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Literary Realism, Speculative Fiction and Queer African Futures in Akwaeke Emezi's *Freshwater*

Abstract

This article positions Akwaeke Emezi's novel *Freshwater* as a challenge to both literary genres and ontological boundaries. By positioning Igbo ontology as the grounding principle of earthly existence, *Freshwater* contests the division of realism into multiple subsets (magical, animist, literary). Furthermore, this article suggest that the novel playfully refigures ọgbanje identities and Igbo cosmological structures to envision new horizons for kinship and embodiment. Rather than speculating about futures in response to European colonial disruption, *Freshwater* reconfigures uniquely Igbo concepts such as ọgbanje and iyi-ụwa into means for queer agential re-destination. In doing so, the novel shifts focus away from postcolonial efforts to "write back," and instead locates the basis for speculative futures within Igbo ontology. *Freshwater*'s complex navigation of multiple realisms and literary genres, as well as traditional notions of kinship and embodiment, defies easy categorization and instead offers open-ended avenues for queer Igbo and other African futurities.

Introduction

This article considers Akwaeke Emezi's novel *Freshwater* in response to ongoing efforts at placing the text within pre-existing literary genres such as magical realism, animist realism, and speculative fiction. Rather than situating the text within a single genre, I suggest that *Freshwater* contests the boundaries of genre by presenting unexpected visions of both literary realism and speculative fiction. Moreover, the novel uses its distinctly speculative dimensions to refuse the notion of an unchanging Igbo "tradition." *Freshwater* expands upon its Igbo ontological framework to imagine queer African futures predicated on more-than-human

relations and agential re-destination. By challenging the limits of both genre and embodiment, Emezi's novel offers a literary vision of queer futurity that extends beyond the boundaries of western definitions of genre, kinship, and embodiment. *Freshwater* centers around the Ada,[1] a young Igbo-Tamil woman who is born and raised in Nigeria before moving to the United States to attend university. Though the Ada appears outwardly human, internally, she is plagued by multiple spirit entities who compete for control over her physical body. Despite being the protagonist, the Ada herself narrates only a fraction of the story, with two spirit entities – We and Asụghara – coming through as the dominant voices. The Ada never questions these spirits' existence. Instead, she reluctantly accepts them as part of her lived reality. By the novel's end, the Ada self-identifies as an ọgbanje, or repeatedly reincarnated spirit child. In Igbo cosmology, an ọgbanje is a spirit born into a human family only to repeatedly die and be reborn to the same parents. Ọgbanje are typically considered malevolent spirit intruders into the family line, disrupting lineages, and inflicting mental and emotional pain upon their human parents (Bastian "Irregular" 59).

Readers have understood *Freshwater*'s ọgbanje as a metaphor for mental illness, in which the text's fantastical and disjointed narrative serve as realist representations of psychological conditions such as dissociative identity disorder (Albano; Alvarez; Ogundare; Okoye 79n1). Others consider the novel to be magical realism due to its heavily spiritual framework (Omar; de Villiers). Conversely, Kelsey Ann McFaul (2021) and Oluwadunni O. Talabi (2023) productively position *Freshwater* within the realm of Africanfuturism despite the absence of science fiction elements. Talabi argues that *Freshwater* operates as Africanfuturist text by bringing the ọgbanje "into a technological future while staying rooted in African consciousness" (340). Similarly, McFaul points to the novel's "ability to hold

[1] Throughout the novel, the primary narrator refers to the protagonist as 'the Ada'. This is a point which I will examine in depth in this article under the section entitled 'Magical Realism, Literary Realism and *Freshwater*'. As such, I will refer to the protagonist as 'the Ada' throughout the article to avoid confusion.

multiple orders of knowledge and ways of being together without contradiction…all the while focalising…Igbo ontology and spiritual materiality" (55). Both Talabi and McFaul define Africanfuturist texts as future-oriented literary visions of African perspectives and ontologies (Talabi 331; McFaul 48). While McFaul's and Talabi's work will inform the second half of this article, I want to begin by considering alternative ways of thinking about genre in *Freshwater*, particularly the implications of reading *Freshwater* as magical, animist, and/or literary realism. While magical and animist realism in many ways align with the novel's stylistic elements, I suggest that such niche categorizations can further reinforce Eurocentric post-Enlightenment assumptions about the boundaries of realism as a genre. I argue that reading *Freshwater* through a literary realist lens can complicate the idea that realism necessarily excludes Igbo ontology's metaphysical elements. Such a lens is not the only way in which *Freshwater* might be read; however, I want to suggest that the novel itself prioritizes productive tension rather than easy reconciliation in both its narrative and its generic positioning. To demonstrate this argument, I examine the dual perspectives at play in *Freshwater* – Eurocentrism's observable reality on the one hand, and Igbo cosmological phenomena such as ọgbanje on the other. I argue that the novel's interplay of physical and spiritual figures complicates singular readings which rely on either exclusively realist or speculative approaches. In other words, *Freshwater* not only straddles the boundaries of the human and the spirit, but also the division between literary realism and speculative fiction. Finally, I demonstrate the novel's generic ambiguity by considering its explicitly speculative dimensions. I argue that *Freshwater* further complicates genre categorization by modifying Igbo concepts of embodiment and kinship through speculative reimagining. These alterations employ Igbo ontology's inherent flexibility to imagine queer African futures predicated on more-than-human kinship and agential re-destination.

Complicating Genre: Magical, Animist or Literary Realism?

In 2019, Akwaeke Emezi's debut novel *Freshwater* won the prize for Best Novel in the African Speculative Fiction Society's annual Nommo Awards, which aim to "recognise works of speculative fiction by Africans" ("2019 Nommo Award Winners" n.p.). These works include "science fiction, fantasy, stories of magic and traditional belief, alternative histories, horror and strange stuff that might not fit in anywhere else" ("About Nommo" n.p.). *Freshwater*'s preoccupation with spirits and the spirit world seems to land the novel squarely within this definition of speculative fiction. An often ambiguously defined genre, speculative fiction's broad scope can include not only science fiction and its "derivatives, hybrids and cognate genres" but also "ghost stories…magic realism, fractured fairy tales and more" (Oziewicz 1). As a result, any literature that engages with the mystical, spiritual or supernatural is potentially categorized as non-realist, whether broadly speculative or distinctly magical realist. Despite these definitions, which seem to accord with *Freshwater*'s narrative and formal elements, the novel's navigation of the material and the spiritual destabilizes easy genre categorizations. The speculative prioritizes that which does not yet exist, while *Freshwater* unfolds in a version of the world which would be distinctly mundane if not for the presence of Igbo spirits and gods. This convergence of material and metaphysical elements implies a magical realist tendency in the text. However, I want to complicate that correlation by first briefly exploring the potential pitfalls of reading *Freshwater* as magical realism.

In the decades since its inception, magical realism's political dimensions have become problematized by commercial uses of the genre as "a ubiquitous term in describing literature in the twenty-first century" (Harlin 298). In her article on African surrealism, Kate Harlin argues that genre labels can operate as part of the "impulse to universalize African literature in order to render it legible to a global readership" (Harlin 296). Magical realism, with its

attendant risk of exoticism and exploitative fantasy (Cooper 29), is especially susceptible to publishing's preoccupation with "conveying literary works to a middle-class readership that increasingly demands 'diverse' books" (Harlin 297). Despite its efforts toward "the obliteration of the boundaries between the spirit world and that of humans" (Quayson 162), the magic of magical realism equally risks feeding into ongoing colonial assumptions that "non-Western beliefs are attended to by an inherent 'unreality'" (Harlin 298). As Harlin notes, writers and scholars such as Nnedi Okorafor and Ainehi Edoro have tried to negate the potentially homogenizing effects of magical realist labels by specifying genres such as "Africanjujuism" and Africanfuturism," both of which attend to "the complexities of African life, histories and cosmology" (Edoro, quoted in Harlin 297). These distinctions, like my argument in this article, are responses to magical realism's shifting positions within both commercial literary practices and academic discourses. In the latter context, Stephen Slemon argues that magical realism's postcolonial potential stems from its incompatibility with "the established systems of generic classification [which] are complicit with a centralizing impulse in imperial culture" (408). Despite these resistant possibilities, Slemon qualifies his assertion by observing that "the concept of magic realism itself threatens to become a monumentalizing category for literary practice and to offer to centralizing genre systems a single locus upon which the massive problem of *difference* in literary expression can be managed into recognizable meaning in one swift pass" (408-9). It is this potential for homogenization and easy categorization that animates my own critique of magical realist readings of Emezi's novel.

As Ato Quayson notes, magical realism emerged as an "attempt to appropriate the tools of both traditionalism and modernity" to challenge "the Western tradition of realism" (Quayson 161, 160). However, retaining the division between realism and magical realism risks maintaining the very boundaries between the real ("the pragmatic and ordinary") and

the magical that it "seeks to obliterate" (Quayson 164, 162). Rather than reading *Freshwater* as magical realism, I suggest that reading through a literary realist lens can "encourag[e] resistance to monologic political and cultural structures" without falling prey to the very binarism that magical realism initially set out to destabilize (Harlin 298). The novel presents a version of reality in which the spirit and human worlds not only coexist but continually interact with each other. Far from being Emezi's invention, this concept of coterminous spirit and material realms stems from Igbo cosmology. Chinwe Achebe states in her influential work, *The World of the Ogbanje*, that the "world-view of the Igbo, recognises the existence of a spiritual realm and of the contiguous relationship between man and spirits" (57). Similarly, Chinwe Nwoye argues that the "Igbo people…see their world as made up to [sic] two planes: the physical and the spiritual" with "dual-traffic and interaction between the inhabitants of the two worlds" (307). While such cosmological concepts are by no means universal among Igbo people, nor are they exclusive to African ontologies, they offer an interesting premise for considering texts such as *Freshwater*. Accepting a spiritual and material reality cohabited by both humans and spirits takes for granted the presence of spirits and deities within the realm of the real. Moreover, such a premise offers grounds for reading *Freshwater* through a literary realist lens.

Realism in *Freshwater*, taken not as a one-to-one mimetic correspondence between text and context, but as a process of making fundamental ethical and political claims about the nature of reality, both questions and reifies what is "true" or "real" (Morris *Realism* 2). The novel's conception of the universe, in which humans, spirits and deities share reality in a "contiguous and continuous… non-hierarchical manner" (Nwoye 307), undermines assumptions that stories of spirits and humans must exclusively belong to the realm of fantasy, magical realism, religious faith or speculative fiction. Emezi's novel resonates deeply with realism's ethical and political implications, which involve "both claims about *the nature*

of reality and an *evaluative attitude* towards it" (Morris *Realism* 2, emphasis added). Understanding realism as a shifting and discursive mode of representation reveals possibilities for reading *Freshwater* within the specific Igbo cosmological framework that informs the text's "nature of reality." Rather than simply representing a world full of magic, *Freshwater* claims a reality predicated on Igbo cosmology, which fundamentally includes spirits and the spiritual. This claim carries ethical and political implications, as the novel positions Igbo cosmology as a valid and viable modern framework for experiencing the material world. If so, *Freshwater* utilizes realism to move beyond simplistic claims to verisimilitude or mimetic representation and instead constructs a politically instrumentalised vision of reality (Levine 15).

Thus far, one might still argue that magical realism appears to be the best descriptor for Emezi's novel. However, I want to consider the disparity between the instrumentalization of magic in magical realism and *Freshwater*'s distinctly cosmological approach. In his work on postcolonial magical realism, Christopher Warnes defines the genre in part as "a mode of narration…in which real and fantastic, natural and supernatural, are coherently represented in a state of equivalence" (Warnes 3). In an echo of Warnes's definition, Quayson argues that magical realism "posit[s]…an alternative universe in which fantastical elements are placed side by side with the real" (160). By emphasizing the equivalence between real/natural and fantastical/supernatural, these two definitions inadvertently highlight the point at which *Freshwater* diverges from the magical realist mode. Warnes and Quayson both emphasize equivalency, in which neither the real nor the supernatural "has a greater claim to truth or referentiality" (Warnes 3). However, *Freshwater*'s narrative openly positions the spiritual as its organizing principle, a move which fundamentally refuses parity between the supernatural and the real. The secular appears secondary to the text's spiritual elements, to the point where the narrators themselves often describe the secular "real" (gender affirming surgery,

medically assisted transition, breast reduction surgery) as alternative understandings of the spiritual or "magical" aspects of the story (blood sacrifice, divine oaths, and spiritual shedding). Thus, designating *Freshwater* as magical realism risks diminishing the novel's cosmological approach to existence and human embodiment.

It is here that I turn to Harry Garuba's concept of the animist unconscious for yet another vision of alternative realisms. Cooper argues that "consummate cosmopolitans like Rushdie or Marquez" are "Western educated writers who assume an ironic distance from the lack of a 'scientific' understanding" represented by the "so-called authenticity of superstition" or magic (32, 33). From this perspective, authors of magical realism must necessarily position themselves at a distance from the supernatural elements in their texts in order to retain its realism and indicate their awareness of magic's political instrumentality (Cooper 34). Such a conception of magical realism locates the author at a privileged distance from the "exoticism and otherness of indigenous cultures" that provide fodder for their "magical realist plot" (Cooper 41, 34). While Cooper's stance is perhaps more heavily critical of magical realism's cosmopolitan dimensions than others such as Warnes (133-135), it nonetheless demonstrates the possible disjuncture between author and inspiration in magical realism. In contrast, animist realism is a literary expression of what Garuba terms the "animist unconscious" (269). Garuba defines the animist unconscious by its "almost total refusal to countenance unlocalized, unembodied, unphysicalized gods and spirits" (267). Instead, animist gods and spirits dwell in the object world with no division between their material and spiritual properties or characteristics. A further dimension of the animist unconscious is that it is indeed unconscious. According to Garuba, not all individuals within an animist society must believe in animism, or embodied spirits in the earthly realm, in order to demonstrate an animist sensibility about the relationship between the human and nonhuman world (271, note 21). Instead, an animist unconscious takes for granted the

interchange between spirits and human beings without recourse to institutionalized religious beliefs. Furthermore, an animist unconscious is not inherently contradictory to a secular worldview. Garuba explains that the animist unconscious "subverts the authority of Western science by reinscribing the authority of magic *within* the interstices of the rational/secular/modern" (271, emphasis added).

Freshwater employs an animist materialist perspective through the novel's narration. Both We and Asụghara continually refuse to distinguish between the spiritual and material worlds they inhabit, instead figuring them as coterminous with and co-constitutive of each other. Moreover, the protagonist concludes her longest narrative chapter by reaffirming her identity as an ọgbanje who dwells at the interstices of the human and spirit worlds. The novel's insistence on depicting reality within an Igbo cosmological framework echoes Garuba's definition of animist materialism as "the practice of *continually re-enchanting the world*" (267; 265, original emphasis). This continual re-enchantment of the world relies upon an animist worldview in which "objects are the physical and material manifestations of the gods and spirits" (Garuba 267). While it is clear that an animist unconscious, as Garuba describes this worldview, deeply informs Emezi's work, I nonetheless avoid ascribing the term "animist realism" to *Freshwater*. While animist realism can be a useful tool when it comes to contextualizing the novel within some aspects of Igbo cosmology, such subgenres may also reinscribe prevailing assumptions about the hegemonic status of literary realism. Reading *Freshwater* as a subset of realism (magical or animist) risks implicitly accepting literary realism's secular Eurocentric foundations as the normative measure. Conversely, deliberately reading *Freshwater* through a literary realist lens acknowledges "the semantic fullness" of an Igbo social reality that is capable of intruding upon literary realism's dominant position (Morris *Realism* 106). Thus, I return to my original contention – that *Freshwater* can and perhaps should be read through the lens of literary realism, if only to consider how it

might destabilize the genre's Eurocentric post-Enlightenment foundations. However, rather than enforcing a strictly realist reading of *Freshwater*, I want to position the novel at the boundary between realist and speculative fiction. I suggest that a realist-inflected reading of *Freshwater* can not only reveal the novel's cosmological underpinnings, but also challenge literary realism's assumptions about the nature of reality. At the same time, attending to *Freshwater*'s speculative reimaginings of ọgbanje, kinship, and destiny demonstrate the flexibility inherent to Igbo cosmology.

Understanding *Freshwater* as potentially realist means first recognizing that "[r]eality and knowledge about it are socially determined and therefore relative" (Schipper 559). Susan Andrade partly defines realism as "the attempt to depict people and their worlds in their complexity" (294). While *Freshwater* appears fantastical to many, for readers invested in the novel's complex Igbo cosmological framework, the world of ọgbanje and spirit siblings is both plausible and potentially real. Accounts of ọgbanje occurrences persevere to this day across a wide range of social, geographical, and religious contexts (Schneider 134; Asakitikpi 60; Uche and Uche 73). Biological or medical interpretations typically understand ọgbanje as folkloric explanations for sickle cell disease or mental illness (Asakitikpi 62; Nzewi 1408-1409; Ogundare). Some psychological approaches employ ọgbanje as explanations for seemingly "deviant" behaviours, particularly among woman who refuse to marry, bear children, or perform other socially constructed gender roles (Ilechukwu 246). Meanwhile, sociological perspectives theorize ọgbanje as communal efforts to navigate complex new kinships forged across increasingly permeable cultural boundaries in a rapidly globalizing world where "[c]ommodities and bodies, information and personalities from previously unknown places of the world are circulating through their lives and living spaces" (Bastian "Married" 131). Such a wide range of ọgbanje interpretations attests to its flexibility across these and other epistemological frameworks. Similarly, I suggest that the idea of literary

realism can shift depending on whose realities are centered and which readers are engaging with the text. Secular definitions of literary realism rely upon a binary division between the secular and the religious (Morris *Realism* 10). As Garuba notes, however, this binary is less present in animist societies. For the animist unconscious, the "'locking' of spirit within matter" is sometimes simply part of living in the world (267). *Freshwater* exemplifies this "locking" through its protagonist, whose earthly existence is predicated upon her relationship with the spirit realm. By representing the material world as coterminous with the spiritual world, the novel positions an animist unconscious as the operating force behind its realism.

In *Freshwater*, innocuous details such as the Ada's name introduce overlapping ontological frameworks which challenge the Eurocentric post-Enlightenment boundaries of realist literary representation. The novel's protagonist is referred to as both Ada and *the* Ada – a distinction that means little in the larger narrative, but which indicates the multiple realities at play in the text. A secular western perspective might assume that the protagonist's name is Ada and the narrator We uses "the" to position Ada as a body-object in contrast to their own spirit personhood. However, if one reads the novel from an Igbo cosmological perspective, it becomes evident that the Ada's name may not be Ada at all. As deeper examination will reveal, the protagonist's name is in fact "Akwaeke." I will outline the process required to discover this name shortly; however, first let us consider the multiple dimensions present in "the Ada." In Igbo, "ada" means "first daughter," an indicator of birth order and familial status rather than a given name (Nwoko 72). We, therefore, never addresses the protagonist by name and instead refers to her solely as "the first daughter," or "the Ada." This detail may seem insignificant, since she is in fact the first daughter in her family. However, it also implies a possible alternative name which is never explicitly stated in the novel. We offers clues when they explain how the Ada first received her unspecified name. They state that the Ada's uncle De Obinna named her, describing De Obinna as "a teacher who travelled into

those interior villages and knew *the things that were practiced there*" (Emezi *Freshwater* 9, emphasis added). The phrase "the things that were practiced there" indirectly refers to esoteric water deity worship, which We terms "the worship that is drowned in water" (Emezi *Freshwater* 9). This water deity worship signifies a form of knowledge distant from the reality that Saul, the Ada's father, inhabits. Unlike Saul, with his western medical education, De Obinna knows ancient ritual practices which enable him to bestow a fitting name upon the Ada. According to We, this name means "precious," though this meaning is "both correct and incomplete. The name meant, in its truest form, the egg of a python" (Emezi *Freshwater* 9). The phrase "in its truest form" signals the name's multiple layers of meaning, all of which are true to some degree.

This ambiguity invites the reader to question not only the Ada's name (which is in fact "Akwaeke"), but also introduces multiple registers for reading the novel itself. Accepting "Ada" as the protagonist's name changes little in the novel's wider narrative, assuming the reader is willing to accept information that is "both correct and incomplete" (Emezi *Freshwater* 9). "Ada" is perhaps the easier name since it is relatively common among English speakers. However, We emphasises multiple meanings, thus inviting further investigation. Researching the name further reveals that "python egg" in Igbo translates to "àkwá," meaning "python," and "éké," meaning "egg" (McFaul 58-59, note 4). In other words, the Ada's truest name is "Akwaeke," an interesting fact that not only reveals *Freshwater*'s autobiographical underpinnings but also rewards the reader who is willing to meet the novel on its own grounds. The name highlights the dual realities at play in the text – both the English "Ada" (with its further Igbo dimension) and the Igbo "Akwaeke." However, to discover the Igbo name, the reader must shift their ontological center to include Igbo language and ritual worship. Such a shift echoes the novel's larger project, which is to "name [the margin] the center and refuse to move" (Emezi *Dear Senthuran* 78). With both the name

"the Ada" and the narrative as a whole, *Freshwater* offers its reader a choice between a western secular lens and an Igbo cosmological lens. From a secular, Eurocentric perspective, the text generally adheres to magical realism's criteria. However, from an Igbo cosmological perspective, *Freshwater* is a "detailed, carefully observed representation of [the] whole social world" which Emezi themself inhabits (Morris "Making" 13). A literary realist lens would therefore require the reader to accept Igbo reality as credible and meaningful beyond the confines of the magical, supernatural or speculative. Accepting Emezi's cosmological vision thus reveals how the novel's many seemingly fantastical elements can contest the boundaries of realism by asserting a distinctly Igbo perspective on the nature of reality.

Freshwater continually blends secular and Igbo cosmological realities by deliberately refusing clear divisions between the physical and the spiritual. When Asụghara first emerges as a distinct entity, she describes herself as "[sinking] my roots in [the Ada's] body, finding my grip on her capillaries and organs" (Emezi *Freshwater* 61). Initially, this description appears either metaphorical or non-realist – after all, what do a spirit's roots look like? Nonetheless, the deliberate reference to bodily details such as capillaries and organs invokes a discomforting materiality at odds with what one might expect of a spirit being. This narrative dissonance recalls Jaak Tomberg's concept of "double vision," in which a text elicits "the simultaneous feeling of utmost familiarity and utter cognitive estrangement" (267). Such double vision further recalls Garuba's notion of "the merger of the material and the metaphorical, which animist logic entails" (267), and which likewise consists of understanding material phenomena through its nonmaterial (spiritual/metaphorical) doubling. In this case, the cognitive estrangement – i.e., the spiritual elements which estrange an otherwise mundane human existence – highlights the dissonance between dualistic conceptions of body and spirit on the one hand, and the animist unconscious that underpins the novel on the other. The double vision in this passage, as well as the iyi-ụwa passage

which I will discuss below, stems from the assumption that a spirit only engages with spiritual aspects – the soul or perhaps the mind. Asụghara, however, specifically locates herself within both the Ada's body and the "marble room of [her] mind" (Emezi *Freshwater* 61). Moreover, she deliberately invokes anatomical language to reinforce the moment's bodily realism. Asụghara is not metaphorically inhabiting the Ada, but actually physically digging her roots into the Ada's very capillaries and organs. This emphasis on both the tangible and intangible aspects of Asụghara's new embodiment elicits a sense of simultaneous familiarity and estrangement by demanding that the reader think the spiritual alongside and coterminous with the physical. Such a complex conception of embodiment employs the body's materiality to complicate the spirit's presumed immateriality. In doing so, Asụghara forces the reader to perform the kind of animist thinking that the novel's Igbo cosmological framework seems to take for granted.

This use of realist imagery to emphasize the imbrication of spirit and body occurs again when We describes how they created their iyi-ụwa. The iyi-ụwa is the "oath of the world" – a material object which symbolizes the ọgbanje's promise to one day return to the spirit realm (Emezi *Freshwater* 14). Most iyi-ụwa are inert objects comprised of various materials – "bits of bone, an igneous rock, worn-out velveteen, a strip of human hide" – which the ọgbanje buries for safekeeping (Emezi *Freshwater* 14). However, We decides to incorporate their oath into the Ada's physical body:

> "We took [the iyi-ụwa] apart and we disseminated it. The Ada came with bones anyway – who would notice the odd fragments woven in? We hid the igneous rock in the pit of her stomach, between the mucus lining and the muscle layer. We knew it would weigh her down, but Ala carries a world of dead souls inside her – what is a simple stone to a child? We put the velveteen inside the walls of her vagina and we spat on the human hide, wetting like a stream. It rippled and came alive, then we stretched it from one of her shoulder blades to the other, draping it over her back and stitching it to her other skin" (Emezi *Freshwater* 15).

Like Asụghara's arrival, this description of the iyi-ụwa relies upon tangible elements of human biology in order to describe a spiritual process. Rather than metaphorically relating the iyi-ụwa's components to parts of the Ada's body, We explicitly describes the places and methods by which they incorporate the oath into the Ada's physical form. They describe placing the rock "between the mucus lining and the muscle layer" of the Ada's stomach, thereby foregrounding the material reality of both the Ada's body and the pieces of the iyi-ụwa stitched inside it. We emphasizes the stone's physicality when they state that the stone literally "would weigh her down." Neither the Ada's stomach nor her iyi-ụwa stone is described in figurative terms, but in language that deliberately invokes their physicality. Likewise, We does not simply place the human hide on the Ada's shoulders, but stretches and stitches it to her pre-existing skin. The use of the word "stitching" invokes images of medical procedures that rely upon the body's physical materiality. One cannot help but envision the needle and thread required to stitch one piece of skin to another. Once again, We ensures that the iyi-ụwa's elements do not remain in the realm of spirit or metaphor, but impose themselves upon the Ada's bodily existence. This imbrication of spiritual and physical realities is not solely Emezi's invention, but a part of core Igbo cosmological concepts. Achebe notes that Igbo understandings of the world include recognition of "the close interface of the spiritual and material worlds," with a "contiguous relationship between man and spirits" (*World* 57-8). The interconnection of the human and spirit realms pertains not only to their geography and activity, but also to the constitution of the human subject. According to Sabine Jell-Bahlsen, Igbo conceptions of the self recognise "no rigid dividing line between body and mind, physical and spiritual well-being" ("Female" 114). Instead, body, mind, and spirit are mutually co-constitutive aspects of each individual, thus blurring the boundaries between material and spiritual existence. The continuity of body and spirit therefore lends itself to We's portrayal of the iyi-ụwa as part and parcel of the Ada's physical

and spiritual aspects. By stitching a defining element of ọgbanje embodiment into the Ada's material body, We asserts the iyi-ụwa's reality in both the human and the spirit realm. Reading such passages, and indeed the entire novel, through a realist lens positions *Freshwater* as a challenge to the boundaries of literary realism. More importantly, such a reading participates in and reinforces Emezi's wider project, which aims "for Igbo ontology to be taken seriously in a world that often invalidates non-Western schools of thought" (Emezi and Shode). By challenging the boundaries of what literary realism may contain, *Freshwater* offers alternative ways for thinking about genre which acknowledge the "incommensurate worlds and relative realities" that the realism can and perhaps should encompass (Morris *Realism* 135).

Speculative Fiction and Queer Igbo Futures

Thus far, I have argued in favour of reading *Freshwater* through a predominantly realist lens. However, my purpose in this article is to consider how the novel challenges easy assumptions, not only in terms of genre but also in its conceptions of kinship and agency. Thus, I want to complicate a literary realist approach by considering how the novel evidences speculative dimensions. While realism and speculative fiction operate in contrast to each other, *Freshwater* straddles multiple worlds: the human and the divine, the physical and the spiritual, the realist and the speculative. In refusing neat categorizations, the novel challenges western literary and epistemological divisions, instead foregrounding Igbo ontology's flexibility. As Chinua Achebe notes, in Igbo cosmology, "[w]here one thing stands, another stands by it" (*Morning* 10). Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, the speculative in *Freshwater* stems from the novel's Igbo cosmological foundations. Rather than retaining a static Igbo tradition, the text reconfigures notions of kinship and destiny in order to imagine queer African futures. In her analysis of speculative fiction in African literature and film, Jane Bryce argues that the

genre "challenge[s] us to reassess the boundaries of our own subjectivity," including through the "unsettling/queering of gender" (10). While *Freshwater* evidences a deep investment in challenging the boundaries of gender and the Eurocentric ontological limits of humanity, I suggest that the novel also operates as speculative fiction in its efforts to imagine alternative futures for *Igbo* ontology and traditions. Sami Schalk contends that contemporary speculative fiction by Black women writers "changes the rules of reality to create worlds with new or different genders, races, disabilities, and other forms of life" (3). These fictive worlds offer visions of the future in which "relations between currently empowered and disempowered groups are altered or improved" (2). Schalk emphasises Black speculative fiction's resistance against the power imbalances between marginalized and dominant peoples. *Freshwater*'s Igbo cosmological framework aligns the novel with speculative fiction by Black women writers, which Sami Schalk argues aims to "comment on our world and make us imagine alternative possibilities" (1). While Schalk's work focuses on specifically women writers, I suggest that work by gender nonconforming authors, including agender authors such as Emezi, can help further extend this project. Furthermore, I argue that Emezi uses speculation to undermine the universality of secular Eurocentric perspectives by imagining a world that foregrounds Igbo cosmological reality as its basis. Reading *Freshwater* as a convergence of realism and speculative fiction thus recognizes the ọgbanje's reality while also acknowledging how "traditional practices and beliefs [can be] recuperated from their association with the past to become active agents of a speculative future" (Bryce 8). This speculative future, far from being a reaction to a western post-Enlightenment present, is instead a response to the past and present of "traditional" Igbo and Afro-diasporic knowledges, offering a story which speaks of uniquely African futures for self and being.

In *Freshwater*, Emezi employs the ọgbanje figure as a speculative play on traditional Igbo conceptions of kinship and destiny. In doing so, they offer alternative possibilities for

ọgbanje and other cosmological concepts. Ọgbanje primarily operate as inherently disruptive and malicious entities, an unfortunate hardship visited upon their human mothers (Bastian "Irregular" 60). The fact that Emezi appropriates such a universally feared and maligned entity as the foundation for this story demonstrates deliberate resistance to the idea that tradition is static, unchanging, and open to only one interpretation. By figuring ọgbanje as an empowering identity, *Freshwater* asks its readers to consider how re-imaginings of "traditional" Igbo cosmology can create new possibilities of being. Rather than imagining a speculative future predicated on histories of colonization and imperialism, *Freshwater* foregrounds speculative subjectivity founded upon the creative reconfiguration of Igbo cosmological structures. The latent contradictions within the novel's central ọgbanje figure produce a range of possibilities for those people who, like the Ada, experience embodiment through a spiritual lens. Furthermore, the novel's nonlinear genealogies between humans and deities build on the flexibility inherent to Igbo cosmologies. While Emezi playfully refigures ọgbanje identities and cosmological structures to suit their narrative, this practice itself speaks to the wider possibilities within Igbo and other African ontologies. Thus, the novel shifts the speculative focus away from postcolonial efforts to "write back," and instead locates the basis for speculative futures within Igbo ontological structures.

Throughout the novel, We emphasizes that their embodiment was "an unusual incarnation" marked by deviations from tradition such as "gates [that] were left open" (Emezi *Freshwater* 207; 5). These markers of difference create an opening by which Emezi can imagine an alternative version of ọgbanje earthly existence, which resembles but is not defined by "traditional" ọgbanjehood. Such deviation from convention not only offers an avenue for creative storytelling, but it presents a perspective of Igbo tradition and cosmology that is flexible, adaptable, and open to change. By employing an overtly negative figure in an ambiguously open-ended fashion, Emezi offers a perspective on both ọgbanje and Igbo

tradition, which "allows the African queer body to stretch differently into the world and overcome its tragic perception of itself" (Talabi 332). Rather than adopting an exclusively positive or negative interpretation of ọgbanje, Emezi positions Ada's ọgbanjehood as an ambivalent identity creating space for productive reimaginings of queer African subjectivities: the non-normative ọgbanje enables speculation about alternative futures predicated upon, but not rigidly bound by, contemporary understandings of Igbo cosmology. These futures imagine a world where kinship extends beyond bloodlines and lineages, and where people otherwise bound by destiny have the power to shape their own fates. Both formulations create space for individuals to enact transformations which are nonetheless rooted in the specific histories, cultures, and realities that shaped them.

The question of kinship and family threads itself throughout *Freshwater*. The Ada has a fraught relationship with her human parents, who fail to recognize her ọgbanje nature, and her human brother whose friends subject her to sexual abuse at a young age. Her sister Añuli is the only blood relative who occupies a positive, if peripheral, place in the Ada's life. Instead, her Dominican friend Malena, the Nigerian priest Lẹshi and her spirit selves We, Asụghara and Saint Vincent, become the Ada's surrogate family. We continually refers to Asụghara and Saint Vincent as their siblings, and they describe their ndị otu, or spirit child cohort, as their "brothersisters" (Emezi *Freshwater* 19). Their mother is Ala, the powerful and omnipresent Igbo earth deity (Ezekwugo 9). At first glance, these familial relations appear relatively straightforward – there is a clear mother (Ala) and a collection of siblings (We and the ndị otu) who together comprise this spirit family. However, closer inspection reveals moments of disjuncture in which familial relationships and kinship lines become tangled or even contradictory. Take for instance the Ada's friend Malena: though the Ada never refers to Malena as a sister, their kinship is evident throughout the novel. We explains that they "loved Malena because she smelled like us" (Emezi *Freshwater* 89) – like a human

being who is "mounted and then left by saints, gods, spirits" (89). This mutual understanding of their shared position at the border between human and spirit realms forges a kinship between the Ada and Malena which eschews blood relation. While they may not share a human lineage, Malena and the Ada are nonetheless kin through their spiritual relationships with African and Afro-diasporic deities. When Malena tells the Ada outright, "[y]ou're the daughter of Santa Marta… La Dominadora" (Emezi *Freshwater* 89), the narrator We immediately questions this assertion, wondering "what would Ala have said to Malena's claim that Santa Marta was the Ada's mother? An old god to a newer, younger one" (Emezi *Freshwater* 90). We immediately decides that Ala would refuse Santa Marta's claim on her human daughter. While We relies upon linear conceptions of family to establish Ala's maternal ownership over the Ada, I want to show that the reality is not quite so clear cut. In fact, I suggest that the entire novel deliberately introduces ambiguity into its own assumption that Ala is the Ada's (only) mother in order to challenge normative notions of kinship and genealogy.

To better understand the novel's complex configuration of familial lineage structures, I will first trace the connections between Ala and Santa Marta. The primary avatar that Ala inhabits throughout the text is the python, specifically the royal python through which Ala visits the Ada in her childhood. More than Ala's physical manifestation, the python operates as the driving metaphor through which the Ada eventually learns to accept herself as an ọgbanje. The text's correlation between the earth goddess Ala and the python relies upon long established Igbo traditions which identify the python as one of Ala's sacred avatars (Ngangah 6). However, this easy equivalency is complicated by the fact that the python is also an avatar of Mami Wata, the multiplicious water deity who is also one of the creators of ọgbanje. In both traditions – Ala worship and Mami Wata worship – the python is a sacred animal which it is taboo to kill (Jell-Bahlsen *Mammy Water* 22). Those people who kill a python must bury

the animal in the same way they would bury a human being. Failure to do so means they risk bringing down the wrath of the deity who presides over the python (Iheka 60). The question is, which deity? Depending on the context, the deity might be either Ala or Mami Wata. While Ala is universally revered in Igbo religion (Mmadike 13), Mami Wata's worshippers consist primarily of marginalized members of society. These include women who refuse to conform to social norms, men and women who are infertile or unfortunate in their endeavours, or people who suffer from mental or spiritual illnesses (Jell-Bahlsen "Female Power" 109, 114).

Another key demographic associated with Mami Wata are ọgbanjes. According to Achebe, there is a specific group of ọgbanjes who owe their allegiance to Nne Mmiri (Mother of Water), an older name for Mami Wata. These "ogbanje mmiri" (*World* 17) are in some ways the children of Mami Wata, as their creation results specifically from human interaction with the water deity at the portal between the spirit realm and the human realm. This portal marks the human spirit's passage into the earthly realm and is the point where a person determines whether or not they become an ọgbanje. If the human strikes a deal with Mami Wata, they become an *ọgbanje mmiri*, or water ọgbanje (Achebe *World* 22-3). Among other things, this deal sets the conditions for their sojourn in human society, including the time and manner of their premature death. Thus the water deity presides over the birth of ọgbanje and plays a central role in deciding how they will live and die (Achebe *World* 22-23). Interestingly, Mami Wata herself is often described as having a close relationship with Ala, the "great mother" (Abanuka 31). Achebe notes that both Mami Wata and her forest-dwelling counterpart Onabuluwa (the other potential ọgbanje mother) operate "within ALA's jurisdiction," as the forest and water are both part of the earth over which Chukwu granted Ala "a distinct jurisdiction" (*World* 16). Other explanations posit an even closer relationship between Ala and Mami Wata. Nwoye mentions that "a filial relationship is believed to exist

between the Earth Goddess and the water spirits, called Mami Water" (307). In other words, Ala is either Mami Wata's direct superior or, more intriguingly, her mother. To further complicate things, Mami Wata herself has countless iterations depending upon the context in which she is worshipped. In Nigeria and other parts of West Africa, she is both a singular entity and an overarching category of water spirits who inhabit specific bodies of water (Drewal, Gore and Kisliuk 294-95). Across the Atlantic, she divides into several aspects which each embody particular attributes of the larger Mami Wata complex. In Haiti, for example, the deity appears most frequently as Ezili, the many-faceted lwa associated with femininity, womanhood, and water. In the Dominican Republic, Mami Wata is called Santa Marta la Dominadora, an "unmistakably sensual and erotic" deity who "lifts up women deprived of their dignity and dreams for the future" (Drewal 206). Like her Santa Marta iteration, who primarily serves the needs of women, Mami Wata offers priesthood to women who refuse marriage and motherhood in favour of alternative personal fulfilment (Bastian "Married" 124). Returning to *Freshwater*, these convoluted relationships between Ala, Mami Wata, and Santa Marta hint at the Ada's familial ties. Rather than aligning the Ada clearly with Ala or Mami Wata (and thus Santa Marta), the novel constructs a convoluted and arguably unreliable genealogy that defies linear human kinship structures.

In the novel, Malena tells the Ada that she is Santa Marta's daughter. We immediately asserts that "the child was not hers [Santa Marta's]. The Ada has always belonged to Ala, and Ala is not inclined to share" (Emezi *Freshwater* 90). However, the Ada's divine lineage is far more complex than even We realizes. The connection between Ala, Mami Wata, and Santa Marta complicates the three deities' relationship to both the Ada and each other. Ala is the mother of Mami Wata, who is iterated in the figure of Santa Marta, who is perhaps the Ada's mother. At the same time, Ala is also the Ada's mother in a twist which "opens up a different time outside the usual, linear positivist time" that dictates human genealogies (Garuba 271).

Thus, the Ada has a mother (Santa Marta) who is also the Ada's sister (Mami Wata) through Mami Wata's mother (Ala), who is both the Ada's mother and grandmother. Moreover, the Ada's complicated kinship includes both human found family such as a Malena, as well as her spirit siblings We, Asụghara, and Saint Vincent. When she eventually accepts her nonhuman lineage, the Ada begins to embrace the flexibility and multiplicity that such a genealogy provides. Like the python, who repeatedly sheds its skin and embodies two powerful deities at once, the Ada transforms across human and nonhuman boundaries throughout the novel. Aided by her African and Afro-diasporic divine mothers, the Ada is born and reborn with each successive emergence of her spirit siblings until she finally accepts her identity as an ọgbanje. When viewed separately, these tangled threads of kinship offer little cohesion between Ala, Mami Wata, Santa Marta, pythons, and ọgbanje. Another way of viewing this, however, is that weaving them together reveals a network of connections that creatively unites ọgbanje with an Igbo earth deity, a transnational water deity and a Caribbean saint in a web of familial relations. Kinship through this lens is no longer fundamentally predicated upon direct blood relations from one generation to the next – after all, divine lineages need not always follow human patterns. Instead, family emerges through shared spiritual investments in women, ọgbanje, and nonconforming members of society for whom conventional roles are too restrictive.

Like Mami Wata, who thrives in the continually shifting flows of tides and currents, the Ada moves fluidly from one gender expression to another, one realm to the next, one continent to the other and back. However, she only reconciles herself to her unusual existence once she realises that she "did not come from a human lineage and [she] will not leave one behind. [She has] no ancestors. There will be no mediators" (Emezi *Freshwater* 225). Unlike human beings whose relationship with their ancestors and their gods is mediated by rituals, diviners, and priests, the Ada's unconventional family bridges the boundaries between

humans and spirits. Rather than replicating "traditional" kinship structures, *Freshwater* imagines a reality in which family transcends notions of blood, emerging instead through the shared experiences of spiritual and material embodiment. It is this future vision of kinship that I suggest forms one of the novel's most powerful speculative dimensions. The text re-imagines Igbo cosmological frameworks by building a world where gods and humans forge kin across spiritual and geographical boundaries. In doing so, Emezi offers a glimpse into future conceptions of family which bypass normative familial structures and therefore encompass nonreproductive and gender nonconforming people. The novel's concept of nonlinear genealogies opens space for creative forms of relation rooted in the "interconnectedness of all things" that characterises Igbo cosmology (Okonkwo 654). In this way, *Freshwater* speculates on possible Igbo futures by demanding that its readers "*re-imagine* things we thought we knew" about tradition, kinship, and what constitutes a family (Schalk 2).

Another compellingly speculative aspect of *Freshwater* is its use of the iyi-ụwa to imagine possible Igbo cosmological futures that create space for queer African bodies. As discussed previously, the iyi-ụwa is an ọgbanje's "oath of the world" – the material representation of a contract they make that promises the time and manner of their premature death. The most effective way to sever an ọgbanje's ties with the spirit world is to find and destroy the iyi-ụwa, thus freeing the ọgbanje from their binding obligation to die (Ilechukwu 241). However, unlike other ọgbanje, the Ada's iyi-ụwa is part of her physical body rather than a bundle of objects buried in a hidden location. We explains that their reason for stitching the iyi-ụwa into the Ada's body is to ensure the oath could never be broken, for "[t]o destroy it, they would have to destroy her" (Emezi *Freshwater* 15). This rather ingenious method for safeguarding their iyi-ụwa proves only somewhat effective, as by the end of the novel the Ada not only manages to remain alive but she asserts her will over We and her other

spirit siblings. Considering that the Ada never receives formal intervention from a dibia (diviner), as many ọgbanje children do, her ability to circumvent her fate appears incongruous with conventional conceptions of ọgbanje. I suggest that this deviation operates as another emanation of the speculative within the text. Emezi uses the iyi-ụwa to imagine an alternative version of Igbo cosmological reality in which ọgbanje have control over their own fates.

To circumvent death, an ọgbanje child must choose to live a full human lifespan. However, Achebe emphasizes that a "cure is never presumed to be complete" for an ọgbanje, and that otherworldly pressure "will always exist as long as the [ọgbanje] client lives" (*World* 46). Despite lessening calls for return once their iyi-ụwa has been destroyed, the ọgbanje will always be part spirit, forever aware of and in tune with the spirit realm. In *Freshwater*, the Ada acknowledges this fact when she says, "I am here and not here, real and not real…I am my others, we are one and we are many" (Emezi *Freshwater* 226). Rather than banishing her ọgbanje siblings, the Ada simply accepts them as part of her earthly embodiment. At the same time, she resists their constant calls for death, choosing instead to continue living in the human realm and thus refusing the predestined death that is fundamental to an ọgbanje's existence. This basic premise of a mutable fate neatly aligns with Igbo cosmology on a broader ideological level, but it also coincides with specific conceptions of the iyi-ụwa. Achebe explains that despite its association with destiny or fate, the iyi-ụwa "is not an absolute contract written with indelible ink. Part of it is renegotiable and flexible" (*World* 21). This negotiation occurs at the point of earthly embodiment – iyi-ụwa are not in fact unique to ọgbanje, but are the oaths that all human beings make at the point of incarnation in which they agree upon the conditions of their human existence (Achebe *World* 21-22). From that point forward, both ordinary humans and ọgbanje must honour the terms of their oath or risk divine punishment (Jell-Bahlsen "*Eze*" 122). *Freshwater*, in fact, extends the iyi-ụwa's initial

mutability beyond the moment of embodiment in order to imagine possibilities for radical self-determination through manipulation of the physical body: the body modifications the Ada makes throughout the novel are in fact modifications made to her iyi-ụwa as well. As discussed previously, We stitched pieces of their iyi-ụwa to the Ada's skin, stomach, and vagina, but these parts of the Ada's body do not remain unaltered.

In the early years after We awakens within her, the Ada's only recourse for appeasing her inner spirits is through self-mutilation. When the Ada is twelve, she discovers that cutting herself with razors is an effective way to silence We through blood sacrifice. This temporary solution mirrors more formalized cutting rituals in which a diviner makes "several small incisions…with a sharp razor, on the client's forehead, cheeks, chest, back, sometimes palms and stomach" in order to persuade the ọgbanje's spirit siblings to cut ties and leave them in peace (Achebe *World* 44). Over time, the Ada begins tattooing her body as an alternative to both her previous self-mutilation as well as the ritual cutting to which she has no access. Unlike the razor cuts the Ada made before, the tattooing succeeds in appeasing We and the others permanently. We explains that "she never cut herself again" because "[w]e had all evolved" (Emezi *Freshwater* 210). Though the details of this evolution remain unclear (is it growth, maturity, or something more?), it seems that the Ada's purposeful modification of her own body, unlike the haphazard cuts she made before, indicates a level of ownership and control that she previously lacked. By choosing to radically alter her bodily appearance through formally implemented changes such as the "thick sleeve of black ink tattooed down her left forearm" (Emezi *Freshwater* 210), the Ada replicates ritualized cutting while simultaneously altering and reimagining it. Unlike other ọgbanje, the Ada requires no dibia to make the cuts and perform the rituals, since she has adapted her spiritual practices to meet her current needs. More importantly, her extensive tattoos change the very skin to which her iyi-ụwa is stitched. Even We recognises the significance of the Ada's tattoos, explaining that

"[a]ll these things she was doing to her skin made her closer to us; it was like an advertisement, a timeline of sections, who she was on the inside being revealed on the outside" (Emezi *Freshwater* 210). If the iyi-ụwa is the physical manifestation of the ọgbanje's oath, and the Ada's body is the physical manifestation of her iyi-ụwa, then changing her body changes her oath, and thus changes the conditions of her life in the human realm. In other words, by modifying her body to reflect her spirit(s), the Ada unwittingly alters the conditions of her earthly existence.

The Ada continually re-negotiates her iyi-ụwa by enacting bodily changes throughout the novel. After her breast reduction surgery, We explains that "[r]emoving [the Ada's] breasts was only the first step" in making her body habitable (Emezi *Freshwater* 187). While the next step is never explicitly stated, the following paragraph begins, "You must understand, fertility was a pure and clear abomination to us. It would be unthinkable, unbelievably cruel for us to ever swell so unnaturally, to lactate, to mutate our vessel" (Emezi *Freshwater* 187). This indirect reference to pregnancy and reproduction, coupled with the idea that an ọgbanje does not "leave a human lineage" (Emezi *Freshwater* 187), implies that the unspoken next step is to remove the Ada's uterus. Unlike pregnancy, which We seems to consider the "unnaturally" utilitarian alteration of the body undertaken at least partly on behalf of another, surgical interventions such as breast reduction and hysterectomy are deliberate changes enacted solely for the sake of the Ada's own sense of physical and spiritual wellbeing. Indeed, Emezi's memoir *Dear Senthuran* describes the author's experience of having a hysterectomy as part of "a spirit customizing its vessel to reflect its nature" (Emezi *Dear Senthuran* 16). Taken in combination with Emezi's insistence that *Freshwater* is "~5% fiction" (yungdeadthing), it seems reasonable to assume a correlation between the hysterectomy in *Dear Senthuran* and the next step mentioned in the novel. Of course, the uterus and the vagina are not the same, which means that having a hysterectomy

is different from altering the walls of the vagina that houses the Ada's iyi-ụwa. Nonetheless, such a drastic alteration to the reproductive part of her body indicates that the Ada's changes to her physical being have direct consequences for her spiritual state. Like the extensive tattoos and breast reduction surgery that prompt We to begin accepting human embodiment, the impending hysterectomy potentially alters the conditions of her iyi-ụwa. By changing the body within which the iyi-ụwa has been installed, the Ada perhaps renegotiates the conditions of her deadly oath. Not only does such a renegotiation lengthen the Ada's sojourn on earth, but it extends notions of queer autonomy from the body to the spirit. The Ada begins by deliberately enacting a form of bodily queering which refuses the "violence of compulsory gender norm adherence" through breast reduction and hysterectomy (Spade 329). More importantly, these surgeries alter her iyi-ụwa, which in turn queers her ọgbanje embodiment, itself already part of the "African cosmologies and epistemologies [which] are queer by virtue of their existing outside of a Western dominant worldview" (Talabi 332). These multiple layers of bodily and spiritual defiance gesture toward the novel's wider implications for queer African futurity.

The Ada's bodily and spiritual renegotiations indicate the possibilities latent in Emezi's speculative reimagining of ọgbanje existence. By presenting ọgbanje as consistently flexible and self-constructing, *Freshwater* offers a vision of ọgbanje subjectivity beyond popular conceptions of them as maliciously capricious spirit antagonists. Emezi imagines ọgbanjehood as an identity which enables the individual to dictate the terms of their human embodiment rather than resigning themselves to a predestined fate. After all, in Igbo cosmology "every individual has a hand, which is quite major, in his own destiny, and therefore must endeavour to take the initiative always to set things in motion in whatever direction one wishes" (Achebe *World* 21). The correlation between ọgbanjehood and socially nonconforming people, particularly gender nonconforming and same-sex loving people,

offers a theoretical engagement with agential re-destination. By permitting the Ada to renegotiate her iyi-ụwa, the novel creates space within Igbo cosmology for the deliberate and empowering refiguring of what it means to be and have "others." Rather than speculating a future for the Ada in which she departs entirely from "traditional" Igbo conceptions of social difference, *Freshwater* insists upon reshaping what comprises "tradition" itself. In doing so, Emezi presents a story in which the protagonist "*prepossess[es] the future*…by laying claim to what in the present is yet to be invented" (Garuba 271, original emphasis). Ọgbanje are a ubiquitous part of the Igbo cosmological reality which shapes many people's experiences today. Emezi uses ọgbanje to envision transhuman kinship and bodily autonomy, both physical and spiritual, as part of Igbo ontological continuities founded upon the cosmological present. By speculatively re-imagining what ọgbanje are and can do, Emezi conceives of a future for queer Africans in which their identities and experiences are encompassed by, rather than excluded from, Igbo and other African ontologies.

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