Images of Transcendence: "Crisis Always" and the New Black British Poets

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let the dark
not drape this body on terms other than its own

-Victoria Adukwei Bulley, "How Not to Disappear"

To watch the fourth season of Netflix's crime thriller series *Top Boy* is to be subjected to an almost constant barrage of violence.[1] Set in and around a fictional council estate in Hackney, East London, *Top Boy* follows the trials and challenges of drug kingpin Dushane Hill as he establishes, loses, and then reestablishes control of his local crime scene. Supported by his reluctant lieutenant, Sully, Dushane's arc is repeated from season to season: his commitment to his profession wanes, he concocts some scheme to rise above or escape, but he is, inexorably, pulled deeper and deeper into crime, his kingdom expanding as the body count rises. The show's creator and screenwriter Ronan Bennett has admitted he tends to "start dark and get darker" in his work (Hughes) and season four of the show makes this trend plain. It is relentless in its display of human cruelty, its eight episodes featuring, among other things, a forced drowning, followed by a violent reprisal; the murder of a child, followed by a violent reprisal; a homophobic assault, followed by a violent reprisal; an abduction, followed by a violent reprisal; and, spoiler alert, an unexpected scene of domestic harmony, after what appears to be a season-ending montage set to music, followed by a violent reprisal. Close-range gunshots to the head are frequent; domestic assault is routine; characters repeatedly declare their love for and kinship with those they intimidate, harass, and sometimes murder. In many ways this is par for the genre. Although the show is set in a broadly verisimilitudinous East London and grants some space to real-life local issues like police harassment, gentrification, and the aggressive deportation of migrants of colour, it is, at its heart, a thriller. Formally, it features claustrophobic framing, at times jarring editing, bass-heavy sound design, and frenetic hand-camera work. Structurally, it chops from A to B plots in moments of crisis to heighten tension within and across its episodes. Its sets are secretive: small flats, car interiors, staircases and alleyways. Its props are burner phones, pistols, knives and machineguns. It is a contemporary show about crime; as such, people die.

[1] I refer here to the show's fourth consecutive season. When *Top Boy* moved from UK broadcaster Channel 4 to Netflix in 2019, Netflix restarted the season numbers from one. To date there have been two seasons on Channel 4 and two on Netflix: four in total.

What makes the show significant, and what drives my choice to use it as a starting point for a discussion of contemporary Black British poetry,[2] is its cast. The war of all against all and each against each that *Top Boy* depicts is driven by and against majority Black and Mixed-race characters. In his analysis of the show, Kehinde Andrews flags the cast's racial composition as both "notable"—"it is one of the very few [British] series with a majority black cast"—and a cause for concern, a sentiment replicated in Sarita Malik and Clive James Nwonka's detailed assessment of *Top Boy*'s origins, predecessors, and representational stakes (Andrews 111; Malik and Nwonka 429–31). Malik and Nwonka argue that the first two seasons of the show, like the films *Adulthood* (2008) and *Bullet Boy* (2005) before them, offer a view of their characters, and by extension the minoritized community from which they come, as "an anti-social 'underclass' deliberately pursuing a subculture of criminality" (431); that is, as individuals whose faults and failures, and there are many, are divorced from any external sociopolitical causes, whose problems seem to be self-generated and self-perpetuated. While the show locates several supporting characters outside of its fictional council estate and criminal underbelly, and/or focuses on their desperation to escape, no one is safe: everyone is touched by the violence of the drug trade. Collateral damage in the form of innocent people killed or injured by street crime is a feature of every season. In Andrews' words, "[e]ven when they leave, the characters take the ghetto with them"; in the show "[b]lack people do not just live in the ghetto, they *are* the ghetto, defined by conditions of poverty, violence and deviance" (117, 123). Further, notably, the show's few White characters are located at an angle from the fray (Andrews 119, 121). To be Black in *Top Boy* is to be a victim or a perpetrator, usually both.

This image of Black Britons chimes with racist discourses in circulation since, at least, the moral panic about "muggings" in England in the 1980s (see Hall *et al.*). To view Black British life through a lens like *Top Boy*'s is to see it as both terrifyingly precarious and defined by constant violence. To borrow Frank Wilderson III's words, it is to believe that:

> [a]t every scale of abstraction, violence saturates Black life […] [F]or Black people there is no time and space of consent, no relative respite from force and coercion: violence spreads its tendrils across the body, chokes the community, and expands, intensifies, and mutates into new and ever more grotesque forms. (218)

I open with *Top Boy* because of the way its core paradox points to a central feature of Black Britishness. The show seems intent to reveal real hardships faced by the city-based Black working class that are its subjects,[3] while simultaneously perpetuating an additional,

[2] The racial concepts "Black," "White" and "Mixed-race" have been capitalised throughout this essay as a marker of their constructedness and to foreground the implicit opposition between the former two. This diverges from some sources cited. In addition, I use "Black" in its contemporary sense to mean, crudely, people of putatively visible African, Afro-Caribbean, and African American descent.

[3] The show's creators' statements underscore this. Ronan Bennett has stressed an "ethnographic," "anthropological" approach to its development (Malik and Nwonka 434–435); its cast have portrayed it as neither glorifying nor sensationalising, instead presenting "what people go through" (Lawton). Mainstream media assessors have followed this lead to read the show as speaking for a silenced community (see, for instance, Hughes).

significant, decades-long crisis faced by Black Britons. Through its endless violent spectacle—the aesthetic inflation that turns violence into the organising principle of its subjects' daily lives—it continues a longstanding cycle, a crisis, of misrepresentation.

It is approaching an axiom that we live in what Lauren Berlant has dubbed an age of "crisis ordinary," where "the traditional infrastructures for reproducing life—at work, in intimacy, politically—are crumbling at a threatening pace" (Berlant 9, 4–5). Widespread anxiety emerges from this context: one where a sense of collapse is endlessly heightened by the fact that the world—or certainly the most disruptive occurrences in much of the world—is increasingly accessible and visible through our ever-present screens. Our constant exposure to frightening events drives frightened responses, which lead to further frightening events. In Britain this feedback loop is evident in the major crisis moments of this millennium: from rights-curtailing legislation passed in the name of defence against terror attacks, to widespread support for austerity measures after the 2008 financial crash, to disproportionate sentencing in the wake of the national riots of 2011, to Brexit, to the disorderly initial response to the Covid-19 pandemic. However, Black life is caught in this spin of crises *plus*.

Black people have been repeatedly presented, in Richard Wright's words, as "an undeveloped negative" (qtd. in Marriot x–xi): as "absolute others" (Pugliese 12), as beings "incapable of inhibition, morals or ideas […] whose violent, sexual criminality is incapable of any lasting, or real relationships, only counterfeit, or trickery" (Marriot x). Where Berlant reads "crisis ordinary" as a broadly contemporary social phenomenon, the association of phenotyped "Black" features with crisis/disruption/destabilisation/threat is by no means new; in discourses about Black people, a state of current or coming crisis is a constant. In Britain this has taken a variety of forms. From colonial officials fearing the threat of "coloured" male migrants journeying to and establishing themselves in the metropole in the late 1940s (Hammond Perry 67–68), to Black people's residence in the country being rendered emblematic of social decline in the 1960s (Procter 25), to the aforementioned panic around "muggings" in the 1970s, channelled in part through media representations that suggested "problems are caused by [Black and immigrant] presence, not by the hostility and discrimination [these groups] face" (Titley 89; see also Hall 152), the simple existence of Black and other non-White Britons has a long history of representation as dangerous. More contemporary rhetoric around questionable cultural allegiance (Paul 188), community change and housing shortage (Goodfellow 113), and criminality (Birbalsingh) extend this tradition. In this discourse, Black people are not individuals who are *subject to* crisis; they are individuals who *create* crisis. Following Andrews, crisis is parcelled as part of what they fundamentally *are.* Lauren Berlant renders "crisis ordinary" an emergent condition that unites various actors in the contemporary world. It is a sense of lost safety, security, and certainty that, I want to argue, Black Britons both experience and are too often rendered as emblematising—and producing. Instead of Berlant's concept of a unifying state of crisis ordinary, substitute divisive narratives of Blackness as *crisis always.* In what follows, I will explore how Black British poetry acknowledges discourses of Black life as generative of crisis and subtends and transcends them.

The specificities of Black British literature

Before turning to the poetry that will occupy the bulk of this essay, it is important to make some quick but important distinctions. The last decade has seen an outpouring of significant works by African American scholars reflecting on Blackness as ontology and epistemology. Among them, Stefano Harney and Fred Moten's *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study* (2013), Christina Sharpe's *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (2016), Saidiya Hartman's *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments* (2019), and Frank B. Wilderson III's *Afropessimism* (2020) are just four notable examples. These works are all united by a commitment to accounting for the echoing legacy of the enslavement of Africans in the United States and assessing the constraints imposed on the descendants of the enslaved by this legacy. While these works are often bracing, challenging, and revelatory in argument and form—potentially evident in my quotation from Wilderson III, above—they largely speak to, and from, a North American experience. I follow Silvio Torres-Saillent's argument in "One and Divisible: Meditations on Global Blackness," that the "structures of racialization and configurations of blackness" (4) in the United States make African Americans' confrontations with anti-Black racism unique and distinct. This is a recognition "that, though the imperial history that spawned racialization happened on a global scale, the conditions in which differentiated communities have lived their sense of selves as racial beings unfold on an inexorably local terrain" (8).

That is to say that, while theories of Blackness form an increasingly globalised academic discourse, *experiences* of Black racialisation vary from place to place, occurring within unique geocorpographies. I borrow the term "geocorpographies" from Joseph Pugliese's article "Geocorpographies of Torture," which reflects on the abuses offshored by the United States military in its "War on Terror" and argues that "the body, in any of its manifestations, is always geopolitically situated and graphically inscribed by signs, discourses, regimes of visuality […] that invest the body [and] are constitutive of its cultural intelligibility" (12). Pugliese's claim is simple and significant: prevailing ideas of bodies, bodily hexis and their relative worth, and the significance and symbolism of their features, differ from culture to culture—as do projections of meaning onto other bodies in other spaces. Thus, dominant, emergent, and residual discourses in sites around the world lay sometimes conflicting, sometimes compatible maps of meaning over externalised geographies and those who live within them. Therefore, although who is, and is not, considered "Black" may be similar in Birmingham, Alabama, and Birmingham, West Midlands, what "Blackness" means in those two places "may respond to variables attributable to the specificities of the sites, histories, and genealogies of those participating" in its assignment (Torres-Saillent 6).

The representational crisis in Britain is not the same as the crisis in the United States, although the crisis is shared, which means transposition of theories of the legacy of Atlantic slavery must be done with care. Central to prevailing concepts of Blackness in Britain is the idea of "newness" (Fowler 404), the belief that non-White Britons are all relatively recently arrived, "that 'race' is something that enters English culture from the outside during the post-war period" (Gilroy 1990, 48). This way of seeing is a product of the active forgetting of colonial realities (Fowler 404, 409). It is tied, too, to Britain's dominant discourses of waning

status post-war, which tend to project melancholic fantasies of lost glory onto non-White "others" in all their forms (Gilroy 2005, 90), "condensing a range of anxieties onto the figure of the black man as both disruptive to the national order and explanatory of its decline" (Gilmour 349). British discourses of *crisis always* are thus a product of a historic lack of Black presence in the national imaginary folded into very local preoccupations—not least a fixation on an idyllic past as conjured through the regular invocations of a timeless, prelapsarian "Deep England": a rural White space of "ancestral continuities" (Wright 85). Like African Americans, Black Britons are frequently figured as the self-destructive urban Other, but alongside this is a sense of fundamental geocorpographical alienness that supervenes many readings of Black bodies in Britain: in cities, in the countryside, in schools, in universities, in wealth, in poverty, they are novel, they are outsiders, they are emblems of our decline. The body of Black British poetry contains numerous responses to this outsider framing.

It must be acknowledged that the proportion of Black people living in the British Isles *did* markedly increase after the Second World War. However, insofar as Britain's colonies were a part of Britain's administrative body, the number of Black British subjects markedly *declined* in the decades of decolonisation. Narratives of immigrant influx are predicated on a particular way of representing Britain's colonies as simultaneously an essential part of the country prewar and wholly peripheral; the perception of Black people as, necessarily, "immigrants," outsiders, rather than fellow residents of a global Empire, is the offspring of this perception. Understandably, then, the story of much post-war writing by Black Britons is a story of the assertion of a right to belong, but that assertion has been variously articulated.

A broad critical consensus has emerged around a three-part periodisation of postwar Black British writing,[4] one summarized and uniquely christened by Deirdre Osborne as (1) the "migratory and arriviste" phase of the 1940s-60s, (2) the "settler" phase, of the 1970s-1980s, and (3) the "indigene" phase of the 1990s-2000s (Osborne 3).[5] Uniting others' descriptions with Osborne's terms, the migratory and arriviste phase featured "sceptical, if conflicted and often humorous, approach[es]" to writing about an England "where racist, xenophobic and imperialist attitudes frequently greeted migrants of colour" (Ramazani 208); the settler phase of 1970s and 80s saw "contexts of deepening crisis in British race relations" where "wider struggles over race and representation were played out through strategic deployments and interpretations of creole languages [… with] [a]rguments about assimilation, authenticity, and cultural legitimacy […] often routed through language" (Gilmour 345); and the 1990s indigene period saw "multicultural policies, new funding streams and the opening up of spaces for black and minority ethnic artists" (Lawson Welsh 179). In poetry "new 'tribes'" possessed "a strong performance aesthetic, and continued literary experimentation with dub, rap, hip-hop and other primarily black musical forms" (Lawson Welsh 179). Black British poets writing as natives understood "a cross-racial, polyglot England to be fundamental," inarguable, and were "less

[4] See, in addition to the sources cited below, Procter 2000.

[5] See an alternative christening in the section divisions in Nasta and Stein's encyclopedic survey of Black British writing. Theirs are: "Disappointed Citizens" (1950s-70s), "Here to Stay" (1970s-90s), "Writing the Contemporary" (1990s+).

interested than some poets of the 1970s and 1980s in championing a separate black experience" (Ramazani 211).

The poetry of today grows from a different soil. First, many of the most renowned Black poets have passed through one route of access to the literary field: author Bernardine Evaristo's Complete Works project, a two-year mentoring programme established to cultivate the talent of Black and Asian poets, established in response to Arts Council England/Spread the Word's *Free Verse* report, which "revealed that less than 1% of poetry books published in the UK were by black or Asian poets, and none of the poetry presses had any BME editors" (Evaristo 3). Alumni include Raymond Antrobus, Malika Booker, Jay Bernard, Kayo Chingonyi, Inua Ellams, Nick Makoha, Karen McCarthy Woolf, Momtaza Mehri, Roger Robinson, and Warsan Shire. As a collective, the Complete Works poets have won most major commendations and poetry prizes in England: the T.S. Eliot prize (Roger Robinson 2019; Sarah Howe, 2015), the Ted Hughes award (Jay Bernard, 2017; Raymond Antrobus, 2018), the Forward prize (Malika Booker, 2020), the Dylan Thomas prize (Kayo Chingonyi, 2018), *Sunday Times*/PFD[6] Young Writer of the Year award (Sarah Howe, 2015; Raymond Antrobus, 2019; Jay Bernard, 2020), and Poet Laureate for London (Momtaza Mehri, 2018).[7] Perhaps owing to their emergence from a support scheme framed around excluded identities, into an era of the active repoliticization of race marked by Prime Minister David Cameron's declaration of the end of "passive tolerance" and "state multiculturalism" in 2011 (BBC News),[8] many of these poets write in a mode that recalls the features defined above of the 1970s/80s "indigene" period. Namely, they and their peers' works celebrate specific cultural features of Black Britons, acknowledging local crises whilst foregrounding Black vernaculars, practices, lives, to slip underneath and arc away from surface-level representations.

Asserting Alternatives (Subtending)

The return to 70s/80s-style assertiveness is clear and captured in the opening of Momtaza Mehri's 2019 poem "Glory Be to the Gang Gang Gang":

> In praise of all that is honest, call upon the acrylic tips
> and make a minaret out of a middle finger, gold-dipped
> and counting. In the name of Filet-O-Fish, pink lemonade,
> the sweat on an upper lip, the backing swell and ache
> of Abdul Basit Abdus Samad on cassette tape, a clean jump shot,
> the fluff of Ashanti's sideburns, the rice left in the pot (60)

This mode of highly deictic, "semantic maximalist" writing (Arnold Klein qtd. in George 9) which strings together chains of proper nouns—"Filet-O-Fish," "Abdul Basit Abdus Samad," "Ashanti"—and then further grounds them through a list of time and community-specific

[6] Peter Fraser and Dunlop.
[7] Note that the Complete Works poet Sarah Howe is of Mixed Chinese descent. I include her several wins in the interest of a comprehensive list. Her work itself falls outside of the scope of this essay.
[8] I have written at greater length about this speech in the essay "The Exigencies of Exile and Dialectics of Flight" (McIntosh 2015).

cultural signifiers—"acrylic tips," "pink lemonade," "cassette tape"—while aiming disdain outward—the "minaret," "middle finger"—is common to the new Black British poetry. It marks out a communal everyday and invites in an interlocutor who can easily decode place, time, meaning. Mehri goes on to reference "the seasonal burst of baqalah-bought dates," "Shah Rukh's dimples," "taking our aunts back to those summer nights" (60), knitting together a world of brands, cultural experiences, food and fashion that invites in an in-group and draws a border around a community.

We see similar technique in Warsan Shire's "Joyride," whose second stanza invites us to "Bless the mandem," and eulogises the way "Speed cameras track your escape from tunnels / of youth" (2022, 35); see it also, repeatedly, through Caleb Femi's 2020 collection *Poor*, both in poem content—local terms like "opps," "mandem," "boydem," "my g"; places like "Gloucester Primary School" (16), "Aylesbury estate" (23), "Winchcombe Court block" (37); and clothing including "Air Max 90s" (19) "Air Force Ones" (23) "Air Jordans" (51) appear throughout. We see it too in Kayo Chingonyi's *Kumukanda* and *A Blood Condition*, notably in the former's "Self-Portrait as a Garage Emcee," which includes "lurid dreams of Natasha Laurent," "the alley between flats where Sacha blasts / a tattered ball into the goal-net simulacrum" (2), and name-checks regional radio stations: Delight 103.0, Majik FM, Kiss 100. These poems recall the contents of odes and elegies: they praise and mark the transience of individuals, symbols, locations and communities in terms specific to given communities.

Laid alongside the content of the other poems in the collections above, we see how this unapologetic marking and archiving of the lives of the peripheralised forms an essential part of a wider strategy to acknowledge and subtend *crisis always* perceptions—they show the full lives that exist underneath these discourses' claims.[9] Meaningfully, none of the poets mentioned shy away from addressing the struggles faced within the groups they describe. Warsan Shire's work is famously wracked by representations of the hardships of Black womanhood, girlhood, and immigrant and refugee status (Leetsch 84). *Bless the Daughter Raised by the Voices in Her Head,* begins with a poem, "Extreme Girlhood," that mourns

> A loop, a girl born
> to each family,
> prelude to suffering. [….]
> Born to a lullaby
> lamenting melanin,
> newborn ears checked
> for the first signs of colour. (3)

The opening second-syllable caesura forces a pause on "A loop," the recognition that what follows is the description of a cycle, the "girl born / to each family," placed within it, the birth "prelude to suffering," the struggle linked to skin. "Bless this House," later in the collection, is

[9] I borrow the idea of these poems creating "archives of the present" from Caleb Femi, who used the concept as an introduction to a poetry reading in Senate House, University of London, on 4 December 2018. See <https://archives.history.ac.uk/ihrcms/podcasts/where-do-we-fit-black-and-asian-british-history-curriculum/where-do-we-fit-black-and-asian.html> (accessed 04/10/22).

filled with violent imagery used to describe serial relationships with men who "Sometimes […] come with keys, / and sometimes […] come with hammers" (50). We see this throughout. Black, migrant femininity in Shire's work features regular, often violent crisis. Caleb Femi's highly localised poems are similarly filled with violence. *Poor* is a chronicle of shootings, stabbings, funerals, the poem "Survivor's Guilt, or Anikulapo" offering a microcosmic inventory of losses:

> Run over, twice.
> Stabbed.
> Shot.
> A car crash. (32)

The poem's speaker mourns a life composed of "Gang signs and prayers," a "procession" of deaths where living makes them feel like "a museum of all / the ghosts I could have been" (31–32).

What breaks these poets' works away from stereotypical representations and harks back to the work of an earlier generation, is how they assess the causes of the problems they depict. Alongside depictions of intra-communal tension, they all also reach wider. Femi's "Thirteen" describes the irony of a police force whose members tell primary school children that they are "*little stars* […] *supernovas*" in assemblies, but which stops and searches its speaker at age thirteen, triggering a recollection, a realization:

> you will remember that Wednesday, after that assembly,
> your teacher speaking more about supernovas:
> how they are, in fact, dying stars
> on the verge of becoming black holes. (16)

Femi's "Schrödinger's Black" reflects on the 2011 riots and media misrepresentation; his "Excerpts from Journal Entries, 2017" offers extended prose on the Grenfell fire in which the narrative voice longs for a change in laws and is confused about where to direct his blame, cataloguing "who I hate:" "the Government," "the News channels" and bigoted online commentators (114). Shire's "Conversations about Home (at the Deportation Centre)" is part testimony, part appeal to an insider community in response to the question: "*how did you get here*," its speaker declaring "I am the sin of memory and the absence of memory" (2011; 25, 26). Chingonyi's sequence "calling a spade a spade" in the centre of *Kumukanda* itemises day-to-day encounters with racism, the "The N Word" "[l]ounging in a Pinter script" (14); "you're so black you're blik" (15); "a cricket match […] blacks versus whites" where "Danny asked me why / I'd stand here when I could be there, with my kind" (17). Race as imposition, as fundamental to the perpetuation of crisis, as coming in from outside and worsening struggles already inside, as occasion for the oversights and slights of others, as cause for the folding in of communities, as a trigger for pathologies, is everywhere in these collections. They go beneath or, literally, in the physical pages of the books themselves, exist alongside depictions of crisis to point to explanations for why.

Moving through and beyond (Transcending)

The collections and poems referenced above—as seen in Shire's speaker's mention of the "sin of memory and absence of memory"—are responses to Britain's amnesia—its lack of full attention to the pasts and presents of its Black residents. They refuse to shy away from crises but they also contextualise. In doing so, they ground themselves fully in the temporal and spatial sites they describe and offer alternative geocorpographies that explicitly respond to the maps provided by dominant discourses. This trend of subtending harks back to the 1970s/80s, but, too, it can read as compatible with ideas of *crisis always*. These poets critique, but in cases where their depictions of crisis-ridden everyday exceed engagements with any alternatives, their work, like those of their predecessors, can provoke a sense of Black life as endless crisis, albeit with a cause. An attendant trend in Black British poetry gestures to another representational mode, one that feels emergent and more disruptive.

There are glimmers of this other style in individual poems of those referenced above, and in a sustained way in Tjawangwa Dema's *An/Other Pastoral* (2022), in Victoria Adukwei Bulley's *Quiet* (2022), and in the recent writing of Roger Robinson and Elizabeth-Jane Burnett. I will focus on the latter two who seem, like Dema and Bulley, to be interested in how we might completely break the bounds of dominant discourses in the service of novel readings of Black being beyond. Burnett, in particular, is unique in the way her works eschew the locational and communal markers of the poets already considered and situate themselves in alternative geographies, and through that offer novel geocorpographies.

Burnett's collections *Swims* and *Of Sea* bring the body into harmony with the extra-human world. It is essential to note that Burnett, unlike her contemporaries, does not explicitly write poems where Black or Mixed-race identity feature; those identifications are locked in the paratexts of author biography, photograph, and notes. That said, poems like "Meadow Brown," "Dusky Sallow," and "Painted Lady" in *Of Sea* coyly present questions of racialized otherness through title and epigraph, Burnett's texts' pushing of major markers of race, even the question or suggestion of race, to their physical fringes above, below, and around, highlighting, through their own topographies, the remapping exercise that they undertake.

Swims and *Of Sea* are about encounters with the rural world. Burnett describes the first, in her author's note, as "a long poem documenting twelve wild swims across England and Wales, beginning and ending in Devon, my home county" (i); the second is, in "A Note on the Text", about "encounters" with "39 invertebrates through swimming" (i). Mere location in and claim of the countryside, "my home county," is a subversive act in the face of discourses of Black otherness and a frequent feature of Burnett's work (see, for instance, Burnett and Thomas 265). Devon, rural England, *is hers,* her family are *from there.* Black Britons are presumed to be urban subjects; a Mixed-race poet asserting a right to belong, pass through, and occupy the rural spaces of Deep England—"an iconic site of [White] Englishness which has long been defined as off-limits" (Fowler 413)—quietly unravels that notion. Burnett's poems are rarely assertive; they are playful, experimental in their mise-en-page, interested in fragmentation and intertextuality, "immanence" and "multiplicity" (Baker 93). They are also about the human body in/as nature, about "co-constitution" of the "I" and the world (Baker 93) and the ability

to transcend the self through contact with water and other animals, and the way these encounters allow one to transcend the everyday:

> To Swim To give
> up.
> To disappear.
> (Burnett 2019, 13)

Burnett's collections are dotted with brief references to "crisis ordinary" in Berlant's sense—those global upheavals that penetrate and unsettle all our lives. In her two collections, she writes of the collapses of Greece's economy, effluents in Britain's rivers, war in Gaza, the Trump administration's attack on climate-change legislation. While her poems are located in particular spaces in the British Isles, their community and concerns are planet-wide and thus position their subtly racialized subject in an Earth-spanning geography, simultaneously in/of Britain and the globe.

I read Roger Robinson's collection *A Portable Paradise* as straddling the line between the updated poetics of the past and the novel, more transcendent form found in Burnett's work. Like Momtaza Mehri, Warsan Shire, Caleb Femi and Kayo Chingonyi's collections, *Paradise* undertakes a more explicit mapping and present-archiving exercise than Burnett, but it also explores other possibilities. *Paradise*'s first poem, "The Missing," is dedicated to "the victims of the Grenfell Tower fire disaster," and both registers their tragedy and changes it. The poem speaks of the dead as ascending; those caught in the fire "floating / from the windows of the tower block" alongside congregants lifted away from earth, as "ten of those seated / in front pews began to float, / and then to lie down as if on / a bed":

> The Risen stream slowly, so slowly
> out the gothic doors
> and up to the sky, finches darting
> deftly between them. (9)

The loss of life, here, is made holy. The lost are an "airborne pageantry of faith," a "flock of believers"; the world is divided into "the city of the missing," of those who ascended, rather than died, and "the city of the stayed," rather than the "saved" (10). "The Missing" is a poem of transcendence in three ways: it explicitly depicts the rising of its subjects in line with Christian ideas of Rapture; transcends the true story of the fire by making it magical, making it new; and it denies discourse of the fire's victims as poor, Black, migrant, punished: here they are praised, "superheroes" (10).

A Portable Paradise is, over its whole course, concerned with ways away from Black stereotype, but it oscillates in and out of the practices of everyday archive, direct address and the presentation of images of transcendence. This tension is present in two competing movements in the book. Scattered throughout are poems that turn to the Biblical and consider the possibility of creating, finding or attaining "paradise." There are also, as concretized in a central string of "Citizen" poems, those works that are unapologetic in their confrontation with crisis. In "The Missing" and the paradise poems ("The Job of Paradise," "And if I Speak of

Paradise," "Paradise," and "A Portable Paradise") we are presented with, or given access to, reflections on alternative geocorpographies. In "The Missing" this is explicit: we have a smouldering wreck in the centre of London turned into two counterbalanced cities, with lost bodies remade. In the paradise poems the process of conceptual remaking is foregrounded, questioned. The first includes a longing to "make Earth feel like Paradise" (20), the second itemises, again revaluing, and makes paradise "my grandfather", "horse racing", "my father", "shirt jacs", "intellectuals", "revolutionaries", "independence" (40). To read the paradise poems in sequence is to encounter a voice openly debating ways to be in the world differently, outside of the frames of reference that prevail. The penultimate paradise poem includes questions—"Is Paradise an island of perfection?", "Will we see storms far out at sea / that mysteriously never trouble our shores?"—that signal a deliberation, a debating of the value of transcendence that wonders if, in paradise, wherever and whatever that might be, "will we not secretly long for a night / when we wake to a sky of bruised clouds, / lightning, a deluge of rain" (65). The "Citizen" poems, numbered I, II, III, go a different way. Their titles recall Claudia Rankine's collection on Black exclusion in the United States, *Citizen*, and their content directly addresses major crises in Black British life. The first two poems are dramatic monologues that rage, respectively, at the architects of the Windrush deportation scandal and the Grenfell fire, the second poem's speaker "watch[ing] static for hours on the black and white / TV", absorbed and undone by the binary representations and treatment by the media and the state. The final poem in the sequence is aimed at young men involved in violence and is equally scathing. These three poems live in the centre of the collection—are the hub to which the rest of the work connects.

Before, after, and around the "Citizen" and paradise poems, *A Portable Paradise* contains several more direct poems on the Grenfell fire, enslavement, Windrush, youth violence, music, an infant son's illness. Those poems present, like those of Robinson's contemporaries, features of Black British life using communal and external address, but, meaningfully, are punctuated by the poems on paradise. The structure of the book makes it always return to reflections on ways through, escape: it shows the hardship but thinks past it, Robinson's poems subtending stereotype, but, like Burnett's work, also looking above.

Conclusion

To confront what can feel like the ruins of the contemporary world is to often feel undone, constrained, powerless, alone. How to act in the face of systems and structures that precede you and feel like they overarch everything? How to live within a body minoritized, sidelined for its hair texture, nose shape, skin shade; for its gender, place of birth, place of residence; for its first language, perceived "ability," bank-account balance—almost anything? "How […] can we hope to dream a reprieve from the real when that real is already a part of our dreaming?" (Marriot viii). In the face of Black British marginalization, several poems above turn inward whilst also highlighting the absurdities and damage of ideas aimed in from outside. In Burnett and Robinson's work, we see an interest in a total remapping of landscapes, new ways of

understanding bodies, claims made on what has been denied, a search for natural spaces, paradises, in this world or beyond, where all meaning can be changed.

Robinson's collection ends, interestingly, with a final paradise poem that eschews total escape. The conclusion of the collection's deliberations, the poem, "A Portable Paradise," includes the speaker's grandmother's advice to carry paradise "always / on my person, concealed" to respond to life's pressures, implicitly including the pressures on Black Britons conveyed in detail throughout the book, by "get[ting] to an empty room […] and empty[ing] your paradise onto a desk" remaining in place, and transfiguring pain by "[s]hin[ing] the lamp on it like fresh hope" (81). Presenting writing as the way beyond turmoil can feel like an easy solution. And yet across all of the works I have considered, writing is tacitly framed in this way: as a means to liberate and reclaim. The poems all assert the ability of a subject to reimagine and alter perceptions through words; they sketch out and deliberate what another world might be, even if that's only by highlighting the flaws in ours. Whether they subtend or transcend decades of misrepresentation—all the ways of presenting Black life that "start dark and get darker"—these poets offer visions of other ways of being. With signs of despair, mourning, longing, hope, and with praise, they take us, in Burnett's words, "up."

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