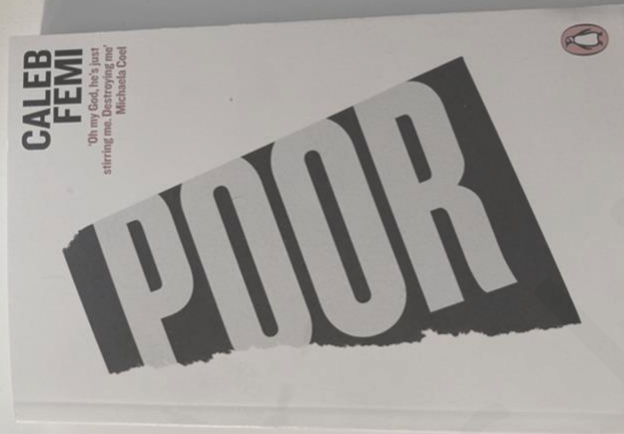


Reading...

Poor by Caleb Femi



Introduction

In 2017 poet, director and photographer, Caleb Femi, was listed as one of *Dazed's* top 100 people shaping youth culture. Femi – formerly London's Young Poet Laureate – is an extraordinary voice on the contemporary arts scene. He was born in Nigeria and raised by his grandmother. At seven years old, Femi was brought to the UK to live with his parents. Their home: London's North Peckham Estate. *Poor*, published in 2020, is the poet's prodigious debut collection. It is a breath-taking ode to Femi's black boyhood, lived inside the concrete blocks and walkways of one of London's notorious housing estates (dubbed "sink estates" by the media). *Poor* is more than a poetry collection: containing a selection of Femi's striking original photography, this book is a curated snapshot of the lived experiences of many black people on the North Peckham Estate.

To appreciate fully Femi's astounding debut collection of subversive urban pastorals, it is essential to understand something of the place from which it comes.

Context for Reading

In the 1970s London's Southwark Council embarked upon a housing regeneration project. Five pre-existing and distinct housing estates, connected only by their geographical proximity, were the subject of a funding bid to bring them together architecturally. Like so many urban planners, those in charge of the project had high hopes: the regeneration would create a variety of affordable housing, each home with their own front door, with access to communal "decking" areas that would connect walkways to housing and amenities for both residents and service staff.

These raised decks promised residents two and a half miles of walkway, raised away from the grime and air pollution of inner-city London traffic. The ground level – it was envisioned – would serve as a network of interconnecting courts in which families could congregate, socialise and play. Indeed, many early visitors to the finished project were quietly impressed by what they saw of this low-rise, high-density estate. But by the 1980s, the utopian social dream had become a nightmare. The Five Estates were making news headlines for the wrong reasons: by the 90s, hundreds of thousands of pounds per year was being spent on repairing vandalism in the area, whilst crime rates were being picked up by the national press.

In 2000, a child – 10-year-old Damilola Taylor – was stabbed to death as he walked home from school to the North Peckham Estate. The facts of his murder are abhorrent. The young boy was apprehended and fatally wounded by a gang of thugs wielding a broken bottle. Following the stabbing, Damilola struggled to a nearby stairwell in a derelict tower on the estate. There, he lay down and bled out. Damilola died in the ambulance.

In the wake of the Damilola Taylor tragedy, steps were taken to address the poor housing conditions and lack of security on the North Peckham estate. Within two years of the young boy's death, Peckham Partnership (a council-led body) had demolished over 500 flats on the estate. Ten years on from Damilola's death and newspapers were still reporting negatively of 'child gangs still [terrorising] estate'.

Over the course of 20 years, continued efforts have been made to regenerate the area, but many of the "solutions" found at council level have involved the demolition or selling off of valuable social housing stock. Although Southwark has an established house building programme, it remains the case that the rate at which the council is knocking down social housing is faster than the rate at which they are building new ones.

When Femi writes of his estate it is with anger, frustration, and fatigue at the blatant injustices dealt repeatedly to his community. He speaks for his peers, victimised by recession, unemployment and societal neglect and the result is *Poor*, the most visceral expression of disaffection and vulnerability that you are possibly ever going to read.

Reading

Below are analytical notes to open up two poems within *Poor*.

‘Collective Noun: A Play by an Onlooker’

In the poem’s dedication we are told that this poem is ‘*After Suzan-Lori Parks*’, a Pulitzer-winning American playwright. As such, this poem is set out on the page as a **play** and takes the **form** of a **dialogue** between inanimate shop CCTV cameras as they witness the end of a Police chase involving a boy.

- We are introduced to the “**characters**” in line one.
- CAM 1 ‘sees blind spots’, while CAM 2 ‘sees opens spots’. In literal terms, camera one is positioned to capture the ‘dead zone’ – ie. the area underneath another camera that cannot be captured by its range.
- CAM 2 sees the area that CAM 1 does not.
- Although each character has weaknesses, collectively they should be reliable witnesses to the event unfolding before them. In this respect, we might read a link to the poem’s **title**. They have collective responsibility to record the events. They should be reliable witnesses to the event unfolding.
- Italicised lines indicate **stage directions** describing the actions of the police. We are perhaps primed (by recurring reports of police brutality towards young black men and videos in which the actions of police have been captured) what to expect next. The writer cuts the scene at the point at which ‘two officers are on top of the boy’ and this is important.
- Firstly, society voyeuristically consumes images like this all too frequently – why should we be allowed to watch another? Secondly, the cameras seem to turn a **metaphorical** blind eye to the event. They are so used to watching scenes like this that they do not find it important. Indeed, so used are they to the scene unfolding that they make a **joke** out of it. This poem underscores societal negligence that has allowed **systematic racism** to fester.
- CAM 1 has a question and Cam 2 is happy to oblige it. CAM 1 is interested in **collective nouns**, the names used to group items/categories together.
- CAM 1 uses the example of ‘an embarrassment of pandas’ to ask what the collective name would be for a ‘group of pigs’ – the **colloquial** and **irreverential** term for the police – ‘chokin’ a boy on the floor’.
- The insinuation here is that this happens with such frequency that one must surely exist.
- CAM 2’s candid response: ‘depends on the boy’ is a coded way of articulating that it depends on the race and class of the boy.
- Poignantly, the final lines of “**dialogue**’ weigh heavy in their silence.

Tasks

Critical Reading

Write an essay on a poem that uses an interesting form to explore an important theme.

Writing

Choose one of the following writing activities:

- Using Femi's 'Collective Noun' as inspiration, script a **dialogue** between two inanimate objects.
- Write a **report** on the topic of systematic or institutional racism.

Start by reading Chapter 7 of *Natives* by the writer and rapper Akala. In this chapter ('Police, Peers and Teenage Years') the writer describes the fraught relationships between working-class black boys and the Police.

Research the topic further and present your findings in the form of a report on this topic. Remember to include statistics, evidence from credible and reliable sources and a bibliography.

- Write a 1,000-word **short story** in which the central character falls victim to systematic racism. You should focus on fifteen minutes in that character's life.
- Create a PowerPoint or Sway presentation on urban housing in Britain's most densely populated cities.
- Write a **short story** titled 'Cities in the Sky' in which the protagonist is prohibited from leaving the place where they live. The focus of this story should be on the development of setting and on theme. Think about how place impacts upon the central character's actions.

‘Thirteen’

In ‘Thirteen’, Femi describes a boy’s interaction with a police officer who has apprehended him on suspicion of committing a robbery. This poem continues Femi’s look at systemic racism and would be a good partner piece for ‘Collective Noun: A Play by an Onlooker’.

- Use of **second person** gives the sense that the speaker is engaging directly with the reader. This narrative voice creates an immersive experience – we are forced to place ourselves in the position of the speaker and consider how we would feel/have felt in similar circumstances.
- But this **mode of narration** also gives the impression that the narrative persona is imparting a cautionary tale, a warning to the listener: ‘You will be four minutes from home / When you are cornered by an officer’. It is a scenario, the poet suggests, that happens to countless black boys on a daily basis.
- The position of the **line break** after the word ‘home’ and **word choice** of ‘cornered’ immediately signposts the danger that the young boy is in, yet the boy does not seem to have fully registered it.
- The **rhetorical question** (*‘You fit the description of a man?’*) shows the highly questionable nature of the officer’s actions. We might rightly ask to whom this question is being posed.
- The **dash** immediately following creates a **caesura**, building in time and space for the question to sink in.
- The boy’s first instinct is to laugh. He has been apprehended for a crime carried out by a man. **Repetition** of the word ‘thirteen’ draws attention to the boy’s youth, but also reinforces the utterly reprehensible actions of stopping a child for an act they know has been carried out by an adult.
- **Stanza two** focuses on the second officer, a familiar face to the boy. We learn that the officer has attended the boy’s primary school some years before, and encouraged the children to aim high, to value themselves.
- In this stanza the writer establishes the **extended metaphor** that will recur in the final stanza.
- The officer describes the children as ‘being little stars [...] supernovas,/ the biggest and brightest stars’. Use of **superlatives** not only reinforces the potential of these children gathered in front of him, but also heightens the sense of the injustice unfolding in present time.
- A **metaphor** is used to suggest the allure of the officer’s message for the onlooking child: ‘This same officer had an horizon in the east of his smile’. Here, the poet hints at the disingenuity of that smile, offering hope and promising a bright future that will never materialise for some.
- Stanza three develops the metaphor further: in a bid to prove his innocence the boy shines a smile at the officer (‘you will show him the warmth of your teeth’), reflecting back at him the hope that he shone on them that day at primary. **Word choice** of ‘warmth’ conveys the kindness of the child, emphasising once more the injustice occurring.
- **Lexical choice** of ‘praying’ introduces the concept of faith, the only thing the boy has left at this point. The **alliterative** ‘powerless – plump’ underlines the helplessness of the boy.

- The stanza closes with a **biblical allusion**: ‘you will watch the two men cast lots for your organs’. In the Old Testament casting lots was a means by which to make impartial and unbiased decisions, a way to determine the will of God. Here, it is used by the poet to **ironically underscore** the seemingly random nature of the officer’s actions that have been driven by racism. The fact that they will ‘cast lots over his organs’ shows the inevitability of the boy’s fate.
- The **rhetorical question** with which stanza four opens (*‘Don’t you remember me?’*) shows the creeping desperation of the boy as ‘fear condenses on [his] lips’.
- The final four lines of the poem build to a devastating **climax**. The boy remembers back to the follow-up discussion in his primary classroom, and a fact that the teacher imparted about supernovas: they are ‘dying stars on the verge of becoming black holes’. The poet draws comparison between these bright stars that are already dying, and a generation of bright Black boys who are destined never to succeed or survive in an unjust society.
- **Thematically**, Femi explores dreams and aspirations and the reasons for which these are systematically stymied for many Black boys.

Critical Reading

With reference to this poem, and to at least two other poems you have studied by Caleb Femi, show how the writer explores the theme of social injustice in interesting ways. (8 marks)

Extension

In 2016 Femi directed the short documentary, *‘Heartbreak and Grime’*. In this documentary, Femi explores the interconnectedness of music and relationships. People share their memories of the music genre Grime, and reflect on the important part it played in their lives.

Task One

Watch the documentary, currently available on Youtube. Summarise **three** things we learn about the genre of Grime from this documentary.

Task Two

Think of your favourite album or song. Think about the first time you ever heard it.

- What did you think of it?
- What did you like about the song?
- Why did you keep returning to that song?
- What memories do you have involving that song?
- How did that song make you feel when you first heard it and how does that song make you feel now?

Write an 800-word **reflective essay** beginning with the sentence stem 'The first time I heard...'.
English is Lit!