

Where are You Really From?: Raman Mundair's poetic resistance to Asian-British cultural objectification

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Raman Mundair's poetic voice contends with a wide variety of themes relevant to the tensions characterising Britain in the second millennium, yet it would be reductive to attempt to confine her art to a few choice terms. She challenges gender expectations, class distinctions, the absurdity of religious divisions and the fragility of memory in language that is at once brutally honest and sublimely tactful, and indeed, her work efficiently reflects her own experiences as a global citizen. The linguistic proficiency and cultural architecture of her poetry quickly creates in her readers the desire to read on and on. Her work is at once deeply personal and profoundly political as it addresses the demons of racial intolerance and community injustice by name. Mundair's nuanced allusions to the lack of balance in contemporary society explode the reductive myth of young British Asian women as nice, well-behaved members of our multicultural society. In doing so, her poems resist William Connolly's assertion that 'identity is what I am and how I am recognized rather than what I choose, want or consent to'.¹ This is a poet who unapologetically insists on being the maker, rather than the bearer, of meaning.

Mundair grapples with the politics of the South Asian diaspora and the fractured experiences of migrants on both sides of the Atlantic in her two volumes of poetry, *Lovers, Liars, Conjurers & Thieves* (2003) and *A Choreographer's Cartography* (2007). She explores her identity in these collections, weaving disparate images into a web linking her first-generation migrant self with distant memories of the rhythms of her early childhood

¹ William Connolly, *Identity/Difference: Democratic negotiations of Political Paradox* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991): 64.

years in India. Mundair manages to combine violent images with delicate linguistic musings of some of the most universal of private women's experiences: domestic violence, betrayal, and the confusion of both loving and loathing self. In this essay, I examine how Raman Mundair's poetry interrogates the cultural and political tensions between subject and object and consider how her creative output powerfully contributes to the canon of transformative Black British writing of the early twenty-first century.

British identity has undergone a dynamic transformation over the past fifty years. The debates surrounding multiculturalism and the extent to which non-white Britons have genuinely integrated into mainstream British society have given rise to a generation of poets who unapologetically contend with these issues. Additionally, within these poems is evidence of Peter van der Veer's assertion that 'non-western cultures are no longer located outside the West, but form an increasingly important social element of the Western cultural scene itself'.² The everyday hybridity Mundair portrays in her two collections of poems offers a clear example of how art imitates life when it comes to postmodern, postcolonial Britain.

One of my most memorable encounters with the pioneering Black British poetry scene was at London's Barbican Centre in 2003, where Dorothea Smartt, Patience Agbabi and Raman Mundair read pieces from their recent collections to a rapt audience during a celebration of multicultural Britain alongside the theatrical debut adaptation of Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*. I have never quite recovered from this first experience with Raman Mundair and her frank poetic responses to some of the crises she experienced as a child and a first-generation South Asian immigrant. I offered my first reactions to her poetry in *Wasafiri*, where I argued that Mundair's poetry is

² Peter Van der Veer, "'The Enigma of Arrival": Hybridity and Authenticity in the Global Space', in *Debating Cultural Hybridity*, ed. by Pnina Werbner and Tariq Modood (London: Zed, 1997): 92.

best enjoyed directly from the page. This is gutsy writing; even the silent spaces between the words are emotionally raw. Hers is an insider's view of otherness that begins in the womb:

Seeded in desperation
I blossomed secreted
in the folds
of my mother's trousseau sari.³

Despite the skilful way Mundair reflects the experiences of many South Asian migrants to Britain, she resists the culturally reductive notion of acting as a spokesperson for British Asian voices. Mundair's voice is wholly individual and resists easy categorization.

Amongst the most obvious signifiers of cultural difference within Mundair's poems are the voices and skin of those perceived as 'other'. How do voices and skin, as cultural and social tropes, become powerful and destructive metaphors for difference, with particular reference to the brown skins of British Asians and the white skins of those Anglo Britons with varying levels of tolerance towards a visible – and auditory – ethnic diversity? Stuart Hall argues that 'identity is formed at the unstable point where the unspeakable stories of subjectivity meet the narratives of history, of a culture'.⁴ The historical relationship between Britain and the subcontinent inescapably informs the construction of a postcolonial Britishness, in which neither white skin nor received pronunciation hold the dominant reins within race and class power struggles. The discrepancies between subjective perceptions of one's own experience and the grand narratives which historically inform culture on a larger scale are central to the formation of the identity of those who are not perceived as *visibly* springing from the centre of dominant culture.

³ Devon Campbell-Hall, 'Review of Feroza Jussawalla's *Chiffon Saris* (2003) and Raman Mundair's *Lovers, Liars, Conjurers & Thieves* (2003), *Wasafiri*, 43 (Winter 2004), 77-78 (p. 78).

⁴ Stuart Hall, 1986:44.

In her study *Skin: on the cultural border between self and the world* (2002), Claudia Benthien ‘investigates the question of the body surface as the place where identity is formed and assigned’.⁵ If indeed identity is in part constructed via the acutely visible surface of our physical bodies -- our skin -- then it is perhaps logical that we perceive the identity of others as accurately reflected in their discernible covering. The body becomes the site of cultural inscription, a location in which history plays an inescapable role. By virtue of its very visibility and universality, skin becomes a form of public property, open to inept, ignorant interpretations of those for whom skin colour is inseparable from colonialist history. Skin is so powerfully – and dangerously – received as an accurate guarantor of interiority that individuals who wish to free themselves from the historical implications of their skin colour necessarily enter a battleground in which cultural loyalty and national identity come under intense scrutiny.

Raman Mundair’s poetry confronts scenes of racism and interrogates the possibility of a genuinely multicultural British society. She grapples with some of the ugly complexities of the racism she has faced as a first-generation South Asian migrant to the UK, particularly through the signifier of skin as a visual benchmark against which self-identity is constructed. Arguably, identity is not simply constructed, as Stuart Hall suggests, ‘across difference’, but is the result of comparing what is believed to be ‘self’ with what is allegedly ‘not self’.⁶ Both skin and voice occupy an important location of cultural confrontation within these poetry collections. Within these poems, the relationship between these signifiers of difference to often inaccurate perceptions of race and class identities serves as a vital point of contact between those relegated to the margins and those supposedly inhabiting the centre. In ‘The Meeting Point’, the narrator describes how she is encouraged ‘to ask | in my “nice British

⁵ Claudia Benthien, *Skin: on the cultural border between self and the world* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002): 1.

⁶ Stuart Hall, ‘Minimal Selves’, in *Identity: The Real Me*, ICA Identity Documents 6 (London: ICA, 1986): 45.

accent". I did, and for the first time ever | my Black Britishness was rewarded.'⁷ The poignant surprise with which the narrator realises she is heard, seen, and respected makes uncomfortable reading. Yet Mundair's poems present skin and voice as more than a point of cultural contact between self and other. Skin serves as the trigger point for cultural and domestic violence, as well as a symbol of an interiority that is supposed by others to be in stasis. Take for example her poem 'The Jamat Khanna': 'I hold | the wrong name, | the wrong creed, | the wrong history | to be deemed worthy | to worship with you, | mediate and share, | the benevolence | of your God.'⁸ Due to the narrator's name, appearance, history, and religion, she was deemed 'other' – she was relegated to the role of object by others who knew nothing of her interiority. Poems such as this remind readers of the fragility and impermanence of skin – of its cultural and physical vulnerability.

The blank spaces in between words suggest unhealed cultural rejection that reminds me of another of Mundair's poems, 'The Red Chamber Revisited', in which a skin rupture seems to equate to a deeper violence: 'In experiment, | I take off the fresh skin | and let the wound weep.'⁹ Through self-inflicted violence, the narrator allows herself the distance to consider objectively her pain, as a disinterested observer. However, she claims back the perspective of subject in another poem, 'Walking Wounded', which evidences a refusal to cower in objectified passivity in the face of domestic conflict: 'Inside my body there's a war going on | Seemingly invisible to your eyes | Slashed, knifed in the back, cuts weeping raw | Trailing bloody footprints across your floor | I am the walking wounded'¹⁰. Clearly, there is a powerful relationship here between the subject claiming her voice and the perceived object

⁷ Raman Mundair, 'The Meeting Point', in *Lovers, Liars, Conjurers & Thieves* (Leeds: Peepal Tree Press, 2003): 33.

⁸ Raman Mundair, 'The Jamat Khanna', in *Lovers, Liars, Conjurers & Thieves* (Leeds: Peepal Tree Press, 2003): 46.

⁹ Raman Mundair, 'The Red Chamber Revisited', in *Lovers, Liars, Conjurers & Thieves* (Leeds: Peepal Tree Press, 2003): 27.

¹⁰ Raman Mundair, 'Walking Wounded', in *Lovers, Liars, Conjurers & Thieves* (Leeds: Peepal Tree Press, 2003): 26.

who is expected to hide in shame at her difference. The subject celebrates the power of being 'other' while the object is stilled into silence when faced with the same treatment. I am using Claudia Benthien's definition (2002) of the cultural practice of 'othering', which she describes as the 'demarcation and devaluation of the other',¹¹ to interrogate the notion of skin's role in this often violent practice. Benthien writes of a 'culturally marked epidermis',¹² which acts as a useful lens through which to consider how Mundair portrays her skin as a fragile barrier between self and any others who might want to challenge the integrity of her strength.

The issues raised within these collections draw attention to the plight of many recent non-white arrivals to the UK, whose 'othered skins' and 'othered voices' are welcomed not with tolerance but suspicion. Arguably, subversive representations in which brown skin is textually represented to be as equally British as white skin serve as a direct interrogation of the following comment: 'Our homogenous Anglo-Saxon society has been seriously undermined by the massive immigration – particularly Commonwealth immigration – that has taken place since the war.'¹³ Unfortunate statements such as this, made by Conservative Yorkshire MP John Townend in March 2001 have added dangerous fuel to the emotive debates surrounding the rights of non-white immigrants moving to the UK. Interestingly, it was Townend's inferred reference to an impossibly pure indigenously white skin that provided the platform for an ironic response to this statement by poet Zachary Hudson, entitled 'Pure Bred': 'It's true, you know and what a shame, | We've only but ourselves to blame | For the pollution of our race | In not too long an English face | Might just as well be brown or black. | Enough's enough – we must fight back! | Resistance is the sole solution | To

¹¹ Claudia Benthien, *Skin: on the cultural border between self and world* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002): 145.

¹² Claudia Benthien, *Skin: on the cultural border between self and world* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002): 148.

¹³ Matthew Tempest, 'Speech row Tory refuses to sign race pledge', *The Guardian*, Wed 28 March 2001: np.

limit subsequent dilution | Of the pure-bred pallor of our pelts, | We Anglo-Saxon-Norman-Celts!’¹⁴ This not-so gentle jibe at the myth of a historically homogenous British ethnicity reflects the insecurities raised by contact with ‘othered skins’ and the unknown cultural quantities represented by these ‘brown pelts’. In *White* (1997), Richard Dyer argues that it has been historically assumed that ‘British’ is synonymous with ‘white British’, and that ethnic descriptors are only tacked on when the colour of the skin – or, I might add, the sound of the voice – becomes an issue. Yet the presence of a substantial non-white British population is certainly not a twentieth-century trend.

Rozina Visram’s study *Asians in Britain: 400 Years of History* (2002) aims to demarginalize the South Asian presence in Britain. Her painstaking research has shown that there has been a substantial Asian contribution to British society since the seventeenth century. She shows that there have been South Asians in Britain since trading contact between Britain and India first began with the founding of the East India Company in 1600. Most importantly, Visram has shown that contrary to the stubbornly held dogma of an impossible purity,

What Indians in Britain and their contributions to British life tell us is that migration has long been part of Britain’s history and society, and that British culture has never been a homogenous product of indigenous origins as some nationalist ideologies would have us believe.¹⁵

Yet even in the face of the evidence brought about by such scholarly argument, fear of the ‘otherness’ of brown skin as *visibly* non-British continues to thrive. Headlines such as ‘Now Maybe it is Time to Start Listening to the BNP’, which appeared on the sides of London buses within days of the terrorist bombing attacks on London in 2005, indicate a tokenistic

¹⁴ Zachary Hudson, ‘Pure Bred’ (unpublished, 2001): used with author’s permission.

¹⁵ Rozina Visram, *Asians in Britain: 400 Years of History* (London: Pluto, 2002): 360.

attitude towards multiculturalism that does little to increase public acceptance of the multiracial makeup of Britain's population. The fear of the 'other' is nothing new. There is an unrelenting tension between this longing for the exoticized 'other' and a frustration with what is perceived as the changing anatomy of Britain. The fetishization of cultural difference disempowers non-white Britons and dangerously depoliticises the issues surrounding racist behaviour.

Tariq Modood's definition of a genuinely multicultural society 'allows individuals and communities the right to be culturally different from their neighbours and to be understood in their own terms rather than in the terms of racist and anti-racist stereotypes'.¹⁶ This definition, which necessarily confronts the unhelpful binaries of self and other by claiming the ground in between the simplistic notions of racist and anti-racist categorization, argues for an acknowledgement of the fluidity of cultural identity. Modood's statement arguably suggests that multiculturalism is both normative and relatively unproblematic. This stands in direct contrast to many of Raman Mundair's poems, in which she uses the platform of poetry to contend with the dangers of idealising multiculturalism within a Britain still coming to terms with its own post-colonial identity. My argument here is that ignoring the cultural codifications of both skin and voice as portrayed in these poems is a racist practice.

Consider Mundair's poem '60° North': 'You swallowed my tongue | left me *fantin*, | without voice, | Now I look | for my tongue | in other people's mouths.'¹⁷ The stark sensuality of this poem with its use of Shetland dialect suggests that once a migrant allows herself to fully submerge into the depths of the dominant culture, she may lose touch with both her natural voice and her identity. The effort to assimilate can far too often silence the beauty of different perceptions of the new culture. This is implied by Stuart Hall when he asserts the

¹⁶ Tariq Modood, *Not Easy Being British: Colour, Culture and Citizenship* (Stoke-on-Trent: Trentham Books, 1992): 6.

¹⁷ Raman Mundair, '60° North', in *A Choreographer's Cartography* (Leeds: Peepal Tree Press, 2007): 9.

necessity of ‘a new conception of ethnicity as a kind of counter to the old discourses of nationalism or national identity’.¹⁸ If we consider this idea as superimposed upon representations of contemporary Britishness, such as those in Mundair’s poem above, the role of vocal ethnicity in identity construction takes on new significance. Identity stems not only from one’s own perceptions of self but from those preconceived notions of selfhood imposed by others. Modood’s relativistic and utopian concept of multiculturalism assumes an individual empowerment that is more realistically enabled by the privileged arena of fiction, than by the problematic realities of contemporary British society.

Within Mundair’s poetry, the aural signifier of ‘a different voice’ serves as a benchmark against which, arguably, society’s version of her identity seems to be constructed. Consider her poem ‘Name Journeys’:

[...] My name | a journey between rough and smooth, | an interlacing of banyan
leaves with sugar | cane. Woven tapestries of journeys; | travelling from South | to
North, where the Punjabi in my mouth | became dislodged as milk teeth fell |
and hit infertile English soil. | My mouth toiled to accommodate | the rough musicality
of Mancunian vowels | and my name became a stumble | that filled English mouths |
with a discordant rhyme, an exotic | rhythm dulled, my voice a mystery | in the Anglo
echo chamber – | void of history and memory.¹⁹

Where Mundair explores the significance of voice in this poem, there is clear resistance to what Graham Huggan aptly terms ‘the postcolonial exotic’ (2001), in which ‘marginality is deprived of its subversive implications by being rerouted into safe assertions of a fetishized

¹⁸ Stuart Hall, ‘Minimal Selves’, in *Identity: The Real Me*, ICA Identity Documents 6 (London: ICA, 1986): 46.

¹⁹ Raman Mundair, ‘Name Journeys’, in *Lovers, Liars, Conjurers & Thieves* (Leeds: Peepal Tree Press, 2003): 16.

cultural difference'.²⁰ Instead, Mundair reminds her readers of the role of both history and cultural memory in the formation of migrant identity. She writes of how she was unable to find any familiar reflections of her own identity, despite her efforts to accommodate the linguistic norms of her adopted country, in her poem 'Refractions':

I glean survival essentials | Thank you Thank you | Very much Very much | Please
Please | Sorry, so sorry ... | Is this the queue? | But now tell me, how | do you say that
which can not be spoken | in any language? How do you say | I think I do not exist? |
How do you speak, | where there are no images of self to claim?²¹

This poem shifts the focus from 'different voices' towards the visual signifier of 'different skin'. Interestingly, her explorations of both 'othered skin' and 'othered voices' suggest that neither can serve as an accurate guarantor of interiority. Jacques Lacan suggests that 'the effect of mimicry is camouflage [...] It is not a question of harmonizing with the background, but against a mottled background, of becoming mottled'.²² Rejecting the physicality of one's natural voice necessarily confuses the sense of self. Within 'Refractions', the speaker's attempt to blend in with the dominant culture simply serves to internalise her sense of cultural inadequacy. This supports Frantz Fanon's argument that the internalisation of an inferiority complex is actually an 'epidermalization of this inferiority'.²³

Among the most obvious cultural signifiers of cultural difference within these two collections are the skins of those perceived as 'other'. Skin, as an imagined cultural and social trope, becomes a powerful and destructive metaphor for difference, with particular reference to the brown skins of South Asian immigrants and the white skins of those Anglo

²⁰ Graham Huggan, *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins* (London: Routledge, 2001): 24.

²¹ Raman Mundair, 'Refractions', in *Lovers, Liars, Conjurers & Thieves* (Leeds: Peepal Tree Press, 2003): 17.

²² Jacques Lacan, cited in Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994): 85.

²³ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (London: Pluto Press, 1986): 13.

Britons with varying levels of tolerance towards visible ethnic diversity. Hall argues that 'Identity is formed at the unstable point where the "unspeakable" stories of subjectivity meet the narratives of history, of a culture.'²⁴ The historical relationship between Britain and the Indian subcontinent inescapably informs the construction of a postcolonial Britishness, in which whiteness no longer holds the dominant reins within the ethnic power struggle characterising contemporary British society. The discrepancies between subjective perceptions of one's own experience and the grand narratives which historically inform culture on a larger scale are central to the formation of the identity of those who do not *visibly* spring from the centre of dominant culture. Skin itself becomes an important location of cultural confrontation within Mundair's poems. Skin serves as a crucial point of contact between those relegated to the margins and those supposedly inhabiting the centre of those relationships she unsentimentally portrays.

I support Hall's notion that the construction of identity is characterized by fluidity, and that migrant identity in particular is necessarily subject to multiple cultural influences that problematize the idea of a cohesively constructed identity. Despite convincing advertisements that suggest otherwise, it appears as if we have little control over the way our identities are socially and culturally assigned. Identity is not simply how we are recognized by the dominant society but is formed through a developing awareness of one's 'otherness' in relation to dominant culture. Frantz Fanon argues that:

In the white world the man of colour encounters difficulties in the development of his bodily schema. Consciousness of the body is solely a negating activity. It is a third-person consciousness.²⁵

²⁴ Stuart Hall, 'Minimal Selves', in *Identity: The Real Me*, ICA Identity Documents 6 (London: ICA, 1986): 44.

²⁵ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (London: Pluto Press, 1986): 110.

By becoming aware of the self, one is automatically taken outside the self to become an observer of one's own actions. Rather than experiencing life within the expected position of the 'first person', an awareness of one's own 'otherness' distances the subject from the essential self. Fanon's argument that this is a 'negating activity' suggests that to become aware of the otherness of self prohibits a full participation in a 'first person' relationship to everyday life.

It is not, then, ironic that an awareness of one's skin in relation to the skins of others is precisely what leads us to the adoption of what I call a 'second skin'? Second skin is differentiated from primary skin – that with which we are born – by its provisionality. The choice to assume the disguise of a second skin that *temporarily* camouflages our inborn epidermis is to manipulate how we are viewed by others. Examples of this second skin are temporary tattooing, the intentional tanning or bleaching of the skin, putting on costumes that act as disguises or even wearing 'ethnic' clothes from a culture not one's own, in order to *appear* connected with the culture these garments represent. The act of putting on this second skin is arguably a form of cultural appropriation, as the subject adopts what Jacques Lacan refers to as the 'identification' of the mirror stage. He describes this as 'the transformation that takes place in the subject when he assumes an image'²⁶ – I argue that this image could be that of the 'other' – in order to hide what is felt to be lacking in the self.

Raman Mundair addresses the alienating aspects of visual identity based on sociocultural perceptions of skin and second skins as the originating location of shame in her poem, 'Charity': '[...] your tall, skinny boy's frame | suited in the shame | of a Salvation Army | shop-bought suit | your mouth open, | fighting | for air.'²⁷ For the migrant child in

²⁶ Jacques Lacan, cited in *The Continental Philosophy Reader*, ed. by Richard Kearney and Mara Rainwater (London: Routledge, 1996): 328.

²⁷ Raman Mundair, 'Charity', in *Lovers, Liars, Conjurers & Thieves* (Leeds: Peepal Tree Press): 45.

Mundair's poem, the second skin of his visibly second-hand – though undoubtedly British – suit is unable to mask the visible 'otherness' of his perceived class position. Within this context, no second skin can successfully enable this child to appear visibly neutral, as the politicised 'otherness' inherent in his presentation prevents this child/object from entering what Fanon describes as 'a zone of nonbeing, an extraordinarily sterile and arid region, an utterly naked declivity where an authentic upheaval can be born.'²⁸ The inability of this child to adopt a socioculturally neutral position posits him in a role where anger and a lack of agency could naturally give rise to cultural rebellion. Mundair writes of how she, a 'Punjabi Alice' was 'transported to England', where 'she found no true reflection of herself [...] but mirrors which dissolved, shrank and obscured her size'.²⁹ This directly reflects the power balance she writes into the little boy in 'Charity', who was also unlikely to have had any say in the matter of being uprooted and transplanted into a strange land where his very skin provides visual proof of otherness.

Mundair continues her critical examination of the defiant potential of adopting second skins in her poem 'Light Relief'. In a blatant rejection of unwanted gender expectations thrust upon her by an insensitive lover, she writes of how:

The women of your fantasy are as diverse as you are inconsistent. | There is the woman who dances like a courtesan | but whose modesty is as dark as a hijab [...] | There is the woman who slips effortlessly into the dead | woman's clothes that hang in your wardrobe [...] | The women of your fantasy are as diverse as you are inconsistent, | and you demand me to wear them, like the dead woman's clothes | in your wardrobe. But did I not mention: last season's look | has never been my style,

²⁸ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (London: Pluto Press, 1986): 10.

²⁹ Raman Mundair, from back cover of *Lovers, Liars, Conjurers & Thieves* (Leeds: Peepal Tree Press).

and crushing my esteem | so that it fits into your rhythmic, lubricated palm | never my
desire, fantasy or fashion.³⁰

This woman sees the costumed potential of adopting another character through the medium of garments as disempowering and degrading. She adopts a position of power and refuses to fall into the guise of exoticised Asian woman. This woman subverts the Orientalist discourse that would render her obedient, submissive, and above all, unquestioning. Although I argued early on in this essay that Mundair clearly rejects the role of British Asian cultural spokesperson, some of her poems could be seen as a battle cry to anyone who finds themselves ‘othered’ to learn to celebrate rather than subjugate, their difference.

The poem ‘A Choreographer’s Cartography’ offers an antidote to the plight of many non-white arrivals to the UK, whose ‘othered skins’ are unexpectedly welcomed not with tolerance but suspicion: ‘[...] Rethink, | re-scale, re-form, re-shape | cultural boundaries to create | physiques full with emotional geography. | You need no passport for pliant limbs | loose with joy. No visa, | no nationality needed for loving | kindness; claim your right for asylum | here – this earth – everyone’s sanctuary.’³¹ The celebratory abandon with which this poem suggests a relationship between the physical body and its right to exist without external cultural validation reminds me of the first of five developmental stages that I have suggested (2009) first- and second-generation migrants often pass through, including: 1) *an unrealistic expectation of the host community*; 2) *a rejection of and by the host community*; 3) *a melancholic nostalgia for the culture of origin*; 4) *a search for a new domestic community*; and most crucially 5) a recognition of the need to *renegotiate the boundaries of the domestic, extended-family unit* so they can reflect the changing social structures of multicultural,

³⁰ Raman Mundair, ‘Light Relief’, in *Lovers, Liars, Conjurors & Thieves* (Leeds: Peepal Tree Press, 2003): 49-50.

³¹ Raman Mundair, ‘A Choreographer’s Cartography’, in *A Choreographer’s Cartography* (Leeds: Peepal Tree Press, 2007): 57.

postmodern, postcolonial Britain.³² While I revel in the playful beauty of this poem, the scholar in me suspects that, the ‘exuberant xenophilia frequently finds its nemesis in the xenophobia of the dominant host culture in which anything different is greeted with suspicion rather than open arms’.³³

However, the experiences of Black and Asian Britons are understandably not characterised by these stages, as they are not arriving from elsewhere, but are already home. ‘Where are you from – really?’ is an aggressive question too often addressed to those Britons who are reductively judged to be other due to nothing more than a perceived difference of skin colour. To the overtly racist challenge faced by the narrative persona in Jackie Kay’s poem ‘In My Country’, ‘*Where do you come from?*’, the response is magnificent: ‘Here. These parts.’³⁴ Kay joins Black British writers such as Andrea Levy in the assertion that it is time to redefine the invisible boundaries of what is rightfully British. Their writing arguably interrogates the idea of an impossible homogeneity within British culture even as it confidently claims the mantle of contemporary British writing that characterises the new canon embracing multiracial identities.

Powerful Black British voices such as Kay’s, Levy’s and Munday’s avoid the simplistic reductivity of rainbow multiculturalism through their confident assertions that Britishness is wider and more ethnically diverse than ever, as a direct result of colonization. They do not avoid the politics of racial inequality in their work. The idea of the subject traditionally being the maker of meaning and the object, the bearer of meaning, is interrogated within the creative outputs of these powerful voices. The uncomfortable irony is that within such poems as Munday’s ‘An Elegy for Two Boys’, those portrayed in the poems

³² Devon Campbell-Hall, ‘Renegotiating the Asian-British Domestic Community in Recent Fiction’, *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 45/2 (June 2009): 171.

³³ Devon Campbell-Hall, ‘Renegotiating the Asian-British Domestic Community in Recent Fiction’, *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 45/2 (June 2009): 174.

³⁴ Jackie Kay, ‘In My Country’, in *Other Lovers* (London: Bloodaxe, 1993): np.

are shown not to be the forgers of their own destinies, as should be taken for granted, but fatally objectified ‘others’. She interrogates the racist murders of Stephen Lawrence and Ricky Reel with angry energy: ‘Your fingertips trace | the A-Z veins | and change the cartography | of the metropolis. | Have travel card will travel | zones 1-6 the world | your oyster, but London | killed you.’³⁵ Superimposing the transportation map upon the identity of these boys is a stark reminder of how far our culture has yet to go in widening the definition of what it means to be British. The voice of narrative truth within this poem is far more likely to haunt the reader than objective news stories of the brutal murders of these two young men.

Paul Ricoeur argued that ‘just as narrative fiction does not lack reference, the reference proper to history is not unrelated to the “productive” reference of ... narrative’.³⁶ Ricoeur’s suggestion indicates that events are more likely to be remembered as a part of ongoing life if they are written down – or represented – even if this is documented via fiction or poetry rather than direct reportage. He appears to recognise that although poetry is not a replacement for sociological study, it can indeed have significant moments of intersection with culture, and thus, is in itself a valuable repository of alternative narrative ‘truths’. Using Ricoeur’s notion of the importance of literary representation, I have considered how poetry can be used as a culturally significant indicator of the climate of racial, class, and gendered integration of supposedly ‘othered’ Britons into the centre of dominant culture. Aijaz Ahmad has pointed out that:

[O]nly since the late 1960s has Britain [...] seen the coming-of-age of expanding new strata of Black British who have demanded, on the basis of schooling and professional competence, new kinds of middle-class representation, premised as much on non-

³⁵ Raman Mundair, ‘Elegy for Two Boys’, in *Lovers, Liars, Conjurers & Thieves* (Leeds: Peepal Tree Press): 79.

³⁶ Paul Ricoeur, ‘On Interpretation’, in *The Continental Philosophy Reader*, ed. by Richard Kearney and Mara Rainwater (London: Routledge, 1996):43.

racist assimilation into employment and property structures as on recognition of cultural difference.³⁷ (1992: 83)

Surely Raman Mundair and her contemporary Black British poets have the literary gifts to artistically respond to this new breed of middle-class representation – they tell the stories of a new generation of Britons, for whom skin and accent are significantly less important than intellect and voice, and for whom the constraints of history will eventually become a distant memory.

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³⁷ Aijaz Ahmad, *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures* (London: Verso, 1992): 83.

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