"The Ada" na chi ya: Culturally Determined Freedom in Akwaeke Emezi's *Freshwater*

Ọlaọcha Nwadiuto Nwabara, PhD
onwabara@geneseo.edu
Associate Professor of Western African Literature and Culture
Department of English and Creative Writing
SUNY Geneseo

Abstract

This article argues that Igbo cosmology and spirituality can be used as a path toward self-realization by centering the "chi" – an individual's guiding spirit/god/guardian – as a compass toward one's destiny. As autobiographical fiction, the novel, *Freshwater,* is examined as a cultural artifact that engages with the lived experience and journey of the protagonist, Ada. Ada is caught between two spiritual callings as both ogbanje (spirit-child) and akwaeke (egg of the python/Earth Goddess Ala), and must negotiate and determine their identities within neocolonial, neoracial environments ill-equipped to guide her. This article uses Ada's narrative to exemplify culturally determined freedom, which reveals indigenous methods of incorporating ancient ways of being within a contemporary reality. It provides a reading of gender-, sexual-, spiritual-, and cultural-based identities from Igbo perspectives. As a case study, this article aims to encourage other Black/African scholars to center African ways of understanding self, community, and destiny to restore erased and maligned African ways of being and provide them back to African and Black peoples today.

Siyabonana: The Journal of Africana Studies, Volume 4, Number 1, Winter 2026

Keywords
Igbo cosmology, self-realization, gender and sexuality, chi, ogbanje, spirituality

Introduction

> "If he had lived at the time of the old fathers, they would have said of his state that he had affirmed something, and I, his chi, had affirmed, too, as it is wholly true that onye kwe, chi ya kwe."
>
> —Chigozie Obioma, *An Orchestra of Minorities*

"Onye kwe, chi ya kwe. If one agrees, one's chi agrees." This proverb radically and beautifully sums up the center of the Igbo universe and the individual within it. It is an ontological positioning of onye na chi ya, one and one's chi – one's personal spirit/god/guardian – to oneself and to the world(s) around one. One and one's chi must be in unison and in agreement to affirm the now in order to move toward their destiny: a combination of personal purpose and duty to family and community (Amanambu; Onyibor). The novel, *Freshwater* by Akwaeke Emezi, is about a child coming of age while fighting her chi, a taboo in Igbo culture. Her struggle comes about because of her environmental conditions that are ill-equipped to raise her due to who she is meant to be versus what society wants her to be. Ada's environment includes a *lack* of human guides to help her negotiate her divine callings as ọgbanje (a spirit child) and as umu Ala (child of the Earth Goddess). As a result, the reader is taken on the journey of a child, Ada, who comes into her divine calling, but who depends on every spirit except her own, chi ya, to navigate reality, life, and death.

What is not said to the reader and, perhaps, to Ada is that her mother endured the death of a child before Ada's own birth, usually through miscarriage, abortion, early child death, etc. The Igbo and Yoruba, as well as some cultures of Senegal, Sierra Leone, and other parts of Africa, consider a child born after such a passing to be the deceased child returned amongst the Igbo, Yoruba, as well as some cultures of Senegal, Sierra Leone, and other parts of Africa. The child has moved, and may

continue to move, between the earthly and spiritual realms. The Igbo believe parents must find the child's iyi-uwa, an artifact belonging to the living child, in order to prevent the child from returning to the spiritual world through death.

The Earth Goddess, Ala, represents the land/earth and the prosperity of agricultural endeavors, fertility, and life itself. As a child of Ala, Ada is called to emulate such beauty in the world and to live life to the fullest. These two realities contradict Ada's understanding of self, like a rock regularly hitting a hard place. Without guidance, these realities are incompatible to her and unable to co-exist. However, when Ada moves toward her chi, she learns to recognize the ọgbanje and Ala as diunital forces in her life. These opposing forces can be complementary realities that exist within her in a way only people, like Ada, can define, navigate, and exude to the world. Where Igbo culture often sees ọgbanje's existence as negative and opposing, Ada's narrative offers an example of their complex existence and of her empowerment through them (Talabi). Before this awakening, and while she is in a vulnerable state of becoming, her fellow ọgbanje – or as Ada calls them, "brothersisters" – find ways to control her bodily existence. They are, in fact, trying to protect her in their own way by reducing her to a minor character in her life story. This inability to control her body and align with her chi to take charge of her destiny is represented through the book's narrators. The main character, Ada – called "the Ada" by the brothersisters to represent the vessel they inhabit –narrates her life in only a few of the book's many chapters. "We" – the brothersisters – and Asụghara – a singular spirit – narrate their lives within Ada's body for the majority of the book's chapters. Overall, this story is about Ada's journey toward self-discovery, self-realization, and self-determination. Ada must eventually build strength within herself through her connection with her chi to be in control of her body, the vessel, and navigate the spirits and gods within and around her.

Freshwater by Akwaeke Emezi offers many significant interventions to the notion of self-determination, which provide important contributions to what it means to be in the world from African indigenous and ancient cultural perspectives. The Ada na chi ya [The Ada and her/their chi] exist in a Westernized world that devalues and makes taboo Ada's ancient Igbo culture. Yet, she is called to a path that can only be understood in conversation with her Igbo culture. She fights a Nigerian society's Westernized norms to survive, let alone thrive, in this world. This struggle began as the Ada na chi ya, two complementary entities that make a whole

human, moved toward their purpose. However, they are working as opposites until Ada's journey toward self-definition, resulting in vital aid to others in the African world and beyond, and seeking the road to their own chi, and thus, their destiny. There are two interventions, or guides to the self, that this article discusses. The first is the chi from Igbo cosmology as an ontological offering to the world about how to exist for oneself and to the world around one. This is shown through Ada's fight to her light. The second intervention is to guide readers toward indigenous African notions of gender and sexual identity from cultural and spiritual perspectives. Emezi uses Ada's relationship with her brothersisters to do this, revealing Ada's diverse sexual and gender identity as a manifestation of a divine calling. The brothersisters awaken or, as Emezi writes, are "birthed" into Ada. This awakening is complementary to her own existence. As they awaken, so must she, and together, they are multiple.[1] Ada must make sense of the collective, alongside her calling as umu Ala, to exist and do the work asked of her.

The brothersisters' distinctive characteristics, needs, and realities provide a deeply cultural understanding of sexual identity as well as what it means to embody multiple gender identities, or what the West calls "transgender/non-binary" identities. Gender and sexual identity in *Freshwater* are structured on Ada's godly/divine existence as ọgbanje and her responsibility to live as umu Ala. As is common in many indigenous African societies, identity is focused on what one is meant to be in the world, spiritually determined, and culturally actualized. Sexual and gender identity are the same: those who embody multiple gender/sexual identities have spiritual callings that relate directly to their earthly responsibilities to the community. For instance, H. Sharif "Herukhuti" Williams reveals through a discussion with Burkina Faso shaman Malidoma that his people, the Dagara, call people like Ada "bodeme" (Williams, "Bodeme in Harlem"). Bodeme is a bridge between the physical and spiritual worlds with responsibilities to aid their community toward their physical and spiritual well-being. The critical point here is that *Freshwater,* and this article, challenge us to deepen our understanding of such people in the world by moving beyond the West's limited naming system for sexual desire and what gender(s) one relates to, and speak to one's divine essence and how this essence manifests into the world (Asanti; Talabi; Williams). This piece uses

[1] The Ada is referred to as "she/hers," as it is in the book. However, it is important to note that in this autobiographical novel, the author has since publication asked to be addressed as "they/theirs." This essay reveals this transformation that is evident within the novel *Freshwater*.

frameworks, such as Williams' Afrocentric Decolonizing Kweer Theory (ADKT) to centralize African sexuality/gender, to imagine Afrocentric ways of knowing, drawing from indigenous African ontologies of identity in relation to community. This action adds to our African-centered understanding of their specific/niche contribution to their people's balance. Further, it positions us to define them as people who border-cross worlds or who exist, as Emezi says, in liminal spaces. We hope to normalize that meeting a traveler, such as the bodeme, is equated to meeting someone with power and strength to impart significant good to any space they occupy.

One must align with one's chi in order to recognize oneself as such within environments that minimize this identity to sexual desire alone, or diminish it altogether. In Igbo cultures, the chi is seen as the spirit force of any individual, their representation in the spiritual realm. Chinua Achebe describes that amongst the Igbo:

> We may visualize a person's chi as his other identity in spiritland – his spirit being complementing his terrestrial human being; for nothing can stand alone, there must always be another thing standing beside it. (Achebe 93)

Onye kwe, chi ya kwe is, again, critical to the importance of an individual being in alignment with their spirit. One must be conscious that one does not stand alone; there is always another, a complementary. "One does not challenge their chi to a wrestling match" (Emezi, *Freshwater*); but, finds ways to work in unison. In her society, our protagonist's chi is unwell due to her attempts to conform to others' notions of her reality and destiny. Ada must resist her surroundings and find ancient traditions and tools to help guide and heal her in order to realign herself. When she finds them, she must find power within herself to use them to navigate what she and her chi determine her destiny to be. In relation to destiny, there comes the added responsibility to accept the consequences of finding herself. The world still functions after Ada achieves personal freedom. She now has the added responsibility of the freed to liberate others in kind – something Emezi does through their writings.

As part of this community, Emezi identifies themselves with the spiritually based identities Ada is blessed to have. This provides an insider's perspective on what it may mean to acknowledge these identities in terms of diversity in gender identity

and sexual expression. Being one with multiple spirits within means the embodiment of multiple genders that those spirits exude. In "Living with Dual Spirits: Spirituality, Sexuality and Healing in the African Diaspora," Ifalade Asanti offers a way of understanding the physical manifestation of gender fluidity that is a result of embodying multiple spirits. "In uncolonized African and other indigenous societies, assigned gender roles are interchangeable and, in some regions, were nonexistent" (26). The spiritual vibrations of the Dagara's bodeme allow them to fluidly move between gender/sexual identities with one foot in the spiritual realm and one in the physical (Hoff; Williams, "*Bodeme* in Harlem;" Asanti). As autobiographical fiction, and given Emezi's identity as transsexual, their lived experience deepens our notion of gendered identity from African spiritual and cultural-based perspectives.

Freshwater adds to ADKT notions of African existence by revealing African (Igbo) centered epistemologies to the world. It uses Emezi's lived experience, fictionalized in the novel, as a primary source of evidence. This essay begins with a cultural analysis of the chi and ọgbanje in order to contextualize the major aspects of Igbo indigenous culture that affect Ada's journey. This analysis is used to show the critical intervention of cultural hegemony that books, like *Freshwater,* machete their way through. This essay then examines Ada's journeys by emphasizing her transformation into a more deeply rooted sense of self; her journey to becoming herself. The section "Truth of Selves" aims to reveal who Ada is to the reader by first examining her familial and environmental surroundings. Within a sea of lies and silences, this section uses truth to illuminate what Ada has to acknowledge, negotiate, fight against, and stop fighting against in order for her to determine who she is at any given moment in her journey. The section "Becoming Selves" continues this discussion. It reveals how acknowledging self(ves) in truth, affirming one's chi, leads to Ada's ability to take control of her destiny. It is about a healing journey that comes as a result of being on one's journey and truly working to become oneself.

Overall, the analysis of Ada's voyages across physical and spiritual realms is a way to expose the beauty and complexities of Igbo culture more deeply. The process of self-determination through self-realization is at its center. This essay will show the ways that Akwaeke Emezi fights the attempted erasure of African histories and cultures in literature. Using Ada, Emezi paints a contemporary image of a soul who trusts what has been made taboo and invisible as a critical means of realizing *selves,* and thus, freeing *self.* Emezi's hope is that the Ada's rediscovery of herself, via her

culture, can be read across African global cultures to encourage African people to seek out historically determined realities – spiritual, cultural, personal, and familial. It offers radical decolonial methods for survival and the re-envisioning of humanity post-oppression. This article positions indigenous knowledge systems as a critical tool not only to break free from one's mental enslavement, but also as a space that holds solutions that the living must incorporate into their own understanding of their existence. It places upon us the responsibility to plant those innovative realizations in the earth of the contemporary environment to grow new futures and new freedoms.

Re-definition of Selves from Igbo Cosmological Perspectives

> "Onye na chi ya" in the Igbo cosmology means the belief that every man has a destiny and guardian god whose duties are to guide an individual into attaining the goals and aspirations of his/her life, preserve him against dangers and ensure the person lives his life to the fullest."
>
> —Uchenna Ebony Amanambu, "The Religious Praxes of 'Onye Na 'Chi' Ya' in the Igbo Cosmology"

The chi is central to this article's analysis of Ada, and must be understood as a representation of her full identity. All Ada is and will be already exists within her chi. The physical manifestation of life – the body – must be led by the chi toward their collective destiny. Many readings of the chi recognize its relationship to "eke." The term "chi na eke" refers to the "chi," the spirit force of an individual, and "eke," the action/creative force that complements the chi. While many sources refer to the chi alone, others find it impossible to discuss one without the other (Achebe, Chukwukere, Onyibor). Many African cultures take a diunital approach to the relationship between items, recognizing that most things have their complements, reciprocals within the physical and the spiritual. Tolagbe Ogunyele relates this to the complexity of existence: "According to traditional African culture, the cosmos has complementary pairs. This is why the divine being in many African cultures is androgynous and therefore able to reproduce itself" (442). The Igbo are no different, believing in the complementary dualism: "Ife kwulu, ife akwudebe ya": where

something exists, another exists beside it (Onyibor, Achebe). Even the Earth Goddess, Ala, is seen as the complement to Chukwu, the supreme God in many African cultures, offering a balance of masculine and feminine amongst the divine (Izuegbu). The beauty is in the fluidity where the chi's complement is eke, and yet, the person as well. Opposition is minimized, and the relationship between forces and beings is privileged.

The chi works with Chukwu before the human is born to determine their destiny. It is set in action with eke in one's life (Amanambu, Onyibor), making it critical that the human stay in communication and in harmony with its chi, as the chi is the one who understands who they are and where they are going. Truly, the chi is at the center of existence; it can guide a human to follow a more communal, familial set of morals, traditions, etc. An Igbo community that understands its cosmological positioning should guide its people back to their chi as an important source of advice on any given matter. To fight one's chi, or to challenge it to a wrestling match, has not only physical consequences, but also spiritual consequences as it disrupts one's predetermined path and way of contributing to a greater society.

It is important here to discuss the nature of ọgbanje to grasp the multiplicity of identities that leads Emezi to understand what was once "herself" as "themselves." This helps us expand our understanding of gender identity beyond the physical into the ancient and spiritual.

> An ọgbanje is a trickster godling who constantly straddles realms of spirit and flesh, life, and death, being half human and half numen. His/her somehow malevolent and mischievous nature is predestined to be born again in order to die again in a never-ending loop of woe inflicted upon the human mother and family. This deity is also a carrier of multiple consciousnesses whose precocity and imagination appear to be beyond that of ordinary humans. (Ossana)

One who is determined to be ọgbanje has been on Earth before, but in a way that is deemed more tragic and mischievous than reincarnation. The ọgbanje, or "spirit child," comes back again and again, dying again and again as a young child – sometimes, through a miscarriage or infant/toddler death or as a young child. That is a mother who has one or more of these border-crossing children in a row is known

to be giving birth to the same child repeatedly. The child's spirit has determined to return to the spiritual world and finds its way there through death. It is upon the parent(s) to find a way to keep the child on the physical plane. Such children, with the power they hold as spiritual border crossers, are often given trickster titles. They are seen as troublesome, mischievous, and impossible to control because of the pain they have caused their parents over many short lifetimes.

These many births before the final birth of the body into the physical realm that ages into adulthood – let alone, other births while alive – put Ada in good company with other ọgbanje. Emezi reveals a spiritual community of ọgbanje who are able to communicate with each other. They are the driving force and voice behind holding the living accountable to their oath – to return to death again, and to return to them again. The existence of past and multiple selves comes with multiple understandings of identity. The Ada na chi ya are not the only ones contending with the physical body, but Ada's "births" while alive bring others who arrive through divine selection and as protective figures arriving after trauma (in her case). These spirits who find homes in Ada are fellow ọgbanje, who, like any spirit, have identities, needs, and expressions of character and being. Two – Asụghara and Saint Vincent – are expressly female and male, respectively, adding these gender expressions to Ada's collective identity. The Ada is not one, but many. So "she" becomes "they" or "we," moving collectively or sometimes, one at a time. This deconstructs the Western notion of rigid gender identity while adding holistically to the notion of fluid and multiple gender identities.

Various African cultures have names for people, as well as their gods, that move across binaries of sexual/gendered identity (Asanti). In "Decolonizing Queer Sexualities," Tina Magaqa and Rodwell Makombe suggest that "Emezi pushes the idea that humans are both natural and spiritual beings to the limits by suggesting that it is possible to live both a genderless (spiritual) and gendered (natural) life" (28). Contributing to ADKT, this novel helps readers redefine the notion of identities previously/currently homogenized to only Western perspectives by centralizing African (Igbo) indigenous explanations of "non-binary" identities. They are rooted in spiritual realities, making them sacred and critical to appreciate in order to understand humanity more clearly and completely (Magaqa and Makombe). Addressing the fluid nature of gendered realities, Malidoma Somé defines the bodeme (noted as "gay" below):

> The gay person is looked at primarily as a "gatekeeper." The Earth is looked at, from my tribal perspective [Dagara of Burkina Faso], as a very, very delicate machine or consciousness, with high vibrational points, which certain people must be guardians of in order for the tribe to keep its continuity with the gods and with the spirits that dwell there. Spirits of this world and spirits of the other worlds. Any person who is at this link between this world and the other world experiences a state of vibrational consciousness which is far higher and far different from the one that a normal person would experience. This is what makes a gay person gay. This kind of function is not one that society votes for certain people to fulfill. It is one that people are said to decide on prior to being born. You decide that you will be a gatekeeper before you are born. (Hoff)

Williams provides more analysis of the bodeme, especially tied to responsibility on earth. He quotes Somé: "A person does not become a gatekeeper because they desire power, or even because of a sense of sexual orientation. No. Gatekeeping is part of one's life purpose, announced before birth and developed through rigorous training to ensure that its power is not misused. A gatekeeper is responsible for a whole village, a whole tribe. It is no game" (Williams, "*Bodeme* in Harlem" 71). He offers lived experiences of this vibrational consciousness and community responsibility as bodeme through his personal training from Somé by tying spiritual power and consciousness to this gendered/sexual identity.

Moving toward ADKT, we must recognize that this complex identity is intrinsically tied to one's purpose, and specifically the power one is given to achieve one's destiny. Williams pushes this corrective definition of gendered/sexual identity toward theory when he argues, "ADKT is not merely a framework for understanding lesbian, gay, and bisexual sexualities. It is a project to advance understanding of African/Black sexualities that embraces all of who we have been, are, and will be. It seeks to honor the humanity and sacredness of African people…" (Williams, "Herukhuti" 26). He does not steer away from sexual desire, but adds deeply to it from the African-centered perspective. Those who are bodeme may have heterosexual or non-heterosexual relationships, placing them in a far more important category through their ability to access the spiritual vibrational points Somé discusses. The vibrational consciousness is that power; a form of

communication between worlds one must harness and use accordingly toward the betterment of one's community. Asanti addresses the critical nature of this role by arguing that failure to "acknowledge this sacred self would be to commit psychological and spiritual suicide" (25). This is similar to Alice Walker's observation of the elder women around her who were full of creativity, which she relates directly to spirituality. She says these women "were Creators, who lived lives of spiritual waste, because they were so rich in spirituality-which is the basis of Art - that the strain of enduring their unused and unwanted talent drove them insane" (Walker 233). Telling the story of these identities is critical to provide life to those with simplistic, Western understandings of their identity. Instead, this identity should be understood as the nature of one's existence (chi) and relationship to the earth, and thus, responsibility to it (eke).

Tied to our reading of the chi, ọgbanje like Ada, who identify with non-binary and non-heterosexual identities, are bodeme. They are gatekeepers of their communities, tasked with the special ability to commune across physical and spiritual realms. Gender identity and expression are functions of this reality and tied to a responsibility to help others access this spiritual realm.[2] However, Ada is unable to meet this destiny early in her life due to lack of a community that understands her indigenous/ancient callings. Instead, she moves through the novel fighting against her chi, and so "chie ekwero," or "[her] chi does not agree" (Achebe 97). As a result of this disconnect throughout the novel, Ada finds it difficult to control her existence once Asụghara and Saint Vincent arrive. She eventually attributes this difficulty to not being aligned with her chi. I argue that Ada is a combination of the body and the chi (spirit/soul), and "the Ada" – the vessel embodied – must acknowledge that chi, her own chi, in order to gain control of, and manifest, her destiny. Without it, others are given the ability to move as they see fit, attempting to fulfill the destiny they know – the continuous death of an ọgbanje. However, Ada's destiny is greater than death, and in finding alignment with her chi, she recognizes all the powers within her and their calling toward life. This said, she remains an ọgbanje. In Ada's case, those who were born within her remain within her, and thus, must be respected as part of her. With her chi, she is never just one, but with the ọgbanje she is many.

[2] This article's reading of "gay" by Somé is more generalized to terms such as non-heterosexual AND/OR non-binary or "queer" or "bodeme." I recognize the fluidity and inclusivity of his use of the term given limited English terminology at the time (1990s).

Becoming the Daughter of Life and Brothersister of Death in *Freshwater*

> "The Ada of your house is a secret stillborn, a recurring dream you think you love. The child fucks spirits and eats chalk, then shouts until the sky bleeds… How did you miss all of this? "
>
> —Akwaeke Emezi, "OGBANJE NKE ABUO, 2010"

Freshwater takes on a very distinctly Igbo nature by focusing on the protagonist's, Ada's, development around her understanding of and interaction with spirituality within the Igbo culture. This includes how she interacts with gods and goddesses, deities, and the spiritual realm during her journey to becoming herself. This coming-of-age story is about a girl referred to by many names based on who is talking about her. There are other humans who know a name not given to the reader, and there are those in the United States who call her Ada. There are the collective spirits within and around her who call her body "The Ada," and singular manifestations of them (Asụghara, Saint Vincent) who call her "Ada." This novel moves between narrative perspectives of the collective, the individual(s), and Ada herself to reveal a complex godly existence of this child. The story brightly colors what she must move through, between multiple realms, to be her strongest and most divine self. Magaqua and Makombe argue, "The name 'the Ada' as opposed to 'Ada' encapsulates her identity as a human with a spiritual connection and a spirit with a human connection. To call her 'the Ada' is to acknowledge her borderline existence as 'another' way of being human. She is partly a god and partly a human" (27-28).

Then there is the undeniable understanding of her connection to the Igbo Earth Goddess, Ala, referred to in *Freshwater* as the "first mother," predating Western gods such as "Yshwa," or the corrected name of "Christ," as narrated by the collective – "We" (brothersisters). One's reality as ọgbanje is seen in *Things Fall Apart* when the protagonist, Okonkwo, and his wife, Ekwefi, are tasked with keeping their daughter, Ezinma, an ọgbanje, in the world of the living. They are successful because they adhere to traditional customs that bind the child to the physical world. They

demand that Ezinma reveal her iyi-uwa and separate her from it. However, Ada's parents are either ignorant of or resistant to this, perhaps because of the father's strong Christianity and distance from Igbo culture, and the Malaysian mother's ignorance of ọgbanje. Even Emezi's use of the name "Ada" is telling of this clash of cultures. Ada is Igbo for firstborn daughter, which comes with its own responsibilities to family and culture. The parents reject the existence of previous children, or secretly recognize the return of their first daughter, by naming their child Ada and not telling her of her ọgbanje identity. In an early painting that led to what would eventually become *Freshwater,* Emezi adds a caption in the section's epigraph. Addressed to Ada's parents, the passage questions the nature of "Ada," considering that she has been here before. Further, it challenges who Ada is now, a manifestation of that same "secret stillborn" and "recurring dream you think you love." Signs of the ọgbanje are in plain sight – "The child fucks spirits and eats chalk, then shouts until the sky bleeds." Yet, they are still denied. Asking "how did you miss all of this?" speaks to the complexity of denying cultural and spiritual identity in a neocolonial reality, even when it is clearly present.

Though this passage and the conversation of a child before her are not mentioned in the novel, it is clear that the consequences of not telling Ada who she is are dire. This passage encapsulates who Ada becomes without knowledge of where all this craving and demand to feed her spiritual selves comes from. Yet, the novel suggests that the parents still created a powerful name for the child. Elizabeth Ben-Iheanacho suggests this name is "Akwaeke," given the book's autobiographical nature. The name means the egg (child) of a python (physical manifestation of Ala, the Earth Goddess). Despite their inability to support their daughter's powerful being, fate intervened by giving her "[a] name that resonates, evokes, and invokes the stamp of gods and their ancient saints on the children as theirs" (Ben-Iheanacho 20). Ada is not just the child of her parents, but of the gods. Both Okonkwo (*Things Fall Apart*) and Saul (Ada's father) have a huge responsibility to guide their child well. Unless the parents of an ọgbanje find and destroy their iyi-uwa – what Emezi calls "the oath of the world" or a physical object that marks this continued border crossing between the spiritual and physical world – the child is destined to try and return to the spiritual realm through physical death. Such a child is plagued by the call to return from those like them existing in the spiritual realm. The reader learns that the brothersisters hid Ada's iyi-uwa within her body, rather than outside it, so that

destroying it would mean sending her back anyway. She would be doomed to the constant desire to return: to kill herself to destroy the iyi-uwa or to kill herself in order to rejoin her people – the ọgbanje of the spiritual world, her brothersisters:

> We did not come alone. With a force like ours, we dragged other things along– a pact, bits of bone, an igneous rock, worn-out velveteen, a strip of human hide tying it all together. This compound object is called the iyi-uwa, the oath of the world. It is a promise we made when we were free and floating before we entered the Ada. The oath says that we will come back, that we will not stay in this world, and that we are loyal to the other side. (Emezi, *Freshwater* 14)

Each of these cultural and moral entities has a duty to its counterparts on earth. As a daughter of Ala, there is a responsibility to stay on earth and to emulate her powers on earth. Ala is the great mother, second to Chukwu, and satisfying feminine qualities, "the custodian and protector of life among the Igbo," Queen of mortality, Goddess of fertility, and the very land the Igbo move on and plant their crops in (Izuegbu 162). However, the brothersisters, with their own nuance toward a quickened cycle of life and death, also expect Ada to return to the spirit world and are determined for this to happen. It often leads to them hurting those around her, like her little sister or her lovers, in order to guilt the Ada into returning. Thus, you have the earth goddess, Ala, who is inclined toward the fulfillment of life that ends with one's proper return to death (hopefully, at old age), and the ọgbanje's fulfillment in death that can only begin with a birth. Ada's development into self is at the center of this *seeming* contradiction. This development is made difficult because of her parents' inability to guide her through these life-changing events due to their status as neocolonial African/Asian and/or coming from or adhering to outside cultures. Her mother is from Malaysia, and her father is an Igbo Catholic; consequently, there is no one to help her understand this deep relationship with the gates between the world of the living and that of the gods and spirits:

> In the old culture, there would've been rites and rituals for you to control the gates. There were no rites or rituals done to help you control the gates. You are the jewel at the heart of the lotus. (Emezi, *Freshwater* 33)

She is divorced from a community that could help her understand who she is and who she is becoming, as one of Somé's bodeme or gatekeepers. Ada is forced to reckon with her power and destiny alone, which leads her down the path of spiraling destruction, terrifying, hurting, and bringing down those around her. By the end of the novel, she must either build self or be destroyed, and she has to choose how to build herself in a community of one aligned with chi ya. This then opens her up to being supported by other bodeme of the world. They help her move forward on her path of recognizing who she is. They love her without judgment, and use their own powers and connections with the spiritual world to protect and support her. For instance, her friend, Malena, who is a Dominican and daughter of Changó (Shango), or Santa Barbara within Santeria, is able to communicate messages to Ada in ways she has yet to learn. Malena uses this power to pray for her friend's separation from her continued sexual assault by her partner. Ada's reality is not an isolated experience. She is one of many in the world, destined within their culture as Igbo or otherwise to carry out sacred responsibilities in their community. These responsibilities add to the healing and balance of a community. For instance, Emezi is a storyteller and uses their writing and art to fulfill this responsibility to the world. The creation of *Freshwater* and deep development of Ada falls within this responsibility. Emezi details their story, freeing those like Ada and Emezi by revealing an ancient reality, spirituality, culture, and heritage. They use Ada's journeys to self and to her chi to potentially help others navigate who they are in a world that no longer recognizes and venerates all that is sacred and beautiful within them.

Truth of Selves

> My mother does not sleep at night. She worries.
> This is the way of things
> When cold gods give you a child. I sleep like swollen opium.
>
> —Akwaeke Emezi, *Freshwater*

Ada is a child, then a woman, and eventually, more understood to self as a person with many entities of their own making and calling. The result is that they and others suffer. We see the beginning of Ada's interaction with the Earth Goddess, Ala when

a python enters her family's home in Nigeria during her childhood. In many African and indigenous cultures, the snake is seen as a sign of fertility for humanity and earth alike. Amongst the Igbo, the python is a sign of the Earth Goddess' presence. From the perspective of ancient Igbo culture, the presence of the python should be seen as a divine sign of Ada's power and a part of Ada's path of becoming. This is a sacred and honored visit from the Earth Goddess whose responsibility is to care not only for the land of Igbo people, but for the babies coming to life and the children growing into adulthood. Instead, it is seen as a dangerous and evil creature, made taboo by the Europeanized Christian colonialists. This is a sign of the dying belief in ancient Igbo gods. Historically, *not* giving reverence to gods such as the earth mother, Ala was taboo and could lead to the death of the worshiper (Izuegbu). This ironically parallels what Saul does to Ala, who comes in python form. The python is seen as a threat and something to kill, readily done by her father – ironically, in order to protect Ada.

> Now, Saul was a modern Igbo man. His medical training had been on scholarship in the Soviet Union, after which he spent many years in London. He did not believe in mambo-jumbo, anything that would've said a snake could mean anything other than death. When he saw Ada, his baby, with tears dripping down her face, blubbering in terror at the python, a wintered fear clutched his heart. He snatched her up and away, took a machete, went back, and hacked the python to bits. Ala (our mother) dissolved amid broken scales and pieces of flesh; she went back; she would not return. (Emezi, *Freshwater* 13)

Therein lies the irony, or the contradiction, where the father is trying to protect her by killing a python. However, though he should make sure that the snake does not harm the child, the Earth Goddess' presence should be a sign to the family of the bright future ahead for their daughter. Ala should be, at minimum, left alone or guided back to her wilds, and, at most, revered as a symbol for their child's sacred positioning toward greatness. Her father's failed protection and ignorance of failure foreshadow his inability to protect Ada in the future. The reality is that Ala would protect Ada and does so in the end. However, it is not without much pain and confusion beforehand due to Ada's misguided journey to herself. Her father's actions mark the solitary relationship Ada will have with Igbo spirituality. Her immediate

community is not cognizant enough of Igbo culture to make connections between the way Ada is and who she is and will be. This is not to say those who may see her divinity do not exist, but they do not yet have access to her.

Ada's relationship with her "human mother," Saachi, truly reveals the separation from the community that the protagonist experiences. She finds herself unable to go to her mom to deal with her births, awakenings, traumas, and growth. In Nigeria, the child, Ada's younger sister, Añuli, is dragged by a car. Ada understands this as her brothersisters taking revenge for her unwillingness to return to the spiritual world. Saachi does not know how to console her distressed daughter:

> Finally, Saachi sat down with the Ada. 'Tell me,' she said. 'Why won't you go to the hospital?' The Ada started sobbing. 'It's my fault…' Saachi looked at her, confused. 'Ada, it's not your fault the car hit her.' 'I'm the big sister…it's my j-job…t-to protect her…' She broke down wailing, and Saachi put an arm around her, holding the child to her side, and feeling the small shoulders curve in as they convulsed. We realized later that she was always a little uncertain when it came to her first daughter, and what exactly to do with her, including how to soothe such a force. It was understandable; it was always like this with ọgbanje, it is difficult for their mothers. If we could go back, we would tell Saachi what she realized only years later: that none of the ways she tried to take care of this child would ever feel like enough (Emezi, *Freshwater* 25).

Distressed by this incident and a series of building events, Saachi finds herself wanting time away from her family. She eventually takes a job in Saudi Arabia to support them financially, leaving her three young children without their mother's presence. Therefore, Ada is twice left as a child through the departure of Ala in physical python form and Saachi in physical proximity. Her absence later makes it difficult for Saachi to bridge the widening gap in her relationship with Ada. Thus, she also fails to support and protect Ada both in Nigeria and during her early journeys in America. By the time Saachi moves to the United States, Ada is deep in her university community and personal madness of being led by fellow ọgbanje. She is utterly unable to control her body and connect with chi ya, and Saachi is the last person Ada considers helping her understand, let alone navigate, this reality. Visits to her mother are represented more as an afterthought, and are a brief description

of time between Ada's reality. Saachi does not understand how she can protect her child, but tries to do so in many ways from afar.

Ada "births" into deeper manifestations of herself at least three times within the novel. Each brings her consciousness more aligned with, and aware of, the gods within her. The first is when she was born from Saachi, a ruptured connection between spirit-self and flesh. In the chapter titled "We," Emezi explains that the spirits – who Ada names Smoke and Shadow – were to eventually merge with Ada so fully that only she controls the body. They would not float to and from the spiritual world, conscious of their existence. However, this failed, and they remained quiet at first, yet present within Ada. The second is in Umuahia, when Ada was at home visiting her village. She goes to the masquerade festival where spirits are welcomed and represented through the masked physical representations. It is then that the brothersisters call Ada and those within her to wake up. As a result, Ada is now consciously aware of them as well. The third birth comes when she realizes she is being sexually assaulted by her self-proclaimed boyfriend. Despite many expressions of her lack of desire to have sex, he had sex with her without her consent. Ada is so unfamiliar with the process that she does not know what happened to her or how long it has been happening until he tells her to begin birth control. The realization is so painful and so traumatic – a sexual assault she does not know is rape for another three years. In her despair, she calls two of the "We" to the surface: a hungry female beast of a godling spirit she names Asụghara, and a gentler male spirit she calls Saint Vincent.

So many words are left unsaid as Ada becomes herself. The farther away she is from her home, the further away she is from who she is by any cultural standards. This leaves her spiraling, diving, and blacking out into the physical world. However, she also spirals and dives deeper into herself, her trauma, and her experiences by calling upon that deep within her that may protect her birthing Asụghara. Asụghara promises that from now on, be it the continued assault, future abusive boyfriends, or tender lovers, Ada would never be present when engaging in sex. At most, Asụghara would wear Ada like a skin, this spirit taking charge of Ada during sex toward her own desires. At least, when Ada was happy and Asụghara was dormant, Ada could pull Asụghara on like a shell so she would not have sex herself. Asụghara is a spirit Ada identifies as a god within the "We." With this freedom to control Ada, she lives a life on the hunt looking for men to "fuck." Ada wants lovers to hold her, but her

inability to be in control results in Asụghara's desire destroying her relationships through betrayal and neglect. A gentler Saint Vincent is understood as incapable of holding Ada's body for long since he is male and her body is born female. Years later, he brings out Ada's masculinity, finding women to kiss and eventually be in relationships with. All along, Ada is also looking for ways to return to the realm of the brothersisters, a quest led by Asụghara, who is reminded by them that she is not meant to stay long. Their existence is meant to protect Ada and does so. However, outwardly, Ada hurts many who are innocent in Asụghara's hunt to hurt those who deserve it because of her need to feed, to feel. Her sexual encounters with other men, brothers of friends, brothers of those brothers, women, and so forth are often seen as coldhearted, mean, or stoic.

Friends by her side try to keep her alive, but Asụghara grows stronger feeling she is more of Ada than Ada herself. Perhaps, that is true; the framing of the novel is divided by perspective. Three short chapters of *Freshwater* are from Ada's perspective; the remainder is from the collective "We" and Asụghara. By diving deeper, we see it is not only about the spirit(s), but also Ada's own inability to be in control. I read this as the continued separation and misalignment of Ada from her chi, which together would be able to control the balance between body and spirit(s). Asụghara also seeks to be seen as separate from Ada. We learn that all the spirits and visitors meet together in the marble room of Ada's mind. Here, conversations between Ada (chi ya in the spiritual realm), Asụghara, Saint Vincent, the "We" – the collective of brothersisters with access to Ada – and others are possible. For the reader, Ada's reality is undeniably represented by the strength that trauma created. Even if perceived as "mad," the protagonist must learn how to fully encompass and incorporate who they are into her life, even if this is chaotic at first. Toni Morrison, in the foreword to *The Bluest Eye*, mentions how characters are sometimes developed to protect the protagonist from the abuse of one's existence:

> The project, then, for this, my first book, was to enter the life of the one least likely to withstand such damaging forces because of youth, gender, and race. Begun as a bleak narrative of psychological murder, the main character could not stand alone since her passivity made her a narrative void. So, I invited friends, classmates, who understood, even sympathized, with her plight, but had the benefit of supportive parents and feistiness all their own. Yet they were

> helpless as well. They could not save their friend from the world. She broke. (Morrison X)

Both Morrison and Emezi create deep imagery of people surrounding their protagonists who can heal them and be there for them in light of an environment that hurts them. However, ultimately, they write characters who must free themselves, if at all. Ada is successful while Pecola is not. Ada must contend with those around and within her, but also find a way to step to the front and take control of her reality in order to move forward. She can only step forward in a way that is consistent with her own footprint.

An excerpt from Emezi's book, *Dear Senthuran: A Black Spirit Memoir,* called "Maps|Dear Toni," discusses what it means to write different characters into existence in a way that follows no maps and no structure, but only that within the writer. Emezi was inspired by Morrison's Nobel Prize acceptance speech where she says, "I stood at the border, stood at the edge and claimed it as central and let the rest of the world move over to where I was" (Emezi 77). Within Morrison's writings, Emezi understood the depths of self she went through to write characters into existence that did not meet the standards of the everyday world. This gave Emezi the power to write their own:

> You knew about the dark folds of people, their sliding underbellies, and you spoke about looking at these things without blinking. So many people are too afraid to look. You gave me permission to lean into the terrible, of both myself and the people I wrote into existence. (Emezi 77)

Emezi saw in Morrison the ability to develop complicated characters who acknowledge the deepest parts of themselves: "the dark folks of people, their sliding underbellies," "the terrible." This is a critical motivation they draw from in order to write Ada, who honestly addresses all parts of herself in order to free herself. As a fictionalized narrative that comes from truth, Emezi's letter to Morrison reveals how critical this lesson was for Emezi's own freedom to create the real, yet literally, unimaginable.

What happens next, Ada's healing, can only come first with this deep introspection. This leads to reconnection and alignment with her chi. Here, we have

a tale that goes deep to show what it looks like to be embodied or "ridden" by multiple spirits of one's subconscious. However, the story is also an important tale of coming into possession of indigenous power (as ọgbanje, daughter of Ala). Specifically, in a neocolonial present, *Freshwater* models how this happens through eventual access to cultural traditions and simultaneously through trauma. In a conversation in the marble room, Ada and Asụghara have a meaningful conversation about Asụghara's birth and Ada's readiness for it:

> "I [Asụghara] shouldn't even have existed."
> "Oh god, are you getting to the sad drunk stage?" Ada reached for my bottle and I hugged it to my chest.
> "Fuck off!"
> She laughed. "Okay, stop whining then. You had to exist. I wasn't ready."
> "But, like, you should've been, you know? You should've had time to do it when you were ready, not the way it happened." I was getting a little sad. Maybe her grief was contagious. I was remembering the day she realized it wasn't her fault, three years after I arrived, when she read the definition of rape online and burst into tears… (Emezi, *Freshwater* 174)

Coming into the consciousness of multiple spirits within oneself could have been introduced within a more comfortable and familiar setting. Perhaps, if Ada's identities were explained to the child early on, her births could have come without the trauma and within cultural spaces provided to other women, healers, and bodeme in the community. Ada's existence as ọgbanje is at least introduced by her brothersisters' presence, and when Asụghara and Saint Vincent are born. In this case, the violent introduction parallels the violent environment that Ada finds herself within. This provides a powerful commentary on the conditions of both Nigeria as a homeland and the United States as an equally damning host land.

At the height of Asụghara's reign, there are physical transformations Ada goes through to cope with the reality that they must stay on Earth. In Asụghara's last chapter leading the narrative in first person, she tries to end Ada's life by overdosing after a final world-shifting demand from the brothersisters to return. However, Ada's earthly support system intervenes and keeps her in the physical world. It is after this that Ada finally accepts that she cannot return to the spiritual world because she is

the daughter of Ala, the daughter of life. In one of the chapters from Ada's perspective, she notes that as the first mother, older than Western gods, Ala is not to be crossed. Even the Igbo word for taboo, "Alụ," stems from a story of the ill fate of a son of Ala who tried to evade her – Earth itself – by moving only through trees (ironically grown from the earth) (Emezi, *Freshwater* 217-18). To end her life would be immoral, an insult to Ala, or Nso Ala. It would be seen as aru, a crime against literal and spiritual earth. That land must be appeased to right oneself again in the eyes of Ala (Izuegbu 163). The "We," who control Ada at this point, finally yield to this reality as well:

> Ala did not want us to return yet, then we had been disobedient by trying. The brothersisters were no excuse, even though they had commanded us to come back–between them and her, the choice of who to obey shouldn't have been a choice. (Emezi, *Freshwater* 185)

Ala's calls to Ada to do her will includes: protecting land; seeking justice; maintaining moral codes; guiding children into life; and elders into the spiritual world (Izuegbu). This is far more demanding than any call to return to the spirit land by the ọgbanje. Ada has conflicting destinies, but eventually learns her realities can coexist and are complementary. She must determine what that looks like and share it with the world. This becomes invaluable knowledge to Ada, aiding in the calming and calling of her own spirit, chi ya, preventing her from killing herself as her ọgbanje reality demands. As a goddess of eternity, there is no way that self-inflicted harm can be part of her daughter's destiny. No, she must grow and give back to those around her for she is also destined to give life. Part of her life is marked by destruction, sacrifice, and confusion because of her unrealized balance between the two realities of being a child called to death and a child of the one who gives life. The process of becoming truly is an awakening, a journey to self-love and self-determination through self-realization. "We" acknowledge this by saying:

> How do you survive when they place a god inside your body? We said before that it was like shoving a sun into a bag of skin, so it should be no surprise that her skin would split or her mind would break. Consider her burned open. It was an unusual incarnation, to be a child of Ala as well as an ọgbanje, to be

> mothered by the god who owns life yet pulled toward death. We did the best we could. (Emezi, *Freshwater* 207)

As mentioned earlier, Ada is sexually born a female; however, her "We" embodies and identifies deeply with both divine masculine and feminine. At the front, Asụghara is she, and Saint Vincent is he. "We" decide to "carve" the Ada to align better with who they are now that they have committed to staying. Saint Vincent is finally able to come to the front, dress, and be as he feels. "We" goes further to give Ada breast reduction, making this easier for the collective. In this shift, Ada dresses even more femininely since their identity is not constricted to earthly manifestations or societally approved representations of what is masculine and feminine. In this space, they are more themselves. Emezi narrates what on the surface are popularized identity markers of "transgender" or "non-binary" identity while demolishing them at the same time. The reader must be vested in understanding Igbo spirituality by this point and thus, recognize that what we see is just a physical manifestation of a divine transformation into self and purpose, chi na eke. More deeply, *Freshwater* reveals that these terms are limiting to the vast African reality and world of people like the bodeme. Emezi and Ada understand that they have a lifelong relationship with spirits. They are blessed with the capacity to embody multiple genders, let alone identities, either individually or simultaneously. What comes next is how this realignment with chi serves to *finally* guide Ada toward her destiny and truly becoming selves.

Becoming Selves

> "Ichuru chi ya aka mgba. One does not challenge their chi to a wrestling match."
>
> –Igbo Proverb, translated by Akwaeke Emezi, *Freshwater*

What are spirits to the reader, especially in a Westernized Nigeria or the Western world itself? One article from *the New York Times* about *Freshwater* titles its piece "In This Debut Novel, a College Student Hears Voices," suggesting a form of mental psychosis-multiple personalities (Mzezewa). Even though the article goes into the

reality of the spirits embodying Ada, to call them mere "voices" flattens their capacity to live through her. It denies their real ancient existence, and demonstrates that they are not invented characters or a coping mechanism. At a conference, I found more Westernized readings of *Freshwater* that were devoid of discussions of spirituality in connection to gender identity. This happened despite both issues being so clear and centrally laid out in the novel. A more African-centered reading of *Freshwater* more intimately understands the painstaking expression of an ancient and greater power. As the paper argued, this power is one that the child cannot process because no one has taught her how to do so due to the loss and suppression of their culture. Surely, if Ada understood what she knew by the end of the book, at the beginning, she would not suffer so. However, perhaps, she would not be able to receive her power so readily and see it so evidently in others without having to fight to find and understand herself. It takes a while for her to learn the difference between herself and "We." It takes more time before Ada can be in control; determine when any of them takes the lead; and remember what happened to the body from a young age until now (suppressed memories of pain, sexual abuse). All of this must be realized for Ada to forgive and begin to heal herself and grow. Finally, she comes to accept Asụghara and others by recognizing her relationship to their survival, and their collective need for her body to exist. It is Ada's acceptance of Ala that helps stabilize her with the calling of the ọgbanje to return home to the spirit world. All of these events must happen for Ada to shift toward who she is meant to be; to acknowledge and honor chi ya; and to shift away from some shell of herself that society has convinced her to be.

As mentioned, Ada's acknowledgment of her chi is powerful for transformation toward healing and alignment with her chi ya, her position as ọgbanje, and her responsibility as daughter of Ala. As she grows, so does the reader's ability to understand what this looks like for the protagonist. As a narrative device, we step into a room within her mind with Ada and are able to witness what she is saying to both the god- and goddess-like spirit(s) within her. With Ada, we join her first conversations in a way that is increasingly discernible to Ada. For example, the reader understands as Ada understands, and what may seem to be mass confusion to both the reader and Ada becomes clearer as the narrative continues. A student told me they were never confused by the narrative line. As they read, the main clarification was how much they saw Ada within themselves and thus, learned about

themselves. Collectively, we are better able to understand the difference between Ada na chi ya; "We;" Asụghara; Saint Vincent; the visiting Yshwa; the brothersisters; and eventually Ala who comes when Ada finally prays to her.

Consequently, our character must find herself in order to strive and succeed. She must do so virtually alone, and in doing so, she goes deep into who she is within her Igbo culture. Three major events in the novel guide Ada to the front with strength enough to control her body. These events happen after she decides to stay in the physical world and understands why she must stay. The first is when she returns to Nigeria and meets with a Yoruba priest, Lẹshi, who she realizes is like her, embodied, a godbody. "…[W]e recognized the marks Lẹshi displayed; we knew that they told what spaces he lived in, those liminal gutters" (Emezi, *Freshwater* 212). Seeing another such as herself helps Ada build community. She realizes she is not alone in her reality as a border crosser living in liminal gutters. Asụghara attempts to seduce him, and in this moment, the priest is able to acknowledge Asụghara directly. He clearly sees the shift between Asụghara and Ada, and acknowledges her in order to help break her reality into parts so that Ada can build herself up again:

> And just like that, in two nights with the moon shifting slowly between phases, he reached inside us, through us, and he pulled the Ada out into the light. Believe, we would have kept her inside our great shadow, but Lẹshi pushed himself into her terrible loneliness, called her by all of our names, then left, because some gates do close. (Emezi, Freshwater 215)

As a result, the collective within Ada must recognize the truth that "she [Ada] is not ours; we are hers" (Emezi, *Freshwater* 215). It is from here, as "some" gates close, that Ada meets an Igbo historian who affirms who she is – akwaeke. "The python's egg means a precious child. A child of the gods, or the deity themselves" (218). The historian encourages her to continue her path, and tells her that she must learn more about her history to understand who she is and what is happening to her. He also affirms that "there is nothing more anybody can tell you. It's important for you to understand your place on this earth" (219). We can trace this back to the importance of Ada's relationship to chi na eke ya, one's chi and eke. To acknowledge her chi is to be able to access eke, the enacting of the path to who she is and thus, her destiny. With that, we witness the balancing of Ada; none the easier, but more

powerful. She is able to call Asụghara when needed; return to Ada when she is done; and continue her path with her collective "We." Ending with Ada's perspective reveals to the reader her own power in controlling herself, and thus, their combined destiny. She acknowledges that her battle is one with her chi and that:

> Ichuru chi ya aka mgba. One does not challenge their chi to a wrestling match. It feels as if that's what I've been doing for years now, wrestling as if it could end in anything other than my loss. But it's a relief to finally be thrown, to lie with my back on the sand, alive and out of breath. You can see the sky properly this way. Besides, the sand is my mother, and no one can run from her. They say that she can find you as long as your feet are touching the earth, and once she does, the earth can split open like a pod and just swallow you up. (Emezi, *Freshwater* 217)

Ada is learning the capacity of her power. We also see that another anchor of who she is can be found in the lessons of Yshwa, which are grounded in love. So much self-acceptance is critical to her survival, understanding that she is forever a "We," "the brothersister who remained" (Emezi, *Freshwater* 226). Thus, she can move through and between worlds in a way that honors all of who they are. Eventually, her mother and sister learn, in their own way, how to be there for Ada. Her chosen friends and family, fellow people who deal with their own deities, and those who just love her can provide support from the periphery of Ada. With community and reading into her history, she is able to learn who she is by diving deep within her to what her spirit already knows and what her chi knows. With this support and knowledge, she is powerful within her control of selves to move with them as fluidly as the waters she sources (freshwater), and as solidly as the earth she is one with as daughter of Ala. As Ada narrates of herself in the final line, "I am the source of the spring. All freshwater comes out of my mouth" (226).

Emezi's ability to bring Ada's narrative together, a manifestation of their own narrative, is a key to unlocking the power of the text for the reader: the Igbo girl who reads this and wonders who she is; the Shona girl who reads and wonders who she is; the Black girl who reads this and wonders who she is; and the Dominican girl who reads this and wonders who she is. She has to go on the journey with oneself(ves) before being able to gain anything from the outside world. The reader bears witness

to what is truly a revelation for our protagonist, and how she transforms into the woman she is: the person she becomes by the end of the narrative. We begin to understand the power she and others hold – the power to embody identities of women, of men, of others, and that of herself as a result of her connection to her most divine self. Her divinity comes forth as that of a daughter of a goddess, and a brothersister of the ọgbanje who perpetually travel between worlds; one who, like Emezi, is "based in liminal spaces."

In Conclusion, Cosmic You

> Beside the waters of the Hudson, I feel my race. Among the thousand white persons, I am a dark rock surged upon, and overswept, but through it all, I remain myself. When covered by the waters, I am; and the ebb but reveals me again.
>
> —Zora Neale Hurston, "How it Feels to Be Colored Me"

Ada's story adds to the repository of knowledge of what it means to exist, to be, from Igbo perspectives. Emezi takes the reader on a journey to the way multiple environments can both imprison and free an individual. *Freshwater* does this as a narrative that crosses borders, spiritual and physical, from Nigeria to the United States and back. The key to one way of being, or the other, goes directly back to one's ability to align oneself with one's chi. That is a critical lesson the Igbos have for the world, and one Emezi uses brilliantly to guide Ada to herself. It also has the power to guide the reader, who identifies with Ada's story, back to themselves.

Storytelling is at the center of revealing lived experiences in ways that correctly and complexly represent African people to the world. It contributes to a decolonizing project where "[w]e become aware of who we were and who we are as well as whom we have been told we were/are. In that awareness, we seek a deeper intimacy with the true nature of ourselves, our history, our roots" (Williams 25). Oluwadunni Talibi offers the importance of Afro/African futurism as a way to "tell new kinds of stories and undo the irreparable harm caused to racialized bodies and cultures by European colonial modernity" (330). Talibi offers the polyphonic – "diversity of independent

perspectives and consciousness that can potentially alter old boundaries" – to recognize and analyze Emezi's contribution:"

> I reflect on the intersection of embodied knowledge—of how the author pulls together the frame of physical and spiritual freedom technology, i.e., technological intervention on the human body and African spiritual world consciousness—to write an African queer cultural futurity that transcends the characteristic existential dilemma with which African LGBTQI+ identities are confronted. (Talibi 330)

Our Black women writers have been writing the value of one's expression of self to our knowledge of self and community. Specifically, the artists make known the power of receiving and understanding our art. Our art stands as a vehicle to deliver our notions of self and culture back to our community. Zora Neale Hurston explains this by recognizing the difference between how she and her White male friend receive jazz music – an innovative Black musical art form with Blues, spirituals, and ancient African music forms at its base:

> In the abrupt way that jazz orchestras have, this one plunges into a number. It loses no time in circumlocutions but gets right down to business. It constricts the thorax and splits the heart with its tempo and narcotic harmonies. This orchestra grows rambunctious, rears on its hind legs, and attacks the tonal veil with primitive fury, rending it, clawing it until it breaks through to the jungle beyond. I follow those heathen--follow them exultingly. I dance wildly inside myself; I yell within, I whoop; I shake my assegai above my head, I hurl it true to the mark yeeeeooww! I am in the jungle and living in the jungle way. My face is painted red and yellow and my body is painted blue…
>
> "Good music they have here," he remarks, drumming the table with his fingertips. Music. The great blobs of purple and red emotion have not touched him. He has only heard what I felt. (Huston 1042)

In this expression of the power of jazz, Hurston's chi – cosmic Zora – is awakened more widely to the present, and she feels every bit of it within herself, and her self

expresses this back. Surely, performance is not one-way when it comes to Black/African societies, but where energy is cyclically given and energy is received. Conversely, she must acknowledge the widening difference between her and her friend. He can only say, "Good music they have here," where she has had a spiritually enlightened experience. The music did not hit him the way it had ensnared her. As a result, she sees herself farther across the ocean from him and his culture, a widening gap, which helps her see herself more clearly.

The awakened "cosmic Zora" that emerges is connected to the "Great Soul" through the authentic expression and reciprocal reception of Black art, a language of our own. *Freshwater* models authenticity via cultural representations steeped in historical traditions and realities. By nature, authentic African and Black art incorporates ancient notions of self, community, the spiritual, and the physical. *Freshwater,* and works like it, challenge the reader to be cosmically themselves in order to draw from their own ontological positioning to be and to exist. This is necessary where oppressive environments use cultural hegemony to strip individuals of their people's ways of being and ways of knowing, leaving them without pathways to themselves, as Ada found herself. Works, like *Freshwater,* draw lived experiences from liminal spaces to help others understand the ebb and flow between space and time. Hopefully, current and future works, like these, stand between one and one's wrestling match with one's chi, and encourage one to find ways to use the truth of self as a means to affirm oneself. From there, one must trust that chi ya will follow and also affirm.

Works Cited

"About TANA Press." *Tana Press Ltd.* http://www.tanapressltd.com/tanapress.html, accessed Jan 25, 2023.

Achebe, Chinua. "The Chi in Igbo Cosmology." *Morning Yet on Creation Day,* London, Heinemann.

–. *Things Fall Apart (50th Anniversary Edition).* New York, Anchor Books, 2009. (Originally published: 1958).

Amanambu, Uchenna Ebony. "The Religious Praxes of 'Onye Na 'Chi' Ya' in the Igbo Cosmology." *AMAMIHE: Journal of Applied Philosophy*, vol. 18, no. 6, 2020, 73094.

Asanti, Ifalade Ta'shia. "Living with Dual Spirits: Spirituality, Sexuality and Healing in the African Diaspora." *Journal of Bisexuality*, vol. 10, 2010, pp. 22-30.

Ben-Iheanacho, Elizabeth Onyewuchi. "Finding Self: Of Gods, Contestation and Containment in Akwaeke Emezi's Freshwater." *Veritas Journal of Humanities*, vol. 4, nos. 1- 2, 2022, pp. 18-28.

Chukwukere, I. "Chi in Igbo Religion and Thought: The God in Everyman." *Anthropos*, vol. 78, nos. 3-4, 1983, pp. 519-534.

Davies, Carole Boyce and Ann Graves. *Ngambika: Studies of Women in African Literature*. Trenton, NJ, African World Press, 1986.

Emezi, Akwaeke. *Dear Senthuran: A Black Spirit Memoir.* New York, Riverhead Books, 2021.

–. *Freshwater,* New York, Grove Press, 2018.

–. "OGBANJE NKE ABUO, 2010" @akwaekeemezi on Instagram, August 25, 2022.

Hoff, Bert. "Gays: Guardians of the Gates. An Interview with Malidoma Somé." *Menweb,* 1993. Original: http://www.menweb.org/somegay.htm Current: https://web.archive.org/web/20211021082011/http://www.menweb.org/somegay.htm Accessed Oct 10, 2023.

Hurston, Zora Neale. "How it feels to be colored me." *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature. Third ed.,* edited by Henry Louis Gates and Valerie Smith, W.W. Norton & Company, 2014, pp. 1008-1010.

Izuegbu, Samuel Chigozie. "Influence of Modernity on the role of Ala deity: Effects on Igbo of Nigeria," *Journal of Chinese & African Studies (JOCAS),* vol. 2, no. 1, 2021, pp. 160-168.

Magaqa, Tina and Rodwell Makombe. "Decolonizing Queer Sexualities: A Critical Reading of the Ogbanje Concept in Akwaeke Emezi's Freshwater." *African Studies Quarterly*, vol. 20, no. 3, 2021, pp. 24-39.

Morrison, Toni. *The Bluest Eye.* Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2007 (Reprint).

Mzezewa, Tariro. "In This Debut Novel, a College Student Hears Voices." *The New York Times,* 26 Feb. 2018. https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/26/books/review/freshwater-akwaeke-emezi.html

Nwapa, Flora. *Efuru.* Heinemann, 1978.

Obioma, Chigozie. *An Orchestra of Minorities.* Little Brown & Company, 2019.

Ogunleye, Tolagbe. "African American Folklore: Its Role in Reconstructing African American History." *Journal of Black Studies*, vol. 27, no. 4, 1997, pp. 435-455.

Ogunyemi, Chikwenye. *Africa Wo/man Palava The Nigerian Novel by Women*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996.

Onyibor, Marcel. "The Role of Chi in Self-Actualization in Traditional Igbo Cosmology." *Nnamdi Azikiwe Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 11, no. 1, 2019, 84-100.

Osinubu, Taiwo Adetunji. "The Promise of Lesbianism in African Literary History." *College Journal: A Journal of Critical Literary Studies,* vol. 45, no. 4, 2018, 675-686.

Ossana, Eugenia. "Precolonial Igbo Voices in Akwaeke Emezi's Freshwater (2018): A Palimpsestic Search for "Home." *Complutense Journal of English Studies*, vol. 29, no. 1, 2021, pp. 81-92.

Talabi, Oluwadunni O. "Writing the Polyphonic African Queer Future: Reflections on Akwaeke Emezi's Freshwater." *Journal of the African Literature Association*, vol. 17, no. 2, 2023, pp. 329-344.

Walker, Alice. "In Search of Our Mother's Gardens," *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens,* Mariner Books, 2003 (1983 original).

Williams, H. Sharif "Herukhuti. "Introduction to Afrocentric Decolonizing Kweer Theory and Epistemology of the Erotic." *Journal of Black Sexuality and Relationships*, vol. 2, no. 4, 2016, pp. 1-31.

Williams, H. Sharif. "Bodeme in Harlem: An African Diasporic Autoethnography." *Journal of Bisexuality*, vol.10, 2010, pp. 64-68.