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# Even Your Queer Reading Is White

Vivek Shraya's Poetic Justice

## ABSTRACT

Racism is inextricable from queer politics. The prevailing whiteness of mainstream queer communities in Western secular contexts draws attention to the pressing need to consider how white supremacy wounds racialized queer people. Vivek Shraya is a transgender South Asian Canadian artist, whose multidisciplinary creative praxis and prolific writing is profoundly valuable in times of pervasive systemic oppression and commonplace cruelty (Vivekshraya.com 2016). Shraya's most recent book of poetry, *even this page is white* (2016) is a visceral challenge to the racism that defines white settler colonial ideologies in Turtle Island. Shraya's poetry smashes the veneer of an imagined polite, peaceful, and quaint "Canada" not marred by racism. By discussing whiteness as an economic, structural, and embodied form of sexual capital, the author shatters the illusion of a queer community that is not steeped in white supremacist ideology. Racist injunctions regarding whose aesthetics and bodies are constructed as "properly" queer and as deserving of love produce ostensible feminist and queer "communities" of normative and celebrated whiteness. *even this page is white* is a rich assemblage of queer anti-colonial art, a prosaic form of politics that refuses complicity in the face of oppression. Shraya's brilliance lies in merging the aesthetics of poetic form with an affective political discourse that challenges the chilling violence of racism. *even this page is white* boldly confronts whiteness, contesting neo-Orientalist forms of multicultural pageantry and nauseating platitudes of "diversity" that are used to evade questions of systemic oppression. As a literary work, *even this page is white* interrupts the seamless systemic racism that structures canons of poetry and "queer readings" of "queer fiction" that are in

fact white readings of white fiction. Shraya's deft literary skill, artistic empathy, and political tenacity evoke the poetry of Audre Lorde who once wrote, "I am deliberate and afraid of nothing."

**Keywords:** poetry, homonationalism, white supremacy, whiteness, racism, racialization, queer people of colour, postcolonialism, sexualities, resistance

*for anyone who has lost  
a friend  
from saying the word  
race. (Shraya 2016)*

**RACISM IS INEXTRICABLE** from sexual politics. The prevailing whiteness of mainstream queer communities in Western secular contexts draws attention to the pressing need to consider the epistemic violence of racism in the lives of queer racialized people. Vivek Shraya is a transgender South Asian Canadian writer, multidisciplinary artist, and prolific author. Shraya's first novel, *She of the Mountains*, was named one of *The Globe and Mail's* Best Books of 2014. *even this page is white* is her first collection of poetry and was released in the spring of 2016. Shraya was the 2016 marshall of the Toronto Pride parade and is a three-time Lambda Literary Award finalist. Shraya was also a finalist for the 2015 Toronto Arts Council Emerging Artist award and received the 2015 Writers Trust of Canada Dayne Ogilvie Prize. Her artistic oeuvre is as prolific as it is profound. She has recorded several musical albums, exhibited art installations in several mediums, and offers a striking political commentary regarding the mainstream art world and its contentious relationship to whiteness (Vivekshraya.com 2016).

Shraya's most recent book of poetry, *even this page is white* (2016) is a visceral and emotive challenge to white supremacist ideology in Turtle Island/Canada.<sup>1</sup> Her poetry smashes the veneer of an imagined polite, peaceful, quaint Canada, and particularly the illusion of a queer community not marred by white supremacy. The invisibility of whiteness that often structures the romance and eroticism of many canonical white queer texts reflects the brutal erasure of queer racialized lives.

To desire bodies also involves acknowledging that they carry an incorporated history, one born out of ongoing genealogies of colonial violence. Shraya's text challenges the hegemony of whiteness by unmasking it of its assumed normativity. I suggest that one of Shraya's remarkable skills lies in her rich assemblage of queer art as anti-colonial politics. Shraya and other authors of colour challenge authoritarian narratives of queerness, enduring fictions of normative whiteness that structure both bodies of literature and bodies marked by the violence of racism.

I begin by situating Shraya's deft political poetry in a tradition of racialized queer, transgender, and feminist poets. Drawing on Audre Lorde's "Poetry Is Not a Luxury" (1984), I suggest that the poetics of racialized author's cannot be subsumed within a canon of white queer fiction. Shraya's *even this page is white* can be read as anti-colonial writing that exists in consort with epistemologies of sexuality and gender that rupture Eurocentric understandings of desire, the self, and sexual identity. Lorde's assertion regarding the importance of poetry as a discourse of emotion that challenges discourses of enlightenment rationality resonates with Slavoj Žižek's (2008) writings regarding trauma. I also draw on Žižek to highlight the importance of Shraya's poetry and the poetry of writers of colour as a means of addressing the unspeakable violence of racism. By writing from and about the skin, Shraya ruptures Western European knowledge's of the self that assume rationality and objectivity. Shraya writes the skin of white people out of the unmarked silences that allow white privilege to function. While white queer fiction writes the sexual body into being, it is often grounded in discourses of European enlightenment rationality in which the white subject occupies a universal human position. Universalist ideas of white humanity are constructed against the racialization of people of colour who are invisible and desexualized or whose embodiment is over determined and their intellect denigrated.

The erasure and/or fetishism of racialized skin within white queer writing corresponds to contemporary sexual politics within queer communities. Recent media articles point to racist practices of desire and dating among white queers. Queer people of colour are explicitly con-

structured as phobic or fetishized objects within a white gaze. Many white queer people in the secular West openly espouse that they will not date people of colour. Pervasive racist ways of seeing and not seeing people of colour construct racialized bodies as exotic fantasies rather than human beings who could be loved (Jones 2016; Takeuchi 2017). The ways that white queer desire is structured by white supremacy is something that Shraya has explored in previous artistic works. *Seeking Single White Male* (2010) is a short film that Shraya made, which shows her transitioning from brown to white. The stark and painful images, expressive of a silently imbibed whiteness are juxtaposed with racist commentary heard by the artist from white queers regarding their preference for white lovers. Shraya (2016) writes about the film and white supremacist queer culture in Canada:

For years, I had this idea of exploring comments I had heard in Edmonton gay bars when I first came out but it wasn't until the summer of 2010 that it occurred to me to juxtapose those statements with photos of myself "transitioning" to whiteness – blonde hair, blue contacts – in an effort to show how the internalization of racism can manifest externally. *Seeking Single White Male* was born shortly thereafter. (Vivekshraya.com 2016)

Shraya's artistic honesty regarding the pervasive nature of racism resonates with many queer people of colour in white settler Canada. Discussing the responses to her film, she writes:

I was surprised to see the video reposted dozens of times on Facebook and tumblr. Perhaps what I valued the most was also what broke my heart over and over again: the many discussions with/by (queer) people of colour who had heard the exact same/similar statements... There was also a kind of shared gratitude amongst us that the sick feeling we would have after hearing these kinds of statements every time we were out wasn't imaginary and was completely valid. (Vivekshraya.com 2016)

Just as gender-centric feminisms have historically maligned the lives and experiences of women of colour, while normalizing the racism of white women, “queer” literature and art centres whiteness is deeply violent ways. José Muñoz (1999) cites the writing of Yvonne Yarbu-Bejarano who states:

[T]he lack of attention to race in the work of leading lesbian theorists reaffirms the belief that it is possible to talk about sexuality without talking about race and sexuality only when discussing people of colour and their text. (Muñoz 1999, 10)

By naming, discussing and interrogating whiteness as a form of privilege that sustains white supremacy, Shraya draws the reader’s attention to how whiteness structures hierarchies of desire within Western queer communities and archetypal images of who and what is queer. The unmarked privileges of white queerness support what Jasbir Puar (2007) terms homonationalism, a process by which white queers function as nationalist symbols, aligning themselves with Western and European state powers as white nationalist subjects. Homonationalist white supremacy structures canons of queer and transgender Canadian literature, national identity, and sexuality. It is interesting to note that texts such as *Queer CanLit: Canadian Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) Literature in English* (2008) discuss the rich tradition of queer writers of colour in Canada, but do not mention whiteness. In the introduction to this text Scott Rayter (2008) states:

Writers such as Connie Fife, and those included in Makeda Silvera’s *Piece of My Heart: A Lesbian of Colour Anthology* (1991), name and speak out against the homophobia some women experience in their particular racial and ethnic communities, as well as the racism they encounter in white queer communities. Ian Iqbal Rashid’s collection of poems *Black Markets, White Boyfriends and Other Acts of Elision* (1991) makes the reader aware that any examination of race or sexuality must include an analysis of both. (Rayter 2008, 12)

Rayter's discussion of race, racism, and sexuality only makes reference to Indigenous and racialized queer and transgender authors in Canada, thus illustrating Yvonne Yarbu-Bejarano's argument regarding the inability to name whiteness as being foundational to queer and transgender writing and identity.

"Race" is something that people of colour possess, embody, and experience and thus racism becomes an issue for and about people of colour, while white people are never implicated or critiqued for their sustenance of white supremacy. Shraya's *even this page is white* begins with a quote by Sara Ahmed (2007, 149): "If whiteness gains its currency by being unnoticed, what does it mean to notice whiteness?" Within a white supremacist culture, white queer and transgender writers do not need to discuss race and racism, as these politically charged issues are those that ostensibly only concern people of colour and Indigenous people. In the very expectation placed solely on people of colour to discuss race and racism, the universal humanity of whiteness is reified as innocent. The discourse of white innocence is used to ignore the pervasive nature of racism and to excuse the justified denigration and debasement of racialized people (Butler 1993b).

Shraya's writing is thus deeply important as she pointedly questions how and why white supremacy overdetermines the mainstream queer literary and artistic imaginary. Shraya unearths a series of deeply important political questions regarding the relationship between white sexualities in Canada and the sexual violence that Indigenous and racialized people in Turtle Island experience. Racist violence is foundational to the making of a white settler state.

### **In the Shadows of White Queer Genealogy: Situating Shraya's work**

Vivek Shraya's *even this page is white* is situated within an ongoing genealogy of artist's of colour who use poetry to challenge racist epistemologies. Lorde (1984) argues that poetry is a foundational form of feminist, anti-racist knowledge that challenges what Lorde discusses as the epistemic violence of the "white fathers" of intellect. Lorde writes:

I speak here of poetry as the revelation or distillation of experience, not the sterile word play that, too often, the white fathers distorted the word poetry to mean – in order to cover their desperate wish for imagination without insight. (Lorde 1984, 36)

Lorde argues that the “white fathers” discipline emotion and stifle of creativity in the name of rationalist, disembodied objective intellect. The author states:

The white fathers told us, I think therefore I am; and the black mothers in each of us – the poet – whispers in our dreams, I feel therefore I can be free. Poetry coins the language to express and charter this revolutionary awareness and demand, the implementation of that freedom. (Lorde 1984, 36)

I suggest that Shraya’s work can be located in the tradition of poetry that Lorde triumphed. Writers such as Lorde and James Baldwin created literary works that function as a critique of how supposedly apolitical writing by white writers is implicitly racist. Refusing to name and interrogate whiteness is racist.

As a racialized Canadian writer, Shraya’s poetics are informed by many traditions of dissident literature that use the medium of poetry as an affective form to honestly comment on and expose racism. The relationship between racism, white settler colonialism, and the Canadian landscape places Shraya’s poetry in consort with authors such as Dionne Brand, Trish Salah, George Elliot Clarke and many writers of colour who use art to expose the white supremacy of Turtle Island/Canada. These authors explore the nuanced ways that racialized people experience racism, transphobia, heterosexism, and systemic injustice while also participating in settler colonialism of Indigenous land.

The power and necessity of Shraya’s *even this page is white* lies not only in its beauty as a work of art, but also in the political discourse that is created by this text. As a South Asian poet, Shraya’s poems also discuss Brown people’s implication in anti-Black racism and the ongoing

ing genocide of Indigenous people. Therefore, while her work resonates with the techniques and political sensibilities of writer's such as Lorde and traditions of Black queer poets, her writing can also be read as South Asian diasporic queer fiction. Often popular South Asian fiction in the Americas that gains mainstream attention and accolades revolves around narratives regarding immigrant families and Indian community politics. These popular commercialised narratives often centre on exposing the sexism, transphobia, and homophobia within the South Asian diaspora. South Asian diasporic writers are often validated when they play the role of the "native informant." The "native informant" is a figure who is positioned as an "insider" to racialized communities, while also constructed as possessing "progressive" white secular enlightenment rationalist knowledge that allow them to critique racialized peoples (Spivak 1999; Khan 2005). Transgender, female, and queer racialized people can gain popularity by exposing gender-based oppression in racialized communities while whiteness is unquestioned and implicitly celebrated. Stories of sexist and homophobic Brown people find an audience in an unimplicated white and non-South Asian readership who are left with a feeling of benevolent pity towards the Brown woman, transgender and/or queer person who is ostensibly in need of missionary white salvation. *even this page is white* is a brave text that refuses self-exoticism and Orientalism, using poetics to tell the truth of white supremacy and our complicity in it.

In the mainstream popular culture landscape, South Asians in Canada and the United States continue to be largely invisible outside of multicultural exoticism. Artists who have gained widespread popularity such as Aziz Ansari and Mindy Kaling are largely comedic writers and performers, who comment on racism using a comic voice and jokes (Thakoor 2014; Smith and Thakoor 2016). While these artists often shrewdly employ humour to tap into the libidinal anxieties regarding skin colour, religion, and racism, the tone of comedy can be used to ignore the trauma and melancholy of racism. By using poetry as her medium, Shraya's work is an original and iconic work of fiction that creates a space for South Asian transgender, queer, and feminist writers



to tell the painful truths of white supremacy and all the ways it scars, sickens, and attempts to destroy Brown people. Shraya's poetry can also be read as existing in consort with other contemporary feminist, transgender, and queer poets of colour who experiment with the form of poetry to construct deft political poems. For example, poets of colour such as Nayyirah Waheed, Yrsa Daley-Ward, and Rupi Kaur have utilized Internet-based technologies and experimental techniques that defy the rules of Western and European poetry to create poems that resonate with and are accessible to readers outside of predominantly white literary and academic spaces (Sawhani 2015; Kruger 2017). Like Shraya, this new generation of poets of colour break with the literary conventions of European poetry and with the silently imbibed whiteness that structures much of the European canon of literature.

The passion of Shraya's poetic voice in *even this page is white* offers readers a sensuous political lament that embodies the political spirit of queer culture. Shraya (2016)<sup>2</sup> writes: "Once I loved a brown woman/You said I hated myself/Now I also love a white man/You say I hate myself." Her personal and stark accounts of the judgment and stigmatization felt by those who are both racialized and queer are deeply powerful. Her poignant narratives are even more arresting due to the artist's use of the medium of poetry. The terse, concise use of language and metaphor offers the reader haunting images and lingering questions. Shraya's *even this page is white* stays with you, a faint trace of the author's voice whispering to you in city streets as you encounter the unremarked upon violence of white supremacy. Caught in the gaze of mainstream, homonormative injunctions regarding what forms of desire are adjudicated as "properly" queer and "properly" anti-racist, Shraya's text is a liberation from the violent markings of skin by airtight coffins of colonial categorization (Puar 2007). Shraya's remarkable skill as a writer, her artistic empathy, and tenacity as a transgender woman of colour who speaks publicly about social justice offer exemplary evidence of bell hooks (1994, 281) assertion: "The function of art is to do more than tell it like it is – it's to imagine what is possible."

## White Gazes, White Pages, and Queerly Racist Readings

The act of “reading,” often utilized in Queen’s English terminology refers to reading the dark ink on usually white pages. This practice of the literate and those with access to the cultural capital with which to read queer fiction is a marker of great privilege. To “read” the body is to discern certain signs and signifiers that become intelligible through fields of power. And yet, despite the fetishization of words on the page as markers of multicultural capital and progressive identity politics among many left-leaning white liberals, the (mis)reading of the bodies of queer people of colour is a marker of continued racism among homo-normative, white queers. If, as Judith Butler (1993a) suggests, gender is the performative construction of the body through a series of stylized repetitions enunciated within existing power relations, we read bodies through gendered norms that are always intelligible through accompanying discourses of race and racism. Dominant images of who and what is constructed as queer, and who and what is sexual within Western secular capitalist lifeworlds are white images, thus making the desires of racialized people invisible. While Vivek Shraya’s text might “read” as queer fiction, the use of the poetic voice and deeply personal nature of *even this page is white* gesture to the uncomfortable position of the body of the transgender queer person of colour who is often (mis)read within a world of normative white cisgender images of queer desire.

Shraya’s *even this page is white* is structured in several sections, each building upon the next. Perhaps reflective of her musical talent the book is similar to a great album, and is structured in ways that bring the reader to a final resounding chorus and refrain in the last section of the text, “Brown Dreams.” The first section “White Dreams” offers lyrical and poignant reflections regarding the lived pain of being read as brown in a white queer world. The first poem in Shraya’s text is also titled “White Dreams.” The evocative poem begins with these words:

i have white dreams  
billboards magazines

mighty praise accolades  
top 10 lists and top 10 hits

so i climb dodge bolders  
earn blisters but even  
the top of the mountain  
is white (2016)

The reader follows Shraya's body, climbing white mountains and left with the scars of the impossibility of white dreams, which lead to white peaked mountains of accolades that cannot contain the material *jouissance* of the racialized body (Žižek 1997). Just as Shraya's brown skin is left blistered from trying to straddle white worlds of merit, topping white men is also an aspirational pursuit. The poem continues:

i have a white boy i top  
i dream on his long body  
as his past bodies have long  
built upon mine but when I come  
on the dip of his spine  
even the colour of my pleasure  
is white. body you betray me  
the only brown i make

for sewer but for him  
for him my brown body  
makes white makes nice  
if my cum was brown

would he still eat it? from my core  
i seek courage  
but even my bones  
are white (2016)

The accolades that quantify artists of colour as being worthy of merit inculcate them into canons of white queerness. Similarly, being desirable to a white boy means topping a ladder of white supremacist desire that betrays racialized bodies and wills to both self love and anti-racism. The white cum is symbolic of how queer sex within a white supremacist world is inextricable from racism. Shraya's lament that the only brown "i make/for sewer but for him/for him my brown body/makes white makes nice" is reflective of the homonationalist calcification of white queerness within times of commonplace racism. Puar (2007) suggests that homonationalism invites white queer bodies into the vitality of the nation. This coveted white body is celebrated as supporting the future of white supremacist capitalist dreams, while brown bodies are racialized through islamophobic discourse within a global "war on terror" to signify the "terror" and death of ostensible North American dreams. While queer people in North America were once associated with the biopolitical death of the Western nation state through the homophobic discourse of the AIDS crises, white affluent cisgender queers are now used to support the branding rhetoric of Western meritocracy and "success." Images of white secular queer liberation are used to support capitalist ideals of freedom while brown people are associated with sexual repression and tyranny to justify war, racist surveillance, and border security measures (Puar 2007; Butler 2008). Queerness is symbolically and materially successful when it involves professionalism and financial gain in the form top ten lists, depoliticizing queer politics and separating pink dollar queers from racialized and economically impoverished people. Queer people of colour are imagined to be ascending racialized and class-based hierarchies embedded into North American history when they are successful in topping white men, demonstrating the relationship between sexual, racial, and financial capital.

What Shraya's *even this page is white* allows for is entry into this multi-talented artist's affective oeuvre. When one purchases the text, you also receive a copy of Shraya's accompanying song "White Dreams." As Shraya is also a musician, a filmmaker, and has recently collabo-

rated with visual artists to create a queer children's book *The Boy and The Bindi* (2016), the song is yet another example of Shraya's prolific creative work. When heard in tandem with the tactical placement of the small dark words on the expansive white page, the song "White Dreams" is a highly charged, visceral, and deeply emotive experience. The page of a text is as overpoweringly white as the colonizing statist bureaucracies that continue to order bodies hierarchically through racist systems of biopolitical categorization. Through the piercing sound of Shraya's voice singing "White Dreams," one feels the lived pain of racism. In *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections* (2008) Žižek rewrites Theodor Adorno's famous comment that after Auschwitz no poetry is possible. Rather, he suggests that after Auschwitz only poetry is possible. He asserts that violent events resist full, linear representation in language. The truth of trauma evades factual, rational narrative. It is in the language of the seemingly irrational, the poetic and the affective that trauma is often cathartically expressed (Žižek 2008, 63). Shraya's artistry is an evocative expression of the traumas of whiteness that mark the skin, psyche and perhaps the souls of racialized people.

Rosi Braidotti (2006) states that nomadic ethics involve a willingness and ability to engage in affective relationships with those whom one encounters in shared space beyond the colonial countenance of skin and name. She writes: "Being an affective entity means essentially being interconnected with all that lives and thus to be engulfed in affects, emotions, and passions." (Braidotti 2006, 164) This form of affect does not divide emotional relations and responsibility to others based on a familiar image of an idealized biopolitical citizen as opposed to a feared "stranger." Within a global "war on terror" and increased forms of securitization in which Brown bodies are often marked as "terrorists," xenophobic racism prevents emotional interconnection in disturbing ways. Fear and rage attach themselves to Brown skin preventing empathy and revealing the inhumanity of contemporary whiteness.

Shraya's text poses lingering questions regarding the possibility of getting off the conveyor belt of model minority wills to attain normative ideas of achievement, and off "getting off" with white men in ways

that are as paradoxically pleasurable as white dreams of “success.” The spatial metaphors in the poem that associate whiteness with the tops of mountains and brownness with the sewer, are striking. To be read as a great queer writer is to top a white literary genre in similar ways as being read as desirable in white worlds of normative beauty is to top white men. The Brown body claws her way to the tops of white mountains only to be betrayed by the constant question her Brown skin poses regarding assimilation to whiteness as the only way to be intelligible as both successful and desirable. Shraya’s comment in the poem, “the only brown i make/for sewer” is both simple and deeply powerful. The association between brown skin, feces, and dirt is one that comes out of long genealogies of racism. The “dark continents” of the world were spatially imagined as those far from white civilization, just as dark skin was marked as subhuman, disposable waste positioned at the bottom of racist hierarchies of humanity used to justify colonization, slavery, and murder. And yet, Shraya’s text also involves an understanding of how the brown of the sewer still hovers above ground in white settler Canada. Underneath the stolen land are the frequently buried mythologies of those other Indians whom the author discusses, poetically interrogating the relationship between anti-racism and anti-colonialism, in profound ways.

### **Imagi/nation: Brown Settlers and Queer Diasporas**

The second poem in Vivek Shraya’s book is titled “Indian.” The term Indian in India signifies through a radically different genealogy than the Indian of a white settler colony with an ongoing genocide of Indigenous peoples also referred to as “Indians.” Shraya begins by addressing the poem to the “missing Indian,” making reference to the privileged position that the queer person of colour can occupy in a white settler colony as compared to the absence of Indigenous people. The figure of the “missing” Indian is a deeply political symbol in the context of contemporary Canada, where thousands of Indigenous women are missing and have been murdered. In “Indian” Shraya writes:

podium mic on  
remind them  
this land is not ours  
heads nod hands clap  
feet fixed  
are you even in the room?

Shraya's previous poem "White Dreams" offers a lyrical and moving dialogue regarding the impossibility of words to ever fully address or conceal the material violence of racism. "Indian" also comments on the ironies of anti-colonial gestures as words. Acknowledging that one is on stolen land for the racialized transgender speaker does not make "missing" Indigenous bodies appear. Racialized settlers can be afforded the space and lexicon with which to take the "podium mic" while there are ongoing systemic wills to obliterate Indigenous people, their languages, and their entitlement to land. Shraya's writes:

once my mother accidentally drove near a reserve  
the only time I have seen her afraid hit gas pedal  
strange to be indian and the sound of car locks  
to be synonymous with *indians*

The evocative image of Shraya's fearful mother who expresses "terror" at the thought of those other Indians, demonstrates how racialized migrants within white settler colonies imbibe white supremacist nationalist mythologies. Shraya's passage, "strange to be indian and the sound of car locks/to be synonymous with *indians*" allows the reader entry into the queer position of an "Indian" whose life as a settler in a colonial country produces complicity in racism against those other Indians. Just as totalizing terms such as "queer" are eclipsed when Shraya exposes the whiteness that structures desire, succinct categorizations of "people of colour" as a term that can collapse colonial genealogies in flippant ways is also creatively questioned.

Shraya's skill as a poet lies in using images of the everyday, scenes

of mother's locking car doors and artists at podiums to pose deeper philosophical and political questions regarding racism and colonialism. Just as "White Dreams" questions how whiteness structures normative notions of success, the poem "Indian" questions how the production of "successful" diasporas in Canada invites South Asian "Indians" to colonize those "missing Indians." Images of affluent Brown people are used to conceal an ongoing genocide of Indigenous people, with Shraya's words documenting the traces of vulgar racism that structure the everyday violence of Turtle Island. The black ink on the white pages is haunted by blood red histories of chilling denial.

### **Your Whiteness Never "Gets Better": The Timeless Nature of Political Art**

In the context of North America, Asians, and South Asians are often constructed as "good" immigrants, as hard working, conservative model minorities against images of vilified Indigenous and Black people, whose bodies are biopolitically maligned. This epistemology of racist, colonial hierarchies essentializes brown people in white settler colonies such as Canada as those that reproduce class-based wealth, and heteronormative apolitical "family values." Canadian multiculturalism functions as a form of multinational capitalism; in which saleable exotica is fetishized while the disruptive *jouissance* of the body is kept at bay. This sanitized and profitable celebration of ethnic folklore and desexualizing of brown bodies is acutely expressed in the Canadian context. Mainstream images of South Asians in Canada often celebrate essentialist caste-based Hindu signifiers that are also deeply gendered. The "saris and samosas" that are salivated over by white settlers construct a saleable femininity that is simultaneously associated with opulence and heteronormative domesticity. Such white Orientalist dreams can prove to be nightmares for queer brown bodies who are positioned between a heteronormative patriarchal "community" and a white queer community in which they are subject to racism and erasure. Vivek Shraya's poetry courageously and honestly laments the privileges of these "successful Indians" in relation to Indigenous people. Through poetry, Shraya finds a language in



which to express the complexities and nuanced emotions produced in the lives of racialized people who inevitably participate in white settler colonialism by virtue of living in Turtle Island. Shraya writes:

is acknowledgment enough?  
*i acknowledge i stole this*  
but I am keeping it social justice  
or social performance  
what would it mean to digest you and yours and  
blood and home and land and minerals and trees and dignities and legacies  
to really honour no  
show gratitude no  
word for partaking in violence in progress

Shraya's reference to and challenge of universal ideas of progress<sup>3</sup> is striking in regards to contemporary queer culture in North America. The "It Gets Better"-campaign was launched by gay sex columnist Dan Savage after an outbreak of queer suicides erupted in the West. To grow up to approximate the idealized middle-class white family is a testament to the arduous hard work of immigrants and the "it gets better" rhetoric of class mobility as an expression of achievement. What haunts the metaphoric equation between ostensible "progress" and white settler accumulations of wealth and property ownership is the ghostly haunting of the Indigenous. The ongoing genocide of Indigenous peoples demonstrates the morally and politically regressive aspects of white settler Canada. A narrative of Western teleological "progress" in which all those in white settler colonies are encouraged to follow a narrative of progression as capitalist accumulation must conceal the brutal and barbaric racism that makes such fantasies of development possible. Getting "better" for South Asians in North America also often involves processes of symbolic whitening that align brown people with white supremacist ideology against Black people and Black liberation politics. Shraya's compelling poem "Indian" ends with these words, small black ink on an expansive white page:

last year Baltimore intersection black man  
approaches once again finger reaches for car  
locks except this time the finger  
is mine

These lines are particularly significant in the context of contemporary political struggles against anti-Black racism.

### **Black Lives Matter: Solidarities and Fighting Words**

Vivek Shraya was the 2016 Pride Marshall for the Toronto Pride parade, an event in which anti-Black racism within Toronto's queer community and the wider mainstream public was viciously expressed. In a courageous display of activism, Black Lives Matter Toronto, who were asked to participate as an honoured group in the 2016 Toronto Pride parade stopped the usual march and occupied the city streets to stage a sit-in and ask the organizers of Pride Toronto to comply with a series of demands. As Rinaldo Walcott (2016a) writes outlining the demands of BLMTO:

They ask for solid financial support for the Blackness Yes group who stage Blockorama, and for a central and fully supported stage for Black Queer Youth. Additionally, the group wants Indigenous, Black and trans people and those living with disabilities to have better access to paid positions within the Pride organization. They also demand the return of the South Asian stage and the removal of police floats from the parade. This last demand has overshadowed all the others. (Walcott 2016a)

While representatives of Pride Toronto signed BLMTO's list of demands, they later recanted their support. Janaya Khan discusses the "pink washing" of Pride, in which queer Black spaces are eroded while Pride is branded to appeal to upper middle-class white queers and tourists (quoted in Craven 2016). "Pink washing" refers to the depoliticization of queerness, through aligning LGBTQ struggles with neoliberal capitalism (Puar 2007). While Pride Marshall Shraya stood in solidar-

ity with Black Lives Matter at the 2016 Toronto Pride parade, others screamed at the group in contempt and even threw bottles at Black activists. The disturbing treatment of Black Lives Matter at the Toronto Pride parade is reflective of Walcott's assertion that Blackness is both hyper visible and invisible (Walcott 2016b). Mainstream white queer elites and politicians want to "see diversity" as a means of supporting nationalist and citywide branding, while radical Black activists are constructed as eyesores to the underlying white supremacist ideology of Turtle Island. As Shraya stated to the press:

There is a disturbing idea that because gay marriage is legal, that the battle has been won for LGBTQ people, but this isn't the case for so many trans and queer people, especially Black, Indigenous and trans and queer people of colour. The only reason we get to have a giant gay parade in 2016 is because of protests by Black, Indigenous and trans and queer people of colour decades ago, not unlike Black Lives Matter's protest this weekend. (Quoted in in Hong 2016)

Shraya comments on the contentious politics of queer pride in the poem, "what pride sounded like June 24, 2015." This is a found poem comprised of the dialogue that erupted during then U.S. President Barak Obama's speech at the White House LGBT Pride reception. Jennicet Gutiérrez, a transgender Latina activist interrupted Obama's speech to politicize the detention and abuse of non-status LGBTQ migrants, staged the protest. Shraya uses Guterrez' words arranged in three parallel columns. The central column is a found poem, reciting a refrain regarding deportation and the persecution of transgender migrants:

release all lgbtq in detention centres  
stop the torture and abuse  
of trans women in detention centres  
i'm a trans woman  
i'm tired of the abuse  
i'm tired of the violence

The column finishes with the repeating of the phrase five times:

not one more deportation

Obama's victory perhaps offered a symbolic image of a Black person in a position of political power to counter the racism of North American media and ongoing history of white supremacist politics. And yet a mainstream Black politician in the White House does little to address global foreign policy, the exploitation and debasement of racialized migrants, and racist hierarchies of citizenship. The securitization of Western nation states happens by guarding against the constructed "threats" of supposed "terrors" to meritocratic white dreams. Queer people who are made into deviants owing to racialization, citizenship status, and poverty, and transgender embodiment become sites of shame and anxiety for mainstream LGBTQ "communities" abiding by the colonizing norms and common sense capitalist ideologies of white settler nationalisms. The first column of Shraya's found poem is that of Obama's response to the protest and reads:

hold on a  
second no no no  
no no no no no  
no no no you're  
in my house  
you're not  
going to get a  
good response  
from me by  
interrupting me  
like this shame  
on you you  
shouldn't be  
doing this can  
we escort this

person out you  
can either stay  
and be quiet

Throughout *even this page is white*, there is a compelling discomfort that emerges in Shraya's artistic rumination on the ethical difficulties that arise between competing marginalities. One can ask how affluent Black politicians are able to occupy the White House and other institutions of obscene power to the extent that they support the heteronormative capitalist hegemony of colonizing American Dreams. Frantz Fanon (1963, xx) once wrote: "You are rich because you are white, you are white because you are rich." Skin colour, capital and citizenship coalesce in ways that do not allow for easy solidarities.

The form is as important as the content in Shraya's visually arresting text. The artist's clever use of form turns the page into a prison of words. The final column is the most heavy prison bar of text, with these words repeating forcefully down the page:

shhh shhhh shhhh  
shhhh shhh shhhh

The imagined "freedom" of a Black male president and the "freedom" of affluent white queer citizens is produced through the imprisonment and exile of others, namely undocumented queer migrants and racialized people who are subject to the state violence and incarceration.

### **Bleached Out: Queer Sex and/As Racism**

Queer readings and writings of texts often centre around the assumed liberatory staging of non-normative sexual acts and moments of revelatory queer desire. Vivek Shraya's *even this page is white* brilliantly queers the very idea of queerness itself, by poignantly exposing the racialized nature of white queer desire. The typical refrain regarding sexual and romantic desire within white secular capitalist teleologies of progressive rationalities often lies in universalist claims of agency and paradoxical

ideas of instinct. We are often inundated with messages regarding agency that suggest that sexual partners and romantic love objects are “chosen.” Paradoxically, we are often presented with discourses of uncontrollable desire where one is imagined to be attracted to others in irrational ways. Throughout *even this page is white*, Shraya returns politics to queerness and queerness to politics, by politicizing discourses of fatalism and agency that often structures mainstream understandings of desire. Moving away from evoking a language of free will or one of primordial instinct, Shraya’s poetry asks the reader to consider how the politics of racism undercut sexual and romantic bonds. In the poem “Raji,” Shraya complicates the celebratory mirroring of bodies that often frames the queer scene of desire. Shraya writes:

you have a twin worst thing to tell a queen  
his name is raji I despise him already  
who? I ask avert my eyes  
I guess he is brown and tall  
no one says and queer  
no one needs to

Other lines from this deeply emotive poem evoke the pain of internalized racism and its ability to curtail solidarities and desire between brown queer people trapped within a racist gaze defined by white settler colonial ideologies. Shraya writes,

so accustomed to being token  
his arrival obsoleted me

two weeks later I’m told by the way raji can’t stand you  
two brown faggots distantly loathing each other  
because how else can we liberate the hurt  
from being brown and queen in a dirt city  
that hates us so hard  
that even the word twin

tells us that there isn't enough space  
for both  
dear raji sorry for not recognizing you as my brother  
admiring you as my sister

The imagined love and empathy between brown queer people is exposed as a fiction in Shraya's writing, which touches on the painful ways that internalized racism turns into externalized hatred.

Shraya's poem "Omar," which comes in the later section of the text "Brown Dreams" stages scenes of sex and lust between the narrator and another brown person. Read in relation to the rest of the book, the poem "Omar" reflects the shaping of sexual desire for another brown body as being imbricated in challenging white supremacy. Shraya writes of "Omar":

it was your sexy how you knew named owned our fuckability  
was this allowed for brown boys? yesterday I forced myself  
to watch aziz having sex on master of none listen  
to him moan not cringe but absorb  
a brown body having giving pleasure

The criminality of South Asian queer desire, sex and identity causes Shraya's question, "was this even allowed for brown boys?" to take on a wider global relevance that gestures to the impossible place that brown queers occupy in white settler colonial discourses and in a Hindu nationalist imaginary. One can consider that Shraya is part of the South Asian diaspora and that the Supreme Court of India ruled in 2013 to criminalize queer sex and people by upholding Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, a colonial law that upholds the puritanical ideologies of white colonizers. The sexual pleasure seeking brown body is invisible and unspeakable due to white supremacy and also pathologized by a conservative Hindu state. The poem continues with Shraya invoking symbols of mirrors that are reminiscent of Fanon's foundational post-colonial text *Black Skin, White Masks* from 1952. The "brown mirror" of the brown lover becomes an object of lust in ways that not only fulfill

the need for a queer encounter but one in which self-hatred born out of racism is addressed. As Shraya writes,

you can't love anyone until you love yourself  
i have found the opposite to be true  
you a reflection the brown mirror  
i never had a face to look upon  
adore when mine was ugly my selfie  
pre-selfie

The remarkable beauty of *even this page is white* lies in its lyrical courage, one that refuses to draw on apolitical sentiments of love, lust, and beauty that remain untouched by systemic racism.

### **Touchy Subjects: Dalit Pride/Brown Dreams**

As strong works of art often do, Vivek Shraya's *even this page is white* evokes lingering questions. Questions regarding what being "brown" and "Indian" mean in the context of a white settler colony such as Canada are left for the reader to consider. Owing to British colonialism and the explicit and implicit violence of casteism, skin colour holds a great deal of symbolic capital globally. While "race" and racism are in no way identical to caste and casteism, markers of skin colour often signify caste-based identities and are also marked by colonial ideologies that equate whiteness with civility. In the poem "fair" taken from the section "White Dreams" Shraya discusses how skin colour and a preference for light skin informs familial relationships. Shraya writes the poem for her brother who is marked as darker within a South Asian imaginary structured by colonial and casteist desires for whiteness:

but when they asked you  
why are you so much darker  
than your brother called you the n word  
lingered for an answer  
all i did was bask



Throughout the book, it is Shraya's sincerity regarding an implication in global processes of racism and racialization that often make her prose so striking. Products such as "Fair and Lovely" skin bleach continue to be used by many in India and the Indian diaspora to bleach brown skin in an effort to lighten bodies and lighten the heavy truths of colonial history. "Fair and Lovely" skin bleach, once predominantly marketed to women now has a male market with products such as "Fair and Handsome" being sold to Indian men. The advertising campaigns for "Fair and Handsome" often involve allusions to homoeroticism while also depicting those who lighten their skin as being more likely to find employment and gain financial success. White and light skin for South Asians signifies in a myriad of ways. Whiteness is equated with beauty, success, and economic capital, and also with caste-based privileges. While caste privilege is not always synonymous with the racial privileges of light skin, the associations between dark skin and "pollution" still exist to mark dark bodies as those who are often assumed to be among lower castes and associated with "untouchability."

One can consider that Dalits in India, those who often occupy the lowest and most degraded positions in the violent hierarchy of Hindu castes staged their own "Dalit Pride" events during queer pride in India in 2015 (moulee 2015). The suicide of Dalit students in the Indian subcontinent has also gained a great deal of press and many lower caste people are increasingly receiving mainstream media attention for politicizing the ongoing violence of casteism (Naik 2016). Considering casteism when reading Shraya's text is deeply important as caste-based marriages continue to be prevalent not only in India but throughout the South Asian diaspora. To read queerness in Brown bodies and to read "race" and racism in queers involves considering how the reproduction and preservation of supposed "communities" involve the reproduction of idealized "races," castes, and colours of people and the violent exclusion and unremarked upon exile of "others."

The last poem in Shraya's wonderful collection of poetry is titled "Brown Dreams." In this poem Shraya writes:

have you ever heard white question its colour

snow moon salt milk tooth chalk

what if there is no right way to be brown

besides the brown you are

The reader is left with lingering questions regarding how the brown that one is, is born out of a global discourse of racism that is inextricable from casteism. One is also left to question the white fetishism of “multiculturalism” as a form of multinational capitalism that glorifies signifiers of store-bought Hinduism and caste-based “communities” in ways that support transnational racist hatred.

### **Conclusion: White Love and Grey Bins?**

The final questions that linger after experiencing the admirable art of Vivek Shraya lie in the possibilities and impossibilities of love, not tainted by the violence of racism, not stalked by the ghostly hauntings of whiteness. To read racism queers romantic ideas of “community” in wonderfully uncomfortable ways. *even this page is white* is a brave literary feat that balances political discourse with provocative aesthetics. There is an unflinching love of creativity that dances off the white page of this text, my copy worn from many travels across borders. One of Shraya’s many talents lies in making one deeply uncomfortable with the ways that white supremacy structures our everyday lives. My copy of *even this page is white* travels in grey airport security bins across this border and the next. I watch the book travel through systems of surveillance and categorization as commonly cruel and mundanely violent as whiteness. The courage of this artist is as rare as her striking text, a space of breathtaking imagi/nation.

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colonial sodomy law criminalizing “unnatural” sexual acts, and effectively threatening the rights, lives, and dignity of queer people. This book is titled *Azadi: Sexual Politics and Postcolonial Worlds* (Demeter Press 2016). The second book discusses contemporary political art and artists who challenge the aesthetics of white supremacy and Eurocentrism and is titled *Uncommitted Crimes: The Defiance of the Artistic Imagi/nation* (Inanna Publications 2017).

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## NOTES

1. Turtle Island is the name that some Indigenous groups use to refer to North America. The term makes reference to "Canada" as part of Turtle Island before the arrival of colonizers and founding of the contemporary white settler state.
2. The copy of *even this page is white* that the author cites throughout the text does not contain page numbers. Apologies to readers for any inconvenience. Please refer to the text to find specific passages and poems that are referenced in this article.

3. In her work, "Torture, Sexual Politics, and Secular Time" Butler (2008, 1) argues that the idea of warring civilizations or cultures within the "war on terror," would miss an important point, namely that hegemonic conceptions of progress define themselves over and against a pre-modern temporality that they produce for the purposes of their own self-legitimation. The idea of "progress" is deeply suspect and is often strategically used to justify neo-colonialism and war.

## SAMMANFATTNING

Rasism är oupplösligt förenad med queer politik. Den övervägande vitheten hos etablerade queera gemenskaper i västerländska, sekulära kontexter riktar uppmärksamheten på det akuta behovet av att beakta hur vit makt skadar rasifierade queera personer. Vivek Shraya är en transkönad, sydasiatisk kanadensisk konstnär, vars multidisciplinära kreativa praktik och stora litterära produktion är ytterst värdefull i tider av omfattande systemiskt förtryck och vardagsgrymhet (Vivekshraya.com 2016). Shrayas senaste diktsamling, *even this page is white* (2016), är en djupt känd utmaning mot den rasism som kännetecknar vita bosättares koloniala ideologier i Turtle Island. Shrayas poesi slår sönder fernissan av ett tänkt artigt, fredligt och pittoreskt "Kanada" som inte är vanprytt av rasism. Genom att diskutera vithet som en ekonomisk, strukturell och förkroppsligad form av sexuellt kapital, krossar författaren illusionen av en queergemenskap som inte är genomsyrt av vitmaktideologi. Rasistiska påbud vad gäller vilkas estetik och kroppar konstrueras som "riktigt" queera och förtjänta av kärlek, skapar skenbart feministiska och queera "gemenskaper" av normativ och hyllad vithet. *even this page is white* är en rik blandning av queer anti-kolonial konst, en prosaisk form av politik som vägrar inblandning med förtryck. Shrayas begåvning ligger i att sammansmälta den poetiska formens estetik med en affektiv politisk diskurs som utmanar rasismens skrämmande våld. *even this page is white* konfronterar djärvt vithet och förnekar nyorientalistiska former av mångkulturella spektakel och de äcklande plattityderna om "mångfald" som används för att undvika frågor om systemiskt förtryck. Som litterärt verk bryter *even this page is white* upp den helgjutna systemiska rasism som strukturerar poesikanon och "queera läsningar" av "queer litteratur" som i själva verket är vita läsningar av vit litteratur. Shrayas stora litterära skicklighet, konstnärliga empati och politiska målmedvetenhet påminner om Audre Lordes poesi, Lorde som en gång skrev: "Jag är avsiktlig och inte rädd för något."