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Making Space at the Queer Intersections of Sex and Gender

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Abstract

Multilingualism is one of marginalised authors' strategies to express their stories and identities when writing in what bell hooks labelled 'the oppressor's language'. It allows them to navigate language imbued with contradictions: the language that connects and provides terminology for some marginalised identities while being infused with various oppressive regimes. This article discusses the forms and roles of multilingualism in two queer life-writing texts: written in English and interwoven with African influences, Akwaeke Emezi's *Freshwater* (2018c) is an autobiographical novel; Zahra Patterson's *Chronology* (2018) is an experimental autobiographical essay. The scope and the forms of multilingualism differ: in *Chronology*, a significant part of the text is written in Sesotho; in *Freshwater*, the passages in Igbo are comparably scarce. Emezi, however, also adopts a non-Western register in the English passages as another strategy of postcolonial writing 'in character'. The article argues that while the concrete strategies vary, the authors employ multilingualism for similar political and aesthetic purposes: they utilise it to challenge the presumed universality of the Western conceptualisations of identity, gender, and sexuality, to express hybridity and heterogeneity of the narrated identities, and for its potential to create intimacy in the language.

Keywords: multilingualism; queerness; postcolonialism

bell hooks (1994, p. 167) quotes a line from Adrienne Rich's poem 'The Burning of Paper Instead of Children': "This is the oppressor's language yet I need it to talk to you" to emphasise the experience of marginalised peoples using the language imbued with power imbalance. Queer writers, postcolonial and immigrant writers, and those at the intersection of these identities speak and write in 'the oppressor's language'. They are often challenged by the limits of the language and by various forms of linguistic

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violence resulting from binarism, heteronormativity, imperialism, and white supremacy. Creating space for one's self-expression in this language often means employing strategies of linguistic creativity that allow the authors "to complicate traditional, rigid categories of identity" (Bar-Itzhak, 2019, p. 3) associated with those oppressive regimes.

One such strategy is multilingualism, which this article understands as both a tool of self-expression and political resistance that exposes and challenges linguistic oppression and a strategy of particular aesthetics. The article considers not only combining different languages in conventional multilingualism, but also the multilingual nature of all postcolonial texts (Bertacco, 2014a, p. 66) that reject the linguistic violence of the language in which they are written.

This article discusses the employment of multilingual elements in two contemporary life-writing texts written in English and interwoven with African influences: Akwaeke Emezi's *Freshwater* (2018c) is an autobiographical novel drawing on Igbo ontology; Zahra Patterson's *Chronology* (2018) is an autobiographical essay consisting of emails, journal entries, fragments of articles, and notes. The article argues that while the concrete strategies vary, both authors employ multilingualism for similar purposes, which are both political and aesthetic: they utilise it to challenge the presumed universality of the Western conceptualisations of identity, gender, and sexuality, to express hybridity and heterogeneity of the narrated identities, and for its potential to create intimacy in the language.

Writing in 'the oppressor's language'

For marginalised authors, language may be a site of contestation; imbued with binaristic, heteronormative, racist, imperialist, and white supremacist elements, it complicates expressing their identities and lives. In the analysed narratives, English assumes the contentious role of 'the oppressor's language'. English has been burdened by the oppressive past and present as the language of the (post)colonial elite and a tool of

linguistic imperialism and linguicide; yet, as a *lingua franca*, it also provides a shared and accessible language. Specifically in a queer context, both in real life and in digital spaces, English allows one “to connect, build communities, find sexual pleasure, meet lifetime partners, and resist and perform queer activism” (Atay, 2019, p. 141). It gives language to describe experiences and identities to people whose mother tongues do not offer suitable vocabulary. These benefits are, however, accompanied by continuing linguistic oppression.

In the postcolonial queer context, English as *lingua franca* is tied to the concept of the “Global queer”, which is equated with the “Western queer” (Oswin, 2006, p. 779). This development is often believed to be a positive one: the growing awareness about queer identities and the spread of queer activism are associated with improving conditions of people with non-normative genders and sexualities around the world (Altman, 1996). However, westernising the term ‘queer’ is potentially problematic: it can lead to sexual and gender minorities and their proclaimed protection being abused for political purposes by portraying the Global South as “uniformly hostile to lesbian, gay and transgender people” (Baderoon, 2015, p. 899). It also contributes to creating a division between the right kind of queer – homonormative (Duggan, 2002), westernised and suitable as a representation of token progressivism – and those outside this normative kind of queerness, who are consequently conceptualised as the dangerous Other (Puar, 2007), and continue to be exoticised and fetishised. Furthermore, in this intercultural queer context, one cannot avoid “linguistic and cultural slippages” that are “infused with colonial past, the linguistic domination of English, nationality and citizenship, queer oppressions and diasporic conservatism” (Atay, 2019, p. 141). The language of the global queer movement is not democratic since it is informed by the Western understanding of gender and sexuality. For example, Sylvia Tamale (2011) in *African sexualities* explains that as a result of the former colonial rule, “the shape and construction of the meanings and definitions of [sexuality] related concepts necessarily reflect realities and experiences outside Africa” (p. 12), identifying the

continuing impact of linguistic violence on people's private lives. The global queer language might exclude or alienate those whose experiences and identities cannot be described through its available vocabulary.

Zahra Patterson (2018) in *Chronology* quotes postcolonial scholar Achille Mbembe's (Burrows *et al.* 2015) advice to authors writing in a language burdened by these implications: "If the language we use is in itself a prison ... We have to put a bomb under the language" (p. 48). Patterson adds their own proposal to "fuck with language" (2019b). This advice suggests that the marginalised authors may still speak and write in the language, but they can do so "not to ratify its power, but to expose and resist its daily violence" (Butler, 2009, p. x). The oppressive language always carries the potential to become a "site of resistance" (hooks, 1994, p. 170); this transformation is achieved precisely through diverse strategies of 'fucking with language'. This article explores multilingualism as one such strategy.

Multilingualism as a strategy

It is, however, necessary to first acknowledge that "there are multiple conceptions of multilingualism that intersect with and reflect diverse global ontologies and experiences of living with languages" (Ndhlovu & Makalela, 2021, p. 4). Multilingualism is primarily a lived experience; this is especially the case of the African context on which these two narratives draw. The workings of multilingualism in Africa are, as Finex Ndhlovu argues (2008), yet to be fully understood due to the continent's linguistic diversity and the omnipresence of multilingualism in both its history and the present everyday life. When this article employs the term 'multilingualism', it refers to a literary strategy in writing by marginalised authors.

Multilingualism is always, to some extent, political. It carries a potential "to challenge the national sphere ... [and] to contest existing cultural and linguistic hierarchies" but also to "complicate traditional, rigid categories of identity" (Bar-Itzhak, 2019, pp. 2–3). This article

approaches *Chronology* and *Freshwater* as texts that, while focusing primarily on individual stories, nevertheless evoke the transgressive political potential of multilingualism. By transferring the Sesotho and Igbo words from the private and intimate spheres to the published narratives, Patterson and Emezi “assert the multi-lingual reality of the public sphere, and ... refuse those privatization strategies that require English in the public” (Butler, 2009, p. v). Within their narratives, multilingualism simultaneously represents individual identities and performs political resistance.

Combining political with aesthetic, multilingual elements also create a specific atmosphere that makes the Western readers intensely aware of both “the presence of an ‘Other’ culture” (Ashcroft, 2014, p. 25) and the limits of their everyday code of communication. They allow the authors to “insert a deep reflection on the language” (Bertacco, 2014a, p. 80) in their texts, thus momentarily conveying their experience to the reader. Finally, Simona Bertacco (2014b, p. 2) argues that language in these multilingual positions “steps out of its ordinary function and becomes exhibitionist and intensive”, emphasising that apart from their political function, multilingual elements also contribute a specific aesthetics. Referring to Amir Eshel’s *Poetic thinking today* (2019), Bar-Itzhak (2019, p. 3) corroborates Bertacco’s claim by arguing that:

[w]riting multilingually opens up new, more nuanced possibilities of literary representation and of “poetic thinking” about human lives ... or about the always-existing mediation between selves and others.

In *Chronology* and *Freshwater*, these mediations appear on multiple levels: between the different versions of a self, between the protagonist and the other characters, and between the narrator and the reader. Multilingualism not only allows the authors to represent these sites of interaction but also appears in its other, often interwoven, functions: political, identitary, and aesthetic.

Categorizing primary texts

Multilingual elements demonstrate the hybridity of the narratives and identities in *Freshwater* and *Chronology*: both narratives combine Indigenous African knowledges and voices with passages situated in the United States context and featuring Western-specific terminology. This hybridity, together with the texts' constant attention to language, translation, and (the lack of) understanding, complicates categorising the narratives in terms of genre and themes: both can be read as life-writing texts that address issues of gender, sexuality, and queerness, but also postcoloniality and diaspora. Nevertheless, neither of these categories can be evoked without considering their Western context of origin.

Neither narrative is a conventional autobiography, which traditionally privileges an “autonomous individual and the universalizing life story” (Smith & Watson, 2010, p. 3). They can rather be found in the space that the “life writing” category created in response to the inadequacy of autobiography “to describe the extensive historical range and the diverse genres and practices of life writing not only in the West but around the globe” (p. 3). The analysed narratives represent the “heterogeneity of self-referential practices” (p. 4) through both their form and content: while *Freshwater* features fictional elements and disrupts the conventional connection between “the *author*, the *narrator*, and the *protagonist*” as defined in Lejeune’s (1989, p. 5, original emphasis) autobiographical pact, *Chronology*’s fragmented and nonlinear structure and lack of information about the protagonists complicate reading it as a coherent narrative.

Labelling both narratives as queer and postcolonial texts requires equal consideration. In *Chronology*, hesitating over different meanings of behaviours and interactions in different cultures, the narrator only suggests queer romance. In *Freshwater*, the protagonist’s elusive connection with the human world problematises classifying her relationships in human “flesh terms” (Emezi, 2019), and the author situating the text in the “different centre” (Emezi 2018a) of the Igbo

ontology complicates employing Western categories such as ‘queer’. However, both authors also use for their protagonists Western terms such as “gay” (Zahra in *Chronology*, Patterson, 2018, p. 35) and “trans” (Emezi in an interview, 2018a), and their texts feature some references to the conditions and struggles of queer communities (Emezi, 2018c, p. 178; Patterson, 2018, pp. 35–36). This suggests a possibility to still read *Freshwater* and *Chronology* as queer narratives, but it is crucial to recognise the implications of such categorisation and remain attentive to the coexistence of varying and competing perspectives on identities and desires in the texts. Similarly, neither narrative can be read exclusively as a postcolonial or diasporic narrative. *Chronology* comments on the (post)colonial condition in South Africa and the position of African Americans openly, but the narrator’s subject position is neither an insider nor a complete outsider. *Freshwater*, on the other hand, features a diasporic protagonist, yet it mentions matters of ethnicity and race only rarely and covertly; it rather illustrates the effects of the clash of different worlds and the struggles of an individual caught among them on the example of an individual story.

Finally, when discussing such liminal texts and their multilingual elements, the question of intended readership is inevitable. Bar-Itzhak (2019, p. 4) argues that multilingual texts have an ideal reader who speaks all the languages included and “can therefore access the text in its entirety, and other readers, for whom one or more of the languages of the text remain illegible”. Yet, as further discussed below, both narratives appear to be mainly intended for, and indeed read by, readers who cannot read Sesotho and Igbo. Therefore, when this article analyses the narratives with a consideration of a reader, it imagines a Western reader without a knowledge of these languages. Nevertheless, it is imperative to emphasise that this reading uncovers only one layer of these texts. After all, it is precisely the multilingual elements through which the authors remind us of the existence of other, coexisting layers of meaning, and it is the sense of inaccessibility and liminality these layers evoke that this article explores.

Chronology

Zahra Patterson's *Chronology* (2018), written initially as their final project in a 'Multilingualisms: Translation and/as Composition' course during their MFA studies (Patterson, 2019a), was published by a New York non-profit experimental Ugly Duckling Presse. This suggests a rather limited, likely artistic, activist, and academic readership. The text is best described as a collage; it is a collection of different documents – notes, emails, and articles – and images that together form a story of the narrator Zahra and their relationship with their late friend Liepollo Rantekoa. Some parts of the text take the form of loose pages inserted in the book that Patterson (2019a) added to associate “the souvenirs, the flowers and love letters you collect in your travels and keep in your journal”. This sense of ephemerality and instability, together with the experimental, fragmented and non-linear structure, and the fact that one learns little about Zahra and Liepollo's lives outside the short periods mentioned in the text, challenge the expectation of the autobiographical narrative's completeness. Rather than a cohesive individual life story, *Chronology* is a fragmental narration of a few moments in life, a relationship, and partially a community and a country at a particular time and place.

In *Chronology*, Zahra, who lives in the United States and identifies as Black, recalls visiting South Africa for a relative's wedding and meeting Liepollo during subsequent travels. The narrative does not detail the character of the closeness between the two protagonists, and the intimacy at the time of sharing one bed in Liepollo's flat is hinted at rather than described. Years later, after learning about Liepollo's unexpected death in a car accident, Zahra decides to honour her memory by translating a story from Liepollo's mother tongue, Sesotho, into English. *Chronology* follows these translation attempts and contemplates the questions arising from the endeavour – of the postcolonial condition in Lesotho and South Africa, language hegemony, and the ethics of translation.

Chronology is a text “about language in all of its amazement, its transfigurations, its complexities, and its own problems” (Bem, 2018). According to Marie-Hélène Westgate’s review (2019), in *Chronology*, the language is “the plot and the protagonist”. The text’s experimental and fragmental character makes it not easily accessible to readers, regardless of their language knowledge, who become acutely aware of the complexities of language also beyond multilingualism and translation. An example of fragmentation and language becoming “exhibitionist and intensive” (Bertacco, 2014b, p. 2) is a passage:

One of the first reactions of the European explorers and colonists, on being confronted by a world that was wholly novel and outside the bounds of their experience, was to reorder it according to their existing structure of knowledge. This entailed imposing their intellectual grid on the unfamiliar mass of detail that surrounded them. Linguistic and other orders and boundaries were erected in order to restructure the African world in a way that would make it more comprehensible to Europeans.

(Patterson, 2018, p. 67)

The narrator explains that they copied the text from the Internet to a Word document, which led to its distortion. However, instead of correcting the text, the narrator chooses to preserve it that way, as a metaphor for (post)colonial reality: “still legible, but distorted” (p. 67). According to Westgate (2019), this passage featuring “broken syntax” helps to express “the colonial dislocation of meaning by fracturing actual words”. The multiple interconnected textual layers contribute to the final effect of the passage – the narrator’s decision to quote from an article on colonialism, the quoted content, and the format of the text that gains meaning and becomes a sign in itself.

Chronology addresses the act of translation, its potential to create intimacy, and its ultimate limitations. Intimacy achieved through language is represented when Zahra describes their reaction to learning about Liepollo’s death:

The next day, after work, I walked into a tattoo parlor around the corner and had ke nonyana – the first words I spoke in Sesotho – inked into my arm so no future day could pass without memory.

(Patterson, 2018, p. 33)

This act of commemorating accompanies the main pursuit of *Chronology*: the narrator attempts to translate a story from Sesotho into their mother tongue English, to honour the memory of Liepollo as a proud speaker of the language, an activist, and an artist. Following Liepollo's past request to "get a sesotho/english dictionary" (p. 11, sic), Zahra embarks on their translation journey. However, this translation process is disconnected from its common purpose – communication, as the narrator no longer has a person with whom they can communicate. They corroborate this by saying: "The translation itself is arbitrary; what is important is my interaction with her language" (p. 23). Patterson (2019a) says in an interview that Gayatri Spivak's essay 'The politics of translation' was "incredibly important to [them] in thinking about the meaning of [their] work". In this essay, Spivak (2004, p. 144) argues that translation is "the most intimate act of reading". While *Chronology* endorses Spivak's perception of translation as an intimate erotic encounter, the object explored through this intimacy is not the individual story chosen for a translation nor its author, but rather the language of the text.

Spivak's view of translation suggests parallels to theories of two other feminist thinkers: firstly, Audre Lorde's (2006, pp. 88, 88, 91) argument that "erotic" may serve as a "source of power and information" if released from the constraints assigned to it in the "European-American male tradition". It is precisely the erotic that Zahra found in connection with Liepollo – a connection outside the prescribed places for erotic in both the European-American and South African traditions – that motivates their translation attempt. The view of translation as intimate also evokes bell hooks' (1994, p. 174) claim that people "touch one another in language". hooks contends that vernacular – an unruly language created by transforming the standard language and devalued by

the dominant culture – carries a potential for this intimate touch that is inaccessible for marginalised people in the standard language (pp. 169–171, 175). To achieve intimacy, Zahra in *Chronology* does not evoke vernacular but Liepollo’s mother tongue, a language similarly “rendered meaningless” (hooks, 1994, p. 168) by the colonial and postcolonial powers. The act of translation is not only an expression of affection, fulfilment of Liepollo’s wish and demonstration of willingness to dedicate oneself to learning a ‘meaningless’ language; this contact with Liepollo’s language, no matter how unruly and filled with obstacles, also allows Zahra to experience the intimacy that is otherwise no longer accessible.

Once Zahra starts with the translation, they nevertheless realise that the encounter cannot be only intimate; for subjects like Zahra and Liepollo, the collision of the intimate with the political is unavoidable. An example illuminating how English inflicts “profound impoverishment ... on its non-native speakers, individually as well as culturally and historically” (Westgate, 2019) is an episode in which Zahra realises that they cannot find a dictionary from Sesotho to English, while a dictionary from English to Sesotho is available, as a telling testimony on the colonial subject’s expected silence. Zahra describes this as “frustrating politically” (Patterson, 2018, p. 33). Similarly, when Zahra eventually finds a dictionary from Sesotho to English, to their “further dismay”, they realise that they “gleefully engaged in the act of translation with [a] problematic source” because T. J. Kriel wrote his *New Sesotho-English dictionary* with the intention to contribute to creating “a unified orthography” that would include all Sotho-Chwana languages (p. 66). Such unifying attempts that are “inextricably linked to the political project of oppressing people of different linguistic and historical backgrounds according to arbitrary racial groupings” (Shinners, 2020) corroborate Zahra’s conclusion that “[l]inguistic homogeny is a pursuit of hegemony” (Patterson, 2018, p. 72).

The limited and problematic choice of sources is one of several obstacles the narrator struggles with in the translation process. *Chronology* initially includes the entire story Zahra chooses for the

translation attempt – Lits'oanelo Yvonne Nei's 'Bophelo bo naka li maripa', published on the website of *Ba re e ne re*, a follow-up project to a literature festival of the same name that Liepollo had organised (p. 21). Pages later, different versions of the translation start appearing: initially, these versions are unclear and full of question marks: "U (???) tla (*come/will come*) llela (*weep for*) metsotso ngoan'ake, (???) ke (*I am*) bona (*look*) u (?) potlakile (*hurry?*) haholo' (*interjection hope*)" (p. 61). The story slowly uncovers itself in increasingly coherent versions: "Translation of translation: Attempt 2: You come weeping // I am looking and hoping" (p. 63). It remains unclear, however, to what extent these translated versions are faithful to the original story.

In the translation process, Zahra realises that the "[a]ccess to [Liepollo's] language is limited" (p. 55). The extensive use of multilingual elements is one strategy to convey the affects resulting from understanding the limitation of translation. The form of multilingualism employed in *Chronology* does not maintain the hierarchy of languages in a way that ensures the reader's undisrupted reception (as is characteristic of the form of multilingualism common in the mainstream media). In *Chronology*, some passages of the text written in Sesotho are never translated. Considering it being published in the United States, there clearly is little expectation that the text would find its ideal Sesotho-speaking readers; it rather seems that sections of the text are meant to remain hidden from the reader as a part of the reading experience. The reader and the narrator share these feelings of lack of clarity and knowledge and together realise that some things will remain concealed from them.

Closely related to the discussion of the possibilities of creating intimacy in the language are also challenges to Western concepts of intimate aspects of people's lives and identities. Unlike *Freshwater*, which primarily challenges the Western conceptualisation of gender identities, *Chronology* focuses on sexual identities and sexual and romantic relationships. Zahra considers how certain relationships may be difficult to express in English in their completeness when reading Mpho

'M'atsepo Nthunya's autobiographical story titled "When a Woman Loves a Woman", part of the collection that the author narrated in Sesotho and translated into English. The story describes a relationship between two women; the qualifying term is "friendship", and the story states that "[the woman] doesn't want to share the blankets. She wants love only" (quoted in Patterson, 2018, p. 32). Zahra evokes the narrative when thinking about their relationship with Liepollo and the intersection of "Liepollo and her cultural context, and [Zahra's] cultural context" (p. 32). An intimacy in the form of "cuddles" (p. 40) and ending up "in each other's arms" (p. 39) is mentioned, but Zahra hesitates to name the relationship, aware that they possibly "[weren't] getting something when [Liepollo] called [them] a beautiful person" (p. 40). This absence of Western terminology to describe their relationship with Liepollo is telling of Zahra's understanding that this relationship is different from their relationships in the United States: the passage following Zahra's contemplations about Nthunya's story is a posthumous letter to Liepollo that mentions "a lover" (p. 33) who asked about Zahra's tattoo commemorating Liepollo. The tattooed words in Sesotho represent a relationship for which Zahra does not have and does not attempt to have an English name.

The following passage, where Zahra attempts to translate the abovementioned letter, further demonstrates how multilingual elements complicate the reader's perception of Western terminology for relationships as universal and unmarked. The translation attempt is fragmented because Zahra does not understand the meaning of all the words in the one-way dictionary. Consequently, instead of translating the entire letter, the text only shows keywords and their definitions "to simulate the disjointed experience of reading the dictionary, the strange spacing, and the multiple unexplained words" (p. 34). Zahra's attempt to translate the word 'lover' takes the following form:

Lover :n : morati(ba); serati(li); babonyetsani; bafèrèhani;
 baratani; mōrata(ba)
 Love-making :n :lèrèrèhi(ma)

The Western reader is left to wonder, together with Zahra, what are the differences between the individual words, which one of them is the closest translation of the word 'lover', and whether these words are gendered. Zahra comments that some of the "terms in parentheses are ... masculine and feminine perhaps" (p. 34). This passage demonstrates Zahra's struggle in the situation when English does not provide words for a relationship, yet words in Sesotho are inaccessible.

Apart from the technical obstacles of the translation, Zahra also struggles with their own role in the process. This foregrounds the hybridity of their subject position. They attempt to achieve closeness with Liepollo while writing from a temporal and spatial distance: a few years after Liepollo's death, working in a New York library on their translation. Furthermore, Zahra wonders about the complex ethics of their position:

What is my function? I am not mere bystander critiquing orthographic politics and the violent gift of literacy. I am a writer. A speaker of English. I am not a translator or a speaker of Sesotho. What right do I have to embark on this project? An emotional pang – is that a right?

They consider whether their relationship with Liepollo and grief over her death are sufficient reasons to commence a project in which they and their mother tongue English could eventually perpetuate the colonial project they attempt to criticise. At this point, Zahra turns to an imaginary conversation with Gayatri Spivak, who in her writing argues for an intimate relationship with the source language and deep knowledge of the culture as conditions for translating. Zahra wonders whether Spivak would condemn them and ends the section asking whether it is "possible to not engage in violence – when everything [one has], everything [one is], is its product?" (p. 71).

Keely Shinnars (2020) closes their review arguing that *Chronology* ultimately gives the reader “[n]o map. No conclusions. No chronology”. The feeling that there exists only a limited possibility of understanding permeates the text and is represented on multiple levels: Zahra struggles with the Sesotho language, with their only partial ability to understand the postcolonial situation in South Africa, and ultimately, they equally struggle with comprehending and accepting Liepollo’s untimely death. Like other questions posed by the text, their question about the ethics of the translation attempt remains open. Nevertheless, precisely their conversation with Spivak’s text uncovers one possible resolution of this ethical issue: a challenge to the “autonomous individual” narrator (Smith & Watson, 2010, p. 2) characteristic of the autobiographical genre. Patterson’s text is not only multilingual but also polyvocal; while not synonymous, both strategies allow for creating a plural narrating subject in texts where the positionality of an autonomous individual narrator (in life-writing studies conventionally associated with privileged identities) might not be available or desirable. Among different voices in *Chronology*, there is Liepollo; she comes alive on the pages through the email exchanges with Zahra: “fuck, ama rant given you ‘kinda’ asked: why the fuck at my age can i not motivate myself and squander money like a bitch?!” (Patterson, 2018, p. 73), disrupting Zahra’s otherwise minimalistic and contemplative style. The text includes a range of quotes: postcolonial thinkers like Spivak appear next to those contributing to the oppression like Kriel with his dictionary. Zahra also quotes books that influenced them: *Black Sun* by Dambudzo Marechera, over which they bonded with Liepollo, and Mpho 'M'atsepo Nthunya’s *Singing Away the Hunger: The Autobiography of an African Woman*. While this polyvocality certainly does not contribute to the clarity and accessibility of the text, it gives the narrator another tool to tell a story they are unsure they have a right to tell, and that they themselves know and understand only partially.

Freshwater

Akwaeke Emezi's *Freshwater* (2018c) follows the protagonist Ada, who grows up with a Tamil mother and a Nigerian father and later moves to the United States. *Freshwater* includes several elements common to the narratives of growing up and immigration: family matters, first friendships, romantic and sexual relationships, and feelings of displacement and otherness in the new country. Moreover, drawing on Igbo ontology, the narrative describes Ada's experience as an embodiment of spirits *ogbanje*⁶. These *ogbanje* are depicted as multiple distinct entities struggling with the physical embodiment and for control over Ada's body.

Unlike Patterson, Emezi is a prolific and increasingly famous author, and identifying their intended reader is more complicated. *Freshwater* was originally published in the United States, followed by Nigeria and other, mostly European, countries. Emezi appears to belong among the prominent African writers who reside abroad and publish primarily for Western audiences, a phenomenon impacted by multiple factors: the asymmetrical market for African literature, the financial influence of the Western donors, and the gatekeeping by some of Africa's most successful writers (Brouillette, 2017). Considering this background helps understand the different audiences Emezi appears to be simultaneously addressing. At the time of writing this article, the section listing selected interviews on their website features three African outlets of the total twenty-six; of the same number of selected press coverage, none is by an African outlet. Nevertheless, Emezi also expresses uneasiness with the publishing industry aimed at primarily white readership (Anderson, 2021) and with readers misinterpreting *Freshwater* (Emezi 2018b, Emezi 2018d), suggesting that the text might

⁶ *Ogbanje* is an Igbo term for a "spirit-child caught between oppositional pacts in the spirit world and human world"; upon birth, these children want to return to the spirit world and thus they are trapped in "a cycle of birth, death and rebirth" (Krishnan, 2014, p. 101). Emezi (2018a) in an interview also uses the term "spirit-child", rejecting interpreting Ada as a human possessed by spirits and the binary between the human and the spirit worlds this definition suggests.

be more accessible to readers of colour with non-Western cultural backgrounds (Emezi, 2018e). Finally, they state that they wrote *Freshwater* for others inhabiting different realities pathologised in Western or religious contexts (Emezi, 2018b). Rather than contradictory, Emezi's emphasis on non-white and non-Western readership in interviews and their presentation oriented primarily at Western markets testify to the ongoing precarity in which marginalised writers find themselves.

Freshwater is a text permeated by a sense of plurality; Emezi (2018e) describes the protagonist Ada as “a plural individual or perhaps she is a singular collective”. Ada experiences her genders fluidly and moves between different gender expressions, lives between different cultures and between the human world and the spirit world of *ogbanje*, who co-narrate the story. The text oscillates between diverse voices, each of them characterised by an idiolect; while the spirit Asughara's voice is often crude and aggressive: “He gave me that damn look again as he left, the fucking resurrected bastard, but I didn't care” (Emezi, 2018c, p. 86), Ada's voice rarely appears, more timid, vague and poetic, sometimes in the form of a letter or a poem: “I drank from my terrible depths // my mother cannot keep me safe” (p. 163). Similarly, as in *Chronology*, polyvocality is prominently employed to create the sense of plurality in *Freshwater*. However, unlike in *Chronology*, the multiple voices in *Freshwater* do not originate from different individuals; they all come from within the protagonist Ada.

Apart from its multiple narrators, *Freshwater* also unsettles the life-writing genre norms through its relationship to fictionality: the text was published in the United States and Nigeria with the label ‘novel’ on its cover, and this characterisation is endorsed by several reviewers who interpret the spiritual elements of the text as supernatural or an elaborate metaphor for mental illness (e.g., Canfield, 2018; Hubbard, 2018; Mzezewa, 2018). However, the author (Emezi, 2018a) claims:

It's an autobiographical novel – a breath away from being a memoir ... I wanted to make clear it was autobiography, otherwise it would be considered to be very fantastical. I wanted readers to be sure that it was not magical realism or speculative fiction. It's what has actually happened! I'm using fiction as a filter for it.

Emezi insisting on the narrative's autobiographical quality while acknowledging the employment of fictional elements, the positionality of the narrative in the non-Western ontology, and the employment of multiple narrators corroborate their intention to situate themselves and their work in “liminal spaces” (Emezi, no date); after all, *Freshwater* is dedicated to “those of us with one foot on the other side” (Emezi, 2018c, dedication).

The employment of multilingualism is another manifestation of this plurality and liminality. Compared to *Chronology*, *Freshwater* includes less of the traditional multilingualism, with the words and phrases in Igbo appearing relatively scarcely. However, similarly as in *Chronology*, these multilingual elements foreground the hybrid subject position of the protagonist. In the running text, words in Igbo designate culturally specific objects, e.g., musical instruments. Emezi employs methods such as contextualisation and cushioning (Zabus, 2014, p. 34) to make these words accessible: “everyone was dancing and throwing themselves to the sound of the music, to the sounds of the ekwe and the ogene” (Emezi, 2018c, p. 18). In the case of words crucial to understanding the narrative, the explanation is more overt: “This compound object is called the iya-ụwa, the oath of the world” (p. 14). Finally, a translation is also used for terms without context, such as titles of the book sections: “ỊLAGHACHỊ / (To Return)” (p. 137), where, nevertheless, the distance between the Igbo word on the top of the page and its translation in parentheses at the very bottom and the difference in the font sizes foreground the Igbo words. In these instances, the Igbo words create a specific atmosphere of the text, reminding the Western reader of, in Ashcroft's (2014, p. 25) words, “the presence of an ‘Other’ culture” without, however, impeding the understanding.

The text of *Freshwater* is intelligible for a Western reader; nevertheless, the multilingual elements contribute to a different, more intimate relationship between the writer and their text and the Igbo-speaking reader. This again evokes hooks (1994, p. 169), who argues that through transformation, the dominant language can become a “space of bonding” and reconnection for marginalised peoples separated by the colonial impact. In *Freshwater*, the multilingual elements appear more frequently in the early passages describing Ada’s childhood in Nigeria. The words for culturally specific objects communicate a connection with both family and home culture, such as when Ada’s mother covers herself with an “akwete blanket” (Emezi, 2018c, p. 29) and Ada at a festival listens to “the sounds of the ekwe and the ogene” (p. 18). Ada’s Tamil mother’s exclamation: “Aiyoh, you have such a big mouth!” (p. 12) also conveys informality of the communication among family members, and through the combination of languages points to the multicultural setting of Ada’s childhood. In the later passages taking place in the United States, such references to everyday objects are missing. The intimacy communicated through the multilingual elements, therefore, not only connects the writer and some of their readers but also evokes domesticity, familiar scenes and the protagonist’s home culture, elements that are significantly less present in the later parts of the text.

Another form of multilingualism Emezi (2018c, p. 146) employs throughout the whole narrative is the inclusion of Igbo quotes at the beginning of some chapters, for example “Ebe onye dara, ka chi ya kwaturu ya” in chapter fourteen. Unlike the words in the running text and the titles of book sections, these epigraphs are neither translated nor contextualised. Since they seem to have primarily identitary and aesthetic functions, the inability to understand them does not necessarily impact the comprehension of the narrative by readers who do not understand Igbo. As discussed earlier, Emezi has reached a wide readership, and they also explain they would like their texts to be accessible to these audiences: “I don’t mind making little adjustments because, again, it’s a very big world and there are a lot of readers” (Emezi, 2018f). Importantly, they

emphasise that in their language choices, “[s]ometimes [they] make compromises, but ones that are not necessarily for the benefits of a Western audience”. Emezi refers to a Nigerian writer Chinelo Okparanta, who says:

I’m translating for the millions of other Nigerians who don’t speak Igbo. Or the millions of other Africans who don’t speak Igbo. Why is your assumption that I’m doing it for white people? There are other people in the world who don’t know what this means.

(quoted in Emezi, 2018f)

Nevertheless, Emezi (2018e), referencing Tope Folarin’s essay ‘Against accessibility’, also makes clear that they do not want their text to be completely transparent because they believe that “there are some things that should be a little closed”. They refuse to include a glossary and italics (Emezi, 2018f), indicating their unwillingness to make the text completely accessible to all English-speaking readers and to highlight the otherness of the Igbo words by differentiating them from the rest of the text. Bill Ashcroft (2014, p. 25) argues that “[t]he refusal to translate is a refusal to be subsidiary”, identifying the choice to not include a translation as a strategy of reclaiming agency and power in writing. The reader has to accept that they do not understand the text entirely; those who want this complete understanding can “earn access by being resourceful and finding information” (Emezi, 2018e). Additionally, bell hooks (1994, p. 174) advocates for a “patient act of listening to another tongue” which not only enables understanding but “may subvert that culture of ... consumption that demands all desire must be satisfied immediately”. Engaging with a multilingual text teaches some readers that to access it, one has to be patient and willing to actively engage with the language and, by extension, with the writer’s culture.

Denoting the story’s central theme, *ogbanje* is the most prominent culture-related Igbo term in *Freshwater*. The term signals not only the plurality and hybridity of Ada’s identity but also the fundamental

inadequacy of English to describe its spiritual element. The term *ogbanje* is employed similarly to most of the other multilingual elements – it is not explained directly, but also a reader unfamiliar with the term can gradually understand it from the context. The first reference to *ogbanje* appears when discussing Ada’s birth. The word itself, however, only occurs after several pages already narrated by the spirits “we”, who initially only describe their existence through comments such as “When the fetus had been housed, we were allowed freedom, but it was going to be alone, ... and we were the one meant to live in it” (Emezi, 2018c, p. 4). They also explain the cause of Ada’s struggles: because of possibly “absentminded” gods, the gates between the worlds of spirits and flesh remained open, and the spirits “were a distinct *we* instead of being fully and just *her*” (p. 5). Only after this explanation does the word *ogbanje* appear for the first time: the “we” state that, unlike humans, “We ... [gods’] children, the hatchlings, godlings, *ogbanje* – can endure so much more horror” (p. 6). By including multiple other words that presumably carry similar meanings, the reader may deduce the meaning of the term *ogbanje*. The word appears several times in the text, explained through differently worded definitions: “*ogbanje* are entitled to their vengeance; it is their nature, they are malicious spirits” (p. 31); and “*Ogbanje* are as liminal as is possible – spirit and human, both and neither” (pp. 225–226). *Ogbanje* is also defined as “a child of Ala” (p. 218), the god “who is the Earth herself” (p. 9). Finally, Emezi also employs polyvocality in an epigraph to chapter seven – a Celestine Chukwuemeka Mbaegbu’s quote in *The Ultimate Being in Igbo Ontology*: “[The *ogbanje* are] creatures of God with powers over mortals ... They are not subjects to the laws of justice and have no moral scruples, causing harm without justification” (quoted in Emezi, 2018c, p. 72, original parentheses). All the instances show how the term central to the narrative is gradually uncovered to the vigilant reader, both in the voices of the different narrators: “we”, Asughara, and Ada, and in a scholarly explanation. Through this strategy, even though the term is explained, it remains partially elusive and

continues to be an overt reference to the inaccessibility of the complete understanding for the Western reader.

Finally, it is not only the inclusion of words and phrases in Igbo that creates the atmosphere of *Freshwater*, but also the character of the text written in English. The language of *Freshwater* resonates with the question of Steven G. Kellman (2019, p. 110), who asks: "...are we not all multilingual? Are not all texts translanguaging?", highlighting the fact that all speakers, including those who have not studied a foreign language, are daily shifting between different registers and dialects. This perspective possibly threatens to conceptualise multilingualism too broadly; however, this article subscribes to Simona Bertacco's (2014a, p. 66, added emphasis) narrower argument about "the multilingual nature of all *postcolonial* texts" which highlights the impact of a multilingual environment, where the unequal language hierarchy reflects social inequality, on the texts originating from it. Considering not only examples of traditional multilingualism but also the multilingual mode of writing allows us to identify non-Western cultural resonances in the English-written passages of *Freshwater*. These can be read as Emezi following the tradition of other postcolonial writers, such as the Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe. He formulated this strategy in his influential essay 'The African writer and the English language', in which he argues that it is good to use English for writing because it allows the work to reach more both African and non-African readers. However, this does not mean that one should write in Standard English. Achebe (1975, p. 100) suggests "fashioning out an English which is at once universal and able to carry [the writer's] peculiar experience". He proposes using language that, through the choice of style, vocabulary, and grammar, keeps "*in character*" (p. 102, original emphasis) with the source culture.

Emezi's (2018a) decision to keep their text 'in character' might stem from their "very deliberate choice to narrate the story from a different centre". This centre is not only non-Western but also "non-human" (2018a), and this positioning is evident in the language choices. The text is written primarily in English but avoids 'the oppressor's

language' with its culturally specific and potentially marginalising connotations. Stating that "Ada in the book is an ogbanje, period. She's not even human, so human labels don't apply to her", Emezi (2019) makes clear that they refuse to subscribe to the Western conceptualisation of identity and personhood. By not using terminology related to the Western understanding of gender, sexuality, race, and postcoloniality in *Freshwater*, they seem not to endorse these concepts. Read through this Western human lens, the text discusses a protagonist in the process of discovering her non-normative gender and sexual identity and eventually undergoing gender-affirming surgery. The text of *Freshwater*, however, does not employ such vocabulary when describing Ada and other characters; for example, Ada's cousin is described as a man who "dated men" (Emezi, 2018c, p. 166). Furthermore, Ada binding her chest before the top surgery is described as the "preparation for a shedding" (p. 188) and the surgery itself as a "carving" (pp. 186, 189) by the spirits. While the former phrase employs the metaphor of a snake, which plays a prominent role in the narrative as both the embodiment of Ada's god mother Ala and the symbol of time and transformation, the word 'carving' evokes associations of working with materials rather than with a human body. These poetic descriptions create a detachment from the embodied experience they describe and consequently foreground the perception of Ada as not only a non-Western but also a non-human individual.

There are rare occasions when Western terminology appears in the text, but it is always in some way marked as an outsider language. It is evoked by Ada when she tries to diagnose or label her condition and consults medical professionals; the spirits, nevertheless, make clear that such terms are strange and foreign to them:

The Ada used a therapist to assist our carving plan and we discovered that humans had medical words – terms for what we were trying to do – that there were procedures, gender reassignment, transitioning.

This distance from medical terminology is also indicated by the use of quotation marks in a passage where Asughara comments that Ada “looking up her ‘symptoms’ ... felt like a betrayal” (p. 139). Quotes like this draw a distinction between the spirits’ perspective and the perspective of the Western medical professionals and show Ada oscillating between these positions attempting to understand her experience. Another example when Western terminology appears again shows the word as coming from an outsider: a man Ada talks to in a bar who reacts to a comment about her female lover with “You’re too pretty to be gay” (p. 204). Ada eventually rejects the man, and the whole episode emphasises his misunderstanding of her identity, not only in terms of gender and sexuality but also spirituality. The passages when either Ada or someone else attempts to characterise her feelings, identity, and relationships through the Western vocabulary always carry this sense of misunderstanding and disjuncture between these words and what they are supposed to address. When the spirits narrate these situations, their disbelieving and irritated reactions clearly indicate distance from these words.

In *Freshwater*, the purposeful marking and distancing from, or the absence of a particular vocabulary and register are strategies of writing in ‘the oppressor’s language’ while avoiding its oppressive connotations and recreating the language as a site of resistance. bell hooks’ argument that “we may learn from spaces of silence as well as spaces of speech” (1994, p. 174) highlights how these absences gain meaning and are equally telling as the inclusion of Igbo words.

Conclusion

Audre Lorde (1983, p. 94) famously said: “[t]he master’s tools will never dismantle master’s house”. Akwaeke Emezi’s *Freshwater* and Zahra Patterson’s *Chronology* are texts that attempt to do exactly that: writing in and about English, the authors seek ways to challenge and subvert its

oppressiveness and to utilise it to describe their experiences and identities situated between different cultures, languages, genders, and desires. The present article discussed the various intersecting goals, both political and aesthetic, that the authors achieve through the employment of multilingual elements and writing ‘in character’ with the source culture, a strategy perceived here as continuous with a multilingual mode of writing. These strategies allow Emezi and Patterson to convey that Western views on identity, genders, and sexual relationships are not universal, and the related Western terminology cannot fully capture relationships and identities originating in an African context. Analysed passages also powerfully demonstrate how absences and silences gain meaning when the available and understandable vocabulary is inadequate. Through the employment of multilingualism, both authors also emphasise the hybridity and liminality of their identities: Ada’s position as a non-Western and a non-human individual, and Zahra’s in-betweenness of neither complete insider nor outsider in the culture and language they explore. Finally, emphasising the impossibility of disconnecting the political from the intimate and erotic, both narratives demonstrate that multilingual elements allow for creating sites of intimacy to overcome the alienation of ‘the oppressor’s language’. While Emezi’s Igbo words evoke a sense of domesticity and establish a connection with an Igbo-speaking reader, Zahra’s engagement with Liepollo’s language in the translation process recreates the intimacy that is no longer accessible.

Writing in *Chronology* and *Freshwater* foregrounds the language as a separate entity and makes the reader realise that language is not always clear and uncomplicated; rather, it is complex, imperfect, and imbued with tension. Embracing the impossibility of understanding is always a challenging choice for those in a position of precarity. Judith Butler (2009, p. ii) reminds us that those who live their genders in unintelligible ways are always endangered. These dangers, both the epistemological and the everyday physical one, are only greater for queer individuals with intersectional identities. There is a courage in not

explaining, not translating – both in terms of language and culture, and not making the identities and intimate experiences readily accessible to the reader.

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