Gigi Adair

Archipelago-izing or Re-continentalizing Africa: Oceanic Paradigms in Two Recent West African Novels

ABSTRACT This article examines two contemporary African literary engagements with Black diasporic history and culture and the meaning of the diaspora for African identity. *Freshwater* by Akwaeke Emezi (2018) turns to diasporic cultures and the history of slavery in order to develop an understanding of its protagonist's identity within Igbo cosmology and to seek a new wholeness achieved by shattering and mutilation: a process that might be described as archipelagic thought (Édouard Glissant). In contrast, *The Sacred River* by Syl Cheney-Coker (2014) eventually imagines the continent washed clean, purified of diasporic—particularly Haitian—influences, a paradigm that I, drawing on the work of Glissant in *Philosophie de la Relation*, call re-continentalization: both a forgetting of the influence of the diaspora in Africa and a reinstatement of origins, linearity, and hierarchy.

KEYWORDS archipelagic thought, Édouard Glissant, queer diaspora, African literature

Introduction

In this essay, I examine two recent novels by West African writers that that turn to the Atlantic Ocean and its African diasporic cultures and history in order to consider questions of African modernity. Both *Freshwater* by Akwaeke Emezi (2018) and *The Sacred River* by Syl Cheney-Coker (2014) deal broadly with questions of African identity and society in a globalizing world. The former is more personal and individual, the latter more interested in political and cultural communities, but both turn outwards towards the ocean, following the freshwater rivers of their titles and the

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old routes of the slave ships across the Atlantic to the Caribbean. The relationship between Africanity and the African diaspora—and the ocean—that they develop is radically different, however. One turns to diasporic cultures and the history of slavery in order to develop an understanding of its protagonist's identity within Igbo cosmology and to seek a new wholeness achieved by shattering and mutilation, while the other eventually imagines the continent washed clean, purified of diasporic—particularly Haitian—influences, a paradigm that I, drawing on the work of Édouard Glissant in *Philosophie de la Relation* (2009), call re-continentalization.

Oceanic paradigms are hardly new in African diaspora studies. Paul Gilroy's model of the Black Atlantic—despite its many critics still the most influential paradigm in the field, and also influential in diaspora studies more generally[1]—suggests taking "the Atlantic as one single, complex unit of analysis [...] and [using] it to produce an explicitly transnational and intercultural perspective" (Gilroy 1993, 15). As numerous critics since the 1990s have noted, however, Gilroy's model tends to position Africa as an origin and past for the diaspora, but not a participant in ongoing diasporic exchanges or diasporic experiences of modernity, and thus it "replicated the problematic exclusion of Africa from discussions of modernity" (Goyal 2014, v). We might say that, particularly in Anglophone scholarship, there is a conception of a one-way current from Africa to the Americas, Caribbean, and (to a lesser extent) Europe, which then circulates around the North Atlantic without returning to African shores, inhibiting the recognition of African modernity and thinking about connections between the diaspora and *contemporary* Africa.

This conceptual framing of cultural influence and exchange also affects disciplinary framings and the focus of scholarship: for example, while much important work has been done about the *présence Africaine* in the Caribbean, there has been much less attention paid to diasporic influences in Africa, although some work in this area is now emerging, such as Jemima Pierre's (2013) study of the importance of diasporic encounters to racialization in Ghana. The dominant reading paradigms for African literature have, for many decades, been either national or continental, but several more recent studies on the representation of slavery in West African fiction (Christensen 2012; Murphy 2012; Osinubi 2014) point to a tentative opening of African literary studies towards the diaspora and the potential for greater exchange between African studies and African diaspora studies. Yogita Goyal suggests that "we need new diasporas" (2017) in order to understand the contemporary meanings of migration and blackness (see

1 See Evans (2009) for an overview of responses to Gilroy's work.

also Koser 2003; Manger and Assal 2006; Okpewho and Nzegwu 2009). In this essay, I suggest that new conceptualizations of the African diaspora—particularly the relationship between Africa and the diaspora—are relevant to understanding not only migration, but also African modernity and identity on the continent. I argue that African literature may and indeed must also be read through a diasporic, in addition to a continental or national, paradigm. Fittingly enough, it is the work of African diasporic, Caribbean thinkers, particularly that of Édouard Glissant, that provides the conceptual tools for thinking through an “archipelagic Africa.”

Archipelagic Africa: *Freshwater*

Akwaeke Emezi’s *Freshwater* (2018) at first appears to fit broadly into the category of the Afropolitan novel: the story of a young woman, born into a middle-class family in Nigeria, who moves to the USA to study before assuming an apparently comfortable (at least materially) itinerant existence between Africa, Europe, and America, seemingly without encumbrances such as regular paid work. The plot takes an unexpected turn, however, when it is revealed that she is in fact an ogbanje: a spirit child. Ada is the daughter of the Igbo goddess Ala, whose symbol and messenger is the python, and is inhabited by a cohort of somewhat malevolent spirits who influence and at times control her—and who narrate a large majority of the novel (although Jesus Christ, called Yshwa, is also a regular visitor). The novel therefore combines the Afropolitan interest in African identity in a globalizing world with an earlier tradition in African writing concerned with African (rather than national) identity: the mythopoetic turn to African traditions, dubbed by Anthony Appiah a “postcolonial recourse to Africa” (1992, 153). Unlike the earlier texts, however, which were oriented to the continent as opposed to the nation, *Freshwater* turns to the diaspora, particularly Caribbean cultures and the history of transatlantic slavery, to represent both a form of transgender African subjectivity and to find a new connection to almost forgotten African beliefs and knowledges. It thereby offers a vision of African “wholeness” not derived from origins but rather sutured together from broken pieces of African and diasporic cultures: an archipelagic rather than continental Africa.

Freshwater is not the first novel to narrate such a story of spiritual possession, of course, but it displays several key differences from its most famous predecessor, Ben Okri’s *The Famished Road* (1991), which tells the story of an abiku child—the Yoruba equivalent of the Igbo ogbanje. *The Famished Road* is frequently read as a critique of Nigerian economic and

political realities (Obumselu 2011); its abiku figure understood either as an allegory for the Nigerian nation-state (Mathuray 2009) or a regenerative force for his society (Cezair-Thompson 1996). It does not celebrate the abiku figure itself, however; rather, the novel charts the abiku's *rejection* of his own liminality in favour of "the construction of an inviolable African identity" that is above all self-sufficient, formed by an "innate capacity for self-formation and self-transformation on an epic scale" (Cezair-Thompson 1996, 40). Okri's novel is therefore broadly in the tradition of the Bildungsroman: the abiku child overcomes his initial alienation from human society and finds his proper place in that society once he rejects his "refusal to be" (Okri 1991, 487)—a phrase taken from Wole Soyinka's *The Interpreters* (1965, 231), an early work in the West African tradition of contemporary mythopoetic writing—and becomes determined to live.

Freshwater can also be understood as a Bildungsroman: it is also about a child and young woman's search to understand herself and her place in society (or rather multiple societies), but the resolution it offers is significantly *not* based on the protagonist's adaptation to social—or national—norms and expectations. Emezi's novel does not reject the liminality of its ogbanje figure in order to imagine a social or national unity; rather, it embraces the difference of its representation of ogbanje being: its fluidity and multiplicity. Yet this embrace of the ogbanje and refusal of social norms nonetheless enables a reimagining of the (African) social: one which refuses the cultural logic of filiation (and its heteronormative logic in the realm of human relations) to arrive at an understanding of an Africanity which is non-unified, non-homogeneous, and generated in interaction with diaspora cultures.

In order to narrate this unusual story, and to explore the ontological and epistemological questions that it poses, the novel turns to three interlinked metaphorical, cultural-historical, and theoretical resources: the language and imagery of water and liquidity, the African diasporic cultures of the Atlantic and the history of slavery, and the Caribbean philosophy of the archipelago. The "freshwater" of the title, it soon becomes clear, is both a sign of the novel's location in a specific Igbo cosmology and its protagonist's spiritual status in that cosmology, *and* a medium of connection to other bodies of water and diasporic locations and cultures. This apparently paradoxical claim is made early on: "All water is connected. All freshwater comes out of the mouth of a python" (Emezi 2018, 9). The novel highlights the importance of water and water spirits in Igbo cosmology even as it also suggests that this culture and knowledge has become rare, at least in the urban and middle-class world into which Ada is born. The watery world of Igbo cosmology comes to stand for other forms of fluidity and liminality:

the spirits which occupy Ada are said to exist in a "liminal fluid" that is also a symbolic space of transition, especially gender transition: the "liminal fluid" is a place the ogbanje spirits are "suspended in," both "between the inaccurate concepts of male and female" as well as between the human and spirit worlds (Emezi 2018, 193).

The novel's representation of the ogbanje and the spirit world, and Ada's process of coming to understand her identity, are decisively diasporic rather than continental. Although Ada is born in Umuahia and grows up in Aba in Igboland, Nigeria, her ogbanje nature goes unrecognized there. The people around her, including her Igbo father and other relatives, appear to have little knowledge of Igbo cosmology—just one uncle "knew the songs and dances of Uwummiri, the worship that is drowned in water" (Emezi 2018, 9). He dies when she is a small child—and Ada is raised as a Christian. Ada's first real understanding of who and what she is arrives much later and via a diasporic detour through her friendship with Malena, a fellow student in the USA originally from the Dominican Republic, and "a daughter of Changó, of Santa Bárbara" (Emezi 2018, 88). Malena's knowledge of the syncretic religious pantheon of Santeria, and her own self-understanding as the daughter of a Yoruba Orisha translated into a Santeria saint, enables her to recognize Ada and her collective of spirits. Translating Igbo cosmology into her own Santeria cosmology, she defines Ada as "the daughter of Santa Marta [...] La Dominadora" (Emezi 2018, 89). Malena's "prophecies" prime Ada for the highly inconstant existence—both psychically and physically—which her ogbanje nature grants her: "the shifting, the quick skinnings and reshapings, the falling and revival of the scales" (Emezi 2018, 193). Years later, Ada gains further self-understanding and self-acceptance through her conversations with Lẹshi, a decidedly unorthodox Yoruba priest and sound artist living in Paris. It is only at the end of the novel, after these diasporic encounters, that she begins to learn more about Igbo cosmology and thus her own "roots" (Emezi 2018, 223)—a term that acquires, however, a particular meaning in this text.

The language and imagery of the Atlantic diaspora and the history of slavery are central to the novel's representation of Ada's occupying spirits, and the trope of capture and transportation comes to stand both for their experience of being placed in Ada's human body and for their further displacement from the spirit world that is their homeland when Ada leaves Nigeria. The spirits are "wrenched, dragged through the gates, across a river" (Emezi 2018, 4) to be placed in the growing foetus, and the image of a gate between the spirit and human worlds is repeated throughout, recalling the common post-slavery diasporic trope of the "gate of no

return."[2] The gate between the spirit and human realms is described as open but uncrossable for the spirits (they can return to the spirit world only upon Ada's death), and, like the metaphoric gate of no return that marks the violent and irreversible rupture and catastrophic loss of the Middle Passage for black diasporic subjects, it is therefore a gate towards which they are constantly drawn, feeling keenly both the call of the spirit world and its inaccessibility. The imagery of enslavement and transportation is used to show how the spirits too have been "carried away like cargo […] deposited in the land of the corrupters" (Emezi 2018, 47). While they consider this a grave insult, they also understand that this experience joins them to many other once African, now diasporic, gods and spirits: those "godly stowaways that came along when the corrupters stole our people" (Emezi 2018, 87). The spirits are therefore paradigmatic diasporic subjects: violently and forcibly displaced from their homeland, to which they repeatedly turn, but are unable to truly return; the novel employs the diasporic metaphor of "scattered seed" to describe their exile: "We were ejaculated into an unexpected limbo—too in-between, too god, too human, too halfway spirit bastard. Deity seed" (Emezi 2018, 34). The exile of the spirits is painful; they describe the "open" (but unpassable) gates between the human and spirit worlds as being "like sores that can't stop grieving: they infect with space, gaps, widenings" (Emezi 2018, 35), and this diasporic "gap" is shared by many migrant characters in the novel, although they respond to it differently. It is this diasporic displacement, this "limbo"—another Caribbean cultural borrowing—that binds Ada to her friends from other parts of Africa and the African diaspora, not race. Ada "didn't quite fit" with the African American students at her university, who find her strange (in part because she does not share their understanding of race); instead, she becomes friends with those who "didn't quite fit either" (Emezi 2018, 50).

Why turn to the Caribbean to understand African and Igbo cosmology and ontology? The novel suggests that Caribbean writing and thought, particularly the work of Édouard Glissant, provide valuable philosophical resources for thinking through at least some forms of contemporary Nigerian or African identity in the context of, among other things, substantial cultural change, urbanization, migration, diaspora, and queerness. In this context, identity is not assured or given; towards the end of the novel, the narrating spirits suggest that they desire "wholeness," but

2 This term is used for historical and contemporary structures commemorating the forced transportation of Africans in several West African coastal cities. See also Brand (2001).

that "when a thing has been created with deformations and mismatched edges, sometimes you have to break it apart before you can start putting it back together again" (Emezi 2018, 210). Precisely such a process—of patching together a subjectivity and identity from broken pieces, of creating a whole that shows its sutures—has long been a focus of Caribbean writing. Derek Walcott identified this "gathering of broken pieces" (1993, 262) as the motor of Caribbean cultural creativity, and many other scholars have highlighted the "foundational ambiguity of Caribbean subject formation" (Munro and Shilliam 2011, 162). But according to Kwaku Larbi Korang, "that fracture in black ontology produced by Western Imperialism is not the exclusive property of the diasporic branch of the Black Atlantic: it is to be seen both here, in the Old World, and there, in the New" (2004, 285).

The work of Caribbean thinkers and writers over at least the past century to describe the experience of dislocation, the reformulation of culture, and the creation of non-essentialist identities now makes Caribbean identities and cultures paradigmatic for understanding Ada's experience. Ada's human experience already shows enough signs of fracturing and dislocation: her Christian upbringing in an Igbo family, with one migrant parent from South Asia via Malaysia, and later her own migration. The novel suggests that these are *compounded* by her spiritual status as ogbanje. The fact that Ada is the daughter of an Igbo goddess does not automatically lead to a stable, let alone enclosed, African identity; rather, it is only the circulation of meaning and knowledge via the Caribbean that helps her to understand her African, Igbo self. This is necessary in part because very few Africans—Nigerians or Igbo—are able to understand Ada or recognize her for what she is. Ada is therefore displaced from herself by colonial and post-independence politics, including the Nigerian civil war and its effects on Igbo culture. She is a metaphysical diasporic subject, displaced from norms of individual, unitary selfhood and rationality that reign both in the West and in contemporary, postcolonial Nigeria. In addition to Ada's ontological ambiguity, the novel adds a layer of epistemological ambiguity: in the Nigeria of the novel, the knowledge of Igbo cosmologies that might help Ada to understand herself has been widely forgotten. Furthermore, the novel offers no clear epistemological guidance for the reader, that is, it never fully resolves whether we are to understand the spirits as real (as in Okri), or whether they are to be understood as an analogy for what, in Western terms, are understood as mental illnesses. Ada's experiences of self, gender, and even body are multiple, and the novel turns to the cross-gender subjectivities and modular discourse of personhood of Afro-Diasporic religions like Santeria and Vodou to understand these, and to understand the knowledges that many modern Africans have (almost) forgotten.

As a result of historical and contemporary political, social, and economic processes, the Igbo characters have suffered a version of the "erasing of the collective memory" that in the work of Édouard Glissant generates a "nonhistory" (Glissant 1989, 62). That is, not a lack of history (and certainly not in the Hegelian sense), but a sense of dislocation from the past, rendering them unable to relate to their own history. It is telling, therefore, that Ada is encouraged to pursue her understanding of Igbo cosmology and her own ogbanje being by a man referred to only as "the historian" (Emezi 2018, 218). In doing so, the novel recalls the longstanding Caribbean debate on the relationship of history and myth. Rather than myth offering a way to rewrite history and refuse colonial historiography, as in the work of Glissant, Wilson Harris, and Alejo Carpentier (among others) (see Webb 1992, 3–25), in Emezi's novel it is history—that is, a realization of the ruptures in recent Igbo and Nigerian history that have led to this collective forgetting—that leads Ada to myth, in the sense of finally accepting and acknowledging her spiritual status. This acceptance does not lead to a sense of wholeness or cultural purity, however: in contrast, Ada recounts that she "fell apart that night" (Emezi 2018, 219). The Igbo and African identity which *Freshwater* imagines for its protagonist is as syncretic as Santeria: Ada's Christian childhood is recuperated, the Igbo spirits reconciled with "Yshwa." The "roots" (Emezi 2018, 223) that Ada seeks are not genealogical—as an ogbanje she "did not come from a human lineage" and has "no ancestors" (Emezi 2018, 225)—nor do they stand for a conservative understanding of Igbo traditions and beliefs, which the novel clearly does not offer, but rather a creolizing and creative connection to Igbo spirituality and epistemology. It can therefore be understood as an *archipelagic* identity and understanding of Igbo-ness and Africanity.

For Glissant, archipelagic thought *(pensée archipélique)* is first and foremost opposed to continental thought *(pensée continentale)*—his term for the hegemonic Western tradition. Continental thought is "system thinking" (Glissant 2009, 45) that seeks synthesis from above and is grounded in fixed hierarchies. Archipelagic thought instead starts from the particular, recognizing even the "smallest rocks in the river" (Glissant 2009, 45), and is committed to preserving that particularity rather than imposing homogeneity (see also Murdoch 2015). Archipelagic thought is an alternative to the colonial logic of filiation and origins. It is characterized by the absence of a stabilizing centre or any claim of pure origins or a fixed identity; it is drifting and tends toward diversions, "anything but linear or teleological" (Wiedorn 2018, 114). Crucially, Glissant described archipelagic thought as "the thinking of the ambiguous" and thus suited to a globalizing world that is "archipelago-izing" (quoted in Wiedorn 2018, 115), that is,

becoming *more* ambiguous. Archipelagic thought therefore moves from geographically existing archipelagos to the archipelago as a model for culture in global modernity, with the Caribbean as the model of a "repeating island" (Benitez-Rojo 1996) that may expand and "chaotically repeat across the entire planet" (Roberts 2013, 123). In *Freshwater*, the Caribbean archipelago, that is, its cultures, history, and literary debates, wash back to the West African coastline. This is a diasporic "return" that does not promise an unproblematic wholeness, but rather more fracturing and rejoining—not a fantasy of pre-modern, pre-colonial, pre-globalization cultural purity, but rather a newly created "wholeness" that is always in becoming—as cultures, peoples, and epistemologies collide and become entangled—and that shows its scars. Ada learns that she is the daughter of the Igbo freshwater goddess, but also that "all water is connected" (Emezi 2018, 9): modern culture and identities on the continent today can only be made sense of via ocean circuits.

Re-continentalization and the Burden of History in *The Sacred River*

Syl Cheney-Coker's second novel was published in 2014 as a very belated follow-up to *The Last Harmattan of Alusine Dunbar* (1990). Like its predecessor, it is set in the imaginary West African land of Kissi and its capital Malagueta, Cheney-Coker's fictionalized version of Sierra Leone. It takes place in the last decades of the twentieth century, concluding with the (fictionalized) end of the Sierra Leone Civil War around the turn of the twenty-first century. One of the strangest, hardest to parse themes of this sprawling novel is that of Caribbean, specifically Haitian, influence on the political and economic fate of this West African country. At the beginning of the novel, Tankor Satani, president of Kissi, is repeatedly visited in his dreams by Henri Christophe, the one-time king of Haiti, who encourages Tankor to pursue a dictatorship, have himself crowned emperor, build Xanadu (an extravagant hilltop castle that recalls Christophe's Citadel and Sans Souci Palace), destroy his enemies, wreck the economy, and generally leave the country in ruins, ripe for the civil war that erupts after his death. The novel's exploration of the frustration of hopes for liberation and democracy in post-independence Africa, replaced by political corruption, crony capitalism, further resource extraction, and armed conflict, is thereby represented as a diasporic influence, a second and belated diasporic return after the arrival of black settlers in the eighteenth century. Against this diasporic influence, and against the horrors visited upon Kissi

by the dictator and his military and business accomplices, West African forms of spirituality associated with rivers and oceans appear to offer the only hope for renewal and peace.

The ghost of Henri Christophe first appears in response to a historical neglect: a severe storm is interpreted by local people as a sign of "the vengeance of the dead at the bottom of the ocean for the neglect they had lately suffered" (Cheney-Coker 2014, 8); and the president briefly considers "rectifying that neglect" (8) by holding a remembrance ceremony—a tradition begun by the first, ex-slave settlers who founded the city. After Christophe's visit, however, this idea is forgotten, so that this neglect of Black Atlantic memory, this forgetting of the relevance of slavery and the diaspora to West Africa is cast as a historical mission and bequest from revolutionary Haiti. "As you know," he says to Tankor Satani in a dream, "Haiti was the first republic created by ex-slaves; and Malagueta was established by the children of former slaves and recaptives, who had been deprived of their kings. So it is up to you to start acting like an emperor" (Cheney-Coker 2014, 8–9). Christophe tells Tankor that he is the "chosen one" (Cheney-Coker 2014, 9) to complete Christophe's "unfinished work" (11), which was interrupted two centuries prior by "that damned Napoleon" (256). That is to say, he carries "the burden of history" (Cheney-Coker 2014, 9). There are many possible parallels that might be drawn between Christophe and Tankor in this case of history repeating as farce, but the claim that Christophe is passing on the burden of history to Tankor is perhaps the most intriguing.

Nick Nesbitt argues that "two of the processes that came to distinguish the twentieth century were invented in Haiti: decolonization and neocolonialism" (2005, 6) so that "in the two centuries since its foundation, the history of Haiti has become the development and perfection of a system of total exploitation by a tiny elite and the most absolute lack of popular sovereignty and governmental mediation imaginable" (2005, 10). If in the mid-twentieth century Caribbean writers frequently represented Haiti as the birthplace of anticolonial consciousness—for Alejo Carpentier, Haiti was "the antithesis and antidote to European cultural domination" (Webb 1992, 17), for Aimé Césaire it was the place "where negritude rose for the first time and stated that it believed in its humanity" (2017, 29)—it is therefore equally fitting that Haiti might also be drawn upon to explore "the bankruptcy of postcolonial regimes [...] the rampant corruption and vicious authoritarianism" (Scott 2004, 1–2) of postcolonial states in the current era. Yet there is a certain discomfort generated by Haiti being invoked in this way as well. The novel's story of post-independence corruption and conflict is, unfortunately, hardly an uncommon one, and the claim that it is initiated by the bad influence of Henri Christophe might be read as

an excuse: European colonialism is apparently no longer to blame, and while the local "Corals" (Lebanese traders, resident in Kissi for generations) are corrupt and exploitative, they are clearly not responsible for the worst crimes. Even as the corruption of politicians and military officers is described unsparingly, there is nonetheless an implication that the supernatural visit from Haiti set the worst of it in motion, thereby absolving the country's African elite from blame.

The novel therefore invokes diasporic connections seemingly in order to reject them as a bad influence, despite the people of Kissi being in part descended from returned diasporans, and its history and culture therefore, as in the Caribbean, a product of the encounter of the Old and New Worlds. This heritage was explored in Cheney-Coker's first novel, *The Last Harmattan of Alusine Dunbar* (1990), a story of the Black Loyalists, those mostly African American migrants who settled in Sierra Leone, via London and Nova Scotia, after the American Revolution. While that novel shows various moments of disconnect and inequality between native Africans and the settler population, these are largely resolved in favour of a claim of a shared community and the possibility of a functional multicultural state, including the triumph over postcolonial corruption (Borman 2016, 59). This is made possible in particular by the poetry of Garbage, the child of a native African and a returnee, which is both the vehicle of political and social critique and which proposes African spirituality and magic as a means for the settlers to affiliate themselves with Africa. In *The Sacred River*, in contrast, poetry, philosophy, and critical journalism are shown to be powerless against the corrupt regime, and only magic remains. Tankor Satani's reign is finally ended when his young lover is revealed to be a Mami Wata, a mermaid-like spirit, who causes a huge wave to wash the emperor's Xanadu down into the sea, thereby also symbolizing the end of Christophe's influence, and positioning this African water deity as the counterpoint to the Haitian king. The turn to magic and spirituality is therefore not a sign of chauvinistic ethnocentrism, but rather a rejection of the "burden of history." It remains unclear, however, how that is to be defined.

The novel's engagement with Haitian history is significantly complicated by the fact that the Haitian revolution is *misremembered* throughout the novel: it is repeatedly claimed that Napoleon defeated the Haitian revolutionaries, when of course it was Napoleon's armies that were defeated, leading to Haitian independence in 1804. This claim of Napoleonic victory is extended to the founding of Malagueta—and perhaps more importantly, shared even by the opponents of Tankor Satani—a part of which is reported to have been built by settlers who arrived "following the defeat of the Haitian revolutionaries by Napoleon Bonaparte's forces" (Cheney-Coker

2014, 242). The "burden of history" of the actual Haitian revolution—that is, its demonstration "that the colonized can take hold of their own historical destiny and enter the stage of world history as autonomous actors, and not merely passive, enslaved subjects" (Nesbitt 2005, 6), its effects on Caribbean literature, Atlantic cultures, and the Negritude movement (see Geggus 2001; Munro 2004), and of course on European literature and philosophy, particularly Hegel (Buck-Morss 2009)—is therefore *not* the "burden of history" that the novel confers upon Tankor or Kissi.

By claiming this rewritten story of the Haitian revolution as the foundational event of the country, the novel assigns its fictional people not the burden of the difficult and complex history of post-independence Haiti, but a simpler story of defeat. Tankor's understanding of *this* "burden" leads him to imitate European history: he feels his mission from Christophe is complete when he has himself crowned emperor at a "Versailles Conference of West Africa leaders" (Cheney-Coker 2014, 211)—an echo of Christophe's decision to establish an aristocracy in Haiti and his own building projects, popularly understood as "meant to impress the *blan* (whites / foreigners), meant to provide the world with irrefutable evidence of the ability of the black race" (Trouillot 1995, 35).[3] This mimicry of whiteness and European history as the path to historicity, the means to overcome Hegel's denial of history to Africa and Africans, is emphatically rejected by the novel, and Hegel's claim that the progress of history leads to universal freedom embodied by the state is revealed as a bitterly false promise by events in Kissi. Instead, Tankor's reign, inspired by Christophe, recalls Derek Walcott's characterization of the Haitian revolution as a story of "the corruption of slaves into tyrants" (2002, 93)—an overly simplified understanding that according to Chris Bongie testifies to Walcott's "longstanding disengagement from, his disinterest in and contestation of, History itself" (2005, 74). For Walcott, the assertion that the "sea is History" (1992, 364) is a means to start anew, to assert the validity and vitality of the Caribbean cultures which emerged from the rupture of the Middle Passage, rather than forever lamenting the New World's apparent lack of history. Other Caribbean writers, such as Glissant, do not share Walcott's rejection of history (that

3 Trouillot reports this as the popular interpretation; however, he later notes that one of Christophe's closest advisers, Baron Valentin de Vastey, chancellor of the kingdom, evoked the 1813 completion of Sans Souci and the adjacent Royal Church of Milot in grandiose terms that anticipated Afrocentrism by more than a century: "These two structures, erected by descendants of Africans, show that we have not lost the architectural taste and genius of our ancestors who covered Ethiopia, Egypt, Carthage, and old Spain with their superb monuments" (Trouillot 1995, 36).

is, the European and colonial norm of historicity) and embrace of myth in quite the same way, or to the same extent, but they too are interested in using myth not to *forget* but to reimagine history and thereby disrupt colonial historiography.[4] Glissant advocates a "prophetic vision of the past" (1989, 64), that is, a poetic engagement with history that seeks to disrupt the authority of colonial thought and historiography by "imagin[ing] the world differently: open, fractal and creolizing, always resistant to the habitual appeal of a common aesthetic, and always refusing the security of a final end or purpose" (Parham and Drabinski 2015, 4).

In contrast, *The Sacred River* disengages from history entirely, instead reinstating a strict binary between history and myth. Having rejected the "burden of history," the only "stubborn hope" (Cheney-Coker 2014, 425) left against the ravages of the civil war and the corrupt state are spiritual beliefs in the power of the "sacred river," which in the final scene of the novel is represented as having the power to wash clean: washing clean the young woman whose brutal rape opens the novel, and washing clean the country as magical forces create a sudden storm to wash the guerrilla soldiers and rapists out of Africa into the sea. The novel thereby not only criticizes postcolonial efforts to emulate European imperialism—Tankor's dream of Versailles in Africa—but also suggests that myth might wash Africa clean of its recent history, the worst of which is represented as a diasporic influence. *The Sacred River* therefore draws extensively on diasporic thought and a (misremembered) version of its history *not* in order to extend the Caribbean archipelago across the Atlantic, but to effect a re-continentalization, that is, both a forgetting of diasporic influence in Africa, and a cementing of *pensée continentale,* with its focus on origins, linearity, and hierarchy. The river and ocean are not a medium of connection, but of a renewed separation, as the crimes and tragedies of post-independence West Africa are washed out of the continent to join the other forgotten dead at the bottom of the sea.

Archipelagic Thought and Gender Fluidity

One of the most striking differences between the two very different oceanic imaginaries developed in these novels is their effect on gender representation. It is remarkable that amidst the rich variety that *The Sacred*

4 In a further twist, Bongie suggests that a similar critique of colonial historiography was formulated in the early nineteenth century by none other than Baron de Vastey, the private secretary to Henri Christophe (2005, 79).

River attributes to its West African world— its landscapes, flora and fauna, cuisines, cultural practices, spiritual and religious beliefs, the ethnicities of its inhabitants, and more—there is no indication of any variations of gender or sexuality. Instead, the gender politics of the novel might be described as strenuous heteronormativity: the African women beautiful and seductive in their youth, great cooks and wise advisors to their husbands and children as they age; the men inevitably virile and well endowed. This gender binary underlies the novel's reinstatement of other conceptual dualisms: while politics and history are masculinized domains, magic and spirituality are primarily practiced by women and eunuchs, and the novel's privileging of the latter does little to unsettle this binary thinking. In contrast, *Freshwater* is, among other things, a story of African transgender identity—one that comes to be understood through Ada's engagement with diasporic cultures and effected by surgery in the USA. The protagonist and her occupying spirits must negotiate the contemporary Western discourse of "gender reassignment" and "transitioning" (Emezi 2018, 189) in order to gain access to surgical procedures. The novel, however, offers a counter-discursive understanding of Ada's desire to make changes to her sexed body derived from its (reimagined) Igbo epistemology. In this understanding, Ada is motivated to transform her body into a fitting "vessel" for her collective of multi-gendered but nonhuman spirits, a process described as "mutilating her […] all the way to righteousness" (Emezi 2018, 186). Ada's transition, arrived at via both Santeria beliefs and American medical and trans identity discourses, makes her, if anything, *more* African: the final scene of the novel imagines her in rural Igboland becoming "the source of the spring" (226), that is, becoming like her python goddess mother.

Conclusion

The gender politics of the two novels thus appear to match their more general approach to diasporic and African spirituality and history: while *Freshwater* rejects the logic of origins, traditions, authenticity, and strict binaries, *The Sacred River* tends to reinstate them. In *Freshwater*, the turn to diaspora and archipelagic thought is also a rejection of the logic of lineage and origins in the form of heteropatriarchy, while the imagining of an Africa washed clean of foreign influence in *The Sacred River* is accompanied by a naturalization of heteronormativity. This suggests that the turn to diaspora, at least in African writing, might often be a turn to a form of queer diaspora that works against the logic of genealogy and patriarchy as

much as against the logic of pure cultural origins. The currents that wash the shores of the archipelago—of which Africa might also be an island—are "recurrent, eddying, *troublant*" (Sedgwick 1994, viii).

ORCID®

Gigi Adair https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0198-5775

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