Transgender, Trans-human, Trans-religious

The Decolonial Queer Possibilities of *Ọgbanje* and Other African Spirits

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ABSTRACT This article examines the writings of the Nigerian author Akwaeke Emezi, in particular their acclaimed semi-autobiographical novel *Freshwater* (2018), as a form of African queer and trans autotheorizing. It critically examines the theoretical significance of the indigenous Igbo concept of *ọgbanje* (spirit-child), which is central in Emezi's self-writing and which serves to decenter and decolonize Western trans terminology. Reading Emezi in conversation with Stella Nyanzi's argument about the queer possibilities of African understandings of spirits, the article argues that *ọgbanje* is an indigenous concept that allows for transing not just the category of gender, but also of religion and of the human. It further contends that Emezi, through the narrative epistemological frame of *ọgbanje*, performs a decolonial gesture that interrogates gender dualism, religious orthodoxy, secularity, and anthropocentric thought and that creatively reconceptualizes gender, religion, and, fundamentally, human personhood. Thus, this article advances debates about decolonization, religion, and (trans)gender in the fields of trans studies in religion and queer African studies, as well as in religious and trans/queer studies more broadly.

KEYWORDS Akwaeke Emezi, transgender, spirits, decoloniality, Igbo, queer Africa, *ọgbanje*

> **Cultural and indigenous understandings of gendered spirits of ancestors who may possess individuals offer socially appropriate notions of handling fluid, transient gender identities.**
> **—Stella Nyanzi, "Queering Queer Africa"**

Introduction: About African Spirits, Gender, and Sexuality

In the above epigraph, the Ugandan feminist and queer scholar Stella Nyanzi alludes to the queer potential embedded in African indigenous religious beliefs and practices, specifically those regarding spirits. Drawing attention to the serious risk of misreading "dynamic gender identities of bodies in flux" by Africanist scholars, Nyanzi highlights the problem of analyzing and understanding African transgender subjects in a conceptual frame of fixed gender binaries.[1] As she argues, "Trans—whether transvestite, transgender or

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transsexual—experiences facilitate the destabilising of gender identities between the two polarised divisions of men and women, male and female, masculinity and femininity."[2] She subsequently calls for a conceptual space that allows African trans persons to "transition into queerness," and suggests that such a space is, in fact, at the heart of African indigenous thought and social practice regarding gender, although the memory of it has been erased, to a significant extent, as a result of European colonialism, missionary Christianity, and Western-led globalization. Specifically mentioning the traditions of spirit possession and the gender fluidity and transience associated with it, Nyanzi argues that "Queer Africa must reclaim such African modes of blending, bending and breaking gender boundaries."[3]

Nyanzi's argument is part of a broader discourse about what the Nigerian gender studies scholar Oyèrónkẹ́ Oyěwùmí has called "gender epistemologies in Africa." This discourse draws attention to the historicity of gender and the limited applicability of Western-derived concepts of gender in relation to African cultures. As Oyěwùmí points out, "The problem of gender in studies of Africa is fundamentally an epistemological one," meaning that the categories and methods of knowing and making sense of gender and sexuality themselves require critical attention and that African cultures have their own histories and systems of knowledge regarding these phenomena.[4] Similar arguments have been made in the study of sexuality in Africa by scholars such as the Ugandan feminist Sylvia Tamale, who calls for the "rewriting and rerighting of African sexualities" by acknowledging the "nuanced pluralities and meanings" of sexuality and its complex relationship to gender.[5] Nyanzi's relatively short essay makes a significant contribution to this conversation for two reasons. First, it draws critical attention to transgender people—a group that is often rendered "invisible, inaccessible, or ignored" in research on gender and sexuality in Africa.[6] Second, it puts religion and spirituality, in particular the belief in spirits, at the heart of thinking about transgender epistemologies in African contexts.[7] The latter suggestion is reminiscent of the concept of "two-spirit people" that was coined with reference to Native American communities and that highlights the sacred dimension of indigenous third-gender experiences of personhood across and beyond the binary of masculine and feminine.[8]

To some readers, Nyanzi's suggestion might sound like a surprising one. After all, as much as Africa "has long brought spirits to mind," this centrality of spirits also fueled the European colonialist perception of the continent's "ostensible darkness."[9] And today we usually hear negative discourses about spirits in relation to queer sexuality in Africa, especially in Pentecostal-Charismatic Christian contexts, where sexual and gender variance is diabolized and linked to demonic spirits, with the queer body being subjected to often violent rituals of deliverance.[10] Yet this contemporary Pentecostal discourse reflects a more fundamental insight: in African worldviews, the body, and therefore also sexuality and gender, is believed to be connected to, and impacted upon by, spiritual realities. As the anthropologist Matthew Engelke

points out, African beliefs in spirits demonstrate that there is no clear natural/supernatural divide, and no distinction between spirit and matter.[11] As such, spirits are in the queer business of crossing boundaries, blurring categories, and transing borders. Even within African Christian circles, one can find fascinating performances of "charismatic queerness," such as that of the self-identifying "lesbian prophetess" who is featured in *Kenyan, Christian, Queer* (dir. Aiwan Obinyan, 2020), a documentary film I was involved in producing. In fact, the latter encounter put me on the journey of further investigating the role of spiritual phenomena as they intersect with African queer and trans experiences, which explains my fascination with Akwaeke Emezi's writings, in particular the use of the concept of *ọgbanje* (spirit-child) as a queer and trans meaning-making device.[12]

Discussing historical and anthropological evidence from southern Africa, the historian of African sexualities Marc Epprecht argues, "What we today would term homosexual orientation or transgender identity was also not necessarily an offense but a respected attribute if caused by certain types of spirit possession and manifest in certain ways."[13] One case in point is the well-documented phenomenon of sangomas (traditional healers in southern Africa) involved in same-sex relationships, who use the motif of ancestral possession to explain and legitimize their same-sex attraction.[14] Simply put, their argument is that they are attracted to somebody of the same sex because they themselves are possessed by a spirit of the other sex. Perhaps more surprisingly, the religion scholar Nathanael Homewood, in his study of Ghanaian Pentecostal churches, found that spiritual worldviews not only fuel the demonization of queer sexualities but also "open up additional interpretative possibilities and opportunities for resistance" because Pentecostal spirits, like the just-mentioned ancestral spirits, sometimes allow for gender bending and sexual ambiguity in a socially acceptable religious framework.[15] Clearly, spirits can be part of, and may even be crucial to, decolonial queer and trans African worldmaking.

Following up on Nyanzi's suggestion that local understandings of gender and sexuality as connected to spirit worlds offer a critical alternative to the "loaded westernized frame of the LGBTI acronym,"[16] this article explores how such understandings can provide us with a more meaningful, indigenized lexicon. I do this by focusing on the semiautobiographical novel *Freshwater* (2018) by Nigerian writer Emezi, which I read with reference to their subsequent memoir, *Dear Senthuran* (2020). Both texts center on the Igbo concept of *ọgbanje* spirits to narrate queer, and specifically trans, experience. Thinking in the same vein as the Kenyan queer studies scholar Keguro Macharia, I ask: What is the theoretical significance of African gendering practices? And I apply this question to Emezi's self-writing.[17]

This article aims to contribute to two fields of scholarship—African queer studies and trans studies in religion—the intersections of which have hardly been explored in current scholarship. Thus, the next section will first outline

these fields, focusing specifically on the methodology of self-writing. Subsequent sections will then introduce and analyze Emezi's texts, exploring the three key concepts in the title of this article: transgender, trans-religious, and trans-human. By foregrounding the Igbo concept of *ọgbanje* as an indigenous gender epistemology, the article also advances conversations in trans studies about decolonizing transgender—a conversation that hitherto has lacked substantial African contributions.[18] Furthermore, by drawing attention to the appropriation of religious symbols and the creative engagement with indigenous religion and Christianity in Emezi's work, the article contributes to the study of African literature, and of religion and literature, specifically highlighting religion as a rich and productive interface with contemporary African queer literature.[19]

Self-Writing in Queer African and Trans Religious Studies

Although contemporary Africa is often associated with a strong climate of homo-, trans- and queerphobia, the same continent in recent decades has witnessed the emergence of lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, intersex, and queer (LGBTIQ) communities and movements, and reflects a growing visibility of LGBTIQ actors in creative arts, activist circles, and the public domain. The complex and diverse ways in which these groups negotiate their identities, organize themselves, engage in activism and advocacy, and claim public visibility has become the subject of a growing body of academic scholarship known as queer African studies or African queer studies.[20]

This article contributes to ongoing debates in this emerging field, specifically engaging two discussions: one about decolonization, the other about religion. Regarding the former, the Western conceptual and theoretical origins of queer studies have made some scholars hesitant to apply queer theorizing in African contexts. Highlighting the need for decolonization, Epprecht has stated that queer studies "awaits a rigorously theorized indigenous term or terms grounded in African culture and contemporary struggles."[21] His discomfort about uncritically applying originally Western and English-language categories of gender and sexuality, such as in the LGBTIQ terminology, to African contexts in human rights, public health, activists, and academic discourses is shared by other scholars who underline the "necessity of better understanding sexuality on the continent on its own terms."[22] Zethu Matebeni and Jabu Pereira phrase this latter project as "reclaiming Afrikan," using the spelling of *African* with a *k* to "emphasize the need to reclaim our existence and being in this continent."[23] Although indigenizing the language and conceptual frameworks of queer studies is important as part of the quest for "epistemic freedom in Africa,"[24] it would be problematic to reconstruct a (possibly romanticized) queer African past from which indigenous conceptualizations of gender and sexuality can simply be distilled and reclaimed for contemporary purposes. Instead, in this article I seek to acknowledge that contemporary African queer knowledges are "entangled, contextual and contingent,"[25] with African

and Western categories, concepts, and epistemologies being refractured and reconfigured in creative and complex ways.

With regard to religion, scholars in queer African studies have begun to recognize that religion is a multifaceted phenomenon that not only drives the politics of queerphobia on the continent but also offers resources for queer agency and visibility.[26] Compared to Western contexts, where queer emancipation and liberation has often adopted a strategy of resisting and breaking with religion, the picture in African contexts is more diffuse. On the one hand, activists and scholars decry the prominent role played by religious leaders and organizations in the spectacle of queerphobia. Yet on the other hand, many African queer folk are found to be "proudly, happily and deeply religious" themselves;[27] queer activists frequently appropriate religious beliefs and symbols as part of their efforts to claim sexual citizenship and human rights;[28] and queer writers and artists often creatively engage with religious language and imagery.[29] Yet much of the scholarship on religion and queer studies in Africa tends to focus on Christianity and, to some extent, Islam. These religions are the two most prevalent on the continent today, and they are both associated with projects of modernity and globalization. Perhaps for that reason they have also allowed for the emergence of African queer subjectivities in a modern religious guise, legitimizing LGBTIQ identities with the help of Christian and Islamic language like "[created] in the image of God"[30] and "Allah made us."[31] Although such discursive strategies are viable forms of African queer and trans worldmaking in their own right, they do not do much to destabilize the analytical categories of gender, sexuality, and identity (although both religions have such a potential, as mentioned earlier with regard to Pentecostalism). Without romanticizing African indigenous religions—which, as David Tonghau Ngong has argued, have a strong heteronormative concern with procreation that is a factor in contemporary queerphobia on the continent[32]—could it be that these traditions have a greater potential for indigenizing and decolonizing queer sexualities? Epprecht, among other scholars, has indicated that this might well be the case, writing that "traditional religions were in fact less dogmatically intolerant of, and indeed sometimes more respectful toward, sexual difference than is frequently claimed."[33] In this article, I address and advance these debates about decolonization and religion in queer African studies by taking up Nyanzi's suggestion that indigenous understandings of spirits "offer socially appropriate notions of handling fluid, transient gender identities." [34]

An emerging form of African queer visibility is located in the creative arts, including literature in various genres, such as poetry, life stories, novels, and memoirs.[35] African queer literary texts engage creatively and critically with religious language, symbols, and imagery.[36] Several decades ago, in a review of the representation of homosexuality in African literature, literary scholar Chris Dunton observed that "even when the treatment of homosexuality is not crudely stereotypical, it remains monothematic: the function that the

subject plays in the text's larger thematic and narrative design is restricted and predictable."[37] Clearly, a lot has changed since then, and African literature has become a site of significant queer cultural production that is "beginning to disrupt the existing hegemonic frameworks that read sexual diversity only in terms of scandals, silences, and violence."[38] Many of these texts are explicitly or implicitly autobiographical, presenting a unique queer form of what critical theorist Achille Mbembe has described as "African modes of self-writing" through which new African imaginations are being developed.[39]

Although autobiography is widely adopted in African queer writing, there are few texts that specifically highlight African trans experiences.[40] Yet trans self-writing has been recognized as an important resource and method, because it generates, in the words of trans studies scholar Susan Stryker, "precisely the kind of knowledge that transgender people, whether academically trained or not, have of their own embodied experience, and of their relationships to the discourses and institutions that act upon and through them."[41] Siobhan M. Kelly, in a review of trans studies in religion, highlights the risk that such self-writing, when done by academics, may cement "the requirement of both certain identity labels and an amount of experiential disclosure to gain access to the field of trans* studies."[42] Emezi's writing, partly because it is creative (and, in the case of *Freshwater*, fictional) and partly because it is deliberately rooted in an indigenous African epistemology, demonstrates the ability to avoid this risk. As much as their work is recognized for making an innovative contribution to African queer and trans self-writing,[43] it expresses an ambivalent relationship to the terminology of *transgender* itself, instead privileging the Igbo spiritual concept of *ọgbanje*.

Akwaeke Emezi's *Freshwater*

Freshwater, the critically acclaimed[44] 2018 debut by the Nigerian (US-based) writer Emezi, can be seen as a literary text substantiating Nyanzi's point about the queer possibilities of spirits in African contexts. Indeed, the novel has been welcomed as a text contributing to the decolonization of queer sexualities[45] and offering a "transgender spirituality through an African lens."[46] Evoking a world of Igbo cosmology, this novel is queer not just for the way in which it explores issues of gender and sexuality but, more importantly, how it interrogates Western, specifically Cartesian dualisms of human and spirit, body and mind. It does so by engaging the Igbo concept of *ọgbanje* (spirit-child)—a theme that has been used by other Nigerian writers—such as Chinua Achebe in *Things Fall Apart* and Ben Okri in *The Famished Road*[47]—but that Emezi deploys in an original way as "a metaphor of multiple identities and notions of being."[48] Emezi has described the novel as semiautobiographical, the extent of which becomes clear in their 2020 book, *Dear Senthuran*, described as "a black spirit memoir," where Emezi narrates their own existence as *ọgbanje*.[49] In this article, I explore the queer themes of *Freshwater* (*FW*), with cross-reference to *Dear Senthuran* (*DS*). As I will show, *Freshwater* can be read

as a trans novel in at least three ways, as its narrative is transgender, trans-human, and trans-religious.

Reading *Freshwater* as a trans novel is somewhat tricky because Emezi themself has rebutted certain readings of the text by saying: "It is *not* a book about nonbinary/trans identity through an Igbo lens, ffs. It is not about gender whatsoever and framing it as that is trying to force it over to a human/Western center. It is about embodiment as an ọgbanje."[50] Does this mean that the novel cannot be read as a trans novel at all, or that doing so would be a case of imposing a conceptual frame alien to the text? Emezi's rebuttal appears to be somewhat at odds with the novel itself, which does in fact narrate that the protagonist undergoes a process of gender reassignment surgery, with the spirits commenting that in this process, "We discovered that humans had medical words—terms for what we were trying to do—that there were procedures, gender reassignment, transitioning" (*FW*, 189). Moreover, Emezi themself has also suggested that the novel is intended as an intervention in the transphobia prevalent in Nigeria: "Nigerians are transphobic for the most part. My work is about inhabiting realities that people don't consider real or valid."[51]

I understand the point of Emezi's rebuttal as being that *Freshwater* is not *primarily* about (trans)gender, and that the concept of *ọgbanje* is not *just* an instrumental narrative frame to indigenize Western language of transgender experience and identity. The text is much more ambitious than that: its central motif of "embodiment as an ọgbanje" aims to decenter Western epistemologies and to foreground other ways of experiencing life and making sense of the world. As Emezi writes in their memoir, "*Freshwater* was drenched in obscure Igbo mythology" (*DS*, 98). This mythology is the epistemologically privileged narrative frame, with the concept of transgender being at best secondary. Yet the relationship between these two frames is made subject of discussion, such as when Emezi asks, "Do ọgbanje even have a gender to begin with? Gender is, after all, such a human thing" (*DS*, 16). As I demonstrate below, *ọgbanje*, as the main concept of Emezi's self-writing, allows for transing not just of the category of gender but also of the human and of religion.[52]

Emezi identifies as *ọgbanje* but also describes themself as a "non-binary trans" person (*DS*, 17). They write, "The possibility that I was an ọgbanje came to me years before I wrote *Freshwater*, around the time when I began calling myself trans, but it took me a while to collide and connect the two worlds" (*DS*, 16). It does appear as if *Freshwater* is a fictional account of Emezi's efforts to "collide and connect" these two worlds in a way that clearly privileges the world of *ọgbanje*. As such, the novel is a literary example of what has been called "auto-theorizing" as a productive genre in trans studies in religion, with *ọgbanje* being Emezi's central autotheoretical concept.[53] So, what is *ọgbanje*, and how does it, in Emezi's account, connect to nonbinary and trans experience and identity?

Embodiment as *Ọgbanje*

The epigraph to chapter 7 of *Freshwater* is a quotation, from C. Chukwuemeka Mbaegbu's PhD thesis about Igbo cosmology, describing *ọgbanje* as "creatures of God with powers over mortals. . . . They are not subject to the laws of justice and have no moral scruples, causing harm without justification."[54] Mbaegbu categorizes *ọgbanje* as a type of malevolent and mischievous spirits who are restless, as they are not fully accepted in the spirit world as ancestors but instead are "repeaters" or "born to die"—they are in a constant cycle of return, where they keep entering women's wombs and inhabiting newborns only to die shortly after at childhood age. Emezi paraphrases this notion when writing that "an ọgbanje is an Igbo spirit that's born to a human mother, a kind of trickster that dies unexpectedly only to return in the next child and do it all over again" (*DS*, 11). The only way to break this cycle, according to Igbo mythology, is by destroying the *iyi-ụwa*, the material object—typically a stone—that symbolizes the oath that the spirits have made to return to the spirit world.[55] In Emezi's words, the *iyi-ụwa* is the "shortcut back into" the underworld, and "if the Ada's human parents found it and destroyed it, we would never be able to go home" (*FW*, 15).[56]

Although *ọgbanje* are "born to die" at childhood age, Ada, the protagonist in *Freshwater*, does not die but reaches puberty and becomes an adult, though scarred and damaged. This is not a result of her *iyi-ụwa* being found and destroyed but of her spirits becoming more intimate with and loyal to her (*FW*, 43). Fundamentally, Ada's survival as an *ọgbanje* appears to be the result of her special connection with Ala, the Igbo god (or goddess[57]) of the earth. After all, Ada is not just an *ọgbanje*—she also is Ala's answer to the prayer of Saul (Ada's father) for a daughter (*FW*, 7, 35). As stated, "It was an unusual incarnation, to be a child of Ala as well as an ọgbanje, to be mothered by the god of life who owns life yet pulled towards death" (*FW*, 207). Much of the novel centers on this paradox. Although Ada as an *ọgbanje* is subject to destructive tendencies, including self-mutilation and suicidal thoughts, the will and power to live, in the end, is stronger. *Freshwater* includes a scene where Asụghara (the dominant spirit-self of Ada) tries to kill Ada by committing suicide, yet the attempt fails, leading Ada to reflect:

> I knew the brothersisters[58] hadn't been serious about trying to drag me over to the other side the night before. The thing about Ala is that you don't move against her. If she turned me back from the gates and told me to live, then I would have to live, ọgbanje or not. Even the brothersisters weren't reckless enough to try and disobey her, which meant that they were just trying to scare me, or warn me. (*FW*, 222)

The suggestion here is that the god Ala wants Ada to be alive. Indeed, the final chapter of *Freshwater* narrates the culmination of Ada's spiritual journey as an ọgbanje, where she prays to Ala, addressing her as "Nne," that is, Mother, and is united with her. The title of the novel is explained in its closing sentences

about Ada being united with Ala, reading: "Why should I be afraid? I am the source of the spring. All freshwater comes out of my mouth" (*FW*, 226). This links back to a statement early in the novel, that "all water is connected. All freshwater comes out of the mouth of a python" (*FW*, 9), which is a direct reference to Igbo mythology about the sacred python as the avatar of the god Ala. By discovering that she is the "python's egg" (the meaning of Emezi's first name, Akwaeke), Ada realizes that she is "a child of the gods, or the deity themselves" (*FW*, 218) and therefore is connected to "the source of the stream" (*FW*, 9), that is, Ala herself, which feeds her will and power to live.[59]

Typically, *ọgbanje* refers to one spirit inhabiting a human. Yet in the case of Ada, it appears to be multiple spirits at once, which the novel suggests was a carelessness or neglect of the gods: "When the transition is made from spirit to flesh, the gates are meant to be closed. . . . Perhaps the gods forgot. . . . By the time she (our body) struggled out into the world . . . the gates were left open. . . . The main problem was that we were a distinct *we* instead of being fully and just *her*" (*FW*, 5). The multiplicity of spirits creates a fragmentation of Ala's self, which, given that this is semiautobiographical fiction, can also be read onto Emezi's self. Indeed, they describe themself as having a "multiplicity of self" and as a "writer living on multiple margins in a country that is not home, writing metaphysics and queer sex" (*DS*, 79, 104). By embracing *ọgbanje* as a self-signifier, Emezi appears to also embrace this multiplicity and subsequent fragmentation as a state of being, resisting what has been described as the "narrative drive held as most precious in transsexual autobiography: from fragmentation to integration."[60]

Several chapters of *Freshwater* are written from the perspective of these spirits, an undefined "we." As the story unfolds, Ada as a child—feeling abandoned by her mother, who has separated from her father in Nigeria and has moved abroad—retreats into her own world, begins to sense and recognize her spirit-selves, and to make blood sacrifices to them by cutting herself. At first, Ada names the spirits Smoke and Shadow. Later, as they become more distinct and strong characters, they are named Asụghara and Saint Vincent[61]—two spirits through which Emezi explores the complexity of Ada's gendered and sexual selves. Of these two, Asụghara is the most dominant one, and many of the book's chapters are told through her voice. Asụghara's "birth" is directly linked to Ada's experience of rape while she is in a violent relationship with a fellow student at a college in Virginia where her mother had sent her for studies. Finding Ada abused and broken after this experience, Asụghara takes over Ada's body, knowing that "Ada was mine: mine to move and take and save" (*FW*, 61–62). The tension between "taking" and "saving" Ada's body remains as the story unfolds. As much as Asụghara becomes Ada's protective shield, they also lead Ada—or Ada's body—into violent sexual encounters and abusive relationships, and into self-destructive behaviors. Asụghara completely takes over Ada's sexual embodiment, to the extent that Ada at some moment in the story confesses to a lover: "I've never had sex without a mask

on before. There's always this other hard layer on top of the real me" (*FW*, 155). The lover becomes her husband, but the marriage is doomed to fail because Ada remains emotionally unavailable, with Asụghara concluding: "The only thing that could've saved them was if I had never existed" (*FW*, 161). In the meantime, Asụghara also seeks to drive a wedge between Ada and the person from whom she seeks emotional comfort and refuge, Jesus Christ (in the novel referred to as Yshwa, possibly in reference to the Igbo claim of having Jewish ancestry[62]). Ada is made to feel guilty toward Yshwa, to whom she has made a vow of abstinence, and is made to believe that Yshwa is not there to support her when she needs him—as Asụghara tells her, "Yshwa [is] the one who gives you nothing" (*FW*, 144).

In contrast to Asụghara, Saint Vincent is Ada's gentler spirit-self. He also impacts on her sexual and gendered embodiment but in a different way. Although born at the same time as Asụghara, Saint Vincent initially stayed in the background for Ada. He dwells in "the marble of her mind because he couldn't survive her body" (*FW*, 121), the reason being that his "delicate masculinity" does not fit with Ada's female body (*FW*, 124). Yet while residing in Ada's mind, Saint Vincent begins to mold her quietly in a new body, a "dream-body" complete with an erecting penis, which he uses as his own. The spirit-narrator comments that retrospectively, Saint Vincent has lived in Ada from her childhood when she was "always mistaken for a boy" (*FW*, 122). In her teenage years, Ada does make an attempt to be intimate with a female friend in order to satisfy Saint Vincent's desires. The attempt fails, after which Saint Vincent is pushed to the background again, where he stays until, years later, Ada's marriage breaks down, and—in the midst of a depression and a suicide attempt—her male spirit-self comes to the fore again. He leads Ada to dating women, dressing in a more masculine way and binding her chest, and finally into a gender-reassignment surgery. Yet even in this process, Saint Vincent never becomes dominant, as he has to negotiate Ada's other spirit-selves. Thus, Ada's breasts are reduced but not removed, and after the surgery Ada starts wearing dresses again. The ambiguity of Ada's gendered embodiment remains intact, reflecting her complex spirit-selves who live in "ọgbanje space," that is, "between the inaccurate concepts of male and female" (*FW*, 193).

Transgender: Transing Gender Binaries

In my reading of *Freshwater*, the text can be seen as a trans novel in at least three ways: transgender, trans-human, and trans-religious. Regarding transgender, Emezi explores the gender ambiguity with which *ọgbanje* are traditionally associated. As the anthropologist Misty Bastian has pointed out: "To be *ogbaanje* is to be categorized other—and to bring alterity home in a way that transcends the more ordinary, bifurcated 'otherness' of gender. We could even speculate that *ogbaanje* children fall under a third gender category, that of human-looking spirit."[63] Emezi reflects the point made here when asking, "Do ọgbanje even have a gender to begin with? Gender is, after all, such a

human thing" (*DS*, 16). By placing both a female and a male spirit in Ada, with both spirits using and shaping Ada's body to their own interests and desires, the novel narrates the limitations of a gender binary and interrogates the cisgender notion that gender is linked to biological sex. Doing so, it illustrates a more general point made by Oyěwùmí that the binary categories of male and female, and the biological determinism underlying these, are Western concepts that are alien to many precolonial African societies. Interestingly, Oyěwùmí supports her argument with a brief reference to the religious realm, where "spirit possession does not discriminate based on anatomic sex," from which she questions the "imposition of the Western, overly physicalized and gendered model of apprehending the world."[64]

As mentioned above, the ambiguity of Ada's gendered appearance at a young age is linked back by the narrator to the presence of Saint Vincent. Thanks to this male spirit residing in her, Ada as a child "could move between boy and girl" (*FW*, 123), which remained the case until hormones made her body more explicitly female. Saint Vincent was unsatisfied with the grown-up Ada's female body—"too feminine, too reproductive" for him (*FW*, 187)[65]—and begins to shape it into the dreambody in which he could feel at home, thus leading Ada into the transitioning process. Thus, *Freshwater* narrates the gender-affirming surgery from the perspective of the spirits residing in Ada, as for them it is a way to "alter the Ada, to carve our body into something that we could truly call a home" (*FW*, 188). This narrative might raise concerns about the agency of the person undergoing the surgery, as if it is not their decision. Whose gender is being affirmed, exactly? The notion of spirit possession or inhabitation that is related to *ọgbanje* and similar phenomena obviously complicates notions of human agency. Yet while there is an apparent displacement of human agency, spirit possession can also be seen as "a sacred space which necessarily entails the involvement of both divine and human agency" and in which the boundaries between these two often are blurred.[66] This blurring is reflected in *Dear Senthuran*, where Emezi recognizes their own agency in the process of gender-reassignment, referring to the surgeries they went through as "a bridge across realities, a movement from being assigned female to assigning myself as ọgbanje" (*DS*, 16). Yet they also describe it as a form of "obedience" to Ala and as "spirit affirming" (*FW*, 164, 33). A similar ambiguity regarding agency can be observed in the autobiography *Black Bull, Ancestors, and Me* by the self-identifying "lesbian sangoma" Nkunzi Zandile Nkabinde, which uses the motif of ancestral spirit possession as a framework to explain and narrate same-sex desire and gender fluidity. As Chantal J. Zabus argues, Nkabinde's "agency in desiring women is somewhat subsumed by Nkunzi's [the male ancestor possessing her] highly sexed persona and penchant for sexual conquest."[67]

Freshwater's original contribution is that it adopts the concept of embodiment as *ọgbanje* as a narrative starting point for the narration of transgender experience. As the spirits comment: "The Ada used a therapist to assist with

our carving plan and we discovered that humans had medical words—terms for what we were trying to do—that there were procedures, gender reassignment, transitioning" (*FW*, 189). Adopting embodiment as *ọgbanje* as the conceptual frame, Igbo cosmology takes precedence over Western categorizations. As Tina Magaqa and Rodwell Makombe point out with reference to critical theorist Walter D. Mignolo's concept of epistemic disobedience, Emezi's contribution to the decolonization of queer studies in Africa is that through the frame of *ọgbanje*, it "seeks to decentre the Western episteme and locate gendered 'otherness' within cultural and spiritual worldviews of the Igbo."[68]

Trans-human: Transing Human-Spirit Realms

Keeping in mind Emezi's earlier-quoted comment that *Freshwater* is not simply about "nonbinary/trans identity through an Igbo lens," it is important to recognize that the principal theme of living as *ọgbanje* does more work than interrogating gender-binary and cisgender restrictions—the novel, so to say, "transcenders transgender."[69] The concept of *ọgbanje* allows Emezi to call into question the distinction between human and spirit, which relates to the dualisms of body and mind, matter and spirit, the natural and the supernatural. As they reflect autobiographically in their memoir:

> I kept thinking of spirit and human as a binary, either one or the other, even though the whole point of an ọgbanje is that it's both. An ọgbanje is only an ọgbanje when it is in a human body. It's not a spirit possessing a human; there is no demarcation between the two—there is no two in the first place. I didn't need to *do* anything to move as an ọgbanje. I was already doing it, by existing, by breathing. (*DS*, 57)

Against this background, *Freshwater* can be seen as a trans-human novel, but in a different way from how this term is usually understood. It is not about enhancing the human condition through technological advancement, but about existing at, and across, the boundaries between human embodiment and other forms of life—that is, spirits. If transhumanism, at its heart, is about "the potentiality to *become*," then in Emezi's version this becoming occurs through recognizing the interconnectedness between human life and other forms of life, between the physical and the spiritual world, which for Emezi allows for the becoming of Black African queer existence.[70] Instead of the terminology of possession, perhaps the notion of "copresence" of person and spirit is more adequate to capture this interconnectedness and to acknowledge the intricate and fluid ways in which both entities live together and constitute an interdependent, and at times somewhat contradictory, form of agency in a context of transcorporeality.[71]

According to Bastian's description, an *ọgbanje* is a "human-looking spirit," yet Emezi appears to complicate that representation.[72] Embodiment as *ọgbanje*, as narrated by Emezi, is reminiscent of the transcorporeality that, according to the Black studies scholar Roberto Strongman, is characteristic of

African and Afro-diasporic religions. He uses this concept to capture how, in these traditions, the body is conceptualized as a vessel that can be occupied by spiritual and divine forces, with the human psyche being seen as "multiple, removable, and external to the body that functions as its receptacle."[73] This transcorporeality has significant gendered affects because when the gender of the deities or spirits is different from the body that is occupied, "the commingling of the human and the divine produces subjectivities whose gender is not dictated by biological sex."[74] The language of the body-as-vessel that Strongman uses is also invoked by Emezi (e.g., *FW*, 193). Yet where Strongman emphasizes that this transcorporeality is temporary, manifesting in moments of "ritual ecstasy of trance possession" after which the body returns to its normal state,[75] Emezi emphasizes that *ọgbanje* transcorporeality—and thus also the related gender fluidity and ambiguity—is a permanent condition. The language of spirit possession thus falls short, as Emezi themself indicates. Embodiment as *ọgbanje* is not so much about a spirit occupying a body, but about a spirit (or spirits) merging with the human psyche to such an extent that the demarcation between human and spirit is fundamentally transcended and that the human-spirit subject is deified. On the final page of *Freshwater*, Ada concludes: "Ọgbanje are as liminal as is possible—spirit and human, both and neither" (226). Further reflecting on this, Emezi writes in their memoir: "After I wrote *Freshwater*, I had to reconcile with the fact that I'm not even human" (*DS*, 10). Subsequently, they came to understand themself as "a small deity" (*DS*, 57). Although Emezi's own thinking of the complex relationship between spirit and human appears to be developing within these two texts, it is clear that for them, embodiment as *ọgbanje* entails a trans-human transcorporeality that dissolves the dualisms of body and mind, and of spirit and human, into a liminal space enabling complex gendered, sexual, and embodied subjectivities. The multiple possibilities opened up by this are fundamentally rooted, not just in the notion of *ọgbanje*, but in the belief in the divine as the source of life and as the basis for the Black queer will and power to live. In addition to the god Ala, who, as discussed earlier, serves as Ada's "deity-mother" (*DS*, 198) and with whom Ada is spiritually united at the end of the story in *Freshwater*, Emezi refers to "God, the big one, the one that covers the rest with a shadow" (*DS*, 198) as her foundation in life.[76] Referring to their survival of a suicide attempt, Emezi asks rhetorically, "How can you die . . . if Ala won't swallow you down, if God commands that you live? So. I lived and I will live" (*DS*, 194).

Trans-religious: Transing Religious Boundaries

Freshwater also crosses religious boundaries. It engages the relationship between indigenous religion and Christianity—a classic theme in African literature—in a complex and original way. At first sight, Christianity is depicted rather negatively: Christian missionaries are referred to as the "corrupters" of indigenous religion, instilling among converts a "christ-induced amnesia"

(*FW*, 9). This amnesia (the alienation of indigenous religious and cultural traditions as a result of colonialism and mission[77]) is illustrated, for instance, by the story about the church refusing to baptize Ada under the Igbo name her parents had chosen because that name was "unchristian, pagan" (*FW*, 8). As mentioned earlier, a narrative thread throughout the novel is about Asụghara attempting to drive a wedge between Ada and Yshwa (Jesus Christ). In the novel, Asụghara appears to be successful in separating Ada from "that nice, innocent Christian world" of her upbringing (*FW*, 119), with Ada reaching the point where she considers the church "irrelevant" (*FW*, 196). Yet Asụghara is less successful in separating Ada from Yshwa. Although Ada goes through a stage of losing her faith, she keeps seeking the comforting presence of Yshwa and discovers that his moral code of love helps her control the unruly and demanding spirits inside her. Asụghara, in the end, even undergoes a "change of heart" (*FW*, 196) and accepts the role that Yshwa continues to play in Ada's life. Emezi's suggestion is that belief in Yshwa can be dissociated from institutionalized Christianity, and that one can maintain a relationship with him outside of the context of the church. This might well appeal to African queer persons who feel ostracized by the church but for whom the relationship with Jesus Christ remains meaningful.[78]

Religious hybridity is certainly not uncommon in West Africa given the region's long history of "religious encounter," especially between Christianity and Islam, on the one hand, and indigenous religions, on the other.[79] Yet while this usually means that elements of indigenous traditions are incorporated in Christian faith and practice, in Emezi's account it is the other way around, with belief in Yshwa being extracted from its Christian context and incorporated in a reappropriation of Igbo religion. This move might well illustrate how Christianity, for Emezi, has become intricately connected to the politics of trans- and queerphobia in Nigeria and has become irredeemable. Yet apparently the figure of Yshwa has not. Interestingly, the spirits in *Freshwater* come to recognize Yshwa as one of them, "an older sibling [and] another brother-sister" (*FW*, 196), the fascinating suggestion being that the figure of Jesus Christ can be incorporated in the Igbo pantheon of gods and spirits, thus queerly blurring the boundaries between religious imaginaries. In their memoir *Dear Senthuran*, Emezi shares autobiographically how they became alienated from their Christian background but continued to have a relationship with Yshwa while rediscovering indigenous Igbo spirituality. This is another illustration of the religious bricolage queer people have often been found to engage in, combining elements from different traditions that they find affirming.[80] In Emezi's case, the ongoing relationship with Yshwa turns out to be deeply meaningful as they narrate their own experience of surviving a suicide attempt with direct reference to Yshwa's experience of death and resurrection (*DS*, 188–96), clearly identifying with him and finding "home in his skin" (*DS*, 198), with his stigmata reflecting Emezi's own pain and struggle. Queer theologian Elizabeth Stuart has argued that in the crucifixion, death, and

resurrection, the body of Jesus "becomes liminal and soaked in iconicity."[81] Emezi brings home this insight in a unique way by suggesting that Jesus's embodiment maps onto queer embodiment as *ọgbanje*. The last time Yshwa is mentioned in *Freshwater*, Ada—struggling again with the burden of life—speaks to him, saying, "You will be the one to whom I direct my longing" (*FW*, 204), thus illustrating how Yshwa as a liminal figure is a point of identification, a source of consolation, and an object of desire.

Conclusion

In his book *Frottage*, Macharia has raised the following question: "If we take African gendering practices as theoretically significant, what might become possible in thinking through African and Afro-diasporic queer and trans politics?"[82] In the conclusion to this article, I would like to briefly reflect on this question, with specific reference to Emezi's self-writing and self-gendering through the Igbo concept of *ọgbanje*, which I have read as a response to, and illustration of, Nyanzi's argument about the queer possibilities of spirits in African contexts. This article has unpacked and elucidated the profound theoretical significance of *ọgbanje* for African queer and trans scholarship and politics. Although not offering a wholesale new African queer theory (which, obviously, they never intended it to be in the first place), Emezi's creative self-writing as *ọgbanje* does gesture in a direction for indigenizing and decolonizing African queer and trans studies.

The theoretical significance of Emezi's self-theorizing can be captured by the notion of "decolonial gestures."[83] This notion is defined by Mignolo as "all gestures (fictional and nonfictional, artistic and non-artistic) that explicitly confront the colonial matrix."[84] As we have seen, Emezi's work performs such a gesture by interrogating colonial dictates of gender dualism, religious orthodoxy, secularity, and anthropocentric thought, and by creatively reconceptualizing gender, religion, and, fundamentally, human personhood with the help of the narrative epistemological frame of *ọgbanje*. The latter frame allows for the creative appropriation of an indigenous concept, privileging this over Western queer or trans terminology. As such, it resists what Mignolo calls the "colonial matrix," both in relation to originally Western gender binaries and Euro-American LGBTIQ identity politics. Emezi's self-writing as *ọgbanje* puts the category of spirits at the heart of African queer and trans world-making, and it acknowledges and explores how spirits allow for the transing of rigid categories and fixed oppositions, such as male and female, body and mind, human and spirit, indigenous religion and Christianity. Decentering Western epistemologies through the concept of *ọgbanje*, Emezi also radically decenters and deprivileges the category of the human, reminding us, in Mignolo's words, of "the life in/of the planet of which the human species is only a minimal part and of which it depends."[85] Thus, *ọgbanje* gestures in the direction of a post-anthropocentric queer and trans theorizing in which human embodied, gendered, and sexual existence, for better or worse, is embedded in, and dependent

on, the realms of spirits and the divine. The phrase "for better or worse" serves to signal that such spiritual queer and trans worldmaking is not necessarily easier, better, or preferable over alternative strategies. Emezi's writing is honest about the struggle of living with spirits, the wounds it may inflict, and the trauma it may cause. Yet it also gestures at the affirmation, empowerment, and homecoming that can be found in the journey of coming to terms with spiritual and divine beings—whether they are called Asụghara, St. Vincent, Yshwa, Ala, or "God, the big one"—accepting them as a copresence in one's life and finding ways of living with them in harmony.

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Notes

1. Nyanzi, "Queering Queer Africa," 67.
2. Nyanzi, "Queering Queer Africa," 67.
3. Nyanzi, "Queering Queer Africa," 67.
4. Oyěwùmí, "Introduction: Gendering," 1.
5. Tamale, "Researching and Theorising Sexualities in Africa," 22–23.
6. Jobson et al., "Transgender in Africa," 160. For more on how transgender people are overlooked in research on gender and sexuality in Africa, see also Mbugua, "Transsexuals' Nightmare"; Theron, "Does the Label Fit?"
7. Similar suggestions have been made regarding queer studies in African diaspora and Black transatlantic contexts. See, for instance, Strongman, *Queering Black Atlantic Religions*; Tinsley, *Ezili's Mirrors*.
8. See Jacobs, Thomas, and Lang, *Two-Spirit People*.
9. Engelke, "Spirits," 288.
10. For a critical analysis of such discourses, see Homewood, "Leaky Anuses, Loose Vaginas, and Large Penises"; Richman, "Homosexuality, Created Bodies, and Queer Fantasies."
11. Engelke, "Spirits," 292.
12. For the purpose of this article, I will use the terms *queer* and *trans* alongside each other. This is not to suggest that these words are interchangeable and their meanings are identical but that, in the context of the discussion here, they are overlapping and intertwined.
13. Epprecht, "Religion and Same Sex Relations in Africa," 520–21.

14. For more about sangomas and same-sex sexuality, see Mkasi, "Threat to Zulu Patriarchy"; Morgan and Reid, "'I've Got Two Men and One Woman'"; Nkabinde and Morgan, "This Has Happened since Ancient Times"; Van Klinken and Otu, "Ancestors, Embodiment, and Sexual Desire."

15. Homewood, "Leaky Anuses, Loose Vaginas, and Large Penises," 126.

16. Nyanzi, "Queering Queer Africa," 67.

17. Macharia's question is: "If we take African gendering practices as theoretically significant, what might become possible in thinking through African and Afro-diasporic queer and trans politics?" (*Frottage*, 26).

18. For a discussion about decolonizing transgender, see Boellstorff et al., "Decolonizing Transgender."

19. About religion and queer African literature, see Onanuga, "Shackling (Im) morality"; Van Klinken, "Religion in African Literature."

20. For examples of this scholarship, see Macharia, "Archive and Method in Queer African Studies"; Currier and Migraine-George, "Queer Studies / African Studies"; Nyeck, *Routledge Handbook of Queer African Studies*; Otu and Van Klinken, "African Studies Keywords: Queer."

21. Epprecht, *Heterosexual Africa?*, 171.

22. Moreau and Tallie, "Queer African Studies and Directions in Methodology," 51.

23. Matebeni and Pereira, "Preface," 7.

24. Ndlovu-Gatsheni, *Epistemic Freedom in Africa*, 1–42.

25. Cooper and Morrell, "Introduction," 3.

26. See, for example, Robertson, "Queer Studies and Religion in Southern Africa"; Hellweg, "Same-Gender Desire, Religion, and Homophobia."

27. Epprecht, *Sexuality and Social Justice in Africa*, 50; for ethnographic examples, see Dankwa, *Knowing Women*, 124, 247, 270.

28. See Chitando and Mapuranga, "Unlikely Allies?"; Judge, "Navigating Paradox"; Van Klinken, *Kenyan, Christian, Queer*.

29. See Stobie, "'Devil Slapped on the Genitals'"; Van Klinken and Chitando, *Reimagining Christianity and Sexual Diversity in Africa*, 129–80.

30. Van Klinken and Phiri, "In the Image of God."

31. Gaudio, *Allah Made Us*.

32. Ngong, "African Indigenous Religions and Queer Dignity."

33. Epprecht, "Religion and Same Sex Relations in Africa," 516.

34. Nyanzi, "Queering Queer Africa," 67.

35. For a discussion of this trend, see Ekotto, "Reflection on Gender and Sexuality as Transnational Archive."

36. Examples can be found in a diverse array of texts, including autobiographies such as Nkunzi Zandile Nkabinde's *Black Bull, Ancestors, and Me* and Siya Khumalo's *You Have to Be Gay to Know God*; collections of LGBTIQ life stories such as Unoma Azuah's *Blessed Body*; poetry collections such as Animashaun et al.'s *Walking the Tightrope*; fictional story collections such as Karen Martin and Makhosazana Xaba's *Queer Africa*; and a growing number of novels, such as Chinelo Okparanta's *Under the Udala Trees*.

37. Dunton, "Wheyting Be Dat?," 422.

38. Ekotto, "Reflection on Gender and Sexuality as Transnational Archive," 192; for further discussions of queer African literary production, see also Green-Simms, "Emergent Queer"; Dunton, "Tuning into the Polyphony."

39. Mbembe, "African Modes of Self-Writing."

40. For example, see Le Roux, "Proudly African and Transgender."

41. Stryker, "(De)Subjugated Knowledges," 13.

42. Kelly, "Multiplicity and Contradiction," 13.

43. Phiri and Cobo-Piñero, "Nigeria's Queer Literature."

44. Emezi's website lists many accolades of *Freshwater*. See "Freshwater," *Akwaeke*, https://www.akwaeke.com/freshwater (accessed February 23, 2024).

45. Magaqa and Makombe, "Decolonising Queer Sexualities."

46. Phiri and Cobo-Piñero, "Nigeria's Queer Literature."

47. Okri uses the Yoruba word *abiku*, which refers to a very similar phenomenon as the Igbo word *ọgbanje*. For a discussion of several short literary stories centered on the *ọgbanje* theme, see Bastian, "Irregular Visitors."

48. Magaqa and Makombe, "Decolonising Queer Sexualities," 2.

49. Emezi, "Q and A with Akwaeke Emezi."

50. Emezi, "It is *not* a book about nonbinary/trans identity."

51. Emezi, "Inhabiting Realities."

52. A fourth category of transing can be identified in relation to geographical boundaries. Both Ada in *Freshwater* and Emezi in *Dear Senturan* find themselves in a diaspora context, and it appears that the *ọgbanje* motif allows them to engage in transnational homemaking and worldmaking across borders.

53. Kelly, "Multiplicity and Contradiction," 13.

54. Emezi, *Freshwater*, 72; Mbaegbu, "Ultimate Being in Igbo Ontology," 211–12.

55. This concept is narrated, for instance, in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, where Enzinma is an *ọgbanje* who stays alive after a medicine man digs up her *iyi-ụwa* and destroys it.

56. The novel frequently uses the phrase "the Ada," to signify Ada's depersonalization.

57. In both *Freshwater* and *Dear Senthuran*, Emezi uses the word "god," but also uses female pronouns for Ala and addresses her as "Mother."

58. "Brothersisters" is the word used in *Freshwater* for the spirits in the underworld who remind an *ọgbanje* to return to their midst.

59. In *Dear Senthuran*, Emezi has written about their own journey of discovering and reconnecting to the god Ala, and they write about Ala as their mother and about themself as a god (126–36).

60. Prosser, *Second Skins*, 80.

61. *Freshwater* doesn't give a meaning of the name Asughara, and it does not appear to be a common Igbo name. Saint Vincent's name is given because "he fell with holiness on his hands" (Emezi, *Freshwater*, 121).

62. Lis, *Jewish Identity among the Igbo of Nigeria*.

63. Bastian, "Irregular Visitors," 59.

64. Oyěwùmí, *Invention of Women*, 100.

65. The spirit-narrator explains that ọgbanje are not supposed to procreate—after all, they are "born to die" and therefore cannot reproduce themselves and become part of the cycle of ancestral reincarnation (also see Emezi's discussion of this in *DS*, 11–12).

66. Abbey, "Divine Possession and Divination," 181.

67. Zabus, *Out in Africa*, 241.

68. Magaqa and Makombe, "Decolonising Queer Sexualities," 27.

69. Tinsley, *Ezili's Mirrors*, 31.

70. Hill, "Introduction," 6.

71. The notion of copresence is commonly used in scholarship on spirit mediums and psychics. For instance, see Beliso-De Jesus, "Santeria Copresence."

72. Bastian, "Irregular Visitors," 59.

73. Strongman, *Queering Black Atlantic Religions*, 2.

74. Strongman, *Queering Black Atlantic Religions*, 3.

75. Strongman, *Queering Black Atlantic Religions*, 3.

76. This language could refer to the Igbo supreme deity, Chukwu, but also to the biblical/Christian God, and it might well refer to both at the same time.

77. See Mazrui, "Cultural Amnesia, Cultural Nostalgia, and False Memory."

78. For examples of such narratives from the Nigerian context, see Azuah, *Blessed Body*.

79. For an account of this history, see Peel, *Religious Encounter and the Making of the Yoruba*.

80. Wilcox, *Queer Women and Religious Individualism*, 123–28.

81. Stuart, "Sacramental Flesh," 66.

82. Macharia, *Frottage*, 26.

83. Lane, Godoy-Anativia, and Gómez-Barris, "What Decolonial Gesture Is."

84. Mignolo, "Looking for the Meaning of 'Decolonial Gesture.'"

85. Mignolo, "Looking for the Meaning of 'Decolonial Gesture.'"

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