Reaction and Response to the Colonial Canon: The Failure of the Physical Utopian in Patience Agbabi's "Makar"

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The rallying call to "decolonize the canon" emerged from the University of Cape Town's "Rhodes Must Fall" campaign in early 2015. The phrase refers to a radical reconsideration of literary history; it suggests, in part, investigating structures of domination in the education of literature from pedagogy to syllabi. Further than a reconsideration of the diversity of voices presented, some authors have emphasized "decolonizing the canon" to include the examination of how prioritized forms of poetic and prosaic structure dominate the landscape of literature and limit an expression of language that rejects the status quo. In contention with a literary tradition based in a colonial mindset, these authors have utilized subversion of form and language to protest the dominance of the canon in its current state. Works such as Gloria Anzaldúa's Tex-Mex-written poetry in *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, Jos Charles's Middle English reimagining in *feeld*, and Natalie Diaz's *Postcolonial Love Poem* come to mind. Rooted in the evolving landscapes of each author's life, these collections reveal their desires, identities, and overwhelming love as unable to be expressed in the constraints of the English language and Western poetic tradition. In a review of Diaz's anthology for *The Guardian*, critic Emily Pérez writes, "part of the project of what she calls 'postcolonial love' is to remain open and empathetic in the space of devastation" (4). Perhaps no author more openly embraces Diaz's concept of "postcolonial love"—a rebuilding of utopian communal imagining upon an insecure yet seemingly impenetrable basis of harm—than Patience

Agbabi in her 2014 anthology *Telling Tales*, a poetry collection that remixes Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*.

Telling Tales has, to quote Dr. Suzanne Edwards, a professor of English at Lehigh University, "rocked the world of Medieval Studies." Through location placement, contemporary character reinterpretations, and prosaic form, Agbabi methodically deconstructs each tale and subverts it into a new framework consistent with a postcolonial theoretical project, breathing new life into one of the giants of the canon. At a time in which many are embracing the impulse to barrel headfirst into the future, leaving the Middle Ages to rot untouched in the corners of college libraries, Agbabi reminds us of the insight we might glean through critical examination of the past. Her project of deconstruction fully realizes itself in "Makar," a poetic subversion of Chaucer's "The Franklin's Tale." Through her strategic use of rhyme royal, an act of defiance against Chaucer's iambic pentameter in Breton lai and his use of masculine and feminine rhyme, Agbabi reinvents the wheel, turning back time to fit our contemporary moment. Her intentional subversion of forms associated with utopian thought, *fin'amor*, and masculine and feminine rhyme, and her allusions to Freetown Christiania—a threatened utopian commune—makes a statement on the failed implementation of utopian possibilities when confronted with dominating structure—whether it be the police violence inflicted upon Freetown Christiania or the proliferation of the prosaic and poetic forms popularized by Chaucer and upheld by a colonial literary tradition. In a radical reformation of her own utopia, Agbabi offers alternative possibilities in the subjecthood of her female speaker and main character, Deirdre, manifested in "Makar" through feminine rhyme and the breaking of the rhyme royal.

Agbabi's placement of her poem in Freetown Christiania may seem at first random; Freetown Christiania, as it stands today, is mostly a tourist attraction for visitors to gawk at what once was, and is no longer a place of unlimited possibility. Nestled in the Christianshavn neighborhood of Copenhagen, Denmark, Freetown Christiania became a haven for artists and activists in 1971, beginning as a squat community in a vacated military base (Amaroux 1). At the time of Agbabi's writing, Freetown Christiania was the subject of several violent police raids and physical demarcation by Copenhagen residents, ultimately leading to the downfall of the commune's famed

Pusher Street post-publication in April 2024 (Carlsson 1). Agbabi's stationing of the primary character of "Makar," Arild/Aurelius, within Freetown Christiania and, specifically, Pusher Street, poses an inherent contrast between an attempt at a physicalized utopian space and dominant frameworks of legality that make its continued existence impossible. Agbabi's *physical* structuring of "Makar" in this political context, in connection to her subversion of Chaucer's form, emphasizes the struggle between a haven of idealism and masculine violence, both as an insufficient basis and an ever-persistent encroaching force.

Agbabi, too, turns the original intention of Chaucer's form in on itself; while he uses iambic pentameter couplets, Agbabi pointedly uses rhyme royal in altered iambic pentameter—most commonly associated with, although not exclusive to, medieval visions of courtly love or *fin'amor* and "spiritual transcendence of moral limitation and […] the form of prayer" (Nolan 23; Nuttall 1612). Chaucer uses rhyme royal in four tales, "The Man of Law's Tale," "The Clerk's Tale," "The Prioress's Tale," and "The Second Nun's Tale," three of which deal explicitly in colonial logic; "The Man of Law's Tale," "The Second Nun's Tale," and "The Prioress's Tale" feature young Christian women converting, often violently, non-Christian communities. Agbabi's choice to resemble rhyme royal (save for her periodic breaking in the first, tenth, and fourteenth stanzas) places her "Makar" as a poem in contention with a tradition of utopian desire (courtly love) and colonial violence. Chaucer, in contrast to Agbabi, calls his "The Franklin's Tale" a Breton lai despite lacking many of the traditional qualities of a Breton lai (Schofield 2). A short, rhymed romance, this choice points to Chaucer's emphasis of the romantic overtones of "The Franklin's Tale" between Dorigen and Arveragus, rather than Agbabi's interest (as exemplified through her usage of rhyme royal) in the tension between Dorigen and Aurelius. Agbabi's use of subverted rhyme royal emphasizes the confrontation of violence with the utopian inner world of Arild (her renamed Aurelius) and his utilization of violence in his desire for Deirdre (Dorigen). Chaucer's form becomes a metaphor for violence upon the female main character, and, in effect, Agbabi herself.

Agbabi's slight breaking of the rhyme royal occurs somewhat inconsistently, broken once in the third line of the first stanza (a-b-

c-b-b-d-d) and on the last line of the ninth and fourteenth (both a-b-a-b-b-c-d) stanzas. The first occurs in stanza one, on the first evocation of Freetown Christiania:

> To Denmark's Freetown Christiania
> my mind transports me when it's overcast
> when there's a thunderstorm or the night draws near. (Agbabi 1-3)

On "near," rhyme royal is broken. The second break in rhyme royal crashes with the height of Arild's desperation for Deirdre. Deirdre, in love with Angus, has evaded Arild's attempts at sex for years. The rhyme royal breaks when she makes a joking agreement to satisfy him: "'I will,' she laughs, 'if, for three weeks, my Danish / bookworm, you can make the Castle vanish'" (55-56). Here is the first physicalization of *fin'amor*, a material promise that Arild cements her to. Unknowingly, this joking agreement violently manifests. As the poem continues, Arild manages to complete her task, causing the rhyme royal to break once more: "til August brings the Festival: day one, / Edinburgh wakes to find her castle gone!" (69-70). These hints at violent physicalization—both its speaking aloud and the upholding of the promise—are inconsistent with Arild's internal utopia; his desire for her is unable to escape a structure of masculine violence (one that would violate Deirdre's body) as he attempts to externalize it. Though stressed, the rhyme royal ultimately breaks for the last time when Arild realizes the strength of Dorigen and Angus's attachment and her intense desire to stay faithful to her husband:

> … sees in Deirdre's being how profound
> true love can be; his monumental oral
> feat has spelled out love's double-headed arrow:
> physical, headstrong, passionately selfish,
> psychical, headstrong, passionately selfless. (Agbabi 92-98)

In this last breaking of rhyme royal, Deirdre assumes subjecthood through Arild's viewing of her attachment to Angus (Arveragus). In this stanza, Arild's illusion of Deirdre's availability through her false promise falters, breaking the rhyme royal. This assumed subjecthood fails to fit within rhyme royal; Deirdre's personal desires are incompatible with Arild's vision of physicalized utopia (sex with Deirdre). The form cannot handle the weight of Deirdre's subjecthood and, here, as she is released from the prison of her own joking promise and the violence of its realization, the form breaks.

Although the poem allows Deirdre to breathe for a quick moment, the rhyme royal is ultimately reassumed when Arild returns as the main subject. The realization that his desire will not be physically manifested hurts him, so he expresses it in other ways: "… art is his catharsis. / Through words, words, words, he'll purge the pain, the doubt. / The cave erupts and pushes Arild out" (103-105). Arild's internal struggle and lingering desire for Deirdre, formed as words physicalizing beyond his internal world, ultimately become another form of masculine violence that reassumes the rhyme royal. Agbabi reminds the audience that language, although different from bodily harm to another person, is still a form of violent weaponization, although cracks are always visible.

Agbabi's desire to show the "cracks" in form additionally show in her subversion of iambic pentameter. Each stanza has ten syllables per line, consistent with Chaucer's iambic pentameter, but, again, Agbabi slightly subverts its structure. For example, the second opening line, "my mind transports me when it's overcast" is nearly iambic pentameter, but, on closer inspection, the emphasis of the "o" on "overcast" does not fit (2). Again, this points to the failure of utopian possibilities, represented here as an ideal depiction of Freetown Christiania, in confrontation with the dominating structure of Chaucer's iambic pentameter. In this case, Chaucer's iambic pentameter stands in parallel to the violence of the deconstruction efforts of Pusher Street; it contorts the possibility of what can be said, performed, and physically realized beyond the scope of the mind. However, in the emphatic subversion of the "o," the conceptual application of utopia and Agbabi's own voice resist.

Agbabi's last defensive layer lies in her employment of feminine rhyme. Chaucer has been lauded for his near equal and unique usage of masculine and feminine rhyme across his *Tales*, most often attributed to the accompanied "e" at the end of a line in rhyme royal's rhyming couplet. Paramount to the understanding of Chaucer's use of iambic pentameter in "The Franklin's Tale" and Agbabi's subverted iambic pentameter in (close) rhyme royal, is American poet Howard Buck's analysis of Chaucer's use of feminine rhyme. He states, "Every feminine rhyme breaks that beat (of iambic pentameter) with what is to the ear either an anapest or a dactyl … precisely at the division of two lines … Chaucer felt that the slight shift involved in the feminine rhyme constituted a type of rhythmical

marking-off" (Buck 1-2). Agbabi's choice in "Makar" to instead rely heavily on masculine or otherwise non-feminine rhyme (suggesting an incompleteness, a wearying continuation of violence) makes her limited usage of feminine rhyme notable. Feminine rhyme is used in the first, fifth through eighth, eleventh, and fourteenth stanzas at the placement and speaker intervention in Freetown Christiania (first), Arild's internal longing for Deirdre in *fin'amor* (fifth through eighth), and plainly, mentions of Deirdre as a subject (eleventh and fourteenth). Masculine rhyme, and the violence of the attempted physical realization of internalized utopia (Arild's desire to have sex with Deirdre), intervenes and ultimately undoes the utopian ideal, represented in "Makar" as masculine rhyme. However, the feminine rhyme's breaking of the iambic pentameter beat offers a form of resistance to the structure, offering possibilities beyond. Arild ultimately rescinds his predatory agreement with Deirdre that would require her to have sex with him, a mode of existence that only exists due to each character's desire to move beyond physicalization back into the realm of the internalized ideal. As focus returns to Arild, masculine rhyme returns, but removed from the subject of violence (Deirdre) with which it was previously associated. Both the retainment of the rhyme royal structure and the usage of masculine rhyme speak to the physicalization of a form of violence through Arild's spoken word poetry, but its breaking of iambic pentameter—"Through words, words, words, he'll purge the pain, the doubt"—reforms its application (104-105). Although still a continuation of violence, its manifestation through art offers a version of violence that may be productive. It is still an attempt at physicalized reality through spoken word—rhyme royal and the prioritization of masculine subjecthood—but unconstrained from the structure of violence—iambic pentameter—from which it originates.

Ultimately, Agbabi illuminates the violence in the attempted physicalization of the utopian—here both as possibilities moving beyond Chaucer's structure and the internalization of the *fin'amor*. Beyond her use of subverted rhyme royal and iambic pentameter, the confrontation of masculine rhyme with feminine rhyme illuminates Agbabi's own voice within "Makar" in conflict with Chaucer, placing her subjecthood as speaker in congruent emphasis with her written speaker and Deirdre. Finding her place in a new anti-tradition of postcolonial literature, Agbabi offers possibilities beyond Chaucer's

dominant structure in her version of utopian possibility. While she acknowledges that structures of violence are not easily thwarted, the realization of autonomy of the violated subject is the first step forward. *Telling Tales* is a conversation with the violent past and present through prose, a dizzying acknowledgement of structural oppression, and, through everything, a crack in the castle.

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