

Chapter Six

PILGRIMAGE: CHAUCERIAN POETS OF COLOR IN MOTION

GEOFFREY CHAUCER'S *THE CANTERBURY TALES* begins with "sondry folk, by aventure yfalle" [various people fallen together by chance] gathering in Southwark across the river from the City of London.¹ A mixed assemblage of people of different genders, ages, professions, and regional backgrounds, they form a temporary and at times fragile community (a "felaweshipe" or "compaignye") traveling to the shrine of Thomas Becket in Canterbury,² and along the route they tell stories on topics as varied as romantic love, violence, class conflict, religious devotion and conversion, geopolitics, philosophical matters, and sex. This chapter considers how modern-day poets of color use Chaucerian materials not only for the purposes of humor and light-hearted social satire (as they might be expected to do). They also—on a much more serious note—subvert longstanding Eurocentric cultural and linguistic norms, and they intertwine themes of race and migration to give testimony to long histories of violence and ongoing systems of oppression around the globe.

In modern-day Chaucerian adaptations by people of color, mobility—in both its physical and sociopolitical dimensions—drives the storytelling enterprise. In Chaucerian adaptations that transport the Canterbury pilgrimage into the present day while also relocating the pilgrimage to disparate locations worldwide, the storytelling narrators are always in motion, and it is impossible to disassociate the fictive speakers from their surrounding sociopolitical environments.³ Writing from a Caribbean perspective, Barbara Lalla observes that "Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* assembles and confronts identities continuously on the move, displaced from their 'proper' categories, traveling light in the characteristically en route condition of the pilgrim,"⁴ and "[p]ostcolonial writing in the Caribbean and elsewhere" is similarly "peopled by travellers. Travel facilitates shifting positions from which to view what is given out as reality ... Implicated in travel is the denial of fixity."⁵ Contemporary adaptations of Chaucer often use pilgrimage and its mixed storytelling potentials to explore present-day interplays of local and global phenomena and the "denial of fixity" that pervades transit, dislocation, and uprootedness, as well as ever-shifting ideas of home and (un)belonging. Although some modern Chaucerian poets focus on one city or neighborhood—or even a particular street—some explore a dispersal of voices and bodies across global trajectories.

1 Chaucer, *Canterbury Tales*, "General Prologue," line 25.

2 Ibid., lines 26 and 24.

3 Barrington and Hsy, "Afterlives"; Barrington and Hsy, "Chaucer's Global Orbits."

4 Lalla, *Postcolonialisms*, 44.

5 Ibid., 253.

Chaucerian poets of color, in other words, center racialized subjectivities in transit. Marking departures from the white “universal” subject or “global” citizen of the world who is free to move as he (usually he) desires, poetry by people of color inhabits the unequal conditions of mobility across national borders and geographies, as well as the culturally fraught meanings of “return” when a destination or desired place of return is inaccessible.⁶ Attesting to historical forces of dispossession, displacement, and restricted mobility, poets of color demonstrate the “unfixed modernity” of an interconnected globe and reveal what Eleanor Ty calls the “fluidity of contemporary transcultural identities and the layering subject positions” of people in transit.⁷

In these sections to follow, I examine the relationship between race and transit in works by Chaucerian poets of color. When modern Chaucerian authors of color mark or disclose any particular racial identity, they challenge readers to ask if an unmarked narrator *necessarily* reads as white. Cord J. Whitaker has shown how metaphors of whiteness and blackness from the Middle Ages to the present create the rhetorical “shimmer” of blackness and “its simultaneous presence and nonpresence” in Western literary discourses of race,⁸ and poets of color navigate the shimmering dimensions of racial disclosure beyond seemingly rigid black/white binaries that pervade racial thinking throughout predominantly white anglophone societies. Urgent questions of blackness and anti-blackness have been explored in prose writings by Chaucerian authors of color around the globe including Karen King-Aribisala (Nigerian born in Guyana), Gloria Naylor (African American), and Ana Lydia Vega (Puerto Rican), to name a few.⁹ This chapter explores how Chaucerian authors grapple with the consequences of claiming or disclaiming racialized literary personas through poetry. I explore how these poets—wherever in the globe they are positioned—explore the mobility of racial identities, experiment with the craft of fictive voicing, and reflect on the complex ethics of speaking for others.

Reverse Migrations: Transatlantic and Hemispheric

Chaucer’s pilgrimage narrative is famously incomplete. The original plan was for each pilgrim to tell two stories en route to Canterbury and two during the return—but the pilgrims don’t even reach their destination, and some pilgrims never tell a story, and the text ends before any return journey. I begin by considering poets throughout African diaspora contexts (Afro-Caribbean and African American backgrounds) who use the openness of the Chaucerian pilgrimage and its lack of a “return” to their advantage, repurposing Chaucerian allusions to experiment with rhetorics of “reverse” colonization and to address the thwarted possibilities of “return” in migration stories.

Reading Caribbean poetry in English requires a fundamental rethinking of the relationship between language and geographical space, as well as the intertwined histories

6 Chu, *Where I Have Never Been*, 21.

7 Ty, *Unfastened*, xxix–xxx.

8 Whitaker, *Black Metaphors*, 11.

9 See this book’s Further Readings and Resources, “Creative Works by People of Color.”

of language and race. Lalla has observed that “Caribbean experience differs markedly from that of medieval England,” with “one glaring distinction” of how “race and ethnicity are implicated in Caribbean postcoloniality” through a “massive translocation of peoples of varied races.”¹⁰ Kofi Omoniyi Sylvanus Campbell shows how anglophone Caribbean writers have drawn from medieval literary traditions “to create new, hybridized identities capable of surviving in the face of centuries-old racisms,”¹¹ and the “literary emergence of English as a literary vernacular” in Chaucer’s day was the “birth and growth” of a “nation language” that emerged as an expression of “independence from a recent history of French literary and cultural domination” after the Norman Conquest.¹² This term “nation language” derives from an influential lecture by Barbadian poet and intellectual Kamau Brathwaite, who discerns in the anglophone Caribbean a “nation language” that is not Chaucer’s Middle English but rather a “kind of English spoken by the people who were brought to the Caribbean” and it is “not the official English now, but the language and slaves and labourers, the servants who were brought in by the conquistadors.”¹³

In contrast to an official form of “English, which is the imposed language on much of the archipelago” by British colonialism,¹⁴ Brathwaite defines “nation language” as “the submerged language” of enslaved Black Caribbean people, “that underground language ... constantly transforming itself into new forms,” incorporating African structures and “adapted to the new environment” in a “very complex process ... now beginning to surface in our literature.”¹⁵ Brathwaite pointedly rejects the iambic pentameter long associated with Chaucer¹⁶ for a local Black Caribbean “syllabic intelligence” and calypso rhythms that can “describe the hurricane, which is our own experience,” rather than white Eurocentric forms that “describe the imported alien experience of the snowfall.”¹⁷ Brathwaite’s rhetoric of imposition, importation, and “alien experience” does not just refer to movements of language and cultural values from medieval Britain across the Atlantic; his story about “nation language” also names the harms of racial hierarchies and the dehumanizing legacies of forced migration, enslavement, and colonization throughout what Paul Gilroy and Campbell would later call the Black Atlantic.¹⁸

Jamaican poet Louise Bennett anticipates Brathwaite’s principles of “nation language” in her own works that employ a decidedly local vernacular, rhyme, and rhythm. Bennett’s “Bans O’Killing” (1944), which roughly means “lots of killing,” uses poetry to name the historical mechanisms of power and violence that result in one prestigious London-based form of English claiming its status as the “standard” and being positioned

10 Lalla, *Postcolonialisms*, 28.

11 Campbell, *Black Atlantic*, 1.

12 Ibid., 12.

13 Brathwaite, “Nation Language,” 459.

14 Ibid.

15 Ibid., 461.

16 Ibid., 463.

17 Ibid., 462. See also Warren, “Chaucer in Caribbean,” 83.

18 Gilroy, *Black Atlantic*; Campbell, *Black Atlantic*.

over time as superior to other varieties around the world. Speaking to “Mass Charlie” (white Master Charlie) who wants to eliminate nonstandard dialects, the poetic speaker asks: “Yuh gwine kill all English dialect / Or jus Jamaica one?”¹⁹ Prestigious forms of English poetry, the poetic speaker argues, were themselves “dialects” to begin with, springing from earlier vernacular traditions dating back to the fourteenth century: “Dah language we yuh proud o’ ... it spring from dialect!”²⁰ and it was initially crafted when “dem start fe try tun language, / From the fourteen century.”²¹ To eradicate nonstandard Englishes now would mean killing off existing regional variations within Britain²² and also ripping out texts by Chaucer and other historical authors from *The Oxford Book of English Verse*: “Yuh wi haffee get the Oxford book / O’ English verse, and tear / Out Chaucer, Burns ... An plenty o’ Shakespeare!”²³ In what might very well be a submerged allusion to Chaucer’s bold Wife of Bath, who rips pages out of a misogynist anthology or “book of wikked wives”²⁴ compiled by her husband who “somtime was a clerk of Oxenford,”²⁵ Bennett rhetorically imagines violence against an “Oxford book” that embodies an oppressive system.

Bennett’s Afro-Caribbean voice exposes the myths of purity that underlie the historical process of creating and sustaining white anglophone norms and by extension an ideology of global white supremacy. The prestigious vernacular of “standard” English was not inherently superior to any other language variety and was ultimately based upon a once humble fourteenth-century London “dialect” itself. The construction of one prestigious form of “standard” English that is marked as “superior” and aligned with global white anglophone hegemony was the outcome of a historical process that relied upon social structures such as educational systems and literary anthologies that privilege only certain language varieties. In a recent analysis of racial and linguistic ideologies in the field of anglophone medieval studies, Shyama Rajendran reminds readers of the historical heterogeneity of “multiple Englishes” during the Middle Ages and also critiques longstanding “English raciolinguistic supremacist structures” dating back to nineteenth-century philology.²⁶ Along similar lines of sociopolitical critique, Bennett’s poem reminds readers of a historical multiplicity of Englishes in medieval Britain and also reveals the longstanding systems of violence that suppress all the other forms of language that are deemed inferior by comparison to some “standard” prestigious variety of English.

Bennett’s later and more well-known poem “Colonization in Reverse” (1966) uses a complex form of Chaucerian irony to characterize mass migration from Jamaica to

19 Louise Bennett, “Bans O’Killing” (1944), in *Rotten English*, ed. Ahmad, 40–41, at 40.

20 Ibid.

21 Ibid., 41.

22 Ibid.

23 Ibid.

24 Chaucer, *Canterbury Tales*, “Wife of Bath’s Prologue,” line 685.

25 Ibid., line 527.

26 Rajendran, “Raciolinguistic Supremacy,” 2.

Britain as a “reverse” migration across the Black Atlantic.²⁷ The seemingly naive poetic speaker, addressing “Miss Mattie” and other women, brings “joyful news” that makes her “feel like me heart gwine burs.”²⁸ She observes that Jamaicans are departing from their island of birth to settle in England, a process of “Jamaica people colonizin / Englan in reverse.”²⁹ Jamaicans by “de hundred” and by “de tousan”³⁰ depart on ships and planes to “settle in de mother lan”³¹ with an aim to “immigrate an populate / De seat a de Empire.”³² In this inversion of forced migration across the Atlantic, Black Caribbean migrants “reverse” the direction of settler colonialism, willingly traversing a modern Black Atlantic to populate and settle in the former imperial center. Bennett uses a nuanced Black Caribbean poetic voice to ironize discourses of transplanting and “settling” and creates a comic geographical ambiguity in the process: “What an islan! What a people!”³³ could refer either to Jamaica or to a disoriented Britain.

While this phenomenon of “colonizin in reverse” might seem like poetic justice, the tone of the poem is not entirely celebratory. Many Black Caribbean women seeking employment and social advancement in Britain will in the end find their goals and ambitions thwarted: “Some will settle down to work / An some will settle fe de dole.”³⁴ The verb “settle” assumes another valence beyond putting down roots; it now refers to “settling” for lower expectations. Ominously, the poet ends by remarking that the English have faced “war and brave de worse” and might not respond well to a continuing influx of immigrants: “But me wonderin how dem gwine stan / Colonizin in reverse.”³⁵ Bennett’s poem ends with an admonition: racism, xenophobia, nativism, and sexism all loom as threats for Black Caribbean immigrants upon their arrival in, or colonial “return,” to Britain.

A more lighthearted instance of “transplanting” Black Caribbean English into a London setting is a poem by Jamaican poet Jean “Binta” Breeze. “The Wife of Bath speaks in Brixton Market,” first published in *The Arrival of Brighteye* (2000), offers a line-by-line translation (or adaptation) into Jamaican Patois of the opening portion of Chaucer’s “Wife of Bath’s Prologue.” Here are the opening lines of each text compared:

Experience, thogh noon auctoritee
Were in this world, is right inough for me
To speke of wo that is in mariage.
For, lordinges, sith I twelve yeer was of age,
Thonked be God that is eterne on live,

My life is my own bible
wen it come to all de woes
in married life
fah since I reach twelve,
Tanks to Eternal Gawd,

27 Bennett, “Colonization in Reverse” (1966), in *Rotten English*, ed. Ahmad, 38–39.

28 Ibid., 38.

29 Ibid.

30 Ibid.

31 Ibid.

32 Ibid., 39.

33 Ibid., 38.

34 Ibid., 39.

35 Ibid.

Housbondes at chirche-dore I have had five— is five husban I have
 If I so ofte mighte han wedded be ...³⁶ (if dat is possible)³⁷

Breeze's practice of translation—or perhaps linguistic transplantation—asserts the vitality of a Black Caribbean “nation language” against the historical vernacular aligned with the predominantly white norms of Standard English. In this poem, Breeze rejects Chaucer's use of iambic pentameter (i.e., she eliminates the use of rhyme and reduces the length of each poetic line); she simplifies Chaucer's Latinate vocabulary by swapping in short words (“experience” and “auctoritee” become “my own bible”); and the spelling reflects the sounds of Jamaican Patois (“wen,” “de,” “fah,” and “Tanks” instead of *when, the, for, and Thanks*) as well as its grammar (“is five husban I have”).³⁸ Chaucer's fictive Wife of Bath has been dislocated in place and time from the medieval Canterbury pilgrimage to the contemporary Brixton Market, a location in south London that became the locus of Black Caribbean immigration and settlement in the mid-twentieth century.³⁹ Breeze's linguistic transplantation enacts Bennett's “colonizin in reverse” by moving Black Caribbean sounds into a Black British space.

In Breeze's poem, place and race are richly entwined. By writing a poem with a distinctively Black Caribbean female voice and situating the fictive setting as Brixton Market, Breeze reclaims Chaucerian “universality” through a particular cultural location often called the “soul of Black Britain.”⁴⁰ The reclaiming of space through poetic performance is particularly clear in Breeze's recorded audiovisual reenactment of this same poem, filmed on-site in 2006 with the poet herself walking throughout the covered market of Granville Arcade in Brixton Market, recently rebranded as “Brixton Village.”⁴¹ In this videorecording, Breeze embodies the fictive female speaker in this poem, dressed in a white headwrap signaling Black Caribbean heritage.⁴² Composed entirely of footage of Breeze speaking directly to the camera, the recording creates a vivid sense of immediacy; colorful storefronts, restaurants, and grocery shoppers are in view in the background of the rapidly interspliced camera shots with passersby at times reacting with confusion, amusement, or disapproval of the poet's disruptive performance.⁴³

36 Chaucer, *Canterbury Tales*, “Wife of Bath's Prologue,” lines 1–7.

37 Breeze, *Arrival of Brighteye*, 62–64, at 62.

38 Breeze's project of resituating Chaucerian English becomes even clearer through the act of translation. “God bad us for to wexe and multiplie” (Chaucer, “Wife of Bath's Prologue,” line 28)—the Wife of Bath's translation of the “gentil text” (line 29) of Genesis stating *crescite et multiplicamini*, meaning “increase and multiply”—becomes “Im order we [i.e., He ordered us] to sex an multiply” (Breeze, *Arrival of Brighteye*, 62).

39 Gbadamosi, “Road to Brixton Market.”

40 Ibid.

41 Breeze, *Wife of Bath in Brixton Market*.

42 Elizabeth, “A Short History of African Headwrap.”

43 At one moment, the poetic narrator says “de man mus lef im madda an im fadda / an cling to me” and Breeze clings her breasts with her hands; a pedestrian in the background shoots a look in her direction and then resumes walking (Breeze, *Wife of Bath in Brixton Market*, 1:01–1:04). See also Hsy, “Teaching the Wife of Bath through Adaptation.”



Figure 12: Multicultural storefront in an arcade in Brixton Market, in south London, also known as the “Soul of Black Britain.” In 2006, Jean “Binta” Breeze recorded her “Wife of Bath speaks in Brixton Market” while walking through this arcade. London, March 2014. Photo by the author.

In performing Chaucer’s distinctive and bold Wife of Bath in this Black British space, Breeze’s body in motion artfully disrupts perceived social scripts. In “reclaiming” (or reincarnating) Chaucer’s Wife of Bath as a Black British woman, Breeze demonstrates how a contemporary “nation language” of Jamaican English rivals the claims to legitimacy, complexity, and rootedness that Chaucer’s Middle English enjoys.

Marilyn Nelson, Poet Laureate of Connecticut from 2001 to 2006, relocates the Chaucerian pilgrimage not in terms of “colonizin in reverse” or transatlantic trajectories but a hemispheric American context in her verse novel *The Cachoeira Tales* (2005). Nelson’s first-person narrative relates a journey of African Americans that is initially envisioned as “a reverse diaspora ... a pilgrimage to Africa” or “some place sanctified by the Negro soul,”⁴⁴ but it is instead rerouted to the predominantly Black state of Bahia in Brazil. It culminates with the group’s arrival at “A Igreja do Nosso Senhor do Bonfim” [The Church of Our Lord of the Good End] in the city of Salvador, the capital of Bahia.⁴⁵ Composed in iambic pentameter couplets (with occasional slant rhyme), *The Cachoeira Tales* explores the socioeconomic, religious, and linguistic heterogeneity of Black diaspora

⁴⁴ Nelson, *Cachoeira Tales*, 11.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 52.

communities. The word “fellowship” first refers to the prestigious Guggenheim grant that financed the trip: “I’d have to modify the plan I had / concocted on the fellowship application, / but at least we’d have a wonderful vacation.”⁴⁶ New meanings of “fellowship” (community) emerge as the group travels. Nelson’s “General Prologue” introduces a Director of a Black theater, a Jazz Musician who “improvised Portuguese / as he had French, Spanish, and Japanese,”⁴⁷ a retired Pilot, and an Activist with prior experience in the Peace Corps—with additional African American travelers Harmonia and Moreen joining the group by chance in Brazil.

The verse novel interweaves shared diasporic experiences and (at times) comic intercultural perceptions among Black Americans and Africans across the Atlantic. The Jazz Musician invents a nonsense language “Creole Swahili” during a visit to Zimbabwe to compensate for his complete lack of knowledge of local languages.⁴⁸ The Jazz Musician’s account of his comic “return” to Africa demonstrates his improvisational performance skills, and the phrase “Creole Swahili” playfully denotes at least two different historical Black diaspora contact zones. “Swahili” could refer to Waswahili, a cultural and ethnic group in eastern Africa, or to Kiswahili, a lingua franca in the Bantu family of languages, with considerable influence from Arabic, spoken throughout eastern and southern Africa; “Creole” can ambiguously refer to a number of Black Caribbean cultural and linguistic contexts including francophone Louisiana.

Ultimately it is Brazil’s vivid syncretism that fully juxtaposes colonial European and diasporic African frameworks in Nelson’s novel: “I wondered what the statues really meant: / Was it Mary, or was it Yemanjá / in the chapel ... or was it the Orixá of the sea?”⁴⁹ The destination of the rerouted pilgrimage is not a “return” to origins in Africa, nor a “reverse” colonization of the imperial center by arriving at Brixton Market or Westminster Abbey or the shrine of Thomas Becket in Canterbury. Rather, this mixed group of African Americans arrive at a site of religious and cultural fusion and cultural hybridity in Latin America: a Chaucerian nod to a pilgrimage that has reached a *bonfim* or “good end.”

Urban Spaces: Multiethnic and Multiracial

Contemporary authors of color use Chaucerian poetics to navigate questions of race and place. This section addresses two poets who transport the mixed Canterbury storytelling collective to contemporary multiethnic cities: Patience Agbabi, whose poetic anthology *Telling Tales* (2014) features a fictive multiracial cast of characters in present-day London;⁵⁰ and Frank Mundo, whose verse novel *The Brubury Tales* (2010) features a multiracial group of storytellers in Los Angeles soon after the race riots of the 1990s.⁵¹ Both

46 Ibid., 12.

47 Ibid., 14.

48 Ibid., 28.

49 Ibid., 50. See also Barrington and Hsy, “Afterlives,” 15.

50 Agbabi, *Telling Tales*.

51 Mundo, *Brubury Tales* (2010).

poets create space for a fictive multiracial ensemble of storytellers while also addressing harmful legacies of racial violence in the past and their implications for systemic racism and social conflict today. Each poet uses the Chaucerian pilgrimage and storytelling game structure to explore interpersonal and sociopolitical dimensions of urban spaces and to navigate shifting social positions across ever-changing environments.

Nigerian British poet Patience Agbabi's *Telling Tales* (2014) brings Chaucer's tales into a multiracial and multiethnic London. Spoken-word performing artist and 2009 Poet Laureate for Canterbury, Agbabi was born in London to Nigerian parents and raised by a white English family in Sussex and later in Wales, and she brings a transnational and multicultural sensibility to her poetic exploration of motion across spaces and communities.⁵² *Telling Tales* presents itself as if it were a poetic anthology, with fictive "Author Biographies" for the narrators contributing to a thickly layered representation of the multicultural milieu of modern London; these author-narrators compose in a variety of verse structures including iambic pentameter couplets, sonnets, free verse, sestina, and modern forms derived from contemporary popular culture (such as grime, spoken-word poetry, 144-character tweets, and ransom notes).⁵³

One poem in *Telling Tales* that explicitly addresses contemporary anti-Black racism in Britain as well as harmful legacies of the medieval past is "Sharps an Flats" (Agbabi's remix of Chaucer's "Prioress's Tale").⁵⁴ In the medieval version of the story, Chaucer's French-speaking Prioress who acts as the narrator styles herself as "Madame Eglentine" but she has never traveled extensively beyond London;⁵⁵ her antisemitic story takes place within a multiethnic city in Asia inhabited by Christians and Jews ("Ther was in Asie, in a greet citee, / Amonges Cristen folk, a Jewerye")⁵⁶ and she recounts the martyrdom of a young Christian boy, with the entire performance presented as if it is an extended prayer to the Virgin Mary.⁵⁷ "Sharps an Flats" is assigned, by contrast, to a contemporary Afro-Caribbean social justice activist named "Missy Eglantine" who is originally from St. Lucia,⁵⁸ and her spoken-word poetry testifies to Black victims of violence in modern London.⁵⁹

The posthumous narrator of "Sharps an Flats" uses a distinctive form of "nonstandard" English (in terms of spelling, sounds, and vocabulary) to tell the story of a Black British schoolboy murdered on the streets of southeast London. In a rap letter (or song) to his mother, the posthumous narrator who enigmatically identifies himself only as "your son, J, chattin on a mix made / in Heaven," tells the story of how he was suddenly

52 Agbabi, "Stories in Stanza'd English," 1–3.

53 Agbabi, *Telling Tales*, 115–20.

54 Ibid., 81–82.

55 "Frenssh she spak ful faire and fetissh, / After the scole of Stratford-atte-Bowe, / For Frenssh of Paris was to hire unknowe" (Chaucer, *Canterbury Tales*, "General Prologue," lines 124–26).

56 Chaucer, *Canterbury Tales*, "Prioress's Tale," lines 488–89.

57 Ibid., "Prioress's Prologue," lines 453–87.

58 Agbabi, *Telling Tales*, 116.

59 Ibid. The author biography of "Missy Eglantine" evokes a compressed Twitter bio: "born St Lucia / raised in Lewisham / R&B singer-rapper-poet [...] studied French UEL Stratford [...] Love Peace & Justice" (slash marks in original).

“cut off by a switchblade”⁶⁰ or “stabbed with a sharp” by “2 boys from the back flats” resulting in his untimely death.⁶¹ This poem is thick with allusions to Chaucer’s narrative of a schoolboy who sings the Marian hymn *Alma redemptoris mater* [“Loving Mother of Our Savior”] in the Jewish neighborhood of a medieval city and miraculously keeps singing even after his throat is cut.

Agbabi’s posthumous narrator states to his mother: “*Mater?* Made a martyr 4 back-chattin in Latin / sharps and flats, I had no idea what I woz chattin ... Do Re Mi Fa, with my spa [i.e., buddy, pal, mate], Damilola.”⁶² The name “Damilola” (here used as a rhyme word) evokes the tragic murder of Damilola Taylor, a schoolboy originally from Nigeria whose killing on November 27, 2000 exposed the lack of visibility for Black and immigrant victims of violence and the slow process of bringing justice to their communities. Damilola Taylor, described in public discourse as “a good boy who never would have joined a gang,”⁶³ was on his way home from the library when he was stabbed with shards of glass and bled to death, and numerous failures during a six-year trial process delayed the arrival of justice for his murder.⁶⁴

As Agbabi herself has noted, the story of urban violence against a Black British boy in “Sharps an Flats” provides an eerily modern intertext for the Prioress’s own invocation of Hugh of Lincoln, the medieval English schoolboy allegedly murdered and thrown into a privy by Jews.⁶⁵ Chaucer’s disturbing tale of antisemitism and martyrdom becomes a venue for Agbabi to question social attitudes towards Black vulnerability in contemporary Britain—with her text repeatedly asserting the boy’s innocence by aligning him with an angelic “chorus / in God’s gang.”⁶⁶ Meanwhile, the “boys in blue” (i.e., police and authorities associated with the legal system) fail to bring solace to the victim’s family.⁶⁷

Whether it is Agbabi or Missy Eglantine or the dead boy himself whose voice is “really” recorded in this work, “Sharps an Flats” prompts the audience to consider who gets to be recognized—and mourned—as an “innocent” victim of violence. Racist public discourses of violent youth crime of the kind emerging in Britain after Damilola Taylor’s death persist to the present day, and a politicized rhetoric of “black on black” violence perpetuates harmful stereotypes that align blackness with criminality and contribute to a pervasive and deadly policing of Black communities in predominately white societies.⁶⁸ “Sharps an

60 Ibid., 81.

61 Ibid., 82.

62 Ibid.

63 “Damilola Taylor: Killing.”

64 “Damilola Taylor: Timeline.”

65 On Damilola Taylor as modern Black “mirroring” of Hugh of Lincoln, see Patience Agbabi’s Twitter thread from January 22, 2015. <https://twitter.com/PatienceAgbabi/status/558312910074953729>.

66 Agbabi, *Telling Tales*, 81.

67 Ibid., 82.

68 Headley, “‘Black on Black’ Crime: The Myth and the Reality”; Braga and Brunson, “Police and Public Discourse.”

Flats” forces the audience to confront the pervasive harms that Black people face on a daily basis in societies structured by white supremacy, and to ask which lives matter.⁶⁹

Agbabi deliberately leaves the racial identities of the Black British boy’s assailants unspecified in “Sharps an Flats,”⁷⁰ but her allusion to the murder of Damilola Taylor suggests an awareness of failure of the legal system to bring justice to, or create safety for, Black communities. Black Lives Matter, the global movement founded in the US in 2013 by radical Black organizers Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi in response to the acquittal of the killer of Black teenager Trayvon Martin, drew attention to this high-profile case of anti-Black murder to advocate for systemic change.⁷¹ Agbabi’s rap poem published in 2014 testifying to the full humanity of a Black victim of violence in Britain implicitly resonates with the current international aims of Black Lives Matter as “an ideological and political intervention in a world where Black lives are systematically and intentionally targeted for demise,”⁷² regardless of the particular racial identities of those who commit lethal acts of anti-Black violence.

Frank Mundo’s verse novel *The Brubury Tales* (2010), set in contemporary Los Angeles in the 1990s, grapples with questions of systemic anti-Blackness and models a process of self-reflection on racial stereotyping.⁷³ Mundo’s fictive storytellers are hotel security guards passing away the time on the graveyard shift. The text’s “General Prologue” is composed in rhyming iambic pentameter couplets and attributed to a first-person narrator named J. T. Glass, who introduces to the audience a range of fictive storytellers from varied ethnic, racial, and national backgrounds: Leo Kapitanski (“a Russian Jew”), Alex Loma (race or ethnicity not immediately specified), John Shamburger (Black American), Joseph Dator (Filipino immigrant born near Manila), Rolla Amin (female student from Iraq), and Darrin Arita (“unsuccessfully Japanese”) are all described in turn.⁷⁴ The narrator’s erratic use of ethnic and racial descriptors across these portraits invites the reader to ask how “relevant” an externally perceived racial or ethnic identity is to the particular “content” of the story that a person tells.

John Shamburger, who is well aware of systems of racial oppression and white settler colonialism, initially emerges as a parody of a Black social justice activist. Ventriloquizing Shamburger’s discourse, the narrator states: “Shamburger, he said, was a slave name / Imposed upon his shackled ancestors” by white capitalists or “white American Dream investors / Who killed the Natives and enslaved the blacks” and “built this country upon their backs.”⁷⁵ J. T. Glass—who cryptically remains “unmarked” in terms of his

69 Cachia, “Damilola Taylor’s father [and] Black Lives Matter.” Agbabi critiques racist police brutality as well as homophobic violence in “The Black The White and The Blue,” *R.A.W.*, 26–27; see Goddard, *Staging Black Feminisms*, 168–72. On Agbabi and intersectional Black feminist and queer diaspora approaches, see Hsy and Barrington, “Noir Medievalism.”

70 Agbabi, Twitter thread, January 22, 2015 (cited above).

71 Black Lives Matter. “Herstory.”

72 Ibid.

73 Mundo, *Brubury Tales: Illustrated Edition* (2014).

74 Ibid., 2–9. Alex Loma is later revealed to be originally from Mexico (ibid., 287).

75 Ibid., 3.

own race or ethnicity—suggests that he doesn't fully share Shamburger's worldviews, characterizing Shamburger as always "pull[ing] the race card" in order to win arguments.⁷⁶ Nonetheless, the narrator respects Shamburger's activism and deep commitments to his community: "But, I must admit, I admired him. / The fire that inspired him / Made him always look outside of the box," and Shamburger is "one of the best men I ever knew ... a volunteer mentor in the hood."⁷⁷ This same narrator acknowledges his changed perceptions of Shamburger after hearing his story relating among other things his father's traumatic experience as a soldier in the Korean War and offering a tender, nuanced model of Black masculinity.⁷⁸ The narrator declares Shamburger the winner of the storytelling contest for his "heartfelt tale" with a "story ... so untypically male," a performance that is simultaneously "instructional and entertaining."⁷⁹ By layering the text through Shamburger's performance and J. T. Glass's response, Mundo gradually disassociates Blackness from harmful notions of militant or toxic masculinity.

Although the fictive narrator's own engagements with antiracist theory and activism aren't entirely clear, the evasive figure of the "sup" (supervisor) named "Frank Mundo" who is "hard to label" and "doesn't fit neatly in a table / Of beliefs, politics or even race" is even more difficult to pin down: "He has like a permanent poker face / That's somehow both eager and resistant / To being stable and inconsistent."⁸⁰ A perpetual resistance to tidy racial and political categories is consistent with the first-person writings of Frank Mundo *in propria persona*, when the author writes about his own complex social positionings as a Mexican American. "How I Became a Mexican" (2012), published after the first edition of *The Brubury Tales*, exposes the absurdity of essentialized racial formations. Mundo begins by stating: "When I was eleven years old, I became a Mexican."⁸¹ Born to a brown Mexican father and blonde American mother and raised in Maryland as "the 'brown' white kid of an interracial marriage gone bad,"⁸² he had "never identified with a single race" and it was only once he "moved to California [that] I became a Mexican."⁸³ Soon after his move to California, he encounters an efficient "variation on the old shirts-and-skins theme" called "Whites versus Mexicans,"⁸⁴ the method of forming teams on the basketball court at recess. "Everyone with brown skin was on one team, and everyone with white skin was on the other,"⁸⁵ and Mundo finds himself grouped with "seven brown-skinned kids like me."⁸⁶ This reductive sorting into teams based on

76 Ibid.

77 Ibid., 4.

78 Ibid., 155–85.

79 Ibid., 283.

80 Ibid., 194.

81 Mundo, "How I Became a Mexican," 1.

82 Ibid., 4.

83 Ibid., 3.

84 Ibid., 1.

85 Ibid., 1–2.

86 Ibid., 2.

physical appearance robs Mundo of any say in how he might identify. "It's not like I even had a choice of what to call myself," Mundo recalls, and his complex bicultural identity is reduced to the external matter of skin color alone.⁸⁷

Mundo resists essentialized categorizations that white anglophone American culture imposes, and he also critiques narrow notions of authenticity that Mexican American communities can reinforce on the basis of Spanish fluency. The "young Mexican girls and Mexican women" first called him "pocho" (a derogatory term for an "Americanized" person of Mexican descent) due to his limited Spanish skills, and eventually he is "downgraded" to "gringo" (usually referring to a white American with a negative connotation depending on context) or "guero" (referring to a person with lighter skin) once it becomes apparent that "I would never learn to speak their language."⁸⁸ Mundo reveals a contingent and context-specific alignment of language and racial identity, navigating ambivalent and complex claims to "Mexican" identity due to his lopsided language skills as well as his biracial background.

One opportunity to evade binary thinking emerges when Mundo recognizes "brown" as a capacious sociopolitical category that unwittingly groups disparate ethnic and racial groups together. The "Mexican" team includes a number of "browner-skinned ballers" who were "not Mexican or even Latino," including an Iranian immigrant as well as a friend of Italian ancestry who happens to have a Portuguese surname.⁸⁹ The heterogeneous meanings of Mundo's "brown" suggests a localized manifestation of what Kelly Lytle Hernández calls "Mexican Brown," a pervasive rhetorical tool of social profiling on the basis of class, color, and perceived immigration status,⁹⁰ as well as what Nitasha Tamar Sharma calls the "always-under-construction lines" of "brown" as a racial designation or identity category that encompasses individuals with actual or perceived origins in the Middle East, South Asia, and Latin America.⁹¹ Mundo likens himself and peers who thwart binary categories of classification to "'liminal' characters ... mystical sort of beings or creatures (monsters even) ... that [live] 'in the threshold' between two distinct realms or realities."⁹² Observing that "I was brown and my last name ... Mundo meant 'world' in Spanish,"⁹³ Mundo acknowledges the fraught conditions of "brown" identity on a global scale and suggests worlds of possibility for hybrid identities in literature and theory.⁹⁴

Mundo's context-specific understanding of cultural and racial identities implicitly evokes Chicana lesbian feminist Gloria Anzaldúa's rhetoric of a *mestiza* subjectivity that

⁸⁷ Ibid., 4.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 3.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 4.

⁹⁰ Hernández, *History of U.S. Border Patrol*.

⁹¹ Sharma, "Brown," 19.

⁹² Mundo, "How I Became a Mexican," 5.

⁹³ Ibid., 3.

⁹⁴ On "brown" as a framework that creates political solidarity as well as constructing new literary archives, see Chander, *Brown Romantics*; Hsy, "Brown Faces." On a different Mexican American's "feelings of nonbelonging" in California, see Muñoz, "Feeling Brown," 679.

navigates multiple linguistic and cultural identities (in her case anglophone American, Indigenous, and Chicano Spanish); Anzaldúa states that “to be an Indian in Mexican culture [and] to be Mexican from an Anglo point of view” entails “a tolerance for ambiguity” and living “in a pluralistic mode,” and her text abounds with imagery of mythic hybrid creatures and first-person reflections on navigating positions that are always in flux and socially situated.⁹⁵ The character of “Frank Mundo” who evades fixed categories and the (racially unmarked) first-person narrator of J. T. Glass in *Brubury Tales* embody poetic counterparts to the flexible sociopolitical positionings in Mundo’s autoethnographic writing. Nonetheless, claims of identity that seek to break free from, or somehow remain innocent of, external social categories or perceptions of race can never fully prevent an individual from navigating the sociopolitical realities of racialization in everyday life.

Crossing Waters: Mediterranean and Pacific Mobilities

The final section of this chapter examines the sociopolitical dimensions of two Chaucerian projects from disparate parts of the globe: *The Refugee Tales* (2015 to the present), an ongoing collaborative effort, drawing upon an ethos of Chaucerian storytelling, that seeks to end indefinite immigrant detention in the UK; and Ouyang Yu’s *The Kingsbury Tales* (2008), a verse novel set near Melbourne, Australia, that addresses complexities of migration, xenophobia, racial belonging, and mobility in a contemporary Asia-Pacific context.

The Refugee Tales, organized by Gatwick Detainees Welfare Group in collaboration with Kent Refugee Help, was originally entitled “A Walk in Solidarity with Refugees, Asylum Seekers and Detainees (from Dover to Crawley via Canterbury),” and the annual walk and its associated events stage collaborations between an “established writer” and an “asylum seeker, former immigration detainee or refugee” whose story is told with the aim to put “an immediate end to indefinite immigration detention in the UK.”⁹⁶ Inspired by *The Canterbury Tales*, the project creates “a charged sense of place,” foregrounding “the visible fact of human movement” and offering “an exchange of information in the act of telling stories.”⁹⁷ Three literary anthologies have appeared associated with the project, each collection grappling with the ethics of speaking for and with others in pursuit of social justice. Sierra Lomuto states that the “*Refugee Tales* transforms the imperial power of English into a tool of resistance precisely by speaking through Chaucer,” who is “a looming, masculine figure of the English canon” yet also composes in a poetic language that holds “the potential for ‘welcome’” in the present day.⁹⁸

The first anthology of works published by *The Refugee Tales* project was entitled *Refugee Tales* (2016) and it includes a poem by Patience Agbabi; entitled “The Refugee’s Tale,” her poem relates the first-person narrative of a woman named “Farida” who fled religious violence in her homeland before relocating to Britain. Composed as

⁹⁵ Anzaldúa, *Borderlands / La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, 101.

⁹⁶ Herd and Pincus, eds., *Refugee Tales*, “Afterword,” 133.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Lomuto, “Chaucer and Humanitarian Activism.”

a sequence of sonnets, Agbabi's poem offers some traces of a collaboration with the woman whose story she narrates: "I make a very good falafel, / you must try. Are you recording?"⁹⁹ Farida reveals she is a Coptic Christian, raised in Egypt, of Sudanese birth: "though my parents are Egyptian, / I am born in Sudan, Sudan is in my blood."¹⁰⁰ She invokes a strong sense of belonging across multiple homelands, invoking tender Christian/Muslim coexistence "back home"¹⁰¹ in Egypt before religious violence began as well as her affective ties to Sudan: "Christians and Muslims break the same bread / before the change ... Though I am always a Christian ... I loved Muslims as I love the Nuba" [i.e., Nuba Mountains in Sudan], referring to the land of her birth.¹⁰² Her story is charged with motifs of motion, and waterways act both as boundaries and pathways. "How can we be at war / when the Nile flows through our twin faiths?"¹⁰³ Farida asks in reference to Christianity and Islam and also (more obliquely) to her "twin" homelands of Egypt and Sudan, through which the Nile also flows. When Farida survives religious violence due to the protective shell of her car, she sees "waving fists part like the Red Sea" and "I still think it's a miracle I find myself free": an allusion to a biblical exodus from Egypt that anticipates her own departure.¹⁰⁴ When her mother dies, "my whole body drowned with grieving / in this room, with the ribbed roof ... heavy as Jonah," a rich evocation of environmental space that evokes a prophet's biblical transit across the Mediterranean.¹⁰⁵

The Refugee Tales (in all its iterations) maintains that a Chaucerian voicing of others might enable world transformation and social justice if only anglophone readers can empathize with migrants who are so often dehumanized in public discourse. A woman with a rich cultural background, life experience, and faith tradition can so often find herself reduced to the signifier *refugee*: "'Refugee' is in your head when you call me Farida."¹⁰⁶ Agbabi uses the formal structure of a crown of sonnets, a recursive form in which the final line of each sonnet becomes the first line of the next; the final line of the final sonnet echoes the entire text's opening line: "Maybe the real story begins here."¹⁰⁷ By bringing the end of the story back to its beginning, Agbabi builds empathy with Farida and conveys some of the feelings of stagnation and perpetual "new beginnings" that legal structures can create.¹⁰⁸ An unjust immigration system or unwelcoming environment for

99 Patience Agbabi, "The Refugee's Tale," in *Refugee Tales*, ed. Herd and Pincus, 125–32, at 125.

100 *Ibid.*, 126.

101 *Ibid.*, 125.

102 *Ibid.*, 126. On Sudanese and Nubian diasporic identities in relation to Arab Egyptian culture in a different literary context, see Abbas, "Nubian Diasporic Identity," 149–50.

103 *Ibid.*, 128.

104 *Ibid.*

105 *Ibid.*, 132.

106 *Ibid.*, 125. "Farida" means "unique or precious" in Arabic.

107 *Ibid.*, 132 and 125.

108 Agbabi uses this same poetic form in "Joined-up Writing" (her retelling of Chaucer's "Man of Law's Tale"), which relates the story of an African immigrant through the first-person voice of her racist northern British mother-in-law (Agbabi, *Telling Tales*, 21–27). See also Agbabi, "Stories in Stanza'd English."

refugees can result in an extended limbo: a state of suspended animation and thwarted motion.

Agbabi's literary voicing of the story of "Farida," and the poet's critique of how her entire identity and life experience can get reduced to the legal or social designation of "refugee," potentially aligns with some of the activist approaches currently employed in the interdisciplinary field of critical refugee studies. This field of study, as announced and outlined by Yǎn Lê Espiritu, examines how "the refugee, who inhabits a condition of statelessness, radically calls into question the established principles of the nation-state" as well as an "idealized goal of inclusion and recognition within it."¹⁰⁹ The field of critical refugee studies attends to "the displaced refugee, rather than the rooted citizen," as a "social actor whose life, when traced, illuminates the interconnections of colonization, war, and global social change."¹¹⁰ Poetry that centers the perspectives of dehumanized migrants and displaced individuals can not only make the case for the full inclusion of marginalized people as citizens within the existing legal structures of nation-states, but such storytelling can also critique the ubiquitous forms of violence and border policing that these same nation-states enact.¹¹¹

Across the globe, Ouyang Yu (Chinese-born Australian poet, novelist, and translator publishing works in English and in Chinese) offers disparate individual stories of migration, but through the experiences of many travelers over time. Ouyang's verse novel *The Kingsbury Tales* (2008) focuses primarily on Kingsbury, a suburb of the city of Melbourne where Australia's oldest Chinatown is located.¹¹² Founded during the Gold Rush of the 1850s, Melbourne's Chinatown is an "iconic enclave" that is arguably the oldest continuously inhabited Chinatown in the so-called Western world.¹¹³ Ouyang's multi-voiced novel incorporates a variety of verse forms (none of which are rhyming couplets nor iambic pentameter), telling discontinuous stories of Chinese migrants and people born in Australia over the centuries—as well as charting his own movements through-out Singapore, Malaysia, and Chinese diaspora communities across Australasia.

Ouyang's verse novel opens with a prologue-poem "A Novel, Tentatively" that acknowledges the complexity of speaking for others across time: "The Kingsbury Tales are no match / For The Canterbury Tales ... A novel, tentatively ... in a jagged form / A crap old / Format / That treats other's histories as / If they were my own."¹¹⁴ In these lines, Ouyang evokes Chaucer's comments that "[w]hoso shal telle a tale after a man ... moot reherce as neigh as evere he kan ... or finde wordes newe" [whoever wants to repeat a story from somebody else must repeat it as closely as he can or find new words].¹¹⁵ Ouyang offers "[a] novel written, to be written / In a novel form / For novel

¹⁰⁹ Espiritu, *Body Counts*, 10.

¹¹⁰ Ibid, 11.

¹¹¹ Ng, "Detention Islands."

¹¹² Ouyang, *Kingsbury Tales*.

¹¹³ Chau, Dupre, and Xu, "Melbourne Chinatown as Iconic Enclave."

¹¹⁴ Ouyang, *Kingsbury Tales*, 15.

¹¹⁵ Chaucer, *Canterbury Tales*, "General Prologue," lines 731–36.

readers.”¹¹⁶ In the context of Ouyang’s work as an announced adaptation of Chaucer, the double meanings of “novel” (as a noun and as an adjective) transform the Canterbury pilgrimage from an anthology of stories in motion into a multivoiced historical novel in verse. Ouyang transforms the conventions of Chaucerian storytelling to craft a new community of voices in transit across time and to tell divergent stories of individual inhabitants of, or travelers through, a particular place.

“The Aussie’s Tale” opens with a seemingly typical male Aussie narrator: “I take a lot of pride in being an Aussie / I go to the footy / If you are an Aussie that’s what you do.”¹¹⁷ Race and gender norms set the conventions of the presumed “default” of white Australian masculinity. It is the sudden reality of a Chinese face that disrupts the speaker’s perceived belonging: “You think I look like an Aussie? / Of mixed blood? / I am as Chinese as you guys.”¹¹⁸ These rhetorical questions provisionally mark the silently unmarked whiteness that underlies the term “Aussie.” Ouyang’s verse novel toys with acts of racial disclosure and uses a mobile first-person voice to explore Australia’s own history of Chinese exclusion through its own “Yellow Peril” era genres of anti-Asian “Invasion Literature” and its “White Australia” immigration policy,¹¹⁹ and Ouyang reflects on histories of displacement of Aboriginal Australians through ongoing settler colonialism as well.¹²⁰ Throughout these poems, Ouyang creates new spaces for a Chinese face or voice in Australia, and he asks how Chaucerian personas might change social perceptions of who is “authentically” Australian.¹²¹

Ouyang primarily writes in “standard” English, but he occasionally uses a Chaucerian middling vernacular to reflect uneasy positionings across Chinese and Australian and “Chinese Australian” identities. “New Accents” uses the words “Anguish” and “English” as near-homonyms: “In Kingsbury, in the late 1990s” he hears many “new accents,” and upon his arrival in Australia people “tried to fool me around because I couldn’t / Speak ‘Anguish.’”¹²² “Place Names, A Tale of Chinese Invasion” offers literal translations (phonetic transliterations) of Australian place names. The poetic speaker observes that politicians “are so concerned with Asian read non-white immigration / Into Australia” but the “Chinese have sinicized Australia / Without your knowledge, graphically.”¹²³ Chinese sounds and phrases replace English and Aboriginal place names: “xueli (Snow Pear) is their name for Sydney / moerben (Ink That Book) is theirs for Melbourne /

116 Ouyang, *Kingsbury Tales*, 15.

117 *Ibid.*, 64.

118 *Ibid.*

119 *Ibid.*, “Sir Wong Hung Foo’s Tale,” 22–23.

120 *Ibid.*, “An Aboriginal Tale,” 21–22.

121 On the myth of the “monochrome Middle Ages” and “the Whiteness of the imagined world” in medieval-inspired fictions, see Young, *Habits of Whiteness*, 72–76, regarding an online discussion about the lack of Asian and Indigenous Australian influences in George R. R. Martin’s novels and the *Game of Thrones* franchise.

122 Ouyang, *Kingsbury Tales*, 46.

123 *Ibid.*, 59.

wulongang (Five Dragon Ridge) theirs for Wollongong.”¹²⁴ Enacting a linguistic form of displacement (which white settler colonialism has previously enacted against Aboriginal Australians), Chinese migrants move across the Pacific to settle in white anglophone spaces and proliferate new place names. “Speaking English in Chinese” reflects on how Chinese and English intermingle in Singapore: “‘Here we are la,’ our Malay driver says ... ‘Is this [word ‘la’] something like the English ‘Isn’t it?’”¹²⁵ Simultaneously a form of making and breaking, Singlish “can create things like ‘break English,’ not ‘broken English.’”¹²⁶

In “English Language, My Colony,” Ouyang layers his critique of white settler colonialism in Australia with histories of Chinese migrant labor in the Australian gold mines. Just as white settlers used names such as “Sin Fat” or “heathen Chineese” to assert their dominance over “the early dinkum Chinaman diggers,” so does Ouyang struggle to control “the bastardy colony, the English Language ... I have much to do to establish, to destroy, in this colony of mine ... this derelict mine of words.”¹²⁷ Attentive to intricacies of vernacular speech and an unsettled English language, Ouyang’s modern Chaucerian poetry traces forms of racial unbelonging across Australia and the Pacific—breaking down conventions in order to create something new.

Fellow Travelers and New Solidarities

Anticipating some of the sociopolitical critiques currently explored in the field of critical refugee studies, Ouyang crafts a markedly Asian voice inscribing a multifaceted and multiracial history of migrants, travelers, and settlers inhabiting a local Australian environment. Ouyang’s poetic craft develops a “novel voice” that not only accommodates a plurality of unrooted or displaced experiences throughout Australasia but also critiques the historical and ongoing harms of white supremacy and settler colonialism—as well as the ongoing violence of xenophobia and border policing that so often vilifies migrants throughout the so-called Global North.

The Chaucerian poets of color discussed in this chapter all come from distinct geocultural and sociopolitical environments, and their positions on antiracism and activism diverge, with some writers more deeply aligned with particular histories of antiracist theory and practice and others expressing more informal experience, or even some rhetorical distance, from such approaches. Poets of color are not a monolith, but all of these writers invite readers to think carefully about our own social and racial positionings and our own complicity (in whatever communities we find ourselves) in ongoing structures of oppression and exclusion. We can also, just as crucially, continue to create and sustain spaces for people of color and historically marginalized voices—and work to dismantle unjust structures as we collectively construct a more just world.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 78.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 79.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 94.