

## **Moving Spirits, Shifting Bodies – Connecting Africa and the Caribbean in Literature**

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### **Literary Bridges Between Africa and the Caribbean**

The foundation of the contemporary Caribbean is the mobility of people, materials, and imaginaries. Individuals from many places have been moving there on different terms, either voluntarily or by force. They have moved there through various means of transportation, and under changing global and local conditions. It is, as Ineke Phaf-Rheinberger suggests, a “region that always seems to be in flux” (2018,p. 94). Terms associated with the studies of the Caribbean are, thus, creolisation, transculturation, multiculturalism and syncretism, among others. The Caribbean may also, as Cuervo Hewitt suggests, be thought of as a “complex space of cultural mediation [which] offers a repetitive and self-referential discourse of mediation by reinventing local memories perceived as African” (2009,p. 19). Caribbean authors writing in English, French, Dutch, and Spanish have reflected upon the hybridity and performativity of their identities, histories and cultures in their works. Edward Kamau Brathwaite affirms that the African presence in Caribbean literatures has a long history, which has led to a remarkable corpus of prose and poetry, both oral and written (see 1974,p. 78).

But what about the “other side”, what about the consciousness of the Caribbean diaspora and the historical, linguistic, religious and artistic connections between Africa and the Caribbean on the African continent and in African literatures? On this “other” side of the Atlantic, the 20<sup>th</sup> century, too, brings change. The *négritude* movement established close connections between the Caribbean, France, and Africa. Later on, from the 1950s, it was the new revolutionary and ideological movements – fights for independence and the tricontinental and Non-Allied movements – in the Caribbean, mainly in Cuba and on the African continent (and here especially in Algeria and Egypt), that influenced and shaped not only politics but also artistic production. These movements thereby raised awareness both of widespread struggles against (neo-)imperialism and of heritage, and in doing so crossed linguistic borders (see Lomas López, 2013; Abdel Nasser, 2020).

The present article, however, moves away from the fruitful 20<sup>th</sup> century to focus instead on contemporary 21<sup>st</sup>-century literature and to show bridges spanning the Caribbean and Africa in the selected novels. Helen Oyeyemi's *The Opposite House* (2007), Akwaeke Emezi's

*Freshwater* (2018), and Rita Indiana's *La mucama de Omicunlé* (2015; published in English as *Tentacle* in 2018) shed new light on the links between the two geographical regions. They expand the notion of hybrid diasporic identities, look beyond the category of race, and participate in the current discourses on gender construction and identity. These novels connect Nigeria, Cuba and the Dominican Republic in multiple, complex forms through their female, non-binary and transgender protagonists. In these novels, deities and spirits, which move between continents, shift between bodies and take the protagonists on spiritual as well as physical journeys, create the main connection between the Caribbean and Africa. Regardless of their engagement with contemporary discourses, the novels do not neglect the past; the transatlantic slave trade and slavery are remembered by the protagonists. They are not forgotten, and neither is their relevance diminished, but they no longer constitute the foremost reference for the protagonists' negotiations of identity. However, they still represent a powerful connection between Africa and the Caribbean. In *The Opposite House*, *Freshwater* and *Tentacle*, the links between the regions are established by the protagonists, among them spirits and deities. *Orishas* and *ogbanje*<sup>i</sup> do not simply constitute part of the protagonists' religions and spirituality; instead, they become independent characters with their own particular qualities, stories, voices and spaces in the novels. They assume agency, interact with the 'realistic' protagonists and interfere in their lives and destinies. The spirits and deities move through space and time on their own, they shift their appearance and assist or initiate the bodily shifting of the 'realistic' characters. The ties between Africa and the Caribbean are revealed only after the novels' protagonists move. Mobility, thus, connects the past and the present as well as the two geographical regions. The 'realistic' and the spirit characters meet only after they leave the borders of their native countries. While moving, they start to experience shifts in their identities, and they begin to engage with them.

### **Shifting of Bodies: The Continuity of Mobility**

*I am that Black A-Rican bruja  
Straight out from the Yoruba  
And my people come from Africa  
Diaspora Cuba  
And you mix that Arawak  
That original people  
Princess Nokia*

As mentioned above, the current Caribbean has been shaped by mobilities across the Atlantic. Those mobilities were characterised by unequal power relations, motivations, and perspectives. Whereas enslaved people and indentured labourers were deprived of their freedom, rights and human agency, settlers arrived in the Caribbean seeking freedom, power and wealth. The hybridisation of cultures in the Caribbean has often been referred to as cosmopolitanism, as Mimi Sheller points out. She stresses that, while mobility constitutes the essence of cosmopolitanism and the creolised cultures of the Caribbean have frequently been described as cosmopolitan, a critical reflection on the connotations and uses of this term is indispensable, as it “only thinly veils a *frisson* of exotic allure in the possibilities of racial and sexual miscegenation suggested by the term” (Sheller 2011, p. 349; emphasis in the original). Furthermore, various theories on cosmopolitanism describe the contemporary world as more mobile than in the past (see Sheller, 2011, p. 352). Among these, Ulrich Beck’s and John Urry’s figure prominently. Their notions of cosmopolitanism, however, are deeply rooted in a modern (from the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century to the 21<sup>st</sup> century) and Western setting, whereby they dismiss notions of earlier cosmopolitanisms and of cosmopolitanisms beyond Europe, as Sheller points out (see Sheller 2011, p. 350). In their article *Cultures of Cosmopolitanism* (2002), Bronislaw Szerszynski and John Urry explore an emergent cosmopolitan culture, but this cosmopolitanism’s beginning is set in late 19<sup>th</sup>-century Europe, rooted in the thoughts of three Western white men (H. Thoreau, Martin Heidegger, E. M. Forster), and explained on the basis of data collected in present-day United Kingdom. The article implicitly suggests that mobility, too, has only started in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Ulrich Beck and Natan Sznaider call for a cosmopolitan turn in the social sciences in their article *Unpacking Cosmopolitanism for the Social Sciences: A Research Agenda* (2006). Their focus is on the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, and they explicitly name 1989 a decisive year for shifts for the current “age of cosmopolitanism”. When the two authors briefly mention other historical moments of cosmopolitanism, they only refer to *European* moments (Ancient Greece, the Alexandrian Empire, the Enlightenment). By not highlighting the fact that these moments are, primarily, European experiences, they universalise them and, implicitly, deny other geographical and cultural regions claims to cosmopolitanism in any given moment of their histories (see Beck, Sznaider 2006, p. 3). Sheller, referring to Beck and Urry and their respective works on cosmopolitanism and in mobility studies, points out that:

[t]here is [an] unexpected resemblance between the two theoretical approaches in that critics have framed both as being specifically *European* social theories that ignore gendered, racial, and colonial power relations by re-centering the European masculine

subject. This is despite the fact that both Beck and Urry are often at pains *not* to do this. Yet, undeniably, their work does at times marginalize the scholarship within the fields of postcolonial and feminist theory that has directly contributed to the very cosmopolitanization of the world that is at stake. (Shelley 2011, p. 352; emphases in the original)

Such claims, as posed by Beck and Urry, clearly pose a problematic contradiction when studying the Caribbean and its history. Diaspora studies, postcolonial studies and mobility studies all focus on the relevance of mobility for both the Caribbean and Africa, thus proving that mobility is neither new nor a predominantly European experience. On the contrary, they highlight precisely that “dislocation, displacement, disjuncture, and dialogism—the sine qua non of cosmopolitanism—as widespread conditions of migrant subjectivity in the world today *and in the past* for many colonial subjects” (Sheller, 2011, p. 353; emphasis in the original). Mobility, which constitutes the foundation of the hybrid creole Caribbean peoples and cultures and has unquestionably transformed the African continent, continues to shape the region and its diaspora and, consequently, is also a frequent motif in literatures from the Caribbean and Africa. Mobility is, furthermore, an important tie between these two geographical regions. The middle passage is, as Jenny Sharpe points out, “a particularly charged signifier within a black literary imagination” (Sharpe, 2009, p. 97). In the selected novels, however, the middle passage is remembered, but it does not comprise the route of mobility nor does the transgenerational trauma of the passage determine the mobilities of the present.

Oyeyemi, Emezi and Indiana employ the image of the middle passage and the remembrance of the slave trade and slavery to stress the ties between the Caribbean and Africa. These ties are decisive aspects of the characters’ identities, especially after the protagonists leave their native countries or change their bodies so that they conform with their gender identities. The novels’ characters question their roots, their belonging to one country, nation, or gender, and are accompanied by spirits during these reflections. The spirits, be they *orishas* or *ogbanje*, do not remain static but are mobile themselves – the experience of the middle passage has changed them as well. Religious beliefs and practices of African heritage, among them obeah, santería and voodoo, reflect the mobility and creolisation of the Caribbean itself and have crossed not only the Atlantic but also racial borders within the Caribbean, as Tim Watson affirms in his article *Mobile Obeah: A Response to “Obeah: Knowledge, Power and Writing in the Early Atlantic World”* (2015).

The novels by the Nigerian-British author Helen Oyeyemi and the Nigerian Akwaeke Emezi present a reconsideration of the connections between Africa and the Caribbean, specifically,

between Cuba and the Dominican Republic, which can only be imagined after moving to a 'neutral' place in the United Kingdom and the United States of America.

*The Opposite House* by Oyeyemi centres around Maja, a young Cuban woman brought up in Germany and England, and Yemaya Saramagua<sup>ii</sup> (Aya), an *orisha* living in the "somewherehouse", as her home is called in the novel, who is able to choose between different doors in the house, which lead her to Havana, Lagos or London respectively. Aya's and Maja's stories unfold in alternating sections; each chapter is dedicated to the storyline of either one of them. Their storylines are never brought together but develop separately. Still, as readers we may perceive the motifs that connect the two characters and their stories: the quest for understanding their own changing identities, the need for simultaneously holding onto their past and accepting their changed identities in the present. While Aya is allowed to leave her sections and to intervene in Maja's life, Maja, as a mortal, cannot glide into the narration of Aya's life. Maja is a hybrid character: she is Afro-Cuban, but identifies as British, as she grew up in London: "In my blood is a bright chain of transfusion; Spaniards, West Africans, indigenous Cubans, even the Turkos – the Cuban Lebanese" (Oyeyemi, 2007/2008, p. 98). Her identity as Afro-Cuban is based on only one memory, to which she holds on desperately. It is the memory of her family's farewell party before leaving Havana, which she cherishes and shares with no one.

I remember a tiny, veiled woman appeared beneath the palm trees at the bottom of the garden of a house in Vedado. Our going-away party. It was full moon, white paper moon; the glass lantern on the tables cast shadowed orange crescents onto the grass. I peered out from beneath the high table, an earthy hinterland where I and another girl with a soft, ruddy face were sitting and eating papaya in the centre of a polished starfish of adult feet. There was a stir as someone else noticed that woman at the end of the garden, the woman who was not one of us. People began asking who she was. And then she began to sing to us out of the falling night. We couldn't understand her words – she mixed Spanish with another language that no one there knew – but the first notes felled me the way lightening brings down trees without explanation or permission.

The girl who was under the table with me began to suffer a fit [...]. (2008,p. 45)

The unknown singer is Aya and the language Maja cannot understand is Yoruba. As the readers find out later, this is the precise moment Aya's powers suffuse Maja (see Cooper, 2009,p. 115). Thus, the latter takes Yemaya's spirit with her, first to Hamburg and then to London. In that human body, the *orisha* shares the gift of singing with Maja, which she discovers unexpectedly. Eventually, Maja becomes a singer in nightclubs (see Oyeyemi, 2007/2008p. 103). Regardless

of the presence of Spanish and Cuban traditions, Cuban food, and conversations about Cuba, Maja does not identify as easily as her parents with the Caribbean island, which to her feels like a distant and unknown place. Instead, she seeks a place for her heterogeneous background in a multi-ethnic Britain at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> centuries (see Cousins, 2012, p. 3). As a consequence of colonialism and globalisation, the United Kingdom, and particularly London, has become home to immigrants and refugees from all over the world. Processes of colonisation and migration create, as Homi Bhabha (1994) explains, hybrid cultures in both centre and periphery, but the British society portrayed in *The Opposite House* does not acknowledge and value this form of hybridity. Instead, a multiculturalism dominated by ‘unspoilt’ British people is described or, as Cousins states: “[...] multiculturalism demands cultural compromises from immigrant communities and continues to hold up the culture of the indigenous white population of Britain as the norm” (2012, p. 2). Cousins illustrates the divisional character of such a notion of multiculturalism not only in terms of Black/White populations and natives/immigrants, but within Black communities as well: “The discourse of blackness, as Oyeyemi deploys it here, is interested in the differences created by slavery, not in common origins” (2012, p. 5). As an adolescent, Maja experiences this division at school when her Black schoolmates bring up her ‘other’ form of being Black: not directly of African but of slave heritage. She is not Black in the same way her schoolmates of direct Nigerian, Ghanaian or Ugandan descent are, as she is even more hybrid than they are:

Dominique was at home sick the day Lucy came up to me at registration, peeped at me through heavy lashes and said, ‘You know, a lot of the others have been saying that out of you and Dominique, we like you better. You’re all right. You’re roots.’

I must have seemed stupid to her. I said, ‘Huh?’ I thought a black girl was a black girl. Why did it come down to a choice between me and Dominique, and not any of the other girls? Then I got it; we were both black without coming directly from the right place. We were the slave girls from Trinidad and Cuba; not supposed to speak Spanish, not supposed to speak English either. I wanted to curse Lucy Cuban-style, but I was afraid she’d understand; she was predicted an A star for GCSE Spanish. (Oyeyemi, 2007/2008p. 96-97)

The Caribbean “cosmopolitanism” and mobility are, thus, not given space either in the dominant white British society nor in the African communities on the margins of that British society; the hierarchisation of races, heritages and positions Maja experiences during her youth is tightly connected to mobility (see Hannam et al., 2006, p. 3). Her ancestors’ forced movement from what was most likely West Africa to the Caribbean constitutes the base for Maja being

perceived as ‘differently black’ by her schoolmates, and her Hispanic Caribbean heritage and immigration in general constitutes an interruption to the British norm, as Cousins explains. Maja’s cosmopolitanism and mobility seem to fall out of the range of the imaginable in contemporary British society: she is black, but not of direct African descent, she is Caribbean, but not from one of the former British colonies. Her ancestors’ and family’s movement has led to a double crossing of the Atlantic and a double crossing of linguistic borders. Consequently, Maja struggles to re-negotiate her own cultural and racial identity throughout her adolescence and early adulthood.

Grasping the processes of othering and differentiation, her “Cuban memory” becomes essential to Maja’s notion of her own identity, both in a racial and in a cultural sense. It constitutes her only bond to Cuba and her own Cubanness, which is independent of her parents and their memories. Thus, she keeps coming back to it throughout the narration, impressed by the voice of the unknown woman and the secret of having witnessed the other girl’s “fit”. In the novel, it is not specified what kind of “fit” Maja refers to. She is the only one who observes it, and as the occurrences of that night remain a mystery to her throughout the narration, it falls to us readers to interpret the “fit”. Unexpectedly, her Cuban identity is shattered, when Magalys, the other girl from under the table, appears in London and imposes her memory of that evening on Maja: there had been no singing woman and the one with the “fit” had been Maja, not her (Oyeyemi 2007/2008, p. 168). At this point, it becomes clear that the “fit” is the moment Aya possesses – or mounts – Maja. With the loss of her “Cuban memory” comes the loss of her (singing) voice. Yemaya’s presence in Maja’s body and soul also manifests itself in less subtle ways. During her childhood years in Hamburg, Maja starts to sleepwalk. When doing so, she is usually accompanied by two girls only she can see – her guiding spirits from the waters (“Often the girls were wet, their clothes soaked through even when the weather outside was dry.” (Oyeyemi 2007/2008, p. 7)<sup>iii</sup>). Although this scene occupies only a small part of the novel, it is an important hint to Yemaya’s presence in Maja’s body and soul for the readers, and a relevant memory for Maja, even though she does not link it explicitly to either Cuba or her “Cuban memory”. Instead, she associates the two girls with her mother Chabella, with whom she has a close but nevertheless conflicted relationship. The conflicts between mother and daughter are rooted in their mutual misunderstanding of the other’s struggle with identity.

Chabella constructs her own Afro-Cuban identity based on her memories of Cuban life, her connection to her family, especially to her grandmother and father, and Afro-Cuban spiritual and religious beliefs. Whereas for Maja, London constitutes the zone of contact with Africa, Chabella perceives Africa as part of herself, a fact also perceived by her daughter: “When she

[Chabella] prays to the saints for intercession, her Spanish is damaged and slow because she is moving her thoughts from Africa to Cuba and back again” (Oyeyemi 2007/2008,p. 12). The transgenerational memory of slavery, which is lost to Maja, remains an undeniable reality to her parents:

The Word ‘slave’ is a big deal to Chabella and Papi; neither of them can get out from under it. It is blackness in Cuba. It is sometimes bittersweet, for such is the song of the *morena*; it is two fingers placed on the wrist when a white Cuban is trying to describe you. Papi tries to systematise it and talk about the destruction of identity and the fragility of personality, but he is scared of the Word. Mami hides inside the Word, finds reveries in it, tries to locate a power that she is owed. (Oyeyemi 2007/2008, p. 24; emphasis in the original)

Whereas Chabella embraces her African roots through spirituality, Juan, Maja’s father, rejects this spirituality; he does not define his heritage as African but stresses its hybridity and Caribbeanness. He does not perceive himself as African in any way. He vehemently affirms that he is only Cuban, more specifically Afro-Cuban, but does not show the need to hold onto the transgenerational memory of the forced crossing of the Atlantic. He does, however, emphasise the importance of the transgenerational memory of slavery in Cuba and the repressions Afro-Cubans suffered during the past centuries. The mobility that has shaped the Caribbean has lost its importance to Juan; paradoxically, he perceives its hybrid and cosmopolitan form as more or less static.

Interestingly, while Chabella’s thoughts move back and forth from England to Cuba, from Africa to Cuba, her body remains static. Mobility creates both movement and stasis (see Hannam et al., 2006, p. 4) and both aspects play a significant role in *The Opposite House*. Throughout the novel, the readers find Chabella either in her and Juan’s home in Peckham or in Maja’s house; Maja and Aya, on the contrary, are constantly moving. This difference between the characters accentuates the ongoing mother-daughter-conflict in the novel. Chabella is firm in her beliefs and does not question her roots or her Afro-Cubanness. She is aware she does not belong in England, but she cannot go back to Cuba. Therefore, it is only in her thoughts that she can move to her roots, the island where she was born and the continent her ancestors were forced to leave. Maja and Aya are portrayed in these moments of transformation in their identities, of questioning their roots and their belonging. The process of change is symbolised by their constant walks through cities – they are two *flanêuses* who simultaneously explore cities and their own identities:



Yemaya, in love with Cuba, went walking in La Regla, repeating after the Columbus in her mind's eye, 'This is the most beautiful land I have ever seen.' (Oyeyemi, 2007/2008, p. 89)

All the way to Papi and Chabella's I watch my shadow, try to step on it, feed it in every hungry, unlucky crack in the pavement. Nobody looks at me strangely. In Mami and Papi's part of Peckham, jerk chicken, Obalende *suya* and shops stocking Supermalt and Maggi sauce are seconds away. (2007/2008, p. 139; italics in the original)

Although mother and daughter share their spirituality, attend Catholic mass on a regular basis and spend weekends in a convent near London, Maja cannot make sense of Chabella's Afro-Cuban religion, *santería*. Regardless of her having been surrounded by *orishas*, altars, stories and rituals throughout her life, *santería* opens up a chasm between the two generations. The first-person narrator, Maja, tells the history of slavery and syncretism from the perspective of the *orishas*, and even emphasises the syncretic links between *santería* and Catholicism (Oyeyemi, 2007/2008, pp. 24-25), but she remains distant and does not adopt *santería* the way her mother has. Her distance from Cuba and her rootedness in the hybrid space of London impede her from feeling as protected by the *orishas* as Chabella does:

My heart bounces on the end of a string whenever I hear the names of *Chabella's Orishas*. Those gods who trip us up, then haul us up, then string us up, who understand that it hurts, but also understand that it needs to. They're deadly friends from stories, their names braided into explanations for the heavy nights edged with uncertain light like dull pearls, the nights when Chabella would wake me up at hourly intervals, pleading with me to sip a little, just a little, of one herbal tincture or another. Nights when I protested with all my soul to be allowed to sleep instead. (Oyeyemi, 2007/2008, pp. 35-36; emphasis mine)

Maja usually refers to the deities as "Chabella's Orishas", marking even linguistically a frontier between her and Afro-Cuban syncretic religion. Her scepticism, however, is characterised by respect and a certain degree of confidence. Her father, a scholar and a 'rational' man, is vehemently opposed to practicing this religion (or any religion, for that matter), and breaks the bridge between Africa and the Caribbean that his wife has internalised: "They [the *orishas*] make Papi impatient. 'Those are Yoruba gods,' he tells Mami. 'And you are not Yoruba. You are a black Cuban. There is a difference. [...] To us, these gods are historical artefacts'" (Oyeyemi 2007/2008, p. 36). For Chabella, a *santera*<sup>iv</sup>, the difference between Afro-Cubans and Yoruba people is almost non-existent, at least in a religious context<sup>v</sup>, whereas for Juan, Yoruba culture is only one aspect of his Caribbean heritage. His identity is clearly centred

around Cuba and Caribbean hybridity, whereas Chabella incessantly highlights her Yoruba heritage. She shares her rituals with Maja, thus expecting to pass on to the next generation what she has learnt from her grandmother, but ultimately fails in her attempt to do so. Chabella's and Juan's identities were shaped in Cuba, and to them it is clear beyond a doubt that they are Afro-Cubans. Their children's identities, however, are shaped far away from that Caribbean island. For Maja, Cuba consists of only one memory, and for her brother Tomás', who was born in London, it is just a country he has been told of. Therefore, the loss of her only "Cuban memory" is highly destructive to Maja.

These struggles, represented in the realistic part of the novel, which is the part revolving around Maja and her family, pervade the more surreal and magical part of *The Opposite House*: Aya's story. She lives in an imagined home, the somewherehouse, and is able to move between Lagos, Havana and London. Together with her family, Olorun (the supreme God), and the other *orishas*, she has accompanied the people who worshipped them on the slave boats, and who were taken from West Africa and brought to the Caribbean, where they have started to forget their old selves and to change. Aya is one of the many aspects of the Yoruba *orisha* Yemaya, who, like many other *orishas*, constitutes a part of the cultural imaginaries the enslaved people took from West Africa to the Caribbean. Just like the human beings, the *orishas* have changed throughout the generations and have creolised. The creolised Yemaya occupies a prominent role in *The Opposite House* and in *Tentacle*, thus, a brief introduction to Yemaya, her stories, qualities and powers is considered indispensable for a profound understanding of Oyeyemi's and Indiana's novels.

### **Yemaya's Fluid Movements**

Yemaya<sup>vi</sup> has many names: Yemoja in Nigerian Yoruba religion, Yemayá in Cuba, Yemanjá, Iemanjá and Janaína in Brazil (see Otero, Falola, 2013, p. xix). She is the mother of both salt water and sweet water and is the Universal Queen (see Cabrera, 1980, p. 20); thus, being its mother, the water's fluidity is considered to be characteristic of Yemaya, Yemaya is also associated with women, motherhood, family, and the arts. Her name has various translations, one of which is 'mother of fish'. Furthermore, she has been linked to the Gelede masks and the spirit children embodied by those masks, connecting Yemaya to the powers of the *aje*, female spiritual forces (see Otero, Falola, 2013, p. xix). Otero and Falola stress her importance for explorations of gender performativity: "Since Yemoja is noted as a primordial female *orisa*, she is central to how Yoruba religious discourses enact the power of performing gender as a reflexive critique and satire of these roles in society and culture" (Otero, Falola, 2013, p. xix;

emphasis in the original). Additionally, Yemaya is said to have healing powers (see Otero, Falola, 2013, p. xxiv). In Cuban *santería*, the Virgin of Regla, always portrayed as a black Madonna, is her Catholic counterpart. Yemaya is, though, not a unique and exceptional case of a water deity to gain popularity in the African diaspora. Yemaya joins a number of sea and river goddesses, one of whom is Idemili from the Igbo cosmology. This goddess is far better known as Mami Wata, “a general name for the hybridized river and sea goddesses popularized across Africa and the African diaspora in the nineteenth century” (Krishnan, 2012, p. 2). Yemaya’s fluidity, which we will see is also characteristic of Aya in *The Opposite House*, is a trait Madhu Krishnan points out in her study of Nigerian first- and third-generation authors:

[The] water goddess thus serves as an allegory for the shifts in representation in the Nigerian novel, as writers move from seeking to legitimize their cultural identifications to an outside audience historically dismissive, to a sense of reclamation of tradition that strives, instead, towards emergent and heterogeneous collectivities that surpass the binaries of male/female, Africa/Europe, and colonizer/colonized [...]. (2012, p. 15)

While the conclusion that the water goddess serves as an allegory for shifts that surpass the binaries of Africa/Europe, or rather the binary Caribbean/Europe, is valid for *The Opposite House*, Oyeyemi’s novel does not contest the male/female binary. Gender remains a firm, unshifting category, whereas the spirits’ gender fluidity becomes a characteristic trait for Ada and Acilde in *Freshwater* and *Tentacle*.

The hybridisation of the deities in Africa and the diaspora is reflected through the splitting into “aspects” of the *orishas* in *The Opposite House*. Aya’s family grows considerably after they leave Nigeria, since each of its members, including Aya, is split and doubled into what the novel refers to as “aspects” once they arrive in the diaspora. Her aspects are “Yemaya Ataramagwa”, “Yemaya Achabba”, “Yemaya Oquette”, and “Yemaya Saramagua”. The latter is Aya, the novel’s protagonist, whose story we read. After the African Yemaya splits into these aspects, most of them depart from the somewherehouse, spread around many countries, and Aya never gets to meet them again (see Oyeyemi 2007/2008, p. 111). Just like Aya, they also change and become unrecognisable:

On arrival [to Cuba], communications arrived from others; word from Haiti, from Brazil, from Jamaica, from America. Even from England there were some whispers, and then all the talk stopped. The conversations had become too strange. The family’s aspects abroad had changed. It was hard to know what the difference was, but it was there. (2007/2008, p. 111-112)

The discussions between Chabella and Juan resonate in Aya's story. In the diaspora, the *orishas* change so much that they no longer recognise each other when they meet again. The somewherehouse is where these changes and shifts take place: "The house is a crucible, which condenses history and enacts the process whereby African deities live and syncretize with foreign gods and myths, in Cuba and in London, or die in their failure to do so" (Cooper, 2009, p. 112). In her article, Cooper explains how in the novel, the somewherehouse is a symbol of the Caribbean and of the processes of creolisation or transculturation. It is in the somewherehouse that African *orishas* and European mythology meet, or rather clash, once Proserpine enters and aims to change Aya. The *orisha* resists for a long time and seeks refuge in Lagos before she realises that even Africa has changed, and that Lagos is not the same it was before. Soon enough, Proserpine becomes aware she has to change, too, in order to survive (see Cooper, 2009, p. 112). Cooper assures here:

The fusion has to be in two directions, between Africa and Europe and Europe and Africa, for the survival of both. European myths and legends have to metamorphose such that they are able to find the nourishment that will sustain the Yoruba travelers. [...] For their own part, the African gods, who have been taken with the slaves, must survive by adopting Christian incarnations and amalgams. (2009, p. 112)

Those who do not readjust, who do not mix and become hybrid, have to die, like the Kayodes who share the somewherehouse with Aya. The novel thus suggests that it is only after the *orishas* and spirits move away from their native territories that Africa and the Caribbean meet and that it is precisely in this very place that a new, hybrid identity, one which unites the cultures, traditions, languages and beliefs of both regions, is created.

As in Oyeyemi's novel, in Akwaeke Emezi's *Freshwater* the encounter between Africa and the Caribbean only takes place after the characters move away from both Africa and the Caribbean. Ada, one of the text's protagonists and narrators, comes to the United States as a university student and meets Malena, a young woman from the Dominican Republic. *Freshwater* is an autobiographical debut novel by the Igbo and Tamil author Emezi. Movements, migration and hybridity are as decisive for Ada's family as they are for Maja's. The daughter of a Nigerian father and a Malaysian mother, she is raised in a multicultural family, which does not remain in one place but moves between England and Nigeria during Ada's childhood. Saachi, Ada's mother, spends a few years working in Saudi Arabia supporting the family financially and, therefore, has to leave her two daughters with their father in Nigeria. Later in Ada's life, her mother moves to the United States, but this time her daughters follow. It is not for political

reasons – as in *The Opposite House* – that the family leaves; instead, they choose to move abroad for educational and professional reasons.

Fluidity and queerness are dominant characteristics of Emezi's novel, both on the level of content and of form. Like Oyeyemi, they<sup>viii</sup> choose fragmentation and multiple perspectives as narrative strategies, but, unlike Oyeyemi, they give the spirits, the *ogbanje* and Asughara, the opportunity to speak in the first person: in the case of the former spirit in the first-person plural and in the case of the latter in the first-person singular. In fact, the 'realistic' person Ada is the narrator of only two out of the novel's twenty-two chapters.

Whereas Aya's presence in Maja's body and mind is only insinuated, the various spirits sharing Ada's mind have names, particular qualities – good and bad –, and stories of their own. The spirits are the two *ogbanje*, who have formed part of Ada since her birth, Asughara, who is born only after Ada is raped by her boyfriend, and Saint Vincent, the last of the spirits to grow inside Ada. The spirits each obtain a voice and power as they struggle against each other as well as against Ada; struggles which do not remain hidden inside the human body and mind they all share, as they influence Ada's behaviour and are noticed by the people around her. Ada's family, friends and fellow students, and occasionally even Ada herself, interpret these struggles as signs of mental illness, but as the *ogbanje* let us readers know, there are other characters who can see them for what they are and who doubt the adequacy of a Western medical approach. In this context, they narrate the story of the transatlantic slave trade and slavery from the perspective of the gods, evoking Aya's story in *The Opposite House*:

We have told you about some of them [the gods] –Yshwa, for example. Ala, the controller of minor gods, our mother. But there are others, and anyone who knows anything knows this, knows about the godly stowaways that came along when the corrupters stole our people, what the swollen hulls carried over the bellied seas, the masks the skin on the inside of the drum, the words under the words, the water in the water. The stories that survived, the new names they took, the temper of the old gods sweeping through new land, the music taken that is the same as the music left behind. And, of course, the humans who survived, [...] Those humans recognized us easily; it was as if they could smell us under the Ada's skin or feel us in the air that heaved around her. (Emezi, 2018, pp. 87-88)

Less straightforward than in *The Opposite House*, the story is still the same, though *Freshwater* does not explicitly refer to the Caribbean but to the diaspora in general. Still, it is striking that the only character able to "recognise", "smell" and "feel" the *ogbanje* should be an Afro-

Dominican woman, Malena, and that they should meet in the United States, a long way from both Africa and the Caribbean.

Ada and Malena do not perceive themselves to be part of a multicultural, cosmopolitan or hybrid US-American society. They are, rather, positioned at the margins of what is portrayed as a predominantly white and Anglo-Saxon society; they are othered not only because of their skin colour but because of their unusual cosmopolitanism and their history of mobility. The foundation of their friendship is, however, not made up of shared experiences as foreign students in Virginia; instead, it is the transgenerational memory of colonialism and the transatlantic slave trade that performs this function. The cultural imaginaries the enslaved people from West Africa brought with them, and their development in the Caribbean, are what bind the two female protagonists together. Ada recognises Malena's cosmopolitanism and her spirituality as related to her own cultural context and, reciprocally, Malena encounters her heritage in Ada.

On one occasion, Malena is "mounted" by a spirit in Ada's, and, therefore, the *ogbanje's* presence. The novel specifically uses this unusual word to describe Malena being possessed by a spirit. It is a direct translation of the Spanish term "montar" used by mediums. By adopting the verb "montar"/"mount" into English, the text implicitly stresses the experience's rootedness in Hispanophone Caribbean beliefs. Simultaneously, the ties between Africa and the Caribbean are expressed on a linguistic level as well as on the level of content. The spirits seize the opportunity to communicate with that other spirit, thus fortifying the bond between Africa and the Caribbean as well as between Ada and Malena. The *ogbanje* acknowledge the similarities and differences between themselves, the African spirits, and the Caribbean spirit who mounts Malena: "We loved Malena because she smelled like us" (Emezi, 2018, p. 89). Malena herself reiterates this act of recognition:

"There's a claim on your head, Ada," she told us. "Back home. Something wants you back home."

"Who?" The Ada didn't know the things we did. None of this sounded like anything to her.

"I don't know." Malena pushed her black hair off her face and poured a glass of Johnnie Walker. "These are West African gods, not mine, so I can't speak to them like that, you know?" [...] The problem is that when you have saints, old-school saints, trying to communicate with you, they don't understand. It's like talking to your grand-grand-granddaddy about the Internet." (2018, p. 89-91)

Malena, a spiritual and religious person, is deeply rooted in her African heritage and thus shares a similar epistemology to Ada. Her efforts to talk to the “old-school saints” resemble the attempt to connect more deeply to her ancestors who were brought to the Dominican Republic as slaves and who might have spoken a similar language to the spirits claiming Ada.

Malena, contrary to other characters, does not doubt Ada’s sanity; for her, self-harm and atypical behaviour do not necessarily indicate mental illness, as she thinks there might be a different reason for their presence. So, without Ada’s knowledge, she performs rituals to save her friend from self-harm and suicide. Her workings, though different to what they know, are acknowledged and appreciated by the *ogbanje*:

It is like we said, we loved her [Malena], from back when we all lived in the mountains, for the way she loved us, all of us, and never made the Ada feel insane. For the way she was a witness. She worked for the other gods, yes, but she loved us and perhaps she did help save the Ada; perhaps what she worked was part of the veil-tearing that brought Asughara here, the third birth. We do not know these other gods, so we cannot verify the impact of what their workers wrought. (Emezi 2018, p. 92)

Similar to *The Opposite House*, an encounter between Africa and the Caribbean, the acknowledgement of a shared heritage and its different developments seem to be imaginable only after the characters move to a different, neutral place.

Malena recognises that Ada’s changing personality and her queer identity are tightly connected to the spirits that live inside Ada. As a practitioner of Afro-Dominican religion, Malena is familiar with the qualities and powers of spirits and deities. She knows that many of them have the power to transform into other aspects of themselves and that some are even characterised by constant fluidity, like Yemaya for instance. Furthermore, Malena is convinced that the spirits and deities are capable of sharing their powers of transformation and fluidity with human beings. Saint Vincent, the fourth spirit apart from Asughara and the *ogbanje* inhabiting Ada, is the one to share his need for bodily transformation with her and to push her towards a shift of the body:

And with Saint Vincent, our [the *ogbanje*’s] little grace, taking the front more than he used to, the body, as it was, was becoming unsatisfactory, too feminine, too reproductive. That form had worked for Asughara – those breasts with the large, dark areolae and nipples she could lift to her mouth – but we were more than her and we were more than the saint. [...]

When Ewan left and Asughara allowed Saint Vincent to take the Ada’s body and start binding her chest – all of these things were in preparation for a shedding, the skin

splitting in long seams. The first time the Ada wore the binder, she turned sideways in a mirror and Saint Vincent laughed out loud in relief, in joy, in the rightness of the absence. (Emezi 2018, pp. 187-188)

Ada decides to have a mastectomy to adapt her body to her non-binary gender identity. During the process of bodily transformation, Saint Vincent is the most powerful spirit inside her and he gives Ada strength throughout that entire period.

Like Saint Vincent, in *The Opposite House* and *Tentacle*, the orisha Yemaya accompanies the protagonists during processes of bodily transformation, be it pregnancy or transition from one sex to another. **Shifting of Bodies: Of Pregnancy and Queerness**

*Mother I need  
mother I need  
mother I need your blackness now  
as the august earth needs rain.*

Audre Lorde, From the House of Yemanjá

“Indeed, though often depicted as the eternal mother, Yemoja can perform different kinds of gender roles, and *she has the power to shift*, change and display an ambiguous sexuality in mythology and ritual” (Otero, Fayola, 2013, p. xxi; emphasis mine). Yemaya, the mother of all waters, is also the patron of mothers and motherhood. In her poem *From the House of Yemanjá*, Audre Lorde implores Yemanjá/Yemaya to come to her and be with her because she needs her, the mother. In *The Opposite House*, Yemaya comes to mothers regardless of whether they are calling her.

It seems useful to stress that after her relocation to the Americas, “a dramatic shift in the understanding of Yemoja’s nature, and in particular, the perception of her as a woman [took place]. [...] Therefore, female *òrisá* [...] came to embody several classic Western female archetypes” (Sellers, 2013, p. 141; emphasis in the original). These archetypes are the mother, the wife, the temptress, and the ‘fallen woman’ – once pure but now corrupted. In the Americas, as Sellers points out, the *orisha* cedes her independence to male domination. Colonialism and slavery forced Western gender norms even on deities and spirits (see Sellers, 2013, p. 141).

The realistic section of *The Opposite House* starts with Maja’s discovery of her unexpected pregnancy. In this moment when her body starts to change, turns against her and becomes home



to another human being, and when she struggles with her pregnancy, unsure whether this is the right moment to become a mother, her story moves back and forth between the present and the past, between her life and Yemaya's presence in it. The pregnancy triggers memories of her childhood in Hamburg, London, and Cuba. It leads us readers back to the moment she met Aya, and Aya left a piece of her in Maja; it evokes Maja's struggles with her identity and her "hysterical", as she calls her anxiety and depression from which she has been suffering since her adolescence. It also reminds Maja of the time when Chabella was pregnant with Tomás. On one occasion, Chabella decides to dance *apataki* and is possessed by Aya:

One morning Mami came downstairs wrapped in nothing but a cloth of preternatural white, with strands of her hair swimming around her face, strands of her hair tied with little flags of white cloth. [...] Because she was pregnant with Tomás, Tomás became part of the outfit too: it was he that made the cloth coast out in front of her and around her; it was he that made the white flow. [...] A drumbeat jumped up, collided with another one, and the two chased each other around and around – rhythm. [...] The drum talk was threaded through with fast, loud *bembe* singing, Yoruba patched with Spanish. I couldn't understand a word, but I understood that it was a story, and that the way Mami began to dance, she knew which story. [...] Mami became Yemaya Saramagua, a sure, slow swell in her arms and her hips like water after a long thirst, her arms calling down rain, her hands making secret signs, snatching hearts. (Oyeyemi 2007/2008, pp. 106-109)

Chabella dresses for a *santería* ritual, listens and dances to a song for Yemaya, which tells the story of her unreciprocated love for Ogun Arere and, as it may happen in any ritual, is possessed by Yemaya. Even the outsiders, Maja and Juan, notice the changes in Chabella, and recognise the *orisha*. This being the only instance of Chabella dancing *apataki* after having left Cuba, Maja concludes: "[...] it must have been some kind of Tomás-related thing, like a craving" (Oyeyemi 2007/2008, p. 110). Chabella turns to Yemaya during her pregnancy; she feels the urge to call her through the drums and the *apataki*. The *orisha* responds to her calls, and as the great mother she protects the other, human mother by possessing her and leaving a piece of herself inside Chabella as well as inside the unborn baby. The novel thus suggests that Aya constitutes an integral part of Maja's family, as almost every member, except Juan, carries her within their bodies and souls.

In contrast to the predominantly heterosexual, and in the case of Maja's parents even heteronormative, characters in *The Opposite House* – Maja's closest friend, Amy Eleni, a lesbian, constitutes the only exception – gender fluidity and queerness predominate in

*Freshwater* and in *Tentacle* by the Dominican author Rita Indiana. Unlike *Freshwater* and *The Opposite House*, *Tentacle* is not set in a space apart from Africa and the Caribbean but in the latter region itself, namely in the Dominican Republic. As with *Freshwater*, fluidity and queerness determine both the novel's content and form.

The dystopian novel is set in a not too distant future and shifts in a fragmented and overlapping manner between various temporal and physical spaces (Santo Domingo in 2027 and 2037; Sosúa Project in 2001; Sosúa in the 17<sup>th</sup> century; Playa Bo in 1991). None of the narrative threads follows a linear chronology; the narrative is rather shaped by the protagonists' consciousness, their feelings and emotions (see Herrero-Martín, 2019, p. 58). Spirits and *orishas* are not protagonists as such, they do not have either a proper voice or a story; instead, they merge with the mortal characters, and their powers fuse with the mortals' desires and transform – shift – the mortal bodies. In *Tentacle*, the *orishas* and their *caminos* (avatars) still occupy a prominent role despite their lack of a voice and their own storyline comparable to *The Opposite House* and *Freshwater*. A clear example of their importance is the first chapter's title, "Olokun", which immediately emphasises the *orisha*'s relevance to the narration. Olokun is tightly connected to Yemayá, the other *orisha* in *Tentacle*.

Sellers explains the relationship between Yemayá and Olokun as follows:

For instance, in Cuban mythology, Yemayá is often said to be hermaphroditic. This is not terribly surprising. In Yorùbà tradition, many *òrisà* are depicted with ambiguous sexualities. While Yemoja is most often referred to as female, she is no exception to this tendency. In Santería, she has a *camino* called Olocun or Olókun. Generally recognized among the Yorùbá outside Cuba as a separate deity and the god of the sea, Olocun in this case is essentially an alternative, male personality of Yemayá. (Sellers, 2013, p. 137; emphasis in the original)

The power to shift between genders is the essential trait which the main mortal character in *Tentacle*, Acilde, needs, seeks and uses to save the Dominican Republic from a natural disaster. Acilde Figueroa, an androgynous young woman who desires a sex change, is the housemaid to Esther Escudero, whose consecrated name as a daughter of Yemayá is Omicunlé.<sup>viii</sup> Esther, herself a Dominican like Acilde, was initiated in *santería* as an adult in Cuba:

In Matanzas [a Cuban city] I met my padrino [godfather], Belarminio Brito, Omidina, child of Yemayá, and he was so bad, as noxious as gas. But he consecrated me and returned me to life. [...] In the prophecy delivered at my initiation ceremony, it was revealed I had been cursed since I was in my mother's womb. [...] Omidina named me

Omicunlé, after the cloak that covers the sea, because it was also prophesied that *my followers would protect the house of Yemayá*. (Indiana, 2018, pp. 17-18; emphasis mine) Acilde, destined to become one of those followers, is still sceptical and curious at the beginning of the novel. She accepts the readings of the cowrie shells by Esther, a ritual in santería which permits the santeros, santeras or babalawos to “read” the destiny of those who seek their advice, and though enjoys them, she loses faith in them as soon as Esther leaves. One night, Acilde gives in to her curiosity and enters the shrine to Esther’s *orishas*:

Acilde heard a hum coming from the room where they kept the altar to Yemayá, the goddess of the sea to whom Omicunlé was devoted. Esther was sleeping. Acilde dared to go in. It smelled of incense and flower-scented water, of old fabric and the perfume of the sea held within conch shells. She approached the altar, whose centrepiece was a replica of a Greek jar some three feet tall. [...] All over the jar were offerings and the attributes of the goddess: an old oar, a ship’s wheel, a feathered fan. [...] But inside, perfectly illuminated and oxygenated by a mechanism adapted to the jar, Acilde saw a live sea anemone. (Indiana, 2018, pp. 19-20)

Yemayá and her male *camino* (or avatar) Olokun both represent the sea, which has been devastated after the catastrophic tsunami of 2024. Yemayá, who has already recognised Acilde as one of her daughters, calls her, and wants to share her secret with the mortal: the fact that she possesses an anemone, to which the English title refers, and which has become an animal of immeasurable worth at that point of climate change and destruction of the environment.

It is Acilde’s prophecy, though still unknown to her, to rescue the sea and the Dominican Republic as a daughter/son of the *orishas* of the sea:

The oracle had told Esther Escudero, Omicunlé, that she would receive the Chosen One in her own home, and that she would meet death at his hands. She’d accepted that future calamity with equanimity. She trusted Eric to carry out her plan to have him initiate Omo Olokun when she was no longer here. (Indiana 2018, p. 50)

Acilde’s initiation as Omo Olokun is not achieved through the traditional ritual. Instead, Eric injects her with the Rainbow Drug, which transforms Acilde’s female body into a male one (see Indiana 2018, pp. 50-52). The painful metamorphosis from female to male resonates with Yemayá’s own fluidity and her transformation into Olokun. Fluidity and transformation do not end at this point: Acilde separates into two more avatars – or aspects, like Aya in *The Opposite House* – Giorgio (born out of this initiation in combination with a Taíno ritual) and Roque. They act on the novel’s different levels of time and plot, gaining consciousness of their ability to shift between space and time and, in the end, choose to lose this consciousness in order to

fulfil the prophecy and save the ocean, the realm of Yemayá and Olokun. The legacy of European neoliberalism destroys the ocean, whereas West African and indigenous (Taíno) epistemologies offer the solution to the problem. The (possible) salvation of humanity and the environment can, thus, be achieved through spirituality, but only a spirituality derived from the Caribbean's Yoruba and Taíno heritage (see Herrero-Martín 2019, p. 58).

The protagonists in *Tentacle* are in constant movement. Their mobility is not limited to movements of bodies in geographic spaces but expands to the possibility of moving through time. After her initiation as Omo Olokun, Alcilde becomes Giorgio, an Italian patron of art and protector of the environment, who lives in the Dominican Republic in 2001, before the climatic catastrophes destroy the country and the surrounding ocean. Eric's body dies after the ritual of initiation but he himself does not disappear entirely. In the past, he is Iván, Giorgio's close friend. The shift in body and the movement through time are not portrayed as unconscious processes; on the contrary, at the end of the novel Giorgio reflects on whether to save the country and the environment or his changed body:

Everything with Argenis had been an accident. Giorgio hadn't imagined another human could replicate himself in the past the way he did. [...] Quickly and overwhelmingly, he [Giorgio] had before him the real goal of his mission: to give Said Bona a message – as president, to avoid accepting biological weapons from Venezuela. To tell him that, in the future, when he was elected president, he needed to reject them: Giorgio had to convince him. Giorgio had to convince him. But just as quickly, he began to think about the other consequences of that decision: if Said Bona followed his advice and there was no chemical spill after the tsunami, would Esther Escudero go looking for him? Would Eric Vitier find him among the hustlers of El Mirador? Would he be crowned in that shanty in Villa Mella and allowed the life he'd come to appreciate? Would Giorgio disappear? (Indiana 2018, p. 127-129)

Thus, mobility becomes fundamental for the progress of the narration in *Tentacle* on various levels. Through the movements between the Dominican Republic and Cuba, Esther becomes a *santera* and meets Erick. Their shared knowledge and mission facilitate Alcilde's bodily transformation and her movement into the past and into Giorgio's life. This journey to the past is indispensable to save the future of the Dominican Republic. The knowledge and the powers for the mobilities between geographical and temporal spaces are rooted in mobilities of the distant past: the transatlantic slave trade and the arrival of Yoruba religion in the Caribbean.

Rita Indiana's *Tentacle* suggests that the heritage and the epistemology which originated in the traditions of those who colonialism either killed to extinction (Taíno) or enslaved is

indispensable for an understanding of the Caribbean, its past and its future. Africa is ubiquitous in the Caribbean – in the novel, *santería* even becomes the state religion. Climate change and the approaching collapse of the seas are, in this novel, inherently connected to humans' loss of spirituality and connection to their legacy. It is only the re-connection with spirituality and those legacies that might save the Caribbean.

## Conclusion

A comparative analysis of *The Opposite House* by Helen Oyeyemi, *Freshwater* by Akwaeke Emezi and *Tentacle* (*La mucama de Omicunlé* in Spanish) by Rita Indiana reveals contemporary representations and reflections of the strong links between Africa and the Caribbean, specifically West Africa and the Hispanophone Caribbean countries of Cuba and the Dominican Republic; links which are, primarily, rooted in mobilities. The three novels suggest that the transatlantic slave trade, slavery, and the epistemology, traditions and religions which enslaved people took from Africa to the Caribbean are still of great relevance. The focus shifts, though. The young protagonists no longer struggle with the legacy of slavery, the memory of their enslaved ancestors or the loss of the ‘mother’ continent of Africa. Instead, they reflect on, and negotiate, their hybrid identities, while still moving between countries and continents. These movements are not forced but voluntary. The protagonists come to the new countries as educated professionals or students; thus, there is a notable shift in power compared to colonial times. Nevertheless, the protagonists remain at the margins of the societies in the centre and seek connections which tie them to their heritage.

Spirits and deities occupy prominent positions in these three novels. They become the ‘personification’ of the ties between Africa and the Caribbean, and with their shifts in space and corporality, the mortal bodies of the ‘realistic’ protagonists also move and shift.

The two Nigerian-born (though still hybrid) authors, Helen Oyeyemi and Akwaeke Emezi, only seem able to imagine the encounter between Africa and the Caribbean and the discovery of their mutual, though transformed, heritage after moving away from their native countries in the periphery to others in the centre (the United Kingdom and the United States of America). There, the Caribbean cosmopolitanism cannot be understood by those who belong to the dominant culture. The novels, thus, reinforce Mimi Sheller’s critique of theories that analyse cosmopolitanism from a Eurocentric perspective and neglect to include postcolonial and feminist analyses of the term and its history.

The Dominican author, Rita Indiana, who has grown up in the Caribbean, surrounded by the presence of the Caribbean’s African heritage, represents the encounter with Africa in the Caribbean itself. Mobility between the Dominican Republic and Cuba as well as between different time periods is essential to the narration and the development of the characters in her novel. Their bodily transformations are possible only because they consciously move through time and space.

Movements and transformations constitute the shared quality of the ‘realistic’, that is to say, human, protagonists and the spirits and deities. Spirits, *orishas* and *ogbanje* become more than

just images or distant deities the characters pray to or ask for guidance in these novels. They narrate their own stories of movement – shifting between continents – and of transformation – shifting between genders and identities. As their stories and voices develop in *The Opposite House*, *Freshwater* and *Tentacle*, they merge with the mortal protagonists, interfere in their stories and leave bits of themselves in those other characters.

Migration, political oppression and dissidence, pregnancy, gender identities and climate catastrophes are the main topics these three novels engage with, and through the agency of spirits and deities, these issues are linked to the connections between Africa and the Caribbean, while reflections on the differences and transformations of epistemologies, languages and religious rites are also given space in these novels. The spirits and deities serve as allegories for those transformations, those shifts, and it is them who help the mortals to understand how these changes first came about.

The analysis of the selected contemporary novels constitutes an important contribution to mobility studies on various levels. First of all, it highlights the possibilities the concept of cosmopolitanism offers for the studies of contemporary Caribbean and African literary texts and of reclaiming cosmopolitanism as a truly cosmopolitan term, that is, of not perceiving it merely as a Western experience rooted in determined moments of European history and movement. Secondly, the novels show how cultural and religious imaginaries adapt to new contexts after individuals or entire peoples transfer them from one geographical and cultural space to another. Furthermore, the novels emphasise the fact that both mobilities and adaptations of imaginaries are ongoing processes. They are not limited to a specific historical moment or one particular movement but keep transforming according to new circumstances and discourses. Lastly, the work by Oyeyemi, Emezi and Indiana demonstrates that the connections between Africa and the Caribbean, which derive from the forced mobility from one region to the other, continue to be relevant factors for both African and Caribbean identities, especially once they meet in countries of the centre.

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<sup>i</sup> *Orishas* (also spelled *orichas* in the Hispanophone Caribbean or *orixás* in Brazil) are deities in Yoruba religion and syncretic religions in the Americas, which derive from Yoruba religion. In Igbo religion, *ogbanje* are believed to be evil spirits, which plague families. Usually, they are imagined as children.

<sup>ii</sup> Saramagua is Yemaya’s praise name in Cuban santería (see Sellers 2013, 142).

<sup>iii</sup> In her debut novel *The Icarus Girl* (2005), Oyeyemi explores such a friendship between a ‘real’ girl and her spirit friend in more depth.

<sup>iv</sup> Oyeyemi refers to Chabella as a *santero* throughout the novel; in Spanish, that is the male form, so *santera* would be more correct.

<sup>v</sup> As Wande Abimbola argues, the similarities between *santería* and African Yoruba religion are unmistakable, though there are also differences regarding the syncretism, which do not exist in African Yoruba religion. There are also substantial differences in their respective rituals (see 2003: 106-108).

<sup>vi</sup> The spelling of the *orisha*’s name varies. In this article, it correspondingly varies, too, as the spelling of each of the referenced texts shall be used.

<sup>vii</sup> Emezi identifies as genderfluid and Emezi’s preferred pronoun is ‘they’, which shall be respected and used in this article whenever referring to the author.

<sup>viii</sup> In the original Spanish title, the references to Acilde and Omicunlé are explicit: *La mucama de Omicunlé* (*The Housemaid to Omicunlé*).