

Spotlight

The newsletter for English Faculty
Alumni



July 2020 | Issue 6

This newsletter is coming from our newly virtual Faculty. We closed the doors to the St Cross building on 24 March 2020, and have since been finding new and creative ways to work with our students until we reopen in Michaelmas Term.

Despite the tumultuous and unpredictable nature of life in a world with COVID-19, we've managed to navigate new technologies which have enabled us to continue teaching and research from afar. Thanks to the support of TORCH (The Oxford Research Centre in the Humanities) we've even managed to host our first ever online [Professor of Poetry lecture with Alice Oswald](#), plus take part in numerous other online events including: [The Social Life of Books](#), [Invalids on the Move](#), and [Shakespeare and the Plague](#) (hosted by the University as part of Oxford at Home). These are all still available to watch (click on the links to be taken to the recordings). We also participated in the University's [Online Open Days](#) at the beginning of July with video recordings by staff and students and live Q&As.

Members of the Faculty have secured funding for projects which offer a response to the repercussions of COVID-19: Professor Sally Shuttleworth for [Contagion Cabaret](#), and Dr Stuart Lee for [Lockdown 2020](#). We were also delighted to be recognised with an Athena Swan Bronze Award in May. The award recognises commitment to the advancement of gender equality in higher education and research institutions.

Black Lives Matter has seen us look to our teaching, syllabi, and recruitment and retention of staff to see how we can positively effect change in our Faculty. The Chair of Faculty Board has set up an anti-racism action group with a team of Faculty members to lead on change and build on existing measures. We have concentrated at the end of this term and over the summer on reviewing our reading lists and syllabi so that they are refreshed ready for teaching and study at the beginning of next academic year. We will be holding more consultations with staff and students early next term to ensure we are doing all we can to promote racial equality at the Faculty.

You can stay up to date with our (mostly online) events on the [Faculty website](#), as well as on social media ([Twitter](#) and [Facebook](#)).

Contents

Spotlight on Research

[Accelerate Hub](#)

[TIDE: Travel, Transculturality, and Identity in England, c. 1550-1700](#)

Spotlight on Staff

[Dr Ushashi Dasgupta](#)

[Dr David Taylor](#)

Spotlight on Students

[Bhagya Casaba Somashekar](#)

[Sophie Gwilt](#)

[Sam Spencer](#)

Spotlight on Alumni

[Patience Agbabi](#)

Spotlight on Research



Accelerate Hub

Though stories are universal and universally of benefit, access to story-telling is not. I am currently involved in a research project that's trying to address this. The [United Kingdom Research and Innovation](#) fund's [Accelerate Hub](#) is working with adolescent groups in Africa with the aim of helping African teenagers achieve their goals and aspirations. Narrative is often an excellent medium for doing so. As has recently been demonstrated under the COVID-19 lockdown, storytelling and related creative activities can provide powerful forms of relief and release in situations of isolation and deprivation.

The Accelerate Hub is led by an interdisciplinary team at Oxford University and the University of Cape Town, with University partners across Africa from South Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo to Lesotho and Tanzania. We actively host adolescent engagement activities in multiple African countries, which have included Sierra Leone, Uganda, Kenya and South Africa to date. These groups have been composed of diverse groups of young people, including young parents, adolescents living with or closely affected by HIV, and

adolescents living in contexts of poverty and precarity. Aware that adolescents are experts in their own lives and contexts, Accelerate Hub has been hard-at-work with teen advisory groups to learn about the issues that are important to them.

Some of these engagement events have been storytelling workshops, the most recent of which, [Narrative and Adolescence](#), was held in Cape Town in March 2020. The workshops have looked at how adolescents across the African continent use storytelling, performance and a range of narrative forms and patterns to understand their worlds. We observed throughout how sharing personal stories helped the young people to manage stress and share anxiety.

The aim was to discover not only how can adolescents exercise agency through story-telling and other kinds of creative practice; but also how institutions, structures and social interventions can help to support their stories in empowering ways.

Asking these questions about storytelling and adolescence required approaches that bridged disciplines. It brought in perspectives from psychiatry to literary studies, public health to postcolonial geography, and economics to medical humanities and philosophy. It also meant listening attentively to the experiences and work of storytellers, performers, and especially adolescent storytellers themselves.

The workshops highlighted that the African teenagers we worked with are not seeing enough of themselves in the stories they access; there is a lack of representation in global popular culture. Although creativity is clearly not correlated to wealth, there remains an inequality in access to certain (often positive) stories, meaning that where you come from affects the narratives you have available to feed your imagination. The teenagers in the workshop saw positive stories as coming from elsewhere. Breakthrough stories in many cases involved an escape from their communities to affluent places abroad.

Experiential psychology provides ample [evidence](#) that “how we see the world” is as important as “how the world is”. So, the activity of storytelling can itself make an impact on how we see the world. It is in itself a postcolonial activity. If individuals are empowered by hearing stories that speak to their own conditions, then there is an excellent case for policy-makers and researchers on Africa to intervene to make more stories and more storytelling facilities available to more young African people.

Professor Elleke Boehmer



TIDE: Travel, Transculturality, and Identity in England, c. 1550 – 1700

An Indian broker, Jadu, enters the employ of the fledgling East India Company, leaving an elusive trail in the archives. A Spanish woman moves to London and creates Catholic relics from the bodies of executed priests. An English scholar travels to Syria and returns to occupy the first Chair of Arabic at Oxford.

The TIDE project (Travel, Transculturality, and Identity in England, 1550 – 1700) is an ERC-funded project that investigates how mobility shaped English perceptions of human difference and belonging in the first age of global expansion. Based in the English Faculty, its interdisciplinary research team works to uncover the range of migration and border-crossing within and beyond

England in this period. That work involves tracing individual lives, such as those mentioned above. It also involves exploring how particular terms and concepts were developed and adapted in attempts to categorise difference. A major output of the project has been the co-written, open access [TIDE: Keywords](#), a series of 36 essays that focus on critical terms around early modern race, mobility, and identity, from 'broker' to 'blackamoor', 'subject' to 'stranger'.

TIDE's investigation of belonging and exclusion, of the status of foreigners in early modern England, and the spaces where such issues were debated – on the stage and in parliament, in printed treatises and coffeehouses – is perhaps more relevant now than ever. A significant part of the project's research involves bringing these conversations about Englishness and identity outside academia. Last year, TIDE collaborated with the Runnymede Trust, the UK's leading think tank on race and diversity, to produce a policy-advisory report on '[Teaching Migration, Belonging, and Empire in Secondary Schools](#)', which was launched in parliament in July 2019. The report has since been cited by policy-makers to highlight the urgency of teaching migration in schools, most recently on 13 June 2020 by the signatories of an open letter published in *The Times* (which also spurred a new hashtag: #TeachMigrationRaceEmpire).

TIDE has worked with a contemporary writer every year since 2016, in partnerships that have taken the project's research to unanticipated new places. The World Museum in Liverpool, for example, will integrate the object poems written by TIDE's 2017/18 visiting writer, Sarah Howe, in the permanent redisplay of their pre-modern Chinese ceramics. TIDE is currently working with the novelist Preti Taneja, whose collaboration with musicians and spoken word poets will showcase responses to TIDE's keywords on an interactive website. Combining the voices of sixteenth and seventeenth-century individuals in the archives with new interpretations by creative writers has allowed the project to explore the slipperiness of belonging, and the enduring poignancy of ideas of home in moments of fracture and upheaval.

Project team:

Professor Nandini Das (Director)

Dr João Vicente Melo, Dr Haig Smith, Dr Lauren Working (Postdoctoral Researchers)

Tom Roberts, Emily Stevenson (Doctoral Researchers)

This project has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (grant agreement No 681884).



Spotlight on Staff



Dr Ushashi Dasgupta

1. *Which book has had the biggest impact on you?*

That's difficult—I know what I've enjoyed, but less sure what's really made an impact. These are the books I wouldn't be able to live without: *Pride and Prejudice*, Zadie Smith's two collections of essays (*Changing My Mind* and *Feel Free*), the poems of Elizabeth Bishop, *Bleak House* (preferably my own copy—not for the slightly naïve annotations, but the ticket-stubs and postcards that fall out whenever I pick it up). When I was very small, it wasn't a book that had the most impact, but one of my dad's stories. He'd tell it in the evenings with minor variations, as we sat squashed in an armchair. It was an early, virtuoso display of what it meant to be a cultural magpie: a Rajput prince and Brontosaurus travelled downriver on the Famous Five's wooden raft and happily coexisted with Merlin (who melted during the denouement, like the Wicked Witch of the West). We also had a massive volume of Dr Seuss—I think that's one of the reasons I have such a soft spot for silliness, though I know he is also very serious. When I was a little older, I often re-read *Charlotte's Web* and *The Trumpet of the Swan* by EB White, as well as EL Konigsburg's *From the Mixed-Up Files of Mrs Basil E. Frankweiler*, I suppose they're all about creativity and finding one's language, in one way or another. There's Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* trilogy, of course. I remember reading the first chapter of *Northern Lights* aloud in the Pink Group at my primary school, and that must've been when I learnt about a place called Oxford. I probably applied to Oxford because of Lyra, and so she's had a tangible impact on the way things have gone.

2. *What do you do in your spare time?*

Lately I've realised I spend a lot of time just staring into space and daydreaming, which is disconcerting.

3. *Describe your ideal day.*

I'd have submitted something that's taken a lot of effort—I love that very specific post-deadline catharsis and sense of freedom. Reading in bed with a strong cup of coffee and a not-quite-respectable breakfast—cake? Weather would be important—somewhere between twenty and twenty-five degrees, sunny with a breeze. Many hours wandering around a city—I don't mind which one. A dim sum lunch with my parents; a hug from my grandma and a chance to hear her singing; leisurely conversation and laughter with a small group of old friends. (I'm noticing that I would need access to a teleportation device to make all of this work.) A trip to the movies in the evening. A large, very low moon.

4. *If you could live anywhere in the world, where would that be?*

In a city by the sea, in oddly-shaped rooms with lots of windows. But now I'll over-think this, because my academic work is about literature and place! I was born just outside Los Angeles to parents from Kolkata, grew up in Hong Kong, and have spent the latest stretch of time in Oxford; if you've been visa-to-visa for a while, you tend to feel your relationship to place is less about choice than about accidents, and being prepared for change. I find everywhere interesting, and could be at home anywhere I ended up.

5. *As a child, what did you want to be when you grew up?*

There were phases when I thought I might be an archaeologist, or someone who studied whales. In hindsight, neither would have suited me. I mainly wanted to write novels. We had a shelf full of scrap paper, which I easily could reach. I'd sit on the floor and fill pages and pages with stories and illustrations, with three staples down the side to make a book. I would also attempt to sell my 'art' to my parents.

6. *Who had the greatest influence on you during your childhood?*

My parents.

7. *Who were your childhood heroes?*

If I'm entirely honest, the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles. (We got a strange mix of TV feeds. Along with the local soaps and dramas, we had the 1995 *Pride and Prejudice* and *The Animals of Farthing Wood* from the UK—I mourned the death of some cartoon hedgehogs about two decades before I actually saw a real one—and *Jem and the Holograms* from the States, which is now very retro.)

8. *What teacher had the greatest impact on you?*

My fantastic A Level English teachers, Mr Turver and Mr Wheeler, who gave us a sense of what university classes might be like. We read Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace* with Mr Wheeler, and that led to so many conversations about gender, class, and settler colonialism. It's very exciting to teach the same novel in my own tutorials now. Mr Turver introduced us to literary theory, and I found myself suddenly thinking in different ways. He also lent me a copy of Vishal Bhardwaj's *Omkara* when we were studying *Othello*, which was fascinating for all kinds of reasons.

9. *Do you have pets?*

Not at the moment—but after many years living with comical and splashily affectionate golden retrievers, and a recent dream in which I adopted a greyhound, I hope that'll change.

10. *Were you popular as a teenager?*

No! I was too shy (and well-behaved) to be popular!

11. *What is your favourite music?*

Anything by Joni Mitchell. I'm not very original or discerning when it comes to music, and rely on other people to recommend things to me. When I'm writing and need a boost, I listen to Queen or Lady Gaga.

12. *If you could have dinner with five famous people from history, who would they be?*

I'm not bothered about meeting Byron, but would love to bring his dog, Boatswain, back to life. He could lie under the table and slobber on everyone's feet. I think I'm most curious about people who weren't famous, and to hear what they might tell me—so, five people, chosen at random, from across the span of Hong Kong's history.

13. *Describe yourself in five words.*

Dickensians can't stick to five words.

14. *How would your friends describe you?*

'Pixellated' (given how much of our human contact is taking place over the Internet at the moment).

15. *What do you like most about your job? What do you like least?*

My mentors and colleagues, going to the Bod, and working with my wonderful students—which can be like magic. It's a very great privilege to have this job. What I least enjoy—well, that point in the research process when you feel as if you're the stupidest person alive.

16. *Why are we here?*

Why do *you* think we're here? (Throwing the question back has surely got to be sound pedagogical practice... hasn't it...?)

17. *If you weren't a member of the English Faculty, what would you be?*

The sobering answer is that I'd most likely be unemployed. I can imagine an alternate reality in which I end up as a real estate agent, get swept up in the sheer romance of matching homes to people, but have no talent for securing an actual transaction.

Ushashi is the Jonathan and Julia Aisbitt Fellow in English at Pembroke College, where she teaches literature from 1760 to the present day. Her first book, *Charles Dickens and the Properties of Fiction: The Lodger World*, was published in May this year.



Dr David Taylor

1. *Which book has had the biggest impact on you?*

Can I give you two? The first is Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*. I read it as a teenager – I think I was 16 – while on a family holiday and I was utterly blown away by it. Overnight, it changed the way I thought about storytelling, history, and character. For me, it'll always be a summer book, a book that *is* summer. The second is T. J. Clark's *The Sight of Death*, which I read about ten years ago. In it, Clark revisits the same two paintings of Nicholas Poussin day after day, recording on each occasion what he sees, whether for the first time or in a new way. It's a book that concerns the nature of attention and the words we use to describe images, and it's profoundly shaped my thinking.

2. *What do you do in your spare time?*

I'm a lifelong Man Utd fan and watch a lot of football. "Not football again, Daddy", as my four-year-old daughter is fond of saying. I also love going to the theatre, and to art galleries and museums. But, to be honest, thanks to the aforementioned four-year-old, I don't have much spare time these days!

3. *Describe your ideal day.*

A long lie in. Pancakes with strawberries and maple syrup for breakfast. A walk in the countryside (it's a warm summer's day, with a slight breeze) followed by a picnic lunch with friends. Then reading – and napping – in the shade of a tree through the afternoon. Finally, a show (or perhaps a seat at the Theatre of Dreams!) in the evening.

4. *If you could live anywhere in the world, where would that be?*

For the weather, southern California. For the art, Florence. But I might have to be boring and say London – e.g. Bloomsbury – because there'd be so much culture on my doorstep and I'd be close to friends and family.

5. *As a child, what did you want to be when you grew up?*

An astronaut. I loved the idea of exploring space. But I could never be an astronaut: I'm a terrible coward.

6. *Who were your childhood heroes?*

Eric Cantona. The Ghostbusters.

7. *What teacher had the greatest impact on you?*

Dot Emm, who taught me English Lit at GCSE and then Theatre Studies at A-level. She took us to see so many wonderful shows. Shakespeare, Harold Pinter, Caryl Churchill, Conor McPherson, Mark Ravenhill, Foresight Theatre. I dedicated my first book to Dot because I owe my love of theatre to her – and my understanding that plays are for the stage, not the page.

8. *Do you have pets?*

No. I'm afraid I'm not an animal person at all.

9. *Were you popular as a teenager?*

No. To be honest, until sixth form I didn't even like school. I did have friends but I found the complex social dynamics of it all – especially the expectation (from peers) that boys had to show themselves "men" – intensely stressful. I tried to keep my head down and avoid attracting attention. In that, I was largely successful.

10. *What is your favourite music?*

If we're talking classical, Shostakovich and Vaughan Williams are up there, but above all I love choral music by the likes of Tallis and Byrd. If we're talking popular, I'm a fan of the Australian synth-pop band Cut Copy. And I don't mind a bit of the Spice Girls.

11. *If you could have dinner with five famous people from history, who would they be?*

Rembrandt. Aphra Behn. Ignatius Sancho. James Gillray. George Eliot. But ask me tomorrow and I'll give you a different five!

12. *Tell us an unusual fact about yourself.*

I was once an extra in a Hollywood movie.

13. *How would your friends describe you?*

They'd say I have a very sweet tooth. I once hosted a "custard party". I provided the custard, friends brought the puddings. Win.

14. *What do you like most about your job? What do you like least?*

Like: That I'm still a student: reading, exploring, and writing about the things that interest me. And that I get to teach young people who are full of ideas and determined to change the world. God knows, it needs to change.

Dislike: That most of my family really don't have a clue what I do. They're convinced I spend most of my life "on holiday".

15. *Why are we here?*

I'm definitely the wrong person to ask. Try my four-year-old.

16. *If you weren't a member of the English Faculty, what would you be?*

I'd like to say a Premier League footballer but, as my former five-a-side teammates will tell you, my footballing skills are limited at best.

David Taylor is associate professor of English Literature, specializing in the literature and culture of the eighteenth century. He's the author of *Theatres of Opposition: Empire, Revolution, and Richard Brinsley*

Sheridan (Oxford, 2012) and *The Politics of Parody: A Literary History of Caricature, 1760-1830* (Yale, 2018). He's currently completing an edition of the plays of Joseph Addison as well as beginning work on a book that explores how concepts and practices of spectacle negotiate the relationship between text and image.

Spotlight on Students



Bhagya Casaba Somashekar

I joined the Faculty of English as a DPhil candidate in 2016. My doctoral dissertation examines the under-scrutinised corpus of Indian writings in English which depicts the Emergency in India (declared by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in 1975). A tumultuous period in postcolonial Indian history, the period has been well-documented in memoirs, biographies and political non-fiction. However, genres like novels and political cartoons, too, have represented the intricacies of life during the Emergency, but received little scholarly attention. In my dissertation, I bring together an inter-genre ensemble of works on the Emergency, including novels, political cartoons, long graphic narratives, and theatre.

Before starting my DPhil, I completed an MA and an MPhil at the Centre for English studies at Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) in New Delhi. The keen attention paid to the thriving crop of Anglophone writing from India in many of the courses I took during my stay at JNU, and the vibrant political culture in the university, fortuitously joined forces in stirring my interest in a subject which lies at the intersection of history, politics and literature. Though I had earlier received a BA in Psychology, English and Journalism from Mount Carmel College, Bangalore, and initially thought I would want to pursue a career in print journalism, I found the few small stints I did at news-desks over many summers rather uninspiring. In contrast, I found myself gripped by the imaginative hold of the worlds inaugurated within literary texts. As my MA degree was not tied to a specific period in English literary history, I was able to research a variety of subjects, including flanerier in the poetry of Bombay modernists in the 1960s, cyborg hypermasculinity and posthumanism in twentieth century science fiction, translation studies, and gender and sexuality in world cinema. In my MPhil dissertation, I brought together my long-standing interest in urban writings from the global south, my love for the city of Delhi, and a burgeoning curiosity in the philosophy of temporality to produce a dissertation on how the politics of time plays out within representations of Delhi in Indian writings in English.

Though I dedicated the bulk of my time at Oxford to writing my dissertation, as someone who had taught very little before arriving here, the Faculty's many teaching programmes proved invaluable in helping me rest my worries regarding my pedagogical acumen even as I constantly wondered if a career in research and teaching was really for me. As a graduate teaching assistant and tutor to visiting students, I designed and taught courses on postcolonial and world literature, South Asian writings, statelessness and literature, and modernist writings, among others. I have also benefitted from the wide-ranging roster of exchange programmes at Oxford: in June 2019, I was given a generous grant by Merton College to attend the School of Criticism and Theory at Cornell University, where I spent an intense and intellectually-rich summer.

A profile of my academic life at Oxford would be incomplete without mentioning the Postcolonial Writing and Theory seminar at the Faculty of English.

Convened by Prof. Ankhi Mukherjee and Prof. Elleke Boehmer, the seminar enabled me to work closely with numerous like-minded scholars who share my passion for fostering an inclusive academic culture in higher education. In keeping with the same goals, I also worked as the MCR BAME officer at Merton College between April 2019-March 2020. Amidst fine-tuning my scholarly interests in postcolonial and world literatures in my academic work in the future, I hope to continue working on improving access for diverse and under-represented students within academic spaces.

*[Bhagya Casaba Somashekar](#) is a fourth-year DPhil candidate in English. Her near-complete doctoral dissertation is titled “Tropes of Exception: Representations of the Emergency in Indian Writings in English.” Her academic writing has appeared in the *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, *Oxford Research in English*, and *Queen’s Political Review*. She was awarded the PSA/JPW postgraduate essay prize in 2019.*



Sophie Gwilt

My first year experience studying English is strangely encapsulated by one of my favourite texts that I encountered this year: Exeter Riddle 23 ('Bow'). Beginning with the declaration '[w]ob is my name', this riddle, in revealing the identity of its riddling object in the very first word, albeit backwards, explores not what the riddling object is but rather how this object, a bow, came to be. Similarly, whilst at the beginning of Michaelmas I knew that I was an English student at Oxford University, I was yet to find out just *how* to be one.

This process began with battling bouts of imposter syndrome. I left my first tutorial filled with self-doubt, questioning whether I really deserved my place amongst such talented people. But, I gradually got into the swing of things and, to my surprise, found that I enjoyed thinking aloud during discussions just as much as, if not more than, writing down my thoughts in an essay. My way of thinking has also changed as I came to realise that in analysing texts, I was just as much analysing myself and my stance on the beliefs I encountered. The thing I love most about studying English is being continually encouraged to form my own opinions and original ideas, no matter how unusual, as this gives me fresh ways of looking at the world and positioning myself within it.

Arriving back in Oxford at the beginning of Hillary just felt *right*. I had missed all the people and the city itself so much more than I ever thought I would. Yet, as I became more familiar with the degree side of things, a small voice at the back of my mind began to question whether I was doing enough outside of academics. This is something I am still getting used to: being at Oxford means being surrounded by brilliant people doing so many brilliant things. I would love to be a part of more societies and events separate from my degree next year.

Trinity presented new challenges. As a massive over-thinker, I was really unsettled by the uncertainty of how the term would play out. However, I was in a very fortunate position, able to isolate with family, and this situation brought with it new opportunities that otherwise would not have been presented. I was given the chance to write a mini dissertation and I chose to write about

murderesses in Victorian sensation fiction, a genre that I had never explored before and one that I have completely fallen in love with. In completing this project, I realised just how many resources had been made available online. Even still, I have missed the Radcliffe Camera so much! Studying in a round space is magical and, as strange as it sounds, I feel much less trapped with my thoughts when working there. I hope I will be able to reclaim my favourite seat next year.



Sam Spencer

Getting my acceptance letter to study English at Mansfield College was perhaps the most incredible thing to happen in my life. But it certainly didn't come easily. I remember, in a class discussion about our road to Oxford, I inadvertently worried my tutor by comparing my A Level experience to that of the drummer in *Whiplash*. But arriving at the start of Michaelmas term, at a place I had worked hard to get to, at a place that had, to me, become more symbolic than just the next step in my education, I felt the epic arrival of Daenerys Targaryen landing at Dragonstone. What appealed to me about Oxford was not just the promise of literature from 650 to the present day, but

absorbing it all in an environment with the pursuit of knowledge and academic intrigue in its foundations.

Smash cut to Trinity term and I'm back on the Wirral and I'm wishing I could give this series a miss and dip back in when it's good again.

No longer can I hunt down books two floors below the Rad Cam, meet with classmates to organise our thoughts on the week's reading, or huddle in a panic before tutes, under-slept and over-caffeinated. Now, all the people and places that made my first two terms a tangible reality are in a strange "somewhere" place that I can't see or physically interact with. It feels as though, if I switched off my phone and laptop, blackened all screens, English Language and Literature at Oxford would no longer exist.

What has made recent months even more absurd is that, despite my life being predominantly contained within the four walls of my bedroom, it appears as if the entirety of the real world and all global events have been compressed into this space. In such a small space are crammed Black Lives Matter, J. K. Rowling, anti-vaxxers, All Lives Matter, Yemen, ICE, Liz Truss, Rhodes, Carson, Churchill, and Trump – it's one hell of a party. With all this surreal compression and distortion of geography and psychology, I've become very aware of what the modernists were getting at.

My studies have then become an important through-line that create purpose and tangible reality to this strange world in lockdown. Although so much of Oxford now exists solely on the other side of a screen, I have found some solace in the physical existence of my notes and books. They are a reminder that I still have something, *something*, to do and to persevere with and to work at. In my 1m² workspace, stretch my right leg and I kick *Jane Eyre*, the left and it's *Orlando*. Even though everything feels a little less real, I can look at the stacks of novels and notes that I have amalgamated over the past few months and feel content that this year did mean and count towards *something*. I can

point to them and say, *That – that there – that is what I have managed to achieve.* And, at this strange moment, that means a lot.

Spotlight on Alumni



Patience Agbabi

Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* made me the poet and novelist I am today. I attended Eirias High School in Colwyn Bay, North Wales. By A Level, I was already a poetry aficionado but simultaneously hearing, reading and mouthing the opening lines of the *General Prologue* expanded my world—the musicality and muscularity of Middle English with its pronounced final -e, the language both familiar and alien. Then we studied *The Pardoner's Tale*. The dizzying range of registers from the Latin refrain to the cursing, the astute characterisation and humour contrasting with the strong moral message, thrilled me. Poetry could do everything a novel could and more. It was three-dimensional—oral-aural-visual.

My excellent English teacher, Keith Toy, set us homework in creative

translation. Write a character sketch in the prosody and tone of Chaucer. I received my only A in two years (he was a hard taskmaster!). That inspired me to write a series of character sketches based on mods, rockers and new romantics in the local area.

I arrived for my interview at Pembroke College armed with my 'General Prologue to the Colwyn Bay Tales'. Three years' later, I would take the 'Chaucer and/or Langland' option paper, enjoying the opportunity to study Chaucer's complete works. In the first year, I relished learning Anglo-Saxon, enjoying the grittiness of the language, the robustness of kennings, the percussive punch of alliteration. I agonised whether to take Course 2 but in spite of my love of language, I was no linguist so opted instead to broaden my literary knowledge across the ages. Later, I appreciated the Lake Poets, particularly attracted to Wordsworth's 'language really spoken by men' and Coleridge's supernatural poems. But my fondest memory? Withdrawing audiocassettes from the English Faculty Library and noting the previous borrowing stamps were a decade earlier, in the 1970s! Surely a poem was made to both 'herkne' and 'rede'?

On leaving Oxford, I attended Apples and Snakes performance poetry events in Covent Garden. It was a vibrant, young scene where poets delivered their work from memory. I found my tribe. I have always written in rhyme, the perfect mnemonic tool and I had the ability to effortlessly learn my own poems. I gradually managed to make a living as a 'performance poet'. But I always took issue with the umbrella term which did not adequately describe the richness of the scene. There were punk poets, rap poets, dub poets, stand-up poets, surreal poets: half of us paid equal attention to the page and stage. My second collection, (*Transformatrix*, 2000), began with a freeform rap and ended with a sonnet, an attempt to bridge the gap between the literary and the performative. It included an early version of the Wife of Bath's Prologue. *Transformatrix* led me to be nominated for the Next Generation Poets list in 2004.

In 2002 I obtained an MA in Creative Writing from the University of Sussex and subsequently lectured in Creative Writing at Cardiff, Greenwich and Kent Universities till 2004. I have been Fellow in Creative Writing at Oxford Brookes University since 2008. When I teach, I share my appreciation of traditional poetic forms like the sonnet and the sestina and my favourite, the specular, where the second half of the poem exactly mirrors the first half, in reverse order. The visual repetition is further enhanced by the aural echo. Chaucer's influence persists just beneath the surface: *herkne...and rede*.

In 2012, as a poet who had lectured at the University of Kent, I was invited to be Canterbury Laureate. I applied for Arts Council funding and wrote *Telling Tales*, my 21st century retelling of all of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. I was particularly interested in translating his range of vernacular to contemporary, multicultural Britain whilst simultaneously celebrating his couplet and the Troilus stanza, *rime royale*. I also redressed the gender balance. The book was shortlisted for the Ted Hughes Award for New Work in Poetry 2014 and Wales Book of the Year 2015. I was subsequently invited to collaborate on a poem for the Refugee Tales project, giving voice to the voiceless and have been a supporter ever since.

Reworking Chaucer, inhabiting a range of registers in strict poetic forms, gave me the confidence to write a novel. I aimed to represent the voice of a 12-year-old autistic girl and her neurodiverse friends. My debut novel, *The Infinite*, began as a Creative Writing PhD proposal for an adult text, was submitted to my publisher as Young Adult and was published this April for 8 to 12 year olds. (I would argue it is suitable for 8 to ∞). I never did the PhD. Translating Chaucer necessitated some linguistic time travel: *The Infinite* has time-travel as a central motif. Its heroine, Elle, is obsessed with words, 'the sound and shape of them and how they feel on my tongue.' I suspect Chaucer would approve.

Stay in touch

We love to hear about what our alumni have been doing. If you'd like to feature in a future issue of the Spotlight newsletter, please do get in touch with us at comms@ell.ox.ac.uk.
