

Mad Poetics and the Vortex of Vexation (A Poetic Dialogue with Ndubuisi Martins)

Tolulope Oke,
University of Groningen, the Netherlands

Evocative and invocative, Martins' body of work embodies what I have described as mad poetics: a relentless poetic pursuit of meaning, marked by unyielding fury, intellectual restlessness, and a desire for purgation. His poems are not quiet reflections; they are ruptures that charge readers to and through the vortex of social and existential vexations. Raw and often jarring, his language resists ease. His poems are characterized by a song-like temper, not only in their cadence, but in the way they align melody and meaning. In the response-and-call symphony of his work, one encounters a staccato of chants and refrains that conjure buried griefs, communal agonies, and personal reckonings. Martins' poetics thrive on entanglement: between the unconscious and the conscious, the aesthetic and the political, the intimate and the historical. His emerging theory of the *signifying chameleon*¹ captures this liminality, accounting for the porous boundaries between intention and inspiration. Some poems, he suggests, arrive fully formed from the unconscious; others are consciously moulded in response to sociopolitical stimuli. And this is central to his poetic practice. Whether confronting political betrayal, ecological devastation, or the fatigue of hope in the face of Nigerian governance, Martins' poems are undergirded by a theory of social answerability. He does not write for performance or abstraction, but as a mode of reckoning with the crises that define his world. Even in their severity, his poems are often punctuated by deliberate codas which are closures that do not offer resolution but leave behind an aftertaste of defiance. This dialogue draws from his collections: *One Call, Many Answers* (2017,) *Answers through the Bramble* (2021,) and *The Harmony of Lost Things* (2023). Conducted as an extended online exchange over several weeks beginning in January 2025, our conversation explores the aesthetic, political, and philosophical underpinnings of his work.

Tolulope Oke: I am grateful we are doing this because my relationship with you is perhaps one of those I have taken for granted. I mean, we've somehow always been around one another, from the University of Ibadan, yet didn't make much of a connection until some five to six years ago. It is perhaps one of the profound lessons I've learned, to take every moment with grace and live with more agency. And one of the beauties of poetry is its enduring truth. I revisited my blurb to your *Answers through the Bramble*, and even before returning to the poems, I could sense the rush I felt while reading them and writing those words. The intensity of your poems came to live again.

Ndubuisi Martins: Yes, the University of Ibadan is that cultural and creative firehouse, central to knowledge, unfathomable imaginative factory, forging kindred spirits beyond the ethnicization of friendship. One important event that pleases a creative is reception. I've admired your work, critical perspectives, and yes, the blurb for *Answers through the Bramble* doesn't look rushed if you revisit again and again; maybe the rush is in the wave of idea and meaning you encountered when I emailed you the manuscript and you produced your thought with a speed of lightning. You hit your usual element, that critical eye, which I find in the *Lunaris Review* that you curate with some other fine minds, churning out impressive issue after issue, and to make it even fit in your profile, noiselessly, makes it more interesting. And your work for many years now has revolved around some remarkable quality, so that it's hard to think of you of as a trivial person. I'm so happy that, away from routines of critical answerability, poetry and doing purely academic work the many years I have known you, you sat with me to talk about my work beyond the acclaim you accorded my work. Thank you so much for thinking about my poetry, particularly without the *padi padi* gloss.

Tolulope: I would like to start from your self-description as a poet and critic. What do these two identities mean to you? Would you say it is crucial for every creative to be equally critical and vice versa? This seems to be the thrust of your poem "And Our City is Bereft of Thinkers."

Ndubuisi: A challenging politics of identity you've broached there. Might be that I thought of myself as a potential poet even before writing my first poem. And, also, the label "critic" came to me even before I wrote my first essay on literature in secondary school and university. Both identities—poet and critic—are fused for me, in that they're circled into social answerability, not just a mere performative act, which attends to both devotions. This social answerability for me is the mother-call for writing to reflect on my world, and like the chameleon, to take the shape of the subject-world. I like to bare my mind on the subjects, which reveal themselves to me in some poetry and critical dialogue. If Osundare notes that the writer is a *righter*², in his monograph, I believe that separating assuming a poet without being a critic is perhaps, writing for the gallery, for art without its act.

Tolulope: Indeed, I agree to an extent. However, I also wonder if art should sometimes exist beyond the weight of ideological consciousness or the societal imperatives often imposed on it, call it non-conceptual, abstract or playful art. In essence, art for the sake of being, free from the obligation of *righting* society or serving a higher purpose. Do you think this is too anti-essentialist?

Ndubuisi: Art can exist the way it so chooses outside the ideological firepower and be useful, but how useful would it be to African realities would be the question. Can the African writer avoid the "big occasion"

for pure aestheticism and writings of Wordsworthian weight that itself feeds on the Romantic ideology? I understand that African polity needs the kinds of writers that privilege *righters* and if this is how it behoves anti-essentialism, for me, I'd have no fuss with it.

Tolulope: Your poems carry a song-like temper, not just for their cadence but their soulful blend of melody and meaning. This is evident in the titles of your collections and individual poems. In the response-and-call symphony of your poems, one often encounters a staccato of chants that forcefully summon the tensions heralded within. This is especially evident in "Tide of Answers":

Let the wind
Let the pipe
Let the windpipe come
Through hazels, hearths through
clanks, martial music
of new hyenas' race
for tide of answers...

The poetic persona itself seems to summon answers, asking for some divine possession, as reflected in the poem's closing line: "Let me be the tide of answers." How do you view these invocations in your poetry?

Ndubuisi: I think my unconscious currents pick poetry as song, and to give credence to this idea, some very brilliant critics, like Romanus Egudu, would not think much of poetry that has little or nothing to do with music. But, for me, poetry is expressive, also as singing is. More than that, the inquisitional method becomes as important as the melodic unconscious in my poetry. If my poetry picks on the quotidian and the political answering becomes as insistent as music. For that reason, it's entangled with a search, in the throes of inquisition, not just answers. I think of questions in the mould of answers, layered answers, perhaps in the trope of songs, in the cloak of answers.

Tolulope: Yes, there is always that intricacy. Like Chinua Ezenwa-Ohaeto's, your poems are multilayered, but unlike his accessible style, yours often lean toward obscurantism. Your work seamlessly blends the existential and the social. In "We Go Bald," the poem reflects on the dissipation of time while critiquing the herdsman terror in Nigeria. The coda reads: "But if you do not own a herd, your head must be bald." How do you navigate these dimensions, and what drives your poetic negotiation of them?

Ndubuisi: You made a fine observation about my poetry being layered. Well, I don't quite agree to the obscurantist charge. Elsewhere, Carl Terver hinted at the same thing, but Ifesinachi Nwadike saw a marriage of two styles, the deeply layered and the simple or prosaic. Bartholomew Akpah and Kosiso Gabriel Okonkwo chose to see me in my social current. No one seems to have keenly

observed that my subject orients my style and that I allow the poems write themselves through me as the medium. The mood of my work shows through in my style, and this style is called upon by the individual poem insisting on how it wants to come to the reader. So, when I write layered poems, these poems insist on the way they should be written, and I try not to over-edit many of them. The way I write my poems reflects in my theory of poetry where, for instance, I think of poetry as an unconscious and conscious act. When poetry comes to me, overpowers my deliberateness in a forceful way, so that legislating its style is impossible and pointless, I'm merely its medium and I can't think too much about its style and the reader. This is the unconscious act. Again, there are times I'd want to write poems because I know I have the gifts of language and style. I write about a subject and choose its story and style. This second type and the first operate on contexts that produce them. This is the beginning of what I'm doing in my doctoral work as "the signifying chameleon," that's the entanglements of the unconscious and the conscious acts freely producing poetry that shows the workings of our mind and the world.

Tolulope: On the currents, in "A song too hard to pluck," there is a confrontation of hope as a "timeless currency." It explores how hope degenerates into hopelessness across generations:

Hope leaves a deluge of pain in its repeated
Flashpoints, till what remains becomes dry
Uncultivable seeds.

While this has existential undertones, there is an important political dimension, especially when reflecting on Nigeria's presidential elections in 1993 with MKO Abiola and in 2023 with Bola Ahmed Tinubu. Both moments were framed as moments of transformative governance. However, one is remembered as a lost opportunity, and the other for its inability to transcend the guises of Nigeria's political elites. In your poem "Now Many Have Forgotten to Laugh or Cry," the existential concern deepens. I know you to be politically conscious, but how does this sensibility intersect with and inform your poetics?

Ndubuisi: Something I don't deny is the obvious political dimension of my work. I find that hope is naturally positive, as humans depend on it to confront and celebrate life's trials and triumphs, but politicians generally trope on the word in ways that make it a depressive term to the long-suffering Nigerians, who have never realized that each political dispensation taps on that rhetoric to build castles in the air. Nigerians are naturally hopeful even in times of hopelessness. To ring hope on their sky like something positive, particularly when it comes from politicians, is a fraud. So, I try to contextualize how hope is depressive when engaging with the context of Nigerian politics and politicians. Nothing these hyenas say or do produces anything in the direction of hope. So, perhaps, I have not used the regular semantics of hope as understood. My poetics picks on the kind of hope that reacts to the Nigerian politicians' invention of hope, and this is almost too

routine for them. As we see in the current dispensation that hope means more taxes, hunger, and deprivation for an uncertain future. It means hope is timeless for those who only come to feed fat on the commonwealth. Wait for it, the next dispensation harps on the hope slogan and makes masses groan as usual. I don't understand the elasticity of the hope that exists in Nigeria.

Tolulope: On the externalizing of the existential in your poems, “Finding Life Again” stands out. There, the poetic persona jolts in, through and out of living, self-awareness and renewal. What considerations or intents inform your exploration of the existential, and why are these concerns important to you?

Ndubuisi: Poetry is first and foremost dialogic, and I don't suppose that, here, dialogue is only rooted within the speaker and the listener. It is more intricately related to the extant realities. This sense of the dialogic means that my poetry, even if it draws on call and answer, engages the probing of an unanswering world that I hope to fully understand by reflecting on it on the weird idea that, in such mode, radio silence is another way to generate some interpretation. Why? You ask questions of the world: it doesn't have a relatable agency, but your experiences are expressive enough to provide you more answers hedged in brambles. “Finding Life Again” opens me up to the reality of an obtuse life of trying to know and coming short as it so happens in this space.

Tolulope: I strongly believe that your poetry's most outstanding aesthetics are their raw, evocative and jarring imageries. In “A Rousing Call,” we are informed “I am masked for the ritual of jarring songs.” In “We Go Bald,” it reads:

Herdsmen come for grass, but take women and farms,
Burning what grasses the grazing herd crave.

And in “Answers through the Bramble”:

The lungs will wake in the thorns of scars.
The sun will pierce through the dark clouds.
A song gathers in this wind-froth pipe,
Waiting for birth and rebirths.

What is your creative process like, particularly in crafting these striking images?

Ndubuisi: Poetry is something I hardly set about writing; it calls me, and I answer. When I sometimes call it, answers come. So, we return to the unconscious and conscious acts as deeply implicated in my creative process. The images come unconsciously and consciously to me. I haven't been in many situations where I search tropes to answer the prompts of any subject I engage with. When poetry comes to me unconsciously, I allow my Poetry Acquisition Device (PAD) to

suggest images that distil the experience. At the times I set out to ground a particular experience, I trap it with associative images, perhaps what Nelson Fashina, in the critical introduction to my first collection, calls “formism.” He similarly observed the virtuosity of images in my poetry. I’m grateful for those kind words, but I rarely attribute such readings of my work as things that proceed from my poetic genius. These things come to me, or I go to them, even though I also sometimes trap the trips from reflections on the nature of the subject I engage with in my poetry.

Tolulope: In the pre-word to your first collection, you note how Nigeria gravitates everyone, “and particularly the creative mind, towards the vortex of vexation.” James Baldwin similarly remarked, “to be relatively conscious is to be in a rage almost all the time.” Hence, the staccato, the jarring imageries, the calls and responses all swirling the reader towards the critical consciousness that pervade your poetics, which is first the reflection of socio-political ills and, then, most importantly, purging the society off its menace, and the renditions are not in any way subtle nor compromising, like in “Seven-Point-Agenda” and “The Clock that Cringes . . .”. In “A Rousing Call,” the third stanza reads:

Take this iron bell
Tell the farting fathers
That ruins roll around their lecherous heads
If business as usual is still the anthem.
Tell all who slaughter the poor
And peel their barns for the fattest tubers
That the storm without rain awaits them
To wrench the rots and spare no traitor.

How do you perceive the creative’s role as the conscience of society and environment? How important is this to your work?

Ndubuisi: I noted earlier that my duty to society is predicated on answerability which my environment throws up, all the time. This underscores the whole import of my creative life as an *answersmith*, if you like. My creative allegiance is to poetry as a method of that critical call and answer in the throes of complex experiences that challenge my mind and living. Chinua Achebe has reiterated the function of writer in Africa, and it’s not short of a social critic, visioner, and redeemer. So, I should think that writing in Africa can’t abandon the hydra-headed problems of ethnic polarisation, thuggish party politics, poor economic situations, repression, and push-and-pull migration for issues about tending the flowers in Manchester or the aesthetics of train trip in Berlin or Prague.

Tolulope: Speaking of the environment, literally, there’s an ecocritical perspective in your poetry. “We Go Bald” critiques not only human terrors but also environmental devastation: “Herdsman come for grass, but take women and farms, / Burning what grasses the grazing herd

crave.” In “Finding Life Again,” which is concerned with the existentiality of self-reflection and actualisation, we find the ecocritical as crucial, perhaps the most crucial, where the green self emerges after death. It does not only foreground the cyclitic life or the imminence of death, but also their importance (living and dying) to existence; hence, giving in to “the green self.” This manner is also evident in “I Saw the Green.” The last stanza reads:

In the asthma of fleeting pulse,
They say it is still greening here
But I see shrunk gray leaves . . .
To double check this loaf of truth
Where are my spectacles?

Also, in “I need a new faith to believe,” the poetic persona confesses: “I believed in a green spirit. / I believed in the future change” (although it resonates in the contradiction). How do you view the intersection of poetry and ecocriticism, especially in the context of the Anthropocene and posthumanism?

Ndubuisi: My thinking that the unconscious of my poetry entangles with the environment that feeds it materials has probably called in the question of the ecocritical. And recall that my emerging theory of the signifying chameleon connects to my poetic experience and expressions, and I believe it has resonance beyond me. I find traces of this mind-worlding connection in the poetry of people, who have come ahead of me. Ezenwa Ohaeto takes his unconscious, but, of course, he fuses it with other tropes that produce for him styles that might not be arcane, because unlike me he might have whittled down the voices of his cultural unconscious in some of the poems you find to be largely accessible. Poetry is one of the tools through which ecological subjects can be negotiated. Global poetic practices are amenable to such isms as posthumanism, as poetry keeps pace with the ways in which life produces the concepts of machine bearing the consciousness of humans even if they lack the full human potential. It is also impossible to think that poetry will lose interstices that make theories absent in its critical evaluation, be it ecological subjects or posthumanist ones.

Tolulope: While it seems logical that poetic expressions (or even narratives) have a resolve, revealed or not, yours often end with codas punctuating the narrative. In “Tide of Answers”: “Let me be the tide of answers.” And in “There Is a Laughter That Haunts Us”: “This very laughter haunts us.” How do you decide when a poem is complete, especially when dealing with unresolved thematics?

Ndubuisi: I like your observation on how I sometimes resolve my work. Do I need to reiterate that, even though I'm very much trained in literary theory and understand the possibilities of these structuralist methods, I let the text open up? I also rely on my unconscious to start and finish my poems. When this happens, I suspect that my conscious or the unconscious relates those structures of poetics. Again, when you

think of my poetry as an attempt to answer some call, or probe a question further to hazard an answer, the possibilities of generating codas in the instances you mentioned are part of the critical perspectives you can point to.

Tolulope: Are the recurring symbols of calls, answers, brambles, hawks, and hyenas that run through your work another semblance with Chinua, unconscious, too? What meaning do they hold in your poetics?

Ndubuisi: Poetry is unconsciously cybernetic, if I'm correct. The universe of signs that poets work with can be varied and associative yet domiciled in or estranged from its subject-needings, as it were, a deeper lens to excavate meanings therein. I try to involve figuration to either produce simple or complex ideas on the subject that my poetry relates. Above all, I chose the associative signfields to ground my meaning in relation to the mood of my subject. With respect to the recurring symbols you mentioned, they recall with my poetic field of the signifying chameleon, as they produce meanings that are deeply invested in the political subjects they reveal.

Tolulope: Speculative poetry has emerged prominently with voices like Abu Bakr Sadiq, Zaynab Iliyasu Bobi and Martins Deep, and your poetry is not shy of this emergence as well. In "The Harmony of Lost Things," there is the contestation of the past and the present, the traditional and the modern, the human and the machine in an Africanfuturist and postmodern temper to locate the tensions surround the existence of the modern man. It contends:

Now, we all are accord:
We sing of home from a home, embracing from distance the names we lost
Because we must be machines, urban strawberries the city calls refined.

In comparison with film, photography and prose, do you see a viable intersection between poetry and Africanfuturism?

Ndubuisi: The question here harks on how poetry relates to the theory of Africanfuturism. It's easy to say that many poets rarely think of these theoretical reverberations that critics pinpoint. Again, poetry being a site of theorisation has its sufficient width to draw upon complex notion of Africanfuturism or Afrofuturism, as might be retrieved, in say, the poem you mentioned here or to probe a little further the theoretical explication Mark Amerika does in *Digital Poetics*, where the fascinating idea of cybergeography frames the possibility of downloading human consciousness in a machine. Now, this is posthumanist manifestation, but is this not somewhat connected to the kinetic human voice in Chuma Nwokolo's "Sudan Sudan" (2009) where one can argue that the video poem takes the bardic, human agency to recount the ruins of war in Sudan? I would say that African futurist creative works have taken off from fiction, but the possibilities of their imbrications with poetry are already suggested by

some works like African poetry and the technologies that frame African mythologies, past, present, and futures.

Tolulope: You pay homage, a lot (more than your contemporaries) to earlier generations of poets, such as Okigbo, Osundare, and Tosin Gbogi, what you have described as following the “long tradition of ‘iron bells’.” In “I Am Finally Here,” this is especially evident. What place do these poets hold in your craft, and how do they influence contemporary voices?

Ndubuisi: You’ve made a very important observation. I think of myself as produced not only by my biological roots and cultural environments but also by the endless networks of poets, dead and alive. Paying homage is somewhat refractive of poetic acknowledgements of sources of influences. I believe that acknowledging the influences from a long tribe of poets I have read and been impacted by is simply the act of poetic integrity. This homage, as Fashina observes this, too, in his critical introduction, hints at some act like footnoting scholarly sources, as in academic writings. I thought that to take off in my walk into the tide of answers, my acknowledgements of these human creative batteries underline my conviction that my poetry dialogues with a network of poets that have come before me. This dialogue is rooted in righting preachments or, if you like, social answerability.

Tolulope: Your poetry questions everything. There seems to be no resting, no solace nor consolation. In fact, they are sceptical of silence, as it is often masked as a collaborator of evil, so silence needs to be questioned. In “I Know the Name of Silence,” we are told “Because questions break the sanctity of evil.” We also encounter this confrontation in “Silence is Spirit,” but beyond the evident socio-political probing, it exhorts questioning as the inlet to existential awareness, to being human. What existential significance does silence hold for you and your poetics?

Ndubuisi: I think that any African poet, who is attentive to social dynamics in Africa in its polity, suspects any regime of silence as loss of voice from complicity in repression or resignation by it. By taking on silence, I lay bare, or I question the masks of silence, its guile and guises, which either pretentiously hides the rotten politics in my social reality or produces its repressive noises from its lethargic politics of subversion. In Nigeria, those who speak out against evil have to be wary of state “kidnap”; more recently journalists and writers have suffered that kind of indignity. Look at the recent protests in Nigeria, for instance, the end hunger protest in August³, where state agents arrested mostly hungry children, who defied regimented silence to question economic deprivation that confronts them. “Sorosoke,” the Yoruba word for “speak loud,” is the mantra engaged with by EndSARS protesters in October 2020. This is a direct affront to the brutal reign of silence under the spell of repression. My poetry is

attentive to the ways silence denies human expression, and I, because my society privileges one or two of these strands of political silence, reflect upon it in my poetry, while presenting the chameleon import of poetry and my world.

Tolulope: What is positioned in opposition to silence is rage. Rage seems central to your work, transcending the mere poetics of consciousness. In “If I Am Mad,” you write:

If I am mad, give me ragged clothes,
Let me weave into the songs that bite and light
For funeral of noon's wrath and birth of dawn.

Do you see your poetics as being defined by rage? How have critics and readers responded to this intensity, and do you agree with the term *mad poetics* for your work?

Ndubuisi: I don't know any poet, who is sane and lives in Nigeria that endlessly produces insanity in people, who simply cannot overlook the daily aberrations read and experienced in and about the country. Rage is the tonality of a poem, which confronts the leadership deficit, monstrosities of power and recklessness, and masses' silence in the throes of social anomy amongst other things that thug at my sanity. Mad poetics, if you choose to label it, I have no objection as I can't legislate terms and discursive points that critics produce from my work. Like I wrote in my pre-word to one of my collections, which I can modify to fit in the context of your question, the labels or isms don't matter to me, only the regenerative rage, which I would want to see bear fruits in a truly redeemed Nigeria matters.

Tolulope: I wonder how influenced you are, or your poems are, by ideological frameworks such as postmodernism, especially given your academic and critical background. “I was a Tale Told Without a Plot” reads like a frantic conversation in some hallway with the ghosts of Jean-François Lyotard, Jacques Derrida, and Michel Foucault.

Ndubuisi: My training in literary theory might have filtered into my unconscious even as a poet. Umberto Eco's *Foucault's Pendulum* (1989) couldn't have been shaped by anything else other than his poststructuralist leaning or even specifically, semiotic undercurrents. So, my knack for theorizing brewed that poem. The poem is one strong evidence of the poetic of the conscious current. It might have been unconsciously stirred, but it gave itself to structuralist reformatting, so that an attentive reader does not miss its poststructuralist tropes. So, I agree with your reception of the poem.

Tolulope: Rage poetics seem to abound amongst your contemporaries, too, but yours is a notch above that. At first, I was sceptical to call it mad poetics for the many unintended meanings it can evoke, especially the trope of being in a “maniacal state and with a daemonic

automatism,” as Maria Takolander (2015) explained it. But your poem “If I am Mad . . .” proves me right, on both levels. And really, I wonder how you tame this rage that burns through your poetics. The second stanza of the poem reads:

If I am mad give me ragged clothes,
Let me weave into the songs that bite and light
For funeral of noon's wrath and birth of dawn.

In “Colours of the Times”, the last verse gropes:

With rage and counter rage alternating the corridors
of my hearts the fear of this moon is the final kiss,
slanted Beings, trigger charged for eternal wailing.

I know we've treaded the edges of rage, consciousness and critical agency; here, I am more interested in how your works have been perceived by critics and readers, even by yourself? Do you ever have an out-of-body experience going back to your works? Is there an element of embodiment in your creative process? And would you agree to your poetics being labelled mad?

Ndubuisi: Critics and readers of my poetry note the rage that runs through my work. I don't deny this because the context that produced the poems summoned it as a method of answering. One can particularly point to Ifesinachi Nwadike's review of *Answers through the Bramble*, which came in a similar fashion of attentive reading in line with the tone of my poetry. In the essay, he described me as that “irritating gadfly,” and elsewhere he mentioned that “the poet assumes the dissident revolutionary voice.” All these emerge from the tone of my work and if these labels are what my readers and critics of my poetry produce, they make references to the poems that underscore their meaning construction: one is compelled not to disagree. Barth Akpah and Kosiso Gabriel Okonkwo similarly find me in Marxist temperaments, as they assert that my poetry confronts social imbalances and addresses state terrorism. I have enough with to either reject or accept labels for my poetic efforts, but I have chosen to just sit back and read whatever is said about my work. The ideas produced from reading my work rarely rule me. What upsets me is the parlous condition that persists with the Nigerian/global contexts of the rage people observe in my poetry.

Tolulope: Metapoetics is another dynamic to the current generation of Nigerian poets. In “How a poet makes love,” “Did I call this Poetry” and “The Poem I will not Write,” we encounter a poet's note on poetry, an unhindered authorial intrusion. How do you relate to your poems, and most of the time, what overall intent do you hope your poems achieve, how people relate to it? How do you hope your poetry will be remembered, and what impact do you wish to leave on readers and the literary world?

Ndubuisi: I particularly love poems on poetry, and I try to write some. I have read many instances of such from poets. I really admire their poetry. Those titles have come to me at different times of my poetic evolution, but metapoetics has had its enduring life beyond my current generation of poets. Remi Raji's poetry is notable for its metapoetic plasticity, I'd say. "How a poet makes love" plays a rebound of "Duty," a poem from Remi Raji's *Web of Remembrance*, one of his seven collections of poetry.

Tolulope: Beyond the aesthetics and preoccupation that characterize your poems, what are the other ones you've seen abound or hope to see amongst your contemporaries? And would you agree to the generational labelling of Nigerians poets, especially the fourth?

Ndubuisi: I hope to not work the tight rope of prescription in any way or form, even though I like poems that tax my critical sensibility. We all choose our subjects and the styles, so prescription or suggestion is in this way some way to complicate another's choices. For me, I will focus on tradition and my individual talent, while also being uncanny in my poetic writing. I will keep an eye on the interpellations of the local and the global in my poetry as I have always done. I love poetry of different colours and temperaments, and I don't legislate on aesthetics or politics therein. Generational mapping has been a problematic thing. Emmanuel Ngara, Pius Adesanmi and Chris Dunton, Harry Garuba, Sule Egya, Oyeniya Okunoye, Joe Ushie amongst others, even to the recent article by Darlington Chibueze Anunoye, scholars and thinkers have engaged with poetry in ways that tackle or theorize such assumptions of temporalities and thematic scales of periodisation.

Tolulope: It is not all rage, after all. You're also a romantic, when you choose to. "And now there's light" is a love gesture, not only for Antoinette, to whom it is dedicated, but I assume also to yourself, to the collective, to the rage that burns through the metrics of your poetry. It comes bearing a glitter of hope that once were torn and thorned; it indeed offers light. What do these hope and light hold for you as a creative, and what would you say they should symbolize to the collective?

Ndubuisi: A poet must hope and for me, the women in my life have helped me to produce fresh meanings of hope and light. Antoinette, my soulmate, offered me some light, and despondency died at that instance. Anger persists with the way things recur in Nigeria, but my wife, Olamide Kehinde, and mother, Christiana Kanebi, also my loving sister, Ruth Izunwanneka, and many friends, like Funmi Gaji, Onyinye Anyalekenya, provide me with enough bursts of light and hope to survive the ammonia of hate and distress that Nigeria confronts us with. Hope and light are two factors that keep any creative mind in

tune with sanity where, in my case, insanity can produce the worst in us if not for these women who inject hope and light in my world.

Tolulope: The women (and girls) in your poems are not essentialized, as one encounters them in some of the grief poetics of your contemporaries. They are rather symbols of strength and salvation. There is a craving for their companionship and love that deconstruct patriarchal gaze. How do you manage to see through the societal oppression of women without commodifying it?

Ndubuisi: I tell people anytime I can that I was raised properly, and I have no reason to objectify a woman. Perhaps, as a keen reader, you've observed this extension of my thinking and my love for my wife and mother to theorize women as sources of strength and salvation in my poetry. You are not far from the truth, as even beyond my mother, wife, and sister, my grandmother and great-grandmother have energized me from childhood to this point. They've invested so much love in me to the benefit of the world. This explains my aversion for anything that puts women in ignoble situations. So, when my poetry explores the themes of women as strength and salvation, I reveal the things that gender hegemony misses, in other words, I insert women through the instances of the abused women, lover and other family members, as counterpoints to patriarchal subjugation.

Tolulope: You've established how your influence cuts across borders, both critical and creative. But only in "Answers for another America" do we encounter an active poetic expression to this effect, and maybe this is an overgeneralisation; although, yes, the poetic concerns of the other poems are universal, their sensibilities are not rooted in the global or even in the pan-African. How important, would you say these outstretched sensibilities are, especially given the breakthrough of the digital?

Ndubuisi: The world in Minneapolis in America is either a click away or it is heralded by the headline in another distant place yet touched by the digital. So, global concerns are as much close to me as the local. The outstretched sensibilities you speak about come and I produce an inquisition or an answer for it, as much as I respond to the local prompts around me. Both are in this instance, important, as my world is not rid of the extant conditions in America, Sudan, Gaza, Iran, South Africa, and other places. The question is by what agency, and I leave my readers to grapple with that. Globalization is not at the instance of the Internet. Elsewhere predated the digital world even though the digital space prods my poetry to respond to such outstretched sensibilities.

Tolulope: It has been a delightful conversation, Martins. To round this up, for now: what are you currently working on? And I know you to be a very devoted Catholic, which I admire, but it is almost shocking not to encounter the heavy influence of this in your works. Of course, there

are several subtle undercurrents of religion and spirituality, as in “Forcing Resemblance.” I am curious to know how you place your faith in relation to your poetry, and vice versa.

Ndubuisi: Yes, as you observe, one can call me a devout Catholic. Though I might not have infused Catholic imagery in my poetry, it has its spirit deeply inscribed in the Catholic semiotics and Eucharistic celebrations. So, it is also easy to miss the point in that methodical life of Catholicism recurs in call and answers. So, if the trope isn't Catholic, what of the spirit that struts through my poetry? I should note that two things undersign my Catholic unconscious in my poetry—the almost relentless burst of questions you observe in my poetry and the religious rage against vices and repressive strongholds. I would say those are serious Catholic manifestations. The church, through catechism and liturgical offerings, has impacted my sense of justice and pursuit of regenerative power of change. One who has internalized the Catholic way of life, as me, already finds poetry a philosophical window to produce images that foreground my subjects, be it through reusing Catholic motifs or not using Catholic motifs, like Richard Crawshaw, Patrick Kavanagh, David Diop and others like them. My life as a Catholic is very much connected to the intensity of my imagery, as the deeply rooted liturgical tradition of Catholicism allows for the protean and prosaic frames that make poetry evocative and profound.

On next things, I am looking to wrap up my Ph.D in the coming months, find new creative projects, explore positions in teaching and research, and other literary engagements. Also, I have long finished and edited a new work in the offing, the completing trilogy, *Promenades*. It is due out in the summer of 2026 from Noirledge Publishing. Tolulope, many thanks for the intense conversation on my work. Delighted to do it, particularly with you who has a knack for width and depth in literary making.

Ndubuisi Martins, scholar-critic, teacher, poet, poetry theorist, and author of three full collections of poems: *One Call*, *Many Answers* and *Answers through the Bramble* (Shortlisted for 2022 Pan African Writers Poetry Prize (English Category), *The Harmony of Lost Things* (gazelle) selected by Carl Terver and published in the Shamsrumi Gazelle Series, and the forthcoming *Promenades*, Noirledge Publishing, was a member of the Advisory Board of *The Protagonist*, a journal of literary and cultural criticism at the Department of Anglophone Literatures and Cultures, Charles University, Prague, where he is completing his PhD in Anglophone poetry and poetics. Ndubuisi has taught English and literature courses at the University of Ibadan and McPherson University, Seriki-Sotayo, Ogun State before leaving Nigeria for his Ph.D studies.



Credit: Olasunmbo Ali

Tolulope Oke is a creative and a researcher with interests at the intersection of narratives, decoloniality, and technological innovation. He is the publisher of *Lunaris Review*, co-facilitator of the Toyin Falola Prize, and author of the recently published poetry collection *Encounters* (PAUP, 2026). This dialogue is one in a series of conversations with contemporary Nigerian and African poets.

Works Cited

- Eco, Umberto. *Foucault's Pendulum*. Translated by William Weaver, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1989.
- Martins, Ndubuisi. *Answers through Bramble: A Collection of Poems*. New Africa Book Publishers, 2021.
- . *One Call, Many Answers: A Collection of Poems*. Communicators League, 2017.
- . *The Harmony of Lost Things*. Konya Shamsrumi Series, 2023.
- Nwokolo, Chuma. "Sudan. Sudan." *YouTube*, uploaded by Chuma Nwokolo, 2009.
- Takolander, Maria. "From the 'Mad' Poet to the 'Embodied' Poet: Reconceptualising Creativity through Cognitive Science Paradigms." *TEXT*, vol. 19, no. 2, 2015.

¹ Editor's Note: The "signifying chameleon" recalls the "signifying monkey." See Henry Louis Gates, Jr. *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (Oxford University Press, 1988).

² Niyi Osundare contemplates the social function of the writer in African society in the slim book. Consistent with his poetic manifesto, Osundare highlights the range of responsibilities (seer, reformer, visioner, and others) that writers undertake. The book addresses the role and obligations of writers historically and socially. It is a robust intervention in writing as social commitment. See: Osundare, Niyi. *The Writer as Righter: The African Literary Artist and His Social Obligations*. Hope Publications, 2007.

³ This is a reference to the August 1, 2024, hunger protest which came as a ten-day protest all over Nigeria, to end hunger. Propelled by the protest against the rising cost of living in Kenya, many Nigerian youths took to the streets, to mount pressure on the Nigerian government to address the high inflation caused by government removal of fuel subsidies and other government policies that caused Nigerians misery and hardship. See: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/article/2024/aug/03/why-are-nigerians-protesting-young-people-were-roused-by-events-in-kenya>