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Cherishing Chaucer, Choosing Chuck D: Patience Agbabi and Cultural Traditions

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Born in 1965 to Nigerian parents and raised in Suffolk and Wales by a white foster family, Patience Agbabi witnessed the travails and pitfalls experienced by Black Britons in the late seventies and early eighties, poetically chronicled by Linton Kwesi Johnson, Jean Binta Breeze and Benjamin Zephaniah. Weaned on a regular diet of punk and two-tone lyrics, hip hop verses and “the dead white (...) poets”¹ (Thompson: 153) – an amalgam of influences discernible in her debut collection of poems, she later on, as manifest in her second book, trod precariously for fear of being impaled on “The Sting” of essentialist platitude: “a heroine/ in a black-and-white cliché” (Agbabi 2000: 76).

To this end, her poetry, a product of organic crossbreeding, evolved into the exemplar of what one may refer to as post-dub poetics. While classic postcolonial dub poetry² merges socially

¹ “Rappin It Up”, a final poem in *R.A.W.*, Agbabi satirises a repellent sycophantic male, who uses Wordsworth's verse (“I wandered lonely as a cloud”) as a backfired, hackneyed chat-up line (Agbabi 1995: 63).

² Notable representatives of Anglophone dub poetry include: Mutabaruka, Michael Smith, Linton Kwesi Johnson, Oku Onuora, Lillian Allen and Jean Binta Breeze.

conscious sentiments with 1970s roots reggae-inspired prosody, Agbabi's consciousness-raising poetry utilises elements of late 1970s punk rock and 1980s hip hop. The British poet's verses spin like a hip hop vinyl; the poet herself, critiquing the dominant Eurocentric literary discourse, curses like a cocksure rapper: "I don't cross my i's I don't dot my t's/ Shakespeare Milton Pope and Dryden/ Wordsworth Eliot Great Tradition/ all you poets I don't give a fuck/ coz you're dead" (Agbabi 1995: 63).

With time, however, whipped into formal discipline by a high-heeled dominatrix (the Muse of Agbabi's second collection, fittingly titled *Transformatrix*), Agbabi's poetry xeno-morphed only to astound by sheer sonneted elegance of continental origin: "She trusses up/words, lines as a corset disciplines flesh./Without her, I'm nothing but without me/she's tense, rigid as a full stop"³ (Agbabi 2000: 78). Soon the poet will cite the 'dead white poets' as her European inspiration, admitting the Great Tradition to the echelon of her diverse aesthetic influences in *Transformatrix*, her 2000 collection. Acting on this contention, my paper endeavours to chart Agbabi's artistic stepping beyond the thematic barricade of committed verses of protest – characteristic of the dub poetry style and symptomatic of her debut volume – and enumerate the post-dub features of her poetry, which are present in both her volumes.

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Notwithstanding embedded textual reservations⁴, it is Caribbean-British dub poetry, with its logocentric creed of "word sound and

³ The poem is both a parody of conventional sonnet themes (sodomasochistic relationship instead of amorous love) and a poetic manifesto (a verbal-physical dominatrix is the Muse). Furthermore, Bruce King, pointing to one more intertext inherent in Agbabi's writing, observed that this very "title poem which concludes the volume is Robert Gravesian with a twist" (King 2004: 302).

⁴ The character of "Buffalos & Silver Stiletos" sneers at roots reggae's anachronism: "But the vibe's dry, d'ya get me? Like the whole family flew over from Jamaica and they are playing reggae singles! Ain't they heard of jungle?" (Agbabi 2000: 23). Another ambiguity is played out by the lexeme "jungle", denotative of a then-popular style of music and connotative of cultural backwater.

power”⁵, that resides at the core of Agbabi's *R.A.W.* (1995). The titular acronym stands for 'rhythm and word', a verbal gesture of belonging to the combined aesthetics of reggae/dub and slam/hip hop poetry. In this respect, poems like “The Black The White and The Blue”, include a number of features characteristic of Linton Kwesi Johnson's protest poems such as “song-like [structure] with increased frequency of end-rhymes [and] increased use of chorus” (King 2004: 111). In fact, much as Benjamin Zephaniah's 1996 *Propa Propaganda* was a tribute “to the memory of Old Labour” (Zephaniah 1996: 5), *R.A.W.* is explicitly “dedicated to freedom of speech” (Agbabi 1995: 5), implicitly to fighters for artistic freedom, innovative advocates of integrating “rhythm and word/uncooked uncut/uncaged unchained/uncensored” (Agbabi 1995: 48).

Since “[a] poet (...) is a four-letter word” (Agbabi 1995: 48), s/he is concurrently a taboo subject, a tabooed object, and a taboo-subjecting objector. As such, her poetic duty is to tackle the topical issues that generate social discord among underprivileged communities in the UK. Hence, in “London's Burning” Agbabi's poetic persona⁶ marches in protest against the 1990 Thatcherite government and the levy of the infamous poll tax. In “It's My Party”, Agbabi construes Margaret Thatcher – “[politically] born in 79 (...) mummy suffered no labour this time” (Agbabi 1995: 41) – as a Tory politician who in 1992, two years after her 1990 fall from Prime Ministerial grace, defends her bastion of callous elitism in a shamelessly prelapsarian vein: “I was born quite comfortable/but now I live in luxury (...) I live in an all-white suburb/oh it's not that I'm a racist/I respect good breeding and serious wealth/in all sorts of far away places” (Agbabi 1995: 41). In “Blonde Bombshell Defused”, another *R.A.W.* political poem, the governmental liaison between Margaret Thatcher and John Major receives the gutter-press-like treatment and is tabloidised into an

⁵ One of the core tenets espoused by dub poetic practitioners is the belief in the power of verbal resistance over colonial/dominant forces (Prahlaḍ 2001: 10).

⁶ Not unlike Linton Kwesi Johnson's 1978 demonstrator in support of George Lindo, a Bradford factory employee framed for robbery, as portrayed by the poet in his “It Dread Inna Ingran”.

amorous affair, which secures the former Prime Minister 'The Sun Exclusive' in which she recounts how: "John's grey hairs mingled and mixed with mine" (Agbabi 1995: 45).

Similar anti-Tory sentiments are conspicuous in the writings of reggae-influenced dub poets such as Benjamin Zephaniah (the 1996 'Belly of de Beast' LP) or Marsha Prescod (*Land of Rope and Tory*, 1985) for whom the British Iron Lady was as despicable, torturous and deadly as the iron maiden⁷. Yet, criticising the establishment, Agbabi remains highly critical of established literary conventions regarding committed poetry so as not to follow in the footsteps of Linton Kwesi Johnson⁸ whose decade-long adherence to politically-charged reggae idiom (Markham 2001: 260) stifled his poetry, rendering him, in the poet's own words, "a one-theme writer" (Markham 2001: 259).

Sensing instinctively, as C.L.R. James⁹ put it, "[that] the artist in uniform soon ceases to be an artist" (Phillips 2002: 162), Agbabi opted to jump off the one-way political bandwagon. *Transformatrix* (2000), Agbabi's second collection of poetry, is preceded by a 'Prologue' in which she asserts her poetic right not to be inhibited by a choice of single lexemes, not to mention occasional topics or worthy causes. Since her first book Agbabi has endeavoured to outgrow the mere cut-and-paste reworking of touristy exotica, such as the flattened beyond recognition symbolism of Rastafarian and/or African colours, mercilessly overused by second-rate self-styled dubbers. Her "Serious Pepper" demonstrates instead the magnetism of a first encounter with enigmatic words, constructed out of history-splattered tints and hues¹⁰,

⁷ Correspondingly, Linton Kwesi Johnson in his "Inglan is a bitch" equated Thatcherite England, as personified by the female Prime Minister, with a malicious woman, echoing Babylonian Jezebel.

⁸ Agbabi, who complained that "about 50% of the poems in that era [the 1980s] sounded the same" (Thompson 162), succeeded in circumventing such an artistic undoing by, as my paper endeavours to corroborate and as her multi-faceted collections of verse show, venturing out poetically

⁹ James spoke about Richard Wright's staunch affiliation with the Communist Party.

¹⁰ Green, yellow/gold and red is the Rastafarian triumvirate of colours that the Ethiopian flag is composed of.

and resultant post-experiential distress: “I stopped playing/with dolls and began with words/red words green words yellow words/if I rubbed my eyes they stung me” (Agbabi 1995: 15). “From Green to Red to Black” problematises the colours of Garveyism; Agbabi's poem presents a vision in which psychological maturity is available through physical/bodily pigmentation, and self-acceptance obtainable by means of organic growth: “and they reach to pluck/and face colour hot/from red to black/ BLACK/and green and red/complete” (Agbabi 1995: 17).

To Agbabi, writing *Black* is contained within British writing, which is in turn internationalised by its immigrant/postcolonial component; to a similar degree her writings reveal a miscellany of referential sources. Of those, music plays first fiddle contentwise in *R.A.W.*, while literary form leads the way in *Transformatrix*. Before hip hop spearheads Public Enemy, as maverick music producer Rick Rubin recalls, were concomitant of “black punk rock” (Ogg 1999: 95), there emerged UK punk groups to whom Agbabi is indebted in terms of her artistic empowerment, as evident in her formative debut collection. She cites 1970s punk lyrics and two-tone texts as the reason for her own involvement in the arts: “for the first time in history you really 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).

Consequently, “Becoming A Nonymous”, Agbabi's punningly-titled poem, is preceded by an epigraph culled from a song by the Strangers, a UK punk group (Agbabi 1995: 36). “London's Burning”, the title of her counter-poll tax poem, which delineates the Poll Tax Riots of 31 March 1990 (Trafalgar Sq, London), copies the title of the song by the iconic British punk rock quartet the Clash – equally known for their music to pogo to and social lyrics to ponder on, a feat not overlooked by Agbabi, who declares in “R.A.W.”: “if you want a white parallel/look at the politics of punk/When we entertain we edutain/articulate the pain/of our ancestors' ball'n'chain/rubbing raw on our psyche” (Agbabi 1995: 50). In the same poem, as if projecting

her prospective disillusionment with the 90s hip hop, Agbabi lampoons brand identity: “Black culture goes deeper/than X and Nike” (Agbabi 1995: 50).

Such above-mentioned distancing remains in marked contrast to the poet's own formative allegiance to the 1970s Doc Martens, when “Two-tone brought back Ska/intending to unite/roots reggae-loving Black/roots reggae-loving White” (Agbabi 1995: 24). Yet, as “Ode Intimations of DM ortality” and the history of music attest, even then “the bubble burst” and some DM-wearing, Ska-listening Brits confused fashion with fascism. Similarly, 1980s rappers – Agbabi is quick to point out – were yet to switch in the 1990s from “rap to rape” (Agbabi 1995: 51). It is all the more disturbing if one recalls that Black Atlantic/African American early trailblazing hip hop espoused “a spirit of independence and a DIY ethic that mirrored the development of punk in the UK” (Ogg 1999: 34).

3

Agbabi's relationship with her musical influences, Black Atlantic hip hop being the most palpable, is an uneasy one: it reminds one of “nervous conditions”, as coined and diagnosed by Zimbabwean Tsitsi Dangearemba. Ambivalence is most acutely expressed by Agbabi in her “Prologue”: “I got more skills¹¹ than I got melanin” (Agbabi 2000: 10), claims the speaker, both utilising hip hop lexis and unbridling the umbilical cord of ethnicity. Still old-school hip hop remains at the core of her influence, especially in her debut book. After all, the ambiguous phrase “more skills” is an assertion of oneself by dint of a rap-like braggadocio. Accordingly, the first major linguistic element of Agbabi's hip hop-saturated poetics is the phenomenon of alliterative wordology, directly inspired by KRS One's 1993 “Sound of da Police” (Thompson 158): “I was desperate/ disparate/ diasporate” (Agbabi 1995: 15); “I'm pied piper/vampire viper” (Agbabi 1995: 32). Another, albeit modified, instance of hip hop wordology is what I label as written performance in progress, which is contingent on the

¹¹ Hip hop slang lexeme “skills” denotes verbal prowess; it is a rapping technique and the rhyming craft combined.

mocking repetition of sounds until a polar message is imparted, as in “E (Manic Dance Mix A)”. From a hippy to a yuppie, from a factory to a Tory, to a tree (the bearer of the initial fruit) to a scribally implicit, though sonically present, retreat:

Hippyhippyhippyhippy

yippyippyippyippy

yuppy yuppi yuppie

(...) fruit of the factorytorytreetree [retreat] (Agbabi 1995: 33).

The next item in Agbabi's hip hop inventory are acronyms; indispensable in rhyming for they convey additional information by the expedient of sought-after brevity: “MC MDMA”¹² (Agbabi 1995: 33), “from MP to PM she put the Tory back in history” (Agbabi 1995: 44), “cos they knew I put the S&M into M&S” (Agbabi 1995: 45), “I'm not MD I'll wear DMs instead (...)/ W1 they double your fare” (Agbabi 1995: 47).

The third type of hip hop wordology is thematic and appears to be the most prominent – it comprises references to musicians/ensembles or alternatively samples of their lyrics. For instance, Agbabi's *R.A.W.* includes a tribute to Public Enemy, one of the founding groups of Black Atlantic hip hop. “Don't Believe the Hype”, one of the band's most renowned songs, is implicitly mentioned in Agbabi's poem “RAPunzel”, whose eponymous heroine is previously, in the course of the fairytale struggle, “serenad[ed] (...) with Public Enemy” (Agbabi 1995: 54).

Despite Agbabi's affinity for hip hop, the poet is unable to treasure the present-day prurience-besotted rap: “slack/went the rhymes/when you signed on the dotted line” (Agbabi 1995: 51) – “slack” indicates qualitative negligence and the artistic nudity of slackness, which is a style of Jamaican reggae/dancehall exploring the themes of salacious sexuality and party-like hedonism; “bounce” is its hip hop equivalent.

¹² First of all, MDMA stands for methylenedioxymethamphetamine, which is the colloquially known as Ecstasy. Secondly, MDMA is an anagram for biblical Adam – the Adamic naming is the poet's telos;

Therefore, rap, as suggested by the title of one of Agbabi's poems, is nothing but “rap trap”, which rhymes with claptrap in which “Uncle Tom with a hard-on (...) disgrace[s] the race”. The race, in turn, “rhymes with free-base [cocaine]” (Agbabi 1995: 52). The cardinal sins of intellectually undemanding Black music encompass homophobia, misogyny¹³, glamorization of violence, dependency on meretricious sampling and radio-friendly format. Hence, Agbabi, as is a battling freestyler's wont, disses the culprit in “Rap Trap”:

you pimp your sisters on vinyl (...)

Black man ragga ragga Shabba

did you lay down that track

or was it Abba?

Money Money Money (Agbabi 1995: 51).

Similar criticism is included in Agbabi's “Stings Like a Bee”:

Blackman badman gambler pimp

he twists his gun-tongue

around a rhyme of disrespect (Agbabi 1995: 53).

Having been “raised on Watch with Mother [1950s-1970s BBC children's programme]/The Rime of the Ancient Mariner/ and Fight the Power [Public Enemy's song commissioned by film director Spike Lee]” (Agbabi 2000: 10), Agbabi hones and refines hip hop discourse, reaching beyond the expendable bling of rap lyrics. A hip hop poem titled “Becoming A Nonymous”, which punningly encapsulates an entity and nonentity in one, is her vehicle for a beyond-hip hop poetic manifesto: “I was a cidic /an archic /archaic prosaic” (Agbabi 1995: 36). Referring to Ross Winn's Archic, a monster kept by archons, neglected and destroyed by anarchists, Agbabi reinvents herself as an archic – residing in between the anarchic liberation of *R.A.W.* and the

¹³ Paul Gilroy identified sexualised idiolects of male deejays as “anti-woman jive talk” (Gilroy 2005: 253).

archaic archonship of order and tradition, yet to be manifested in *Transformatrix*.

It is the latter collection that welcomes the broadening of her poetic scope: an endeavour to flee from the blind alley of “a sth writer”, not to be “underscored by the figment of the pigment” (Phillips 2002: 93). In her sophomore book Agbabi emerges as a “formalist”, influenced – as the poet herself admits (Thompson) – by among others Carol Ann Duffy, R. S. Thomas and Patrick Kavanagh (Hoyles 2002: 164). *Transformatrix* contains a series of sestinas (“Seven Sisters”) and a number of sonnets (e.g. Petrarchan “The Sting” and “Transformatrix”, Shakespearean “The Shift”). The matrix of her literary transformation also involves intertextual dialogues with the (English) canon. For instance, she voices her being enamoured with the character(s) of Chaucer and poetically teleports his Wife of Bath to contemporary London, where the Nigerian Wife of Bafa, dealing in clothes and assorted accessories, delivers her dramatic monologue: “My name is Mrs Alice Ebi Bafa./I come from Nigeria./I’m very fine, isn’t it./My next birthday I’ll be...twenty-nine./I’m business woman./Would you like to buy some cloth?/I’ve all the latest styles from Lagos,/Italian shoe and handbag to match,/lace, linen and Dutch wax” (Agbabi 2000: 28).

4

What even more strikingly distinguishes Agbabi's poetry¹⁴ and further legitimates the usage of the post-dub poetics rubric is her printed performance: scribal endeavours to stage orature, to put the oral/theatrical in writing. She pays heed to the typographic side of her verses, perhaps paying tribute to Edward Kamau Brathwaite's Sycorax video style: “I write because my ink must flow like blood. The written must be spoken. The chasm between page and stage must be

¹⁴ According to Bruce King, “(...) the poems in R.A.W. (...) are intended primarily for the page as they are either shaped to offer a visual appearance or have a complex stanzaic form” (King 2004: 301). That is yet another divergence from the dub poetic idiom.

healed.”¹⁵ The “insist[ence] on the textuality” of her poems (King 2004: 292) contrasts with the practices of West Indian/West Indian-British dub poets such as Michael Smith or, to some extent, Benjamin Zephaniah, who favour the oral/spoken component.

Immersed in literary/writerly tradition, Agbabi takes the printed to another level; as she did in *R.A.W.*, she promises in the preamble to *Transformatrix*, which serves both as an act of conception of the whole book and an account of creative process and its (open)end(ed) product, to “take you [reader/listener] higher” (Agbabi 2000: 9), beyond the obvious implications of the very term of performance poetry that dub poetry became synonymous with.

Typography, from a deliberate typo, which emulates the lisp of one of the characters (“speak like thith” in “Buffalos and Silver Stiletos”) to intricate calligrams, is intrinsic to Agbabi's poetics. Her “word-imagery” (Kennedy 948) includes polyfonts, which accentuate various registers incorporated by the poet, such as the journalese/headline, racist graffiti or a tabloid masthead featured, respectively, in “Blonde Bombshell Defused” (Agbabi 1995: 44) and “The Black The White and The Blue” (Agbabi 1995: 26).

On another occasion the size of the font (the signifier) illustrates the size of the signified, as in “It's Better Post- than Pre-”, where lower and uppercase letters mirror the diameter and absorbency of the tampons in question: “she told me about men/and she said *It's them and us*/mini regular/Super SUPER PLUS” (Agbabi 1995: 58). In addition, capitalisation is, not uncommonly, retained to stage direct the demonstrative shouting of protesters rallied against (and riled by) Margaret Thatcher's poll tax: “The anti-poll tax people say/CAN'T PAY WON'T PAY (...)/Maggie Maggie Maggie/OUT OUT OUT” (Agbabi 1995: 38).

Apart from individual phrases/verses, Agbabi designs entire poems, invoking the emblem poetry of her predecessors (e.g. George Herbert, Guillaume Apollinaire, e.e. cummings, Robert Hollander).

¹⁵ See an interview with Agbabi available at her section of contemporarywriters.com.

Forward-looking “Cheers”, as uttered by a poetic persona, uncorks the wine-bottle-shaped “Accidentally Falling”, a poem which toasts sparkingly amorous past until the last drop of wine is but a memory: “a bottle of wine now it's over/past just like the other nine” (Agbabi 1995: 11). “One Hell of a Storm” visualises a hell-raising, storm-brewing tornado, if not problematised by the triangular initial stanza (male ideogram) in which an identity statement ensconces itself in Agbabi's “One Hell of a Storm”:

I am a woman
 about to
 erupt
 like
 a
 volcano (Agbabi 1995: 20).

The conclusive¹⁶ typographical evidence that will substantiate my claim concerning Agbabi's post-dub poetics is the ekphrasis exhibited in the concrete poetry of her “Weights and Measures and Finding a Rhyme for Orange”. The text, comprising three chronological parts (titled and dated: 1983, 1987, 1996), is yet another sestina. Written as a result of the poet's conducting three literary workshops at the Museum of Modern Art in Oxford, it chronicles Agbabi's nascent artistic life in the 80s and salutes the work of Carl Andre, an American concrete poet. The year 1996 saw the thirtieth anniversary of the conception of his *Equivalent VIII*, the twentieth anniversary of its first exhibition in the Tate Gallery and the Oxford “reincarnation of his *Tate Bricks*” (Agbabi 2000: 57). Andre's *Equivalent VIII* is comprised of two layers of 60 fire bricks (120 altogether), arranged in a 6X10

¹⁶ Conclusive for the purpose of this essay, however by no means final. For instance, this time I have declined to discuss Agbabi's usage of pauses/breaks – clearly perceptible in the typography of “The Black The White and The Blue” (prosodic function) and “Cain” or “Becoming A Nonymous” (semantic function): “I met a morphose” (Agbabi 1995: 31), “and my i dentity/was flaking and cracking up” (Agbabi 1995: 37).

rectangle. Agbabi's commemorative "1996" contains five elongated (6X12) columns of words, the individual letters of which are Andre's bricks "change[d]'", as one reads in the envoi, "into [senary] poetry", a poetic scenery (Agbabi 2000: 58).

Hoping that the afore-compiled body of evidence is cogent enough to refer to Agbabi as a post-dub poet, let me conclude by stating that she is "a new-world order writer who engages herself in one global conversation with limited participation open to all, and full participation available to none" (Phillips 2002: 5). Since "[t]he white kids on the [UK] street are more likely to know some Bounty Killer's lyrics before they could quote you some Shakespeare"¹⁷ (Letts 2001), Agbabi manages to diffuse the open-ended synthesis of fluid influences: from the school-studied verses of Chaucer to the self-chosen rhymes of Chuck D. She merges dub poetic themes¹⁸ (grass roots dissent, working class ethos, remonstrance with the establishment etc.) with a nod to the Great Tradition¹⁹ (sonnets, sestinas, emblem and concrete poetry, ekphrasis) and filters them through her post-dub, i.e. punk rock and hip hop-influenced, sensitivity.

Hers is a complex poetic voice, the one that shields Agbabi from having her name mispronounced. Neither typecast as a token performance poet.

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¹⁷ Caryl Phillips observes: "They [the contemporary adolescents] are able to synthesise Wordsworth with Jamaican patties, or *Romeo and Juliet* with the music of Bob Marley, and happily many of the pioneer generation who stepped from the ships in the 1940s and 1950s have lived long enough to see these changes" (Phillips 280). The writer concludes that [the] "British character (...) has been forged in the crucible of hybridity – of cultural fusion" (Phillips 288).

¹⁸ Prominent in *R.A.W.* (1995).

¹⁹ Prominent in *Transformatrix* (2000).

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