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AKWEKE EMEZI'S *DEAR SENTHURAN*: METAPHYSICAL HOME(S) IN TIMES OF GLOBALISATION

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This article aims to explore the liminal spaces portrayed in Akwaeke Emezi's (they/them) memoir *Dear Senthuran*. In the current globalized world, mobility of African writers to the West has produced a literature that some critics label as "Afropolitanism". Firstly, I trace the origin and implications of this term, which presents some issues that must be interrogated. Secondly, considering the example of other diaspora writers, I seek to analyze the territories in which Emezi imagines and creates their writings. I argue that these spaces, following Homi Bhabha's postcolonial analysis of "Houses of Fiction", act as locus communale, places in-between for the unhomely —the displaced, the refugees (political or social), the discriminated. Akwaeke Emezi identifies as a non-gendered God with multiple identities, an Igbo spirit who was "born to die". Therefore, home is not perceived as a place of origin nor the place where they reside. Neither it is a place recreated from memories nor a place they observe and deploy in their writings. Instead, corporeal, fixed spaces are a form of delimitation and submission to the colonial discourses that Emezi tries to revert in their texts. Their queer identity does not fit into modern Nigerian society as it has lost touch with Igbo's systems of

values, their condition of black migrant does not allow them to feel at ease in the United States, and their godly identities surpass the physical need of belonging to a specific area. By denying the terrestrial links, they express their thirst to be in constant movement, in literal, continuous transformation. Thus, their existence is based in a flux, in liminal spaces, and by sharing their experience in the form of writing, they provide a safe refuge for those living in the cultural periphery.

Keywords: Emezi; home; postcolonial; Afropolitanism; liminal.

1. African Literature in Times of Globalisation: Afropolitanism?

An author who identifies as a non-gendered God with multiple identities does not easily fit into labels such as "African" or "American". Consequently, their literature is hard to describe as belonging to a specific territory. Akwaeke Emezi, whose pronouns are they/them, and born in Nigeria in 1987, moved to the United States when they were seventeen years old. In the current globalized world, the number of authors of African origin that have travelled between continents is so high that there have already been discussions about how to define this diasporic phenomenon. In fact, there seems to be an opposition between authors who defend Panifricanism and Négritude, and Afropolitanism —a more recent term that serves as an umbrella to those authors who decided to migrate elsewhere, but write about their African roots or experiences. In words of Amatoritsero Ede: "Afropolitanism's first enunciation in public discourse can be traced to Taiye Selasi's 2005 online article, *Bye-Bye Babar*. This idea of a new subjective experience of African diasporic self-identity then migrated into academic contemplation" (2018, 35).

Renowned authors such as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Taiye Selasi, and Petinah Gappah embody Afropolitanism (although some of them openly reject this term): being from African origin or having been raised in Africa, they have published their work with Western publishing houses and have relocated to the West, mainly to the USA, but also to Europe. In their condition of migrants, they

continue to write about Africa despite the fact that they are no longer there and they fill their characters with a certain 'africanness'. However, the experience of migration for these authors is not the same than the experience of expatriates who were forced —for political reasons or trying to escape hunger and lack of opportunities— to leave their homelands. Writing from this privileged diasporic point of view presents some issues that have raised different opinions among critics. In some cases, it has been pointed out that these writers give some taste of Africa in order to exoticize their novels, without getting involved into the more problematic or harder experiences of the continent. They do not deal with the sociopolitical situation of their countries in-depth, and seem to focus, particularly, on stories that will be of some interest for Western readers. Thus, it is an "Africa sans the 'unhealthy' or 'intoxicating' baggage of Africa" (Musila 2016, 110). In this sense, many critics of Afropolitanism like Binyavanga Wainaina, an author and journalist, see Afropolitanism as a "fashion", as Pucherova echoes:

> Africans living in the west have become cut off from their fellow citizens and immune to Africa's problems, feeling no empathy for those who still live there and capable only of a "sympathy" that "bears no responsibility". (...) By living and working in Kenya, Wainaina is not only trying to reverse the flow of African writers to the West, but also to remain connected to Africa and its problems, since he feels that without having that experience he cannot possibly reach African readers. (Pucherova 2018, 415)

Indeed, Wainaina, before passing away in 2019, positioned himself as a pan-africanist and not an afropolitan. In regards to literary diffusion, the publishing of the so-called African literature is concentrated in cities such as London and New York, and authors who have decided to publish their works with African publishers have a "smaller readership, fewer chances of winning literary prizes or being recognized by literary critics and scholars" (ibid: 414) as well as less possibilities of being translated into other languages. Furthermore, the majority of works are written and published in English, despite the ferocious advocacy of writers such as Ngugi Wa Thiong'o for the use of local languages. However, according to Susan Gerhmann (2016, 63), the critique of Afropolitanism focuses on three main aspects: "[...] elitism/class bias, [...] a-political-ness

and [...] commodification" (2016, 63). First of all, broadly speaking, Afropolitan writers belong to a social class which is highly educated, able to move around and migrate comfortably —to some extent, they frequently obtain diplomas from Western universities, live in urban spaces, and so on. In most cases, their experience of poverty is therefore imaginative or second-hand. As for commodification, these works are usually apolitical and seen by many as "products" more than works of art: they are comfortable to read and do not ask too much from the reader. In this sense, Yewande Omotoso identifies a pattern which they all seem to follow:

> Written in English by an expatriate African author who resides and publishes in the West, they describe the negotiation of African identity in the West from the perspective of a middle-class, Western-educated African. Moreover, they use Western plots and narrative forms even when parts of these novels are set in Africa. (Pucherova 2018, 409)

It is essential to note that the problem with commodification is not only that books are primarily written in English, but that they are not complicated to understand despite the significant cultural differences between the USA/Europe and the complex and diverse African societies. However, they are sold under the label of "African literature" and therefore can participate in literary prizes in this category. In words of Musila, "Afropolitanism as another mode of integration into a main stream that appears to remain uneasy with cultural differences" (2016, 111).

The tendency to travel or migrate has always been a reality among African peoples, but according to Pucherova, more than a simple desire to get to know other cultures or seize academic or professional opportunities, the reasons behind this mobility have been socioeconomical and political (2018, 411). In fact, there are authors who defend some kind of nationalism as opposed to Afropolitanism. It is the case of Yewande Omotoso, *Bom Boy* (2011) and *The Woman Next Door* (2016), who in an interview with

Rebecca Fasselt[1], shares her thoughts about her personal journey from Nigeria to South Africa and wonders if this "migration to the south" is any different to the "migration to the north". She affirms that what concerns her is whom are the writers addressing in their novels. Later on in the interview, it is clear how she rejects the idea of Afropolitanism since she is obviously aware of the class privileges that mobility and migration entail in certain cases:

> Being an Afropolitan to me sounds as if you are supposed to be a mediator between the West and Africa because you have travelled and lived overseas. I have no torn allegiances and I have no current interest of ever living in America or the UK. I want to live here. I'm of the continent. My mother was from the Caribbean, so I'm multicultural anyway, not only Nigerian. But I feel this doesn't mean I'm Afropolitan. I've travelled to places and I've learned things, but I'm still African. It doesn't mean I'm less African, and that's why the term is problematic. (...) Many of those Africans who travel and get educated overseas have the money and the means to do that. So they are of a privileged class, that's all. We are living in a global village, people move around, they have cross-cultural experiences. My story is not a unique one. The term Afropolitan only seems useful for the West as it gives the West an opportunity to understand and even "consume" Africa. (Ibid, 5)

Other critics, however, are in favour of this terminology and continue to use it. In her recent publication, *Feminism and Modernity in Anglophone African Women's Writing* (2022), Dobrota Pucherova analyzes Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and Sefi Atta's novels and states that "Adichie's and Atta's feminist fictions are typical of postcolonial migrant women who, in a quest for feminist emancipation, leave for abroad (...) to seek freedom and happiness away from the oppressive systems of their own conservative cultures" (2022, 57) and adds "Adichie's and Atta's cosmopolitan feminism is shaped by the same postcolonial dynamics of unhomeliness, deterritorialization, displacement, and disillusionment about the direction of postcolonial Nigeria" (2022, 58). After reading these affirmations one might wonder if it is

[1] "'I'm Not Afropolitan — I'm of the Continent': A Conversation with Yewande Omotoso.", 2015.

impossible to be free and to be a feminist if one decides to remain in Nigeria, or some of the other so-called "oppressive" countries. However, the notion of cosmopolitanism implies a certain privilege which cannot be representative of all African migrants. Stories of real displacement, violent discrimination, and lack of opportunities in the new "free" countries seem to be disregarded.

> In some unstated senses then, the term Afropolitanism seems to come with a certain glow of access, affluence and mobility in the global north that signals particular class and cultural inflections which would therefore not be extended to Brian Chikwava's migrants in *Harare North* surviving on the fringes of London, or the many African migrants who attempt the Mediterranean passage into Europe. Afropolitanism then, seems to reference a particular kind of affluent mobility in the global north, as opposed to all global mobility. (Musila 2016, 111)

In order to be Afropolitan, therefore, it looks like one has to tone down their 'africanness', which is nothing more than white-passing. Is there a way for African authors to escape from this wave of commodification? Are there authors who are writing from an ancestral point of origin and towards a real African audience, who do not inhabit none of these binary spaces, but rather a 'third space'? Is it possible for a writer to migrate to the West and keep the authenticity of their writing? Emezi's autobiographical narratives certainly defy all the classifications that had been associated with diasporic African literature.

2. Akwaeke Emezi: From Global to Metaphysical

The author of *Dear Senthuran* have lived half of their life in the USA, but they affirm their writing is not addressed to a white readership: "I was writing for people like me, not for a white gaze" (2021, 168). Surely, their literary productions are not the easiest to digest, since they talk about first-hand experiences unparalleled in the autobiographic realms. First and foremost, the conception of themselves as godly beings wrongfully embodied in the human form of a woman, and the fact that they self-identify as an *ogbanje* (Igbo for "evil child spirit") that has survived more than what these

creatures usually do, are not the most recurrent themes in literature. As they explain in this memoir, at the beginning of their literary career, they were torn between fame and success and writing for what they really believed in. They do not deny, however, that they still wanted to "shine", which can be problematic since it "often involves too much contact with white people and making things that would be very boring for me. (...) My ontology isn't something fickle that depends on humans and their loyalties, thank goodness. I am golden even in isolation" (171). Thus, they understand their literary production as a priceless expression of their identity that is independent of external opinions and set of values. They know that, although their work might not be the most mainstream, it fills a void for the culturally displaced: "When I cast questions to my deity-parents, the answer has always been the same: to face my work. To make it, to protect it, fight for it, bring it to the people who need it" (169). It is clear how their voice(s) serve a purpose, and significantly, it does so from an ancestral, spirit-first point of origin. Nevertheless, the author is aware of the 'overlapping' of their ideas, and mentions how they suffered from body dysphoria, which they call "flesh-dysphoria", "nonhuman dysphoria", "spirit dysphoria" (16). They explain how they began calling themselves trans, but later realized how colonialism and science had prevented them to consider the Igbo spiritual world: "Do ogbanjes even have a gender to begin with? Gender is, after all, such a human thing" (16). Far from being sheer superstition as the Western colonial discourses would have described it, the Igbo cosmology gave meaning to their gender identification and they decided to begin their transition:

> Whether ogbanjes are a gender themselves or without gender didn't really matter, it still counts as a distinct category, so I didn't consider my transition to be located under human parameters at all. Rather, the surgeries where a bridge across realities, a movement from being assigned female to assigning myself as ogbanje –a spirit customizing its vessel to reflect its nature. (2021, 16)

In order to 'customize' their vessel, there were some physical alterations to be done. Removing their uterus was the most complicated due to the high cost of the surgery, but also because of the medical resistance they encountered. In addition to consuming hormones, they also removed their breasts. For Emezi, these

invasive procedures were almost natural. As they explain, ogbanjes are a cohort, they separate from each other when they are born, but come back together when they pass away in the physical world. In their words, mutilation is “a shift from wrongness to alignment” (20). Therefore, the body is an uncomfortable carcass that can be scarred and taken apart because it is the spirit what matters most. The violence they themselves allow on their embodiment is, however, not enough when the death drive is so constant. During the tour to present *Freshwater*, and even though the book was doing great, the desire of leaving this world was bigger than the satisfaction about the novel: “I want to fold the flesh right off my bones and collapse into nothing” (2021, 33). All they could feel was “death stroking my throat and calling me home” (33). Their severe depression episodes were aggravated with the pressure of the tour, having to be alone in hotel rooms, displaying a public self in order to sell more books and being away from loved ones who would take care of them and protect them. Due to this mental health issues, the tour was postponed and even canceled in several occasions. Every time they had to start again and endure it, the thoughts of suicide would come back to the point of even trying to hang themselves from the closet rod (36). Usually, ogbanjes die quickly, but it has not been the case in this life, in this embodiment, which they find intensely traumatic: “this violent birth ripping you away from home, and you aren’t allowed to return. Instead, you’re kept in your mortal form, subject to mortal rules” (211). Moreover, the relationship with humans is disturbing, it is hard to conceive their impermanence and the fact that people, even family members, can come and go. Bonds and people are not immortal, and they all transform throughout time. This is something perplexing for someone whose spirit is around sixteen thousand years old and always partnered with other spirits. Besides, they are aware of the fact that most people do not accept their true identity, which feels like they do not want it to exist, a feeling they actually share. In the complexities of their existence, where do they belong in this corporal world they neglect? Where could their human body feel at ease?

As for the physical spaces they inhabit, in the chapter called "Shiny" (*Dear Senthuran*), they talk about the house where they grew up, which is filled with bad memories. Their father's home is, therefore, a place they "hate", although they admit that in the process of writing their first novel, *Freshwater*, they felt the urge to go back to their roots: "I knew I had to go home and complete something, I wasn't quite sure what" (2021, 127). Their deity-parents asked them to greet Ala, whom they consider their creator. Once they were back in Nigeria and tried to find a shrine to talk to her, they found a person who opened their eyes about the fact that there was no need to do so, since she is far-reaching: "'Ala is everywhere', he said. It's so literal because she's the earth, but also because she's a deity that's ubiquitous across Igboland, she's not restricted to region (...) so there isn't just one central shrine to her" (131). Hence, they realized that gods exist without being physically attached to one single place or territory. On this note, as they self-identify as godly, they neglect the idea of belonging to physical spaces. In fact, the belief of not fitting into their own body and the physical world is central to their work and has caused them to be entangled in toxic relationships, to self-mutilate, and to attempt suicide in several occasions. All their literary success and the benefits which come with it (recognition, fame, economic means, independency) cannot conceal the loneliness they feel, but they reckon that there is a reason why they are not allowed to die yet.

> I was born, and no one's come to take me home. Embodiment is the stranding. I am marooned in flesh. I am alone, but I keep waiting for them to come and take me back, I keep trying to go home (...) I see now, especially after this last attempt to return, I will go home eventually, but first, I have a mission. I was sent here to do something, to make this work. (215)

Their spiritual home is death but the cohort spirits, what they call "brothersisters", have left them on this world to accomplish a well-defined objective: writing and making their writing accessible to people who might feel the same way. Limiting them to a country or specific territory would be to limit their work, which would turn their production ineffective. As their goddess Ala, they are everywhere: "The shift itself, the flux itself is a space. You can belong in a flux. You can be based in a flux. And you don't have to

be firm in one place or another. The flux takes you from place to place"[2]. Moreover, they affirm "I've been thinking about these earthly homes less as homes and more as places of origin for our embodied forms" (2021, 135), which would explain why they needed to go back to Nigeria to write their first novel. Nigeria is the place of origin, but now they feel more comfortable shifting, moving, not being tied anywhere specifically, in liminal spaces. They refuse to put a geographic location and argue that this idea in itself "is a location, a valid location"[3]. They do not deny, though, that they have double nationality. In fact, they talk about their physical house in several excerpts of *Dear Senthuran* —as when they define it as "a tomb, a walled-off mausoleum", but also "a safe thing" (2021, 114). "Shiny the Godhouse" is a house entirely theirs, made in their image, filled with arts and plants, where there is no place for human anxieties. Despite this home being solidly located on New Orleans, they claim "I genuinely have absolutely no idea what it means to be American…I know I have an American passport, I live in America. I tend to focus on those verbs rather than the verb 'to be'"[4].

Emezi has always felt "othered". Born from a Malaysian mother, in Nigeria they were too white. In Malaysia, they were too black. In the USA, another kind of black, African black. Furthermore, their queerness has also made them exist in the margins. Indeed, in regards to the hysterectomy, they are aware of its transgressiveness as a Nigerian since "it was too easy to tune into our communities and hear the voices heavy with disgust, saying that what I had done was disfiguring, that God had made me one way for a reason and I had no right to say or do otherwise, that I was mutilating myself" (2018b, 5). The ideal, for them, is not the standard, but the deviance. Thus, concerning gender, they are consciously determined to be in-between. Their aim is now to

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[2] Akwaeke Emezi, "My America: Akwaeke Emezi". *American Writers Museum* (blog), December 11, 2019, https://americanwritersmuseum.org/my-america-akwaeke-emezi/.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Ibid.

survive in this periphery and amplify their resonance. For that purpose, they have found a way in literature:

> I only belong in places I create. And that has been, I think, the most important thing I've learned in my brief life so far, is that I can make worlds. That's literally my job: to make worlds. I can make them for myself, I can make them for other people, I can put them in books. So instead of searching for other people to give me a place to belong I just bent one into existence myself. (2019)

3. Homi Bhabha's 'Houses of Fiction' in Emezi's Autobiographical Narratives

From time immemorial, literature has been a way to create worlds: alternative realities where one would like to live, or realistic places where one can feel like living in another period of time. Authors have painstakingly used their imagination, but in some cases, a glimpse of their own reality is seen through the pages of their fiction. Toni Morrison used to preach that if you could not see yourself in a book, then you should write it yourself. The question of portrayal and identification is important for readers: we like stories about people who look like, behave and think like us. Reading about somebody who shares some of our experiences validates our own. On the other hand, not seeing yourself in any type of fiction (books, movies, songs, series), could make you feel like an outcast. For this reason, narratives about culturally displaced people are essential for the wellbeing and survival of the same people they render. In a lecture given at Princeton University, which transcript was published in *Social Text*[5], and reconfigured in *The Location of Culture,* Homi Bhabha wonders if a novel could be a house and what kind of narratives would serve 'unfree people'. He asks: "Is the novel also a house where the unhomely can live?" (1992, 142). He uses the symbol of the house to analyze two novels, Nadine Gordimer's *My Son's Story* and Tony Morrison's *Beloved,* where

[5] The quotes come from the transcript published in *Social Text*, since it differs from the book the author published later on. *The Location of Culture* is cited in other parts of the text, when indicated.

the authors metaphorically construct houses of racial memory. "Although the unhomely is a paradigmatic colonial and post-colonial condition, it has a resonance that can be heard distinctly, if erratically, in fictions that negotiate the powers of cultural difference in a range of transhistorical sites" (142). He affirms that the image of the house has often been used to refer to the 'expansive, mimetic nature' of the novels and that the elements of cultural displacement and diasporic movement cannot be easily contained in traditional realism (142). Creating this 'unhomely' narratives is what Bhabha terms as 'to unspeak': "To release from erasure and repression and to reconstruct, reinscribe the elements of the unknown" (144). Gender queer people have been subject to erasure in most societies around the world, and it is only lately that their stories are becoming visible, they are reconstructing and reinscribing their own (hi)stories as a way of surviving the difficulties they have had to face during their lives. In an anthology of writing entitled *She Called Me Woman* (2018), thirty Nigerian queer women shed light on their experiences. They recound how they navigated fear, love and relationships, and how they fought to accept themselves and be accepted by others. Their writing becomes an act of resistance and resilience, for it ensures the survival of their realities and it provides strength to those in similar situations. The stories, however, are anonymous in order to safeguard the writers' integrity. They are finally 'unspeaking', understood as the opposite of not to speak, yet not revealing their identity because it is still unsafe.

In fiction, authors are not so personally compromised. However, even though Akwaeke Emezi published their debut novel, *Freshwater*, as a piece of fiction, they later affirmed it is based on their own life. It is rich in Igbo symbolism and for some readers, it can be understood as a coming of age novel dealing with gender dysphoria and dissociative identity disorder, manifested in the main character(s). Ada (pronouns they/them) show separate identities and believe they are an ogbanje, a reincarnated spirit that has no place in the world of the living. In the book, the Igbo ontology Emezi conveys as a way of displacing colonial, scientific understandings of the character's identity is pivotal. Ogbanjes are supernatural creatures, spirit deviations, which take human form and have a short

life cycle: They come from nowhere, refuse to reproduce and are born to die. Ada is just the embodiment, the recipient of two different personalities, Asygara and Saint Vincent, who cause the physical body to inflict violence upon itself and upon others. This human body, Ada, is in constant fight against the voices in their head, who long to come back to the other side (the one of the spirits). Moreover, they realize they are not comfortable with the gender they have been born into since ogbanjes are genderless and so Ada struggles to transform into what they feel they really are. Due to this, they need to self-mutilate and physically remove parts of their body, in the same vein the author did in real life. Researchers and critics have labelled the author's perspective as a trauma response, or a need to reconnect with home after having relocated to another country (see Jessica Newgass). The supernatural motifs are wrongly understood as "diasporic entities", invalidating the autobiographical component. Nonetheless, and as the author claims, this is an interpretation that tries to diminish indigenous realities and the perception Igbo people have about their own life and beliefs. Emezi tells the story from a precolonial understanding of the world, thus reinforcing their own cultural values. Therefore, "the unhomely moment relates the traumatic ambivalent of personal, psychic history to the wider disjunctions of political experience" (Bhabha, 144). The novel, along with the memoir *Dear Senthuran,* are clear political statements. One might find their writing style obscure, but this is because, as commented formerly, they are not writing for a white readership. Emezi is living and creating between the lines and has purposedly chosen to remain this way, their 'fictional space' and their reality are undistinguishable. In addition to these two books, they have also published a poetry collection, *Content Warning: Everything* (2022), where once again their inner voice(s) calls for a re-understanding of analytical concepts, escaping from binarism and building on a spirit-first perspective. Some of the verses from the poem 'Sanctuary' read "the safest place in the world is a book" which "is a meadow, is a menu of worlds / an oxygen mask, chest compressions / is a map for someone who has died / many times, and wants to come back" (24).

On another note, Bhabha identifies hybridity as a liminal space, or space in-between, what he calls the 'Third Space'. Scholar Naglaa Abou-Agag criticizes this definition for contributing to Neocolonialism. In her understanding "Bhabha places the notion of Third Space at the heart of colonizer / colonized relations with reference to cultural identity and suggests that walking through Third Space is the means of moving on with human history and reaching 'the beyond'" (2021, 28). Nonetheless, she, in accordance to Bhabha, affirms that "cultural identity is fluid and is in a constant (...) process of continuous negotiations" (28). In this paper, the focus is not to examine Bhabha's argument in regards to national identity, but rather, to assert that it renders a paradigm for a sort of 'un-national' identity. In the present times, globalization has made it difficult for an individual to profess where one is from, which does not mean they belong everywhere. In my view, one's identity is constructed from the pieces they take from every place they inhabit or visit, and in many cases, this means a constant revisiting of self-identification. This way, identity does not become global, but distinctive, particular, and unique, which responds to Bhabha's question at the beginning of *The Location of Culture*: "How are subjects formed in-between, or in excess of, the sum of the parts of difference (usually intoned as race/class/gender, etc.)? (1994, 2). Significantly, to describe liminal spaces, he uses the image of the stairwell as a symbol that connects differences: upper and lower, black and white, "the hither and the thither (...), the temporal movement and passage that it allows, prevents identities at either end of it from settling into primordial polarities" (1994, 4). Thus, identities go 'beyond', they have no boundaries. To the same extent, postmodernity is not after-modernity, or anti-modernity, but rather 'beyond' modernity, including "a range of other dissonant, even dissident histories and voices —women, the colonized, minority groups, the bearers of policed sexualities" (1994, 5). In this beyond modernity, Akwaeke Emezi can be found. Their identity is boundless, escapes binarism and scientific notions of life and death, and their writing thoroughly reflects that.

4. Writing into the Unknown

Akwaeke Emezi is not only a prolific author (they have published seven books in five years as well as several short texts in online magazines), but also a successful visual artist who explores their embodiment in short films. In their website, the artist's statement reads that their practice "is deeply rooted in the metaphysics of Black spirit and employs the lens of indigenous Black ontologies to examine embodiment, ritual, and rememory"[6]. In an article for *The Paris Review*, they label their working speed as "inhuman" and voice the issues they suffer since their embodiment cannot keep up with their mind: "The simple truth is that I don't know how to stop, not even when my body breaks down under this pressure. I love my work, these worlds and stories, and all I can think is how frustrating it is to be delayed by flesh"[7]. Since their spirit is hungry for more, at a pace that is unsustainable for a human body, their physicality has become disabled (it suffers from convulsions and excruciating pain, and they need to take medication to control the symptoms).

The power of Akwaeke Emezi's imagination creates the liminal spaces they need to exist, which mirror and center their own multiple identities and make visible their metaphysical experience. Their conflict, after all, and as they explain, is not to be black, or queer, or immigrant, but to exist and be several (2021, 50). The reasons why they started writing might have been self-centered, as they mention "I'd started (...) because I had a slew of questions about existence that I was trying to figure out, rooting the process in Igbo reality and my own archive, excavating my own self" (52), but why they continued their task surpasses the individual, since they are not writing only for themselves, but for the rest of people existing in the margins:

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[6] Akwaeke Emezi , "Akwaeke Emezi," 2023, <https://www.akwaeke.com/> [Accessed on February 22, 2023].

[7] Akwaeke Emezi, "My Spirit Burns Through This Body". *The Paris Review*, December 10, 2020, <https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2020/12/10/my-spirit-burns-through-this-body/> [Accessed on February 20, 2023].

> It was a reflection for those of us living in shifting realities, worlds framed as madness, bordered by unknowns. To write into that space was the only way I knew how to confront it, (...) We don't have to swallow our work or be afraid that it's too deviant to do well, we don't have to worry about sounding pretentious or not measuring up to dead white men (...) we can create without permission, we can write into the unknown" (52-53).

Hence, Emezi challenges the literary canon and its labels (it cannot be said that their literature is Afropolitan), addresses otherness, and generates a safe space for those living in the cultural periphery. They exist in the metaphysical, create in the material, and find home in their imagination. In Bhabha's words, their stories are "to pass on". In the House of Fiction, "there is a stirring of the unspoken, of the unhomely... today" (1992, 152) which proves the possibility of their survival through fighting against erasure. Hence, their novel *Freshwater* is dedicated to "those of us with one foot on the other side" (2018a), which evidences the author's awareness of how their writing might be a lighthouse for the culturally and socially displaced.

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