid sexual affair with Severus with her devotion to poetry as her strategy for seeking out forms of enjoyment within and, in her eyes, beyond the hierarchies within which she remains restricted. In effect, she wishes to live up to her very name, "the magnificent one," by stealing forms of self-possession and hedonistic pleasure that have been foreclosed to her and converting herself into an emblem of sexual and aesthetic adoration. This process of mastery through objectification, however, is not without its own conflicts, particularly as her desire for recognition from imperial power and poetry alike both depend upon a logic of "possession."

Concerning her relations with Severus, the intimate space of the bedroom becomes for her a counter-public sphere in which she can engage in masochistic fantasies of adopting the role of imperial power. After having been pierced by the gaze of Severus – "It's like my tits were my eyes, // they responded to *The Look* first" (119) – Zuleika declares to her friends, Alba and the trans drag queen Venus, "I want to feel // extreme pain and extreme pleasure" (121). Zuleika idealizes yet misperceives in Severus an image of the total man, as when she imagines "being crushed into the imperiales // purple robes / of Emperor Septimius Severus" (128). During their climactic sexual relation and immediately before Severus's death in battle at York, Zuleika commands Severus to declare her his "imperatrix" and "dominatrix," "mistress of all you survey" (226–27). Severus, like Sacher-Masoch's Severin, seeks in Zuleika a sexualized model of the lost maternal by becoming her slave: "'take me home, maman, / I want to go home, home, home,'" he screams in the moment of orgasm (227). In this moment, the Libyan Severus, according to Burkitt, becomes "symbolically unmanned and his desire becomes manifest as a longing for home" (92). Burkitt argues further that this moment for Severus in the bedroom "highlights the physically dislocated position of settler communities" who long both for a return to the plenitude of the motherland *and* for a fulfillment

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of the fantasy of "a pre-British nationhood," in the face of experiences of displacement and racialization in an unwelcome host country (Burkitt, 92). For Zuleika, her moment of postcoital bliss leads her to fantasize about becoming empress to Severus, occupying the "Imperial Palace / on the Palatine Hill," and having a fictive daughter, Claudia, whose name signifies "perseverance" and longevity (229). As she comes to recognize, however, the fetish of imperial authority and feminine mastery proves vacuous and, ultimately, self-destructive, especially once Felix learns of her affair, leading to her subsequent death by food poisoning at the end of the poem.

Zuleika's desire to possess Severus sexually – "How I craved to possess / he who cannot be possessed" (188) – proves inseparable from her desire to possess language and poetry: "'To leave a whisper of myself in the world, / my ghost, a magna opera of words'" (159). Zuleika's poetic education through her tutor, Theodorous (literally, "gift from the gods"), in part reinforces her position of derivativeness. Evaristo uses the figure of Theodorous to instill imperial, masculinist assumptions about poetry's monumentality, universality, difficulty, classical status, and cultural significance and centrality. For instance, he requires Zuleika to study "the last thousand years // of the canon, learnt it off by heart / *and* can quote from it at random, // *and* imitate it" (83–84). She works her way up the canon, beginning with Juvenal and Pliny Jr. before taking on Homer and, ultimately, Virgil, "*noster maximus poeta*" (84). Zuleika displays a characteristic irreverence towards Theodorous's pedagogy, preferring to write about the matters of her day: "about Nubians in Londinium, about men / who dress up as women, about extramarital / peccadilloes" (85). Evaristo here and elsewhere satirizes conceptions of the poetic canon that uphold social, political, and racial hierarchies. She further uses Zuleika to reflect upon her own mock-epic project. Zuleika may claim "I don't care about the past / and I ain't writing for posterity." Evaristo nonetheless taps into, updates, and refashions canonical figures such as Virgil, who here becomes mobilized to reimagine the founding of Londinium through a "thoroughly modern miss" living in an ancient world that, for Evaristo, resonates with our own.

While Zuleika largely dismisses Theodorous's masculinist-imperialist precepts of poetry, she unwittingly falls into the trap of internalizing poetic ideologies of fame. Her desire for public "exposure" and "recognition" (191) comes to culmination when she, Alba, and Venus organize a "verbosa orgia," or poetry recitation and orgy (194). The reading features "the very real Authentic Pict!" Hrrathaghervood, who wears "ginger dreadlocks" and delivers his poems in an angry "Pictish patois" (195–96), and "Manumittio

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X, whose every poem began, / *Take these chains from my heart*, // and finished with *I just wanna be free*" (198), among others. Throughout this section, Evaristo satirizes the identity politics of the London performance poetry scene and the staging of "authenticity," as when it is revealed that Hrrathaghervood's real name is Robbie and that he was born in Northern England by the "Antonine Wall" (212). The poetry reading ultimately spirals into a "piss-up, feel-up and throw-up" orgy, leaving Zuleika to perform her juvenile poem, "Identity Crisis: Who is She?," before a "pit of writhing flesh, grunts, and gasps" (199). Afterwards, Zuleika decides to abandon her poetic career and instead devote herself to Severus. Venus, however, encourages Zuleika not to concern herself with recognition and instead to hone her craft: "it's about the art," Venus says (211). Zuleika, however, still desires fame and "a standing ovation" (211). For her, the category of poetry and her desire to become a poet serve as the fetish for the fashioning of her ideal-ego as full, complete, autonomous, and beloved by all around.

In each of these instances, the categories of "Severus" and "poetry" function as fetishes of disavowal, that is, idealizations of fulfillment through which Zuleika suspends – and wishes to imaginatively transform – the realities of inequality afflicting her and numerous others surrounding her. Ultimately, her pursuit of self-possession fails, especially because it cannot account for the ways in which her subjectivity depends upon systemic forms of exploitation from which she benefits and, indeed, that she inflicts upon others. For instance, Evaristo goes to significant lengths to parallel Zuleika's life conditions with those of the Caledonian (Scottish) girls, whom Zuleika names Valeria and Aemilia. After having been sold into slavery in York, the girls arrive at Felix's villa, where Zuleika orders Tranio, the house servant, to chain them to a tree (57). Describing their physical appearance as "filthy" and "vile" and their Scottish patois as "vulgar babble," Zuleika promptly sends the girls to the baths to transform them – as Felix had done to her – into "little ladies," hoping they will become her "devotees" (56). In some instances, Zuleika begins to identify with their history of forced migration and subjugation, which closely mirrors her own (59). In other instances, she even begins to develop a quasi-erotic relation with the girls, as when they massage Zuleika and the three women's bodies – their "fingers," Valeria's "sighing breasts," Aemilia's "lips whisper brush my neck" – begin to merge into one another (108). Later, the girls enthusiastically partake in the verbosa orgia, citing their own sexual desires and future aspirations to "git wed" and "hiv bairns [children]" (204).

And yet it is precisely when Zuleika empathetically identifies with, erotically merges into, or sees her own reflection in Valeria and Aemilia

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that she doubles down on the role of the cold, cruel, domineering woman before her real slaves, thereby replicating the subjugation that she herself suffers. "You will have your libertas when I die," Zuleika promises them (206). Out of their own desire for self-possession, Valeria and Aemilia cash in on her promise – and fulfill their contract to the letter – by revealing Zuleika's affair to Felix and effectively purchasing their freedom through her death. In these ways, Evaristo demonstrates how Zuleika's claims to self-possession prove self-destructive and willfully blind to the suffering of those around her. What's more, *The Emperor's Babe* as a whole deploys masochist aesthetics to frame the ways in which Zuleika's multilayered crises over authority – sexual, familial, cultural, political, and aesthetic – derive from an entire social world driven by the logic of property, ownership, and possession.

There are, however, a few instances in the poem that challenge this logic of possession and, in the process, work to unravel Zuleika's subjectivity, leading her "I" towards dispossession and thereby offering her a glimpse into the violent negations that produce her and her world. To give just one of the most visible examples, in the middle chapters of the poem Zuleika joins Severus and his "imperial entourage" at the amphitheater, where she initially expects to enjoy the entertainment of gladiatorial games that soon become a spectacle of violence, all overseen under the sovereignty of Severus (164). Readers will recall how she witnesses the wanton slaughter of wild beasts, "prisoners of war and the poor" (176), and pregnant women "smeared // with the semen of bulls and raped by them" (178). Throughout these pages, Zuleika's "I" splits and divides. In one instance, Evaristo composes a single, elongated paratactic sentence to position Zuleika's "I" first in the role of participating witness: "the crowd stood / and roared, and I with them, // *Encore! Encore!*" (179). But by the end of the sentence, the scenes of dismemberment bring back traumatic memories of her rape by Felix, as when her "I" assumes the role of unwilling victim: "I hugged myself, the pitchfork entered // and turned, warm pee burst down my legs" (179). And yet Zuleika also converts the realities of violence she witnesses into supersensual, aesthetic emblems for her own contemplation and banal affirmation of life: "Now I understood it all, oh beautiful terrible pain, // to witness you without my personal suffering, / let us know that we live, let us live!" (182). This failure on her part may, however, self-reflect on the ways in which Evaristo self-critically capitalizes on the aestheticization of violence, as when she names gladiators after professional wrestlers, such as "Da Rock" and "Undertaker," or after Sir Thomas Malory's chivalric romance, "Morte d'Weed" (181–83).

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By the end of the amphitheater section in the chapter titled "All the Evil of the World Let Loose," Zuleika meditates upon the violence she has witnessed in ways that are both self-implicating and self-exculpating:

> None of us is guilty,
> each of us took part, as limb
> was severed from bleeding heart, I lost
> my mind
> was flung wide open … (184).

In certain regards, her subjectivity veers between dismemberment ("bleeding heart") and dispossession ("lost"), as if the act of witnessing has opened her up to the precarity of others whose lives are akin to her own. In the final lines, her subjectivity further proceeds towards disintegration, as when she internalizes the lost lives she has beheld:

> they live
> inside me now all that was contained
> has come undone.

Here, Zuleika affirms common experiences of oppression and dispossession – as if her plight could at any moment become exchanged with those of animals, slaves, the poor, pregnant women, and all others who have become rendered as disposable lives. And yet her intimation of intersubjective attachments through dispossession remains partial and incomplete, particularly as her "me" houses and ultimately effaces the very real lives of those who have become "undone." Her supersensual disposition – of converting violated lives into heightened forms of aesthetic apprehension – functions as a protective shield and ideological weapon for her to go on to pursue self-possession, whether in the bedroom with Severus or through the verbosa orgia. Evaristo seems to use Zuleika as a cautionary figure regarding the self-destructive consequences in her pursuit of self-possession, particularly as she remains blind to numerous conditions of exploitation, which she perpetuates and capitalizes upon.

The tensions comprising Zuleika's masochistic subjectivity in cosmopolitan Roman London opens onto a metacommentary concerning Evaristo's literary masochism in *The Emperor's Babe* as a whole, as readers are invited to consider the relation between Zuleika as poet figure and Evaristo as branded author. In many respects, her irreverent humor and flagrant flouting of decorum demonstrate Evaristo's cheeky relationship to the ostensible laws of canon formations, disputing their presumed "authority" by scrambling their codes, blurring their boundaries of time and space

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through anachronism and anachorism, and upending hierarchies of taste. To this I would also add that, in the context of early twenty-first-century Britain, the humor of her work also conducts an internal critique concerning the strategies available to Black British poets who seek to subvert – but also submit to – the rules of the game to gain legibility within a restrictive cultural field. "What we call humor," Deleuze writes, "is a downward movement from the law and its consequences," carrying out the letter of the law to its fullest degree and, in the process, revealing its arbitrary absurdity (88). We could say, then, that the masochist turns the tables on authority, subversively "overthrow[ing] the law" through humor and irreverently unleashing the unruly disorder that conventional forms of authority seek to contain and prevent (89).

Evaristo's mask of comedy furthermore lays bare the violence at work in her poetic project, particularly by taking on the persona of Zuleika in the name of disavowing conventional forms of poetic and political authority and inventing historically expansive models of Britishness. In the epilogue to the poem, "Vivat Zuleika," Evaristo's speaker breaks out of the poem's dramatic monologue and directly addresses how the poet-speaker has worn "Zuleika" as a masked persona: "It is you I have found to wear, Zuleika" (253). Across the following five quatrains, the "I" approaches "Zulieka" at the very moment before her death. Throughout these lines, Evaristo imbues the encounter between the "I" and "Zuleika" with masochist aesthetics of supersensualism, coldness, suspension, and temporal delay. It is as if the entire tableau were frozen in time, as the "I" encounters Zuleika luxuriantly "lying in a panel of summer," reclining upon a "golden couch" facing "the aching stone mouth of Medusa," and surrounded by the sounds of the City, themselves "suspended," as Zuleika's body becomes "chill[ed]" by a passing cloud. Zuleika remains on the very brink between life and death – "Zuleika moritura est" [Zuleika is about to die] – before the poem concludes:

> I slip
> into your skin, our chest stills, drains
> to charcoal. You have expired, Zuleika,
> And I will know you, from the inside.

In these lines, Evaristo textualizes the inescapable but productive antagonisms at work in rewriting British history by having taken on the body and voice of "Zuleika." However much Evaristo may wish to claim Zuleika for her own, the twenty-first-century Black British "I" and the Roman Londinium "you" remain incommensurable even as they

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intermingle and feed off one another, as when the enjambment literally slips the "I" into "your skin," or when their shared "chest" cavity becomes arrested ("stills") before it "drains / into charcoal." It is as if their shared body, breath, and voice momentarily leak into the material substance of the pencil. If Zuleika has "expired" (from the Latin, "to breathe out"), she has nonetheless inspired ("breathed into") Evaristo's poetic voice and hence lived on in mediated, charcoal form: "Vivat Zuleika" [Long live Zuleika]. Whatever knowledge the "I" may have "from the inside" of Zuleika's "you," such knowledge remains deferred indefinitely into the future. The brief caesura, the comma separating "I will know you**,** from the inside," demarcates the nonidentical relation between "Evaristo" and "Zuleika" and her purported representative status concerning race in multiethnic Britain, then and now. The caesura marks the ways in which any full and complete understanding of another person, another historical period, another culture, and another body of poetry remains necessarily suspended, incomplete, and open to further revisions and rewritings.

And yet where Zuleika fails in the poem, Evaristo succeeds in book form by reconfiguring the cultural field for Black British poetry at the turn of the century. "*Imminent death*," Zuleika muses at the end of poem, "*allows the birth / Of new perspectives*" (247). From another perspective, then, Zuleika's textual death – and even her failure as a poet – furnishes Evaristo with the raw material for her to contribute to public conversations concerning poetry, canons, and public histories of Britishness. "The weakening of imperial hegemony," Stilling notes, "unleashes a pluralism that undermines the dictates of imperial history and loosens the generic boundaries in which such history is often told, be it novels, epics, or lyrics" (187). Indeed, Evaristo requires her readers to submit to the authority of *The Emperor's Babe* to enable the birth of new – that is, Black, feminist, and queer – perspectives regarding Britain's deep histories, which appeared as taboo.

Earlier I mentioned that during the time of Evaristo's residency at the Museum of London such perspectives seemed speculative at best, at least in the eyes of the museum's curators. Twenty years later, on February 7, 2018, to be precise, several news outlets revealed that Cheddar Man – Britain's oldest skeleton, dating back 10,000 years and first found by workers digging a trench in Gough's Cave, Cheddar Gorge, Somerset, in 1903 – likely had a dark complexion. On February 8, the following day, Evaristo tweeted three humble "boasts," vindicating her intuitions. In one tweet, she links a 2015 BBC article titled "DNA Study Finds London

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Was Ethnically Diverse from the Start," which mentions the "Lant Street Teenager," a young girl who lived in Roman London c. 300–400 CE and likely migrated from sub-Saharan Africa. In another, Evaristo links to a *Guardian* article from 2000 on a scheme promoting poetry in public spaces: The article features her unpublished poem "Routes," on the movement of Britain's first "dreadlocked" peoples "from below the Sahara," which is engraved on Perspex and has been on public display in the Museum of London since her residency. And, to seal the deal, the third tweet links to the widely circulated *Guardian* article reporting that Cheddar Man likely had "blue eyes, dark skin and dark, curly hair," based on DNA and genome analysis.[3] The article mentions that, according to scientists studying Cheddar Man, approximately 10 percent of the genes of the white British population can be traced to peoples whose origins were from Europe, the Middle East, and Africa.

To be sure, it may seem troubling that claims to Britain's originary hybridity must proceed through recourse to biological discourses. Recognizing the fiction of ethnic purity and replacing it with an intermixed genealogical community transmitted through blood clearly does not overcome how racial formations are socially produced and politically enforced through structures of power. That said, these reports seek to displace hegemonic conceptions of Britishness – particularly given ongoing forms of racial exclusion – and further underscore the relatively modern invention of racial categories, which are inapplicable to ancient Britain. Evaristo has been part of these continuing conversations through her roles as author, editor, promoter, educator, and cultural critic.

Finally, if the categories of "poetry" and "the canon" figure as a fetish in *The Emperor's Babe*, Evaristo's Black queer feminist poetics unmasks the fetish's empty, arbitrary status, despite or even because of the ways in which it is widely misrecognized as a repository of symbolic power and cultural capital. Who draws the geographic boundaries and historical periods of Britishness? Who decides a canon? Who and what determines what counts as "good poetry"? In staging these questions through Zuleika, Evaristo both subverts and enjoys the fetishization of poetry as the ideological transmitter of culture and history as her strategy for disavowing hegemonic conceptions of political and literary authority. She further invests Zuleika and, by extension, *The Emperor's Babe* with the symbolic power to authorize otherwise forbidden and queer conceptions of British history and British poetry as part of the project of unmaking and remaking Britishness.

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Lemn Sissay's London Landmark Poems

Lemn Sissay takes on an undisputedly public voice across his diverse cultural productions and in a wide array of venues. His first self-published pamphlet of poems, *Perceptions of the Pen* (1984), was in its own way "state funded," through monies he received while unemployed; he sold these collections to mill workers and striking miners in Lancashire. As an editor of the anthology *The Fire People* (1998), Sissay contributed to the diversity of the publishing scene, further expanding the canon by including more voices and aesthetic modes by poets of color. Since then, he has become highly prolific, including publishing a collection of selected poems, *Gold from the Stone* (Canongate 2016, 2020), and has been a tireless promoter of poetry, regularly contributing to the BBC, *The Guardian*, and TED talks. In 2010, Sissay was honored as a Member of the Order of the British Empire (MBE), and two years later he was named the official poet of the London Olympics, about which I will have more to say later.

Sissay's poetic personae tend to assume the posture of a passionate enthusiast for art as a living, breathing form of survival and transformation. In part, this is due to his personal upbringing, which was marked by experiences of displacement and, in his own words, dehumanization (Hattenstone). Sissay was born in 1967 in Wigan to an Ethiopian mother, Yemershat Sissay, who had fled her home country in the early 1970s due to political violence and arrived in the UK to pursue her education. She soon surrendered her infant son to childcare services, where Lemn was renamed "Norman" after his social services worker, Norman Goldthorpe. Sissay was subsequently adopted and renamed once more (Norman Mark Greenwood) by a religious family in Lancashire, where he lived until the age of twelve before moving through four different care homes. After turning eighteen and being released from the care system, Sissay was issued his birth certificate and learned the identity of his mother as well as his true name, Lemn, which means "Why" in Amharic.[4]

In his plays for stage and radio, such as *Something Dark* (2006) and *Child of the State* (2010), his short BBC documentary *Internal Flight* (2012), and his one-off stage play *The Report* (2017), Sissay has transformed the traumatic experiences of his tumultuous upbringing in the care services and foster homes into the material of artistic performance and activism. For instance, Sissay has served as a Fellow and member of the Board of Trustees at the Foundling Museum in London and worked closely with Letterbox Club (sponsored by the British Council and Book Trust) to provide books and promote literacy for children in need. Since being elected

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to Chancellor of the University of Manchester (2015–22), he has established a bursary to provide funds to increase the number of Black law students pursuing criminal justice. Sissay seeks to combine the performative, enactive powers of verbal art with his roles as a broadcaster and university administrator as his way of intervening in the social-political spheres, particularly for those most vulnerable to institutional deprivation and systemic violence.

Sissay's numerous "landmark poems" constitute one of the most visible ways in which he has invested in poetry's public roles.[5] This began in 1994, when his poem "Hardy's Well" was painted on the wall of one his favorite pubs in Manchester. In the following years, Sissay went on to produce and contract numerous landmark poems across the UK. For instance, in the early 2000s, Sissay received a "Futurecity commission" from the City of London to commemorate the bicentennial of the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act of 1807, for which William Wilberforce campaigned in Parliament for twenty years. As a result, an extract from his poem "The Gilt of Cain" was engraved upon a monument designed by Michael Visocchi (b. 1977). In 2008, the monument was unveiled by Archbishop Desmond Tutu in Fen Court, the location where many abolitionists, including John Newton (author of "Amazing Grace"), campaigned against the injustices of slavery and the slave trade. If you visit Fen Court, you will notice how the sculpture featuring "The Gilt of Cain" resembles a pulpit. The plaza also contains seventeen slim figures that are in the shape of sugarcane but that may represent Black peoples as racialized commodities, whether standing in Fen Court or laboring across the Atlantic. The extracted concluding stanza of Sissay's poem reads:

> Cain gathers cane as *gilt*-gift to his land,
> But whose sword of truth shall not sleep in hand?
> Who shall unlock the *stocks and share*,
> Break the *bond*, the bind unbound – lay bare
> The truth? *Cash flow* runs deep but spirit deeper,
> You ask the question, 'Am I my brother's keeper?'
> I answer the best way *I* can, through laws.
> My name, my brother, Wilberforce. (165)

Here and across the longer four-octave poem, Sissay repurposes words and phrases from *The Bloomberg Financial Glossary*, which appear in italics in the print version. The poem unmasks the violence inflicted by the abstracted language of capitalist economic exchange, laying bare the human and spiritual costs entailed in transforming human beings

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into living cargo. It seems likely that Sissay alludes to William Blake's "Jerusalem [And did those feet in ancient time]" (1804, 1808) particularly through the line "whose sword of truth shall not sleep in hand?" If so, he seems to extend Blake's scathing critique of "the dark Satanic Mills" of the Industrial Revolution to the "cash flow" of the transatlantic slave trade. Like Blake, Sissay seeks to displace the language of profit and accumulation by potentially appealing to the founding of "a new Jerusalem," now premised in a "deeper," spiritual truth of fraternal reconciliation and legal transformation. By the end, it is as if the "I" of the poem threads together, all at once, the names of "Cain" as a figure for the greed of sugarcane plantation holders, "Wilberforce" as a figure of white abolitionism and legal reform, "Sissay" as artist of the Black Atlantic, and, well, anyone at all who happens to walk through Fen Court and read the words just cited and insert her name into the poem. In my reading, it is not that these subject positions are identical with, or collapse into, one another; rather, they remain radically incommensurable and nonidentical.

For all the work of commemoration and legal transformation, "The Gilt of Cain" finally pays homage to Wilberforce, arguably at the expense of the Black lives upon which Wilberforce's reputation (and, by extension, this poem) rests. It is not without irony that Sissay's landmark poem occupies space in the heart of London's economic exchange, or what we might call a New Babylon rather than a New Jerusalem. The series of rhetorical questions challenge viewers and readers to confront the formal mechanisms and structural limitations – whether in economic structures, legal policy, or poetry – for animating collective interconnectedness before the irreparable historical violence due to slavery and the gross economic-racial inequalities that persist as they are symbolized, materialized, and so often obscured in the City of London.

As we can see, landmark poems such as "The Gilt of Cain" make especially prominent the concrete challenges poets and artists confront when they operate within, and yet often seek to challenge and critique, cultural institutions promoting national remembrance and cultural diversity in the era of neoliberal multiculturalism. We can see this dilemma in particularly acute form through Sissay's role as the official poet of the London 2012 Olympics. Sissay was the very first poet commissioned by the London Olympics to compose a poem, which would be displayed in Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park in East London, managed by the London Development Legacy Corporation.

When Sissay was approached in the mid 2000s, the plans for Olympic Park were already a matter of public discussion and heated debate. The

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five boroughs comprising East London were a hub of industrial factories and manufacturing in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In the aftermath of deindustrialization and the long downturn since the 1970s, East London has become one of the most economically deprived, socially stratified, and ethnically diverse areas in all of London and, by extension, the UK. After London won the bid to host the Olympics in 2005, the Department for Culture, Media, and Sport issued a policy statement in 2007, *Our Promise for 2012: How the UK Will Benefit from the Olympic and Paralympic Games*, which pledged (among other things) to "transform the heart of East London" by leaving a legacy of development.[6] Then Mayor Ken Livingstone stated that he hoped "to get the billions of pounds out of the government to develop the East End – to clean the soil, put in the infrastructure and build the housing."[7] For this reason, many observers referred to the London Olympics as the "Regeneration Games," leaving an oft-invoked "legacy" of new and improved housing, transport, health, business, and leisure in East London. The debate over the legacy of the London 2012 Olympics for East London has and likely will continue, whether the area is described as an example of urban "regeneration," for good or for ill, or as "a suburb on steroids," one largely available only to the elite few.[8]

Sissay joined several other poets – including Caroline Bird, John Burnside, Jo Shapcott, and poet laureate Carol Ann Duffy – in the project titled "Winning Words," which was devised by entrepreneur William Sieghart, founder of the Forward Prizes for Poetry and "National Poetry Day." The poems featured through Winning Words were among many artistic projects on exhibit in Olympic Park, including Sir Anish Kapoor's *ArcelorMittal Orbit* sculpture (now controversially featuring a slide), and Neville Gabie's *Great Lengths*, whose pieces reflect upon laborers working in the space of Olympic Park in East London, past and present. Taken together, these Olympic-sponsored (and publicly funded) artistic projects branded as the "Cultural Olympiad" were meant to fulfill the political promises to develop East London and the stated imperatives by the London Olympic and Paralympic Games Organising Committee to promote "diversity and inclusion" in the arts industries as testament to London as a global city.

Needless to say, the corporate and state-sponsored branding of the Cultural Olympiad placed significant expectations upon artists to reflect dominant Olympic ideologies generally – of participation, competition, fair play, and multiculturalism – and to represent "London" in particular. But whose London? And which London? In her work on the cultural politics of

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the Olympics, performance scholar Jen Harvie outlines how the overwhelming economic power of official corporate sponsors (such as Visa, Coca-Cola, McDonalds, and Heineken) resulted in what she describes as "aggressive policing" of permissible branding, marketing, and advertising (491). Harvie dubs this Olympic ideological form as "Brand London." "London's self-branding," she says, "subscribed it to those [neoliberal corporate] winner-take-all values, distancing it from the commitment to redressing inequality made in its bid" (492). Often sanitized from Brand London were those perspectives and voices recalling, for instance, East London's industrial histories, postindustrial ecological damage and radioactive waste, economic deprivation, ethnic diversity, and artistic and creative communities.[9] Not all artists, however, concealed East London's complex histories, and many works questioned dominant perspectives on the Olympics and Brand London in particular. For instance, Jo Shapcott's poem "Wild Swimmer" lauds aquatics even as it mentions the history of water pollution in East London, while John Burnside's "Bicycling for Ladies" pays homage to Sylvia Pankhurst and the suffragist movement in the early twentieth century.

Sissay, for his part, titled his poem "The Spark Catchers," immediately invoking the pageantry of the Olympic torch. He took inspiration, however, from an essay by Annie Besant, titled "White Slavery in London," first published on June 23, 1888, in *The Link*, a journal advocating union organization and free speech. There, Besant exposes the brutal labor conditions of (mostly) young women and teenage girls working at the Bryant and May match factory, which still stands at the edge of Olympic Park in Bow. As Besant recounts, shareholders received 23–25 percent dividends in 1886–87, while the women worked ten- to twelve-hour shifts, earning as little as four shillings a week – subject, I must add, to fines paid back to the factory for mistakes on the job. Many women suffered from necrosis, or "phossy jaw," due to exposure to white phosphorus.[10] Besant concludes her essay with a series of rhetorical questions, exposing Bryant and May's indifference to the suffering of the women workers and provoking her readers to participate in a consumer boycott:

> But who cares for the fate of these white wage slaves? Born in slums, driven to work while still children, undersized because underfed, oppressed because helpless, flung aside as soon as worked out, who cares if they die or go in the streets, provided only that the Bryant and May shareholders get their 23 per cent., and Mr. Theodore Bryant can erect statues and buy parks. Oh if we had but a people's Dante, to make a special circle in the Inferno for those who live on this misery, and suck wealth out of the starvation of helpless girls.

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> Failing a poet to hold up [Bryant and May's] conduct to the execration of posterity, enshrined in deathless verse, let us strive to touch their consciousness, i.e. their pockets, and let us at least avoid being 'partakers of their sins', by abstaining from using their commodities.

After Besant's article appeared, at least one woman was controversially dismissed from work, leading 1,400 women to walk out of the factory in early July 1888. This event sparked what would become known as "The London Matchgirls Strike," a full year before the Great Dock Strike of 1889 and the "official" birth of the labor movement under "New Unionism" (Raw, 2). According to historian Louise Raw, Besant did not inspire, let alone advocate for, the strike. On the contrary, working-class women themselves organized the walkout and strike by opposing "management bullying" and operating within "a tradition of industrial militancy at the factory" (Raw, 150).[11]

Still, the conclusion of Besant's essay inspired Sissay to adopt the persona of "a people's Dante." "The Spark Catchers," however, does not so much enshrine Bryant and May's diabolical exploitation of "helpless women" in "deathless verse" but, rather, reimagines the lived experiences of women workers as historical agents of politics and poetry alike. Loosely imitating Dante's terza rima across nine stanzas (one, perhaps, for each Circle of Hell), the poem begins:

> Tide twists on the Thames and lifts the lea to the brim of Bow
> There, shoals of sirens work by way of the waves
> At the fire factory, the fortress of flames.
>
> In tidal shifts East London Lampades made
> Millions of matches that lit candles for the well-to-do
> And the ne'er-do-well to do alike. Strike. (Sissay, 183)

Sissay casts the women as "sirens" and "lampades," that is, mythical torch-carrying nymphs of the underworld who accompany Hecate, the goddess of witchcraft and crossroads. Encased within the "fortress" of the "fire factory," the women's subjugation is far from total in these lines, which we can hear through Sissay's fluid alliteration. As makers of matches and mythical figures of necromancy, they "strike" (that is, "enflame") an uprising in response to precarious working conditions.

Sissay proceeds in the subsequent lines to imagine the women meeting and organizing under cover of night ("In the silver sheen of a phosphorus moon"), practicing what he calls "Spark Catching." In one sense, this phrase refers to a woman's agility in catching a lit match in the factory, "Holding the malevolent flare tight, / Till it became an ash

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dot in the palm," and so preventing the factory from burning to the ground. It is as if the poem compares the women's "magnificent grace" and "skill" to the "precision" of Sissay's poetic composition, such that his intellectual labor might pay symbolic credit to the grace of their bodily labor.

The poem concludes in the final lines, though, by layering on yet another sense of "Spark Catching," which self-reflects upon the political effects of performative poetic utterance and public address:

> *'The fist, the earth, the spark, its core*
> *The fist, the body, the spark, its heart'*
> The Matchgirls march.
>
> Lampades, torch bearers,
> The catchers of light.
> Sparks fly. Matchgirls strike. (183)

"The fist" of the matchwomen's march songs inspire ("spark") a new relationship to earth, to body, and to affect. These lines do not merely mimic or quote protest. After having adopted the persona of "the people's Dante," Sissay defers to the Matchgirls as the poem's true political-poetic subjects whose historical significance, for him, persists into East London today. "The Olympic site looks shiny and new and bright and clean," he says in an interview. "But it's built on land that has a history which feeds it."[12] It is fitting, then, that Sissay's poem is installed in wood and wrapped around an electric transformer, as if the very material of the poem too might catch fire should "sparks fly" in Olympic Park.

To be sure, "The Spark Catchers" does not explicitly comment upon East London's postindustrial decline and gentrification, nor upon poetry's participation therein through "Winning Words": Winning for whom, we might ask? As a latter-day "people's Dante," Sissay does nonetheless animate readers' historical consciousness, provoking us to link prior forms of feminist workers' struggles to contemporary forms of economic, gendered, and racial exploitation. In these ways, Sissay, by way of the Lampades of East London, provokes readers and viewers to reflect upon the historical, material roles of performative speech acts in collective (and not merely individual) forms of protest and social transformation. His landmark poems seek to make legible the other legacies of struggle and unrest embedded in urban spaces, even as these subversive energies are often obscured, contained, and developed over by state-sponsored, corporate structures capitalizing on minority poetic production.

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Daljit Nagra's *British Museum*

In *Look We Have Coming to Dover!* (Faber, 2007) and *Tippoo Sultan's Incredible White-Man-Eating Tiger Toy-Machine!!!* (Faber, 2011), Daljit Nagra adopts humor and parody to address questions of belonging and nonbelonging, empire and nation, and Britain's cross-cultural constitution. Readers can visit the poet's website, https://daljitnagra.com/, to see for themselves his professional trajectory leading up to being published with Faber and Faber through a number of mentors, including Martin Dodsworth, Ruth Padel, and Stephen Knight. He also enrolled in a series of tutorials, workshops, and feedback sessions through the Poetry Society with poet Angela Dove, the flagship magazine *Poetry London* with editor Pascale Petit, and an Arvon Residential course with Jackie Kay and Carol Ann Duffy.[13] Since winning the Forward Prizes for Best Individual Poem (2004) and Best First Collection (2007), he has gone on to teach at Brunel University London and works as Poet in Residence for BBC's Radio 4 and Four Extra. What's more, Nagra has also been instrumental in promoting a younger generation of Black and Asian poets, whether through tutorials and mentoring or through the poetry anthology *Ten: New Poets Spread the Word* (Bloodaxe, 2011), which he co-edited with Evaristo. In these ways, he has become one of the most important voices in contemporary British poetry.

I mention these biographical details and institutional networks for a few reasons. For one, Nagra bears a keen awareness of the inequalities shaping the cultural field, particularly given his initial lack of schooling in "high art." This is especially the case for a poet from a working-class, minority background who came to poetry only after having taken evening classes to pass his A-levels before attending Royal Holloway University in the 1980s. Along the way, though, Nagra has accrued significant recognition. Second and relatedly, he does not take these divisions for granted but makes them part of the material of his work. Nagra's poetry denaturalizes how perceived standards of taste are produced, policed, and reinforced by dominant institutions and publishing outlets. Third, Nagra takes on a number of postures in his work to negotiate between how his cultural productions have become absorbed within large-scale, national cultural institutions advancing multiculturalism, inclusion, and global Britishness on the one hand and, on the other, the kinds of agency available (or not) to him for questioning and critiquing his own poetry's participation in the hierarchies of taste and their foundational basis in, and perpetuation of, the structural inequalities subtending the cultural field.

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From the beginning of his career, Nagra has engaged his canonization, market status, and participation in literary institutions, such as in "Booking Khan Singh Kumar" and "Kabba Questions the Ontology of Representation, the Catch 22 for 'Black' Writers." As Sarah Brouillette has observed in her discussion of *Look We Have Coming to Dover!*, Nagra's "metapoetics" and "metabranding" are signature strategies in his writing. Nagra's first collection goes to significant lengths to display "a carefully packaged product" that, in its cover design, marketing, and poetic content, is highly "self-conscious about its marketed production" (152). Nagra's metabranding, she says, "labors against the fact that the author's access to value within the market depends upon his ability to inhabit a literary space that has not yet been occupied by an English child of Punjabi immigrants."

Since then, his poetry has shifted from questions of identity and representation to broader questions concerning empire, nation, and cultural institutions. For instance, the title poem from *Tippoo Sultan's Incredible White-Man-Eating Tiger Toy-Machine* takes as its subject a large automaton held in the Victoria and Albert Museum. Similarly, "A Black History of the English-Speaking Peoples," which closes that collection and is modeled on W. H. Auden's "Spain" (1937), focuses on the Globe Theatre and its reconstruction as Shakespeare's Globe at the hands of American actor and director Samuel Wanamaker, who founded the Shakespeare Globe Trust. Subverting Winston Churchill's *A History of the English-Speaking Peoples* (1956), Nagra's "A Black History" reflects upon the rise, consolidation, and decline of empire over the nearly 400-year interval between the theater's destruction in 1613 and its reconstruction in 1997. The poem concludes with the speaker walking along the South Bank and reflecting upon the ongoing history of empire as it flows into the era of accelerated global capital: "tonight the waters of Britannia bobble / with flotillas of tea and white gold / cotton and sugar and the sweetness and light" (*Tippoo*, 53). Reading Nagra in relation to postcolonial modernism, Ramazani claims that "the poet's role [implicitly] is to recover that history, to remember and attest to its insistence even in the present, and one way of doing so is to think back critically through English literature's complicities in empire even while extending that poetic tradition" ("Modernist Inflections," 474). In the final lines, the speaker looks upon "upbeat lovers who gaze from the London Eye / at multinationals lying along the sanitised Thames" (*Tippoo*, 53). For Nagra, cultural production is necessarily implicated within uneven economic relations, from Arnold's age of empire up through the present, even as corporate globalization seeks to wipe clean realities of exploitation through shiny national monuments such as the panoptic London Eye.

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In contrast to the exclamatory mode punctuating his first two collections, his third collection, *British Museum* (Faber, 2017), assumes a more reflective, searching tone, which we can see through question marks across the volume. As he explains in an interview from 2017, the question mark carries with it a particular cadence: "the way the voice rises up in a question and always seems to turn in on itself with that kind of inquisitive note" (Faber, "Faber Poetry Podcast"). The question mark becomes, for him, a formal strategy for addressing difficult, if not intractable, public questions over "nation" and "nation-state thinking," whether viewed from the transatlantic perspective of Britain's perception from the US or from the internal perspective concerning the ongoing legacy of empire and the treatment of those deemed "foreign" within the political boundaries of the UK. Following his lead, I perceive Nagra as adopting an inquisitive and interrogatory persona in *British Museum*.

The title poem that closes the collection, "Meditations on the British Museum," especially explores his poetry's vexed roles before large cultural institutions of national commemoration and Britain's broader relation to geopolitics. In many ways, "Meditations" can be read as a companion piece to "A Black History of the English-Speaking Peoples." Nagra describes "Meditations" as animated by "how poetry can help me think about the British Museum but also help me think about global politics … and how this institution can help us think about Britain's role in the globe" (Faber, "Faber Poetry Podcast"). For Nagra, "a poem should be a dramatic construct, it should present perhaps one point of view against another, built within the very same fabric of the question itself." Nagra's preponderant emphasis on the interrogative, in turn, provokes his reader to reflect upon the contradictory discourses and uneven distributions of power that comprise contemporary debates over nationhood in the global era. It further enables him to turn inward, to make legible the ways in which his poetry participates in the very structures and inequities it seeks to counteract.

Founded in 1753 under King George III through an Act of Parliament, the British Museum was created when Sir Hans Sloane bequeathed his enormous collection of various zoological specimens, book manuscripts, drawings, and coins (among other objects) to the British state. The collection was initially located at Montagu House before moving to its current building, designed by Sir Robert Smirke and constructed between 1823 and 1852. As several scholars have established, Britain's colonial and military expeditions in the Pacific, South Asia, Africa, and elsewhere were instrumental in the museum's acquisition of antiquities, sculptures, and

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artifacts.[14] In a postimperial context, the British Museum (like other colonial museums such as the Commonwealth Institute in Kensington) have sought to rebrand their image as such as a repository of "global" and "world" cultures, with free admission and open to all. Nagra, however, challenges the bases for upholding institutions such as the British Museum, even as he fully acknowledges its nineteenth-century colonial history and, now, thoroughly corporate underpinnings, despite its purported claims of open access to the public.

Nagra takes as his epigraph two lines from Louis MacNeice's "Museums" (1935): "Mirrors himself in the cases of pots, paces himself by marble lives, / Makes believe it was he that was the glory of Rome." In MacNeice's poem, the viewer "mirrors himself" in decontextualized artifacts and, in the process, becomes unwittingly cajoled by imperial ideologies linking the lost greatness of Britain to the "glory of Rome." Like MacNeice, Nagra similarly critiques the museum space for reinforcing certain forms of knowledge and specific ways of looking, knowing, and walking that are inseparable from questions of power and community as sanctioned by the state. And yet, in his late modernist moment, MacNeice could still credit institutions such as the British Museum Reading Room for creating a haven in which intellectual cultural production exists side by side with, but nonetheless is cordoned off from, realities of deprivation and the mass movement of peoples to interwar London. As Karen Brown writes concerning MacNeice's museum poems, "the museal space was experienced [by him] as troubling immobility, but it was a suspension out of which one would ultimately emerge regenerated and reaffirmed to face a noisy world" (online, para. 28).

MacNeice's claims to qualified autonomy and the restorative powers of aesthetic apprehension are, to a significant degree, untenable for Nagra. Throughout, Nagra casts the British Museum and his own art as thoroughly enmeshed within state power and late capitalist mechanisms, often serving as an ideological weapon for perpetuating the very inequalities the museum and, by extension, his poetry seek to rectify. Indeed, the poem's interrogative persona holds in productive tension conflicting discourses that converge, unravel, and become recombined to address his poetry's imbrication in historical and contemporary instances of violence and conquest.

Divided into four discrete movements, the poem consists of a series of quintains (five-line stanzas), each comprising two long, expansive lines of eight to ten beats followed by three lines of six to eight beats. At the most basic level, the sheer expansiveness of the poem's stanzaic form in

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many ways mirrors the physical space of the British Museum, with its "four-wing three-floor stone," and where "each triangular pane" of the roof is "uniquely sized to renew perspective" (*British Museum*, 49). The first section lays the foundation for the poem's ensuing concerns: "Could this," he asks, referring to the "this" of the poem, "be a court for stock-taking, a spare room to measure / by upheld mirror our own silk goods and grave ills, our ideals?" Similar to the London Eye in "A Black History," the British Museum better resembles Foucault's panopticon. "Inside the dome," we read in Nagra, "a copper dome that's embraced by a green-glass bridge / its columns facing each café and kiosk. A museum as nation // as a fragment of varnished Britannica" (50). Across the poem, Nagra recalls prior imperial histories that have produced the British Museum as a physical space, as an ideological formation, and as a disciplinary, political tool underwritten by corporate interests.

For my purposes, the fourth and final movement brings into crisis the problem of negotiating his poetry's entanglement with neoliberal cultural institutions, canon formation at national and global scales, and the political pressures shaping artistic production in twenty-first-century Britain. Nagra's speaker begins to leave the museum but is suddenly arrested by a bust of Plato. After pondering the philosopher's arguments for banishing poets from "his ideal state" where "human shadows perform eulogy and hymn alone," the speaker decides instead to remain "in the Reading Room to rebut the gods so I can voice // the best of our house" (53). And yet "the best of our house" takes on a deeply ironic edge as the poem lays down a series of rhetorical questions:

> My gilded masters who sat here to model compassion
> that rose through the oculus, who'd say now, which sanctioned invader leaves
> each trove unguarded while it enshrines another oil giant?
> Which dignified nation looks away despite each precious cargo
> of slave and migrant being run overboard, while demigods
>
> set themselves in stone? While each new zealot blows history to the laws
> of commandment? Which victorious rebel ennobles the art of rubble
> piled high as human death-pits? Lately Baghdad, Nimrud,
> Bamiyan went viral with statues collapsing in slow motion
> accompanied by a voice-over of euphoric prayer. (53)

Then Director of the British Museum Neil MacGregor has claimed that "[a] collection that embraces the whole world allows you to consider the whole world." He goes on to defend the Enlightenment ideals of the museum, that "knowledge and understanding" can serve as "the best remedies against the forces of intolerance and bigotry that led to conflict,

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oppression and civil war." He even describes the British Museum's collection as "a powerful weapon" against extremism to "free minds as well as bodies from oppression." Nagra's series of questions, however, should give us pause.

In the lines cited earlier, Nagra alludes to his late modernist precursors who studied and wrote in the Reading Room, including Ezra Pound, W. H. Auden, and of course MacNeice. The compassion modeled by his "gilded masters" proves, to a degree, insufficient in a twenty-first-century context. For instance, the first question refers to the British Museum's corporate backing by BP, which has supported the institution since 1996, donating as much as £10 million per year. In May 2016, the Art Not Oil Coalition published a report, *BP's Cultural Sponsorship: A Corrupting Influence*, which widely circulated in the mainstream British press including *The Guardian* and *The Independent*.[15] *BP's Cultural Sponsorship* exposes how, despite claims by BP that "it supports the best of British arts and culture with no strings attached," it has used its economic power to "influence the content of events and exhibitions," such as through procuring direct curatorial decisions for exhibitions, regular meetings with security staff to quell dissent and manage anti-BP protests within the museum space, and political relationships with the Department of Culture, Media, and Sport and other forms of sponsorship with policymakers (Art Not Oil, 3). One British Museum staff member quoted in the report describes BP as "extremely demanding of the Museum – bullying"; meanwhile, 62 percent of British Museum staff members perceive BP's involvement as "unethical" (5). The museum is only one of several institutions supported by BP, including the Royal Opera House, the National Portrait Gallery, and, until 2017, the Tate, which has since severed ties with the oil corporation owing to public pressure and the activism of Art Not Oil. Besides referring to the corruption of big oil in the arts, Nagra's poem also portrays the British Museum as a neoimperial "sanctioned invader," betraying its ostensible commitment to the public trust of the artifacts it displays for all, but under the banner of corporate interest.

Indeed, the lines cited previously interrogate the ways in which "advanced" modern nations uphold claims of the "dignity" of democracy and human rights even as they turn away displaced peoples due to mass migration. What's more, the poem implies that the apparent dichotomy pitting Western liberal nations that seek to preserve "universal" cultural artifacts for all to see within the guarded walls of the museum against so-called Islamic fundamentalists who seek to destroy holy sites due to national-religious ideologies is not a dichotomy at all. Nagra refers to the 2016 ISIS bombing of

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the Shia Mausoleum of Sayyid Muhammad bin Ali al-Hadi in northern Baghdad, the 2015 ISIS bulldozing of a ziggurat and the Temple of Ishtar in the ancient city of Nimrud (the former capital of the Assyrian empire from the eighth century BCE), and the 2001 Taliban bombing of the fourth- to fifth-century CE Bamiyan Buddhas in March 2001. Who, the speaker asks, determines what distinguishes "sanctioned invader" from "oil giant," "dignified nation" from "demigods," or "new zealot" from "victorious rebel"? The poem's stark juxtapositions unmask how the museum's universalism disguises its historical grounding in colonial looting, corporate influence, the policing of political borders, and the ideological hierarchies of cultural capital. How far removed is the British Museum, the poem asks, from the viral images of "religious fanaticism"? Both conjoin through their common pursuit of self-destruction within the uneven antagonisms of global capital, converting real lives and peoples into nothing more than "cargo" and "human death-pits." It is as if the poem's piling of question on top of question itself "ennobles the art of rubble" in a "euphoric prayer" to oblivion.

What roles, if any, does Nagra credit to his cultural production within these competing antagonisms and political pressures? "Meditations" concludes in ironic praise and excoriating criticism:

> Let's praise
>
> the unconquerable climate of our cultures who find a portion of their own
> safe in this fortress, in our sovereign values where Britain is guardian
> of the legacy to ensure monumental mankind stay immemorial.
> We're at home, albeit lost, while roaming among our kind
> in Cuerdale, Yarlung, Shang, Ashanti, Aulong, Kush, Thule, Ur.
>
> (British Museum, 53)

In many ways, the poem's vatic voice ironizes prevailing arguments defending museums as spaces of active contemplation and cultural preservation, whether espoused by MacGregor or by art historian and curator James Cuno. Museums, according to Cuno, "keep, preserve, research, and share [objects] with the public, holding them in public trust for future generations and all of time," in order to "encourage appreciation and understanding of the world's many cultures and our common artistic heritage" (29). Given the preceding stanzas and their biting rhetorical questions, Nagra wryly satirizes how such cultural discourses of encyclopedic comprehensiveness, transhistorical monumentality, and common heritage risk dovetailing with right-wing nationalist political discourses defending "fortress Britain" as "guardian" of "our sovereign values," such as those voiced by the UK Independence Party leading up to the Brexit vote in

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2017 (which occurred *after* Nagra composed his poem). If "We're at home, albeit lost," this may be due to the dizzying economic, social, political, cultural, and ideological forces materially producing the actual British Museum, the neoliberal British state, and Nagra's poem itself, which becomes ensnared in a maze of contradictions and under total and complete determination by state and corporate power.

There is, however, another way to read the poem's conclusion. In what follows, I focus closely on the final lines because they seem to labor towards a progressive, humanist mode of aesthetic apprehension and social consciousness, akin to what Stephen Greenblatt has described as "resonance and wonder" (42). Resonance, for Greenblatt, refers to the capacity of a given artifact to "reach out" beyond itself to the broader world and call to mind the "dynamic cultural forces from which it has emerged" as we stand before it. Wonder, conversely, describes the power of the artifact to arrest us through its radical particularity, its unique singularity, which demands "exalted attention" on the part of the viewer.

In his final line, the catalogue of cultural particulars – each separated only by a comma – demands that readers slow down and grant attention to each signifier in turn, as if we might pause to meditate upon its irreducible specificity. Here's the list. The poem catalogues the vast Cuerdale Hoard of Viking silver from tenth-century Lancashire; Tibetan sculpture from the Yarlung Empire, seventh to ninth century; Shang dynasty artifacts from ancient China, spanning the sixteenth to the tenth century BCE; the Ashanti Empire in western Africa from the seventeenth to the twentieth century, including the controversial Benin Bronzes obtained through Britain's colonial expedition in 1897; the white town of "Aulong" in Taiping Malaysia (created during the Anti-British National Liberation War of 1950), which may also refer to a recent Gallery of the Islamic World, thanks to an unreported donation from Albukhary Foundation of Malaysia in 2015, given with the hope of counteracting the public impression of Islamic militants demolishing diverse Islamic and non-Islamic holy sites;[16] the collection of Nubian and Sudanese artifacts from the Kingdom of Kush from the eighth century BCE to the fourth century CE; prehistoric artifacts from indigenous Arctic peoples in Thule, now Qaanaaq, Greenland, which may also figuratively refer to the Greek and Latin mythological name for the most northerly region of the world beyond Britain; and the many pieces from Ur, Mesopotamia, from the early Bronze Age to the Iron Age (thirty-eighth to fifth century BCE), including the Standard of Ur and the Royal Game of Ur, both excavated by Sir Leonard Woolley in the 1920s during Britain's "mandatory" control over Iraq and soon after the 1920 Iraqi Revolt.

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Nagra challenges his viewers to apprehend these cultural artifacts by taking account of the ways in which they "resonate" through the dynamic forces that have brought them before our eyes, in particular how they have been forcibly uprooted and decontextualized from their initial time and place, often obtained in contexts of colonial occupation, displayed due to very specific economic and political interests, and put to the service of promoting a false notion of "universal" world culture by procuring cultivated dispositions on the part of museumgoers. Neither testaments to the monumentality of world culture for all time nor emblems of Britain's national greatness, these signifiers recall and performatively summon the fragility of cultures before realities of plunder. Each element, when viewed on its own, also invokes "wonder" through its historical depth, its radical singularity, and its incommensurable relation to other artifacts surrounding it. The poem upholds a cultivated disposition premised in resonance and wonder while also laying bare the divisions of cultural capital that enable specific modes of aesthetic apprehension that are decidedly not equally accessible. The final line further underscores the very real violence that becomes encoded and mediated in artistic forms on display within the walls of corporate-sponsored cultural institutions of the state.

Positioned within and against the fortress of the British Museum and fortress Britain, Nagra posits his poem as "this fortress," that is, the fortress of *this poem*. I'd like to propose that he inscribes the poem itself as a "fortress within the fortress" in ways that are related to but ultimately remain incommensurable and nonidentical to the histories and cultures that the poem seeks to preserve. Seen this way, his writing carves out a discursive space that might offer imaginative protection and safety to those peoples and cultures who have faced or will face obliteration due to the rapacious pursuit of power. Indeed, I might go so far as to say that the final line is no simple catalogue of global culture. Drawn from disparate locations and histories and separated only by commas, each of the signifiers can be seen as at once separate from but linked with one another to form a metaphorical barricade against the forces that seek to destroy them. It is, of course, a fantasy. But Nagra's poem seems to commit to the fantasy of forging shared collectivity by apprehending incommensurable forms of historical violence as they relate to one another side by side.

In the end, Nagra puts to question who is counted as belonging among "our kind." If "our" often functions as a neoimperial, corporate manufacturing of Britishness even as the state tightens its borders to numerous others, Nagra splinters the "our" into its own internal divisions, "at home albeit lost," yet now potentially open to anyone. "Meditations" labors towards

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a model of relating to difference in apposition: that is, of *being with* irreconcilable differences in proximity, without aspiring towards assimilation, but nonetheless bound together in contexts of conflict and violence. We can see and hear this model of commonality in difference at the smallest level of phonemic patternings and sonic echoings, as through the *r* sounds linking Cuerdale to Yarlung to Ur, the *ng* sounds conjoining Yarlung to Shang to Aulong, the *sh* sounds connecting Shang to Ashanti to Kush, and the letter "u" threading through Cuerdale, Yarlung, Aulong, Kush, Thule, and Ur. Finally, in concluding the poem with "Ur," Nagra does not only return the poem to Bronze Age Mesopotamia and one of the most canonical origins of poetry, *The Epic of Gilgamesh*. In disarticulating and rearticulating the borders and boundaries of collectivity, he further struggles towards a common, ur language ("our kind") that might subsist and survive in and through the profusion of differences distinguishing diverse and highly uneven cultural practices in global Britain.

Conclusion

Taken together, my discussions of Evaristo, Sissay, and Nagra have sought to demonstrate how now well-recognized poets of color negotiate the nonidentity between their poetry's imbrication in large cultural institutions advancing multiculturalism and diversity and ongoing forms of structural inequality and the violent legacy of colonial conquest, from ancient Rome (Evaristo), through transatlantic slavery and economic underdevelopment in industrial and postindustrial UK (Sissay), up through Britain's neocolonial geopolitics and ostensible role as transmitter of global culture (Nagra). To be sure, their aesthetic strategies and modes are quite different from one another. Evaristo writes a humorous, parodic novel in verse that has popular appeal to remake Britishness, whereas Sissay produces highly public landmark poems commissioned by state and corporate entities, both of which contrast with Nagra's highly allusive and comparatively difficult poetry on empire, race, and nation in *British Museum*. Still, they hold in common a self-reflexive preoccupation with the ways in which Black and Asian cultural productions have been absorbed within British literature even as their writing uncovers forgotten histories and counter-memories of violence and injustice. In different ways, these poets, along with many others, have sought to reconfigure and expand the boundaries of canon formation and publishing venues, both for themselves and for younger generations of artists and writers of color. Their roles as artists, editors, educators, and promotors invest their cultural labor with a progressive

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politics. They are committed to transforming and improving institutions – museums, public spaces, presses, and so forth – to create space for more voices to be heard in articulating the kinds of memories and histories that are included – and silenced – in shaping public discussions on race and Britishness, however self-critically and self-consciously.

In Chapter 5, I look to two innovative British Asian and Black avant-garde writers based in the US: Bhanu Kapil and D. S. Marriott. If the writers considered in this chapter have tended to work towards the expansion of the cultural field by signaling, often implicitly, the continuity of crisis in the early twenty-first century, Kapil and Marriott make deepening crisis the material of their writing and cultural works. The surplus of crisis – the ongoing, seemingly never-ending instances of anti-Brown and anti-Black violence, economic immiseration, uprising, and riot – appears in experimental form, which I call "surplus lyric." Their political vision appeals not to progressive transformation but rather to a radical abolition of the structures that perpetuate racial violence in Britain, structures that uphold their aesthetics of violence as it pursues its own annihilation.

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