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BETWEEN BABEL, DEVOTION AND DOUBTS: A DIALOGUE OF POETICS WITH O-JEREMIAH AGBAAKIN[1]

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In the work of O-Jeremiah Agbaakin, poetry is encountered as a transcendental experience, a mode of negotiating spirituality, as well as Yoruba cosmologies, postcolonial hauntings, and contemporary estrangements. Although he identifies as a religious poet, Agbaakin does not read scripture with doctrinal reverence but with poetic suspicion. The formative immersion of his background in religious and cultural sensibilities resonates across his poems. His poetry is marked by what he describes as the construction and destruction of possibilities, in which language is not a fixed tool but a restless generative force, as well as the use of persona form, ecological vision, and the paradox of how the vision of human progress is also that of human damnation. His poetry is multisensory and interdisciplinary, drawing as much from music and visual art as from myth and scripture. Perhaps, the most distinct signature of his poetics is his unflawed transpositional grasp of language. His poetry resists the dogmas of languages and places, arriving instead at new truths through fracture, tension, and reinvention. This conversation, conducted as an online exchange over several weeks in early 2025, is centered on his chapbook *The Sign of the Ram*, and on a wider constellation of his poems. Across this dialogue, we explore Agbaakin's use of the persona form, his engagements with preoccupations of sacrifice, survival, betrayal, satire, and the paradoxes of language.

O-Jeremiah Agbaakin is the author of *The Sign of the Ram* (Akashic Books, 2023), selected by Kwame Dawes and Chris Abani for the New Generation African Poets Chapbook series. His poems and reviews are published/forthcoming in *Poetry Review (UK), Kenyon Review, POETRY Magazine, Poetry Daily*, Poetry Society of America, *The Rumpus*, and elsewhere. He's received fellowship & support from Good Hart Artist Residency, Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art, Bread Loaf, Tin House; and a Graduate Research Award from the Willson Center for Humanities and Arts, University of Georgia where he is currently a doctoral student of Creative Writing and Literature.

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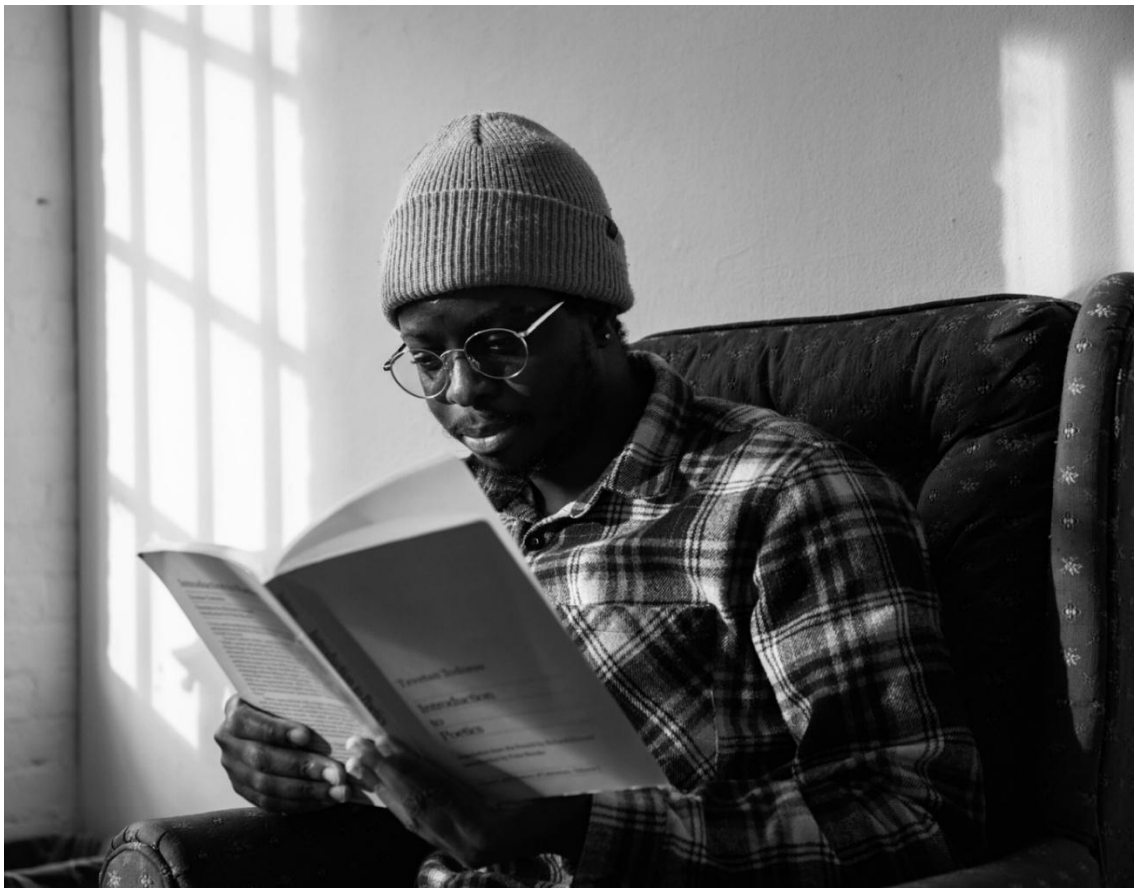

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Tolulope Oke: I was faintly acquainted with you from the University of Ibadan, where we both graduated, and more intimately through Tomi, your sister, and our mutual acquaintance, who introduced me to your writing. We have also shared spaces like *Africa in Dialogue*, and you once wrote a beautiful foreword for one of *Lunaris Review*'s issues. How has the journey been? What trajectories have shifted from your earlier writing days to now?

O-Jeremiah Agbaakin: My earliest literary community (beyond my family) was the Christopher Okigbo Poetry club of the English department at the University of Ibadan around 2013/2014. My membership and participation in Okigbo were short-lived for a few reasons. First, I was barely out of the furnace of freshman law. The second reason was that I was wooed by campus journalism and was unable to dip my toes for long in a poetry community, although I was introduced to some poets like 'Gbenga Adoba, Oredola Ibrahim, and others through campus journalism. The more dramatic reason was that I had lost the Christopher Okigbo poetry contest. There was a juvenile soreness and shame about the loss, since I had convinced myself at the time that I was an exceptional writer.

My sister will remember this because she attended the event. In hindsight, the real reason was that I needed a kind of isolation to nurture my voice without the pressure of competition, the shadow of community, without premature praises that accompanied every poem that you read during a meeting. It is a paradox that communities are supposed to nurture us, but true nurturing starts from within, from the solitude that Rainer Maria Rilke encourages in his *Letters*. I am not saying that this was my rationale then, (I had not even read *Letters to a Young Poet* at the time) but it is a legitimate impulse. Ironically, it was through the loose communities of poets I found after Okigbo that I was introduced to the works that influenced my writing.

Now that we have gotten Okigbo out of the way, I will say that since our work together in *Africa in Dialogue* and *Lunaris Review* in 2019-2020, I have found and co-founded other communities. One of the latter is the *Unserious Collective* where we not only support one another's writings but also do the work of recognizing Nigerian poets with annual fellowship awards. We are in the process of expanding the scope of our programming. I can tell you that the future is bright!

Since our work together, I have left Nigeria, completed my MFA at the University of Mississippi, published my chapbook *The Sign of the Ram* with the African Poetry Book Fund and am currently preparing for my comps and working on some creative projects at the University of Georgia where I am a PhD student. When I arrived in the US, one of the promises I made to myself was that I was not going to write what people expected writers of my kind to write: that is, on migration. I have not kept that promise. But only subconsciously. Coming into an MFA program, I was concerned more about my craft. Full stop. The subjects or themes come later. This is still true but as a writer who is also being trained as a scholar, I now pay more attention to the trends in my writing and that of my contemporaries. I realized that my old writings are imbued with an ecological vision which I now interrogate in my current practice. That is what has changed! I am more interested in investigating the old 'trends' of my work such as the use of persona form, ecological vision, the paradox of the vision of human progress which is also that of human damnation. Perhaps, the only radical shift is that I now consider myself as a writer of autofiction and read more prose than poetry these days. I am also currently working on a short story collection. Can you believe that?

Oke: It has been an admirable journey. You remind me of the significant impact that the Okigbo Prize had (and I hope it continues to have). I would like to highlight a trajectory

that appears to be common among the development of several contemporary Nigerian poets: the MFA in North America. There have been debates about the positive or negative effects it has had, particularly regarding the ideological influence it exerts on African poets. How was your experience with the MFA?

Agbaakin: I applied for an MFA because we do not have such strong and developed institutional support and community for writers back home and to have a successful career as a writer and a teacher of creative writing. We cannot turn around and blame MFA for providing a solution to this problem that has pushed people outside. My experience in an MFA program is that writers come with different voices, interests and approaches. While different MFA programs have a unique writing and teaching philosophy (based on the faculty there) my voice was never stifled to fit in at the University of Mississippi. This is why I think that writers should have confidence and maturity before walking into an MFA.

MFA is not unique since various literary journals, prizes, fellowships, and other institutions have their own tastes, even back home. This is not to ignore the fact that many of these notable institutions are rooted in the MFA structure. The point is that we are asking the wrong question. If we genuinely feel that the MFA is harming the ecosystem of *authentic* African writing, maybe we need to strengthen our system? The world is global. Our priority should be based on collaborations, not antagonism or a resentment that the old African literature is dead. Imagine bemoaning the fact that Christopher Okigbo's work was influenced by the modernism of his time or that Soyinka was drawing nodes of connection between the classical and Yoruba mythologies?

Oke: Restless existential inquiries on life and sacrifice permeate your work, particularly in "Isaac's Confessions," where the poetic voice asks: "…don't we burn enough/ offering to keep you warm?" The poem alludes to the biblical Isaac, questioning the purpose of sacrifice and survival. Similarly, the lines: "a ram is a lamb that didn't die/ yet" evoke the burden of existence. What draws you to the theme of sacrifice and survival, and how do you see it shaping your poetics?

Agbaakin: Essentially, I am drawn to the paradox that our desire for progress, to please a god like in the case of Abraham and Isaac, or to create a utilitarian benefit in matters of public policy, or whatever precisely produces the circumstances that reinforce the original problem. For instance, we want the world to move faster, so we manufacture fossil-

powered technologies. Surprised that the planet is heating up, we try to seek alternative energy sources, like electric cars. That is an extreme illustration of nihilism in that mode of inquiry: that nothing we do can reverse the negative consequences of progress or something like faith. It is about sacrificing more. It is the same question as the line that you have quoted: "don't we burn enough / to keep" the machine or a god warm? Maybe I am asking myself to redefine the meaning of progress, of life, of sacrifice, of devotion.

To put this poem into context, it is a poem born out of a precise guilt. I had betrayed a childhood friend in Primary School out of the fear of punishment by a dreaded teacher. Earlier, I had been betrayed by a friend, a seatmate in fact. I said something inappropriate about that teacher and this person told the teacher about it. I begged the person and could not understand their insistence to report when nobody had been harmed. Anyway, they told me they insisted on telling the teacher because they had been punished for making a similar comment. So, in child-logic, I ought to be punished too! I told the teacher that I only reported what a friend had told me. I only said that because I knew the friend was absent from school that day, but that doesn't lessen the betrayal. In a poetry chapbook about betrayal and abandonment, I felt that the speaker had to come clean. You know, he who comes to equity must come with clean hands and stuff. I try not to make the poems slide into self-righteousness but in doing that, the reader (including myself) can observe a kind of self-flagellation. Every literature starts with a kind of flagellation. Think about Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart* who punishes himself and inevitably his family for the weaknesses of his own father before the punishment arrives. Most time, this self-flagellation is born out of fear, and fear is probably the most primal emotion. So, what draws me to sacrifice and survival in that book is the need for the speaker to not only be human, fearful, and vulnerable through the self-flagellation ritual but to confess, to establish trust, to offer an acceptable sacrifice by confession of guilt.

I took some hermeneutic liberties of understanding Isaac's frame of mind in the moment of attempted sacrifice. Perhaps, it is not that he finds the sacrifice a betrayal or even some catharsis at the sign of the ram. Perhaps, the lack of sacrifice feels like some rejection, which is a greater indictment on Isaac's character. Sacrifice, then, becomes the most physical form of desire, the most violent form of love or essence. In the Old Testament, only the cleanest animals can be sacrificed. So, by Abraham's (or God's) change of mind, Isaac, for a fleeting moment, Isaac must have initially felt unclean, unwanted, forsaken even, which is why the speaker in the poem finally asks for the

sacrifice. This hermeneutic interpretation itself is a sacrifice of meaning. At the end, everything is constructed through the destruction of other possibilities.

Oke: That is a remarkable exegesis. As a Jeremiah, perhaps it is unsurprising that your poetry is deeply influenced by biblical narratives, not just in subject matter (as seen in "Isaac's Confession," "Jericho Hymnal," "the root word of babble is babel"), but also in structure (as in "genesis"). Your poems are embedded in religious undercurrents, which are sometimes tense, as seen in "the book of jacob II // or explaining the birthday paradox to my little cousin" and "lamentations with the list of the abiku stillborn's demands," where the speaker declares: "but, God, I'd rather my body a garden and not/ a temple." Would you describe yourself as a religious poet? And how does your religious sensibility inform your poetics, or how would you characterize the spiritual undercurrents in your work?

Agbaakin: I will preface my response with the fact that the Bible was my first literary inspiration before any actual art and literary forms. The complicated answer to your question is that I am not a religious person, but I am a religious poet. I don't believe that only one religion (or religion at all) is the only 'way' to the transcendental. I believe that poetry, like all art forms, is inherently transcendental. This is because it doesn't need to rely on the normative structure of religion through its loudest interpreters, institutions or even some phenomena as innocuous as signs and wonders. I am not saying we don't have the problem of gatekeeping, hierarchy, false signals or dogmatism in literature. There are dogmas of writing and literary criticism but disobeying those kinds of dogmas in literature such as "this is how to write', "what to write", "this is *the* meaning of this poem," and so on do not produce the same level of rejection or objection that someone in a religious sect might face. In fact, resisting dogmas is the only way that poetry has survived. Poetry allows me to be more questioning, doubtful, and unbelieving, virtues which contradict the idea of faith. Poetry allows me to reject dogmas and iconographies in both religious thoughts and art.

Oke: Your poems not only reflect religious preoccupations but are also deeply rooted in cultural sensibilities. In your poems, Yoruba spirituality, proverbs, and idiomatic expressions interact with English translations, extending their meaning. During a private discussion with Carl Terver, I noted that you might be the only Nigerian poet who demonstrates such a strong transpositional grasp of language. In "Necromancy," you

write: “Iya n J’esin, a ‘lo m’ere sa. / we name the horse’s power after its long suffering.” How does your cultural background shape your poetic language, and how do you navigate the act/art of translation in your work, especially in how you deflect or deconstruct semantics?

Agbaakin: Perhaps, this is the best opportunity to expatiate what I first said about my family being my first literary community. Although my immediate family was Pentecostal and raised me as such, I was also exposed to a rich oral literary culture. I grew up in a very large extended family with granduncles, grandaunts, first cousins once removed, and so on in Ikire, town along the Ife-Ibadan expressway. So, there was always gossip, rumor, and inevitably, moonlight tales by the children at night. You know, the usual stuff in communal societies. There was a specific ritual after the storytelling-night that still fascinates me now. When you finish telling a story, you must pledge to the group that the story is true. The test of authenticity is a bizarre one: you stick your forefinger in your balled-up mouth and pull it out quickly three times. If the action doesn’t pop each time (what the narrator describes as: “if my mouth doesn’t peal thrice”), then you have lied, and your story is untrue. This ritual was as important as the story itself. Although we all knew that the stories were made-up, you must prove to the group that the story was true. Even if the story sucks, the bell must ring! The music must shine. All this was a normal part of growing up for many children of my generation, but because we lived in a large house, the scale was more sophisticated than usual. But I never took those for granted. I was also lucky to meet two of my maternal great grandparents alive who spoke mostly in proverbs.

What this means is that culture and orality shaped my formative years. So, it is inevitable that they manifest in my writing. Since we all write from memory as Loius Gluck writes in her poem, “Nostos,” that we look “at the world once, in childhood. / The rest is memory,” the rhythm of the Yoruba language and culture come up in my work. The act of writing in English is already an act of translation. I know some people talk about thinking and dreaming in their indigenous language and write in English. For me, my writing feels most authentic when nothing stands in the way of the rhythm of Yoruba. I approach the work of translation by closing my eyes to the non-Yoruba readers of my work. That is, I don’t try to write for them or explain myself. I just try to move past language, at first by rebelling against Yoruba and English in equal measure. It is why a line from my poem, “The root word of Babble is Babel” says “The cure for vertigo is to

cut off the head / of the task force." The first half of the line is a translation of a Yoruba saying that says decapitation doesn't remedy a headache. By resisting the dogma in language, I push that proverb to arrive at the new truth on the next line which mentions the head of an authoritarian "task-force," the agent of an empire. So, essentially, I don't try to cross from one language to another, but to inhabit the cracks in between to arrive at new truths.

Oke: Yes, there is always an arrival at new truths, which makes the religious and cultural sensibilities not just ornamental, but well charged with socio-political undercurrents in a manner of contemporary refashioning. "The Book of Revelation with a Rare Audio Recording of Abel's Monologue" reimagines Abel's biblical murder against the 2019 Christchurch shooting and similar incidents in Nigeria. The poem captures horror through lines like: "I'm stuck in this poem. my bladder fills / with blood. my heart stopped ticking like a clock." Similarly, "Pray, Tell!" pulses with a restless longing for answers. What do you see as the role of the creative in mediating or bearing witness to such horrors?

Agbaakin: In a way I think you already answered the question. Our primary role is to bear witness. But we cannot be good witnesses if we don't first bear witness to our own horrors, whatever they may be. One of my horrors is the horror of not writing what wants to be written. I have woken up from vivid dreams sometime with a voice that instructs, "you must write, you must write that!" Because the world is always in a hurry, it is not the role of the creative to merely represent or document the immediate horrors of the world as a newscaster or twitter headline may do so. There is a reason why William Carlos Williams registers the fact that it is difficult "to get the news from poems." Therefore, the writer's work is to be in harmony with the cosmos. Our work is to slow time and avoid distractions. It is noble and important to bear other kinds of witnessing beyond the page, but truly enduring works of art resist the violence of manufactured time. We must focus on what it means to be human, to be fleeting just because time and humanity are stolen from us. There is a risk in always wanting to bear witness to the moment. We don't get to fully live as humans, and if we do not do that, our art will suffer for the lack of that vitality. I'm not saying that art can't capture the fleeting. It can, as the speaker in Olena Davis's poem, "Six Apologies, Lord" confesses: "For You, Lord. I Have Loved The Frivolous, The Fleeting, The Frightful." The fleeting too can be beautiful. But the real work of a witness is to be alive to our life itself.

Oke: "The Tower of Babel Fails Reverse-Engineering at Aburi" reflects on the Biafran War and Nigeria's failure at nation-building, teasing out historical tensions from colonialism to the country's amalgamation and the conflicts that followed. Babel is a recurring motif in your work. What does Babel symbolize in your poetics?

Agbaakin: For me, Babel is a site of poetic possibilities. The story of Babel (and its folkloric equivalences across different cultures) was perhaps my favorite growing up. Not only because of the appeal of their ambition, but also because of their feeble leap into the Imago Dei. That is, the desire to be elevated to the image of God just like it was in the Eden story. When I finally realized that I was a poet, I realized that what I most love reading and writing is poetry in which there is risk, surprise, ambition, and tension. Where language as a form inevitably makes way for its own fracture through a sublime and transcendental process.

As a poet from the postcolony, I am invested in the question of empire. Babel symbolizes the ecotones of language and fracture, labor and exploitation of labor, and the ecological crisis that goes into building and maintaining every empire. It is a place that we badly want to inhabit to stake our self-reclamation but is ultimately symbolic of the empire. Therefore, it is a place of contradiction.

Oke: Talking about possibilities and contradictions, your poems navigate the paradoxes of human existence, our overreaching efforts against discouraging realities, the tension between opposing forces. In "Necromancy," we see the father wiping "his father's portrait faster / until the frame squeaks, almost cracking / as if to breach the time-proof glass." Similarly, in "the root word of babble is babel," you write: "why a lover that wants to be left / alone is not also asking to be abandoned." How do you approach writing these complexities, and how do you balance ambiguity with clarity in your poetry?

Agbaakin: One doesn't need to be a poet to see that humans are always in the process of making, shaping and complicating the simplest meanings. So already, the premise of clarity is deeply flawed in our interpretation of art. I find poetic insight through paradoxes, through a conflict between definitions: what I described earlier as new truths through the sacrifice of meanings. I do not try to prioritize clarity for clarity's sake in my poetry. I must first work through the ambiguities myself to let the music and language manifest.

What this means is that I am a slow writer. Sometimes, I do not know what a poem wants to say so I give it as much time as it wants me to match the vision of the poem on

its own terms and timing. This is what helps me to arrive at some clarity. I have written many poems where only one or a few lines survive to tell a new story.

Oke: Beyond myth and mysticism, your poems have a strong musical attribute. Some are dedicated to musicians ("Devotion" to Ellie Mannette, "Epistolary" to Yanni's Blue), and your work also engages with visual art ("Tenebrae" references Caravaggio, Picasso, Repin, and Gentileschi). How does your poetics navigate the intersection of music and visual art? What role do these artistic expressions play in your writing process?

Agbaakin: Because of the ambiguities in my poems, I want the readers to go away with music and an image. I like to push back against the idea of genre. I want all my poems to sing, to paint, to pirouette, to mime, to chant, to ballet, to radiate. To do whatever. I am only able to find a natural rhythm when I surrender to the childhood version of myself in a large house where the only rule is music. The pealing of mouths, the waiting silence, the always blue sky. I believe that the poetic voice is a product of multi-genre influences, so it is important to stay true to that origin.

But every poem will call for different valences or combinations. I have written some poems that want to narrate a story more than sing. I have written some poems that want to be paintings. The hardest job is knowing the distinction. I should also add that growing up, I was surrounded by siblings and friends who could naturally sing, paint and do some artsy stuff. Poetry is where I show myself that I can do all these too. I am drawn to these other media because of their emotive power in the absence of a language. We don't understand our favorite songs. My greatest ambition is to write poems that emote similar affect beyond what the words say. To me, bad poetry does have the ambition or arrival of this harmony, where the poem is self-conscious that it is a poem, where meaning walks faster than the signifiers. It is a cliched affair between rhetoric and communication. What I want is for my carts to lead the horses down a hill of wind.

Oke: True, I also think of them as overlapping rhythms of expressions. And yes, your poems are quite emotive. While reading "Devotion," which is dedicated to George Stinney Jr., I was coincidentally listening to Yacouba Diabaté's kora, and the poem's rhythm, combined with history's weight, created an eerie, shivering sensation. How do you reach into your poems and what intents/affects do you hope they achieve?

Agbaakin: I'm glad that the poem had such effects on you, but If I knew the answer to that, I'd stop being a poet. There's no secret formula to reach into any poems. As a matter of practice, I love composing the first full draft of a poem on my fingers, on paper, on a beat of ten syllables per line, accompanied by an evocative song. I usually prefer playing the violin in the background. During the revision, I try to move the notes around as much as I move words around. In the end, I want my readers to feel, to see, to sing along with the poem. It is my goal to enchant the reader so that meaning is subordinated to music.

Oke: That partly explains the Yanni effect. Your poems are deeply invested in language, in a manner that defines your poetics, not with mundane paradoxes and puns, but in how it informs the complexity that your poems navigate, the coalescing, shifting, extensions of meaning. This is evident in "the root word of babble is babel" and even more pronounced in "a thesis on language (abstract)," where the persona claims to know how to "derail a white man's tongue" and "borrow words with both eyes." How do you "tame" language in your creative process?

Agbaakin: I am not sure that language itself could be tamed or should be tamed. We all write in English, and we are talking in English right now. I agree with the speaker in the second poem that the English language, a colonial language, can be transformed. The speaker stands on the shoulders of our predecessors like Achebe to do the work of subversion and hybridization. But it is not enough to simply subvert (the) language. All languages are oppressive simply because they are portals and currencies to the meaning, and along the way, they can stagnate and coalesce incomplete/unexamined paradigms, like the stone door of a tomb that has not been rolled at all.

Like I mentioned earlier, I try to push back against translation practice that ends with interpreting for an audience. My interests are in the spaces between languages. They are in the continuation of meaning. The language of language itself. I do this usually by resisting the norms of the Yoruba language (say a proverb, an epigram, anecdote, etc.) as it translates itself in a writing and see how English can bear the weight. At worst, this can easily come off as cultural matricide or in public betrayal. At best, this can reveal some kind of incompetence in one's own indigenous language. I find the tension between the two generative and this is where my poem finds a current to swim to. Now would I do the inverse of that? Would I translate English this way? I do not need to. My people are already bilingual. My greatest delight is when the trained eye can get the inside joke.

Oke: "Colour Manners" satirizes Westernization, but it also explores racial and postcolonial tensions, particularly around identity. The second stanza reads:

when I think of misapplied qualifiers
black is the only word on the list:
the only excerpt on the lips of a
white suspicion

How does your work engage with race, identity, and postcolonial struggles, especially considering you now live outside of the continent?

Agbaakin: That is a very old poem. I am glad that the commitment to confront the empire has remained the same, but I wish the poem was more subtle in language and style. Haha. To answer your question: these days, I find value in the wisdom of Nadine Gordimer's saying that "If you're going to be a writer you can make the death of a canary important, you could connect it to the whole chain of life and the mystery of life." In other words, the empire is too big and invisible to just hold in words. But the empire is embodied in the things we take for granted, in the canary, and even in our own unexamined acts of cruelty. It is like we are the symptoms of the empire. Therefore, I try to find my own canaries. It is like I mentioned before: the witness of the internal horror is important for the ambitious project of witnessing for the public. As someone who now lives in America, the questions of identity come into a closer focus. For the artist, the site of struggle is always language. Again, it is important to not write a poem with the burden of doing this. This can produce cliches and rhetoric. I believe that the poem knows better and will reveal its own canary life at the end.

Oke: Similar to the art inferences, your poetry recurrently references classical narratives, beliefs, and figures, often with striking reinterpretations. What draws you to classical influences? How do you approach adapting and subverting them in your work?

Agbaakin: I am interested in time as a *place,* not just as a *when*. A place with no borders. What draws me to the classical is the desire to resist time itself and to resist the impulse of progression that obliterates antecedences in the 'past,' with eyes blindly turned to the future. As a Yoruba, I believe in the cyclical cosmology where things are reborn from the old. So, ironically, the impulse to draw from the classical is because of a non-Western philosophy of time. This suggests that I am drawn to other antiquities. It is why I am

interested in Babel as continuities in our contemporary construct of human progress and destiny. My approach to adaptation and subversion is through the persona form: where a speaker is ostensibly a 'historical' figure that is also quite contemporary, and personal, or sometimes autobiographical. I am currently examining the aesthetic of the persona form as historical continuity instead of a referent that is frozen in time. Therefore, the Isaac in my chapbook *The Sign of the Ram* is also *the poet* in some ways. It is a braiding technique that allows for crosscurrents in the cosmos.

Oke: You have shared your influences, sensibilities, and other related perspectives, which leads me to your poem, "Autobiography." One can infer that the poetic voice is autobiographical, not only because of the title but also due to personal invocations; this sense of authorial presence is evident throughout your work. What is the separation between you and your poem, and to what extent do your poems reflect your own experiences or and how much of yourself do your poems embody?

Agbaakin: "Autobiography" is my most personal work yet. As you can tell, and as 'Gbenga Adeoba graciously notes in his preface to my chapbook, *The Sign of the Ram*, there is usually a considerable distance between me and my work. It is important for me to keep it that way to stare into the abyss of the Self. The distance has closed over the past few years, partly due to the influence of being in writing workshops where folks want to read "you," the writer, instead of the speaker. Americans love personality. I still try to resist that mode of reading but when you write often from memory, the self is always going to be embedded in the poem. The persona form allows me to look at myself and my experience in a different way. I believe the poet persona is a construct, even in the most confessional poetry. The confessional speaker is the *id,* the most elemental version of the self in the wild. Nobody can live like that in the real world. So, the paradox reveals itself in the sense that even the most personal voice is also a form of mask for the self that is elementally slippery and always in flux. The *mask* thus becomes a kind of net, a reckoning, and not a disguise. I will end my response here with a quote by Sylvia Plath that, "personal experience is very important, but certainly it shouldn't be a kind of shut-box and mirror-looking, narcissistic experience. I believe it should be relevant, and relevant to the larger things, the bigger things, such as Hiroshima and Dachau and so on."

Oke: Elements of ridicule and satire are quite prevalent in your work. Moreover, as you have mentioned several times, there exists a persistent spirit of defiance that defines them.

"The alchemist" ridicules the techno-capitalist order and consumerism, questioning the paradox of human technological advancement, where the very innovations we create enslave us: "we prefix their names 'smart': / these engines sit obediently / heeding only to button-clicks. / till they became jinns enslaving / an impetuous century." How does your poetry/creativity respond to the increasing digitization of our lives? Do you see technology as a threat or as an inevitable evolution?

Agbaakin: I find it interesting that technology has evolved as a kind of witness. For instance, when the wife of Wilhelm Conrad Röntgen (the German scientist who discovered radiography) saw a partial skeleton of herself in an X-ray, she exclaimed: "I have seen my death!" I am similarly enchanted by technology, even the ones we are already used to. I remember writing "The Alchemist" in 2016 in a church camp. I was bored and immediately reached for my phone. The normalcy of that instinct struck me. I immediately wrote the poem out of the enchantment. I think good art comes from a place of enchantment, from resisting the normalcy of wonder all around us, whether natural or manufactured. The images of recent lynchings came into focus in the poem. I wondered about the by-standers who take pictures and videos. What kind of boredom or escapism allows someone to ignore the tyranny right in their face? I am still interested in how technology has colonized our instincts. In a pre-modern world, what would I do when I was bored during a sermon? I think it is an important question because technology provides solutions that make us become more self-indulgent, more on the palm. It is futile to think about technology as a threat without grappling with our intimate response to it. What becomes of a palm (that is an iconography of openness and divinization) in the hand of technology. How does the body reconfigure itself in response to technology?

Oke: Outside the frameworks of posthumanism and transhumanism lies the innate exploration of what it means to be human in the quest for self-discovery. Jeremiah, this was a wonderful discussion, thanks for indulging me. To conclude this for now, could you share some details about your current creative endeavors and future trajectory?

Agbaakin: Thank you so much for the conversation. The rigor of our exchange gave me a flashback to our editorial stint at *Africa in Dialogue.* You were always thorough with the interview transcripts. So, thank you, again. Anyway, I am currently working on my poetry collection which was also my MFA thesis. I first dreamt of it and wrote the first version in 2017. It is an enduring obsession for me. I started sending it out seriously last

year after it was shortlisted for the Sillerman First Book Prize in 2020. It came close as a finalist at Acre Books. I will start sending out a revised version of it out again this year. I can tell you that the manuscript has changed a lot and has changed my life! So, I hope it finds a place soon. I am also working on a poem-long collection and a short story collection. I hope to complete all this before my PhD program ends.

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTOR

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