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Myth, magic and metaphysical alterity in Ayanna Lloyd Banwo's *When We Were Birds*

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Abstract

Contemporary Caribbean literature frequently revisits ancestral memory, folklore, and indigenous spiritual traditions as means of interrogating the enduring effects of colonialism and cultural displacement. Ayanna Lloyd Banwo's novel *When We Were Birds* (2022) exemplifies this literary tendency through its engagement with Afro-Caribbean cosmology, oral storytelling, and beliefs surrounding death and the afterlife. This paper examines how Banwo employs myth, magic, and metaphysical alterity to challenge colonial forms of othering and to recover marginalized cultural epistemologies. Drawing on postcolonial perspectives on cultural memory, hybridity, and resistance, the study undertakes a close textual analysis of the novel's major characters, Yejide and Emmanuel, alongside its representations of ancestral spirits, oral traditions, and sacred landscapes. The analysis demonstrates that Banwo reimagines death not as a finality but as a continuum connecting the living and the dead, while simultaneously validating Afro-Caribbean spiritual practices such as Orisha and Obeah traditions. The novel further reveals how storytelling, memory, and inherited beliefs function as mechanisms of cultural survival and resistance against colonial erasure. The study concludes that *When We Were Birds* transforms myth and folklore into powerful modes of reclaiming identity, preserving collective memory, and affirming alternative ways of knowing within contemporary Caribbean literature.

Keywords: Ayanna Lloyd Banwo, Caribbean literature, Afro-Caribbean cosmology, myth, oral tradition, cultural memory, postcolonial resistance, metaphysical alterity

Introduction

Caribbean literature has long served as a site for the recovery of histories, cultures, and belief systems marginalized by colonial rule. Emerging from the experiences of slavery, displacement, and



cultural hybridity, Caribbean writing frequently engages with questions of identity, memory, resistance, and belonging. Writers from the region have often turned to folklore, mythology, oral traditions, and indigenous spiritual practices to preserve cultural knowledge and challenge colonial narratives that dismissed non-Western epistemologies as primitive or irrational. Consequently, myth and spirituality occupy a significant place in Caribbean literary expression, functioning not merely as cultural artifacts but as living modes of knowledge that connect communities to their ancestral pasts.

Among contemporary Caribbean writers, Ayanna Lloyd Banwo has gained critical attention for her imaginative engagement with Afro-Caribbean traditions and spiritual cosmologies. Her debut novel *When We Were Birds* (2022) intertwines a love story with a meditation on death, ancestry, memory, and cultural inheritance. Set in a fictionalized Trinidad inspired by the multicultural realities of the Caribbean, the novel follows Yejide St. Bernard, a young woman who inherits a sacred responsibility for guiding the dead, and Emmanuel Darwin, a Rastafarian gravedigger struggling to reconcile his spiritual beliefs with his occupation. Through their experiences, Banwo explores the relationship between the living and the dead while foregrounding Afro-Caribbean beliefs that survived centuries of colonial suppression.

Recent scholarship on Caribbean literature has emphasized the role of folklore, oral traditions, and cultural memory in resisting colonial erasure and reconstructing collective identities. However, relatively little attention has been paid to the ways in which *When We Were Birds* conceptualizes myth and spirituality as alternative epistemological systems that challenge dominant colonial frameworks of knowledge. Existing discussions of the novel frequently focus on its treatment of grief, love, and mortality, while its engagement with metaphysical alterity and Afro-Caribbean cosmology remains underexplored. This gap invites a closer examination of how Banwo employs mythological and spiritual elements not only as narrative devices but also as forms of cultural resistance.

The concept of metaphysical alterity is particularly useful for understanding the novel's representation of marginalized spiritual worldviews. Colonial discourse often positioned African-derived beliefs and practices as forms of superstition, thereby constructing them as the cultural "other." In contrast, Banwo presents these traditions as legitimate systems of meaning that offer continuity between past and present, life and death, memory and identity. Through the novel's portrayal of ancestral spirits, oral storytelling, and sacred cultural practices, the narrative challenges Western binaries between the rational and the supernatural.

This paper argues that *When We Were Birds* employs myth, magic, and Afro-Caribbean spiritual traditions to resist colonial forms of othering and to reclaim ancestral memory as a living cultural force. Drawing on postcolonial perspectives on cultural memory, hybridity, and resistance, the study examines how Banwo reimagines death as a continuum rather than an endpoint, validates marginalized spiritual epistemologies, and demonstrates the enduring power of oral traditions in preserving cultural identity. By situating myth and folklore within contemporary Caribbean experience, the novel affirms alternative ways of knowing and contributes to broader conversations about memory, heritage, and postcolonial self-definition.

Myth, Afro-Caribbean Cosmology, and Cultural Memory in *When We Were Birds*

Myth has occupied a central position in Caribbean literature as a repository of cultural memory and a means of preserving identities disrupted by colonialism, slavery, and forced migration. For communities whose histories were frequently excluded from official colonial records, oral narratives, folklore, and spiritual traditions became important vehicles for transmitting collective knowledge across generations. These cultural forms not only preserved ancestral beliefs but also enabled colonized peoples to maintain a sense of continuity with their African heritage despite geographical displacement and cultural fragmentation. As cultural memory theorists argue, memory functions as a dynamic process through which societies reconstruct and reinterpret their past in response to present circumstances (Assmann, 2011). In this context, myth serves as a living archive that sustains communal identity and cultural

belonging.

Ayanna Lloyd Banwo's *When We Were Birds* draws extensively on Afro-Caribbean cosmology to create a narrative world in which the boundaries between the living and the dead remain permeable. Rather than presenting spirituality as an irrational or supernatural phenomenon, the novel treats it as a legitimate system of knowledge through which characters understand their place within the world. The narrative foregrounds ancestral presence, ritual practices, and inherited responsibilities that connect contemporary Caribbean life to African-derived traditions. In doing so, Banwo challenges colonial epistemologies that historically dismissed indigenous and African spiritual systems as superstition.

Central to the novel is the character of Yejide St. Bernard, whose family possesses the inherited ability to guide and communicate with the dead. This gift is transmitted through the maternal line, emphasizing the role of women as custodians of cultural memory and spiritual knowledge. The transmission of this responsibility from mother to daughter symbolizes the continuity of ancestral traditions across generations. Significantly, Yejide does not acquire her spiritual role through formal instruction but through stories, memories, and inherited experiences. Such a representation highlights the importance of oral tradition as a mechanism through which cultural knowledge survives beyond written records. The ancestral voices that guide Yejide embody a form of collective memory that refuses erasure and remains active within the present.

The symbolism of birds occupies a particularly important place within the novel's mythic framework. The title *When We Were Birds* evokes a cosmology in which human beings once possessed a closer relationship with nature and spiritual freedom. Within Caribbean folklore, birds frequently function as mediators between earthly and spiritual realms, symbolizing movement, transformation, and transcendence. Banwo adapts this symbolic tradition by associating flight with the movement of souls and the continuity of existence beyond physical death. The image of carrying the dead "in their wings" transforms birds into figures of remembrance, suggesting that ancestral connections remain intact despite the apparent separation between life and death. Consequently, the novel reimagines death not as absence but as an ongoing relationship sustained through memory and ritual.

The novel also engages with Afro-Caribbean spiritual traditions rooted in West African cosmologies, particularly those associated with Orisha and Obeah practices. Historically, such traditions survived the Middle Passage and adapted to Caribbean cultural environments despite systematic colonial attempts to suppress them. In colonial discourse, these belief systems were frequently represented as signs of primitiveness or cultural backwardness. Banwo, however, reverses this perspective by depicting them as sources of wisdom, healing, and communal continuity. The spiritual practices represented in the novel enable characters to maintain meaningful relationships with their ancestors and to navigate experiences of grief, loss, and uncertainty. Through this portrayal, the narrative validates alternative epistemologies that exist outside Western rationalist frameworks.

Equally significant is the novel's emphasis on naming and remembrance. The repeated suggestion that remembering the dead keeps them present reflects an Afro-Caribbean understanding of memory as an active and communal practice. This perspective resonates with African concepts such as *Nommo*, which associate language and speech with creative and transformative power. Within the novel, storytelling becomes more than a narrative activity; it functions as a spiritual responsibility through which the living sustain the presence of their ancestors. Oral narratives therefore operate as acts of cultural preservation, ensuring that histories excluded from official archives continue to circulate within the community.

Through its integration of mythology, ancestral spirituality, and oral tradition, *When We Were Birds* demonstrates that cultural memory is neither static nor confined to the past. Instead, memory emerges as a living force that shapes contemporary identities and sustains connections between generations. Banwo's use of Afro-Caribbean cosmology ultimately challenges colonial narratives of cultural loss by presenting ancestral knowledge as resilient, adaptive, and enduring. The novel thus transforms myth from a relic of the past into a powerful medium for cultural survival and resistance.

Death, Ancestral Presence, and the Continuum Between the Living and the Dead

One of the most distinctive features of *When We Were Birds* is its reconfiguration of death as a state of continuity rather than cessation. While Western philosophical traditions have frequently conceptualized death as a definitive separation between the living and the dead, many African and Afro-Caribbean belief systems regard death as a transitional stage within an ongoing cycle of existence. Banwo's novel draws upon this worldview to challenge dominant understandings of mortality and to affirm the enduring presence of ancestors within communal life. Through its portrayal of spiritual inheritance, ancestral guidance, and sacred spaces, the narrative constructs a cosmology in which the dead remain active participants in the lives of the living.

The novel's representation of Yejide's inherited responsibility exemplifies this alternative understanding of death. Following the death of her mother, Yejide assumes the role of guiding spirits and maintaining the fragile boundary between different realms of existence. Rather than presenting this inheritance as a burden rooted in superstition, Banwo frames it as a sacred duty grounded in familial and cultural continuity. The transmission of spiritual knowledge across generations suggests that death does not terminate relationships; instead, it transforms them into new forms of connection. The deceased continue to influence, guide, and communicate with the living, thereby reinforcing the idea that ancestral presence remains an integral aspect of communal identity.

This understanding of death is further reflected in the novel's treatment of memory. Throughout the narrative, remembrance functions as a means of sustaining the existence of those who have passed away. The act of recalling names, stories, and experiences becomes a ritual of preservation through which the dead continue to occupy a place within collective consciousness. Such a perspective aligns with cultural memory theory, which views remembrance as an active social process rather than a passive recollection of the past (Assmann, 2011). In Banwo's narrative universe, memory serves as a bridge connecting generations and ensuring that ancestral voices remain audible within contemporary life.

The setting of Fidelis Cemetery is particularly significant in articulating this worldview. More than a burial ground, the cemetery functions as a symbolic archive of history, memory, and cultural survival. It contains the traces of countless lives whose experiences continue to shape the present. The cemetery therefore operates as a liminal space where temporal boundaries become unstable and where interactions between the living and the dead are rendered possible. Through this setting, Banwo transforms a conventional symbol of loss into a site of remembrance, continuity, and spiritual encounter. The character of Emmanuel Darwin provides an additional perspective on the novel's engagement with mortality. As a Rastafarian employed as a gravedigger, Emmanuel occupies a position that places him in constant proximity to death while simultaneously confronting him with spiritual questions regarding destiny, faith, and belonging. His initial discomfort with the cemetery reflects broader tensions between rational explanations of death and inherited cultural beliefs about ancestral presence. As the narrative progresses, however, Emmanuel becomes increasingly receptive to dimensions of reality that transcend material explanations. His evolving relationship with Yejide and the spiritual world demonstrates the novel's insistence that human experience cannot be fully understood through empirical knowledge alone. Banwo's treatment of death also serves as a critique of colonial epistemologies. Colonial systems frequently dismissed African-derived spiritual beliefs as irrational or primitive, privileging Western secular understandings of reality. In contrast, *When We Were Birds* presents Afro-Caribbean cosmology as a coherent and meaningful framework through which individuals interpret grief, loss, and existence itself. The novel validates forms of knowledge that have historically been marginalized, thereby challenging hierarchical distinctions between legitimate and illegitimate ways of knowing. This process constitutes a significant act of postcolonial resistance, as it reclaims cultural practices that colonial discourse sought to suppress.

Furthermore, the recurring presence of ancestral spirits within the narrative destabilizes rigid binaries between life and death. The dead are neither entirely absent nor wholly detached from the living

world. Instead, they exist within an interconnected network of relationships that transcends physical boundaries. Such a representation reflects an understanding of existence grounded in continuity, reciprocity, and communal responsibility. By emphasizing these connections, Banwo redefines mortality as part of a broader spiritual ecology in which every life remains linked to those that came before.

Ultimately, *When We Were Birds* portrays death not as an ending but as a transformation that preserves the bonds between generations. Through its depiction of ancestral guidance, cultural memory, and spiritual inheritance, the novel challenges dominant conceptions of mortality and affirms the enduring significance of Afro-Caribbean cosmologies. In doing so, it presents death as a site of cultural knowledge and metaphysical possibility rather than final disappearance. The narrative thereby transforms mourning into remembrance and absence into presence, revealing the profound role of ancestral memory in shaping contemporary Caribbean identity.

Metaphysical Alterity and Colonial Othering: Reclaiming Marginalized Ways of Knowing

The concept of alterity has occupied a central place in postcolonial studies, particularly in analyses of how colonial discourse constructs and marginalizes cultural differences. Colonial regimes often established their authority by representing colonized peoples as the “other”—irrational, primitive, and fundamentally different from the supposedly civilized and rational West (Said, 1978). Such representations extended beyond racial and cultural distinctions to encompass spiritual beliefs, indigenous knowledge systems, and non-Western cosmologies. African-derived religious practices and metaphysical traditions in the Caribbean were frequently dismissed as superstition, witchcraft, or folklore, thereby relegating them to the margins of legitimate knowledge. In *When We Were Birds*, Ayanna Lloyd Banwo challenges these colonial assumptions by foregrounding Afro-Caribbean spirituality as a valid and meaningful framework for understanding existence, memory, and identity.

The notion of metaphysical alterity is particularly useful for examining the novel’s treatment of spirituality. In this context, metaphysical alterity refers to forms of spiritual knowledge and cosmological understanding that have historically been excluded from dominant Western epistemologies. Rather than presenting these traditions as exotic or irrational, Banwo integrates them into the everyday experiences of her characters. The supernatural does not function as an extraordinary intrusion into reality; instead, it constitutes an ordinary dimension of life. The coexistence of ancestral spirits, inherited gifts, and sacred obligations within the narrative suggests that multiple realities can exist simultaneously. Through this representation, the novel destabilizes Western binaries that separate the rational from the supernatural and the material from the spiritual.

Yejide’s spiritual inheritance exemplifies this challenge to colonial epistemological frameworks. Her ability to communicate with and guide the dead is not portrayed as an aberration requiring explanation or skepticism. Instead, it is treated as a legitimate responsibility rooted in ancestral knowledge and communal tradition. The narrative grants authority to experiences that would often be dismissed within Western rationalist discourse. By centering Yejide’s perspective, Banwo invites readers to engage with a worldview in which spiritual communication is not merely symbolic but constitutes a valid mode of understanding reality. Consequently, the novel rejects the assumption that empirical knowledge represents the only path to truth.

The representation of Orisha- and Obeah-inspired spiritual traditions further reinforces this epistemological intervention. Historically, colonial administrations frequently criminalized or stigmatized African-derived religious practices because they served as sources of cultural cohesion and resistance among enslaved populations. These practices survived through oral transmission, ritual performance, and communal memory despite persistent attempts at suppression. Banwo’s novel reclaims these traditions by depicting them as repositories of wisdom, healing, and cultural continuity. Rather than reproducing colonial stereotypes, the narrative emphasizes their significance in sustaining relationships between individuals, communities, and ancestors.

The novel's engagement with hybridity also complicates simplistic oppositions between tradition and modernity. As Bhabha (1994) argues, postcolonial identities emerge within spaces of cultural negotiation where multiple influences intersect. The characters in *When We Were Birds* inhabit a society shaped by African, Indigenous, European, and Caribbean cultural formations. Their experiences reveal that cultural identity is neither fixed nor homogeneous but constantly evolving through interaction and adaptation. Yet Banwo demonstrates that hybridity does not require the abandonment of ancestral traditions. Instead, the novel portrays cultural inheritance as capable of adapting to contemporary realities while retaining its spiritual significance. In this way, Afro-Caribbean cosmology becomes a dynamic and living presence rather than a relic of the past.

Language and storytelling constitute additional sites through which the novel resists colonial othering. Colonial systems frequently privileged written texts and institutional knowledge while devaluing oral traditions. Banwo counters this hierarchy by emphasizing the power of storytelling, remembrance, and spoken language. Stories function as vehicles of historical transmission, preserving experiences that have been excluded from official narratives. The repeated emphasis on remembering names and recounting ancestral histories demonstrates how oral practices sustain collective identity across generations. Through these acts of narration, marginalized voices reclaim cultural authority and challenge historical silences imposed by colonial structures.

Moreover, the novel's spiritual worldview offers an alternative conception of reality that prioritizes relationality over separation. Colonial thought often relied upon binary distinctions between self and other, civilization and primitiveness, reason and superstition. Banwo's narrative undermines these oppositions by emphasizing interconnectedness among humans, ancestors, nature, and the spiritual realm. The living and the dead, the past and the present, and the material and the metaphysical are represented as mutually dependent rather than mutually exclusive categories. This holistic worldview challenges the epistemological foundations upon which colonial othering was constructed.

By foregrounding Afro-Caribbean spiritual traditions, ancestral memory, and oral knowledge systems, *When We Were Birds* reclaims forms of understanding that have historically been marginalized within colonial discourse. The novel transforms metaphysical alterity from a marker of exclusion into a source of cultural strength and epistemological authority. Banwo thereby demonstrates that alternative ways of knowing are not remnants of a forgotten past but vital resources for negotiating identity, memory, and belonging in the contemporary Caribbean. Through this intervention, the novel contributes to broader postcolonial efforts to decolonize knowledge and to affirm the legitimacy of diverse cultural epistemologies.

Oral Tradition, Language, and Cultural Resistance

Oral tradition occupies a foundational place in Caribbean cultural history. For communities whose histories were disrupted by slavery, displacement, and colonial domination, storytelling became a crucial means of preserving collective memory and transmitting cultural knowledge. Folktales, songs, proverbs, rituals, and ancestral narratives functioned not only as forms of entertainment but also as repositories of history, identity, and resistance. In the absence of institutional power and access to written archives, oral traditions enabled enslaved and colonized peoples to maintain connections with their cultural heritage and to preserve alternative understandings of the world. Consequently, storytelling emerged as a powerful cultural practice through which marginalized communities asserted their humanity and historical continuity.

In *When We Were Birds*, Ayanna Lloyd Banwo foregrounds oral tradition as a living force that sustains relationships between generations. The novel repeatedly emphasizes the significance of stories inherited from parents, grandparents, and ancestors. These narratives are not presented as static remnants of the past; rather, they continue to shape the experiences and identities of the living. Yejide's spiritual inheritance is transmitted primarily through memory, storytelling, and familial knowledge rather than

through formal instruction. Her understanding of the dead, the responsibilities she inherits, and her connection to ancestral spirits are all mediated through oral transmission. In this sense, storytelling functions as a mechanism of cultural continuity that preserves knowledge across generations.

The novel's emphasis on remembrance also highlights the transformative power of language. Throughout Afro-Caribbean traditions, spoken words often possess spiritual and communal significance. The act of naming, remembering, and recounting stories allows individuals to maintain connections with those who have passed away. This perspective resonates with the African concept of *Nommo*, which associates language with creative and generative power. Within this framework, speech is not merely a tool of communication but a force capable of shaping reality and sustaining communal bonds. Banwo's narrative reflects this understanding by suggesting that the dead remain present through acts of remembrance and narration. To speak a name is to acknowledge a continuing relationship, and to tell a story is to resist forgetting.

The preservation of language itself constitutes an important dimension of cultural resistance in the novel. Caribbean literary traditions have long challenged colonial linguistic hierarchies by incorporating local speech patterns, Creole expressions, and indigenous modes of narration into written texts. Such practices contest the privileging of standardized colonial languages and affirm the legitimacy of local cultural expression. Banwo's prose reflects the rhythms, cadences, and linguistic textures of Trinidadian speech, creating a narrative voice deeply rooted in Caribbean cultural experience. Through this stylistic choice, the novel resists linguistic homogenization and preserves forms of expression that carry historical and cultural significance.

Language in the novel also functions as a site of identity formation. Colonial systems frequently sought to suppress indigenous and African cultural practices by controlling language and modes of representation. The preservation of oral narratives therefore becomes an act of resistance against cultural erasure. Stories allow communities to remember histories that have been excluded from official records and to preserve perspectives marginalized by dominant historical narratives. Banwo demonstrates that cultural survival depends not only upon the preservation of traditions but also upon the continued circulation of stories that give meaning to communal experience.

Furthermore, the novel portrays storytelling as a communal rather than individual practice. Knowledge is shared collectively through conversation, ritual, and remembrance, creating networks of connection that transcend temporal boundaries. Through oral narratives, ancestors remain present within contemporary life, and the experiences of previous generations continue to inform the present. This communal understanding of memory challenges individualistic conceptions of identity by emphasizing interconnectedness and shared cultural inheritance. Oral tradition thus becomes a means through which communities sustain continuity despite historical experiences of displacement and fragmentation.

The relationship between storytelling and resistance is particularly significant within a postcolonial context. Colonial domination often depended upon controlling historical narratives and delegitimizing alternative forms of knowledge. By foregrounding oral traditions and ancestral stories, *When We Were Birds* reclaims cultural histories that colonial discourse sought to marginalize. The novel demonstrates that stories possess the power to preserve memory, transmit values, and sustain identities across generations. In doing so, Banwo affirms the enduring importance of oral culture as a form of intellectual, spiritual, and cultural resistance.

Ultimately, the novel presents language and storytelling as vital instruments of cultural survival. Through oral tradition, ancestral knowledge remains accessible, collective memory is preserved, and cultural identities are continually renewed. Banwo's representation of storytelling underscores the idea that traditions do not survive simply because they are inherited; they survive because they are repeatedly spoken, remembered, and retold. In this way, *When We Were Birds* celebrates the resilience of oral culture and its capacity to sustain communities in the face of historical erasure and cultural displacement.

Conclusion

Ayanna Lloyd Banwo's *When We Were Birds* represents a significant contribution to contemporary Caribbean literature through its imaginative engagement with Afro-Caribbean spirituality, ancestral memory, and oral traditions. By weaving together mythology, folklore, and metaphysical inquiry, the novel challenges dominant colonial narratives that have historically marginalized African-derived systems of knowledge. Rather than treating myth and spirituality as remnants of a distant past, Banwo repositions them as dynamic and living forces that continue to shape cultural identity and communal experience in the contemporary Caribbean.

This study has demonstrated that the novel employs myth and Afro-Caribbean cosmology as powerful instruments for preserving cultural memory and resisting historical erasure. Through the character of Yejide and her inherited responsibility to guide the dead, Banwo foregrounds the enduring relationship between ancestors and descendants. The narrative presents death not as a final rupture but as a transformative process that sustains connections between generations. In doing so, the novel offers an alternative understanding of mortality rooted in continuity, remembrance, and spiritual reciprocity. Such a perspective challenges Western conceptions of death as an absolute ending and affirms the significance of ancestral presence within Caribbean cultural consciousness.

The analysis has further shown that the concept of metaphysical alterity is central to the novel's postcolonial intervention. By validating spiritual beliefs, ancestral communication, and Afro-Caribbean cosmologies, Banwo contests colonial epistemologies that privileged Western rationalism while dismissing indigenous and African-derived traditions as irrational or superstitious. The novel reclaims these marginalized forms of knowledge and presents them as legitimate frameworks through which individuals interpret existence, grief, identity, and belonging. In this respect, *When We Were Birds* participates in broader efforts to decolonize knowledge by affirming the value of alternative epistemologies and cultural worldviews.

Equally important is the novel's emphasis on oral tradition and storytelling as mechanisms of cultural survival. Banwo illustrates how stories, memories, and spoken language function as repositories of collective history, enabling communities to preserve identities that have been threatened by displacement, slavery, and colonial domination. Through acts of remembrance and narration, the dead remain present, ancestral wisdom continues to circulate, and cultural traditions are renewed across generations. Storytelling therefore emerges as both a spiritual responsibility and a form of resistance against forgetting. The novel suggests that cultural continuity depends not merely upon inheritance but upon the active practice of remembering, speaking, and retelling.

Furthermore, Banwo's integration of Orisha-inspired spirituality, ancestral memory, and Trinidadian cultural traditions demonstrates the resilience and adaptability of Afro-Caribbean heritage. The novel rejects rigid distinctions between tradition and modernity by portraying cultural practices as evolving yet enduring forms of knowledge. In doing so, it highlights the capacity of marginalized communities to sustain meaningful connections with their histories while navigating contemporary realities. This representation reinforces the idea that cultural identity is not static but continuously shaped through memory, adaptation, and communal participation.

Ultimately, *When We Were Birds* transforms myth, magic, and spirituality into powerful modes of cultural affirmation and resistance. Through its exploration of death, ancestry, oral tradition, and metaphysical alterity, the novel reclaims voices and histories that have often been excluded from dominant narratives. Banwo's work demonstrates that ancestral knowledge remains a vital resource for understanding the present and imagining alternative futures. The novel therefore stands as a compelling testament to the enduring power of memory, storytelling, and spiritual inheritance within Caribbean culture. By restoring visibility and legitimacy to Afro-Caribbean cosmologies, *When We Were Birds* contributes to ongoing conversations about identity, belonging, and the decolonization of knowledge in contemporary literary discourse.

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