



universität
wien

DIPLOMARBEIT / DIPLOMA THESIS

Titel der Diplomarbeit/ Title of the Diploma Thesis:

"(Re)writing England Through the Lens of Female, Black
and Queer Identity: Selected Poems by Patience Agbabi"

Verfasst von/ submitted by

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angestrebter akademischer Grad / in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the
degree of

Magistra der Philosophie (Mag. phil.)

Wien, 2019/ Vienna, 2019,

Studienkennzahl lt. Studienblatt:
degree programme code as it appears on
the student record sheet:

A 190 344 350

Studienrichtung lt. Studienblatt /
programme as it appears
on the student record sheet:

Lehramtsstudium UF Englisch UF italienisch

Betreut von / Supervised by:

Emer. o. Univ.-Prof. Dr. Margarete Rubik

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Prof. Rubik for her precious help, her contagious enthusiasm
and her patience,
my grandmothers Mirella and Rosa for teaching me how to overcome obstacles with
grace and dignity (and a smile),
my family and Sonja for the support and the love,
and Ludwig for always believing in me

“What really knocks me out is a book that, when you're all done reading it, you wish the author that wrote it was a terrific friend of yours and you could call him up on the phone whenever you felt like it. That doesn't happen much, though.”

— J.D. Salinger, *The Catcher in the Rye*

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1. Introduction

In 2005, the Arts Council England (ACE) commissioned a report¹ with the aim of examining diversity within the realm of British poetry. The situation was alarming: black and Asian poets accounted for a mere 1% of published poets in the UK. Fortunately, the figures have risen in the last decade, but the numbers remain relatively low. A diachronic study carried out between 2012 and 2018 by the University of Liverpool² shows that only 9.1% of the 20,000 poems published in this time span were authored by poets of colour. It emerges from this picture that black British poetry is still “a hidden, marginalised affair” (Welsh 181). Even in the worlds of academia and literary criticism, black British poetry holds a somewhat marginal position, eclipsed by the more popular genre of narrative fiction (see Salman Rushdie, Zadie Smith, Monica Ali, etc.).

This fact can be observed in the scarcity of publications about black British poets, except in the case of a few, prominent names that have made it into anthologies and have sometimes become public figures, collaborating on projects of various natures (e.g. Bernardine Evaristo, Benjamin Zephaniah, Jackie Kay). Nonetheless, most Britons might not be familiar even with these well-known personalities. Poetry is indeed still seen as the “taxonomic other” (Zettelmann 137) when compared to narrative fiction, living in the shade of this persistent dichotomy. The genre is in itself cryptic and requires a certain effort in order to decode the meanings encapsulated in its brevity, making it more difficult to be appreciated upon a superficial reading. It is not a coincidence that instances of best-selling poetry are rarer than in fiction, as nowadays the average reader seems to be more oriented towards more accessible kinds of readings, such as thrillers and romance novels.³ In order to illustrate this tendency, it is sufficient to observe the sale statistics within the UK. Even if poetry sales have risen by 12% in the last year, in 2017 1.3 million

¹ “Free Verse Report” (2005), commissioned by the Arts Council England, the Scottish Arts Council, and the Arts Council of Wales.

² “The State of Poetry and Poetry Criticism in the UK and Ireland 2012-2018,” *The Ledbury Emerging Poetry Critics* sponsored by Centre for New and International Writing, the archives at the Scottish Poetry Library, and the National Library of Scotland.

³ “The Information: Genre Fiction Sales”, Anna Chambers, *Financial Times*.

volumes of poetry were sold, compared to the 18.1 million sales of general and literary fiction and the 18.7 million of crime books.⁴ If we then consider poetry in combination with a postcolonial element, the result appears rather unfortunate (at least in terms of the sales figures, as demonstrated in the first paragraph). It is certainly a shame to observe this phenomenon since black British identity constitutes an important part of the multicultural British society.

Moreover, there are a number of emergent poets that wish to make their contribution to the portrayal of Britain from a non-hegemonic perspective. It is long overdue to give prominence to these voices, especially in this specific historical moment, when many parts of the world are experiencing a rise in nationalism. The politics of cultural homogeneity and fervour for tradition advocated by these political currents can inevitably have negative effects on minorities, who are increasingly at risk of being disregarded and, under the worst circumstances, being silenced. In this scenario, the notion of minorities does not only include ethnic and cultural ones, as previously discussed, but also sexual and gender minority groups. Therefore, it is important that universities as well as other educational institutions – but also public broadcasters and the press – dedicate enough space and time to allow these identities to be heard, recognised and explored by a greater audience. As Bertram argues, “literary criticism shapes canons. Academics and teachers play a large part in determining what gets read and taught, hence what secures a place in literary history” (2005: 11-12). Without entering the system, most of these voices continue to be neglected. It is also crucial to remember that reaching a wider public and making people more familiar with these non-normative identities also helps to mitigate the fear of the unknown, of the abject, of the Other, which is a tendency we urgently have to counteract in our present society. “In times of political upheaval and uncertainty,” argues director of Nielsen Book Research Andre Breedts, “people turn to poems to make sense of the world” (“Poetry Sales”, *The Guardian*), a statement that suits the current socio-political situation.

For this reason, I decided to analyse the poetry of Patience Agbabi, a unique case in the panorama of contemporary British poetry since she “embrace[s] the page-stage,

⁴ See “Record Numbers Of Readers Buying Poetry In The UK”, *Arts Journal* and “Crime pays: thrillers and detective novels now outsell all other fiction”, Anita Singh, *The Telegraph*.

black-white, / heterosexual-homosexual continuum" (Agbabi 2008: 34). In 2004, Agbabi was nominated one of Britain's Next Generation Poets, an award that granted her some deserved recognition from the critics. Amongst the wider reading public, by contrast, the poet is still largely unknown. In spite of the increasing academic interest in her work, there seems to be a scarcity of secondary literature reviewing her writing. Part of the existing research focuses on formal aspects of her poetry, also connected with her activity as a performance poet. In this thesis, I would like to analyse an aspect that needs more investigation, namely the intersection of different, sometimes overlapping, identities. This is considered a useful approach since, due to her varied interests, the poet cannot be portrayed only as e.g. a black poet, or as a feminist poet. It seems more accurate to state that she addresses issues related to black identity, feminism and queerness, frequently in combination. However, it is advisable not to understand intersectionality as a concept hinting only at social oppression. In Agbabi, the overlapping of different categories may or may not be seen as something negative. The same holds true for the single categories, as the poet's intent goes beyond a mere critique of racism, homophobia and/or sexism. For instance, Agbabi writes about queer identities from a refreshing perspective, celebrating their diversity as something enriching.

For the scope of this analysis, a body of eleven poems from the collections *Transformatrix* (2000) and *Telling Tales* (2014) was examined in detail. The poems are assigned to three chapters, which cover the main themes of Agbabi's poetry: feminism, black identity, and queerness. It must be mentioned at this point that many of these poems contain multiple themes, for instance race and feminism, which could justify their inclusion in more than one category. Ultimately, each poem was assigned to a single category of analysis according to one important feature. This should not be understood to mean that a given poem belongs exclusively to a single category, rather that this decision was taken for practical reasons. A telling example is "The Wife of Bafa", which is placed in the chapter dedicated to female voices, but it could be also included in the chapter about black identity, given the Nigerian origins of the protagonist. The detailed analyses of the selected poems will, I hope, do justice to the complexity of their themes and perspectives.

To conclude, I would like to draw the readers' attention to the sometimes enigmatic nature of Agbabi's poetry. Her writing is dense with intertextual references ranging from popular to high culture that, often, might also have intentionally been used in an obscure manner. This fact requires a careful reading, especially given the paucity of secondary literature. It is also necessary to use a wide range of sources to decode the meanings hidden behind her carefully-chosen words. Despite these difficulties, this thesis seeks to provide a useful contribution to the study of Agbabi's poetry and aims to shed light on this talented and resourceful author.

2. About Patience Agbabi

2.1 Biography

Patience Agbabi (1965-) is, without any doubt, one of Britain's most dynamic and fascinating poets. She defines herself as bi-cultural and bi-sexual (Santilli 295) and is a skilful writer, poet, performer, as well as lecturer and workshop facilitator. Her talent has been acclaimed by a number of poets and writers (e.g. Jeanette Winterson and Simon Armitage), and she has won a series of prestigious awards and has been nominated for numerous other prizes. Agbabi was Canterbury Poet Laureate from 2009 to 2010 and she was also poet-in-residence at Eton college and Oxford Brookes University among others (Smith 2003). She won the Excellence Literary Award for her first collection *R.A.W.* (1995) and her last volume of poetry *Telling Tales* (2014), a humorous and inventive 21st-century re-writing of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, was shortlisted for the Ted Hughes Award. Her work has appeared in a great many journals and anthologies, which focus mostly on black British authors (e.g. *Bittersweet: Contemporary Black Women's Poetry*). Her poetry is also included in the *Cambridge Companion to Twentieth-Century British and Irish Women's Poetry* and one of her compositions ("Eat me") was selected for the English Literature GCSE.

The fascination with Agbabi's non-traditional work probably derives from her uncommon life story. The poet was born in London from Nigerian parents but at the age of one, she was given to a British, upper-class foster family living in Sussex. The "umbilical cord" to her African descent was never severed, as young Agbabi used to spend every summer break in London with her biological parents. This untraditional upbringing contributed to the feeling of belonging to different cultures simultaneously, which is the reason why the poet defines herself "bi-cultural" ("I am I am I am I am / bicultural and sometimes clinical" Agbabi 2000: 10). The poet stated that this practice was rather common at the time and she suffered more from having to constantly explain her family situation rather than from having two families, a fact which she considered beneficial for her writing career ("Crossing Borders"). In fact, also her varied and miscellaneous literary influences attest an interest in sources as different as the British literary canon and manifestations of

popular culture, such as rap music and poetry slams. The mixing of the British upper-class establishment with contents of black consciousness makes her approach peculiar, even if compared with other contemporary black British poets, who often have a similar agenda but cannot be compared to Agbabi in terms of form and inspirations, as Smith observes (2003).

Agbabi has always had a fervent passion for the literary world. She graduated from Oxford Pembroke College in English Language and Literature in 1986. Before she became a professional writer, she pursued different jobs in London: tele-interviewer, assistant manager, freelance typesetter, proof-reader for the BBC. However, starting from the publication of her first collection she was offered to conduct workshops and take part in literary residencies in different contexts (Ramey 6). In 2002, after the publication of two successful poetry volumes, she completed her studies with a master degree in Creative Writing from the University of Sussex, thanks to a special grant awarded to her by the Arts and Humanities Research Board (9). Not surprisingly, her thesis was dedicated to the relation between poetry and the written and oral medium ("Word of Mouth: deconstructing the 'P' Words: 'Performance', 'Page' and 'Poetry'"). Part of her final project included also a corona of sonnets accompanied by a skirt covered with graffiti (9).

The poet has been performing in London since the 1990s (Smith 2003), passionately declaiming her work in poetry slams and spoken word events of different kinds. She is also widely present at Poetry Society Events, Literary Festivals, and Gay Pride Rallies across the country (Smith). Her love for eschewing categorisation motivated her to choose totally diverse venues for performing her work, ranging from London's underground scene to the fortress of the male British upper-class establishment, Eton College. In 1999, she became the poet in residence at London's Poetry Café, a project supported by the Poetry Society, and later that year she also completed her residency at a tattoo parlour in Camden, where she sought to create "poems suitable to be tattooed" (Smith). Moreover, this residency sparked her interest for the human body and body art (Smith) ("the tattooist, Cruella De Ville, who stitched hot, dark / ink into my taut flesh as time / flowed in a corset of glass", Agbabi 2000: 47).

In the following years, she turned to education. In 2005, she was invited to hold a literary workshop at one of England's most prestigious boys' schools (Young, "Eton"), which is something of a contradiction for an artist who has been called "the PVC poet" due to her frequent allusions to kinky and sadomasochistic love (hence the reference to PVC, used to produce the glossy, dark garments commonly used in this sexual practice) (Young). Eton's headmaster Little referred to her as an "exciting wordsmith" (Young). Moreover, he was not worried about the explicit subject matter of her work, admitting that "after all, sex and drugs and rock 'n' roll are part of everyday life" (Young), showing in this way a certain opening of the establishment towards non-traditional and subversive art. In the 2000s, she started to work as a university lecturer, teaching Creative Writing at the University of Greenwich (2002-2003), University of Cardiff (2002-2004), and University of Kent (2004-2005) (Smith 2003). She is currently a fellow in Creative Writing at Oxford Brookes University and collaborates with the British Council, with literary festival and poetry associations as a workshop facilitator. In 2017, she was appointed a fellow of the prestigious Royal Literary Society.

2.2 Style, Influences and Poetics

The poetry of Patience Agbabi is perhaps so intriguing because it is difficult to categorise. The artist has drawn inspiration from many quarters, resulting in a poetry that is multi-layered and constantly evolving (Ramey 2). Agbabi stated that as a poet, she "like[s] the idea of marrying pop culture with tradition" (qtd. in Young, "Eton"). In fact, in the "Prologue" of *Transformatrix* she explains her diverse cultural influences: "I was raised on Watch with Mother / The Rime of the Ancient Mariner / and Fight the Power" (9).⁵ Her literary practice derives partly from the love for form of the "high" culture and her education within the English upper-class establishment, first and foremost as an Oxford graduate. It is not only the canon's formal aspects that influenced Agbabi but its contents and themes as well. In fact, her works show the sensitivity of someone who has a deep knowledge of tradition

⁵Here, she refers to: 1) the BBC'S programme aimed at pre-school children, 2) Samuel Taylor Coleridge's famous ballad, and 3) to the title of a famous song of Public Enemy, Agbabi's favourite rap group.

and can, thus, not only refer to but also appropriate it. A prime example of this practice is her homage to Chaucer, the creation of a modern and bold reconstruction of *The Canterbury Tales*. Solely an expert could have ventured to re-tell one of the greatest works of literature of the British tradition. At the same time, she has always been influenced by popular culture: her fascination ranges from hip-hop and rap to generally popular music and style trends. Amongst all of these sources, black culture definitely had a considerable impact on her personal and artistic development, although she does not want to be categorised as a “black writer” as the notion is “too universalising” (Thompson 159) and would be distorting the true nature of her oeuvre, so varied that it is “dangerous to just see that side of it” (Thompson 156).

Agbabi started to develop a passion for writing during her childhood, after being read plenty of literature by her adoptive parents, especially fairy tales and nursery rhymes (Ramey 3). It must be added that her foster parents held great academic expectations for Patience, and they were the ones who introduced her to the British literary tradition (4). She spent her childhood reading classical masterpieces such as C.S. Lewis’ *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (1950) and Frances Hodgson Burnett’s *The Secret Garden* (1911) (3). At the age of seven, she started to write long “short” stories, as she defined them (Thompson 147), and later in her teenage years she began to write poetry. The poetic world became a “place of self-discovery”, a safe and private harbour where she could experiment, away from “confusing intercultural experiences” (Ramey 4). At the age of thirteen, she moved with her parents from Sussex to Colwyn Bay in northern Wales, so that they could open a bed and breakfast in this seaside resort. Since she had to move in the middle of secondary school, settling down in a new town was initially rather difficult for young Agbabi, but later on she realized that living in Colwyn Bay brought some advantages, such as having a “room on one’s own” in the new, larger house, where she could retreat and write (“Crossing Borders”).

It is exactly in this period of her life that she discovered *Northern Soul*, a music movement born in the North of England in the 1960s that was inspired by black American soul music, and also influenced the way people dressed and danced (Fontenot, “Northern Soul”). This music movement also had a strong connection

with ska and two-tone lyrics (Ramey 5), which the poet acknowledged to be the sources of her inspiration for starting to write poetry in her teen years (Thompson 148). Northern Soul became so fundamental because it introduced her to black art: as she claimed, "suddenly it was cool to be black and, more importantly, the music was black and/or inspired by black culture which I could claim as my own. And it was brilliant" (Ramey 5). In addition to this, the poet comments on the influence that Northern Soul had on her poetry: "I've always tried to emulate the soul spirit in my writing" ("Chaucer Remixed"). Definitely, this movement helped her to form her identity since she had issues with finding her place between the two cultures she lived in. In fact, in the autobiographic poem "Ufo Woman" (2000: 15) she recalls how the other white classmates looked at her afro hair and two-toned hand palms with astonishment, namely making her feel like the alien in the group ("Can we touch your hair?" Or not ask at all; / my two-tone hand with its translucent palm"). They also thought she would be familiar with Caribbean patois since she was "black" (Ramey 4), and black people were mainly thought to be immigrants from the Caribbean Commonwealth (Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago and other smaller islands), who emigrated from the former colonies after the 1950s. The children could not tell the difference between the Caribbean and African culture, and this added to the confusion in Agbabi's head, who asked herself if she was supposed to understand patois (4). With the discovery of Northern Soul, being black became something of interest and she started to get more attracted to forms of black culture, which partially already ran through her veins but were blurred by the previous situation of cultural confusion. The predominance of the oral element in this music movement was particularly fascinating in the eyes of the poet:

I was inspired by punk and two-tone lyrics where for the first time in history you could get on a microphone and sing, and if you couldn't sing, you could speak the words – and that appealed to me so I started writing what I called lyrics and then got interested in more poetic forms (Thompson 148).

It is interesting to observe how the author discovered the major influences of her poetry in her teenage years. On the one hand, she listened to two-tone lyrics, ska, and punk and on the other hand, she read the works of "dead white poets" (as she often calls the poets of the literary canon, Thompson 148). In the sixth grade, young

Agbabi was introduced to one literary work that significantly affected her writing: Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* ("I was sweet 16 and ready to be seduced by Literature with a capital 'L'" qtd. in "Chaucer Remixed"). She was immediately attracted to this masterpiece: "it blew my mind. The characters, the rhymes, the fact that it was so old, the language, the irony" (Ramey 5). Her teacher asked them to write a portrait in the style of Chaucer, and Agbabi started to write a General Prologue to "The Colwyn Bay Tales", which featured different characters inspired by the groups of young people from her local town: "mods, rockers, bikers, punks, new romantics and soulies" ("Chaucer Remixed"). The style was also adhering to Chaucer: iambic pentameter, rhyming couplets, archaic inversions ("Profile of the Poet"), which are all elements that she will retain in *Telling Tales*. A couple of years later, the parody of the Prologue was brought to the interview for Oxford's Pembroke College and it surely contributed to the fact that she was accepted to major in English Language and Literature (Ramey 5).

During her college years, she started to be acquainted with other authors: these were further examples of "classics" as well as contemporary poets such as Carol Ann Duffy, Roddy Lumsden and Michael Donaghy, who appealed to her as they were "really into form" (Thompson 153). In particular, Agbabi said that Duffy is her favourite poet and that she really inspired the volume *Transformatrix*, especially because of her clever use of rhymes (149). Agbabi has always had an unrelenting fascination for formal aspects of poetry and she "likes to tinker and toy with language, with metre and with sound," as her mentor Kwame Dawes has noted (qtd. in Smith 2003). An aspect that reminds of Duffy's work is the use of certain poetic features, such as the dramatic monologue, a form used skilfully by both poets. In *The World's Wife* (1999), Duffy uses this poetic technique, made famous by Robert Browning in the 19th century, in order to give voice to the inner thoughts and feelings of her heroines, who were previously outshone by their famous husbands, brothers and relatives. Bertram praises this poetical form by stating that it is "well-suited to these post-modern times" since "[...]it is preoccupied with identity, ideally suited for exploring the relativity of perspectives and truths" (80). Agbabi also uses this technique to explore the minds of her different characters. In *Telling Tales* (2014), a great number of compositions benefit from the use of the dramatic

monologue since the characters engage in conversation with the reader or with an inner-textual addressee and they present themselves directly through their own words (see section “Telling Tales” at the end of this chapter).

During the 1990s, after graduating from university, Agbabi moved to London and started to attend a number of open mic events. This meant coming into contact with the vibrant black culture of the metropolis, including the community of black artists which were making their voice heard in venues like *Apple and Snakes*. Agbabi felt quite a difference between her and the people who had grown up inside this community since, even though her parentage was African, she had little contact with that world before this moment:

I hadn't been brought up with a strong Black community as they had. I hadn't been brought up in London or gone to school there. I spent time in Sussex and North Wales and then went to Oxford, so I was quite removed. (Thompson 162)

There are various black authors that inspired her, especially in terms of content, like Jackie Kay, Lemn Sissay and Merle Collins. She met them at poetry performances and was able to connect and become friends with them, as she stated herself (148). Interestingly enough, both Jackie Kay's and Lemn Sissay's personal stories have some similarities with Agbabi's: they were all born in Britain from African parents and were later adopted by British families, although they did not retain such a vivid contact with their biological parents as Agbabi did. It can be said that they went through a struggle to belong, which is vividly depicted in their works (e.g. Kay's *The Adoption Papers* 1991 and Sissay's play *Something Dark* 2006). This struggle can also be exemplified in the words of Audre Lorde, the famous African American poet, who once told Jackie Kay: “You're both. It's fine to be black and Scottish and you don't need to pick and choose” (Jenkins 126), a statement that could also fit Agbabi's situation. In the early 2000s, Agbabi also attended the Afro Style School for young black writers launched by Kwame Dawes. The poet became her tutor, giving her feedback for her writing. Agbabi acknowledges that there are some similarities in the subject matter that she and other black writers deal with, especially other women writers (“In terms of the subject matter, the Black identity and the woman identity comes through very strongly” Thompson 153).

Notwithstanding, the poet is not a supporter of labels, and she does not like to be categorised solely as a black writer since there are many more aspects to her work, which can be enjoyed both by white and black audiences. They will perhaps get different nuances of the same composition, like the references to the classics versus the content coming from the black sub-culture (153). Moreover, she is critical of essentialist views on writers from cultural minorities and warns of the editorial exploitation of such phenomena, which tend to trap writers in certain stereotypes in order to increase the sales. She rather thinks that black writing is part of British writing and, given its postcolonial element, it is, in turn, part of an international scenario (Wójcik 82). In this regard, the author stated that:

It's as if all Black writers are supposed to be the same, whereas white writers, of course, they're allowed to write lots of different styles and genres. But because that 'Black thing' is still seen as a separate market by a lot of publishers. [...] So they have to be quite hip, humorous, very current. What if you want to write a historical novel as a Black person – does that mean no-one would be interested? (Thompson 152).

Furthermore, Agbabi herself, together with a number of critics (e.g. Jenkins, Smith, Coppola), has pointed out that her writing is somewhat different from that of other black authors. In relation to formal aspects, she claimed the following, re-stating the influence of more traditional writers on her poetry: “in terms of actual style, I generally write in Standard English [...] people wouldn't necessarily know I was Black” (153). She also stated that the writing styles of other black authors differ a great deal from hers, which might originate in her “bi-cultural” upbringing and the fact that she fully discovered her black identity at a later time, characteristics that made her voice “more unique,” as she acknowledged (Thompson 162). Smith (2003) claims that her dynamism goes beyond dub poetry, the musical poems of Jean Binta Breeze, and the social and racial protest of Kwesi Johnson and Zephaniah. In addition, the critic considers her work different even from Sissay' and Kay's, especially for her use of form (Smith 2003). Wójcik also argues in favour of the poet's uniqueness, writing that Agbabi deliberately seeks to avoid “the mere cut-and-paste reworking of exotica” (81), such as the one of the African colours and the Rastafarian symbols, very dear to some “second-rate” dub poets, but also associated with Reggae music (81). Coppola also reminds us of her unique style: “although her work is featured in anthologies on black British poets, apparently rooting her in a

fixed national space, Agbabi's aesthetics is deeply influenced by her transnational and transcultural sensitivity" (374).

As regards the influence coming from rap lyrics, it is important to note that Agbabi is able to own and expand beyond the limits of the superficial "bling" of rap discourse, as noted by Wójcik (85). The poet started to listen to rap during her university years and she became an admirer of Chuck D and his group Public Enemy, whose lyrics she considered qualitatively good and "clever", unlike those of other similar rap artists (Thompson 148). Public Enemy's texts are, indeed, very well written and have some meaningful substance, mainly concentrating on social and political criticism. From the hip-hop and rap world she takes the pulsating rhythmicity (which, in the jargon, is called "flow"): her lyrics have a beating rhythm and highly rely on rhymes and figures of sound. Alliteration is another phenomenon which adds to the musicality. Often, the poet plays with a word transforming it into something else: "I was desperate / disparate / diasporate (1995: 15), the transformation from "hippy" to "yuppie" (1995: 33) or from "white powder" to "white power" ("Cain" in R.A.W.) This "alliterative wordology" (Wójcik 83) is a technique often used by rappers, and Agbabi acknowledges that she was inspired by some of these lyrics: "There's a rapping track ("Sound of da Police" by KRS One) which repeats the word *overseer* until it gets to *officer* – it's brilliant" (Thompson 158). Another feature taken from the hip-hop world is the use of acronyms, which on the one hand help her to achieve brevity while on the other hand allow to create a cryptic poetic world. In fact, the meaning of her poetry must be sought between allusions and associations that belong to pop culture as well as something completely different, such as mediaeval folklore or Greek mythology. For instance, the rap-like "Prologue" of *Telling Tales* closes with the following verses: "I'm MC but the M is for mistress / when my April shows me what a kiss is ..." (2). The general reading public would probably ignore the meaning of the acronym *MC*, which stands for "Master of Ceremonies" or "Mic Controller". Whereas the first word is already well-known, the latter's meaning is not familiar to a non-expert audience. It is defined by the Urban Dictionary as "a rapper who is either the host of an event; someone with enough flow and skill to be considered a master of the art of rap" ("MC"). Agbabi is a master of making different worlds merge without any clash:

alongside these “rap-inflected” verses (Hena 530), she includes a clear homage to Chaucer’s opening of *The Canterbury Tales* (“Whan that Aprille with his shoures soote”).

Notwithstanding the great influence of hip-hop and rap on her poetry, Agbabi seems to have an ambivalent relationship with these genres, especially when it comes to their content. Wójcik (83) defines this struggle as a “nervous condition”: in the opening of her second collection, she promptly announces to the readers that she has “more skills than [she] got melanine” (2000: 10); this line shows what could seem as an uncomfortable position to her own identity. It is quite clear that the poet does not want to be associated with a certain rap tradition, which is often expressing homophobic, misogynistic and violent views (Wójcik 85). She criticises this kind of cheap rap (85) in the poem “Rap Trap”, which she associates with the negative term “claptrap”⁶, also followed by the line “Uncle Tom with a hard-on [...] disgrace[s] the race” (1995: 52). She clearly distances herself from a strand of this culture that does not represent her personality and her view of the world. Nonetheless, the poet is still able to retain a number of stylistic and oral features of this often-discussed music genre.

One of the most distinctive traits of her poetry is the “stage-page continuum”,⁷ as she declares in her manifesto poem “The Word”: “Give me a stage and I’ll cut form on it / give me a page and I’ll perform on it” (Agbabi 2000: 11). She has defined herself as a performance poet for a long time: not only has she given innumerable readings in the UK and throughout Europe, and Africa but she is also a poetry-slams and open-mic-events performer and *aficionado*. Her poetry “shrines” in London include Apples and Snakes, an organisation promoting spoken-word poetry, working on “amplifying unheard voices” (“Manifesto Apples and Snakes”) and the Hard Hedge Club located in Soho, a venue with a predominantly “white, working-class audience” (Ramey 2). Moreover, Agbabi was also a member of the performance group *Atomic Lip*, “poetry’s first pop group”, who toured from 1995 to 1998 (Smith 2003). Although she continues to perform her poetry in front of live audiences and has a deep connection to the oral medium, at the moment she prefers

⁶ “Absurd or nonsensical talk or ideas” (“clap trap”, Oxford Online Dictionary).

⁷ In spite of the importance of the oral element in her poetry, this aspect will not be analysed in this thesis since the topic is not particularly relevant for the aim of this research.

to define herself just as a writer (Thompson 153). On the one hand, this decision partly derives from her branching out to prose (the play *Fo(u)r Women*, 2003), including the idea to publish a novel and a children's picture book ("I Don't Call Myself a Poet" 2012). On the other hand, she is aware that the term *performance* can be "both celebratory and pejorative [...] depend[ing] on who is saying it," which is a huge issue according to the poet (Thompson 153). In an interview, Agbabi has claimed that she "[has] always felt more at home on the page than in performance. But people might not think that because I've been performing a long time" (Novak and Fischer 360). Indeed, she is widely known for her numerous public appearances, but she is a successful published poet and only a portion of her work has been performed. This positions herself (once again) in a liminal space: her poetry is not "written specifically for performance" (Novak 2011a: 32) nor it is solely declaimed "[...] in such a way you acknowledge there is an audience there" (Thompson 2006) as one would do in a common reading. She rather acknowledges that the written and oral media "can empower [each] other" (Ramey 9) and the one should not be privileged over the other since "poetry should be both" ("Chaucer Remixed"). She sees a continuum between the two: "the written must be spoken. The chasm between page and stage must be healed" (Smith 2003).

2.3 "*Transformatrix*: Girls Who Are Boys, Dominatrixes, Garçonnes"⁸

Agbabi's second collection, *Transformatrix*, was published in 2000 by Canongate Press. The poems analysed in this thesis partially come from this source. The essence of the volume is summarised in the futuristic title. On the one hand, the word *matrix* derives from the Latin *mater* ("mother"), which is Late Middle English for "womb" ("matrix" *OED*), indicating how the female element is prominent (see Thompson 157). On the other hand, the verb *transform* reflects the chameleonic changes (either physical or mental) that the characters populating this collection undergo. Since the changes taking place in a woman's life are vital to this collection, Agbabi dedicates some poems to the passage from childhood to puberty ("The

⁸ See Coppola 377.

Excoriation", s. chapter 6) or from puberty to womanhood ("The Tiger", "Leila"), as well as to bearing a child ("The Art of Creation").

As scholar Emmanuela Coppola pointed out, a further crucial element hidden in the title is *form* (377): in fact, the volume celebrates form, playing with it and twisting it. In this work, the poet excels in her experimentation with traditional lyrical conventions, such as the Shakespearean and Petrarchan Sonnets and the sestina form. Her main objective is re-appropriating the canonical patterns, not only writing within their boundaries. As can be seen in the opening "Prologue" (2000:9), Agbabi is poetically mature and can venture into the world of poetry, and re-work it from the inside:

I'm not scared of revelations
cos I've done my calculations [...]
If you wanna know what rhyme it is
it's feminine.
Cos I'm Eve on an Apple Mac
this is a rap attack
.....
Now I've eaten the apple
I'm more subtle than a snake is.
I wanna do poetic things in poetics places. (Agbabi 2000:9)

In what seems to be her poetical manifesto, the poet claims her right to use poetical licence and artistic freedom. If Petrarch devoted his love sonnets to the angelic Laura in the middle ages, there is now a female poet who turns into the troubadour of the 21st century, combining poetical conventions with rap lines and hip-hop beats. As can already be seen in these few lines, the attention to form is effortlessly combined with colloquial language (e.g. phonetic reduced forms, such as *cos* and *wanna*) and influences from popular culture ("Cos I'm Eve on an Apple Mac"). The reference to feminine rhyme represents a stand in favour of the appropriation and re-thinking of tradition. In fact, this rhyme is typically used by black poets and rappers, who "cross the line" in spite of "people think[ing] they're [feminine rhymes] more humorous and frivolous" (Thompson 158).

Most importantly, Agbabi re-works the perhaps quintessential myth created by patriarchy, the one of Eve as the source of the original sin ("Now I've eaten the apple / I'm more subtle than the snake is"). Eve is the source of male projection and takes

on the figure of a temptress. She eats the forbidden apple and then offers it to Adam, condemning the human race to mortal life, forever exiled from the Garden of Eden. In these lines, Agbabi is neither trying to reverse nor escape the myth, but rather proudly embraces her position of “sinner”, as the symbolical descendent of Eve. She takes pride in having eaten the prohibited fruit and boasts about having become more deceitful than the snake itself. The myth is fully embraced, and it sounds almost as a provocation towards the original one,⁹ which is part of the conservative Judeo-Christian culture. In this sense, she is also formulating a subtle critique towards the static and misogynistic discourse adopted by the Christian Church (especially the Catholic one).

In the closing sonnet of the volume, titled “Transformatrix”, the poet also skilfully reverses the traditional heterosexual *topos* of the poet and his muse. Here, she comments on the process of poetry-making and reveals that her source of inspiration comes from a cruel dominatrix (Coppola 378):

A pen poised over a blank page, I wait
for madam’s orders, her strict consonants
and the spaces between words, the silence. (Agbabi 2000:78)

There is no intention of hiding this sadomasochistic and homosexual relationship, rather the contrary. The inspiration from poetry does come from an erotic aspect, but it certainly does not conform to the expectations of the readers. Jenkins sees Agbabi as re-working the amatory tradition in order to make it a medium to express her bi-sexuality (124). The sonnet is one of the most representative forms of love poetry: for Carol Ann Duffy, it represents the slick “little black dress” of poetry (“Carol Ann Duffy on Her Collection Love Poems”), while Patience Agbabi pictures it as its “kinkier” version, a corset (Jenkins 124):

[...] She trusses up
words, lines, as a corset disciplines flesh.
Without her, I’m nothing but without me
she’s tense, uptight, rigid as a full stop. (Agbabi 2000:78)

⁹ This is a feature peculiar to Agbabi who, as a feminist writer, never blames or scolds patriarchy directly (whereas other feminist authors certainly do) nor does she linger on the victimisation of the oppressed female ‘Other’.

It seems that the corset is a metaphor of “empower[ing] and contain[ing]” at the same time (Ramey 12). As Agbabi puts it, “constriction can give you freedom” (12). Poetic forms such as the sonnet could be felt to be a cage, but Agbabi finds a manner to revitalise them with her formal dexterity and unconventional content. In addition, in the poem “Scorn the Sonnet”, appearing in *Bloodshot Monochrome*, she states that “the sonnet’s narrow room can break doors, break glass ceilings” (2008: 38).

In relation to the practice of re-writing sonnets, Coppola claims that the poet “queers” this traditional poetic form by “destabilis[ing] safe assumptions regarding literary canons, race, sex and gender” (372). Currently, the adjective *queer* is used primarily as an umbrella term standing for different kinds of sexual and gender identities comprised in the LGBTQI community, especially for individuals who do not wish to be labelled with a stable sexual identity. Furthermore, it also refers to a non-heterosexual reading of texts, such as Eve Sedgwick’s queer reading of Henry James (s. *The Epistemology of the Closet*, 1990). The scholar invited the public to recognise possible “queer nuances” also in traditionally heterosexual writing. What Agbabi engages in is a further dimension of *queering*, which often ties in with active textual re-appropriation, not only interpretation. As Coppola explains, the verb *to queer* can be understood in its first etymological sense, with the meaning of “to question” or “to inquire”, but also with the more provocative “to baffle” or “to unsettle” (372).¹⁰

The term *bafflement* describes exactly the reaction that the poet wants to evoke in the readers, which can be seen as a feeling of curiosity, but also astonishment and unsettlement. In fact, it takes some time to decipher her intricate wordplay and messages, but when the readers grasp them, they notice that their meaning is often deeper than it would have seemed at a first glance. This is especially true as Agbabi incorporates different levels into her poetry, layers which might intersect or lead to different directions. On the level of content, her poetry is characterised by the rich use of imagery. In this way, the snake that the girl asks for her birthday in the poem “The Excoriation” (2000: 27) is “green, white and green,” a detail which can be

¹⁰ For a more detailed discussion of queer theory and the concept of queering the canon, the reader is invited to read the following chapter.

recognised by some attentive readers as the colours of the Nigerian flag. Another important aspect is the postmodern practice of drawing from mythology and folklore and coming to dialogue with it, even de-construct it (see other prominent contemporary writers such as Angela Carter, Carol Ann Duffy and Margaret Atwood, just to quote some names in the anglophone literary panorama). In *Transformatrix*, Agbabi abundantly references myths, fairy tales and folklore: from Cinderella to Rapunzel and the whole range of princes and princesses archetypes. The other sources of inspiration come from popular culture, including music and fashion from the 1970s to the 1990s.

Besides the sonnet, a further important form explored and re-appropriated by Agbabi in this collection is the sestina. This composition dates back to the Middle Ages, notably beginning with the Provençal troubadour poets. It features six stanzas of six lines and a final triplet (called *envoi*) and “instead of [having] a rhyme scheme, the sestina repeats a series of six end-words in each stanza, but in a fixed pattern of variation”. Usually, the last word of the stanza is also the last word of the following one (e.g. an example from W.H. Auden’s “Paysage Moralisé”: “Visions of green to them who craved for water. // They built by rivers and at night the water”) (see Wainwright 2011: 144). In *Transformatrix*, the section “Seven Sisters” is conceived as a series of seven sestinas, exploring London’s suburbs and its rebellious personalities, struggling to find their sexual and gender identity. It provides a good example of Agbabi’s intention of re-working traditional forms. Each composition reiterates the use of the words *boy, girl, child, dark, end and time*. This formal virtuosity serves the purpose of creating a thread running through the series of poems, which results in a hypnotic quality characterising this section. The last stanza is also humorously closed by the word “end”: “and Once upon a time... becomes the End” (Agbabi 2000: 52). Here, the expression is used as it is in books or movies, with the capitalised first letter. The graphical aspect is also quite relevant: the poems are, in an unusual fashion, printed on the left side of the volume and the three-line *envoi* is found on the following right-hand page, which remains mostly blank.

The graphical aspects are also very prominent in other poems in *Transformatrix*. For instance, the concrete poem called “Weights and Measures and Finding a Rhyme

for Orange” (57), inspired by her collaboration with the sculptor and concrete poet Carl Andre at the Museum of Modern Art in Oxford. Concrete poetry originated in the 20th century and was inspired by disruptive artistic movements such as Dada and Surrealism (“concrete poetry”, *Britannica*). In these compositions, the poet “uses typeface and other typographical elements in such a way that chosen units [...] and graphic spaces form an evocative picture” (“concrete poetry”). In these verses, Agbabi draws a comparison between building a house and writing poetry, both actions working with their own kinds of bricks and layers (“Poets are similar to brickmakers / except we repeat rhythms or rhymes / instead of bricks. And houses still carry more weight / than poems. [...]). In order to illustrate this similarity, the third stanza is composed of four columns of words written in capital letters, which resemble bricks in their own way.

1996

FAMOUS BRICKS	RETAIN	IRONIC	WEIGHT
OXFORD MUSEUM	HOUSES	FORMAL	POETRY
COILED RIBBON	SHINES	BRIGHT	BRONZE
CHALKY BRICKS	SPROUT	DOUBLE	LAYERS
MAKING SUBTLE	SILENT	VISUAL	RHYMES
SPIRAL QUEUES	DONATE	SILVER	CHANGE
POETIC ARTIST	SENSES	PUBLIC	CHANGE
SHARED WISDOM	AROUND	POETIC	WEIGHT
FAMILY GROUPS	SCULPT	DOUBLE	RHYMES
CEMENT SPRUNG	RHYTHM	SENARY	POETRY
WHILST OXFORD	SUMMER	SPURNS	LAYERS
BEHIND MIRROR	SHADES	ADORES	BRONZE

It is also interesting to note how she merges the two semantic fields of house building and poetry making (“CHALKY BRICKS SPROUT DOUBLE LAYERS / MAKING SUBTLE SILENT VISUAL RHYMES”), sparking a meta-reflection on the process of writing poetry. Andre’s work *Equivalent VIII* featured two layers of 60 bricks, arranged in six columns each made up of ten bricks (6x10). Agbabi pays tribute to Andre’s work of art in giving a similar shape to the stanza “1996”: as can be observed below, it is composed of six columns composed of twelve words each, symbolically representing Andre’s bricks. This arrangement gives a special

ekphrastic (from Greek *ekphrasis*, “description”) quality to the poem since it makes a direct reference to a work of art (Wójcik 88).

The volume also features a humorous list-poem (“Who’s Who?” 64), a form of poetry often associated with children and inexperienced writers, but nonetheless a rich resource in the hands of Agbabi. She poses direct questions to the readers and invites them to choose which of the two elements are the most representative for each category. The subject matter of the questions varies from music (“13. Scary spice: Mel C or Mel B?”) and cinema (“5. Psycho: Anthony Perkins or Anthony Hopkins?”), but also art (“8. *Space shit*: Chris Ofili or Salvador Dalí?”) and literature (“2. Famous Irish Poets: Yeats or Keats?”). There are also frequent references to personalities of the black community, such as Muhammad Ali and the writer Toni Morrison, which illustrate how deeply influential black culture is for the poet.

2.4 “*Telling Tales: Chaucer Tales, Track by Track, It's the Remix*”¹¹

Agbabi’s last published collection is a 21st-century re-writing of Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. The volume was published in 2014 and was also shortlisted for the Ted Huges Award, an annual award given to the most innovative and unconventional British poet, recommended by members of the Poetry Society and Poetry Book Society (the latter also appoints the *Next Generation Poets*). She has always been highly indebted to Chaucer, but only recently she decided to write a tribute to celebrate his greatest work, which she considers “probably the best work of English literature” (“Chaucer Remixed”). The collection is by no means a simple re-writing of the medieval masterpiece. It features indeed all the notorious tales, from “The Miller’s Tale” to “The Knight’s Tale”, but the author transported them to an entirely different dimension:

“[...] if I’m taking this on, I can’t just repeat what’s already been done, because I can’t hope to be anywhere near this. What I can do is what I do best – take an interesting angle and play around with form and sound and character.” (“Chaucer Remixed”)

¹¹ See Agbabi 2014: 2, “Prologue”.

To start with, the pilgrims become a miscellaneous group of people travelling on a classic red double-decker Routemaster bus from the south London's Tabard Inn to Canterbury Cathedral, as is stated in the "Prologue" (2). The fictional biographies at the end of the volume (115) reveal that the passengers come from all walks of life, although they are not knights, friars and merchants anymore: among the story-tellers there are a pub owner, a dark cabaret performer, a retired stock exchange trader, an English-Nigerian poet (whose life story is curiously reminiscent of Agbabi's) and a Creative-Writing professor (and many more).

Even if this group of characters is varied in terms of identity, what they all have in common is their passion for writing poetry and for participating to live performances. In Chaucer, the one who will tell the best tale will be awarded with a free meal at the Inn upon returning to London. In *Telling Tales*, Agbabi imagined a poetry slam battle instead of a competition for the best tale, but in both settings, the entertainment element is central, and Agbabi wanted to retain it ("Crossing Borders"). It must be remembered that the *Canterbury Tales* include a great deal of irony and they are also meant to be entertaining, which sets them aside from many other medieval literary works. Given the fact that Chaucer was a courtier, it is believed that his compositions were addressed to the nobility (Brewer 295). Brewer believes that the external audience was rather different from the internal one, which is composed of the pilgrims group: "Chaucer's *actual* audience [...] clearly consists of lords, ladies, knights, well-to-do gentry-folk [...] and upper-class scholars and lawyers [...]" (295). The tales were also meant to be read aloud, probably as a courtly diversion, a practice which was common in this historic period, preceding the introduction of the printing press in England by William Caxton (1476). In the Middle Ages, hence, the transmission of literature was mainly oral, as texts were copied by hand and there was a limited number of copies circulating. This meant that there was only one text and, in turn, only one person reading to a group of listeners. The listeners enjoyed literature as a shared experience, as we would do nowadays with television, cinema and theatrical representations (Hallisay 1). In fact, when Patience Agbabi comments on Chaucer, she stresses the fact that she was not only influenced by his brilliant and versatile writing (which includes moving effortlessly between literary forms and linguistic styles), but also by his

rhythmicality and the fact that the tales are also made to be read aloud: "I've only recently acknowledged the influence it has had on my penchant for performance poetry. No wonder I describe my poetry as 'page meets stage'" ("Crossing Borders").

A pivotal element for Agbabi was updating the work in order to represent the multicultural panorama of British society, which is frequently represented in her poetry. The poet wants to show that the concept of Britishness should be much more inclusive than it used to be, embracing a number of cultures which now merge with the traditional British identity in order to make a new, multi-faceted version of it: as for representing a more multicultural Britain, "there are massive gender and race differences, so I had to update all that" ("Chaucer Remixed"). At times, there is a clash between the old idea of Britishness and a more modern one: e.g. in "Joined-up Writing" (21), an old English woman refuses to accept her African daughter-in-law and plots to send her and her "bastard" son back to Zimbabwe. The old woman rejects the idea of being racist, using the deceptive line of argument "I am not racist/sexist/ etc., but":

She wasn't bonny, always overdressed
I'd never understand her when she spoke.
Not that I'm prejudiced, some of my best
friends are foreign. These days folk are folk
but she was so different: Constance was coloured, brown,
a name so long you'd sweat to break it down.

Didn't Belong. [...] (22-23)

It seems like "foreign" is a category of people who probably can be understood as expats from Western countries but by no means people with a different skin colour or an "exotic" language. The woman also finds other ways to let her scorn for Africa creep in through the verses: the chair where the woman fed the baby "smelt / of milk and sadza," the latter being a sort of porridge typical of Zimbabwe. She also comments in her head that there is no reason to try to reach her son who left England since "he'll never ring [...] anyway, no doubt / they'll never have phones in Africa". This last thought reveals how she has an outdated and static idea of Africa, which she sees as a remote and savage third-world country stuck in its colonial past. In the collection, there are also a number of other characters who claim their right to be part of a "British narrative", such as the writer Yejide Idowu-Clarke, who

recounts the story of how her parents met in Nigeria and how she wished they would not have made this mistake (“I Go Back to May 1967”, 47).

Although the African identity is very present, there are also other cultures which are represented in the collection, although they will not be discussed in this thesis. A good example is the blonde and strong Pavel, probably coming from a rural part of Russia or another Eastern European country, judging from the names appearing in the poem (Pavel, Yakov) and the description of his hometown (“Where I come from like this. Small place. Is cold / but life good”). It is interesting how a refined form of poetry such as Agbabi’s can also turn the broken English of some characters into something very poetical. The poet also wants to show that the British identity is not always synonymous with England, but there are a number of other local cultures that are included in it. For instance, there is the character Robbo from “The Devil in Cardiff” (38), whose story is set in Wales. Since the author grew up in Wales, she knows how important it is to make the voice of the geographical and cultural periphery heard (in this case it might be Wales, Scotland and Ireland), showing that identity is a complex concept and it does not only originate from the centre, which only represents one side of the story.

In a number of tales, Agbabi uses folklore as a source, like in the case of the French “*fabliaux*” genre (“The Miller’s Tale”, “The Reeve’s Tale”, etc.). *Fabliau* (plural: *fabliaux*, from Old French *fable*, “story”) is a medieval French genre featuring comic and often coarse short tales which were recounted by so-called *jounglers*, professional storytellers (“*Fabliau*”, *Britannica*). The characters are often staple ones (a man, a woman, a priest, etc.) and they engage in anecdotal situations. However brutal their destinies might appear to be, the public is not asked to sympathise with them. This is actually different in Chaucer’s versions of the stories, where there is a deeper characterisation and the reader/listener is invited to bond with the pilgrims as well as with the characters populating the tales (since it is a frame narrative). Agbabi decides to give hers quite an extensive characterisation, which can be both explicit and implicit. The author made the decision of making the characters speak for themselves, “regardless of whether [they] are ‘speaking’ good or bad things and regardless of their skin colour” (“Chaucer remixed”). In this way,

Agbabi can take on the role of different poets/performers and change between various registers and styles but can also assume different visions of the world. What she sought is authenticity, wanting to have a broader range of characters that really represent contemporary English society, even if there are values and ideas that the poet does not share. When asked about her stance on misogyny and “male voice” in the majority of rap music and how she dealt with it, Agbabi replied the following:

Telling Tales is an interesting example where there are actually sexist raps in the voices of men, and there are biographies at the end of the book, which suggests that they really are the people doing these poems. I wanted that authenticity... [...]. I allow some of my male characters, the sexist ones – they’re not all sexist, thankfully – to actually just be themselves, and get to that stage where they are being quite sexist within the poem, and then there are other poems in the book that kind of counteract that. (Novak and Fischer 358-359)

Chaucer’s Retraction is the final part of *The Canterbury Tales*, where he asks for forgiveness for the vulgarity of some of his writing and hence tries to be absolved from his sins. Similarly, Agbabi closed *Telling Tales* with a “Back Track (Grime Mix)”, rapped by Harry Bailey, the master of ceremonies, who is, in reality, Agbabi, who apologises for too much authenticity in her tales:

If you slam this slam anthology
for the sick bits, here’s my apology:
to all Christians we misrepresented;
for the hardcore macho and sexist,
every encore showing sex as sex is
for the stereotypes I held my head low,
Should I fix the mix? April said no,
keep the cursing, class A’s and violence [...]
so we’re keeping it real on the papyrus [...]. (Agbabi 2014:113)

On the level of form, Agbabi includes various features already present in Chaucer (e.g. rhyme royale, heroic couplets, iambic pentameter) as well as other elements from popular culture, such as a rhythm that is highly influenced by rap music. A telling example is “The Tale of Sir Thopas”, which is transformed into a rap battle (“Sir Thopas vs Da Elephant” 83). The registers used by the poet vary considerably, although there is a tendency towards the use of colloquialism, swear words and regionalisms. As mentioned previously, different varieties of English are also included (e.g. Nigerian English and Scottish English), as well as instances of broken,

ungrammatical English. As a matter of fact, register and vocabulary choices are utilised to portray the differences between the characters since they convey a great deal about their identities (especially because the majority of the poems are first-person narrations). In fact, certain linguistic choices can hint at low social status, at certain ethnic minorities, or even at gender identities. It is also worth noting that the poet pays particular attention to the poems' graphical aspects. This can be seen in the inclusion of a concrete poem ("Fine Lines" 57) and of a ransom-note poem, where different fonts are juxtaposed as if to reproduce a letter made from cut-up snippets of newspapers ("Reconstruction" 69). Agbabi even ventures to re-write "The Merchant's Tale" by using the lyrics of different songs and, not surprisingly, renames the poem "That Beatin' Rhythm" (49).

Like in *Transformatrix*, she makes extensive use of the dramatic monologue, thanks to which her characters are able to engage in conversation with the reader or with an inner-textual addressee. They introduce themselves through their own words and thoughts, but their personality is also revealed through their behaviour and the dialogues with other characters. Some of them boast about their story-teller/rapper talents, like "Roving Mic" (15), a former factory worker now renting a shop for covering his illegal business and seducing women with his rapping art. Also, the Nigerian businesswoman ("What Do Women Like Bes") proudly tells of her five husbands and of her business of selling counterfeit accessories. Others confess their secrets, often through the writing of a letter or a note that sheds light on a past event ("Joined-up Writing" 21, "Sharps an Flats" 81). It is particularly interesting to have this kind of first-person narrators since they are often unreliable and tell their stories from a subjective point of view. This gives the reader the opportunity to judge what is being told, whether the narrator can be trusted or not, and how the text can be read (as irony, satire, moral preaching, etc.). Examples of dramatic monologues from this collection are analysed in the chapter dedicated to female voices. In this chapter, the biography and the critical response as well as the style and the poetics of the author have been illustrated. The following chapter moves on to consider the theoretical frameworks used to analyse Agbabi's poetry.

3. Theoretical Frameworks

3.1 Intersectionality and Categorisation Issues

I would like to begin by describing the concept of intersectionality, before discussing the single frameworks that will be used to analyse Agbabi's poetry. In fact, given the complexity of its content, her work can only be explained by drawing on a number of different theories and concepts. It seems reasonable to consider how these "perspectives" work together, how they interlock. As I will show in the analysis chapters, these intersections are different for every poem and they also take on different meanings. The readers should bear in mind that Agbabi's intersectionality is not always portrayed with a negative connotation (nor is it present in each and every single poem). In some instances, the intersection of different identities is rather conceived as an enrichment, especially in terms of the expansion of the British identity, which profits from this cultural "hybridisation". Following the discussion of intersectionality, I will present the limitations of some categories, such as those of e.g. black or feminist writers, and show that a number of authors identify with more than one category, or do not want to be categorised at all. In fact, categorising Agbabi just as a black writer or just as a feminist writer would mean looking at her work from a somewhat limiting perspective since her oeuvre reaches well beyond this rigid classification. Therefore, it seems important to develop this argument before turning to the discussion of the single categories and in order to understand them critically. In the second part of the chapter, I will analyse the different theoretical frameworks and how they can be applied to the poet's work, connecting theory with interpretation.

In 2015, Coppola has advocated using an intersectional approach when analysing Agbabi's poetry since putting her in just one category would not do her justice. The term *intersectionality* was introduced in 1989 by legal scholar and civil rights activist Kimberlé Crenshaw in her essay "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics", published on the University of Chicago Legal Forum. This theory gave a great contribution to the field of black feminist studies, although the term is now also widely used in sociology and other disciplines. *Intersectionality* is a

key framework defined as “the complex, cumulative way in which the effects of multiple forms of discrimination (such as racism, sexism, and classism) combine, overlap, or intersect especially in the experiences of marginalized individuals or groups” (“intersectionality”, *Merriam Webster*). Crenshaw argued that it is was fundamental to consider more than one axis, such as race, gender and social class, when dealing with black women in order to fully understand how these different coordinates interact in their specific case. She argued that it is not sufficient to take the experience of other oppressed categories (e.g. poor white women) and apply it to the case of black women. This would be like forcing a mould where it does not belong, as Crenshaw points out:

Because the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism, any analysis that does not take intersectionality into account cannot sufficiently address the particular manner in which Black women are subordinated. (1989:140)

The theorizing of this new analytical framework was revolutionary, as it advocated a new way of analysing black women’s experience, claiming that it had its very own peculiarities and they should be analysed as such (“Intersectionality”, Cooper).

Subsequently, various scholars have built on Crenshaw’s theory and applied it to different contexts. For example, the theory was expanded when not only gender dynamics but also the ones concerning sexuality were considered as a further influential factor, including the variable of e.g. homosexuality. While discussing the situation in the context of British poetry, Wright uses the term *triple marginalisation* (280) when referring to the intersection of different (oppressed) social conditions: she claims that lesbian black British authors are neglected by literary criticism and have difficulties in reaching a wider public due to their belonging to an ethnic minority, their gender, and their “deviant” sexual identity, non-conforming to the heterosexual normativity (280). According to the scholar, oral art (such as performance poetry) is a preferred channel of communication by black artists since there is an empowering quality to it. This is the result of the “immediacy of performance”, also called the “power of presence” (274). This immediacy grants the performers the power of shaping their own identity (277), which is too often constructed externally, a fact which causes an internal struggle to be able to negotiate one’s true identity. Furthermore, the performance element

creates a unique relationship between the performer and the audience, making this genre different from other poetic forms:

[...] In addition to its entertainment value, performance poetry also possesses efficacious qualities which transforms the performance into ritual. It engenders a collective, holistic atmosphere in which the audience participates instead of merely watching, where the audience 'believes' the words of the poet-performer (the truth-teller) as opposed to appreciating his or her work, and where an underlying objective is to elicit responses, even criticism and to effect transformation in some degree for the listening community. (272)

There are other critics who advocate a more intersectional approach in order to give proper recognition to all marginalised groups. Sheena Howard dedicates an entire book to black lesbian women but also to black queer women (*Black Queer Identity Matrix: Towards an Integrated Queer of Color Framework*), developing a methodology to study this community. The scholar sees gender, race and sexual orientation as interlocking systems of oppression and claims that the scarcity of research regarding this social group is problematic due to the lack of understanding of the "complexity of identity, identity dimensions, experiences, and perceptions of this population" (39). As an academic coming from a communication-studies and civil-rights-activism background, she developed this methodology for the fields of queer studies, media studies, but also for sociology and anthropology rather than literary studies. Notwithstanding, she discusses important issues for the LGBTQI community and for researchers who desire to adopt a more fluid and complete approach in their analysis of phenomena regarding the black queer community. Furthermore, the author comments on a very relevant and interesting theory, namely what has been defined as *Quare Theory*. Patrick E. Johnson coined the term in his essay "Quare Studies, or (Almost) Everything I Know about Queer Studies I Learned from my Grandmother" (2001). The term comes from the adjective *quare*, the African American vernacular word for "queer", which could also be used in a homophobic way, as the author recalls from his African-American grandmother's use of the word (2). Johnson criticizes queer theory for its inability "to accommodate the issues faced by gays and lesbians of color who come from 'raced' communities" (3). Quare theory, instead, can be used as a tool to address gender,

race, sexuality and class simultaneously. It does not only “speak across identities, it *articulates* identities as well” (3), differently from queer theory. Johnson quotes Gloria Anzaldúa, whose claim is that “queer is used as a false unifying umbrella which all ‘queers’ of all races, ethnicities and classes are shored under” and warns the black community that “even when we seek shelter under it [“queer”], we must not forget that it homogenizes, erases our differences” (1991: 250). As can be seen, already when the essay was published, the need emerged for recognising the differences within the newly-born queer community. Also Sapinosa supports the project of Quare theory as a “racial project of intersectionality” which “focuses on the experiences of racialized queer people and in so doing offers us the means to interrogate the hegemonic whiteness of LGBT[QI] studies and queer theory” (2009: 8). Despite the fact that Johnson’s project is highly interesting, it seems like the scholarly world has not accommodated his request since further work using this term is extremely scarce.

Nonetheless, there are a number of voices emerging from the critics as well as from writers themselves who advocate a more intersectional approach. Another scholar, Rinaldo Walcott, takes a similar critical stance on this subject by questioning the heteronormativity within the Black Studies project (92-93). He argues that queerness has not yet been properly integrated into this field, due to its desire for “epistemological respectability” in a context of vacillating institutionalisation (93). He explains his views in the following quote:

In short, the black studies project in its institutionalisation has come to stand in for one kind of black respectable community [...] Black queers mess with that desired respectability by bringing their shameful and funky sexual practices to it. (93)

Walcott does not only criticise the marginalisation of queers inside the black community, but he also suggests that Black Studies should “open[...] up a transnational, diasporic queer space of intervention” (Coppola 371). Therefore, he proposes to include other geographical areas, such as the Caribbean, Latin America and Canada, now occupying the margins of the Black Studies project since they are overshadowed by the dominant focus on “U.S. blackness” (92). Bertram comments on the British literary panorama by claiming that “black British poets get little

attention from the establishment” especially regarding performance poetry, which “is largely ignored, despite the large audiences it attracts” (2005: 8). A more positive note comes from Bill Ashcroft who, updating his 1989 masterpiece *The Empire Writes Back*, edited the anthology *Literature for Our Times: Postcolonial Studies in the Twenty-First Century* (2012). In the introduction, Ashcroft stresses the importance of merging the boundaries of disciplines as it produces fruitful results:

Transdisciplinarity [...] produce[s] new knowledge not from the core of the disciplines, but in the ‘interstices’ between them, the pressure of innovation causing their boundaries to become increasingly ‘fuzzy’.”
(xix)

Moreover, he considers this border-crossing as “the strength of post-colonial studies” (xx) and reminds us that the boundaries have various natures, “not just disciplinary but also cultural, racial, ethnic, and linguistic [ones]”(xix).

As can be seen from this short overview, the intersectionality framework, used in research areas ranging from feminist studies to legal studies, is continuously expanded and revisited in order to adjust to societal changes, but also to include all realities, not merely the most visible ones. Intersectionality can be applied to the poetry of Agbabi in order to get a more complete image of her work, which does not only tackle a single aspect separately but often features an overlapping of different dimensions. One could define Agbabi as being simultaneously a black, feminist and queer poet. Nonetheless, it might be more correct to say that Agbabi is a poet who addresses feminist, racial and queer issues, rather than labelling her with a series of adjectives. In fact, the practice of categorising authors into sealed “compartments” is often disliked by some scholars as well as by the authors themselves, especially by the ones who belong to minorities (we could also define these subjects as the ones who hold the position of the ‘Other’). The reason behind this aversion is the fact that such a categorisation produces a rather essentialist picture of them and helps to reiterate the idea that they are a separate group and should only be analysed as such.

A prime example of this problem is discussed in *Gendering Poetry* (2005) by Vicky Bertram, who points out that anthologies continue to dedicate special chapters or

editions just to women's poetry, regardless of the heterogeneity of these poets, whose only shared commonality is having the same biological sex:

'women's poetry' implies a uniformity that is derogatory and inaccurate; it is as meaningless as the term 'men's poetry' would be. [...] In such a comparison, men emerge as standard, normal subjects against which women's 'difference' is measured. (20)

Bertram also argues that the term *women's poetry* was useful some decades ago, as women writers were largely neglected and needed to gain a voice (20). In contrast, right now the use of this term is rather problematic since "it collapse[s] differences between women and it also encourages comparison of women poets and men poets, as though there is some fundamental opposition between them" (20). A similar situation can be found in the case of homosexual or queer writers, as novelist Jeanette Winterson states: "In any discussion of art and the artist, heterosexuality is backgrounded, whilst homosexuality is foregrounded" (*Art Objects* 103). She also recounts how she has been often identified as an author writing about homosexuality, as if this were the only relevant feature of her novels. Winterson opens the chapter "Semiotics of Sex" with an anecdote that explains her frustration when she is compared with very different writers on the sole basis of their shared sexual orientation:

I was in a bookshop recently when a young woman approached me. She told me she was writing an essay on my work and that of Radclyffe Hall.¹² Could I help?
'Yes,' I said. 'Our work has nothing in common.'
'I thought you were a lesbian,' she said. (*Art Objects* 103)

This kind of interest in her sexuality is also a recurring topic in her interviews. The author is keen on stressing that her writing skills are not strictly related to her sexual orientation and should not be the focus of attention: "I am a writer that

¹² Radclyffe Hall was a British poet and author (1880-1943) who was openly lesbian and caused a scandal with her *Loneliness of the Wells* (1928). The book was judged as obscene as it described a lesbian relationship and, as a consequence, all its copies were destroyed. The ban was lifted after Hall's death, also as a result of a U.S. court decision ("Radclyffe Hall", *Encyclopaedia Britannica*). An aspect that might have driven the student to parallel Hall and Winterson might also be their masculine look, especially in the case of Hall, who used to wear and be portrayed in men's clothes, a fact that might have been bizarre for her time.

happens to love women. Not a lesbian that happens to write" (Art Objects 103), she states.

A further category that struggles with this essentialist views is the one of black writers, amongst which there are some voices that disagree with the idea that their skin colour can be a satisfying index for analysing their works. Even if there are some shared elements in their writing -though not always- this label seems more like a constraint to many (included Agbabi). This is especially true if the only features that emerge from their writings are the theme of black identity as well as other "exotic" elements, such as the use of patois. Particularly post-colonial authors who consider themselves e.g. British, American, Canadian or Australian do not want to be constantly relegated to the inescapable position of the Other. Despite the fact that some of them count as acclaimed writers and have entered the history of anglophone literature, they continue to be categorised as something separate. It appears that, in spite of their success, they are not considered part of the mainstream, "untagged" literature but always run alongside it: a separate chapter, a separate anthology, a separate section in the library, and so forth. This is the reason why the label "black" is sometimes criticised as a mere container that does not represent the vast panorama of experiences of these authors. A strong supporter of this position is the writer Mike Phillips, who comments on the homogenising term *black British*:

Our work is labelled as 'black British', not because of its content, or style or mood or tone or because it has a British landscape or says anything about Britain, but because the author has dark skin and conveniently happened to spend some more time in this country. (14)

The author goes on to describe his frustration with his simultaneous identity as an English writer and a black British writer, the latter being a concept he is endlessly struggling with, especially since it is defined from the outside:

My name is Mike Phillips and I'm a novelist among other things. You may not know that I am a United Kingdom citizen, and you may not know that I do not think of myself as a Caribbean writer, or an African Writer, or an African American writer, or a diasporic writer [...] No such luck. I think of myself as an English writer, and all of this seems simple enough, except that I also think of myself as a black British writer. In

this last persona, however, I am perpetually and consistently confronted by a specific difficulty [...]. (13)

As can be seen from these lines, Phillips does not deny his own identity, but he finds something disturbing in the practice of defining someone from the outside and focusing on the commonalities rather than on the uniqueness of every personality. This homogenising practice is particularly counterproductive when a black writer chooses a genre (such as crime fiction in the case of Phillips) which is not strictly identified with the characteristics of black writing (15-16). In fact, there are some sort of expectations related to this apparently innocent label and there is the danger that these pieces of writing might never “overcome” the metaphorical wall erected by these expectations. As a consequence, these authors risk to be marginalised because they do not match societal assumptions. Undoubtedly, black writers not complying to the “migrant saga” (Phillips 15) or exploring the theme of Otherness, must fight harder to be published and recognised since their identity has been associated almost exclusively with some types of content, as Mike Phillips reminds us. Wright also comments on a similar issue, focusing more on the Afro-Caribbean community in the UK, but noting that her statements can be extended to other communities of “black Britain” (271):

Investigations into Black British life are principally relegated to the realm of sociology, crystallized around issues of racism and social disadvantage, thereby disregarding the dynamism and vibrancy of Afro-Caribbean cultural life. [...] The shape of Afro-Caribbean cultural identity, similar to other communities in the Black Diaspora, is characterized by a fluidity and an advanced capacity to negotiate and shift in the face of change. (271)

All these “testimonies” are mentioned here in order to stress the fact that often there is more than one significant aspect to one author’s writing. Moreover, authors change over time and their works can change significantly too, revealing aspects of their writing that might be entirely different and, perhaps, “atypical” for the categories they are recurrently put into. It is because of the different facets that an author has that it might be useful to consider multiple features of their works. These aspects might be additive, but usually it is safer to consider them as overlapping. In fact, the risk of minimising their complexity should be avoided, as scholar Sheena

Howard warns in her example of black lesbians women (additive: black + lesbian + woman *versus* intersectional: black lesbian woman) (40).

In the case of Agbabi, these identities are constantly shifting and, often, they are also not present at all. Through her storyteller skills (if we consider a poem as a form of narration, which I believe it is), the poet portrays the experience of both white and black, women and men, as well as children. Some poems also feature lyrical personas who are animals, anthropomorphic or not. She also writes about different sexual and gender orientation. Given this complexity, it is interesting to analyse Agbabi as an author who addresses multiple issues, whose intersection is more telling than their sum. However, since the combinations are countless, it is difficult to dedicate a separate chapter to each and every intersection. Therefore, the second part of this chapter seeks to find the relevance of the most important macro aspects in relation to Agbabi's work. As much as it is possible, potential intersections will be mentioned and discussed in the analysis chapters.

3.2 Agbabi's Feminist Views

The first "perspective" from which Agbabi's poetry can be analysed is a feminist one. The poet undoubtedly has strong feminist views and she often (although not always) chooses female characters as the protagonists of her lyrical world, as she does for the majority of the poems in *Transformatrix*. In her writings, "the woman identity comes through very strongly": the poet even defines herself as "quite militantly feminist" (Thompson 153, 157). Her interest in the female universe is vast, and she explores the lives, the joys and the perks of women of all ages, ranging from children to the elderly. It is quite clear how she is interested in showing and describing all the aspects of women's lives. The poet also likes to challenge gender stereotypes related to traditional female roles, and show how the women in her collections can be different from our expectations. A prime example is her version of *The Canterbury Tales*, where some of the women who were originally relegated to marginal and rather passive roles become central characters and definitely take up a more central role. Moreover, a great number of her female characters fully embrace their sexuality (not only heterosexuality) and have a rather uninhibited

way of dealing with it. For instance, there is a present-day Nigerian version of the Wife of Bath (2014: 31), who is proud of her five husbands and even beats one of them. In a way, she challenges her father's record, who has "only" had four wives. She is also very conscious of her sexual power: "I cast a spell with gap-toothed smile and my bottom power" (28). In the poem "Animals!" (2014: 91), a fable inspired by Chaucer's Nun's Priest's Tale, a shrewd fox called Mozilla Firefox seduces the attractive rooster, who has already several hen-wives. In the original tale, there was no particular mentioning of the fox's gender, while in Agbabi's the animal is clearly a female. She "gate-crashes" into the rooster's dreams and lets him wake up "sweating in his blue jeans" (93), showing in this way that she is the one who is in control of the situation, especially on the sexual level. In general, it can be said that Agbabi makes some of her characters regain their "lost" voices, especially in the rewriting of *The Canterbury Tales*. Her female characters are strong and do not assume the roles of victims even if they find themselves in unprivileged positions (e.g. financial hardship, prostitution, drug addiction, etc.).

3.3 Agbabi in the Light of Queer Theory

A further important aspect of Agbabi's poetry is her interest in queerness, which is closely related to the exploration of sexuality and the challenging of traditional gender roles. The poet eschews any labelling regarding sexual orientation, as she addresses heterosexual as well as homosexual and bi-sexual love. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the term *queer* can have multiple meanings. It originally meant "strange, peculiar, eccentric" (used from the 16th century onwards) and its first use in association with homosexuality was attested at the beginning of the 20th century, when it was used as a slang word for homosexuals, often in a derogatory or offensive manner ("queer" 1.3 *OED*). From the late 1980s on, it was re-appropriated in order to describe a fluid sexual subjectivity that escaped the binary system of masculine/feminine gender, but also transcending the opposition of hetero- and homosexuality (Halferty 125). In fact, during these years that the term began to have a more neutral to positive connotation, as the LGBT community started to adopt it (see the case of *Queer Nation*, the lesbian and gay right organization

founded in the U.S. in 1990). Currently, it can be used as an umbrella term describing different types of sexual and gender identities, often fluid ones. Furthermore, it is also used to refer to a queer reading of texts, escaping heterosexual normativity, like a “prisms” or a lens that highlights certain nuances that are otherwise not analysed. Finally, the term can also refer to the practice of *queering* texts, in the sense of actively de-constructing them on a sexual and gender level, which is a practice favoured by Agbabi.

In an institutional and academic context, the concept of queerness started to get recognition as film theorist Teresa de Lauretis first used the term *Queer Theory* in a conference organised at the University of Santa Cruz, California. Queer theory emerged from the field of women’s studies, feminist theory, gay and lesbian studies but is also heavily influenced by postmodern and poststructuralist theories (“Queer theory” Giesecking), especially by the work of Michael Foucault, postulating that identity is a “discursive construction” (“Queer Theory” Jagose). The works of Judith Butler and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, building on Foucault’s, are seen as the founding texts in this field (Giesecking). Queer theory does not seek to create and define new identities based on the “mismatch between sex, gender and desire” (Jagose 1996: 3), but is rather distancing itself from the “identity-based categories of modern sexuality [...], ceaselessly interrogating both the preconditions of identity and its effects” (“Queer Theory” Jagose). However, it is difficult to give a precise definition of queer and queer theory: Jagose goes so far as stating that there is no unambiguous definition of “queer” since there are a number of interpretations circulating that are contradictory (1996: 99). It seems like the term wants to retain its fluidity at all costs, intentionally escaping fixed definitions by “refusing to crystallise in any specific form, queer maintains a relation of resistance to whatever constitutes the normal” (99). The struggle also interests its “theory” element: according to Sullivan, queer theory is “a discipline that refuses to be disciplined”(v): accepting complete institutionalisation would mean “to have the kinks ironed out of it”(v) and this would go against its very ambiguous and fluid nature. Jagose, who is clearly one of the scholars who has mainly been dealing with queer theory also insists on its fluid quality:

queer theory is not really a theory at all. While it might seem paradoxical in a dictionary entry to insist on this resistance to definition, queer theory's refusal to specify itself has been widely recognized as one of its tactical strength. ("Queer Theory")

In sum, there are many ongoing debates on the nature of queer theory, including whether it can be considered a theory or not. In spite of this ontological debate, the concept of queerness and queer reading are extremely important for numerous disciplines, including cultural studies and literary studies, even if these notions are constantly invested by a process of becoming and carry a fluid meaning.

Agbabi seems to have a deep understanding of the concept of queerness, above all of how to queer a text. The poet comes up with a queer version of some traditional narratives, whose characters challenge traditional gender roles and take up fluid identities which are often difficult to label. These include some of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* but also fairy tales, like Cinderella, who becomes a West-End boy who turns into a transvestite at midnight ("Midnight chimes. Time / for boy / meets girl / in the mirror [...]", 2000: 14). Even though heterosexual relationships are well represented, there is a great number of poems that address other kinds of sexual orientations. It is interesting to note that the sexuality of the characters often remains unclear or open to questions, inviting the readers to reflect. In a number of cases, there is a twist that causes the readers to reconsider what has just been read. It is usually a little detail that reveals that some things might not be as expected. The inclusion of this surprise element, where the readers are suddenly faced with a non-heterosexual reading, is definitely a recurring characteristic of Agbabi's poetry. The feeling of initial confusion and surprise that might be triggered in the readers is caused by the fact that we are used to recurring gender patterns. It seems like the author uses this surprise element to invite us to question what is usually conceived as "normal". As Sullivan states in the chapter "Queering 'Straight' Sex", in present-day Western society heterosexuality "attained the status of the natural, the taken for granted" (119). Heterosexual narratives have come to be recognised as the normality and whatever deviates from the dichotomous nature of the categories of sex and gender tends to evoke a feeling of surprise or worse, abnegation or disapproval. It is probably to question this presumed normality that Agbabi uses the practice of queering in a thought-provoking way.

One author who inspired Agbabi's ideas on this matter is certainly the philosopher Judith Butler. At the end of the 1980s, Judith Butler introduced the notion of gender as something one *does* rather than something one *is* (Salih 55), as a repeated sequence of acts that constructs the gender identity of a subject. In order to support her view, she quoted Nietzsche's *On the Genealogy of Morals*, adapting his view to the feminist and queer projects: "there is no 'being' behind doing, acting, becoming; 'the doer' is merely a fiction imposed on the doing—the doing itself is everything" (qtd. in Butlers 1990: 25). She builds on this idea to describe how gender is discursively constructed, both in her ground-breaking work *Gender Trouble* (1990) and in "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory" (1988):

Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being. (1999: 43-44)

[...] gender is instituted through acts which are internally discontinuous [...], a constructed identity, a performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and to perform in the mode of belief. (1988: 520)

Butler argues that the notions of masculinity and femininity are socially constructed and do not derive from one's biological sex. The concept of "natural body" is a deceptive one: the body has been inscribed with meaning by the time a subject enters into social life (Salih 55). According to Butler, gender identity is not essential, but a "stylised repetition of acts" (1988: 520), which is performed repeatedly and hence comes to be perceived as normal. There are multiple aspects that contribute to the construction of one's gender identity: the way we talk, we move, we dress, we behave (Butler 1999: 179). Thus, our gender identity encompasses all realms of our daily life. These gendered acts come to be seen as "normal" due to their reiterative nature. According to Butler, their continuous repetition throughout our lives make us internalise and re-enact them unconsciously by believing they are the norm. This is the reason why we perceive behaviours that are not conforming to the limited repertoire assigned to one gender as deviating from the (falsely assumed) normality. This happens to a great number of people, although the "heterosexual norm" is a performance of cultural conventions, neither inborn nor natural.

This “self-regulatory” gender behaviour can be equated to the one of the prisoners in Foucault’s panopticon example (*Discipline and Punish* 1975). Foucault draws on the work of the 18th-century philosopher Jeremy Bentham, who imagined a building where all convicts could be surveilled by only one guard positioned at the centre. This would be possible as the convicts “never know whether [they are] being looked at at any one moment; but [they] must be sure that he may always be so” (Foucault 201). Bentham pictured this invention as “a new mode of obtaining power of mind over mind, in a quantity hitherto without example” (39). In fact, Foucault argues that the prisoners, as they always think they are watched, tend to internalise the authority gaze and engage in a self-regulatory behaviour (200-201). We also internalise cultural power discourses when it comes to our gender behaviour, which is ultimately a cultural product. In Agbabi’s poetry, we are repeatedly confronted with “deviating” identities who display a contradictory or unstable gender behaviour. These characters are presented to the readers in order to make them recognise the contradictions of the “normative phantasm” (Butler 2011: 58) of heterosexuality, which is omnipresent in our culture. This myth calls for the stability of gender identities, obscuring the differences of every person’s single identity.

Let us now consider how Butler describes drag and queer identities and their parodical enacting of gender. If gender is a “show” we put on, then it is also possible to “act out” and imitate this performative behaviour. Butler argues that all gender can be seen as a form of parody, although in some instances the performance is more parodic as it consciously (or unconsciously) reproduces a certain gender behaviour (Salih 57). By way of re-enacting gender parodically, it is possible to show the “constructedness of heterosexual identities,” whose claimed essentialism is exposed in this way (57). In fact, drag queens and transvestites do not imitate something natural, but rather “imitate the myth of originality itself” (Butler 1999: 176). Individuals like drag queens, who are biologically male, usually homosexual and exaggeratedly dressed up as women, draw attention to the discontinuity between their body, their sexuality and their gendered performance (175). This triad has long been believed to be stable and logical, but drag queens are the demonstration that there are various possibilities of combining sex with gender

performance. Halberstam even argues that, “in a drag performance, [...] incongruence becomes the site of gender creativity” (236). In *Transformatrix*, Agbabi is probably following this line of thoughts for some of her poems, characterised by the presence of numerous “deviating” identities, such as “Hans” (2000: 74), a butch lesbian that looks and behaves like a macho, who at last surrenders to nail extensions or the “gender-bender” characters of the poem “Double Entendre (2000: 72) (see chapter 5).

Besides dedicating some poems to transsexuals and extremely fluid identities, Agbabi also uses the “queering” practice to liberate women from static and passive roles attached to them in traditional narratives. According to Segal (*Straight Sex: Rethinking the Politics of Pleasure*), women should venture to subvert heterosexual norms: “All feminists could, and strategically should, participate in attempting to subvert the meanings of ‘heterosexuality’, rather than simply trying to abolish or silence its practice [...] (1994: 260-1). The scholar also suggests that, “straight women (and men) should also play a part in the subversion” through the “queering of traditional understandings of gender and sexuality, questioning the ways in which women’s bodies have been coded as uniquely ‘passive’, ‘receptive’, or ‘vulnerable’” (1997: 88). Agbabi does not only question stereotypical heterosexual narratives, but she also subverts and queers them. In the poem “Tit for Tat”, which mimics Chaucer’s “Reeve’s Tale”, the two students John and Aleyn are transformed into *Fem Jan* and *Butch Al*: “dykes on speed, / musky, milky, masculine” (2014:11), who succeed in fooling the drug dealer (the revisited version of the treacherous miller) and in the night engage in homosexual intercourse with his beautiful daughter Molly and with his wife. Even the masculine drug dealer is given an element of uncertainty to his identity: he is so high on drugs that “he’d shared whole spliffs with gays” (11), a line that possibly hints at hidden homosexual tendencies. In this poem, as well in other ones, the two young male protagonists have not only been turned into women, but they are also portrayed as two lesbians. Agbabi seeks to question and subvert gender roles by exchanging two men with two homosexual women. The poet definitely queers the tale, whose original version featured the Miller’s wife and daughter as the only two female (and passive) characters. Furthermore, it is certainly emblematic that the author chose the “The Reeve’s Tale”

for this character constellation, where the sexual intercourse passages have often been interpreted as rape, as Crocker reminds us in her paper “Affective Politics in Chaucer’s Reeve’s Tale: ‘Cherl’ masculinity after 1391” (245). Sexual assault in the Middle Ages was often used to punish men by using their wives or daughters: a power struggle whose battlefield was constituted by women’s bodies. In fact, Crocker defines women as “the site of punishment” for the men’s sins (237). The two women are used as a commodity to satisfy the two young men’s sexual appetite but are also a means to challenge the miller since they are considered part of his own property in every respect. It is thus very provocative to exchange the role of seducer, and perhaps rapist, with two women as Agbabi does.

3.4 Agbabi’s Portrayal of Black Identity¹³

As discussed earlier, one of the axes of Agbabi’s intersectional writing is black identity. Although it is discussed as last, this side of the poet is very central to her writing and to her identity, both as a private person and as a writer. The field of Black British Studies has been investigated by a number of acclaimed scholars, such as Homi Bhabha and Stuart Hall, key figures in contemporary postcolonial studies, who themselves have experienced the life of diasporic subjects in Britain. The concept of “black British” emerged in the 1960s and 1970s as a way of identifying a group of writers from different ethnic minority groups who felt united by this “marker of alliance” against the odds of racism experienced in their daily lives (Welsh 179). In the 1980s, the term was officially adopted to identify a group of writers born or based in Britain, and anthologies containing their writing started to be published. New techniques emerged, such as the experimentation with poetic forms (dub poetry, musical influences) and language (e.g. the use of creole) (179). The 1990s saw the affirmation of the concept of black British writing and the emergence of the so-called “new tribes of poetry,” which had “a strong performance aesthetic, and continued literary experimentation with dub, rap, hip-hop and other primarily black musical forms” (179). In the new millennium, black British writing

¹³ The discussion about black British writing featured in this chapter was partially expanded for the scope of this thesis from a previous, unpublished work of mine (see Deiana 2017).

continues to grow and there is now more public recognition for this group of authors and performers compared to the last decades, also on an institutional level (179) (e.g. through special regional and national funding, possibly granted in order to counteract the shortcomings of the publishing industry). Notwithstanding, this does not mean that black literature has entered mainstream culture (some exceptions excluded), nor that all its subgroups are equally represented, as I will demonstrate in this section. Black literature continues to be a contested site of meaning, as the struggles related to the term itself clearly show. As Welsh points out, the term oscillates between inclusion and exclusion:

Certainly, for every poet, anthologist or editor who prefers to speak of 'British poetry' as an inclusive, perhaps even post-racial, category which transcends the dangers of ghettoization and the hierarchies of value implicit in 'Black British poetry', or the problematic 'lumping together' of African, Caribbean, Black British and British Asian writers under the one term, or which seeks to frame Black British writing in terms of all those transnational forces, influences and cultural exchanges which have made it what it is there is another who argues for the continued need for the category of 'Black British poetry'. (180)

In the academic world, there is a growing interest in black British writing, although there are still large areas of this field that have not yet received the scholarly attention they deserve, such as the works by black female poets. Firstly, in the collective imagination, the space of the diasporic subject is often perceived as androcentric (Coppola 370). In fact, various scholars (Gopinath 2005, Jenkins 2011) have highly criticised this reading of diasporic experiences, seeking to demonstrate that the experience of migrancy is not exclusively a male prerogative, but that it should also include the work of female writers and poets. As a matter of fact, the majority of black British female writers and poets are not included in anthologies (or just briefly mentioned) and do not receive particular attention, neither from the publishing industry nor from the critics (except a few of them, s. introduction). Secondly, academic work on the black British diaspora is principally investigating the genre of narrative fiction, rather than poetry. As a result of these two factors, there is a lack of academic work on female black British poets, who appear marginalised in the British literary panorama. Not only do they belong to an "ethnic minority", but they also get less exposure due to their sex, a conjunction defined as

“double jeopardy” (340) by feminist legal activist Frances M. Beal. Moreover, if the artists openly declare their homosexuality, they can also be the objects of a “triple marginalization”, as discussed by Wright (280). These are some of the reasons accounting for analysing Agbabi under the lens of black Identity, with all her specificities. The poet cannot be considered as a diasporic author, as she was born and raised in Britain. Nonetheless, she has a multifaceted cultural identity which cannot be described as solely British. The post-colonial concept of *cultural hybridity*, associated with the works of Bhabha, Hall and Said, fits Agbabi’s split cultural experience. *Cultural hybridity* can be explained as the refusal of a stable and homogeneous cultural identity, as subjects that have experienced the diaspora find themselves in a constant process of hybridisation (Hall 438). Rasool also comments on this concept, describing it as

the ongoing quest for rootedness within a society so fundamentally hostile to their presence, [where] black people continually have to adapt, adjust and change their cultures, customs, behaviours, expectations, aspirations and cultural consciousness in order to belong ‘socially’ as well as to identify culturally and politically with the dominant culture. (202)

As we can observe, a number of scholars have suggested that diasporic subjects have a non-stable identity, one constructed in a “liminal space” between their country of origin and the new “home” (Hall 435). Another representative of this vision is Paul Gilroy, who in his ground-breaking work *The Black Atlantic* (1990) illustrates how diasporic subjects need to have some sort of “double consciousness” when struggling to be both European and black at the same time. Even though Agbabi has no homeland to return to because her biological parents live in London, there is a part of her identity that points somewhere else. Williams goes as far as stating that this “doubleness” is characterised by a “profound sense of alienation” (16). He suggests that the concept of “home” does not exist, as behind the sign there is no signifier (16). In fact, on the one side, there is the refusal of assimilation to the mainstream culture, while on the other one there is no homeland to return back to, especially for immigrants of the second and third generation (16). In the case of Agbabi there is no refusal to assimilate but the poet is well aware that there is more to her identity than to that of a regular, white British subject. Her struggles to

belong are represented in the autobiographical poem "Ufo Woman" (2000: 15-17), which reflects Agbabi's personal experience of feeling excluded from the British as well as from the Nigerian cultural community. The title of the poem suggests that Agbabi feels like an alien coming from outer space, hurt by her inability to belong somewhere. Williams' statement about the "sense of alienation" (16) perfectly encompasses her situation: she is "a heroine/ in a black-and-white cliché" (Agbabi 2000: 76), too exotic to be accepted in English society and too westernised to be perceived as a true Nigerian.

According to Ashcroft, 21st century-postcolonial writing has partially changed its essence, producing writers who are not located far away from the hegemonic centre anymore. In this regard, he argues that "the UK and London in particular have provided a steady stream of diasporic writing, often appearing as the centre, not so much of the empire, as the empire's fragmentation" (2012: xxxi). It must be noted that Agbabi's black characters are almost only living in Britain, not in Africa or elsewhere in the former Commonwealth countries. Therefore, it is not anymore the Empire that is writing back, but the margins within the centre. In fact, the theme of belonging and the struggles connected to it are central to Agbabi's poetry, who wants to show how the individual personalities are dealing with these problems in contemporary British society. These new postcolonial identities are "constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew" (Hall 438), willingly to take an active part in the construction of their identity. They struggle, for instance, against the practice of recurring stereotypes concerning black people: Rasool argues that black minorities in Britain are characterised by non-homogeneity, even if popular culture tends to relegate all of them in one artificial group, perceived as the Others (187). Rasool also agrees with Hall when defining black people as non-static subjects, "involved in the questioning, challenging and fracturing hegemonic meanings and practices" (202). Wright (2000) indirectly challenges Williams' position when suggesting that diasporic writers and poets deliberately wish to retain a so-called "strategic marginality" (281). This means that they want to reach the centre to launch social criticism and be effectively heard but, at the same time, it is necessary for them to retain a "privileged position of perception", a non-normative point of view (281). She also adds that performance poetry is a powerful tool to empower

the minorities and to denounce social problems, which is relevant for Patience Agbabi's case.

Although Agbabi is engaged in social criticism, she reserves the right to shift to other contents: when interviewed, Agbabi stated that "[black writers] don't have to do poems about racism all the time! Or clashing oppression, or neo-colonialism or whatever -ism" (Thompson 161), signalling in this way that black writers have no moral duty to give voice (exclusively) to oppression. McLeod also shares Agbabi's concern, pointing out how important it is to take distance from the stereotypes attached to black British writing:

Black writers do not speak for black Britain, of course; but neither do they write necessarily for black Britain first and foremost . . . contemporary writers talk of 'discrimination and stuff' but not exclusively so; there are 'other things' to speak of too, which are inseparable from Britain's ongoing racial predicaments but not confined to them, and in which all are involved. (51)

This is very visible in Agbabi's collections, which alternate socially-engaged poems with other kinds of poems, including more humorous ones. For instance, the poet jokes about a flight attendant that has to put up with all kinds of passengers on her flight ("The Time Traveler" 2000: 41) or creates an absurd and almost hilarious conversation where the wife confesses to her husband that she is cheating on him with their dog ("Bitch" 2000: 32). The poet also thematises the scams of an apparently devoted benefactor, performing to an audience and asking them to follow him on Facebook and buying his books ("Profit" 2014: 70). Agbabi sees this thematic variety as a positive signal for black literature, as she explains: "I think now young Black writers realise that they are allowed to write about Greek myth, rap or whatever –there's much freedom now– and that's very positive for Black literature and culture" (Thompson 162). In conclusion, the reviewed theoretical positions on the issue of black British writing and black consciousness take into account the complex reality of black British identities, showing that the concept of *cultural hybridity* implies an underlying struggle to belong, which often remains unresolved.

3.5 Intertextuality, Adaptation and Appropriation

In the postmodern era, the act of re-writing has assumed a primary role. Re-writing has always been present, but in the 20th century, followed by the 21st, there is a growing tendency towards the (re)appropriation of the past (Alfaro 269). In the essay titled "On Originality", Said confirms this idea by stating that "the writer thinks less of writing originally, and more of rewriting" (135, s. Alfaro 271). Alfaro shows how this can be seen in two major artistical currents, Modernism and Postmodernism. Within the modernist movement, intertextuality can be seen in a number of cultural fields, such as literature (Elliot, Joyce, Pound), art (Picasso), music (Stravinsky, Mahler) and photography, even if in different manners and degrees (271). It is, in fact, one of the quintessential representatives of Modernism, T.S. Elliot, who wrote the maxim "[...] immature poets imitate; mature poets steal; bad poets deface what they take, and good poets make it into something better, or at least something different" (114). Postmodernism, in spite of its partial drifting away from Modernism, retained and developed the practice of textual polyphony, of intertextuality. In spite of the fact that our society has been mainly engaging with this practice starting from the last century, borrowing from other texts (in its broader meaning) and re-writing actually date back to the origin of humankind (Alfaro 269). A prime example is that of classical mythology, coming from cultures which are considered the cradle of Western thinking. For instance, writers whose work we recognise as the source of our mythology, such as Euripides, Aeschylus and Ovid, were not the inventors of certain myths, but they were rather adapting earlier versions of these narratives (Sanders 81). When discussing the specific category of myths, Roland Barthes claims that "the fundamental character of the mythical concept is to be re-appropriated" (1993: 119) and it is common for every generation to re-adapt myths in order to "make [them] suitable for communication" in a specific period and cultural setting (110). Speaking more generally about literature, Barthes argued that "any text is an intertext" (1981:39), implying that every piece of literature is ineluctably indebted to the past, or to another text.

Kristeva was the first to introduce the term *intertextualité* in her essay "Word, Dialogue, Novel", building on the work of the Russian critic Mikhail Bakhtin, who was practically unknown by Western criticism since he lived during the time of the

Soviet Union (Alfaro 272). According to Kristeva, a text is not a closed entity nor is it self-sufficient (268), but it is rather “a permutation of texts, an intertextuality” (1980: 36). No text exists in isolation, but it is always part of a cultural discourse, an expression of society (Allen 35). The notion of the text as a collection of references was at first very unsettling since it shattered the modernist belief that a text is self-sufficient and complete in itself, even if it borrows from the past (“History of Modernism”). In contrast, the postmodern text is defined as a product of intertextuality, never autonomous and always relative (Willette, “Comparing Modernism and Postmodernism”). Alfaro points out that the practice of borrowing used by the postmodern writers is different from the past, also from the modernist era. Postmodern writers do not include allusions and quotes from the classics and the canon in order to elevate their writing, but they want to erase the difference between high and low culture, equally borrowing from past and present, pop culture and all kinds of arts (271). Furthermore, he stresses the pro-active engagement with the practice of intertextuality, which is part of the essence of the postmodern literature: “while all authors rewrite the work of the predecessors, many contemporary writers *consciously* imitate, quote, parodize... extensively” (271, emphasis added). Also the concept of originality changed: according to Kristeva, no text could be original (which reads as “firstly created”) because it was a collection of pre-existent texts, which were in turn all made up by the so-called “cultural (or social) text”, understood as the sum of all the different discourses that form what we define as culture (Allen 35-36). Nonetheless, it is important to note that the concept of re-writing what has already been written does not deprive the new texts of their intrinsic quality and originality (reads as interesting and special), nor do they want to simply replicate the source text they borrow from. Andreas puts it in the following way: “the rewrite transcends imitation, adding, supplementing, improvising, innovating, amplifying. The aim is not replication as such, but rather complication, expansion rather than contraction” (107). Sanders also stresses the prolific bond that connects a text to this source, enriching both of them: literary adaptations and appropriations “actively creat[e] a new cultural and aesthetic product, one that stands alongside the texts that have provided inspiration, and, in the process, enrich[...] rather than ‘rob[...]’ them.” (53). Hence, there should be no

anxiety connected with these practices, which generally benefits from these new forms of rewriting.

Gérard Genette also addressed the concept of intertextuality, creating a very systematic framework that could be applied in literary studies. Differently from Kristeva, whose work was deeply devoted to the study of semiotics (but also applicable to the social, philosophical and social sphere, Alfaro 280), Genette tried to create a definition that could function more specifically for *literary* texts as such (Alfaro 280). The term intertextuality was substituted by the more functional *transtextuality*, which is to be understood very broadly as “all that sets the text in a relationship, whether obvious or concealed, with other texts” (1997: 1). The relationships between source text and the new product can be multiple and overlapping, and he divided them into five different categories, which can be utilised in precise literary analyses (intertextuality, metatextuality, paratextuality, architextuality and hypertextuality). For reason of space and complexity, all these categories will not be discussed here, except for the one of *intertextuality*, which might cause some confusion with the poststructuralist term coined by Kristeva,¹⁴ given their homonymity. According to Genette, *intertextuality* is not concerned with the extensive processes of semiotic and cultural signification but is rather a mere textual relationship defined as “a relationship of copresence between two texts or among several texts” (1997: 1). This relation happens through means of allusion, quotation or plagiarism, excluding other types of intertextual relations such as commentary (metatextuality) or imitation (hypertextuality). An example of intertextuality as understood by Genette could be the type of quotation used in the Early Modern period where some authors simply wanted their readers to recognise the citation they used in order to better understand what they were saying, to point out the irony behind those words, or the contrast. (Forsyth 2). T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* could be also considered as a text containing innumerable instances of intertextuality, given the fact that nearly every line of the poem cross-references another artistic work.

If the relationship of similarity is more extended and consistent one, Genette talks of *hypertextuality*, which is a direct or indirect transformation of the source text

¹⁴ For the complete description of these framework see Genette, Gérard. *Palimpsests*. 1982 [1977].

(which could be understood as imitation). In line with Kristeva, he stated that every text is an *hypertext* that is related in some way to an *hypotext* (its source) (1997: ix). Joyce's *Ulysess* (1922) constitutes "the archetype of the adaptive text", although it distances itself extremely from the hypotext (Sanders 8, see Genette 1997: 309). Normally, an hypertext could not possibly exist without its source, but it can make sense on its own, as Sanders argues: "Joyce's novel can undoubtedly be read and appreciated in its own right, free of any Homeric associations [...] And yet a reading of the narrative alongside an awareness of the events of Homer's epic clearly enriches the potential for the production of meaning" (8). Despite the complexity of this system (Forsyth warns that some might perceive it as "an obsession for categorisation gone mad", 6), these terms serve the purpose of showing how complex the relationship between texts can be.

A further distinction is made by Sanders, who seeks to differentiate between the similar concepts of *adaptation* and *appropriation*. It seems important to make such a distinction since the field of intertextuality abounds with similar, almost synonymic terms. Examples of this vocabulary are *homage*, *mimicry*, *travesty*, *echo*, *allusion* (Poole 2004: 2), *variation*, *version*, *interpretation*, *imitation*, *hypertext*, *palimpsest*, *reworking*, *rewriting*, *refashioning*, *re-vision*, *re-evaluation*, and so forth (Sanders 5). Without a doubt, all of them (and many more could be added to the list) can be considered useful, even if their meanings could sometimes overlap. Sanders chooses to focus on just two of these terms as they seem to be particularly relevant for this field of research. Nonetheless, the author stresses how important "exploring, even celebrating, ongoing interactions" (22) is in this particular context. Thus, she positions herself against "closure to alternatives" (22), as the very concept of intertextuality calls for interaction and exchange. In her study, differently from Genette, she uses the broader definition of text, which reads as literary texts, films, creations, compositions, events and performances (1).

The category of adaptation, sometimes known as *rewriting*, is defined as a "reinterpretation of established texts in new generic contexts or perhaps with relocations of an 'original' or source text's cultural and/or temporal setting, which may or may not involve a generic shift" (24). Adaptation is in fact often involved with the passage from one genre to another, as for example the one from novels

made into films (24). This might be operated in order to make the text accessible to new audiences (e.g. younger generations) through processes called *proximation* and *updating* (23). Many will be familiar with this kind of adaptation, as in Disney's movies staging a number of classics (*Alice in Wonderland*, *The Little Mermaid*, *The Jungle Book*, *Pinocchio*, etc.) (4). Also Shakespeare is a great source of adaptive material (46): Baz Luhrmann's *Romeo + Juliet* (1996) is an example of transposition of the evergreen dramatic love story adapted for the big screen in order to make it more familiar to new audiences (25). The drama's setting has been relocated to Venice Beach, California, and it shows the conflicts of mafia gangs using handguns instead of swords (25). The importance of the hypotext in this kind of adaptation is most often signalled by the use of the same title (27), which might also be included in the subtitle, or by the use of a title that strongly reminds of the original, as in the case of *Romeo + Juliet*.

There are a number of adaptations, though, that deviate from the original by commenting on it. This means that they are "offering a revised point of view from the 'original'," which might also include "adding hypothetical motivation of voicing what the text silences or marginalizes" (23). A good example of this kind of commentary is one of the transpositions of Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park*, by the Canadian director Patricia Rozema (2000). In this version, alongside the main narrative, the director decided to show what was neglected in the original, namely the context of colonialism and the slave trade taking place at the time of the British Empire (before its abolishment in 1833 through the Slavery Abolition Act) (27). In fact, the wealth of the Bertram family derived from the exploitation of African slaves transported to the plantations of the Caribbean island of Antigua to produce tobacco and sugarcane, a fact which Austen does not comment on in the novel. According to Said, Jane Austen does not criticize nor question slavery as she accepted that this was the order of things at the time ("It would be silly to expect Jane Austen to treat slavery with anything like the passion of an abolitionist or a newly liberated slave"), although he also notes that she was probably not in favour of it ("Jane Austen and Empire"). A further type of adaptation is defined as *analogue*¹⁵. These texts are

¹⁵ Sanders adopts Deborah Cartmell's categories of adaptation, subdivided in transposition, commentary and analogue. See Cartmell, Deborah and Whelehan, Imelda. *Adaptations from Text to Screen, Screen to Text*. London: Routledge, 1994, 24.

“stand-alone works that nevertheless gain layers of meaning when their status as analogue is revealed” (29). This is the case of the “recontextualization” of Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* in Francis Ford Coppola’s film *Apocalypse Now* (1996) (29). The film draws a comparison between the colonial expedition in Congo and the negative implications of the Vietnam War, seen as a modern form of colonisation.

Sanders also elaborates on a further category, which should be considered separately from that of adaptation. In fact, *reappropriation* can be seen as a more critical and distanced form of rewriting. Comparing it to adaptation, it can be said that it more frequently “adopts a posture of critique, overt commentary and even sometimes assault or attack” (6), and can also be defined as a “wholly new cultural product and domain” (35). Moreover, “[...] appropriations tend to have a more complicated, intricate and sometimes embedded relationship to their intertexts than a straightforward film version of a canonical or well-known text would suggest and [...] are not always as clearly signalled as in the adaptive process” (35). The author brings examples such as *West Side Story* (1961), which could not have been created without the story of *Romeo and Juliet*, but it has distanced itself a great deal from it (36). The story, set in 1950’s New York, stages the prohibited love between the members of two rival gangs and implies some parallels with Shakespeare’s classic, although not simply being a remake or a modern 1:1 version of the story. Regarding more literary examples, Sanders talks of Jane Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea* as an appropriation of Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*. Rhys’s novel can be seen as a possible prequel to *Jane Eyre*, narrating the story of Mr. Rochester and his first wife Antoinette, the Jamaican creole girl whom she marries and subsequently forces to come with him to England. Antoinette, whom we recognise as Berta Mason from *Jane Eyre*, will be later known as “the madwoman in the attic”. The unfaithfulness and emotional abuse of her husband destabilise her precarious psychological condition, which is the reason why Mr. Rochester decides to seclude her in the attic. If in Brontë’s story we only perceive the haunting presence of Berta, Rhys dedicated a whole novel to her story and to the explanation of how she came to be mad, giving her back her neglected dignity.¹⁶ As Sanders points out, this preoccupation with

¹⁶ Brontë describes Berta as a savage animal: “[...]”In the deep shade, at the farther end of the room, a figure ran backwards and forwards. What it was, whether beast or human being, one could not, at first sight, tell ... it snatched and growled like some strange wild animal: but it was covered with

reading literary tradition under a critical lens is justified: “the central problem with any tradition is the ability to recognize not only those who constitute the tradition but those who are at various time excluded from it, or, at the very last, consigned to its margins” (13). Also Adrienne Rich, within her feminist and lesbian research interests, talked of a politically loaded appropriation, which she called *re-vision*. It is described as “the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction [...] we need to know the writing of the past and know it differently than we have ever known it; not to pass on a tradition but to break its hold over us” (369, s. Sanders 12). A very prolific kind of appropriation, discussed in Chapter 4 and 5 by Sanders, is that of myth, fairy-tales, and folklore.

As regards the works of Agbabi, there is much implementing of adaptation and appropriation. The most striking example is certainly *Telling Tales*, defined by Agbabi’s publisher Canongate as “a brilliant *re-interpretation* of The Canterbury Tales for the 21st century, from one of the UK’s foremost poets (“Telling Tales”, Canongate website, emphasis added). It is certainly difficult to position this work into one of the specific categories analysed by Sanders, as poetry collections can be much more varied and contradictory than novels and screen or stage adaptations. In general, Agbabi’s work acknowledges a great deal to Chaucer’s and deliberately seeks comparison with it. This characteristic points more in the direction of adaptation, especially at the last category defined as *analogue*, which calls for a complete recontextualization of the source text. Analogues can be seen as stand-alone works, but the parallel reading enriches them with deeper meanings. This is certainly true for *Telling Tales*, as the collection precisely follows the paratextual elements of Chaucer (e.g. the number and order of the tales, the allusions to the content of each tale and its characters). Nonetheless, these similarities do not account for all that has to be said. In fact, a great number of the tales engage with a critical re-writing of the original text, even though Agbabi’s intention is not primarily that of attacking Chaucer (which she might well consider as an anachronistic practice), but rather that of adapting the context to the social British landscape of the 21st century. It is clear that addressing issues of gender and race, especially to show the contradictions of traditional narratives, is a clear act of

clothing, and a quantity of dark, grizzled hair, wild as a mane, hid its head and face” (321, London: Penguin Edition, 1966).

appropriation. In this case, though, the hypertext does not distance itself much from the hypotext, nor are the relations covered and embedded. There is, instead, a pattern of intertextuality with popular culture, as well as literature and culture in general, which makes Agbabi's last collection a typical example of postmodern poetry. In the other collection analysed in this thesis, *Transformatrix*, there are some examples of re-writing, which might be identified quite clearly as appropriations, but it must be said that this practice is not as important as in *Telling Tales*. A telling example is "Ms De Meanour" (45), a drag version of Cinderella, who turns into a transvestite for her Saturday party time, instead of turning back into her more humble version at midnight, as Cinderella does. There is a transformation, but certainly not the one expected from the well-known fairy-tale. Besides extended rewritings, there are also numerous scattered references to other fairy tales and folklore stories. One examples is the recurring theme of "open sesame" in "Ajax", who is also said to be "Alice, Ali Baba and Aladdin" (68). This shows a recurrent interest on the part of Agbabi for rewriting, probably also inspired by Carol Ann Duffy, whom Agbabi acknowledges as one of the main influences of her writing. Duffy is another key figure in the postmodern, feminist re-appropriation of tradition, and her work has been widely analysed and studied. Nonetheless, Agbabi does something unique, incorporating the teaching of Duffy and going beyond it by effortlessly adapting tradition by using categories as broad as those of sex, gender and race with an impeccable attention to form and originality.

4. Female Voices

In this chapter, I will discuss how various poems by Patience Agbabi give female characters the opportunity to be heard, some of which had previously been silenced or misunderstood. This is partially true for the last poem (the rewriting of the “The Wife of Bath’s Tale and Prologue”), whose original version was already “feminist” in its own peculiar way. In the selection that it is made here, all four compositions come from *Telling Tales* (re-appropriations of “The Knight’s Tale”, “The Miller’s Tale”, “The Nun’s Priest Tale” and “The Wife of Bath’s Prologue and Tale”). Agbabi’s latest collection seeks to re-write medieval tales and, in some cases, to make up for some of the misogynist views that were common in Chaucer’s time. The poet has considerable respect for Chaucer and his work, and her objective is probably not to attack the great medieval writer, as she never expressed herself in these terms. She rather wants to “take it to a different dimension” (“Chaucer Remixed”) and update it to the 21st century, with all its differences in race, gender relations and sexual orientations. Most probably, the poet understood how anachronistic it would have been just to criticise *The Canterbury Tales* for their recurrent misogynist tone, as this was a feature inherent to medieval society, noticeable also in Chaucer’s contemporaries. Martin comments on the issue of an anachronistic reading of Chaucer in the following way:

But how far are modern and feminist ideas about justice, equality, cultural conditioning, personal growth and self-realisation appropriate in discussing medieval literature? Are not our ideas anachronistic and irrelevant? (30)

The question of whether Chaucer was a misogynist or not is quite complicated and difficult to answer. As Agbabi is an English literature graduate, she might well be aware of these controversies, which frequently surface in the academic discussions about this topic. She decided to rewrite some tales from a different angle, where the female characters could re-tell their stories from their own perspective or have a narrator that does it for them. However, Agbabi’s intention is not making flawless heroines out of Chaucer’s original characters. She rather wants her characters to be authentic (Novak and Fischer 359), even though this means indulging in their “sins” (or should we say pleasures?). Emily has a drug addiction, Alison cannot get enough

of cheating on her husband with younger and more attractive men, and so forth. The immoral behaviours of the original tales, although often presented in an ironical tone, would have generally been condemned by the Christian Medieval society. The difference in Agbabi is that there is no intention of giving a moral judgement. The poet wants her characters to develop as they truly are, with all their flaws (and their virtues). On a closer look, she even adds some “negative” traits to the character, like in the case of Emily, who she re-thinks as a fragile young women abusing drugs.

The practice of re-writing stories from a female point of view has some famous precursors, like Duffy, Carter and Atwood, to name some of the most important ones. Bertram describes this practice as an “act of reparation” which allows to “giv[e] a voice to the silent wife or mother, shifting the focus” (81). Duffy included a variety of different characters, such as Circe, Eurydice, Pygmalion’s wife: many of these “represent what men fear: the released, primary sexual energy” (Wainwright 2003: 53). In many ways, Duffy’s tone resembles that of Agbabi. Also Agbabi wants to liberate women on the level of sexual freedom, allowing them to behave and misbehave. Abad-Garcia describes it in terms of “intelligent and subtle irony,” which is also identified as a “subversive factor in gendered poetry” (268). Horner makes a similar point by calling it “humorous debunking”, which she considers “far more effective than sober-sided feminist criticism” (106). Agbabi, too, often uses irony as a means to de-construct traditional narratives, many of which have been handed on throughout the centuries retaining the same gender inequalities. It is only in the twentieth century that scholars and writers have started to question the apparent “normality” of social structures presented in all kinds of literary and non-literary forms. In the case of Duffy and Agbabi, irony has the power to unmask what has been perceived as unquestionable, in this way exposing its weaker spots. Bertram agrees with this point and states that the feminist practice of de-construction “provides subversive opportunities to invert or challenge the status quo by bringing marginalised voices to the fore, a way of making what is conventionally seen as weak appear strong” (84). Another shared feature between the two poets is the fact that they tend to show the “[...] social power dynamics between empowered and disempowered group[s]” (Horner 105). In this case, the disempowered group is

composed of female roles in literature and in the collective imaginary of Western culture.

In choosing Chaucer as a source, Agbabi knows that she is also re-working previous literature, not only the medieval one. We must be aware of the fact that the origins of these ideas have deeper, ancient roots and that their consequences are seen in much later times, as Simone de Beauvoir cleverly explains in the milestone of feminist literature *The Second Sex* (1949). In fact, the “‘rigidification’ of gender roles” (Horner 105) has its origin in the cradle of Western thinking, in ancient Greece. This is the millenary society that posited the basis for a great part of our mythology and epics. Myths and epics have been re-adapted throughout the centuries, although the salient features remained the same. Notable examples can be found in Dante Alighieri’s *Divina Commedia*, Giovanni Boccaccio’s *Teseida* and Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*, which are all medieval works that resumed these stories and adapted them for their own literary projects. These great literary works show how mythology had and has deeply entered our collective imaginary. In addition, the fact that these stories still spark interest in us and are still an object of study after several thousand years shows that their impact is still significant. Their relevance is perhaps the reason why many feminist authors have decided to take myths, epics and fables and rework their conventions.

The same holds for the genre of fairy tales, many of which were transmitted orally for a long time before being put down on paper. Of the authors previously cited, Angela Carter is surely the one who has mainly dealt with this genre, deconstructing the deep-rooted patriarchal beliefs in tales such as “Snow White”, “Little Red Riding Hood” and “Bluebeard” (and many more). Jack Zipes sees this deconstruction process as a way of “expos[ing] the artifice of the fairy tale and mak[ing] us aware that there are different ways to shape and view stories” (157). Recreating these stories from a new angle does not produce a new truth, but it rather triggers new possibilities. Zipes argues that this practice offers “not recuperation but differentiation, not the establishment of a new norm but the questioning of all norms” (Zipes 157-158). Thus, it does not come to a resolution, it rather opens up new questions. Nonetheless, it seems that the ultimate objective of many feminist writers is showing how identities are socially constructed and are not the result of

biological conditions. Following a feminist line of thinking starting from Beauvoir, they try to show how women (and female characters in literature) have long been relegated to an oppressed position, victims of social inequality on the sole basis of their gender. In fact, female identity has been discursively crafted (in a Foucauldian way) to solidify the concept of a male, essential subject. In *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir argues that, historically, women have occupied the role of the *other*, “determined and differentiated in relation to man, while he is not in relation to her; [...] the inessential in front of the essential” (26). This ties in with the ideas of the philosopher Zygmunt Bauman, who explains that the concept of *otherness* is created via a binary dialectic that permeates our society:

the second member is but *the other* of the first, the opposite (degraded, suppressed, exiled) side of the first and its creation. Thus abnormality is the other of the norm [...] Both sides depend on each other, but the dependence is not symmetrical. The second side depends on the first for its contrived and enforced insulation. The first depends on the second for its self-assertion. (15)

It is exactly this logic that is followed, for instance, in Chaucer’s “Knights Tale”: the silent Emelye is used as an object against which the knights Palamon and Arcite can measure their virtuosity on the battlefield and in courtship. She is the “reward for male prowess” (Hallissy 64), to be won in a tournament. Similarly, in “The Miller’s Tale”, the beautiful and young Alisoun is the “pawn in a contest between men” (Hallissy 81), in the rivalry between the educated Nicholas, the carpenter John and the clerk Absolon. Nicholas takes pleasure in outwitting the other two men by prevailing over them and “conquering” Alison and, more specifically, her body.

The first tale discussed in this chapter has undergone a major deconstruction. Chaucer’s “Knight’s Tale” has been transformed into “Emily” (2014: 5), a title that shifts the attention from the knight(s) to the female character. The epigraph directly under the title serves the purpose of promptly explaining the intention of the poet: “In Chaucer’s story there are two heroes, who are practically indistinguishable from each other, and a heroine, who is merely a name” (Hulbert qtd. in Agbabi 2014: 5). Ironically, it is indeed her name that becomes the title of the new version of the poem. The love triangle of the original tale is retained: there are two men, Pal and Arc, who fight for a “lady”, whose name is Emily. Instead of a medieval courtly

setting, the poem takes place in modern days, and the three characters are depicted as drug addicts. As in the original,¹⁷ Emily is not aware of their attentions, nor that they fight against each other for her.

The poem form is a sestina, with the same six end-words repeated cyclically (*body, smoke, Emily, alter, cell, temple*), with some minor exceptions. Nonetheless, some of the stanzas are grouped together, so that in the end there are four stanzas instead of six. The tale has acquired a new post-modern, hallucinatory touch, which makes it utterly different from the original one. One of the biggest differences on a formal level is the choice of letting the characters speak for themselves and tell their own story, with their authentic voices. In this case, the third-person narrator disappears, replaced by the voice of Pal, the revised version of Chaucer's Palamon, the Theban knight who survived the fight against his cousin Arcite to win Emily's hand. He is the one narrating most of the story, although not much is happening, except for the mentioning of Arc's death and Emily's addiction and sexual habits. Given the very colloquial language, with occasional grammatical mistakes ("it don't alter the facts"), we can infer that Pal does not come from an educated background, but could rather be identified as a (possibly lower-class) drug addict. The poem is written in the form of a dramatic monologue, with the last three-lines spoken by Emily, who has seemingly woken up from a long night or, more probably, from a drug trip. These lines can be seen as the *envoy* of a sestina, giving a final twist to the main plot. It is indeed quite atypical to have a polyphony of voices in the same poem, especially as in this case, it has been presented as a dramatic monologue from Pal's point of view. The fact that this is a dramatic monologue is visible due to the numerous direct references to the inner-fictional addressee (e.g. "And if you're sniffing for his body / you won't find nothing", "Got anything to smoke? ... I'm Emily ...").

As regards the setting of the tale, there is no trace of the courtly surroundings nor of aristocratic knights and princesses. In fact, the character constellation is reduced to the essential: Emily, Palamon and Arcite (who is dead at the point of "narration"). Theseus and Hippolyta and all the other secondary characters – gods and goddesses included – have disappeared. The new setting is not completely clear, but it seems

¹⁷ In Chaucer's tale, Emily finds out about the knights' love for her only at a later point in the story, but she is not interested in reciprocating their feelings.

like the whole tale takes places in Emily's head, which becomes Pal and Arc's alternative kind of cell ("Two men locked in a woman's body, / her messed up head. When I say we shared a cell / I'm talking brain"). The poet plays with the oxymoron of the words *cell* and *temple*: the cell is so idealised by the lyrical persona that it is perceived as a temple, a "shrine to her". At the same time, we understand that both terms, *cell* and *temple*, refer to Emily's mind. The word *temple* is used with the meaning of "sacred building" as well as to indicate the flat, side part of the head ("it was a shrine to her, a temple. // I miss him, like a gun to the temple."). The image of a gun at the head points at the fragile condition of the human psyche, as in the case of Emily.

The poem has a hallucinating quality to it since the more one reads it, the more absurd it appears to be. A possible interpretation is that Agbabi employs Freud's psychoanalytical theory (*The Ego and the Id*, 1923) and applies the categories of *ego*, *id* and *super id* to the three characters. In the psychoanalytical triad, Freud argues that every individual has three different internal driving forces. On the one side, there is the *id*: the id represents the subconscious and the pleasure principle, which drives us to satisfy our primary instincts. On the other side, there is the *superego*, which is defined as the "conscience of the personality" (Lapsley and Stey 6). The *superego* represents the internalised moral conduct dictated by society and it induces the subject into guilt when the latter follows the irrational and egoistic drives of the *id* ("Sigmund Freud", *Britannica Academic*). Lastly, there is the *ego*, that is identified with the "self" or the "I" and serves as "the integrator of the outer and inner worlds as well as of the id and the superego" ("ego", *Britannica Academic*). Hints that the poet referred to Freud's is the word play with the terms *ego* and *id*: "I'm Pal, Emily's alter. / Think ego" and "Arc's dead. Broke his parole, an alter / crazy on id". In the second stanza, Pal also asks the question "who reads her diagnosis?," which might be seen as an allusion to Freud and his work as a psychoanalyst.

From what is stated in the poem, the readers understand that the two men live in Emily's mind and they could represent the principles of the *id* (the subconscious) and the *super-ego* (the regulatory instance), while Emily incarnates the *ego*, mediating between these two instances fighting inside her psyche. Pal seems to be

the more instinct-driven and ruthless one, hence he could possibly be identified with the *id*. Emily “lets [him] out” of her mind “when she likes to “play[...] damsel”: Pal represents the more instinctive side of Emily and he is “released” when she spends time with her lovers. Arc, instead, is described as the one “who won the war but lost the plot” (Agbabi 6). In Chaucer, despite defeating Palamon in the tournament, Arcite dies from complications after falling from his horse, which is an emblem for the fall from the medieval Wheel of Fortune (Hallisay 69). In Agbabi’s poem, Arc is described as “crazy on id,” which could possibly mean that the *id* is driving him crazy (he is unlikely to represent the *id*, although this cannot be said with certainty). In fact, Arc acted against Pal and Emily by “starv[ing] [them] all” in order to “cancel / [Pal] out for good”. These lines suggest that Arc could be the *superego*, perhaps trying to wipe out Emily’s self-destructive habits, like her drug abuse. Since drugs are taken for pleasure, it would have been necessary for Arc to kill Pal, the irrational *id*, in order to achieve its objective. Arc is also described as over-confident, smoking his Romeo cigars, and is compared to an authoritative figure such as Winston Churchill (“Having a big fat Romeo to smoke / don’t make you Winston Churchill”). It seems like Pal ultimately wants to give a lesson to the inner-fictional addressee (and in the end, also to Emily) in order to show that he has finally won, in spite of Arc’s (authoritative) power.

Another element that connects Emily to her two suitors, especially to Pal, is the drug. The text is highly loaded with words coming from this semantic field, even quite colloquial ones that are only known by frequent drug users. Pal smoked “tars”, which is the “least pure form of heroin” (“tar” def.1, *Urban Dictionary*) and he explains that their body is “written off”, which means that is “damaged by drugs” (“written off”, def. 1, *Urban Dictionary*). As we find out in the closing three lines, Emily has just recovered her senses because she “must’ve blacked out”, probably due to her addiction, and the first thing she asks for is something to smoke (most likely another illegal substance, not a cigarette). Also, Pal sends her “a ring, of smoke” to declare his love and future union. The two men are in Emily’s head, whereas Emily represents the bodily presence, but we notice that both body and mind are negatively affected by the drug abuse. Metaphorically, the two men smoke tars and Romeos, but maybe the fact that they smoke is just a way of representing

the effects that the substances taken by Emily have on her brain. This would be coherent with the idea of her superego (Arc) dying, probably due to her dissolute lifestyle.

As we can see, there is no vindication for the silenced Emily. If possible, she seems even more miserable than in the original version. When she awakes at the end of the poem, the readers find out about her own vision of the story: "Must've blacked out ... This body ain't no temple / but what's the alternative, a padded cell?" Agbabi does not make her the heroine of the tale and there is no happy ending awaiting her, only a glooming reference to a "padded cell" in a psychiatric hospital. However, the point of view changes: the two men are now trapped in her head and she becomes the vehicle through which their existence is possible. Without Emily, there would not be either of them. As no one is free in the original tale, no one can be considered free in Agbabi's version either. In Chaucer, both the cell where the two knights are imprisoned and the garden surrounded by walls where Emily strolls are a form of prison (Martin 107). Here, Emily appears "imprisoned" in her body, as the two men are imprisoned in her head.

Notwithstanding, what Emily is released from is her idealistic construction as a passive, angelic and virginal beauty. Chaucer literally draws on the Medieval stock representation of the angelic woman, the unattainable object of courtly love (e.g. Dante's Beatrice and Petrarca's Laura) and applies it to Emily. Beyond her physical appearance, little is described of her personality and she only speaks a couple of times in the whole tale, once praying to the goddess Diana to remain chaste and unmarried. As Martin argues, her "thoughts are very different from the ones projected onto her" (49), but at the same time, it is also true that they confirm the stereotype of the virginal beauty, her "Madonna-like absence of sensuality" (51). In turn, these qualities confirm her purity and make her worthy of the knights' love. It is important to note that an author has the power to give life to his characters, but at the same time he can also silence them ("The Madwoman in the Attic" 14), and this is quite literally the case of Emily. Agbabi does not make her speak extensively, but she decides to release her from this absurd idealisation, in a way also parodying the practice of courtly love. First of all, Emily becomes the contrary to the idealised and pure damsel: she makes extensive use of drugs, has a number of lovers and seems

quite miserable and physically wrecked. The two knights also lose their noble manners and titles, together with their pompous, heroic names, substituted by the shortened *Pal* and *Arc*. They too are reduced to suffering drug addicts and to mere voices –almost caricatures– in Emily’s head. As can be seen, Agbabi does not want to create an idealised, adjusted version of the story. She rather wants to give Emily the power to be different, even if she engages in a self-destructive process.

Lastly, it can be noted that this tale could also be analysed from an intersectional point of view. On the one hand, the character of Emily was a silenced female character. Although she has been liberated from her role as a virtuous and chaste damsel, the focus of the poem is still on how she deals with her gender role and the relationship with the other sex, represented by *Pal* and *Arc*. On the other hand, it is clear that Emily’s social background is problematic and she is going through a difficult time due to her drug addiction. In a way, then, there is an intersection of gender and social issues discussed within the same poem.

The next tale I will interpret has a close connection with “The Knight’s Tale”, although they are connected by contrast rather than by similarity. The revisited title of “The Miller’s Tale” is “The Kiss” (Agbabi 2014:7). “The Kiss” portrays the story of another love triangle but with a more ironical tone compared to the previous poem: the eighteen-year-old Alison, a “fucked-up femme fatale”, cheats on her old husband with two different lovers, the French Nick and the “musclehead” Abs. The former studies “engineering astrophysics” at the University of Greenwich and is “fit, well hung, well read,” whereas the second is a muscly (the name *abs* stands for “abdominals”) and attractive drug dealer, who has an interest in both women and men (“this Abs comes on to guys *and* girls”). The title of the poem refers to the comical situation in Chaucer’s tale where the clerk Absolon mistakenly kisses the posterior of Nicholas, a situation which occurs also in Agbabi’s poem. The poet chooses this title in order to refer to the climax of the tale and she does it quite humorously, knowing that this is one of the most trivial and vulgar moments of this fabliau-inspired story.

Agbabi pays attention to the contrast that Chaucer wanted to create between the two subsequent tales (the Knight’s and Miller’s tales) and she tries to recreate it in her own manner. The idealistic devotion of “The Knight’s Tale”, with its long and

chaste courtship, is replaced by the lustful love scenes between Alisoun and her two lovers, as well as by the very graphic homoerotic passage featuring Abs and Nick. In Agbabi, also the form mirrors the difference between the story-tellers: for the first one, she chooses an elegant and more refined sestina form, whereas for the second she uses plain four-line stanzas with monorhymes (e.g. *wed / bed / read / musclehead*). As in Chaucer, Alisoun uses low-style language accompanied by colloquialisms and swear words ("prick", "piss"), which served the purpose of contrasting her trivial and earthly nature with Emily's angelic and virginal one (Hallissy 75). Ironically, she uses a couple of French words because her lover is French ("bon appétit – French-kiss my arse!") but the effect is far from elegant as we can infer that Alisoun is anything but educated. In the original, she is not a "silenced" female character like Emily, but her dissolute and unfaithful behaviour does not make her an ideal wife. This is also the reason why Chaucer wants to create such a sharp contrast between the tales (and ultimately between the two women). Nonetheless, in the end, Alisoun is the only character that comes out unscathed, unlike the other three male protagonists (John, Nicholas and Absolon). According to scholars, her behaviour is in a way justifiable as a young woman who married an old man (the topos of the *amor senex*) was somewhat ridiculous for a medieval audience (Hallissy 75). Thus, they expected the young, frustrated wife to cheat on her husband with a more virile man (75). In the end, Alisoun is able to have the best of both worlds: a young and handsome lover and a wealthy husband who loves her unconditionally and allows her to have a privileged life. She gets her romantic night with the fascinating Nicholas and her husband does not find out about it. According to Chaucer, casual extra-marital relationships might have been acceptable in the working-class milieu, but not amongst the nobility (Martin 73): Alisoun was good "for any lord to leggen in his bedde, / Or yet for any good yeman to wedde" (3269-70), which translates as "for any lord to lay in his bed, / Or yet for any good yeoman to wed" ("The Miller's Prologue and Tale", *Harvard.edu*¹⁸). A commoner like Alisoun could not have married an aristocrat, but his servant, a yeoman. She could have, instead, entertained a lord in bed (like a courtesan or a prostitute would do). The characters know these social rules very well: in fact,

¹⁸ In this chapter, the original passages from Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* and the paraphrasis in Modern English are taken from *Harvard's Geoffrey Chaucer Website*.

Alisoun tries to improve her social position by marrying a rich carpenter. As Martin points out, in the medieval patriarchal system women were suffering – amongst others – from economical inferiority and could try to redeem their condition by using what they had – their sexuality (82). They could either conform to the system and marry or they could decide it to make it their profession, through prostitution (82). Sex is a commodity and women are “objects of consumption” (104). John, Alisoun’s old husband, decides to take a young beautiful wife of whom he is very jealous and tries to keep her “narwe in cage” (3224) (“Jealous he was, and held her narrowly in confinement” 3224) as one would do with an animal or a prisoner.

Compared to Chaucer, Agbabi’s poem is a cheeky celebration of sexual promiscuity. In the poem, this complex intertwining of relationships is proudly orchestrated by Alisoun. The young woman did have a voice in the original tale, but here she is in control of the situation and she even narrates her own tale. To be more precise, there is a first-level narrator, Robyn Miller, who introduces his tale in a very abrupt manner (“Get me a pint of Southwark piss!”) and quickly hands the floor over to Alisoun, who is the second-level narrator. Thus, there is one extradiegetic and one intradiegetic, first-person narrator. If the original was a farce, also Agbabi’s version retains a humorous tone, which makes the whole story quite light-hearted (in compliance with the fabliau tradition). Alisoun is not described explicitly, but through her own words we understand that she is an egoistic young woman who takes pride in cheating on her husbands since he is “a jealous prick” and “old an crap in bed”. Again, Agbabi does not want to depict a heroine. Notwithstanding, Alisoun finds a way to vindicate for her “objectification” as a trophy wife, frustrated from being kept away from the amusements appropriate to her young age. In Agbabi’s poem, she is turned in a possibly more rude, shrewd and boasting version of the Chaucer’s character. She talks bluntly about the financial interests behind her wedding: “he’s proposed [Nick] but I’m a bitch, / I’d leave my husband, but he’s rich”. In this case, it seems like Alisoun has decided that she wanted to marry, not the other way around. She is also able to break her promise anytime: in fact, Nick has proposed to her, but she is more interested in the financial wealth her husband has to offer. Unofficially, she allows herself to have as many extra-marital relationships as she desires.

In “The Kiss”, it is Alisoun who describes the other three men, and her words often have a strong sexual connotation. In a way, this is a subversion of tradition. First of all, it mocks the tradition of the *blazon*, the poems that praised the lady’s attribute in the eyes of the lover, a tradition that was made popular by Petrarch and used by Edmund Spenser and Shakespeare (“blazon”, *Poetry Foundation*). In the original tale, Alisoun is described as slender as a weasel, softer as the wool of a sheep and her mouth sweet as honey and apple (3234, 3249, 3260-1). These and other parts of her description suggest a “vibrant, warm, sleek, soft, [...] playful sexuality (Martin 72-73). In Agbabi’s poem, the situation is reversed: the lovers are described by the woman-narrator and she “owns” her sexuality, allowing herself to comment on their sexual performances and bodies, which is inconceivable for a female character in traditional literature. She also talks about her enjoyment of sexual life openly, in a stanza where she plays with the word *fuck* and its derivatives, creating a beating rhythm. In the case of Alisoun, the word has a positive meaning, namely that of enjoying sexual intercourse with her lover(s). For John and Nick, the word takes more negative connotations:

So, I got fucked; John’s a fuckwit
 an Nick my lover, fuckéd¹⁹ to shit;
 an Abs scored hard, he’s fucking fit;
 both men were fucked by the fucked-off git.

As we understand, Alisoun is the only one amongst all the character that does not suffer the consequence of her actions. Nick pays the price for his and Alisoun’s joke, which is also pretty distasteful: they both show their posteriors to Abs, a part of their body that Abs mistakes for Alisoun’s lips and kisses (at least the first time). In the end, Abs takes revenge only on Nick, namely by forcibly penetrating him:

We laugh, but Abs laughs last, the sod,
 Abs has a hard-on, like his bod,²⁰
 he grabs Nick’s arse, I swear to God,
 in goes his red-hot iron rod!

¹⁹ Here Agbabi inserts an accent on the *é*: quite ironically, she wants to make a swear word as *fuck* sound like a French, refined word since Alisoun’s lover Nick is French.

²⁰ “Bod” is Scottish-Gaelic for indicating a man’s penis (“bod” def. 3, Urban Dictionary).

Here, we also have an example of Agbabi's queering practice: Absolon is turned into a bisexual character and the "iren hoot" (3809) of the original tale becomes Abs' penis, metaphorically described as "red-hot iron rod". Agbabi queers the words of Chaucer, who writes that Absolon is "jolif [...] and gay" ("elegant and gay" 3339), and exchanges the meaning of gay as "light-hearted and carefree" ("gay" def. 2, *Oxford English Dictionary*) with "homosexual". Therefore, it can be said that also this poem shows intersectional characteristics, given its interest in re-appropriating Alisoun's female voice as well as queering the literary canon through the inclusion of a bisexual character.

In the end, all the male figures are "punished" in a way or another. Nick, who thought to be the cleverest amongst them, is penetrated by Abs. When John walks in and witnesses this unusual scene, he is shocked by the two men's homosexuality and, consequently, he throws them out of the house. John pays his price by becoming a "cuckold husband" (a staple character very common in Medieval literature, also in *The Canterbury Tales*). In contrast to the men, Alisoun is said to be "scot-free"²¹ and the jealousy of her husband now "made him even more devout". However, she does not say this because she is now more in love with him and has learned her lesson. Instead, this jealousy is something she is coquettishly proud of, although she does not really care about John. The woman does not seem to care much about her lovers either. When she meets them on the street, she mocks them: "Now, when I see them, *Kiss?* I shout, / raise my eyebrow and pout". In this farce, Alison is the grotesque "winner", who has outwitted all her men and can continue to enjoy the pleasures that life has to offer.

The third poem analysed in this chapter is a re-writing of "The Nun's Priest Tale" called "Animals!" (Agbabi 2014: 91). Like the original tale, it features "the fox", Chanticleer, and all the "hens" that surround him. At the beginning of the poem, the fox describes the moment when she sees Chanticleer at the pub, singing by the jukebox, and how she subsequently decides to intrude into his dreams, where the two engage in sexual acts. The poem is composed of twenty-four stanzas, generally

²¹ "Without suffering any punishment or injury" ("scot-free" *Oxford English Dictionary*).

following the scheme of rhyming couplets. The tale is yet again another dramatic monologue, narrated by the fox, who recounts the events to an inner-fictional listener. The only point of view represented is hers, differently than in Chaucer. In fact, in the original, the point of view shifted very often from the external narrator to that of the rooster Chanticleer.

Chaucer's tale has the characteristics of a fable in the Aesopian tradition, but it is much more complex than that. In fact, it is in a way also a mock-epic and a parody of courtly love (Finlayson 493). The protagonists are animals "in their context but human in speech and action," representing human flaws, such as flattery and excessive pride (497). The cock Chanticleer takes pride in his beautiful voice and exceptional beauty and the fox exploits his weak spot to catch him; the predator asks the cock to sing by way of distracting him with his simulated adulation. In Agbabi's version, the characters are humans, but they behave like "animals", hence the title. Chanticleer is described as a handsome "rooster / bronze, crimped red hair, crisp blue jeans" and Mozilla Firefox, a is a very sensual and confident woman, wearing "all red [...], slappered and eyelashed". The reference to the well-known browser (whose shortened version is also *Firefox*) alludes to its logo, a fox embracing planet Earth. Poutalot, Chanticleer's favourite, is the one in the gold choker who "pretends / to sing his backing vocals like she's number one". In fact, the "rooster" is a man with a beautiful voice, probably a well-known singer²², who stands by the jukebox while Poutalot accompanies his vocal performance. The parallel with Chaucer is made in a very cunning manner. Besides choosing names that allude to the original tale, Agbabi also uses the words *rooster*, *cock*, *birds* and *hens* to refer to humans: "Anyway, this cock / has a hen for each day of the week, [...]" and "[he was] the one by the jukebox / surrounded by birds but eyeing up I, the Firefox?". To be precise, the poet uses these animal names to describe the characters, and the readers can only understand that they are not real animals by inferring from the co-text. In fact, it would be improbable that animals would wear jeans, watch TV and have lips to speak and sing.

²² In fact, the Firefox tells him: "I saw you on TV last week. / Never heard a man hit a note so hard!". The fact that his performance was broadcasted makes us assume that he is probably famous. Moreover, the Firefox also calls him a "pop star".

Another parallel can be found in the setting: besides starting in a bar or pub (“from too many bevvies at the King’s Head”) with a jukebox, the rest of the poem takes place in a “farmyard”. Chanticleer is “feathering one of his hens” (the same wording used by Chaucer to refer to love-making) in the farm’s garden, when the fox interrupts them and takes Chanticleer away from Poutalot. This idyllic location is known as “Dove Cottage”, which is an allusion to the cottage where William Wordsworth and his sister Dorothy resided in the Lake District (Wordsworth.co.uk). In a way, Agbabi mentions this in order to allude to the subaltern position of Dorothy, Wordsworth’s sister, who had always lived in the shadow of her celebrated brother, like the hens live in the shadow of the “glorious” Chanticleer. Agbabi addressed this matter also in the “Problem Pages” section (*Bloodshot Monochrome*). In the guise of an agony aunt, she reminded William Wordsworth of the following: “Your intellect is equally indebted to your sister” (“Scorn Not the Sonnet”) (not only to Samuel Coleridge, whom he writes of in this fictive letter). This reference might have the purpose of criticising the excessive vanity of Chanticleer, as well as the one of Wordsworth, who has been described as arrogant and intolerant to any criticism (“Coleridge was Wordsworth’s Albatros”, Eder).

In Chaucer, gender relations appear to be quite important. Chanticleer is surrounded by his many hen-wives and he and Pertelote take up a series of gender roles: they represent both the roles of knight and lady as well as of husband and wife (Finlayson 501). The tale includes some debatable details, especially as regarding male-female relationships, although many of these choices are probably part of the farcical nature of this story. First of all, the rooster has a harem of hens at his disposal, even “under his control”, as the word *governaunce* suggests (“This gentle cock had in his governance / Seven hens to do all his pleasure, / Which were his sisters and his concubines” 2885-87). Chanticleer also engages in incestuous relations with his “sisters”, as it seems that he is the only male on the farm. Another dubious point is the fact that Chanticleer acts as if he is a “pompous, learned husband”(Finlayson 502) that scolds his unlearned wife. When Chanticleer has a premonitory dream where he imagines to be attacked by a wild beast, Pertelote, who is convinced that nightmares are caused by indigestion (“The Nun’s Priest’s

Tale", *Harvard.edu*), urges him not to take this "omen" seriously and to forget about it. Chanticleer soon repents having listened to Pertelote's advice since his dream was indeed a premonition of the fox's attack. He compares his disgrace with Adam's Fall from Paradise, for which Eve is to blame: "Women's counsels are very often fatal; / Woman's counsel brought us first to woe. / And made Adam to go from Paradise, / Where he was very merry and well at ease" (3257-9). The narrator, though, promptly dissociate himself from these ideas saying, "These are the cock's words, and not mine; / I know no harm of any woman divine" (3265-6). As previously stated, we might assume that Chaucer wanted to create a parody of the rooster, describing him as an overly-confident man, a tragicomic version of the "fallen" hero that has actually nothing in common with real, epic heroes (s. Finlayson 499, 503).

Unlike in the two previous examples, Agbabi does not give voice to a character in a subaltern position. Instead, she turns the villain of the story, the hungry and deceitful fox, into a female character. It is quite telling that she imagines the villain as a woman and even turns her into the protagonist. In all these disputes between genders, Chaucer does not seem to consider the fox's gender particularly relevant. The readers understand that the animal is a male from the use of male personal pronouns (*he* and *his*) and the fact that Chanticleer compares him to Judas and other male deceivers famous in history. In Agbabi, the fact that the fox is a female is central for the development of the tale, as she becomes the rival of Poutalot, trying to steal her hero-lover. In the original, the fox was hungry and looking for food. Mozilla Firefox, instead, has more of a sexual appetite, which she seeks to satisfy by seducing the rooster. The fox, like Alisoun and the Wife of Bafa, owns and controls her sexuality and has no shame in talking about it. If possible, this is the parody of the parody: the practice of courtly love is subverted as it is the woman that targets and seduces the man. The Firefox "gatecrashe[s]" into Chanticleer's dreams, making him "wake[...] up sweating in his blue jeans". From the very beginning, it is clear that her sole objective is engaging in a sexual relationship with him, ignoring the "pure" form of love and adoration so typical of knightly courtship. The poet creates on purpose a character that is opposite to Chaucer's "faire" (2885) Pertelote, who is "courteous [...], discreet, and gracious" (2871) (like a noble lady) and whose biggest

desire is to have Chanticleer's heart only for herself (2874). Agbabi adds to the image of Pertelote as a submissive wife by picturing the hen wearing "her Wonderbra / to make him think he's some kind of pop star". Here, the female hen wants to appear more attractive in order to boost the male character's ego.

In the Firefox's case, different from Poutalot's, Agbabi wants to legitimate the woman's sexual choices, and she does it in quite an ironical fashion. Like in the other poems in this collection, there is no trace of catchy feminist slogans, no patriarchal enemy that needs to be attacked – or at least not directly. A veiled challenge to patriarchy can be found in the allusion to Freud. The poet kept the element of the dream from the original tale and skilfully turned it into something completely different. In the first part of the tale, the fox acknowledges to have had daydreams about Chanticleer and makes reference to Freud's theory of the interpretations of dreams ("Freud says there's only two / kind of dreams, daydreams and wetdreams"). The protagonist summarises Freud's theory in her own words, although in a slightly misleading way. In *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1899), the psychoanalyst argued that dreams have a manifest content (which is not overlapping with daydreams, as the Firefox stated) and a more latent content. The latter was considered as an expression of the human libido, principally identified with a sexual drive ("Sigmund Freud" *Britannica Academic*). In the same years, Freud was also studying neurotic symptoms in a mental condition that he defined as *female hysteria*. He argued that in this malady, as in the latent part of dreams, the "most insistent source of resisted material was sexual in nature" ("Sigmund Freud"). He also argued that these repressed sexual drives, in trying to find an outlet, eventually caused women's hysterical breakdowns. Agbabi seeks to ironically subvert these views by putting the sexual desires of the male in focus, instead of the female's. This becomes even more ironical if we consider that the fox is able to control his dreams to her liking. The fox is very resolute and could also be seen as a sexual aggressor, as she forces Chanticleer to receive oral sex and "he doesn't quite know how to react". The forcible nature of her actions can also be seen in Poutalot's response, who screams "like [she is] murdering him," whereas the Firefox mistakes non-consensual (oral) sex for love, and she does not care if her sexual advances are offending him ("Death and Love, same thing [...]"). Poutalot interrupts them before

they can climax and this is the reason why, by the end of the poem, the fox adopts a scornful attitude towards Chanticleer, who ceases to be her object of desire. She declares to prefer fashion to love, as she explains in the closing line: "love? Bah, handbag!". Her sudden change of opinion is reminiscent of that in Aesop's fable "The Fox and the Grapes", where the animal cannot reach the sweet grapes and says that they are only "a bunch of sour grapes that are not worth gaping for" ("The Fox and the Grapes", *Library of Congress*). As a matter of fact, the moral of the fable ("there are many who pretend to despise and belittle that which is beyond their reach", *Library of Congress*), seems suitable also to Agbabi's poem.

Furthermore, the Firefox is described as quite cheeky, as her direct remarks reveal. She teases the listener on the subject of wet dreams: "You / never knew that, did you? They don't call me / Mozilla Firefox for nothing, I should be /on *Mastermind* [...]". She is very self-confident and sees herself as clever and knowledgeable, compared to her listener(s). This behaviour, in a way, also mimics Chanticleer's patronising attitude in the original tale. Her nickname is *Firefox*, suggesting that her knowledge is as vast as a browser's, and she acknowledges her "outstanding intellect" ("Mastermind", *Urban Dictionary*). Moreover, there are also other elements in the poem that signal how the Firefox "teases" great male thinkers, by making occasional references to them. Firstly, she disagrees with Shakespeare: "Money? Bah, handbag! Money can't buy you love, William Shakespeare [...]".²³ Subsequently, she refers to John Donne, who frequently wrote about the themes of love and death in his poetry, minimising the content of his work: "Death and Love, / same thing, John Donne." In the same, casual way by which she refers to illustrious names of literary history, she also refers to popular and gay culture. Her examples come from *Sex and the City*, the cult American series about a group of women and their love and sexual life in the 1990s New York City. The poem opens with the lines "love or money? Sex or the city?" and ends with "Love? Bah, handbag!". The Firefox, after losing Chanticleer to the loyal Poutalot, readily decides that she prefers materialistic goods to love.

²³ "Money can't buy you love" is another reference to popular culture, namely to The Beatles' song "Can't Buy Me Love". This is another instance of mixing "high" culture with pop culture.

The Firefox also alludes to homosexuality a few times, a fact which makes her a sexually-ambiguous character. When she dresses in red to star in Chanticleer's dream, she "put[s] the pink pound in the red". Behind her words, she conceals the expression "pink pound", which is used to indicate "the spending power of gay men and lesbians" (Bengry, "The Pink Pound"). Probably, the Firefox is another bi-sexual character, who adapts according to the situation (in this case dressing in red and courting a man). Her ambiguous sexual orientation is surely connected to Agbabi's intention of queering traditional female sexuality. Also, when she is caught spying on Chanticleer' and Poutalot's sexual act, she "ha[s] to come out, so to speak". The woman plays with the verb *to come out*, which could indicate the action of revealing herself but also of "openly declar[ing] one's sexual or gender identity" ("come out" def. 7, *Oxford English Dictionary*). In addition, watching them copulating amongst the trees immediately reminds her of "the Heat". According to the Urban Dictionary, *the Heat* is a "Notorious wooded spot [...] in Kent, England. After dark, it becomes a spot for middle-aged men wearing caps and sunglasses to engage in gay sex [...]" ("The Heath", def. 1). This comparison is yet another way of ridiculing Chanticleer's virility and self-confidence.

The last poem I will deal with in this chapter is titled "What Do Women like Bes'?" (2014: 31) and is inspired by "The Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale". This is probably one of the tales that impressed Agbabi the most since she already engaged in a re-writing of the story in *Transformatrix* and later expanded that version in *Telling Tales*. The poet comments on the character of the Wife of Bath in the following way: "In literary circles, she is often considered the most three-dimensional of the pilgrims. She is larger than literature. [...] I had a lifelong ambition to reinterpret the character" ("The Wife of Bafa – Analysis"). As the readers probably already know, Chaucer's Wife of Bath is not a silenced female character, but quite the opposite. She embodies a number of "manly" characteristics (assertive, extroverted, well-read) that make her very different from the women of her time. Hallissy argues that she represents an "utter violation of the norms for medieval womanhood" (134). First of all, a widow was expected to renounce other potential marriages and devote herself to God (107). The Wife of Bath does not re-marry just once, but five times. In the tale, she does not mourn her deceased

husbands, nor does she apologise for not behaving like a good Christian widow. Instead, she accepts her sexuality with the argument that she was born under the house of Venus and this determined her lustful tendencies (107). Secondly, the fact that she travels very often and is going on a pilgrimage is not considered a proper behaviour for a woman, not to mention for a widow. Furthermore, she also breaks the rules regarding a widow's typical garments, which should show the woman's grief and thus be as sober as possible (103). By contrast, the Wife's clothing is expensive and extravagant, with red stockings and a very big hat: these clothes are a clear signal that she decides to ignore her widow status.

This excessiveness shows, above all, her economic power, which also allows her to claim some authority. The Wife is a successful businesswoman, who manufactures and trades cloths. Her fortune derives from two main sources: her trade and the inheritance left by her deceased husbands. It is mainly her economic status that permits her to challenge institutional authority, which in the Middle Ages equated with the Church. She does not need to submit to a husband because she has some capital of her own. This was quite the opposite when she was young and poor: married at twelve for the first time, she became a "possession" of her first old husbands because "the men's possession of money enables their possessiveness of her" (Martin 94). At the older age of around forty, she embodies all those qualities that were considered appropriate for a man, but despicable in a woman: she is "confident, active, articulate, experienced [and] sexual" (222). She breaks the virtue of feminine silence: Medieval women were supposed to be silent and not to joke, as popular conduct books of the time explained²⁴ (219). Eloquence was not an appreciated trait in women, and this is one characteristic that makes the Wife a subversive female character, already in the original version (220). She wants to demonstrate how her own experience is as important as a man's authority. The Medieval concept of *auctoritee*, authoritative thinking from the past, was "certain, complete, and unquestionable" (Hallissy 105), not challenged by educated men, let alone by women. Martin describes her subversiveness, which derives from the fact that she

²⁴ One of this is Jenkins's *Book of Wicked Wives*, which the Wife of Bath harshly criticise. Her fifth husband possessed one copy of it and she threw it in the fire.

"[...] competes with the most articulate men in her society, the clerks, and invades such masculine territories of discourse as preaching and interpretation of Scripture." (219)

Hence, she is defined as

"a latter-day Eve, repeating the original sin of intellectual curiosity when she should comply in obedience. She deviates rather than following a straight and narrow path." (38)

Nonetheless, Chaucer does not condemn this character for her rebellious behaviour. In spite of the controversial role for the time, the poet's intent does not seem that of boycotting her. Melville argues that Chaucer made a subversive choice himself in depicting the Wife of Bath and her unruly ideas on marriage: "[...] by giving Alisoun the voice to question masculine ecclesiastical authority over religious texts, Chaucer subverts medieval notions of male power" ("Female 'Soveraynetee' in Chaucer"). Hallissy goes so far as arguing that the poet made her "a character so likeable that her controversial position wins the audience's approval" (134).

On a closer look, the tale itself and the character of the Wife are quite important: in fact, she challenges the Church's authority and vision of marriage and tries to put women's experience in the foreground. According to the Wife, men should not claim authority in matters where women have more experience. One of these matters is marriage: the Wife, having had five marriages, claims to have accumulated enough experience in order to be able to share her knowledge about it. It is important to note that the topic about which the woman has extensive knowledge is connected to sexuality, not politics, trade or any other "authoritative" subject. Also, if we observe the three *estats* of women in the Middle Ages, they are all connected to women's sexuality. In the Wife's Tale, the women at King Arthur's court belong to all three female *estats*: virgins, wives and widows. As we can observe, their status is directly connected to the presence (or absence) of a husband, which seems to be the main characteristic used to classify women at the time. This deprives them of any intrinsic quality if the only index against which they can be measured is their relationship to a man. The Wife breaks these rules, as she is a widow but does not behave as one, travelling alone and showing her independence. Nonetheless, it is telling that she is defined by her immanence, earthly and bodily nature. She does claim authority on the subject of marriage, but the fact that women cannot escape

this sexual dimension is a “double-edged sword”, which does not emancipate the Wife of Bath completely. Beauvoir argues that, “man defines woman, not in herself, but in relation to himself; she is not considered an autonomous being” (26). Men embody fullness, gifted with body and mind, while women are defined by their lack of qualities, their imperfection. They lack the intellect, and are strategically identified with their body and their sex. Hence the foregrounding of pregnancy and menstruation, two bodily experiences that define the female essence according to patriarchy. Even their virginity is “physically” marked. Beauvoir argues the following in favour of this theory: “she [the woman] is thus called ‘the sex,’ meaning that the male sees her essentially as a sexed being; for him she is sex, so she is it in the absolute” (26).

Astonishingly, the Wife of Bath also possesses the “mind” part since she is well-read and knows the authoritative writing she is criticising. Nonetheless, the only subjects she has authority on are sexuality and marital life, a fact which degrades her again to her immanent nature, incapable of dealing with “higher” questions. Moreover, also the “old madame” of her tale is a demonstration that women can work against the rigid patriarchal rules. Her physical aspect is repulsive, but she is able to save the knight’s life with her wisdom. The knight is initially horrified by their union, but he finally bends to her will and hands her the decisional power. It is at this final moment of gender equality within the marriage, that both of them can find happiness and fulfilment. Hallissy comments on this passage, seeing the final transformation from a rapist to a loving husband: “in order for such a man to be released, he must change radically, to the point where he can learn to respect will in women” (125).

Agbabi recreates a twenty-first-century version of the Wife of Bath, retaining a number of similarities to the original, but transforming her into a Nigerian woman. In the following quote she explains her objective in re-writing this specific tale:

As a British-born Nigerian writer it was a risky business presenting a Nigerian character that was not the perfect female role model. I was also aware of the prevalence of Nigerian stereotypes in Britain and didn't want to reinforce them. My aim was to celebrate a timeless, complex character and to present her not only to our modern age but also show how she exists in all cultures. I am proud that my character is Nigerian

[...]. As for the women issue, the stance is feminist but always open to interpretation. ("The Wife of Bafa – Analysis")

As we can see, this tale reunites interlocking systems of *Otherness*. The feminist voice is foregrounded but, at the same time, there is the level of black female consciousness that is also present (not to be confused with black British consciousness since the protagonist has no diasporic legacy, she lives in Lagos). This changes the nature of the Chaucer's tale substantially because its essence is re-worked from the inside.

At the same time, Agbabi decides to keep the structure and the tale's moral untouched, besides creating a number of parallels between the two texts. On a structural level, her tale resembles closely the structure of Chaucer's original, with two third of it dedicated to the Prologue and one third to the tale itself. The story narrated by the Wife of Bafa is very similar to the original in its essence, but the most striking transformation is its spatial and cultural relocation. In the original, a knight living at the court of King Arthur and Guinevere was condemned to death for raping a young virgin. The only way to save his own life was finding the answer to the queen's question: "What thing it is that women most desire" (905)? After one year, an old woman can finally help him and save his life, provided that he would satisfy her desires. In Agbabi, the knight is turned into "a big man soldier" and the medieval court has been transformed into the royal palace of Ghana, ruled by a queen ("In Ghana woman was goddess"). By choosing to move the story to Nigeria, Agbabi probably wanted to demonstrate that human behaviour is universal and women from different countries have the same desire, in Chaucer's time as well as nowadays: "Women desire to have sovereignty / as well over her husband as her love, / and to be in mastery above him" (1038-40, *Harvard.edu*) This is the same claim made in the original tale, which is supported by every single woman at King Arthur's court as well as at the Ghanaian royal palace featured in the adapted version.

The new setting of the poem can already be inferred from the protagonist's name: in fact, Agbabi transformed the word *Bath* into *Bafa*, the surname of her last husband. This makes her quite literally the wife *of* someone, and is not a signal of her origin any longer (Chaucer's character comes *from* the city of Bath). The Wife's Middle

English is turned into Nigerian English by means of which the poet “hoped to retain an earthiness and an otherness, that standard English would tame” (“Wife of Bafa – Analysis”). The rhythm of the poem also seeks to re-create the sound of Nigerian English. Agbabi avoided using Chaucer’s iambic pentameter, as her “character is too down-to-earth to sustain [it]” (“Wife of Bafa – Analysis”). Instead, she substituted it with “short, end-stopped lines often omitting the definite or indefinite articles” (“Wife of Bafa – Analysis”) written in free verse, which is more plausible for the social background of the protagonist. Mrs Bafa is a businesswoman trading clothes and accessories, an occupation that requires her to travel very often, like the Wife of Bath. Nonetheless, she is not a wealthy businesswoman as she wants the readers to believe (“I only buy de bes’ / an’ I travel first class”), because in the last line we understand that she is practically a street seller, trying to bargain with the inner-fictional listener and even begging her to buy her items (“Fifty pounds / I give you discount ‘cause I like your smile [...] Make it my lucky day. / Please, I beg you!”). Also, the character does not disdain lying, which is indicated by the insertion of ellipsis where she has to think about what she is going to say, as Agbabi explained (“Wife of Bafa – Analysis”). In fact, she is not twenty-nine, but thirty-nine, the same age as the original character (“Wife of Bafa – Analysis”).

Through direct characterisation, the readers understand that she had, like the Wife, five husbands. Three of them were “old and rich”, which she considers a good fact, and two of them were bad: one cheated on her and the other one was a “wife batterer” who liked “pornographic magazine[s]” (his favourite was *Playboy*). She is a very sensual woman, as her description openly suggests. The “gap-toothed smile” is considered a sign of beauty (whereas in Chaucer is a sign of lecherousness, Martin 38), to which she adds the “bottom power”, a feature that is considered attractive in African culture. She is called a “femme fatale” but she is also said to “have blood on [her] han’s” because she is wearing red nail polish. Here, we can detect the unreliability of the first-person narrator, who also admits to indulging in lying (“I told lie to pepper de marriage”). The rumours are not to be understood metaphorically, but rather quite literally: the blood on her hands is a clear allusion to the fact that she might have murdered her husbands to inherit their fortunes. Nonetheless, she cannot have inherited much from her late husband – according to

her, a “chief justice” – as she is still selling clothes on the street. Differently from the Wife of Bath, she cannot count on a fortune, but rather has to live of her own humble work.

Mrs Alice Efi Bafa is a woman, like Alison of *The Kiss*, that takes pride in orchestrating her relationships with men and manipulating situations to her own liking. The first three men, two of whom were African and one a “white Englishman”,²⁵ were “quiet simple men” whom she lied to; she even “accuse[d] them of fornication” in order to enliven their married life. She was displeased with her fourth husband, who was a “ladies’ man”, since he could be unfaithful and she had to be religiously loyal to him. She considers this an injustice but she is not a “feminax” (read as feminist), although her words really demonstrate the contrary: “I do not believe women are equal to men, women are better!”. But the part of her life which she is most proud of is the story of how she came to have control over her last husband. When she burned his *Playboy* magazine, the uttermost symbol of modern objectification of women, he tried to punish her with violence. Alice has the spiritual as well as the same physical strength as a man and she “beat him till he begged for his ancestors”. This means that showing him her strength was the key to obtaining his respect, which would have otherwise been lacking even though they married for love.

The protagonist also displays a certain level of control over her body, also in a more traditional country like Africa. Like the Wife of Bath, she bore no children and she does not consider this in any way a problem, although in traditional Nigerian society this would certainly cause some issues. Ironically, Agbabi comments on the rumours of her infertility (“some say I’m a witchcraft”) by giving Mrs Bafa the chance to decide over her body through “Western medicine”, alluding to the contraceptive pill. It is important to note, though, how she reports the comments on the woman’s apparent infertility, which is considered “unnatural” and even a form of sorcery. Mrs Bafa could be seen as a witch as she is escaping what was long considered the main duty of a woman: procreation. According to Simone De Beauvoir, women who could not be categorised under the rigid logic of patriarchal rule were labelled as

²⁵ The fact that she married an Englishman is an allusion to the foreigners’ presence in Nigeria, especially in Lagos. The colonial legacy is still very strong, and so are the capitalistic interests in the country.

deviating. In the collective imaginary, they might take the form of sinners (e.g. prostitutes), luring men into doom and lustfulness, as well as supernatural creatures identified as sorceress (Circe) or monsters (the Sphinx, the Medusa, the men-eating Sirens, etc.) (*The Second Sex*, Part 3 “Myths”). Beauvoir argues that, “[...] as woman’s destiny is to be doomed to another, if she does not submit to a man’s yoke, she is available for the devil’s” (209). Agbabi’s character naively reports the rumours concerning her alleged sorcery (although the poet’s intention is anything but naïve), but at the same time she decides to ignore them, demonstrating in this way that she is not under the spell of patriarchy. Thus, Agbabi follows in Chaucer’s footsteps, portraying an independent woman who goes against the rules of traditional society. Nonetheless, by adding a postcolonial element to her story, the poet makes it fundamentally different from Chaucer’s tale.

5. Agbabi's Queering Practice

As already discussed in chapter 3, *queer* is a word that takes multiple meanings. Its essence is contested, especially within academia, as it is difficult to agree on a definition of the term. In fact, many scholars argue that "it is completely 'un-queer' to define *queer*" (*Britannica Academic*, "Queer"). However, there are some guidelines that help us when working with this concept. It seems that Agbabi understands the term as "something that is outside the 'normal,' something fluid and unfixed" ("Queer"). The complex intertwinements that fall within the range of *queer* are described by Sedgwick as "the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or can't be made) to signify monolithically" (1993: 8). Agbabi engages in playfully experimenting with her characters and their stories in a way of exposing the "mismatches between sex, gender, and desire" (Jagose 2006: 3), which have very often been silenced or tabooed in mainstream literature. In this chapter, I will analyse four poems from *Transformatrix* ("The Earth Mother", "Double Entendre", "Ms De Meanour" and "Claws"), all of which feature queer characters. Agbabi has created a multitude of fictive personalities that do not lend themselves to any easy (sexual/gender) categorisation. These characters range from the cross-dressing Cinderella of West London to the black, butch lesbian Hans.

In Agbabi's collections, there are also a great number of poems tackling homosexuality, but this chapter is dedicated exclusively to the analysis of those compositions where queerness is not to be understood as a synonym for *gay* and *lesbian*, as is sometimes the case. Instead, these poems do not present us with a simple non-normative identity, but they rather seek to show the incongruencies of gender and sexual roles. This regards not only traditional roles, but also non-traditional ones: like in queer theory, Agbabi, too, is "ceaselessly interrogating both the preconditions of identity and its effects" (Jagose "Queer Theory"), rather than trying to define identities. She is, however, quite eclectic and also explores the realms of homosexuality, always being careful not to simplify its nature (see "Martina", "The Joyrider", "Tit for That"). These poems are not discussed here since

the focus in this chapter is placed on more ambiguous identities. In fact, in the poems selected for this analysis, Agbabi is depicting characters that are often deviating even from the category of homo- and bisexuality, eschewing any type of traditional labelling convention. I use the expression “queering the queer” for the unique practice adopted by Agbabi, especially in the case of “Hans”. Moreover, the selected poems demonstrate the poet’s ability to merge form with content, giving equal importance to the two aspects, as we can observe from the concrete poem “Ms De Meanour” and the “mirror” poem “Double-Entendre”. Some of these compositions, like “The Earth Mother”, are particularly interesting as they also revisit and subvert the fairy tale genre, which is part of Agbabi’s intention of queering tradition.

The first poem that I will analyse is “The Earth Mother” (2000: 43). The composition is part of the section called “Seven Sisters”, which comprises seven sestinas that explore the lives of seven rather different characters with a “non-conventional attitude towards sexuality” (Coppola 377). They are females or identify with female identity, for example when cross-dressing as a woman (like in “Ms De Meanour”). The poet creates significantly different compositions in spite of using the same stanzaic form throughout the section and the same final words arranged in different ways (*child, girl, boy, dark, time, and end*). On the one hand, the cyclical repetition tends to establish a red thread running from poem to poem, enriching the content by creating some sort of comparison. On the other hand, these six end-words take different nuances in different poems. Thus, there is also a significant element of contrast that originates through their juxtaposition. “The Earth Mother” is a poem that skilfully mixes elements of the traditional fairy-tale (old woman/witch, two children, potion-making, the dark, the forest) with openly queer traits. Moreover, it also touches upon the subject of black identity, although this is not as central to the poem as the queer element. The result is a short fairy tale, but one re-worked from the inside out. This poem does not re-interpret one specific fairy tale (differently from Angela Carter’s *The Bloody Chamber*), but it rather takes some staple features of the genre and subverts them. Agbabi’s objective is to mimic a fairy tale both in content (characters, leitmotifs) and in form (using phrases such as “once upon a time” and “here the tale would end”).

The story features a “wise old woman” and a “young girl” who live in a house in the forest, set apart from the rest of society. These characters cannot be defined as proper round characters; they are actually rather flat since we are not given many details, neither about their physical aspect nor about their personality. In addition to this, they do not undergo any major development during the course of the story. The staple character of the old woman does not follow the traditional fairy tale conventions: she is not wicked, nor is she described as hideous (compare e.g. *Snow White's* queen disguised as an old hag or *Hansel and Gretel's* wicked witch, just to mention two well-known examples). The old woman does not keep the girl in order to feed on her or hold her captive to use her as a servant. She is repeatedly described as a “wise” old woman, who acts more like a grandmother (e.g. she cooks “hot pottage” for Girl and Boy) who might need some help from her grandchildren, opposed to a man-eating witch. The young girl is not her (grand-)daughter, but we might assume she is, or that she was adopted by the woman at some point. The girl’s personality as such is not particularly relevant, given the scarcity of information provided about her. Also the fact that she is merely called “Girl”, with a capital letter, attests the lack of relevance that individuality bears in this tale. The same holds true for the newborn child, who the narrator simply mentions as “Boy”. The only information that we are given is that she is a “short-sighted child” who likes to “converse with snakes and conquer trees”. Her hobbies strike the readers as unusual for a girl, especially in the light of conventional image presented by fairy tales about this type of character, who is either represented by angelic, beautiful princesses or by girls who are obedient, humble and help with domestic chores. As this is the only detail given about “Girl”, we can infer that it is relevant for Agbabi’s objective of challenging the fairy-tale genre. The girl does, in fact, like to be “wild” and spend time in nature, rather than help at home.

Another detail that clashes with the canonical description of young girls is the fact that she talks to snakes, which in Western culture usually have “evil associations” (Ferber 187). Snakes are primarily associated with the biblical image of the tempting animal (identified with the Devil) that induced Eve to sin, causing humans to be expelled from the Garden of Eden. In line with this interpretation, the whole tale could be seen as an allegory of Adam and Eve’s creation with one substantial

difference: the order is reversed. In fact, in Agbabi's poem, it is the girl who is born first, followed by "Boy" (even though he effectively is a girl).²⁶ "Girl" and "Boy" may symbolically stand for women and men respectively. Both the detail of the snake talking to Girl as well as the fact that they are assigned the generic names "Girl" and "Boy" tie in with this argument. By reversing the myth of creation's order, Agbabi probably wants to deconstruct the naturalised notion that Adam was born before Eve. Furthermore, the old woman can be seen as "the Earth Mother" of the title, in this way substituting for God in his function of creator of mankind. The substitution of a male creator with a female one is also a way of challenging patriarchal beliefs, common to the biblical tradition as well as to the fairy tale genre. It may allude to older religious cults that identified the divinity of creation as female, not as male, like the Christian tradition does. A case in point is the figure of the *Earth Mother* ("all things come from her, return to her, and are her", "Earth Mother", *Britannica*), an archaic divinity that was worshipped all around the globe, as archaeological and anthropological evidence suggests e.g. in ancient Mesopotamia as well as in the pre-Columbian civilisations (see, for instance, Stone, *When God was a Woman*).

The old woman wishes to have another child, namely "a boy / whose skin would sing the tone of the potent dark" that could help her in more difficult chores such as "chop[ping] the wood and mend[ing] the roof". His skin colour does not appear to have any particular relevance for the story, but it can definitely be seen as a further element that disrupts the conventions of the traditional fairy tale, along with the queering practice. As the old woman has magic powers, she can "create" the boy in "her womb-dark / cauldron" by drinking a potion. The procreation happens without the need of a male; the female is self-sufficient and can give birth to a child by herself. The fact that she is too old for this is unusual but justifiable as an "absurd" element allowed by this genre. Girl is sent to the forest to gather the ingredients for the potion but, ironically, she is "short-sighted" and collects the wrong "special Boy / ingredient". Instead of the "skinned tail of an Alsatian pup" – chosen for its phallic symbolism, given its elongated shape, suitable for a boy – she brings back a "glow-worm". This mistake is quite ironic, as the two ingredients could barely be confused, unless the girl was extremely short-sighted. Other ingredients, such as the "frogs'

²⁶ The fact that "Boy" is in reality a girl might point at the fact that gender categories are a social construction, as I will discuss later in this analysis.

legs” and “snail’s antennae”, also help to create a parody of potion-making in fairy tales. This part could be an allusion (and a challenge at the same time) to *Snow White* when the queen prepares a potion to transform herself into an old hag. Differently from this classic fairy tale, in Agbabi’s poem the wise old woman drinks the potion to have a child and not to cause any harm, another element that distinguishes her from the conventional role of the wicked witch.

Agbabi also inserts the detail of the mirror (“Look into the convex mirror of my belly, Girl. / Translate to light that which is dark”),²⁷ which can be seen as a further reference to *Snow White*. In fact, the evil queen’s magic mirror is turned into a looking glass reflecting the content of the old woman’s belly. The object not only loses its connotation of a “mundane tool of vanity” (Ferber 125), but it also ceases to be the medium through which the queen is spying on Snow White. Instead, the old woman asks Girl to look into the mirror and tell her about the stage of her “pregnancy”. She trusts her to tell the truth about it, a fact which signals that the two female characters have quite a positive and trusting relationship, in contrast to what happens in *Snow White*. In a way, the use of the mirror could allude to modern-day screening tests. The only difference to modern screening devices is that the girl can only tell the old woman, “It’s time,” but cannot give her any information on the sex of the baby, which will later prove crucial for the plot of this poem. In fact, the wrong ingredient collected by Girl causes a big change: the child turns out to be a girl, not a boy as the old woman wished. Notwithstanding, the woman names her “Boy” and raise her “to chop the wood and mend the roof,” in conformity with her original intention.

The element that causes a feeling of surprise in the readers is surely the practice of (mis)labelling, especially in the case of Boy. The old woman names the newborn girl “Boy” and treats her as such, teaching her to do housework that has traditionally been associated with men. Thus, Boy’s gender behaviour does not conform to her biological sex, at least not in the traditional sense. Giving a girl the name “Boy” is not only subversive, but it also challenges the argument that gender behaviour is inborn or natural. In fact, the girl grows up being treated as a boy and she does not face any

²⁷ The adjective *dark* is ambiguous: it could stand for the colour of her “womb-dark / cauldron” but it could also point at the skin colour of the child.

kind of problem, whether internal (psychological struggles) or external (sexism, social exclusion, etc.). She does not ask herself any questions, because in her social environment the only person who has mainly impacted on her development is the old woman, who decided to treat her as a boy since she considered it a legitimate choice.²⁸ The female gendered behaviour is not imposed on her by society, rather the opposite (i.e. a “male” behaviour). Since there are no other models to follow beside the old woman and Girl, Boy believes that her behaviour is perfectly normal. The old woman’s gendered behaviour is not really described and Girl, as already discussed, is not a prototypical young female character. Hence, neither of them really constitutes a model for Boy.

Through the practice of deliberately mislabelling, Agbabi wants to show how, ultimately, gender is mostly a “constructed identity, a performative accomplishment” (Butler 1988: 520). In fact, Boy’s identity is artificially constructed. The old woman wished to have a strong boy to help her with the more strenuous chores: by calling the child “Boy” and teaching her the necessary skills, the woman gets what she initially aimed for. Furthermore, the practice of labelling has a strong connection to Butler’s theories on the performative nature of what she defines as “girling” and “boying”. By drawing on Searle’s Speech Act Theory (*Speech Acts*, 1969), she argues that certain speech acts are performative. This means that they are statements or discourses that “do” something: they produce the subject. Subjects and bodies are thus “never merely described, they are always constituted in the act of description” (Salih 61). Butler gives the example of the labelling practice happening when a child is born: “When the doctor or nurse declares “It’s a girl/boy!”, they are not simply reporting on what they see [...], they are actually assigning a sex and a gender to a body that can have no existence outside discourse” (Salih 61). In the poem, the old woman does the exact opposite by *naming* the child *Boy*. The practice of naming is in itself a powerful tool through which she ascribes a meaning to the child and her body. There is also a meta-textual comment by the narrator, who reminds us of the subversive nature of this tale: “And here the tale would end / if little girls could truly tame the dark / and little boys were really boys, not girls”. The readers are initially surprised by the fact that “her baby Boy was a

²⁸ When the old woman finds out that her child is a girl, “being wise, [gives] praise” and teaches her to be like a boy.

girl,” but eventually the story finishes with a happy ending that – only superficially – resembles classical fairy tales. Although there seems to be a reassuring conclusion to the story, the tale leaves the readers thinking about its internal controversies and their meaning.

The next poem analysed here, “Ms De Meanour” (2000: 45), directly follows “The Earth Mother” in the section “Seven Sisters”. Like the previous poem, it features the re-appropriation of a fairy tale through the queering of its key components. Therefore, there is a common thread connecting the two consecutive poems. In “Ms De Meanour”, Agbabi loosely reworks the tale of Cinderella, focusing in particular on the night of the ball, where she is transformed into a beautiful princess with the help of the Fairy Godmother. Coppola describes this sestina as the “bend[ing] of a classic fairy tale to describe the Saturday night hype of a transvestite” (377). The title is an ironical wordplay with the word *demeanour*, which is twisted to resemble an aristocratic surname with the prefix *de*. This could be the nickname that the transvestite adopts in his parallel (night)life, or perhaps his name as a drag queen performer (even though it is not clear if he is one or not). The term *demeanour* is used ironically, as we can understand from a close reading of the poem: it suggests that he is probably (sexually) misbehaving.

Agbabi makes unique choices both for the form as well as for the content of this poem. As regards formal aspects, she uses the classical sestina form with the same six end-words also used in “The Earth Mother”. Nonetheless, this composition immediately catches the readers’ attention for its peculiar visual aspects. For instance, the text is unconventionally right-justified, instead of being printed on the left side of the page like the other poems. In addition to this, it has a curious structure: the first three stanzas gradually increase in length, while the last three gradually decrease in length. By observing the text, it can be said that the visual aspect matches the content, making “Ms De Meanour” a concrete poem. In this case, “typographical elements [are used] in such a way that chosen units and graphic spaces form an evocative picture” (“Concrete Poetry” *Britannica*). Both the fact that the text is printed on the wrong side of the page and the fact that the page is divided into two reflecting halves evoke the idea of a mirror, which is central to the poem. Ms De Meanour is a transvestite that takes advantage of the dark (“the dark / is

every boy's / sheath")²⁹ to transform from male to female and enjoy the queer scene of West London. Instead of undergoing a magical transformation like Cinderella, the metamorphosis happens in front of a mirror, which becomes the only "witness" to this moment. Before going out on a Saturday night, Ms De Meanour transforms into a "diva with dark / luscious lashes," wearing "a sequinned shift," an outfit that could also possibly indicate a drag queen. According to Coppola, there is a further re-working of a traditional "romantic" *topos*, namely the "boy-meets-girl-story", which becomes a "self-reflexive tale of discovery where the meeting takes place in the mirror" (377). The concepts of *boy* and *girl*, two of the recurring end-words, are now united in one single person:

Midnight chimes. Time
for boy
meets girl
in the mirror and wild child
bitch with a dick from Crouch End

becomes Wild West End
diva with dark
luscious lashes [...]

Throughout the poem, there are numerous references to Cinderella, although they all adopt different, queer nuances. Turner and Greenhill argue that the fairy tale is a suitable genre for the practice of queering since "the interpenetration of fantasy and reality and the acceptance of a magical world within the tales allows for eccentricity and strange making" (6). Furthermore, they write that queered tales are able to "[...] dramatise incoherencies in the allegedly stable relations between chromosomal sex, gender and sexual desire" (4), which is exactly what Agbabi does when transforming Cinderella into a transvestite. The three axes (sex-gender-desire) are destabilised by the fluid behaviour of the transvestite. According to Butler, transvestites and drag queens are "subversive to the extent that [they] reflect on the imitative structure by which hegemonic gender is itself produced and dispute heterosexuality's claim on naturalness and originality" (1993: 125). Ms De Meanour

²⁹Sheath is defined as "a close-fitting covering to protect something", but is also used as a synonym for "condom" ("sheath" *Cambridge Online Dictionary*). This means that the "dark" operates as an instance that conceals the boy's aspect as a male, although there is also a strong sexual connotation that comes with the use of this specific word.

imitates Cinderella and at the same time subverts her fairy tale by showing that Charles Perrault's original story (*Cinderella; or, The Little Glass Slipper*) could be easily applied to his transvestite "Wild West End" tale. The characteristic features of the princess suddenly disappear or, to be more precise, are translated into their queer, ambiguous version. Like Cinderella, Ms De Meanour has a "pumpkin carriage" (probably a taxi) waiting for her: she steps inside it and "dive[s] into the dark". If Cinderella was supposed to leave the ball at midnight, here midnight becomes the moment when everything begins ("It's midnight. It's party time"), with its "funky smell of the dark" that is able to conceal unwanted truths (and looks). The lyrical I also cheekily comments on the fairy tale by referring to himself as the well-known princess ("time / to lose the glass slipper, Cinderella"). Unlike the princess, though, he expects a night of fun and has no inhibitions ("I'm harder than a brickie from Mile End!"), waiting to lose his glass-slipper in order to find a "prince". Ms De Meanour also mentions the Fairy Godmother, who brings the luscious lashes, although this seems to be a mere allusion to the character for the sake of maintaining the intertextuality, not a reference to a real person in the narrative. The only real character, "the bastard child of Barbara Cartland and Boy / George",³⁰ is enough to make the fairy tale complete. There is a "princess", but this time Prince Charming is missing, or at least he is omitted from the main narrative, occupying only a marginal role (perhaps he is the "lover boy" addressed by Ms De Meanour in l. 5, who could be a potential companion for the night).

The real encounter is the one which occurs in the mirror, where "he" becomes "she". The whole fairy tale is queered, its key elements have been challenged. Probably, the poet's main objective is to confuse the readers by creating a character that oscillates between male and female, in this way challenging the traditionally feminine role of Cinderella. This is visible in the alternating use of the words *boy* and *girl* throughout the poem. Ms De Meanour, in her Saturday-night-fever, refers to herself with the noun *girl* (e.g. "Time for a girl / to hit the West End", "A girl's gotta

³⁰ Ms De Meanour is described as a mixture of strikingly different personalities. On the one hand, her father is a gay icon, famous for his flamboyant outfits, complete with heavy make-up. On the other one, her mother is a best-selling writer of romance novels, who likes excessive looks and make-up, making her occasionally resemble a drag queen.

do what a girl's gotta do"),³¹ although the word *boy* surfaces a couple of times, like a signal that indicates her double-nature ("the dark / is every boy's / sheath"). Agbabi also associates contrasting details, which stress once more that Cinderella is a man in disguise: she is wearing "a sequinned shift, checking the time / on a Rolex". Although also worn by women, Rolex is a watch brand usually associated with men.³² In addition, the act of checking the time is also a parody of Cinderella's worrying about the passing of time since the Fairy Godmother's spell will be broken at midnight. It is once again clear that the rite of transformation of Ms De Meanour, dressing-up like Cinderella for going to her own kind of ball, is in itself a bold challenge to the original version of the tale because "the time is ripe for girls who are boys in the dark".

In another section of *Transformatrix*, we find the poem "Double Entendre" (2000: 72). It is a free-verse composition – although highly rhythmical – divided into two sections, one dedicated to London and one to Amsterdam. "Double Entendre", defined as "a word or phrase open to two interpretations, one of which is usually risqué or indecent" ("Double Entendre" *Oxford Dictionary*), is a fitting title for this poem, which brilliantly plays with the idea of doubleness. In this case, both sections are strongly characterised by the subversive element of fluid gender and sexuality, as well as a more general sexual undertone,³³ giving the whole poem an undeniable erotic quality. In Agbabi, "the notion of the erotic as an empowering knowledge" is fully embraced, writes Coppola (373). This is particularly true for this poem, which is set at the highest point of spring, traditionally associated with fertility and mating. Agbabi is fascinated by this association, as she explained referring to *Telling Tales*: "April is classically springtime, isn't it? It's the mating time. [...] it's more like they [the pilgrims] are going because it's springtime, they want to mate [...]"

³¹ The latter is a famous phrase, though usually used with the word "man": "a man's gotta do, what a man's gotta do". The phrase is famously associated with John Wayne, an icon of masculinity, a fact which makes Ms De Meanour's statement ironical.

³² In the article "What is it With Men and Their Watches?," Cartner-Morley writes, "rich men adorn themselves with that ultimate macho status symbol the Rolex [...] Men care about watches, and they think about watches" (*The Guardian.co.uk*).

³³ The final description of Amsterdam merges two images of its mainstream "recreational attractions": prostitution and drugs. As regards prostitution, it is described as "the place where red light spotlight shop windows and they, black / widows, spin sugar candy seduction". In both cities, "toy boys clutch / mobile phones", waiting for the call of one of their mature lovers (or clients). Moreover, it is no coincidence that the cocktail ordered in section II is called "Between the Sheets".

("Chaucer Remixed"). As in her revision of Chaucer, the characters in this poem also want to enjoy themselves during these joyous occasions.

As regards the doubleness, it derives from the fact that the two sections are mirroring each other, just like the cities of London and Amsterdam face each other geographically, separated by the North Sea. In both sections, the poet describes the vibrant and festive atmosphere of two public holidays, "May Day" in Britain and "Queen's Day" in the Netherlands (called "King's Day" after 2013). May Day (celebrated on 1st May) is an ancient holiday for the "celebration of the return of spring" ("May Day" *Britannica*), whereas Queen's day (30th April) is a national Dutch holiday in honour of the reigning monarch, typically with a carnival-like atmosphere. The situation is very similar in both parts, with the main narrative focusing on a group of LGBTQI friends meeting in a local pub or coffee shop, chatting, drinking and smoking together. The parallels between the two sections are signalled graphically by the repetition of identical or similar words, phrases and structures (compare "Soho, London" vs. "Amstel, Amsterdam"), whose reiteration can be seen as a signposting helping the readers to recognise the similarities between sections I and II. Signposting is a device that creates visual and oral patterns and, in this case, helps to structure the poem even without the use of stanzas.

"Double Entendre", although not possessing a fixed rhyme scheme, has other types of sound patterns that contribute to its pulsating rhythm. The poem almost has a rap quality to it, due to the high number of short, internal, full rhymes ("It's pay day. Tomorrow's May Day", "dykes on bykes shop till they drop"). The musicality of the poem results from the frequent use of consonance and onomatopoeia. A prime example of consonance can be seen in the last few lines of section I, where the recurring /s/ and /k/ sounds (*clink drinks, clash, smash, car crash, broken glass*) evoke the image of the chaotic streets of Soho on such an animated night, with drunken people stumbling, falling and smashing their glasses and bottles on the ground. Some onomatopoeic repetitions are also included in order to represent the nonsense talk between the drunken friends ("down in one, jabber jabber, blah blah blah"). Moreover, the frequent enjambments convey the feeling of a continuous

flow, like in rap and hip-hop music. In some parts, the numerous repetitions and the internal rhymes are also reminiscent of a nursery rhyme ("Double, double, no toil, no trouble"), with its predictable and memorable melodies. Like in other poems by Agbabi, the run-on lines "cut into the syntax" (Wainwright 2011: 107) and often leave the readers surprised when noticing what follows on the next line.

The first section is set in London, the air full of "fish and chips and vinegar and lager," where the group is gathering in a pub. The second section is set in Amsterdam in a coffee shop by the river Amstel, "the whole city set to binge on orange things," the traditional colour worn on Queen's Day. Ironically, people in both cities seem obsessed with shopping ("Bread heads and scene queens shop till they drop. Greed meets need") and spending money, in particular on alcohol ("It's payday. Let's spend spend spend"). This seems quite ironical since "May Day" is also known as the *International Worker's Day*, a holiday established by the labour party in the twentieth century. There is thus a striking contrast between the real sense of the holiday, instituted in honour of workers, and the hedonistic behaviour of the characters populating the poem (the third-person narrator, describing the mood of the group, even says "No toil,³⁴ no trouble"). Both sections feature a group of ambiguous characters, with likewise bizarre nicknames: e.g. "Tia Maria", "Bizzy Lizzy the speed freak", the "gender-bender rubber stuffer Handy Andy" in the first section, and "Café au Lait", "Annie the Tranny" and "gender-bender *fille de nuit* Neon Dionne" in the second section. The names themselves suggest that these are two mixed LGBTQI groups, and that they have different origins (e.g. *Tia Maria* sounds Hispanic and *Café au Lait* is a term used to refer to "a person of mixed black and white heritage", *Urban Dictionary*). In the second section, there is also a prostitute ("Still selling your cunny for money?"), which ties in with the final image of Amsterdam presented in the poem, vividly depicting the red-light district.

Following the presentation of the characters, we find a reported dialogue in both sections. This is certainly the part that triggers a feeling of bafflement in the readers, as they start to notice that the two sections present opposite details. In fact, the two central parts are extremely similar, just like a reflection in a mirror, but Agbabi

³⁴ "Hard work, especially work that makes you feel physically tired" ("toil" *Cambridge English Dictionary*).

inserts some diverging details playing especially with the male/female contrast. In the first section, the gender-bender Handy Andy sings along the notes of *My Girl* on the jukebox, while in the second section, the gender-bender *fille de nuit*³⁵ Neon Dionne sings *My Guy*. *Gender-bender* is an adjective that is used to describe a man as well as a woman, as it can be observed in the use of personal pronouns (“‘Tia Maria,’ he [Handy] cries, hitting *My Girl* on the juke box” / “‘Café au Lait!’ she [Dionne] screams, hitting *My Guy* on the juke box”). As we can see, in the two sections, the personal pronouns as well as the name of the songs are inverted, changed to the opposite gender. Furthermore, both Handy and Dionne are “solo”: “the shit hit the fan,”³⁶ says the former, while the latter replies “the shit hit the fanny”. Dionne’s answer plays on this colloquial idiom by transforming the word *fan* into *fanny*, the latter being British slang for a “women’s genitals” (“fanny” *Oxford Dictionary*). The intricate web of relationships created by Agbabi is further complicated by the fact that both gender-bender Handy and Dionne have heterosexual relationships, a detail that might perhaps cause some surprise when one is initially presented with such gender-fluid characters. Their answers are likewise bizarre, adding to the promiscuity of the whole situation as well as to the nonsense of their drunken conversation: “[...] she was sex on legs in long johns but wore pritt-stick for lipstick” and “He was sex on legs in PVC but wore wheels of steel in his conga eel”. The first one declares that he finds long, thermal underwear attractive, whereas the second one clearly engages in sadomasochism.

As previously discussed, the erotic becomes the primary element emerging from this poem. The characters are defined chiefly by their sexual orientation and preferences, and sex seems to be the main topic of their conversation, be it leisure or work (as for Café au Lait). Nonetheless, it is mainly the queer element that defines this erotic quality of the poem. In fact, the parallel between London and Amsterdam does not lend itself to a traditional reading, but reveals a web of cryptic allusions that require a queer reading. In this case, *queer* can definitely be understood with its secondary meaning of “to baffle” and “to unsettle”, as Coppola

³⁵ Literally translates as “girl of the night”. It might be a play-on-words with the French *belle-de-nuit*, a synonym for prostitute (“belle-de-nuit” *Larousse*).

³⁶ “There was suddenly a lot of trouble or angry arguments” (“the shit hit the fan”, *Collins English Dictionary*), hence they split.

suggests (372, see chapter 2). The poet, by creating a specular second section, wants us to go back to the first, as the two only make sense when considered together. As the closing lines of the poem read, “like jet set in Perspex, their dual fates are sealed in low-cut glass”. “Low-cut glass” is created with a very complex cutting technique, which results in numerous decorative motifs opposed to “Perspex”, a uniform “solid transparent plastic” (“Perspex” *Oxford Dictionary*). This indicates that the destinies (as well as the identities) of these two groups of people are very complex; at the same time they are “sealed”, united by this specular poem.

The last poem discussed in this chapter is “Claws” (2000: 74). It directly follows “Double Entendre” and continues in the exploration of the “(trans)gendered topography of North London” (Jenkins 124),³⁷ already encountered in “Ms De Meanour”. It is composed of seven stanzas and, like a number of other poems in *Transformatrix*, plays with form and visuals, with every second line indented by half a centimetre. It does not have a fixed rhyme scheme, although there are several occurrences of reverse rhymes (*chintz/chance, three/through*), internal rhymes (“I can manicure, I can pedicure, but the ultimate cure is the one / I won’t be selling”) and slant rhymes (*haunted/hunted, quins/queens*), which all help to enhance the rhythm of the poem. It features the story of a “big, black [...] butch,” whose name is Hans. Since the poem opens with the word *Hans*, the readers expect a male character, but this is soon revealed not to be the case. In the third line, the narrator refers to the character with the female pronoun *she*, revealing to us that Hans is in effect a woman. Moreover, the typical German name *Hans* also clashes with the black identity of the character. The stark contrast between her name and her biological sex and origins contributes to the creation of a very subversive character. Hans’ behaviour and appearance are those of a “butch dyke”: she has a masculine look (“she shaved her hair”), wears men’s clothes (“She wore tan leather brogues [...] / and tailor-made suits from the 30s and 40s”) and has habits usually associated with men (“smoked cigars, drank cognac chasers”). She looks and behaves like a macho, and therefore “intimidate[s] both boys and men,” while at the same time attracting “women and girls”. The latter would travel all across London and “sharpen their claws if they thought they were in with a chance” to seduce Hans.

³⁷ “North London” is used by Jenkins to refer to the great area extending on the Northern side of the river Thames, such as the East- and the West End.

Despite her long list of admirers, in the end Hans falls in love with Wanda, the beautician working at “Hollywood Nails”. Often, Agbabi plays with alliteration and consonance (/w/, /f/ and /r/ sounds), as in the part where she describes Wanda: “Hans liked her women forward, femme and fun to be with, and / Wanda was all three” and “for if ever a woman could wrap Hans round her incy-wincy finger, / it was Wanda”. Most probably, the /w/ sound recalls the initial letter of Wanda, whereas the /f/ sound recalls the word *femme*, the type of woman preferred by Hans. A *femme* is also the opposite of a butch lesbian and this is consistent with the depiction of Wanda as the reverse of Hans. If Hans is said to be “more / matter-of-fact than fiction,” Wanda has a passion for astrology (“an archetypical Cancer, with a Scorpio rising”)³⁸ and palm-reading (“I can read your palm, I can read your mind”). Clearly, Wanda’s hobbies have a rather spiritual and esoteric nature, a feature that the Hans at the beginning of the poem would disapprove of. Nonetheless, Hans is “magnetically” attracted by Wanda, who is able to convince him to “surrender her right” hand to her and have her nails extended. It is no coincidence that Hans “kept her left [hand] intact” since it is associated with the left side of the brain, the more rational and logical one, but also the one she personally relates to the most.

The second page of the poem marks a transformation happening within Hans, which is also indicated by the slant rhyme *revolution/Revelation*. Although initially not convinced about getting nail extensions, in the end Hans is starting to appreciate this radical change. The nails, usually identified as a feature that enhances femininity, here take on a darker and more aggressive connotation: “Hans had claws more predatory than any beast in the Book / of Revelation”, the latter being a biblical book which depicts an apocalyptic scenario with gruesome creatures.³⁹ Agbabi mixes intertextual references coming from all quarters, such as the New Testament and contemporary cinema and TV series, but they all suggest a feeling of threat. A further example appears in the final stanza, where Hans is compared to “Edward Scissorhands”, Tim Burton’s tragic character who has scissors for hands.

³⁸ Here, the third-person narrator appears to be shifting into Wanda’s subjective focalisation. Moreover, both crabs and scorpions are animals that possess claws, suggesting that Wanda also participates in the fight to win Hans’ heart by metaphorically using this kind of “weapon”.

³⁹ Like, for instance, the dragon with ten horns, seven heads and the mouth of a lion (s. *Revelation* 13).

Likewise, Hans has a “Hammer House of / Horror hand that haunted”⁴⁰ (the alliteration of the /h/ is used when referring to Hans and contrasts with the use of the /w/ sound, which represents Wanda). In general, it can be noted that the claws take on a sexual meaning, as they come to represent a weapon of seduction, an association that the readers encounter repeatedly throughout the poem (see stanza 2 and 7). Sex and seduction, though, are strongly associated with threat and aggressivity, hence all the grim and fearful references used to describe Hans.

In the final stanza, Hans is described as simultaneously feeling “emasculated” (i.e. deprived of masculinity) and “emancipated,” showing that there are contrasting identities co-habiting in herself. The following questions arise: why does she feel deprived of her masculinity if she is not a man? And from what does she feel emancipated? From keeping her stable role of butch lesbian? We are inclined to assume that this last assumption is correct, as we read that “Hans’ pure butch persona / faced extinction”. Nonetheless, the story of Hans is proof that gender identities can display numerous combinations of factors. The portrait of Hans created by Agbabi seems to destabilise the readers’ expectations about gender identities, even about “deviating” ones. This shows parallels with Conchita Wurst, acclaimed Austrian Pop singer and celebrity. Her beard is certainly perceived as a disturbing element disrupting her very feminine and glamorous looks, which are also accompanied by luscious hair, fake lashes and sparkling jewellery. Balirano recognises Conchita’s facial hair as a sign of ambiguity and instability since in Western culture the beard “can index virile, hardy, heterosexual masculinity” (167), but in this case “it queers the predictable image of a drag queen and points directly at the subversive nature of drag performances” (167). In the case of Hans, the manicured nails become the subversive element, comparable to Conchita’s beard. The presence of this disruptive element can be seen as part of the practice of “queering the queer”. In fact, Hans was already queered in the first part of the poem, as the contrast between her name and her actual gender identity shows. Her transformation – the second-level of queering – destabilises once again the readers’

⁴⁰ “This British anthology series, which was produced by England’s leading exporters of horror films, told tales of haunted houses, demons, ghosts, and other supernatural wonders” (“Hammer House of Horror” *IMDb*).

expectations, who have become accustomed to her butch identity by this point. The nail extensions make her “far outsh[i]ne the drag of / a thousand queens,” but she is neither a drag queen nor a transvestite. At the same time, she has evolved from her “pure butch persona,” whom she has definitely abandoned. The poem’s closing words describe Hans as simultaneously being “the hunter and the hunted,” two opposites that rarely co-exist in the same person. She is the hunter, luring women due to her attractive butch personality, but also since she now possesses claws, she is “dressed to kill”. At the same time, she is the prey, the hunted. Probably, this small but relevant detail – the nails – make her feel unsure about her previously well-defined gender identity, producing a feeling of vulnerability. In spite of the contrast created by the juxtaposition of these two concepts, Agbabi wants to show us how opposites can co-occur, producing a character that brings with her innumerable contradictions. By accompanying the readers through the psychological and physical journey of Hans, the poet wishes to make us experience her transformation and the feelings related to it. Most probably, it is not a point of arrival, but a stage of exploration of her queer and ambiguous identity. This is also the case for the other characters analysed in this chapter, whose gender and sexual identities are enigmatic and defy traditional gender roles, especially the ones dictated by the very conservative fairy tale genre. With their contradictory essences, these characters are intentionally constructed to make the readers reconsider sexual and gender labels, which are difficult to apply to Agbabi’s queer personalities, as shown in this chapter.

6. *There is Black in the Union Jack*⁴¹

The final chapter of this thesis examines the question of black consciousness in relation to the work of Agbabi. As previously stated, the poet had a “bi-cultural upbringing” (Jenkins 123) that makes her poetry so fascinating, vibrant and multifaceted. Despite being born and raised in Britain, Agbabi retains the connection to her African descent and often identifies with recurrent topics of black (British) writing. In terms of form, although she often stresses her debt to “white dead poets” (Thompson 148), she is also highly influenced by the rhythm and aesthetic of black hip-hop and rap, as well as by the melodies of dub poetry. In terms of content, she acknowledges that there are obvious similarities in black women’s writing that concern her as well, e.g. the topic of black hair (Thompson 153). When asked where she would position herself within the realm of the black British genre, she stated that in her poetry “the Black identity [...] comes through very strongly” (Thompson 153). Notwithstanding, the poet gave a word of warning about the use of the term *black aesthetic*, and about the practice of labelling in general, too often subdued to marketing interests (Thompson 153).

It must be observed that not all of her poems are concerned with black identity, as we have seen in the previous chapters. This variety is certainly a feature that distinguishes her from black writers of the past as well as from some of her contemporaries. In fact, Agbabi is indebted to the British literary tradition, as well as to British contemporary writers and poets, such as Duffy and Lumdsen. These double influences cause her to be situated in an “in-between space” (Bhabha 19). In fact, the poet belongs to both cultural spaces, but ultimately, she belongs to a hybrid space reflecting her own personal story. Similarly to the poet Jackie Kay, with whom she is also acquainted, Agbabi effortlessly merges elements of the two worlds by creating her own identity as a poet. Kay’s identity is a mixture of Scottish and Afro-Caribbean and cannot be easily described with only one of the two nationalities, as she argues in her poem “Kali and Callaloo”: “you know the passport forms / or even

⁴¹ The title of this chapter cross-references Paul Gilroy’s *There Ain’t no Black in the Union Jack* (1987), a “controversial critique of British racial politics” (Thompson, “Still No Black in the Union Jack?”). Moreover, also Donnell (2002: 17) uses this expression (“It is perhaps now that the black is in the Union Jack that this contestation is more urgent than ever”).

some job applications noo-a.days? / well, there's nowhere to write / Celtic-Afro--Caribbean / in answer to the 'origin' question; / they think that's a contradiction // how kin ye be both?"⁴² (1988: 195). Kay, like Agbabi, seeks to demonstrate that it is indeed possible to be both, in this way rejecting the social impulse of labelling a person according to clear boundaries. For Ramazani, poetry is a medium suitable to encapsulate complex and contradictory identities (6), as Agbabi does with her own story ("Ufo Woman") and with all the other characters brought to life in her poetic world. In fact, Ramazani argues that poetry is "well suited to mediating and registering the contradictions of split cultural experience" since it is "a genre rich in paradox and multivalent symbols, irony and metaphor, [...] [able to] articulate the dualities, ironies, and ambiguities of this cultural in-betweenness" (6). This argument perfectly fits Agbabi's poetry, with its vivid imagery and dense intertextuality, as well as its zesty and ironic tone. Her multicultural upbringing, despite the complexities connected with it, has always fascinated the poet and has been thematised in her works:

There were several advantages to my so-called unusual upbringing, including the ability to move between cultures and a strong interest in borders and boundaries. I've long been fascinated with the point at which one thing transforms or translates into another and this has informed my writing in both form and content. ("Crossing Borders", *British Council*)

Indeed, a number of the characters depicted in her poems are living between cultures. The focus of her poetry is placed on exploring black British identities, narrating in which form and to what extent the black element interacts with the British element. Thus, like the work of other second-generation diasporic writers, Agbabi's poetry is almost exclusively set in Britain. She does, in fact, identify herself as a British writer, as she explains: "I don't come from any one tradition but my voice has distinctly evolved from the British tradition and I consider myself a part of it" (qtd. in Novak 2011b: 83). Notwithstanding, the poet retains a privileged position: as argued by Ashcroft, in the 21st century it is not the Empire writing back anymore, but increasingly the margins within the hegemonic centre (2012: xxxi). Agbabi herself does not hold a position at the margins of British society. On the

⁴² Kay uses a mixture of Scots ("noo-a-days", "how kin ye be both") and Standard English (see Papaleonida 129).

contrary, she is an acclaimed poet and a university lecturer teaching at prestigious institutions, in addition to collaborating on some projects with the British Council. Nonetheless, through her poetry she is able to give voice to a number of identities that are marginalised due to various reasons, e.g. their belonging to an ethnic minority or their “deviant” sexual identity, defying heterosexual standards. The characters of these narratives are, in the majority of cases, not relegated to the role of victims since the poet is aware that their complex personalities and life stories require a much broader focus. In fact, they seem to be saying, “don’t paint me as a victim. I am much more interesting than that.”⁴³ This is probably the reason why Agbabi does not only deal with racism and oppression in her poems, but she is also interested in portraying black identity under a different light. She gives the Other(s) the power to speak and to be able to define their own identity, too often trapped in crystallised stereotypes. Therefore, in Agbabi *black British* ceases to be a “dangerously essentializing ethnic and nationalist term,” and rather “opens up the possibilities of narratives and identities that are, as Hall writes, ‘constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference’” (Williams, “Perpetual Wandering”).

Moreover, we can find a variety of compositions dealing with black identity in conjunction with female voices. The poet’s interest is to show how these two coordinates intersect in a range of different situations. In this chapter, I will analyse three poems that all feature black women. “The Excoriation” (2000: 27) and “Ufo Woman” (2000: 15) portray the difficulties of adapting to a new culture as a child and “The Headdress” (2000: 30) humorously describes a black escort at the Ascot Racecourse. Other instances not examined here are the East-End prostitute Samantha (“Samantha” 2000: 49), the “exotic” wife that moved to an “uptight English / village that has more cows / than people” (“Menage a Trois” 2000: 60), and Ajax, a “family lawyer from Nigeria” who lives “for her two-pounds-an-hour job as a cleaner” (“Ajax” 2000: 70). Their life stories, despite their differences, all share the fact that they revolve around female destinies, a theme particularly dear to the

⁴³ As Glenn Close states in the movie *The Wife* (2018), qtd. in Kermode, “The Wife Review”.

poet, who has dedicated the whole collection of *Transformatrix* to exploring the transformations that different types of women undergo in various stages of their lives.

Given the limited length of this thesis, I selected only three poems that I considered particularly representative for this category. “Ufo Woman” is extremely important to understand Agbabi’s personal story, but also to understand the notion of cultural hybridity and the perks connected to it. Her own experience exemplifies and can be extended to a number of other second-generation, black British individuals. In “The Excoriation”, this theme is further elaborated on by using vivid imagery that compares the girl’s cultural rejection with the concept of physical and psychological pain. Lastly, I chose “The Headdress” since it contrasts with the last two poems; namely, it challenges the notion of black identity represented only as “the outsider, the alien, the exile” (Phillips 14), celebrating instead the magnificence of black beauty. Therefore, there is a positive connotation attached to cultural differences, as well as to ethnic ones. It also shows how the concept of Britishness could be extended to black subjects, without engaging in social criticism but rather sending this message subtly, concealed under a veil of humour.

The first poem I will analyse in this chapter on black identity is “Ufo Woman (Pronounced Oofoe)”, one of Agbabi’s most celebrated pieces.⁴⁴ Given the numerous parallels with the author’s own story, the whole poem could be seen as an autobiographical journey through the first part of her life, until she discovered that her identity was multifaceted and she did not need to belong exclusively to one or the other culture. Each and every mentioned place symbolically stands for a stage in her identity-formation process – the journey is, not coincidentally, called “HERSTORY”. The poem is about the adventures of an apparent “alien” travelling to planet Earth and her final return to space. Most of the events described take place in England, with a central journey to Nigeria and a final return to Heathrow airport. The story opens with the landing of a space ship in Heathrow, which might stand for the author’s birth, her literal “coming to the world”. The alien tries to connect to “Mother Earth”, who, in turn, seems not to recognise her. Instead, Mother Earth feels

⁴⁴ This section has been adapted from a previous, unpublished work of mine (see Deiana 2017).

embarrassed by her (“Does my iridescent / sky-blue-pink skin embarrass you, mother?”) and stamps her passport “ALIEN”. The alien is disoriented but not naïve: she immediately asks “Did I come third / in the World Race?”, by way of which she introduces the theme of racism, using word play. The word *third* hints at third world countries, while *race*, although superficially indicating a competition, actually refers to biological race (which is an outdated concept but is still widely used). Here, Agbabi wants to stress that racial prejudices still exist, and that discriminations are made on this ground.

Upon a closer reading, we understand that the appearance of this alien creature conceals the description of a black woman (Novak 2011a: 117). As the fictional reality is filtered through the lyric subject’s eyes, the characterisation occurs mostly through her words. In order to achieve the illusion of an alien, Agbabi uses different strategies. On a formal level,⁴⁵ the author’s linguistic choices are aimed at recreating the world view of Ufo Woman. The woman-alien speaks an “intergalactic lingo”, which could be seen as a sort of idiolect, and she also has a slightly robotic way of talking, like in the split-up word “Heath Row”. In addition, the syntax of the poem deviates from its normative use, as it is moulded to create the illusion of alien-speak. Enjambments serve this purpose, especially when they interrupt the lines in unexpected places (e.g. ll. 3-4 and ll. 14-15). In the description of Ufo Woman, the poet skilfully mixes words from the semantic fields of space and technology (“hologram hair cut”, “space-hopper-green / slingbacks”) with descriptions of a black woman’s physicality and style, using vivid metaphorical imagery that might at first mislead the readers. Examples of this technique are the “antennae plaits” and the “translucent palm” which, taken out of context, could also refer to an alien being. Her skin is initially described as “sky-blue-pink”, but also as “two-toned” and “translucent” on her palms, a fact which makes her stand out in the presence of

⁴⁵ A further remark on the formal structure, perhaps far-fetched, is that the whole poem bears some resemblance with a Shakespearean sonnet, if the sections are counted as stanzas and stanzas as lines. This would be a plausible hypothesis since the author loves playing with language and subverting traditional forms. There are four sections, like the four stanzas of a traditional English sonnet. The number of stanzas corresponds to the fourteen lines of an English sonnet. The final section (IV) could correspond to a rhyming couplet since it is composed only of two stanzas, just as a couplet is composed of two lines. The *volta*, the turning point, can be found in the last section, as in some well-known Shakespearean sonnets (s. Sonnet 73). Here, the woman experiences a true revelation, as the title of the song she is listening to suggests (“*Revelations*” 81): namely, she changes her passive attitude by actively deciding to leave planet Earth.

other white English people. She defines it as her “Day-Glo afro, rich / as a child paints a tree in full foliage”. This “Day-Glo” certainly creates a marked contrast with the “winter / naked twigs” of the English wintertime, which might seem quite dull when compared with the richness of colours and the warmth of African cities and landscapes. In this very phrase, the readers also find the first clue to decoding her true appearance, defined as “afro”. Other clues consistent with this view are found in l. 20, where she describes herself as “hip-hugged, bell-bottomed and thick-lipped”. These neologisms depict the luscious body of many women of African descent, with generous curves and thick lips. Moreover, when she travels to Africa in section III it is also revealed that her “bold wild skin colour” is similar to the one of Nigerian people (the skin is “well camouflaged in this spectrum of life”). The way in which she styles her hair is also typical of the Afro tradition: she wears “antennae plaits [...] / cocooned in thread for bigger / better hair,” which can be seen as African braids.

In the third stanza, the alien reaches the city of London, embarking on her first encounter with humans, who openly reject her. Not only is the contact with humans and Mother Earth a failure, but also the surrounding environment (“NF (no fun) graffiti”) evokes an antagonistic attitude towards her. Ufo Woman seems to have reached the peripheral areas of the English capital. No symbols of Britishness are displayed, not the city centre’s grandeur with its intimidating imperialistic architecture, but rather a squalid suburb, as can be inferred by the scarce details given in stanza three. It is here that the people are most cruel to her. In contrast to Ufo Woman, they are rather flat characters emerging as a group that voice the most deep-rooted preconceptions of their culture. Talking about white British people, especially those living in urban areas, Alibhai-Brown writes that

they opened up their stomachs and their sensory organs, but not, on the whole, their heads and hearts. Subtle moments, light racism flutter in and out of your face so often you barely notice. The evidence of prevailing discrimination, racial violence and abuse piles up daily. (9)

A similar attitude can be seen in the “kids” of the third stanza, who seem embittered by the difficult environment they live in, as their “tin-can eyes” demonstrate. The brief description of the children already expresses a great deal

about their malevolent personalities: “kids with crystal / cut ice cream cones and tin-can eyes,” a metaphorical characterisation that suggests a feeling of cold-heartedness, due to the references to the sharpness of crystal cuts and of the cutting metal. Besides this, their verbal assault portrays them as even more ferocious.

The unwelcoming situation in London prompts her to leave the city and travel to Sussex (section II), although the situation will not improve. The denied acceptance by Mother Earth and the people in London might be a metaphor for the poet’s early adoption, which caused her to leave London for Sussex (see “Biography”). Here, she spent most of her childhood years; this was a fairly happy time for her (Ramey 3-4), but she constantly had to struggle to find her identity. In the poem, the arrival in Sussex is described as a landing in a “crazy crazy cow pat,” a fact which probably anticipates her misfortunes. Here, the lyrical I comes into contact with other humans, who either ask her questions about her deviant, alien appearance or do not talk to her at all. The voices in this section, allegedly children,⁴⁶ also give Ufo Woman a discriminatory treatment. The questions they ask her might at first seem innocent, but they hide racist preconceptions about ethnical minorities. Ufo Woman is treated as an “exotic” specimen and the children even ask offensive questions such as “*Do you wash? Does it wash off?*” (referring to the black colour of her skin). As the evidence shows, in sections I and II the connotation of children as the most innocent part of society is completely subverted. Generally, this might have two purposes. Firstly, it could show to what extent children can be inculcated with certain ideas and can act as (naïve) spokespersons of society. Secondly, the decision of making the children speak instead of adults shows how the society presented has no tolerance, as even the children lack humanity.

As a consequence of this total rejection, the alien interrogates the “oracle”, seeking help. Of the two options, “HISTORY” and “HERSTORY”, she chooses the second, as it makes her feel as she would finally belong somewhere. This decision leads her to travel on a “train plane” to Lagos, in an area of the planet that she calls and initially recognises as “Motherland”. Lagos is described as diametrically opposed to London. In fact, the description foregrounds some very bright colours that initially leave a

⁴⁶In the interview with Thompson, Agbabi gives an explanation that is consistent with this argument. She states that, “as a child you get asked those kind of stupid questions,” such as “Why it’s white on the inside of your hand?” as it happens in “Ufo Woman”(155-156).

strong impression on the readers (as well as on Ufo Woman): gold, red, orange, yellow and indigo. The city exudes life, with its busy market stalls and the people wearing colourful, exotic garments. Lagos is also described as a contradiction in its very essence: the “GO SLOW quick-talking fast-living” capital of Nigeria. This line indicates that Nigerian people tend to go slow; this might be also hinting at the common, western stereotype that African people are not as productive as the “industrious” Europeans. Instead, they talk quickly and live to the fullest. In addition, the mentioning of the “silk-suited men” could even indicate that Ufo Woman has moved near the financial district of the city, which is famous for hosting a number of international corporations that bring with them westernised customs.

The city, at first extremely fascinating in her eyes, reveals itself to be as hostile as London. Soon enough, the lyrical I comes to understand that her skin colour does not make her in any way similar to the inhabitants of Lagos. Here, she is seen as an outsider as much as she is in London. The initial feeling of warmth is eventually turned into disappointment when she is excluded and left alone, “raw”. Her westernised appearance and attitude, as well as the language she speaks, attract the attention of the locals, who label her “oyinbo”. The alien is able to understand their language, or at least fractions of it, even if the Nigerian-Pidgin word “oyinbo” is used to create a linguistic barrier. Her capacity to translate this word into its English counterparts ([...] translates as weirdo / white, outsider, other”) implicitly shows that she does share some common characteristics with these humans: not only the “bold wild skin colour”, but also the language. These are perhaps the reasons why this final rejection makes her withdraw into herself, deeply hurt by her inability to belong somewhere. As for Agbabi, she has never lived in Nigeria, but the journey to Lagos reflects a real event that has definitely left a mark on her. At the age of ten, young Agbabi spent some months in Nigeria during the summer holidays and her expectations of being accepted as part of the Nigerian community were immediately shattered, resulting in a cultural shock (Ramey 4). She was “labelled ‘English’ for the way she walked and talked” (4). As a result, Agbabi was even more confused about her identity, as she could neither fit into the English nor into the Nigerian one. This confusion is skilfully captured throughout the poem and the metaphor of feeling like an alien serves the purpose of describing her disorientation.

Throughout the poem, the protagonist voices the judgements and the prejudices that humans hold in her regard, rather than the perception she has of herself. This is why it seems plausible to state that her *Selbstwahrnehmung*⁴⁷ often overlaps with the *Fremdwahrnehmung*⁴⁸ of the people she meets, especially in section II (Sussex) and section III (Lagos). Interestingly, the alien does not ask why the other humans are so different from her, but it is her assuming their perspective, to the point where she voices their malicious thoughts, as if these were coming from her. According to Stuart Hall, this is a very common practice within the diasporic community since the dominant culture “had the power to make [them] see and experience *[them]selves* as ‘Other’” (436). This is especially noticeable in the following lines:

Perhaps it's not my bold wild skin colour,
well camouflaged in this spectrum of life,
but the way I wear my skin, too uptight,
too did-I-wear-the-right-outfit-today,
too I-just-got-off-the-last-London-flight.

Not only does the alien-woman internalise the comments and the scornful looks as though these were perfectly natural and justified, but she also uses some words in a rather distorted manner. A clue that indicates the adoption of a *Fremdwahrnehmung* can be found in her word choice of *bold* and *wild*, which are used to describe the colour of her skin. In addition, she feels less different than in England, as her skin is “well camouflaged”. As an alien having just landed on Earth, she would be expected to label humans’ skin colour as deviant, not her own. Furthermore, the connotation of “wild” is reminiscent of the outdated prejudice the European colonizers had about African people (or more generally, about subjects living in the colonies), seen as uneducated savages. The use of the word “camouflaged” is equally disturbing, since it conveys the idea that a different skin colour must be hidden, “camouflaged”, as if it was dangerous to show it. At the same time, some prejudices originating from the opposite faction are also expressed: the locals, who are Nigerians in this case, cannot accept the woman-alien for the language she speaks and her attitude since she is too westernised. The woman is immediately labelled as a white outsider, “oyinbo”.

⁴⁷ “Self-perception” (“Selbstwahrnehmung”, *Langenscheidt*).

⁴⁸ “Foreign perception” (“Fremdwahrnehmung”, *Langenscheidt*).

Towards the end of her journey, she renames herself with a label given to her in Lagos: "Ufo Woman". In this way, she declares herself an outsider, accepting and internalising the identity that is attached to her by society. In a certain manner, though, she is also "processing" the names given to her and chooses the one that she considers a "blessing", probably as it allows her to gain freedom and construct her own identity. At this point in the poem, the lyrical I decides to return to space. The woman-alien actively rejects her belonging to planet Earth: "Their world may be a place worth fighting for / I suggest in the next millennium". It is meaningful that the author chose the determinative *their* instead of *our*, thus signalling the end of her quest for acceptance. Clearly, the woman feels rejected by both cultures and is unable to belong somewhere, hence she continues searching the galaxy for a place to call "home". This is the "space", the galaxy, which becomes the so-called *third space*, a term introduced by cultural theorist Homi K. Bhabha (*The Location of Culture*, 53-56). As the alien fails to belong to either cultural spheres, she creates one of her own, an "in-between space" (Bhabha 56, s. Jenkins 124) where her hybrid identity can be expressed.

Lastly, I will discuss the theme of race and its connected issues, which permeate the poem. In section II, the concept of "HISTORY" is associated with "aloneness", rather than "oneness"; the inhabitants of the former British colonies (even when relocating to Britain) have not written history, they have been victims of it, relegated to the margins of the Empire. By pressing the history button, the alien also sees some "subliminal visuals" that she translates as "*slave ship: space ship, racism: spacism*". This line is key to the interpretation of the poem: "slave ship" and "racism" are hidden behind two apparently harmless words, "space ship" and "spacism". Ufo Woman draws a comparison between the space ships and the slave ships: it seems like in her imaginary, space ships have the same function as slave ships had in the (Atlantic) slave trade. Most importantly, Ufo Woman translates "spacism" as "racism", which will aid the readers in understanding ll. 75-76: "Why wait for First World *Homo Sapiens* / to cease their retroactive spacism?," where she implicitly addresses the conservative, outdated racism that she has been victim of. Certainly, there is more to these verses: again, a reference to "First World" humans, in comparison to those with black skin, who have "come third / in the World Race".

This “first race” is the one of the “*Homo sapiens*”, namely people from western countries, who have imposed their domination on Africa on the grounds of their superior knowledge. In fact, they are called “sapiens”, which translates from Latin as “wise” and “judicious” (“Sapiens”, *Online Latin Dictionary*). In a way, Agbabi also denounces the prejudices that Nigerians have against white or westernised people like her, as there are some parallelisms in the text that link the two moments of refusal. For instance, the phrase “from the old days”, which stresses the endurance of these mutual prejudices, is repeated in all sections (ll. 18, 41, 65). Likewise, both the people in Sussex as well as the ones in Lagos find her physical appearance non-conforming, deviant, which “make[s] them stare with flying saucer eyes” (24, 63). It is also interesting to observe how the epithets “Nefertiti” (18) and “oyinbo” indicate two opposite concepts (black vs. white), yet they refer to the same person.

In conclusion, this poem illustrates all the bitter disappointment and the anger felt by the protagonist, considered an “alien” in both the British and Nigerian culture. The poet addresses cultural hybridity and modern-day racism, as though she would like to give an answer to Donnell’s following question, appearing in her essay “Nation and Contestation: Black British Writing”: “Has the nation [Britain] changed or has it just shifted its limits? Has the centre just got bigger and yet remained reliant on its margins for intersubjective identifications still intimately involved with race and ethnic difference?” (2002: 17). It seems that this debate is still ongoing and has a number of intrinsic complexities, as the varied and often difficult experiences of black British writers and artists (among others) attest.

Another poem addressing the struggles to integrate into a new cultural setting is “The Excoriation” (2000: 27). Unlike in “Ufo Woman”, the protagonist of this poem can assimilate into the step-culture, but this radical process is also described as painful, as the title suggests. It is the story of a twelve-year-old Nigerian girl and her radical transformation after having moved to Britain. The poem, divided into three sections, opens on her twelfth birthday and closes on her thirteenth birthday, when her transition into a well-educated English girl is finally accomplished. When turning twelve, the girl “asked for a snake / green, white and green”. The colours used here symbolically stand for the Nigerian flag (Novak 2011b: 84), her country of origin, which she must have left relatively late. In fact, she is still writing to and

receiving letters from her best friend “Hope” in Lagos. The girl’s origins also continue to have some importance to her, as we can see from the colours of the snake, which she also calls “Hope” after her best friend back home. The readers soon understand that Nigeria itself seems to be a distant “hope” in a family where she feels like a stranger.

There is a stark contrast between the girl and the two parental figures, who are openly depicted as two-dimensional antagonists whose only function in the poem is to “discipline and punish”. It is not clear if the girl has been adopted by them, or if the father has re-married a white woman. While it is certain that the step-mother is European, the identity of the father is unclear. He could be African, but his black identity visually disappears from the poem (and from his life); this could only be assumed from the fact that he is not described as “white”, contrary to the woman, and that he is referred to as “father”, which should logically mean that he shares the same genes as his black daughter. Another interpretation could be that he is also her step-father and that the author decided to omit this detail, perhaps to avoid repetitions. However, this detail is not very important, as the father remains a negative figure; he is not supportive of his daughter, “din[ing] on raw silence”, most probably in disapproval of her birthday wish to receive a snake. In addition, his verbal aggression torments the girl in her dreams (“but my dreams were embossed with his curses”), even if she had only heard his screams from the other side of the wall. Her step-mother does not provide any sympathy either: she is the one who “whispered [...] the bad news” of the girl’s relocation to boarding school, and this is the only action she takes in the whole poem. The two adults do not even fulfil any educational function since they hand this duty over to “Miss” and the other educators at the school, showing in this way no true interest in their daughter. Furthermore, the wish to adopt a black child contrasts with their obsessive desire to “domesticate” her. This missing acceptance reveals the hypocrisy they have in adopting a foreign child just to forcibly change her identity. In general, both parents display a scornful attitude towards the girl, an attitude which is also alluded to in the title “The Excoriation”: the verb *to excoriate* also means to “criticize (someone) severely” (“excoriate”, *Oxford Dictionary*), which is exactly what the parents do in the poem’s first section.

At the beginning of the narration, it is quite clear that the girl's choices and behaviour are perceived as exotic and wild by her parents, although we understand this through the subjective view of the protagonist recounting her own story. The snake, her only friend, is "donated to the local zoo", while the girl is "expelled from home to boarding school". The animal is a clear allusion to the untamed nature of the girl, a feature that has to be totally eradicated in order to make her assimilate into the new culture. With the elimination of the snake, the "uncivilized" behaviour of the girl is also symbolically banished. Her forceful transformation happens through a strict education in a boarding school, where she eventually surrenders to the more socially-accepted British manners. In the girl's eyes, this process is "violent, painful and humiliating" (Novak 2011b: 84). Agbabi uses a series of vivid metaphors in order to compare the painful cultural repression to an aching wound:

[...] I'm a ripe bruise

smarting under double-barrelled asides.
I bleed letters to Queen's College, Lagos,
stilted in pidgin English and I bleed

pink-black humiliation as Miss strips
my vowels, clips my consonants until
my voice breaks in Queen's English.

As can be observed, these lines abound with words from the semantic field of pain. The girl compares herself to a "ripe bruise", an open wound that aches because it is being pulled from two opposite sides, which symbolically indicate the two cultures between which she finds herself. In the lines that follow, she describes this wound as a "puce scar", another image where the colours are used in a meaningful way. Both the scar and the bruise, as well as the blood ("bleed letters"), share a dark colour, which alludes to the girl's dark skin. The latter contrasts with the "rose-pink anaglypta⁴⁹" of her house and to her step-mother, "pink and smiling". The girl also feels "pink-black humiliation"; in this case, though, the combination of colours could either indicate her two-toned hands (like in "Ufo Woman") or may convey her cultural doubleness. The description of her pain as a wound reminds us of

⁴⁹ "A type of thick embossed wallpaper, designed to be painted over" ("anaglypta" *Oxford Dictionary*).

Anzaldúa's words when talking of the experience of living within cultural borders. The artist argues that

"the border [...] es una herida abierta ("open wound") at which the Third World grates against the first and bleeds. And before a scab forms it hemorrhages again, the lifeblood of two worlds merging to form a third country - a border culture." (2007: 25)

Moreover, the bleeding also coincides with her physical change into womanhood, with "tiny fists as breasts" and "bomb-black thighs" causing her to feel "too big for [her] body". As Novak writes, "the blood of beginning womanhood is also the blood of cultural violation" (2011b: 85). Both these passages, cultural and physical, are marked by the presence of blood and they both make her fragile identity vacillate.

In "The Excoriation", the pain also derives from the humiliation received at school, where language becomes the metaphorical means of punishment and cultural repression. The consonance of the /s/ sounds (*Miss, strips, clips, consonants, breaks*) reproduces a hissing, whereas the /k/ sound, appearing in the same words, is rather harsh; they represent the hostile nature of the teacher, embodying the role of the punisher. This can also be seen in the use of the verb *to strip*, which evokes the action of physically dismantling her last remnants of African culture, and almost sounds like a form of psychological violence. A similar treatment is described in Kay's poem "Sign", where language also becomes the instrument of cultural oppression:

They say her voice is very strange.
They tie her hands behind her back.
They say repeat after me until
she has *no language at all*. (1993: 20-21)

In the words of Papaleonida, "Kay talks about how they forced her out of her linguistic space into a white, male, hegemonic language" (135). In "The Excoriation", the hegemonic language has also been imposed on the Nigerian girl, in an attempt to wipe out her origins, still showing in her "shameful" and imperfect African English. In this situation, she is portrayed as helpless and passively enduring the rules imposed by others. There is no real communication between the girl and her parents, nor between her and the teacher. The other characters interact with the

girl and she consents to do what they want from her, without raising objections. Silence seems to pervade the story ("Silence / plucks each brazen swelling"), interrupted only by her letters to Lagos, and it represents the cultural silencing she has undergone when moving to Britain.

At the end of the second section, the girl's transformation is almost complete:

[...] the puce scar

is bleached blonde on stiff white cotton gusset,
an invisible message for mummy
who forgives me at half-term, pink and smiling.

This is yet another message of violent oppression, illustrated by the change of colours, from dark violet to "bleached blond". It is also not a coincidence that the gusset is made of (white) cotton, the same material as the elegant "striped brushed cotton sheets"⁵⁰ in the house of her parents. This repetition creates a connection between the act of "bleaching" and the step-mother, who can be seen as the "representative of [the] 'step-culture'" (Novak 2011b: 84) who has urged her onto this painful passage. In the passage quoted, the woman "forgives" the girl, indicating that the latter feels an underlying sense of guilt, and that there is a sin that has to be expiated. Namely, she needs to be forgiven for her Otherness, which is not considered appropriate for her parents' social status. Notwithstanding, the girl calls her step-mother "mommy", so as to indicate that she has accepted her in the end, despite her insensitive behaviour. At the same time, she adopts a term that indicates kinship in British English, a signal indicative of her ongoing (linguistic) integration. There is, though, a subtle irony in describing the "pink" and perfect mother throughout the poem, and this expression ("mommy") could also be a way in which the poet mocks the woman and her hypocritical attitude.

In the last section, the girl has finally completed the radical change that her parents have forced her into. For her thirteenth birthday, she asks for a horse, an expensive present that is more fitting for a well-educated, upper-class British girl. At last, she

⁵⁰ The brushed cotton sheets, the (probably expensive) boarding school and the final wish to receive a horse indicate that the girl's parents belong to the upper- or upper-middle class. These elements might also indicate that the parents value appearance and exhibit their social status through their expensive and elitist lifestyle.

starts to adopt a certain demeanour, “that fine-grained mark that culture stamp on people” (Adichie 176). The striking brevity of this section probably indicates that the process has been apparently effortless, as if the pain could easily be erased, silenced. Nonetheless, the “pink-black humiliation” still resonates after reading the poem, although by the end of the narration the girl has hopelessly surrendered and has accepted her new identity, expressed through her domesticated language and demeanour. This bitter note lingers in the readers’ minds as Agbabi alludes to the colonial past of Nigeria and its ensuing (traumatic) cultural colonisation, which is paralleled in the girl’s story. Her Nigerian English is stripped away as it is shameful, as well as her “wild” nature, probably perceived as too “savage” for her upper-class parents. The parallel becomes clear when Agbabi includes “Queen’s College, Lagos” and “Queen’s English” in section II. Before moving to England, the girl attended a prestigious girl’s secondary school in Lagos (*queenscollegelagos.com.ng*), which was founded when Nigeria was still under the British colonial rule, hence the name. Therefore, even if she was previously living on another continent, the oppressive presence of British hegemony was already there and, in a way, it was like an omen for the cultural shock she will undergo in her future. Although it seems contradictory, the girl discovers her black identity only when she moves to Britain, where her being black deviates from what is considered “normal”. Her traumatic experience can be explained through the words of Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, who states the following about her own life story: “race is something I discovered in America. Because when I was in Nigeria I didn’t think of myself as black and then I went to the U.S. and I became black” (“Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie – Americanah”, 3:45). Like the writer, the protagonist of this poem “becomes” black in the new cultural context, and this sudden awareness causes a deeply-rooted feeling of humiliation and grief.

The third poem analysed in this chapter, “The Headdress”, is written on a totally different note from the last two examples. It does not focus on the “drama of race” (Phillips 28), but it rather addresses the theme of black identity in a more light-hearted manner. These verses are a celebration of black beauty and, simultaneously, they ironically subvert the exclusive tradition of the Ascot racecourse, one of the quintessential (white) British events. The racecourse venue is also associated with

the Royal family, a trait that adds to its prestige. The *Royal Ascot* is a four-day event taking place in June, considered a symbol of “sophisticated English tradition and culture” (Mölleken, “A Hat is a Must”). It is attended by the Queen and by a number of visitors, “all dressed up in their finest clothes and hats” (*Royal Ascot.uk*). In “The Headdress”, which features an alternate rhyme scheme, the narrative revolves around the encounter between a man and an “African goddess”, a prostitute looking for wealthy clients on this posh occasion.

The poem features a male narrator, a characteristic not very common to *Transformatrix*, whose narrating voices are chiefly female ones. Here, there is an autodiegetic narrator describing his experience at Ascot, which turns out to be pretty unusual for him since he is an outsider in such an elegant social environment. He was invited by a girl with a “double-barrelled name” he met by chance at a party, and enjoys entertaining himself with the “nobs”, “get[ting] talking to a couple of diplomats / and order[ing] some champagne”. His lower social status can be inferred from his colloquial language, e.g. the term “bird” used to indicate a young woman, “two grand”, “a few quid” and “the dog’s bollocks” for “something or someone that you think is extremely good” (*Cambridge Dictionary*). It is quite clear from his own words that he does not take the Ascot race seriously (“Horses look all the same / to me, Red Rum, Roll-a-joint”); he is not interested at all in racecourses, although he bets a small sum of money just to feel part of the Ascot experience (“I’m not // a gambling man, myself but I put a few quid / down on the favourite [...]”). The only thing(s) he is interested in are “women with hips like horses”, rather than the horses themselves. In fact, he starts to examine the women’s hats, mandatory accessories for attending Royal Ascot. The elaborate hats take on a sexual allure: “but there’s nothing like a broad hat and a bit of fake / fruit on top to make a man divorce his // principles [...]”. It is then that the man spots the black woman sitting at the bar, standing out from the rest of the crowd:

[...] She’s standing by the bar
like one of those statues carved out of ebony.
If she was a dish, she’d be caviar.
She’s a black widow weaving her web on me

turning your common or garden thread into gold.
In the midst of all this money, she’s true class.

The woman is described as an outstanding and statuesque beauty. The readers find out that she is black through a series of similes and metaphors: she is compared to a statue “carved out of ebony”, an expensive dark type of wood from Western Africa or Asia, and to “caviar”, which is a gourmet food usually black in colour. Both images convey the idea of something exotic and luxurious – “she’s true class,” as the narrator states. Her magnetic beauty has a highly sensual, almost dangerous connotation. She is quite the opposite of a powerless *belle*: she is a serial seducer compared to a “black widow”, a dangerous spider that eats up the male after mating. Although she is the object of the man’s gaze, it seems like she is the one who controls the man’s attentions. She is “weaving her web” (again, like a spider) in order to trap her admirers, like a 21st century black Circe. As the man says, she can turn “your common or garden thread into gold,”⁵¹ meaning that what she touches figuratively transforms from ordinary into something valuable. Thus, the whole description shows an outstanding, enigmatic character. What makes her even more unique is the handsome hat she is wearing, which attracts even more attention to her:

[...] But I’m looking at her hat,
a straw hat topped with fake fruit. I can tell it
cost an arm and a leg. More fruit than you can shake a stick at:
a pineapple so lifelike I can almost smell it,

a tangerine, a mandarin, an orange,
a peach, a pear, a plum, a bunch of black grapes,
and a watermelon. And you know what? I’m ready to binge,
getting off on all these colours and shapes.

The hat is described in its luxurious and exotic richness. The man appears to be hypnotised by this abundance: he lists the fruit in a long asyndeton, as if to slowly savour their taste. The fruit’s ripeness and sweet smell can be seen as a sexual metaphor, standing for the voluptuous and sensual body of the woman, provoking the man’s overwhelming erotic desire (“I’m ready to binge, / getting off on all these colours and shapes”). The readers might ask themselves why the hat is so central to the poem since this garment is mentioned throughout the text as well as in the title.

⁵¹ This could be seen as an intertextual reference to *Rumpelstiltskin*, a fairy tale where a young woman is forced by the king to “spin straw into gold” (from the version by the Brothers Grimm, 1812).

Agbabi concentrates on the hat since it is the characteristic fashion accessory worn at Ascot. The poet destabilises tradition by having this emblem of Britishness worn by a black woman, who is also a prostitute. This creates a manifest contradiction, leaving the readers with a feeling of disorientation since Ascot is not usually associated with black identity. The poet merges tradition with a postcolonial touch, creating a hybrid image of Britishness. A similar situation can be detected in the poem "The Snake Charmer's Ball" by Evelin Marius, combining the Indian and Scottish identities:

Colours reds and yellows
bites of pink and orange,
the sun going down casting shadows
as the old Indian sits curled up,
playing a Scottish bagpipe at
the snake charmer's ball. (70)

The Scottish bagpipe clashes with the rest of the old man's description, similarly to the hat in the description of the black woman at Ascot, at least at first glance. These two objects destabilise common conceptions of Scottishness and Britishness respectively, showing that these identities are not immutable and fixed, but that they can change with the course of time, becoming more inclusive.

A further subversive and unexpected element is the profession of the woman. She is a high-class prostitute who comes to the prestigious racecourse in order to meet potential clients. Initially, the man does not realise this detail and he begins to flirt with her, sending her interested glances. The readers, like him, discover the true identity of the woman at a later point and this causes a feeling of surprise, typical of Agbabi's writing (see, for instance, "Ms De Meanour" or "The Earth Mother"). Subsequently, he offers her some champagne, but while they sip their drinks, the man soon realises that she is there for work: "in between cocktails [she] manages to sell / the pineapple, the bunch of grapes and the watermelon / to Mr and Mrs dirty weekend in posh hotel". However, the man does not seem to be bothered by her profession, and continues to engage in conversation with her and, perhaps, in a potential sexual encounter, as we might infer from the sexual undertone of the poem as well as from the open ending. The poem closes on a humorous note, with a comment by the first-person narrator: "She turns her head, her basket of fruit, to

smile. / At Lord's, you'd call it a hat trick, / at Ascot, pure style". Fascinated by her beauty and sensual manners, the man plays with the expression "hat trick", which is used in cricket (and also more generally in sport-) vocabulary to indicate a difficult move that was initially rewarded with a hat "to commemorate [the] feat" ("hat trick", *Merriam-Webster*). To be more specific, a "hat trick" means scoring three goals in a row in football, or three wickets by the same bowler in cricket ("hat trick"). Perhaps, the mention of hat-trick is significant since it could hint at something that has been done in threes. For instance, she sold three "fruits" (pineapple, grapes, watermelon), or three people might "consume" her services (Mr dirty weekend, Mrs dirty weekend, and the narrator). However, if at Lord's cricket ground a "hat trick" shows dexterity in winning over the opposing team, the same move at Ascot describes the woman's mastery of seducing as many men (but also women or couples) as possible by showing off her magnificent and lavish headdress.

As I have shown, Agbabi actively explores the concept of black identity in a number of poems. In some of them, she wants to demonstrate that being black in a predominantly white society is still a source of struggles. The struggles might be internal, psychological and/or external, accounting for xenophobia and racism of different types. The characters created by the poet are subjected to rejection, humiliation and verbal aggression. In addition, they have difficulties with the formation of a stable cultural identity, they are torn between two cultures, none of which they really belong to. In fact, many of Agbabi's characters live in a metaphorical *third space*, in between two cultures, and should be analysed by taking into account their individual peculiarities. These also include intersections, which account for more than the sum of different identities. In spite of her interest in oppressed social categories, the poet also wishes to portray the notion of black British identity in its different nuances, not only depicting the characters in the role of victims. Her poems are, in some instances, a true celebration of black identity, without any intent of idealisation, as can be seen in "The Headdress", where the black woman is far from being a role model. To conclude, although these black characters are depicted in all their flaws and virtues, the readers cannot help but sympathise with them, appreciating their diversity and authenticity.

7. Conclusion

Poetry is a very concise genre. In spite of its brevity, it is able to convey innumerable meanings and work on very different levels, two characteristics that contribute to its undying (although endangered) allure. As one might have observed by reading this analysis, the poetry of Patience Agbabi also expands in multiple directions, and this fact makes it difficult to categorise. The aim of this thesis has been to find a way to analyse the poet in her complexity, considering different themes addressed in her work.

Agbabi never ceases to surprise with her resourcefulness. The poet has been called a “formalist” (Smith 2003) due to her inclination to work with form and sound, the latter being an aspect fundamental in her performances, which also plays an important part on the printed page. Furthermore, she is able to synthesise high culture with popular and lowbrow culture, weaving the two together outstandingly. In *Transformatrix*, she works extensively with traditional forms such as the sonnet, the sestina and the dramatic monologue, moulding them to fit into her 21st-century feminist, queer and black poetics. This can be seen as a challenge to tradition, which is re-worked from within, and associated with rap beats, colloquialisms and even swear words. From the point of view of the subject matter, subversion is also a central element, as she deconstructs the notion of a stable identity, be this with regard to sexuality, gender and/or culture.

In *Telling Tales*, the poet directly engages with Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*, creating a collection that is deeply indebted to its medieval source, but that simultaneously transports it to modern-day Britain, with all its controversies. Chaucer, thanks to his stylistic virtuosity, portrays different social milieus and different registers, and so does Agbabi. Instead of a pilgrimage, Agbabi imagines a double-decker bus travelling from London to Canterbury, where a miscellaneous group of passengers engages in a poetry slam “en route” (Agbabi “Stories in Stanza’d English”). *Telling Tales* is particularly worthy of notice because it creates a bridge with Chaucer, featuring tales that revisit the original ones by using roughly the same plot, and titles and names that nod to their source. Despite these similarities, they meaningfully re-imagine the narrative situations in contexts that are relevant to our

time. Again, formal aspects remain quite relevant. In fact, both eclectic experimentation and re-introduction of tradition (e.g. rhyme royal, heroic couplets but also dramatic monologues) are well-represented.

This analysis focused on examining a small number of her poems, some of which were particularly intricate and, therefore, required a long and careful interpretation. Future research on Agbabi could investigate other compositions, which are equally interesting and worthy of an in-depth discussion (see suggestions in the single chapters). Moreover, I hope to have the possibility to conduct further research on this topic, perhaps expanding the scope of this study, but also possibly interviewing the author on her choices regarding her subversive literary choices. Previous studies and interviews have dealt with Agbabi's stance on performance poetry, on her black identity and on feminism, but have rarely addressed e.g. her queering practice. This is certainly one of the several aspects of her poetry that deserves more attention from the critics. To conclude on a constructive note, I would like to present a further suggestion that could help to introduce Agbabi's work to a wider public (and also to raise awareness of otherness). A worthwhile project might be to present school pupils (for example, in A levels or International Baccalaureate programmes) and university students with a comparative analysis of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* and Agbabi's latest collection since reading Agbabi's *Telling Tales* "would urge the reader to visit or revisit Chaucer's original" (Agbabi "Stories in Stanza'd English"). This does not mean that *Telling Tales* should be read only to generate interest in Chaucer, but rather that the two works enrich each other. The same holds true with comparing fairy tales and their reworking in different poems by Agbabi. Another proposal is to analyse the "Problem Pages" section in *Bloodshot Monochrome*, where the poet adopts the guise of an agony aunt and engages in conversation with famous writers. This would create a meaningful connection between different literary epochs, and show what the sense of postmodern intertextuality is. All these ideas for future research show that Agbabi is an extremely interesting poet, as she engages into a meaningful conversation with the tradition of English poetry, but also speaks to modern readers: she comments on modern Britain with wit, humour, empathy and understanding, avoids

stereotyping, finds innovative perspectives on well-known motifs and is a poetic voice that deserves to be watched in the future.

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Note to the reader: all online sources have been accessed for the last time 19 March 2019.

9. Appendix

Abstract

Black British poetry still holds a somewhat marginal position, eclipsed by the more popular genre of narrative fiction. In fact, there are a number of emergent poets that wish to make their contribution to the portrayal of Britain from a non-hegemonic perspective. A case in point is Patience Agbabi, one of Britain's most dynamic and fascinating poets. Agbabi mixes contents from the literary canon with popular culture, often subverting literary tradition. This thesis seeks to analyse the intersection of different, sometimes overlapping, identities in her poetry. Due to her varied interests, the poet cannot be portrayed only as e.g. a black poet, or as a feminist poet. Therefore, Agbabi is analysed as an author that addresses issues related to black identity, feminism and queerness, frequently in combination. The corpus includes poems from her collections *Transformatrix* (2000) and *Telling Tales* (2014), which are analysed by taking into consideration her impeccable attention to form and content.

Key words: Patience Agbabi / Queer / Feminism / Black British / Rewriting

Abstract in Deutsch

Black British Poetry ist nach wie vor eine Materie, der nicht viel Beachtung geschenkt wird und steht daher im Schatten der weitaus populärereren Gattung der Erzählliteratur. Es gibt jedoch immer mehr aufstrebende DichterInnen, die ihren Beitrag leisten möchten, um Großbritannien in einer nicht-hegemonischen Perspektive darzustellen. Ein Paradebeispiel dafür ist Patience Agbabi, eine der dynamischsten Autorinnen Großbritanniens. Agbabi verbindet Elemente des literarischen Kanons mit der Pop-Kultur, wobei sie auch oft die literarische Tradition destabilisiert. Diese Arbeit versucht die *intersections* von verschiedenen, sich oft überschneidenden Identitäten, die in ihren Werken vorkommen, zu analysieren. Da Agbabi verschiedene dichterische Interessen hat, kann sie beispielsweise nicht nur als „black poet“ oder „feminist poet“ kategorisiert werden. Daher wird sie als Autorin, die sich mit den Themen der black identity, Feminismus und Queerness beschäftigt, behandelt. Wichtig ist, dass sie sich diesen Themen nicht nur einzeln widmet, sondern sie betrachtet das Gemeinsame, wie sie untereinander oder miteinander agieren und welche möglichen Wechselwirkungen dabei hervorgerufen werden. Analysiert werden Gedichte aus *Transformatrix* (2000) und *Telling Tales* (2014), insbesondere im Hinblick auf ihre tadellose Beachtung der Form und des Inhaltes.

Schlagwörter: Patience Agbabi / Feminismus / Queer / Black British