

14 The power to represent

*Degna Stone with Jo Clement, Rowan McCabe,
Afdi Nomo-Ongolo and Young Writers' City*

Some of the poems in this chapter contain racist language and other phrases that readers may find offensive.

All this talk, all these words, can get a little tiresome. When you're able to pick up and put down a book, it's easier to get your focus back if you find your attention lagging, but during a day-long symposium you need to inject a little something to stir things up. Something to reactivate the parts of your brain that are still human. That was the thinking behind the creative interlude during the Whose Heritage? symposium on 24 May 2019. A pause. An opportunity to look at things differently. A break from the simmering rage that underscored the presentations. Some respite from the questions: Are we still here? Are we still talking about this shit 20 years after Stuart Hall laid out a pathway towards a guardianship of the 'heritage' that involves *all* who build lives on this 'tight little island'?

In addition to dancers and musicians, we invited poets to bring work that responded to the themes of Stuart Hall's 20-year-old keynote speech. Their poems are included in this chapter. The poets provided a palate cleanser from the morning's heaving thinking. Or perhaps it is better to describe them as an aperitif; the poets weren't there to provide a neutral flavour but to whet appetites and lead us into lunch. We've been saying the same things for the last several decades, but we're still unable to build on the knowledge generated in the past. We're unable to move forward. A different way of communicating is needed. By creating a moment with a different texture, the words spoken could land a little more firmly, could sink in a little deeper.

Power

At the time of the symposium I was entering the final year of Slate: Black. Arts.World. (Slate), a three-year artist development programme created by Dawn Walton (see Chapter 8) and her team at Eclipse Theatre Company, which was based in Sheffield at the time. I was one of six 'Enablers' working to support Black artists living and working in the north of England to develop sustainable careers in the creative sector (Eclipse Theatre Company, 2020).

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And by ‘Black’, Eclipse meant politically Black in the old-school sense of the 1970s and 1980s. It wasn’t our intention to foist that definition on the artists we worked with, but it was an easy catch-all that the funders and partners could get behind. It was also a term that created friction both with those who felt it was another act of erasure and those who felt the power of the term was diluted when it extended beyond people of African heritage. Hall noted that the problem of defining people ‘primarily by their otherness – ... their nonwhiteness’ was ‘a negative figuration, reductive and simplistic’ (Hall, 1999), but this problematic definition was what we had to work with. At the time I ended up using the equally imperfect signifier ‘people of colour’ in my conversations with artists, which is the term I will use elsewhere in this chapter. I remain hopeful that a better set of terms will manifest in the future. Better still, that we reach a place where these ‘othering’ terms are not needed.

A large part of my role as an Enabler was to support artists, but another part of my remit was to seek to change the culture of mainstream organisations that would often limit diverse representation to ‘seasons’ that they could market to ‘diverse audiences’. Slate was funded by Arts Council England, who devolved some of their power in the form of a substantial grant to Eclipse (amongst several other arts organisations) from the Sustained Theatre fund.¹ Eclipse then devolved a part of that power to the Enablers, who, with the support of a consortium of cultural organisations, would work in different parts of the region to increase visibility, develop and strengthen relationships, and create the environment for change.²

When we started work on Slate, Walton shared the story of the reintroduction of wolves to Yellowstone National Park, USA, to articulate what she hoped would be achieved (Monbiot, 2014). Over time the presence of the wolves caused a trophic cascade, changing the behaviour of the other animals in the park, changing the landscape and changing the course of rivers. By inserting ‘Enablers’ into the cultural landscape, Eclipse wanted to create a trophic cascade that would change the sector for the better.

In order to do that, we, like the wolves, needed to be at the top of the food chain. But. We were freelancers of colour working for a small, Black-led arts organisation in northern England – nowhere near the top of the food chain. Slate had limited power to make real and lasting change in the context of a programme that was only funded for three years. After all, we still had to work within the cultural sector’s existing structures, and many of the artists I was having conversations with felt that the harm done to them by white institutions was being replicated. The only difference was that those perpetuating harm had Black and Brown faces too. Not everyone felt that way, not every Black artist struggles to get their work out into the world on their own terms. It was often the artists who were living and creating work at the intersections – artists who were disabled, LGBTQ+, living with trauma or living in poverty – who were most likely to experience harm.

My experiences during Slate illustrated that power cascading down becomes more diffuse as it travels until it finally reaches the artists, who remain pretty

powerless in the face of unchanging systemic structures. Is ‘power’ the right word though? What do we actually mean when we talk about power? Control? Security? Acknowledgement? All of these things? Perhaps if we could pin down a definition, we’d be able to correct the imbalance of power experienced by freelance artists working in the arts and heritage sector. Do we even need ‘power’ if we are properly represented?

Another of Eclipse’s innovative programmes was Revolution Mix, which began in 2015. In a 2016 interview with Theatre Voice, Walton discussed her observation that the Black narratives predominantly seen in British theatres could be boiled down to three areas: gang crime, immigration and slavery. Revolution Mix sought to highlight 500+ years of Black British experience and address the lapses in our collective memory when it comes to *what* English heritage is and *who* has been present in this landscape over the centuries (Theatre Voice, 2016). In 2018 the Revolution Mix play *Black Men Walking*, inspired by the Black Men Walk for Health group (a walking group based in Sheffield, England), proudly asserted, ‘We walked England before the English’ (Testament, 2018). By correcting the perception that Black British identity began with the arrival of HMT Empire Windrush and asserting that people of colour are an integral part of British heritage, Eclipse was giving the artists and audiences we worked with on Slate a solid foundation from which to challenge the way people of colour are represented in mainstream spaces and narratives.

Represent

The UK government and its various agencies seek to redress the inequalities experienced by people who share one or more of the following ‘protected characteristics’: age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex and sexual orientation (Equality Act, 2010). Every ethnicity is represented within the visibly and invisibly disabled, just as every ethnicity is represented in every gender and every sexuality.

During the first two years of Slate, I’d spent time listening to what artists wanted, what they needed and what was standing in their way. One theme that kept coming up was the expectation that they had to represent more than just themselves as individuals. That their successes and failures were used to evaluate risk when institutions and venues were looking to programme work by other artists of colour. They felt an overwhelming burden to write about their experiences as narrowly defined by stereotypical aspects of their ethnicity. That they were expected to create semi-autobiographical work; work that explored race or the experience of migration. Work that helped mainstream audiences to understand more about the darker skinned inhabitants of this island. Not only that, artists often found that their work was pitched as part of a ‘season’ focusing on under-represented voices.

When planning the poetry session at the Whose Heritage? symposium I kept thinking about who I am and what that meant in relation to the other people I wanted to share the stage with. With just a 45-minute slot there wasn’t

enough time to ensure that a true multiplicity of voices was represented, and I was aware that it's always the same people who get invited. People who are already in your network, people you already know. An imbalance of power in this situation is inevitable, only in this case I controlled the context and the narrative of representation.

It's rare for an artist from an under-represented background to have the luxury of getting on stage and representing no one but themselves. Consciously or sub-consciously they are being compared with other artists who share their 'protected characteristic'. The burden placed on our shoulders is one that requires us to always 'represent diversity'. But how can a single person represent diversity?

My agenda was to unsettle the idea that representation simply looked like more Black and Brown faces on the stage. I wanted to make two things clear: one, ethnic diversity isn't always visible; and two, the 'white working-class' voice is as much a part of this conversation as my Black working-class voice. Although it is not listed as one of the 'protected characteristics', class intersects with race and ethnicity; every ethnicity is represented amongst the working class. My working-class origin is every bit as important to me as my ethnicity, but it is my skin that is seen first, my skin that dictates how I am treated. Yet the experiences I had growing up on a council estate, living in real poverty with low expectations that my ambitions were within easy reach, impact and intersect with experiences of being a Black person in England. My education and current profession might obscure my class status, but my skin is my skin is my skin.

I make this latter point about class because the politics of representation is not immune to hierarchies, and there is often a narrative that pits the 'white working classes' against other people who are traditionally under- or mis-represented. A narrative that conveniently forgets that the working-class is not homogenous. In reality, it is the working classes in their entirety who are most often kept out of positions of power (Runnymede Trust, 2019). All ethnicities, all genders, all sexualities, all religions, disabled and able-bodied – all working-class people. Yes, it is stating the obvious, but every time a fresh salvo in the government-inflamed 'culture wars' is fired, the obvious always seems to be forgotten; divide and conquer is the tried and tested formula for controlling the masses. A strategy that insists that in order for someone who looks like me to get a seat at the table, i.e., a say in how things are run, someone else is going to lose their opportunity to take a seat. A strategy that dogs the working class and our attempts to create systematic change where we are all accepted as belonging to this land and deserving of our place in it. Challenging this idea is not simply about placing more chairs around a bigger table. We should just admit that 'a seat at the table' is a shit metaphor and that we need to stop thinking about a static, stagnant space where an interminable game of musical chairs plays out.

We need to resist the steady attempt to overemphasise difference (cultural, physiognomy) in ways that sow division. Each of us has a different history of how we ended up on this island, but we all want to live meaningful lives that have a positive impact on those around us. We all want the fact of our

existence to be acknowledged and respected. It's not enough to hide behind the idea that the UK is a tolerant country. We don't want to be tolerated. We want to be embraced.

The poets

The second half of this chapter presents the work of the poets. For me, there was no expectation that they would be representing anyone other than themselves, though, in the context of the symposium, their presence highlighted the people who are often left out of the conversation or whose experiences are misrepresented.

Rowan McCabe

McCabe's poems explore the world through a working-class lens. In his introduction, he spoke about the literary canon being more readily associated with writers from the middle and upper classes. However, discovering the rich history of local poets such as Joseph Skipsey, Tommy Armstrong and Ripyard Cuddling allowed McCabe to see that he could write poetry about topics he could relate to in the language he used every day.³ It is perhaps this grounded background that informs his approach to poetry and its place in people's lives. As 'the world's first door to door poet', McCabe literally took poetry to people's doorsteps: 'Knocking on strangers' doors, he asks what is important to them; he then goes away and writes a poem about this, free of charge, before bringing it back and performing it on their doorstep' (McCabe, n.d.). From working class homes in Arthur's Hill in Newcastle upon Tyne to the gated properties in nearby Ponteland, he spoke with people from all backgrounds, engaging the occupants in conversations and offering them something for nothing. Well, not quite nothing, something for a little of a person's time, something for a chance to glimpse what the world is like through that person's eyes, something for a chance to connect. In exchange, McCabe delivered a gift of a poem back to the same doorstep a little while later.

The poems he shared during the symposium spoke to those who hold the purse strings, those who hold positions of power.

Poems by Rowan McCabe

Austerity Is Over, or, It's Hard To Tell What the Weather Is Like When You Never Go Outside

"Austerity is over."
That's what the headlines say.
The government have sorted it,
everything's OK.
No need to stress about the rising

rent that I can't pay.
Austerity is over.
Oh what a happy day.

Austerity is finished,
crack open that Bordeaux.
Don't fret about the cost of it,
it's my treat, I know
I'm down to my last twenty quid,
it was meant for the electric.
But who needs light at a time like this?
Austerity has ended.

No more dank and dangerous towers,
the clouds are raining diamond showers,
the bailiff's just came round with flowers.
Austerity is over.

Austerity is history,
let's all give solemn thanks.
The doctors and the nurses
working twelve hours back-to-back
have pitched up on a sandy beach,
with not a care at all,
and all they're inundated with
is endless volleyball.

Austerity has had its day.
It's such a special treat.
Won't someone tell that homeless man
who's begging in the street?
For soon he will be living
in a mansion grand and golden.
Oh dear, what rotten luck, it seems
we've missed the boat, he's frozen.

The schools have too much classroom space,
we're all on double living wage,
my mental breakdown's just been saved.
Austerity is over.

And on a float made out of skulls
with red balloons and streamers,
looking proud, and rightly so,

here come the country's leaders.
Their clothes are so expensive,
life must be on the mend.
Oh aren't you pleased we voted
for a bunch as kind as them?

A Deer in a Licence Plate Shop

What I saw that day was
very difficult to explain.
Nothing compares to the image of a deer
running into a licence plate shop.
I thought it was a dog,
as it shot across the busy street
causing a white van to screech to a stop.
But no,
this was an actual deer,
in a busy inner city suburb,
bolting towards the glass door,
pushing it open with its horns,
stumbling inside.

I remember getting off my bike.
I remember rushing over to the window,
peering in;
the deer, pogoing around the small square of floor;
the licence plates on the walls;
the shopkeeper behind the counter
static in disbelief,
his big toe standing on a very sharp pin.

A boy and girl of about my age ran over.
I remember saying something like
Maybe we should phone the RSPCA?
The girl suggested the police.
I'll never forget the sound of that voice:
Aii, basically,
this deer's just gone
pure akka and ran into a licence plate shop in Heaton.
There was a very big pause.

It was at the door now,
gazing at me with
eyes like dark sides of the moon.

It began frantically trying to escape,
rushing into the glass,
over and over; it bust its nose,
a brush leaving a thick stroke of blood.
I felt every single thud.

What exactly does one do
when a deer runs into a licence plate shop?
What is the protocol?
I looked around.
The boy,
the girl,
the shopkeeper.
No one had the answer.
So we all just...
watched it happen.

As the rescue team arrived,
I realised we are all deer,
perpetually running
into licence plate shops of our own making.
We are bears in office blocks,
giraffes in portacabins,
bluffing it.
But sooner or later
we're going to take the wrong turn,
get trapped in something we can't possibly understand,
seize up in the headlights,
or run desperately into the glass.

Jo Clement

As well as being a poet, Jo Clement is also an academic. It would be easy to misread her ethnicity. Her physiognomy and profession might lead you to make assumptions that are distant from her embodied reality. Diversity is more than skin-deep, and Clement's Gypsy heritage is a vital part of her poetics. Gypsy is the term Clement uses to describe her heritage and it is the term used by the UK government (House of Commons, 2019), but, as I don't share that heritage, I will switch to the term Roma.

In the introduction to her poems, Clement called to mind Hall's description of racialised people who are only seen through the Western gaze:

No proper archive, no regular exhibitions, no critical apparatus (apart from a few key journals like *Third Text* and the now-defunct *Ten 8*), no

definitive histories, no reference books, no comparative materials, no developing scholarship, no passing-on of a tradition of work to younger practitioners and curators, no recognition of achievement amongst the relevant communities ... Heritage-less.

[Hall, 1999, p. 11]

Her work addresses the brutal history of the Roma people in Britain, which can be traced back to 15th-century Scotland, and explores 'how a heritage which is never self-perceived, or self-penned, might survive'.

Clement spoke about finding Roma people represented in the literary canon in William Wordsworth's scornful poem *Gipsies* (1807). She wrote her *Knots* poem in riposte whilst walking up Silver Howe in Grasmere. If heritages are to be represented accurately, it is essential that the under-represented create their own archives, using their own definitions to tell the full narrative of their connection to the land. The final poem that Clement shared shows what happens when others do the naming.⁴

Poems by Jo Clement

Knots

Blushed with blood and false summits, outcast,
I keep a familiar distance. Without wind cheats

or the right shoes, I have words with mountains.
Accent bending in the wind, I eke aloud

Wordsworth's *Gipsies*, the lines hung over me
hawk-like, as his cloud-double slips the Screes

toward Appleby. Our luck lands blackly there too.
He saw us as spots, a spectacle, knots.

The same fight picked in private fields.
Is it time to move on? Let me sit this stone

on the marker's pile. Tell the capital I am a Traveller
under open sky and yes, our bonfire's still raging.

Homecoming

rivered like trout there's this flash lad
on his hoss
spading hooves

his waterway gymkhana
deep as a tall mare

banks hooked on pebbled gaits

as he drowns thunder with heels
cannon bones firing

two fingers up to the council
distant reivers

hair slicked back
no saddle all bridle

then stomach led to withers
curb chains drape into her mane

as he speaks in private of diving

for a spell

and ear-close they go under

pressed into the anvil black
sunk like a stone

'til a bubble breaks
then a hand or an ear

he crests
stood on the mirror of himself

barefoot and dripping
in black-wet denim

all teeth and chest shining

half-boy
half-hoss

all bray

Self-portrait as 100 Travellers

Here. No good. Nomad. Roma.
 Rover. Rom. Dom. Rai. Raider.
 Reiver. Truant. Turnpike. Trash.
 Tatter. Tinner. Tinker. Toad.
 Trickster. Tinsmith. Tar-macker.
 Boater. Tea leaf. Pedlar. Potter.
 King. Cuckoo. Knot. Outlaw.
 Tresspasser. Straw hat.
 Scrapper. Johnny. Faa. Moone-
 man. Fly. Fitter. Flitter. Migrant.
 Sharper. Harper. Dipper. Sleeper.
 Soothsayer. Heathcliff. Hawker.
 Knacker. Clogger. Lock. Idler.
 Thief. Jailbird. Lovell. Boswell.
 Lee. Waggon-carried. Wayfarer.
 Crooked. Filthy. Floater. Vagrant.
 Vermin. Band. Muse. Wanderer.
 Journeyer. Vagabond. Smith.
 Gadabout. Me. Flashy. Scum.
 Will o'the wisp. Lowlife. Rambler.
 Pathfinder. Drifter. Carny. Chav.
 Dog. Dregs. Carmen. Maggie.
 Meg. Dove. Ratter. Pilgrim.
 Pedlar. Seer. Witch. Rabble.
 Raggle-taggle. Rag-and-bone.
 Gitano. Egyptian. Postrat.
 Gyprat. Gypsy. Gipsy. Gyppo.
 PIKEY. Gone

Afidi Nomo-Ongolo

Poet, musician and cultural activist Afidi Nomo-Ongolo performs under the name Radikal Queen. When I invited her to share her work, I knew she would be uninterested in indulging the idea that well-meaning-culture-and-heritage-types should be let off the hook for repeated failures to address inequality and misrepresentation. Given the slow progress made on the roadmap outlined in Hall's speech, Nomo-Ongolo's voice in the conversation was essential. Someone needed to speak truth to power and call out the 'bullshit' of centuries of dishonesty in the treatment of Black and Brown people. In the end it was clear that, for the most part, the 'powerful' had chosen to stay away from the room, or had sent subordinates – people who would relay what had been discussed but who had no direct power to change or enact policy.

Nomo-Ongolo wrote something new in response to Hall's speech and the occasion of the symposium. She was writing and re-writing during the morning's speeches, responding to what was being said – and what was not said. Responding to who was in the room and who was not in the room. Her poem presents a challenge to the easy history that is taught in schools, which consciously suppresses any narratives that question the beneficence of the British Empire. As Hall states:

The emblems of Empire do, of course, fitfully appear in the Heritage. However, in general, 'Empire' is increasingly subject to a widespread selective amnesia and disavowal. And when it does appear, it is largely narrated from the viewpoint of the colonisers. Its master narrative is sustained in the scenes, images and the artefacts which testify to Britain's success in imposing its will, culture and institutions, and inscribing its civilising mission across the world. This formative strand in the national culture is now re-presented as an external appendage, extrinsic and inorganic to the domestic history and culture of the English social formation.

[Hall, 1999, p. 7]

Nomo-Ongolo's poem makes it clear that British heritage, English heritage, is dependent on 'the palimpsest of the postcolonial world' (Hall, 1999) – the heritages it has sought to either subsume without acknowledgement or to depict as inferior.

Poem by Afidi Nomo-Ongolo

Bangwa Queen

- a tale of missing histories

At first I was gonna try a gimmick
to force you to see me
I was gonna ask the able-bodied present to stand
while I sit
for a few minutes
in order to communicate the essence
of different perspectives.

For instance: if the rapist flings some coins
from the stolen purse
back at their victim
is that the same thing

as philanthropy? Or remorse?
If not, why is the money coming back to Africa from violent, military
governments called 'aid'?

In the end, I decided it's futile
to try and convince someone of your human status
if they have already made a social contract
to deny your autonomy.
If they've been trained to dehumanise you.

You see: missing histories present as invisible disabilities
within modern imperialist society.
But I only have a few minutes to discuss the bullshit
of several centuries, to speak of the dishonesties
that are consistently swept under this particular (probably
Kashmiri) rug.

So let's talk british heritage, eh?

british heritage places that which was freely commissioned and given
alongside the forced 'donations' from Black and Brown nations.

And these involuntary extractions continue to this day
and are justified
by the prestigious institutions that see work from people who look
like me
as 'inspiration',
whilst simultaneously dismissing and denigrating us,
all while we are imitated.

My evidence?

Oh well. In this room alone
I count at least three organisations and people
who have appropriated the fruit of my creative womb
to benefit a non-Black congregation.

They just snatched up my ideas in the interview or meeting
and passed them off as their own.
My bright birds are now embalmed and enthroned within the
grey palace
of their new owners' lacklustre imaginations.

I partly blame the BAME-ness
the BAME.

An imposed label that erases my Blackness
and allows everyone else
full access and permission to profit from my voice, and my Ways.

When you are mere anonymous 'inspiration', your skilled iridescence
is seen as a non-sentient manifestation of Beingness.
Like an unschooled sunset bursting with free beauty.

Free booty.

Like the one you call 'Bangwa Queen', complete with scare quotes,
because how could SHE be royalty?
AND you think she is just a 'figurine'!

Her real name is Ngwindem, meaning: 'most high priestess of god'.
We in fact already told you this,
but we aren't counted as real people by your limited scholars.

Ngwindem is the embodiment of an ancestor goddess who lived
among us.
She rested in the Grasslands kingdoms of a nation neighbouring my
own people in Central Africa, the Mbetu.

Then the deceitful german scientist who first called her an 'ethnographic
artefact' stole her, and sent her back to his european museum.
His team took advantage of those five days they were graciously
invited and granted access to Agonyi's kingdom.

They looted temples and stately houses and all without shame!
Hai! Is THIS your civilisation??

With regards to heritage, the relevance
is that we are seen by imperialist academics
as unevolved hominids
and this belief that spouts uncontested from the Golden Bough
of western european invention
bolsters their lie of racial superiority.
I say they are culturally invested
in our creative degradation.

So the kidnapped Ngwindem was renamed as your Bangwa Queen
and in the 30s was seen as 'primitive art',

then through Man Ray's modernist camera lens and borrowed
perspective
she was re-introduced in the 50s
to represent western ideas of savage, unthinking sexual expression.
He saw this as THE defining aspect
of African womanity, of our womanness.

And Ngwindem has been sold so many times
that she has been declared the most expensive example of African art
on the planet...
but not due to her inherent value or beauty.
It is because of the illustrious reputations
of all of her previous creative enslavers.

Now I have
Questions.

What does it mean
that british museums
define british culture
as the accumulated weight
of stolen treasures?

Why is it that demanding transparency
in lieu of colonial lies
is interpreted as the desire
to topple Nelson's column?

Nah.
The column is fine, just make sure that little plaque
also tells us that he was an enthusiastic white supremacist.
The evidence shows
that he fully supported the enslavement of Black people
in Caribbean concentration camps.
Nelson counted the depraved serial rapists who ran those accursed
plantations
amongst some of his closest friends.

You see: this is the true legacy
of the brutish empire.

And yeah. I know why you were not taught this.
Your truth hurts.
The fact is that Churchill, like his less celebrated german contemporary,

set up concentration camps for the destruction of African
communities.

And selling and buying African bodies like mine
is how your people stole
the seed capital for your industrial revolution.
It's time we looked at our heritage within the lens
of accurate historical context.

Our ethnographic artefacts populate foreign museums,
and this appears to be what I hear being defined
as british heritage.

Surely british identity can do so much better
than this most gruesome aesthetic?

To be honest – I was surprised to be invited to speak here
to sit at this officially sanctioned table.

The likes of me are usually dismembered and served in the cultural
buffet, later
while our fates and faces are discussed and decided
by those defined as whiter, I mean wiser, and more objective.

I do not accept this system, or its categorisations
as I have de-centred from a paradigm
that only sees me and mine
as plundered victims
and serves our arses as the main mother-fucking meal.

You can smell it.

But still the servers of my flesh and blood have the nerve
to ask me to hold their hands and IMAGINE
a world of purple people.
Sci-fi revisionism makes the purple people always so positive and see!?
The appointed tokens prove it!

They are the axes fashioned from the brown forest of our peoples,
whose job is to facilitate the cultural devastation, the artistic
appropriation,
all in their roles as the most suitable replacement for our true leaders.

Death-dealing and theft are reframed as capitalism.
Cultural appropriation is re-labelled 'appreciation'.

The stolen booty is remembered
as one of life's free donations.

In the end the british definition of heritage will be decided by voices
that will never live within the choices they are speaking on.
And although Ngwindem has been famous for well over 100 years
it appears you still refuse
to say her name.

Missing histories. And within that: another missing Herstory.

Ngwindem! Ngwindem! Ngwindem!
Ancestor goddess, who still breathes.

Young Writers' City (represented at the symposium by Amani Nashih)

I knew the youngest generation had to be part of the conversation and I wanted their voices to ring in the air. My generation (and earlier generations) had royally fucked up our opportunity to create significant and lasting change. Even the Millennials have been left shamefaced by the activism and anger of Generation Z. It's often the youngest who have the clarity to see the world for what it is and the energy to demand change, and they are often the ones left out of the conversation. Only one generation knows what it means to be entering adulthood now, navigating the challenges, hurdles, pitfalls and chasms of opportunity. We knew what it *was* like, but not what it *is* like.

Amani Nashih shared a poly-vocal poem written by fellow students at her school in the west end of Newcastle. The poem was written as part of Young Writers' City, a project that encourages students from the underserved areas of Gateshead, Newcastle and Sunderland to write and speak their experiences.⁵ To be unafraid of using the language that surrounds them. To be unafraid of saying how shit things still are for kids growing up visibly different from the perceived norm.

The poem, *Colour Blind*, communicates the experiences of working-class kids who are othered and abused because they are not white in a majority white country.

Poem by members of New Writing North's Young Writers' City programme

Colour Blind

written by Angelica, Lucie, Manaar, Zara, Shakira and Tessy

Colour blindness is silence
Colour blindness is denial
Colour blindness is an obstacle
Colour blindness is forgetting
Colour blindness fixes nothing
Colour blindness is looking the other way
Colour blindness makes you feel better at my expense

See my colour
See my colour
See our history
See my colour
See our tears
See my colour
And see the assumptions you have already jumped to
See my colour
And see we are enslaved in labels
See my colour
And see the stories you have told about me before I have taken a breath
to tell my own

My skin colour matters
If we pretend that it doesn't then we can also pretend that
No one shouts across the street at me,
'Are you legal?'
'Hey nigger!'
'Do you have a bomb under your hijab?'
'You're a Paki!'
'Allahu Akbar!'
Or 'Go back to your own country!'
That's number 1. Everyday.

What's my normal?
My normal is people thinking I can't speak English and talking about
me, in front of me, as if I can't understand.

What's my normal?
My normal is the man in the corner shop filling up my cup of slush,
whilst asking me, 'When are you ever going to get away from my
country?'

What's my normal?

My normal is an old man coming up to me, laughing, and saying,
'Yo dance for me nigger.'

What's my normal?

My normal is being blamed for the twin towers collapsing to crumbs
on the ground.

What's my normal?

My normal is having to have 'the talk' from my Mum. The time comes
in every black child's life having to teach me how to respond to the
police. 'My name is Angelica I'm 15 years old. I am unarmed and
I have nothing that could harm you.'

What's my normal?

We are twice as likely to live in poverty. We are more than twice as
likely to be murdered. And our brothers are statistically more likely
to end up in prison than at a top university.

What's your normal?

What is your normal?

I am labelled illegal

I am labelled a terrorist

I am labelled unwanted

I am labelled a thug

I am labelled a trouble maker

I am labelled a slave, a cotton picker

I am stoned and mocked with the fabrication of a lie that all men are
created equal.

Conclusion

The symposium took place before the Covid-19 pandemic ground the world to a halt. Before the murder of George Floyd led to a global reckoning on race and white supremacy. The voice of the younger generation has become stronger in the intervening years, and I remain hopeful that the clear-eyed way with which many young people view systemic inequality means that the power to change the world for the better still exists.

Most of the poems presented here speak about racism in one way or another. It is perhaps worth noting that it is only the poet who is not racialised who doesn't. Maybe that would not be the case if the symposium was restaged now, when 'whiteness' is becoming a larger part of the conversations about race and racism. It is also important to acknowledge that, even as we try to provide space for greater representation, someone will always be left out.

That does not mean that we throw our hands up and say at least we tried. We must learn from our omissions, find out who is being kept out of heritage narratives, find a way to remove the barriers that prevent their access and make sure we have created the conditions that welcome and support them.

The poets were invited to the symposium to shift the narrative and change the tone. Their poetry gave a jolt to minds that might have settled into passive listening mode. Sometimes listening is not enough. A poet's job is to say what needs to be said using only as many words as are needed. Not a word more. In a room where often there is too much talk, distilled language can help us to tap into truths that might otherwise be lost. We could all do with being more careful with the words we use and how we use them to shape the narrative about who we are. Not a preserved and conserved heritage, but ever changing. Informed by the actions of our ancestors and by the interactions of the current inhabitants of this island.

Notes

- 1 The Sustained Theatre fund was a £2.1 million fund administered by Arts Council England to support the development and increase representation of Black and minority ethnic theatre makers across the theatre sector in England.
- 2 Slate involved a consortium of ten cultural organisations: Bradford City Council, British Council, East Street Arts, Forced Entertainment, HOME, Hull Truck Theatre, Live Theatre, Oxford Playhouse, Pilot Theatre and Unity Theatre.
- 3 Working-class, north-east poets. Joseph Skipsey (1832–1903) and Tommy Armstrong (1848–1929) were both coal miners. Ripyard Cuddling (1924–2014) was a welder at Swan Hunter shipyard.
- 4 In 2003 the Firlie Bonfire Society, Sussex, paraded an effigy of a caravan bearing the registration plate 'PIKEY' and slogans 'Fair?' and 'As You Likey Driveways'. They then publicly set it alight. A Traveller family with young children was prominently painted on the caravan windows. At the request of the Commission for Racial Equality, the society apologised for what it said was 'emphatically not a racist comment'.
- 5 Young Writers' City is a project run by New Writing North, the leading writer development agency in the UK. It aims to give young people the chance to express their ideas, thoughts and opinions through creative writing.

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