Introduction
British Black and Asian Poetry in Crisis

The Thin Red Line: From Resistance to Abolition

A riot of colorful voices: This book studies the aesthetics and politics of British Black and Asian poetry spanning the period from the mid 1970s through the 2020s. The chapters profile a dozen prominent and lesser-known poets, including Linton Kwesi Johnson, Jean "Binta" Breeze, David Dabydeen, Bernardine Evaristo, and Jason Allen-Paisant, to name a few. The poets considered here hail from different social backgrounds and occupy different relations to the cultural field, from the margins to the mainstream to the experimental avant-garde. Throughout my study, I examine the ways in which contemporary British poetry performs social commentary and critique in changing conditions of crisis. From experimentations in dub poetry and the dramatic monologue through renovations in ekphrasis and the lyric, poetry addresses unresolved questions of common concern through the remaking of aesthetic form.

Throughout, this study traces a core contradiction. Along one line, we can see how British poets of color respond to and intervene in social transformations in race and racial formation. This is arguably common to cultural production by artists of color in the US and the UK, but it takes on specific complexities in the medium of poetry in Black and Asian British contexts. Specifically, this book charts what I am calling an upward movement in Black and Asian poetry's position over the past fifty years. It begins by locating Black and Asian poetry in a space of relative autonomy and at the periphery of the cultural field in the 1970s and 1980s before this poetry gained broader recognition by cultural institutions, museums, and publishing houses in the 1990s through programs promoting multiculturalism and representation, to the point that now, at this late moment, poets and artists occupy a position of greater centrality in British letters, especially through awards and prizes.

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At the same time, however, and along another line, the poets considered here write with a keen awareness that the forces and structures upholding and perpetuating social inequality and racial violence persist, inducing deeper and deeper crisis, particularly among artists' purported ethnic communities. This book, then, also tracks what I am calling a downward movement, including the policing of Black youth and uprisings in the 1970s; the momentary flourishing and eventual evacuation of radical Black British feminism in the 1980s; programs advancing diversity and representation under New Labour and cultural globalization at the turn of the century; and, in the twenty-first century, the subsequent decline in funding for the arts and contraction in publishing, and disparities in hiring in higher education for academics of color, let alone ongoing anti-Black and anti-Brown violence, aggressive policing, deepening poverty, and the conflagration of riots due to systemic immiseration. I am not necessarily saying that the rising prominence of Black and Asian poetry in the cultural sphere is an ideological effect, or manifestation, of crisis in the social sphere. Rather, I propose to read the poetic and the social at their "conjuncture" with one another, at the complex intersection of aesthetic, political, social, and cultural forces and conflicts that give rise to specific instances of crisis, instances of danger and of possibility.

I have in mind Stuart Hall's conception of "conjuncture" as it relates to crisis. In his interview with Doreen Massey, he explains:

> A conjuncture is a period during which the different social, political, economic and ideological contradictions that are at work in society come together to give it a specific and distinctive shape. The post-war period, dominated by the welfare state, public ownership and wealth redistribution through taxation was one conjuncture; the neoliberal, market-forces era unleashed by Thatcher and Reagan was another. These are two distinct conjunctures, separated by the crisis of the 1970s. A conjuncture can be long or short: it's not defined by time or by simple things like a change of regime – though these have their own effects. As I see it, history moves from one conjuncture to another rather than being an evolutionary flow. And what drives it forward is usually a crisis, when the contradictions that are always at play in any historical moment are condensed. (Hall, "Interpreting the Crisis," 57)

In the process, this book traces the contours of British Black and Asian poetry's upward and downward movements and, at the same time, demonstrates how poets and poems put their own cultural practices to aesthetic crisis. That is, poems call attention to their own necessary failures before different conjunctures of crisis in the social world. By repeatedly

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falling into failure, this body of poetry tests the limits of aesthetic innovation to invent forms of racial politics that arise in changing conditions of social crisis.

Following the thin red line threading through contemporary British Black and Asian poetry, this book is a study of change and transformation. Different historical conjunctures of crisis require different aesthetic strategies for patterning racial politics. In particular, I identify the emergence of five different kinds of racial politics roughly corresponding to the five decades that this book covers: resistance (1970s), dissent (1980s), recognition (1990s), progressive transformation (2000s and 2010s), and abolition (2010s and 2020s). As I show, these models of racial politics come to prominence at the conjuncture of specific and changing British social-political contexts regarding race and social inequality. For instance, Linton Kwesi Johnson (hereafter referred to as LKJ) advances Black commitments to political resistance in the context of policing, anti-Black violence, and uprisings in the 1970s and early 1980s. In the aftermath of radical Black feminism, Black British women poets such as Jean "Binta" Breeze and Amryl Johnson perform a politics of dissent during the mid 1980s and early 1990s. Once New Labour advances programs of diversity and official multiculturalism in the 1990s and early 2000s, however, the cultural field shifts from its initial radicalism towards a politics of recognition through the increased visibility of Black and Asian British artistic production by cultural institutions and museums, as in the work of Maud Sulter and David Dabydeen. In the first two decades of the twenty-first century, Black and Asian poets such as Bernardine Evaristo and Daljit Nagra begin to gain centrality and work towards creating new canons of British poetry. Their work with mentorship programs and advocacy for a more expansive cultural field lend their writing a progressive politics of transformation. And yet, there is no question that the crisis continues to deepen through ongoing violence confronting ethnic communities in the UK (as elsewhere). For avant-garde writers such as Bhanu Kapil and D. S. Marriott, surplus crisis requires a poetics of riot and an abolition of the structures perpetuating social death. This, then, is the arc of the book as it moves through different forms of racial politics from resistance to abolition.

In the chapters that follow, I place special emphasis on the historical realities, social pressures, and cultural contexts impacting the creation of British Black and Asian poetry in deepening crisis: The poetry considered here makes legible and audible the ideological contradictions that produce it. At the same time, my critical practice takes as its premise that poems – as aesthetic mediations of crisis, struggle, and contest – carry

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the imaginative capacity to pattern forms of racial politics that at times resist, dispute, transform, or seek to abolish the conditions that produce this body of poetry in the first place. In other words, I read this poetry as putting its own aesthetic material and cultural practice to crisis, here understood as a crisis in mediation: If poetry ultimately (and necessarily) fails to match the social crises that produce it, this poetry displaces itself, repeatedly calling attention to its own insufficiency before the lived experiences of violence and inequality that precede and exceed any form of discursive representation.

Although my discussion focuses on contemporary poetry, it is important to recall the significant cultural work, artistic activism, and political organization of the prior generations of Black and Asian British writers. We can look, for instance, to the work of colonial migrant writers in the pre- and post-World War II period encompassing Una Marson, Louise Bennett, Lord Kitchener, and Sam Selvon up through figures of the Caribbean Artists Movement (CAM, 1966–72) such as Kamau Brathwaite, John La Rose, Andrew Salkey, James Berry, and E. A. Markham.[1] Whether through the BBC's *Caribbean Voices* (Marson and Henry Swanzy), radical independent presses such as New Beacon Books (La Rose and Sarah White) and Bogle-L'Ouverture (Jessica Huntley and Eric Huntley), literary journals such as *Savacou* (CAM), or Berry's pathbreaking poetry anthologies such as *Bluefoot Traveler* (1976) and *News for Babylon* (1984), this group of writers and thinkers were foundational in promoting, advancing, publishing, and broadcasting works asserting the presence of Afro-Caribbean and South Asian peoples to the British public. Their poetry's calypso rhythms, creolized forms, and nation language give expression to the dual consciousness of the migrant experience by interfusing cultural memories of diasporic homelands with a politics of solidarity and resistance before harsh experiences of nonbelonging in an unwelcoming host country. As Peter Kalliney shows in *A Commonwealth of Letters* (2013), colonial, migrant authors renovated modernism and, in the process, transformed British literary culture and paved the way for the emergence of postcolonial aesthetics. The poetry considered here belongs to the subsequent generations of mostly British-based, British-born artists.

There was a burgeoning of scholarship on post-World War II Black British literature, generally, from the early 2000s through the mid 2010s.[2] For instance, Mark Stein examined reinventions of the bildungsroman in *Black British Literature: Novels of Transformation* (2004). Ashley Dawson, in *Mongrel Nation* (2007), studied how, since the arrival of the *Empire*

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Windrush to Tilbury Docks, London, in 1948, a broad range of musicians, novelists, and poets have refashioned Britishness through its irrepressible hybridity and diasporic composition. And in *Living Cargo* (2016), Steven Blevins conducted a rich archival study and theorization of how Black British literature, visual culture, and performance reimagined Blackness in the context of the legacy of colonialism and the transatlantic slave trade. More recently, Joseph H. Jackson's *Writing Black Scotland* (2020) examines race and Black politics in devolutionary Scottish writing from the late 1970s through the early 2000s. And Paola Prieto López's *Black Women Centre Stage* (2023) focuses on Black women playwrights in the UK and the ways in which performance can enact forms of diasporic solidarity in Britain. This book, however, is the first in-depth study on the aesthetics and politics of contemporary British Black and Asian poetry.[3]

"It may seem obvious to say," writes Sandeep Parmar in "Still Not a British Subject: Race and UK Poetry" (2020), "that irreversible change to literary culture within and outside the academy is formulated by an active remembering, revisionist expansions to canons and critical histories that make irrefutable the collective gains of the past." In the subsequent sentence, Parmar notes: "And yet not a single book-length study of race and British poetry exists." Nor has there been a sustained consideration of how renovations of poetic form contribute to racial politics in contemporary Britain. This book fills that gap. My critical practice reaches back and builds upon the significant work of foundational scholars of Black British studies from the 1970s onwards, it expands canon formations of British poetry generally, and ultimately it combines a careful attention to the aesthetics of verbal art with the material, historical contexts shaping the politics of literary form.

I hasten to add that my selection of poets in this book is far from comprehensive. Missing from my discussion are the works of John Agard, Grace Nichols, Imtiaz Dharker, Moniza Alvi, Ben Okri, Benjamin Zephaniah, Jackie Kay, SuAndi, Dorothea Smartt, Patience Agbabi, Anthony Joseph, Karen McCarthy Woolf, Roger Robinson, Malika Booker, Vahni Capildeo, Kei Miller, Elizabeth-Jane Burnett, Zaffar Kunial, Sarah Howe, Mona Arshi, Kayo Chingonyi, Will Harris, Caleb Femi, Momtaza Mehri, Vidyan Ravinthiran, and the late Gboyega Odubanjo, among many others. This is a rich and beautiful archive rewarding the patient attention of attentive readers. Rather than providing a wide-ranging survey of contemporary poetry, though, this book aims to offer an in-depth study of some of the most representative poets and poems from the last fifty years.[4]

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Crisis, Crisis, Crisis. Or, the Enduring Relevance of Stuart Hall

At this moment of writing, it has become *de rigueur* to refer to the early 1970s as the beginning of the long economic downturn of postindustrial decline and the dismantling of the welfare state through the institution of neoliberal economic and social policies in the UK, US, Western Europe, and elsewhere.[5] But already in 1978, the authors of *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State, and Law & Order* observed the ways in which the language of "crisis" had become "almost too conveniently," Stuart Hall and his coauthors say, "in fashion" (310). "Crisis" for Hall et al. takes on a number of very specific historical dimensions that are important to delineate for understanding what they mean by "policing the crisis."

First and foremost, the crisis refers to the deepening recession of postwar British capitalism and postimperial decline. National economic crisis compelled the state to extract and exploit labor pools from the former colonies (migrant, colonial labor that was subsequently delimited through tightening citizenship acts in 1964 and 1981) and to implement failed economic restructuring upon "an extremely weak and vulnerable industrial and economic base" (310). For the authors, postimperial Britain was and remains "unevenly developed" (311): caught in an incomplete transition between a "backward industrial capitalist economy" and an "advanced productive" late capitalist economy, the effects of which "have been experienced at *every* level of society in the period since" (310–11). This primary economic feature subsequently gives shape to all other dimensions of "crisis." A second feature, for instance, refers to the crisis of labor and laborism, the incapacity of organized labor movements to "incorporate working classes into the capitalist state," and, crucially, growing class division and "sectional class consciousness" as itself deeply fragmented and dislocated (311–12). The political class struggles and non-incorporation of working classes into laborism further bear upon a third feature of the crisis, namely the enlarged role of the state as the main arbiter and broker of economic policies through a "'corporate' style of crisis management," one in which the state itself "plays an active and principal role on behalf of 'capital as a whole'" (312). But the failure of the state to adequately manage political class struggle combined with the state's enlarged sphere into nearly all dimensions of civil society creates, in turn, a fourth crisis: a "crisis in political legitimacy, in social authority, in hegemony, and in forms of class struggle and resistance" (312).

It is here that we see the ways in which a crisis in hegemony has everything to do with problems over "consent and coercion" (312). At least

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through the 1950s and early 1960s, the ruling classes could maintain and sustain hegemony through the "social democratic repertoire," the management of society through consent of class forces and alliances (312). But from around 1968 onwards and due to the crises of deepening economic recession, the failures of laborism to incorporate increasingly divided classes into the capitalist state, and the enlargement of the state into civil society and economic affairs, we begin to see the breakdown of consensual repertoires of hegemony and the rise of dissent, resistance, class struggle, and political protest (315). This "crisis in hegemony," the tilting from consent to coercion, gives rise to "the law and order society" as a way of managing what are in truth untenable and ever deteriorating economic, social, and political forces (314).

These forms of crisis manifest in a series of "false resolutions" and "moral panics," whereby an "enemy within" appears to be, on the surface, both "the threat to society 'from below'" *and* "the subversion of society from within" (315–16). The "enemy within" had taken on different social faces in prior decades: the Teddy Boys in the 1950s, Mods and Rockers in the 1960s and early 1970s, and feminists, sexual deviants, hedonists, and, especially, anarchists and communists in the 1970s (315–16). It is, however, from 1971 onwards when, crucially, there is a turn to a very particular target of ideological displacement for the "crisis": the social category of "Black youth," coinciding with a moral panic over "mugging" (321). As I discuss in Chapter 1, LKJ focuses especially on "Black youth" in his poems on policing and anti-Black violence. For my purposes here, though, Hall and his coauthors repeatedly stress a structural question over *the language and meaning* of "race" as economically determined in and through crisis. For them, the category of "race" appears as "the objective correlative of crisis – the arena in which … the totality of the crisis as a whole on the whole of society, can be most conveniently and explicitly projected and … 'worked through'" (327).

Importantly, the twin factors of intensifying economic recession (which takes an especially severe toll on the Black workforce as the last in and first out) combined with the rise of political consciousness among waged and unwaged Black peoples (who are increasingly subject to aggressive state violence) lock in place "the synchronisation of the race and class aspects of the crisis" (325). And it is here that the fullest meaning of "policing the crisis" unfurls and proliferates. Policing Black peoples is tantamount, now, to policing the poor and policing the unemployed in socially and economically deprived urban areas. Of course, the crisis affects both working-class and poor Blacks and whites, who remain in a common struggle and yet

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are pitted in antagonistic relation to one another due to systemic racism (333). The categories of "Blackness" and, especially, "Black youth" become the key signifiers for "policing the crisis": They are the most visible modalities through which the structural features of the crisis become violently inflicted and imposed.

I'll pause here briefly to note that, while the British state attempted to manage its crisis in hegemony through the imposition of violence in the 1970s, Black and Asian communities organized counter-hegemonic political formations through grassroots activism, political mobilization, radical presses and publications, and, yes, poetry in print and performance. This book focuses squarely on the agency of those racialized peoples whose political activity and cultural productions challenge, contest, refuse, and, at times, work to eradicate social conditions of violence and immiseration.

What Hall et al. call the "synchronisation of race and class" remains as relevant as ever and is worth unpacking further. The long history of capital in Britain, stretching back to colonialism and slavery and extending through the postwar period of exploited migrant, colonial labor followed by economic decline, has created what the authors call a "racial division of labor," which is itself internally differentiated along generational and gendered divisions (338). Racial discrimination is not solely a matter of individual biases or exclusionary practices. Nor is it a question of institutional racism, whereby racism is baked into institutional spheres that require (endless, fruitless) reform (340). Their critical attention, instead, falls upon the ways in which each generation of Black youth experiences their objective exploitation *as a class* through what they call "the structures of secondariness": education, language, housing, employment, and everyday life (333). The structures of secondariness take particular and unique form for Black youth in the 1970s, for whom the traditional pathways to upward mobility are now foreclosed and who thereby become the most vulnerable to state and social violence.

"Race," we read, "performs a double function" (340). First, race is the key modality through which class exploitation, or secondariness, becomes produced and reproduced as an objective feature and material reality. Second, "race" is also the primary mechanism through which Blackness and Black youth – as a class – "*comes to consciousness* of their structured subordination" (340). Race, then, performs the "mediated link" connecting the objective fact of economic, social, cultural subordination as a class *and* the knowledge and self-consciousness of that subordination through which organized class struggle becomes possible. "Thus," they write, "it is primarily in and through the modality of race that resistance, opposition

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and rebellion *first* expresses itself" (341). In my eyes, the firstness of race, as the rebellious expression of counter-ideology, foregrounds the centrality of racialized class struggle against all structures of capitalist exploitation and oppression. It also, however, signifies the ways in which "race," however primary because most visible, necessarily opens onto and intersects with other modalities of exclusion through class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, embodiment, disability, and so forth.

From the publication of *Policing the Crisis* in 1978, fast-forward to Stuart Hall in the mid 1980s. In the aftermath of the uprisings in 1985 and 86, Hall was invited by the organizers of a conference held at the University of Warwick to address the topic of "Urban Unrest in Britain." Hall begins by bluntly stating his frustrations regarding the topic of urban unrest: "There is a problem that is followed by a conference; the conference is followed by research; the research reinforces what we already know, but in elegant and scholarly language. Then nothing happens" ("Urban Unrest," 45). He proceeds to identify three overarching themes surrounding the roots of urban unrest in the 1980s, which will sound familiar if not dispiritingly banal. The first stems from sustained alienation, social deprivation, and a profound sense of injustice among the Black population (46). The second theme concerns Margaret Thatcher's neoliberal policies, which have actively assaulted any remaining tenets of "collective social provision" and the affordances of the welfare state under the guise of individual self-possession, austerity measures, and aggressive state power to protect the elite. And the third theme is socially sustained and state-sanctioned racism over decades, which continues to reproduce itself with no end in sight (49). None of this is news, Hall candidly remarks.

What I find particularly compelling in Hall's lecture, though, concerns the ways in which the routine underlying causes demand, for him, a careful and sustained attention to the human dimensions of social unrest that likely remain at a remove, in class terms, from those conducting academic scholarship. So for Hall, the abstract terms "disadvantage" and "deprivation" as social processes fail to approach, in any meaningful way, what those circumstances mean "*as the lived reality of those who experience it*" among Black peoples "everyday, everynight" (46, italics in original). What's more, Thatcher's neoliberal social and economic policies have affective and embodied consequences for the racialized poor (46–47). "When a society commits itself to that as its public policy," he says, "it is slightly obscene to ask the question why those who are at the receiving end of those processes sometimes get so angry that they throw a brick" (47). And when specific groups of people are systematically excluded, non-incorporated, and

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denied "formal and informal economic, political, and cultural rights" so that they feel themselves to be "the alien wedge," Hall strongly insists that "violent form[s] of unrest" should be expected and, arguably, welcome (50). As a way of interrupting "the cycle of perpetual forgetfulness," Hall's insights compel his listeners and readers to attend to the "real, underlying roots of urban unrest."

Hall's writing calls for a critical self-vigilance on the part of scholars and academics in apprehending and imagining conditions of alienation and injustice *and* of social unrest and political insurgency. His insights on crisis inform my own critical practice for linking aesthetics and politics through their conjunctural relation to one another. My synchronic methodology proceeds through a dialectical movement back and forth between the aesthetic and political within a given moment, as each frames and reframes the other with the hope of clarifying the complexity of what are, in truth, irresolvable contradictions concerning race and poetry. Along one line, it entails, yes, careful, close readings of poems, attentive to the nuances of aesthetic form in British Black and Asian poetry spanning the period from the 1970s to the present day, beginning with LKJ's dub poetics, which discursively "sound the violence" for "Black youth." Later poets and poems – in different ways and in changing social-historical contexts – further extend Hall's critical conception of racialized otherness and crisis by self-consciously foregrounding the layers of mediation for signifying "race," "belonging," and "non-belonging" through poetry's performative enactments and poetic utterances. Poems – here understood as comingling forms of discourse combining verbal, visual, auditory, tactile, and cognitive sensoria, all jostling for a reader's attention – have their own ways of approaching and mediating social-political realities, which poems necessarily fail to overcome. I might describe my synchronic method as attending to poetry's perpetual failure before the political moment. Over and over again, I have seen how poems comprise the knotted entanglement of discourses of violence and of collectivity, often gesturing to – or at times purposefully effacing and silencing – realities of inequality, suffering, and death as well as of communal forms of togetherness, in voice and on the page.

At the same time and equally importantly, my readings pursue another, diachronic critical line to elucidate how aesthetic mediations of social crisis change over time, mediations which, in turn, produce different forms of racial politics inflected by changing historical conditions. This requires looking into a range of historical, contextual, and archival sources framing and impacting poetic productions, such as documents on uprisings and

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riots in the 1970s, texts on Black British feminist movements in the 1980s, the Black British Arts Movement in the 1990s, debates over transformations in canon formations and publishing in the 2000s, and ongoing anti-Brown and anti-Black violence and riots in the 2010s. In some instances, social-political contextual framings can illuminate the subtle complexity of a given poem's figuration of race, as when, for instance, the February/March 1982 issue of *Race Today* opens with an introductory article by Darcus Howe on the April 1981 Brixton Uprisings and, later, closes with LKJ's "Di Great Insohreckshan." Reading both texts in the pages of *Race Today* opens a rich conversation over the ways poetic and nonpoetic discourse reflect and refract histories of Black political organization and insurrection, an apparently spontaneous event that grew out of at least a decade of policing and unrest. In other instances, poetic and nonpoetic discourse bring readers to moments of erasure, fragmentation, and fluidity, gesturing to forms of racialized being that evade any discursive figuration, as I discuss, for instance, in Bhanu Kapil's experimental poem, *Ban en Banlieue*, on riot and racialized gender violence in a transnational frame, or as in my conclusion on the embodied vulnerability of Black masculinity in Jason Allen-Paisant's award-winning collection, *Self-Portrait as Othello* (2023).

Like Hall, I write with the unwavering ethical commitment that no keynote, no conference, no poem, and no work of scholarship can resolve or reconcile realities of social violence affecting real people and communities, then and now. What we nonetheless can do is attend to forms of otherness and difference in poetic and nonpoetic discourse that remain at the limits of language, attuning us to the lives and peoples beyond discursive representation, however inscrutable or illegible, but that appear in mediated form. Such an attunement, at the very least, forms a necessary but preliminary step towards apprehending the ways in which poets and poems have contributed to discursive transformations in racial politics over the past half-century.

How do poems performatively refract day-to-day lived realities of deprivation? How do they give aesthetic utterance to the affective and embodied angers and frustrations, hopes and aspirations of those "at the receiving end" of racial violence and social inequality? How does a critical practice attentive to poetic mediation and its social discursive framings activate forms of racial politics as they reverberate in sound, voice, and print? And how does the activity of scholarship itself become entangled in the social-political forces that it seeks to unravel, if not suspend and abolish? These questions inspire my study of contemporary British Black and Asian poetry and the forms of racial politics that poems pattern and imagine.

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Poetry and Race / Race and Poetry

Crisis, race, and poetry. I want to extend Hall's insights on crisis and race even further by articulating them – linking them, voicing them, writing them – to conceptions of poetry and poetic language. I have in mind Hall's essay, "Race, Articulation, and Societies Structured in Dominance" (1980), where he advances "articulation" as the dual movement of both "joining up" and "giving expression to" (41) heterogeneous and interrelated connections linking economic-political structures with cultural forms of race in ways that remain irreducible to one another but nonetheless form a "'complex structure,' a structure in which things are related, as much through their differences as through their similarities" (38). Throughout, I advance a dialectical model for connecting the forces of crisis to the formal features of poetry and race, features grounded in particular locations, times, and ethnic/racial communities. My critical approach places emphasis on shared forms of otherness and difference through which alternative, counter-hegemonic models of racial politics are conceived, uttered, and patterned, ultimately in the name of imagining a politics of life.

In a similar vein, Jahan Ramazani calls for studies of poetry and race that play upon the dichotomy of form and identity. On the one hand, Ramazani warns against drawing "a too-sharp contrast between a poetics of identity and a non- or even anti-identitarian politics" ("Poetry and Race," xi). Such an approach risks losing sight of, for instance, the ways in which even the most experimental and avant-garde poems are informed by, and in reference to, their own politics of location, especially when poets of color have fought for recognition and publication in overwhelmingly white cultural institutions. In Chapter 4, for instance, I focus squarely on race, publishing, and canons in the poetry of Bernardine Evaristo, Lemn Sissay, and Daljit Nagra. On the other hand, Ramazani also calls attention to the ways in which poetry's formal properties contribute to the "multiplicity, contingency, constructedness, … and permeability of racial and ethnic identities" (xiii). Across this book, I focus on the particularity and specificity of *language* as the material substance through which verbal art mediates racial inequality and crisis. My concerns here, however, have less to do with the making and remaking of identities (British, Black, Asian, or otherwise) than with the ways in which the categories of race and poetry hold in common a formal constitution of difference and otherness. As I will explain, the category of race is a *formal* question that bears significant political consequences for reading British Black and Asian poetry as it is produced by changing conjunctures of crisis.

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Some of the mainstay features of poetic language – the ways in which it simultaneously proliferates and frustrates meaning or signification, its figural turns and comparative leaps, its linguistic density and porousness, its tendency towards opacity, unknowability, and difference, the overtaking of sound over sense, its graphic patterning and verbal design, the performative utterance of "vernacular," "dialect," and "patois" that challenges the hierarchies of "standard English" – all these features that we typically associate with the genre of "poetry" lend the poetic an irreducible otherness. Like "race," the categories of "poetry" and "poetic language" also raise formal problems over "language," "meaning," "representation," and "expression," which at once invite and thwart assumptions of a given referent.

To what does a poem refer? To what does race refer? What initially appears, on the surface, as that which is known and fixed (this particular poem, this racial identity) belies the extent to which these categories are already unstable from the onset – they are far more fluid than they may appear by virtue of the profusions of differences distinguishing poetry and race alike. In this way, poetry and race are each constituted, separately, through an internal differentiation, an otherness-to-itself. In different ways, poetry and race operate through modes of discourse that are at once referential and nonreferential, verifiable and nonverifiable.

The difference and otherness distinguishing race and poetry, moreover, could even be theorized through their *nonidentity* in T. W. Adorno's sense, or the inexhaustible gap between concept and object. That is, the *concepts* of "race" and "poetry" cannot be unified through their reference to purported individual *objects* (whether the radical singularity of individual humans or of individual poems). "Aesthetic identity," Adorno writes in the posthumously published *Aesthetic Theory* (1970), "seeks to aid the nonidentical, which in reality is repressed by reality's compulsion to identity" (4). In the domain of art, artworks seek to "synthesize ununifiable, nonidentical elements that grind away at each other; they truly seek the identity of the identical and the nonidentical processually because even their unity is only an element and not the magical formula of the whole" (176). The magical illusion of the fully formed identical artwork depends upon its formal integration of unruly elements whose irrepressible *difference* resists total and complete incorporation. "In order to become self-identical" (that is, autonomous, unified, and harmonious), works of art for Adorno "are in need of what is nonidentical, heterogenous, and not already formed" (176). The interrelation between the identical and nonidentical constitutes for Adorno a negative dialectic in which artworks, as "molded objects," constitute "a force field of their antagonisms" (176).

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The nonidentical, then, occupies a space of heterogeneous, inchoate incommensurability that paradoxically furnishes the basis for the apparent identity of art in its formal solidity. It is what Eric Oberle calls "the rift between concept and object," a rift that leaves behind "a scar, a remnant of social histories of domination … that allowed the subject to make itself by forming its object" (16). To read for the "nonidentical," then, is to read for histories of injury and woundedness (13). At the same time, however, the nonidentical also bears the mark of unrealized and potentially unrealizable freedom in negation. It is the remnant and residue of that which remains "ununifiable" in art's drive to unity. It is an unassimilable element through its refusal and disorder. And it defies the law of exchange and equivalence through the singularity of being unto and for itself (Adorno, 176).

Thus, by "nonidentity" I do not mean that there are no racial or ethnic identities. Nor do I mean that identities aren't mobilized for specific political purposes – whether reactionary or liberatory – and in particular social-historical contexts. Adorno's notion of "nonidentity" carries with it the recognition that what appears before us as a given "identity" – in his case, the recognition of an artwork or "the aesthetic" as identical to itself or, for my purposes, of a racial identity as an expression of a given community – always carries within it the nonidentical: prior histories of violence, conquest, plunder, and death that precede and exceed any identity formation (whether "aesthetic" or "racial") but that are nonetheless encoded in commodities and aesthetic objects, including and especially poems.

The other link between poetry and race concerns their relation to the commodity form. For Afropessimist thinkers such as Frank B. Wilderson III, Saidiya Hartman, and Jared Sexton, Black life is commodified life and so the nonidentity (violent negation) of Blackness is carried in the Black body and in Black being (Wilderson et al., 8, 83–85, 161–63). To be sure, the totalizing powers of white supremacy seek to fix Blackness to its status as pure negation, making very real bodies and very real lives susceptible to violence and marked for death. As I discuss across this book, the poets studied here write with a self-reflexive and self-critical awareness of the ways in which their writing is "Blackened" or "othered" from the moment of writing through public reception. At the same time, "Blackness" also figures across this body of poetry through strategic personae, a deliberate masking of that which remains all too known and all too visible (what Frantz Fanon refers to as the lived experience of Blackness) and also that which remains unknown, beyond discursive representation through the ongoing histories of racial violence due to slavery, colonialism, neocolonialism, and economic immiseration.

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What I am outlining here, then, is a dialectical critical conception of poetry and race and of race and poetry as they become co-articulated through one another. First, poetry *and race*: What does it mean to read for race in *poetic* terms? When seen poetically, race appears as a formal question beyond or before identity and representation, one not just mediated through social and political crisis but as a form always already traversed by crisis.[6] That is, by reading for race in aesthetic terms, the medium and genre of poetry – as a key mode for signifying, enacting, patterning, and uttering difference – has a peculiar capacity to foreground the nonidentity of racialized otherness, that is, the unbridgeable but necessary gap linking singular poetic expression and collective experience. From a poetic perspective, race appears through a series of dynamic, open-ended, and processual utterances and performative enactments – shaped as they are by forces of crisis – that have a discontinuous yet related connection (read: articulation) to embodied and lived experiences of racialized otherness and difference as they are mediated in aesthetic form.

Second, race *and poetry*: What, conversely, does it mean to read for poetry in *racial* terms? From the perspective of the nonidentical, "race" signifies a distinction between a concept (a purported racial group) and an object (an individual as ostensibly representative of that group due to social structures and processes of racialization). When reading for race in poetry, the tendency might be to look for markers of race in language, whether in a poem's reference to specific social-political content or in its modes of verbal expression, sound, voice, form, address, and so forth. But if the nonidentical refers to a rift between cultural artifacts and social realities of violence, the task of reading for race in poetry demands situating speaking selves in poems in relationship to their broader social forces of violence, inequality, and suffering *and* of agency, political organization, and collectivity. What, in short, are the forces that have compelled a poem to take on this particular shape, form, and voice in its aesthetic expression of racialized being? It is for this reason, for instance, that I explore how Black British feminist movements in the 1980s impact dramatic monologues by Jean "Binta" Breeze and her politics of dissent; why I situate how the Black British Arts Movement provides an important backdrop for Maud Sulter's Black queer, lesbian experimentations in her poetry and artwork; and why I place D. S. Marriott's poetry of riot in conversation with the London underground musical genre of grime.

Reading for race in poetry, then, requires a dialectical movement back and forth between attending, on the one hand, to the formal patterns of poems as objects of racialized being and, on the other, to the racialized

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worlds that produce poetic enunciations of violence, belonging, and non-belonging as they appear in their time and place. In these ways, poetry and race formally interweave as performative utterances of difference. Such a critical conception gives rise to forms of "race" and "the poetic" that remain, in truth, other unto themselves. However known, bounded, or given an identity or representation may appear, structurally speaking, poetry and race nonetheless encode forms of otherness and nonidentity that remain anarchic to any structure and system of discursive meaning and ideological power. Poetry and race combine in recalling their dual basis in violence and in calling out for the as yet unfulfilled promise of a world made new.

I hasten to say that I do not seek to reduce this rich and diverse body of poetry to a single analytic or political position. That said, the poets studied here hold in common a knowledge of the irreducible *differences* animating poetry and race alike: the *knowledge* that both "poetry" and "racialized being" arise from out of an otherness-to-itself and in nonidentical relation to the violence and inequality to which their writing refers. This knowledge lends their writing a tendency to mediate social crises as crises in aesthetic representation that take on different shapes and forms due to changing conjunctures of crisis, uneven relationships to publishing, cultural institutions, and canons, and divergent conceptions of poetry's racial politics. Throughout my study of contemporary British Black and Asian poetry, I examine the ways in which social-political forces of crisis shape poetic form and, conversely, the ways in which poetic form itself stages crises of representation for mediating and reimagining the social world from which it springs.

Traversing the Nonidentical: The Politics of Persona across British Black and Asian Poetry

Throughout, this book reads for experimentations in persona as the key aesthetic strategy through which poets and poems perform modes of racial politics in sound, print, and stage.[7] Indeed, reading for persona opens onto a series of nonidentical relationships regarding poetry and race. For one, adopting masked or fictive personae enables poets of color to anticipate the ways in which their writing will be racialized or Blackened in advance. In the process, my study explores the interrelationship between the artifice of persona within individual poems – and its deliberately nonidentical relationship to presumptions of racialized otherness – and the historical material realities of crisis as they imprint themselves upon cultural artifacts.

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Given the ways in which "personhood" is questioned, denied, suspended, foreclosed, or negated for Black and Asian people, uses of persona further highlight and exploit the object status of racialized being as it presents itself in the poem-as-object. By reading poems as forcefields of antagonism, I place pressure on the layers of mediation as they flow through poetic enunciations of violence and suffering as well as of pleasure and communality in the joys of poetic creation. And experimentations in persona purposefully call into question the nonidentical relationship between the artificial singularity of individual expression and its purported representative bearing upon collective experience, which is in no way straightforward but thoroughly discontinuous, gapped, and fissured. In these ways, constructions of persona in poetry generally – but especially in poetry concerning race and racialized being – lay bare the self-reflexive gaps or rifts between fictive speaking selves and constructed social worlds as they are made, unmade, and remade in aesthetic form. Experimentations in persona, then, furnish the mechanism for poets and poems to take on different kinds of political postures, positions, and repertoires as they are available in their time, place, and mode of cultural creation and reception.

Chapter 1, "Policing the Crisis, Sounding the Violence: Linton Kwesi Johnson," discusses his dub poems, which intone a politics of resistance in the 1970s and early 1980s in the contexts of anti-Black violence, aggressive policing, and riot. LKJ (b. 1952) held an early stance as a poet of resistance, which was shaped through his involvements in the Caribbean Artists Movement during its waning years (1966–72), the British Black Power Movement (1968–73), and the Race Today Collective (1974–88). Although he has become one of the most highly regarded poets in Black British culture – and in British poetry generally – in the twenty-first century, LKJ began his career when Black communities faced state-sanctioned racism and entrenched white supremacy. Policing the crisis, as we have seen for Hall et al., is tantamount to policing "Black youth" as the social category through which the structural features of crisis become violently inflicted. LKJ at that time occupied a peripheral position to the cultural field, publishing his work in a space of relative autonomy with radical Black presses, such as Race Today. LKJ's politics of resistance in the 1970s and 1980s was born out of these historical conditions.

It is with this context in mind that I turn to LKJ's poems on Black youth and the ways in which his various personae appear through dub riddim, sound, and voice. As he writes in "Yout Rebels," the "yout" are fueled with anger, "blood risin surely": LKJ's personae re-sound the forces, pressures, and collectivities among "Black youth," here invested with the

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power for "creatin new links / linkin" and carving their circuitous path "forwud to freedom" (*Dread*, 21). Drawing on dub poetry scholarship, I show how the poet's experimentations in riddim become the formal mechanism for "sounding the violence" across the formative years of his career spanning *Dread Beat and Blood* (Bogle-L'Ouverture, 1975), *Inglan is a Bitch* (Race Today Publications, 1980), and his landmark poem on the 1981 Brixton Uprisings, "Di Great Insohreckshan," which I here read in the pages of *Race Today* (February/March 1982), where it was first published. The chapter concludes with a brief discussion of the poet's literary acclaim as the first living Black poet listed on Penguin Modern Classics with the publication of *Mi Revalueshanary Fren* in 2002. The arc of LKJ's career – from a space of relative cultural autonomy and advancing a politics of resistance to his eventual recognition and canonization in British letters even as his writing continues to mark the ways in which forms of racial violence and social inequality persist and deepen – distills the arc of this book as a whole, as it traverses the dual upward and downward movements of spiraling crisis. As I show in the ensuing chapters, later poets who write and work in different contexts and conditions similarly credit their verbal art with the capacity to intervene in public discourses concerning race, racial politics, and social violence.

Chapter 2, "Voices of Dissent: Valerie Bloom, Jean "Binta" Breeze, and Amryl Johnson," examines Black British women's poetry in the 1980s and early 1990s. Not unlike LKJ's poetics of dread for "Black youth," Amryl Johnson adopts a cold, impersonal persona to protest the double racial and gender discrimination affecting "Black women," as when she stoically intones "and I am / Black / for I am angry" in her early 1977 poem "Midnight Without Pity" (in *Let It Be Told*, 36). These poets first began in performance modes (also like LKJ) and then published with independent feminist presses such as Virago and with radical independent Black presses such as Race Today and Bogle-L'Ouverture before publishing with relatively mainstream independent presses such as Bloodaxe. This chapter situates the writing and performance of Bloom (b. 1956), Breeze (1956–2021), and Johnson (1944–2001) in the aftermath of the radicalism of Black British feminist organizations such as the British Black Women's Group (BBWG) and the Organization of Women of African and Asian Descent (OWAAD) that flourished between the early 1970s and mid 1980s. Black women's organizations aspired to create forms of solidarity that might attend to, if not bridge, differences along the lines of race, ethnicity, class, sexuality, and locality, but which became in many ways untenable and unbridgeable. In the aftermath of BBWG and OWAAD,

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an abiding presence of difference, disagreement, and dissent remained as central features animating any politics of racialized feminism.

As I discuss, a Black feminist politics of dissent becomes animated in quite different ways through Bloom's, Breeze's, and Johnson's respective experimentations in the dramatic monologue, especially as the subgenre compels readers to situate speaking selves in social contexts. The conventions of the dramatic monologue – of taking on a fictive speaker that resembles but also stands apart from the voice of the poet – enable the authors considered here to conduct social commentary on the double exclusions of race and gender marking the experiences of "Black women" and to invent forms of solidarity premised in irrepressible difference. For instance, Valerie Bloom exploits the shift in the relative distance between the monologue's fictive voice and the poet's voice to animate different relations, postures, and stances towards feminist politics and Black women's experiences in *Touch Mi! Tell Mi!* (Bogle L'Ouverture, 1982). In *Riddym Ravings* (Race Today Publications, 1988), Jean "Binta" Breeze writes what I am calling "meta-monologues": Her poems frequently take on the voice of marginalized, socially alienated, often psychically disturbed Black female figures, which the poet self-critically and self-consciously performs whether on the stage, in video or audio recordings, or in the pages of her collection. In contrast, Amryl Johnson composes a "multiple monologue" through her serial collection *Gorgons* (Cofa Press, 1992), which adapts the myth of Medusa in a contemporary context by taking on the voices of seven different women from around the world. While these authors certainly do not provide a blueprint for Black feminist praxis, their self-reflexive experimentations in the dramatic monologue nonetheless carve out a space of difference and incommensurability – demanding readers and listeners attend to who is speaking, for whom they are speaking, with what relative power, and whose voices are silenced – as constitutive of any Black feminist politics of solidarity as an open-ended problem and unfinished process.

During the 1990s and early 2000s, LKJ and other Black and Asian poets such as John Agard, Grace Nichols, Moniza Alvi, Fred D'Aguiar, Jackie Kay squarely address what Stuart Hall describes as "the politics of representation" over race and Britishness (Hall, "New Ethnicities," 444). As artists and authors of color begin to gain greater recognition by academia, British letters, and museums, the cultural field shifts such that political postures of outright resistance and radical dissent become increasingly difficult to sustain. Chapter 3, "Beyond Recognition: Race, Visual Culture, and Ekphrasis in Maud Sulter and David Dabydeen," addresses this period of transition for British Black and Asian cultural production.

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In different ways, Sulter (1960–2008) and Dabydeen (b. 1955) highlight the Black presence in European and British art through the poetic genre of ekphrasis (from the Greek *ek+phrazein*, "to speak out"), or the diverse strategies poets and poems deploy to play upon the tension between word and image, or verbal discourse and visual discourse. In Sulter's case, the Scottish Ghanaian lesbian artist had a career-long preoccupation with Jeanne Duval (c. 1820–c. 1871), the common-law wife, actress, performer, "Black Venus," and muse to Charles Baudelaire. "Of course," Sulter's persona of Duval says regarding Baudelaire, "the shit about being a heroic poet, as opposed to an heroic poet, is that if you're black and female the chances of one's poetry attributed to one in later life is slim" (quoted in Cherry, *Maud Sulter Passion*, 39a). In my readings, Sulter's project is one of "queer reframing," of bringing to the center an otherwise invisible or silenced Black European woman, which creates its own set of challenges in "re-presenting" or "speaking for" the other. Sulter's queer reframings foreground the layers of mediation through which Duval appears as a figure of sexual and racial alterity, especially as she becomes charged with lesbian eroticism and affiliated with other queer artists of color – and further propels Sulter to canonical recognition by major British cultural institutions.

In contrast, David Dabydeen takes on one of the most revered English artists in his long poem *Turner* (Peepal Tree, 1995), which enters into conversation with one of the artist's most famous paintings, *Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and the Dying – Typhon Coming On*, commonly known as *The Slave Ship* (1840). In *Turner*, Dabydeen centers especially on the persona of a submerged Black figure jettisoned from the ship and suspended in water in the bottom right corner of the painting. "I have become the sea's craft," the speaker reflects while floating in water, "and will so shape / This creature's bone and cell and word beyond / Memory of obscene human form" (*Turner*, 31). Placing the poem in relation to J. M. W. Turner's critical reception regarding slavery, race, and the sublime and drawing upon Christina Sharpe's concept of "wake work," I read *Turner* as laboring towards an impossible but necessary ethical question: specifically, how aesthetic portrayals of jettisoned Blackness compel viewers of the painting and readers of the poem to imaginatively float with the dead in the name of endless mourning for discarded Black life forever held in the wake, jettisoned lives that remain wholly other and incommensurable to any mode of discursive representation. Their ekphrastic experimentations pattern counter-hegemonic forms of Blackness and racialized being whose radical alterity become "beyond recognition," to the point of becoming nearly inscrutable and unknown in aesthetic form.

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Whereas the first three chapters examine the ways in which particular genres (dub poetry, the dramatic monologue, and ekphrasis) mediate changes in racial transformation and social inequality, I shift focus to poetry's entanglement in cultural institutions and museums in Chapter 4, "Canons, Publishing, and Publics: Bernardine Evaristo, Lemn Sissay, and Daljit Nagra." In turning to Evaristo (b. 1959), Sissay (b. 1967), and Nagra (b. 1966), I pursue the aesthetic strategies they adopt to assert the centrality of Black British culture as a renewable canon in the making and remaking of Britishness. Conversely, the poets considered here also recognize how they operate within – and often seek to challenge – cultural institutions advancing precepts of diversity and inclusion even as their writing self-consciously acknowledges systemic oppression in contemporary Britain and the highly unequal domain of the publishing scene in particular.

First, I look to Evaristo's novel in verse, *The Emperor's Babe* (Penguin, 2001), which she researched and wrote during her residency at the Museum of London. Late in the poem, the text's central persona, Zuleika, queries, "what had I become but a composite" (204). By tracking the composite transformations of Zuleika in her pursuit of sexual, political, and poetic autonomy, I demonstrate how Evaristo queers the presumed authority of the canon through a form of literary masochism. By subverting the power relations of mastery and submission, *The Emperor's Babe* further performs a metacommentary on the hierarchies confronting writers of color seeking entrance into a delimited cultural field. From there, I turn to Lemn Sissay's public "landmark poems," which populate spaces across the UK. I profile two landmark poems in London: "The Gilt of Cane" (2008), which appears in Fen Court and was commissioned on the occasion of the bicentennial of the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act by William Wilberforce in 1807, and "The Spark Catchers" (2012) in Olympic Park, which was commissioned for the Cultural Olympiad of the London 2012 Olympics. In different ways, Sissay's landmark poems bring into stark relief the material, concrete challenges artists confront when they are asked to commemorate events under the sponsorship of corporate entities advancing diversity and inclusion. In Daljit Nagra's collection *British Museum* (Faber, 2017), the title poem provides an extended meditation on his poetry's vexed relation to the institution's colonial history and present-day funding by British Petroleum (BP). "Could this," the speaker asks, referring to the "this" of the museum and of the title poem, "be a court for stock-taking, a spare room to measure / by upheld mirror our own silk goods and grave ills, our ideals?" (*British Museum*, 49). Throughout, Nagra adopts an inquisitive, interrogatory persona to self-critically question how his writing risks

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perpetuating the histories of plunder that his art would seek to rectify even as his poetry also labors towards a form of collectivity for the sake of protecting those cultures that have faced and continue to face oblivion. Ultimately, these authors lend their work a progressive politics by excavating, revising, and transforming forgotten histories and counter-memories of violence for the sake of intervening in public discourses over race and national belonging.

The writers discussed so far have tended to signal implicitly the continuity of crisis in the early twenty-first century. Chapter 5, "Surplus Lyric: Poetics of Riot in Bhanu Kapil and D. S. Marriott," looks to two innovative British Asian and Black avant-garde writers based in the US, each of whom makes deepening crisis the very material of their cultural works. The surplus of crisis – or what Joshua Clover has theorized in *Riot. Strike. Riot.* (Verso, 2016) as the new era of uprisings due to surplus economic immiseration disproportionately affecting racialized populations – appears in experimental form, which I call "surplus lyric." The renovation of lyric creates additional challenges for those artists of color who take for granted how the category of the "person" is denied to Black and Brown populations, who are rendered nonpersons to begin with. Kapil and Marriott pursue this problem through their writing's Orphic descent into spiraling crisis.

In *Ban en Banlieu* (Nightboat Books, 2015), Kapil (b. 1968) composes a cross-genre experimental poem that interweaves lyric, narrative, historical fiction, autobiography, and performance art to mediate instances of racialized violence against women spanning uprisings in London in 1979, a gang rape in New Delhi in 2012, and an imagined woman performing sati, or widow sacrifice, in the Bay of Bengal. "The riot is the charnel ground," she writes, "overlain – in the present – by concrete – poured right down – over the particular spot on the sidewalk I am speaking of – as well as – migrations – from Eastern Europe – and beyond" (22). "Ban" (here read as the multiplicity of violated bodies placed in apposition to one another) coalesces through the pressures and forces that produce a scattered persona of fragmentary decomposition and disembodied abjection, one informed by the writings of Julia Kristeva. Kapil's experimental writing and performance pieces self-purposefully and self-critically perform their own failure, as if to abolish the conditions that repeatedly perpetuate gendered and racialized violence – and consequently produce her art in the first place.

In contrast, Marriott (b. 1963) gives lyrical expression to a poetics of riot through his adaptations of the London-based underground musical genre of grime in his collection *Duppies* (Commune Editions, 2019). Marriott

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links grime's basis in social deprivation and racialized abjection with its aesthetic function as a performative persona ("grime" meaning dirt, soot, and filth but also mask). Reading Marriott's poetic adaptations of grime in tandem with his scholarly engagement with Frantz Fanon brings into view his poetics of riot as a generalizable structure that veers towards disorder. "A petrol-soaked carnage, its art / igniting fires on the streets," Marriott's grime poems nonetheless hold out the possibility of revolutionary politics that would seek to abolish the conditions that produce Blackness in and for death in the name of a renewed politics of life, however unforeseen and uncertain (*Duppies*, 18).

My conclusion, "Prizing Race, Race in Crisis," examines the publication, reviewing, and prizing of poetry in the last decade. In particular, I ask what are the institutional mechanisms through which poets of color have increasingly been shortlisted for, won, and served as judges for the Forward Prizes and the T. S. Eliot Prize, especially since 2015? Looking to *Self-Portrait as Othello* (Carcanet, 2023) by Jason Allen-Paisant (b. 1980), I spotlight how a critically acclaimed and award-winning collection anticipates, questions, and challenges its own racial tokenization in the awards circuit. "My name is in crisis," the present-day persona as Othello says, "I am scattered all over / your cities, Europe!" (*Self-Portrait*, 51). Yet in the process Allen-Paisant self-fashions *Othello* through the writings of Aimé Césaire, thereby inventing a radical racial politics premised in impenetrability and bewilderment as his strategy for animating ways of being with difference in struggle and community.

In the twenty-first century, poetry remains a vital art form within an increasingly interconnected and deeply divided global Britain. Overall, this book argues that poetic discourse carries the capacity to clarify intractable social contradictions, activating in readers and listeners ways of writing, reading, and thinking about racial politics whose utopian possibilities, however apparently unrealizable, gesture towards forms of collectivity and communality in and through crisis.

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