"One Foot on the Other Side": An Africanfuturist Reading of Irenosen Okojie's Butterfly Fish (2015) and Akwaeke Emezi's Freshwater (2018)

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Abstract

This essay argues that Africanfuturism is present in a much wider range of African literature than just those texts with science-fictional or speculative themes. Rather, Africanfuturism is a method of storytelling and of literary criticism that centres African ways of being and thinking and, against inherited traditions that render them science-fictional, affirms that they are real. This essay reads Irenosen Okojie's *Butterfly Fish* (2015) and Akwaeke Emezi's *Freshwater* (2018) as Africanfuturist texts that unsettle inherited categories of the human and of gender. Their sibling kinship sets new terms for the "what is and will be" of the continent's material, relational, spiritual, and literary futures.

> "I wanted the literature I wrote to...go straight to where the soil was, where the fertility was in the landscape... I stood at the border, stood at the edge, and claimed it as central. I claimed it as central, and let the rest of the world move over to where I was."
> – Toni Morrison

Africanfuturism, the term coined by writer Nnedi Okorafor, is typically reserved for conversations about African science and speculative fiction, genres that have proliferated in the 21st century. Often, Africanfuturism is situated as the descendant of Afrofuturism[1], Mark Dery's term for "[s]peculative fiction that treats African-American themes and addresses African-American concerns", in part because Okorafor uses his term to define her own (Dery, 1994: 180).

> The difference is that Africanfuturism is specifically and more directly rooted in African culture, history, mythology, and point-of-view.... Africanfuturism does not HAVE to extend beyond the continent of Africa,

> though often it does. Its default is non-western; its default/center is African. This is distinctly different from "Afrofuturism." (Okorafor, 2019)

On one hand, this definition illustrates a common critical posture that, in K'eguro Macharia's words, "always starts by negating the presumed 'is' of African literature: not ethnography, not tradition, not sociology, not western…not hybrid, not (choose your term)" (Samatar et al., 2015). This voiding or "MAKING-nothing" turns African literature into a genre category and Africanfuturism its even further derivative (Samatar et al., 2015). On the other hand, Okorafor's definition centres the African continent in the imagination and creation of something new. In Macharia's words, the "nothing" can become a speculative something, "a different kind of starting point" for a method that imagines and enacts a literature centred around African culture, history, reality, and point-of-view (Samatar et al., 2015).[2]

An Africanfuturist method acknowledges the reality of those aspects of ontology and life experience that have been classed as deviant, magical, speculative, or science fictional. Etymologically, its intervention addresses both spatial and temporal scales. South African writer Mohale Mashigo, whose fiction and essays have also contributed to defining Africanfuturism, notes the importance of geographic specificity: Africanfuturism draws on histories, cultures, philosophies, and spiritualities which are "divergent for each country on the continent" (Mashigo, 2018: xi). If this is what an Africanfuturist method can be, it surely encompasses a range of literature far larger than that containing science and speculative themes; indeed, it extends to any text in which an African writer envisions a future that centres the African continent and its epistemologies and lifeworlds. In what follows, I read Irenosen Okojie's *Butterfly Fish* (2015) and Akwaeke Emezi's *Freshwater* (2018)—two debuts that could hardly be classed as science fiction—as Africanfuturist texts. As part of an emerging literary canon setting the terms of "what is and can/will be" in the future of African literature, these works embody a sibling intertextuality that draws on continental epistemologies to ground narratives of non-humanness, inheritance, and spiritual emergence.

Irenosen Okojie's debut novel *Butterfly Fish* (2015) brings together four narrative voices, locations, and times. The novel opens with the suicide attempt of its primary protagonist Joy, a British-Nigerian woman in contemporary London, after the death of her mother. Amidst her recovery, Joy inherits a mysterious collection of family possessions and receives visits from a ghost who has travelled

from the 19th century Kingdom of Benin, another of the novel's space-times.[3] Besides this pre-colonial setting, the novel also includes sections focalised on Joy's mother, Queenie in 1970s London and Queenie's father, Peter in 1950s colonial Nigeria. Shuffling between the present and different pasts, *Butterfly Fish* narrates multiple temporalities on concurrent, kaleidoscopic tracks. Characters in different space-times have similar interactions with particular objects—a palm wine bottle, a bronze bust and key, a fish—that move "on the back of time" and through holes in time, accreting layers of traumatic experience (Okojie, 2015: 162). With the ghost Anon's help, Joy travels back in time to Benin and discovers that the events in her life and in her family's history for which she has failed to find medical or psychological explanations are connected to the inherited bust. Cast in Benin, the bust carries a curse that intensifies with each generation. After a discovery about her parents, and a second suicide attempt where she loses an arm, the novel concludes with Joy's homecoming to Nigeria. She travels to Benin Castle, buries the bust and her ghost, and starts a new life as a village craftsperson.

Freshwater (2018) is Akwaeke Emezi's debut work and was initially billed as a novel, though Emezi has since reframed the book as "~5% fiction…and the rest is straight memoir from a spirit first perspective" (Emezi, 2020).[4] Like *Butterfly Fish*, it opens with a making-nothing moment: two spirits are violently torn from their world and made to live within the human body of the protagonist Ada.[5] Ada is an *ọgbanje*, a spirit child in Igbo ontology, but her experience is unique because her body holds a collection of spirits rather than just one—a pair of brother-sister spirits named Shadow and Smoke, the deviant and bold Asụghara, and a meek male alter-ego, St. Vincent. The spirits "hatch" within Ada, often during moments of trauma, and the book renders this breaking open and habitation formally: Ada's body is inhabited by spirits as the text is by sections in different narrative voices. Initially, Ada is voiceless, preferring the spirits to speak on her behalf and to mark her body with tattoos, cuts, breast removal, and suicide attempts. Ada's sense of time is characterised by breaks, jumps, and memory lapses when she is absent from her own body; in contrast, the spirits within her pass fluidly between the borders of life and death. The novel culminates in Ada's acceptance that she is both an *ọgbanje* and a child of Ala (the goddess of earth, fertility, creativity, and the underworld in the Igbo Odinani pantheon) when she returns to Lagos from America. She realises "how useless it had been to try and become a singular entity" and "[lets] go of being human" (Emezi, 2018: 219, 225).

Butterfly Fish and *Freshwater* centre female and non-gendered African bodies that exist outside the categories constructed by universal humanism and its idea of the human built on the negation of gendered, raced, and differently-abled bodies.[6] Thinkers like Achille Mbembe and Sylvia Wynter have observed that "our present genre of the human, *Man*" is overdetermined by "the ethno-class or Western bourgeois biocentric descriptive statement of the human", the White bourgeois subject, typically male, who is also the primary protagonist of and audience for European and American science fiction (SF) (Wynter, 2006: 117). The "revalorisation of black peoples"—in other words, a liveable future for Black people—is only possible with the "no less systemic revalorisation of the human being itself, outside the necessarily devalorising terms" of universal humanism (Wynter, 2006: 119). In other words, we need new ways and stories of refiguring the human outside the epistemologies and ontologies of Western biologics and colonial definitions of gender. In her book, *The Invention of Gender*, African feminist Oyèrónkẹ́ Oyěwùmí asks, "Women? What women? Who qualifies to be a woman in this cultural setting, and on what basis are they identified?" (Oyěwùmí, 1997: 16). Oyěwùmí emphasises the long history of gender as a tool of colonial imposition and the ways it has excluded many expressions of womanhood in preservation of a narrow definition derived from Western experience. She argues that biology is socially constructed and therefore inseparable from the social—the national, communal, and societal spaces one's body exists within. Similarly, writing of African expressions of queerness, B Camminga notes the absence of a binary and universalist understanding of gender and the rarity of language like "switching", a term "grounded in the Global North", among trans and non-binary Africans (Camminga, 2020: 824). Camminga suggests that African uses and experiences of terms like "woman", "queer", and "transgender" must be "geo- and corpo-politically situated…[and] must expand and transform to fit experiences and actualities" (Camminga, 2020: 825). Both *Butterfly Fish* and *Freshwater* abandon the terms of universalism and take care to centre female and non-gendered African bodies within African social and spiritual environments. Using continental epistemologies to structure embodied relationships and to lay to rest the personal and communal inheritances of the past, *Butterfly Fish* and *Freshwater* are Africanfuturist texts that bring future worlds into being.

In *Butterfly Fish*, Joy is the centre of an intimate and proximate network of non-human objects and a ghost moving through time. Their "unsettling co-existence" does not humanise the objects but rather un-humans Joy, who finds the boundaries between different temporalities and the human and non-human increasingly blurred (Okojie, 2015: 113). When she attempts to make sense of her experience through doctor visits, "anti-depressants and anti-anxiety medication", she feels like "a stranger in my own body" (Okojie, 2015: 82, 268). She identifies with butterflies pinned behind glass in a museum, and a friend tells her she is in the "pupa stage" (Okojie, 2015: 144). With the same friend, she scoops a fish from the water of her local London pool, gives it "mouth-to-mouth resuscitation", and plucks a brass key from his mouth, which she later compares to a "tapered brown feminine finger" (Okojie, 2015: 24, 25). She uses the key to time travel to Benin, where

> I found myself on…[a] short copper-toned flight of steps…. Brass artefacts were mounted on the walls near the stairwell…. I'd been thrown into something incongruous, like a piece of time landing in a glass bowl…. [The Oba] washed his hands in a metallic bowl, feverishly muttering (Okojie, 2015: 114-15).

Joy's time travel reveals that the Oba is the original target of the curse, which is spun by his father and his murdered childhood friend, and which moves through time attached to bronze objects. Joy returns from Benin to the present using the key from the fish, one of the "hundreds [that] lay on the red earth" outside the Oba's castle, and travels through time to Joy's present (Okojie, 2015: 203). Akin to the Nigerian mudfish, a species both mythical and real that survives ecological disaster "by crawling on land or burying itself in the mud of the streambed" (Smithsonian National Museum of African Art, 2005), the fish follows the same temporal trajectory as Joy's ghost, who begins the novel as one of the Oba's wives. Tracing the movement of objects like the key and fish through the motif of intergenerational inheritance makes visible the novel's framework of linked temporalities and histories. Inheritance gives form and meaning to what Mbembe calls the "entangled time" of "interlocking of presents, pasts, and futures", the re-emergence of centuries of gendered feudal and colonial violence as ghosts, sexual violence, and suicidal ideation in the present (Mbembe, 2001: 16).

Earth metals like copper and brass play a significant role in *Butterfly Fish*, part of the novel's excavation of an extractive economy with both African and European actors. The Oba obsesses over a new road to bring "more trade for Benin [and] labour" for those who come to the palace "begging for scraps" (Okojie, 2015: 47-48). Beneath the surface of the Oba's splendour is his greed: two concealed murders, and debts to European traders. When he commissions a bust cast from extracted metal to assuage his guilt, the land and its inhabitants go into mourning: children do not sleep for days and wander aimlessly, "tiny brass tears [falling] from the corners of their eyes" (Okojie, 2015: 57). *Butterfly Fish* overlays the history of the Oba's bust with Britain's theft of the Benin Bronzes in 1897, which inaugurated the colonial occupation of Edo State. When Peter is coerced into murdering a fellow Nigerian soldier 60 years later and then compensated with the bust, the novel clearly draws connections between non-human subjects and non-human matter within the context of colonial discourse: Peter is just as disposable, just as much an object to possess and dispose of, as the earth's metal. European and American SF have long mined colonial histories and tropes for their plots and descriptive details. One of Africanfuturism's key interventions, both in its texts and as a way of reading, is to emphasise and account for the legacy of racial capitalism's geo-logic[7] and to emphasise the yoked "exploitation of African peoples [and] the despoilation of the African environment" (Iheka, 2017: 20).

Butterfly Fish uses material and spiritual geographies to unsettle the inheritances of past knowledge formations, traumas, and their effects. In addition to stone, liquid geographies and watery landscapes structure non-human, Africanfuturist practices of "world making in the present" (Yusoff, 2018: 63). Initially, water functions as the conductor of the curse's repetitive violence. Peter carries out the murder by drowning, and years later Queenie replicates the drowning with Joy, "pushing [her] shoulders down...shoving [her] head under water" (Okojie, 2015: 325). This is a desperate attempt to erase the evidence of Queenie's rape by her own father. Joy's attempted suicide by drowning also endeavours to repeat this violence, but she is saved when the water communicates with her neighbour through the pipes: "How do you think I knew you were in trouble that day? It was the water that alerted me" (Okojie, 2015: 181). Later, Joy has violent underwater sex in the "small liquid country" of her bathtub, effectively bringing together a confluence of traumatic pasts (Okojie, 2015:

265). Following Frantz Fanon's argument that colonialism's "native principle" of repetition without difference places Africans outside humanity, the creation of new forms of non-human life and African futures requires subverting the law of repetition, or enacting repetition with difference. Queenie and Joy's relationships to water repeat Peter's act differently, gradually moving toward less deadly and less violent modes. The novel's conclusion hinges upon the spiritual relationship of three women across time—Joy, her mother, and the ghost—and brings together its lithic and liquid environments. Joy and Anon return the metal to the earth, laying the past history of extraction to rest in order to make another set of relations possible. In this new world, Joy has an embodied relationality in a rural Nigerian landscape. Her differently-abled body is valued, and she participates in an artistic rather than biologic reproductive economy. In the novel's closing scene, Joy holds her father's diary, "open[s] the pages and [sits] under water, waiting to begin again" (Okojie, 2015: 344). In this future, water is an environment where Joy can hold the inheritances of the past without being overcome by or replicating them. Joy's presence at both the interstices and endpoint of this inheritance, within co-constituted times and spaces, and in relationship with non-human others, is an embodied vision of an African future.

In *Freshwater,* Ada is similarly the centre of a non-human, spiritual lifeworld with significant connections to particular landscapes and histories. In his book *Of Water and the Spirit* (1995), Malidoma Patrice Somé writes about his journey to rediscover the realities of African spiritual life after years of European colonial education. Colonialism not only erased African languages, forms of governance, religion, and culture, but also rendered African ontologies and ways of being outside time and unreal, perhaps even science fictional. Ada, who is largely raised and educated in Western settings, initially has little experience holding multiple realities and spiritualities within a fleshly, human body. Her spirits are also unfamiliar with human form, which they call a "crazed timeline of embodiment" (Emezi, 2018: 186). They relate to Ada's body as "a house…[with] walls of flesh and liquid" that is simultaneously a trap, a tool, and a subject to protect (Emezi, 2018: 4). They organise time to accommodate their desires and modify Ada's body to suit their needs. The brother-sisters' particular vice is Ada's blood, and they order their narrated chapters to focalise moments of self-harm, shuffling, and remixing Ada's pre-teen, teenage, and college years. Asụghara emphasises her sexual encounters

in Ada's body, first appearing when Ada is raped in college. While she frames embodiment as protection, she often appropriates the language of sexual violence:

> The first thing I did was step forward so I could see through [Ada's] eyes... when I flooded through, she spread herself open and took me in without hesitation...she absorbed me fiercely, all the way; she denied me nothing (Emezi, 2018: 61, 71).

By contrast, Vincent takes Ada's slim body and fashions "a dreambody with reorganised flesh and a penis complete with functioning nerves and expanding blood vessels" (Emezi, 2018: 122). When Vincent floods through, "he kisse[s] women with Ada's mouth"; when Asụghara sleeps with male "bodies in backseats and hostel beds and living room floors" (Emezi, 2018: 164, 186). Asụghara pushes Ada to a suicide attempt, hoping it will return her to the spirit world; when it fails, the brother-sisters accept "that this body was ours too" and "change the Ada into us", removing her breasts and all signs of her fertility, since *ọgbanjes* are averse to reproduction (Emezi, 2018: 187). For Ada's spirits, the boundaries between times, genders, and other human categories are fluid and permeable, a continuum to be shape-shifted across and through and beyond. When Ada gives up being "a singular entity" and learns to control "how we moved," *Freshwater* emerges as a formally polyvocal work of spiritual embodiment and shifts the centre from human to spirit forms of knowing and being (Emezi, 2018: 219).

Freshwater's lithic landscape takes on psychological and spiritual dimensions. Like the novel itself, which holds a multiplicity of non-human beings, voices, and temporalities together, Ada's mind is a pantheon, "this marble room that you call your mind" (Emezi, 2018: 48). Western psychoanalysis might diagnose Ada's marble mind as a crypt, "a secret tomb inside the subject" in which unacknowledged trauma is "buried alive" (Abraham and Torok, 1994: 130). Yet its substance links the marble room to the *iyi-ụwa*, the *ọgbanje* spirits' construction of "bits of bone, an igneous rock, worn-out velveteen, [tied with] a strip of human hide...that says we will come back, that we will not stay in this world" (Emezi, 2018: 14). Typically buried in the ground, Ada's *iyi-ụwa* is hidden in various crevices of her body, a body that weathers significant physical and emotional struggle to stay alive. But the marble is also Ada's only safe place, its "cool veined white walls and floors" the place she retreats to when the spirits overtake her body, the place she talks to Yshwa, or Jesus (Emezi, 2018: 75).

The stone pantheon structures the relationship between non-human spirits and deities within Ada's body, her "marbled flesh" (Emezi, 2018: 126). This is not to discount the violence Ada endures, nor to dismiss her efforts to make sense of her experience using medical and psychoanalytical language. Rather *Freshwater* makes an important observation: that psychoanalysis' method of un-burying, or trying to excavate, aspects of African realities can mimic the colonial geo-logics of extraction. *Freshwater*'s lithic landscape, or stone space, suggests the work's ability to hold multiple orders to knowledge and ways of being together without contradiction—in other words, its Africanfuturism—all the while focalising the Igbo ontology and spiritual materiality within which Ada ultimately finds her true home. In Ada's case, the stone space that is centred within and extends beyond the body accommodates a multiplicity of embodiments she learns to shuffle through and control with the help of an indigenous spiritual community.

Ada centres herself within Igbo ontology and uses liquid geographies and forms to shape her non-human future. The most important of these is the python, the animal form of the goddess Ala: "All freshwater comes out of the mouth of a python", and all forms of water are connected, so all the embodiments of Ada's life are held within and in relation to Ala (Emezi, 2018: 9). From within a "silver and cool" place of Ala's watery womb where Ada is "suspended and rocked," she is guided to

> Curve in on yourself.... You will form the inevitable circle, the beginning that is the end. This immortal space is who and where you are, shapeshifter. Everything is shedding and everything is resurrection" (Emezi, 2018: 224).

The circularity Ala represents is not repetitive but multiple, layered, and embodied. It brings the past and the future into continuity within the circular snakeskin, coiling time around itself in a shimmering braid. Ada is a shapeshifter deity at the centre of a constellation of non-human spirits in interconnected relation. This circular, liquid space-time is a "framework of possibility [for] different forms of life," for a future structured around forms of African spiritual knowledge that recognize the power of non-gendered, queer, shapeshifting bodies outside economies of reproduction (Mbembe, 2015). This new world makes it possible for Ada to finally emerge as a full speaking subject. Not just the godchild of the spring, she is its source: "All freshwater comes out of my mouth" (Emezi, 2018: 226).

The positive resolutions of both *Butterfly Fish* and *Freshwater* hinge on their protagonists' return to the African continent, crossing "the damp roaring ocean" of the Atlantic to arrive in Nigeria after years in England and America (Emezi, 2018: 46). In Caribbean slang, "freshwater" refers to someone who affects an accent after a short or non-existent visit to a colonial metropole, and, in a sense, both works trace the homecoming of characters who have experienced a distancing from African realities. Joy and Ada might also initially appear to be Afropolitans, the term coined by Taiye Selasi to refer to "the newest generation of African emigrants...not citizens, but Africans, of the world" (Selasi, 2005: 36). While *Butterfly Fish* and *Freshwater* share Afropolitanism's sense of multiplicity and movement, the importance of specific geographic locations, and the desire to "*define* our relationship to the places we live", they do not engage the problem of the nation from which Selasi's term is generated (Selasi, 2005: 37). Rather, these works' interest in place is specific to the sites that will bring them healing and the knowledge they need to survive. Hence, Joy travels directly to Benin Castle in Edo State to "bury the brass head deep in the ground" (Okojie, 2015: 342). Restoring the metal to the earth not only lays the curse to rest but begins to change the land back to "royal land" (Okojie, 2015: 341). Relocating to a village near the castle, Joy learns to make pepper soup and crafts market scenes from found objects as "a kind of therapy", building a creative future outside the curse (Okojie, 2015: 343). In *Freshwater*, Ada meets a Yoruba priest and Igbo historian who teach her the "many connotations" of her name (Emezi, 2018: 225). They teach her to finally "[let] go of being human" and to embrace her multiplicity and divinity (Emezi, 2018: 225). While this happens in Lagos and not "back in the Southeast where we were first born", what seems most important is Ada's relationship to the land itself and to its spirit: "some things must happen on home soil if they are to happen at all" (Emezi, 2018: 211). Both the Edo village and a Lagos hotel room are geographically specific, chosen spaces from which a new non-reproductive future emerges.

As narratives of return, *Butterfly Fish* and *Freshwater* also shed new light on the relationship between genres like Afro- and African-futurism. Sofia Samatar notes that Afrofuturist critics like Dery and Afrofuturist media rarely "glance toward Africa except as a lost realm, the site of the massive alien abduction of the slave trade" (Samatar, 2017: 176). While neither Joy nor Ada are direct descendants

of alien abductees, their journeys register aspects of West African histories of abduction and enslavement and the ways the sea acts as both graveyard abyss and womb in African diasporic imaginaries.[8] *Butterfly Fish* and *Freshwater* emphasise particular locations of return (be they diasporic, familial, spiritual, economic, political, or otherwise) and claim the experiences they narrate as real, not science fictional. Literary critic Wai Chee Dimock suggests we see genres like Afrofuturism and Africanfuturism "not [as] taxonomic classes…but fields at once emerging and ephemeral" (Dimock, 2007: 1379). A new literary criticism that embraces this could be "more fluid…putting less emphasis on the division of knowledge and more on its kinships, past, present, and future" (Dimock, 2007: 1379). Thinking beyond inherited categories reveals a kind of "generic wateriness"]" between Afrofuturism, Africanfuturism, and African literature more broadly (Dimock, 2007: 1379). Dimock suggests that literary criticism that works across genres—between *Butterfly Fish* and *Freshwater*, for example—develops relationships of "extended kinship" based on "detailed and precise…micro evidence" at the levels of form, textuality, and spirit (Dimock, 2007: 1382). Rather than genealogical and derivative, the connections between Afrofuturism and Africanfuturism are co-constituted and symbiotic; texts related as sibling kin rather than parent and child.

As an embodied metaphor, sibling kinship revises African literary criticism, which often maintains hierarchical relationships between literary theory and genre theory like SF, and between literary ancestors (typically male) and their descendants. The sibling relationship between *Butterfly Fish* and *Freshwater* relates a concept and way of reading drawn from genre fiction and SF to a work of literary fiction and a literary memoir. This Africanfuturist method emphasises the relationship of these texts to each other rather than to Nigerian patriarchs of the spirit child or African magical realism like works by Chinua Achebe and Ben Okri. Extending *Butterfly Fish* and *Freshwater*'s sibling kinship even further could initiate exciting comparisons with the works of Helen Oyeyemi, Chinelo Okparanta, Eloghosa Osunde, and Francesca Ekwayasi, among others.

Africanfuturism breaks open the boundaries between genres and invites new ways of reading for the future within a greater number of literary texts. Reading *Butterfly Fish* and *Freshwater* as Africanfuturist kin makes visible and perhaps brings into being worlds of liberated expression for African women and differently abled and non-human subjects now and in the future. With texts like these as

our guides, the future may be bent differently, less over-determined by inherited categories of sex, gender, the human, and the nation, and instead centred on African forms of embodiment, knowledge, and ontology. The futures these works enact for their protagonists are also possible for African literary criticism more broadly. Africanfuturism creates multiple routes from the "what has been" into an African-centred "what is and can/will be." What possibilities lie there, in the future, are the writers' and ours to build.

Notes

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Endnotes

1. For definitions of Afrofuturism beyond Dery, see Adriano Elia, *The Languages of Afrofuturism*. University of Salento (2015), available at https://doi.org/10.1285/i22390359v12p83; Kodwo Eshun, "Further Considerations of Afrofuturism", *CR: The New Centennial Review*, 3: 2 (2003), 287–302, available at https://doi.org/10.1353/ncr.2003.0021; and Ytasha Womack, *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture*, Chicago Review Press (2013).
2. Namwali Serpell notes the *ex nihilo* moment—emergence from nothing or rather emergence from the presumed nothing—that begins Nnedi Okorafor's novel *Lagoon* (2014), arguably the novel where Okorafor enacts her definition of Africanfuturism mostly directly. See Namwali Serpell, "Afrofuturism: Everything and Nothing", *Public Books* (2016), available at https://www.publicbooks.org/afrofuturism-everything-and-nothing/.
3. The Kingdom of Benin corresponds to present-day Edo State, Nigeria.
4. In further support of *Freshwater* as autobiography or memoir, the book gives

the meaning of Ada's name as "the egg of a python…the flesh form of the god Ala" (Emezi, 2018: 9). Ada is the name traditionally given to firstborn Igbo daughters, while Akwaeke, the writer's name, combines the Igbo words for egg (àkwá) and python (*éké*). I'm grateful to an audience comment at the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment conference for this insight.

5. This paper follows *Freshwater* in using female pronouns for Ada, but the writer Akwaeke Emezi is a non-human spirit without a gender. For more of Emezi's writing on this topic, see Akwaeke. Emezi, "Transition: My Surgeries Were a Bridge across Realities, a Spirit Customizing Its Vessel to Reflect Its Nature", *The Cut*, 19 January 2018, available at https://www.thecut.com/2018/01/writer-and-artist-akwaeke-emezi-gender-transition-and-ogbanje.html; Akwaeke Emezi, "Akwaeke Emezi On The Toni Morrison Quote That Changed Their Life", *Them* (2019), available at https://www.them.us/story/toni-morrison; and Maiysha Kai, "The Root Presents: It's Lit! Explores the Ethereal With Akwaeke Emezi", *The Root* (2021), https://www.theroot.com/it-s-a-spiritual-thing-the-root-presents-its-lit-exp-1847341151.
6. See Mbembe (2001) and Wynter (2006). Mbembe (2001) observes that "Africa as an idea, a concept, has historically served, and continues to serve, as a polemical argument for the West's desperate desire to assert its difference from the rest of the world" (2). Wynter (2006) adds that "gender role allocations mapped onto the biologically determined anatomical differences between male and female have been an indispensable function of the instituting of our *genres* or sociogenic *kinds* of being human" (117).
7. I borrow this term from Kathryn Yusoff's *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None* (2018). Yusoff understands geology as a category and practice of dispossession, a geo-logic of property that links raced bodies and landscapes through their inhumanity and, therefore, disposability (2018: 3). "[I]mperial and ongoing (settler) colonialisms" underpinned by a universal humanism, she writes, "have been ending worlds for as long as they have been in existence" (xiii).
8. For the ocean as grave and womb, see Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation* (trans. Betsy Wing), University of Michigan Press (1997). Many scholars have noted the importance of the (Atlantic) ocean within Afro-futurism, including

Ruth Mayer, "'Africa As an Alien Future': The Middle Passage, Afrofuturism, and Postcolonial Waterworlds", *Amerikastudien / American Studies*, 45: 4 (2000), 555–566, and Ytasha Womack, *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture*, Chicago: Lawrance Hills Books (2013). Creative works include *Mothership: Tales from Afrofuturism and Beyond* (ed. Bill Campbell and Edward Austin Hall), Rosarium Publishing (2013) and Rivers Solomon, *The Deep*, Saga Press (2020).

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