‘Whitely’: Race and Lyric Subjectivity in Clare Pollard’s Poetry

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A few years ago, I was among a group of poets granted early access to the Bloodaxe Books archive at Newcastle University’s Robson Library. In my time in the special collections of the Robbo, as it’s known, I found myself drawn to the years of correspondence between Neil Astley, Bloodaxe’s founding editor, and his many authors and prospective authors.

I noticed Selima Hill’s tendency to decorate, not just the pages of her letters, but her envelopes as well. It became possible after a while to tell a Selima Hill letter apart from the others. I found letters exploring the complex processes of poetry translation, with translator, poet, and publisher working together towards poems in English that carried over the sensibility of the original. The materials, spanning several decades, provided me with an invaluable window onto changes in the literary climate that mark Bloodaxe as a crucial player in the establishment of an expanded field within recent British Poetry.

I was also given a glimpse into the approaches that various poets made to Neil, and vice versa, and it was in this reading process that I came across Clare Pollard’s manuscript for *The Heavy Petting Zoo* (1998), a book written in Pollard’s mid-to-late teens in response to which she was given the curious appellation, ‘the bad girl of British Poetry’ (Smith np). While the description of Pollard’s work in these problematic terms feels dated, or like marketing spin to make something of her youth in the times that gave Britain the term ‘ladette’ as a way of classifying, and

denigrating, a new generation of confident young [usually working class, usually white] women, I think that this reading of a 'bad girl' sensibility into the work has to do, at least in part, with how Pollard's speakers destabilize acceptable modes of being for young white women.

I'm struck, reading the *Heavy Petting Zoo* now, by how, even at an early stage in her career, Pollard's boldness feels especially attuned, most especially in the way she examines white womanhood as a raced subjectivity. Take the title poem, 'The Heavy Petting Zoo', for example, which explores the idea of pressure to be sexually active perhaps before one is truly ready; a pressure which, in the speaker's reality, has a racialized aspect. At the poem's close, the speaker muses on feelings of sexual awkwardness that arise from a gulf between what she is expected to do and what she chooses for herself:

> Yet in your small child's heart you knew
> That if he'd called you, you'd have followed him as she did.
>
> As a lamb does, whitely and without question. (p.13)

The wrenching of that word, 'whitely', into adverbial form has fascinated me since I first read the poem but coming back to it in my exploration of the Bloodaxe archive illustrated a level of allusion and design across Pollard's corpus that I hadn't apprehended before.[ii]

This passage feels an important point of ingress because the self-consciousness of the word 'whitely' in the context of a poetics that is characterised by syntactical care. It seems unlikely that the word was chosen arbitrarily; and so it feels possible to suggest that Pollard wants to gesture

not just to the symbolic potential of the lamb – by dint of its association with innocence, and by extension holiness, through its 'whiteness' – but also to the idea of the young white woman in the context of structural racism as the chaste repository of white 'honour'. Consider, here, the trope in white supremacy of the 'race traitor'; a white woman considered of equal subordinate standing with the racialized other because she deigns to sully herself by consorting with *them*. It is the coincidence of this allusive quality in Pollard's work with ideas of white womanhood as a raced subjectivity, as well as the politics of that raced subjectivity, that form the focus of this essay.

In his book, *White,* Richard Dyer expounds on the importance of rendering whiteness explicit:

> As long as race is something only applied to non-white peoples, as long as white people are not racially seen or named, they/we function as a human norm. Other people are raced, we are just people. (p. 1)

As important as this exhortation is, Dyer makes a category error in failing to look at the intersecting dynamics that make up the image of a normative person. It is clear from looking at the design of contemporary life (from working culture, maternity and paternity expectations, to the design of consumer goods), that the phrase 'just people' doesn't stand in merely for white people in general, but usually for white men, of a certain class, who are typically cis, heterosexual, and abled. In addition to this, they are of average height and weight, and they are overwhelmingly neurotypical. So, whiteness is not the only category of subjectivity we need to make explicit in order to better

challenge the status of those who ‘go without saying’ in our societies; those who are, in short, gifted with hegemonic capital.

If we turn this perspective on Pollard’s poem, we see the speaker in a renewed light as gendered as well as racialised and therefore vulnerable to the kind of violence that might undermine her agency, casting her as the lamb with a ‘child’s heart’ who ‘follow[s] […] without question’. While there is the sense here of the beginnings of a conscious sexuality, there is also a sense of the power dynamics on which sexuality is predicated particularly in the heteropatriarchal norms of structural whiteness. Dynamics which compromise true consent, conceptualizing sexual desire not as an exchange based on intimacy but rather on the fulfilment of the male through the objectification of women. It is these dynamics, I contend, that form the basis of Pollard’s lyric subjectivity in poems that span her entire career. Indeed, from ‘The Heavy Petting Zoo’ we can draw a thematic thread to later poems like ‘Thinking of England’, ‘The Skulls of Dalston’, ‘The Panther’, and ‘The City Dweller Laments’, among others. For reasons of space I’ll focus on two of these.

To begin with, I want to dwell, asynchronously, on ‘The Skulls of Dalston’ from the book *Changeling* (2011). I read this poem first in the now defunct *Penpusher* magazine and, like ‘The Heavy Petting Zoo’, it is a poem I have been thinking about for some time. For the purposes of this essay, I’ll examine ‘The Skulls of Dalston’ in relation to discourses on race and gender, and discuss the influence of Pollard’s lyric subjectivity, as rendered in this and other poems, on my own practice.

It seems important at this juncture to explore a little context. The poem is set in Dalston, an area of Hackney, in East London, at a time of tension between the settled inhabitants of that borough, a constituency which, for decades, consisted of a mixture of first- and second-generation immigrants along with those white people who could not afford, or felt disinclined, to move away to somewhere 'leafy'; a dog-whistle term standing in for access to nature, affluence, racial, and cultural homogeneity. The phenomenon of 'white-flight' from areas like Dalston followed patterns of immigration into London's poorest areas, those with cheaper housing stock, from the 1950s onwards—as the UK drew on 'the commonwealth' to bolster its war-ravaged workforce. In London, and cities like it, this created a new inner-city underclass, with the attendant social problems of clustering people in areas unfit for purpose. This, in turn, gave rise to the proliferation of discourse calling such areas *no-go zones* in a familiar strategy of demonizing the poor. Because of this, there followed a campaign (led by successive governments under a variety of auspices) to gentrify inner cities, which meant that those who had lived in an area for decades were pushed out in favour of new residents with more financial capital (Taylor np).

In the poem 'The Skulls of Dalston', Pollard's speaker is, at least partially, aware of these dynamics:

> I'm trying to think this 'edgy' –
> white, pushed here by price –
> when I pass a boy. Just us on the street.
> He drifts through pale air, white air, focused,
> jeans low, whole crotch on show, face blacked
> by his hood's shadow. Our eyes don't meet.
> Why would they? We are not on the same street. (p. 54)

The poet and scholar Major Jackson would call ‘The Skulls of Dalston’ a ‘poem of racial encounter’, a term he uses to classify poems written by white authors in which blackness is presented in an othered context, in which blackness cannot stand in for common humanity (p.20). For Jackson the giveaway that delineates such a poem is a lack of agency on the part of the described and an unwillingness in the speaker to be in relation with them. This is, then, an objectifying kind of a poem. However, if we read Pollard’s words in the light of her wider oeuvre, we see that the objectification goes two ways. There is a sense, here, of mutual subjection to a systemic imperative. This is clear from the disempowering note struck by the phrase ‘pushed here by price’ when coupled with the fact of the ‘boy’ moving through an atmosphere that, in its fabric, in the very ‘air’, is not accepting of his presence. In this context there can be no common humanity because systems prevent it; forcing a situation in which these two people ‘are not on the same street’. This last is a telling choice of words as it points to the failure of kinship, an important component of cohesive, empathetic, social relations. The use of chromatic imagery in the poem (‘white’, ‘pale’, ‘white’, ‘blacked’, ‘shadow’) forms another part of a motif that runs throughout the poem, casting an analytical perspective on racialized values as Pollard’s speaker plays with the politics of description. So, while the ‘boy’ in this scene of racial encounter is being othered, the othering aspects of gender as they relate to whiteness are also explored:

> And he’s watching for the Love of Money crew
> the DNA Boys, the Murder Dem Pussies,
> and I’m looking at the Arcola theatre, up-
> and-coming shows, acting out a play in my head:
> rape – the spurt of blood – stairwells –
> I am rehearsing a play called Hell. (p. 55)

The poem's speaker is conscious that her fear of gendered violence from a black, or ostensibly black, man is socially constructed because she is 'rehearsing a play' in her head or, put another way, she is projecting a violent outcome. Even with this knowledge, though, she feels the threat as a genuine possibility. This threat is only partly a function of her racism, though, being also reflective of a preoccupation Pollard's speaker has with the threat of sexual violence, a preoccupation which mirrors the lived experience of all women, and people of minoritized gender identities, under patriarchy. The speaker's attitude, then, serves to re-inscribe white supremacy not just because the speaker makes assumptions about the 'boy' based on his physical appearance, which is 'blacked' by his clothing, but also because, by casting herself in the role of vulnerability, a subject position we can read with a historical lens as one to which white women are consigned by structural racism and the objectifying nature of sexism, the poem's speaker advances the poem's central irony. In this formulation the 'boy' can only ever be an aggressor and the speaker can only ever be a victim. They are both doomed to occupy fixed subject positions, but even this doesn't serve as common ground between them (either in the literal or the figurative sense). The crepuscular setting of the poem is not coincidental, either. The scholar of critical race studies, Rachel Van Duyvenbode, reminds us of the importance of shadows in literary texts as ways of underscoring racialized sexual threat:

> Interestingly, these shadows, hovering amidst the domestic and sexual spaces, allegorize a deeper instability permeating Southern discourse: that of the blurring of racial identities and the threat of miscegenation. (p. 204)

So, while the speaker espouses racist views, she is rendered abject by them also—precisely because her fearfulness is encouraged, under the foundational principles of white supremacy, as a means of control, a means by which racial and sexual 'purity' can be maintained.

When I first read this poem, perhaps because of male privilege, this irony escaped me and the poem angered me – in a way it still does – but I think there is something valuable that the poem achieves, too, in rendering a racialized and gendered dynamic visible. Yes, we should take issue with the white female speaker casting any black man she encounters in the aggressor's role, but if we do this without understanding the way this sense of sexual threat is systemic then we fall into an oversimplification that re-inscribes violence rather than making a space for healing.

What I find especially valuable in this poem is the space it affords for critique, the way it renders whiteness as provisional rather than just a normative mode from which all other subjectivities deviate. The poem is uncomfortable; I refute and dislike many of its sentiments. And yet it was generative to my own work because it made me respond. After reading this and other poems of racial encounter, I began re-engaging with ideas of representation in my work. I started out, as a poet, with the project of trying to represent blackness, and at some point, I fooled myself into thinking that, by subordinating race as a subject in my poems, and adopting poetic modes favoured by established white male poets, I might show myself to be *above such matters*. It didn't occur to me then that a frequent criticism of work by minoritized people, a way of silencing that work, is that it is only interested in identity politics. I was playing directly into the hands of established power structures. The focus of Pollard's poem on the issues of race and gender opens a space for dialogue because it makes race an apposite subject for anybody and not just a subject for 'non-white people'.[iii]

Major Jackson also finds value in poems written from within structural whiteness in this way. Such poems render structural imbalance in an unpalatable form. The unwillingness of the poet to soft-pedal the prejudice of the speakers in the poems shows us the insecurities at the heart of structural whiteness; the insecurities that have been used historically to justify racial separatism as a matter arising from biological fact, related to the natural order of things. It seems to me that Jackson is right, and we cannot make headway, in the republic of letters or anywhere else, unless we are willing to put all our cards on the table. To write into and through our prejudices and to make a space in the work for meaningful critique.

The theme of racialized discomfort underlies another of Pollard's poems exploring lyric subjectivity, 'Thinking of England'. In this poem the speaker attempts to reconcile her sense of pride in her nation with the fact of that nation being a former colonial power; a legacy that has afforded her certain privileges:

> These people held the cargo of my genes within their blood.
> Not all were good.
>
> But how can I be held up as accountable?
> And yet, all of the good they earned, and blessed me with
> brings with it blame. Today I filled a form in –
> ticked *White British* with a cringe of shame.

I am educated, middle-class, housed, well.

I am fat and rich on history's hell. (p. 19)

The tension explored here is rendered in refreshingly blunt terms. The central conflict of the speaker is that, as a beneficiary of institutional privilege, they draw from a wellspring that is problematic by design, being formed of manifold atrocities. The reflection that expressing pride in one's Englishness means expressing pride in this tainted history is a rare perspective from someone 'proud to be English', because it does not work on the basis that these colonial exploits were the natural order of things but ventures instead a perspective that accommodates 'shame'. By including this word in the semantic field of whiteness, Pollard writes into a deep fissure at the heart of white self-identification, the idea of being accountable, because of one's whiteness, for the wrongs of one's forebears. The poem offers no easy solutions as to where blame might rest but it does offer a mode of poetic plain-dealing from which poets writing about race might draw inspiration. As Claudia Rankine makes clear, one needs to observe the attitudes and behaviours of people in order to fully apprehend the way race functions (p. 11). If, in writing about race, white writers cannot make space for shame, for history, then they participate in a literary culture that is either hyper-defensive or one so laden with apology as to obscure the possibility for meaningful exchange. In presenting a speaker caught between the extremes of pride and shame, Pollard moves the reader into the uncomfortable territory where genuine critique becomes possible.

Through this long poem, Pollard can muse on the contradictions that underpin national pride, adding layers of nuance to the perception we have when we think of whiteness as being innately linked with Englishness. While the poem's speaker thinks ahistorically, in the crucial

sense of failing to consider Englishness an always-unstable racial category, she does, at least, include a wider range of historical matter than is ordinarily possible in the euphemistic terms that race often operates:

> England's history is medieval pogroms;
> it is Elizabeth, her skin a crust of Dover-white,
> loosing galleons to pillage fruits, tobacco, men.
> […]
> and the slave-trade; and raping the wife –
> lie back and think of... crinolines, Crimea. (p.19)

That the poem is an extended riff of the phrase 'lie back and think of England', which was famously considered good advice for women embarking on their first sexual experiences with men, is – as I have suggested elsewhere in this piece – a part of a wider scheme in Pollard's work to present the intersection of gendered and racialized norms. This horrifying phrase is redolent of a kind of passivity we might recognize from Pollard's early poem, 'The Heavy Petting Zoo'; it connotes a situation of objectification in which a woman's value derives from her desirability to men and her willingness to satisfy their exercises of power over her. Here, as in several poems across Pollard's career, we are reminded of the historical disparity between men and women and the consequent problems of heterosexual relation. We might also consider here Pollard's engagement with the difficulties of childbirth and rearing in *Incarnation* or her frequent engagement in the act of creative revision, claiming a voice for women where history has denied

them one.[iv] On this last it feels important to say that, across the range of her work, Pollard doesn't limit herself to writing only about white women but rather that she offers an embodied sense of existing in that subjectivity perhaps because it is the one to which she has ready access. On reading, 'Thinking of England', then, the reader is being provoked to think anew about Englishness in a manner that recurs in Pollard's poetics. This is a poet who takes stock of events and attempts to apply a historical sensitivity. We find ourselves in this poem covering a span of material that includes racial disharmony in inner-city communities, the murder of Thomas Becket, the transatlantic slave trade, and the systemic culture of sexual violence which, for centuries, did not consider rape within marriage a criminal matter. The propulsive form of the poem serves to cement its role as a state of the nation address in verse because the lexical density is overwhelming; the poem seems poised to act on its readers rather than being read and reflected on quietly.

This idea of the poem, and especially the political poem, as a site of action, is a foundational aspect of Pollard's poetics.[v] This much we can glean not just from her poems but from her criticism – in its calls for, say, undermining the gendered assumptions of the muse/artist relationship, or participating in a renewal of the confessional mode in poetry –which serves to affirm the role of the poet as an actor in the affairs of public life.[vi] Here I'm brought in mind of my favourite writerly maxim, from Yusef Komunyakaa, which calls for poets and writers to not only write what we know but also what we are 'willing to discover'. In her commitment to a poetics that favours discomfort and full disclosure, I propose that Clare Pollard reminds us what it means to forsake complacency in writing about and through the intersection of racialized and gendered privilege.

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[ii] Here I must thank Sarah Howe whose phrasing I borrow from a conversation we had some while ago about the poem

[iii] A phrase I put in quotes to illustrate my skepticism as to its meaningfulness.

[iv] See, for instance, Pollard's *Ovid's Heroines*, (Tarset: Bloodaxe, 2013); Clare Pollard, *Incarnation*, (Bloodaxe, 2017)

[v] See her essay Clare Pollard, 'In Dark Times: Some Thoughts on Political Poetry'.

[vi] See her essays 'Getting Poetry to Confess' and 'The Female Poet and the Male Muse'.