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► To cite this version:

Georges Letissier. Crisis of the 'Event', Guy Gunaratne's In Our Mad and Furious City (2018). Études britanniques contemporaines - Revue de la Société d'études anglaises contemporaines, 2022, Disrupting the City: Urban Cris(e)s in Contemporary British Fiction and Art, 63, 10.4000/ebc.12945 . hal-03904750

HAL Id: hal-03904750

<https://hal.science/hal-03904750>

Submitted on 5 Apr 2024

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Crise de l'événement, Au rythme de notre colère de Guy Gunaratne (2018)

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Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/ebc/12945>

DOI: 10.4000/ebc.12945

ISSN: 2271-5444

Publisher

Presses universitaires de la Méditerranée

Printed version

Date of publication: December 1, 2022

ISSN: 1168-4917

Brought to you by Nantes Université



Electronic reference

Georges Letissier, "Crisis of the 'Event', Guy Gunaratne's *In Our Mad and Furious City* (2018)", *Études britanniques contemporaines* [Online], 63 | 2022, Online since 01 October 2022, connection on 05 April 2024. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/ebc/12945> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/ebc.12945>

This text was automatically generated on February 16, 2023.



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Crisis of the 'Event', Guy Gunaratne's *In Our Mad and Furious City* (2018)

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Georges Letissier

- 1 There is an uncanny resonance between *Far From the Madding Crowd* (1874) and *In Our Mad and Furious City* (2018).¹ The title from Hardy's novel, a line borrowed from Thomas Gray's 'Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard', conjures the looming prospect of the distant city as a vague threat, jeopardising the safe haven of rural England, Gunaratne's own title claustrophobically flags the city as the only reality and ups the ante through the pleonastic 'mad and furious', with the remote possibility of a Shakespearean echo: 'full of sound and fury signifying nothing' (Shakespeare 2018, 288). Gunaratne, a young British journalist, filmmaker and novelist, born from Sri Lankan parents who had immigrated to London in the early 1950s, drew attention to himself by winning the International Dylan Thomas Prize, the Jhalak Prize whilst being shortlisted for the Booker Prize and the Orwell Prize for Political Fiction after his one and only novel, so far, came out. Like recent French film-makers such as Jacques Audiard with *Dheepan* (2015) or Lady Ly's *Les Misérables* (2019), and Matthieu Kassovitz's 1995 *La Haine*, mentioned in *In Our Mad* (Gunaratne 139), Gunaratne conceives of the relation to the city both in the paroxysmic mode and as metadiscursively linked with representation. Audiard claimed that he felt like treating reality as cinema: 'j'ai envie de prendre la réalité pour du cinéma' (*Le Monde*) and by picking out Montfermeil, of all places, as a setting, and *Les Misérables* as title, Lady Ly, for his part, interposed the prism of Victor Hugo to come to grips with the ignoble strife of the here and now. As for Gunaratne, he claims William Blake in his epilogue as a beacon: 'I see him as being right at home among the anti-establishment grime poets and street lyricists of London today' (Gunaratne 296).
- 2 This presentist stance,² according to which the condition of the utmost urgency of the here and now cannibalises all the other temporal dimensions, characterises *In Our Mad*.

It also dramatises the sense of the erratic and unpredictable that is attached to what is commonly known as the 'event'. In this respect, Gunaratne's London is less historical and palimpsestic (Ackroyd), or spatial (Moorcock 2000 and Sinclair 2003), than it is performative (Schechner 1985). London is literally 'madness and fury' and the writings that echo this violence are thus inflammatory. The fiction comes in the wake of a traumatic event and addresses not so much the event (from a documentary perspective) as the crisis of the event, *i.e.*, the psychic sideration triggered by a cataclysm. Indeed, the staccato prologue is an almost direct reference to the 2013 Lee Rigby murder.³ The phone video of the off-duty soldier, hacked to death by a black youngster (they were actually two in the real-life version), is widely circulated through social networks in the novel. This is the entry point to the fiction which chronicles forty-eight hours constantly kept at a peak of dramatic intensity. *In Our Mad* opens on a barely-fictionalised real life event, mediated through a widely shown video footage, whose broadcast raised ethical issues concerning the suitability of making accessible to a large public a horrendous scene likely to feed further hatred.

- 3 This article starts from the assumption that the notion of event, through its different facets and acceptations, is seminal to account for Gunaratne's take on the city—in the present case Neasden, a multi-ethnic deprived area (or more specifically a council estate) in North West London. Indeed, the event may be construed from various perspectives: the shocking murder which actually took place; its widely-circulated video capture which became the event for many people and the whole range of responses to the video, eliciting in their turn philosophical debates on the phenomenological and pragmatic significance of this specific event. Further, within the compass of a literary project—after all *In Our Mad* is a novel, not an essay or a pamphlet—the fictional treatment of the event is shaped by narratological tools. Whereas in fiction-writing as a rule, the event is a necessary structuring device serving different plotlines and thematic contents, it becomes here the text's linchpin. Indeed, city life is predicated on the traumatic scene of recognition mentioned in the first few lines of the novel: 'The blood was not what shocked us. For us it was his face like a mirror, reflecting our own confused and frightened hearts' (Gunaratne 2). Because *In Our Mad* starts off on this highest pitch of emotion, the novel can only record the devastating impact of this initial event, whose after-effects make up the ensuing fiction/faction's content.⁴ And the best way to sustain this paroxysm is to delegate the narration to a range of characters—Selvon, the athletic black youth and his father Nelson, a migrant from the Windrush generation, Caroline, a single mother from Ulster and her son Ardan, and Yusuf, whose father, a liberal Imam has just died. They are each and every one of them caught up in his/her own tormented present. Their successive, alternating oral deliveries are testament to a crisis of the event as these character narrators are involved in 'limit situations', in Karl Jasper's acceptation.⁵ Linguistically, different vernaculars and the specific syntax of grime lyrics, typified by syncopated breakbeats and aggressive turns of phrase, substantiate this permanent state of crisis. Therefore, structurally, the narrative is not so much built upon an alternation between what Roland Barthes conceived as kernels (events propelling the plot forward) and catalyses (less decisive additional input) (Barthes *et al.* 21–22), as it records the compulsive dissemination of the initial semi fictional event (as it is never fully acknowledged as the Lee Rigby murder), through what Marie-Laure Ryan calls 'braided narrativity', *i.e.*, 'a type of narrative [that] follows the intertwined destinies of a large cast of characters' (Ryan 374).

- 4 This study is threefold, first it introduces perspectives on the notions of 'event' and 'crisis of the event' to argue that they constitute the fiction's matrix, then it is claimed that the novel's structure is not driven by causality but reflects the randomness and unpredictability intrinsic to the event. This is demonstrated by investigating the maverick division of the book into sections headed by intertitles (Genette 271–292) defying immediate understanding. In a last part, the performative aspect of grime music is considered to highlight narrativity as event.

Conceptual Perspectives on the Notions of 'Event' and 'Crisis of the Event'

- 5 The notion of event is a topical philosophical debate, notably in France, through what has been called 'the event turn in French phenomenology' (Viri 2017). The following article cannot of course pretend to propound a purely philosophical approach but will draw from it where necessary. So 'event', as a notion, has probably been analysed conceptually to an extent exceeding the critical attention paid to disruption. The link between the two is nevertheless exposed, unambiguously, by Lars Koch, Tobias Nanz and Johannes Pause: 'Disruptions additionally possess the character of an event, since, due to their relational nature, they are bound to the handed-down form of representation and reception, which can only be challenged situatively' (Koch *et al.* X). For obvious reasons, this remark is germane to this study. Indeed, the relational nature of the event of the murder, both the act and its viral video: 'It was on radio and television, an endless loop' (Gunaratne 2) is not only claimed in the prologue but acknowledged by Gunaratne himself in different interviews: 'It was a spur, for sure. I was in Finland when it happened, and that video of Michael Adebolajo did the rounds, where he's covered in blood. I remember being shocked, not really by the event, but by the fact that he was talking the way I did, and was dressed the same way kids from my school were dressed.' (Hancox 2018a, n.p.)
- 6 London is therefore crucial 'to challenge situatively' the event, or disruption, which ripples through the text: 'See London. This city taints its young. If you were from here you'd know, ennet? . . . It was like we lived upon jagged teeth in the dark, in this bone-cold London city' (Gunaratne 2). The response to the event is poetically erratic, with jarring images reminiscent of metaphysical poetry, and John Donne more especially: 'jagged teeth/bone-cold city'. By the same token, it is also narratively pathological, by treating the initial extradiegetic event as the wound or disruption foreclosing the possibility of stringing together a sequence of logically concatenated events, or episodes, leading to a resolution or an exit. As a matter of fact, the initial reported event, a single occurrence based on an actual tragic incident, triggers a fiction culminating in an apocalyptic event (Kermode 2000, 93–124), the arson of the local mosque, which is not related to one specific referential incident (there is not one specific arson of a mosque in West London which Gunaratne is overtly drawing from). However, it fictionally represents an iterated phenomenon (there are most unfortunately loads of examples of arson attacks against mosques in Europe and the US). In other terms, the faction/fiction starts off with a factual, hardly fictionalised, situation to end on an invented episode, which is a summary of a multitude of real criminal attacks against the Muslim community, taking place regularly.

- 7 From the murder of 'Soldier-boy' (Gunaratne 1), in the prologue, to the arson attack against the mosque at the end, the notion of event is thus seminal, not only to the novel's general economy but also to the vision of London that is conveyed throughout: 'There are parts of this city that create the form of a person, moulds them with its hard wisdom and distant cruelty' (Gunaratne 287). The event, whether singular 'When the soldier boy was bodied' (Gunaratne 285), or generic, *i.e.*, standing for unnamed multiple incidents 'when the Mosque burned' (Gunaratne 285), underpins the novel. This articulation between the one and the many is actually central to Alain Badiou's apprehension of the notion of event: 'an event is always at one point of the situation, which means that it concerns one multiple presented in the situation'⁶ (Badiou 199; my translation). Said differently, through one event, which is localised and historicised (Woolwich, South East London, 22 May 2013), a repressed multiplicity (the cumulated rifts and tensions involving minorities which are maintained in a state of quasi-invisibility) erupts and rips, albeit briefly, as in a flash, the social fabric. Badiou further argues that events are so radical and out-of-bounds that they escape any ontological appropriation. They are also supernumerary in the sense that they exceed the situation in which they supervene randomly. Precisely, the novel plays up the tension between the one and the multiple right from the start: 'his face like a *mirror*, reflecting our own confused and frightened *hearts*' (Gunaratne 2; emphases added) and the adjectives 'mad' and 'furious' in the title soon give way to 'madnesses' (Gunaratne 2019, 4) and 'furies' (Gunaratne 2019, 5). This dialectic between the one and the multiple culminates with London defined in the following words: 'our small furies in this single mad, monstrous and lunatic city' (Gunaratne 5). Strangely, the city condensing any number of personal, singular angers takes on the very attributes of the one-off event which has caused a shock wave in the population at large. '[S]ingle mad, monstrous and lunatic' as referring to the city would, in actual fact, be much more appropriate to qualify the act only rendered visible through the video: 'But it was only after the release of that video, clipped from a phone of a witness, that everyone else saw the truth' (Gunaratne 1). And, incidentally, the time-lag signalled by the phrase 'only after' and the equation of a video with the truth—whatever this may stand for—are also crucial to investigate the perplexing aspect of this notion of event.⁷
- 8 The particular event of frightening magnitude disrupts the relation to chronological time and undermines the foundations of historical knowledge by not lending itself easily to rational treatment. This is perceptible in *In Our Mad*, even if the murder of 'Soldier-boy' is kept out the text; indeed, the novel exists in the wake, or aftermath of a traumatic event persisting only as video or mental images. The temporal disjunction is signalled right from the prologue where the black younger's murder is mentioned in a temporal muddle, together with the burning of the mosque, which readers only discover at the end of the fiction. It is further exemplified by what Yusuf's father, the liberal-minded Imam who is now dead, once told his son: 'History, he said, is not a circle but a spiral of violent rhymes' (Gunaratne 285). In *Logique du Sens* Gilles Deleuze claims that the event partakes of both what he calls Chronos and Aîôn. Chronos is the present as point of reference, to which past and future are subordinated to form a vectorised timeline. Aîôn is chance, rather than predictability, and 'what is this time that does not need to be infinite, but only "infinitely subdivisible"? This time is Aîôn' (Deleuze 77; my translation).⁸ According to the French philosopher, these two readings of time complement each other. Chronos is the time of the unfolding of the triggering event, which remains, as has been shown, beyond the grasp of the diegesis.

And this event, antecedent to the plot which it also exceeds, is also perfectly consonant with Derrida's own definition of event as *différance*:

Différance points to a relationship . . . —a relation to what is other, to what differs in the sense of alterity, to the singularity of the other—but 'at the same time' it also relates to what is to come, to that which will occur in ways which are inappropriable, unforeseen, and therefore urgent, beyond anticipation: to precipitation in fact. The thought of difference is also, therefore, a thought of pressing need, of something which, because it is different, I can neither avoid nor appropriate. The event, and the singularity of the event—this is what *différance* is all about. (Derrida 31)

- 9 Instead of opting for a causal, sociological approach in the vein of English social realism, Gunaratne plays up the unpredictable plurality of *aîon*. The present is a multiplicity of presents, conveyed through multiple voices, or rather vernaculars, each betraying a specific take on time. Ardan's and Selvon's accounts may be described as to-the-present-moment live reports; Yusuf's more academic testimony is imbued with lyrical nostalgia and Nelson's plastic present extends to the past, when he returned to Montserrat Island in the Caribbean, to bring his beloved Maisie back to England: 'fearsome memories what come and go, sending me back like an echo' (Gunaratne 37). This circulation of protean presents illustrates Deleuze's *Aîon* through 'leaps from one pre-individual singularity to another, taking them up all again the ones in the others, taking up again all the systems following the figures of nomadic distribution where each event is already past and still future, more and less both, already yesterday and tomorrow in the subdivision which makes them communicate together' (Deleuze 95; my translation).⁹ A study of the titles of the novel's parts and subparts exposes 'the spiral of violent rhymes' (Gunaratne 285) making up the textual fabric, which is also expressed metaphorically through recurring allusions to tides and waves as the event is always, as seen above with Badiou, the articulation of the one and the many: 'this horrible thing, this string of horrible things' (Gunaratne 199).

A Poetics of Intertitling as Paratextual Eventfulness

- 10 In *Seuils*, Gérard Genette argues that the choice of intertitles for chapters, sections or sub-sections, partakes of the novelist's more general project, even if this aspect is too often overlooked. *In Our Mad* is immediately striking through its proliferation of the titular paratext. This first translates textually the idea of spatial division which is thematically overpresent, the fact that boundary lines between proximate areas—whether tangible or mental—compartmentalise the city, and more closely, the council estate with its four tower blocks, leaving its denizens with no choice except 'to rattle at the bars of this city' (Gunaratne 130). Genette details the wording of titles, which may be rhematic, *i.e.*, consisting in numbers, or thematic; anaphoric when they laconically refer to previous episodes or, on the opposite, cataphoric, when they are future-oriented. The French critic also aptly remarks that in contemporary novels, probably ever since William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*, chapters may be headed by the name of the characters who subsequently filter the events described. At first glance, *In Our Mad* synthesises these various techniques, the rhematic approach is found in the three main sections: 'I. Mongrel' (7), 'II. Brother' (117), 'III. Blood' (221). Thematic contents are introduced to subdivide these main sections into sub-sections which comprise a third level of intertitling with the characters' names in random succession. An element of

unpredictability occurs in the few pages headed 'Irfan', Yusuf's elder brother, who sets the mosque on fire. Unlike what happens elsewhere, the character does not speak in his own name in the one and only section bearing his name (Gunaratne 217–220). The momentous act of arson is, indeed, reported by a heterodiegetic narrator. There may be some dramatic irony in the fact that this exterior narrator very briefly imagines what the character's thoughts are, just as he is about to burn the place down: 'I am not a djinn, he thinks, I am the one you let perish' (Gunaratne 218). The djinn, angel or demon, is a spirit, literally hidden from sight. Not only is Irfan invisibilised, by not being granted a voice, but his desperate expedition to vent his frustration by turning himself against his own culture is a dystopic reversal of the enchanting djinn or genie in Eastern tales. Overall, intertitling takes on the attributes of the 'event' by evincing unpredictability, lack of semantic stability and the infinitely subdivisible.

- 11 The prologue and coda form an untitled diptych, in which Yusuf's voice may nevertheless be heard. In between, the many intertitles evidence the shifting, unstable nomenclatures that play on the three levels of intertitling: sections, sub-sections and characters' first-person confessions. 'Mongrel', to start with, is a lexical nexus branching out in different directions, whose relevance is not confined to the section it precedes. There is firstly an irenic acceptance of mongrel to define multiculturalism, which some writers like Peter Ackroyd have relied upon to qualify Englishness as 'mixed and mongrel style . . . emerging in the most disparate contexts' (Ackroyd 230). If anything, Gunaratne proves that this approach, chiefly a diachronic one—Englishness resulting from a successive mix of the Romans, Anglo-Saxons, Vikings and Normans—is probably a thing of the past. Gunaratne's own take on this idea of mongrel is probably closer to Salman Rushdie's. In *Imaginary Homeland*, Rushdie extends the migrant condition, characterised by uprooting, disjuncture and metamorphosis, to contemplate the possibility that it may constitute 'a metaphor for all humanity' (Rushdie 394). He articulates his total dismissal of cultural purity by coining the notion of mongrelisation: '*Mélange*, hotchpotch, a bit of this and a bit of that is *how newness enters the world* . . . change-by-fusion, change-by-conjoining . . . is a love-song to our mongrel selves' (Rushdie 394). However, today's inner cities are peopled, synchronically, by a wide array of diverse populations: 'Punjabi Indian, Nigerian, Zairean, then Ghanaian young ones, and old Irish some of them and a few Jamaican and St Lucian too' (Gunaratne 236) who *do not* mix but live separately their own lives: 'Was I lonely? Man, of course. But I was lonely among plenty of others who wanted to be left alone' (Gunaratne 236). Coming as it does from Nelson, the Jamaican, this claim can of course be read as a homage to Sam Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners* (1956). A shift of meaning from Rushdie's idealistic acceptance of mongrel is therefore perceptible in so far as Gunaratne faces head-on the interactions of his characters by drawing from his own memories of growing up in a multicultural London inner city. This does not entail that the young novelist objects to the inclusive, humanist philosophy behind this hard-to-achieve mongrelisation, though. 'Mongrel' is not only polysemic but its meaning shifts constantly and with it the ideology it conveys. Mongrelisation may have a linguistic acceptance by referring to the mixedness of English, flavoured by other languages and vernaculars: 'kuffar' or 'Umma' (Gunaratne 251 and 91) in Arabic, 'culchie' for rustic in Irish (151), 'dahl or raita' in Indian (92) or even 'proper legit' (188) for law-abiding in urban slang. Furthermore, this mongrelisation even entails what amounts to metaphoric creation as with the constant use of the Jamaican phrase 'kiss my teeth' (46) to express the shushing noise made by the mouth to repress one's anger. But

'mongrel' more simply refers to dogs, to Ardan's dog Max, the boy's close companion, but also to the dogs that were let loose to chase the black migrants by the Teddy boys and racist mobs in the '50s. However, as meaning never stabilises ideologically, Nelson cannot help but see the puppy he once cherished in the racist attackers' dog, that is mercilessly killed by his companions in their act of retaliation against their white persecutors: 'So a cruel dog. A dog under the leash of everything we hate. Yet all I could think about was the little dog I kept when I was young' (183). And when the athletic Selvon thinks friendly of Ardan, his puny and diffident mate, he calls him 'a right mongrel' (189).

- 12 Yet, the cultural or anthropological perspective ushered in through the section's title 'Mongrel' is not confirmed by the subheads: 'Estate' (Gunaratne 9); 'Square' (39) and 'Ends' (81). The three terms point up a spatial approach, with the (council) estate, subdivided into different turfs: 'But now East Block on Estate, Market Road and Chapter Street were Riaf's territory' (Gunaratne 94). The 'square' as the focal point of the community is where Ardan is publicly intimidated by Riaf and Kassim, Yusuf's Muhaji cousins. The 'square' can also be seen as a theatrical set-up where tension first brews up before exploding into a tragedy. Indeed, the Aristotelian rule of the three unities operates anachronistically in this present-day, deprived urban area. Obviously, 'unity of space' is firmly established, as everything takes place on the 'Stones Estate' (54), and this is the same with time (48 hours) and action, with the knock-on effects in the fiction of the extradiegetic murder of soldier-boy: the goons and skinheads' protest and the ensuing carnage, resulting in Yusuf's death and the burning of the mosque. This said, 'Ends', though being primarily intended as a spatial marker, catalyses meanings in different and sometimes contradictory ways. The 'ends' is the urban dead-end where Ardan finds some solace (Gunaratne 19), but which Selvon dreams of escaping from: 'I'll be out of the Ends like dust, soon enough' (11). Over the years, the 'Ends' have become the 'city's edges' (27),¹⁰ rife with violence. 'Ends' metatextually refer to the different endings in the last subsection 'Echoes', which is chiefly threnodic, by briefly recording the main speakers' agony as Yusuf is dying, turning this anonymous victim of urban riots into a 'grievable character': 'Precisely because a living being may die, it is necessary to care for that being so that it may live. Only under conditions in which the loss would matter does the value of life appear. Thus, grievability is a presupposition for the life that matters' (Butler 2009, 14).
- 13 The second section, headed by the word 'Brother', introduces a nexus of meanings with different forms of brotherhood in different languages, from the endearing Indian 'Bhai': 'Yusuf-Bhai' (Gunaratne 172) to 'breddas' or 'bruvv' which may be used neutrally or menacingly by the Muhajiroun, Yusuf's and Irfan's relatives or pals, once they have converted to Islamic fundamentalism. So, it exemplifies the mutability of forms of address which are not only context-based, but dependent upon the volatility of events. 'Brother' is also historically connoted, with the IRA's 'fallen brother-in-arms' (Gunaratne 121; original emphasis) to whom a duty of memory is owed. In the nomadic temporal distribution of *Aiôn*, events are past and future and communicate together. The Irish sectarian violence, which is still part of Caroline's mental present in today's London, ghosts the sectarian divide between liberal Muslims (Yusuf and his father) and Islamic fundamentalists (Yusuf's cousins under the leadership of Aby Farouk, the new radical Imam). Likewise, the clash between the Islamic fundamentalists and the white skinheads and hooligans is ghosted by the racial riots fuelled by Enoch Powell and his henchmen in the late sixties, which still make up Nelson's present after

the stroke that left him paralysed. Precisely, this spectrality inherent in the event is central to Derrida's philosophy.

- 14 But 'Fanatic' (Gunaratne 119), 'Shame' (151) and 'Defilement' (187), the subheads from this same section, 'Brother', change the angle by overtly bringing in value judgments, religion and ideology, probably to flaunt the sheer violence of language. Again, the terms are multidirectional. 'Fanaticism' is transhistorical and cross-cultural, it recalls Nelson's fear of the fascists in the '50s, when, for the young Caribbean, freshly arrived from Montserrat Island, the collusion between the police and Mosley's supporters transformed London's streets into a permanent hazard. Fanaticism in the novel's present consists in having the '*Sunna*' i.e., the Islamic tradition (147; original emphasis), enforced by dishonest Muhajiroun. 'Shame', a word evocative of Salman Rushdie's third novel, which is about artificial borderlines and the mental frontiers which they foster, is transposed into *In Our Mad* through the self-delusion that Islamist fundamentalists entertain complacently. Abu Farouk, the new Imam, demonises the West, deliberately misrepresented as a hotbed of vice, as an excuse for the members of his community to not be answerable for their acts: 'As if his heart was lent this horror by the city, by its impurity, by the West' (Gunaratne 178). And Irfan, a vulnerable Muslim, having lost his bearings, takes this easy excuse to shirk his responsibilities, which pushes Yusuf to open his brother's eyes regarding his erroneous cultural and geographical misconceptions: '—It weren't the West bruv. We are the fuckin West Irfan. It was you' (179). 'Defilement' too works in several senses thus failing to become fixated on one time, one place, one ideology. When Eily, an Irish Catholic girl, was defiled, i.e., raped by prots who took advantage of her being a simpleton, Caroline found herself enrolled in a retributive expedition to dishonour a protestant girl in retaliation. But she drew the line at making herself complicit in an act of defilement and refused to be an accessory to a primitive vendetta to exact *lex talionis*: 'Your brothers will defile this girl, just like our Eily was defiled' (199). 'Defilement' could also be construed in other ways, bearing witness to a plethora of the eventful, it is what the new occupants of the mosque accuse their predecessors of having done by becoming westernised, it is also the fire of the mosque, a place of worship, and finally it is also the sacrilege that Irfan committed by ruining his arranged marriage to a respectable Muslim girl through his addiction to online pornography.
- 15 'Blood', the title of section III, is equally polysemic and branches out in as many directions, from the agonistic blood spilled across the generations to the irenic allusion to 'those of us who had an elsewhere in our blood' (Gunaratne 3). It is also commonly used by teenage boys to address each other 'No chatting today blood. Fuck off' (45). 'Blood', as an apostrophe, can be replaced by 'fam' (short for family) which metonymically refers to blood. But again the plural, mutating semantics of the hyperonym 'Blood' is not, at least at first sight, logically pursued through the titular hyponyms: 'Freedom' (223), 'Faces' (253), 'Fury' (267) and 'Echoes' (275) which constitute this third section. Besides, the juxtaposition of the four words does not point towards any immediate logic, thus testifying to the breaks and ruptures which are the hallmarks of eventfulness. 'Freedom', paradoxically, is denied through the paralysis of the teleology of emancipatory narrative. Selvon, the athletic youngster, is shown caring for his paraplegic father so that his dream of moving on, by being selected to study and practice sports at Brunel, remains a more than uncertain prospect. Ardan erases the messages on the answering machine, though there might have been one announcing that he had been selected by the recording studio. As for

Yusuf, he is pressed into the ranks of the Muharijoun and, retrospectively, Nelson reflects that his not taking part in the riot to defeat Oswald Mosley 'that villain Mosley' (Gunaratne 237) was the only sensible thing he could do at the time: 'And Now I know. I know that on the night of the riot, when the fury blind the way, I ran not for cowardice but for love. And doing anything for love in a city that deny it, is a rebellion.' (239) Obviously, this does not tally with the sort of emancipatory rhetoric the reader might expect from such a novel and one critic from *The Guardian* brought the point home by stating that *In Our Mad* 'is ultimately a novel with a more diplomatic sensibility than its linguistically disruptive surface might suggest' (Cummins 2018 n.p.). Precisely, linguistic disruption could be the novel's hallmark, it takes the shape of grime, a performative artistic practise which gives itself as an event each time.

Performativity of Grime Establishing Narrativity as Event

- 16 *In Our Mad* is striking through its inclusion of 'a pungent first-person patois, which the author calls "road dialect" (while conceding that it's officially known as Multicultural London English or MLE)' (Armistead 2019 n.p.). Actually, this 'road dialect' both constitutes the creative source for ghetto lyrics and transforms whole swathes of the fiction into an extended ghetto lyric. The novel is, indeed, voice-driven and flaunts self-reflexive nobrow aesthetics—a counter movement to highbrow literary aesthetics. This overt rejection of canonised forms sanctioned by the Tradition is noticeable in the way William Blake, and notably his poem 'Jerusalem, is celebrated through the restoration of its original meaning. Indeed, according to Gunaratne, Blake's initial message has been corrupted to promote a myth of Englishness that the poet never intended: 'The whittling down of the ambiguity of Blake's original verses has left us with an image of England as an imposed coda' (Gunaratne 292). And Gunaratne does not hesitate to range the Cockney visionary poet among contemporary street lyricists:

Wiley, Lowkey, Little Simz, Kano and Wretch32, are all to my mind channelling the same rhythms that many past poets infused into their verses. Blake experienced fantastical visions as a child and it was these visions he put into his poetry. Listen to any verse by Skepta's younger brother JME and you won't fail to notice a hint at that kind of fabulist imagery. (Gunaratne 294)

- 17 The musical form that is overpresent throughout the novel is grime. The fact that it is steeped in the dire bleakness and grime of life in inner city areas is underscored: 'how this city can read so rotten' (Gunaratne 107). However, lyricism can spring from the most derelict environment. Much of the expressive power of grime resides in its reliance on improvisation, the fact that it is first and foremost a creative practice in situ. Each performance is a one-off and has all the attributes of an event: unpredictability, transiency and total dependency upon external circumstances. Besides, grime reflects the volatility of city life in at least two ways, by affording precarious and short-lived moments of convivial exchanges: 'The powerful conviviality and kinship in a genre where lyrical threats of violence are one of the primary means of communication may be surprising, but it's all there' (Hancox 2018b, 4) and by being promiscuously hybrid, as a mix of ever-shifting cultural and musical influences such as R&B, jungle, hip-hop and reggae. Additionally, grime replicates the contrasted logic of multicultural suburban areas, by being simultaneously closed in on the local: 'postcodes and poverty corral[ed] young black lives into ever smaller spaces' (White 259) while

linking up with countries abroad through transnational flows. In *In Our Mad* Ardan gains legitimacy with the owner of a Boxing Club by showing that he is familiar with the grimed up Paris scene and knows Suprême NTM and its two founding members, Joey Star and Kool Shen (Gunaratne 138).

- 18 Not only is *In Our Mad*'s prose inflected by the choppy idiom of Grime 'pounding with a kind of systolic-diastolic pressure . . . The slashed and striated rhythms of Wiley and Skepta are the novel's natural soundtrack, and make themselves heard in the characters' compulsively present-tense self-narrating style' (Bari 2018 n.p.), but one of the most striking scenes is an improvised performance of grime on a bus. As Richard Schechner recalls: 'Performance theory, when well done, takes into account both the beauty and the bleak condition—as well as the negativity. . . . this in-betweenness, thresholdness, also is emphasized by poets as having something to do with performance, with the flow and evanescence of human life (as consciousness of itself)' (Schechner 1985, 295–296). The 'event', when it is not 'artifactualised' by the media, to quote Derrida, has this liminal quality too (Derrida 1994, 28). It sets a challenge to any attempt to grasp it conceptually. Not only does it disrupt any predictive narrative but it also eschews any neat definition. Indeed, the act of conceptualising the 'event' negates its very happenstance. Therefore, the 'event' excludes the position of control afforded by the fact of defining. Derrida argued, in particular, that the event should conjoin the possible and the impossible (Derrida 2007, 441). In a PhD Thesis defended at Goldsmith College in 2020, Alex de Lacey discusses the improvisatory techniques involved in grime performance, notably through the flow, *i.e.*, the vocal delivery keeping up with the musical beat (Lacey 2020). In *In Our Mad*, Ardan is constantly composing bars mentally, or writing and mouthing them, for example to while the time away during lessons at school. He also finds solace from daily humiliations by cupping his ears to shut out the pressure of the outside world and give himself up to his inner mental soundscape. So, after being threatened by Riaf and Kassim and succoured by Selvon, he immerses himself in his own thoughts, where words start flowing out:

In my mind I make a bar.
Irish heroine
Hear her like a seraphim
Silencing fears for pioneers
Living lives before mine (Gunaratne 105; original emphasis).

- 19 The Irish heroine in question is none other than Ardan's grandma, the old nan who used to comfort him once: '*Know your blood boy. You're strong*' (104–105; original emphasis). The tensions resulting from living in a violent environment inflect the lyrics, so that retrospection is penetrated by the emotions aroused by an eventful present rife with incidents. The homophonic bond between 'heroine' and 'heroin', for example, cannot be dismissed, while 'seraphim' is common to Judaism, Christianity and Islam and may point to a form of ecumenism reaching out beyond Christian faith, a possibility which is plainly denied by the facts, as Ardan has just been cowed into submission by the muhajiroun. The polyptoton 'living lives' emphasises patterns of inheritance and repetition. Being a Londoner of Irish descent, Ardan is the inheritor of people who fought for their independence and were also possibly related to members of the Irish diaspora, who found themselves as pioneers on a new continent. Because of the unknown he is confronted to on a daily basis, Ardan is, in his turn, a twenty-first-century pioneer lost in the midst of a large urban sprawl.

- 20 Grime performance is triggered by clashing, or war dubs, in which contestants attempt to outdo each other through their beats, and by spontaneously mingling thoughts and rhymes. Such contests combine urban tension and extempore flows of speech, in response to the here and now. The antiphonal praxis of grime consisting in having both a voice delivering its flow, what is known as MCing, and the music—vinyls played on turntable in rapid, seemingly improvised succession—what is known as DJing, is a common pattern which may be found even when inner city youngsters can only rely on their mobiles for sound.
- 21 One of the most memorable passages in *In Our Mad*, exemplifying the performativity of grime to make of narrativity an event, occurs when on a bus, Selvon presses Ardan, his shy friend, to stand his ground and demonstrate what he can do to a group of black youths and, more particularly, a fat boy and a light-skinned one battling in turn with their bars to get all the attention. Selvon knows that Ardan can do much better, but it is only when the latter is publicly humiliated that he brings himself to let the words out of his mouth and finds himself carried away by the flow of his own lyrics. At this point, the text is all about a one-off event of creation, totally improvised, and precipitated by circumstances. The emphasis is laid on the physical changes undergone as the words are uttered. Metonymically, the rhymes are spat out and the flow—i.e., the syncopated words—is like blood gushing out: 'words emerge on my lips like fresh blood' (Gunaratne 164). During this short, albeit intense, moment of creativity, under duress in a sense, Ardan is split: 'the imaginary sound of a breakbeat in my left ear and the noise of the real world in my right' (164). And there inevitably comes the moment when the rhymes, by mobilising all the body resources, become the only tangible reality: 'The bus, the world, the laughter all smokes away and all I hear is the folding rhythm of the music and the vibrations of the arch of my neck and under my jaw' (168). The text brings forth performatively, in the linguistic acceptation, the ghetto lyrics printed in italics, which recap a kaleidoscope of what has been read previously, filtered through Ardan's consciousness and imagination. But the very production of these lyrics may also be considered as an event diegetically. Indeed, through his improvisation, Ardan defeats, or 'bodies', the boys who have been jeering at him shortly before: 'My skin is straight on fire now and my heart feels like it's beefing another battle' (170).
- 22 It could be said that ultimately Gunaratne fetishises the instant of the text's emergence, the ghetto lyrics, as they spring forth, before they congeal into art. This is where the reference to Blake takes on all its significance. In the essay 'The Englishness of Street Art', appended to the novel, Gunaratne recalls that the initial spirit of Blake, for example in his poem '*Jerusalem*', has been lost to serve as an anthem for the nation to nostalgically celebrate rural idealism. The Blake Gunaratne has in mind, however, is the writer who 'was influenced by street ballads, popular songs and the Methodist hymns of the time' (Gunaratne 293). From today's cacophony of voices, the space open for improvisation is boundless even if the result may be half-baked and tentative. After all, as suggested in the novel, Ardan will probably not make it as a commercialised grime artist. His ghetto lyrics are probably bound to stay ephemeral, as a transient echo of this mad and furious city and as such they qualify as event.

Ends (81), Endings

- 23 Philosophy demonstrates that because the event *per se* eludes representation it can only be accounted for in its aftermath. As has been shown, *In Our Mad and Furious City* has been written in the wake of an extradiegetic triggering event. The challenge was not to mimetically represent the traumatic break, as it is impossible, but to imagine a narrative poetics that could record its seismic aftershocks. In his debut novel, Gunaratne opted for what was closest to his own experience of having grown up in Neasden as the son of Sri Lankan parents. The voices of characters seized in the urgency of communication in a pressured environment bestows an incomparable rhythm to a text constantly kept up at the highest peak of tension. Causal chains which testify to a rational analysis of the random and chaotic are dismissed. Instead, 'braided narrativity' appears as the best means to render the isolation of characters leading parallel lives in what was supposed to be, originally, only a spatial and temporal passage. However, the novelist also explores the resilience and resourcefulness of multicultural Neasden. Grime music and lyrics are not so much thematic elements in the narrative as they are intrinsic to its very fabric. By exploring the mind and body of a character immersed in the act of composing his own bars extempore, Gunaratne affords metatextual comments on narrativity as an event in its own right. What is open, experimental and inclusive defines the young novelist's take on 'an English tradition that is playful, profound and is made of many' (Gunaratne 296). Amongst the 'many' the author rallies 'Hardy' (296). The uncanny resonance between Hardy and Gunaratne, on which this article opened, may not be purely coincidental, no doubt this unpredictable association has something of an event about it.

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NOTES

1. Referred to as *In Our Mad* in this article.
2. François HARTOG speaks of a permanent, elusive and almost immobile present suspending the production of historical time by denying the necessary distance indispensable to apprehend the past whilst dismissing any prospect of the future feared as a threat hanging over our contemporaries. See *Regimes of Historicity. Presentism and Experiences of Time* (2003), New York: Columbia U.P., 2017.
3. On 22 May 2013, an off-duty soldier, Lee Rigby, was murdered near his barracks in Woolwich, South-East London. His two killers Michael Adebolajo and Michael Adebawale, two British men of Nigerian descent, claimed they were acting as soldiers of Allah and their killing was an act of war.
4. A faction is a blending of fact and fiction (as the word itself). It highlights the thin and often porous borderline between facts and fiction which Postmodernism repeatedly foregrounds.
5. For Karl JASPERS, 'limit situations' (*Grenzsituationen*), are induced by such experiences as death, suffering, struggle or chance are moments, usually accompanied by experiences of dread, guilt or acute anxiety, in which the human mind confronts the restrictions and narrowness of its condition and is led to enter new realms of self-consciousness. So 'limit situations' are unpredictable moments of human existence in which reason is drawn by intense impulses and imperatives, which impel it to expose itself to the limits of consciousness and to seek higher or more reflected modes of knowledge, see Karl JASPERS's *Psychologie der Weltanschauungen* (1919).
6. 'Un événement est toujours en un point de la situation, ce qui veut dire qu'il "concerne" un multiple présenté dans la situation', Alain BADIOU, *L'être et l'événement*, p. 199.
7. See 'The Deconstruction of Actuality, An Interview with Jacques Derrida', conducted by Brigitte Sohm, Cristina de Peretti, Stéphane Douailler, Patrice Vermeren and Emile Malet (English translation by Jonathan Rée), *Radical Philosophy*, 68, Autumn 1994, pp. 28–41.
8. 'Quel est ce temps qui n'a pas besoin d'être infini, mais seulement "infiniment subdivisible"? Ce temps est l'Aiôn', Gilles DELEUZE, *Logique du sens*, p. 77.
9. 'Saute d'une singularité pré-individuelle à une autre et les reprend toutes les unes dans les autres, reprend tous les systèmes suivant les figures de la distribution nomade où chaque événement est déjà passé et encore futur, plus et moins à la fois, toujours veille et lendemain dans la subdivision qui les fait communiquer ensemble', Gilles DELEUZE, *Logique du sens*, p. 95.
10. The city's edges bearing witness to the dereliction of urban life fraying at its edges, so to speak, has nothing to do with 'edge cities', i.e., in American urban geography a city on the fringe of a larger one, concentrating recreation facilities, business and commercial activity for the suburban population of this larger city.

ABSTRACTS

This article argues that the notion of event, through its different facets and acceptations (Badiou, Deleuze and Derrida), is seminal to account for Gunaratne's take on the city in *In Our Mad and Furious City* (2018). Whereas in fiction-writing the event is, as a rule, a necessary structuring device, serving different plotlines and thematic contents, it becomes here the text's linchpin. Indeed, city life is predicated on the traumatic scene of Lee Rigby's murder in 2013 which ripples through the novel. The best way to sustain this paroxysm is to delegate the narration to a range of characters who are caught up in their own tormented presents. Their successive, alternating oral deliveries are testament to a crisis of the event as the character narrators are involved in 'limit situations'. The study is threefold, first it introduces perspectives on the notions of 'event' and 'crisis of the event', to argue that they constitute the fiction's matrix, then it is shown that the novel's structure is not driven by causality but reflects the randomness and unpredictability intrinsic to the event. This is demonstrated by investigating the maverick division of the book into sections headed by intertitles (Genette 271-292) defying immediate understanding. In the last part, the performative aspect of grime music is considered to highlight narrativity as event.

Cet article avance l'idée que la notion d'événement, à travers ses différentes facettes et acceptions (Badiou, Deleuze et Derrida), est centrale pour rendre compte de la représentation de la ville dans *Au rythme de notre colère* (2018) de Guy Gunaratne. Alors que, de manière générale, l'événement est un élément structurant dans l'écriture de la fiction, comme vecteur d'intrigues et support de contenus thématiques, il devient ici la clef de voûte de l'ensemble du texte. En effet, la vie de la communauté urbaine est tout entière prédéterminée par la scène traumatique du meurtre de Lee Rigby, perpétré en 2013, qui traverse tout le roman. La meilleure façon de maintenir en permanence ce paroxysme consiste à déléguer la narration à des personnages confrontés à des « situations limites ». Leurs témoignages successifs alternent en écho à cet événement majeur. L'analyse se décompose en trois parties. D'abord est introduit un développement sur les notions d'événement et de crise de l'événement qui souligne à quel point celles-ci sont cruciales pour l'économie narrative. Il est notamment montré que la structure n'est pas tant déterminée par le principe de causalité que par l'imprévisible et la contingence qui caractérisent l'événement. Ceci est mis en lumière par un usage idiosyncratique des intertitres (Genette) dont la logique défie une compréhension immédiate. Enfin la troisième partie envisage l'aspect performatif de la musique grime pour exposer la narration comme événement.

INDEX

Mots-clés: événement, crise de l'événement, roman des cités, poétique des intertitres, grime, performance, poètes des rues, l'un et le multiple, hantise, roman choral

Keywords: event, crisis of the event, council estate novel, poetics of intertitling, grime, performance, street lyricists, the one and the multiple, ghosting, multi-voiced novel

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