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“love : necessity : anti-fa”: Hostile Environments and Necropolitics in Nat Raha’s *Of Sirens, Body & Faultlines* and Jay Bernard’s *Surge*

Abstract: The UK’s legislation on immigration in the 2010s has been defined by a hostile environment. This essay traces the ways in which two poets in the UK have responded to, and intervened in, this violent political climate. Through a close examination of Nat Raha’s *Of Sirens, Body & Faultlines* and Jay Bernard’s *Surge*, the essay demonstrates how both poets understand the present hostile environment in a wider historical context, and how they consequently make possible a new understanding of our contemporary moment, as well as possible pathways towards resisting the UK’s necropolitical immigration policies.

Keywords: Nat Raha, Jay Bernard, the hostile environment, necropolitics, the New Cross Fire, the Grenfell Tower fire

1. Introduction

The question of borders, and that of immigration, defined many of the most seismic political moments in the UK throughout the 2010s. Of course, both borders and the public perceptions around immigration have a much longer and more complex history across the 20th century – one that would require another article to fully address it. However, by opening with such a statement, I want to highlight how the issue of borders and of immigration looms large in the background of recent history that has shaped the country. To name but a small selection of indicative examples, the UK’s national obsession with borders and immigration conditioned the trajectory of the 2015 parliamentary election; the debates of the 2016 Brexit referendum and the UK’s subsequent departure from the European Union; the policies that produced the Windrush scandal of 2018; the numerous incidents of

refugees tragically drowning whilst trying to cross the English Channel; and the UK government's recent (unlawful) efforts to send asylum seekers to Rwanda. Even from this brief account, it seems safe to conclude that the contemporary conditions of the UK would now appear dramatically different were it not for the continued presence borders in its public imagination over the course of the recent decades.

In addition to highlighting the role of borders and immigration as a consistent concern for the UK's recent legislative history, the above summaries also highlight the fact that a fuller understanding of racist culture within the country must not simply look to its "most overt manifestations"; rather, it is of equal importance to carefully observe how the questions of borders and immigration in the UK have been driven by numerous "shifting practices of a security-oriented state seeking legitimacy in times of unbearable economic uncertainty" (Bhattacharyya et al 1). The following summary provides a broad but nevertheless useful picture of these recent developments:

The austerity [...] which followed the 2008 financial crash has brought increased frustration, through both lack of services and cuts to public sector jobs. On top of this, a deregulated labour market, zero-hours contracts and the gig economy mean that work [...] is precarious and low paid. In this context, reactionary nationalism is mobilised for political gain, and migrants, whether constructed as workers or scroungers, documented or illegal, have shouldered the blame for finance capitalism's fiscal calamities [...]. The crisis of legitimacy for governments that cannot provide the [...] prosperity promised by market-led growth has been partially reconciled by new [...] promises to protect the nation from violent crime, terrorism, and immigrants. (Bhattacharyya et al 2)

In other words, while it may be overly simplistic to suggest that the British public has been guided to blame the economic hardship of the country on racialised outsiders, it is nevertheless true that the UK's national legislation in areas such as immigration, counterterrorism and criminal justice has been configured to operate in precisely this manner.

The ideology behind one nebulous piece of such legislation was summarised by Theresa May during her time as Home Secretary, from at least 2012 onwards: "The aim is to create, here in Britain, a really hostile environment for illegal immigrants" (May; qtd. in Hill, n.p.). The phrase "hostile environment" became a staple part of May's rhetoric, and in many ways it defined her six years as Home Secretary, during which she spearheaded seven separate immigration bills and forty-five thousand changes to immigration rules. As such, the legislative practice of the hostile environment can involve a sprawling web of different immigration controls, but it fundamentally means that the government has made proof of legal immigration status a mandatory requirement for accessing the most basic means of existence within the UK: "employment, housing, healthcare, education, a bank

account, a driving license” all require evidence of one’s immigration status; therefore, the hostile environment might be briefly defined as “the system of immigration checks and data-sharing that saw the expansion of everyday, everywhere” border controls (Bhattacharyya et al 21).

The consequences of such a hostile environment must not be underestimated. In 2019, the Human Rights organisation Liberty warned that the UK’s hostile environment policies meant that “undocumented migrants” now found themselves “criminalised for doing what they must to survive” (7). The legislative creation of hostility thus hinges on eroding the potential of survivability. In this respect, Achille Mbembe’s concept of “necropolitics” – as articulated in his 2019 book of the same name – provides an apt framework through which to understand the hostile environment. In brief, Mbembe describes a set of mechanisms in social and political power that understand the ultimate expression of sovereignty as determining “who is able to live and who must die” (66). The term expands upon and revises Foucault’s ideas of biopower, which Mbembe argues are no longer sufficient to fully account for “contemporary forms of the subjugation of life to the power of death” (92). This is because our contemporary systems of political and social power are capable of not only deploying weapons designed for “maximally destroying persons and creating *death-worlds*”; crucially, those systems of power also organise “new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to living conditions that confer upon them the status of the *living dead*” (92; original emphasis). As the above warning from Liberty already indicates, the UK’s hostile environment policies are tantamount to this latter condition described by Mbembe. Indeed, his book is explicit in identifying borders as “the name used to describe the organised violence that underpins” contemporary capitalist states (99). Because policies such as the hostile environment view migrants as “surplus, unwanted, or illegal,” the UK’s continuous demands for proof of immigration status are tantamount to an incessant requirement to prove that one is “a human being,” that one merits “being taken for a fellow human” (Mbembe 96, 132).

Considering these dehumanising and violent consequences, it is perhaps unsurprising to note that the hostile environment has also become a persistent concern in contemporary UK poetry. For instance, the 2018 anthology *Wretched Strangers* collected work from 125 poets, whose work – in various ways – addressed the “vulnerabilities and contingencies” of living in hostile environments, where “anxieties are manifest in dreams and nightmares of borders and walls, passport offices and authorities that arrive without warning” (Lehóczky and Welch 8). While it is not an exhaustive compendium on the topic, the scope of the anthology usefully indicates the frequency with which borders and necropolitical violence preoccupy present poetic discourse. But it is equally important to observe how these concerns might be articulated by writers not featured in anthologies such as these. This article therefore examines two contemporary poets whose respective works present a highly attentive critique of the nebulous necropolitical violence arising from

the UK's hostile environment: Nat Raha and Jay Bernard. Raha is – in addition to her work as a poet – a queer / trans* activist scholar who is currently based in Edinburgh, Scotland, but previously lived in South London for several years. In addition to several pamphlets, she has published three book-length collections of poetry, the most of recent of which is 2018's *Of Sirens, Body & Faultlines*. The volume comprises work that was written between November 2012 and May 2017. Bernard is – in addition to their work as a poet – an artist, film programmer and activist based in London. Their 2019 collection *Surge* was shortlisted for multiple prizes including the T.S. Eliot prize, and it also won the 2020 Sunday Times Young Writer of the Year Award. In the sections that follow, I will try to unpick the connections between the poetics of these two collections – which range from collaged visuality to archival elegies – and the political realities they depict and elucidate. In doing so, I hope to demonstrate that Raha and Bernard's respective works are united in their deep political engagement that offers not only an incisive analysis of the multifarious ways in which the UK's hostile environment makes itself present in everyday life; moreover, their poems also understand this hostile present in relation to a broader historical framework, and work carefully towards possible strategies of resistance against such necropolitical violence.

2. From House Fires to Deportation Vans: *Of Sirens, Body & Faultlines*

Although his scholarship on Raha's work – including the poems in *Of Sirens, Body & Faultlines* – is more focused in ideas of philology and time, Edmund Hardy's observation that Raha's "poetry of borders" pays attention to "every street and every hour" to present the reader with something akin to a "queer necropolitics" or "a slow necropolitics" is an apt description. But whilst Hardy is keenly perceptive in identifying the "fragmented, part crossed out, indented self-commenting" qualities of Raha's lines, his article does not greatly touch upon the visual appearance these fragmented methods produce on the page (Hardy n.p.). There are multiple moments in Raha's book where the fragments of poetry are presented almost as if they were cut-ups (but not in the traditional sense of the term, as Raha predominantly works with her own words), often collaged together with visuals such as photographs. In this sense, then, the visual appearance of many of the pages in *Of Sirens, Body & Faultlines* calls to mind Allen Fisher's reflections on the visuality of Burrough's cutups as being less about the fiction, but more about the "damage [and] destruction" that was "displayed [in] the cut-ups" themselves (Fisher; qtd. in Virtanen 172). That is, if the queer necropolitics articulated in Raha's work are registered in a way that is "felt and read, taken into the body, its breath and blood and oxygen, line by line" then the damage and destruction indicated by the fragmented and collagic visuality of the page is representative of a state of brokenness taken into the body as well (Hardy n.p.).

I use “brokenness” as the term here to draw a link between the visual qualities in *Of Sirens, Body & Faultlines* and what Raha has – in her scholarly work – called Transfeminine Brokenness. To put it briefly, the “states of brokenness” described in Raha’s essay pertain to states where “bodies are jammed, depowered, isolated” in “states of anger, distress, and depression,” and where “community and cohesion do not materialize into socially reproductive sustainable care” that reaches any further than the intimate connections of “lovers and individual friends” (2017, 633). The brokenness Raha describes is therefore defined by states of extreme vulnerability, which bears a resemblance to Judith Butler’s description of precarity as a “politically induced condition of maximized vulnerability [...] for populations exposed to arbitrary state violence and to other forms of aggression [...] against which states do not offer adequate protection” (ii). It therefore follows that the fragmented damage and brokenness that we encounter on the pages of *Of Sirens, Body & Faultlines* – in its gut-wrenching, slow necropolitics – conveys the vulnerability of bodies placed in the hostile environments that characterise the United Kingdom’s border policies and their wider implications.

One two-page spread from *Of Sirens, Body & Faultlines* serves as a good indication of Raha’s complex analyses of these concerns within her poetry itself. Beginning with “the production of scorched earth,” the fragmented lines of poetry circle across the page in a vertical arrangement, as if turning around the centrifugal centre of the page, which is represented as an archival photograph positioned towards the top – or righthand – margin (Raha 2018, 44). The vertical arrangement of the page is the result of needing to replicate the A4 layout of previous iterations of the text, first published as a zine via Raha’s own Sociopathetic Distribution imprint in 2015 and subsequently re-printed by Veer Books later that same year. But whilst the vertical turn is in this instance out of requirements for typesetting, it nevertheless produces a notable effect: a straightforward progression of linear readership is quite literally turned on its side and thus skewed and made more complex.

This skewedness of linearity mirrors certain aspects of how the poem across the two-page spread thinks about time. The centrifugal photograph positioned to the right depicts a protest vigil in the wake of the New Cross Massacre (also known as the New Cross House Fire) of 1981. The fire occurred at No. 439 New Cross Road, during a house party celebrating the birthdays of Yvonne Ruddock and Angela Jackson. Thirteen young Black people lost their lives during the fire, with a fourteenth victim dying by suicide a short while later; although no official cause has ever been established for the origins of the fire, the local community at the time “widely believed” the fire was caused by a “racist-motivated arson attack,” and this remains a view held by many to this day (Austin 117). The subsequent tensions between the local community and the Metropolitan police can be noticed in Linton Kwesi Johnson’s poem “New Craas Massakah,” which derides “di police an di press” for their attempts at stopping the local community’s “ques fi di trute” (2006, 55). Indeed, more recent analysis – including comments from Johnson

himself – have drawn a link between the aftermath of the New Cross Massacre and the “uprisings which began with the Brixton Riots” in April 1981 before spreading “to inner cities across the country” (Johnson 2011, n.p.).

But the photograph around which Raha’s poetic fragments are positioned makes an additional charge. One of the protestors in the image holds up a placard which reads “BRITISH LEADERS INCITE RACIALISM” (qtd. in Raha 2018, 44–45). This is significant because the placard does not simply view the fire as a solitary racist-motivated arson attack, but rather an atrocity that arises from a wider set of prejudices that are sanctioned, condoned, and perhaps even provoked by the national government. The sentiment expressed in the placard is easy to understand when one considers that a mere month after the fire had occurred, Jill Knight – the Conservative MP for Birmingham Edgbaston – took time in the House of Commons to criticise loud house parties in notably racialised and derogatory terms. For instance, she spoke of revellers as a “seething mass of people” and implied that a “Rastafarian” appearance was somehow inherently “frightening” (HC Deb 11 February 1981). At best such comments, coming so quickly after the fire at 439 New Cross Road, would have been unforgivably insensitive; at worst, Knight’s vilification of Black neighbourhood parties does indeed sound like an incitement of racism – as the placard in the photograph suggests.

At the time of writing the poem in 2014, Raha lived around the New Cross area herself, and it is therefore easy to understand why the poem from *Of Sirens, Body & Faultlines* would seemingly centre on an interest in the 1981 house fire massacre and its aftermath. Certainly, there are elements in the poetic fragments that are easy to identify as bearing a relationship to the contexts highlighted above. There is a direct reference to the date “1981 april 11th” – which was the most active and violent day of the Brixton Riots; in addition, the poem features references to sites associated with the riots such as “railton | road,” which was the street where crowds first started resisting police on 10 April and where some of the riot-related looting took place on 11 April (Raha 2018, 44).

But at the same time, it would be erroneous to read the poem solely in terms of its historical references. As with the vertical turn of the pages themselves, this kind of easy linearity in the interpretation quickly gets skewed by other details of the poem. For instance, an early line in the fragments makes reference to “rubble & drones,” thereby alluding to the more contemporary military practice of conducting air strikes with Unmanned Aerial Vehicles [UAVs]; likewise, the poem also includes lines such as “territorial support invest,” which features an oblique criticism of the Territorial Support Group – the unit of London’s Metropolitan Police that specialises in public order policing (such as protests or riots), and which replaced the Special Patrol Group in 1987 (Raha 2018, 44). Both references, and others like them, would seem rather out of place in a poem that was solely interested in exploring the 1980s context indicated by the photograph.

Instead of a single interest in the 1980s, I would like to suggest that the poem

is interested in a kind of non-linear temporal meshwork; an interlaced network in which numerous connections between the present (i.e., for the poem, 2014) and the past (1981) are formed. This relationship becomes clearer in the latter parts of the poem, which increasingly take shape as notational “alerts” (Hardy n.p.). One illustrative extract reads:

suspensions in/ordinate 10
 .42pm cut rest GN14 DWD 9.22
 am start sirens unmarked new
 cross road follows FT63 NYA
 9.25 unmarked follows GY63
 YPZ 9.28 sirens unmarked escort south east
 Old kent 9.39am three riot vans old kent south
 against these days number
 DZ62 WZE lewisham way 4.01pm DZ11
 OZT 9.18 unmarked EA63 EEL unmarked 9.28 patrol south amersham [...] (2018, 45)

The recorded observations are difficult to parse, but readers such as Hardy identify Raha’s alerts as involving a “possible deportation van” (n.p.). The details of the above quotation lend some support to this possibility. The license plates are clearly contemporaneous to the writing of the poem: within the current system of British license plates the number eleven (as seen in, for instance, DZ11) serves as an age identifier used between March and August 2011; likewise, the numbers sixty-two and sixty-three (as seen in DZ62 and GY63) denote plates produced between September and February 2012 and 2013, respectively. In other words, the license plates locate us in a specific period, whilst the other details – such as New Cross Road and Lewisham Way – locate us in a specific place: the area of New Cross immediately in the vicinity of the New Cross Gate train station.

But although we know these details to indicate a contemporary specificity pertaining to the 2010s, why might the license plates belong to deportation vans operated by immigration enforcement officers? The key context for this question is the way in which “immigration control systems of developed states are today frequently characterised by strategies of ‘extraterritorialisation’” (Ryan 3). Although the term extraterritorialisation is commonly used in reference to immigration controls that take place outside of a national territory – such as in the territories of other states, or in international waters – the hostile environment in the UK has ensured that borders contract inward as much as they project outward. That is, while there are extraterritorial controls in place to prevent individuals from entering the country, the territory behind the border hosts numerous control mechanisms as well. This internal extraterritorialisation of the border is, in essence, one representation of the necropolitical “system of immigration checks and data sharing” that was outlined in the introduction to this article (Bhattacharyya et al

21). Raha is keenly aware of these developments as well. In “Transfeminine Brokenness, Radical Transfeminism” she notes how legislation such as the “Prevent Duty (part of the Counter-Terrorism and Security Act 2015) and the Immigration Act 2016” – both of which were spearheaded by Theresa May during her times as Home Secretary – made “immigration enforcement a statutory duty of employers, universities, schools, and landlords.” Such policies, Raha observes, amount to a material border in the workplace, the home, the school, the university, at the Jobcentre, in the hospital, the marriage registry, and the street (634–635). Given these concerns in Raha’s scholarship, as well as the proximity of the legislation and the date the poem was written in 2014, it seems reasonable to assume that the license plates in the above passages belong to deportation vans. Raha’s poem is, at one level, witnessing and recording the intrusion of border controls across various streets in the New Cross area.

Consequently, to borrow from Danny Hayward’s writing on Raha’s poetry, the lines across this two-page spread are “an invitation to a closer and more sustained attention” to the different ways in which British leaders incite racism (124). While the placard in the 1981 photograph featured in the poem was pointing out a connection between political statements in Parliament and racist violence in the street, Raha’s present moment is even more aggressive and direct. In the poem, the legislative authority of immigration acts and the violent intrusion of deportation vans represent two sides of the same coin: “an increased policing at the level of one’s citizenship [...] both rhetorically invoked and practically implicated across all spheres of public and private life” (Raha 2017, 634). In other words, the examined extract from Raha’s *Of Sirens, Body & Faultlines* features an archival document, in the form of a photograph, from the New Cross Massacre and the subsequent protests and riots in 1981. This document is included in order to think through and map out the meshwork of connections between this historical event and the contemporary hostile environment within the UK. In both the past and the present of the poem, it is the British government that is ultimately held responsible for acts of racism – whether through complicity, condoning, or legislatively enforced necropolitical violence.

3. From New Cross to Grenfell: *Surge*

One year after the first zine versions of *Of Sirens, Body & Faultlines* were published in 2015, Jay Bernard was working as a writer in residence at the Geogre Padmore Institute – an archive, library and research centre dedicated to radical black history in Britain – and producing poems for their 2019 collection *Surge*. Although Bernard knew early on in their residency that they were interested in the New Cross Massacre, the process of researching the archival materials around the fire at 439 New Cross Road was nevertheless an eerie experience for them. As they

started their residency soon after the Brexit vote of 2016, they were struck by the extent to which their present moment resembled “the events up to and after the New Cross Fire.” Consequently – especially after the Grenfell Tower fire in 2017 and in light of the Windrush scandal of 2018 – Bernard began to understand the archival materials they were consulting as “a mirror of the present, a much-needed instruction manual to navigate what felt like the repetition of history” (xi).

It might be tempting to think about Bernard’s idea of the archive as a mirror and an instruction manual as being representative of some of the ideas in Arlette Farge’s *Allure of the Archives* – a text that Bernard has acknowledged as a partial influence on their poetics (Alsina Rísquez and Massana 228). For Farge, an archival document allows us to see a “tear in the fabric of time, unplanned glimpse into an unexpected event,” which allows one to find “not only the inaccessible but also the living” (6, 8). In other words, Bernard’s experience of a repetition of history could be understood as akin to Farge’s tear in the fabric of time, which – in turn – can be better understood through accessing to the previously inaccessible mirror or instruction manual that the archive provides. But there is also a crucial difference at play here. Although Bernard acknowledges the influence of Farge on their poetics, they also feel – as an artist and writer – at odds with Farge’s view that the only way to do justice to people’s lives is by writing history (Alsina Rísquez and Massana 228). Indeed, Bernard’s comments in interviews are often keen to point out that they are not a historian and thus not “trying to piece things together as they were”; instead, their engagement with sources such as the archive are really about “listening to the present, listening to echoes of the big bang [...] ripples that are still perceptible” (Bernard; qtd. in Lowe 9).

Due to this insistence of working with the archive so that they may listen to the present, Bernard – like Raha – is not interested in linear accounts of history, but instead in a non-linear temporal meshwork, an interlaced network in which numerous connections between the present and the past are formed. Both poets therefore relate to the archival document (the photograph in Raha; the materials in the Geogre Padmore Institute for Bernard) in a manner that echoes Kate Eichhorn’s writing in *The Archival Turn in Feminism*: in establishing links between past hostile environments and the present day via the archive, Raha and Bernard look to “the archive’s ability to restore to us what is routinely taken away under neoliberalism,” that is, “not history itself, but rather the conditions of our everyday lives” (6).

In the case of Bernard’s *Surge*, one explicit connection between the archival past and the conditions of the present day is the echo of the New Cross Massacre in the Grenfell Tower fire in 2017. Grenfell Tower was a 24-storey block built as social housing in the 1970s. In the early hours of 14 June 2017, a fire that initially began from a refrigerator malfunction quickly spread upwards on the exterior of the building, owing to the recently installed cladding and external insulation that had left an air gap between them. At least seventy-two residents of the Tower were killed, and at least another seventy were injured. Subsequent reports have indicated

that a considerable number of those who died in the fire were from minority backgrounds (Rice-Oxley n.p.). Many consequently refute the view that the fire was an “unforeseen accident”; rather, it can be seen as the “result of a long history of violence” that includes multifaceted forms such as “the logics and legacy of colonialism, racism and xenophobia”; the structural issues that prevent “classed and racialised people” from accessing “legal justice”; issues of “housing justice” and “human concern”; as well as “the national and international spatial politics and neoliberal economic forces of cities and states” (Bulley, Edkins, and El-Enany xiii). To allude back to Mbembe, Grenfell marked a moment in 2017 when British sovereignty was demonstrated through “the power and capacity to dictate who is able to live and who must die” (66). The injustice of Grenfell haunts every aspect of Bernard’s poem “Sentence.” In the “Notes” section that concludes *Surge*, we are informed that the poem is “after Khadija Saye, a victim of the Grenfell fire” (55). Saye was a Gambian-British artist who died in the fire, aged just 24. But despite her young age, Saye had already achieved a great deal of recognition for her work. For instance, she was the youngest exhibitor included in the Diaspora Pavilion at the 2017 Venice Biennale, where her contributions explored the migration of traditional Gambian spiritual practices as a part of a wider investigation of Saye’s identity, heritage and background (Estate of Khadija Saye n.p.). In this context, the “after” in Bernard’s note for the poem operates under a dual meaning. On the one hand, we could understand that “after” in the manner of ekphrasis, whereby Bernard is writing in response to some of Saye’s work; but at the same time, the poem is also – in a very real sense – after Saye had died. The poem therefore operates as both a response of respect, as well as a work of mourning.

However, by articulating the ‘afterness’ of Saye in Bernard’s “Sentence,” I do not wish to simply frame the poem as an elegy. Rather, if “Sentence” is read as an elegy, then its elegiac qualities must be understood in terms of Eleanor Perry’s recent critique of elegies as reflecting a form of “necropoetics: a system of principles, precepts and techniques [...] which serve to establish and maintain whose lives are publicly grievable and whose losses are noteworthy” (19). In other words, Perry notes that the traditionally canonical works of elegy frequently tend to only celebrate and commemorate “whiteness, patriarchal forms of masculinity” and “heteronormative binaries.” Instead, working from the theories of Mbembe and Judith Butler, Perry seeks to reframe our understanding of elegies by calling attention to poems that “challenge a necropoetic understanding of whose lives may be grieved; elegies which articulate the various ways in which political and social power render certain lives precarious, unstable and disposable” (20). Therefore, rather than cohering under any traditional elegiac form, “Sentence” operates akin to the radical modes of elegy that Perry outlines in their book.

The opening of the poem serves as a useful illustration of the ways in which Bernard explores the violence of political and social power upon precarious lives:

If mum is in the living room / sister in the bathroom / then sentence
says / morning / the two have not yet / said their first words –

If mum is in the bedroom / sister in the bedroom /
then it is evening / and sentence says / sister is leaning against the
door, cross-legged / drawing – (45)

Cathie Kanagavalli Lakshmi Jayakumar-Hazra has previously noted how the slashes and dashes that populate these lines serve as typographic devices that signal the “inconclusiveness of the hypothesis made in relation” to the last moments of Saye and her mother, who also died in the fire (376). From this reading, Jayakumar-Hazra suggests the intimacy depicted in the lines can only be inferred indirectly, as the “government, the town council, and the industry executives took away Khadija and her mother’s sense of being ‘at home’ and the protection provided by their home” (377).

In addition to these typographic details and their implications, one of the key phrases in these fragmented opening lines is “sentence says.” The phrase is repeated twice in the extract above, and it appears for an additional third time later in the poem. In each instance, what the sentence says appears as the second part of a hypothetical syllogism: if this is the situation, then sentence says that. In other words, each “sentence says” is written as a working component of deductive logic. On one interpretation, Bernard’s use of deductive logic in structuring these lines could highlight the grievous untruth in the hypotheses offered: the mum and the sister cannot be in the living room or in the bathroom, because both Saye and her mother are dead. Thus, each sentence is a contradiction: they cannot in fact say anything, as the conditions for that saying have now been rendered forever invalid by the Grenfell fire. A similar interpretation could also be formed by thinking about the role of a “sentence” in language. That is, Bernard’s poem reveals the idea of a set of words that is complete in itself to be in fact an impossibility, as demonstrated by the fragmented and inconclusive structure of these lines and the absent presences of Saye and her mother.

But as with the dual meaning of “after” in the poem’s notes, the idea of “sentence says” carries at least one further significance. Etymologically, sentence derives from the Latin *sententia*, meaning opinion or maxim. In this sense, then, “sentence” is never fully removed from authoritative pronouncements – as its continued present-day use in legal contexts attests. In other words, although the typographic and the syntactic arrangements of the poem tend towards fragmentation, the key phrase repeated three times points towards rigid and authoritative structures. The poem – and therefore its imaginary snapshots of Saye and her mother – are caught in a tension between fragile intimacy and structural constraints. And that intimacy cannot be fully realised, as it is rendered inaccessible and impossible by the structural constraints around them.

It is worth noting that this pattern of fragile intimacy and structural constraint seems especially pertinent for a poem about victims of the Grenfell fire. As noted earlier, the fire is easy to understand as result of numerous structural issues. In the enquiry that followed the fire, it was established that while the tower was originally constructed with fire safety as a priority, the subsequent refurbishments introduced unsafe structures such as flammable cladding, ill-fitting windows, unspecified fire doors, poor access for emergency vehicles and equipment that was not suitable for fire fighters to use (Lane n.p.). Moreover, the fateful cladding on the exterior of building had been installed in part to make its appearance “more acceptable to rich neighbours” across the road (Bulley, Edkins, and El-Enany xxi). Thus, the structural issues that led to the Grenfell fire are inextricable from the deeply entrenched social and economic inequalities within the UK. In a very real sense, Saye and her mother were ultimately killed by structural inequality: indirectly “sentenced” to death by British society. That “sentencing” may not have taken place in a court, but it took place at each instance when unsafe refurbishments were carried out, and when concerns about the safety of the building were ignored.

The end of Bernard’s poem provides another direct link between the Grenfell fire and the UK’s structural inequalities. In one of the only lines to feature a full stop, the final words of the poem state: “not rivers, towers of blood” (45). The line features an unmissable echo of the infamously racist “Rivers of Blood” speech delivered by the Conservative MP Enoch Powell in 1968. Powell’s speech was a key-piece of anti-immigration propaganda, which claimed that if Commonwealth immigration to the UK continued, there would be rivers of blood on the street. While the oblique nod towards Powell in the poem is another instance, like in Raha’s poem, in which British leaders “incite racialism,” it is equally important to note that Bernard’s line is precise in its updating of that 1960s sentiment. The blood does not flow because of overt racial warfare and violence on the streets, as Powell’s speech implied; rather, the blood is shed as a result of structural inequality, neglect of safety standards, and government rhetoric that –during and in the runup to 2017 – repeatedly centred on hostile environments, immigration numbers, and so-called citizens of nowhere. Of course, one might not immediately connect the fire with the rhetoric of hostile environments – especially if the term is understood strictly in terms of immigration laws. But as the beginning of this article pointed out, reactionary nationalism is insidious, and it seeps beyond its most “obvious manifestations” (Bhattacharyya et al 1). The same legislative context that informs the hostile environment also paved the way to 14 June 2017. In other words, like the deportation vans at the end of Raha’s poem, “Sentence” understands the Grenfell fire as an act of state violence against its racialised citizens.

4. Towards Counter-Hostility: Tenderness, Care, and Survival

The incisive analyses that both Raha and Bernard outline through their respective meshworks between the New Cross Fire and the 2010s are undoubtedly radical, precisely in the sense that Perry specifies in relation to radical elegies more broadly: each poet writes “in resistance to necropolitical mechanisms” in which certain lives are rendered “precarious, unstable and disposable,” and only some lives are seen as “publicly grievable but not others”; both poets instead insist upon the “grievability of lives that [...] have been erased and marginalized by necropolitical systems” (22).

As a synthesising gesture, I think it is important to think more specifically about the resistance that is articulated in Raha and Bernard’s respective works. What drives their resistant qualities? And what direction does that resistance pursue? These are not easy questions to address. Bernard has been explicit in stating that they would not “claim to bestow something as lofty as justice on the victims of the New Cross Fire,” and – presumably, by extension – the fire at Grenfell; indeed, they go as far as to say that the bestowal of justice is a “temptation” they “actively avoided” whilst writing the book (Alsina Rísquez and Massana 228). Consequently, although poems such as “Sentence” are driven by a “violent condemnation” of the UK’s political landscape, Bernard’s work in *Surge* is also deeply reflective of its anger (Jayakumar-Hazra 377). “Ark,” the second poem in the collection, casts a critical eye on its archival methodology. Right in the first line, Bernard questions how one should “consult the life of a stranger” (2). That is, instead of the imagined intimacy in the depictions of “Sentence” this earlier poem appears more distant and tentative. Here the deceased person is identified as something not known. But even in this distant phrasing, Bernard is already incorporating the possibility of intimacy. While rarely used in the most intimate exchanges, “consult” nevertheless denotes an interaction; it is a discussion or a seeking of advice. Indeed, the prefix that opens the word signifies a being together or being with.

This is significant, because at the end of this archival poem, Bernard decides to file the materials they have consulted under “*fire, corpus, body, house*” (3; original emphasis). There is an element of subtle repetition in these categories. Although corpus normally refers to a collection of written texts, its literal meaning in Latin is body. So, in effect, the word body is included twice, the second time immediately after the first. Consequently, the archival corpus – a collection of written documents – is also understood as a collection of bodies. As a space where one can be together – to be with – the deceased, the archive becomes at least momentarily a space through which intimacies may be formed and strangers would become more known than before. It is important not to overstate the argument here: I am not suggesting that the traces of a life as reflected in the archive are equal to the body or the life of the deceased. But nevertheless, Bernard’s sensitivity to the bodily quality of being with the lives of others in “Ark” remains significant. Sarah Ahmed

has argued that feelings can “make ‘the collective’ appear *as if* it were a body”; that is, the experience of bodily others allows the “emergence of ‘feelings-in-common’ (27; original emphasis). From this perspective, whether it is through the fragments of lives examined in an archive, or through imagined intimacies as is the case in “Sentence,” Bernard does not simply make impressions of the deceased. The deceased also leave Bernard with an impression. The dead impress them (Bernard) and impress upon them. Therefore, the rage that we find in sections such as the final line of “Sentence” arise from a space of tenderness, from the bodily impressions left by feelings-in-common. For Bernard, then, the resistance of *Surge* both arises from an experience of collectivity, and it also works towards further expanding and protecting that collectivity in the face of the UK’s hostile environments.

Similar tones of collectivity, tenderness and resistance can also be found in Raha’s *Of Sirens, Body & Faultlines*. One particular fragment in the text opens with a puzzling tripartite line: “love : necessity : anti-fa” (42). That is, the line comprises three individual terms, each separate by both spaces and colons. Raha’s work in 2014 experimented with punctuation in various ways: when she performed at the London Poetry Festival at Birkbeck College, University of London, in the summer of that year, she would often incorporate a cough into her performance as a way of vocalising specific punctuation marks. But even with this practice in mind, the typographic and syntactic structure of the above line is nevertheless perplexing. It is difficult to make sense of it solely as providing notations for vocal effects.

Although the point may seem obvious, it may nevertheless be helpful to highlight that colons have three common grammatical uses: they introduce lists, separate two independent clauses, and provide emphasis. And while the tripartite structure of Raha’s line does function as a list, there also appears to be more at work within it. When a colon separates two independent clauses, it normally does so because the second clause either explains or illustrates the first. In this sense, then, perhaps all three words in Raha’s line should be understood as clarifications or illustrative extensions of one another. That is, we might read this line as stating: love is necessity is anti-fascism. The three terms, rather than being fully independent *per se*, are instead offered as definitions of one another. Each emphasises the next.

At the same time, it is important to remember that the colons in Raha’s line are not set in a traditional fashion. Rather than following directly after each preceding word, the colons are separated by an additional space. Each colon is effectively placed at an equidistance from the word that precedes and the one that follows it. That equidistance in turn places the three terms at a certain equilibrium with one another. Therefore, while each subsequent term might offer a definition or an explanation of the one that precedes it, this does not mean that there is a hierarchy between them. Love does not necessarily take primacy over necessity and nor does necessity take primacy over anti-fascism. Held in an equidistant equilibrium to one another, the terms can equally be understood in reverse order: anti-fascism is a necessity, and this type of resistance is an act of love.

To clarify, Raha’s typographic and spatial specificity allows the three terms in the line to be understood as equal and non-hierarchical definitions of one another. The care of love is a necessity, and the resistance towards racialised oppression is both an act of necessity and an act of love. But it is also important to observe that the forms of resistance mentioned in Raha’s line are very specific: it is not anti-fascism or anti-racism in general that is mentioned, but rather “anti-fa” specifically. Therefore, the specific form of anti-racist resistance highlighted here relates to – at least in a UK context – broadly anarchist-oriented groups whose actions often include direct physical resistance to far-right groups that try to intimidate multicultural communities. What Raha’s line identifies as an act of love and necessity is therefore direct political action that often requires one to place one’s body in such a way as to physically block the oppressor’s progress – whether that oppressor be a far-right activist or an immigration enforcement officer.

Crucially, Raha’s equal and non-hierarchical definitions of love, necessity and anti-fascism carry a distinct connection to the notions of collectivity and feelings-in-common we find in *Surge*. In her critical work, Raha has said that “desire and need and love emerge only through the inauguration of worlds that do not yet exist” (2017, 633). In other words, Raha sees the “struggle against the world that breaks us” and the struggle for “a world of mutuality and support where we can begin to live and thrive” as being “always in progress” (2017, 643). This in turn means that a true sense of collectivity – of community and cohesion that materialise into sustainable care – is always at a point of potential emergence. And as Ahmed reminds us, the emergence of feelings-in-common can at times arise through the bodily experience of others. The collective and direct acts of anti-fascism that are registered as a necessity in Raha’s work are therefore necessary precisely because they are an expression of, and a precursor to, a more loving society. It is an act of radical care that helps communities survive periods of crisis and thus “contains a radical promise through a grounding of autonomous direct action and nonhierarchical collective work” (Hobart and Kneese 10). To borrow from Ahmed once more: “it is not just that we feel for the collective [...] but how we feel about others is what aligns us with a collective, which paradoxically ‘takes shape’ only as an effect of such alignments” (27). Both Raha and Bernard’s respective poetics understand this. *Of Sirens, Body & Faultlines* and *Surge* meet the hostile environment of the UK with an equally hostile resistance; a resistance that rightly understands its counter-hostility as an act of tenderness, care, and survival.

5. Conclusion

This article began by observing how the political climate of the UK was, throughout the 2010s, shaped by the hostile environment – a trend that has continued to this day. Although the term might at times be narrowly understood in terms of immigration

policy alone, a fuller understanding of the culture the hostile environment instils must look beyond these most overt manifestations. On a deeper level, the legislative creation of hostility hinges on eroding the potential of survivability. The hostile environment must therefore be understood as a form necropolitical power that, in Mbembe's terms, forces communities to "living conditions that confer upon them the status of the *living dead*" (92). The scale and consequences of that necropolitical hostility have been mapped out in multiple examples of contemporary poetry, and the respective works of Nat Raha and Jay Bernard provide incisive analyses of this current moment.

In the case of Raha, the discussions of the article moved through the aesthetics of collage, archival photography, and brokenness to chart the ways in which her 2018 collection *Of Sirens, Body & Faultlines* creates a meshwork of connections between the hostile environment that surrounded the New Cross Fire in 1981 and contemporary realities of deportation vans in the New Cross area where Raha lived in the 2010s. While the activists campaigning for justice following the New Cross Fire in 1981 often drew a connection between political statements in Parliament and racist violence in the street, Raha's poetry depicts a necropolitical reality that is even more aggressive and direct. In her work, the legislative authority of immigration acts and the violent intrusion of deportation vans represent two sides of the same coin: "an increased policing at the level of one's citizenship [...] both rhetorically invoked and practically implicated across all spheres of public and private life" (Raha 2017, 634).

Jay Bernard's *Surge* also looks back to the New Cross Fire but does so in part to map out the meshwork connections between this event and the Grenfell fire of 2017. In particular, the poem "Sentence" – which is written after the artist Khadija Saye, who died at Grenfell – presents a radical form of elegy that challenges "a necropoetic understanding of whose lives may be grieved" and instead articulates "the various ways in which political and social power render certain lives precarious, unstable and disposable" (Perry 20). In doing so, Bernard conducts a sensitive analysis that establishes a clear connection between the events at Grenfell and the hostile environment. The end of their poem suggests that the loss of lives at Grenfell occurred due to structural inequality, neglect of safety standards, and government rhetoric that – during and in the runup to 2017 – repeatedly centred on hostile environments, immigration numbers, and so-called citizens of nowhere. While others might miss the connection between Grenfell and the hostile environment, Bernard's poem understands the fire as an act of state violence against minority communities.

But the two poets also go beyond their respective incisive critiques. Their poetries also think through forms of counter-resistance. While Bernard and Raha pursue this counter-resistance through different routes, they both understand that a true sense of collectivity – of community and cohesion that materialise into sustainable care – is always at a point of potential emergence. In other words, their poetries meet the hostile environment of the UK with a counter-resistance that understands how our strategies for survival must be militant, tender, and caring.

Conclusions are difficult in our contemporary moment. How do we conclude when the subject matter is still ongoing? Any conclusion would, at best, be provisional in the extreme. As such, it seems inappropriate for this article to offer concluding remarks that go further than the above summaries. Except, perhaps, to say: in a present of enclosures that condense multiple intersecting communities deeper and deeper into the centre of a dying star, Raha and Bernard can offer voicings where something unenclosed might potentially emerge. Their respective poetics are ones we can trust.

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