THE STATE OF POETRY AND POETRY CRITICISM
RACE AND REVIEWING: THE LEDBURY POETRY CRITICS PROGRAMME

2020 marks three years since the founding of the Ledbury Poetry Critics programme by Sandeep Parmar and Sarah Howe, in association with Ledbury Poetry Festival. In 2017, 4% of poetry reviews were written by critics of colour—that number is now closer to 10%.

Critical culture and commissioning and editorial practices have shifted undeniable towards the inclusion of non-white voices, largely thanks to the Ledbury Critics themselves and the contexts and opportunities their work has created and inspired. Ledbury Critics are now working in different parts of the US, planned by Vidyan Ravinthiran at Harvard University and with the support of Ilya Kaminsky, who hosted a Critics’ residency in 2019 at Georgia Tech University. Four American Ledbury Critics are making valuable interventions and laying the groundwork for a larger, expanded programme in the years to come. Likewise Catherine Gander at Maynooth University and Poetry Ireland are working closely with Ledbury’s organisers to develop an Irish critics of colour programme and to encourage diversity in reviewing among literary editors in Ireland. The following report, with Dave Coates’s data analysis commissioned by the University of Liverpool’s Centre for New and International Writing, sheds light on the state of poetry reviewing, publishing and prizes broadly in relation to racial diversity over the past ten years. A tumultuous year for global politics, race and health, 2020 also denotes colloquially a clarity of vision. We release this report knowing that how poetry is read and received by literary culture plays its own unique part in the struggle for racial equality, humanity and dignity.

KEY STATISTICS FROM THE REPORT INCLUDE

Between 2009 and 2016, British and Irish poetry magazines and newspapers published review articles by non-white critics

190 times
4% of the total for those years

Between 2017-19, in the three years since the launch of the Ledbury Critics Programme, critics of colour have been published on the same platforms

201 times
9.6% of the total for those years

Of those 391 articles written by non-white critics, 155 (39.6%) were written by fellows of The Complete Works mentoring programme, the Ledbury Poetry Critics mentoring programme, or both.

At the 2011 census, 12.9% of the UK population identified as non-white. Of the twenty-four magazines in the data set which published more than 50 articles, six surpassed this figure: Wasafiri (61%); The Poetry School (24.8%); Modern Poetry in Translation (23.4%); The Wolf (19.9%); Poetry London (15.8%); and Poetry Review (14.9%).

The London Review of Books has published 105 articles by 39 different poetry critics. All 39 were white. Those 106 articles reviewed 127 different books.

All 127 were by white poets.

100 were by male poets.
It is precisely this still pervasive, exclusionary literary culture that Ledbury Critics (alongside others like The Complete Works) has worked towards changing. The Times Literary Supplement's poetry editor, Alan Schmidt, who has co-edited the 124 essay reviews by multiple Ledbury Critics and met with them to discuss TLS reviewing, writes in his essay on this concern: What is at stake in 2019 that ‘diversity and inclusivity have become the official watermark of Arts Council England? All this has helped to create the conditions in which some flamboyant talents have been able to make the scene, on the page and in performance; it has also cast a few in a more garnet light.’ Here, Jenkins directly associates ‘diversity’ – that is, a marked increase in the quantity of non-white, working class, quee, disabled, and other marginalised groups – with familiar tropes of uniterchiefness ('flamboyance'). So often at the heart of concerns about diversity is the unfounded fear of a divorcing culture where what is seen to retain a traditional sense of cultural value and truth, and most dishearteningly, the maintaining discussion(s) about quality and value. The term ‘diversity’ cannot necessarily co-exist with diversity-driven critiques of mainstream white poets. Attempts to address profound and long-standing inequalities in British poetry and reviewing only enhance our shared literary culture – and this is evidenced by the deeply rich and uncompromising critical work the Critics have produced over the past three years.

And yet, on the whole, the Ledbury Critics have been received with open arms across our literary canon. The newspaper editor-poets across the UK and Ireland, of whom we are proud to report, have been so demonstrably made in the quarters of its greatest successes. As has been established in previous reports, the Ledbury Critics have spearheaded a profound change in critical culture in these islands. In terms of pure numbers, the difference the programme has made to the critical landscape is stark.

The twelve UK-based poetry critics account for 63 of the total 239 articles by critics of colour since 2009 (16.1%).

Just eight articles by non-white critics were published in 2009; but after a peak of 42 in 2014, and a trough of 13 in 2015, 79 reviews appeared in 2019, a clear record high.

It is worth noting that the eight critics of colour in 2009 include Jane Yeh, Kit Fan, Sarah Howe and Vidian Ravirhatan, all of whom remain important poets and critics. Yeh and Fan in particular have published such critical work more frequently in the past two years. Ravirhatan’s consistency, it is remarkable by itself; he is the only non-white critic to have published at least one essay every year since 2015. But what is most intriguing is that all of these critics – all of whom have been publicised by non-white critics – have been published within a period of cancellation. ‘Here Schmidt is conflating opinion, contrary argument, are promptly silenced by the authority of Black and Asian critics. Gaining entry into these editorial positions is produced. The Critics are in positions of (largely white) poetry editors as cultural brokers. How long would it take for parity to be reached? How long would it take for parity to be reached? How long would it take for parity to be reached? How long would it take for parity to be reached? How long would it take for parity to be reached? How long would it take for parity to be reached? How long would it take for parity to be reached? How long would it take for parity to be reached? How long would it take for parity to be reached? How long would it take for parity to be reached? How long would it take for parity to be reached? How long would it take for parity to be reached? How long would it take for parity to be reached? How long would it take for parity to be reached? How long would it take for parity to be reached?
POETRY CRITICISM

The London Review of Books has published 105 articles by 39 different critics. All 39 were white. These 105 articles reviewed 127 different books. At 127 were by white poets, and 105 were by male poets.

Of 8604 articles published, 391 (5.7%) were written by non-white critics. Of these 391, 201 were published in 2017-19, more than doubling the previous total.

Of these 391 articles written by critics of colour, were written by fellows of The Complete Works mentoring programme, the Ledbury Criticals Programme, or both.

Although The Times Literary Supplement is one of only five platforms to publish more than thirty articles by non-white critics, this constitutes just 3.5 per cent of their total output.

At the 2011 census, 12.9% of the UK population identified as non-white. This figure has fluctuated but is rising, from 29.6% in 2009 to a high of 45.7% in 2017. It has never been above 50%.

Of 10,685 books reviewed in the data set, 999 (9.3%) were written by non-white poets.

This figure stayed largely fixed between 2009-16, with a peak in 2012 (11%) and a trough in 2013 (4.9%). In the past three years, however, there has been a substantial increase in critical attention to books by non-white poets: 13.3% of all books reviewed in 2017, 15.5% in 2018, and 15.5% again in 2019.

Of 1604 articles published, 2692 (39.5%) were written by women or non-binary people. This percentage was written by women or non-binary people. This percentage has risen year on year since the beginning of the data set, from 37.6% in 2009 to 49.6% in 2018.

Of these 391 articles, 26% were written by non-white critics, this constitutes just 3.5 per cent of their total output.

Of the twenty-one magazines in the data set, six surpassed this figure: Wasafiri (51%); Poetry London (15.8%); The Wolf (18.9%); Poetry London (15.8%); and Poetry Review (14.9%).

Of the twenty-four magazines regularly publishing throughout the data set, only seven featured more than 50% women or non-binary critics throughout the data set.

Twelve featured less than 40%; white six featured less than 30%; Times Literary Supplement (28.9%); Poetry Salzburg Review (24.4%); PN Review (24.1 per cent); Acumen (19.7%); London Review of Books (16.2%); and Stride (12.7%).

Throughout female critics are roughly as likely to review female poets as not, male critics review male poets 66% of the time, compared with just 29% female poets.

The number of books per article a critic reviews differs along gender and racial intersections. An average white male critic reviews 1.52 books per article; a white female critic reviews 1.63; a male critic of colour reviews 1.77; a female critic of colour reviews 1.81.

In June 2020, we found 117 editorial staff at the 45 platforms surveyed:

34 as Editor or Editor-in-Chief; 54 in other senior editorial positions, covering editorial assistants or editorship by committee, which I have combined under ‘Co-Editor’; and the remaining 29 in associate or contributing editorial positions, combined under ‘Contributing Editor’. Due to the small sample size, and the wide variation in what editorship entails in a large periodical and a small blog, for example, the following figures are not as robust as those detailed above. They do, however, give an outline of how magazines are currently run.

While it is worth celebrating how many non-white poets and critics have begun to take up editorial positions in UK poetry magazines, it is very noticeable that the vast majority are in junior positions, and have relatively little material power to affect major policy decisions.

94% of Editors remain white, and 83% of Co-Editors

Diversity initiatives that nonetheless leave people of colour without the power to challenge majority white power structures are of limited practical value.
The State of Poetry and Poetry Criticism

**PRIZES**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Prize Description</th>
<th>Total Wins by Non-White Poets</th>
<th>Non-White Poets</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The T.S. Eliot Prize</td>
<td>12 of the 138</td>
<td>nine since 2014</td>
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<tr>
<td>The Forward Prize for Best First Collection</td>
<td>19 of the 135</td>
<td>since 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Ted Hughes Award</td>
<td>44 of the 129</td>
<td>by non-white poets</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Costa Prize for Poetry</td>
<td>270 of the 653</td>
<td>total wins by female poets (34%), and three by non-binary poets (2.3%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>The T.S. Eliot Prize</td>
<td>8 of the 113</td>
<td>shortlistees for the Costa Prize for Poetry are non-white (71%); five since 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Forward Prize for Best Collection</td>
<td>The average age of T.S. Eliot Prize winners is 50</td>
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**BIographies**

**Dzifa Benson** is a multi-disciplinary artist whose work intersects science, art, the body and ritual which she explores through poetry, theatre, performance, essays and journalism. She has performed her work internationally in many contexts such as: artist in residence at the Courtauld Institute of Art; producer of a poetry in performance event responding to David Hockney’s work in Tate Britain; producer and host of a literature and music experience in the Dissenters Gallery at Kensal Green Cemetery and core artist in BBC Africa Beyond’s cross-arts project, Translations. Her work has been published and presented in The Poetry Review, the Guardian, the Financial Times, the Telegraph, Royal Opera House, the Bush Theatre and the House of Commons. Dzifa is currently working on a commissioned play, Black Mozart, White Chevalier and has an MA in Text & Performance from Birkbeck and RADA.

**Victoria Adugwi Bulley** is a poet, writer and filmmaker. Winner of a 2018 Eric Gregory Award for promising British poets under 30, her work has appeared in The Chicago Review, Ambit and The Poetry Review in addition to featuring on BBC Radio 4 Woman’s Hour. In 2016, she was shortlisted for the Brunel Prize for African Poetry, and her debut chapbook, Girl & forms part of the 2017 New-Generation African Poets series, edited by Kwame Dawes and Chris Abani. Victoria is the director of MOTHER TONGUES, a poetry translation and film project exploring the indigenous language heritages of poets of colour. She is a doctoral candidate at Royal Holloway, University of London, where she is the recipient of Technical scholarship for practice-based research in Creative Writing.

**Mary Jean Chan** is a London-based poet, critic and editor from Hong Kong. Her debut poetry collection, Fickle [Falser 2019] won the 2019 Costa Book Award for Poetry and was shortlisted for the 2020 International Dylan Thomas Prize and the 2020 Jhalak Prize. She has been shortlisted for the Forward Prize for Best Single Poem twice and received an Eric Gregory Award in 2019. In Spring 2020, Chan was guest co-editor at The Poetry Review. She is currently Lecturer in Creative Writing (Poetry) at Oxford Brookes University.

**Jade Cuttle** is Arts Commissioning Editor at The Times, and has also written for The Guardian, The Observer, the Times Literary Supplement and the Telegraph. Jade has been an editor at Ambit and final judge for the Costa Book Awards (2019), and commissioned to write for BBC Radio 3, BBC Continental Europe Language Festival and the BBC Proms. Fusioning metaphor with melody, she released a debut eco-themed album of poem-songs ‘Algal Bloom’ with funding and support from the PRS foundation and Make Noise in January 2020. She previously worked at The Poetry Society and tutored at the Poetry School.

**Sarala Estruch** is a writer, poet, and critic based in London. Her work has been short- and long-listed for several prizes, including the Wasafiri New Writing Prize and the National Poetry Competition. Her literary criticism has appeared in newspapers and journals including The Poetry Review, the Times Literary Supplement, Wasafiri, and The Guardian; and has been featured on BBC Radio 3. Sarala works part-time as Editorial Manager at the Poetry School.

**Maryam Hessor** is a British Manchester-based poet and critic, with poems and reviews appearing in various publications. An alumnus of the University of Manchester, she holds an MA in English Literature & Creative Writing with specialisms in Modernism and Linguistics. Maryam is a Contributing Editor for Ambit and a member of the Manchester-based poetry-reading series Poets & Players. Her reviews have been published in Poetry London, Magma, Poetry Wales and The Manchester Review, among others.

**Srishti Krishnamoorthy-Cavell** is completing a doctorate in contemporary poetry and ecocriticism at the University of Cambridge. Her essays and reviews have appeared or are forthcoming in The Journal of British and Irish Innovative Poetry, Interdisciplinary Space, Poetry London, PBS, The Poetry School, and The Poetry Review.

**Nasser Hussain** is a Senior Lecturer in Creative Writing at Leeds Beckett University; and the author of two books of poetry including SKY I’M TELLING, composed entirely from IATA airport codes, published by Coach House Books (2018). He has published reviews in Ambit, Poetry London, and for the Poetry Review. He also serves on the Poetry Advisory board for Coach House Books in Toronto, and on the editorial board for Inscription: the Journal of Material Text. He can be found on Twitter (@nasshussain).

JENNIFER LEE TSAI is a poet, editor and critic. She was born in Bebington and grew up in Liverpool. She is a fellow of The Complete Works III. Her poems feature in numerous anthologies and magazines including Ten Poets of the New Generation (Bloodaxe 2017), Ambit, Magma, Oxford Poetry, The Rialto, SMOKY, Stand, Soundings and Wild Court. Her critical reviews have been published by Ambit, The Poetry Review, Modern Poetry In Translation, Malwa, Poetry Book Society Bulletin and the Poetry School, London. Jennifer is a Contributing Editor to Ambit. Her debut poetry pamphlet Komel (2019) is published by Ignition Press. In 2019, she was awarded an AHRC scholarship to undertake doctoral research in Creative Writing at the University of Liverpool. Jennifer is the winner of a Northern Writers Award for Poetry 2020.

STEPHANIE SY-GUIA is a freelance writer and critic based in London. Her reviews have featured in The Guardian, FT Weekend Magazine, The Times Literary Supplement, The White Review, The Poetry Review, Poetry London, The Los Angeles Review of Books, among others. She has a BA from Oxford University in English Language and Literature, has twice been shortlisted for the FT Bodley Head Essay Prize, and is currently working on her first work of poetry.

JENNIFER LEE TSAI is a poet, editor and critic. She was born in Bebington and grew up in Liverpool. She is a fellow of The Complete Works III. Her poems feature in numerous anthologies and magazines including Ten Poets of the New Generation (Bloodaxe 2017), Ambit, Magma, Oxford Poetry, The Rialto, SMOKY, Stand, Soundings and Wild Court. Her critical reviews have been published by Ambit, The Poetry Review, Modern Poetry In Translation, Malwa, Poetry Book Society Bulletin and the Poetry School, London. Jennifer is a Contributing Editor to Ambit. Her debut poetry pamphlet Komel (2019) is published by Ignition Press. In 2019, she was awarded an AHRC scholarship to undertake doctoral research in Creative Writing at the University of Liverpool. Jennifer is the winner of a Northern Writers Award for Poetry 2020.

SARAH-JEAN ZUBAIR is a postgraduate student in English literature at University College London. She holds an MA in English and Comparative Literature from Columbia University (New York), and a BA in English from the University of Victoria (Canada). Her current studies inquire into poetic and visual arts portrayals of altered consciousness in Romantic-era English literary texts. In addition to her research, she teaches undergraduate courses in the Department of English at UCL. Her critical writing has appeared in publications such as The Times Literary Supplement, Modern Poetry in Translation, and Poetry London.

ABRAHAM ENCINAS is an English graduate student at UCLA. He studies 20thC. hemispheric American literature and is interested in the genre of the dictator novel specifically. He translates fiction between English and Spanish in his spare time and hosts a language and culture podcast called Extreme Vocabulary.

SHAMALA GALLAGHER is the author of a poetry collection, Late Morning When the World Burns (The Cultural Society, 2019) and a chapbook, I Learned the Language of Barbs and Sparks No One Spoke (Dancing Girl Press, 2015). Her poems and essays have appeared in Poetry, Black Warrior Review, Gulf Coast, The Rumpus, Shenandoah, The Missouri Review, and elsewhere. She lives in Athens, GA.

EMILY PÉREZ is the author House of Sugar: House of Stone and the chapbooks Backyard Migration Route and Made and Unmade. She graduated with honors from Stanford University and earned an MFA at the University of Houston, where she served as a poetry editor for Gulf Coast and taught with Writers in the Schools. A CartaMundo fellow, she has received grants and scholarships from the Washington State Arts Trust, Jack Straw Writers, Bread Loaf Writers’ Workshop, Summer Literary Seminars, and Inprint, Houston; and she is also a member of the Community of Writers at Squaw Valley. Her poems have appeared or are forthcoming in Cosmonauts Avenue, Copper Nickel, Fairy Tale Review, Prairie Schooner, Poetry, and Diode. She is a regular reviewer for RHINO and her reviews have also appeared in The Boston Review, Letras Latinas, and The Rumpus. She teaches English and Gender Studies in Denver where she lives with her husband and sons.

MARIO CHARD was born in northern Utah. The son of an Argentine immigrant mother and an American father, he was educated at Weber State University (BA) and Purdue University (MFA). From 2011-2013, he was a Wallace Stegner Fellow in Poetry at Stanford University. He is the author of Land of Fire ( Tupelo Press, 2018), selected by Robert Pinsky for the 2016 Dorset Prize, named a 2018 Notable Debut by Poets & Writers Magazine, and chosen as the winner of the 2019 Georgia Author of the Year Award in Poetry. His poems and essays have appeared in The New Yorker, Poetry, Boston Review, and elsewhere, and have been honored with various awards, including the “Discovery” Poetry Prize. He teaches in Atlanta, Georgia, where he lives with his wife and sons.