

Precolonial Igbo Voices in Akwaeke Emezi's *Freshwater* (2018): A Palimpsestic Search for "Home"

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Abstract. The present article examines how *Freshwater* (2018), the debut novel of the Nigerian writer Akwaeke Emezi, offers a layered portrayal of precolonial Igbo and western narratives. By recourse to the auto-fictional narrative mode, the fiction deploys a constant tug of war which suggests the culturally hybrid nature of discourses connected to spiritual belief, self-identity dynamics and gender. My analysis pivots around three main discussions. Firstly, I trace and exemplify the aesthetic and thematic imbrication between Igbo cosmology (and Animism) and Christianity. Secondly, I seek to evince the unconventional depiction of plural consciousnesses coexisting in an individual in an effort to contest long-established truisms of identity. I also focus on the ensuing amalgam between western conceptions of mental illness, trauma and Igbo mystic interpretations of reality. Considering the peripheral Igbo stance the novel depicts, the fiction will be contextualised within the current literary meta- and trans-modernist axis. Thirdly, I refer to transgender issues mapped up and brought to the fore through the main character's predicament; a search for existential answers commingling divergent paradigms. Thus, *Freshwater* offers a peculiar polyphony of numinous narratorial voices which strive to question extant (neo)postcolonial truths.

Keywords: Nigerian literature; Igbo *ogbanje* ontology; Dissociative Identity Disorder; trauma; gender reassignment.

[es] Voces pre-coloniales Igbo en *Freshwater* (2018) de Akwaeke Emezi: un palimpsesto en búsqueda de "casa"

Resumen. El presente artículo examina cómo *Freshwater* (2018), la primera novela de la escritora nigeriana Akwaeke Emezi, ofrece un repertorio estratificado de narrativas pre-coloniales Igbo y occidentales. A través de la auto-ficción, la narración entabla una tensión constante que sugiere la naturaleza híbrida de creencias espirituales, dinámicas de definición del ser y cuestiones relacionadas al género. El análisis llevado a cabo gira en torno a tres discusiones centrales. En primera instancia, se traza y ejemplifica la imbricada relación estética entre la cosmología Igbo (y el Animismo) con el cristianismo. En segunda instancia, se procura demostrar la inusual existencia de una consciencia plural en un mismo individuo en procura contrarrestar verdades históricamente establecidas relacionadas con la formación de la identidad. Seguidamente, se hace referencia a la amalgama propuesta entre la enfermedad mental y el trauma por un lado y las interpretaciones de la realidad abordadas a través de la mística Igbo por el otro. Considerando la perspectiva periférica Igbo que la novela evidencia, esta ficción será incluida dentro de contexto del nuevo eje paradigmático del meta- y trans-modernismo. Por último, me referiré a cómo se exponen y visibilizan temas relacionados al transgénero a través del dilema del personaje central del relato. Así, *Freshwater* ofrece una peculiar polifonía de voces narrativas místicas que procuran cuestionar verdades (neo)post-coloniales vigentes.

Palabras clave: Literatura nigeriana; Ontología Igbo *ogbanje*; Transtorno de identidad disociativo; trauma; cambio de género

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1. Introduction

Mgbe ihe guzoro, ihe ozo guzoro n'akuku ya
 “When something stands, something else stands beside it”
 Igbo Proverb

Freshwater (2018) is the fiction debut of the Nigerian author Akwaeke Emezi. Conceived also as an overarching project called *The Unblinding*, the novel is part of a “multi-year, multidisciplinary series of self-portraits” including paintings and videos. The artist’s main aim is to show their/her self-progression from “awareness to clarity” as an Igbo demigod called *ogbanje* (Emezi 2018c). Even though Emezi claims pronouns are not a particularly significant reference issue, the writer accepts she could shift from “he” to “she.” However, “they” –the author believes– is a pronoun that has the flexibility of being “neither male nor female, neither plural nor singular” and seems to more accurately mirror her present self-definition² (Waldman 2018). In Nigerian Igbo cosmology, an *ogbanje* is a trickster godling who constantly straddles the realms of spirit and flesh, life and death, being half human and half numen. His/her somehow malevolent and mischievous nature is predestined to be born in order to die again in a never-ending loop of woe inflicted upon the human mother and family. This deity is also a carrier of multiple consciousnesses whose precocity and imagination appears to be beyond that of ordinary humans (Ogunyemi 1996). Therefore, the aim of the present article is to demonstrate how *Freshwater* offers an intricate negotiation of Igbo and western discourses in a constant tug of war, a journey back and forth that strives to redefine the hybridity of notions connected to spirituality, definition of the self and gender.

For the sake of a better comprehension of the world-view presented in *Freshwater*, I will define some crucial terms and rituals in connection to Igbo/*ogbanje*³ ontology: the gates of Igbo/*ogbanje* realms, the *iyi-uwuwa* and the importance of birth naming. The ensuing analysis will focus on three main discussion subsections. The first will be devoted to spiritual concerns. I will trace and exemplify the extant imbrication between Igbo cosmology (and Animism) and Christianity. Secondly, I will concentrate on the identity dynamics of the self and the construction of a polyphonic fictional reality. I will also pinpoint the existing negotiating contours between mental disorder and trauma and Igbo precolonial world-views –which seem to embed the novel within the meta-/trans-modern axis of contemporary literary criticism. Thirdly, I will address the gender issues mapped up and brought to the fore through the main character’s predicament.

The novel’s plot recounts the tortuous life of Ada, a Nigerian girl born as an *ogbanje* also mothered by the python deity Ala. Her process of growing up and transition from innocence to the realisation of this circumstance unfolds as a *bildungsroman* mostly tainted by suffering and a spiritual quest. Ada is abandoned by her human mother Saachi –who leaves Nigeria and her family behind for a job in Saudi Arabia. Hence, the lonely Ada grows up yearning for love while developing an increasing attachment to some mystical companions who embody her and constantly speak in the “marble room” of her mind (Emezi 2018: 122). During her lonely childhood, Ada has to endure the harsh discipline of her eldest brother’s patriarchal logic and the sexual advances of two male neighbours. Simultaneously, Ada discovers her discomfort with her body changes during puberty and longs for the time when she could be regarded either as boy or girl. Through the voices of the *ogbanje* “brothersisters,” the readers witness the protagonist’s migration to America to finish up her studies at college and her traumatic involvement with Soren –who ends up raping her. An idyllic relationship with an Irish student –Ewan– lands up in a disappointing marriage and subsequent divorce. Ada’s liminal demigod condition is only understood by few people. Henceforth, after showing signs of self-inflicted body harm, anorexia and depression, she attempts to commit suicide with the assistance of one of her inner *ogbanje* companions, Asughara. Ada’s gender uneasiness leads her to a breast reduction surgery and love involvements with women. Eventually, she meets a Nigerian Yoruba priest who helps her to understand her god-human hybrid condition and reach a deeper understanding of her plight. Among the voices which recount Ada’s story, the reader is provided with the shifting *ogbanje* demigods’ perspectives. Thus, one is provided with a somehow neutral “we” –in Chapters One, Two, Three, Four, Five, Eight, Eleven, Seventeen, Eighteen, Twenty and Twenty-One– to the unreliable point of view of lust-driven Asughara –in Chapters Six, Seven, Ten, Twelve, Thirteen, Fourteen and Sixteen. Ada’s narration is scantily found –in Chapters Nine, Fifteen, Nineteen and Twenty-Two. The plot narration proves to be highly fragmented mostly seeking to mimic orality.

² Henceforward, in order to avoid misunderstandings with the reader, and out of respect for the author’s non-binary gender choice, whenever I refer to Emezi, I will use both pronouns “they” and “she” and verb concord/agreement with the third person singular pronoun.

³ Also referred to as *ogbange* or *obanje*, cf. “Ogbanje/abiku and cultural conceptualizations of psychopathology in Nigeria.” Sunday T. C. Ilechukwu, *Mental Health, Religion & Culture* May 2007; 10, 3: 239–255.

2. Igbo worldview: some useful notions

From the very first chapter, one is given a detailed account of some *ogbanje* spirits having a half-conscious existence inside and outside a foetus which was to become the main character, Ada –*the* Ada as they call her. Three occurrences, central to the development of the plot, are revealed in these introductory pages. First, the gates which are usually opened when an *ogbanje* is born into a human child are supposed to be tightly closed after the delivery of the human mother so that the godling living inside the child cannot remember his/her previous demigod existence. The plural narrators admit that the Igbo higher gods are oftentimes capricious and aloof in their relation to humans and their suffering. Hence, in one of such whimsical divine oversights, they leave the gates of the two worlds – “[t]hose carved monstrosities, those clay chalk portals” (Emezi: 33)– open. Thus, the gods compel Ada, and the *ogbanje* hatchlings inside her, to be conscious of their plural and parallel existence. In traditional West African tradition, an *ogbanje* – “one who returns” in Igbo– or *abiku* child – “born to die” in Yoruba– is coerced to stay with the family by means of different rituals such as the killing of animals, sprinkling of palm oil, palm wine libations, scarifications on the infant’s chest, cheeks, palms or back, or attaching notches to their ears (Achebe: 1986; African Soulja: 2013). These marks are meant to break the cycle of rebirth. As Chidi Maduka explains, people claim to have seen many children with these previous marks inflicted on them in previous lives (1987). It is customarily believed that if the *ogbanje/abiku* child survives childhood, s/he will stay in the world of humans. Laura Smalligan argues that “[i]f ever an *abiku* child does remain on earth and grow to be an adult, it is because the powerful *Ifa babalawo* [priest] of the physical realm has trapped him against his will. When this occurs, the *abiku* child’s relationship with the spiritual world is shattered, and he is prevented from ever having contact with the spiritual realm again” (Smalligan 2015: 361). Ada’s condition, however, appears to be somehow different. She is compelled to linger among humans, not owing to her family’s pampering her during childhood or due to a *dibia/babalawo* concocting some charm to break her supernatural alliance to the other world, but because she is herself a hidden token. Thus, a second key definition of the *iyi-uwa* or the “oath of the world” (Emezi 2018: 14) becomes crucial. The *iyi-uwa* is a tokenised object such as a rock, a bone or a piece of cloth which should be hidden or buried so that the *ogbanje* can ensure his/her coming back to his/her cohort of companions. If this talisman is found and destroyed by the child’s parents or family, the *ogbanje* infant cannot die; that is, s/he cannot return to his/her otherworld home. In another mischievous concoction, the godlings hosting Ada conceal the *iyi-uwa* inside the walls of the girl’s vagina. Thus, the child is the hiding place and the covenant. Hence, “[t]o destroy [the *iyi-uwa*], they would have to destroy her” (15). These intricacies in Ada’s fate pave the way for a life that, from the very beginning, appears to be doomed by carelessness, errancy and chaos. Thirdly, one is faced with the importance of naming a new-born child in Nigerian culture. Ada’s name means “the egg of a python,” which, therefore, turns the child into a daughter of Ala, “the source of stream, [...] the earth herself, the judge and mother, the giver of law” (9). There is a certain ominous tone in the following lines, which seem to signal how special Ada is: “the egg of a python is the child of Ala, and the child of Ala is not, and can never be, intended for your [human/the reader’s] hands” (9).

3. *Ogbanje* births and *Yshwa*’s interpolations

Ironically, it is during Christmas time that an event in Ada’s life triggers off the first birth of the *ogbanje* inside her. She has the chance to watch a *Masquerade* ceremony in Umuawa. Masquerades are usually enacted by men attired in colourful raffia robes and wooden masks who represent Igbo deities or dead ancestor relatives. In the old times, the aim of this ritual was to keep a moral check on the community, that is, the performers could expose those who misbehaved (Widjaja 2000). Through this enactment, the brothersisterhood speak to Ada and her godlings within. The cohort is angry with Ada’s inner hosts because, by then, she should be dead (and the *ogbanje* reunited at home). For the first time, what Ada has considered to be (day)dreaming is to be revealed as a reality inside her. Moreover, this birth signals the protagonist’s enduring madness and future struggle: to be a stuffed god “into a bag of skin” (Emezi 2018: 20). The fact that the first emergence of Ada’s plural consciousness is at Christmas time cannot be a mere coincidence. The author seems to place these two celebrations together in an effort to overwrite Christian traditions. They seem to be relegated to the background, the far away reference in which the real birth –not Jesus’s– takes place. The second *ogbanje* birth occurs with the plural companions’s naming. “Many things start with a name” (7) is a punch line which appears to openly denounce the intent colonial erasure of the Nigerian past. Hence, this name-calling brings about the full self-existence of the private hatchlings. Since *ogbanje* are seduced by red and blood, when Ada’s little sister –Añuli– has a serious car accident that almost severs her leg, Ada’s hosts seem aroused by the human leakage. Again, birth and baptism, are on a par with the ceremonies of Christianity. The holy water and the oil ointment are, however, traded by blood. The sign of the cross by body cuts. From this moment on, the hosts become bloodthirsty.

Ada “was just a child when these sacrifices began. She slashed her skin without fully knowing why; the intricacies of self-worship were lost on her” (Emezi: 42). Ada gives the *ogbanje* agency by providing

them with a name: “Smoke, was a complicated gray, swirled layers and depths, barely held together in a vaguely human shape” (42). Instead, Shadow “was a deep black, pressed malevolently against a wall, hints of other colors (mother color eyes, yellowed teeth)” (42). These characters, in all probability twins, remain indeterminate as regards gender and identity. They are the first narrators the readers encounter. The fact that they are twins seems to be no mere coincidence. Multiple births have been subject to ambiguous Igbo/Yoruba communal demeanour. In the old times, these children were thought to be “demons who suck[ed] their [parents’] blood at night (Sunday: 2018) and, accordingly, killed at birth. As Ojri Sunday claims, twins were not considered human. Thus, they were deemed a threat to the community at large. Native healers and ancestral belief saw in twins the meddling of the gods, the intrusion of strange powers and evil brought upon the village. Mothers of twins were even tagged as unclean for begetting “forbidden beings” (Sunday: 2018). Similarly, *umu ejime* –or multiple births– were considered abomination against the earth deity Ala (Misty: 2001). However, in recent times, this repugnance has been deflected into joy and hope (Leroy: 1995). The erstwhile sacrificed new-borns are nowadays celebrated since they are believed to bequeath happiness, health and abundance to their kindred.

The plural narrators’ account of Ada’s story seems to depict the inaccuracy of their demigod perception of the human world. They provide a rather moderate and reconciling perspective of the events though they remain aloof (or absent) during Ada’s most acute moments of crisis. Ada is embarked in a haphazard spiritual journey. First, her human mother, Saachi, leaves her when she is about six. By this time, Ada starts sharing private thoughts and conversations with Shade and Shadow. They concede that “this is how you break a child, [...]. Step one, take the mother away” (Emezi 2018: 32). Some years later, a seventeen-year-old Ada flies to America to study in a small town in the Appalachians (Virginia). While she is at college, she meets Soren –a deeply haunted man. They have a tumultuous relationship which ends up in rape. This sexual assault brings another *ogbanje* host into Ada’s marble room. The third birth –a response to utter despair– materialises in *Asughara*, “Dagger” in English. She takes on Ada’s body and mind and seems to conquer it for an extended period of time. Allegedly, she arrives to protect Ada and she defines herself as “reckless,” with “no conscience, no sympathy, no pity” (70).

In the midst of this demiurgic inner community, a version of an indigenised Jesus or Yahweh –or simply the way a child would (mis)pronounce it– *Yshwa* hovers over Ada’s life all along. The cruel circumstances of her life impinge the taint of sin and guilt on the girl’s conscience. *Yshwa* –as one is led to believe from the very first chapters– is Ada’s only hope for redemption and companionship. When her mother leaves, so deep is Ada’s wound that she yearns for him to materialise in the way the *ogbanje* have. She pleads for *Yshwa* “to come down and hold her, just for a little bit. [...] because no one, you see, no one else was doing it, holding her” (Emezi: 36). Ada’s requests, however, are not substantiated since, as the twin hosts claim with irony, “*Yshwa* had no intentions of manifesting. He had endured abomination of the physical once and it was enough, never again” (37). Moreover, the rivalry between the western and Igbo deities is stressed by the narrators. The same feud seems to be established along the narrative, even though the Igbo cosmivision seems to be given a preeminent place from the very beginning. The *ogbanje* were “older than even *Yshwa*, old as forever, born of the first mother” (131). To some extent, some syncretism between Christianity and ancient Igbo ontology is suggested. So much so that Shadow and Shade see in *Yshwa* another brothersister who has already suffered his embodiment. In the light of the twin narrators, the Christian holy son is a feeble and selfish character. Ada believes she needs a moral code to cling to in order to hold in check her multiplying inside selves. And *Yshwa* appears to be the only provider of this moral order. *Yshwa* is portrayed by the *ogbanje* as a pure, remote and self-righteous almost ghostly entity. For the *ogbanje*, on the other hand, since humans are cruel, they have no qualms in using them as source of pleasure without remorse. The Igbo hatchlings are good and evil, they embody contradiction and cunning. As Hyde argues, the trickster is amoral; that is, s/he embodies good and evil simultaneously in a “hopelessly intertwined” way, “creator and destroyer, giver and negator,” s/he “knows neither good nor evil yet he is responsible for both. S/he “possesses no values, moral or social” (Radin cited in Hyde 1998: 10). After a conversation between Ada, *Yshwa* and the *ogbanje* hosts in Chapter Eighteen, one seems to be confronted with a rather weak Christian god who flinches from pain and asks Ada to bear the burden of guilt for him. *Yshwa* seems evidently lukewarm, unfair and cowardly. He eventually remarks that gods are not supposed to be fair.

Interestingly, there is yet another demigod voice who resides in Ada’s marble room, about whom the reader is told unexpectedly in Chapter Eleven. He has been born together with *Asughara* (yet another pair of twins). Ada names him Saint Vincent, and one is told that “he remained in the marble of her mind because he couldn’t survive her body” (Emezi 2018: 121). To the other *ogbanje* demigods, the saint is strange, not even god-begotten, “he belonged nowhere, except maybe to the Ada. He was gentle, soft as a ghost” (122). Even though his masculinity is evident –he has erections– he prefers to move in Ada’s marble room. The saint incarnates Ada’s innocence and masculinity within. “Saint Vincent was uncontaminated, quarantined, even. Perhaps in another world, where the Ada was not split and segmented, she and Saint Vincent might have been one thing together” (122). Interestingly, the resemblance between *Yshwa* and Saint Vincent seems more than striking. Is Saint Vincent the lost, severed or erased connection to the Christian god? Is he a part of Ada that has always

been latent and waiting to be born? Or is he merely a convenient authorial resource to swerve the plot line and tackle the gender transitioning issue?

In Chapter Nineteen, Ada's letter to Yshwa allows the reader to witness a human being wearied of pain, tired of being lonely and looking for mere antidotes for her inside void (and voices). She seems to have learnt to see love as the only way out. But love conceived in an existentialist, unselfish manner. She also appears to have come to terms with guilt. She has parallel relations –involving sex or without it. She writes that the love she feels for each of her acquaintances “unfurls into a greater love” (Emezi: 201). Ada has evolved into having the certainty that she “will be loved constantly across all space” (202). Moreover, she believes humans are conduits through which love should move unhindered. Hence, for her, an all-encompassing sort of pure affection is the closest state to deliverance. This human-embracing disposition seems to closely echo the biblical “love each other” (The New Oxford Annotated Bible 2001 Jn 15: 12). Eventually, when one is faced with the structure of the novel divided into four parts: the First –without a name– dealing with Ada's childhood and her circumstances of self-recognition and body endurance; the Second Part called *Ashugara* (Dagger); the Third Part, *Ilaghachi*, the Igbo equivalent of “to return”; and the Fourth Part, *Nzoputa* –translated as “Salvation,” one can hardly overlook the fact that Ada's experience curiously resembles that of Yshwa. Like the Christian martyr, Ada is half god and half human, following a cycle of suffering, return or resurrection to finally attain redemption.

4. Identity: fragmentation or layers?

Waldman highlights that one of the main achievements of *Freshwater* is to offer an open answer when it comes to defining the individual self. Emegi appears to succeed in posing a “tension between the affirmation of owning a single identity and the freedom and mutability of being multiple” (2018). Ada's multiple and paradoxical identity manifestations are epitomised “a self that is defined by indefinability” (Waldman 2018). “Even when [Ada] thinks she's broken or fragmented, she's not, not really. The fragment is not a fragment –it's a *layer*. It's not one reality shattered, it's multiple realities pressed together,” the author stresses (Emegi 2018d emphasis added). The image Emegi prefers to use in connection to Ada's identity is that of a “boiling cloud” of selves (Isen 2018). They/she explains that these somehow disparate voices are a rather forced recourse they/she has made use of, since conveying in writing the simultaneous existence of all of these realities seems a difficult notion to grasp. As they/she reveals:

part of what I learned from writing the book is to accept that even though I made these different, bordered selves to write the book, they're constructs. They're things that Ada created to make what was happening in her head make more sense, because at the time, she/I didn't have the understanding that all of it could exist at once. [...]. It's simpler when you divide it and when you make the little boxes. Now I'm better at not dividing it and just accepting the mishmash and layers. (Isen 2018)

It should be noted that the boundaries between fiction and real life, between the author's experience and the main character's are very subtle, even non-existent. Yet, the reader is always confronted with the artificiality that the writing process suggests when conveying the metaphysical complexity of reality and self. Emegi emphasises our contemporary inability “to acknowledge multiple realities, and this insistence that there has to be one dominant reality, and everything that falls outside that reality is false and untrue” (Emegi 2018e) Recurrently, the writer insists upon the necessity of recognising the lenses through which predominant discourses shape our realities. The author stresses that

people came in and enforced a reality and said, “Well, if you believe in anything else, if you believe in your indigenous deities, if you believe in these spiritual entities, then you're ignorant and you're backwards, and it's only because you haven't been educated by the West.” And you know, there's this [thought that] everything that is outside the dominant reality becomes something that's pathological. And with my work, I'm not really interested in trying to convince anyone to shift their center, I'm just refusing to shift mine. (Emegi 2018e)

4.1. Western labels: trauma and dissociative identity disorder

The reading dynamics of *Freshwater* is non-linear. The different ogbanje demigods that inhabit Ada offer an account of her life which may simulate a temporal chronology, though the reader is frequently faced with unexpected births of new voices and focalisation shifts. So much so that Ada's story has to be retrieved by demanding an effort of reconstruction. The fragmentation through which one gets a glimpse of Ada may confer the story traits that relate it to trauma fiction. Trauma literature offers well-defined narrative features to account for the representation of such excruciating experiences in literature. According to Pederson (2018), trauma literary critics of the “first wave” such as Caruth, La Capra, Hartman and Felman, to name but the most salient, and critics of a so-called second generation of trauma studies, such as Rothberg, Schwab, Saal, Craps and Forter have tried

to pinpoint features which characterise so-called traumatic realism. Several tropes have been repeatedly deployed as literary formal devices to account for the representation of psychological unrest and illness. Among the most recurrent, the use of the language of affect through metaphors can be mentioned. The plot relapse into gaps or lacunae—that is, the use of delayed referentiality—is frequently employed in order to convey postponed or faltering memory and the indirection or avoidance of the traumatic event. Other literary resources such as repetition of events, unexpected flashbacks—which have the effect of fragmenting the plot— or dreams as intrusions of the repressed are oftentimes brought into play. As Herrero contends *traumatic time* “is characterised by ellipses and stasis, but also (in the best cases) by returns and sudden progressions” (2014: 284).

Freshwater may be said to share some of the above mentioned features. Gaps are especially noticeable in connection to the main character Ada—whose voice is seldom heard directly and, if heard at all, she sounds aloof and estranged. Moreover, the narration is fragmented. Time and space have a particularly disruptive structure which leaves the reader in a contrived limbo of atemporality. This treatment of time may be in tune with some acknowledged traditional African temporal conceptions. In African languages such as Kikamba (spoken by Bantu people from Kenya) or Kiluba (from southern Zaire) there are two main time conceptions: present and near the present. *Yesterday* and *Tomorrow* are considered “the day next to this one” (Booth 1975: 87). Allegedly, the notions of “past and future both have meaning only in relation to the present” (Booth: 87). The past seems to assimilate present and even the future since the idea of return and repetition of fixed cycles is strongly anchored in the experience of the past. Thus, events such as the seasons, crops, births seem to project or mirror the past into a potential future. The idea of cyclic temporality is, in general terms, better described in terms of “coexistence” of the past, present and future. There is no need to ‘return’ if one has never really left” (Booth: 87). As the Kenyan theologian John Mbiti contends in *African Religions and Philosophy*:

[o]utside the reckoning of the year, African time concept is silent and indifferent. People expect the years to come and go, in endless rhythm like that of day and night, and like the waning and waxing of the moon. They expect the events of the rain season, planting, harvesting, dry season, rain season again, planting again, and so on to continue for ever. Each year comes and goes, adding to the time dimension of the past. (1969: 21)

Mbiti’s aesthetically elegant hypothesis notwithstanding, this conception of circular time—which has been repeatedly contrasted to the western lineal and tridimensional temporal logic—has been strongly criticised as simplistic in intellectual milieus both African and western⁴.

It could also be claimed that the way the narrators deal with time could be likened to that of people suffering from Post-traumatic Stress Disorder. In Chapter Ten the reader is dawned on Ewan and Ada’s tender story before Asughara was born. One is encountered again with a naïve Ada who seems to know nothing about violence and self-harm. Furthermore, in Chapter Eleven, there is another shift back to the times when Asughara was born together with Saint Vincent. Abruptly, the reader travels back to Nigeria and contemplates Ada’s adolescence and the unease of her female blooming body. Furthermore, in Chapter Twenty, Smoke and Shadow recount the “sectioning off” of memories they have been engaged in since Ada’s childhood. Without any warning, one is faced with the sexual and physical abuse by her own kin and neighbours. As the demigods put it: “[w]e did the best we could” (Emezi 2018: 207) to the extent that they offer an altogether new version of reality. However, the novel appears to take some distance from traumatic narratives when it comes to considering the centrality of woeful experiences. The narratorial insistence, and almost taking delight in suffering, is early foregrounded in the story. Ada’s rape is hastily included in Chapter Five. Many other circumstances, which must have been utterly distressing for Ada, are recounted by her *ogbanje* selves in a sublime poetic and minute style. Hence, Saachi’s abandonment, Ada’s mutilations, her anorexia and gender discomfort, her suicide attempt and her childhood abuse are not avoided. On the contrary, they are depicted in the rather raw, bloodthirsty fashion of god-like beings. Nonetheless, there is a situation which remains a source of repetition throughout the novel: Ada is a spiritual being condemned to live in the prison of a human body.

A western medical reading of Ada’s multiple selves quandary would label it as Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID). According to the DSM5—Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders Fifth Edition (2013), “Dissociative Disorders are characterised by a disruption of and/or discontinuity in the normal integration of consciousness, memory, identity, emotion, perception, body representation, motor control, and behavior” (291). The medical manual also states that these disorders are frequently the consequence of repeated traumatic maltreatment episodes during childhood or adulthood. This self disruption is usually accompanied by dissociative amnesia and a state of depersonalisation or derealisation; that is, experiences which involve detachment from the person’s mind, self and body. “The defining feature of dissociative identity disorder,” the manual describes, is “the presence of two or more distinct personality states or an experience of possession” (292). These possession identities are manifested through the conviction that a ghost, spirit, demon, deity or supernatural being has taken over the individual’s personality and, thus, s/he starts behaving differently. At

⁴ For more information see Bénézet Bujo (2008). *Introduction à la théologie africaine*. Academic Press Freiburg Schweiz/Fribourg Suisse; and Eugenio Nkogo Ondo’s essay “El concepto del tiempo entre Occidente y África (2005) in *FAIA*.

the same time, many other side effects may accompany this state of self-estrangement, such as “comorbid depression, anxiety, substance abuse, self-injury, non-epileptic seizures, or another common symptom” (294). Mainly after being raped, Ada shows some of the diagnosis features previously listed in the DMS5. Asughara engages Ada in a diet as an experiment “to see how close to the bone [she] could get Ada down to” (Emezi 2018: 69). The main protagonist also repeatedly mutilates her body “next to the old scars and watched the thin red lines form” (170).

Increasingly sullen and forlorn, in Chapters Nine, Fifteen and Nineteen, the direct accounts of Ada only serve to further diffuse the edges of her self and those of her inmost companions. She seems to surrender to an existence without simple explanations, neighbouring insanity and depression. Contradictorily, and without her hosts’ full awareness, Ada starts looking for rational and medical explanations. She seeks therapy and reads about symptoms such as personality disorders: “disruption of identity, self-damaging impulsivity, emotional instability and mood swings, self-mutilating behavior and recurrent suicidal behavior” (Emezi 2018: 140). She is even hospitalised in a psychiatric ward. When existence is unbearable, Ada, assisted by Ashugara, tries to kill herself with painkillers and alcohol. This is bound to be Ashugara’s much cherished reunion with her oġbanje cohort. The “Dagger” has planned Ada’s final deliverance all along. A western medical diagnosis may have proved efficient in labelling Ada’s troubled predicament. The oġbanje narrators, however, insist on being “the buffer between [Ada] and madness” (159).

4.2. Unearthing the Igbo narrative

At the core of African culture, according to Janheinz Jahn (1961), there is a combination of *person, thing, place, time* and *perceived experience* which comprises a universal force. It could be argued that Animist cosmovisions tend to integrate *force* and *matter*. In *The Igbo World and Art*, Herbert Cole and Chike Aniakor point out:

The Igbo world is an arena for the interplay of forces. It is a dynamic world of movement and of flux. Igbo art [...] is never tranquil but mobile and active, even aggressive. Ike, energy, is the essence of all things human, spiritual, animate and inanimate. Everything has its own unique energy which must be acknowledged and be given its due. (1984: 63)

In *African Literature, Animism and Politics* (2000), Caroline Rooney claims that Animism can be etymologically related to a combination of meanings “concerning what crosses over from life to death to life, and crosses species” (10). The name is derived from *anima*: life or soul. The Zimbabwean critic suggests that Animism could be associated with some particular characteristics which entail the conception of reality in a creative manner or bearing an “empathetic understanding” of it (Rooney 2000: 14). Thus, this reality construction seems to counteract western intellectual culture marked by its *adversarial* and *critical* way of reading the world. In other words, western systems of belief are mainly based on oppositional or contrastive stances and a process of objectifying the reality of study. Rooney also claims that the vitality of being –or energies– is not opposed to absence. There is a close interplay of movement “from invisibility to visibility,” in which “absence need not signify non-being” (Rooney: 20). She clings onto the notions that all nature is suffused with a spiritual force, that “spirit is considered in terms of movement where this is further a question of being moved. Spirits move us in that they animate and affect us and can captivate and possess us” (20). Moreover, in *The Philosophy of Evil*, Paul Siwek contends that western Christianity and rationality tend to draw a clear-cut distinction between good and evil in an uncompromising Manichaeic contradiction. Thus, “‘God’ and ‘Devil,’ heaven and hell, ‘religion’ and ‘superstition,’ the natural and the supernatural, sin and innocence, the sacred and the profane, [...] the chosen and the damned/outcast” are drawn along inflexible stances (Siwek cited in Okonkwo 2004: 656). This dichotomy is allegedly at odds with African Animism, which stresses the imbricated, hybrid and dynamic nature of the universe.

Admittedly, the circumstances of the protagonist of *Freshwater* do not seem alien to these conceptions –and connections. Ada’s inner voices seem to stand for the many manifestations of entity. Thus, what for western thought is labelled as dissociative identity disorder, for Igbo narratives are instances of multiple spiritual selves and/or realities. What in Occident is interpreted as self-injuries, are scarification marks for Igbo ontology; what is diagnosed as suicidal compulsion could be thus understood as deliverance towards the oġbanje numinous cohort; what is absence of being or death is morphed into mutable spiritual existence –not defined by visibility or absence. What is regarded as a fragmented self for psycho-medical theories could be acknowledged as multiple layers (or shedding) of different versions of oneself. By the end of *Freshwater*, Ada’s realisation and acceptance of her oġbanje nature, together with Ala’s motherhood, bring her serenity. In Chapter Twenty-Two, the main character has made a journey of self recognition to Nigeria, also intended as an inner homecoming. Readers are in contact for the first time with Ada’s newly reconciled voice, which admits “how useless it had been to try and become a singular entity” (Emezi 2018: 219). Ada’s was a different path since

the things that were happening in [her] head were real and had been happening for a very long time. After all the doctors and the diagnoses and the hospitals, this thing of being oġbanje, a child of Ala—that was the only path that brought me some peace. (Emezi: 218)

On the issue of spirit possession—which in the DMS5 is referred to as consciousness delusions or fabrications—Rooney contends that “spirit could be considered as an animating creative force, whilst possession and death could be considered in terms of being overcome by stronger forces” (Rooney 2000: 22). Thus, the emphasis shifts from being/non-being towards *other forms of* being and on-going being. Rooney deploys some psychoanalysis terms and processes at work when she relates a theory of trauma with a theory of spirit possession. She claims that there is a general Animistic principle in processes such as *introjection* and *mimetic identification* with other beings or forces—though she hastens to explain that they are not the same. Introjection is defined as a period of life during which each subject could undergo a certain “partial destruction of the self from the external environment” as “a way towards a creative construction” (Rooney: 141). On the other hand, she describes identification as “a receptivity to the other not as an object but as a subject: a sort of displacement of a personal narcissism by that of the other” (143). Irrespective of the different empathetic capacities of each subject, Rooney eventually concludes that “[t]he philosophical concept of the ‘one-and-only-subject’ is a denial of the fact that there is also a creative subject: that is, a subject capable of accommodating to the other or others” (149). In *Freshwater*, Ada’s situation seems more likened to a spirit coexistence—or identification—with stronger versions of her childhood self. In other words, other consciousness cohabitations provide her with the means to survive an, otherwise, solitary and excruciating existence. The plural narrators summarise the complexity of living in a boiling cloud of selves by acknowledging that Ada’s body belongs to her as much as it belongs to them. They also claim that they “were more than [Asughara] and [they] were more than the saint [Saint Vincent]. We were a fine balance, bigger than whatever the namings had made, and we wanted to reflect that, to change the Ada into us” (Emezi 2018: 187). Ada could eventually feel at peace only when her inner companions agree on halting the births, when Ada “was ready to take her front” (216).

4.3. The literary Meta- and Trans-modern axis

Freshwater seems to share many contemporary fiction traits in tune with the so-called Meta-modernist or Trans-modernist literary shift from Postmodernism. Alison Gibbons hypothesises that several global historical and socio-economic events have led to the death of Postmodernism—or, at least, to its increasing coalescence with a paradigm change she calls Meta-modernism. According to Gibbons, the fall of the Berlin Wall, the 9/11 attacks and the ensuing wars on terror and in the Middle East together with the global subprime financial crisis have determined a global sense of failure of the capitalist system. The planetary dismal distribution of resources have resulted in an ongoing sense of disillusionment with the neoliberal project. The increasing migration of entire populations have, in turn, marshalled the strengthening of state borders and the emergence of a fracture between extreme Left and extreme Right. “The cumulative effect of these events,” Gibbons argues, “and the accompanying hyper-anxiety brought about by twenty-four hour news—has made the Western world feel like a more precarious and volatile place, in which we can no longer be nonchalant about our safety or our future” (Gibbons 2017: 5). Gibbons, Vermeulen and van den Akker theorise on the current literary return to the mode of realism in an attempt “to reconnect fiction to social reality” (Gibbons: 2015; Vermeulen and van den Akker: 2010). Realism is also evinced in the emergence of original biographical genres such as auto-fiction. A new focus on emotions, and the connectedness of human experience, seems in vogue together with the advent of a new humanist and communal ethics which can account for the precariousness of life on the planet. Contemporary literature appears to emphasise some conflicting issues such as the transient consideration of space and time in a world that grows increasingly hybrid and borderless. Accordingly, Emezi’s novel evinces a revival of mythical and spiritual awareness and they/she seeks to inscribe their/her fiction in the realm of fictionalised memoir (auto fiction). Another characteristic feature of meta-modernism defined as *heterochrony* is particularly noticeable in Emezi’s debut fiction. Vermeulen and van den Akker define this trope as “a deliberate being out of time, an intentional being out of place, and the pretence that that desired atemporality and displacement are actually possible even though they are not” (2010: 12). This sense of place-time as being both sequenced and yet vague, emerging as a surreal context may be, all things considered, Emezi’s concoction of the demiurgic—and ancestral African—temporal experience.

When it comes to considering the novel’s postcolonial stance, *Freshwater* could also be enlisted within the boundaries of what Rodríguez Magda has termed as narratives of fracture or narratives of the limit; that is, those fictions engaged in the recovery of repressed, excluded or erased precolonial knowledge and traditions (2017). These emerging narratives, Enrique Dussel proposes, seek to undertake a pluriversal dialogue of trans-modern liberation. He puts forward a bi-cultural project understood as a dialectics of the borders, that is, a genuine dialogue which encompasses (post-)modernity and precolonial (or pre-modern) narratives. This emerging culture would not merely be a decolonized project, but an entirely new discourse. The original negotiation required is neither modern nor post-modern. It is trans-modern since it departs from the “borderlands” of

modernity (Dussel 2012). Simply put, pluriversal dialogue involves the integration of those elements of modernity such as scientific development together with the affirmation of cultural alterity from postcolonial peoples and communities. In this respect, *Freshwater* is clearly a narrative involved in such cultural negotiation. Igbo ontology is inextricably knit with religious and socio-cultural long-established western tenets.

5. On gender dysphoria, leopard marks and python moltings

In an extensive essay for *The Cut*, Emezi wonders: “Did ọgbanje even have a gender to begin with? Gender is, after all, such a human thing” (Emezi 2018a). In fact, Emezi ponders whether being an ọgbanje is to be doubly categorised as other. Not only do/does they/she experience the alterity of being transgender, but they/she also bears the burden of belonging to a divergent category of existence, namely, that of being a spirit with a human appearance. Many of the literary reviews on *Freshwater* readily label the novel according to gender transitioning categories. Emezi has been awarded the *Lambda Literary Award* for Transgender Fiction (Isama 2019), and *Freshwater* included within Transgender Literature (Halderman 2018). The emergence of Saint Vincent serves to signal the beginning of Ada’s journey towards transgender. One is told about Asughara’s arguably twin birth brother, his daydreaming nature, his unpolluted demeanour and his gentle but veritable masculinity. Before reaching puberty Ada was comfortable with the fact that her chest was flat, her hips narrow and her facial features rather brawny. She enjoyed having the freedom of movement in both boy and girl spaces. She even secretly savoured being taken for a boy at the swimming pool. Regrettably, when she was about twelve “[t]he hormones redid her body.” She could not stop the “blackish blood, a swelling chest, hair sprouting like an evil forest” (Emezi 2018: 123).

Shade and Shadow were disgusted at the way they were being pushed into a space they hated, “a marked plane that was too clear and too wrong” (123). They regarded their vessel as the “meatbody” or “abomination” (123). Ada dressed in her father’s clothes in an effort to hide her contours, and pretended to ignore her schoolmates’s remarks on her busty silhouette. In addition, in a rather hasty proleptic move of the plot, Saint Vincent steers Ada into love involvements with girls. According to the medical manual DSM5, Ada’s feelings could be described as Gender Dysphoria, which is defined as:

the distress that may accompany the incongruence between one’s experienced or expressed gender and one’s assigned gender. Although not all individuals will experience distress as a result of such incongruence, many are distressed if the desired physical interventions by means of hormones and/or surgery are not available. (DSM5 2013: 451)

Ada’s adolescence body changes and her same-sex crushes, allegedly exerted by Saint Vincent, prompt a new stage in the main character’s tortuous journey home. A path which will entail changing her body, or transitioning. Ada’s initial discomfort with her female anatomy leads her –mainly pushed by the sexually vigorous Asughara– to a loop of free sex. Afterwards, Ada decides to chest bind and starts dating a woman, Donyen. Ada’s uneasiness with her body, together with the world’s equating her ọgbanje condition to madness, sink her into depression and an attempt to kill herself. Eventually –and once again abruptly for the reader– she decides that “[r]emoving her breasts was only the first step” (Emezi: 187). The ọgbanje within wanted to revert things to a time when they “were not capable of biological things, when [they] were neutral” (190). Ada’s multiple selves were determined to “become what [they] wanted, now that the reconfiguration was done” (192). As Shadow and Shade proclaim, they were intent on reshaping their exterior to match their inner self: a fluid river between male and female. Ironically, the plural demigods discover that western therapy has labels for what they thought of as carvings. These terms are “gender reassignment, transitioning” (189).

Therefore, what for westerners is diagnosed as gender dysphoria, followed by reassignment and transitioning, for her ọgbanje companions is simply an instance of Ala’s child shedding. What for medical purposes are self-injuries, for Igbo ontology are offerings, “carvings,” “shiftings,” the “reshapings,” “the sacrifices a snake must go through to continue its timeline, the necessity of molting, the graves built of skins” (189). Simply put, Ada’s body should morph so that her inner ọgbanje spiritual nature –and, decidedly, neutral gender– could be in harmony. Ada’s first move when trying to make her new external image mirror her inner self was to cut her beautiful long hair right to the roots and wax her eyebrows. In addition, the surgical operation to reduce her breasts –to appease her gender unrest– meant for her and her inner demigods an identity carving. The plural narrators reveal in an exalted manner that their sexual lack of restraint

was nothing compared to the best thing we’d accomplished, when we laid out the Ada’s body on a surgical table and let the masked man take a knife lavishly to the flesh of her chest, mutilating her better and deeper than we ever could, all the way to righteousness. After such carvings, how could one human matter? (Emezi: 186)

In addition, the self-mutilations Ada inflicted upon her body to placate her intimate bloodthirsty spirits were changed by tattoos. “*I am letting the leopard go*” announces the epigraph to Chapter Twenty (207). Ada starts marking her skin to remind herself of her past companions, to pay homage to the selves that kept her alive. Ada’s new bodily harmony smelled “like broken mango leaf, sharp, sticking to the inner rind of our skin” (193). They were overwhelmed by the joy of having attained a home-like place:

It was too late for the Ada to do anything except try to keep up with us, try not to be drowned in the liminal fluid we swam in. [...] Sometimes they call this the crossroads, the message point, the hinge. It is also called flux space, the line, or the edge—like we said, resurrection.” (193)

Although Ada’s (and Emezi’s) journey to Nigeria was necessary to find the answer to their metaphysical dilemma, both –character and author– seem well aware of the contemporary transphobic reality of Nigeria. The Nigerian government Same Sex Marriage Prohibition Act expands the extant colonial sodomy laws. Up to fourteen years of prison can be mandated for same-sex couples cohabitating and up to ten years of prison to people supporting gay organisations or displaying same-sex public behaviour (Green-Simms 2016). Thus, it becomes self-evident that many diaspora writers, such as Emezi, seem to be deeply conscious of the new strategy of cultural change they are committed to. *Freshwater* is, avowedly, a start.

6. Conclusion

To conclude, as Emezi has claimed, “Igbo ontology is about more than ‘folklore and superstition.’ It is a way through which one can interpret physics, science or spirituality” (Emezi 2018b). The artistic process the author is engaged in could be equated to a journey of self-discovery and using other lenses to understand reality. This peripheral cosmology is reconstructed, thus bringing to the fore discourses and literary tropes related to issues in dire need of discussion in our contemporary world. The emergence of a new spirituality or ethical stance, the necessity to ask questions in relation to our metaphysical identities and our gender fluidity are some of the issues proposed by *Freshwater*. The great accomplishment of the novel lies in the peculiar blending of both western and Igbo narratives, without suggesting any single (and simple) interpretation. Is the main character of the book someone in need of medical care, or is she in search of a new spiritual awareness? Has she got personality disorders derived from past traumas, or is she allowing for a multiplicity of selves to be liberated? Is she really answering the question who I am? Is she embarked on a gender transitioning process? Or is she flowing into a gender labile space? Alternatively, is she contemplating the possibility of having no gender at all? Is she experiencing the world from a human or a numinous perspective? Or, perhaps, she is plainly a mishmash of both. The answers are, predictably, unpredictable.

The different Igbo narrators in *Freshwater* nonchalantly pose readers all those enduring human interrogations. Today more than ever, in the face of a shrivelling planetary horizon, it seems vital for everyone to engage in divergent, alternative, outside-the-box speculation which could offer a more ethical global coexistence –human or otherwise. Today more than ever, emerging new narratives should gain visibility and seek to mobilise people in search of a more just system. The not for so long established western truths –the ones which were thought to be stable enough– are disintegrating and showing their shallow (or flawed) side. The novel provides a new landscape of sharp and sometimes blood clotted contours. It suggests that the postcolonial condition of the diaspora writer is bound to be in constant flux, subject to hybrid circumstances. Hence, the palimpsestic process of negotiating the worn-out and re-emerging hues of past narratives with the ever-shifting present *palaver* should be sustained and encouraged with a view to counteracting of our self annihilating limitations. The vision emerging in *Freshwater* is, clearly, not an orthodox one. Moreover, it could be rather chaotic and encumbered at times. It may be even shocking for some, though it certainly provides a rich soil for speculation, debate and unearthed spiritual assumptions. It undeniably provides moments of pure lyrical relish. The novel could be understood, eventually, as a bridge towards some notion of home (or familiar space). A locus that is, in our global present and migrant condition, not a stable notion any longer. Home, the novel suggests, is in fact seldom a destination, but the journey itself.

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