State of Poetry and Poetry Criticism 2020

DATA ANALYSIS – Ledbury Poetry Critics annual report

REVIEWS

The Poetry Review

_The Poetry Review_ is leading the way for its publication of reviews by non-white critics, publishing more articles by non-white critics than any other UK magazine or newspaper (63 in total since 2009). Since Emily Berry became full-time editor in Spring 2017, _TPR_ has published 44 articles by BAME critics (38.9 per cent of its output over that time), compared with just 19 over the previous eight years (6.1 per cent).

_The Poetry Review_ has been guest-edited by non-white editors four times: Bernardine Evaristo in Winter 2012; Kayo Chingonyi in Autumn 2016; Sarah Howe in Winter 2016 and jointly by Mary Jean Chan and Will Harris in Spring 2020. Over 34 per cent of the reviews in these four issues were written by non-white critics, more than double the magazine’s ten-year average of 14.9 per cent.

Looking solely at 2019 as an exemplary year, Berry’s Spring, Summer and Autumn issues published 13 articles by non-white critics (44.8 per cent). Colette Bryce’s Winter issue published only one non-white critic (11.1 per cent). But Mary Jean Chan and Will Harris’ Spring 2020 edition published a record seven non-white critics (77.8 per cent).

Poetry London

Changes at _Poetry London_ have also been dramatic: 22 review articles were written by non-white critics between 2009-2016 (9.8 per cent). This has risen to 28 articles between 2017-19 (30.1 per cent) – a huge three-fold increase since Ledbury Critics was founded. _Poetry London_ is the third most prolific publisher of non-white critics beside _The Poetry Review_ and _Wasafiri_.

The Poetry School

Despite only launching in earnest in 2016, the _Poetry School_ blog has published 31 articles by non-white critics (24.8 per cent), the fifth most in the data set. Of these, twenty were written by Ledbury Critics and the reviews editor is currently Sarala Estruch, a Ledbury Critic.

_Wasafiri_

Although _Wasafiri_, due to its multi-genre focus, has published relatively few poetry reviews compared to _The Poetry Review_ and _Poetry London_, it has still been one of the most consistent publishers of BAME poetry critics, totalling 51 since 2009. It should also be noted that _Wasafiri_ is also the only magazine to publish more than 50 per cent female and 50 per cent non-white poets. It was launched in 1984 as both a peer-reviewed academic journal and a literary magazine (not a poetry-specific platform) for ‘international contemporary writing’ that would ‘provide much needed literary and critical coverage of writers from
African, Caribbean, Asian and Black British backgrounds’. This fundamental focus on diversity and international literatures (not unlike *Modern Poetry in Translation*) somewhat sets it apart from many of the other publications in the dataset.

**Modern Poetry in Translation**

For a period between 2010-12, *MPT* was among the leading publishers of BAME critics, despite only publishing two or three articles per issue. This was largely due to half of all articles being written by Saradha Soobrayen, six of a total twelve (50 per cent of the total). This peak was followed by only two articles by non-white critics between 2013-16 (5.5 per cent).

However, since *MPT*'s editorship changed to Clare Pollard in Spring 2018, the magazine has begun to return to its 2010 record, publishing six articles by non-white critics (35.3 per cent); this is in harmony with a strong focus on non-European language poetry in *MPT*, particularly since 2015. Although the magazine has one of the lower rates of publishing women or non-binary people across the data set (only 15 per cent in 2011), since 2018 the magazine has been closer to gender parity.

Again it is worth noting that both *Wasafiri* and *Modern Poetry in Translation* specialise in literature from around the world, and a majority of their contributors are based outside the UK. This is not to diminish their achievements, but to acknowledge that they constitute a significant number of the non-white poets and critics in this data set. Without these two magazines, the proportion of non-white critics drops from 5.75 per cent to 4.81 per cent; the proportion of non-white poets drops from 9.04 per cent to 7.03 per cent.

*The Poetry School, Wasafiri* and *Modern Poetry in Translation* are the only magazines to publish more than 50 per cent women and non-binary critics and more than 20 per cent non-white critics.

**PN Review**

From 2009-2012, *PN Review* published more articles by non-white critics than any other magazine (18). From 2013-2019, however, *PN Review* published just 4 articles by non-white critics (1 per cent of its total output). As of writing, it has been two full years since *PN Review* published a review by a non-white critic.

Only 24.1 per cent of the magazine’s reviewers are women or non-binary people.

**Times Literary Supplement**

The *TLS*’s record on race and gender is uneven. There was a small surge of non-white critics published in 2012-14, during which time the magazine printed 18 articles by non-white critics (7.5 per cent), led by regular contributions by Kit Toda (6) and Vidyan Ravinthiran (5). The *TLS* swiftly returned to its pre-2012 form, however, publishing only 5 articles by non-white critics in the following four years (1.4 per cent of all poetry reviews). Although the *TLS* has published the fourth highest number of articles by non-white critics since 2009 (33), this only accounts for 3.5 per cent of its ten-year output, only fractionally higher than *PN Review*. 
Though the patterns noted above for Soobrayen, Toda and Ravinthiran may have more to do with the individual critic’s availability and choice, it does highlight a serious weakness in the critical ecosystem that even high-profile magazines find it difficult to call on more than one or two BAME critics.

Only 28.9 per cent of the TLS’s poetry reviewers are women or non-binary people.

London Review of Books

Between 2009-2019, the LRB published 105 review articles, all of which were written by white critics, all of which reviewed books by white poets. No other magazine in the UK has published more articles without a single non-white critic. It is the only magazine in our data set to have never published a review of a non-white poet.

Although the LRB focuses on collected or selected editions, including four reviews of various volumes of T.S. Eliot’s letters, it also reviews contemporary single collections, usually winners of major prizes. These include Jacob Polley’s Jackself (2014 T.S. Eliot Prize winner), Hannah Sullivan’s Three Poems (2018 T.S. Eliot Prize winner), and Robin Robertson’s novel in narrative poetry The Long Take, a poetic rarity in being shortlisted for the 2018 Booker Prize for Fiction. Since 2009, eight non-white poets have won either the T.S. Eliot Prize or Forward Prize for Best Collection, including Derek Walcott’s White Egrets, Claudia Rankine’s Citizen, Sarah Howe’s Loop of Jade, Ocean Vuong’s Night Sky with Exit Wounds and Vahni Capildeo’s Measures of Expatriation, and the LRB has reviewed none of these.

Only 17 of the LRB’s 105 reviewers are women.

Poetry Wales, Magma, Mslexia, The North, The Guardian

A recurring feature of the Ledbury Era is magazines with next to no history of publishing non-white critics opening up their professional networks. In each of the above cases, there is a marked difference between their records 2009-2017 – Poetry Wales, 1 article; Magma, 1 article; Mslexia, 2 articles; The North, 4 articles; The Guardian, 7 articles – and the two years since – Poetry Wales, 6 articles; Magma, 7 articles; Mslexia, 7 articles; The North, 8 articles; The Guardian, 9 articles.

Poetry Ireland Review, Southword

We’ve been delighted that some cultural organisers and editors in Ireland have begun discussing a similar emerging critics of colour programme, in association with Maynooth University’s Dr Catherine Gander and Poetry Ireland. There is a great deal of work to be done to promote poets and critics of colour in Ireland.

Although Southword ceased publishing poetry reviews in 2019, it published 116 reviews between 2009-2018, all by white critics. At Poetry Ireland Review, just one of its 221 articles was written by a non-white critic, back in 2013.

POEMS
Compared to the swift improvements in the number of non-white critics gaining publication, advances for non-white poets have been far more incremental. Between 2009-15, the figure remained between 6.9% and 8.4%. Since 2016, this figure averages at 10.6%, with a high of 12.5% in 2019, and a low of 9.6% in 2018. Broadly speaking, these figures follow quite closely the editorial decisions described above.

For example, *The Poetry Review*'s publication of non-white poets rose sharply under Emily Berry’s editorship; her three issues in 2019 published 27 poems by non-white poets (25.7 per cent); Colette Bryce’s issue published four (11.1 per cent); Chan and Harris’ issue published thirteen (44.8 per cent). Other guest-edited issues of the *Poetry Review* reflect this trend: Bernardine Evaristo’s Winter 2012 issue also published 27 poems by non-white poets (48.2 per cent) and Sarah Howe’s Winter 2016 issue published eleven (33.3 per cent).

At *Magma*, the Autumn 2019 issue, co-edited by Adam Lowe and Yvonne Reddick, published 29 poems by non-white poets. This was not only the most in any single issue in the data set, it was also higher than *Magma*’s other two 2019 issues combined.

The inverse is also true: the *Times Literary Supplement* and *London Review of Books* published fewer poems by non-white poets than any other magazine in the UK or Ireland. The *TLS* published ten, and the *LRB* seven (both 1.3 per cent); of these, only one was by a woman, Imtiaz Dharker’s ‘The Trick’ on 5 February 2016. In total, only 27 per cent of both magazines’ poems were written by women or non-binary people. The exclusion of women and the exclusion of non-white people, more often than not, go hand in hand.

It may be surprising, given their record on non-white critics, that *PN Review* is one of the more regular publishers of non-white poets, averaging above ten per cent across the data set (highs of nineteen (2009) and lows of two (2015) per cent); in terms of pure numbers, only *Modern Poetry in Translation* has published more. This makes the magazine’s exclusion of non-white critics disproportionate and puzzling. Like the *TLS* and *LRB*, however, *PN Review* has one of the worst records of publishing poetry by women, averaging 33 per cent over the past eleven years.