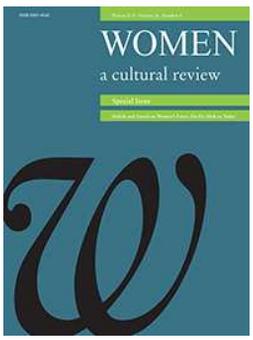

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Queering Sonnets: Sexuality and Transnational Identity in the Poetry of Patience Agbabi

Abstract: The emergence of queer diaspora studies has demanded increasing attention to the ways in which women writers have challenged the heterocentrism of dominant conceptions of diaspora. The theoretical intersection of queer studies with diaspora and black studies in relatively recent years has produced a vital reassessment of the black studies project. In the attempt to reconceptualize black queer and black diaspora, Rinaldo Walcott, in particular, has stressed the importance of a broader geographical and comparative framework, and offered crucial insights into the spatial redefinition of queer studies. Walcott's new black queer theory provides a particularly useful framework in this article to analyse the poetic work of Patience Agbabi in Transformatrix *(2000)* and Bloodshot Monochrome *(2008) as queer poetic praxis. A British poet of Nigerian ancestry, Agbabi combines her experience as a spoken-word artist and performer with her literary background as an Oxford-educated poet. Straddling the British lyric tradition and performance poetry, her work explores the sonnet form while revealing the complexities of gender and sexuality. This article agues that, as she steps beyond safe boundaries of literary conventions in a creative interplay of formal constraint and experimentation, Agbabi queers the sonnet form, destabilizing normative gay, lesbian, black, men's and women's identities.*

Keywords: Patience Agbabi, poetry, performance, diaspora studies, black queer theory

Since the parallel emergence of diaspora studies and queer studies in the 1990s, there has been an increasing scholarly attention to the ways in

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which these two fields intersect. Following the 'transnational turn in lesbian and gay studies and queer theory' (Povinelli and Chauncey 1999: 439), the relatively recent strand of queer diaspora studies has explored the interconnection of sexuality studies and globalization, investigating the ways in which geographical and cultural mobility produces new understandings of sexuality and gender identity. In a critical analogy between diaspora and queerness as both mobile and destabilizing categories, the queer diasporic subject has been read as the paradigm for a transitory postmodernity. As he/she occupies a liberating position within the material and geographical displacements of globalization, the queer diasporic subject troubles issues both of gender normativity and of national and geographical stability.[1]

However, this theoretical strand has been the object of much criticism from various quarters. Although much critical work has been done challenging the heterocentrism of dominant conceptions of diaspora, feminist scholars have deplored a persistent androcentric perspective in conceptualizing diaspora studies. Assessing the crucial role and place of female subjects in diasporas and globalization, Gayatri Gopinath has argued that: 'Just as discourses of female sexuality are central to the mutual constitution of diaspora and nation, so too is the relationship between diasporic culture and globalization one that is mediated through dominant gender and sexual ideologies' (Gopinath 2005: 10). In this light, she contends that a queer diaspora framework will unveil and unsettle the entanglements of gender and sexual ideologies in the construction of notions of nation and diaspora, as well as of processes of globalization, 'particularly as they are mapped on the bodies of women' (Gopinath 2005: 10).

Recent work on 'diasporic hegemonies' has further tried to bridge feminist scholarship on the African diaspora and transnational feminism, stressing the importance of 'the role of racial and gendered formation in the circulation of global capital' (Campt 2008: 2). Moreover, while Sara Ahmed has criticized the reification of 'migrant ontologies' in which migration is a necessarily transgressive and liberating condition (Ahmed 2000: 81–2), others have denounced how this reading of queerness and diaspora as 'theoretical twins' fails to recognize the 'material relations that produce gender and sexuality as social formations' (Wesling 2008: 32), paying little attention to black queers as situated, speaking subjects.

The underlying assumption here is that both 'queer' and 'diaspora' are abused terms, often used as a metaphor for something else. As a consequence, their reification and metaphorical use may produce a problematic erasure of difference, 'normalizing' queer and migrant subjectivities. Queer,

[1]As Gopinath has argued: 'The concept of queer diaspora enables simultaneous critique of heterosexuality and the national form while exploding the binary between nation and diaspora, heterosexuality and homosexuality, origin and copy' (Gopinath 2005: 11).

in particular, risks undergoing the same fate that Ahmed denounced with regard to 'migrant' and 'nomad'; the tendency to generalize these experiences results in the problematic removal of their specific context and of their temporal and geographical situatedness (Ahmed 2000: 81). As has been noted, there has been a suspicious readiness on the part of academic institutions to accommodate and then canonize queer theory, specifically by virtue of this strategic removal. David Halperin, for instance, suggests that the 'theory' in queer theory soon prevailed over the 'queer', so that 'queer' became 'a harmless qualifier of "theory"' (Halperin 2003: 341). As a result of this 'neutralization', queer is used today in an array of contexts as an umbrella term to signify a theoretical approach.

It is undeniable, however, that queer studies has irrupted into and revitalized many fields. In particular, its intersection with diaspora and black studies has produced a vital reassessment of the black studies project 'by putting on the agenda new and different positions and conditions for thinking' (Walcott 2005: 90). In the attempt to reconceptualize black queer and black diaspora, Rinaldo Walcott in particular has stressed the importance of a broader geographical and comparative framework, and has offered crucial insights into the spatial redefinition of queer studies. By interrogating and expanding the analytical categories of queer black studies, Walcott has not only challenged the (hetero)normativity of black diaspora studies, but also implicitly questioned its mainly US/American focus by opening up a transnational, diasporic queer space of intervention. In his words, he argues for:

> a diaspora reading practice, which can disrupt the centrality of nationalist discourses within the Black studies project and thereby also allow for an elaboration of a Black queer diaspora project […]. [P]olitically the invocation of the diaspora requires us to think in ways that simultaneously recognize the national spaces from which we speak and gesture to more than those spaces. In fact, sometimes it might require a subversion or at least an undermining of the national space. (Walcott 2005: 90–6)

In his revisionist project, Walcott has advocated for a new black queer theory whose anticipator and exemplary figure he individuates in Audre Lorde. Reading the African American poet and essayist as a queer theorist who 'lies at the nexus of diaspora consciousness, queer queries and feminism', Walcott highlights the crucial contribution of Lorde in 'moving beyond the stabilizing normative identities of gays, lesbians, black and women to call for a politics and ethics that allows for experiencing identity claims quite differently' (Walcott 2007: 36, 37). In this light, the new black queer theory he calls for is represented not as a codification of knowledges,

but rather as 'a set of knowledges, conditions and politics' foregrounding the urgency of 'multiple forms of engagement with questions of gender and sexuality across a range of locations, institutions, desires and politics' (Walcott 2007: 37).

This call seems particularly fitting for my reading of Patience Agbabi's work, whose intersection of queer diasporic spaces provides an apt illustration of the new black queer diaspora project and its subversive transnational quality. A contemporary British-born poet of Nigerian ancestry, Agbabi is considered to be one of the most prominent poets of the British literary scene. Her work has been widely anthologized and, in 2004, she was selected as one of the Poetry Book Society's Next Generation Poets. Despite her critical acclaim, however, her poetry defies easy categorization. She describes herself as bisexual and is deeply interested in the formal techniques of the lyric tradition, while combining them with a constant striving for innovation and experimentation. Her experience as a spoken-word artist is coupled with her literary background as an Oxford-educated poet, and her influences declaredly range from Northern Soul to *The Canterbury Tales*. She has been a member of the performance group Atomic Lip, has refined her art as a poet at Kwame Dawes' Afro-Style School, and has been poet in residence at Eton College.

Far from embracing or deliberately choosing one limiting literary or sexual definition, her poetry freely moves between genres, gender and sexual identity politics. In her highly experimental work, Agbabi disregards the conventional separation between the page and the stage, combining sonnets and sestinas with spoken-word performances. She is not concerned with the stigma attached to performance poetry of not being 'proper' poetry—that is, 'white' poetry—and she feels equally free to use her many cultural and literary influences to convey her queer diasporic, transnational identity. In particular, I will argue that, by destabilizing safe assumptions about literary canons, race, sex and gender, Agbabi *queers* the sonnet form by challenging and reworking its conventions. In this regard, rather than using it as an umbrella term, I will use the verb 'to queer' also in its etymological meaning of 'to question'—'to inquire' in the first instance and then 'to baffle' or 'to unsettle'. In an attempt to recuperate its provocative and unsettling quality as highlighted by Teresa de Lauretis (1991), and drawing on Judith Butler's insistence that the term should never be fully owned but 'only redeployed, twisted, queered from a prior usage and in the direction of urgent and expanding political purposes' (Butler 2011: 173),[2] I will use 'queer' in its intersections with diaspora (Walcott 2007) in order to analyse Agbabi's latest collections of poetry—*Transformatrix* (2000) and *Bloodshot Monochrome* (2008)—as queer poetic praxes.

[2]Butler has similarly welcomed the term 'queer' as a site of collective contestation that could assert political demands and activism. She has argued that 'the genealogical critique of the queer subject will be central to queer politics to the extent that it constitutes a self-critical dimension within activism, a persistent reminder to take the time to consider the exclusionary force of one of activism's most treasured contemporary premises' (Butler 2011: 173).

The Erotic as Action: Tradition and Transgression

Agbabi's poetry is remarkably versatile and ranges from African American cultural forms to traditional lyrical forms. Her 2000 collection, *Transformatrix*, opens with a rap ('Prologue') and ends with a sonnet (the title poem 'Transformatrix'); her following 2008 collection, *Bloodshot Monochrome*, is framed between an Italian sonnet and a corona, and includes poetry and prose, heroic couplets ('Ruby the hypodermic DJ') and blank verse. Similarly, rejecting all dichotomies, Agbabi calls for an embracing of 'the page–stage, black–white, heterosexual–homosexual continuum' (Agbabi 2008: 34). Such a 'continuum' of experience is the distinctive mark of her work, which equally investigates heterosexual and homosexual desire and bisexual love, as well as maternity—her multiple poetic personae in *Bloodshot Monochrome* range from heterosexual lovers or mothers ('Sol') to lesbians ('Foreign Exchange') and gays ('Yore just my type'). As a self-proclaimed 'poetical activist' (Agbabi n.d.), Agbabi uses this continuum of experience 'to tackle the divide between "spoken word" and "real poetry" by bringing a reconfigured sense of performance to the page and the stage' (Murphy 2010: 69). However, not only is her poetry increasingly committed to unsettle the public–private divide, but she also deftly makes use of this creative freedom by thriving on multiple intersections.

The notion of a 'continuum of experience' resonates with Lorde's formulation of the erotic as a self-revelatory experience that reconciles the spiritual and the political, rejecting false dichotomies. In particular, Agbabi seems to embrace the notion of the erotic as an empowering knowledge, which, in Lorde's words, 'becomes a lens through which we scrutinize all aspects of our existence' (Lorde 2007: 57). Lorde articulated her thoughts on poetry and the erotic in the late 1970s, prefiguring its function as a tool of critical investigation or, rather, a call to action, to counter the marginalization of women of colour and lesbians within mainstream feminism. In particular, her desire to make visible the interconnection of multiple identity markers is still reflected in contemporary attempts to articulate culture-specific positionalities accounting for the situatedness of racialized sexualities which queer theory fails to accommodate.[3] In what has been termed 'poetic praxis' (Johnson 2012: 313), Lorde envisioned poetry as a vital necessity, 'first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action' (Lorde 2007a: 37). Following this inextricably interrelated passage from poetry to action, E. Patrick Johnson has argued for 'theories of the flesh', in which theory and practice are combined 'through an embodied practice of resistance [that] is manifest in vernacular traditions such as performance, folklore, literature, and verbal art' (Johnson 2001: 4).

[3]A case in point is Johnson's formulation of 'quare', which suggests the need 'to devise a strategy for theorizing a racialized sexuality' (Johnson 2001: 3). Looking for a definition of identity which is 'closer to home', Johnson rearticulates race, place and affect by utilizing 'quare', the African American vernacular for 'queer'.

Despite her privileging of the use of Standard English and traditional lyric forms, Agbabi commits to her poetic praxis by drawing on the multiple intersections of her identity. The poet skilfully challenges the strictures of poetic forms and literary canons, inflecting them with popular culture, political commitment and a rich transnational heritage, and thus redefining received notions of national belonging, literary canons and sexuality.[4] In this regard, Walcott's formulation of 'an imagined black queer diaspora located in the ephemera of artefacts, imaginations and desires', and fashioned by a wide range of cultural expressions, can help illuminate the web of transatlantic influences informing Agbabi's poetry (Walcott 2007: 29). 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 sensibility, which also provides a broader definition of racial and sexual identity categories. In her analysis of black Liverpudlians, Jacqueline Nassy Brown uses the term 'diasporic resources' 'to capture the sense that black Liverpudlians actively appropriate particular aspects of "Black America" for particular reasons, to meet particular needs' (Nassy Brown 1998: 298). Although she acknowledges that the scope of the processes that form diasporas is global, she argues that these processes are 'localized, gendered, and racialized' in different ways in different contexts (Nassy Brown 1998: 317). This attention to local, gender and race formations of diaspora provides a useful insight into Agbabi's poetry to illustrate the ways in which she reappropriates the 'transnational formations of community' available to her as a black British woman (Nassy Brown 1998: 317). Her imagination is equally fired by icons of the African diaspora as diverse as Josephine Baker and Angela Davies, as well as by John Milton, William Shakespeare or the fourteenth-century poet Geoffrey Chaucer, considered to be the founding father of English national poetry. Far from simply accommodating or celebrating them in her work, Agbabi refers to and interrogates these cultural and literary icons in ways that disclose her unconventional engagement with gender and sexuality.

Quite significantly, not only do these considerably different influences inspire her poetry and its formal innovation, but they also provide a model to revise normative poetic representations of love, gender and sexuality. In particular, as she reworks the genre's amatory tradition, Agbabi 'renovates the Petrarchan sonnet as a medium in which she can explore her (bi)sexuality' (Jenkins 2011: 124). The classical conventions of amatory poetry, celebrating the platonic love for an angel-like woman, are here radically revitalized by the poet's full exploration of the potentials of the erotic. In Lorde's formulation, it 'offers a well of replenishing and provocative force to the woman who does not fear its revelation, nor

[4]Agbabi has been praised for her 'blazing talent for having written poems of bold sexuality, stylistic finesse and insight into the "underbelly" of popular culture' (Ramey 2009: 317).

succumb to the belief that sensation is enough' (Lorde 2007: 54). The empowering knowledge of the erotic also brings the vital responsibility 'not to settle for the convenient, the shoddy, the conventionally expected, nor the merely safe' (Lorde 2007: 57). In this light, Agbabi 'queers' the sonnet form: as she performs an intervention into and problematization of cultural politics and national ideologies, as well as heteronormative approaches, the poet does not 'settle for the convenient', but, rather, *unsettles* it by fully embracing the erotic.[5]

Although Agbabi's poetry is strongly gendered, it constantly eludes any expectations regarding gender. In the 'Prologue' to *Transformatrix*, the feminine rhymes—explicitly declared in the lines 'If you wanna know what rhyme it is / It's feminine'—reflect their traditional use to suggest a feminine subject matter (Agbabi 2000: 10). However, Agbabi also seems to be alluding to Shakespeare's extensive use of this rhyme in the ambiguous Sonnet 20, in which the poet addresses 'the master mistress of my passion' (Shakespeare 2008: 421). Transgression, however, is a pervasive presence at all levels in Agbabi's 'Prologue', which introduces the experimental nature of the collection:

> Cos I'm Eve on an Apple Mac
> …
> Now I've eaten the apple
> I'm more subtle than a snake is.
> I wanna do poetic things in poetic places. (Agbabi 2000: 10–11)

As the poet identifies herself as 'Eve on an Apple Mac', she subverts the biblical myth and embraces the choice of eating the apple that will grant her knowledge and, at the same time, evil. Her apple is information technology, and she playfully uses the potentials liberated by the crossing of this new frontier while hinting at sexual/poetic freedom ('I wanna do poetic things in poetic places'). If it is true that 'the desire to meet literary expectations is complicated by a parallel desire to transgress, to misbehave, to buck the saddle of tradition' (Murphy 2010: 75), Agbabi is playing with transgression at multiple levels, not just in terms of defying poetic traditions. 'Misbehaving' here signifies a critical engagement with literary as well as social, racial and gender boundaries and expectations, in which the erotic is a signifying principle interacting with her experimental poetic form. A case in point is, for instance, the poem 'Comedown', where the epigraph from Milton's *Paradise Lost* anticipates a double subversion of canonical literary forms and gender expectations. In this poem, 'Heaven' is the name of a London gay nightclub, where, with the lines 'taking a drug that made us innocent / enough to leave Heaven and end up in Hell', the poet evokes

[5] A similar use of this notion can be found in Warren Crichlow's analysis of Isaac Julien's 2006 *True North*, in which he describes the artist's installation as 'a theoretically grounded form of querying or "queering" meant as intervention and problematization of didactic cultural politics and nationalist or nativist ideologies' (Crichlow 2006: 39).

and contrapuntally reworks Milton's argument that: 'The mind is its own place, and in itself / Can make a heav'n of hell, a hell of heav'n' (Agbabi 2008: 11).

A brilliant example of the attempt to articulate the complex interplay of tradition and transgression is provided by the 'Problem Pages' section of *Bloodshot Monochrome*, in which Agbabi appropriates the traditional problem-page form of magazines in order to establish dialogues of sorts with some of her literary influences—all of them experimenting with, reworking and subverting the sonnet form. Agbabi here traces a poetic genealogy, from the initiator of the English sonnet tradition, the Earl of Surrey, along with Shakespeare and William Wordsworth, to Claude McKay and June Jordan, all of whom are writing to 'Dear Patience' about their problems with poetry. The 14 poems which form the sequence suggest that the 'Problem Pages' text is itself a sonnet (Murphy 2010: 79), which explores issues of race, gender and sexuality, while celebrating the expressive flexibility of this poetic form.

In one of the first poems, 'Two Loves I Have', she 'empathises' with a 'poet who writes for the stage' and whose plays are on the General Certificate of Secondary Education syllabus, asking for help with the potential censorship concerning his 'sonnet sequence, addressing a white man and black woman'. The 'anonymous' yet easily recognizable poet laments that his 'publishers claim it will confound the reader but [he] suspect[s] homophobia/racism' (Agbabi 2008: 34). As she thrives on the well-known debate on gender and race in Shakespeare's *Sonnets*, Agbabi puns on the 'fair youth' and the 'fair lady' in order to bring to the fore contemporary issues of racism and homophobia.

In 'Scorn not the sonnet', another poem in the 'Problem Pages' sequence, Agbabi wittily defends the apparent fragmentary and scattered nature of the sonnet form. When a reader/poet complains that his friend, 'an alcoholic and heroin addict' with whom he has published his first collection in 'joint venture', scorns his habit of writing 'such a multitude of small poems', Patience aptly argues in her reply that '[t]he sonnet's narrow room can open doors, break glass ceilings' (Agbabi 2008: 38). The question of the divergent poetic vision of Samuel Taylor Coleridge and William Wordsworth is here tackled from a new perspective. As she reassesses the influence of Dorothy Wordsworth on William's work—'Your intellect is equally indebted to your sister' —Agbabi (2008: 38) also emphasizes the sonnet's flexibility, which cuts across gender differences ('break[s] glass ceilings') and provides a wide range of expressive possibilities, despite its 'minor' status.

In another letter, 'From Africa Singing', a poet writing 'from the tradition of non-European poetry that celebrates the voice of the people' laments the fact that 'sometimes the struggle shrinks to a clenched fist in

a European cage: a sonnet' (Agbabi 2008: 46). However, Agbabi points out how the restraints of western lyrical forms (the 'European cage') can be manipulated and resignified. As she mentions her own sonnet written for Phillis Wheatley, the first black woman to be published in the United States in 1773, the anonymous writer implicitly reveals herself as June Jordan, the African American poet and activist. The poet thus makes it clear how, by writing 'Something Like a Sonnet' in a 4/4 beat, she has powerfully distorted the bars of that 'cage', turning the constraint into an empowering tool of expression—so much so that Patience 'Hi-5s' her 'for using the sonnet to highlight her fame and subverting it back to its roots' (Agbabi 2008: 46).

Girls Who Are Boys, Dominatrixes, Garçonnes: Form, Performance and Transformation

A 'twenty-first-century sonneteer' (Murphy 2010: 67), Agbabi breathes new life into the sonnet form, recreating an audience within the text and retrieving the aural/oral elements by utilizing dramatic monologues while, at the same time, maintaining the discipline of form and technique. As she stated in an interview, the very title of the collection *Transformatrix* was meant as a way to 'encompass and encapsulate' some of the elements she felt she wanted to include. If the term 'matrix' addresses female creativity, 'transform' refers to either physical or mental change and metamorphosis. 'Form', of course, is a further crucial element embedded in the title, since the whole volume is a celebration of form 'on many different levels' (Thomson 2005: 162).

The section 'Seven Sisters' provides an illuminating example of Agbabi's skilful use and manipulation of traditional lyrical conventions, coupled with the exploration of gender identities, performance and transformation. Each poem in the section is devoted to a 'sister' with a non-conventional attitude toward sexuality, while all the seven sestinas use the same end words (girl, boy, child, time, end and dark), which 'convey the hypnotic, circling quality of the sestina powerfully' (Mack 2009). In the sestina 'Ms De Meanour', for instance, the poet celebrates urban nightlife, when 'the time is ripe for girls who are boys in the dark' (Agbabi 2000: 46). The elaborate lyric convention of the corona, in which the final word of every stanza is repeated in the following line, is here utilized to present the subjectivity of 'the bastard child of Barbara Cartland and Boy George' (45). The 'boy meets girl story' is replaced by a self-reflexive tale of discovery where the meeting takes place in the mirror. As the poet plays with the myth of Cinderella, the magical transformation provides the boy with a new, glamorous, transgender identity:

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, courtesy of every child's
dream fairy godmother. (Agbabi 2000: 45)

Midnight becomes 'party time' and, while the fairy godmother is supported by the transformative power of make-up, the pun of the title, 'Ms De Meanour'/misdemeanour, playfully engages with a 'transgressive' subjectivity that is constantly shifting and performing—precisely like the word endings, which, by repeating themselves line after line, slip from one meaning to another, changing and chasing each other in a constant performance.

As if to testify her engagement with form and performance, the title poem of the collection, 'Transformatrix', significantly contains the image of a corset—an ambiguous object symbolizing 'the sonnet's ability to both empower and contain' (Ramey 2009: 319). The metaphor of the corset is a particularly fitting one. Feminizing the sonnet form as a 'she' who has given her 'a safe word', the poet envisages a homosexual sado-masochistic relationship with the strictures of this 'disciplining' corset. In this painful yet necessary relationship, the poet refuses to comply with the conventional prescriptions of literary forms: she is

breaking the law
on a death wish,
ink throbbing my temples, each vertebra
straining for her fingers. (Agbabi 2000: 78)

According to Bruce King: 'Using the idea that the poet is at the mercy of his [*sic*] Muse, Agbabi offers a street-wise feminist parody in which she is the submissive lover of a cruel, demanding, erratic dominatrix' (King 2001). Subverting the male heterosexual relationship between the poet and his muse, Agbabi prefigures a homosexual and sadistic engagement in which she sees herself as subjected by her dominatrix: 'A pen poised over a blank page, I wait / for madam's orders' (Agbabi 2000: 78). In this light, as has been suggested, she challenges the 'typically feminist interpretation

of this form as corset', revelling 'in the excitement of toying with limits' (Murphy 2010: 74). While the poet reconfigures the relationship between the body and the corset, content and form, she dismisses any feeling of coercion or constraint, foregrounding, on the contrary, a pleasurable interaction between the two.[6]

Agbabi does not simply sprinkle the sonnet form with remarks on or references to sexuality; on the contrary, she lets the erotic invade the sonnet, using it as an empowering source of knowledge that radically shapes and moulds (like a corset?) this traditional form. In this light, her poetry seems to resonate with Lorde's claim that '[t]he erotic is the nurturer or nursemaid of all our deepest knowledge' (Lorde 2007: 56). The necessary disciplining of the form thus establishes a mutual relationship, which eventually nurtures and revitalizes both the form and the poet's imagination:

> She's given me a safe word, a red light
> but I'm breaking the law, on a death wish,
> ink throbbing my temples, each vertebra
> straining for her fingers. She trusses up
> words, lines, as a corset disciplines flesh.
> Without her, I'm nothing but without me
> she's tense, upright, rigid as a full stop. (Agbabi 2000: 78)

A significant illustration of her skillful use of poetic conventions and interplay with ambiguity is the palindromic poem 'Josephine Baker finds herself'. Agbabi does not celebrate the 'Bronze Venus' performing as an exotic commodity on the Paris stage of the 1920s and 1930s, but rather pays tribute to the woman who manipulated her performances so as to make them empowering, subversive tools to return the white male gaze. Since her debut at the Revue Nègre in 1925, Baker had been 'playing the other', incarnating the colonial fantasies of the white European audience. However, she decidedly never reduced herself to a mere spectacle. Manipulating her image, playing with ambiguity and contradictions or, rather, consciously constructing them, Baker exploited 'the intelligence of her body' (Hammond and O'Connor 1991: 90) to destabilize both race and gender expectations (see Henderson 2011). To a French fan claiming that he saw her as a 'virgin forest' bringing 'savage rejuvenation', she replied that, to her, 'Paris was the virgin forest' (quoted in Wood 2000: 91), thus turning the mirror back on Europe. However, she did not simply return the gaze. As many scholars have highlighted, her self-fashioning was fraught with contradictions (her obsession with bleaching her face, for instance), and yet she appeared to develop 'ways of distancing herself from the stereotypes even as she reproduced them' (Kraut 2003: 438). In

[6] In a similar vein, the body in her poetry is always the ambiguous signifier of pleasure as well as pain. Celebrated as the battlefield of representation through tattoos or as the bearer of metaphorical bruises and excoriations, the body is often represented by Agbabi through a sadomasochistic dynamics of pleasurable pain.

this light, Agbabi's poem is particularly significant in its underpinning of Baker's complex use of her self-image. As the title itself suggests, *la garçonne*, the sexually liberated woman, 'finds herself' in a Brixton girls' club through the specular reflection conveyed by the palindromic poem:

> She picked me up
> like a slow-burning fuse. I was down
> that girls' club used to run in Brixton,
> on acid for fuel. Lipstick lesbians,
> techno so hardcore it's spewing out Audis.
> She samples my heartbeat and mixes it with
> vodka on the rocks. I'm her light-skinned, negative,
> twenty-something, short black wavy-bobbed diva.
> She purrs *La Garçonne, fancy a drink?* I say
> *Yes*. She's crossing the Star Bar like it's a catwalk. So sleek!
> …
> Yes! She's crossing the Star Bar like it's a catwalk so sleek
> she purrs, la garçonne! *Fancy a drink?* I say.
> Twenty-something, short, Black, wavy-bobbed diva:
> Vodka on the rocks, I'm her light-skinned negative.
> She samples my heartbeat and mixes it with
> techno so hardcore it's spewing out Audis
> on acid for fuel. *Lipstick Lesbians*,
> that girls' club used to run in Brixton
> like a slow-burning fuse. I was down.
> She picked me up. (Agbabi 2008: 24)

However, the encounter with *la garçonne* is not limited to a homoerotic relationship. Agbabi seems to suggest that, in her playful attempt to control her own image, Josephine Baker acted as a role model for contemporary queer diasporic subjectivities. Living like her in a racial, cultural and sexual borderland, her exoticized and highly sexualized body, as well as her sexual ambiguity and her humour, are mirrored and doubled by the contemporary poet's performance, prefiguring the possibility for an empowering self-representation.

Agbabi's poetic experimentations, in short, cannot be reduced to a 'subversive' commitment to form. Far from being a mere 'exercise in prosodic virtuosity' (Murphy 2010: 77), her poetry discloses a 'performance space' where a broader definition of identities can be staged, thus articulating a diasporic, queer position which theorizes a radical challenge to stabilizing identities. Despite her dismissal of a necessarily political poetry, Agbabi's claim that poetry 'has to do something' nonetheless focuses on the performative

quality of poetry and its inherent agency and instability (Thomson 2005: 161). As a truly 'poetical activist', her poems are 'shapes of meaning', as Catherine Murphy has aptly suggested (Murphy 2010: 77). The poetic forms she daringly experiments with (coronas, palindromic poems etc.) are signifying practices in themselves, activating unsettling intersections and similarities. For this reason, Agbabi's scepticism about the idea of a 'black aesthetics', as well as of a political black expression, also leads her to oppose the notion of a poet's responsibility 'to reflect a fixed agenda or aesthetic based on a socially imposed identity' (Murphy 2010: 70). Her constant questioning of categories interrogates narrow and limiting definitions of identity, either concerning sex, gender, race, nation or political agendas.

In conclusion, returning to Walcott's reading of Lorde as a 'queer theorist', it can be argued that Agbabi also lives and works at the nexus of various discourses, intersecting multiple positionalities and conflicting identities, calling for 'a politics and ethics that allows for experiencing identity claims quite differently' (Walcott 2007: 36). Paraphrasing Walcott, as she 'simultaneously recognize[s] the … spaces from which [she] speak[s] and gesture[s] to more than those spaces' (Walcott 2005: 96), Agbabi preserves her engagement with the originary meaning of the verb 'to queer': to inquire, to question, to baffle or to unsettle. In this light, her 'queering' of the sonnet, in its creative interplay of formal constraint and experimentation, steps beyond the safe boundaries of literary conventions, destabilizing normative gay, lesbian, black, men's and women's identities.

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