A Call to Return: Rerouting Healing Pathways in Akwaeke Emezi's *Freshwater*

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ABSTRACT

Recent scholarship on the novel *Freshwater* (2018) by Akwaeke Emezi has compellingly argued for approaching this work as a postcolonial trauma narrative, depicting the alienation from African spirituality with the material and spiritual worlds constantly colliding, restructuring their borders. In this narrative, Akwaeke Emezi illustrates the psychospiritual impacts of trauma by using a Nigerian Igbo worldview to weave Ada's journey as an *ọgbanje*, a spirit child that dies and comes back repeatedly. However, scholarship on Emezi's debut novel has yet to analyse the different pathways of healing that African cosmology offers as Ada strives to survive multiple ordeals before eventually encountering harmonious communion with the deities that influenced their life. This article argues that the physical, psychological, and spiritual traumas Ada encounters not only mirror the *ọgbanje* cycle but also demonstrate efforts to heal from the lack of cognizance of their spiritual self. To develop this analysis, this article combines trauma theory, African diaspora studies, and postcolonial studies. It prioritises African diaspora studies due to trauma theory's limitations when it comes to identifying and analysing modes of healing that transcend material bounds and experiences from Western points of view. Thus, this article highlights the healing potential of diasporic African cultures

KEYWORDS

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Introduction

African spirituality offers forms of healing (Deterville 122; Kurtz 430) that require a more acute examination of the ways that sources of trauma, such as colonisation and migrational displacement, weaken Africans' connection to their spiritual selves. Nigerian writer Akwaeke Emezi's debut novel *Freshwater* (2018) probes the arduous pathways that pervade this disconnection. *Freshwater* tells the story of Ada, a Nigerian character who migrates to the United States to attend college. However, Ada is an *ọgbanje*, known in Igbo cosmology as a spirit child who repeatedly dies and comes back again in different forms. As a non-human entity, the main character inhabits the liminal space between the spiritual and material worlds. Paradoxically, the geographical distance from their homeland leads to their reconnection with African spirituality while the borders that separate the material world from the spiritual become fuzzier as the former starts to affect the latter. Emezi construes *Freshwater* as a diasporic African narrative, which continues to engender fruitful debates in African literature, to explore the psychospiritual consequences of trauma for African identities and history. The main character's physical, psychological, and spiritual deaths in the novel evince their *ọgbanje* nature. Like wounds continuously opening and cicatrising, these metaphorical cycles of intertwined life and death represent the main character's pursuit to heal from the ultimate trauma of being alienated from African spirituality. Therefore, while scholars have mainly focused on the traumatic events of Ada's journey, I take it a step further to argue that the novel's richer contributions are more clearly apprehended when we give fuller weight to the potency of healing. To push this discussion forward, this article combines African diaspora studies, postcolonial studies, and trauma theory to examine the extent to which colonial efforts to efface African cosmology inform Ada's difficulty to connect with their spiritual communities across the diaspora.

Ọgbanjes have been ongoing subject matter in Nigerian literature. According to Christie C. Achebe, the *ọgbanje*, for the Igbo, or abiku, for the Yoruba, "means, simply, a spirit child, one fated to a cycle of early life and death to the same mother. […] The literal meaning of an ọgbanje is one who dies repeatedly or one who dies and comes again" (32–33). These iterations of life and death have a devastating impact upon the mother, who is subjected to repeated grief because of the constant loss of the child, and the cycle can only be broken if the parents find and destroy the *iyi-uwa*, an object which will impede the child from dying at a certain age and returning to earth (33). Some of the characteristics of the *ọgbanje* include idiosyncratic behaviour and precarious health (34). This phenomenon has integrated the literary oeuvres of Nigerian authors J.P. Clark and Wole Soyinka in poetry and in prose by Chinua Achebe in *Things Fall Apart* (1958) and Ben Okri in *The Famished Road* (1991). Within the purview of literary affirmations of African spirituality, Emezi continues this tradition by creating a psychospiritual narration to explore this topic in the contemporary African diaspora. Since this concept buttresses the main argument, I also consider the ontological plurality of the *ọgbanje* as a formal metaphor for the method of analysis. This close reading strategy intersects the fields mentioned above to read the life span cycles as exemplifying the dynamism of African cosmology and discussing various factors that have contributed to its suppression, which I will explain in the following sections of this article.

Contemporary scholarship on Emezi's debut novel has heavily focused on the depiction of trauma and the linkages between Western and African cultures. Eugenia Ossana argues that "*Freshwater* offers an intricate negotiation of Igbo and western discourses in a constant tug of war" (82) to analyse Emezi's portrayal of African and Christian spirituality, gender identity, and trauma in Ada's fragmented or layered existence (86). This method effectively allows for reading the syncretism between "Christianity and ancient Igbo ontology" (84) featured in the novel and brings to light Emezi's engagement with knowledge and traditions that preceded the period of European colonisation in Africa (88). While Ossana poses compelling interpretations of *Freshwater*'s intricate themes, her discussion does not address Ada's spiritual journey as a taxing yet liberating healing process.

Deploying a similar method, Tina Magaqa and Rodwell Makombe discuss how Emezi uses the *ọgbanje* concept as a strategy to decolonise queer sexuality in the Nigerian Igbo worldview, which does not subscribe to the binaries of Western conceptualisation of gender (25). Additionally, Kelsey Ann McFaul, Jessica Newgas, and Jay Rajiva similarly read *Freshwater* as a postcolonial trauma novel while also recognising the limitations of trauma theory to encompass the boundary-breaking nature of Igbo experience (Newgas; Rajiva 123; McFaul 55). As Rajiva observes, animism, the belief in the agency of non-human matter (125), underpins African cultural experience: "An animist worldview […] offers an alternative ontology for inhabiting traumatic experience, one that is rooted in African culture and that can respond dynamically to problems that arise out of a specifically Nigerian environment" (111). Akin to Rajiva, McFaul reads non-human practices through "an Africanfuturist method [that] acknowledges the reality of those aspects of ontology and life experience that have been classed as deviant, magical, speculative, or science fictional

(48)" in Western modes of thought. Such consideration loosely aligns with the goals of this article in validating modes of being that require a more culturally specific analysis due to colonial attempts to nullify these experiences. Nonetheless, the particularity of this African way of being does not preclude reading the *ọgbanje* life and death cycles as repetitions of trauma in Ada's psyche "in order to build resistance in the mind's protective shield" (Newgas). Newgas and Rajiva both discuss animism and trauma theory in their readings. My reading aligns with Newgas' and Rajiva's approaches as I assess Ada's necessity to return to Nigeria to reconnect with their spirituality. Lastly, Chukwunonso Ezeiyoke deploys a unique approach to interpret *Freshwater* by reading the *ọgbanje* as a monstrous figure through the lens of Gothic literature which accounts for the fear and trauma this entity inflicts upon the family (482). Ezeiyoke deliberately avoids a solely postcolonial theory framework to move beyond the coloniser/colonised binary (480) and reads gender and sexuality in the novel through the destruction of the *iyi-uwa* in Ada's body as a way of bestowing the *ọgbanje* "with individual freedom to express their own gender identity and sexuality, and [analyse] how that freedom threatens the hegemony of their predominantly heterosexual cultures" (489). Ezeiyoke compellingly points to the different hermeneutic possibilities the novel offers, in a similar vein to what this article aims to accomplish, thus inviting a nuanced angle to the discussion of this text. Nevertheless, discussing trauma partly in relation to postcolonialism also enables me to identify the ills from which Ada seeks to heal. Without this foundation, it becomes nearly impossible to comprehend why Emezi continuously engages with colonial history and migration as some of the sources of interference for Ada's difficulty in communicating with African deities. Regarding the generative value of postcolonial theory, Leela Gandhi adroitly observes: "The colonial aftermath calls for an ameliorative and therapeutic theory which is responsive to the task of remembering and recalling the colonial past. […] In adopting this procedure, postcolonial theory inevitably commits itself to a complex project of historical and psychological 'recovery'" (18). This article proposes using literary criticism to excavate collective history and individual psychospirituality. A more cautious application of this theoretical framework requires a study of the main character and the individuation of colonial history.

Notwithstanding the validity of these interpretations, these discussions anchor their arguments on the portrayal of different manifestations and implications of trauma. Scholars have yet to address the attempts to foster viable healing practices through African cosmology enmeshed with the traumatic events that repeatedly thwart these attempts. Stef Craps and

Gert Buelens define the scholarly debate that connects trauma studies and postcolonial studies through the theorisation of “the infliction of a collective trauma and reconceptualizing postcolonialism as a post-traumatic cultural formation” (2). Although this theorisation is useful to examine the colonial history undergirding the text, I, nevertheless, read it as a narrative of spiritual healing. This argument does not ignore the communal implications of colonial trauma, which categorises it as a collective experience instead of an individual one (Craps and Buelens 4). It builds on this concept of trauma to set forth a conversation about the implicit exploration of healing in the novel. Instead of simply rehashing these distressing trials, this article will build on existing scholarship to better discuss not only what plagues Ada, including migrant alienation and sexual assault, but also how this character heals from these wounds.

Unpacking Spiritual and Migrational Displacement in *Freshwater*

In *Freshwater,* Ada’s migration symbolically marks geographical displacement as a form of spiritual death. When Ada migrates to Virginia, the *ọgbanjes*, Shadow and Smoke, using the conjoined voice “We” in the narration, disclose to the reader their displeasure in having to depart from their birthplace, Nigeria. Concomitantly, their critique alludes to the history of colonisation and its baleful impact on Igbo spirituality:

> We felt just like she did, the most alone we could remember, torn from the place of our first and second births: taken on a plane across an ocean, given no return date. […] We raged at the displacement of a new country. After all, were we not ọgbanje? It was an insult to be subject to the decisions made around what was just a vessel. To be carried around like cargo, to be deposited in the land of the corrupters […]
>
> (Emezi 47)

This passage illustrates a feeling of isolation in migrating to the United States, paralleled with displacement of African peoples during the slave trade in cargo ships. Nonetheless, this passage has a twofold metaphorical implication: Ada’s initial lack of belonging in a foreign country marks the trauma of being uprooted from their place of origin, away from their family and distanced from their cultural environment; for the spirits it represents a spiritual death due to their circumscribed agency. They geographically fixate Nigeria as their birthplace, which puts the United

States, or as the *ọgbanjes* call it “the land of the corrupters” (47), as an antonym of their birth. Entrapped in Ada’s body, which becomes a ship of transport of these spiritual entities to a foreign land, this displacement is unwanted. This occurrence mirrors the forced displacement that African peoples were subjected to through slavery and colonial invasions, resulting in death of millions of Africans. By describing Ada’s migration while alluding to forced displacement, Emezi deftly explores shifting historical semantics and consequences of the African diaspora. The field of African diaspora studies has historically investigated the transatlantic slave trade (Iheka and Taylor 2), but in 1965 historian George Shepperson made his intervention in the field by describing “all peoples of African descent outside of the continent as constituting a diaspora” (Quayson and Daswani 7). Contemporary scholarship, however, has employed this term to examine the “new diaspora”, as Cajetan Iheka and Jack Taylor explain: “the new diaspora emphasises the push and pull factors of migration for a new generation of Africans born in postcolonial Africa […]” (2). Emezi aesthetically and thematically showcases the continuity of these two meanings of diaspora in this allusion to the slave ship. In *The Black Atlantic* (1994), Paul Gilroy discusses the representation of the slave ship in the Black diaspora as a reference to the Middle Passage and the slave trade (17) as “a living, micro-cultural, micro-political system in motion” (4). Moreover, Gilroy pays careful attention to this image due to “the various projects for redemptive return to an African homeland, on the circulation of ideas and activists as well as the movement of key cultural and political artefacts: tracts, books […]” (4) that these ships carried. In the context of the novel, Ada embodies this image and transports a spiritual microsystem bearing intangibly significant cultural artefacts, those being their cultural identity, which will weave Ada’s redemptive return to Nigeria. As for the other *ọgbanjes*, they are now forced to inhabit a space that evokes Eurocentric worldviews where social and racial hierarchies were weaponised to snuff out enslaved peoples’ cultural connections with their homelands, particularly African practices deemed pagan by Christianity (Blyden 102). What disrupts the spirits and Ada in this overlap between contemporary migration and forced historical displacement is the legacy of colonialism distancing them geographically and spiritually from Nigerian Igbo cosmology. Emezi conjures the collective wound of Africans’ stolen agency as a trigger of ancestral trauma but also continues the journey of awareness that will eventually result in healing. However, because of the mnemonic heft of their new host country vis-à-vis the history of enslavement of Africans, Ada's healing journey will only be fully realised when they return to Nigeria.

Postcolonial and Personal Trauma

The *ọgbanje* spirits also continually highlight the pernicious impact of Christianity on Igbo cosmology. Their mother, Ala, is an Igbo earth goddess represented by the python snake and the moon. The conjoined voice "We" asserts that, "Since the corrupters broke her shrines and converted her children, how many of them were calling her name anymore?" (35). The *ọgbanjes* punctuate the narration with such critiques to enact the remembrance of Ala and address the lack of people calling, praying to her, as a consequence of the ploy of European colonisers to suppress Igbo spirituality through the conversion of Africans in the nineteenth century. In "Conflicts Between African Traditional Religion and Christianity in Eastern Nigeria: The Igbo Example" (2017), Chukwuma O. Okeke et al. posit that Christian missionaries built schools across Igboland and, through the instruction of children and adolescents, facilitated the process of conversion (4). This process worked in tandem with efforts to demonise Igbo cultural practices:

> They plunged into the condemnation and eradication of traditional religion. Traditional music and song, drama, and dance were totally denounced as bad and immoral. Statues, images, and emblems of remarkable artistic work and aesthetic merit were wantonly destroyed by some of the overzealous converts as idols and works of the devil.
>
> (Okeke et al. 4)

As Okeke et al. explain it, the proselyting expedition certain missionaries deployed hinged on destroying indigenous cultural expressions to establish Christianity, acts which the *ọgbanjes* denounced earlier. Consequently, Emezi's prose has the twofold impact of foregrounding the colonial legacy and countering this malicious destruction of Igbo spirituality by reasserting its validity. As Emezi discusses in an essay for *The Cut,* Western education continues the colonial legacy explored above because "[t]he legacy of colonialism had always taught us that such a world wasn't real, that it was nothing but juju and superstition" (n.p.). What ensues from Emezi's statement is the creation of a narrative that allegorically cauterises the collective wound of colonialism by affirming a holistic reality where the *ọgbanjes* act as interlocutors, resulting in the demarginalisation of

African spirituality. Irene Visser observes that the narrativisation of postcolonial trauma is "crucial for cultural survival" (257) and "allows insight into specifics of the colonial past as a pathway to integration of the traumatic memory" (258). The *ọgbanjes*' weaponisation of anti-colonial rhetoric operates as a tactic to work through postcolonial trauma in a metalinguistic exploration of the colonial factors that obstruct Ada's access to African spiritual knowledge. In their preoccupation with Igbo cultural survival, they catalyse healing for Ada by mediating the main character's relationship, and eventual reconnection with, their spiritual self.

Furthermore, colonial history personally impacts Ala's relationship with Ada. In a metalinguistic interpretation of the novel, the reiteration of the need to reconnect with Ala represents Emezi's artistically reviving Igbo spirituality from the deathly forces of colonisation through a spiritual diaspora. Emezi also represents the intricate relationship with Igbo cosmology and modernity when Ada's father Saul has an encounter with a snake: "Now, Saul was a modern Igbo man. […] He did not believe in mumbo-jumbo, anything that would've have said a snake could mean anything other than death. […] He snatched her up and away, took a machete, went back and hacked the python to bits. Ala (our mother) dissolved amid broken scales and pieces of flesh" (13). Saul's alleged modern identity rejects the spiritual reality that credited Ala's existence in the form of a snake by killing it and enlarging the disconnection between Ada and their spiritual mother. Emezi uses this spiritual death through the murder of the snake as an allegory for how Western modernity attempted to destroy African spirituality by diminishing it. According to Catherine Walsh and Walter Mignolo, the Western model of modernity strived to snuff out non-Western knowledge to establish its solipsistic version of reality, "but if there's a hope to survive on the planet it would be due to memories and conceptions of life that Westernization under the banner of modernity could never conquer and of course never kill" (207). Therefore, Emezi foregrounds the spiritual realities that European colonisation endeavoured to suppress by actualising it and inviting the reader to learn along with Ada about Igbo cosmology. The rebirth in this case occurs through narrativisation as a response to colonial effacement, drawing African spirituality out of the necrophiliac hands of Westernisation.

Nevertheless, other forms of violence also bring forth disharmony in the multifaceted reality of the novel. Ada experiences several incidents of sexual assault. The spirits inhabiting the character's mind and body operate, to some extent, as a coping mechanism to deal with these psychological traumas. In college, the character Soren surprises Ada by telling them to start taking birth control pills, even though the main character did not remember having sex with him. Then the gruesome realisation strikes the character: “Birth control pills, because this boy […] had released clouds into her. But she couldn’t remember any of it and she couldn’t remember saying yes because she couldn’t remember being asked” (57). He assaulted them when they were asleep, prompting the shock, and from the psychological wound of the traumatic event emerges Asughara, the *ọgbanje* they would continuously wear as a psychological mask whenever they had any kind of sexual contact. As Asughara reveals: “I was a child of trauma; my birth was on top of a scream” (73). Asughara’s assertion demonstrates the entanglement of life and death, a constant for an *ọgbanje*. A part of Ada’s psychological well-being dies when the knowledge of the assault comes to them, and from their consciousness they birth Asughara. This new character becomes a temporary shelter from physical and psychological injuries. The psychospiritual mask hides the face of pain until healing can truly occur.

In this instance, trauma theory usefully explicates Ada’s metaphorical death as a sexual assault survivor. Cathy Caruth argues that surviving traumatic violence is comparable to surviving death:

> the trauma consists not only in having confronted death but *in having survived, precisely, without knowing it*. What one returns to in the flashbacks is not the incomprehensibility of one’s near death but the very incomprehensibility of one’s survival. Repetition, in other words, is not simply the attempt to grasp that one has almost died but, more fundamentally and enigmatically, the very attempt to *claim one’s own survival.*
>
> (64, italics original)

In Caruth’s interpretation of Freud’s reflections about traumatic awakenings, the iteration of trauma occurs when the victim has a nightmare. This re-emergence of the traumatic event is the mind striving to face what happened and bring the survival from the subconscious to the conscious state in order to claim it. However, the difficulty to grapple with and understand one’s survival, as Caruth puts it, leads the victim to awaken in apprehension from the nightmare. For Ada, knowledge of the sexual assault creates Asughara, and the latter becomes the former’s psychological shield, “Ada was never there. I had already promised; she would never be there, not again” (74). In the material world, Asughara functioned as a suture for the psychological wound. In the spiritual world, the constant deaths, which are part of the *ọgbanje* fate, happen psychologically, with the repeated encounter with death, represented by sexual intimacy for

Ada, thus the necessity of Asughara to take their place to protect them from the iterations of trauma. With a damaged relationship with humans, Igbo spirituality extends its influence on Ada's life in attempts to heal from trauma. Here, this analysis reaches a point that exceeds the grasp of Western trauma theory, considering its Eurocentric framework which has been amply criticised in postcolonial studies for sidestepping healing, spirituality, and non-Western cultures (Craps and Buelens 3; Visser 254).

Attempting to Heal

The conflated but at times opposed psychological and spiritual realities also fulfil part of *ọgbanjes*' fate, which is to have precarious health. Ada experiences the symptoms of PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) such as anorexia, excessive drinking, and self-harm. Yet the *ọgbanjes*, observing life events in the character's life, interpret self-harm differently. For instance, Ada cut themselves to cope with lingering effects of the assaults because as a child, their cousin touched their breasts without their consent, and "We" (Smoke and Shadow) narrates: "she cut into the back of her hand and bled us into a restless silence. She would continue, if you remember, for another twelve years, but back then was when she learned that sacrifices worked, that using blood could make existence bearable, at least for a little while" (Emezi 124). Such conflicting situations invite interpretations of dealing with trauma and the *ọgbanjes* trying to comprehend Ada. Smoke and Shadow perceive the negative bodily impact of self-harm as an act that appeases them. In these traumatic moments, however, Emezi employs kinship structures to contrast Ada's spiritual connections with the danger humans present to the character. After a family member sexually assaults them, Ada attempts to heal by severing blood bonds, physically and metaphorically, and harming their body. The *ọgbanjes*, Ada's spiritual family, watch over the character throughout these incidents and interpret the character's actions as a call to strengthen their bonds, a call for protection. Similarly, Ada, at this point in the novel, continues to be distant from Ala, their spiritual mother, and later gives birth to Asughara, as both their child and sibling, when they lack resources to heal. Moreover, the constant back and forth between psychological and physical damage and unconsciously seeking spiritual healing is better understood based on reciprocity in Igbo cosmology. Chinwe M.A. Nwoye argues that reciprocity informs the relationship between humans and gods: "when the Igbo offer sacrifices to their gods or in any other ceremonies of the religion, they expect something good to come out of such transaction" (314). For Ada, the physical pain distracted them from the psychological pain of these traumas. For the African entities, the blood was the sacrifice they offered as protection from the assaults. As Emezi writes: "There are limitations in the flesh that intrinsically made no sense, constraints of this world that are diametrically opposed to the freedoms we had when we used to trail along those shell-blue walls and dip in and out of bodies at will" (12). Cutting their own body, for the *ọgbanje* spirits, followed the logic of freedom in which the circumscriptions of human flesh contradicted their immaterial existence. Nevertheless, the character's lack of knowledge about being an *ọgbanje* and inhabiting both worlds accompanied by these spirits creates a disharmony that impedes healing, until they find ontological self-awareness.

Ada's path towards trauma healing positions African spirituality as a repository for traumatic emotional homelessness. Migrant and spiritual alienation continue to intersect in fomenting Ada's feelings of unbelonging with Black North American communities in college: "After a few weeks with that crew, it became clear that she didn't quite fit. They disliked white equestrians who lived on the honors floor with her, and [sic] Ada didn't know why, not yet. America would teach her that later" (50). Ada did not meet the protective and exclusionary criteria to join their group due to the group's perception of the character's proximity to whiteness, leading Ada to seek roots in a community of international students. What elevates sections where Emezi portrays common struggles that Black African immigrants contend with, as they try to build communities in their host countries, are the spiritual implications of events that take place in the material world. The character embodies multiple forms of alienation, and these emotional scars underscore the pain of being away from home for both the spirits and Ada. They feel as though home was not in the United States but rather "back across the ocean, where [they] belonged" (51). The spirits that inhabit their body seek to preserve the character in their transition to adulthood:

> She turned eighteen and nothing happened. We kept her. They watched her move in her innocence, a golden chained thing, dancing on dim dance floors and bright stages, winding circles with her waist as if she'd done so on a body before. […] All those boys, all that empty following it all. We kept her, we held her, she was ours.
>
> (51–52)

This passage showcases a possessive and protective belonging where lacking solid emotional connections in this foreign space means nurturing their bond with Ada without human interference. It also suggests that the successive traumas that ensued would complicate their relationship, since a few pages later Soren would assault Ada, leading to the birth of Asughara. The path of reconnection and awareness of their spiritual identity meshes with the trajectories of healing that would guide Ada.

Psychospiritual Healing Pathways in Diasporic African Worldviews

Emezi uses the diasporic ramifications of West African spirituality to exemplify other modes of healing. In college, Ada meets Malena, who is a "Dominica girl with the cigars. […] she was the daughter of Changó, of Santa Barbara" (88). Changó is a deity entitled Orisha from Yoruba culture, which due to the enslavement of Africans and their displacement to Latin America has expanded across the African diaspora in countries such as Brazil, Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the Dominican Republic (Lefever 320; Glazier 200). For Changó or Shango, illness affects humans' ability to communicate with this deity as Stephen D. Glazier explains it: "a central premise of [Shango] belief is that illness and misfortune result from lack of attention to the [Orisha] and a belief that the [Orisha], when properly attended, care about their devotees and are willing and able to help them in their daily lives" (201). In *Freshwater,* Malena acts as foil to Ada because of her constant attention to her Orisha and exemplifies healthy spiritual relationships Ada has yet to form. Contrary to Ada, Malena possesses a strong awareness of her connection with her spirituality, prompting the *ọgbanjes* in Ada's body to say she "smelled like [them]" (89), and motivating them to be respectful towards her influence in Ada's life. Malena has a brief yet pivotal role in the novel, as she aids Ada in paving the road that would eventually lead to the main character's healing by bringing them closer to Ala: "'There's a claim on your head, Ada,' she told us. 'Back home. Something wants you back home' […] She told us other things, though. 'You're the daughter of Santa Marta,' she said, early on. 'La Dominadora'" (89). Albeit she informs Ada about one of their spiritual mothers, entitled Filomena Lubana (90), Malena guides them to the location of their healing process: Nigeria. Hence, Emezi alludes to the expansiveness of African spirituality and the spiritual network the character has with "a million mothers with a million names" (90) thusly foregrounding the African diaspora as a support network with countless linkages, and nomenclatures, across the world. Malena, being a role model for Ada, convenes with diasporic and, although with more limitations, West African gods to deliver this message of return. This interaction between Ada and Malena occurs before the traumatic event that would birth Asughara but after the sexual assault perpetrated by Ada's cousin, demonstrating that healing also signifies preservation from foreboding physical and psychological deaths. Malena's profound spiritual awareness gives her cognizance of her role in Ada's life: "'They told me you were going to kill yourself' […] 'When we were in school. You remember? You started breaking glass, cutting yourself? Yeah. That was them.'[…]'I saved your life, Ada.' She never told [sic] Ada what exactly she'd worked or what the rituals looked like, only that they were necessary. 'I held a lot of stuff that was gonna hurt you'" (91). Because Orishas defy human constraints of space and time, "they can journey from past to present and to the future; thereby offering predictions and advice to their devotees" (Glazier 201), and Malena employs this ability for Ada's sake as an illuminating path towards a better life. She does not disclose the healing rituals she employs to save Ada, but those details are not necessary to consider that Emezi presents West African spirituality as a healing source. In turn, the concealment of these rituals implicitly reveals that Ada needs to find their own methods of reconnecting with Ala. This reconnection cannot be fully realised if they do not return home, harkening back to Malena as a transmitter of the call to return to Nigeria.

Before the geographical healing journey begins, Ada aligns spiritual reconnection to bodily agency. Ada's body is the site of recurring self-inflicted and external trauma that I have equated with the *ọgbanje*'s death and life cycles. While it might not be the focus of this article, it is important to examine how Ada's gender-affirming surgery represents a physical, and healthier, mode of reconnecting with African deities by removing their uterus and reducing their breasts as the *ọgbanjes* narrate when compared with the acts of self-harm earlier in the novel: "To make the vessel look a little more like us – that was the extent of our intent. We have understood what we are, the places we are suspended in, between the inaccurate concepts of male and female, between the us and the brothersisters slavering on the other side" (193). To bridge the gap between humans and spirits, Ada challenges gender binaries to which an *ọgbanje*, a genderless entity who embodies liminalities (death/life; human/spirit), does not ascribe. Ezeiyoke similarly interprets this passage and explains: "Though it is not directly identified as such in the novel, by removing her breasts during the surgery, Ada is transitioning to non-binary since ọgbanje, by their nature, are genderless" (489). Building on this reading, the exercise of bodily autonomy also symbolises the death of a gendered body through the eminent birth of Ada's spiritual reckoning: "The space between life and death is resurrection" (193), as Shadow and Smoke put it, so Ada can heal their scarred body, mind, and spirit in this act of self-care. Studies from Anthony N. Almazan and Alex S. Keuroghlian link such gender-affirming surgery to significant improvement on trans people's mental health (615). For this analysis, I consider that the spiritual implications of self-care bring forth Emezi's own journey of discovery of their gender identity happening alongside their spiritual awakening. "The possibility that I was an ọgbanje occurred to me around the same time I realised I was trans, but it took me a while to collide the two worlds" (Emezi, *The Cut*). The autobiographical parallels between Ada and Emezi are evident, but I remain focused on examining healing as composed of physical, psychological, and spiritual self-realisations complementing each other in equal measure to save Ada from a life of repeated turmoil.

The overlap between identity and memory also plays a significant role in rekindling spiritual connections. According to Jan Assman, "Memory is knowledge with an identity-index, it is knowledge about oneself, that is, one's own diachronic identity, be it as an individual or as a member of a family, a generation, a community, a nation, or a cultural and religious tradition" (114). By conceiving a narrative about pursuing self-knowledge, Emezi centres collective voices of Igbo cultural worldview, which transcend human limitations and awareness of their relationships with these powerful beings. For Ada, it results in a more harmonious relationship with their prismatic identity. When the character travels to Nigeria to visit their human mother, they meet an Igbo historian at a restaurant, tell him their life story, and he talks about Ala, their spiritual mother. Because of this encounter, Ada realises: "After all the doctors and the diagnoses and the hospitals, this thing of being an ọgbanje, a child of Ala – that was the only path that brought me any peace" (218). The journey motif was to look inward, look back on life, try to understand the past, to improve the present and pave a better way into the future, or, as Ala says when they finally pray to the Igbo earth goddess for the first time, *"Find* [their] *tail"* (224). Finding their tail requires looking back to learn about themselves and their repressed spirituality, making a nod to the concept of *sankofa* in Akan philosophy. In a study of psychospiritual wellness, Adeeba D. Deterville defines *sankofa* as "[looking] back and [fetching] that which has been forgotten–including African-centred philosophical concepts in transpersonal notions of self and personhood" (118). In Akan philosophy, spirituality is integral to the wholeness of the self, which accounts for the interconnectedness of human existence with community, culture, psychology, and spirit, hence transpersonal psychology as Deterville explains it (124). Then to practise *sankofa* means to make a holistic recovery of one's personal history, indissociable from communal history, based on an African worldview, as Emezi writes: "The meaning was clear. 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" (224). Ada's *sankofa* is an epistemological practice, an exercise of rebirth that necessitates looking inward to find missing pieces of themselves in African spiritual knowledge to rehabilitate from trauma. The rehabilitation of the self depends on locality, where an individual is situated, denoting the interplay between ontology and epistemology coming to fruition when Ada answers Ala's call to return to their birthplace, solving the double-edged issue of migrant and spiritual alienation.

Spiritual Harmony as a Healing Process

The symbolic layers of nature in the closing paragraph of *Freshwater* indicate spiritual trauma healing through the concatenation of African divinities:

> I can see a red road opening before me; the forest is green on either side of it and the sky is blue above it. The sun is hot on the back of my neck. The river is full of my scales. […] I am a village full of faces and a compound full of bones, translucent thousands. Why should I be afraid? I am the source of the spring. All freshwater comes out of my mouth.
>
> (226)

Travelling on a road in Umuahia to visit Saachi, their human mother, there exists a metaphorical representation of the harmony they now find with Igbo divinities since each natural element represents one of them. I read the detailed illustration of the environment as a subtle portrayal of Ala (earth goddess) in the road where Ada travels, Igwe (sky god) with the blue sky, and Anyanwu (sun god) through the sun enveloping the main character (Nwoye 307). A harmonious relationship between humans and the environment demonstrates a key feature of African spiritual worldview (Deterville 126; Nwoye 306), as these deities now harmoniously accompany Ada in their healing journey. For J. Roger Kurtz, the intricate process of trauma healing, which happens continuously and involves the subject overcoming the devastating effects of trauma, entails "the forging of new connections and relationships that can ultimately result in a transformed sense of purpose, meaning and identity. Traditional African societies are rich in resources for trauma healing, characterised as they are by a holistic view of humanity grounded in a strong sense of spirituality" (430). In one of the few instances in which Ada narrates the story, they say, "I don't even have the mouth to tell this story" (93), for the inability to narrate connotes the burden of trauma. However, in the conclusion of the novel, Ada finally claims their story by realising that the psychospiritual masks they used for hiding or protecting themselves from trauma are now different facets, the village of faces, composing their identity. The freshwater coming out of the character's mouth connotes an overabundance of life emerging and healing from the place that was once the metaphorical vehicle for the narration of pain. According to Ogbu U. Kalu, water plays an important role in Igbo spiritual cosmology: "Rivers and streams are endued with spiritual potency and the Igbo believe that 'people live in the water', that is, there is a kingdom of marine spirits who interact in various ways with the human world" (189). To extend this observation, I note that, among its varied conceptualisations in Igboland, *ọgbanje* is a marine spirit of "children whose spirit comes from the river and who tend to die in childhood" (Gore and Nevadomsky 66). Ada embarks on a spiritual journey in this concluding paragraph delineated by water as an element of return and healing. Metaphorically, to expel a stream of freshwater from their mouth signifies a return to the *ọgbanje*'s natural element. Secondly, spiritual interactions with the human world cease to be conflicting, and healing – water in this case – comes from within as the source of spring, through their self-actualisation as a water spirit. Concluding the physical, psychological, and spiritual deaths, Ada heals and rebirths themself from water, ready to plunge into a life where they can finally communicate with other spiritual beings and access resources to trauma healing more effectively. Instead of perpetuating the view of *ọgbanjes* as a spiritual affliction because of their life and death cycles, Emezi recasts the *ọgbanje* as yet another complex form of existence capable of achieving recovery.

A caveat to complete this discussion is to avoid categorising trauma healing derived from personal and postcolonial tribulations as a finite process. Craps and Buelens problematise dangerously projecting individual recovery onto postcolonial trauma in the "psychologization of social suffering" (4): "Immaterial recovery –psychological healing – risks becoming privileged over material recovery: reparation or restitution and, more broadly, the transformation of a wounding political, social, and economic system" (4). While *Freshwater* opens the possibility of allegorical readings correlating diasporic Africans' spiritual disconnection embedded in Ada's character, this article does not suggest the postcolonial structures that distanced Ada from Ala have also been overcome. It rather points to some of the immaterial, yet salient, consequences of colonial corruption in an African life. We do not witness Ada concluding their journey in Umuahia, and in a similar way we do not witness the closure of Ada's spiritual healing process. Emezi unveils only the beginning of the new self that will continue to grow and flow throughout the African diaspora just like the cascade of freshwater emerging from Ada's mouth.

In this analysis, I examined Akwaeze Emezi's contemporary rendering of African spirituality through the portrayal of an *ọgbanje*'s cyclical life. Through the polyphonic narrativisation of trauma healing, Emezi poses a counter-narrative to the contrived demonisation of African spirituality using the contemporary African diaspora to pose such critique. Emezi provides profound reflections about the effects of trauma and the possibility of healing. They prove that African gods are not dead; they just need to be remembered.

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