e-ISSN 2499-5975

Il Tolomeo
Vol. 27 – Dicembre | December | Décembre | Dezembro 2025

The War on Terror in Contemporary Black British Poetry: Hannah Lowe and Moniza Alvi

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Abstract In the light of Cultural Studies' focus on the signifying practices of forms of power, this article concentrates on some poems from Hannah Lowe's *The Kids* (2021) and Moniza Alvi's *Fairoz* (2022), in order to highlight the modalities through which they undermine the discriminatory profiling of minorities effected by the so-called war on terror. By means of a textual analysis of the poems in relation with contextual references, it is argued that both poets unveil the presence of power structures behind symbolic processes. Thus, they unmask the constructedness of apparently natural categories, offering a springboard for undermining them.

Keywords Black British poetry. War on terror. Cultural Studies. 7/7. Hannah Lowe. Moniza Alvi.

Edizioni Ca'Foscari

Peer review

Submitted 2025-06-29
Accepted 2025-09-22
Published 2025-12-17

Open access

Citation Deandrea, P. (2025). "The War on Terror in Contemporary Black British Poetry: Hannah Lowe and Moniza Alvi". *Il Tolomeo*, 27, 101-118.

DOI 10.30687/Tol/2499-5975/2025/01/007

1 Introduction

> Those who command the definitions
> command the credibility.
> (Hall 1988, 202)

The theoretical premise of this article originates from Cultural Studies and from its focus on the representational practices of cultural and historical forms of power asymmetrically ingrained in everyday life, as Iain Chambers holds (2018, 18). This focus is a politically committed one: when Stuart Hall reflected on the beginnings of Cultural Studies, he depicted a project aiming to

> conduct an ideological critique of the way the humanities and the arts presented themselves as parts of disinterested knowledge. (Hall 1990, 15)

Furthermore, in his "Cultural Studies and Its Theoretical Legacies", Hall emphasised the "ever irresolvable but permanent tension" between theoretical and political issues which allowed Cultural Studies to avoid any "final theoretical closure" (Hall 1993, 106).

Within this frame, the present article argues that some contemporary Black British poetry is engaged in a similar activity. It shows how some poets have been taking to task forms of discriminatory profiling of minorities as a consequence of the so-called 'war on terror' in the aftermath of the July 7th 2005 bombings (known as '7/7'). What the poets here examined do, I argue, is unveil the mechanisms whereby these symbolic processes are related to power structures, as is typical of Cultural Studies (Monegato 2016, 67). More specifically, their poetical works bring to the fore the artificiality of some specific labels (as shown in the following pages), thus deconstructing their supposed naturalness and conferring flesh and blood on Hall's reflections in his seminal article "New Ethnicities":

> The term ethnicity acknowledges the place of history, language and culture in the construction of subjectivity and identity, as well as the fact that all discourse is placed, positioned, situated, and all knowledge is contextual. (Hall 2008, 588)

It is precisely by deftly reconstructing the living context of the people they write about that Lowe and Alvi manage to open glimpses on the ways in which these young girls and boys are reduced to flattening definitions. In relation to this, the two case studies presented here are investigated both through textual analysis and contextual reading. Part 2 focuses on three sonnets from Hannah Lowe's *The Kids* (2021) centred on the exclusionary definition 'British-born', from her perspective as a teacher in some multicultural schools in London.

e-ISSN 2499-5975

Part 3 examines Moniza Alvi's poetry sequence *Fairoz* (2022), a fictional portrait of a British teenager lured into participating in terrorist attacks – where definitions such as 'extremists' are placed under scrutiny. Through the peculiarities of their differing poetics, these two authors discuss and undermine mainstream notions which operate under an exclusionary agenda.

They both belong to the category of Black British poetry, and not simply for biographical reasons, being both of mixed origins. Their shared focus on the marginalising fallout of war-on-terror policies constitutes a political orientation which in itself re-affirms a much argued "continued need for the category of 'Black British poetry'" in the face of "a powerful counter impulse […] to simply see such poetry as 'British'" (Lawson Welsh 2016, 180-1). At the same time, Lowe's and Alvi's oeuvres cannot be said to be limited to political themes – an age-long stereotype attached to Black British poetry (Lawson Welsh 2016, 179; Ramey 2004, 111, 120): as the following pages show, Lowe's recurrent focus on her family history and Alvi's surrealist inspiration testify to their richly diverse output. It should also be noted that according to Lawson Welsh's classification, Lowe (born 1976) and Alvi (born 1954) belong to different phases of Black British poetry (respectively, "millennial" and "second generation"); nevertheless, their shared concern proves the validity of Lawson Welsh's caveat (2016, 181) about the need to see her own categories as necessary oversimplifications.

The Conclusion of this article returns to the theoretical paradigms of Cultural Studies, tracing connections between Lowe's and Alvi's strategies and some mechanisms of the so-called war on terror in British society – mechanisms which have liberticidal effects.

2 British-Born: Hannah Lowe's *The Kids* (2021)

Hannah Lowe is part white British and part Jamaican. Her first two poetry collections *Chick* (2013) and *Chan* (2016) were mainly centred on her Sino-Caribbean father, his migration to England and his role as father and husband controversially maintained through his night-time gambling activities. Those books occasionally experimented with poetical forms (Wong 2020, 249-58), whereas her third collection *The Kids* (winner of the Costa Prize and shortlisted for the TS Eliot Prize) is composed exclusively of sonnets. Their canonical form is re-interpreted by Lowe thanks to a colloquial – when not slangish – register, irregular rhyme patterns and half rhymes. This "response to the English poetic canon" has characterised Black British poetry thanks to foremothers such as Una Marson (Lawson Welsh 2016, 182) and later authors like Patience Agbabi (Ramey 2004, 128-33; Lawson Welsh 2016, 190). Through it, Lowe deals with topics

e-ISSN 2499-5975

such as identity, inter-ethnic relations, her own Caribbeanness behind her light-skinned features (alongside her trademark autobiographical and family memories). In the first part of the volume, she focuses on her experience as a teacher in multicultural London schools. The three poems closing this part compose a triptych on the fallout of 7/7 (Lowe 2021, 34-6; hereafter, references are given as *K* followed by page number).

"7/7" is also the title of the first sonnet, where Lowe describes the last minutes of a friend of hers before taking the train which would carry her to her death as a consequence of the notorious bombings. As if to magnify the momentous importance of this watershed for individual and collective worldviews, Lowe arrests the whole scene in a tableau:

> Let's freeze her here, at the edge, pressed tight between
> a young undertaker, say, and a ballroom dancer, who minutes later
>
> can't save her life. […]
>
> Across the street, the flats where my friend has left a burning lamp,
> a half-made bed. A single drop is midway falling from a rusted tap.
> (*K* 34)

The second sonnet, "Ricochet", is worth quoting in full, in view of an in-depth textual analysis:

> Four boys blew up three tube trains and a bus.
> My old pal was stood beside a bomber.
> The police shot a man they said had *Mongolian eyes*.
> For days, friends searched the hospitals for her.
> The wrong man they shot, they shot eleven times.
> We'd heard a voicemail, her saying she was fine.
>
> It was summer still when the kids came back.
> Muslim boys in Nikes and thobes and skull caps.
> Boyish beards that made them look like men.
> Her face still flashed up on the television.
> Two girls swept down the hall in full black burkas.
> Moniza said a police van took her brother.
> The papers called the bombers *British-born*.
> (*K* 35)

As a collection, *The Kids* is criss-crossed with numerous intra-textual references; here the bombings in line 1 are again connected to Lowe's killed friend. Immediately after that, the sonnet traces a link with one emblematic victim of the fallout of the 7/7 bombings: Jean Charles de

Menezes, a 27-year-old Brazilian who was repeatedly shot in the head by the police in Stockwell tube station (notably, Lowe repeats "shot" thrice), two weeks after the bombings, because he was mistaken for a fugitive terrorist. His seemingly "Mongolian eyes" (l.3) were mentioned as a justification for such a cold-blooded institutional execution, which Vikky Bell describes as the result of a Lombrosian categorisation singling out the victim of an Agambenian state of exception, whereby the right to life is suspended and sovereign violence can result (Bell 2007, 1-4). This event represented a sinister omen of racial profiling: in this specific poem by Lowe, lines 7-12 shift the setting to her school and to her students of Muslim origins.

Ariane de Waal (2016, 6) highlights how the British media were flooded with a climate of suspicion and fear centred on the "racialized body carrying the rucksack on public transport". In the weeks after De Menezes was killed, a photo of a service information board, supposedly taken at Notting Hill station and dated July 26th, circulated widely on the internet. The pictured "Notice to all passengers" read:

> Please do not run on the platforms or concourses. Especially if you are carrying a rucksack, wearing a big coat or look a bit foreign. This notice is for your own safety. Thank you. (De Waal 2016, 12)

Even though the notice was proved to be a spoof, and in spite of its "polite coding" (13), De Waal aptly deems it significant of the kind of racial profiling dominating the post-7/7 atmosphere, exposing "the racial schemas that organise urban life" (2016, 12). In "Ricochet", lines 7-12 focus on Lowe's Muslim students, and on the inescapable question: how would they feel when reading that understated "if you […] look a bit foreign"?

Lowe's depiction of these schoolboys and schoolgirls stands out for its accumulation of details which implicitly point to the British Muslim community. In their article, Mark Featherstone, Siobhan Holohan, and Elizabeth Poole detect, in post-7/7 British media, a difficulty in reconciling multicultural principles and Islamic fundamentalism: in their attempt to distinguish good integrated Muslim from foreign-manoeuvred bad ones, they show a general tendency to Islamicise issues rather than applying socio-economic paradigms. If even some British-educated Muslims have fallen prey to radical fundamentalism, then, is the whole community potentially susceptible (Featherstone, Holohan, Poole 2010, 178-9)?

Such simplistic generalisations, which the scholars also identify in some speeches by Tony Blair (181-2), are mixed with vulnerability by Lowe in lines 7-12, where beards make boys "look like" grown-ups and a girl named Moniza is speaking about her arrested brother. This complex, disorienting climate is also reflected in the subtle stylistic facets of this sonnet. Structurally, in a collection markedly

characterised by a fluid colloquial tone enhanced by a massive presence of enjambments, "Ricochet" stands out for being made of self-complete lines all ending on a full stop – as if to convey the near-impossibility of shaping the frames of this traumatic event into a coherent story. Furthermore, this is the only truncated sonnet in the collection consisting of thirteen lines; in an email exchange with the present writer, Lowe explained that this structural choice gestures toward the traumatic disappearance of her friend.

Metrically, line 1 begins with a succession of seven stressed syllables; other similar devices in the rest of the poem (as in lines 2, 8, 11) all add emphasis to key images related to the tragic events. A related emphasis-raising effect is obtained phonetically through alliteration on [b], especially at the beginning and at the end of the sonnet (totalising fifteen occurrences); the repetition of the plosive consonant sound [b] echoes the bombings (and the keyword "bombers") and hints at the ricochet of the title. It is a recurrence which may be deemed significant not least because it becomes a dominant sound-effect to the point that it may be said to replace the traditional use of rhyme, and because it culminates in the profiling label "British-born". The final line is a regular iambic pentameter, thus enhancing through a canonical metre the mainstream view ("the papers") being voiced.

As an example of the numerous intra-textual references in this collection, the following sonnet is entitled "British-born", taking up the same image with which the previous sonnet ended:

> And suddenly, new language – 'British-born' –
> for kids who grew up on terraces in Leeds
> or tower blocks in Bow, and at weekends tied
> their bootlaces for footies on the lawn
> and went to college to study Sports or Business
> or Car Mechanics and spoke with accents thick
> as Yorkshire mud or London bullet-quick –
> *yes blud!* and *innit!* – and were as British as
>
> a pack of salt-and-vinegar and no,
> his teacher hadn't noticed him withdrawing
> and no, his mother hadn't wondered who
> he called at 2 p.m. in the blue-lit bedroom
> of their bungalow – despite her scrubbing,
> the words aglow on their garden wall: GO HOME.
> (*K* 36)

Featherstone, Holohan, and Poole (175-82) repeatedly return to the contradictory effort, on the part of post-7/7 British media, to reconcile the fact that the bombers were British-born with the

convenient belief that the terrorist is always an external other, finally proposing an unconvincing image of the bad sheep manoeuvred by an evil foreign mentor. Not only does Lowe's third sonnet expose this mainstream discourse by emphasising the abruptness with which the label seemed to emerge ("And suddenly," line 1), an abruptness further strengthened by the two consecutive stressed syllables ("néw lánguage", line 1). I argue that it also undermines the racist signifying power of that very label: "British-born" gestures to the saying 'born and bred', subtly suggesting that these youths were only born and not bred, not really part of British culture (cf. Manzoor-Khan 80-1) – not to mention the biologically racial connotations of 'bred' being the participle form of the verb 'to breed'.

In ll. 2-8, Lowe dismantles the label through mention of these youths' dispossessed upbringing, sporting activities, studies, and eating habits; accents-wise, lines 7-8 are noticeable for the bitter irony in "bullet-quick" and the metrical vehemence of "*yes blud!*", an accent cluster and spondaic beginning of the line. Structurally, the volta after the caesura is clearly marked by a "no" (repeated in line 11) expressing an institutional and family neglect which culminates in the capitalised rejection of the closing "GO HOME" (its aggressiveness again emphasised by two consecutive stressed syllables). What home, one may ask, after a whole poem explaining that they were born *and* bred in Britain? Phonetically, the sonnet reverberates the consonance in [b] of the previous poem (with twelve occurrences), as if to re-echo the bombings and at the same time to hint at the subtextual presence of 'bred' in the title. A marked change may be noticed in the two closing lines, where a consonance in [g] culminates in a virulent "GO" – a rejection that pervades Moniza Alvi's volume, too.

3 Extremists, Murderers: Moniza Alvi's *Fairoz* (2022)

Born in Lahore in 1954 of a Pakistani father and a white British mother (Splendore 2014, 182), Alvi is today a renowned poet who distinguishes herself for writing about issues of power and identity in relation to the Black British context, while at the same time going well beyond such thematic concerns (Shehata 2017, 169). Her visionary surrealism is sometimes hard to relate to specific realms (King 2004, 307-8), and Lawson Welsh (2016, 187-8) identifies in her a typical example of how some "second generation" Black British poets moved away from the focus of the nation to concentrate on "imagined places". These two main aspects of her poetics converge in her recent volume *Fairoz*, described on its blurb as a "book-length poetry sequence [on…] an imagined teenage girl's susceptibility to extremism". Unlikely as it may seem, this challenging topic and

protagonist is conveyed by Alvi through her usual lightness of tone, described by Splendore (2014, 181) as a prose-like simplicity capable of relieving the heavy precariousness of living.

It must be premised that Alvi repeatedly expresses her awareness of the difficult task at hand, as in the poem entitled "Listening to Fairoz and Tahir":

> To shut out other sounds
> to be the curved surface
>
> their voices bounce against,
> to put the unsaid on one side.
>
> To eavesdrop on them,
> to overhear and underhear,
>
> and attend with my faulty ear
> to a made-up conversation
> attempting
>
> with my own words
> to hold my own words back.
> (Alvi 2022, 31; hence, the book will be referred to parenthetically, with the title of the poem followed by *F* and page number)

The daunting difficulty of conjuring up such a character truthfully is made clear, especially through the closing paradox. These lines are also representative of Alvi's apparently simple language, with a lack of metrical and rhyming regularity and a series of stylistic traits, such as alliterations and consonances (like the sibilants in ll. 1-4), onomatopoeic assonances (as in "out", "sounds", "bounce"), paronyms ("unsaid" and "side"), and graphic strategies such as the detachment of "attempting" from the rest, as if to single out her imperfect perspective on which the numerous conversations between her characters rest (the neologism "underhear" can be interpreted in this light).

As for the generic frame established by this collection, it swings between social realism and the fable (or the metaphysical). The unwelcoming world described by Lowe for second-generation immigrants, both at home and in society at large, is envisioned by Alvi as a bleak land. This environment is composed partly of a fairy-tale icy world, where empathy is not supposed to count and Fairoz is not meant to have her say in the choice of a husband (cf. *F* 40); and partly of a dreary, deafening outside:

It was cold. It was raw.
Their mother was a version
of the Snow Queen.
[…]
How dried she looked
when she looked in the mirror!
She smiled her best smile

and the room behind her
filled with snow
which soon became hard-packed.
[…]
Half-blinded by flakes

the girls fell out into the garden.
No snow there, but greyness
and grit and the traffic

thundering on the ring road.
("Indoors", *F* 14-15)

The dreariness of the outside is enhanced by the alliteration in [g] and [gr], and the echo of "ring". In this context, Fairoz's frustration unsurprisingly becomes ever deeper, its slow erosion replicated by the alliteration in [sk] and consonance in [k]:

cold bore ice and more ice –
thick sheets of it

to the hemispheres of the house.
It scratched and scoured

the human core.
("Ice age", *F* 58)

This general condition provides a perfect terrain for an unexpected intrusion, whereby the fable-like veers towards the metaphysical:

The Devil enjoys 'I don't like my life.'

He echoes the words:
'I don't like my life! I don't like my life!'

It's familiar to him – this chink.
This fast-widening crack.
("In the morning", *F* 25)

e-ISSN 2499-5975

The widening cracks, phonetically embodied by the vowel sounds becoming more open in the last line quoted above, will be the place where the Devil will sow the seeds that he calls "shrivel-the-soul" (cf. *F* 52). This is one of a group of poems in *Fairoz* which present a background confrontation between God and the Devil. It is a sort of morality-play scheme that may be considered a poetic translation (with possible caricatural implications) of an ideological process that de-politicises terrorism: in the words of Featherstone, Holohan, and Poole,

> the presentation of a totally non-politicized struggle between good and evil is perfect cover for the generalized insecurity produced by neo-liberalism. (2010, 173)

In Fairoz's case, her own insecurity at home and in society leads her to explore the Web as a safety valve and as the pursuit of an alternative socialisation:

> it is the Internet which is perceived as being the most influential in radicalizing the young, described quite poetically in the *Daily Mail* as 'bedroom radicalisation'

as Featherstone, Holohan, and Poole comment sarcastically (2010, 179). Significantly, Alvi depicts the internet as a populated environment:

> Fairoz wanders the dark pathways of the internet.
> The trees form tunnels over her head.
>
> People jump out of the bushes
> each with something to say.
>
> They pounce.
> It's airless.
>
> It's a way of leaving home.
> ("In the present tense", *F* 12)

Though sanitised ("airless"), it is a much-needed world in which to escape from her suffocating home. And when (at first virtually) she encounters Tahir and becomes fond of him, this is depicted by Alvi as if Fairoz were in a real outdoor place: "She's there with him, out in the open" ("Questions in the wood", *F* 20). She is clearly a victim to online recruiting:

TAHIR: What would you do for Allah?
He needs us, you know. They hate us here.

FAIROZ: Yeah, I know that. Most of them do –
they treat us like shit. We pray…

TAHIR: Praying is all very well. But we must
be braver than that. We owe it to Allah
as an act of faith.
(untitled, *F* 32)

This exchange shows how religious faith lies behind Tahir's request for violent action, but an even more effective bond is provided by a shared feeling of being hated and rejected. The ruthless "GO HOME" emphasised in Lowe's third poem is likewise received by Fairoz – first with incredulity, then with rage:

The first time she heard it
it took her a moment to take it in.

'Go home!' She was just by the house,
walking up the short front path.

She dropped her bag on her doorstep,
turned and picked up a stone.

But he'd already slid away.
He left his two poison words.
("Home", *F* 26)

Here, too, the nonsensical question – what home are these second-generation immigrants supposed to have in mind? – centres on "home" itself, as the title of the poem exemplifies. The contested notion of home has occupied centre stage in the debates around Black Britain for ages; Lauri Ramey considered it a founding one in her 2004 reflections on Black British poetry (Ramey 2004, 109-10), and it is dispiriting to notice how often it is still surfacing today. The context depicted by Alvi is part of the violence and insecurity spread by neo-liberalism on a worldwide scale, as Featherstone, Holohan, and Poole (2010, 172) write:

> We want to suggest that the specific problem of contemporary (Islamicized) global terror emerged in response to the generalized anxieties produced by neo-liberalism and the consequent spread of the precariousness of everyday life through the capitalist economies.

In Alvi's volume, Fairoz's "two poison words" lead her to swear profusely (cf. *F* 27), while this common experience of exclusionary abuse offers Tahir a terrain for his recruiting purposes:

> FAIROZ: The more you try to forget, the more
> you can't forget… Yeah, that's what I think.
>
> TAHIR: Yeah. When I was a kid our town was
> mostly white and our window was smashed
> so many times there was no point mending it.
> When they banged on the door we hid upstairs.
> Like we couldn't exist. I can't forget that.
> (untitled, *F* 50)

The frustrating feeling embodied in "Like we couldn't exist" is channelled into a thirst for affirmation which translates itself into throwing back the same charge of extremism that has been levelled against them:

> FAIROZ: Some fights are good fights. Yeah.
>
> TAHIR: Yeah. Against the West. WESTERN extremists.
> They won't say they are. The hypocrites! The shits!
> Someone I know, their uncle was imprisoned, tortured by
> westerners for nothing. They thought he was someone else.
> They never apologised.
>
> FAIROZ: They just say it's us! And
>
> TAHIR: Listen – we were great once, way back. And we'll
> be great again. We're global already you know.
> (untitled, *F* 63)

Tahir's anecdote and jingoist slogan may easily be related not only to the liberticidal laws and practices operating after 9/11 and 7/7 (such as the CIA's extraordinary renditions). This results in an extremely polarised exchange of accusations which constitutes a fertile ground for a violent confrontation – in the playground, as recalled by Fairoz:

> *That time in the playground blood-red voices*
> *couldn't not hear them 'Murderer! Murderer!'*
> […]
> *'You're all murderers!' words thrown*
> *ducked threw back 'Murderers yourselves!'*
> *couldn't deal with it not really not at all words*
> *gouging we're all humans they're not should she*

e-ISSN 2499-5975

tell? Amma? the teacher? maybe no
no point what would they do? could make things
worse yeah an unfairness bigger than
("Who's there?", *F* 78; italics in the text)

Through these "blood-red voices", an us-them discursive framework is affirmed where the other is "presented as a monstrous other incapable of reason" (Featherstone, Holohan, Poole 2010, 180, 173). This is powerfully reminiscent of Edward Said's famous words on "fundamentalism":

> A word that has come to be associated almost automatically with Islam, although it has a flourishing, usually elided, relationship with Christianity, Judaism, and Hinduism. The deliberately created associations between Islam and fundamentalism ensure that the average reader comes to see Islam and fundamentalism as essentially the same thing [… even though it] defines a relatively small proportion of what actually takes place in the Islamic world. (Said 1997, XVI)

The outcome of those "blood-red voices" is inevitably Manichean, with counter-accusations of extremism flying across the playground. "We're all humans they're not", Fairoz thinks, without a reliable listening ear in which she can trustfully confide – "what would they do?". This deadlock paralyses Fairoz's (self)awareness, as hinted at by the stalemate in the morality-play subtext:

God held one hand of the argument
and the Devil, the other. They heaved
and strained but nothing ever

moved much. The two of them
locked in a tug-of-war.
The rope they couldn't drop.
("The contest", *F* 72)

The consonance in [p] in the last line may be seen as emphasising the need to drop that stifling rope. For her part, in the closing lines of "Who's there?" Fairoz strains to break that deadlock and humanise the individuals who compose the opposing "seething" blocks:

And now long after and not so long after
looking at her hands her shoes and into
the chasm behind her eyes to see to see
who's there him her us 'Murderers!'
Murderers? no yes no who's there

in the seething?
("Who's there?", *F* 78; italics in the text)

"Long after" signals a flash-forward, in the plot of Fairoz's parable. As her story developed along this poetry sequence, her estrangement from society and schooling led her to become apathetic: for example, a whole poem is interspersed with "O" as a sort of refrain, representing "The noughts | in the teacher's register" ("Her absences", *F* 47). After Tahir asked her to kill for Allah with the promise that she would reach Jannah (the believer's Paradise), and after a real marriage between them was arranged, he vanished. The volume does not specify what Fairoz's destiny will be. It is made clear that she has never taken part in violent actions, but what will the authorities do with her?

She hasn't she didn't luckily she hadn't she did
just a bit not really more than a bit no a little
and she watched will the police?
[…]
what did she really think? it was
wrong not completely no yes violence like murder?
she has her life she's young not so young no
will they think she's young? responsible like guilty?
("Her whole life", *F* 90; italics in the text)

Here the third-person point of view conveys both Fairoz's confusion and her painful attempts at self-awareness ("what did she really think?"). She finds herself in a position marked by uncertainty, very far from the (once again) polarised dominant narrations which characterise this phenomenon:

> In the media constructions after the 7/7 attacks, it has been more necessary to mark out the 'good' and 'bad' Muslims. (Featherstone, Holohan, Poole 2010, 176)

Alvi's lines undermine this congealing narration by finally creating a Fairoz who strives to make distinctions *within* seething blocks, who has her misgivings,

She always, almost
always (especially later)
had her doubts –

They crept in like waves
[…]
Is there anything she'd like to say?
'I had my doubts. Yeah, doubts.

I'm telling you the truth
("What she'd like to say", *F* 93)

and who tries to envision a different life:

A star to watch over you
not just to watch you
a piercing star
if this could be true
if the beautiful ideas
could really be beautiful
and stay beautiful
("'Over every soul there is a watcher'", *F* 98)

4 Conclusion

> The vocation of cultural studies has been to enable people to understand what is going on, and especially to provide ways of thinking, strategies for survival, and resources for resistance to all those who are now – in economic, political and cultural terms – excluded from anything that could be called access to the national culture of the national community: in this sense, cultural studies still has as profound a historical vocation as it ever had in the 1960s and '70s. But on the other hand, in relation to the mass education of students, both in higher education and elsewhere, cultural studies is, as an institutional form, very minor. But the humanities and the arts are not. And indeed the contestation that cultural studies was partly responsible for putting on the agenda has been taken into the humanities themselves.
>
> (Hall 1990, 22)

In this seminal article, Stuart Hall highlighted the connections between Cultural Studies and the Humanities. Inspired by his reflections, the present analysis of contemporary Black British poetry is meant to be seen as yet another example of the manifold ways in which the Humanities have "taken into […] themselves" the "contestation" expressed by Cultural Studies. The pages above have argued that the analysed poems by Lowe and Alvi perform a similar function of providing "ways of thinking" outside the frame of racist and Islamophobic profiling. Provide for whom, one may ask? The first to be "excluded", to use Hall's words, are again the victims of such profiling – Lowe's students and people like Fairoz.

Certainly, they are not the only ones. The "resources for resistance" would also benefit the general public, those who are increasingly involved in the exclusionary policies implemented by British institutions. In 2003 the Prevent programme was introduced as a

counterterrorism strategy and later made law in 2015, thus placing 500,000 civil servants under compulsory duties of surveillance and monitoring activities for purposes of national security. Among others, the signals that they should look out for include questioning issues of identity, faith, and belonging; being unable to discuss one's point of view; dissociating oneself from one's friends to join new ones; being withdrawn (Manzoor-Khan 2022, 64-6). On the one hand, Manzoor-Khan aptly observes that such vagueness could not but leave ample room for all sorts of stereotypes (66), increasing Islamophobic cases and related problems for British Muslims' mental health, sense of safety and trust in institutions (69-70). This phenomenon is to be placed within the frame of the psychological crisis characterising minority groups: in their 1996 conversations, bell hooks and Stuart Hall agreed how neglected this facet of the African diaspora was, whereby "the richness of their own subjective life" was (and still is? I ask myself) overdetermined by race and racism (hooks, Hall 2017, 99-109). In this light, focusing on Black British *poetry* allows one to delve deeper into this aspect, thanks to Lowe's and Alvi's lines.

On the other hand, with the Prevent programme we are dealing with signals so vague that they might well apply not only to Lowe's students and Fairoz, but to most teenagers regardless of their origins. It is perhaps the general public, then, who should be considered as the addressee of these appealing lines from the final pages of *Fairoz*:

> *Could someone help her? she has this one life hers*
> *she's an intelligent girl yeah more than quite intelligent*
> *her whole life sometimes it's nothing though not nothing*
> ("Her whole life", *F* 90; italics in the text)

The general public should also be alert to the fact that institutional anti-extremism programmes like Prevent also monitor political ideas such as pacifism and support for Palestine, and so constitute a danger for political dissent and critical thinking at large (Manzoor-Khan 2022, 72-3). In other words, the war on terror can result in any individual being "excluded from […] the national culture of the national community", to go back to Hall's words.

e-ISSN 2499-5975

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