

Borderliner

Hannah Lowe

The first person to call me *half-caste* was the father of my friend Emma from primary school. I'd gone to her house for tea and my dad had come to collect me, pulling up in his old brown Cortina, beeping the horn. He was never one for airs and graces. I was putting on my coat, ready to say goodbye, when Emma's father, looking out above my head to the car, said thoughtfully, 'I didn't know you were a half-caste.'

I didn't know I was a *half-caste*, either. At that point in my life, I knew nothing about the language used to describe or denigrate people of mixed heritage, although I did know what racism was. At the multicultural primary I attended in Ilford, Essex, we were taught about difference and tolerance. This was during the now maligned era of multicultural education – the 'steel bands, saris and samosas' approach whereby schools undertook a kind of tokenistic sampling of other cultural traditions.¹ I was too young to understand any of this. But I remember we would accuse each other of playground racism at any given opportunity, though often our young tongues slipped up on the language, *racist* becoming *racialist* – 'Miss, so-and-so's a *racialist*!'

Driving home that evening from my friend's house, I didn't ask my father what *half-caste* meant. I already knew. Emma's father had seen mine in the driver's seat – a light-skinned black man with an unkempt Afro. The surprise he expressed was because, to most people, I look white. I *pass*. As in *pass for white*. But my lack of racial resemblance to my dad held no meaning for me back then or now. He was just my dad. I knew scant details about his life. He'd been born in Jamaica to a black mother and a Chinese father. I had no idea how he'd ended up in Ilford, but there he was. I was probably more

interested in him teaching me to ride my bike than anything else.

Later on, language regimes shifted. I remember this more consciously because I was older and becoming interested. *Half-caste* was replaced by *mixed-race*. Then *dual-* and *multi-heritage*. When I studied in America in the late 1990s, *bi-racial* and *multi-racial* were the terms deployed. It was then, studying for a degree in American Studies, that I became aware of the vast historical lexicon of language for describing non-white people, of the 'one-drop' theory of racial categorisation rooted in slavery, and those tongue-twistery terms: quadroon (taken from the French word *quarteron* and the Spanish *cuarterón*, which both have a root in the Latin *quartus*, meaning 'quarter'); octoroon for one-eighth black (Latin root *octo-*, 'eight'); hexadecaroon for one-sixteenth black.

Hidden behind this faux-scientific language and the phenomenon of 'passing' is the brutal history of forced miscegenation in slave societies – the rape of slave women at the hands of white plantation owners. No laws prevented this. I think my own grandmother, Hermione, my father's mother, most likely had this violence in her own ancestry. Her face in the only photograph we have of her shows what might be construed as African features, but her skin, which she was apparently very proud of, was pale – almost what we would call *white*.

Sitting in the British Library, some years later, I found eighteenth- and nineteenth-century runaway slave notices from Jamaican newspapers:

30 July, 1718

Weekly Jamaica Courant

Runaway from Mrs DRAKES, a yellow negro wench, named ROSE, marked *L C* upon her right shoulder. Whoever brings the said negro to her mistress, shall be well rewarded. And whoever entertains her be it at their peril.

And this:

5 May 1795

Cornwall Chronicle

Ran away from the subscriber about a month ago a mulatto man, named JAMES BEARD, by trade a carpenter, stout and well made, about 35 years of age, with lighter coloured eyes than the mulattoes usually have, has somewhat the look of a Spaniard, is sensible and artful, and may perhaps attempt to pass for a free man.²

There were frequent notices about absconded slaves described as having light complexions and/or light eyes, some who could pass for European or white. Reading these advertisements, my visual imagination of slavery and of plantations suddenly changed. People who looked as white as me, who, like me, had more than one drop of *negro blood* – were slaves. They worked in the cane-fields, or more likely, in the great houses of plantations, because of the privilege incurred by their lighter skin colour, and/or being an (un)acknowledged descendant of a white master or overseer.

Many years after first being called *half-caste*, these disturbing historical discoveries cemented my interest in the racialised language of slavery and Empire and its aftermath. Searching online for terms for people of mixed heritage, I came across the term *Borderliner* between *Biracial* and *Coconut*. The index indicated whether the term was derogatory by placing a D in brackets after it. *Borderliner* (D). Though I am still to discover its actual etymology, the word caught my attention because it speaks to notions of racial transgression *and* geographical borders, both of which are heavily policed. It evokes ideas of the nation state, of Fortress Europe and the door half-open/half-closed immigration policies of many European countries. Most currently, it makes me think of the still unfolding Windrush scandal, in which British citizens who had hitherto assumed their settlement and British citi-

zenship to be safe, were made *borderliners*, forced back to the border, then over it. Though the scandal is born out of the 'hostile environment' policy of recent governments, I've also wondered whether there hasn't always been a potential problem with the historicising and celebration of the arrival of the *Empire Windrush*. In repeatedly replaying the moment of arrival (and inaccurately lauding this as the beginning of British multiculturalism), British nationals of Caribbean origin have been continually imagined on the docks, at the border, in a perpetual process of late arrival. The dominant image of the ship still emphasises that arrival, not the decades of settlement, struggle, survival and renewal.

What to do with such a term? *Borderliner*? As a student at university, the African-American feminist writer Audre Lorde's claim that the master's house could never be dismantled with the master's tools resonated strongly for me.³ I believed these archaic, racist terms should be made obsolete. I felt that writers of BAME heritage should reject the old tools. But in my life as a poet, I have found myself often reaching for, say, traditional poetic forms, reclaiming and, I hope, challenging and rejuvenating them. And this was also my instinct with the word *borderliner* – to see how it might become a place of possibility and advantage. I felt that, despite its dubious etymology and negative connotations, the word also has energy and agency.

If I think about the word visually, I see a person standing, bizarrely, in the English countryside, at a juncture point, between two fields maybe, one of wheat, one of maize. Maybe there's a stile. Maybe my imaginary person climbs over and walks through the wheat field or into the field of maize. They can choose. Or perhaps they just stand there, looking both ways. Maybe they look like me. Maybe they look like my father – both of us *borderliners*. This image spills into another. A memory of my father on

one of our rural English holidays, stood on a windy day on a Dorset beach, dressed in a denim jacket and denim flares, his hair wild. He smiles for the camera, having just buried myself and my brother in the sand. Our white faces are smiling for our mother's lens.

Up late one night, feeding my son, I came across Philip Nikolayev's 'embedded sonnets' which experiment with bold and non-bold typography, embedding a bold sonnet within a free verse field of non-bold text. I immediately saw possibility, and that night sketched out the first of the poems I later named *Borderliners*. In that first poem, I tried to explore both the ideas of racial and of geographical crossings, experimenting with typography and making a kind of porous border between the two poems, meaning you can read across, and find, I hope, a new kind of sense. The reader can be as active with the poem as they wish. Like the person stood between two fields, they have agency, they can cross the border, or not:

Borderliner

I'm skirting the bold lines of the map **border-liner, might mean white girl**
neither here nor there, but home in the border places **with corkscrew hair**
Tijuana, where rich American boys slam tequila **or brown girl with flat hair**
or controlled drugs, or down the fence **slipping from one side to the other**
where a veiled woman clutches her baby **always looking for the right light**
in the thin shadows **Passing, hoping the old world wouldn't catch her up**
always waiting to cross **a how do or hey girl in the wrong hotel or store**
I've always loved sea-swimming **some fool too loud, not seeing the signs**
but sometimes these waves carry **That kind of stuff could put you back in**
make-shift rafts bobbing empty of their cargo **chains or end with the blade**
below my feet, the sea-bed **but ever notice how green eyes in yellow skin**
cross-hatched with bones **look so good, how some faces have no borders**
There were times when these borders had **no fixed abode. You can draw**
no barbed wire, and even now not all borders are **a pretty rainbow diagram**
so hard. There are places nobody cares to pass **or use faux scientific words**
think of that frozen mountain trail where only a tin sign **to classify, or slang**
tells one snowy Nordic edge from another or miles **relating to nation states**
of rough green march-lands **chocolate bars or animals – mongrel or mule**
where I have wandered for days **But I say it's only when you are standing**
That I'm home on the border doesn't mean **on the border that you are free**
I don't think about who took the world and carved it up **to look both ways**

If I have claimed this term *borderliner* to describe myself, choosing to embrace its potential, the possibility of identifying not by race, ethnicity or nation state, but by a more deliberately miscellaneous, perhaps more antagonistic marker, I have also wondered what other writers would make of the term.

This guest editorial began with me talking to writers about the word 'borderliner' and what it meant to me, then inviting them to respond in any way they chose – to embrace the term, reject it or ignore it altogether. I consciously asked writers whose heritages are as varied and complicated as my own but, as an act of resistance to the constant categorisings of race and ethnicity, I won't describe their backgrounds here. All speak for themselves.

What you will find in this edition is a consistent preoccupation with language – from issues of naming in Arji Manuelpillai's exploration of his name, to translation, as so wonderfully articulated by J G Ling ('Translation cannot be a nation state with policeable borders'), to Will Harris's preoccupations with the language of the murdered American-Korean writer, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha. The personal, intimate writing of Pema Monaghan and Nina Mingya Powles reminds me of how issues of identity are issues of the heart – of coming of age, exclusion, inclusion, objectification, the need for self-expression, the experiences of grief and solace. Andy Martinez's photographic exploration tells a story not of arrival, but of settlement, and the transformational power of diasporic culture. Some of the images call to my mind Stuart Hall's discussion of earlier photographs of multi-heritage families – images he defiantly read as 'the trauma of black and white people, together, making love, finding their sexuality with each other and having children as the living proof that, against God and Nature, *It Worked*.⁴ Johny Pitts' essay is a poignant, politicised testimony to a particular time

and place, and further probes the difficulties in trying to foist racial categorisations onto individual people with their own unique experiences and subjectivities. It champions the subterranean, kinetic and dynamic spaces of mixedness above any attempted containment by officialdom.

I hope *borderliner* can hold open some of this subterranean, kinetic energy. It's not a word you can find in a dictionary. But it is a word you can enter, explore, interrogate and renew.

Notes

1 Madoo, T. 'Multiculturalism: not a minority problem'. *The Guardian*.

www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2011/feb/07/multiculturalism-not-minority-problem

2 ed. Chambers, D. B. 'Runaway Slaves in Jamaica (1). Eighteenth Century'. University of Southern Mississippi. <https://ufdc.ufl.edu/AA00021144/00001>

3 Lorde, A. *The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle The Master's House*. London: Penguin Classics. 2018

4 Hall, S. 'Reconstruction Work: Images of Postwar Black Settlement' in ed. Proctor, J. *Writing Black Britain 1948 – 1998*. Manchester: Manchester University Press. 2000

Hannah Lowe

Hannah Lowe was born in Essex in 1976 to a white English mother and Afro-Chinese Jamaican father. She studied American Literature at the University of Sussex, followed by an MA in Refugee Studies. She undertook her PhD in Creative Writing at Newcastle University in 2012.

Broadly, Lowe's work is concerned with migration histories, multicultural London and the complex legacies of the British Empire. Her first poetry collection, *Chick* (Bloodaxe, 2013), blended these political concerns with a deeply personal and elegiac commemoration of her father, and won the

Michael Murphy Memorial Award for Best First Collection. Her second collection, *Chan* (Bloodaxe, 2016) is about the life and untimely death of her father's cousin, the jazz saxophonist, Joe Harriott. In this book, Lowe developed a new poetic form – the 'borderliner' – which uses typography and double narration to explore ideas about multi-heritage experiences. Lowe's work is often concerned with historical omissions, and in *Ormonde* (Hercules Editions, 2014), she excavates the story of the SS Ormonde, on which her father migrated, and which arrived in Britain before the better-known Empire Windrush. *The Neighbourhood* (Outspoken Press, 2019) explores how communities respond to the pressures of austerity, gentrification and deportation. She is currently working on a third full-length collection, *The Kids*, inspired by her work as an inner-city sixth form teacher.

Lowe's memoir, *Long Time No See* (Periscope, 2015) was Radio 4's Book of the Week in July 2015. Critical work includes recent essays on the fictional narrativising of the Empire Windrush for the *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* and on 'Windrush Women' for *Wasifiri*.

Lowe has been Poet-in-Residence at Keats House, a commissioned writer on the Colonial Countryside Project, and wrote *Hillviews* in collaboration with the residents of the Hillview Estate in Kings Cross. She is a regular at international literary festivals and an invited speaker at events about literature, migration and multiculturalism.

Lowe teaches Creative Writing at Brunel University and lives in London with her young son.

A recording of this talk can be found on the WritersMosaic website at

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