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21st-Century Refugee Writing as a Refraction of World Literature: Rerouting Multicultural Canons

1. Introduction: Multicultural Canons and New Refugee Writing

In times of 21st-century globalisation, critical revision in terms of race and ethnicity continues to be a major principle of canon reform. Few would dispute the “ideal of a multicultural canon” (Marx 2004, 85), even if – or precisely because – the idea of multiculturalism has come under attack. As Paul Gilroy has observed of resurgent nationalism and the so-called war on terror from the 2000s onwards, “[m]ulticultural society appears to have been abandoned at birth” (2005, 1). Despite or because of such a backlash, the debate over immigrant and minority writers is very much alive. Reiterating the case for revisionist expansion, Pulitzer-Prize winner Viet Thanh Nguyen has recently insisted that “[b]ooks by immigrants, foreigners and minorities don't diminish the 'classic' curriculum. They enhance it” (2018). To include underrepresented or previously forgotten perspectives clearly constitutes an ongoing task.

21st-century refugee writing is an obvious candidate for multicultural paradigms of canonisation, and yet it requires extending and rerouting them at the same time. One reason consists in its tenuous connection with any canon or society, and the fact that its primary concern tends to lie with citizenship and human rights (or lack thereof), long before the question of representation can begin to be entertained. Moreover, literary affiliations appear to have become invariably more dispersed in recent accounts of refugee migration than in earlier migrant writing of the post-WWII era, to which the idea of a multicultural society dates back. 21st-century refugee writing is arguably best described in terms of world literature, with the refugee experience as a transnational subject-matter.

The idea of a new, diasporic world literature, widely mooted in postcolonial and Anglophone literary studies, is a major direction for rerouting multicultural canons, as I will suggest in this article.1 In addition, I want to claim a second sense of world literature, which has already started to inform the canonisation of new refugee writing with respect to both its reception and production. This other sense, in which refugee writing is related to world literature, designates a renewed interest in older, existing canons, or the “classic curriculum” (Nguyen 2018). Nguyen’s own collection of short stories, The Refugees (2017), is a case in point. Through different characters and voices, it retells the traumatic journeys of refugees from the Vietnam War and its aftermath to the US. The collection’s title references that particular conflict as much as more general or generic parallels: amongst others, Edith Wharton’s WWI long short story about

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1 See Bhabha: “[P]erhaps we can now suggest that transnational histories of migrants, the colonised, or political refugees – these border and frontier conditions – might be the terrains of world literature” (1994, 12). See also Schulze-Engler (2007) and Young on “a new genre of transnational writing […] written by diasporic authors” (2012, 215).
Belgian refugees coming to London, likewise entitled *The Refugees* (1919), or Hannah Arendt's autobiographical essay "We Refugees" (1943), written in exile during WWII, come to mind. A frequent characteristic in contemporary accounts of refugee migration is taking recourse to predecessor texts and gesturing towards shared ground between divergent fugitive itineraries across time and space. Similarly, on the kind of best-books lists compiled on the internet and elsewhere, readers will find anything from the bible to *The Aneid* and *The Odyssey* that new bodies of refugee writing pick up on.\(^2\) Another important reference, and my key and core example below, concerns Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*, with Chaucer's pilgrims being reimagined as present-day refugees. Conspicuously, Homer's epics, Chaucer and other canonical texts are drawn on to make sense of the present situation, and they are reinterpreted under a current set of issues.

In discussing new refugee writing and its refraction of world literature, I will proceed in two steps and first explore contextual factors of 21st-century globalisation as bearing on shifting paradigms of canonisation.\(^3\) New states of global precarity and increasing levels especially of forced migration clearly pose a challenge, raising the question of how to accommodate the growing body of refugee writing and "contemporary asylum narratives" (cf. Woolley 2014) when ideals of representation or even rights have become elusive. I will then analyse adaptations of Chaucer in contemporary Anglophone works such as *Refugee Tales* (Herd and Pincus 2016; 2018; 2019), an activist project, and Patience Agbabi's *Telling Tales* (2014). With regard to both context and text, I explore the mobilisation of diverse diachronic archives of world literature. However, rerouting multicultural canons in this direction will not mean dissolving them altogether. Apart from its transnational pull and perspective, new refugee writing displays a number of domestic concerns, peculiar to different countries and places of refuge, such as the UK government's so-called 'hostile environment' policy and its practice of indefinite detention. To the extent that contemporary accounts of refugee migration respond to specific immigration regimes, and are conditioned accordingly, they share in the more circumscribed orientation of multicultural canons, as well as in the struggle over representation and visibility.\(^4\)

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\(^2\) See also Patrick Kingsley's best-selling journalistic account *The New Odyssey: The Story of Europe's Refugee Crisis* (2016).

\(^3\) I draw on David Damrosch's definition of "world literature as an elliptical refraction of national literature" (Damrosch 2003, 281) here. This elliptical space is constituted by two foci pertaining to various literary and spatiotemporal contexts -- the original context of national literature and a different one to which works that gain world-literary status circulate. I argue that new refugee writing refracts world literature in a similar way, introducing a focal point of its own as well as a new set of interests by which selected works of an old world literature canon are mobilised.

\(^4\) On the question of a black British canon, Alison Donnell argues for "reading within and across the national frame" (2006, 195) as an ongoing concern alongside transnational perspectives. See also Rupp (2017).
2. Shifting Contexts of Canonisation: Multiculturalism and Immigration Shock

Delineating shifting contexts of canonisation, I take my cue from Paul Lauter, general editor of *The Heath Anthology of American Literature* (Lauter 2012). Currently in its seventh edition, the *Heath* first came out at the end of the 1980s, blazing a trail ever since as arguably the most revisionist anthology to date. In several more recent articles, Lauter has taken stock of this multicultural paradigm of canon reform, contrasting it with new challenges at a time which he refers to as "immigration shock," as a shorthand for the nature and effects of 21st-century globalisation:

> Doing multiculturalism no longer puts one on the cutting edge of teaching literature – though the recovery of lost, marginalized, or repressed texts continues apace. Moreover, I would argue that the multicultural paradigm is being replaced by what I have called "Immigration Shock." (Lauter 2010, 108)

According to Lauter, "the canon revolution has been fought and won" (ibid.), but it now falls short of attending to a situation marked by increasing levels of immigration, economic disparity and terrorist violence in the 21st century. Among scholars of migration, too, it is a widely shared insight that the new millennium has witnessed distinctively different patterns and evermore precarious forms of migration, and that these necessitate an adaptation of conceptual frameworks. How to refer to and designate this new set of circumstances is certainly open to debate, as are loaded metaphors like immigration 'shock' or refugee 'crisis' (Kingsley 2016), especially given the intense level of scrutiny that media coverage as well as public discourses of migration have received. Moreover, while immigration shock is a fairly standard sociological and economic concept, it still appears to be rooted in a perspective of "methodological nationalism" (Bachmann-Medick and Kugele 2018, 1). Assessing the impact of sudden, large-scale immigration on the labour market and the welfare state (framed as immigration 'shock'), the concept continues to focus on domestic concerns within host nations at the receiving end of migration processes.

Whatever the term, however, it is important to note that multicultural canons do not give way entirely in the light of new social circumstances, as Lauter's ongoing concern with marginalised texts makes clear. Rather, the paradigm shift he discerns involves overlapping – if clearly contrasting – contexts and developments of multiculturalism and 21st-century globalisation respectively:

> Multiculturalism focused on access and integration, but these are not the primary issues of globalisation and the immigration it has generated. The issues here are legitimisation, whether one is, and is seen and received as, legal, legitimate, fully a citizen. […] The

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5 See Bachmann-Medick and Kugele: "In a constantly changing world of global migration we must develop new frameworks that allow reflection more specifically upon conditions, laws, borders, and cultural and political encounters, and on exclusions, inclusions, and unequal power relationships in transnational migration processes. […] Today, we face emerging global and interconnected conditions of migration entangled with lives in transnational communities that are infused by insecurities and persecution" (2018, 1-2).
issue is not what constitutes an identity that needs to be respected, but what constitutes a viable political community and offers the possibility of decent work. (Lauter 2009, 12)

As this quotation suggests, the era of immigration shock introduces far more precarious conditions than the framework that multiculturalism operates in. What is at issue here are basic questions of citizenship and legitimacy, which, more often than not, exclude a growing number of asylum seekers, illegal migrants and stateless refugees. The absence of legal status is also the single most important characteristic of literary mediations of the new era of immigration shock. In her study of asylum narratives, Agnes Woolley repeatedly stresses "the ways in which asylum seeking – as both legally precarious and persistently indeterminate – is distinct from the traditional narratives of diasporic accommodation that have historically shaped discourses of migration" (2014, 3). This situation does not render multiculturalism obsolete, but concerns of identity and representation can only begin to be engaged again, as it were, once a viable political community has been established or restored.

Paradoxically speaking, developments of new refugee writing could be said to both follow and predate the post-WWII era of multicultural canon-making. Accounts of 21st-century refugee migration have returned to what Stuart Hall, for instance, described as a fundamental "struggle to come into representation" on the part of black migrant artists in early post-war Britain (Hall 1996 [1988], 442). This was a struggle over "representational and discursive spaces of English society," in which "blacks have typically been the objects, but rarely the subjects, of the practices of representation" (ibid.). Consequently, the "struggle to come into representation was predicated on a critique of the degree of fetishisation, objectification and negative figuration which are so much a feature of the representation of the black subject" (ibid.). Given the omnipresent circulation of xenophobic and dehumanising media images of refugees in the 21st century, the "question of access to the rights of representation" (ibid.; original emphasis) looms as large in black British cultural production in the wake of post-imperial immigration as in new refugee writing in the wake of 21st-century globalisation. In fact, this question has gained renewed urgency regarding the precarious presence of today's asylum seekers in society and the erosion of rights in the era of immigration shock, all of which has suspended the terms and conditions on which multicultural paradigms of canonisation proceed.

In the meantime, and as a consequence of the sociological developments he deals with, Lauter suggests that literary canons and curricula focus on the repercussions of immigration shock, selecting works for what they say about globalisation and its

6 In The Postcolonial Unconscious, Neil Lazarus argues that this latent asymmetrical constellation in practices of representation has led to a "blanket repudiation of representation itself in contemporary theory" (2011, 140). While "[i]t is important to problematise representation" (ibid., 145), Lazarus foregrounds the "strategic negotiation of representation in the corpus of 'postcolonial' literature" (ibid., 115), which is not unlike the role of representation in new refugee writing. In both cases, representation recovers "modes of life, forms of culture, and ways of thinking that have been obliterated, destabilised, or rendered invisible by the systematic operations of power (global, national, local)" (ibid., 141).
discontents, rather than for who they are written by. As a measuring rod and criterion for inclusion he turns to "content" (Lauter 2010, 109), choosing works that either reflect, or provide historical analogues for, new states of global precarity such as they inform refugee migration. Among others, he suggests reading narratives of 19th-century class conflict, driven by capitalism and colonialism, as a precedent of global inequity today, and as a warning reminder to "insure triumph of the 'revolution'" (ibid., 110) and its values. Eventually, this paradigm shift will help to appreciate and reassess multicultural values rather than invalidate them, Lauter stresses.

This critical makeover of multicultural paradigms has been widely received, including in world literature studies, as a field germane to approaches of "methodological transnationalism" (Bachmann-Medick and Kugele 2018, 2) that new forms of global migration as well as practices of canonisation in their wake may be seen to call for. Of course, demands for canon reform are equally pressing in national as in global frameworks, where the idea of a universalistic or Eurocentric world literature canon has long been subjected to critique. On top of accommodating new bodies of diasporic writing, Peter Carravetta has echoed Lauter's call for diachronic inquiry and for reorienting the curriculum in the face of globalisation. Making a case for plural "[c]anon(s) of [w]orld [l]iterature," Carravetta agrees that:

A canon of world literature must reflect on this critical paradigm shift. Perhaps the concerns of identity ought to shift not to difference but to multiplicity, to hybridity, and in more practical terms, given the role of translation as an encounter, to content, to processes of assimilation, and to variable modes of relation. A conceptual and ideological transformation of a world literature canon occurs when, besides the introduction of previously unknown or ignored texts, the texts of the established canon are reinterpreted in view of a different set of issues. (Carravetta 2012, 269)

As if to bear this quotation out, developments of current refugee writing have indeed seen the construction of more diverse canons built on principles of multiplicity and relation and including older established texts. In the process, antagonistic conceptions of the Western or European canon and of some of its central works are being revised. Reconstructing a "relational mnemohistory" of Homer's epics, Astrid Erll argues that "they are often erroneously cast as 'European heritage' or 'foundations of the West'" (Erll 2018, 274). By contrast, she highlights "Near and Middle Eastern, and possibly Egyptian influences on Homer's epics" (ibid., 278), among others, to demonstrate that the latter in part emerged from and continue to circulate well beyond Europe. Thus, "in twentieth-century literary history […] remediations of Homer flourished most in colonial and postcolonial situations" (ibid., 282). In Europe's post-2015 refugee situation, the *Odyssey* arguably serves as an enabling and productive rather than limiting reference, too.

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7 Referring to the concept's use across a wide spectrum of disciplines, including philosophy, sociology and postcolonial studies, Erll defines relationality as "describ[ing] an ongoing connectivity among diverse elements, which creates meaningful structures and at the same time transforms all elements involved" (2018, 278).
A similar relational network has been fleshed out for Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. Candace Barrington and Jonathan Hsy characterise it as "a text – or an assemblage of texts – that simultaneously reflects and constructs an entire world" (2018, 2). They thoroughly extend or suspend Chaucer's role as a national English poet, highlighting Chaucer's extra-European settings and characters as well as his "wide world of cultural influences" (ibid.). Moreover, they emphasise "how pervasively his influences were filtered and reprocessed through layers of translation as they moved around the Mediterranean" (ibid.). From this perspective, the *Canterbury Tales*, like Homer's *Odyssey*, emerges as a highly symbolic and conducive template to inscribe present-day accounts of refugee migration. As these examples also show, new refugee writing can be seen to take a less adversarial approach to the canon than works of postcolonial criticism have tended to suggest. Instead, relational and multidirectional constellations are brought to the fore – constellations which are mutually enabling and convergent rather than competitive, as in Michael Rothberg's concept of 'multidirectional memory.'

To summarise the shifting conditions and contexts of canonisation discussed here, it is worth stressing that multiculturalism and immigration shock constitute two distinct but complementary moments. As the latter comes to replace the former, it does not instigate a clear-cut break, but an adaptation of canon reform. Overall, the trajectories of canonisation involved respond to two distinct moments and challenges – the genesis of post-WWII multicultural society on the one hand and increasing global precarity in the 21st century on the other. In the process, the revisionist politics of multicultural paradigms are opened up to attend to new diasporic traditions of refugee writing as well as to their refraction of existing world literature canons. Concomitantly, criteria for inclusion shift from cultural difference and representation to accommodating a multiplicity of hybrid, relational and multidirectional bodies of work. The best-books lists mentioned earlier, based on a principle of resonance between spatially and temporally distant works, clearly corroborate this trend, just like adaptations of works by Homer and Chaucer.

Proceeding from this rough matrix and periodisation, I will now turn to my case study and explore the role of Chaucer in 21st-century refugee writing. While I have, so far, mainly dealt with the question of anthologies, reading lists, or the curriculum, the next section will explore aspects of canonisation concerning the production of refugee writing. As is well-known, any canon is formed by a multiplicity of factors from across
the literary system. In the case of refugee writing, these include the canon-making projects of activists, community gatekeepers, go-between writers and, not least, the testimony of refugees themselves.

3. Modes of Relation: Chaucer in 21st-Century Refugee Writing

Like the *Odyssey* and the *Aeneid*, Chaucer is a conspicuous reference in current debates as well as in literary mediations of the refugee situation, both within and beyond the Anglophone world. A great number of examples from the past couple of decades attest to the popularity that Chaucer's *œuvre* and the *Canterbury Tales* in particular have gained in a wide variety of contexts. 21st-century refugee writing or asylum narratives generally circumscribe a highly diverse field, including non-fictional genres and other media apart from literature.

The BBC adapted and updated Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* in a six-part series of television dramas as early as 2003. One of the episodes is based on "The Man of Law's Tale," which is fast becoming a quintessential and highly resonant element of Chaucer's medieval storytelling contest for present-day times. The BBC version of "The Man of Law's Tale" features a Nigerian refugee among its modern-day cast of characters, who is found hiding on a boat in Kent and becomes embroiled in a romantic relationship resisted by her lover's family – not unlike in Chaucer's original, in which Constance is washed ashore in the North of England *en route* from the Mediterranean. By casting her mother-in-law and her lover's former partner as Arab and African characters respectively, the BBC version elaborates on Constance's racial diversity. In this and other respects, it is not an example of strict textual "fidelity" (Yager 2007, 58), but still "faithful to the tradition of the Constance legend" (ibid., 57), as a theme already present in Chaucer is enlarged and foregrounded in the latter-day television drama. The BBC adaptation and "Chaucer's narrative may be considered companion pieces, instantiations of the Constance story, resonating with each other in essential ways" (ibid., 58). In a relational constellation, both adaptation and original mutually reflect on each other and undergo change as "each version enriches an understanding of the other" (ibid., 57). Eventually, Chaucer's tale is viewed as a blueprint of cultural diversity and an early example of refugee migration, which is able to address and speak out against racism and xenophobia in today's multi-ethnic Britain.

As for literary adaptations, a major book-length reworking of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* comes in Patience-Agbabi's *Telling Tales* (2014). An "inspired 21st-century Remix of Chaucer's Canterbury Tales" (Agbabi 2014, blurb), Agbabi's...

10 Anthologies and the curriculum constitute an overriding issue in US academic debates, as reflected by Lauter's discussion. However, "apart from the teaching canon there are many others" (Grabes 2011, 313), formed by the collaborative if uncoordinated efforts of writers, editors, and publishers, as well as of critics and literary historians (ibid.).

11 On recent developments of refugee writing see Sandten (2017), Wilson (2017) and Woolley (2014). The latter includes in her definition of asylum narratives the non-fictional, credible account of their reasons to flee – a persuasive 'narrative' of sorts, too – which refugees have to submit as part of their asylum claims.
collection assembles a polyglot party of modern storytelling voices as well as a wide variety of styles from performance poetry to the sonnet in her “cross-cultural Canterbury Tales” (Agbabi 2018). Hailed as a "Canterbury Tales for a multicultural Britain" by one of the reviews reprinted on its cover, Agbabi's rewriting highlights characters and settings in Chaucer that gesture beyond England or Europe, just like the BBC's adaptation. In addition, it is significant that Agbabi reproduces the tales' cross-cultural content also in her fictive cast of storytellers, complete with flamboyant names and far-flung "author biographies" (Agbabi 2014, 115-120). Among others, these include "Dr Kiranjeet Singh," a "plastic surgeon with a passion for poetry" (ibid., 119), "Missy Eglantine," who was "born St Lucia/raised in Lewisham/R&B singer-rapper-poet" (ibid., 116) and "Tim Canon-Yeo," from "Singapore but schooled in the UK," who "resides in Kent and writes a poem a day" (ibid., 115). Thoroughly diversifying what remains a domestic crop of pilgrims and storytelling contestants in Chaucer, Agbabi's speakers travel on a "Routemaster bus" from "Tabard Inn to Canterbury Cathedral," as announced in the collection's "Prologue" (ibid., 2). As "poet pilgrims competing for free picks," they retell "Chaucer's Tales, track by track, here's the remix / from below the belt to the topnotch" (ibid.). Their cross-cultural competition can self-confidently take inspiration from Chaucer's model, as Agbabi's tongue-in-cheek reference in her acknowledgements makes clear: "Finally, I want to thank Geoffrey Chaucer for creating a literary work that defies time and space" (ibid., 124).

Drawing on Chaucer allows for 'telling' tales in more than one sense, to take up the collection's productively ambiguous title Telling Tales. On the one hand, Agbabi's tales are telling in that they reveal and pay homage to a long cross-cultural (pre-)history, dating back as far as Chaucer. On the other hand, they constitute an empowering act of telling tales in the present by speakers who share in the migrant or refugee experience of a character like Constance and who, on top of this (unlike Constance), are even given narrative agency themselves.

Having cross-cultural characters not only appear in, but actually tell her modern-day tales makes Agbabi's collection a veritable 'companion piece' (see Yager 2007, 58) in its own right. Rather than a case of strict textual fidelity, it powerfully extends and transforms Chaucer's original, similar to the BBC's "Man of Law's Tale." In principle, the same is true of Refugee Tales (Herd and Pincus 2016; 2018; 2019) as well, though it might be considered as an even more telling example of 21st-century refugee writing and its canonisation in terms of world literature than either of the two examples thus far explored. For all its multiperspectival structure and imaginary cross-cultural poet pilgrims as extradiegetic storytellers, Agbabi's Telling Tales remains a single-authored text, seeking to trace and carve out a legacy of cross-cultural diversity from within Chaucer. By comparison, Refugee Tales relies on a de facto collaboration between British-resident writers and refugee testimony (to which Agbabi has contributed, too). The stories collected in Refugee Tales are effectively co-produced, further extending cross-cultural multiperspectivity from the level of narrators (as in Agbabi) to the level of authorship. Refugee Tales is based on actual encounters and conversations between refugees and a go-between writer, who then goes on to communicate their experience to a wider reading public. I will elaborate on this constellation of authorship below, but
I want to preface my discussion of *Refugee Tales* by emphasising its intersection with Chaucer as world literature. *Refugee Tales* truly links up with Chaucer's 'global orbits' (Candace and Hsy 2018), constituted not only as a matter of his wide-ranging textual geographies, but more importantly also through the global circulation of appropriations and translations. As a relational companion piece, too, the complex mediation of testimony in *Refugee Tales* is part and parcel of reinscribing Chaucer from elsewhere.

In the process, Chaucer is thoroughly repositioned, as echoed by Marion Turner's recent biography *Chaucer*, tellingly subtitled *A European Life* (2019). In it, Turner rejects a number of conventional associations of Chaucer as "a figure of Englishness" or as "father" of "a national literature" (ibid., 508). Instead, she stresses his European travels and influences, a relational network newly retrieved:

> Chaucer, indeed, has been much resurrected in ever more inventive ways in recent years. No longer entombed and monumental, he is an inspiration for diverse writers around the globe. Rather than thinking about Chaucer in his tomb, I'd like to think about him as the starting point for *Refugee Tales*, a collection published in 2016 that brings together contemporary politics, current writers, and Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. (ibid.)

*Refugee Tales* is an activist project first carried out in 2015, slightly ahead of that year's historical curve of refugee migration into Europe. It consisted not only in recording, but also in performing refugee stories on historic ground. The tales were first read out while walking along the North Downs Way in Kent, which largely coincides with the ancient Pilgrims' Way from London to Canterbury. Annual walks and readings have continued ever since, with online video recordings of various stories adding to the project's narrative archive.

Apart from the publication mentioned by Turner, two more book-length collections of stories have been released since 2016. Having almost built a canon of its own, *Refugee Tales* can be seen to intervene in various textual formations, engaging in a rerouting of canonisation to accommodate accounts of 21st-century refugee migration. In this connection, greater attention is due to new diasporic traditions of world literature, for one thing, with the refugee experience as a transnational theme. Moreover, adapting Chaucer mobilises an existing world literature canon. *Refugee Tales* capitalises on Chaucer's global circulation as well as on wide-ranging text-internal spaces in works like the *Canterbury Tales*. Highlighting itineraries that link Chaucer's pilgrims to elsewhere in the world, *Refugee Tales* retrieves a proto-cosmopolitan vision from its canonical pre-text. Last but not least, Chaucer also represents a more specifically English literary canon, providing a link to the domestic concerns that *Refugee Tales* is motivated by. Facilitated by well-known multi-ethnic as well as mainstream writers in the UK – a "who is who of contemporary progressive British writing in the age of transnational postcolonial globality" (Wiemann 2018, 72) – the project thus moves in the direction of a world literature frame while

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12 See the [*Global Chaucers* project](https://globalchaucers.wordpress.com [accessed 1 July 2020]), a growing online database of adaptations and translations of Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* worldwide since 1945.
simultaneously reflecting back on domestic conditions of immigration. In particular, *Refugee Tales* protests against indefinite immigration detention, a practice unique in Europe, which allows the UK to hold migrants without a time limit. The stories collected are by individuals who have direct experience of this policy. In a physical space that typically excludes refugees, performing their tales opens up a cultural space challenging indefinite detention. Needless to say, this cultural intervention does not amount to actual, real-life change yet. It can only fully unfold its activist potential with a different set of policies in place.

As part of a larger relationality highlighted in the *Canterbury Tales*’ recent reception history, Chaucerian connections in *Refugee Tales* concern its narrative set-up, its investment in language, its meditation on journeying and remapping of geography, and its construction of a new social community. These more specific modes of relation I will single out in my close reading, focusing mainly on the first instalment of *Refugee Tales* while also turning back once more to Agbabi’s *Telling Tales*.

As for *Refugee Tales*, the collection’s complex constellation of telling is signalled by its subtitle, which is worth reproducing in full alongside the main title: *Refugee Tales, as Told to Ali Smith, Patience Agbabi, Abdulrazak Gurnah, Inua Ellams and Many Others* (Herd and Pincus 2016). Both title and subtitle have the same structure in all three volumes (except for differing sets of contributors in the subtitle), thus foregrounding the collection’s status as a multi-authored volume, consisting of co-authored tales. In a complex mediation of refugee testimony, the tales have been told to a go-between writer, such as Ali Smith and Patience Agbabi, in order to be retold and expanded by them in turn. The original storytellers remain unnamed because they were too traumatised or did not want to be identified for fear of reprisal, and so were protected by activists and writers serving as community gatekeepers. *Refugee Tales III* (Herd and Pincus 2019) for the first time includes a number of first-person narratives, written by former detainees themselves. Again, however, their identity is protected, with only their initials, such as "A," "J" or "F," being provided as author names. For the most part, *Refugee Tales* relies on what might be characterised as a heterobiographical rather than autobiographical mode.\(^{13}\)

As in Chaucer, the writers contributing to *Refugee Tales* thus mediate life-stories of others and give expression to what otherwise might not get heard. They perform an important function as interlocutors, witnessing and corroborating the refugees’ experience. This collaborative set-up – while chosen for reasons of gatekeeping, among others – might be criticised for not directly representing subaltern voices. This is a longstanding problem in literatures involving testimony or marginalised subject positions in terms of gender and race.\(^{14}\) Addressing such concerns, Helen Barr emphasises that "*Refugee Tales* is also a physical, bodily realisation of *The Canterbury Tales*" (2019, 105), in which refugees do have a direct, visible presence as part of the project's walks

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13 See Boldrini (2012, 9), who, drawing on Philippe Lejeune’s work, defines heterobiography as a "collaborative autobiograph[y] in which the writer […] speaks of another in the first person," effectively constituting a "collaboration between the two 'I's' involved" (ibid., 10).

14 See Beverly (1989) on problems of representation informing testimonial literature.
and performative readings along the way. Paradoxically, the fact that the refugees' names are textually absent might not be seen to detract from but in fact help to authenticate their accounts: "by signposting their names, the contributing writers make themselves accountable […] for the accuracy of the telling of the story," as Dirk Wiemann (2018, 73) notes. Moreover, he sees the "visible author" as an "identifying device for the average reader" (ibid., 74), enabling the latter to share in the concrete encounters that many stories stage. To this I would add that Refugee Tales not least bespeaks a topical development of canonisation, by which global circuits of refugee writing interact with the project's local activists and authors, as well as with previous experiences of migration and multicultural society as a multidirectional memory. All this feeds into a relational act of Chaucerian storytelling mapped onto a global scale – "re-humanising some of the most vulnerable and demonised people on the planet," as pointed out by an endorsement printed on the collection's cover.

Regarding further modes of relation, it is well known that Chaucer not only painted a multi-faceted portrait of society, but popularised English at a time when sophisticated writing tended to appear in French or Latin. Refugee Tales draws heavily from his role in establishing the vernacular as a literary idiom. It also seeks to develop a new language, away from the dehumanising legal discourse of immigration policy. David Herd's "Prologue" is a case in point. In it, the tales to follow are characterised and signposted as:

- Stories of the new geography
- Stories of arrival
- Of unaccompanied minors
- Of people picked up and detained
- Networks of visitors and friends
- This new language we ask for
- Forming
- Strung out
- Along the North Downs Way. (Herd and Pincus 2016, vii-viii)

The collection's collaborative set-up is crucial to this new language forming. It symbolically uses the writers' craft and the dialogical model of Chaucerian storytelling to help construct these "networks of visitors and friends" in the first place. While it certainly cannot make up for the dim realities of immigration policy, the collection nevertheless launches a powerful intervention and commentary, juxtaposing the dehumanising discourse of indefinite detention with an alternative vision of convivial culture.

As much as on language, the Refugee Tales capitalises on Chaucer's intersection with international geographies and tales of journeying. Several of the project's stories draw on "The Man of Law's Tale" in Chaucer, which has come a long way from being "little appreciated by modern readers" (Yager 2007, 55) and is worth recapitulating in some more detail. Constance, the story's central character, is the emperor's daughter in Rome. She is married off to a Sultan in Syria, but the Sultan's mother has him killed for turning his back on Islam. Brutally widowed, Constance is made to leave Syria, flees
across the Mediterranean and is eventually washed up on English shores. She gets married for a second time, but again to the dismay of her (new) husband's mother. So Constance is displaced yet again and embarks on another perilous journey at sea. Only at the very end, back in Rome, is she reunited with her English husband, the Northumbrian king Alla. Unmistakably, this is a tale that resonates presciently with itineraries of current refugee migration. The fact that "The Man of Law's Tale" circulated across the Mediterranean long before Chaucer drew on it in translation creates an added significance, extending the relational network at play well beyond Chaucer.15

In *Refugee Tales*, Constance is invoked several times, such as in "The Migrant's Tale, as told to Dragan Todorovic." The tale is based on Todorovic's conversation with Aziz, a young political refugee from Syria, who attempted to flee to Europe twice, only to be detained on his arrival in England. In alternating sections, Todorovic retells Aziz's ordeal and constantly interweaves Constance's original story as a prism through which to interpret current events. As for Constance, Todorovic's account remembers: "For days, for years floated this creature across the eastern Mediterranean, and into the Strait of Gibraltar – such was her fate. Often she expected to die" (Herd and Pincus 2016, 7). Today, a similar kind of suffering has violently inscribed itself on Aziz, as Todorovic reports: "He holds his upper arms and rocks back and forth. Slow and steady, waves in the bay. I've seen this same movement, this same posture, in other times and other cultures" (ibid., 4). History repeats itself, with the only redeeming factor that Aziz, similar to Constance, might ultimately hope to be re-joined with his family, his wife and children, whom he has had to leave behind in Syria.

In whichever scenario, refugees like Aziz have little to expect from the law, as other stories in the collection make clear. "The Lawyer's Tale, as told to Stephen Collis" shifts attention from Constance's story to its narrator, the eponymous Man of Law. In a combination of critical commentary and lyrical passages, this time not based on a particular refugee's story, Collis reflects on the Man of Law as a curious blank space in the canonical pre-text: "Chaucer's Man of Law tells us precious little about the law, or himself. […] It is not clear what Constance's story means to him, either personally or professionally" (ibid., 108). The Man of Law is an enigmatic figure and difficult to place indeed, just as legal representation or even basic human rights will be impossible to attain for many present-day refugees in a framework of indefinite detention or hostile environment policies. Chaucer's Man of Law thus becomes symptomatic of a fundamental split between the law and any sense of compassion or moral justice, failing to attend to structures of global precarity and inequality that prompt people to flee their home in the first place. As Collis's tale asserts: "the law sits / a hooded falcon / on whose arm / privilege preys" (ibid., 117). Both Constance and the Man of Law in Chaucer's tale ominously foreshadow the current situation of refugee migration.

"The Man of Law's Tale" also features in Patience Agbabi's *Telling Tales*, in which Constance is reimagined as a refugee from Zimbabwe. Her time in England is retold deliberately from her mother-in-law's point of view, who is pictured as an older woman

15 See Yager (2007, 56) on Chaucer's sources for "The Man of Law's Tale."
from Newcastle. As Agbabi recalls, "I didn't want all the tales to be delivered by sympathetic characters. In fact, writing from a negative viewpoint was ultimately more rewarding because you had to work harder to engage the reader" (2018, 5). In her version of the "The Man of Law's Tale," subtitled "Joined-Up Writing" and performed by one "Memory Anesu Sergeant" as part of Agbabi's imaginary poetry slam, it soon becomes clear that the mother expresses some staunchly racist views in describing Constance:

She wasn't bonny, always overdressed,  
I'd never understand her when she spoke.  
Not that I'm prejudiced, some of my best  
friends are foreign. These days folk are folk  
but then was different: Constance was coloured, brown,  
a name so long you'd sweat to break it down. (Agbabi 2014, 22)

From Constance's poor English to the spurious racist disclaimer "Not that I'm prejudiced," this passage – the sestet of a sonnet – contains a number of familiar stereotypes. The mother-in-law's xenophobia is further thrown into relief by the quite regular, formal style of Agbabi's use of the corona, a sequence of sonnets where every new first line picks up on the previous sonnet's concluding line. Agbabi exploits this formal principle to particular effect, demonstrating psychological repercussions for Constance as a matter of her xenophobic experiences:

Didn't belong, nigh verging on a breakdown  
and Ollie, such a softy. African.  
She'd not talk much, her face a constant frown,  
must have been pity made him take her hand –  
raped, or so she said. We were dead close,  
Ollie and me, until she came, from nowhere:  
whole house smelt of sadza; all his clothes  
designer labels; cut his bonny hair (ibid., 23)

In the (new) first line of this subsequent, third sonnet of the corona, Constance is "nigh verging on a breakdown" (ibid.). This is linked back to her name being "so long you'd sweat to break it down" (ibid., 22), as stated in the second sonnet's concluding line. In other words, Constance's nervous breakdown is linked to racist responses to her very name, to the fact that people refuse to spell and pronounce properly "a name so long you'd sweat to break it down" (ibid.). The third sonnet then elaborates on the mother's account, who generically refers to Constance as "African," objects to her cooking smells, and suspects her of using "Black Magic" (all ibid.).

Significantly, the voices featured in Telling Tales include not only migrants and refugees, but representatives of the host society, too. The same is true of Refugee Tales, where readers get to hear, among others, ""The Migrant's Tale,"" ""The Chaplain's Tale"" or ""The Lorry Driver's Tale,"" all of which are figures who play important roles in the refugee process as well. As in Chaucer, diverse social groups are bound together, working towards a viable community that is not yet established in the political arena: "In creating a space of appearance, and a polity out of the structural model of Chaucer's
Canterbury Tales, The Refugee Tales project reads back into Chaucer's work a community of fellowship and common purpose (Barr 2019, 103). Even Constance's racist mother in "Joined-Up Writing" is part of a multiperspectival community, which Agbabi chooses to stage and contain, including its divisions and tensions. Both Telling Tales and Refugee Tales thus provide a collective and reciprocal account of refugee migration, gesturing towards common effort while pointing up lingering challenges. In both cases, refracting Chaucer's global circulation and afterlife yields important modes of relation, afforded by his work as well as reflecting back on it. As a matter of their geographical scope and polyglot cast, the Canterbury Tales becomes a powerful model and metaphor for these new refugee writings.

4. Conclusion: Global Canons and the Deep History of World Literature

As shown in works like Refugee Tales and Telling Tales, 21st-century refugee writing is indeed engaged in building new canons that are global rather than national in scope. The same is true of the fast-growing body of reading lists and online catalogues, which curate and take stock of texts that explain and help readers get to grips with the current refugee situation. The need for processes of canonisation to respond to urgent global challenges is an insight generally shared.

The resulting canonical formations are clearly relational and multidirectional, navigating various temporal and spatial frames. They are oriented towards the present and future as well as to transnational flows, but simultaneously to past bodies of writing, including extant world literature and multicultural canons. Perhaps most conspicuously, a central element of refugee writing as a new global literature is its refraction of what Jason Frydman calls a far-away, "deep history of world literature" (2012, 233). Such retrospective inquiry may be seen as characteristic of diasporic traditions of world literature at large. As Frydman has noted, diasporic perspectives question the "nation-based, proleptic emphasis of world literature" (ibid.). In its place, they "conjure a literary past marked by […] circulation, translation, and revision" (ibid.). What comes into view is a past always already inflected in terms of world literature, whether through ancient Indian and African epics (ibid.) or through works by Homer, Chaucer and early modern writers.16

Stories and scenes from this far-reaching archive, such as Chaucer's international tableau of travellers, hold an important legitimising function. They provide an instructive historical precedent for social and cultural diversity at a time when, in the present world, the legacy of multicultural reform needs shoring up. In the face of resurgent nationalisms, retrieving Chaucerian connections and a proto-cosmopolitan vista in works like the Canterbury Tales is a highly symbolic move.

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16 See Carravetta "Studies in early modern European literatures have amply demonstrated the heterogeneous, multilayered presence of subjects which embody avant la lettre the condition of hybridity, dotted as they are with mestizos, mulattoes, creoles, and other multiracial, multi-ethnic characters. In a sense, a world literature canon has always existed, though it has not always been visible under the screening protocol of a national or even nationalistic literature" (2012, 269).
Drawing from deep diachronic archives built on resonance and relationality represents a major emerging trend of canonisation today. A pertinent example to this effect is the Longman Anthology of World Literature (Damrosch and Pike 2009), which has already started to engage texts in a dialogue across space as well as time. Rather than individual author listings, it groups works together in what it calls "Perspectives" sections and as "Resonances" between texts, such as Homer's Odyssey, which is paired with Franz Kafka, George Seferis, and Derek Walcott. Such a relational mode of reading no doubt poses a challenge to more straightforward forms of canonisation, but it is clearly conducive to further adapting canon reform in times of globalisation.

Works Cited


