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At the Crossroads of Life and Death: The Body in Akwaeke Emezi's *The Death of Vivek Oji* (2020)

Abstract. This article aims to analyze the representation of embodiment in Akwaeke Emezi's *The Death of Vivek Oji* (2020). Exploring the novel's narrative, this paper argues that Emezi employs Igbo spiritual beliefs to dismantle gender taxonomy rooted in the Western episteme. Furthermore, because the novel presents Vivek's existence as deviating from the linear trajectory of human life, the main character's embodied form transcends the notion of materiality. In this light, the main protagonist's departure from life emerges as a form of emancipation from the rigid boundaries of liberal humanist conceptualizations of the body. Following the footsteps of their Nigerian literary predecessors, Emezi portrays life on Earth as a cyclical process, interweaving both the living and the dead. Given the above, Vivek's corporeal death is not presented as a demise, but rather as a step towards imagining a world in which the existence of African queer bodies is not tainted with precariousness.

Keywords: corporeality; Nigerian literature; postcolonial literature; spirituality; queer African body; *The Death of Vivek Oji*

1. Introduction

In a world marked by anti-gay violence, the existence of queer bodies is often precarious, and revealing one's sexual identity may be seen as dicing with death. Such is the case of the main protagonist in Akwaeke Emezi's novel entitled *The Death of Vivek Oji* (2020). When one day a female named Kavita opens up the door to her house only to find her dead child at her feet, the novel invites its readers to, on the one hand, unravel the mystery of Vivek's death, but also to ponder a more nuanced understanding of the queer African body. Set in southeastern Nigeria in the 1980s and 1990s, the narrative weaves together Vivek's loved ones' endeavours to grapple with his death, but most importantly, it attempts to answer the question, posed by Vivek himself, meaning "If nobody sees you, are you still there?" (Emezi, *The Death* 38).

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2. Fleshing out the History of the Queer African Body

In Nigeria, there are still voices that claim non-heterosexual manifestations of the body as a product of Western modernity which does not align with the traditional experiences of African indigenous cultures. Furthermore, due to the current social and legal climate, the country's non-heterosexual inhabitants confront significant obstacles on a regular basis; Nigeria's judicial system publicly condemns same-sex desire, creating a hostile and dangerous environment for its queer population, driving many to conceal their identities or to seek refuge in more welcoming countries. On top of that, the Same-Sex Marriage Prohibition Act, passed in 2014, criminalizes not only same-sex marriages but also public demonstrations of affection between same-sex couples and their witnesses, that is, "individuals who are aware of same-sex relationships, including those who run gay clubs and organisations" (Balogun and Bissel 116).

However, regardless of these circumstances, all Africa has a long history of same-sex relationships. As Sylvia Tamale notes, although heterosexuality held prominence as the primary form of sexuality in precolonial Africa, as was the case in other parts of the world, and most communities highly prioritized procreation, there is evidence which suggests that same-sex desire is no stranger to African history. To illustrate this point, Tamale provides an example of the Langi community of northern Uganda, where effeminate males known as "*mudoko dako*" were regarded as females and were allowed to marry other men (35). Additionally, in her groundbreaking study entitled *Male Daughters, Female Husbands: Gender and Sex in an African Society*, Ifi Amadiume argues that in the precolonial society of her hometown in Nniobi, located in southeastern Nigeria, the disconnection between biological sex and ideological gender paved a way for women to assume roles traditionally associated with men or be recognized as 'males' in terms of power and authority and, as a result, they were allowed to marry other women. What is more, she highlights that since these roles were not strictly defined as masculine or feminine, there were no repercussions for such behaviours—"As such roles were not rigidly masculinized or feminized, no stigma was attached to breaking gender rules" (Amadiume 185).

Additionally, in *Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe*, Hortense Spillers sets out to differentiate terms such as body and flesh, emphasizing this distinction as a fundamental aspect of assessing positions of subjugation and freedom. According to Spillers, "flesh" precedes the conceptualization of the "body" (67). To put it differently, in the equation of dividing society into fully-fleshed humans and non-humans during the slave trade era, Black flesh was marked as "that zero degree of conceptualization," deprived of any value (67). Furthermore, Spillers argues that anti-blackness gave way to the "ungendering" of Black individuals; she asserts that the Black body was commodified in terms of quantity, transcending gender categorizations, as both female and male identities were treated as dehumanized entities (67). In this light, anti-blackness denied Black body its humanness, reducing Black people to enslaved bodies bereft of gender:

> That order, with its human sequence written in blood, *represents* for its African and indigenous peoples a scene of *actual* mutilation, dismemberment, and exile. First of all, their New-World,

> diasporic plight marked a *theft of the body*—a willful and violent (and unimaginable from this distance) severing of the captive body from its motive will, its active desire. Under these conditions, we lose at least *gender* difference *in the outcome,* and the female body and the male body become a territory of cultural and political maneuver, not at all gender-related, gender-specific. (67)

Drawing on Spillers' theorization of the ungendering, C. Riley Snorton takes a closer look at the Black experience from a period predating the present-day gender classification, and he highlights the enduring historical connection between Black identity and gender mutability. In *Black on Both Sides,* Snorton examines slave narratives, interpreting acts of fugitivity as a form of gender performance, where cross-dressing emerges as a "way of seeing fungible flesh as a mode for fugitive action" (12). In other words, Snorton conceptualizes gender mutability as a site of emancipation, with captive bodies playing a crucial role in shaping the contemporary discourses of transgender identity—"In this regard," he continues, "captive flesh figures a critical genealogy for modern transness, as chattel persons gave rise to an understanding of gender as mutable and as an amendable form of being" (57). Thus, assertions that consider contemporary behaviours diverging from conventional gender norms inconsistent with the essence of Africanness seem devoid of theoretical grounds. "Such claims," as Tamale points out, "are simply reductionist oversimplifications of extremely complex human phenomena that are impossible to bind in racialized or ethnicized bodies" (36).

3. The Shift of Queer Narratives in Nigerian Literature

While the first generation of African writers, including Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka, alluded to the presence of non-heteronormative expressions of sexuality in their novels, such as *Things Fall Apart* and *The Interpreters,* these renderings, according to Lindsey Green-Simss, are not discernible at first glance—"Soyinka, like Chinua Achebe, gestures toward the presence of queer love but does not actually bring it into discourse" (140). Furthermore, in his article, Chris Dunton highlights the reluctance of the first generation of African writers to provide an accurate representation of gay relationships among Africans. He contends that these representations would not necessarily have to fall within Western patterns of self-representation. Instead, he suggests, homosexual encounters in African literature have been met with "outbursts of silence," and associating homosexuality with the Western world has contributed to the consolidation of this silence (Dunton, *'Wheyting'* 448). However, it is worth pointing out that the aforementioned essay was published in 1989. From that point onward, significant changes and modifications have taken place in the Nigerian literary scene. With the increased popularity of social media platforms and an expanding body of Nigerian writing, the views of third-generation Nigerian authors who publicly oppose anti-homosexual laws are becoming harder to ignore. This phenomenon has not escaped Dunton's attention; more than two decades after publishing the aforementioned essay, he notes "as doors are shut and bolted it seems the hammering on those doors gets louder" (*Tuning into the Polyphony* 5). What is more, Adriaan van Klinken and Ezra Chitando argue that while the African queer body is often marginalized and disregarded, queer activists

and communities in Africa employ a strategy of storytelling to combat the stigma surrounding African queerness; they "reclaim and affirm their embodied existence by sharing the stories of their lives" (129). Although, as Katherine McKittrick points out, the act of sharing these stories of "[B]lack livingness and ways of knowing" may elicit discomfort and fear, such narratives are essential in relieving the deep-seated burdens of historical oppression (*Dear Science and Other Stories* 3). These shared accounts, according to McKittrick, pave the way to confronting the dominant systems of knowledge. "Sharing", she explains, "signals collaboration and collaborative ways to enact and engender struggle" (7). Among those Nigerian literary works which engage in a battle against discrimination targeting sexual minorities in Nigeria, one can distinguish Chris Abani's *Graceland* (2004), Jude Dibia's *Walking with Shadows* (2007), Chinelo Okparanta's *Under the Udala Trees* (2015), Romeo Oriogun's poetry collection *Sacrament of Bodies* (2020), Arinze Ifeakandu's *God's Children Are Little Broken Things* (2022), and Akwaeke Emezi's *The Death of Vivek Oji* (2020). Hence, the growing polyphony representing diverse modes of sexual expression in Nigerian literature contributes to breaking down the doors Dunton hints at.

4. The Body in Akwaeke Emezi's *The Death of Vivek Oji* (2020)

Born in Nigeria to an Igbo father and Tamil mother, Akwaeke Emezi (they/them) often draws inspiration from their roots, weaving their own biography into their novels. Identifying as a non-binary trans person, the author taps into the liminal spaces and ties their body of writing by common thematic threads, including the multitude of selves, spirituality, and gender fluidity. Their first novel, entitled *Freshwater,* follows the story of the Ada, who occupies the in-between space between the spiritual and the human. As an *ogbanje*, she is inhabited by several spirit entities, each with their own sexual desires that translate into her embodied form. Similarly, in *The Death of Vivek Oji*, the main character's sexual preferences encompass both men and women. What is more, Vivek liberates from the strict binary boundaries of male and female; as he grows older, his physical appearance starts to acquire attributes conventionally regarded as feminine despite his family's sceptical attitudes. Instead of trying to conform and fit into the general dichotomous distinction between male and female, Vivek fluctuates between both realms while his gender identity in the novel remains uncategorized. In one interview, Emezi rejects a rigid Western binary, questioning the validity of a singular identity. The author states that the main reason for avoiding Western vocabularies in terms of gender was to prompt readers to consider the credibility of the main protagonist, irrespective of Vivek's physical appearance or chosen pronouns—"No matter what he wore, no matter what pronouns he used, Vivek was Vivek the entire time" (Masters). Furthermore, Vivek does not strive for social acceptance. In the passage that follows, he seems fully at ease with himself, and it soon becomes evident that the only people who find it difficult to accept his sexual expressions are the people who surround him:

> I know what they say about men who allow other men to penetrate them. Ugly things, ugly words. Calling them women, as if that's supposed to be ugly too ... Less than a man—something disgusting,

> something weak and shameful. But if that pleasure was supposed to stop me from being a man, then fine. ...I was never one to begin with anyway. (Emezi, *The Death* 131)

Insisting on his authentic self-representation, Vivek illustrates an alternative mode of existence that does not bow under the weight of what Sylvia Wynter conceptualizes as "the ongoing imperative of securing the well-being of our present ethnoclass (i.e., Western bourgeois) conception of the human" (260). In her writings, Wynter delves into the origins of Western and colonial knowledge systems, revealing the concealed connections between racial, gender, and sexual identity, and the prevailing regulatory principles that have established, perpetuated, and accepted exclusionary practices. According to Wynter, the invention of and the encounter with the colonial Other contributes to shaping the modern Western way of thinking and its ideas about its own identity. Wynter refers to this preferred identity with the term Western Man, arguing that a dominant view of humanity these days stems from Western ideals such as secularism, rationality, and whiteness. Simultaneously, she does not advocate for contributing to or complacently participating in the dominant knowledge systems. Instead, she engages in what Walter D. Mignolo describes as "epistemic disobedience" (106). As a result, Wynter prompts her readers to consider individuals currently marginalized within the category of Man-as-human. For Wynter, "those cast out as impoverished and colonized and undesirable and lacking reason" offer a fresh perspective on the concept of being human, wherein humanness is defined not as a fixed state but rather a praxis, resisting the essentialist classification rooted in the Western episteme (McKittrick, *Yours in the Intellectual Struggle* 2). Thus, using Katherine McKittick's words, Vivek's fungible state can be described as "the possibility of undoing and unsettling—not replacing or occupying—Western conceptions of what it means to be human" (2). Regardless of numerous attempts to persuade him to adhere to patriarchal gender norms, including placing him in a military school against his will and his family's constant urging to cut his hair, Vivek does not allow these dominant societal beliefs to suppress his desires and he keeps on transgressing gender boundaries by engaging in sexual encounters with men and women. Furthermore, he manifests his alternative mode of inhabiting the world through physical appearance—"placing necklaces against his chest, draping them over his silver chain, clipping his ears with gold earrings, his hair tumbling over his shoulders" (Emezi, *The Death* 71–72). Consequently, shifting the place of peripheral identities to the center of Nigerian literary dialectics, the novel evokes a twofold effect; not only does it resist the idea of homosexuality as something that is un-African and incompatible with traditional customs, but it also opposes the idea of a gender taxonomy anchored in the Western rationale. Simultaneously, the narrative sheds light on the failure of colonial epistemology in grasping what Oluwadunni O. Talabi describes as "the many possibilities of ontology," highlighting how colonial legacies repress gender exuberance "before it even has the opportunity to blossom" (335).

What adds a profound layer to the narrative is Vivek's occupation of both material and spiritual worlds. In the novel, the author draws from Igbo ontology, utilising spirituality as

a means to move beyond rigid binaries and fixed categories of identity. In doing so, Emezi seems to follow the footsteps of their literary predecessors, including Amos Tutola's *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* (1954) and Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* (1991). As a result, Emezi embeds *The Death of Vivek Oji* in the broader tradition of Nigerian writing. At the very beginning of the novel, it is revealed that Vivek was born around the time of his grandmother's passing; she died of a heart attack with "her heart seizing at the threshold of her house", the same threshold at which Kavita finds the body of her dead child—"on their front veranda, under four yards of akwete material ... the back of his skull was broken and seeping into her welcome mat" (Emezi, *The Death* 12). What is more, well before Vivek's birth, Ahunna sustained a foot injury while tending to her farm. The incident leaves her with a distinctive mark on her body—"a dark brown patch shaped like a limp starfish" (5). Remarkably, the same scar is also present on Vivek's foot from the day he is born—"a soft starfish, colored in deep brown" (12). Despite never having the chance to meet and occupying different temporalities, Ahunna and Vivek share a distinctive physical trait that unfolds a deeper connection between the two of them. This prompts the reader to consider Vivek as the reincarnated spirit of his grandmother. Unfortunately, his father refuses to accept this possibility due to Vivek's gender assigned to him at birth:

> He did know. How else could that scar have entered the world of flesh if it had not left in the first place. A thing cannot be in two places at once. But still, he denied this for many years for as long as he could. Superstition, he said. It was a coincidence, the marks on their feet—and besides, Vivek was a boy, not a girl, so how can? (13)

However, interpreting Vivek as an embodiment of his grandmother's spirit seems to appear in line with traditional Igbo cosmology, in which death is viewed as a passage to an existence beyond the present one, meaning that "life continues in another form after corporeal death" (Igbo and Ayika 94). Because the entanglement of spiritual and material dimensions is what lies at the core of most traditional African customs, Vivek's perception of reality "is not limited to that which one sees and touches" (Okwu 19). In other words, through Vivek's character, Emezi blurs the rigid divisions between human/non-human, male/female, material/spiritual, as well as between life and death, as indicated by chapters narrated by Vivek from beyond the grave. This framework, in contrast to the conceptualisation of linear time, suggests a cyclical trajectory of human life. Tapping into the wisdom of indigenous knowledges, Emezi utilizes Vivek's character to bridge the gap between past, present, and future. As suggested by M. Jacqui Alexander, according to African cosmologies, spirit energy navigates time in a manner that does not conform to our usual understanding of a linear progression, meaning that "there is no distance between space and time that it is unable to navigate" (309). Therefore, the concept of time strictly moving in a linear fashion is not accurate in Vivek's case, as his energy operates outside human understanding. This perspective gains further support later in the novel when Vivek recounts his dream to Osita. In this dream, he witnesses himself in the mirror, with his reflection taking on the form of Ahunna:

> "I dreamt that I was our grandmother," I [Vivek] tell him. "I looked in a mirror and she was there, just like the pictures, and she spoke to me in Igbo." "What did she say?" "*Hold my life for me*." (160)

Furthermore, in *Pedagogies of Crossing: Meditations on Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory, and the Sacred*, Alexander elaborates on the selective acceptance of the sacred in postmodern consciousness, where Christianity is identified with good tradition, while other traditions are cast aside as inferior. The cosmologies rooted in Africa, she explains, are frequently subordinated to the framework informed by Eurocentric perspectives, with their significance negated in the formation of modern categories of identity. As a result, these indigenous knowledges cannot be utilized in comprehending the construction and development of self or in the restructuring of the primary categories that transnational feminism grapples with. "And yet," as she suggests, "some of its most formative categories—migration, gender and sexuality, experience, home, history, and memory—can be made intelligible within these very systems" (Alexander 324). Thus, Emezi draws from indigenous African spiritual beliefs and, as a result, rejects the long-standing history of Western philosophy in which those categorized as 'different' have often been perceived as "the embodied", driven by instinct and emotion, with reason deemed beyond their capabilities (Oyewumi 3). In doing so, the author delves into "border gnosis", which Mignolo elucidates as the ways of sensing and knowing obtained through residing in colonial borderlands (11). Border thinking, as Mignolo argues, challenges the inclination of colonial endeavours to regulate the production of knowledge and emerges as an interplay of "the body-politics of knowing, thinking, and doing" which stem from "the bodies who dwell and think in the borders" (XX). This leads to a shift in understanding where, rephrasing Toni Morrison's words which Emezi often describes as formative in their writing, Emezi unfolds the epistemic margins and encourages the world to shift its focus to their position—"All I needed to do was stand exactly where I was, name that the center, and refuse to move" ("This Letter Isn't For You").

While Kavita feels she holds the strongest connection to Vivek as his mother, she takes on the role of the novel's investigator. But it is Vivek's cousin, Osita, who serves as one of the most important witnesses in the story. Since the two cousins share a strong bond from a young age, Osita often finds solace in Chika and Kavita's home, seeing it as an escape from the strict atmosphere imposed by his conservative Christian mother, Mary, back in Owerri. When they grow into teenagers, Osita and Vivek use a secluded bungalow as a safe space to express themselves and break free from parental supervision. But this alleged freedom of expression exists merely on the surface level. In fact, it is Osita's limits of comfort that dictate the degree of Vivek's self-expression. When one day Vivek asks Osita if he can observe through the window as he engages in a sexual encounter with a girl named Elizabeth, Osita is initially taken aback by this request. Eventually, he agrees, citing their comradeship as men who enjoy showing off their sexual capabilities—"We were men together and we liked to show off, so I agreed" (Emezi, *The Death* 33). However, when Elizabeth catches sight of Vivek in the doorway, Osita reacts with immediate rage and, as a result, Vivek's body becomes the object of Osita's violent outburst, regardless

of Vivek's ongoing blackout episode—"I was tired of him being sick or strange or whatever was wrong with him" (36). When the cousins meet a couple of years after this incident, Osita is surprised by Vivek's long hair and tremendous weight loss. Although, at first, he is concerned for Vivek's well-being, he soon admits that Vivek's physical alteration makes him feel uncomfortable:

> My hands brushed against the tangle of his hair as we pulled apart. It felt soft. I stepped away from him and wiped my hands on my shorts. Vivek kept looking at me, but I couldn't meet his gaze directly. He was stranger than I was admitting to either of us, and it made me feel uncomfortable. (59)

In *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-coloniality*, Sara Ahmed elucidates how the figure of a stranger is not someone whom we have not yet encountered, but someone whom we already recognize, someone who is already familiar in their unfamiliarity. In other words, there are methods which enable us to distinguish between unfamiliar individuals and those who are part of a specific environment. These techniques, as Ahmed suggests, "involve ways of reading the bodies of others we come to face" (21). In this context, strangers are not just individuals foreign to a particular setting; they are those who, by their close presence, are "*already recognised as not belonging*, as being out of place" (20). In the case of Vivek, this becomes even more pronounced when his family members compare his changed appearance to "a madman" or "a masquerade" (Emezi, *The Death* 57). Additionally, as Ahmed points out, strange bodies serve as the boundary defining a space where the familiar body, unmarked by strangeness, cannot go, and where the strange body establishes itself as at home. Furthermore, the process of constructing the body of a stranger entangles both assimilation and rejection, moving between interior and exterior, suggesting that the strange body has already affected the surface of the alleged body-at-home. The alteration of the familiar body-at-home boundaries occurs through affective gestures. These gestures, in turn, make it easier to withdraw from cohabiting with strangers in a specific social environment; "The withdrawal," as Ahmed elucidates, "remains registered on the skin, on the border that feels" (*Strange Encounters* 51). This particular reaction is encapsulated in Osita's behavior; first of all, after touching Vivek's hair, he rubs his hands off on his shorts and avoids Vivek's gaze, and then he uses a bucket of water to scrub his skin to wash away any imprints of touch between the two of them, "trying to get rid of the unsettled feeling" that permeates him (Emezi, *The Death* 59).

Osita's discomfort intensifies when Vivek suspects Osita of having a boyfriend at university. Exclaiming he is not like Vivek or any of his male friends, Osita remarks that Vivek's physical appearance mirrors features traditionally associated with females, and accuses him of "knacking men" (67). And yet, to his surprise, Osita is confronted with Vivek questioning his cousin's fear of something simply because it deviates from the norm. With arms folded, Vivek props himself against the headboard of the bed and expresses disappointment with Osita, expecting a more open minded approach from him—"I'm disappointed, bhai. I didn't think you'd be one of those

close-minded people. Leave that for your mother" (68). This statement foregrounds how the masculine ideals and conservative Christian values induced by Osita's mother play a crucial role in his ambivalent attitude towards Vivek. When, after Vivek's death, Osita ponders the time when he condemned Vivek for decorating his body with Kavita's jewellery, his remorse indicates his simultaneous attraction and apprehension of the unsettling reality of his non-conventional desires—"Osita wished, much later, that he'd told Vivek the truth then, that he was so beautiful he made the air around him dull, made Osita hard with desire" (68). Therefore, it soon becomes evident that Osita's conflicted feelings towards Vivek escalate when Vivek's physical appearance becomes an additional factor constitutive of his queerness, especially if one takes into account the novel's socio-political setting.

Throughout *The Death of Vivek Oji*, readers get glimpses of the Nigerian political landscape, following the death of dictator Sani Abacha, with people rioting in the streets and tensions frequently turning into violent fights over ideological differences—"voices were raised, blows were thrown, and the violence sometimes escalated into bloody clashes on the roads" (91). This socio-political context allows Vivek's family to assume his susceptibility to external violence. Fearing that the mobs flooding the streets where "death entered with upcoming elections" might take a toll on Vivek's life, his relatives attempt to protect him by limiting his spatial movements to a safe space of their house (91). First of all, his parents bring him back home from university and subject him to constant supervision. His outcry, "You are keeping me in a cage!" articulates his frustration at being kept in an enclosed space as if he were a prisoner (92). This arrangement also provides Kavita with the opportunity to address Vivek's mental health struggles, using the resources she has at hand. First of all, she takes her child to a doctor who fails to identify any medical issues, although Vivek struggles with lack of sleep and loss of appetite. As a last resort, Kavita, unaware of the nature of the process, allows Mary, her sister-in-law, to take Vivek to her church for deliverance after Mary insists:

> "I know it's hard to hear," Mary said, softening her voice. "But you know how these men are. The boy is slim, he has long hair— all it takes is one idiot thinking he's a woman from behind or something, then getting angry when he finds out that he's not. Because, if he's a boy, then what does it mean that the idiot is attracted to him? ... You're his mother. It's your job to protect him. I'm telling you, bring him to Owerri. We can help him at the church here." (71–72)

Alas, to Kavita's astonishment, Vivek comes back from church in a much-deteriorated condition. While Kavita tries to find out what happened, Vivek eventually reveals that the incident in question involved physical abuse inflicted by individuals who thought of him as possessed by an evil spirit. These people, Vivek claims, "had to beat it out", leaving "a swath of dark red welts on his side" (75). This event marks a pivotal point where Vivek departs from his family even further—"Don't touch me," he continues, "stop trying to fix me" (75).

In *The Cultural Politics of Emotion,* Ahmed illustrates how, when confronted with the societal norms of heterosexuality, queer individuals may experience discomfort as their bodies do not seamlessly blend into a pre-established schema; "the sense of out-of-place-ness and estrangement involves an acute awareness of the surface of one's body, which appears as surface when one cannot inhabit the social skin, which is shaped by some bodies, and not others" (148). This discomfort manifests as a feeling of disorientation, where one's body seems "out of place, awkward, and unsettled" (148). The following passage illustrates how this alienation translates into Vivek's bodily symptoms

> [H]eaviness found me and I couldn't do anything about it. I couldn't shake it off; I couldn't transform it, evaporate or melt it. It was distinct from me, but it hooked itself into my body like a parasite. I couldn't figure out if something was wrong with me or if this was just my life— if this was just how people felt, like concrete was dragging their flesh off their bones. (Emezi, *The Death* 89–90)

Additionally, as Ahmed suggests, queer people might be asked not to make heterosexual individuals uncomfortable by refraining from openly exhibiting gestures of intimacy that do not follow heterosexual norms. This request, however, contributes to an uncomfortable experience, imposing limitations on the ways queer individuals may interact with their own bodies and the bodies of others within social settings. While his family members dread the possibility that Vivek might fall victim to a public lynching, they attempt to conceal his ambivalent gender expressions, preventing his figure from entering the public space. However, as Ahmed writes, the domain of normative gender expressions is only suitable for "those who can inhabit it" (*The Cultural Politics of Emotion* 147). This, in turn, entices Vivek to engage in acts of transgression to break free from the limitations of "an uneven block, chipping and sparking on the hard ground, tearing off into painful chunks" (Emezi, *The Death* 89). And while, to a certain degree, it holds true that the community of Nigerwives and Vivek's circle of friends—Juju, Elizabeth, Olunne and Somto—provide Vivek with a relatively safe space that allows him to more fully develop his gender expressions, including his shaved legs/chest, braided hair and red-painted toenails, this comfort zone soon becomes too confined to accommodate Vivek's body in its full form. Afraid of the outside world, where precarious bodies that do not fit into the gender binary are framed as "degenerate and killable," Osita seeks to protect Vivek's life by implying he should not leave Juju's house (Snorton and Haritaworn 67). In Osita's view, "[e]verything would have stayed okay if he hadn't left the bubble. If he hadn't felt the need to start going outside and putting himself at risk" (Emezi, *The Death* 232). But, as shown later on in the story, Vivek's death is much more nuanced, and attributing it to a matter of hate crime/sexual discrimination would be an oversimplification.

Although the opening sentence, "[t]hey burned down the market on the day Vivek Oji died," might lead its readers to suspect Vivek became the subject of a collective violent outburst, at the end of the novel, Osita discloses that Vivek's demise is tied to more ambiguous factors (1).

When he spots Vivek, clad in a dress, in the marketplace, Osita attempts to drive him forcefully back to Juju's house. Nevertheless, Vivek does not comply with Osita's wishes and insists on being referred to as Nnemedi, an Igbo name which would have cemented his connection to Ahunna if only the name was not denied to him at birth—"It's not a common name," Vivek's uncle explains, "but it was for Mama. Because they had the same scar on their feet. But Chika didn't agree. If Vivek had been a girl, maybe he would have agreed" (222). Consequently, fearing "[w]hat would happen if someone looked too closely at her, someone holding a machete and buffeted by a mob," Osita drags Nnemedi by her arm to place her in a secure location against her will (235). In response, Nnnemedi, wounded by Osita's evident embarrassment, strives to liberate herself from his hold, accusing him of hypocrisy—"'You're ashamed of me,' she said, her voice surprised. 'That's why you don't like me going out like this. It's like you're always ashamed, Osita. First, of yourself, then of us, now of me'" (235). As a consequence, Nnemedi uses all her physical strength to break free from Osita's grasp, and Osita's shame becomes a driving force that puts an end to Nnemedi's life:

> She pulled herself with such force that she stumbled, and her heel caught on a stone, and she fell. It happened so fast. I saw her head strike the raised cement edge of the gutter at the side of the road. I saw her body slump, eyes closed, blood pooling into the sand within seconds. (235)

In Achille Mbembe's conceptualisation of *necropolitics*, sovereignty plays a crucial role in defining which bodies are considered significant and which ones can be disregarded—"In this case," Mbembe suggests, "sovereignty means the capacity to define who matters and who does not, who is *disposable* and who is not" (80). When it comes to those bodies cast as disposable, their physical structure places them within indistinct and undifferentiated entities and reduces them to "simple relics of an unburied pain, empty, meaningless corporealities" (36). Building on Mbembe's theory, Jasbir K. Puar introduces the term *queer necropolitics*, criticising the pernicious assumption that "the homosexual other is white, the racial other is straight" (32). This misconception, as Puar explains, excludes individuals of colour who diverge from heteronormative norms, deeming them as a marginalized population with a precarious future marked by social, political, or literal death. This perception gains particular confirmation in the following words of Vivek/Nnemedi—"I knew I was dancing with death every day," the main protagonist explains, "especially when I walked outside like that" (Emezi, *The Death* 244). Because Vivek/Nnemedi's expressions of the body do not fit into the rigid gender dichotomy, it seems that the perpetuation of such ideas which disparage certain bodies as not worthy of mourning allows Osita to conceal the traces of his entanglement in Vivek/Nnemedi's death and dispose of the dead body of his loved one, placing it by the welcome mat of her house only to flee the scene shortly after.

Although Vivek/Nnemedi's friends initially want to keep their word given to their friend and prevent his/her parents from discovering the truth about their child's alternative mode of

existence, Kavita's detective pursuits finally help her form a genuine picture of her offspring. When she insists her child's friends reveal the truth, they disclose that Vivek wanted to be referred to with he/she pronouns; they recall—"Sometimes he asked us to call him by another name; he said we could refer to him as either she or he, that he was both" (217). In the context of Vivek/Nnemedi's existence, the notion of anthroponymy is important insofar as names, in Igbo ontology, consistently mirror indigenous perceptions of space, time, and the divine. As Michael C. Mbabuike suggests, these names might be related to the *ogbanje*, express acknowledgement and appreciation to the gods for their blessings, or represent the rebirth of a deceased ancestor. Therefore, Igbo anthroponyms are "actual persons rendered in words and sound. To exist without a name for the Igbo people is to be faceless" (Mbabuike 47).

Taking that into account, one might suggest that Vivek was stripped of his identity before he even passed away—"I am homeless," he confides in Osita at one point in the novel (Emezi, *The Death* 58). When Vivek admits that he has no place to call home, it prompts one to consider whether this homelessness is a consequence of Vivek/Nnemedi's inability to reproduce the heteronormative ideal. This, however, might lead to an assumption that the overarching objective of queerness is to strive for acceptance at the core of societal norms. In the case of Vivek/Nnemedi, nothing could be farther from the truth; in fact, the home in question refers to an acknowledgement of Vivek/Nnemedi's alternative mode of being in the world. As Emezi suggests in one interview, although an individual's personal experiences might revolve around their subjective reality, this subjectivity does not diminish the legitimacy of other realities. However, as Emezi contends, the majority of the violence prevalent in our world today often arises from individuals attempting to establish their own reality as dominant, disregarding the alternative modes of existence—"the best way to make sure that someone's reality doesn't exist is to make sure the person doesn't exist" (Shapiro). Furthermore, in *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, Judith Butler sheds light on the link between grievability and violence. She argues that there is a distinction in society between lives that are considered worthy of mourning and those that are not. This unequal distribution of grief reflects societal norms about which bodies deserve to be recognized as human or, using Butler's words, "what counts as a livable life and a grievable death" (XV). The question of whether Vivek/Nnemedi is deemed worthy of mourning comes to the forefront when Kavita begins to realize that, as parents, she and Chika failed to recognize their child's true identity—"*If he had been a girl*…" Kavita ponders, "[w]hat did it mean now? And he had ended up a girl anyway, with the name they had denied him" (Emezi, *The Death* 222). Furthermore, although Kavita initially deems her child's alternative mode of existence as "unnatural," she gradually begins to acknowledge the diverse realities intertwined within her child's identity (217). Consequently, she insists on changing the inscription on their child's tombstone to one that reads "VIVEK NNEMEDI OJI. BELOVED CHILD" (242). In doing so, she makes room for hope in envisioning a different world, that kind of hope which might reshape the narratives surrounding gendered expression. As Snorton suggests, the flexibility inherent in hope, similarly to the psychological aspects of grief, enables the assertion

of claims about corporeality that surpass discussions focused on materiality—"It allows for the possibility of transition, which does not occur on the surgeon's table at the clinic but instead in the spaces where people come together or in the quiet moments of reflection in one's room" ('A New Hope' 90). This theme of hope emerging from contemplation is further invoked when Osita visits Vivek/Nnemedi's grave on his cousin's birthday, and he ponders Vivek/Nnemedi's deceased body as a source of vitality, giving life to other creatures—"giving life to things after he'd run out of it himself" (Emezi, *The Death* 230). Therefore, contrary to the negative discourse which paints death as haunting human life, *The Death of Vivek Oji* portrays departure from life as, on the one hand, a new beginning and, on the other, a form of liberation from the constraints of liberal humanist conceptualizations of the body, for Vivek/Nnemedi dies in their most authentic form, "in the arms of the one who loved me [Vivek/Nnemedi] the most, wearing a skin that was true" (244).

5. Conclusions

In *Return to My Native Land*, Aimé Césaire claims that the end of the world is "the only thing that's worth beginning" (39). Seen in this light, the death of Vivek/Nnemedi can be perceived as a step towards annihilation of the world where Western theories define which bodies can be deemed as human. Weaving indigenous cosmologies into the novel's fabric, Emezi dismantles binary oppositions of identity and presents Vivek/Nnemedi's alternative mode of existence which goes beyond materiality. In this sense, the portrayal of Vivek/Nnemedi's body indicates a forward-thinking and transformative perspective on African queerness and emerges as what José Esteban Muñoz describes as the "warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality" (1). Concluding the novel with the words, "Somewhere, you see, in the river of time, I am already alive" (Emezi, *The Death* 245), Vivek/Nnemedi's character re-surfaces from corporeal death as a modality of a "*then and there*" (Muñoz 1) of queer African futures, marking a new paradigm of the queer African body.

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