

# Essay

## Lyric Violence, the Nomadic Subject and the Fourth Space *Sandeep Parmar with Bhanu Kapil*

'What is born in England but is never English?' What grew a tail? What leaned over and rested its hands on its knees? An immigrant has a set of complex origins, is from elsewhere; the monster is made, on the other hand, from local mixtures of organic and inorganic materials, repurposed teeth, selenium, lungs, pink lightning, public health concerns. [...] I thought I was writing about an immigrant. I was writing about a monster. Monsters don't incarnate. They regress. [...] What would I have written – what would have become of these materials – had I stayed in the UK?

– Bhanu Kapil, *Ban en Banlieue*

The lyric subject, the lyric 'I', was largely invisible to me until I crossed a border. To put it more accurately, it became noticeable only when I returned to England, where I was born, and into the sovereignty of its dominant poetic mode. Accustomed to a broader range in American poetry, my first encounter with the contemporary British lyric placed me where I felt I had no natural place. Its 'I' spoke from within a kind of integrated knowingness and belonging, even if anxious, transcending the self in favour of coherence. I, on the other hand, transformed into a curio of voice, an embodied other, vitrined like an artefact alongside those with whom I shared a passing resemblance or some common history. I didn't know where I was coming from until I arrived and became visible in this rarefied space. Yet the lyric, of course, has a complex historical relationship with subjectivity and individual voice, both within and beyond Britain's borders. But in its most prevalent sense, the lyric 'I' that interests me here will be familiar: it emerges from Romanticism – and averts its eyes during modernism – to find itself temporarily suspended in the epiphanic present of the poetic anecdote. Its border guards are the literary gatekeepers of shared assumptions about experience, language and tradition.

But perhaps the problem is not formal, but rooted in the ways that assumptions about individual voices are read within national idealisations of the state and its culture. Recent studies of the lyric by Gillian White and Jonathan Culler point to its use of addressability, of the poem's intersubjective relationship between the 'I' and the reader. Culler refers to the shaping of the lyric subject as a 'triangulated address' between the speaker and the reader via apostrophe. Yet neither White nor Culler's revisiting of the lyric or address discuss the specific and unique markers of race and the racialised subject. (It is acknowledged only by White in the final pages of her study *Lyric Shame*.) This in itself speaks to the supposedly transcendent nature of the lyric subject. To my mind, it is impossible to consider the lyric without fully interrogating its inherent premise of universality, its coded whiteness.

Alternatives to mainstream lyricism aren't without their own problems for the 'foreigner'. Anti-lyric poetics that emerge from poststructuralism undermine the coherence of a lyric subject, as well as lyric poetry's association with a kind of personal, direct expression of authenticity, sincerity and transcendent meaning. The poet David Marriott writes in his essay 'Signs Taken for Signifiers, Language Writing, Fetishism and Disavowal' that some postmodern poetic modes (US 'Language poetry', but this could equally apply to British avant-garde poetry) reject the lyric 'I' only to create their own 'fetishistic poetics of embodiment'. But to not need to recognise oneself, to render oneself without a voice, is only appealing or possible for those who have not been screened out, marginalised, silenced by the powers inherent in language itself. Like the exoticised subject, the absence of referentiality, of the lyric 'I', is an enactment of violence. But how do poets of colour embody the 'I'? How does it come to embody us? Is it no more than the dead metaphor of our universality, our being as other?

As postcolonial and feminist critiques of humanism remind us, universal values have for hundreds of years been encoded as male, white and heterosexual. Robin DiAngelo writes in her essay 'White Fragility' that 'whiteness' is the assumed 'universal reference point' for humanity that goes unchecked. 'White people are just people. Within this construction, whites can represent humanity, while people of color, who are never just people but always most particularly black people, Asian people, etc., can only represent their own racialised experiences'. Poets of colour and readerships as well as the literary market (publishers, reviewers, etc.) are to different degrees complicit, pre-determining voice and coherence in ways oblivious to the power dynamics that root them to an unbending literariness. And literariness points back, in both 'avant-garde' and mainstream poetry, to established traditions founded on aesthetic principles from which those subjects have been historically excluded. Dorothy Wang states 'There is no one stable Asian American or Chinese American identity or subjectivity or point of view or poetic practice. The subjectivity of an ethnic American is not a thing or a content.' In her view, such thinking works against the absolute 'inseparability of the aesthetic and the sociopolitical'. In these contexts, and particularly in post-imperial Britain where colonial history remains undigested, many poets continue to carry the weight of their ethnic difference as subjects situated in the minority against a national culture that has not addressed its legacy of violence. Fixity and nostalgia, promulgated by majority and minority cultures, disempower the lyric present as a site of resistance or structural social change.

Looking for ways to rethink the lyric/anti-lyric dimensions of the 'I', the subject/citizen, the state, its universality and whiteness, I am drawn to the posthumanist theorist Rosi Braidotti's figuration of nomadic consciousness.

The point of nomadic subjectivity is to identify lines of flight, that is to say, a creative alternative space of becoming that would fall not between the mobile/immobile, the resident/the foreigner distinction, but within all these categories. The point is neither to dismiss nor to glorify the status of marginal, alien others, but to find a more accurate, complex location for a transformation of the very terms of their specification and of our political interaction.

British society, especially since Brexit and the rise of nativism and xenophobia, is founded on nostalgia and the very binaries Braidotti disputes. For Braidotti, 'The nomad does not stand for homelessness, or compulsive displacement; it is rather a figuration for the kind of subject who has relinquished all idea, desire or nostalgia for fixity'. An alternate space of becoming requires a rejection of culture that supercedes the complexity of the individual. I acknowledge that for some – for the very recently immigrated, the exile, the refugee, for whom citizenship offers a longed-for stability – these are not necessarily tenable or desirable ambiguities. Nomadic consciousness is rather an aesthetic solution to an essentialised othering through which poetic modes and traditions, the market and its reader objectify those who assimilate or adapt and refuse to threaten fixed cultural hierarchies and borders.

In 1947, when Punjab (until then part of British India) split in two, an estimated two million people perished. The flux of refugees as a result of Partition is still possibly the largest single mass migration ever recorded. The resulting trauma was compounded – and still is – by a historical silence borne from new fervent nationalisms on both sides, Pakistan and India (and present-day Bangladesh). When one considers that a mere fifteen or twenty years later many of these one-time British subjects, suddenly made refugees, would immigrate to England in search of work, it is perhaps not surprising that these immigrants often formed tight-knit communities when they arrived. In some cases, like that of my own family, Indians who came to England in the 1950s and '60s could trace their friends and neighbours not to the India they left, but to the Pakistani village from which they had fled, a ghostly reminder of their own multiple, layered itinerancies. The long-term effect of a single generation twice removed from 'home' is measurable in the lives of their descendants, often still faced with a sense of non-belonging though they are, at least technically, British citizens.

These coordinates of being – not bodies or identities, but points on a vector from India, to the UK, to the US, and sometimes back or elsewhere – were the starting point for a shared experiment between me and the poet Bhanu Kapil. Before 1947, our families lived within miles of each other. Since then, we've shared similar journeys. We thought instead of a fourth space – something else. We are still thinking of it.

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**SP:** *My way in is my way out.*

Reading the *Odyssey* at fourteen in my grandmother's front room. Telemachus at the marketplace. The colour

of his tunic. The glare of his hardware. The way he casually addressed the grey-eyed goddess who had the power to wring his life from breathing. I read it twice listening to Vivaldi and the colours of longing were the motile sheen of grain.

That summer my sister and I were monsters all season with our female obstacles and short frayed cut-off jeans. The boys down Normanton Road hollered, flicking lit matches at my cousin who'd spurned one of their gang. We bought Pre-Raphaelite postcards of Hylas and the Water Nymphs, the Danaïdes. Our grandmother warned us not to sit in the window. We became women and put away our bodies. She worried about us leaking all over her good standing.

I clear a path to retrace my steps.

So many hours at the loom was wifedom and a slow unpeeling of what fathoms, who knew? Tides or other dark unfoldings. Do not make knots. What is the scene we're pulling apart, nightly, when our suitors sleep off their fantasies of us?

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**BK:** *That summer my sister and I were monsters...*

'We heard from our neighbo[u]\*rs. They hid us. They helped us. The family on the other side of them.... slaughtered....all of them....the five daughters....and one night our neighbo[u]rs were on their roof, sleeping, and two of their own daughters, maybe seven and nine, saw, on the roof of that family, the family who had died, those five sisters, the daughters who had been....chopped up.... dancing, dressed in white, all white, salwar chemise, dupatta, everything, white. They saw it with their own eyes and woke up their parents. But then the girls, dancing, hand in hand, in a circle, singing a beautiful song, a quawaal, were gone. Our neighbo[u]rs wrote to us, a letter, and it reached us somehow. For many years, we stayed in touch'. – N

\*My computer registers the US spelling as incorrect, typing into: the document: you initiated. Then sent.

N is a woman in my family. She herself is an elder. We haven't spoken in four years; no, three years. She is something like an aunt. She is an aunt. We haven't spoken, though she told me this story the last time I was in Delhi, wrecked already by the lush October heat, its greens and oranges every day.

*I clear a path to retrace my steps.*

We haven't spoken because she found, she said, a sanitary pad on the floor of the room where I was sleeping. I went upstairs; it was an Always pad from the Safeway near my house in Colorado, wrapped in its plastic, intact. I came downstairs. I said: 'It slipped from my suitcase. I apologise. But it was not used'. She said: 'Who looked after your grandfather? It was me. Nobody thanked me. Who looked after your grandmother when she was dying? It was me. You're disgusting. You threw the dirty pad on the floor and now you are lying'.

*We became women and put away our bodies.*

The blood.

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**SP:** They saw it with their own eyes.

The plan of the hour. Breaking. Over their heads. Girls felled like trees by their fathers, brothers, uncles. For no one to carry them over a border or to put a sword in their hands. Swords are expensive and dull easily. Blows to the neck. Silence? Honour. *The blood.* I'm telling you the facts, plainly; you say *there are no plain facts*. This one irreparable night in a burning village is almost a century of hours folded together in darkness. I can't see these daughters and sisters dancing on the rooftops as N does. I would like to say to her there was no plan. That letters cross borders like bodies torn open unanswered. That there are only facts pouring seeds into an unlikely season.

B, I can't lie down in language as you do. In this place that shapes our bodies we can't see with our own eyes. I can't lie on the ground as you do. I would stop breathing.

*It was me.*

Back to Ithaca. How many women were thrown off like obstacles in the paths of heroes? Monsters every one of them. And who looked back, over a shoulder, to watch them shrink into ordinary women as the sailors departed? To see with their own eyes if they were dancing whitely in a dream? Is N setting her house in order? Or are you the memorised pattern she nightly pulls apart.

*It was me. Nobody thanked me.*

For what. The sudden logic, sharp as iron, that leaves us behind in this place we cannot see.

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**BK:** Because the taste of iron is the taste of blood in the mouth, or perhaps a remedy.

Or meat.

I remember diving into the lake in Ithaca at night, the fireflies like leopards in the bushes and grasses of the verge.

*To see with their own eyes if they were dancing whitely in a dream?*

S, in the gaps between our writing to each other, I forget to return. I forget to come here. I forget to write. Imagine leaving the gas stove lit, or the windows unbuttoned, or the grass up to the waist then the neck come July.

In the fourth space, the *memorised pattern* has been tugged loose, the yarn or wool or radical fibres on the floor like water.

A kind of water.

Is it hair?

I understand.

Neither can I, lately.

As I once did.

To reverse the star.

*'I can't lie on the ground...'*

Composite nomadism is like a mud-covered ruby, it's like rotating [touching] something again and again.

Similarly, our correspondence is glinty and European [recursive], and yet the 'burning village' is like a well.

The ghosts and monsters in our stories are seated\*\* at the bottom of the dank well, throats extended, mouths open ready to receive whatever's poured down there.

Down go the sparkles.

Down goes the particular language.

S, I have never corresponded with another writer with whom I share a cultural memory, the wandering and painted memory that is nevertheless washed off.

Curious, suddenly, I realise about the what and where of your grandmother's home. Can you describe a cushion cover? My complex eye doesn't know where to look. India? The north of England? LA?

\*\*Or so I imagine it.

Because: *there are only facts pouring seeds into an unlikely season.*

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All of Kapil's books differently and yet with tremendous repetition of traumatic detail give voice to the horrors of Partition, the effects of migration, intergenerational trauma and the loss (in this case too small a word) of family. She takes her epigraph to *The Vertical Interrogation of Strangers* from Hélène Cixous's *Utopias*:

Because she arrives, vibrant, over and over again, we are at the beginning of a new history, or rather a process of becoming in which several histories intersect with one another. As a subject for history, woman always occurs simultaneously in several places. (In woman, personal history blends together with the history of all women, as well as national and world history.).

Over the course of four years, between 1992 and 1996, she travelled the three countries with which her own narrative somehow intersected, India, England and the United States, interviewing Indian women by asking them a series of twelve questions. This project, Kapil tells us, became something other than an anthology of Indian women's voices. She writes: 'As I travelled between the countries of my birth (England), ancestry (India) and residence (America), I answered the questions for myself again and again'. In a

notebook or on scraps or stickers she affixed to shop windows or café tables, Kapil distributed and collected her own responses. The voices of the women she met became, in her words, 'pure sound' and 'shapes' that moved through the world as well as the 'methods' to describe her own body.

Kapil answers these questions differently ninety-eight times. Overlaying and disregarding the three specific sites and their borders, she determines the sounds and methods of the subject rather than its self. Amid these are images that recur throughout her books, in particular a gruesome memory – her mother's – of seeing women's bodies, their wombs cut from their stomachs, tied to trees along the border of Pakistan and India in 1948. In answering 'who are you and whom do you love' she writes: 'the distances between my body and the bodies of the ones I love: grow. They are limited by coasts. I have few questions to ask, but I do not know how to break the growing silence. I breathe in the salty mist, walk back along the wild, shifting edge of everything'. In response to 'who is responsible for the suffering of your mother?' she writes 'the subject is not the modern era, or the era we are living in now. The subject is not the metamorphosis of migrants, or the theory of limits, or the practice of seeing further into paintings. The subject is the human torso. Its dismemberment.'

Kapil's *Schizophrenie* handles the memories of the violent upheaval of Partition that survive in the imagination of her parents and grandparents' generation. *Schizophrenie* begins with a section titled 'Passive Notes':

For some years I tried to write an epic on Partition and its trans-generational effects: the high incidence of schizophrenia in diasporic Indian and Pakistani communities; the parallel social history of domestic violence, relational disorders, and so on. Towards the end of this project, I felt the great strength of the page: its ability, as a fibrous surface, to deflect the point of my pen. The paper, and then the screen, as weirdly reflective, repelling the ink or the touch. On the night I knew my book had failed, I threw it – in the form of a notebook, a handwritten final draft – into the garden of my house in Colorado. Christmas Eve, 2007. It snowed that winter and into the spring; before the weather turned truly

warm, I retrieved my notes, and begun to write again, from the fragments, the phrases and lines still legible on the warped, decayed but curiously rigid pages.

The resistant page – first to the pen and then to decay – engages with the impossibility of constructing narratives of trauma (particularly second-hand ones). But the curiously rigid pages also emblemise the irreconcilability of those histories for the subject wishing to return to the scene, a return through reverse migration to a 'country both dead and living that was not, nor ever would be, [her] true home'. For the immigrant – who is inherently, inescapably othered, she concludes: 'it is psychotic not to know where you are in a national space'. Her 'passive notes' form a subject that is marginal to the text itself, marginal to national borders, calling into question the centrality of an unwritten narrative, and the self that has no start or finish. One that is unfinished, that resists the violences of both coherence and negation. As a way towards – not necessarily arriving, but fluid, fluxive – the nomadic 'I' demands that our addressability be negotiated from multiple angles, from our many sites of being and from the strength of our shared resistance.

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Bhanu Kapil lives in Colorado where she teaches at Naropa University. She also teaches in Goddard College's low-residency MFA. She is the author of a number of full-length works of poetry/prose, including *The Vertical Interrogation of Strangers* (Kelsey Street Press, 2001), *Incubation: a space for monsters* (Leon Works, 2006), *humanimal [a project for future children]* (Kelsey Street Press, 2009), *Schizophrenie* (Nightboat, 2011) and *Ban en Banlieue* (Nightboat, 2015).