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**36. Redefining the Boundaries: Black and Asian Queer Desire**

Any reference to black and Asian queer desire immediately necessitates certain caveats and qualifications, not least because many black and Asian individuals historically have found themselves torn between racial and sexual identifications potentially at odds with one another. Kobena Mercer and Isaac Julien, for example, write movingly of finding no voice for their sexuality in contexts of racial solidarity, and no acknowledgement of their race within the gay community, while similarly, Ashley Tellis claims that to ‘be a British South Asian queer subject […] is to face a repressive family within and a hostile society outside’.[[1]](#endnote-1) Nevertheless, as this chapter goes on to attest, the twenty-first century has seen more black and Asian writers than ever exploring same-sex desire in their fiction, leading to a vibrant body of work that demonstrates the ways in which queerness unsettles racial, national, class and gendered categories. In fact, queer writing might even be said to have obvious resonance with writers of colour who often themselves transgress the imposition of narrow, racially-determined physical and discursive boundaries in forms akin to the ‘slanting’ or ‘oblique’ positionalities discussed by Sara Ahmed.[[2]](#endnote-2) Ranging across diverse literary forms to look at authors including Bernadine Evaristo, Kei Miller, Neel Mukherjee, Diriye Osman, Jay Bernard and Saradha Soobrayen, this essay raises questions about the interrogation, blurring and translation of racial and sexual identities across a range of orientations. In so doing, it charts the uneven evolution and heterogeneous quality of queer black British and Asian writing, framing it against Stuart Hall’s ‘refusal to represent the black experience in Britain as monolithic, self-contained, sexually stabilised and always “right on”’.[[3]](#endnote-3)

As the introduction to this collection has already made clear, the labels ‘black’ and ‘Asian’ are not without both their limitations and their detractors. For the purposes of this chapter, the terminology is used tenuously, critically, and with the recognition that: ‘different heritages can be juggled within the same neighborhood, within the same household, and within the same person’.[[4]](#endnote-4) In practical terms, some of my chosen authors use these labels and some do not; some have spent extended periods in the UK, whereas others have lived there since birth; while the fictional settings of my selected texts range across Britain and abroad. In similar fashion, ‘queer’ also stands as conflictual or problematic term, with there being some concern that it has little valence for raced invocations of same-sex loving. As Emily Taylor rightly cautions, we must be wary of ‘the potential imperialism’ of analytical modes that ‘might assume Eurocentric notions of the subject and categories of gender and sexuality that have their basis in Western epistemologies’.[[5]](#endnote-5) More specifically, Jin Haritaworn, Tamsila Tauqir and Esra Erderm outline how ‘queer’ frequently signifies white, gay male, with the visibility of controversial figures such as Peter Tatchell – criticised for the troubling racial tenor of his queer activism – signalling less, progress on gendered and sexual concerns and more, racial and national conservatism.[[6]](#endnote-6) I therefore use ‘queer’ with some wariness, and only in the absence of preferred nomenclature by any particular author. Yet some writers do claim the term. Valerie Mason-John, for example, explains:

‘[Q]ueer’ doesn’t just mean ‘homosexual’, it encompasses a range of identities, gay and straight. It includes bisexual and transgender people. ‘Queer’ covers a whole range of sexualities and genders. It means ‘other’ or ‘different’. It’s a political term that permits greater freedom around gender and sexuality. ‘Queer’ indicates identities that are fluid. It loosens the attachment to binaries.[[7]](#endnote-7)

Of course, as Thomas Glave warns, this ‘linguistic and intellectual fluidity and expansiveness’ means ‘almost anything can be “queer”-ed or “queery”’ed’ [[8]](#endnote-8); words that alert us to the hazards of post-structuralist word play watering down the political or material realities at stake. Nevertheless, this chapter remains committed to the idea that racial and sexual questioning can, and do, happen in tandem, in keeping with Hall’s assertion that ‘the new politics of representation’ crosses ‘the questions of racism irrevocably with questions of sexuality.[[9]](#endnote-9) Over the pages to follow, I therefore emphasise the undeniable presence of what might tenuously be called black and Asian queer British lives.

Although increasing scholarly attention has been paid to black and Asian cultural production over the last fifteen years, sexuality has not featured prominently in many studies. In fact, amidst the raft of monographs encompassing Asian and/or black fiction that have appeared since the new millennium, few devote substantive attention to questions of sexual desire.[[10]](#endnote-10) Gabrielle Griffin is careful to probe the racialised sexualities depicted by her subjects in *Contemporary Black and Asian Women Playwrights in Britain* (2003) and, interestingly, both Dimple Godiwala’s (ed.) *Alternatives within the Mainstream: Black British Black and Asian Theatres* (2006) and Geoffrey V. Davis and Ann Fuch’s (eds.) *Staging New Britain* (2006) include coverage of the topic, suggesting that discussion of sexuality is perhaps more prevalent within theatre scholarship. R. Victoria Arana (ed.) oversees some acknowledgement of same-sex loving in *“Black” British Aesthetics Today* (2009), while John R. Gordon and Rikki Beadle-Blair’s anthology *Black and Gay in the UK* (2014) is the first UK-focused collection to address the experiences of gay black men. Finally, Kanika Batra offers a timely chapter on ‘British Black and Asian LGBTQ Writing’ in Deidre Osborne’s recent Cambridge Companion (2016). Aside from these works, stand-alone essays and author-specific collections are the only source of academic insight into queer Asian and black British fictional lives.

**Early Examples**

Yet this scarcity is not because such desires are absent from black and Asian British writing. Osborne, for example, rightly notes the ‘rarely acknowledged Black and Asian LGBTQ literary continuities to be found in a broad spectrum of poetry, drama and fiction’.[[11]](#endnote-11) The nomenclature and cultural understandings of sexuality might have changed, but as early as the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, queer sexual readings can be applied to texts by those who journeyed to, and found fame, in Britain. In line with Daniel O’Quinn we might, for example, consider the male libidinal impulses and bodily masochism of Olaudah Equiano’s *The Interesting Narrative and Other Writings* (1789).[[12]](#endnote-12) The sadism, sexual silences and narrative strictures of *The History of Mary Prince* (1831) can, likewise, be both queried and queered, not least in their undermining of normative, white, domestic heterosexuality. Despite the fact that Mary Seacole’s memoir (1857) asserts her personal adherence to the norms of English femininity, these are revealed to be premised on the rejection of gendered nonconformity espoused by ‘those French lady writers’, in a veiled reference to the kinds of female sexual transgression demonstrated by George Sands amongst others.[[13]](#endnote-13) These works might reflect period trends in the creation and formalisation of autobiography as a genre, as well as the instantiation of the slave narrative as a recognised form, but they also speak to a twenty-first century interest in queer life writing and the significance of the personal in political self-fashioning. Furthermore, whether it be O’Quinn’s emphasis on Protestant myth-making and the sexual habits of shipboard culture in Equiano’s case, or Sara Salih’s argument as to how the Abolitionist cause tried to present Mary Prince as sexually pure and sufficiently Christian, what these early examples also have in common is their linkage of sexual propriety, racialised colonial violence and religion.[[14]](#endnote-14)

In the twentieth century, queer readings can be coaxed from a number of unexpected texts by authors who moved between the UK and abroad. Rahul Rao discusses Rabindranath Tagore’s 1915 work, *Ghare Baire* in terms of the politics of the *zenana* (women’s space) and notions of ‘coming out’, highlighting how the ‘Woman Question’ is ‘always already queer’.[[15]](#endnote-15) In a similar vein, Cornelia Sorabji’s engagement with the zenana in *India Calling* (1934) can be read for its ‘depiction of the easy intimacy between women, the rituals of touch, grooming, affection, and pleasure’, despite what Gayatri Gopinath describes as the author’s determination to ‘position herself as a cosmopolitan, modern nationalist subject’ in opposition to the women on whom she gazed.[[16]](#endnote-16) Claude McKay’s novels, *Home to Harlem* (1928) and *Banjo* (1929) can also be read in overtly queer terms. Michelle Ann Stephens discusses the former through ‘a queer reading that explores how constructions and discourses of sexuality shape McKay’s ultimate turn away from stories of home’ and the latter as ‘a gendered story of the formation of alternative male desires’.[[17]](#endnote-17) Furthermore, Joshua Gosciak points to McKay’s reliance on radical Victorian intellectual traditions such as Fabian socialism and the Arts and Crafts movement, which reflected a blurring of queer, political and patronage relations.[[18]](#endnote-18) These writers’ complex renderings of gendered and sexual lives attest to both their own internationalism and the difficulties of navigating the sexual proscriptions of British rule in an era of increasing anti-colonial sentiment. As Stephens makes clear, figures such as McKay struggled ‘to chart a course’ for the rendering of sexual desire ‘somewhere in the interstices between empire, nation, and state’.[[19]](#endnote-19)

**Post-war Shifts**

Although black and Asian individuals have asserted their influence over British life and culture for centuries, post-war migration to the UK served, as Osborne puts it, to alter the country’s ‘demographic composition more markedly than in any other period in its history’.[[20]](#endnote-20) This led inevitably to a greater number of texts being set (at least in part) within the shores of England, as authors began to lay claim to what Mark Stein calls ‘British cultures *in Britain*’.[[21]](#endnote-21) Within this body of work, references to black and Asian queer characters can be discerned with some frequency, albeit that a certain veiled allusiveness still pertains; unsurprising given the moral panic and aggressive policing typical of the period before legalisation in 1967. Even so, V. S. Naipaul’s *In A Free State* (1971) and *Guerrillas* (1975), along with Neville Dawes’s *The Last Enchantment* (1960) can be read for their conflictual, and occasionally hostile, treatment of male same-sex desire. Unusually, George Lamming devotes persistent attention to female homosexuality across a number of his novels, demonstrating the intense heteronormative pressure faced by women at the time.[[22]](#endnote-22) Andrew Salkey and Oscar Dathorne, meanwhile, place men desiring other men at the heart of their narrative concerns. Salkey’s *Escape to an Autumn Pavement* (1960), in particular, constitutes an important early intervention in the formation of a black British queer canon through its framing of protagonist, Johnnie as ‘*both* sexual and racial outsider’.[[23]](#endnote-23) Many of these texts demonstrate considerable difficulties with the stereotyping of black male sexuality, skewering the racialised sexual fantasies of white British society at the same time as they share parallels with Kobena Mercer’s discussion of ‘ambivalent’ structures of feeling.[[24]](#endnote-24) Despite their tentative portrayal of a range of peripheral lives, these works more commonly reveal the negative emotions of ‘nostalgia regret, shame, despair, *ressentiment*, passivity, escapism, self-hatred, withdrawal, bitterness, defeatism, and loneliness’ identified by Heather Love as characterising the queer canon – in contradiction to the more celebratory and assertive renderings of same-sex loving visible in twenty-first century writing.[[25]](#endnote-25) The chief exception to this is Aubrey Menen, whose satirical novels not only provide consistent critique of heteronormativity but, as Leela Gandhi puts it, also imagine: ‘a dissident alternative world populated by irreverent Wildean figures who find themselves in sympathetic counterallegiance with, among others, trees, “orientals,” children, criminals, and “primitives”’.[[26]](#endnote-26)

The latter part of the twentieth century saw diverse expressions of same-sex desire become far more prevalent, Kanika Batra going as far as to describe the 1980s as a ‘threshold generation’ for whom the ‘social and cultural visibility of sexual subjectivity and diversity in Britain increased’.[[27]](#endnote-27) From Hanif Kureishi, Rikki Beadle-Blair, Caryl Phillips and DeObia Oparei through to Suniti Namjoshi, Barbara Burford, Jacqueline Rudet, Jackie Kay, Dorothea Smartt, Patience Agbabi, Valerie Mason-John, Bidisha and Meera Syal, expressions of queer desire are more easily traced in these concluding decades. In the world of film, Stephen Frears and Hanif Kureishi’s seminal work, *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1985), along with Isaac Julien’s *Looking for Langston* (1989) and *Young Soul Rebels* (1991)seemed to usher in a new era of queer black and Asian loving on the big screen, which continued through to the 2002 film of Syal’s *Anita and Me* (1996). The trajectory between these movies gestures towards two key fictional trends of the period: first, greater numbers of black and Asian women gaining access to the cultural domain; and second, an accompanying increase in emphasis on lesbian lives. Accordingly, much of this work chimes with Audre Lorde’s argument as to the generative possibilities of eroticism between women of colour and the radical potentiality of shared connection with another.[[28]](#endnote-28) Jackie Kay’s 1986 drama, *Chiaroscuro* is emblematic of both these tendencies. Detailing the friendship between four friends of diverse racial and familial backgrounds, this ‘political play centres on issues of naming, belonging and self-definition, particularly in relation to the labels “black” and “lesbian.”’[[29]](#endnote-29) In similar fashion, lesbian-feminist poet, myth-maker and fabulist, Suniti Namjoshi’s work explores the consequences of being both lesbian and Indian, detailing the ‘problems of self-conception that arise when a decision to adopt a particular identity has to be carefully negotiated with a resistant and unwieldy universe’.[[30]](#endnote-30) Towards the close of the 1990s, Valerie Mason-John’s provocative play *Sin Dykes* (1998) claims black lesbian identity in out and proud fashion, invoking S&M sexual dynamics between women in a repudiation of sexual shame that ‘seeks to overcome the booby traps of a simplistic racial or sexual politics through the corporeality of sexual desire’.[[31]](#endnote-31) Finally, on the cusp of the millennium, poet and activist, Patience Agbabi’s lyrical collection *Transformatrix* (2000) plays wittily with gendered and sexual expectations, signalling a more confident fluidity as she moves between masculine and feminine gendered subjects. Her work reflects an outward and globalised experience of queerness, where ‘the queer diasporic subject troubles issues of both gender normativity and of national and geographical stability’.[[32]](#endnote-32)

In the present moment, more black and Asian writers than ever are exploring queer desire in their fiction. Authors of note whom I have not been able to include due to space constraints include: Dean Atta, Malorie Blackman, Maya Chowdhry, Yrsa Daley-Ward, Thomas Glave, Marlon James, NSR Khan, Ash Kotak, Adam Lowe, Seni Seneviratne, Andra Simon and Luke Sutherland, as well as there being a number of queer writers of colour in Adam Lowe’s *SPOKE: New Queer Voices* (2015); all of whom reveal in playful ways, how ‘the question of the black subject cannot be represented without reference to the dimensions of class, gender, sexuality and ethnicity’.[[33]](#endnote-33) In particular, the twenty-first century sees greater questioning of toxic black and Asian masculinities, along with intensified recognition of sexual and familial silences. Gendered constructions are increasingly destabilised, as well as the boundaries between text and image. In addition, the groundwork laid by Dorothea Smartt, Malika Booker, Patience Agbabi and others has led to an exciting new generation of poets who traverse written, musical and performative modes as much as gendered and sexual barriers.

**The Twenty-First Century: Caribbean Losses**

Known for her engagement with histories of the African diaspora and her light-footed experimentation with genre, in 2013, Bernadine Evaristo brought out the wryly comic, London-based novel, *Mr Loverman*. In keeping with well-known texts like *White Teeth* (2000) by Zadie Smith and *Small Island* (2004) by Andrea Levy, this work returns to previous generations, providing a new inflection on foundational narratives of black Britain. In Evaristo’s case, she looks to the Windrush era, excavating the queer voices obscured at the time, in line with J. Dillon Brown and Leah Read Rosenberg’s interest in ‘unsettling and overturning the potent originary myths’ of the period.[[34]](#endnote-34) *Mr Loverman* tells the story of two, closeted gay men in their seventies from Antigua: dandyish Barrington and his gentle-natured lover, Morris. A wise-cracking and somewhat affected autodidact, Barry has the self-educated man’s joy with words and much of the novel’s pleasure comes from his verbal showmanship (his character has echoes of Sam Selvon’s Moses in his London trilogy).[[35]](#endnote-35) Told through the alternating viewpoints of Barry and his long-suffering wife, Carmel, *Mr Loverman* brings movingly to life the shared damage of a lifetime clouded by fear and shame. At the same time, it does not shy away from Barry’s masculine failings, illustrating the cost borne by the women closest to him of his deceit. Like many queer novels before, it reflects back on the innocence of the boyhood fumblings between the two men. Caught in a compromising position by Barry’s brother, Larry, the elder boy keeps their secret, simply warning the pair to take better heed – in what is perhaps a gentle nod to a similarly understanding character named Larry in Salkey’s *Escape*.[[36]](#endnote-36) The novel is also at pains to show Barry as a man who cares for children (both his own and those of others), countering what Cecil Gutzmore describes as the tendency within certain Caribbean communities to associate homosexuality with paedophilia.[[37]](#endnote-37) In fact, in some ways, it is the unexceptionality of Barry and Morris’s relationship that stands out, making this a novel for the generation of LGBTQ marriage and what has been termed ‘homonormativity’.[[38]](#endnote-38) Yet, despite their celebration by a younger generation of gay men as ‘*living* history’, there is some poignancy to the men’s belated sexual freedom, Barry himself recognising that ’75 percent’ of his life has passed and that ‘this is the story of we lives. Hellos and goodbyes’.[[39]](#endnote-39) Not quite the suffering of Heather Love’s queer canon, Evaristo does, nevertheless, remind her readers that there have been costs to attaining the sexual freedoms many now take for granted. As a London-born woman of Nigerian background, *Mr Loverman* also demonstrates similar linguistic dexterity and confident multiculturality to Zadie Smith’s work, supporting Evaristo’s critical lauding as an author who says ‘things about modern Britain that no one else does’. [[40]](#endnote-40) Given this prescient eye, one can only wonder at the noticeable scholarly paucity of writing on *Mr Loverman*, despite its positive reception from reviewers.[[41]](#endnote-41)

Novelist, poet and short story writer, Kei Miller has come to greater public prominence in recent years as a result of his Forward Prize-winning collection, *The Cartographer Tries to Map a Way to Zion* (2014). In tandem with figures such as Marlon James and Thomas Glave, his writing heralds a new generation of black, gay, male Caribbean literary talent, whose work builds on precursors such as H. Nigel Thomas, as well as Caribbean women authors of the late twentieth century who challenged gendered and sexual norms. The fiction of these men works to contest stereotypes of Caribbean homophobia, Miller, for example, proving alert to the hazards of ‘queer imperialism’ as he points out: ‘It is very obvious that several well-meaning white North Americans would like (ever so earnestly) to bear witness to the suffering that LGBT people experience in the Caribbean […] And this kind of advocacy is deeply problematic’.[[42]](#endnote-42) Yet, at the same time, James, Glave and Miller alike have all left the region themselves, highlighting the continued difficulties of queer Caribbean experience and echoing previous, exilic male traditions. Two earlier works by Miller deal overtly with same-sex desire: the 2006 short story collection, *Fear of Stones and Other Stories*; and the novel, *The Same Earth* (2008). Both employ a folk vernacular interspersed with warm humour to bring to life small-town Jamaica and its attendant religious-sexual proscription. *Fear of Stones* contains two striking tales about the challenges facing queer Caribbean men. ‘This Dance’ reveals how social pressure and restrictive masculine codes combined mean that ‘some men in this island will never dance the way they want to dance’, while the titular story’s dextrous narrator teases out the ‘something else would have happened’ that never actually does; both sentiments reflecting Glave’s description of ‘that erotic-emotional desire for people of our own gender that it seemed no one – not anyone at all – ever spoke about’.[[43]](#endnote-43) In *The Same Earth*, meanwhile, Miller’s ‘matter-of-fact narration of the sex-life of Eulan Solomon, a man-loving actuary […] marks an important expansion of the Caribbean novel’s sexual world’, this despite the fact that all three stories are haunted by the erotic possibilities left unfulfilled.[[44]](#endnote-44)

**The Twenty-First Century: Queer Escape**

Novelist Neel Mukherjee published *Past Continuous* – known as *A Life Apart* in the UK – in 2008. It focuses on the life of a young gay man, Ritwik Ghosh who flees Kolkata for England, heading first for Oxford university before experiencing a life of precarity amidst London’s undocumented workforce. Mukherjee claims that he ‘consciously wanted to have a gay protagonist in my novel’, believing the topic to be ‘a trend in India’.[[45]](#endnote-45) Accordingly, Ritwik’s sexual experiences are rendered in matter of fact, explicit and detailed fashion, this despite the author’s further description of his character’s homosexuality as ‘a sideshow. The novel is not a “gay novel” […] His sexuality is what it is, a given’.[[46]](#endnote-46) The book concentrates on the protagonist’s isolation in pitiless fashion, emphasising Ritwik’s outsider status both at home and abroad. In so doing, Mukherjee rejects ‘both a nostalgic vision of the nation and an understanding of freedom as Westernization-at-home or emigration-to-West’.[[47]](#endnote-47) In contrast to Evaristo and Miller’s more private and domestic portrayals, Ritwik’s primary sexual experiences come through the public realm of cottaging and gay cruising culture. His first forays into this world are portrayed as a dance or game, before gradually we are told that his activities have become: ‘a habit, an addiction, and he is powerless to break out of its grip […] he has the clinical gambler’s dopamine-addicted brain, hooked to the tyranny of uncertain and random rewards.[[48]](#endnote-48) Mukherjee is careful to reflect the exoticism of which Ritwik is victim, echoing trends within post-war fiction, as his protagonist recognises: ‘his is a type of minority appeal, catering to the “special interest” group rather than the mainstream’.[[49]](#endnote-49) As the book’s original title suggests, this is also a text fixated on questions of time. Ritwik takes the view that cottaging, ‘is to experience time in its purest form; he understands how viscous, like treacle, it is in its unadulterated state’ – words with echoes of Jack Halberstam’s discussions of queer temporality.[[50]](#endnote-50)

Short-story writer and visual artist, Diriye Osman’s work deals with themes of sexuality and mental health. His debut collection *Fairytales for Lost Children* (2013) is a striking mixture of text and Osman’s own illustrations (which weave in Arabic calligraphy). It concentrates on the voices of displaced, young, gay and lesbian Somalis attempting to make their way both in the world, and in love, in keeping with Brenna Munro’s claim that: ‘A new figure has begun to appear in the anglophone African novel: the gay African is being written into literary existence, and more often than not, is being represented sympathetically’.[[51]](#endnote-51) Osman’s rendering of diverse African sexualities works to challenge one-note depictions of the continent as sexually regressive, while also showing the very real familial tensions generated by coming out. His stories range across ages, backgrounds and orientations, from queer-curious children, to sexually adventurous adults, judgemental grandparents and understanding mothers who recognise the sexual tolerance that ‘my generation was not capable of’.[[52]](#endnote-52) As was the case with Miller’s work, Osman acknowledges that: ‘In Somali culture many things go unsaid: how we love, who we love and why we love that way’.[[53]](#endnote-53) Countering this, his stories are ‘sensual, erotic, explicit’ as Evaristo recognises.[[54]](#endnote-54) One character, for example, states unequivocally that ‘I’ve always loved being gay. Sure, Kenya was not exactly Queer Nation but my sexuality gave me joy’, words instantiating Audre Lorde’s assertion of the erotic potential of desire (as further signalled by Osman’s choice of a Lorde quote for his epigraph).[[55]](#endnote-55) Finally, *Fairytales* ranges across both male and female same-sex desire – a surprisingly unusual tendency across this body of work.[[56]](#endnote-56)

**The Twenty-First Century: Poetic Forms**

The twenty-first century has also seen an efflorescence of exciting black and Asian poets addressing same-sex desire in both written and performative fashion, including figures such as Dean Atta, Maya Chowdhry, Adam Lowe, Seni Seneviratne, Andra Simon and Yrsa Daley-Ward. In closing, I reference two: Jay Bernard and Saradha Soobrayen. Bernard is a self-described ‘writer, film-programmer and inter-disciplinary artist’ who explores themes of the body, the archive, technology and history.[[57]](#endnote-57) Their 2016 pamphlet *The Red and Yellow Nothing* combines poetry with Bernard’s own images to reimagine the tale of Morien, a Moorish knight of Camelot, ‘skeletal and genderqueer’.[[58]](#endnote-58) This gendered nonconformity is representative of Bernard’s oeuvre as a whole, which, as Kei Miller recognises, is also grounded in the world of ‘London in all of its messy multi-lingual, multi-dialectal, multi-racial, multi-sexual and relentlessly modern complexity’.[[59]](#endnote-59) Like Miller, Bernard’s work considers the violent legacies troubling Caribbean culture. In the poem ‘Fake Beach’, for example, they ponder on the crossover between ‘fucking/discipline’ and parenthood, suggesting that ‘Your dad’s stance thigh muscles tight as he lowers/ himself’ onto your mother ‘is the same as when he draws back his arm’ to beat you.[[60]](#endnote-60) As the spacing here suggests, Bernard’s complex wordsmithery offers a challenging reading experience, one rendered incantatory in their compelling live readings. Finally, Saradha Soobrayen’s lyrical poems explore questions of desire, the body, silence and historical injustice. Her much-anthologised poem, ‘My Conqueror’ reimagines the colonisation of Mauritius – Soobrayen later redrafts it to include reference to the Chagos Islanders[[61]](#endnote-61) – and genders conquest female, albeit with no lesser a ‘lust for breasts and thighs’.[[62]](#endnote-62) This imagined world is populated with ‘cross-dressing captains and girls in white breeches. Boys who like boys who like collars and chains’, its insistent references to ‘tongues’ and ‘sucking’ in keeping with the poet’s ongoing exploration of language and desire. Her conqueror’s claim to be ‘no one and everyone’, meanwhile, reflects Soobrayen’s assertion that ‘I like to remain in the unknowingness. I aim to stay for as long as possible with what is not being understood or expressed’; words appropriate to the questioning and restless nature of both her and Bernard’s work.[[63]](#endnote-63)

In *Queer Phenomenology* (2006), Sara Ahmed discusses the ‘straightening’ effect of the orientations provided by the heteronormative world, whereby ‘we not only have to turn towards the objects that are given to us by heterosexual culture’ but ‘we must “turn away” from objects that take us off this line’.[[64]](#endnote-64) Those inhabiting a queer orientation are framed as existing in ‘slanting’ or ‘oblique’ ways to the norm, facing pressure to fall ‘in line’. In similar fashion, black and Asian writers often come into conflict with the narrow, physical and discursive boundaries of nationhood and race in Britain, Ahmed also pointing out in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2004) how ideas of national belonging work ‘to transform whiteness into a familial tie, into a form of racial kindred, that recognizes all non-white others as strangers’.[[65]](#endnote-65) Countering both the straightening effects of mainstream culture, and the construction of persons of colour as ‘strangers’ to Britain, the texts discussed in this chapter illustrate the heterogeneous quality of Asian and black British queer lives, embodying the ‘refusal to represent the black experience in Britain as monolithic, self-contained, sexually stabilised and always “right on”’.[[66]](#endnote-66)

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