

Border Gnoseology: Akwaeke Emezi and the Decolonial Other-than-Human

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Abstract

The underlying assumption when speaking about the postcolonial nonhuman is that the other-than-human refers to what could be called, broadly speaking, the “natural world,” as opposed to “the human-as-Man,” but still usually understood in (Western) secular terms. Nevertheless, from the perspective of African onto-epistemologies, the nonhuman can also refer to the spiritual world, or to the diverse assemblages between the “natural,” the human and the sacred. *Freshwater* and *Dear Senthuran. A Black Spirit Memoir*, by Akwaeke Emezi, open up a space of “border gnoseology,” where contemporary Anglo-American discourses on transsexuality intersect with African ontologies and epistemologies, specifically with the well-known figure of the *ogbanje* and the sacred python as an avatar of Ala, the Earth goddess in Igbo culture, to produce a radically subversive embodied subjectivity. The ideas of movement, transing, tranimalcy and (transatlantic) crossing conspire to dismantle conventional Eurocentric humanist views on selfhood and identity. Reading Emezi on their own terms also requires revisiting alternative notions of temporality beyond secular, cisheteronormative, modern time, as well as an understanding that the sacred and the spiritual are indeed essential to the worldview and the processes of subjectivation of millions of people across the globe.

Keywords: Trans*, tranimality, Igbo cosmology, sacrality, Akwaeke Emezi.

Resumen

Cuando se habla de lo no humano postcolonial, la presuposición subyacente es que lo más-que-humano se refiere a lo que podríamos llamar, en términos generales, “el mundo natural,” como contrapuesto a lo humano-como-Hombre, pero todavía generalmente entendido desde la perspectiva del secularismo occidental. No obstante, en términos de las onto-epistemologías africanas, lo no humano puede también referirse al mundo espiritual, o a los diversos ensamblajes entre lo “natural,” lo humano y lo sagrado. *Freshwater* y *Dear Senthuran. A Black Spirit Memoir*, de Akwaeke Emezi, abren el espacio para una “gnoseología fronteriza” en la que los discursos angloamericanos contemporáneos sobre la transexualidad se entrecruzan con ontologías y cosmologías africanas, en particular con la conocida figura del *ogbanje* y con la pitón sagrada, como avatar de Ala, la diosa de la tierra igbo, para producir una subjetividad encarnada radicalmente subversiva. Las ideas de movimiento, transición, tranimalidad y cruce (transatlántico) conspiran para desmantelar nociones humanistas eurocéntricas del yo y la identidad. Leer a Emezi en sus propios términos implica también visitar nociones alternativas de la temporalidad más allá del tiempo secular moderno y cisheteronormativo, y al mismo tiempo entender que lo sagrado y lo espiritual son sin duda elementos esenciales en la visión del mundo y en los procesos de subjetivación de millones de personas en todo el planeta.

Palabras clave: Trans*, tranimalidad, cosmología igbo, sacralidad, Akwaeke Emezi.

I want to argue that “in the beginning is ‘trans’”: that what is original or primary is a not-yet differentiated singularity from which distinct genders, races, species, sexes, and sexualities are generated in a form of relative stability. Rather than the animal or the transindividual being a special test case that might provide the normal and normative with a basis for a renewed sense of its own difference, we should think the contrary: any dialogue between human and animal is preceded, conditioned, and haunted by a condition of transitivity. Fixed kinds such as the trans-gendered, trans-sexual, or trans-animal body are expressions of a more profound transitivity that is the condition for what becomes known as the human (Colebrook 228).

The trans as crossing becomes a space of simultaneities, whose orientation is other than just horizontal. The transatlantic is that space of simultaneity in which the body is also water and energy, the water is also energy and body, and the energy is also body and water. Transing, in this sense, is finding that space of transition with(in) body-water-energy. Water is the embodiment of trans-orientation (Silva Santana 183).

I am here and I am not here, real and not real, energy pushed into skin and bone. I am my others; we are one and we are many [...] I am the source of the spring. All freshwater comes out of my mouth (Emezi, *Freshwater* 226).

In their “Introduction” to the collection of essays *Postcolonial Animalities* (2020), Sinha and Baishya claim that “the fundamental predicament of studying the ‘nonhuman’ universe [...] is that it must pass through the human-as-Man, [...] which rests on the elevation of white, bourgeois, European, cisheterosexual masculinity as the only way to being human in Western modernity” (ix). Although this is irrefutably certain, and the essays in this volume are finely attuned to the “varying vectors of difference” and “the unevenly distributed materialities/structures and forms of agency” which affect the “shifting relational terrains that move in and out of the human and nonhuman” (x), both ways of being in the world are understood throughout the collection in consistently secular terms. Only one of the essays in the volume, namely “Wilder Powers: Magical Animalities in Tales of War and Terror,” by Jean M. Langford, points to the possibility of “a potential infinity of non-human animals” partaking of the divine (211) in suggesting that the distinction between the fabulous and the actual depends on “historically contingent measures for reality” (211). However, the very use of terms like “fabulous” or “magical” contributes to pre-empting any onto-epistemological claim to the real existence of forms of being that transcend in any way their embodied materiality, relegating them to the realm of folklore, legend or myth and therefore (unwillingly) privileging again Western frames of knowledge. Despite the editors’ explicit intention of skewing “the hierarchical divide between magical/transcendent and realist/natural” (2), from a critical reading of the collection we can ultimately infer that the (post)modern human-as-Man has not only emerged at the expense of women, peoples of colour, queers, nature and non-human animals, but also out of an agonistic fight with the Sacred or the divine, as Nietzsche sharply put it: “God is dead and we have killed him.” Mircea Eliade asserted in *The Sacred and the Profane* (1957) that the desacralization of the world is the basic experience of the modern man [sic], and with this desacralization of the cosmos comes a consciousness of time as “a precarious and evanescent duration which inevitably leads to

death” (85; my translation).¹ Underlying such a “degodded” (Wynter 263) worldview is the idea that flat, linear and teleological time and the understanding of the cosmos in purely material terms are universal, homogeneous frames of knowledge (epistemes) which affect and subjectively conform *all* human experience of the world, exception made of some peripheral, premodern, primitive societies or individuals. In Walter Mignolo’s terms, this perspective eventually amounts to “the denial of coevalness” (*The Darker Side* 249).

The experience of the divine or the sacred, however, as Jacqui Alexander claims in *Pedagogies of the Crossing*, is still essential to the processes of subjectivation of millions of people in the world: “Experience is a category of great epistemic import to feminism. But we have understood it primarily as secularized, as if it were absent Spirit and thus antithetical, albeit indirectly, to the Sacred” (296). And she goes on to argue:

[I]t is not only that (post)modernity’s secularism renders the Sacred as tradition, but it is also that tradition, understood as an extreme alterity, is always made to reside elsewhere and denied entry into the modern. In this context, African-based cosmological systems become subordinated to the European cosmos, not usually expected to accord any significance to modernity’s itinerary, their provenance of little value in the constitution and formation of the very *categories* on which we have relied. (296; emphasis in original)

But if Western (post)modernity, with its presumed global, homogeneous temporality and domesticated space, has (apparently) become universal, this has only been so by means of the multiple forms of violence and terror exercised on any alter/native ways of conceiving the cosmos and the human, or the divide between the human and the nonhuman (or the more-than-human). In the words of Mignolo again, “there is no modernity without coloniality and [...] coloniality is constitutive, and not derivative, of modernity” (*Local Histories* n/p). Indeed, it is impossible to disassociate modernity from the colonial project, an enterprise articulated around irreducible dualities, and which was sustained upon unassailable hierarchies of domination/exclusion: civilized/primitive; human/animal; male/female; spirit (understood exclusively in Christian terms)/body; culture/nature; science/myth. And as Sylvia Wynter so convincingly argues, it was the post-Renaissance construction of race as the emblematic axis of difference between the Europeans and their “Others”:

that would enable the now globally expanding West to replace the earlier mortal/immortal, natural/supernatural, human/the ancestors, the gods/God distinction as the one on whose basis all human groups had millennially ‘grounded’ their descriptive statement/prescriptive statements of what it is to be human, and to reground its secularizing own on a newly projected human/subhuman distinction instead. (264)

What are we then to make of Akwaeke Emezi, the Nigerian/Tamil/American author who declares to be neither male nor female, both flesh and (Black) spirit, human and animal, material yet immortal? In their debut novel, *Freshwater*, and in its epistolary, non-fictional sequel, *Dear Senthuran. A Black Spirit Memoir*,² as well as in their video art and in several

¹ “Definitivamente desacralizado, el tiempo se presenta como como una duración precaria y evanescente que conduce irremediabilmente a la muerte.”

² This deliberate blurring of conventional boundaries between genres (novel/memoir; fiction/fact) is proleptic of the many ways in which Emezi would defy established, naturalized Western categories, as we will see in the following pages

interviews,³ Emezi has proudly claimed their nonhuman and divine nature, thus reinscribing the sacred into the midst of (post)modernity by “grounding” their subjective being(s) on Igbo onto-epistemologies which, in turn, provide the foundation for their non-binarity and trans*ness.⁴ To complicate matters even further, Emezi claims to be simultaneously *ogbanje* (embodied spirit) and the child of Ala, the Igbo goddess of the Earth whose avatar is the sacred python, and therefore “tranimal.”

Freshwater, the novel that has launched Emezi’s career to international best-selling author in a question of a few months, tells the story of Ada from her childhood in Nigeria through to her formative years in the United States, where she finally comes out as trans* and nonhuman. As opposed to the conventional Western *bildungsroman*, the subjectivity that arises from this narrative, mostly undertaken by the spirits who inhabit the Ada,⁵ is decentered, multiple and fragmentary, illegible in terms of conventional identitary terms, including those that emerge out of transnormative narratives.⁶ As an amplification and further public assumption of this subjectivity, not as symbolic of cultural hybridity or metaphorical for mental illness, but as authentic and truthful to Emezi’s existential experience, *Dear Senthuran* revisits key moments in *Freshwater* and offers an account of the subsequent metamorphoses (tattoos, operations, self-fashioning) undergone by Emezi themselves, who in this text fully inhabits and recognizes their plural and other-than human selves and assumes the narrative voice. If insecurity, self-doubt, an impulse towards self-destruction and mental illness haunts the Ada in *Freshwater*, *Dear Senthuran* is a bold act of selves-assertion and an unapologetic disclosure. In their letter to Tony Morrison, Emezi proudly declares: “I made the NPR acknowledge my multiplicity on air, made the press use plural pronouns, centered Igbo ontology as a valid reality made unreal only by colonialism” (Emezi, *Dear Senthuran* 79). Their ultimate intention, they assert, is to offer a grounding alter/native center to “people like me: embodied but not human, terrified that they are going mad, unable to talk about it, and estranged from the indigenous Black realities that might make sense of it all” (79).

I am a white European, middle-class, cisgender woman. Although raised as a Catholic, I could not say I have much inclination for the spiritual; my intellectual trajectory has been, in that respect, preeminently postmodern. Therefore, I cannot pretend that I understand the reality Emezi inhabits and embodies, or the experience of the sacred they share, under different manifestations, with so many millions of people all over the world. But I am ready to assume that “reality” is much more, and surely other than, what can be measured and accounted for by Western scientific discourses, which from the Renaissance onwards have arrogantly monopolized (and imposed upon other epistemic

³ See their homepage <https://www.akwaeke.com/>

⁴ I use trans* with an asterisk not only to eschew the pathologizing connotations of more conventional terms, but also to underline the multiplicity of bodies, assemblages or ways of being that the paratactic nature of the asterisk invokes (Hayward and Weinstein 2015) as well as its link with decolonial projects (Kankler 2016).

⁵ Throughout the narrative, particularly in the sections narrated by the spiritual “we,” the main character is referred to as “the Ada,” possibly suggesting her condition of object in the hands of the spirits.

⁶ By “transnormativity” I refer to the legal, medical, psychological or surgical procedures, narratives and practices that understand transitioning as a (highly regulated) move from the assigned gender to the felt gender.

and ontological frameworks and geographies) the realms of “truth” and facticity, previously measured by the Church in Europe. “At stake in the distinction between the fabulous and the actual are not only historically contingent organizations of categories, but also historically contingent measures for reality,” (211) says Jean M. Langford. As for me, I would not dare to use the term “fabulous” to describe anybody else’s sense of what is real and true. I would rather accept, with Walter Mignolo, that “a world in which truth is taken to be in parenthesis and ‘geopolitics of knowledge’ prevails is a world of relational ontologies, as all indigenous philosophies around the world have been telling us for centuries” (Mignolo 2012).

Thus, in what follows, I will try to create bridges and connections between contemporary trans* theory and the Igbo worldview that sustains Emezi’s sense of who and what they are, in what is, on my part, a precarious exercise of translation between incommensurable dimensions and discursive universes,⁷ and an attempt to give account of a mode of “border thinking”⁸ which accommodates within itself an “African *gnosis*” (Mudimbe 1988)⁹ and a Western political, affective and bodily praxis, under the aegis of a decolonial project.¹⁰ In this, I will try to be faithful to the way in which Emezi conceives of themselves:

The possibility that I was an *ogbanje* came to me years before I wrote *Freshwater*, around the time I began calling myself trans, but it took me a while to collide and connect the two worlds. I suppressed it for a few years because most of my education had been in the sciences and all was Westernized—it was difficult for me to consider an Igbo spiritual world to be equally if not more valid. The legacy of colonialism has always taught us that such a world isn’t real, that it is nothing but juju and superstition. When I finally accepted its validity, I revisited what it could mean for my gender. (Emezi, *Dear Senthuran* 16)

To those familiar with Nigerian literature and anthropology, the figure of the *ogbanje* is well-known (Achebe 1986; Bastian 2002; Beneduce y Taliani 2006; Ilechukwu 2007; Schneider 2017): they are children who come and go between the world of the spirits and the world of the living, being born and dying in the same family again and again until the object (generally a stone) that serves them as a bridge between both worlds is found and

⁷ Susan Stryker admits that “‘Transgender’ is, without a doubt, a category of First World origin that is currently being exported for Third World consumption. Recently, however, engagements between a ‘transgender theory’ that circulates globally with Eurocentric privilege, and various non-European, colonized and diasporic communities whose members configure gender in ways that are marginalized within Eurocentric contexts, have begun to produce entirely new genres of analysis. Such encounters mark the geo-spatial, discursive and cultural boundaries of transgender studies as the field has been developed within Anglophone America and Europe, but also points towards the field’s untapped potential” (14).

⁸ In Walter Mignolo’s terms, “[t]o engage in border thinking requires engaging in conscientious epistemic, ethical, and *aesthetical* political projects. It requires first of all delinking from hegemonic epistemology (“absolute knowledge”) and the monoculture of the mind in its Western diversity” (n/p).

⁹ Mudimbe states the discomfort he found himself in when he had to survey the history of philosophy as a disciplined kind of practice imposed by colonialism and, at the same time, to deal with other undisciplined forms of knowledge that were reduced to subaltern knowledge by colonial disciplined knowing practices called philosophy and related to epistemology. The ‘African traditional system of thought’ was opposed to ‘philosophy’ as the traditional was opposed to the modern: philosophy became, in other words, a tool for subalternizing forms of knowledge beyond its disciplined boundaries. Mudimbe introduced the word *gnosis* to capture a wide range of forms of knowledge that ‘philosophy’ and ‘epistemology’ contributed to cast away (Mignolo, n/p).

¹⁰ Indeed, the idea of “border knowledge(s)” is akin to the notion of “double consciousness” as developed in Paul Gilroy’s *The Black Atlantic*, which significantly amplifies DuBois’s pioneering use of the term.

destroyed, thus tying them to the world of the living. Fastidious, ungovernable and tyrannical, they are considered to be a punishment to their parents. From Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) to Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* (1993) or Helen Oyeyemi's *Icarus Girl* (2005), from Jonh Pepper Clark's and Wole Soyinka's poetry to Toni Morrison's *Sula* (1976), *ogbanjes* (*abikus* for the Yoruba) have acquired a multiplicity of representational valences for African and Afrodiasporic writers. They have been read as symbols for the precarity and instability of the postcolonial state or the unavoidable hybridity of the Afro-European or Afro-American; as metaphors for the been-to writer or the despotic European colonizer; as a particular manifestation of psychopathology and as palliatives for maternal pain in contexts of extraordinarily high child mortality rates. In any case, the ontological status of the *ogbanje* is defined by continuous movement and transgression. According to Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi:

Ogbanje refers to the iconoclast, the one that runs back and forth from one realm of existence to another, always looking for a place other than where s/he is. It also refers to the mystical, unsettled condition of simultaneously existing in several spheres. Conceptually, the power inherent in the *ogbanje* erases natural and artificial boundaries that are drawn to systematize the cosmos. [...] The mystique of the time and space traveler, transcending human restraints, stands as the ultimate sign of liberation. Crossing borders that intersect others, *ogbanje* opens up the cosmos for a glimpse at the possibilities of becoming. (62)

Ogunyemi's proposal, articulated around ideas of movement, transformation, transgression and crossing, can thus be read in parallel to versions and visions of trans* ontology like those of Sandy Stone (1991), Susan Stryker (1994) or Eva Hayward (2015). To Stone, the transsexual body epitomizes "the complexities and ambiguities of lived experience, [...] that aspect of nature which Donna Haraway theorizes as Coyote—the Native American spirit animal which represents the power of continual transformation which is the heart of engaged life" (230). Stryker emphasizes the ways in which the "monstrous" transsexual body is located outside the "natural order." Hayward, on her part, asserts:

If trans* is ontological, it is that insofar as it is the movement that produces beingness. In other words, trans* is not a thing or being, it is rather the processes through which thingness and beingness are constituted. In its prefixial state, trans* is prepositionally oriented—marking the with, through, of, in, and across that make life possible. Trans*life works purposefully crabwise to ontological claims; trans* can be ontological to the extent that it is the movement across precisely vitality itself. (195-96)

Misty Bastian, in her article "Irregular Visitors," conversely emphasizes the eventual movement between, across or beyond genders that being *ogbanje* involves:

To be an *ogbanje* is to be categorized [as] other—and to bring alterity home in a way that transcends the more ordinary, bifurcated "otherness" of gender. This other gender is marked from birth—as male and female statuses are marked—by special behaviors towards and physical adornment of the child. The sexual appearance of the *ogbanje* may, indeed, be seen as a sham—yet another promise that the *ogbanje* is likely to break in its refusal to act according to human norms. (qtd. in Emezi, *Dear Senthuran* 11)

Emezi chooses this quotation from Bastian to head her essay "Mutilation," included in *Dear Senthuran*, which explains in retrospect the motivations of the author to transform and neutralize their body, as they are partly recounted through the voice of Ada and her

brothersisters in *Freshwater*. As opposed to the transnormative narrative of the “wrong body,” which ultimately reinforces “the binary phallographic founding view by which Western bodies and subjectivities are authorized, [in which] only one body per gendered subject is right” (Stone 231), Emezi transposes their feeling of “wrong” embodiment to the spiritual plane. What is definitely wrong with them is the fact itself of having a human body, and a sexed one at that:

If ogbanje represents an overlapping of realities—a spirit who looks incredibly convincing as a human—then what does it look like for one to experience dysphoria and take surgical steps to modify it? [...] What can we call the dysphoria experienced by spirits who find themselves embodied in human form? Flesh dysphoria, perhaps. Nonhuman dysphoria. Spirit dysphoria. Metaphysical dysphoria. I don’t know but it required me to modify my body to reflect the kind of entity I am. (Emezi, *Dear Senthuran* 15-16)

But the Ada’s/Emezi’s abject embodiment, “this abomination of the fleshly” (Emezi, *Freshwater* 4), does not only answer to their being *ogbanje*. As the narrative “we” in *Freshwater* expresses it, “it was an unusual incarnation, to be the child of Ala as well as an ogbanje, to be mothered by the god who owns life yet pulled toward death” (207). The dialectics between self-destruction and self-preservation, or in other words, the will to return to the world of Spirit which marks the trajectory of the *ogbanje* and the assurance of the continuity of life, which is the essence of Ala’s sacrality, constitutes the narrative substance of the novel and of *Dear Senthuran*. In *Freshwater*, the Ada’s final submission to Ala’s will and the recognition of her filial relationship to the python also marks her true rite of passage towards selves-recognition and affirmation, which further supports Emezi’s/Ada’s claim to a nonhuman, or other-than-human, status: “I am here and I am not here, real and not real, energy pushed into skin and bone. I am my others; we are one and we are many [...] I am the source of the spring. All freshwater comes out of my mouth” (226). From the very moment Emezi/Ada discovers that their name means “egg of the python” and even before, from the time of their first physical encounter with her, they recognize their familial relationship to Ala’s avatar. Her father had told the Ada that her name meant “precious,” “but that translation is loose and inadequate. The name meant, in its truest form, the egg of a python” (9). The narrative “we” goes on to explain:

Before a christ-induced amnesia struck the humans, it was well known that the python was sacred, beyond reptile. It is the source of the stream, the flesh form of the god Ala, who is the earth herself, the judge and mother, the giver of law. [...] It was taboo to kill her python, and of its egg, they would say you cannot find it. And if you find it, they would add, you cannot touch it. For the egg of a python and the child of Ala is not, and can never be, intended for your hands (9).

Thus, while Saachi, the Ada’s mother, observes in amazement that her baby does not move on all fours, but “crawls like a serpent” (10), Saul, her father and “a modern Igbo man,” does not hesitate to kill the python that is staring at her little child in the toilet: “He snatched her up and away, took a machete, went back and hacked the python to bits. Ala (our mother) dissolved amid broken scales and pieces of flesh” (13).¹¹ Nevertheless, Ala

¹¹ This act inevitably evokes the scene in Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* when Okonkwo’s son also desecrates the sacred python, thus bringing about the end of an era and clearing the way for Christianity, which would prove to be devastating for the community.

would never leave her child alone: “After all, the Ada was her hatchling, her bloodthirsty little sun, covered in translucent scales” (38). As the grown-up Ada goes on learning about Igbo spirituality, she also sees with increasing clarity who she/they is/are: “We have understood what we are, the places we are suspended in, between the inaccurate concepts of male and female. [...] The prophecies that came later, [...] they explained this—the shifting, the quick skinning and reshaping, the falling and revival of scales” (193).

From a Western perspective, the identification between Ada and the python points directly to the notion of “tranimality,” which Sebastian De Line explains as follows: “‘Tranimalities’ is a neologism stemming from the word tranimal (trans and animal). In trans studies, words such as “tranimal” and “tranimacy” have become ways to describe relationships between nonhuman and human animals, trans embodiment, and questions relating to agency” (Hayward and Weinstein 100). Theoretical discourses on tranimality make manifest the points of confluence between trans* and animal embodiment, in so much as both forms of life are particularly vulnerable and often their subjectivities are expelled from a discourse on the human which has its roots on the idea of sexual dimorphism as a precondition for identity. Furthermore, both tranimals and trans* humans are engaged in the search for an “affirmative reconfiguration of trans-morphic embodiment *via* a notion of shared processes and experiences of worldly becoming” (Bresser 13). Hence, in the words of Hayward and Westein, “[t]ranimalities does not strive to provide yet another critique of humanism simply by adding trans* insights into the mix or as yet another vector in intersectional critique. [...] Instead, tranimalities wishes to focus on trans-infused apprehensions and engagements with the expansive world of possibility opened up by non-anthropocentric perspectives” (200-201).

In “Lessons from a Starfish,” one of the seminal texts in tranimal discourse, Hayward uses the self-regenerative capacity of the starfish as a metaphor for the productivity and healing nature of the cuts and “mutilations” that trans* bodies experience in their processes of resignification. In her own words: “My cut enacts a regeneration of my bodily boundaries—boundaries redrawn [...] My cut is not passive—its very substance (materially and affectively) is generative and plays a significant role in my ongoing materialization. [...] My cut is *of* my body, not the absence of parts of my body” (72). In an analogous way, *Freshwater* incorporates the identification between the Ada and the python, underscored by the idea of “the shifting, the quick skinning and reshaping, the falling and revival of scales” (Emezi 193) (which also functions as metaphorical for the plasticity of the trans* body) as a further element to destabilize categories which are precisely delimited within Western scientific and philosophical discourses, but fluid and porous in African onto-epistemologies. The borders between the male and the female, the “animal” and the “human,” the natural and the cultural, the purely material and the transcendent become blurry and collapse. The process of getting rid of parts of their body (the breasts, the uterus, the ovaries) means to the Ada/Emezi a trajectory towards the visibility and realization of their spiritual being, as they make explicit in *Dear Senthuran*: “The surgeries were a bridge across realities, a movement from being assigned as a female to assigning myself as ogbanje—a spirit customizing its vessel to reflect its nature” (Emezi 16).

Cutting and self-cutting are thus retroactively explained as essential rituals in a process of self-inscription and progressive revelation of the Ada's complex selves: "The Ada was just a child when these sacrifices began. She broke skin without fully knowing why; the intricacies of self-worship were lost on her. She did only what she had to and thought little of it" (Emezi, *Freshwater* 42). At that point in the narrative, the Ada is being abused by her neighbor and his son (although we learn about it much later in the course of her non-linear narrative), has been abandoned by her mother and starts feeling a profound disgust towards her puberal, changing body: "The Ada became a precocious but easily bruised child, constantly pierced by the world, by the taunts of [her brother] and his friends as they mocked her body for being soft and rounded" (27). In their essay "Injurious Acts: Notes on Happiness from the Trans Ordinary," B. Lee Aultman argues that "[w]hen someone's ordinary is impinged on by an injurious world, they might discover that injurious acts reproduce the normative feelings that 'healthy' forms of self-care are supposed to produce. These include belonging, grounding, control, and relief" (Aultman 10). Thus, self-injuring is linked to the continuity of life, and the experience of self-cutting and scarification generates affects of peace and stability. And Aultman goes on to argue: "We have to think of how the fragility of being-in-crisis gets temporalized through acts that feel like self-sovereign control" (12). To the grown-up Ada, her cuts, scarifications and tattoos are a way of "reminding herself of her past versions" (Emezi, *Freshwater* 210); in Jay Prosser's terms, her skin literally becomes "the body's memory" of her life (Prosser, *Thinking* 2010). To the spirits who inhabit her body, "all these things she was doing to her skin made her closer to us; it was like an advertisement, a timeline of sections, who she was in the inside being revealed on the outside" (Emezi, *Freshwater* 210).

Indeed, it was the custom among the Igbos and the Yorubas to mark and cut *ogbanje* children as a memorial to their belonging to a house and a lineage, as the poem "Abiku," by John Pepper Clark, revealingly expresses: "We know the knife scars / Serrating down your back and front / Like beak of the sword-fish, / And both your ears, notched / As a bondsman to this house, / Are all relics of your first comings." Emezi, in *Dear Senthuran*, recalls and resignifies this practice:

Back in the day, my people used to mark ogbanje children after they died. There were multiple purposes for this: to identify the child when it came back, but also to alienate it from their brothersisters. [...] But imagine how different things are now, because now is not then. Imagine a cohort that is loyal; imagine a world where an ogbanje doesn't have to hide, where it marks itself because fuck a human and a mutilated body. (198-99)

On the other hand, Emezi's account of their self-inflicted wounds and scars also resonates with Jacqui Alexander's interpretation of the body praxis of Vodou and other African-based religions, expanded from Karen McCarthy Brown's idea of the "ritualized human body": "The tradition, the memory of how to serve the spirits is held in the ritualized and ritualizing human body" (McCarthy). Far from being merely superficial, these markings on the flesh—these inscriptions—are processes, ceremonial rituals through which practitioners become habituated to the spiritual, and this habituation implies that requirements are transposed onto the body. One of these requirements is to remember their source and purpose. In this matrix the body thus becomes a site of memory (298).

The bodily transformations undergone by the Ada in *Freshwater*, a mastectomy, and by Emezi, the hysterectomy they recount in detail in the above-mentioned essay, “Mutilation,” answer then to this habituation to the spiritual demanded both by the *ogbanje* brothersisters and by Ala. In answering to the Ada’s call (significantly verbalized in Igbo and not in English), the python says: “Find your tail” (224). To the Ada, by now openly receptive to “the Sacred,” the message is clear:

I had forgotten that if she is a python, so am I. If I don’t know where my tail is, then I don’t know anything. I don’t know where I am going. I don’t know where the ground is, or where the sky is, or if I’m pointing away from my head. The meaning was clear. Curve in on yourself. You will form the inevitable circle, the beginning that is an end. This immortal space is who and where you are, shapeshifter. Everything is shedding and everything is resurrection. (224)

Nevertheless, this “curving in on themselves” also involves a high-tech intervention on Emezi’s material body. “The robot was called a Da Vinci,” they recount in “Mutilations”: “It was delicate, precise, inserted through my navel to slice my uterus and fallopian tubes into small, unimportant pieces. The procedure had a technical name that filled my mouth—a robotic-assisted subtotal hysterectomy with a bilateral salpingectomy” (Emezi, *Dear Senthuran* 14). In the operation theatre where the procedure is performed, a trans*formation involving the human, the spiritual, the animal and the technological intra-act to create a post-gender monster, a new interspecies cyborg, embodying and giving linguistic and literary shape to a way of being partly (only partly) prophesized in Donna Haraway’s post-humanist thought: “I would suggest that cyborgs have got more to do with regeneration and are suspicious of the reproductive matrix and of most birthing. [...] We require regeneration, not rebirth, and the possibilities for our reconstitution include the utopian dream of the hope for a monstrous future without gender” (116). Furthermore, forming the “inevitable circle” demanded by Ala involves the ultimate refusal to perpetuate the horizontal and vertical lines of the genealogical tree, a deliberate “disorientation” and deviation from heteronormativity, “the potentiality of not following certain conventional scripts of family, inheritance, and child rearing” (569), as Sarah Ahmed puts it; but this foreclosing of the possibility of reproduction also implies for the Ada/Emezi complying to the exigencies of neutrality demanded by the *ogbanje* brothersisters, thus amplifying the idea of the cyborg to approach a different kind of assemblage between the spiritual, the technological and the tranimal:¹²

You must understand it, fertility was a pure and clear abomination to us. It would be unthinkable, unbelievably cruel for us to ever swell so unnaturally, to lactate, to mutate our vessel. Could there be anything more human? The ways of our brothersisters, of *ogbanje*, were clear. Do not leave a human lineage, for you did not come from a human lineage. If you have no ancestors, you cannot become an ancestor. (187)

¹² Jasbir Puar points to the possibility of such assemblages in her essay “‘I would rather be a cyborg than a goddess’ Becoming-Intersectional in Assemblage Theory”: “Certainly it sounds sexier, these days, to lay claim to being a cyborg than a goddess. But why disaggregate the two when there surely must be cyborgian-goddesses in our midst? Now that is a becoming-intersectional assemblage that I could really appreciate” (13).

Current accounts of trans-temporality (Hallberstan 2005; Carson 2013; Horak 2014; Lau 2016; Pearson 2018) have underlined the multiple ways in which time is experienced by trans* subjects outside the regulatory frames of cishetereronormative temporality, marked by “the institutions of family, heterosexuality, and reproduction” (Hallberstan 1). Trans-time is discontinuous and non-diachronic, it is transversed by fissures, disruptions and ruptures; it defies the logic of a unified and sovereign subjectivity evolving through the self-conscious memory of a chronological and straight linear progression. But trans* temporality has also been read in terms of anticipation, futurity, and/or the continual interplay of past/present/future (Horak 2014). Thus, the narrative “we” in *Freshwater* says: “After our first birth, it took only a short time before we realized that time had trapped us in a space where we no longer were what we used to be, but had not yet become what we were going to be” (193). However, the telos of Emezi’s narrative is definitely not the moment of bodily trans*formation, but a boundless, sacred and non-teleological time that both precedes and goes beyond human understanding:

[I/my spirit is] sixteen thousand years old, at an estimate. Maybe that’s just where memory stops, or as far back as we can see. The flesh can be dead if likes, but the god who animates it will always be louder. [...] I wasn’t meant to exist like this, but I’m on assignment and since these humans have collared time and created ends, then this too will and I will go home to my brothersisters and it won’t even feel like forever, because what is forever when there is no concept of anything else, a world with no end. (Emezi, *Dear Senthuran* 211-12)

On a collective rather than individual level, a feeling of profound historical rupture and discontinuity, brought about by the violent insertion of diverse cultures into an imperialist enlightenment narrative of progress and modernity, is also characteristic of most colonized peoples and societies. As Huggan and Tiffin assert, “different cultures, with very different notions of time, all found themselves [...] wrenched out of a time of land and ancestry, and subjected to the exigencies of Greenwich time, or in its modern form, ‘corporate time’” (2). Radically heterogeneous temporalities were subsumed under the common rubric of Christian teleological narratives first, and then under the discourses and practices of modernization, thus producing what Emezi calls “a christ-induced amnesia,” and which Jacqui Alexander understands as the collapsing of “divergent histories and temporalities into these apparently irreconcilable binaries of tradition and modernity, [which] produce other accompanying corollaries around religion and secular reason, stasis and change, and science and the nonrational” (186).

Emezi’s countermovement has been, as we have seen, to embrace the non-historical, cyclical, (a)temporality of the sacred, as it was lived in most pre-colonial and pre-modern societies. Not only in Igbo belief, but in many other cultures, religions and schools of thought from Ancient Egypt to Gnosticism or Jungian psychoanalysis, the serpent (particularly when it is represented as *ouroboros*) is a symbol of rebirth and healing, of transformation and immortality: “Everything is shedding and everything is resurrection” (Emezi, *Freshwater* 224), as Emezi puts it. Escaping from the global designs of (post)modernity or taking advantage of the possibilities that it offers for the recovery of subaltern and subjugated knowledges and gnoseology, Emezi has managed to create, understand and project themselves onto the world as a rather unique assemblage between the human, the nonhuman and the divine. They have managed to actualize the

sacred from the distinctive “colonial difference” of the diasporic experience, where temporality is palimpsestic (Alexander 190) and therefore “‘tradition’ [...] doesn’t mean something ‘before’ modernity but rather the persistence of memory” (Mignolo n/p). Emezi has come to inhabit Spirit time, in the terms that Jacqui Alexander understands it:

Spirit brings knowledge from past, present, and future to a particular moment called a now. Time becomes a moment, an instant, experienced in the now, but also a space crammed with moments of wisdom about an event or series of events already having inhabited different moments, or with the intention of inhabiting them, while all occurring simultaneously in this instant, in this space, as well as in other instants and spaces of which we are not immediately aware. Spirit energy both travels in Time and travels differently through linear time, so that there is no distance between space and time that it is unable to navigate. Thus, linear time does not exist because energy simply does not obey the human idiom. (309)

Whether we can understand or are willing to believe Emezi’s truth is, after all, utterly irrelevant. As they claim, all this is ultimately “between us and God, and we know what we are, what we were made to be” (Emezi, *Dear Senthuran* 155).

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