

Foreign Bodies

A conversation between Yasmin Gunaratnam and Ali Eisa

In Context

The text you will read comes from several online conversations and an a-synchronous shared file. A process taking nearly two years. The incremental pace and long stretches of silence were invariably shaped by struggling with workloads, while joining industrial actions taken by the UK's University and College Union over equitable pay, working conditions and pensions. Despite the runaway marketisation of university life, our exchanges were something of a shelter, holding those lovely moments that come from scholarly camaraderie—energising, provocative, dimly lit. As we are both interested in drawing political commitments into formats, we have opted for a conversation rather an interview, which feels like a more democratising form.

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Ali Eisa is an artist and educator based in London. He is a Learning and Participation Manager at Autograph (1) a visual arts charity supporting photography and film exploring identity, representation, rights and social justice. Ali is a lecturer in Fine Art at Goldsmiths and has a long-term collaborative artistic practice called Lloyd Corporation (2), working with sculpture,

installation, performance and participation, often taking inspiration from informal and local economies.

Meeting Up

Yasmin: Ali, I know you mainly through your work at Autograph. *Mortality* readers may be familiar with Autograph through the Jamaican-British sociologist Stuart Hall, a chair of the organisation. In a radio interview Stuart once described how Miles Davis put a finger on his soul. I feel the same way about him. There was Stuart's Gramscian-inspired "conjunctionalist" analysis, tracing how history infuses cultural and political forms and possibilities. And then of course, his creative elaborations of identity, unhooked from any notions of cultural or bodily authenticity, all of which shook-up my understanding of my biographical experience as someone whose parents came to the UK from Sri Lanka in the late 1960s and who has been obliged to continually account for myself. His ideas are very present in my doctoral research on transnational dying and end-of-life care in London in the mid-1990s, which was sparked by caring for my parents throughout most of my twenties. At that time, Britain's post-World War 2 cohorts of "Commonwealth" adventurers were ageing and dying, having a stronger presence in end-of-life care, at least in cities. Stuart himself was a part of Generation Exodus, as I think of them, leaving Jamaica for England in 1951. Towards the end of his life, he was on dialysis for several days a week in a London hospital, experiencing up close what I have been interested in—the debris and broken glass of bodily dissolutions, how this profound vulnerability can hold utopian possibilities of interdependent living, while care deficiencies can wipe us out existentially. In an interview in 2012, two years before he died, Stuart talked of how "...we have to forge consanguinity.", adding, "I've always known that, but of course if you're ill, it comes

through much more.” (Williams, 2012). So, let’s start here, with Stuart Hall, London and vulnerability as some of our meeting points?

Ali: Yes, there have been various meeting points over the years and it’s great to be able to delve deeper into these. I’ve been working at Autograph since 2015 in various capacities, as an artist educator, public programmer and now Learning and Participation Manager. Autograph shares the work of artists, investigating race, identity, representation and human rights through photography and film. Where the organisation works across exhibition making, publishing, archives and research, the programme I developed is most focused on participation and engagement, often with people from marginalised backgrounds and considers how we can explore matters of identity, representation, discrimination, care and freedom together.

Stuart Hall was instrumental for Autograph and its development as an association of black artists from the late 1980’s. He was later our chair for a decade. Hall’s work, between the disciplines of sociology, politics and cultural studies, laid the intellectual ground for much artistic practice that has been critically questioning representation and black identities within a cultural field marked by whiteness and the ongoing structures of inequality produced by capitalism, empire and colonialism.

When I think of my work within Autograph I always return to Hall’s words in *Different* (2001), the book he wrote with Autograph’s director Mark Sealy. Here, Hall writes “Black is considered to be a political and cultural, not a genetic or biological, category. It is a contested idea whose

ultimate destination remains unsettled. And ‘identity’ is understood as always, in part, an invention; about ‘becoming’ as well as ‘being’; and subject to the continuous play of history, culture and power.” (ibid., front matter). These ideas are a rich vein in Autograph’s participatory work with different communities, facilitating processes of identity making, invention and representation, through visual and sensory acts of art and image making. We have been trying to curate spaces in which people can see and feel themselves differently—often against historical and contemporary exclusion, hostility and violence—creating new lenses through which to experience the world and their place within it.

It's interesting you mention Hall’s words on “consanguinity”, which I had not heard before. They relate to the increasing attention in my work to illness, disability, health and care and their intersections with race and identity. They also connect to your text *In Extremis* (Gunaratnam, 2014), featuring the photography of Sonal Kantaria and Sangita Mistry, commissioned for Autograph’s series *Who Cares?* Both artists document the lives of older British South-Asian in culturally specific care homes and residential housing, showing something of the enmeshing of isolation, age, care and migration. Kantaria and Mistry’s images capture their sitters with dignity and empathy, showing the vulnerability and tenderness of bodies ageing, while resolute and present. Autograph’s director Mark Sealy has referred to this as a kind of care work done with the camera.

Am I right in saying *In Extremis* had just followed the publishing of your book *Death and the Migrant: Bodies, borders, care* (Gunaratnam, 2013)? Perhaps you can introduce that work now?

It would be fascinating to hear more about how your research came into conversation with Kantaria and Mistry's "visual care" photographic work?

YG: Yes, I came into that collaboration through *Death and the Migrant*, which brought together various projects. Although I continually remind myself to be patient with writing, I find it frustratingly troublesome and slow. That book took ages to write. Looking back, I needed time to live with the stories, to learn how to move past the convenience of their most obvious outer shells and to make space for their nooks and shading. So often, I was just lost for words. As you know much better than I do, photography and art can be more hospitable to the sensual and temporal registers of sidelined lives; the fleshy histories that circulate all around us in conjunctures of diasporic presence, as Stuart Hall might have put it. The book *Different* (Hall and Sealy, 2001) that you mentioned, was given to me as a gift and took my breath away. The layout and format, the paper, the rich colours, how the narrative slips between theory, geo-social politics and images. *Different* also introduced me to the work of Donald Rodney.

Rodney's installation "Visceral Canker" (first exhibited in 1990), has kept coming back to me over the years, most so during the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests. The axis of the work is two wall-mounted heraldic shields of Queen Elizabeth I and Sir John Hawkings. Hawkings was a second cousin of Sir Francis Drake and England's first slave trader. He forged the triangular slave trade in the late sixteenth century, between England, Africa, the Caribbean and the Americas. His shield includes four enslaved Africans. I see Rodney's Visceral Canker as a blood donation into and from that brutal history. In the work, silicon tubes attached to a blood bag and an electrical pump were designed to circulate Rodney's diseased blood—he had sickle cell

disease—across the shields and the enslaved persons. The trickling bloodlines materialise an unwilling consanguinity. It is as if Rodney is administering a palliative care from deep within the vascular systems of slavery, showing how the circulations between bodies and how history is storied is critical to postcolonial justice and reparations.

AE: Donald Rodney's work was actually the first exhibition I saw at Rivington Place, where Autograph is based, in a retrospective of his work back in 2008. I vividly remember the photographic work "In The House of My Father". There was Rodney's outstretched hand, holding a small sculpture of a house, made up of the artist's skin removed during operations as consequence of his sickle cell condition. The work is profound in how it tenderly and critically sutures together race, illness and disability, migration, belonging and home, not as distinct but as perforating one another (Rodney used pins in making the structure of his skin house). We are taught to understand these conditions entirely anew.

YG: You are right. Rodney's work is pedagogical (see Hylton, 2003). What Rodney's critical gaze did, Stuart Hall has written, is "to unsettle or fragment the surface, seeing through to another, deeper level, below or behind, which 'invades' it." (Hall, 2003: 6). Rodney, for Stuart was "a master of the social-pathological 'investigation' as a critical artistic practice" (ibid.). As soon as I read that, it struck me as analysis and incitement. How to unsettle and be receptive to what lies within and beyond the surfaces of bodily life? This isn't an abstracted or diaphanous question. It's one of these recurring existential prods that can come at us in a committee meeting, as much as at a bedside. It can be a lightning strike or gather weight through the deceptively

cumulative. For me, Rodney's work is absolutely a liberatory aesthetics and consciousness raising. I'm thinking of Katherine McKittrick (2021) words, "Black consciousness is the navigation of this world as a laborious aesthetics of freedom-making." (p.68)

AE: Rodney uses "many objects of care" in his aesthetics—something you have said is important in your research too. Rodney painted on his hospital bedsheets and x-rays, "othering" the conventional frames of artistic production such as canvas. His last exhibition before his death, included a work called *Psalms*, a motorised wheelchair controlled to autonomously navigate the exhibition space of the South London Gallery. As Eddie Chambers (2003) recalls, the work "symbolised Rodney's near tactile omnipresence within the gallery, whilst simultaneously reminding the gallery audience of the artist's enforced absence from his own exhibition." (p.30). Rodney also produced a series of x-ray pieces entitled "*Britannia Hospital*" and an installation "*Care and Control*" at Hackney Hospital, a former workhouse where the only remaining residents were aged psychiatric patients.

In *Death and the Migrant* you give a very concrete example of the power of "objects of care", involving a community nurse and a couple, originally from Jamaica. The husband is dying from prostate cancer. He stays awake at night with a persistent cough, a symptom the nurse feels is about a fear that he may not wake up again. There is physical and emotional pain that he is enduring silently. His frailty and vulnerability undermine the version of masculinity he continues to perform. "He comes from an era where stoicism and fortitude are the trademarks of manliness." (Gunaratnam, 2013, p.130). A new pressure-relieving mattress will allow the couple

to sleep together for a few more weeks, vital moments where it feels as if unquantifiable, last exchanges will flow between them. You write “a world in which a mattress can extend love’s time” (2013, p.131).

YG: As an ethnographer working in urban end-of-life care, I learnt a lot about how the most receptive care is riskily artful. It includes what the English poet (and doctor) John Keats (1958) called negative capability, as being able to tolerate uncertainty, mystery. The idea has a much longer history in contemplative traditions such as Buddhism and Jainism, which recognise sensory worlds and temporalities, beyond the rational and empirical. Yet, our care services, as much as universities, are increasingly driven by market imperatives and a fetishisation of measurement and targets that promise clarity, control and of course replication. As anthropologist Marilyn Strathern (1997, p.308) identified long ago, “When a measure becomes a target, it ceases to be a good measure.” In being sucked into audit culture, we risk closing down elbow room for types of care that are not, and might never be, amenable to measure or mass production. It’s a perverse dynamic, close to what queer theorist Lauren Berlant (2011) called “cruel optimism”; of how we attach to what blocks our flourishing.

AE: This relationship between art and care as practices able to tolerate the unknown is so interesting. I’m reminded of the phrase “calm bafflement”, introduced to me by [Project Art Works](#) (3), an incredible collective, working with art, care work and neurodiversity. The art they produce suggests how the development of deeply creative, caring relationships across neurodivergence emerges exactly at the point where normative modes of communication,

language and thinking become unstuck. In these moments the sensory, tactile and material become vital modes through which connection and care is made possible. I'm interested to hear more about this in relation to how objects and materials show up, mediate, or perform acts of care in the research stories you tell. What kinds of agency do these objects have within the lives of your research participants, both migrants experiencing end-of-life care and the care practitioners who tend to them? How do such objects offer material, emotional and temporal possibilities for care that are not visible to, or registered within, the normative structures of, as you note, "accounting sheets and audits" (Gunaratnam, 2013, p. 131)?

YG: In many ways audit culture is the antithesis of care. And yet, I am curious about the subversive, even insurgent, potential of care made invisible within neoliberal economies. I have in mind Édouard Glissant (1997), reminding us of the continuing sway of colonial value and knowledge systems; of how transparency has been a touchstone in European knowledge-making, characterised by grabbing, objectifying and reductionism. Glissant was a fiercely poetic advocate of the right to opacity. So, I'm a bit in love with care that goes under the radar. Perhaps, it can never be fully co-opted? Maybe, like the university's shady undercommons (Harney and Moten, 2013), there is potential for more meaningful relationships and care?

AE: I totally agree. The margins are a politically important location from which to work. How bell hooks describes this is as a "space of radical openness...a profound edge. Locating oneself there is difficult yet necessary. It is not a 'safe space'. One is always at risk. One needs a community of resistance." (hooks, 1989, p.19)

YG: And that radical openness is always with us in some shape or form. I remember when I was doing my doctoral research, I was often hanging out with hospice nursing auxiliaries or health care assistants (unregistered nurses). Because hospice in-patient menus didn't really cater for multi-cultural diets at the time, these nurses brought in food from home, like rice and peas, or ackee and saltfish, sometimes liquidised for those with difficulties swallowing. With growing health and safety regulations, off-grid care like that is not possible nowadays. I'm not wanting to romanticise or gloss over the haphazardness of these slivers of somatic anchoring, which means that responsive care becomes a lottery rather than being systemic, but it struck me that these nurses were locating their loyalties elsewhere, outside of the organisational machinery.

To come back to care objects in that mattress story—a story I often use in teaching care professionals—the nurse in that situation was reading between the lines of what was not being said or couldn't be put into words. She was stepping outside of what might have passed as perfectly good-enough care. She could have gone, "I'm sorry, but it's more difficult to get a mattress for a double bed. You'll have to sleep separately." Case closed. But she intuited that putting in the extra time and work to find a larger mattress for the couple could have a symbolic, as well as material value, giving them 3-4 more weeks of being able to sleep together. The mattress was also a way of building trust, of demonstrating they were more than a case or statistic.

AE: This is important—how trust is built through the material and the emotional. I've often

found in participatory work that trust building is not a transactional process of people getting material things. It is more about how practitioners demonstrate generosity and a deep responsiveness to people on their own terms, with singular needs and desires, rather than imposing structures and practices that flatten differences.

YG: There are also many practical questions: how to recognise this sort of experimental, not-quite-sure-of-itself care? How does the time that the mattress gave to the couple make itself known in audit cultures? And to flip those around, how do we account for the thousands of small care deficiencies that are becoming normalised by austerity policies and cuts to public services, resulting in avoidable pain, distress and loss of dignity, as well as professional burnout and cynicism?

The care in that story reminds me of Saidiya Hartman's (2008) method of critical fabulation. Hartman has long been working with slavery archives and the African diasporas. She has had to research with and around absences, rifts and ghostly presences. While not wanting to collapse incomparable experiences and contexts, the methodological question of how to work across chasms is relevant in working with serious illness, death, dying and loss. Referring to her own archival research, Hartman has clarified how critical fabulation is not so much about recovering what is absent, but is, "rather to imagine what cannot be verified... and to reckon with the precarious lives which are visible only in the moment of their disappearance." (p.108). Again, I'm not wanting to draw equivalences, but caring against a backdrop of towering schemes of racial injustice can mean practising lowercase critical fabulations. In the mattress story, it felt

like an object can move into a narrative void or stuttering. It can become part of a sensuous archive, pulling open other spaces of care. The artists Aditi Jaganathan, Sarita Malik and June Givanni (2020:105) have written about these types of potentiality in the relationships between archives and social spaces. I mean, beyond their most obvious purposes, hospitals, hospices, care homes and homes are archives.

AE: The idea of social spaces as archives and their potential to create new spaces of care is really interesting. At Autograph we have a significant photographic archive of work by artists, photojournalists and community practitioners, as well as family albums. What's often extremely powerful about sharing these images with the people we work with—who are often scarred and maligned by the violent history and presents of photographic representation—is how the images engender recognition, memory, affinity, desire. And that's because the photographs blur boundaries between composed artistic works and more vernacular tracings of social and cultural lives that are often invisible. Your comments also make me think about Stuart Hall's thinking of the archive as a conversation between the past and the present, as a lot of my work in facilitating workshops involves creating a kind of reciprocity between the photographic archive and the communities we work with, which I hope offers potentials for care and transformation.

YG: I'd love to hear more about how this happens.

A.E. A good example is my work over the last 5 years with the Caribbean Social Forum, a self-

organised community group of Caribbean elders, whose lives are patterned by the entanglements between migration, ageing, illness and disability that we've touched on. Many of the Forum's members are part of the Windrush Generation. The question of what it means for them to be seen, represented, engaged with, cared for—to be “looked in the face” (2013, p. xiv) as you write in *Death and the Migrant*—as people with different diasporic trajectories, living with multiple, complex health conditions and disabilities, is an urgent one addressed by the Forum's founder Pamela Franklin.

The Forum developed out of Franklin's own story of sickness and disability and the exclusions of black, migrant experience. Pamela developed serious health complications and acquired disability. She went from being a corporate professional to dealing with severe frailty, routine hospitalisation and not being able to fully participate in work and life. Isolation began to loom large. Through her own needs and desire for mutual support, care and community, Pamela realised there were no spaces for people like her to meet and be supported. Spaces that were not healthcare institutions where you enter as “patient” for “treatment”. She needed social and cultural spaces where people could come together, make friends, care for one another, laugh, learn and express themselves through to the end of their lives. To live life fully with debilitating health conditions and disabilities.

Pamela began to convene a small group of people with similar experiences to hers. This grew over 7 years into the Caribbean Social Forum, with up to a hundred Caribbean elders coming together each week. It's a space buzzing with energy, offerings of food, typically made in

member's kitchens, chatter, laughter and play, the clicking of dominoes raining down at speed on tabletops. The programme of speakers who visit, includes musicians, healthcare workers, pastors, artists, historians. There are quiz days, cultural trips to theatres, museums and galleries, holidays, as well as a network to discuss and support any personal issues with health and migration. Infusing this all is a deep-rooted expression, pride and exploration of Caribbean cultures and black identity, "a unique collection of people strung together by a common history" (4).

Autograph has hosted many visits to and from the Forum. Perhaps the most significant was a visit to an exhibition by photographer Franklyn Rodgers in 2018. The curation of the space places the viewer in the heightened presence of loss, memorial and commemoration. Entitled "Devotion" there were 9 large format portraits of Rodgers's mother Loretta and her friends; Windrush generation elders whose every line and wrinkle are discerned and honoured by Rodgers's camera and lighting. At the front of the gallery space, a newly commissioned portrait of Doreen Lawrence, mother of Stephen Lawrence whose racist murder in Southeast London in 1993 sparked her campaign for justice for her son and other victims of racist crime in Britain. During the run of the exhibition Loretta Rodgers passed away. The gallery transformed into a site of memory and memorial. The curator Mark Sealy (2020) describes Rodgers's work as "an investigation of what it means to look into the human face with trust and empathy."; and the exhibition as "an act of devotion to his mother and the intimate familial moments of love, care, tenderness and affection in these relationships. Loretta and the devoted network around her are a testament to the case for greater safekeeping and care across the human condition."

The live presence of sixty members of the Caribbean Social Forum in the centre of the gallery brought another dimension to this work, as a living space of care and community. As members looked into the giant faces of the portraits, acts of recognition unfolded. They stood up and passed a microphone around, filling the room with their own biographical stories: roots and routes, home and identity; front rooms and family life; of working lives in the NHS, army, transport network, postal services. We screened the personal archives of Forum members, which we have been digitising over recent years, on the walls alongside Rodgers monumental portraits. This allowed members to see themselves as creative constituents with agency who belonged in this public cultural space. The white cube became, momentarily at least, a front room.

I've noticed in your more recent writing (Gunaratnam, 2022) that you're also interested in the movements of art into non-traditional spaces, through the work of art therapists. You use the term "palliative art" to, as I understand it, describe creative artworks produced by migrants and refugees in end-of-life care. You refer to these works as "diasporic last art", bringing them into conversation with the scholarship of the black feminist Christina Sharpe (2016) for whom "wake work" is how art and practices of critical fabulation can recognise how chattel slavery continues to press in on and haunt the present.

YG: There is some incredible art being made in end-of-life care. In that more recent article of mine, art brought together two of my interests—on hospitality and on radical rest as a

liberatory somatics, or what is sometimes called healing justice. Belonging, for me, is always bodily; those types of sensual experiencing, overspilling paperwork, changes to legislation, or the Arendtian “right to have rights”. Belonging from the diasporic deathbed—the wheelchair, recliner, detention centre, pavement or ventilator—is an understated space of citizenship making and struggle. For example, a hospice chaplain, a couple of years ago, told me that more young black men were beginning to come to the hospice with the life-limiting injuries of knife crime, which had meant rethinking their care. If we recognise that systemic injustices lead to premature debilitation and death, then what constitutes the “end-of-life” must also be radically reimagined beyond its medicalised ring-fencing.

More specifically, with regard to migrants, the idea that hospitality to the dying stranger is the measure of a community, is far from new (Levinas, 1989). I have been trying to thread these discussions through the politics of racialised rest, creativity and pleasure, explored by those such as Pauline Alexis Gumbs (2021), Tricia Hersey (2022) and Lata Mani (2023). These aspects of the diasporic are not how migrant workers exist in our cultural imaginaries and systems of governance. I am interested in how artmaking can create alternative imaginaries to the alienated work and exploitation that characterises how we think of black and brown migrants. Or, at least how diasporic last art might build and rehearse a sort of protopolitical space within which what it means to belong is temporarily reimagined and felt otherwise, particularly outside of ubiquitous “hostile environment” immigration policies. And context is everything, which is where Christina Sharpe’s (2016) wake work is important. Sharpe’s book, “In The Wake - On Blackness and Being”, is about the ongoingness of slavery; what Sharpe describes as a “total

climate” of anti-blackness (ibid., p.21). The analysis is necessarily sweeping, reaching from the meagre archival remnants of the 1781 voyage of the slave ship Zong, for example, to the contemporary perilous Mediterranean crossings of African migrants. Set against these schemes of black death, it is striking that Sharpe’s book opens with the deaths of three people in her family over a ten-month period: a death from unknown causes, a murder and the fast decline of malignant mesothelioma. What Sharpe does is to extend the conventional medicalised remit of what we might think of as palliative and end-of-life care and how we might understand loss and mourning. “In the midst of so much death and the fact of Black life as proximate to death,” Sharpe writes, “how do we attend to physical, social, and figurative death and also to the largeness of Black life, Black life insisted from death? I want to suggest that that might look something like wake work.” (ibid., p.17). Connecting death, loss and grief to histories and structures of racial violence but also “the largeness of Black life” is how Black Studies scholars are reassembling the field of death studies for me. It feels vital that we respond to this work fully, with a sense of urgency, including at the level of field formation, teaching, research and publishing. Which reminds me, we are having this conversation because one of *Mortality*’s editors invited me to contribute to an event. I said no because of my experience of the stark whiteness of British academic death studies. I think it is entirely possible to be working with death and loss and to have never thought about or worked through the repercussions of white supremacy. This is a complicated set of relationships. As Black and Disability Studies writers have pointed out (Erevelles, 2014; Pickens 2019; Puar, 2012), examining abjection through the overlapping of race and disability, in which disability exceeds identity because it is produced by capitalism and colonialism, uncovers tacit cultural assumptions and anxieties about who we are

and what it means to be human.

And on this point, Theri Pickens's (2019) work on "Black Madness" and neuroatypicality reminds me of some of the artmaking you have been supporting, which has meant coming up against ableism in art-worlds and institutions, including those explicitly committed to anti-racism, like Autograph.

AE: In recent years my practice and consciousness has been significantly shifted, in respect of the interlacing between the politics of race and disability, particularly within the arts and culture. You invited me to write an article for *Discover Society* (Eisa, 2020), where I tried to articulate this development through a long-term project between Autograph and Project Art Works, where we critically examined the hardship, accessibility and rights of disabled people to public arts institutions. I was forced to see the many urgent exclusions and marginalisations facing people with complex needs and disabilities. Around this time, I remember taking part in a Black Lives Matter protest in central London. I saw a placard reading "Up to 50% of all people killed by U.S police are disabled. To be black and disabled is a direct target. All Power to the people. Black Disabled Lives Matter." With extreme clarity that placard pin-pointed the kind of cross-cutting dialogues and practices we need to build to dismantle the exclusions of race and disability and open new spaces of belonging within arts institutions and more broadly.

On reflection, the unsettling of institutions you mentioned and an increased engagement with whiteness and privilege, has also led to some progressive shifts in how arts and cultural

institutions operate, alongside significant contradictions, disappointments and barriers. I'm constantly reminded of Sara Ahmed's (2012) analysis of "the politics of documentation". This is about how the writing of institutional policies and commitments meant to address structural issues, such as racism and ableism, end up becoming the doing itself. In other words, they conceal the very violences that permeate these institutions through tokenistic gestures that inhibit transformative action and change. I've previously come up against this on a project called Canvas(s), which aimed to centre and embed young refugee and asylum seekers voices as a catalyst for change at the National Gallery. The gallery was specifically chosen as a kind of test site for how the largest, public and most overtly white, national institution might respond to such a challenge. The participatory audio work, developed over a year by young people from Sudan, Ethiopia and Eritrea, reimagined the gallery spaces and collections through their cultural experiences and viewpoints. When it was launched as an audio guide for viewers in the gallery it was met with incredible responses, especially (and for me, unexpectedly), how it made the institution more accessible to disabled people, as well as people of colour visiting and working there. But the institutional hierarchy simply didn't engage with the work as a serious proposition for how it might address its apparent aspirations for inclusion. So, the work remained a temporary and precarious intervention on the margins. That unfortunately characterises so much anti-racist work that seeks to make structural change and challenge power imbalances.

On a more positive note, working at Autograph during the Explorers project, meant that we engaged in a generative endeavour to radically reshape how we understood our own

institution, spaces and practices through issues of rights, care and neurodiversity. We had to recognise how many conventional tools of art and participation—voice, language, visual imagery, cognition, cultural references, physical coordination—actively promote damaging, neurotypical assumptions that were unsettled in our participatory relationships with people with complex needs. We had to build relationships between artists, care workers, advocates and participants. We rethought creativity and participation from a personalised, non-hierarchical perspective, where participatory work drives toward change at personal and systemic levels. With a focus and responsibility on how we, in practice, promote the rights of disabled people and bring about positive and sustained changes in their lives, we were required to embrace “not knowing”. And at times discomfort and apprehension. How could we do participation differently, in ways that engendered connections and experiences with people that have qualitatively different ways of being in the world?

This work has led me onto further considerations of how participatory methods in arts and research might address equity, racial justice, ableism and other forms of marginalisation. And this was another area in which our paths crossed during the early stages of the 2020 Covid-19 pandemic. You were involved in an exploratory project developed by artist and sociologist Nina Wakeford, myself and other MA Visual Sociology alumni at Goldsmiths. That research built on a call and response approach, using mobile phone footage gathered by a women-led trade union that you were working with in Sri Lanka about the lack of pandemic protections on Sri Lankan tea estates (Gunaratnam, 2020). As artists and researchers, we responded to the footage in different ways, such as using found archival images of tea plantations and their histories to

splice oral and visual testimonies and to put these into circulation between the Sri Lankan trade union and Goldsmiths researchers. The project felt important because of how it pushed our practices and thinking to connect with global South contexts, bringing new questions and perspectives on racialisation, health, justice and rights beyond a diasporic context.

YG: Yes, that's very true. The plantations work shifted my thinking on two interrelated themes I have long been interested in: social pain and suffering and hostile environments. In a nutshell, the "social" as a prefix to pain or suffering brings with it the recognition that injustices and exclusion hurt. These ideas have been given added potency through neuroscience and public health research. For instance, Arline Geronimis's "weathering hypothesis" (2023) draws us to a different physiology of Sharpe's weathering. Building on over 40 years of public health research in North America, Geronomis's weathering refers to the cumulative impact of structural racism and economic inequality on the physical and mental health of impoverished African American and immigrant communities. Geronomis's research suggests that constant exposure to the stressors of racism and poverty lead to accelerated biological ageing, increased health disparities and higher risk of chronic illnesses. Among the evidence that Geronomis cites is how aggressive immigration raids in Iowa in 2008 were followed nine-months later by increased rates of premature births and low birth weight among the affected communities. There are connections here to my collaborative research (Jones et al., 2017) on British hostile environments which produce social and economic conditions that make life intolerably hard for certain immigrants. Lorenzo Pezzani's (2022) "forensic oceanography" research makes a compelling case for how all sorts of hostile environments seep into our social lives and our

bodies, smudging boundaries between an inside and an outside. “They are the food we eat, the water we drink, the air we breathe.”, Pezzani has written.

This intimate Interconnectedness is very real in the tea plantations research. What we heard from the plantation workers in the early stages of the pandemic was that money was more important than the deadly threat of the virus and possible death. Food insecurity was their immediate priority. Within the broader global health agenda, the pandemic added urgency to already passionate discussions about the limitations of a focus on individual risk factors that obscure how health risks are formed through an accumulation of structural forces - laws, policies, the distribution of health resources and research funding, as well as legacies of colonialism, slavery and plantocracy. The plantation system carries brutal histories of exploitation, debility, premature death and loss, feeding into contemporary labour abuses and environmental depletion. Yet, the plantation is also a space in which communities build creative infrastructures of care and where human and the more-than-human intimacies have created sophisticated environmental sensitivities and expertise.

AE: This perspective from working in and from relationships to the global South really chimes with some of my recent work, where I have been similarly interested in how historic and ongoing violence and exploitation are replicated and resisted, and what practices of care and identity making are produced in response to very different urgencies other than my own British diasporic context. I’ve begun to explore this through a project initiated in 2020 called Connecting Sudan. I spent a month in Khartoum working with photographers as well as

exchanging photographic archives relating to my own biography as someone of Sudanese heritage. I grew up in foster care from a young age in London. So, this project was a link to family and culture that I had been estranged from for over 20 years, as well as to my past experiences of grief and bereavement. And the political context in which I arrived in Khartoum was also historic given that the authoritarian regime of Omar Al Bashir was ending, with mass uprisings and protests across the country. When you describe the emergencies of food insecurity and health crises for plantation workers in Sri Lanka, I was engaging with people in Sudan facing similar urgencies also relating to a complex layering of colonial histories and structural violence. On one level the mass mobilisation of the revolution was sparked by what you refer to as “social pain” of discrimination and poverty—huge increases in the price of bread for instance. And yet, as writer Alex de Waal (2023) has observed, Khartoum has for many decades been a centre of colonial violence, frontier capitalism and slave trading that has consistently marginalised other regions and ethnic and cultural identities across the country. Through interviewing photographers and facilitating art workshops I learned of how precarious and dangerous visual documentation has been for the last 3 decades. Being caught with a camera was associated with political dissent and could land you in prison or worse. During this period photography became a “fugitive” practice. It was something that on the surface was exclusively used for the purposes of documenting “weddings” or commercials. But in the shadows, it functioned as a space for collectivity, community care and support, political discussion, a critical exchange of intellectual ideas and knowledge gleaned through huge barriers in access to the wider world. The conditions laid some of the grounds for the vital role photographers played in documenting and visually inscribing the revolution in the streets of

Khartoum and other cities across the country, leading to the downfall of Bashir's regime in 2020. It was a window, opening some space for creative expression and personal liberation that was essential in a country that had been severely restrictive. In this kind of moment, the role art and visual practice might play became apparent—in healing and reconciliation on personal and systemic levels—against the backdrop and history of erasure that the country has faced over many years, going back to the British colonial administration and post-colonial cycles of military coups.

Writing these words now comes with a certain grief, given the present, deteriorating situation in Khartoum, where many lives and homes have been lost to the deepening violence between military factions. An already fragile health system has almost completely collapsed. The monetary system, struggling under the weight of decades of international sanctions, has collapsed. Hundreds of thousands of people, including my family there, have fled to neighbouring countries such as Egypt and Chad creating mass displacement. I come back to your comments on how, in working with tea plantation workers, your research interests at the intersections of race, death and dying, illness and health were reconfigured, but also became expansive in terms of a global and ecological framing that is simply not possible to ignore, as is sometimes the case in the relative privilege and shielded context of the global North.

I wondered about two final things that *Mortality* readers might be interested in. How do you, as a researcher engaging with the sensitive and often traumatic experiences of others, take care of your own well-being as well as that of your research participants? It must be difficult, as I have

always found, to stand back from the work and the stories you tell and to not take on trauma disclosed to you. Is this where your yoga practice fits in? And secondly, given the importance of your work in connecting histories of racial justice, migration and marginalisation, to a field that is still overwhelming white-centered, I wondered about whether there are specific trajectories you see in the field of death studies and beyond, that you want your work to address or change moving forwards?

YG: Those are very big questions! Thank you first of all for trusting me (and Mortality readers) with some of your life story, which I didn't know before. With regard to your question about the impact of other lives on me personally, I've learnt a lot from how queer and global majority writers in particular, reroute the personal to the social and cultural, taking into account not-knowing. Gail Lewis (2009) has written very beautifully about this as the distances, or to go back to Glissant's word the opacity, between the "individual's social self and her psychic truth" (p.2). What is deeply moving and powerful in Gail's writing is how histories circulate in the formation of "objects" such as racism. Yet, the nature of this circulation is not fully identifiable or sayable due to the complex play of unconscious emotions such as denial or projection. All of which is to say, yes, it is difficult to "stand back from" the stories and lives I have encountered over the years but also my experience of them changes over time, as I learn more about different lines of colonial power and how lives, including how my own, are caught up within these histories. There have been some experiences which were clearly too painful to metabolise at the time. There are some I will never understand. More directly, as a yoga teacher and someone who has a meditation practice, I've felt more free since the Pandemic to

express and explore how my research and teaching are informed by what I mentioned earlier as a liberatory somatics. At a very basic level, this is about developing a felt sense of self in kaleidoscopic relation to the world around me, where care is recognising vulnerability and relationality. So, any practices that help me attune to connections are those which ultimately support my capacity to hold difficult feelings and experiences. In response to your second question about future trajectories, I have been developing collaborative work slowly (again!) in environmental humanities. I'd like to think that an unambiguously anti-colonial death studies would have the capacity to bring its intellectual and empirical resources to climate politics. For instance, it has long struck me that the hospice and palliative care philosophy of total pain is the mirror image of colonial violence which has sought complete sovereignty over human and more-than-human worlds and has taken us towards climate catastrophe. The capacity for healing justice, when stretched out from my particular research field of palliative care, is something I'd like to develop in the future. With regard to dismantling whiteness in death studies, that's a question I will leave as an open invitation to Mortality readers to think about and act on with us.

Acknowledgments

Thank you to Bethan Michael-Fox for her care and patience throughout.

Notes

1. Autograph ABP (Association of Black Photographers) was established in 1988. Its mission is to "to champion the work of artists who use photography and film to highlight questions of race, representation, human rights and social justice"

<https://autograph.org.uk/about-us/mission>

2. Lloyd Corporation is a collaboration between artists Ali Eisa and Sebastian Lloyd Rees. Their practice uses sculpture, installation, performance and text, often taking inspiration from informal and local economies. <https://jerwoodarts.org/artist/ali-eisa/>
3. Alongside neurodiverse artists and makers, the Project Art Works collective includes paid and unpaid caregivers who help each other to navigate through the complexities of health and social care systems. <https://projectartworks.org/the-organisation/>
4. Caribbean Social Forum <https://caribbeansocialfor.wixsite.com/caribbeansocialforum>

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