

Research Article

Katherine R. Devereux*

The Witching Body: Ontology and Physicality of the Witch

<https://doi.org/10.1515/oppil-2022-0212>
received January 17, 2022; accepted May 11, 2022

Abstract: These considerations illuminate an ontology of the witch by first disclosing how “witch,” as a linguistic gesture, carries a world of meaning, ethics, and a culture of being originating in the body. Witches and witchcraft speak to a communal situatedness of being by acknowledging the power we have over ourselves, others, and that singular lack of control we often experience in everyday life. In dialogue with Ada Agada, Emmanuel Lévinas, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, I offer an interpretation of the body schema through what I call the “witching-body,” drawing on historical and anthropological examples of witchcraft as related to personhood, thus demonstrating how embodiment philosophy and ontology are already alive in everyday ritual and magical acts. I explain the other’s contradiction of everydayness and transcendence through the reflexivity of self-sensing-self and how aspects of our own body, such as organs and emotions, may be occult or other to us. The everydayness of witchcraft and the ungraspable ambiguity of the witch speak to this necessary transcendence we experience with everyday others; there is both a banality and an infinite plurality. We yearn to know the witch because through the embodied existential expressions of “witch” we find what constitutes being a person.

Keywords: ontology, embodiment philosophy, witches, witchcraft, other persons, Agada, Lévinas, Merleau-Ponty

1 Introduction

What is a witch? Or is it *who* is a witch? I am less concerned here with the debate of constituting qualities and cultural specificities than with the ontological fluidity in a philosophy of body and world as intertwined in the quiddity of “witch.” The essence of existing with others, the ethics of self-and-other, and the power we have or exert over this situatedness is best exemplified through the philosophy of magic and specifically the “witch,” who always refer to a body in some manner yet is not itself a universal concept. Nevertheless, the history of gender embodiment, religious persecution, and warfare demonstrates how the witch and witchcraft have been exploited as tools for othering marginalized people and the dismissal of local ontologies. Marginalization precedes othering in that, as I assert in the second section of this article, the other has a givenness in the world, but how I interact with them is a matter of ethics. To say one is “other” maintains the openness of ontological potentiality, whereas “othering” asserts an ontological commitment based on a perceived degree of sameness, where sameness constitutes correctness. Furthermore, by acknowledging witchcraft as a corpus of practices anathematized by political, social, and religious powers we also recognize an othering of the body as a behavior. The seventeenth century persecution of Juana Icha, an Andean widow, on accusations of employing malicious witchcraft through herbal remedies and demonic pacts is one example among many. The description and testimony of her acts differs in no way from

* Corresponding author: Katherine R. Devereux, Independent researcher, Belfast, Maine, 04915, United States, e-mail: devereux.art@gmail.com

traditional Incan medical practices at the time, but in the eyes of the colonial Spanish authorities, this accounted for witchcraft and heresy.¹ Nelson Maldonado-Torres' work on the coloniality of being does an excellent job of articulating this sentiment, and although I was greatly inspired by his work, did not include it within the scope of this article.²

Through the works of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Emmanuel Lévinas, and Ada Agada, my goal is to reveal how the ambiguity of “witch” speaks to the necessarily transcendent ontological potentiality in being itself. First, I consider the witch’s situatedness ontically and ontologically, establishing how I am already existing in a world with witching-others. From the experience of my own body, I sense and perceive the witch as an embodied behavior, habituated and coping with the world through their own livingness. I illuminate the ethics of existing among witching-others, supported by Agada’s ontology and Lévinas’ ethics. In considering the physicality and material expression of the witch, I again draw on Lévinas with supporting arguments from Merleau-Ponty’s work on the phenomenology of movement, the body schema and ontology of the *flesh*. Language includes other bodily gestures such as dance, the movement of the hand in salutation, and ought not be confined to the bodily movement of spoken language. In ritual magic, the generative power of language further demonstrates the expressive essence of witching-bodies where every gesture and exertion of the body relates to the ritual act. The body, as expressed through everyday language and movement, proclaims its existential experience, and in expressions of the witching-body we attempt to transcend the ambiguity of being and being with others.

2 Situatedness

If I imagine the witch, do I construct a witch-image? This cognitive representation, as a purely mental act, builds an interpretation of “witch” from my existential background, i.e. the perceptible field of my lived and inherited view of the world. I build the witch in a certain manner owing to the existential weight of meaning embodied by “witch.” If I am Bernardino of Siena, a fifteenth-century Tuscan preacher, the witch “appears” differently to me than animists who wouldn’t necessarily envision the witch in a gendered human body.³ The cognitive representation is however an embodied expression of “witch.” It exists ontically as a factual entity of whatever cultural background I build it from, but this existence is hollow, like an object, a photograph. Here, the witch is confined to this representation, this witch-image, their existence immured within my memory or in the cultural narrative.

In the spirit of Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of language, “witch” is a linguistic gesture, and it signifies the world.⁴ This is to say there is an intention offered at the same time as the gesture. And in this intention is carried the landscape, i.e. previous expressions of “witch,” constituting the common world between speaking subjects and evolving in meaning as the sensible world of those speaking subjects intertwine with the world that is always unfolding itself before us in a continuum of sensing and sensed. Thus, the witch-image embodies implicit ontologies built from our interactions with others and “ways of behaving towards things and people,” as outwardly expressed in our everydayness.⁵

The witch-image can change, as my perceptible horizon shifts with newly presented phenomena or experiences, but the image cannot be detached from the context from which it arises. As Emmanuel Lévinas states, “to ask *what* is to ask *as what*,” in that to ask, “*what is a witch?*” does not take up the manifestation of “witch” for itself.⁶ Bernardino of Siena’s understanding of “witch” changed over the course of his life as he traveled and experienced other cultures’ dance and agricultural traditions, and this added to his

¹ Silverblatt, *Moon, Sun, and Witches*, 183–4.

² Maldonado-Torres, “On the Coloniality of Being,” 246.

³ Bailey, “Nocturnal Journeys,” 4, 5; and Meñez, *Explorations in Philippine Folklore*, 88–9.

⁴ Merleau-Ponty et al., *Phenomenology*, 190, 192.

⁵ Dreyfus, “Holism and Hermeneutics,” 11.

⁶ Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 177.

comprehension of the witch “*as what*.” One of his accounts of witches, as with many, miss-attributes an English fairytale (i.e. fairy lore) to a Benevento (Italy) agricultural dance, and then claims all the above as witchcraft.⁷ Bernardino’s *comprehension* of “witch” was a mass of experiences filtered through his perceptual expectations, and consequently reinforced his background; a box of photographs all labeled “witch” but nothing of essence. If the question is the *quiddity* of the witch, then this is put to someone, to *a face* who has already presented themselves and exists prior to the question.

Instead of a witch-image, I perceive what Lévinas refers to as *the face* and what Merleau-Ponty might call “witch behaviors.”⁸ Because what I am imagining are those marked behaviors and embodied “witch” expressions as manifested through a style of being; a body. My body can summon an imagined witch because this is also one of my modalities of being in the world, one of the ways I relate to and cope with the world.⁹ When I imagine a specific witch, I aim at them in the world, but only ever from my own background. Their inner experience can never be understood outside my own. Thus, when I imagine Teodoro Herrera, a current Cuban Palo practitioner and proud *brujo* (witch), I can visualize a corporal body moving as described to me, attributes such as “his boyish and smart” eyes, and with “the seductive resources of his face ... at his full disposal ... he could make his features jump their borders and take on appearances that were not his own.”¹⁰ Even though I have never met Teodoro, when I read *The Society of the Dead* I can hear his quick deep voice spoken from the back of his throat through ill-fitted dentures and a stutter that worsens as it embarrasses.¹¹ Teodoro is there, or here, and as I read the words “a white beard and mustache tinted yellow by cigarettes,” I visualize the behavior of smoking and imagine the smell of smoke. Similarly, I read how Teodoro’s worn hands cup his mouth when he takes a drag from his cigarette and my hands imagine the movement and can *feel* the movement and the rough texture of his fingers. Teodoro is here before me, but he is not transparent, and I can never feel what it is *like* to have *his* hands. Were he to teach me his style of *brujería* (witchcraft), I would not experience the magic through him, only through my being as guided by him. Teodoro’s hands could touch my hands, physically move them in ritual, but my experience of the ritual would still be of my hands as touched by *his*.

I cannot change my existential background nor remove myself from my own history and plug in a different perspective. In this same regard, one cannot perceive their own body as an object of perception, only the subject in the act of perceiving itself. I cannot understand the witch outside my own existence yet neither can the witch understand me outside the status as a perceiving other. This ambiguous barrier of understanding discloses the necessary approach to the existential status of the witch. We come face-to-face with the witch-as-other and through our “communicated interpretation” experience the witch as an expressive being. This ongoing shared interaction can be achieved through language, as well as other bodily gestures, and gives us clues as to the phenomenology of the witch in their more specific iterations.¹² However, the degree of control and our ability to disclose meaning depend upon the interpretation of our ontological possibilities we both inherit from our world and project onto that world, a world we also share with others. My testimonials on what it means *to be* are already interpretations of my being even before I express them to the interpreter, who must then interpret what I have just said before expressing it to another, or to themselves.

I can “sense” the witch because there is reflexivity in sensing and the sensed, my outside is intertwined with the external world and completes itself through this reflexivity. The body senses and is sensible to the world and others in it. In touching another I feel their skin touch mine as I feel touched by theirs. I see the other and in my gaze sense that I am also the subject of their gaze. Additionally, my body and the witch’s body have an openness to the perceptible world and are intertwined with it, perceiving flesh that is both my own body and the world’s.¹³ To synthesize Merleau-Ponty and Lévinas, the openness of my being meets the

⁷ Bailey, “Nocturnal Journeys,” 10.

⁸ Lévinas, *Totality*, 197; and Merleau-Ponty et al., *Phenomenology*, 186.

⁹ Merleau-Ponty et al., *Phenomenology*, 186.

¹⁰ Ochoa, *Society of the Dead*, 63.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 66, 67.

¹² Dahlstrom, “Hermeneutic Ontology,” 401.

¹³ Merleau-Ponty and Lefort, *Visible*, 147.

openness of the witch's; a blending of being in order that the witch may disclose that inner world which the face alone cannot present.¹⁴ I sense the witch because my body is open to the world where witches are already intertwined in being.

Thus, we find ethics to be at the root of our engagement with the witch, as I am already in a world with others, in a world built from social and cultural backgrounds, and already engaging with others, already coping with existence.¹⁵ Ada Agada maintains that the world and others have a givenness that "must be grasped with or without knowledge of this other."¹⁶ This givenness is in time and space; "the human community," establishing the existence of the other through community interaction, and although the individual has existential priority to the community, this does not negate the individual's immediate need for the community.¹⁷ As Agada asserts, generally human beings have an optimistic view of the external world, and only in existential crises seek an explanation or causation. To quote Agada, "my brother and I ... rejoice when value is added to existence and mourn when value is subtracted from the existence or when it seems value has not been found ... in the face of reality whose failure is the imperfection of a universe that is yearning and had nothing but yearning."¹⁸ In this communicable interaction, we see the ethics of being and other, as morality is already "alive" in the singular being and presupposes the community.¹⁹ But for Agada the existence of the other, whom he refers to as "my Brother," thus re-emphasizing the communal foundation of alterity, comes before justification of the other's existence. Here, Agada might claim, the justification for the existence of the witch "gives the mind the right to objectify" the witch.²⁰ I am already in a world with witches and where witchcraft is already an ontology for being in the world, for coping with the indeterminacy of everyday existence and the unknown.²¹ Doubt as to the justification of the other, of the witch, is asserting that the other is only so under certain conditions. Doubt in the other and despair over the existence of a magical other is the despair of the human intellect to express itself outside of the purely corporal experience of others. The witch is other as an existentially ambiguous other, in a perpetual state of becoming, different, separate, and external from self, their inner world an ungraspable and perpetual transcendence.

3 Physicality

The witch-image is a distinction among other witch distinctions, unique in every cultural iteration, as no two cultures are wholly the same. However, these images are hollow and cannot distinguish themselves through a plurality of being when out in the world as ontologically dense beings do. The witch-other has a face, Lévinas stresses, and it stands out before me as a nakedness of being that "calls into question my joyous possession of the world."²² In the face is a relationship between myself and the witch that surpasses rhetoric, it surpasses our common world. This is because the witch-as-other overflows the bounds of the witch-as-image with its dynamic plurality and puts the "I" (the builder of this witch-as-image) into question.²³ The witch-as-image is a totality, we think we have a *comprehension* of the witch, but it is only traces of a transcendence in being that can never be fully grasped, the boundaries of "I" never surpassed. In

¹⁴ Merleau-Ponty and Edie, *Primacy of Perception*, 163–4, 168; Merleau-Ponty and Lefort, *Visible*, 214–5; and Lévinas, *Totality*, 212.

¹⁵ Merleau-Ponty et al., *Phenomenology*, 377.

¹⁶ Agada, *Existence and Consolation*, 178.

¹⁷ Ibid., 184, 188.

¹⁸ Ibid., 182.

¹⁹ Ibid., 189.

²⁰ Ibid., 185.

²¹ Smith et al., "What Kind of Witchcraft Is This?," 142.

²² Lévinas, *Totality*, 75–6.

²³ Ibid., 194, 195.

comprehension, as Lévinas explains, there is *freedom* for the “I,” but this is at the expense of the other’s infinity.²⁴ What Merleau-Ponty calls the “protean freedom” of “the inalienable background ... which in me and in others marks the limits of all sympathy.”²⁵ I may think I understand *witch* when all I can ever perceive is the totality of flesh.

This is because my body is my means of having a world, and through it I live the world. As Merleau-Ponty states, the body “is the origin of all others ... it projects signification on the outside by giving them a place and sees to it they begin to exist ... the body projects a cultural world around itself.”²⁶ I project my own culture in the world, and so does the witch. And this “first cultural object,” Merleau-Ponty reminds us, is the body as the “bearer of a behavior.”²⁷ Lévinas expands on Merleau-Ponty’s assertion when he writes:

The relationship between *I* and the *other* of the world is not to be thought of as an assimilation of the world by the constituting act, but as *expression* of an inner and an outer, life as culture ... The essentially cultural can be traced back to embodied thought expressing itself, to the very life of flesh manifesting soul.²⁸

The collective movements of a body may constitute a human being, but the *meaning* behind those movements, the agency and intentionality in the “behavior” of walking over to my brother in salutation, is the constituting quality of being a person.²⁹ Merleau-Ponty further enunciates this point in asserting that the body is not a mere assemblage of juxtaposed mechanical parts, nor is it the case of spiritual enchantment of an “automaton” shell.³⁰ For Lévinas, the ambiguity of the body is consciousness, and for Agada it is a mental yearning, but for Merleau-Ponty the ambiguity of the body is an ambiguous collection of behaviors, an existential receptivity to the world, an intertwining of rhythms, “and inner communication with the world, the body, and others, to be with them rather than beside them.”³¹ I have a certain *milieu*, a certain manner of being in the world that is wholly unique, thus consciousness is “being toward the thing through the intermediary of the body.”³² The body, specifically the face, is that marked exteriority that is impressed in a being’s essence. For Lévinas, the exteriority of the other constitutes it and is not derived from its identity.³³ There is an openness of being expressed by the face that shatters the visage of the witch-caricature.

The Azande, of Southern Sudan, as interpreted by E. E. Evans-Pritchard’s research in the early twentieth century, conceive of witches as a behavior on a spectrum of human interactions and not as a “distinct category of person ... emergent from the intrinsic ‘nature’ of people and things.”³⁴ This approach to personhood is integral to the ontology of a witching-other, here presented through an interpretation by Martin A. Mills:

We do not, after all, experience persons in any direct, sensory way. What we experience is, at most, the movement of limbs, the twitch, and shift of facial muscles, the emission of specific noises, the leaving of specific traces and imprints. These are, of course, behavior, not action, and the distinction between these two is precisely the *how* versus *why* nature that the Zande evoke when discussing witchcraft.³⁵

Reminiscent of the Zande *why* that moves the arms and limbs of the body, Merleau-Ponty also acknowledges the *why* involved in the relations between segments of the body; his often-quoted assertion “I am my

²⁴ Ibid., 251.

²⁵ Merleau-Ponty et al., *Phenomenology*, 378.

²⁶ Ibid., 147, 148.

²⁷ Ibid., 364.

²⁸ Johnson and Smith, *Ontology and Alterity*, 62.

²⁹ Mills, “The Opposite of Witchcraft,” 29.

³⁰ Merleau-Ponty and Edie, *Primacy*, 163, 168.

³¹ Merleau-Ponty et al., *Phenomenology*, 99.

³² Ibid., 140.

³³ Lévinas, *Totality*, 251.

³⁴ Mills, “The Opposite of Witchcraft,” 26.

³⁵ Ibid., 29.

body" makes this clear.³⁶ For Merleau-Ponty, *being* is a *coming into being*, a begetting, wherein the body is inseparable from sensation, and sensible to itself. "The body connects not only the outside and the inside, but the before and the after," being already sensible to itself and open to the world of the sensible, whereby this openness allows for "incorporation of the external sensible and the incorporation into it"; bodies sensing other bodies.³⁷ This physical-material body, what the modern day Yorùbá of Nigeria call *ara*, is as Segun Coetzee explains, the person's window to the world, their sensory house, the "totality of physical organs" as well as other elements of personhood like emotion and reason.³⁸ Similarly, while the eyes are the physical organ through which the person "sees" the spatial world, there is also extra-sensory perception utilized by witches and ritual participants where the body (including the eyes) can see, or sense beings and events invisible or insensible to others. The hairs on my arm stand up and I sense another presence in the room after a Goetic summoning ritual. In the dim candlelight my eyes detect a shadowy figure near the altar or catch a distorted image of some future event through a scrying mirror; a "seeing" that defies space and time. This idea that persons themselves do or can defy time and space – the non-physical element of *self* that can affect both the physical and non-physical world – is the fundamental argument underlying much of the philosophy surrounding magic. This use of the body as a sensory tool does not denote a quasi-physicality, but instead an openness of the body to perceive or incorporate the non-material.³⁹

Yet even in this openness to sense and the reversibility of self-sensing-self, there remains the occulted flesh of organs and neurons; the self-sensing-self that occurs within our bodies that goes unnoticed or is hidden. In this manner, there are aspects of the self that are also other. This is to say that within my own body is the other, parts of my body are epistemically indistinguishable (unknowable) from my experience *as a body*, and my own body can be other to itself.⁴⁰ My internal organs, to the best of my knowledge, are all present and in working order. Yet I am not acutely aware of the daily functions of my pancreas, at least not in the way I am "present" with my hands; my pancreas is occulted by the totality that is the experience of having a body. Only in the event of my pancreas not regulating insulin properly do I become aware of it. In fact, I may not be aware of this strain on my pancreas until I visit a doctor and have my blood sugar level analyzed.

The Azande concept of *witchcraft-substance* exemplifies this very point. Understood as "a material substance in the bodies of certain persons," and as a part of the body it "grows as the body grows," becoming more effective with age, such that one who has been accused of witchcraft will request their bodies be autopsied to determine if witchcraft-substance resided within.⁴¹ "If there is witchcraft in my belly I know nothing of it ... if I possess witchcraft in my belly may ... the mouth of my witchcraft cool." This is to say that the witchcraft is other to me, exists within my body yet beyond my immediate control.

Similarly, if I think of certain aspects of my body as both present and absent, in the way that my emotions may be present and I may feel them through my own embodiment, they nevertheless remain physically absent from me. If I were to find the exact neuron that mechanically pumps out that "love" I feel toward another, the "love" itself is still absent. This "love" can also be *other to me* if I do not wish to love the person, knowing I oughtn't, but I cannot necessarily control my feelings either. And although my expressions of love manifest in the material reality shared between this lover and I, the flowers are mere gestures of love, love behaviors, and not the love itself.

³⁶ Merleau-Ponty et al., *Phenomenology*, 151.

³⁷ Johnson and Smith, *Ontology and Alterity*, 6.

³⁸ Coetzee et al., "Èniyàn," 176.

³⁹ Ibid., 183.

⁴⁰ Johnson and Smith, *Ontology*, 7; and Merleau-Ponty and Lefort, *Visible*, 148.

⁴¹ Evans-Pritchard, *Witchcraft, Oracles*, 7, 15–6, 226.

4 Expression

Love, like magic, aims at the other, and according to Lévinas, both transcends and falls short of language as an expression of being.⁴² Merleau-Ponty, Lévinas, and Agada might agree that aiming at the other comes from a desire to experience the transcendent quality of otherness ourselves, to *be* the other, and to find consolation in the lived world with others. Because love and magic are a kind of existential anxiety; it can show me a long-lost past, propel me into a future of perceived possibilities and toward a self-transcendence. As Agada states, “anxiety is the dream of self-transcendence [and] a longing for God,” what Lévinas terms the absolute and infinite *Other*.⁴³ In the witch-other we sense this infinitude through the epiphany of the face; it is sensible, objectively graspable, but in expression permanently open and resists the grasp because it “breaks with the world that can be common to us.”⁴⁴

Magic, as an expression of coping with the world, works with the rhythms of everyday life but also to make sense of chaotic events, like accidents and misfortune. The everydayness of witches and witchcraft to many is omnipresent yet unremarkable in a similar manner as one would take certain precautions to avoid being struck by an automobile or making a poor financial investment.⁴⁵ However, if witchcraft is merely the inversion of everyday kinship relations, we must suppose that the society from where this witchcraft originates is singular in its function; “benefiting the good of society” versus “against the good of society.” This inversion as the function of witchcraft is limiting and fails in real-time applications where societies are neither singular nor monolithic in their conception of personhood and social relations. The *functionalist* approach assumes purpose and intent, or at the very least confines witchcraft to a singular representation. To the Ihanzu of Tanzania, the witch may be responsible for any number of usual or unusual daily misfortune, but some witches choose not to use their powers in this way – this is only one aspect of the more complex understanding of witchcraft apprenticeships, as well as “genetic transmission,” again speaking to a plurality of meaning, moralities and concepts of personhood – witchcraft is not a function of the witch but more akin to a trade that may be bought, sold, learned, inherited biologically, or passed down generationally.⁴⁶ Witchcraft as an inherited trait versus a learned skill is an important distinction, even when people make no distinction, as this is still an ontological commitment.

To further explain witchcraft as an expression I esteem contemporary Yorùbá discourses on *àjé*. It is important to note that the term *witch*, as related to Christian conceptions of witchcraft, has existed within Yorùbá cultural discourse since the 1830s, having seen a resurgence in use during the early twentieth century in the decades surrounding Nigeria’s independence in the 1960s.⁴⁷ In “witches as Superior Intellects,” George Bond shows how the *àjé*’s “power for good or ill are rated as roughly twice those of the ordinary person, But such powers are linked to superior intelligence and ability.”⁴⁸ The *àjé* is moral or immoral according to their two selves, *èmí*, “the life giving element put in place by the deity,” and having twice the capability of a regular person, *ènìyàn*, their abilities can be used to benefit others or greatly harm them.⁴⁹ To put this in context, if we think of “an inverted pyramid, with ordinary persons, described as having one *self* (*òní inú/èmí*), at the bottom and the most extraordinary, described as having seven selves, at the top.”⁵⁰ The *àjé* would be just above “ordinary persons,” having two *èmí*.⁵¹ If it helps in understanding this approach to being, one might draw an analogy to the Western concept of *IQ*, the notion of “a gifted

⁴² Lévinas, *Totality*, 254, 255.

⁴³ Agada, *Existence*, 255, 256; and Lévinas, *Totality*, 197.

⁴⁴ Lévinas, *Totality*, 195.

⁴⁵ Sanders, *Beyond Bodies*, 185.

⁴⁶ Agada, *Existence*, 184, 185.

⁴⁷ Peel, “Three Circles of Yoruba Religion,” 220, 221.

⁴⁸ Bond et al., “Witches as Superior,” 88.

⁴⁹ Coetzee et al., “Ènìyàn,” 178.

⁵⁰ Bond et al., “Witches’ as Superior Intellects,” 88.

⁵¹ Ibid.

individual,” “superior intellect.”⁵² However, I hesitate to do so and would rather warn against such a logical fallacy by analogy and this reduction to the background of Western modernity when considering non-Western ontological expressions of personhood.

Ènyàñ can also be understood as an amalgamation of words that allude to an embodied sense of distress but also a self-contained solution. Nicholaj De Mattos Frisvold offers this distinction between ènyàñ and *ará Ayé*, where ènyàñ is conceived as “one who to some extent has retained a conviction or a memory of their spiritual estate, and *ará Ayé*, which does not hold this quality and can refer to whosoever walks the earth – hence we find ènyàñ meaning ‘a person of power’ in reference to someone who possesses àjé in the sense of witch power and the capacity for generating abundance.”⁵³ In this extent, *Ifá* also considers persons as beings toward death – the mysteries of life, birth and death all wrapped up in one secret, “because our human condition is caused by death, and it is through the human experience that we can realize our divinity.”⁵⁴

If we understand the fecundity of language as the bridge of meaning among beings via shared terms, and the meaning-filled temporal anchor that is a name, as “powerfully generative” bodily gestures, new dimensional possibilities to the ritual-act emerge.⁵⁵ Language, “spoken in story and bodied forth in dance,” evanesces the partitions between natural, cultural, and supernatural, intertwining the physical and metaphysical, the micro and the macro, on a multi-dimensional continuum.⁵⁶

Ifá maintains that “words lead to action,” which is why all sacrifice begins with the mouth; “It forms the words to describe the pain or problem experienced and prayers or oaths.”⁵⁷ The body is the expressive field of our composite self, a mode of emitting our own coping with being and transcendent beings. The body is the exclamation of self, and in magic this is an expression of our transcendent self. The vocal cords send sound waves into the world, our feet drum on the earth with every step and this is the rhythm of our existence, our body proclaiming itself a being.

Language is a primary mechanism for self-expression and through communication we take on another person’s thoughts, a way of thinking “according to others, which enriches our own thoughts.”⁵⁸ Just as the ritual incantations emphasize a practitioners’ role as interlocutor between living human *beings* and the infinite *Others*, such as the gods, so too is the body’s role “as the channel through which ‘the spirits pass’.”⁵⁹ The gods communicate through this openness of the body, meaning bursting forth into reality from the mouth as the meaning filled vibrations of the vocal cords hum. The vibrations of word and song are what Merleau-Ponty would call “pregnant” with meaning.⁶⁰ Where the “witch” as a linguistic gesture signifies a world, so too do the linguistic gestures of the witch signify their world.

To further explain the generative power of language in magic, consider the well-known “Stele of Jeu” ritual of the Greek Magical Papyri. The ritual begins by calling on Akephalos, “The Headless One,” to exorcize someone from demons, culminating in the magician speaking *as* Akephalos, and becoming the divine entity themselves.⁶¹ In preparation for the ritual, the magician writes a formula containing magical words on a new sheet of papyrus, and reads the holy names after extending the papyrus from one side of their forehead to the other. These kinds of ritual focus on the power spoken words have, they are essential to the success of the ritual. The whole body is involved; from the confident stance to the deep breath, and harmony of both to create a clear and precise tone. Through ritual incantations we project ourselves into the unknown and toward the truly Other.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Frisvold et al., *Ifá*, 15.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 16.

⁵⁵ Posthumus, *Transmitting Sacred Knowledge*, 33.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Frisvold et al., *Ifá*, 101.

⁵⁸ Merleau-Ponty et al., *Phenomenology*, 184.

⁵⁹ Meñez, *Explorations in Philippine Folklore*, 80.

⁶⁰ Merleau-Ponty and Edie, *Primacy*, 12.

⁶¹ Betz, *Greek Magical Papyri*, 103.

In ritual dance the body itself is thrown into the realm of the unknown. The body here is the direct means of expressing the ritual act, the interpretive resource where movement gives meaning and expands the sphere of the actual to include space for the possible. This is reminiscent of Merleau-Ponty's assertion as to the habit of the body creating a cultural world around itself, and in learning a dance I synthesize the experience of the modality of my being as expressed in each specific dance move. This is because I do not learn to dance by instruction alone but must live the dance enough that it becomes a habit, a re-working of my body schema to include these new movements, heavy with meaning.⁶² The openness created by the body's rhythm also allows for an encounter with the other, who intertwines and overflows the body with its beingness. In this way, dancing as an act "creates space for the encounter and the transformation to take place," where the movement of energy is a rhythm of tension throughout the body and a "splitting and multiplying of self, to the sacrifice of self to the generation of selves."⁶³ My body, on a continuum of becoming, is never the same body who danced before, even if the dance remains the same. And in this kinetic tension of self in the rhythm of existence, the phantasmic is drawn into the realm of the sensible because the body is of and in the world.

5 Conclusion

The consideration of the ontological status of a witching-other is the consideration of a transcendent ontological potentiality in being itself. In reaching out to the witch we are reaching out to infinity, yearning to grasp that alterity of being that we feel as a self already in the experience of being with others in the world. The witch as a term is that bodily gesture attempting to interpret this yearning and humanity's complex concepts of personhood. This transcendent quality of being, wherein one's existential potentiality can control, or in some manner access, the esoteric forces at work in everyday life, is a foundational aspect to the philosophy of magic. As a linguistic gesture, the witch embodies this potentiality of being and the interpretation of our everyday experience with others. To this extent, the witch also embodies our coping with others as existential and expressive bodies. The *ajé* demonstrate how a person can harm or help another, not by intention, but *essence*, the innate ethical quality of being that is already involved in the community as a being with others. That the self would need justification for the existence of others, for the existence of the witch, means that we have already constrained and committed the witch to an ontic status.

The witch, like other people, is an ambiguous being in constant coming into being, multi-dimensional and an intertwining of body and world. The witch, my lover, your brother, and the other do not depend on the perceiving self to justify their existence. Moreover, the optimism in my everyday livingness does not question the existence or quality of being in others. Only in crisis does this optimism wane, and I find myself questioning the witching-other's existential contradiction, the presence and absence. The respectful engagement with the witch-as-other acknowledges their ungraspable alterity, and in this ethical exchange of meaning, the self is not negated by the other but overflowed with meaning as expressed by the other. The world of the witch-other opens a greater field of meaning than the perceiving-self could comprehend in a solipsistic engagement with the external world. We express these meanings through literature and lore, building meanings, adding to or taking away from the witch as an ontic representation of cultural qualifiers and abstractions, i.e. personhood, aesthetics, and ethics.

The degree of otherness we ascribe to the witch mirrors our sense of sameness to the world around us. In the idea of the witch, we attempt to close that existential gap between self and other, but the witch, other persons, is necessarily external to the self, absent. As an object of interpretation, adorned with the determinacy of totality, the witch-other disappears beneath the function of these meanings. Lost under this weight and unable to express their uniqueness of being, the witching-other is silenced by our very drive to

⁶² Merleau-Ponty et al., *Phenomenology*, 143–4, 148.

⁶³ Dimech and Grey, *Brazen Vessel*, 54.

comprehend them. When we consider the witch as a thing, we grant the witch sub-ontological status as an object, non-person. Nevertheless, this term still refers to and speaks of an embodied being, in many cases a person.

Considering the witch opens our perceptible horizon to consider the transcendent otherness of being. We are drawn to the unknowable alterity of the witch because it speaks to an unknowable otherness we experience with everyday others and within ourselves. Whether by language or other gestures (movement), the body is our mode of proclaiming this experience and how we express what it means to be. It is this everyday otherness and existential expression that constitutes being.

Acknowledgments: Infinite gratitude to Dr. Wilson Maina of the University of West Florida's History & Philosophy Department for advising the original version of this article and to this journal's editors and reviewers for their comments.

Conflict of interest: Author states no conflict of interest.

References

Agada, Ada. *Existence and Consolation: Reinventing Ontology, Gnosis and Values in African Philosophy*. St. Paul: Paragon House, 2015.

Bailey, Michael D. "Nocturnal Journeys and Ritual Dances in Bernardino Siena." *Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft* 8, no. 1 (2013), 4–17.

Betz, Hans Dieter. *The Greek Magical Papyri*. Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1992.

Bond, George C., Diane M. Ciekawy, and Barry Hallen. "'Witches' as Superior Intellectuals: Challenging a Cross-Cultural Superstition." In *Witchcraft Dialogues: Anthropological and Philosophical Exchanges*, 80–100. Athens: Ohio University Center for International Studies, 2001.

Coetzee, P. H., Roux A. P. J., and Segun Gbadegesin. "Ènìyàn: The Yoruba Concept of a Person." Essay." In *The African Philosophy Reader: A Text with Readings*, 175–91. London: Routledge, 2003.

Dahlstrom, Daniel O. "Hermeneutic Ontology." *Theory and Applications of Ontology: Philosophical Perspectives*, 395–415, 2010.

Dimech, Alkistis and Peter Grey. *The Brazen Vessel*. London, UK: Scarlet Imprint, 2019.

Dreyfus, Hubert L. "Holism and Hermeneutics." *The Review of Metaphysics* 34, no. 1 (1980), 3–23.

Evans-Pritchard, Edward E. *Witchcraft, Oracles, and Magic Among the Azande*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976.

Frisvold, Nicholaj de Mattos, Ògúnṣínà Adéwuyi Ọlàyínkà Babatúndé, and Childerico. *IFA: A Forest of Mystery*. Bucknell: Scarlet Imprint, 2016.

Johnson, Galen A. and Michael B. Smith. *Ontology and Alterity in Merleau-Ponty*. Evanston: Northwestern Univ. Pr., 1991.

Lévinas, Emmanuel. *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*. Pittsburgh: Duquesne Univ. Press, 2013.

Maldonado-Torres, Nelson. "On the Coloniality of Being." *Cultural Studies* 21, no. 2–3 (2007), 240–70.

Meñez, Herminia. *Explorations in Philippine Folklore*. Manila: Ateneo de Manila Univ. Press, 1996.

Merleau-Ponty, Maurice and C. Lefort. *The Visible and the Invisible*. Northwestern Univ. Press, 1968.

Merleau-Ponty, Maurice, Donald A. Landes, Taylor Carman, and Claude Lefort. *Phenomenology of Perception*. London: Routledge, 2012.

Merleau-Ponty, Maurice, James M. Edie. *Primacy of Perception*. Easnton IL, USA: Northwestern Univ. Press, 1964.

Mills, Martin A. "The Opposite of Witchcraft: Evans-Pritchard and the Problem of the Person." *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 19, no. 1 (2013), 18–33.

Ochoa, Todd Ramón. *Society of the Dead: Quita Manaquita and Palo Praise in Cuba*. Berkeley: Univ. of California, 2010.

Peel, J. D. Y. "The Three Circles of Yoruba Religion." In *Christianity, Islam, and Orisa-Religion: Three Traditions in Comparison and Interaction*, 214–32. University of California Press, 2016.

Posthumus, David C. *Transmitting Sacred Knowledge: Aspects of Historical and Contemporary Oglala Lakota Belief and Ritual*. Dissertation. Indiana University, 2015.

Sanders, Todd. *Beyond Bodies: Rain-Making and Sense-Making in Tanzania*. Toronto: University. of Toronto Press, 2008.

Silverblatt, Irene. *Moon, Sun, and Witches: Gender Ideologies and Class in Inca and Colonial Peru*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987.

Smith, Thomas Aneurin, Amber Murrey, and Hayley Leck. "'What Kind of Witchcraft Is This?' Development, Magic and Spiritual Ontologies." *Third World Thematics: A TWQ Journal* 2, no. 2–3 (2017), 141–56.