

DATA ANALYSIS – Ledbury Poetry Critics 2020 annual report

REVIEWS

Ambit

Under Editor Briony Bax, *Ambit* has added several non-white editors to its ranks, including Poetry Editor André Naffis-Sahely, Deputy Poetry Editor Jade Cuttle, and Contributing Editors Jennifer Lee Tsai and Maryam Hessavi. The Spring 2017 issue was guest-edited by Jee Leong Koh. While *Ambit's* published very few critics of colour between 2009-13—all but one of their 187 reviews were written by white critics—improvements have been made recently on *Ambit's* website, where five of their nineteen reviews between 2016-19 were by non-white critics (26.3 per cent). However, *Ambit's* total for poetry reviews written by critics of colour from 2009-2019 stands at 6 of 205, just under 3 per cent.

The Poetry Review

The Poetry Review has published more articles by non-white critics than any other UK magazine or newspaper between 2009 and 2019 (63 in total out of 424, just under 15 per cent). 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 three times before 2019: Bernardine Evaristo in Winter 2012; Kayo Chingonyi in Autumn 2016; Sarah Howe in Winter 2016.

Looking solely at 2019 as an exemplary year, Berry's Spring, Summer and Autumn issues published 13 articles by non-white critics (out of 29, or 44.8 per cent). Colette Bryce's Winter issue published only one non-white critic (out of 9, or 11.1 per cent).

Poetry London

Changes at *Poetry London* have also been dramatic: 22 review articles were written by non-white critics between 2009-2016 (out of 224, or 9.8 per cent). This has risen to 28 articles between 2017-19 (out of 93, or 30.1 per cent) – a huge three-fold increase since Ledbury Critics was founded.

Poetry School

Despite only launching in earnest in 2016, the *Poetry School* blog has published 31 articles by non-white critics (out of 125, or 24.8 per cent), the fifth highest figure in the data set.

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 non-white 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 non-white 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 many 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 reviews). 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.

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 reviews), 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 non-white 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 not published reviews of any 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 the cases of Poetry Wales, Magma, Mslexia and The Guardian, these publications have actively engaged with and commissioned Ledbury Critics. In all 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, Dr Ailbhe McDaid and Dr Ken Keating of MEAS, Nidhi Zak and *Poetry Ireland*. There is a great deal of work to be done to promote poets and critics of colour in Ireland.

Deleted:

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).

Appointed in 2018, Naffis-Sahely has further advanced *Ambit's* positive trend in publishing non-white poets over the past several years, from 17.7 per cent in 2016 to 26 per cent in 2019; counting solely the three issues edited by Naffis-Sahely in 2019, this figure rises to 37.7 per cent, among the best in the country. Prior to this, from 2009-2016, the magazine published 51 poems by non-white poets out of a total 1050, or 4.9 per cent of its total output in that time.

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.