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A Novel of *Trans*formation: Transcultural and Transgender Crossroads in Olumide Popoola's *When We Speak of Nothing*

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Abstract: *This essay proposes a reading of Olumide Popoola's* When We Speak of Nothing (2017) *as a novel of* trans*formation. In slanting Mark Stein's reading of the black British bildungsroman as a 'novel of transformation,' this essay argues that Popoola's young adult novel interweaves formative processes of transgender and transcultural identity formation, establishing a dynamic, intersectional* trans*identity in its young British-Nigerian protagonist, Karl. The multiple literary and political forms that meet in the novel subvert understandings of the traditional bildungsroman's coming of age (and in this case coming out) as linear and teleological. Instead, the novel explores forms such as the gap and the crossroads, and proposes indeterminacy, circularity, and disruption as formative of* trans*identity formation and constitutive of alternative spatio-temporalities. Popoola's novel of* trans*formation gives voice to a young transcultural transgender community and symbolically claims space for their experiences to be acted and lived out both in Britain and Nigeria. As the novel draws on these different forms and frames of reference, it inscribes itself into multiple, overlapping (both British and Nigerian) textual lineages at once: folklore, estate fiction, and queer/trans writing.*

Keywords: Yoruba folklore, Esu Elegbara, Queer Nigerian literature, Transgender, Transculturality

1. Introduction: A novel of *trans*formation

During a 2019 keynote lecture titled "Postcolonial Activism and its Legibilities", professor, artist, and curator Awam Ampka used the Yoruba trickster deity Esu Elegbara as a theoretical primer for his talk.[1] According to Ampka, Esu's relevance lies not so much in his function as a worshipped deity but in the *idea* that Esu destabilizes, continuously deconstructs, and creates meaning through new assemblages. In what Ampka calls a resulting 'aesthetics of fragmentation', linear understandings of space and time are displaced and substituted by alternative spatio-temporalities that carry the potential to interweave past, present, and future. Through Esu we are invited to realize that in every crisis lies the opportunity for reinvention. Esu opens assumptions to continuous deconstruction, dispute, and re-interpretation.

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Olumide Popoola's 2017 novel *When We Speak of Nothing* speaks through Esu as its narrative voice. The young adult novel follows its two main characters and best friends, Karl and Abu, as both face the challenges of adolescence under very different circumstances. As narrator of the novel, Esu uses his role as tempter to (mis)guide both its readers as well as its protagonists as they go through their coming of age. Esu functions as a crucial frame of reference, especially for Karl's narrative. As the novel explores the identity formation of its British-Nigerian transgender protagonist, it spots and explores queer potentialities that are embedded in Yoruba culture through the figure and idea of Esu. At the same time, the text interweaves transcultural and transgender dimensions in a retelling of Yoruba folklore, queering heteronormative, binary, and linear understandings of belonging, desire, space-time, and the novelistic form. The novel also challenges the idea of reading texts through frameworks that are exclusively bound to specific geographies and cultural contexts. Playing on being read as multiple genres at once, the novel makes bold use of Esu's principles of indeterminacy and non-linearity in Yoruba philosophy as one example of how transcultural imaginaries can transgress and render porous (generic) boundaries as well as ideologies commonly attached to them.

Popoola's young adult novel lends itself to be read as a variant of what Sissy Helff has termed the 'transcultural *bildungsroman*'. Drawing on Wolfang Iser and Arjun Appadurai, Helff describes the transcultural imaginary that underpins such texts as "the amalgamation process of different cross-cultural social realities with manifold styles, writing traditions and literary imaginaries into a unique transcultural aesthetics, a transcultural imaginary" (2014, 27). This genre entails a variety of forms and often it is a "novel of migration in which the young hero has to grapple with his own transcultural heritage as much as with his aspirations to find a place of belonging in the modern world" (Helff 2014, 36). In *When We Speak of Nothing*, protagonist Karl, a London-born teenager, initially struggles both with his vexed situation in his home city London as well as with his ties to Nigeria, which to him are manifest in the stinging presence of his absent father. As a transgender boy who is being read as and bullied for 'looking soft' time and again by classmates out in the streets, Karl finds retreat, joy, and shelter in his friendship with Abu, whose family provides a surrogate to his own. Karl encounters acceptance, comfort, and warmth in the private space of Abu's apartment. Immensely frustrated with his own situation at home, Karl decides to seek out his father in Port Hartcourt. Although the encounters with his father remain unsatisfactory, other personal relationships Karl forges during his journeys establish in him a confident outlook on his identity. The novel's plot structure allows for the text to be read in the lineage of multiple genres at once. Although this essay forecloses an in-depth engagement with Abu's storyline in London, the novel can also be read in the tradition of British estate fiction. As the text continuously juxtaposes the two strands of the plot, interweaves them through the text messages between Karl and Abu, and conjoins them in the end again, it engages yet transgresses the idea to read the novel as 'either/or' and

instead suggests a transcultural reading that bears implications on both 'national' literary traditions at once.

The title of my essay conjures Mark Stein's reading of the black British *bildungsroman* as a 'novel of transformation'. Stein has convincingly argued that such texts re-imagine Britain and Britishness, respectively. According to him, black British texts thus actively partake in changing the nation as much as they engage with their protagonists' identities and belongings. He writes: "The black British novel of transformation, as I understand it, has a dual function: it is about the formation of its protagonists as well as the transformation of British society and cultural institutions" (2004, 22). As novels of transformation often construct new and predominantly disregarded subject positions, they simultaneously also create and form their own audiences and publics. The idea of (pro)claiming space is seminal to how Stein understands the novel of transformation:

> Apart from coming to terms with the protagonist's identity, the genre is about the *voicing* of this identity; the very voices become manifest through the novel. Thus the black British novel of transformation does not predominantly feature the privatist formation of an individual: instead, the text constitutes a symbolic act of carving out space, of creating a public sphere (2004, 30; emphasis in the original).

Popoola's novel certainly contains many of the features and trajectories Stein has singled out for black British texts from the 1990s and early noughties. It is noteworthy here that Stein's findings and Helff's conceptualization are, of course, not mutually exclusive. Instead, the novels of transformation Stein describes are necessarily transcultural – and often translocal. The diasporic traces in the texts make them move between cultures and blur the dichotomies between margin and center, unhinging understandings of home (country) as tied to single and exclusivist geographies. It is their unique crossings in terms of language use, writing styles, and epistemological frames of reference that render cultural boundaries porous and consequently the Britain they imagine a transcultural space.

In slightly slanting Stein's notion of the (transcultural) black British *bildungsroman*, I propose reading *When We Speak of Nothing* not only as a 'novel of transformation' but as one of *trans*formation. The text, as I put forth here, interweaves transcultural and transgender imaginaries, as it accompanies the formative processes of a dynamic, intersectional *trans*identity[2] in its young British-Nigerian protagonist, Karl. In her re-reading of traditional modernist fiction, Jessica Berman finds that transnational and transgender concerns are actually conjoined in some modernist novels. These "trans texts," as Berman calls them, can potentially challenge "prevailing assumptions about national belonging and scenes of reading, asking to be situated in the context of transnational modernism or twentieth-century 'world literature' at the same time as it raises the question of gender and sexual identity as a constitutive dimension of those critical categories" (Berman 2017, 218). Berman's reading of the transnational condition in Virginia Woolf's novel *Orlando* as also intrinsically transgender then, for

instance, "disrupts the determinative power of both the sexed body and its 'home' geography" (2017, 218). *When We Speak of Nothing*, albeit not a modernist novel in the traditional sense, also poses challenges to the concepts of both nation and gender in a transcultural twenty-first century setting, since Karl's travels from London to Port Harcourt and back are simultaneously formative of his transgender identity. In the novel of *trans*formation, the transcultural imaginaries of the black British bildungsroman reverberate and intersect with transgender forms: As the novel draws heavily on Yoruba cosmology, it explores the form of the crossroads to express the intersecting transcultural and transgender dimensions in the formative processes that the novel's protagonist, Karl, undergoes. The text's resulting *trans*imaginary thus actively contributes to *trans*forming both society and culture. Popoola's novel of *trans*formation thus gives voice to a young transcultural transgender community and symbolically claims space for their experiences to be acted and lived out both in Britain and Nigeria.

2. Filling in the gaps: Yoruba folklore meets the *bildungsroman*

At first glance, Popoola's novel seems to follow the archetypical structure of a classical *bildungsroman*: The text traces Karl's rocky journey from a shy, insecure, and introverted British-Nigerian transgender teenager to one who learns to openly and confidently embrace the intersectional layers of his *trans*identity in public. Although the focus on a black transgender boy is certainly already a subversion of the genre, the novel's plot – to an extent – seems to support the traditional notion of coming-of-age (and in this case also coming-out) as linear and teleological. Through the multiple forms that collide in the text (e.g. Yoruba folklore, transgender identities, transcultural imaginaries, the novel, the *bildungsroman* plot) however, we can understand how the *bildungsroman* is challenged and rewritten to imagine Karl's worlding processes. I understand forms here as "the many organizing principles that encounter one another inside as well as outside of the literary text" (Levine 2015, 16). Forms then emerge as "transhistorical, portable, and abstract, on the one hand, and material, situated, and political on the other" (Levine 2015, 11). In a literary text, for example, forms then collide rather than form causal relationships. A collision of forms is thus a "strange encounter between two or more forms that sometimes reroutes intention and ideology" (Levine 2015, 18). The novel is thus attentive to ideas of queer temporality that, in the words of Annamarie Jagose, is "a mode of inhabiting time that is attentive to the recursive eddies and back-to-the-future loops that often pass undetected or uncherished beneath the official narrations of the linear sequence that is taken to structure normative life" (2009, 158). Approaching *When We Speak of Nothing* from such a perspective helps me contour an understanding of the text as a novel of *trans*formation that conveys the formative processes of transgender and transcultural identity formations – while they are affected by linear, hierarchical, and teleological constraints nonetheless – to be productively entangled, circular, disruptive, and indeterminant.

In *When We Speak of Nothing*, the Yoruba deity Esu Elegbara – and its attendant principles of indeterminacy and flux – significantly frame the narrative. The text draws on various cultural traditions and, formally, its *trans*imaginary negotiates anew the boundaries between oral folklore and novelistic form as the text employs Esu as its narrator. According to Yoruba mythology, Esu Elegbara is an *orisa*, an embodied divine spirit. Watching over the crossroads between heaven and earth, Esu is the mediator between gods and humans. Moreover, Esu is the keeper of the *ase,*[3] the force the supreme deity Olodumare used to create the universe. As Orunmila, the Yoruba deity of wisdom and Esu's close companion, delivers the divine will and wisdom of Olodumare (*Ifá*) to the earthly sphere, knowledge is conferred from the *Ifá* divination, a multi-modal geomantic sign system used in and characteristic of Yoruba religious practice. In a "combination of geomancy and textual exegesis" (Gates Jr. 1988, 10), the *babalawos*, Yoruba priests, shuffle sixteen palm nuts sixteen times before the configurations that result from the shuffling are translated into corresponding literary verse from the *Odu Ifá*, the divination verses. During the ritual, Esu functions as metaphorical mediator and interpreter of the *Ifá*, which materializes in carvings of Esu on many *Ifá* divination trays. The trays are vertically and horizontally divided, "creating crossroads in the center of which Eshu, the master of dichotomies, dwells" (Flores-Pena 2016, 215). As Funso Aiyejina notes, "[w]ithout Esu to open the portals to the past and the future, Orunmila, the divination deity would be blind" (Aiyejina 2009, 4). It is thus Esu's potential as interrogator and interpreter through which knowledge can only emerge and come into view. Esu, especially in connection to their location at the crossroads of intersecting paths and spheres, lends themselves[4] to being read as the god of interpretation, chance, uncertainty, mobility, and fluidity.[5]

The figure of Esu Elegbara[6] has traveled widely and circulated across national and cultural boundaries, with variations of their worship still exercised today among the Fon in Benin (Legba), in Brazil (Exú), Cuba (Echu-Elgua), or Haiti (Papa Legba). In *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism*, Gates Jr. traces the correlations between the African-American topos of the signifying monkey and Esu's role in African and African diasporic mythologies. As Gates Jr. notes, the different variations of Esu still share many similarities, pointing out that "[w]ithin New World African-informed cultures, the presence of this topos, repeated with variations as circumstances apparently dictated, attests to shared belief systems maintained for well over three centuries, remarkably, by sustained vernacular traditions" (Gates Jr. 1988, 4). He especially highlights their mediating function as tricksters, with their mediations functioning as tricks on those who seek understanding (Gates Jr. 1988, 6). While Gates Jr.'s reading of Esu as a trickster deity is convincing, it is noteworthy that Ayodele Ogundipe points toward the rather loose affiliations and applications of the term 'trickster' that can encompass, among others, frauds, tempters, the devil, and sinister beings (Ogundipe 2012, 107). She identifies Esu as a 'tempter,' and distinguishes the *orisa* from the Native American Winnebago trickster

Wakdjunkaga and the animal trickster Tortoise in Yoruba folktales. According to Ogundipe, Wakdjunkaga is often depicted as pitiful and grotesque, and Tortoise as a weak animal who depends on its wit to survive dangerous situations. However, about Esu she writes:

> Èṣù is more of a tempter than a Trickster. He does not have to play tricks on people in order to survive. Èṣù has any number of ways of upsetting people to teach them a lesson or to put obstacles in their way to success, peace, and happiness. No matter that he lies or cheats or wears a disguise, it is usually for his own curious amusement rather than his only way out of a bad situation (Ogundipe 2012, 110).

Ogundipe thus understands Esu's mediations not as artifice, as trick, but as a means to understand the polyvalence, the indecisiveness and essential fluidity of what is being mediated. Be it as trickster or tempter, both interpretations of Esu perhaps especially lend themselves to worship in different geographical locations and for appropriation in different cultural contexts because their topos inherently emphasizes the indeterminacy and fluidity of interpretation. As a translocal mythological figure that has moved with African diasporas around the globe and that offers various interpretations, Esu has inspired many literary, dramatic, and poetic engagements, including, for instance, Femi Osofisan's novels and Nora Zeale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), which features the Haitian variant of Esu, Legba Attibon, as a liminal, gatekeeping figure.

Embodying the general principle of flux in Yoruba wisdom, sculptures of Esu often fluctuate between male and female form. As Ulli Beier notes,

> Esu is not only a potent man, he is simultaneously an attractive woman […] The fact that Esu can be represented either as male or female illustrates a basic component of his personality that can express itself in innumerable opposites and paradoxes. […] In the Yoruba world view nothing is final, nothing exclusive; everything is in a continuous state of flow; every image is subject to change; any symbol is subject to constant new interpretations (2001, 31).

These findings also link to Ogundipe's assertion in her seminal study *Esu Elegbara: Change, Chance, Uncertainty in Yoruba Mythology* that "he is certainly not restricted to human distinctions of gender or sex; he is at once both male and female" (2012, 97). Esu's sexuality is read as "ambiguous, contrary, and genderless" (2012, 97). However, what becomes obvious is that although not bound to one distinct gender alone, Esu seems to at least perpetuate stereotypical attributes of a gender binarism as, in their figurative meaning, they are "female when he is positive, attentive, conforming, predictable, and gentle; he is male when he is negative, inattentive, nonconforming, unpredictable, and ruthless" (2012, 97). It is thus at least questionable in how far Esu, in their folkloric tradition, really transgresses binary frameworks of sex and gender, or if their very existence still recurs on and flows between the dualistic poles of male and female. Symbolizing indeterminacy and flux, and thus alternative spatio-temporalities, the figure of Esu, however, embodies great potential in expressing transgender narratives, which Popoola creatively explores in her novel.

In When We Speak of Nothing, Esu themselves narrates the story of the two protagonists and best friends, Karl and Abu. The opening section of Popoola's novel retells a prominent Yoruba folklore tale, in which Esu, wearing a two-colored hat, tempts two friends to quarrel over the color of their headdress. The tale is commonly referenced when the idea of uncertainty and indeterminacy is mentioned with regard to Esu (Gates Jr. 1988; Beier 2001; Ogundipe 2012; Campbell 2016), and Bolaji Campbell further accentuates that the story conveys "the need for tolerance, patience, communication, and dialogue in fostering amicable and peaceful coexistence" (2016, 295). With regard to the double-sided nature of the hat, color "is shaped by the angle, condition, and perspective of one's vision, which invariably is influenced by an indeterminate array of multi-faceted variables" (Campbell 2016, 295). The text in Popoola's novel establishes Esu as a self-conscious, plurivocal narrator who reflects upon how people view them and who is very much aware of their own prominence in traditional folklore: "People talk about me, Esu Elegbara, the snail-shell dancer who scrambles all messages, who can speak in any tongue, take on any voice. They talk about me in hushed tones, afraid, confused. How I came one day and walked in-between the two friends' fields" (Popoola 2017, 5). The lines between narrator and narrated folklore become increasingly blurred as Esu themselves narrates the folkloric story of the two friends in the following and adopts the position of the griot:

> One was on my left, one on the right. I was wearing one of my favourite hats. Two-tone, you could call it. Multifaceted is another expression that springs to mind. It all depends on your position. Either way, I talked to both of them, exchanged pleasantries, cracked a few jokes. […] I stayed almost an hour before they returned to work, waving goodbye. In the evening I heard them arguing, right in the village square. They were calling each other names, accusing each other of lying. […] One was shouting about the man, me, with the black hat. The other was shouting back that he was blind, ignorant in fact. […] Not everything is the same everywhere. They couldn't see it at all. They shouted all night. In the morning, I showed them the hat (Popoola 2017, 5).

While the story Esu tells stays close to the folkloric source tale, the crucial difference is the use of first-person pronouns ("*I* was wearing one of my favorite hats"; own emphasis) and the introspective commentary ("They couldn't see it at all") which clearly fashions Esu as being in control of their own narrative. Esu thus implicates themselves as first-person narrator in the practice of storytelling they initially reflected upon.

Beyond Esu's opening recount of the tale, *When We Speak of Nothing* in its entirety can be read as a retelling of the folkloric tale. In fact, Esu functions as narrator not only in his opening account but throughout the novel. They recede into the background and become almost indistinguishable from the other characters because Esu adopts the different varieties the characters speak, since they can "speak in any tongue, take on any voice" (Popoola 2017, 5). At times, Esu cautiously exposes themselves to the reader, not only blurring the boundaries between heterodiegetic and homodiegetic narrator but signaling that they are

still narrating – and in control of – the story. When Karl and Abu are beaten up by local bullies early in the story, the text reads: "That same Abu who was so messy at home yet jeans ironed and all – that Abu got his jewels kicked. Very neatly. Karl? *My boy* was being dismantled by the leader of the threesome, his hands on Karl's wrists, banging him into a corner between a wall and a fence" (Popoola 2017, 8; own emphasis). The narrator's brief comment, 'my boy,' reveals that Esu, most of the time an extradiegetic narrator with variable internal focalization in the novel, is at play and lends the text its distinct plurivocal narrative voice. Simultaneously, 'my boy' here hints at a unique solidarity between Esu and Karl. Esu's relationship to Karl also manifest in the form of fictional dictionary entries in the text which mediate Karl's inner feelings to the reader. These entries often conjour the common lexical definition of a word and rewrite it according to Karl's perspective or feelings. As the phonetic transcriptions use the inner-city variety spoken among London's youth,[7] – "/rerɪˈzɛnteɪʃən/" (Popoola 2017, 8), for example – the entries mediate between Karl and the reader, sensitizing them not only for the language of London's multi-ethnic working-class youth but for possible worlding processes of a black transgender boy. This moreover stresses that in Yoruba cosmology, Esu embodies the ambiguities of figurative language use. For instance, the definition for "representation" (the first entry in the novel) reads: "1. Not just the state of being represented but of adding to, connecting. / 2. The description or portrayal of someone in a particular way" (Popoola 2017, 8). Here, the text calls for an acknowledgement of Karl's transgender identity as an addition to the dominant pallet of representation, with the novel actively filling a gap in representation. A second early entry in the novel reflects on the very idea of 'form:'

> Form /fɔːm/noun
> 1. The visible shape or configuration of something.
> 2. A particular way of appearance.
>
> verb
> 1. Bring together parts, all sorts, internal, external.
> 2. To create the whole, or the intention. (Popoola 2017, 14)

The text here again alludes to the 'visible' 'and whole' (metaphorically standing for Karl's visible outer appearance) as predominantly determinant of what outsiders take at face value. At the same time, these meta comments also speak about the form(s) of the text which, very much like Karl learns throughout the novel, defy the endeavours to create something that is predominantly understood to be 'whole' or 'unified.'

The way Yoruba folklore, the figure of Esu, the *bildungsroman* plot, and its transgender dimensions meet in *When We Speak of Nothing* queers the conventional *bildungsroman*. In so doing, the novel, for instance, employs the form of the 'gap' – often read rather negatively as 'something that is missing' – and uses it to draw attention to the gaps in transcultural transgender representations. Moreover, the gap is also equipped with a more subversive notion, affording for disruption as a

means of productive becoming in the course of the novel. The novel's emergent literary form often self-consciously plays with the reader. On the page, the recount of the folkloric tale that opens the novel resembles a short prologue. The tale starts mid-page without any heading or primary marker, and without page numbers. A blank page follows this section, and chapter 1 of the novel starts thereafter on yet another unnumbered page. Since Esu's tale only starts mid-page, its form forces readers to notice the blank space above it. The subsequent blank page sets opening section and chapter apart, but simultaneously visually parallels and enlarges the blank space above Esu's account of the tale. In turning attention to the first page of chapter 1, the reader notices that the running text of said chapter also starts mid-page, yet is framed by the chapter number and short verses above it. In comparing this page set-up to the opening section, the blank space and the missing peritextual elements demand attention. They force readers to notice the 'gap,' a motif and form that spikes the novel throughout. The gap affords to represent a variety of things in the novel: Karl's female genitalia, gaps in trans representation, but also gaps as disruptions, formative of Karl's own *trans*identity and constitutive of alternate, non-linear spatio-temporalities.

The first chapter's opening verses – "It is easy to be outnumbered / when you are lost in your tracks. / Keep close to the source." (Popoola 2017, 7) – lend themselves to being read as self-reflexive commentary on the palimpsestuous nature on the text itself. As pages without conventional numbering, the opening section and the first page of each chapter are, in fact, out-numbered and refuse the ordering principle of page numbering. In the story, two friends, Karl and Abu, also often find themselves outnumbered, for instance in their confrontations with bullying classmates several times throughout the novel. The line breaks further accentuate the idea of queering conventional form as they allow the verses to be read either as "It is easy to be outnumbered when you are lost in your tracks" or "when you are lost in your tracks, keep close to the source", thus transgressing the common politics of punctuation as regulatory demarcations. In this self-reflexive moment, the novel represents "allegorically the text's own processes of composition" (Merivale and Sweeney 1999, 2): It tells readers that while reading the novel, they should still bear in mind the folkloric source text – as narrated by Esu in the opening section. The commentary also informs readers that Esu's retelling turns attention toward the outnumbered voices and blank spaces that are often overlooked in both folklore and literature, in the case of Popoola's novel especially the story of British-Nigerian transgender character, Karl.

The short verses that precede the individual chapters also signal an instance in which Yoruba ritualistic practice collides with novelistic form. They lend themselves, I argue, to be read as substitutes for the aforementioned verses from the *Ifá* that the *babalawo* recites during the ritual as he translates the visual signs into the corresponding literary verse text. In reading the *Ifá*, these verses "function as riddles, which the propitiate must decipher and apply as is appropriate to his or her own quandary" (Gates Jr. 1988, 10). The text, and Esu

as narrator and supreme *babalawo*, implicate the reader in the ritual, making them ponder on the meaning of these verses. In so doing, the novel not only allows the traditional ritual to be enacted translocally but evokes Gates Jr.'s idea of *Esu-'tufunaalo*, the practice of upending the knots that Esu has metaphorically woven into black texts.[8] The short riddles carry implications for each chapter, but they defy exact placement within just one chapter. As such, the snippets often relate more directly to other parts in the novel and/or bear repercussions as meta-reflections on the story. The verses for chapter 7 read, for instance: "Missing is still / a presence" (Popoola 2017, 43). While the chapter deals with the absence of Karl's father, the snippet also offers commentary on the opening section and the missing parts detailed in the analysis above, further delineating the text's attention towards blank spaces and missing voices. It proposes a different, subversive perspective on absence as presence, hinting at the fact that presence not only stands in a dialectical relationship with absence but that every absence is always somehow a presence. This not only shows that while transgender representations are often deliberately rendered absent or invisible in dominant discourses, they are still always present, pushing against the surface. Moreover, deliberate absence/invisibility/opacity can also be viewed as a strategic – at times protective or attacking – manoeuvre to subvert dominant epistemologies.

The novel works with this idea as Karl is very protective of his identity towards outsiders in the beginning, with the text only hesitantly revealing to the reader that Karl is a transgender boy, whose birth sex was female, yet who identifies as male. Karl, as Esu seems to know, chose the male pronouns he/him for himself, and is thus addressed as such in the novel. From the beginning, this already signals to readers that Karl is very much in harmony with his male gender identity. The cryptic verses make the reader wonder, startle them, or actively play tricks on them. Chapter 31 opens with "Who waits / for whom / and at which corner?" (Popoola 2017, 212), chapter 33 with "Time is a conundrum. / You're forever chasing its tail" (Popoola 2017, 220), and the snippet for chapter 38 reads "Everything runs according / to how you have set the bar" (Popoola 2017, 249). I read these comments as self-reflexive instances in which Esu plays with the reader's understanding of the text – as a traditional *bildungsroman*, for instance. While the first passage picks up the motif of the crossroads, it also foregrounds Esu as hiding in the text, and only reluctantly revealing themselves to the reader in chosen instances. The verses for chapter 33 then locate the story in an alternative spatio-temporal framework, in which linear understandings of past, present, and future are unhinged. In so doing, the novel comments on itself not only as a retelling of Yoruba folklore, bending the boundaries between source text as preceding 'original' and retelling as subsequent revision. Moreover, it also helps to establish an understanding in the reader of Karl's identity formation as non-linear, non-teleological, and fragmented. The last verses cited here thus show that although the text takes detours and touches upon many different themes, it negotiates exactly what was established in the beginning: the pluralities of perspectives and positionalities as

well as its own nature as a retelling of Yoruba folklore, in itself a travelling narrative.

3. The crossroads: Forming *trans*identities

In inscribing a transgender protagonist into Esu's recount and in extending the folkloric tale of the two friends, the novel thus spots and explores a potential in the colliding forms for expressing transgender identities. As transcultural and transgender dimensions intersect in the young-adult novel, *When We Speak of Nothing* uses the motif and the form of the crossroads to explore the boys' coming-of-age and Karl's coming-to-terms with his *trans*identity. Since Esu, as the gatekeeping deity, is said to wait at every crossroad to challenge the pathways one might take, one rarely finds a street intersection in Nigeria without an altar of them. This spectral presence of Yoruba mythology in everyday life has inspired Bibi Bakare-Yusuf and Jeremy Weate to read Ojuelegba, one of the busiest crossroads in Lagos that is named after its Yoruba patron, against Esu's philosophical implications. As they note, "[t]he only way to stay sane in Ojuelegba is to embrace the polyrhythmic and contradictory complexity of the whole, moving within and between its different rhythms by balancing one rhythm against the other in a form of apart playing" (Bakare-Yusuf and Weate 2005, 333). Their reading of Ojuelegba highlights that rather than just waiting *at* the crossroads, the figure of Esu proposes an epistemology of continuous being *in* the crossroads. As such, disruption and stop-and-go polyrhythmicity become an integral part of movement itself not only in Ojuelegba but in Yoruba wisdom – and most crucially also in the processes formative for Karl's maturity. Esu's limping mobility, as he walks with one leg shorter than the other, "defines space, rather than space defining his movement" (Bakare-Yusuf and Weate 2005, 332). As Esu cannot be confined to any local or national space in particular, Abu and Karl's home near King's Cross, a crossroads as it were, summons Esu's presence in a transcultural flux. Several times throughout Esu's narration of the novel, its protagonists find themselves lead to physical or allegorical junctions, where they must choose a path to move forward, only to question it soon after. Moreover, enigmatic verse texts like "Junctions. / There is always too much choice" (Popoola 2017, 21) or "Junctions are not made for / all-round vision but for / choosing the way ahead" (2017, 82) introduce several chapters and invite the reader to deduce their meaning in the text.

Although his journey seems to trace Karl more confidently embracing his body, sexuality, and transgender identity, the novel does not work toward one central 'coming-out,' and in fact deconstructs the importance assigned to such a singular event – and the teleological path towards it.[9] When Nakale is planning on taking Karl on one of his field trips, local shopkeeper Mena reverts to Yoruba wisdom about Esu's crossroads when she confronts Karl's local contact, John, with "John, dis be your junction. You can go dis way or dat way. But no be you who is going. Let Karl decide. It will be well" (Popoola 2017, 164). As Mena interferes, she lets Karl decide which step to take next on his journey through

Nigeria and toward his self. This marks but one of the many instances in which Karl is being read as not knowing who he 'really' is from the outside. In fact, however, Karl has already decided to go with his choices quite early in the novel. He lives as a transgender boy, and seems to be scolded, beaten up but also admired for that. While Karl's coming-out to the reader is gradual and can be anticipated, he is thus also actually well-founded in his identity quite early in the novel. Yet, it is societal sanctions he fears. In other words: He is constrained by the constrictive forms of the intersectional hierarchies that affect him. When Karl first enters Nigeria and the airport personnel compares his birth sex listed in his passport to his looks, "Karl made himself scarce, pulled himself away from his skin, disappearing inside his bloodstream so that nothing on the outside could touch him. But the guy was still looking. Staring" (Popoola 2017, 59). While the officer's gaze makes him uneasy, Karl wishes to detach himself from his skin to numb himself during the confrontation. Later in the chapter, Uncle T apologizes to Karl for the unpleasant entrance to Nigeria: "I'm sorry, Karl. This is not how you imagined your welcome in your country." Karl's response, "Three months ago I didn't even know that there was such a thing as my country. Obviously it's not *my* country, I just mean…" (Popoola 2017, 70; own emphasis), stresses that he does not feel comfortable in Nigeria, the country he does not know and that he primarily associates with disappointment upon arrival. Karl's relationship with the country changes as he befriends Nakale and Janoma, and as he finds himself falling in love with the latter. When he reveals to Janoma that he is a transgender boy, she simply answer with: "And?," (Popoola 2017, 172) showing Karl that she is truly interested in him no matter his own reservations toward his transgender identity. At the same time, this levels the expectations, and fears, of the coming-out. After their following first intimate encounter that is interrupted by Janoma's aunt (another instance that takes disruption as a given), Karl feels "grown up, like proper, with a secret he couldn't wait to share" (Popoola 2017, 175). Although Karl confidently explores sexual intimacy with Janoma, he hesitates once more when he tries to tell Nakale about him being transgender shortly before he leaves Port Harcourt. He feels "the gap" – which is used as a metaphor for his female genitalia as well as the gap in trans representation throughout the novel – "reaching" (Popoola 2017, 193) again, turning into an abyss (194) before Nakale reveals that he knew all along from Mena. When Karl asks Nakale how Mena knew, he responds: "Maybe she feel am. Ah neva ask her. She say people pretend that we can know everything by looking and saying there is this side and that side. But we can't. It is never like dat. She say to be a friend is to be there and wait for the time. For the time to talk. And then listen" (Popoola 2017, 194). Nakale's response to Karl's revelation again stresses the idea of indeterminacy and of limitless understanding in friendship that reverberates in the story of the two friends. While the dictionary entries that mediate between Karl and the reader list, among others, "form," "deception," and "fear" before Karl travels to Port Harcourt, they read "longing" and "desire" along and after his travels. His travels enable him to forge new networks across bounded

geographies, bodies, and emotions, new forms that help him to openly express himself in public.

In Janoma and Karl's relationship, *When We Speak of Nothing* explores queer affect and bodily epistemologies as an alternative form of knowing. When Nakale educates Karl – and the reader – about the violent facet of Nigeria's history and the protest of its people, it is merely incidental for Karl because Janoma's presence seduces his senses. [10] In this very moment, the text foregrounds Karl's sensory experience, as it vividly describes how Karl senses her breath in the backseat of Nakale's car. The accompanying dictionary entry for "hotness" just reads "1. Intense" (Popoola 2017, 158). When they drive off again, Karl ponders on Nakale's words: "It took someone to show you what was going on, sometimes right in front of your eyes. Sometimes it was further away. […] Nakale was showing him that it mattered how you dealt with it" (Popoola 2017, 159). Although Karl certainly acknowledges and learns from Nakale's lesson in the people's history, the text foreshadows here that it is actually Janoma who teaches Karl how to overcome his remaining insecurities. When they interview an elder they set out to meet for Nakale's project, Karl only feels relieved again after they have left. As Esu narrates: "It had been too hot and he had heard nothing. The only thing he had observed was the heat that hovered around every thought and every look at Janoma" (Popoola 2017, 159). The text here drowns out Karl's developing knowledge about Nigeria's national history against the sensory experiences of the growing intimacy between Janoma and him.

Karl's travels and experiences in Port Harcourt lead to a change in perspective, from a localized London view to a *trans* take on belonging, affiliation, and affection. When Karl returns from Port Harcourt, London feels strange to him. His view on the city has changed, informed by his experiences in the Niger Delta. Some of the streets have underprivileged parts, Karl now thinks, but "nothing like the Shell lights" (Popoola 2017, 206). When Rebecca, his mother, confronts Karl about his disappearance, he tells her that he needed to see his "father, Nigeria", (Popoola 2017, 209) to be himself without his local surroundings telling him otherwise. Karl's father, who acts in a hypermasculine manner throughout most of the novel, and Nigeria are syntactically paralleled here, as for Karl his father embodied Nigeria before his travels. In the course of the novel, phallic Nigeria is metaphorically castrated and queered because Karl not only refuses his fathers implied commands during and after his stay but comes to experience Nigeria primarily through his own body – and Janomas. Karl's sexual intimacies do not only make him start embracing his own body but encourage him in his decision to move forward in hormonal treatment. With Karl's relationship to Janoma comes curiosity for Nigeria. He wants Abu to visit with him, wants him "to come to this bloody Nigeria, the literal bloodiness of it" (Popoola 2017, 218). Karl realizes that "[t]his beyond-King's Cross was a new way of looking at things" (218). Karl is now looking at and beyond the junction, with *trans* knowledges criss-crossing. During a serious therapy session with his mother, he confronts her with how he has felt living in London: "There is no

wholeness. Nowhere I really am. With all of you I am the problem that needs to be taken care of, that needs to be protected. On the streets, I am the freak. I was not here. I didn't exist" (Popoola 2017, 239). In this instance, the novel suspends the societal expectations of wholeness (as yet another form) as not being assigned to transgender persons like Karl. However, as we know as readers, through the crossing pathways that intersect in his dynamic *trans*identity, Karl is in the end able to form a network of affiliations and belongings that destabilizes the idea of an exclusive wholeness. Karl describes his experiences in Nigeria as crucially different, enabling him to embrace who he is: "I stayed in Nigeria, I stayed longer because I was being myself. I wasn't a problem. I could see who I was, from the outside. Because other people saw me for who I was, not how hard I fought to get there." (Popoola 2017, 240) While Karl's emotional revelation is a lot for his mother to process, she is willing to accept Janoma as Karl's girlfriend. This signals a next step in Karl's personal coming-out and coming-of-age, with him proudly roaming, 'owning' the streets in his local ground when Janoma visits (Popoola 2017, 243).

4. Concluding remarks

The novel ends with a Yoruba prayer to Esu:

> Esu, do not undo me,
> Do not falsify the words of my mouth,
> You who translates yesterday's words,
> Into novel utterances,
> Do not undo me,
> I bear you sacrifice
> – Yoruba Prayer. (Popoola 2017, 253)

As the text closes with the prayer that often follows the traditional recital of the tale of the two friends, it self-consciously proposes that the novel has translated "yesterday's words / into novel utterances". In so doing, the text foregrounds to readers how the meeting of forms explores new, possible ways of using these epistemologies to narrate and think transcultural transgender – *trans* – narratives in the twenty-first century. In so doing, the text suggests that identity constructions do not follow linear and teleological pathways as late capitalist societies wants us to think, and are never completed but always ongoing. The prayer is certainly paradoxical in the sense that it counteracts what the novel actually does. The text, with Esu as its narrator, in fact constantly *undoes*. The form of the gap and the crossroads, of intersecting and disrupting trajectories, challenge the *bildungsroman* plot in the novel. From this perspective, we can approach Popoola's text as a novel of *trans*formation, as I have suggested, that negotiates the coming-of-age of its protagonist in transcultural frameworks of flux, indeterminacy, and fragmentation, at the same time suggesting their dynamic entanglements as constitutive for the formative processes of a non-teleological, empowering *trans*identity. To come back to Mark Stein's reading of

the black British *bildungsroman* as a 'novel of transformation', this novel of *trans*formation claims space both symbolically and politically for a community of transgender people whose identities and experiences play out at the crossroads of geographical and cultural pathways. *When We Speak of Nothing* suggests that *trans*identity formations embrace disruption, fragmentation, and circularity and do away with linear and teleological forms which late capitalism proposes as the norm. In so doing, *When We Speak of Nothing* makes a compelling case for disruption, fragmentation, and non-linearity as forms that allow us to re-think borders, center/periphery divides, identity formations, and literary forms alike. In so doing, the novel not only inscribes an important perspective into the already existing pallet of black British literature but also adds to an emerging strand of queer/trans Nigerian texts, including Chinelo Okparanta's *Under the Udala Trees* (2015), A. Igoni Barrett's *Blackass* (2015), and Akwaeke Emezi's *Freshwater* (2018).

Notes

[1]Ampka held the talk during the "Postcolonial Intellectuals and their European Publics" Conference at the University of Utrecht in February 2019.

[2] I am deliberately using the slanted variant *trans* in this essay to express the crossroads of transcultural and transgender concerns.

[3]Gates Jr. approximates *ase* as the 'word' through which the universe (what he translates as 'logos') was created. This word is "reinforced with double assuredness and undaunted authenticity." (Gates Jr. 1988, 7) Esu, keeper and mediator of the *ase*, is often visualized with a double mouth, and his discourse thus equipped with a double voice.

[4]While Esu might be addressed differently in Yoruba religious and folkloric texts, I am using the pronouns 'they/their' deliberately here to attest to the indeterminacy of their multiple gender.

[5]Aiyejina further points out that Esu's location, in its original terminology *orita*, attests to a complex concept that refers not only to crossroads but can mean the front yard of a house or gateways to bodily orifices as well (Aiyejina 4).

[6]As Aiyejina notes, the Yoruba principle of multiple options is underpinned in the retonalisation of Esu's praise name Elegbara as, as Elegba ara, that is, the one with many manifestions." (Aiyejina 2009, 3f.)

[7]Due to Paul Kerswill's seminal work in the linguistic field, today these varieties are often subsumed under the label Multiethnic London English (MLE).

[8]*Esu-'tufunaalo*, a neologism coined by Wole Soyinka (himself a trusted devotee to the concept of the Yoruba deity Ogun in his writing) for Gates Jr.'s study, then describes "the methodological principles of the interpretation of black texts" with *Esu-'tufunaalo* literally meaning "one who unravels the knots of Esu" (1988, 9). Esu then comes to signify "the indigenous black metaphor for the literary critic" (Gates Jr. 1988, 9) and *Esu-'tufunaalo* the study of the critic's practice; the interpretation of literary texts.

[9] I owe much here to my colleague Lea Espinoza Garrido, whose ideas on the levelling of singular coming-out events and the non-teleological pathways that queer/trans coming-out narratives can take instead have greatly helped.

[10] The part of the novel set in Port Harcourt inscribes the text into the lineage of Nigerian literature and conjures up earlier Nigerian novels and activism that have tackled the oil pollution in the Niger Delta and corporate corruption in Nigeria. Most notably, writer and activist Ken Saro-Wiwa is referenced in the text, who rose to international

prominence when he, a member of the Ogoni people, campaigned against Shell's massive oil extraction and the resulting environmental damages in the Ogoniland east of Port Hartcourt during the 1990s.

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