Alterity Remixed: Poetic Hospitality in Patience Agbabi's *Telling Tales*

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Abstract

This essay discusses how issues of otherness/identity are at the heart of Patience Agbabi's poetry collection *Telling Tales* (2014). A rewriting of Geoffey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, the work of the British-Nigerian author addresses alterity through the representation of a heterogeneous group of present-day pilgrims interacting with one another as they are travelling on a bus from Tabard Inn to Canterbury Cathedral. The essay investigates how Agbabi's poems rewrite Chaucer's work from a twenty-first century perspective, and deal with alterity in the form of an unfinished dialogue with the medieval text and in ways which encompass not only moral, ethical or social questions, but also formal and generic issues. It shows that poetry's potential for 'harbouring otherness' is linked to an hybridization whose site is also the literary text: poetry, and more specifically the poetic subgenre of the dramatic monologue, is adapted by Agbabi in order to host a dialogic, heteroglossic and novelized dimension.

Key words: intertextuality, transnational poetics, hospitality, otherness, dramatic monologue.

Ever since the Romantics accustomed us to identify poetic discourse mainly with the 'lyric', poetry is often stereotypically associated with concepts of 'self' and 'identity'. Whether poets present themselves as «a man speaking to men»,[1] or more strictly to readers «of strong sensibility and meditative minds»,[2] we ex-

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1. Wordsworth 1802: xxviii. https://archive.org/details/lyricalballadsw 01colegoog/page/n1/mode/2up
2. Coleridge 1834: 176. https://archive.org/details/biographialiter13cole goog/page/n1/mode/2up

pect their lines to lay bare their individual selves through truthful first-person accounts of feelings and emotions, or to express their sense of belonging to a specific community. Mikhail Bakhtin famously claimed that the fact that the poetic word is typically dominated by a single artistic conscience reflects onto its very linguistic fiber: «The language of the poet is his language, he is utterly immersed in it, inseparable from it, he makes use of each form, each word, each expression according to its unmediated power to assign meaning (as it were, 'without quotation marks'), that is, as a pure and direct expression of his own intention».[3] Dominated by an absolute 'I' (or, in some cases, by an absolute 'we'), the poetic language is described as centripetal, monological and strictly unitary, as opposed to the centrifugal and dialogical structure of the novel. The polysemy, contradictions, and conflicts which we find in poetry, Bakhtin argues, should be regarded as connected to objects, ideas or emotions, but never to poetic language itself which, in the Russian theorist's view, is somewhat oblivious to the fact that words are immersed in a plurivocal exchange stratified in history and society.

In spite of the sustained criticism that the Russian semiotician's position has received throughout the decades, his reflections on 'dialogism', 'carnivalism' and (through the mediation of Julia Kristeva) 'intertextuality'[4] have inspired and influenced a variety of studies on poetry which openly contradict his distinction between 'discourse in the novel' and 'poetic discourse', and encourage new approaches to poetry as 'heteroglottic' – i.e., as a discourse of 'others', but also of 'otherness'. Poetic utterances, differently put, do not simply give voice to a diverse universe of

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3. Bakhtin 1981: 285-286.
4. Kristeva 1991: 36.

speakers (see Homi Bhabha's criticism of "diversity" as a relativist, neo-liberal paradigm),[5] but also strive to express the uncomfortable dimension of difference. From Natascha Pesch's study on epic poetry and novelization,[6] to Isobel Armstrong's analysis of Victorian poetry as double-voiced,[7] and to Jahan Ramazani's reflections on what he calls 'transcultural poetics',[8] the poetic word is no longer approached as 'absolute' or 'individual(istic)'. It is rather addressed as something projected onto the flux of history, society and ideology, and as such, also as a deeply political discourse. Dialogism, as Graham Allen reminds us, «does not necessarily mean a 'conversation' between subjects equally empowered within the language-game; it refers, more specifically, to a clash between languages and utterances which can foreground not only social division but a radically divided space of discursive formations within an individual subject».[9] In this perspective, the poetic text may also be regarded as a condensed arena of semiotic conflict, which is deeply inscribed both in social-political interactions and politics of subjectivity.

Conciseness, intensity, ambiguity, richness in figures of speech and sound make poetry a most interesting site for studying how discrepant idioms, utterances and soundscapes merge, disharmonize, or act as a counterpoint to one another within a single text. Not only discourses, codes, themes or concepts, but also single utterances, words, or even morphological/ phonological units may be regarded as sites in which different signifying structures may interact, fuse or clash, and in which meaning

5. Bhabha 1994: 49-50.
6. Pesch 1998: 305-323.
7. Armstrong 1993.
8. Ramazani 2015. Kindle.
9. Allen 2000: 165.

may be exceeded, diffracted, or even transgressed. If, as Kristeva's poststructuralist rereading of Bakhtin's theories of dialogism suggests, reading/writing processes plunge us into a network of textual and discursive interconnections, the literary word also emerges as «an intersection of textual surfaces, rather than a point (a fixed meaning), as a dialogue among several writings: that of the writer, the addressee (or the character) and the contemporary or earlier cultural context».[10] Thus, approaching dialogism within the poetic word means taking into consideration both the multiplicity of discursive spaces to which a poem is connected or towards which is projected, and the fact that words are internally shaped by a variety of dynamic, internal conflicts. In the condensed space of a poem the 'difference between' – the infrastructures of intertextual and interdiscursive relations which are alternatively described as borrowing or pillaging, quotations or misquotations, homages or infiltrations, filiations or betrayals[11] – ostensibly overlaps with the 'difference within'.

In this essay I intend to focus on poetry and alterity as an association which conjugates both the (inter)textual and the ethical dimensions of the literary text. Poetry has the potential to harbour otherness in a multitude of ways. My focus is Patience Agbabi's[12] poetry collection *Telling Tales* (2014),[13] a

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10. Kristeva 1991: 36.
11. See Maisonnat, Paccaud-Huguet and Ramel 2009.
12. Patience Agbabi (b. 1965) is a British poet and performer of Nigerian descent. Her poetry features issues of gender and racial identity. Prominent on the London scene since the early nineties, she has traveled extensively in the UK and abroad. In 2009/2010 she received an Art Council grant to write a poetry collection based on Jeoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*. In 2017 she was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature and she is currently a creative fellow at Oxford Brookes.
13. Agbabi 2014.

contemporary rewriting of Geoffrey Chaucer's masterpiece *The Canterbury Tales* (1387-1400), which engages with otherness – intertextually, but also thematically, aesthetically, and semiotically – as a form of dissemination. The collection brings together twenty-six dramatic monologues, each of which is characterized by a distinctive lyric voice (24 modern counterparts of the Chaucerian storytellers, plus a 'host' who takes the floor in the first and the last poem) as well as a distinctive prosody, rhythm, tone and even graphic style. Like the original medieval text, *Telling Tales* is introduced by a narrative frame which sets the stage for the various stories-within-in-the-story: a motley crew of tourists meets in the legendary Tabard Inn, which, as the appendix reports, is one of five gastropubs owned by Harry 'Bells' Bailey and is located, like its Chaucerian analogue, in Southwark, London.[14] The tourists travel on a Routemaster bus to Canterbury – a thematic expedient which, as Agbabi humorously suggests, enhances the idea of «poetry in motion»[15] – and their journey is livened up by a poetry slam, a modern take on Chaucer's story-telling competition, in which Bailey proposes to be not Master, but Mistress of Ceremony:

> I'm the Host for tonight, Harry Bailey
> if I'm tongue-tied, April will bail me,
> I'm MC but the M is for mistress,
> when my April shows me what a kiss is...[16]

April (a reference to the opening lines of Chaucer's prologue: «Whan that April with his shoures sote/ The droghte of

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14. Ivi: 115.
15. Agbabi 2018: 2.
16. Agbabi 2014: lines 43-45.

Marche hath perced to the rote»,[17] lines 1-2) is personified as the host's love interest.

Love, like the Chaucerian spring, awakens the desire to travel, and in the case of the narrator, who is identified with a masculine name, to even go beyond the borders of traditional gender identification. The host's assumption of a feminine role signals that the stories about to be told will also traverse those interstitial spaces in which, as Bhabha argued, subjects «are formed 'in-between', or in excess of, the sums of the 'parts' of difference (usually intoned as race/ class/ gender, etc.)». So, for example, "Tit for Tat" transforms "The Reeve's Tale" from a *fabliau* – i.e. the comic and at times obscene tale of how the dishonesty of a miller is punished by two students who manage to sleep with his wife and daughter – into a story of lesbian awakening. Also, in the "Joined-Up Writing" monologue, Agbabi rewrites "The Man of Law's Tale" tackling the issue of refugee crises and choosing, provocatively, not to focus on the figure of Constance (originally a persecuted girl fleeing from country to country; in Agbabi's text, an African fleeing oppression), but rather on the antagonist's point of view, the hostile mother-in-law who manages to chase her away. In addition, instead of telling a tale of courtly love and ethical dilemmas, the dramatic monologue "Emily" (a rewriting of "The Knight's Tale") is about imprisonment and obsession, and the titular character is revealed as a projection of her knight-lover's mind and desires. Gender issues, cultural hybridity, migration, madness, disease, sexuality and crime are explored as angles from which the original Chaucerian text is made, unmade and remade in a game of difference and repetition.

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17. Chaucer 2018: 3.

In the following sections, I argue that Agbabi's poetry is an extraordinary intertextual game which puts the original, already highly dialogical medieval material into a state of tension, and vectorizes it along a series of axes of alterity. After a brief contextualization of the poetry of Patience Agbabi within Ramazani's concept of transnational poetics, the question that I address concerns how the poetic text is able to construct non-fetishized horizons of intelligibility to approach the issue of the 'other' through the complexity of its textual interrelations. The specificity of the poetic subgenre of the dramatic monologue allows Agbabi to host different 'others' within her poems: not only the Chaucerian *Urtext* emerges against the grain of her poetry, but also a variety of other literary and non-literary sources, as well as new languages such as those of mass and social media. The poetic word emerges as the site of a dialectic struggle, a crossroads of voices and utterances, and also a site of 'hospitality', a word which, as Jacques Derrida has taught us,[18] both portrays and enacts ways to harbour otherness simultaneously in terms of relationality and conflictuality. Hospitality is a complex process of mediation in which the tensions between 'self' and 'other', 'home' and 'abroad', 'similar' and 'different' are never fully resolved, but rather become part of a dynamic and dialogic relationship. Thus, unlike lyric poetry, the kind of poetry which is the object of this study does not deal with the 'self,' and it does not invite the reader to identify or sympathize with expressions of personal emotions and feelings, but rather brings us to acknowledge and respect difference.

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18. Derrida 2000.

Trasnational poetics and poetic hospitality

«Poetry may seem an improbable genre to consider within transnational contexts» argues Jahan Ramazani, commenting on the fact that poetry is often analyzed and anthologized as the product of national, regional, and sometimes even local sensibilities. Drawing on Eliot's assertion that poetry is «the most provincial of the arts»[19] and W. H. Auden's considerations that it is to be understood as «the expression and preservation of local attachment» and «the vehicle of particular attachments to mother, home and native place»,[20] Ramazani laments that poetry is still seen «as a genre of culturally and psychologically inwards turns and returns».[21] Not only the experiences of contemporary post-colonial, Black British, migrant or exiled poets (among which he mentions, for example, Derek Walcott, Edward Kamau Brathwaite, Wole Soyinka, Lorna Goodison, Agha Shahid Ali and Christopher Okigbo), but also the cosmopolitan nature of modernist poetics (which most anthologies and syllabi, in the American scholar's view, treat mainly as an accident rather than a constitutive feature) call for a different type of critical attention – one which goes beyond rigid national distinctions, and brings poetry into a conversation about globalization. A study of what he calls 'transnational poetics' would «help focus attention on the creolized texture of transnational experience as it is formally and imaginatively embodied».[22]

Ramazani advances a critical vocabulary which allows him to interweave various levels of poetical analysis – thematic,

19. Eliot 1957: 8.
20. Auden 1968: 23.
21. Ramazani 2015: 3.
22. Ivi: 4.

formal, historical and ideological – with the idea that poetic boundaries can and should be moved. A new transnational paradigm, he argues, would allow for a better understanding of how «through imaginative as well as literal mingling and merging, new coinages, new intergeographic spaces, even new compound identities come into being».[23] What he calls 'transnational poetics', I believe, should actually be understood in the plural, as a set of tendencies which are detectable, in different measures and with important distinctions related to the specificity of each cultural context, in a variety of poetic texts. They should thus be regarded as an invitation for literary and cultural critics to reframe the role that nationality and ethnicity play in literary history, and as an attempt to bring to the fore some features that are peculiar to the poetic language, which make it a privileged site to study how cultures, languages and idioms mix, converge and clash. After all, poetry is a site where the poet may easily switch between a standard variety of language and dialect usages. Besides, as it is clearly observable in the work of Patience Agbabi, who is also an acclaimed performer, and whose recitals are sometimes available on the YouTube platform, poetry may easily transition from the written page to the stage.[24] Moreover, transnational poetry may frame discourses within one another, and either 'creolize' western genres, or vice versa, adapt indigenous forms to western models. In this regard, Ramazani speaks of patterns of assimilations and resistance, and even sketches a rough distinction between disjunctive poetic transnationalism, which emphasizes discontinuities and conflicts, and organic poetic transnationalism,

23. Ivi: 60.
24. See Ramey 2009: 310-322, DOI: 10.1080/09574040903285818 and Tönnies, Brüning and Sand 2016: 301-320.

which emphasizes integration and convergences. Along with that, as a non-mimetic genre, which often reflects on its own surfaces, poetry has the capacity to fracture the spatiotemporal continuum, allowing imagination to travel freely and quickly from one place to a distant one, from a timeframe to a different one, or from one semiotic horizon to another.

Given that the concept of 'transnational poetics' plays a central theoretical role in my study of Patience Agbabi's *Telling Tales*, the question that I intend to raise concerns the way a transnational 'I' comes into being not only as hybrid, composite or syncretic, but also, and most significantly, as an 'other' – someone asserting not his/her own identity, but rather his/her alterity. The transnational paradigm, in other words, allows me to address the work of Patience Agbabi not as 'poetry of identity', in which an Anglo-Nigerian subject strives to find new poetic forms to allow her hybrid subjectivity to take shape, but rather as a poetry focused entirely on allowing 'otherness' to emerge as a complex, provocative concept. *Telling Tales* may in fact be read as an example of 'poetic hospitality',[25] where the word 'hospitality', as Jacques Derrida reminds us,[26] encompasses the tensions between host and guest, self and other, empathy and hostility. The concept of 'hospitality', a term whose etymology is connected both with the Latin words *hostis* ('enemy' and 'foreigner') and *hospes* ('guest' and "foreigner'), has emerged in literary studies as a paradigm conjugating the ethical and the narrative dimensions of texts, to refer to how literary texts deal with the issue of the 'other' not just in terms of sympathy (an approach which, to a certain extent, presupposes some forms

25. The issue of poetic hospitality has been explored in Ravizza 2020: 268-282.
26. Derrida 2000.

of assimilation to the self), but rather of respect and acknowledgement of difference. Narrative hospitality, argues Rachel Hollander in her study of late nineteenth-century fiction, concerns the shifts in novels' plots which deal with «the arrival of the stranger, and the necessity of an ethical response to an unpredictable and not fully knowable demand».[27] *Telling Tales* similarly adopts «an ethics of hospitality, in which respecting the limits of knowledge and welcoming the stranger define fiction's relationship to both reader and world»,[28] but it does so not simply through its plot or its themes. It rather accomplishes it through the intertextual dialogue which the poems entertain with the medieval text, and through the singularity of the poetic voices (the plural has to be used here by virtue of the variety of styles that characterize the collection) which are developed throughout the texts.

As a matter of fact, the poems' capacity to host the voice of the other is strictly linked to Agbabi's manipulation of the dramatic monologue. One very interesting feature of this poetic subgenre, which became extremely popular during the Victorian Age thanks to poets such as Robert Browning, Alfred Tennyson and Matthew Arnold, is the fact that, despite its name and its monological structure, it cannot be really considered as a monological genre. Alan Sinfield, for example, argues that dramatic monologues are often the sign of a «divided consciousness»,[29] but in the case of Agbabi's work it would be more appropriate to describe them as signs of multiple divided consciousnesses. Indeed, *Telling Tales* is characterized by a complex Chinese-boxes structure: Agbabi is identified as the

27. Hollander 2013: 3.
28. Ivi: 1.
29. Sinfield 1977: 15.

author on the cover of the text, but each poem has a fictional author – a contemporary character corresponding to one of the Chaucerian narrators – who is usually not the lyric voice of the poem. So, each text is inscribed in a game of intersected perspectives, and the poetic word acquires a different meaning in relation to the semantic context in which it is received. The fictional narrator and the lyric I are both discursive subjects, but they may occupy different semantic, ideological and cultural positions. Besides that, they are simultaneously objects of critique: the poems are metatextual games which expose the linguistic structures through which their contrasting subjectivities are shaped.

An additional dimension also has to be mentioned, i.e., that of the intertext: how do the characters relate and interact with the Chaucerian subtext, as well as with the other sources with which it is hybridized? These interrelated levels create tensions and conflicts of interpretation within the text. Poetic hospitality emerges thus as a constant dialectic mediation between diverging semantic positions and identifications. The single word or utterance intersects different subjective and/or ideological positions, allowing readers to develop different attitudes toward the text: who is speaking, and what kind of values does his/her voice put forward? Readers may simultaneously sympathize with one subjective standpoint, but also be alienated by another one, which is also contained in the text.

The way the collection achieves this lies not only in the context or in the plot of the monologues, but also in the very linguistic choices that characterize each single text. Dealing with the heteroglottic work of Chaucer's work means translating it into a new form of multivoicedness, one which takes into

consideration the multiple components that make up contemporary Britain. In this view, *Telling Tales* starts a dialogue with the 'alterity' intrinsically present in the original Chaucerian text – the variety of linguistically connotated voices dealing with different aspects of life, from the lowest and taboo ones, to the highly philosophical – re-inhabiting the work of a writer who has gone down in history as the father of English poetry, literature and language, and as such is intimately tied up with ideas of nationalism.[30] The nation emerges from Agbabi's work as a conglomerate: the biographies of the multiple lyric voices who speak through *Telling Tales* reflect precisely a contemporary concern with identity not as a given, but rather as a series of multiple trajectories. So, for example, the character named Robert Knightley (the narrator in "Emily (The Knight's Tale)") is given a recognizably Anglo-Saxon name, and an upper-class identity which parallels the fact that in Chaucer's text, the knight is the person of highest social status: «Robert Knightly is Professor of Creative Writing at UEA, a poet who has represented the British Council in Egypt, Turkey, Lithuania, Russia, Spain, Morocco and Algeria».[31] As his brief biography suggests, Knightly incarnates a cultural model which seems rooted in its traditional Englishness (here, represented by the academic institution where he teaches), but which, as a matter of fact, is nourished by the international recognition it receives, and by the fact that it is highly exportable. Next to him, and other Anglo-Saxon characters from a lower social class such as Robyn Miller ("The Kiss (The Miller's Tale)") or Scott Mansell ("The Crow (The Manciple's Tale)"),

30. Brown 2019; Prendergast 2020.
31. Agbabi 2014: 117.

are characters whose names and biographies tell us of the way the expansion of the British Empire has made the English language a multicultural province. For example, Mrs Alice Ebi Bafa ("What Women Like Bes' (The Wife of Bath's Tale)") is a Nigerian businesswoman; Tim Canon-Yeo ("The Gold Digger (The Canon's Yeoman's Tale)") is a Singaporean personal trainer with an Oxford degree in Medieval Studies; Yves Depardon ("Profit (The Pardoner's Tale)") is a French-Canadian Professional Speaker and Business Coach based in Soho; Missy Eglantine ("Sharps an Flats (The Prioress's Tale)") is a Saint Lucian, «raised in Lewisham/ R&B singer-rapper-poet»;[32] Huw Fryer Jones is a Welsh busker ("The Devil in Cardiff (The Friar's Tale)"). Moreover, other characters are not identified by the geography of their names and biographical circumstances, but rather by pseudonyms revealing their interests and cultural identifications. For example, Femme Fatale ("The Contract (The Second Nun's Tale)") is a «dark cabaret performer and per(form)ance poet»,[33] and Mozilla Firefox ("Animals (The Nun's Priest's Tale)") is «the illegitimate offspring of The Brothers Johnson and the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence».[34] Agbabi's creative engagement with an era which was traditionally conveyed as «total otherness» (an epoch of darkness paving the way for the emergence of European nationalism) has been discussed by Micaela Coppola as part of a cultural process of reassessment of medieval culture in light of transnational awareness.[35] The intersection of medieval and transnational studies, the Italian scholar argues, provides

32. Ivi: 116.
33. *Ibidem.*
34. *Ibidem.*
35. Coppola 2016: 308.

new theoretical frames to «uncover the global interconnections across time and space accounting for the complex webs of relation and hybridity that have been either ignored or repressed».[36] In order to represent contemporary Britain, Agbabi focuses on the conflicts that make *The Canterbury Tales* such an extraordinary document of the liveliness of medieval English life: the new mobility of social classes, who find new ways to meet, interact and mix in a world which had only recently reemerged from the deadliest pandemic in human history; the tension between a local and a cosmopolitan dimension (which, in Chaucer's work emerges through his copious use of Italian and French sources, and his references to a variety of other cultures), and the emergence of a new language developing from the conflictual encounter of two cultures – the Anglo-Saxon and the French – and subjected to a series of other linguistic and cultural influences (e.g., Latin and Norse) as well as local variations. In this perspective, Agbabi's work does not simply shift the temporal frame of the poem to the contemporary age, but also interrogates the medieval text from a new angle, focusing on aspects which the latter hides, marginalizes or suppresses, producing new knowledge on it in a way that, as Coppola puts it, «reveal how our own modernity shares lines of fracture and continuity with the past, calling for new ways of looking at limiting assumptions about the medieval, the colonial and the postcolonial».[37] Also, Agbabi does not refrain from exploring the carnivalesque nature of the Chaucerian work, which brings together the high (i.e. reflections on religion, forgiveness, love, chivalry, and the na-

36. Ivi: 306.
37. Ivi: 316.

ture of tragedy) and the low (bodily functions, sex, deceits and farces), as well as those representations of women and minorities which are felt as particularly problematic from the perspective of twenty-first century readers (see, for example, the honor killing narrated in Chaucer's "Physician's Tale", or the antisemitic content of "The Prioress's Tale"). In the epilogue, titled "Back Track (Grime Mix)", Harry Bailey resumes his/her role as 'host', and produce a *captatio benevolentiae* in which he apologizes for the «sick bits» (line 4) which may be perceived as offensive to those who may feel misrepresented, underrepresented or not represented at all (e.g., Christians or people from other faiths), or to those who may be put off by the collection's sexual content. Yet, as s/he asks «I hold my head low, /should I fix the mix?» (lines 9-10), the answer is negative because: «Our intent was to showcase this island's/ love of retelling tales in its fierce pun/ not to cut out the gem from its pierced tongue» (lines 12-14).

Accelerating medieval rhythms: alterity remixed

Difference is not explored only thematically, but also through experimentation in forms, language and rhythm. The work of the British-Nigerian, Oxford-educated artist, performer and former Canterbury's poet laureate accelerates the original medieval tales, adapting their rhythms to the pace of twenty-first century life, in which the perilous journey of the medieval pilgrims can be comfortably covered in a much shorter time on a tour bus. Agbabi utilizes the word 'remix'[38] as a reference to the practice of producing a new version of a musical recording by altering its balance, a process of rearrangement of the orig-

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38. Agbabi 2018: 1ff.

inal listening experience which is made possible with the implementation of technological tools. 'Remixing' is thus a reference to the poems' contamination with contemporary genres (not only literary, but also musical and cinematic, as well as new media language), a feature which also influences the narrative tempo. Within the field of literary studies, the concept of 'remix' embraces the idea of rewriting as a form of hybridization in ways which go even beyond the idea of intertext, and entail the possibility that texts may incorporate within their structures a complex transmedial assemblage.[39] A product of the so-called 'software culture',[40] remix allows artists to hybridize not only content that usually pertains to different media, but also techniques, operational modes and forms of representation and expression. The "Prologue", for example, is subtitled "Grime Mix" as a reference to the genre of electronic dance music which emerged in London in the early 2000s. "That Beatin' Rhythm (The Merchant's Tale)", retold by a character named Soul Merchant, reproduces the heavy beat of Northern Soul (100 bpm and above) with long stanzas in which lines are not graphically separated.

Another text which plays with the idea of brevity, conciseness, and linguistic experimentation is "100 Chars (The Monk's Tale)", retold by a crossword and puzzle creator named monkey@puzzle, which is written in texting language. The abbreviation 'Chars' in the title plays with the polysemy of the English word 'characters' (i.e. both meaning 'persons' and 'written symbols'). It refers both to the fact that, in Chaucer's *Tales*, the monk promises to tell a hundred examples on the fall of illus-

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39. Piromallo Gambardella 2013: 81ff.
40. Ivi.

trious men (but he actually manages to tell only seventeen, be-
cause his narration is deemed too depressing by his fellow-pil-
grims), and to the fact that each stanza in Agbabi's adaptation
mimics the limits set by microblogging services such as Twit-
ter, and each stanza is shorter than 100 letters. Both the Chau-
cerian monk and monkey@puzzle engage with the retelling of
the life of others: while the monk focuses on the concept and
definition of tragedy through the life stories of a series of char-
acters (e.g., Adam, Lucifer, Alexander the Great, Julius Caesar,
and Ugolino di Pisa), monkey@puzzle focuses on a single man
who spends his life tweeting and retweeting. The tragedy of
this individual is contained in the language he uses to com-
municate with others. The stanza which better summarizes his
situation is the following:

> tragDy's d lot of d nvr-left-d-blocks Mr
> Nobody whose pebble– lyf is intrrptd
> b4 he hs d chnc 2 rise[41]

The clipped and coded language of Twitter and sms messages,
which the speaker uses to remain within certain boundaries,
does allow him to communicate with a community of social
media friends, followers, and possibly also haters. Yet, it also
excludes him from the outside world, where other writing con-
ventions are adopted, and words are full.
Similarly, Agbabi plays with the material aspect of the text, ex-
ploiting the visual dimension and, at times, allowing it to be-
come part of the narrative itself. For instance, "Reconstruction
(The Physician's Tale)", retold by Kiranjeet Singh, mixes regu-

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41. Lines 4-6. «Tragedy is a lot of 'never-left-the-block' Mr/ Nobodys,
whose small life is interrupted/ before he has had his chance to rise». My
paraphrasis.

lar text with words written in different typefaces.[42] The strange combination of different fonts is difficult to read and conveys the idea that the speaker is not able to control her text or that emotions are overwhelming her. Yet, each font reveals a different side of the same, complex story, and betrays some unspoken secrets which go beyond the official version of her tale. Kiranjeet Singh, the fictional author of "Reconstruction (The Physician's Tale)", is described as «[f]ormerly a plastic surgeon with a passion for poetry, she now prefers to reconstruct lines on the page rather than the face».[43] Her monologue is, in fact, a collage in free verses, in which phonetic rhymes are replaced by a sort of visual "rhyme": the last word in each line is written in the apex, and each line also contains a word in a contour font:

> Had her dad's red hair but as **if** [1]
> Ragged it. **He** snapped; she [knew]
> How broke his lens **was**, gave [what]
> It wanted, **a** game of [he...]
> But *he* became **real**. My Gino [did]
> some shots for that man, [..][44]

Also, three words are written in a font which reproduces the technique of cutting out newspaper headlines to form new words in blackmail letters. The poem begins with an epitaph taken form the newspaper *The Echo*, 20th June 1984, in which an honour killing which took place in the Italian communi-

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42. Agbabi's use of different typefaces gets back to a long tradition (starting from the work of Lawrence Stern) of conveying meaning also through the material and visual quality of the page. Agbabi has certainly been influenced by Edward Kamau Brathwaite's Sycorax Video Style, a combination of customized typefaces and spelling used to bridge the gap between oral performance and visual dimension.

43. Agbabi 2014: 119.

44. Lines 1-6.

ty is narrated: a father killed his fourteen-year-old daughter, brought her severed head to her abuser, and received a lenient sentence. The author's biography reports that the poem was inspired by a similar murder which happened in India in 2012, but the sources of Chaucer's "The Physician's Tale" are multiple, and include the biblical story of Jephthah (in "The Book of Judges"), Titus Livius' *Histories*, the *Romance of the Rose*, and John Gower's *Confessio Amantis*. Violence against women, differently put, repeats itself indefinitely through time and place. The lyric voice taken on by the character of Kiranjeet Singh is that of the distressed mother of the murdered girl, who expresses her grief for the lost daughter: the mixture of fonts appears as a symptom of her suffering and her incapacity to cope with the emotional strains. She claims that she could not recognize her husband's actions, or face him, and that she knows that, in the psychiatric hospital where he is serving an eight-year sentence, he feels guilt-ridden. Reading each font separately, nevertheless, allows different narratives to emerge, which intersect with the official version, signaling that the role of the mother cannot totally be understood. The contour font reveals that she thinks that her husband should have killed the abuser («If he was a real man, he would have dealt with it man to man thrust that cold knife where it belonged»), showing that her apparent passivity is actually balanced by a ferocious desire to get revenge. The apexed words at the end of each line instead suggest that she knew about her daughter's abuse, but she did not do anything and, as the ellipsis suggests, still would not know what to do («I knew what he... did to. young 'girls'. He had that. baby...photo and the only way, to. save Virginia... was to....». Finally, the letters cut from the newspaper

read «ferraro [the sexual predator's name] fOund hanging» – but the mismatching of capital and small letters suggests that his suicide is probably only the mother's wishful thinking. The poem, differently put, hosts the word of someone who is both a victim (a mother who has lost a child) and a perpetrator (someone who never stopped her daughter's violation and condones the logic of revenge), and conflates her contradictory flows of thoughts within a single text. The three narratives highlight the complexity of the mother's perspective, and the meaning of the highlighted poetic words are mobilized according to the narrative that the reader decides to follow.

Another monologue in which Agbabi experiments with the conciseness of form in order to translate a controversial theme in *Chaucer's Tales* is "I go back to May 1967 (The Clerk's Tale)". The Chaucerian "Clerk's Tale" is often contrasted with "The Wife of Bath's Tale" because of their depiction of femininity: while the latter presents a strong, independent narrator who tells a story about women's desire to be self-governing, the latter deals with a woman who is exalted precisely for her passivity and acceptance of oppression. Taken from the last of the hundred tales narrated in Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decameron* ("Giornata decima, novella decima"),[45] Chaucer's "Clerk's Tale" tells the story of the powerful Marquis of Saluzzo who, on a whim, decides to marry a poor peasant named Griselda, demanding that she submits to his will unconditionally. He then humiliates and subjects her to the cruelest torments, such as taking away her daughter and son pretending to have them killed, repudiating her on account of his necessity of marrying a woman of higher status, and asking Griselda to attend to his

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45. Boccaccio 1996.

new bride-to-be. Griselda patiently surrenders to her husband's will, and even begs him to not treat his new wife as he treated her: «ye ne prikke with no tormenting/ This tendre mayden, as ye han don mo./ For she is fostred in hire norishinge/ more tenderly […]» (lines 1038-1041).[46] An exemplum of idealized Christian virtue, meekness and endurance, Griselda, at the end of the story, is repaid for all her sacrifices: her husband reveals that he never intended to abandon her, that the young bride and her little brother are Griselda's lost children, and that her sufferings have only been a test for her. Her submission to her husband's will is compared to Christian submission to God. Her mortification and abasement are rewarded, her sufferings turned into happiness, and she is finally able to fully take on her role as her husband's rightfully wedded wife in spite of her low condition, like a good Christian will be repaid in the Kingdom of Heaven. A complex tale which, as Lucia Battaglia Ricci reminds us, «has been constructed through a highly re-fined process of rewriting, which allows important texts from Boccaccio's theoretical library to converse»,[47] Griselda's narra-tive has arisen multiple readings and interpretations, focusing on women's role in medieval society, conjugal happiness, and Christian ethics and virtue.

"The Clerk's Tale"'s celebration of women's submission does not seem to travel as easily into the twenty-first century as the Wife of Bath's assertion of independence. Agbabi manages nevertheless to establish a dialogue with the fourteenth-centu-ry text with the help of another source, i.e, Sharon Olds' poem

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46. «Do not torment this tender maiden as you have done with others. For she was raised with a high upbringing, more tenderly […]» (my paraphrasis).
47. Battaglia Ricci 2013: 79. My translation.

"I go back to May 1937",[48] a text in which the American writer addresses her parents' disastrous marriage both as a personal tragedy and as the necessary course in which both her life and her poetic experience took root. In *Telling Tales*, 1937 is replaced with the year 1967 to accommodate the biography of the two imaginary speakers, Yegide Idowu-Clarke, who, in the appendix, is described as an accomplished poet and academic based in Lagos and London, and her unnamed "lyric I". The structure of Agbabi's dramatic monologue mirrors exactly the structure of Olds' lyric. Both poems begin with a first-person narrator telling an imaginary time-journey to their parents' youth, right before they got married. While in the Californian poet's text (first published in 1987) the parents are seen «standing at the formal gates of their colleges» (line 1), in Agbabi's rewriting they are «standing outside their family compounds» (line 1). In Olds' poem, both are described as young, innocent, and unprepared, whereas in Agbabi's text the asymmetry between the father («twenty-four but already a big man in Lagos», line 5) and the mother («walking barefoot on the red dust road to her/ village, a calabash on her head, wearing her only cloth/ and crucifix» lines 7-9) is striking. In both poems, the first-person lyric voice intervenes abruptly, midway through the poem, to disrupt the idyllic representation of young love and to express a desire to prevent a tragedy from happening. This expedient allows Agbabi to summarize the content of the Clerk's tale: «I want to approach them and say Stop,/ I am begging you – you are not a bad woman,/ he is not a good man, he is going to put you on trial, / like Job: [...]»,

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48. First published in Olds 1987. The Poem is also available at https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/47057/i-go-back-to-may-1937

lines 13-16. In both poems, nevertheless, the lyric I decides not to stop the young couple to unite, because she acknowledges her parents' calamitous union will, nevertheless, give her life. Agbabi's poem intersects Olds' criticism of the bourgeois institution of marriage with the Christian undertext which underlies Chaucer's and Boccaccio's Tales (see the crucifix mentioned in line 9), but also with the Yoruba's cult of Shango and Oshun, as the last lines show:

> But I do not say it. I want to live my life. I
> take them up like Shango and Oshu
> mahogany dolls and rub them together
> at the hips, wood on wood, as if to
> make fire from them, and I say
> Do what is God's will and I will bear witness. (lines 42-47)

The conclusion of Agbabi's poem, like the ending of Olds' poem, overlaps the autobiographical theme with metareflections on poetry's capacity to transform sufferings into art. In the Californian poet's text, there is a reference to two anonymous paper dolls from which the speaker imagines to «strike sparks». The dolls, in other words, are two props whose whiteness refers to the pages onto which poetry takes form. Poetry emerges as strictly connected to a child's solitary game, a sort of consolation, or a form of escapism, which nonetheless is able to metaphorically generate glimmers of hope and resistance. In Agbabi's monologue, the dolls are made of dark wood instead, and reproduce two African deities. The child's game, in this case, emerges not as a solitary, temporary disconnection from reality, but as an exercise of reconnection and hybridization: the English language mixes with Yoruba tradition and imagination, the medieval texts are fused with an American lyric, and the outcome is not just a sparkle, but rather a fire. Poetry,

the text suggests, is an incendiary game, and the fire is connected both with the clashes of differences and with the capacity to generate new life.

Conclusive remarks

In this essay I have endeavoured to follow some of the multiple paths of otherness which make up Agbabi's twenty-first century rewriting of Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*. *Heteroglossia*, a term coined by Mikhail Bakhtin in the early twentieth century has been the lens through which I have discussed *Telling Tales*, a work which inserts itself into the folds and fractures of the already highly composite and variegated Chaucerian world, and explores it to reimagine metropolitan England. Within the poetic text, conflicts of identity and point of view emerge through the insertion one-within-the other of different voices, who are keen on signaling that their utterances are constructed, and part of a game through which they both take on and take a distance from someone else's perspective. We have seen, for example, how in "100 Chars (The Monk's Tale)" Agbabi ventriloquizes a crosswords and puzzle creator giving voice to a social media addict and hikikomori, who in turns mimics a Chaucerian monk retelling stories that have been retold in multiple historical accounts. In "Reconstruction (The Physician's Tale)", an imaginary plastic surgeon-turned-poet sews together the contradictory narratives that linger in the mind of a mother who witnessed the honour killing of her daughter – a crime that repeats itself through time and space, narrated in a variety of media and accounts. Finally, in "I Go Back to May 1967 (The Clerk's Tale)", the Christian allegory of Griselda from Boccaccio's *Decameron* and Chaucer's

"Clerk's Tale" is transformed through the work of a fictional Anglo-Nigerian poet and academic, fashioning a lyric-I which ventriloquizes the work of a contemporary American poet discussing the crisis of her own childhood.

In Agbabi's poetry, conflicts are not composed, but they are condensed in an extremely compressed language, which is also fractured by convergences across idioms, narratives and texts. As Agbabi intersects these one-within-the-other, she also engages with otherness as something that cannot be assimilated to the self. Her work has been addressed as an example of poetic hospitality because what emerges through her lines is mainly difference. Being hospitable means accepting the bond of solidarity that connects us to the other, while also being aware that the other may be a potential threat: in most Socratic dialogues, Derrida reminds us, the foreigner is someone who asks dangerous questions, i.e., questions which may be perceived as challenges to the stability of doxa, of conventions, or even of the law. Hospitality, differently put, does not necessarily mean to sympathize with an 'other', but rather to accept him/her as part of a bond of mutual acknowledgement. Casting light on the variety and diversification of twenty-first century Britain means embracing a wide spectrum of humanity, including the recognition of those aspects that are often marginalized and concealed: sexuality, disease, asymmetry of powers, discriminatory patterns and so on. So, in her melting pot of utterances and expressions, everybody may find a voice: academics (for example in "Emily" (The Knight's Tale)" or in "I go back to May 1967 (The Clerk's Tale)") and swindlers (as in "Profit (The Pardoner's Tale)"), obsessive mothers who persecute their refugee daughters-in-law ("Joined-Up Writing (The Man of

Law's Tale)") and persecuted immigrant children ("Sharps an Flats (The Prioress's Tale)"), surgeons who try to reconstruct the truth of a crime and mothers who decompose and dissect this very truth ("Reconstruction (The Physician's Tale)"). Agbabi's poetry emerges as an extraordinary genre to explore circuits of convergences and divergences, connections and disjunctions, and dialogue across borders. Like the Chaucerian text, the seriousness of the topics she tackles and the complexity of her language are balanced by her humor and lightness. Poetry emerges as a game in which alterity and identity cross and intermingle, and poetic dialogism emerges as a form of internal conflict, created by the profound ambiguity of the poetic utterance.

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