

The State of Poetry and Poetry Criticism in the UK and Ireland, Jan 2012 – Mar 2018

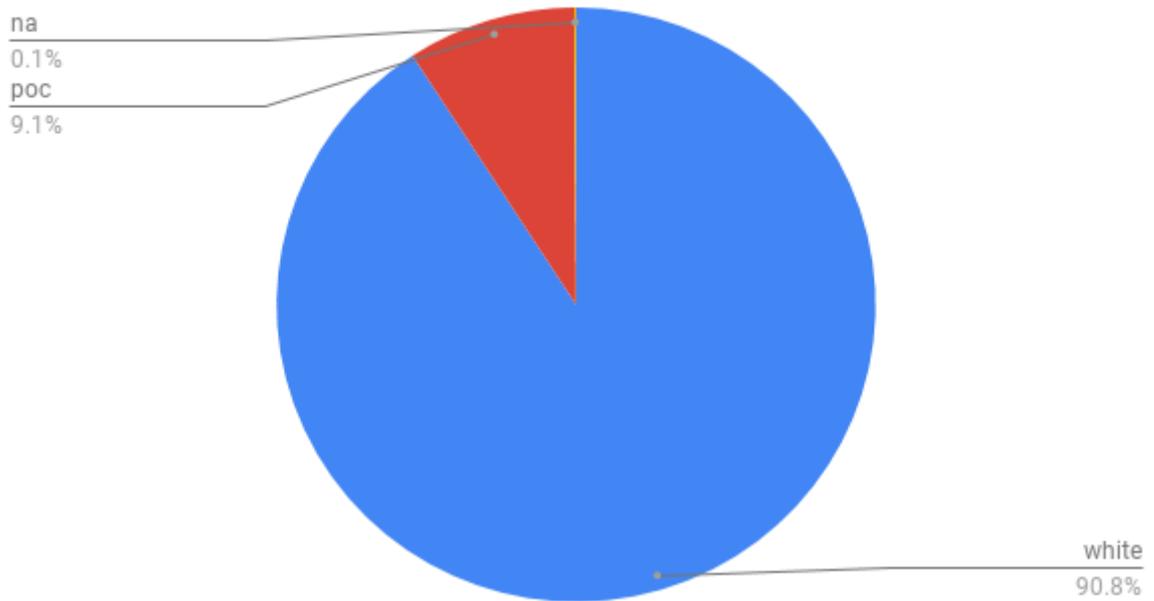
Poems

- Of the **19,993** poems in the data set, **9,185 (45.94%)** were written by women and NB people. This includes *Msllexia* and *Tender*, which only publish women and NB people.
- In **nine** of the thirty magazines surveyed, less than 40% of contributors were female or NB: *The Guardian* (36.1%), *Gutter* (39.9%), *Long Poem Magazine* (38.6%), *Modern Poetry in Translation* (34.4%), *Poetry Ireland Review* (32.7%), *PN Review* (32.8%), *Poetry Salzburg Review* (37.1%), *The White Review* (33.7%) and *The Wolf* (32.5%).
- **1,819 (9.1%)** were written by poets of colour. Of these, **502** were published in a single magazine, *Modern Poetry in Translation*. Without it, the total drops to **1,317 (7.01%)**.
- At the 2011 census, 12.9% of the UK population identified as BAME. Only **five** magazines surpassed this figure: *MPT* (41.8%), *Poetry Review* (17.8%), *Tender* (20%), *The White Review* (16.8%), and *The Wolf* (27%). *The Wolf* ceased publication in 2017 and *Tender* has not published since 2016.
- Also in 2011, 4.9% of the Irish population identified as BAME. None of the three Irish journals surveyed surpassed this figure: *Poetry Ireland Review* (2.3%), *Southword* (2.6%), *The Stinging Fly* (1.6%).
- In the UK, *Msllexia* published 7 poems by poets of colour (3.1%), and *The North*, 49 (3.2%).

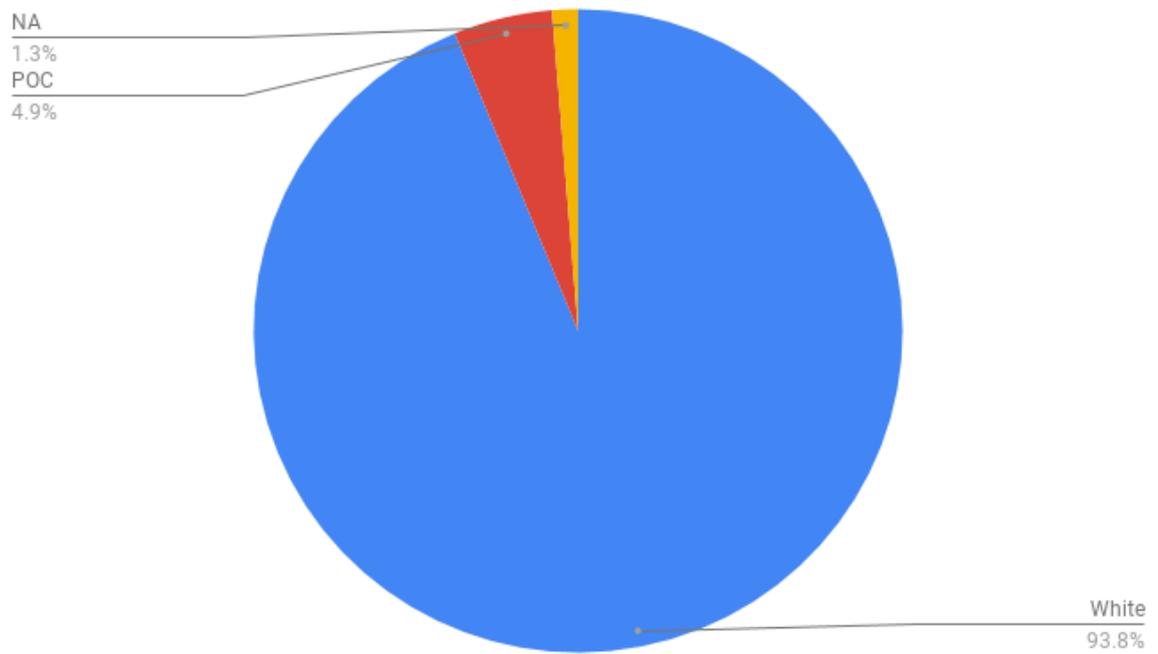
Poetry Criticism

- Of 2,894 articles published, **142 (4.9%)** were written by critics of colour.
- These 142 articles were written by **64** people. Of those 64, **41 (64.1%)** have only been published **once**. Only **eight (12.3%)** have been published **five times or more**.
- For comparison, 2,665 articles were written by 739 white critics. 348 (47.1%) were published once, 158 five times or more (21.4%).
- Of 4,845 books reviewed, **419 (8.6%)** were written by poets of colour.
- 1,346 (46.5%) of all articles were written by women/NB people. 2,044 (42.2%) of all books reviewed were written by women/NB people.
- Though female critics review more or less evenly across genders, male critics are twice as likely to review other men (30.7% of all reviews) than women (16.5%).
- Three magazines have published more than ten articles by critics of colour: *Poetry London* (32, 16.7% of its articles), *Poetry Review* (32, 13.4%), and *Sabotage Reviews* (23, 4.2%).

Distribution of race among UK/Ire poets, Jan 2012 - Mar 2018



Distribution of Race Among UK/Ire Poetry Critics, Jan 2012 - Mar 2018



The State of Poetry and Poetry Criticism in the UK and Ireland, Jan 2012 – Mar 2018: Analysis

The following research was made possible by the archives at the Scottish Poetry Library and the National Library of Scotland, and subsequently by Professor Sandeep Parmar and the Centre for New and International Writing at University of Liverpool, who have funded this research since January 2018.

The data is split into two sections: poetry, and who writes it; poetry criticism, who writes it, and about whom it is written. The data set covers issues of thirty magazines, published both in print and online, between January 2012 and March 2018. In pure numbers, this covers 19,993 poems and 2,894 critical articles reviewing 4,845 books. A note on terminology: *article* refers to a full published piece, and each article may contain one or more *reviews*.

The data refers to gender and race, and in somewhat limited terms. I am reliant on contributors' biographies for both, and where data has been at all inconclusive it has been marked *not available*. Regarding gender, where poets and/or critics have transitioned or changed pronouns since their original publication, I have done my best to have the data reflect their self-defined identities.

Regarding race, my terms are unsatisfactorily binary; this is, in part, due to greater accuracy often being impossible without self-reporting. The data uses the term *person of colour* rather than *Black, Asian and minority ethnicity*, which is more commonly used in these islands, partly to reflect the fact that a large proportion of the poets of minority ethnicity published in the UK and Ireland are based in other parts of the world.

The [2011 census reported](#) that people identifying as BAME comprised 12.9% of the total UK population, [4.9% in Ireland](#). It's worth considering that using 12.9% (or 4.9%) as a quota is insufficient not only because it is seven years out of date: particularly in *Modern Poetry in Translation*, the poets of colour published in UK magazines are very often based outside the UK and Ireland, rendering the figures for UK demographics less relevant as a benchmark.

There are many ways of printing work by poets of colour while maintaining their position as racialised other which cannot be expressed in mere numbers. Even if every magazine or newspaper published 12.9% poets of colour tomorrow, this would only represent a basic minimum of representation, and would not account for the years of inequality that preceded it. The responsibility must come back, ultimately, to the editors of each magazine; unless a concerted effort is made at the outset to publish inclusively and intersectionally, the data shows the final product will be very white and very male. There is no doubt in my mind that, with the means to conduct more involved research, these inequalities (both in quantity and prestige) would prove consistent along other lines of social exclusion. These qualifications should be borne in mind while reading the following analysis.

Poetry

This data was collected from the following twenty-nine magazines and websites: *Acumen, Antiphon Poetry, Bare Fiction, The Compass, The Dark Horse, The Guardian, Gutter, Ink Sweat & Tears, London Grip, Long Poem Magazine, Magma, Modern Poetry in Translation, Mslexia, The North, Oxford Poetry, Poems in Which, Poetry Ireland Review, PN Review, Poetry London, Poetry Review, Poetry*

Salzburg Review, *Poetry Wales*, *Prac Crit*, *The Rialto*, *Southword*, *The Stinging Fly*, *Tender*, *The White Review* and *The Wolf*, between January 2012 and March 2018. **Please note** that figures for *The White Review* are significantly incomplete due to gaps in library archives.

Only 9.1% of all poems published in the data set were written by poets of colour, 1,819 of the total 19,993. Of these, 502 were published in a single magazine, *Modern Poetry in Translation*; without *MPT*, the total drops to 7.01%.

Only five magazines surpassed the basic 12.9% noted above: *MPT* (41.8%), *The Wolf* (27%), *Tender* (20%), *Poetry Review* (17.8%) and *The White Review* (16.8%). *The Wolf* ceased publication in 2017, and *Tender* has not published since 2016; *The White Review* publishes fiction and poetry, and the 16.8% in this data set represents just 17 poems. *Antiphon Poetry* (3%), *Mslexia* (3.1%) and *The North* (3.2%) lag furthest behind.

None of the three Irish magazines came close to meeting the country's 4.9% figure for BAME people: *The Stinging Fly* (1.6%), *Poetry Ireland Review* (2.3%), and *Southword* (2.6%). That an overwhelming majority of UK and Irish poetry magazines are failing to meet even the most basic measurements of inclusivity should give some indication of the extent of the problem, and the scale of action necessary.

Some improvement has been made year on year. In 2012, 8.5% of poems were written by poets of colour, dropping to 6.9% in 2013, and holding steady at 11.9% in 2016 and 12% in 2017. As the data cited above suggests, however, these improvements are not distributed evenly. In 2017, for example, *Modern Poetry in Translation* and *Poetry Review* alone accounted for 140 of the 347 total poems published by poets of colour (40.3%).

On gender, 9,185 (45.94%) of poems were written by women and non-binary people. This figure includes *Mslexia* and *Tender*, which only publish women and non-binary people. Again, meeting a simple 50% should not be considered a success (not least because the UK population in 2011 was 50.9% female, and did not carry data for non-binary people), for similar reasons to those posited above.

Nine of the thirty magazines surveyed published fewer than 40% women and non-binary poets: *The Wolf* (32.5%), *Poetry Ireland Review* (32.7%), *PN Review* (32.8%), *The White Review* (33.7%), *Modern Poetry in Translation* (34.4%), *The Guardian* (36.1%), *Poetry Salzburg Review* (37.1%), *Long Poem Magazine* (38.6%), and *Gutter* (39.9%). It's noticeable that a few of these outlets have remarkably positive figures regarding racial inclusivity; *Poetry Ireland Review* (2.3% poets of colour), *Poetry Salzburg Review* (5.2%) and Scotland's *Gutter* (4.7%) do not.

Poetry by women and NB folk has also improved substantially since the start of the data set. In 2012 the figure was at 41.3%, rising steadily to 48.6% in 2017. This, of course, is still some way short of the bare minimum, and again, if every magazine published 50.9% women tomorrow, this would not redress inequalities so obviously present only a few years previously.

Poetry Criticism

This data is drawn from the same magazines as above, save for *The Dark Horse*, *Long Poem Magazine*, *Poems in Which*, *Prac Crit*, *The Rialto*, *Tender* and *The White Review*, which do not publish poetry reviews, and includes *Sabotage Reviews*, which only publishes reviews. A total of twenty-three magazines were surveyed.

People of colour are overwhelmingly excluded from critical conversations in these islands. Of the 2,894 articles in the data set, 142 (4.9%) were written by critics of colour. In total, only sixty-four critics of colour have had a review published since January 2012; twenty-six have been published for the first time since January 2016, and forty-one have only been published once (64.1% of the total). Only eight critics of colour have been published five times or more (12.5%). It's worth noting that 4.9% is a marked improvement from 2015 (1.7%) and 2016 (3%). 2017's figure of 7.8% is the highest it has ever been.

This total of sixty-four includes four Ledbury Emerging Poetry Critics, and twelve Complete Works fellows. Three of the eight critics of colour published five times or more are Complete Works fellows. These concerted efforts to promote work by both poets and critics of colour can take much of the credit for what positive change has taken place in the past two years.

For comparison, 2,665 articles were written by 739 white critics. 348 were published once (47.1%), 158 five times or more (21.4%).

Antiphon Poetry, *Southword* and *The Stinging Fly* have published no critics of colour since Jan 2012. *Magma* and *Poetry Ireland Review* have published one. *Poetry Wales* and *Mslexia* have published two. Only three magazines have published more than ten articles by critics of colour: *Poetry London* (32, 16.7% of its articles), *Poetry Review* (32, 13.4%), and *Sabotage Reviews* (23, 4.2%). These three magazines account for 61.3% of all articles by critics of colour.

On gender, 1,346 (46.5%) of all articles were written by women/NB people. Five of the twenty-three magazines surveyed published fewer than 40% female/NB critics: *Acumen* (24.6%), *PN Review* (25.3%), *Poetry Salzburg Review* (29.2%), *Poetry Ireland Review* (32.7%) and *Antiphon Poetry* (35.1%). Only *Sabotage Reviews* (61.8%), *The Compass* (68%) and *Mslexia* (100%) published more than 60%.

Though female/NB critics review more or less evenly across genders, male critics are twice as likely to review other men (30.7% of all reviews) than women (16.5%). This disparity rises to three times as likely at *The Guardian* (37.8% to 10.4%), four times at *PN Review* (47.8% to 11.4%) and five times at *Modern Poetry in Translation* (30.1% to 5.5%).

Conclusions

There are limits on how nuanced a response this data can occasion, given the factors discussed earlier in this post, but a few broad points are clear: i) poets of colour do not have access to a wide range of platforms for publication; ii) this exclusion is almost doubly true for critics of colour; iii) white male critics are the default at many publications, particularly those with male editors; iv) female/NB critics are asked to critique work by poets from a range of backgrounds in a way that men overwhelmingly are not.

A recent survey of employment in arts industries in the UK was published recently by [Create London and Arts Emergency](#). The survey found that 2.7% of employees in museums, libraries and libraries were from BAME backgrounds, 4.2% in film, television and radio, and 4.8% in music, performance and visual arts. That these figures are highly consistent with rates among poetry critics should not, perhaps, be surprising. The same economic factors that exclude people from creative industries nationwide are also in play in poetry; writing is work, relatively few people can afford to do it full-time, and relatively little is paid at all, let alone at a liveable rate. It is, to no small extent, true that without significant change at a social level, without widespread financial support for those who need it most, change within the poetry community will be difficult to realise and sustain.

It is vital, then, that magazine editors educate themselves regarding the barriers currently facing poets and critics and make a determined and durable effort to publish the work of marginalised writers. The data shows in stark terms what happens when little to no active effort is made to seek out and support them.

I take it as read that making art is a basic human need, and that meaningful participation in an artistic community is a fundamental aspect of meeting that need. The barriers currently in place come, at a macro level, via decades of rising social inequality enabled by consistent attacks on public services and resources that have benefitted wealthy white people and harmed everyone else. Create London reports that upper class employment in the arts has more than doubled since 1981 (15% to 33%) while working class participation has almost halved (22% to 13%). On a smaller scale, it should be no surprise that these factors, which disproportionately impede people of colour, have a profound effect on who has the spare time and resources to make meaningful contributions to poetry and poetry criticism.

If we take it as read that poetry is, at a simplified and basic level, one means of better understanding ourselves, other people, and the world we live in, it seems deleterious to the point of self-destruction to wilfully exclude so many backgrounds and experiences from the country's most visible platforms. The struggle to provide the kind of livelihoods that make participation in the arts a matter of course is a long and difficult one, but changes to editorial practices, as demonstrated in the past year by *Poetry Review* and *Poetry London*, are eminently achievable. What the Ledbury Emerging Poetry Critics scheme and *The Complete Works* have made clear is that a substantial number of talented writers of colour already exist, and the data in this study makes clear that the systemic exclusion of those writers is very real. I urge poetry editors throughout these islands to take notice and take action.