eTropic: electronic journal of studies in the Tropics

Queering Tropical African Heteronormativity through Spirit Worlds: Akwaeke Emezi's *The Death of Vivek Oji*

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Abstract

This article analyzes how contemporary queer African writing participates in decoloniality by queering (hetero)normative knowledge systems for social and epistemic transformation. In my reading of Akwaeke Emezi's *The Death of Vivek Oji* (2020), I argue that Trans/Queer African literature participates in a very important epistemic project of counterfactualism by offering alternatives to perceived and systemically imposed African gender and sexual realities. The novel achieves this by deconstructing the hetero-naturalization of temporality to locate queer time and queer space within indigenous African modes of worldmaking. In their rendition of the Igbo myth of the Ogbanje spirit children in narrating the transgender life of their protagonist, Emezi not only ascertains the indigeneity of queerness to Africa, but goes further to demonstrate how some tropical epistemologies are already queer in their non-binary imagination of life and death, human and spirit, gender and sexuality. By representing otherworldliness and possibilities of being 'out of order'—beyond the heteronormative framing of identity, space, and time—the novel debunks the pervasive notion of African queerness as recolonization and ascertains the flexibility of tropical knowledges against perceptions of their rigidity.

Keywords: Queer African Literature, Decolonial Tropicality, Counterfactualism, Ogbanje spirit children, Indigenous Queer, Tropical Africa, Akwaeke Emezi

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Introduction: Queering African Literature

The turn of the millennium saw an increase in the engagement with queer genders and sexualities in African literature. This, in part, can be attributed to an aggressive impulse in some writers to offer counternarratives to the framing of same-sex sexualities and gender variance as un-African. Several scholars have since observed that the dominant narrative of a straight African sexuality has been mainstreamed by different regimes of power and has its sources in Western religion, the perceived conservatism of African cultures, colonial memory, and the anxiety of recolonization by the West (Mutua, 2011; Msibi, 2011; Apprecht, 2013; Olaoluwa, 2018). It is however interesting to notice that, while those who strive to relegate queer genders and sexualities to the margins of "Africanness" act from the fear of recolonization, mainstream gender and sexual realities on the continent are very much shaped by colonial discourses that regard Africa as the other place and Africans as the other people. This is where we begin to draw the roots of the purported otherness of African sexuality. As such, queer writing on the continent becomes an important counter discourse to systemically imposed African gender and sexual realities.

In this article, I read Akwaeke Emezi's *The Death of Vivek Oji* (2020) as a contemporary African novel that participates in decoloniality by queering (hetero)normative knowledge systems for social and epistemic transformation. I argue that *The Death of Vivek Oji* is a work of counterfactualism, which offers alternatives to perceived and systemically imposed African gender and sexual realities. The novel achieves this by deconstructing the hetero-naturalization of temporality to locate queer time and queer space within indigenous African modes of worldmaking. In their rendition of the Igbo myth of the Ogbanje spirit children in narrating the transgender life of their protagonist, Emezi not only ascertains the indigeneity of queerness to Africa, but goes further to demonstrate how some tropical epistemologies are already queer in their non-binary imagination of life and death, human and spirit, gender and sexuality. By representing otherworldliness and possibilities of being 'out of order'—beyond the heteronormative framing of identity, space, and time—the novel debunks the pervasive notion of African queerness as recolonization and ascertains the flexibility of tropical knowledges against perceptions of their rigidity.

As evident in my central argument above, decoloniality, tropicality, and counterfactualism are the main theoretical concepts that I employ in my reading of the novel. Presently, I would like to demonstrate how these three theoretical positions are interconnected and why they are useful in reading and engaging in debates on queer African genders and

sexuality. To begin with, it is crucial to understand the hetero-framing of African gender and sexuality as a colonial imposition. As Oyèrónkẹ́ Oyěwùmí (1997) argues, the binary categorization of gender in Africa was introduced by the West as a tool of domination that designates two binarily opposed and hierarchical social categories. While Oyěwùmí's argument primarily focuses on the relationship between men and women in traditional African societies, this binary logic in imagining gender and sexuality heavily affects queer identities on the continent in that they are not accommodated in the heteronormative binary. As such, these identities are erased from the imagination of the nation and end up not having space in the society. Such invisibility is often propelled as evidence of socio-cultural disapproval of queer identities and justification for violations against gender and sexual minorities on the continent (Sogunro, 2018, p. 636).

Maria Lugones articulates that it is important to be mindful of the changes that colonialism brought to understand the framing of gender and sexuality under colonial dominance and in Euro-centered global capitalism (Lugones, 2023, p. 148). In this regard, it is crucial to understand and engage with tropicality as one of the ideological tools that have been used to colonize African sexualities. Tropicality here is understood as a discourse "through which 'the West' regards itself as 'temperate' (moderate, secure, comfortable, self-controlled, and staid) and 'the tropics' as alien and its opposite (a domain of allure, seduction, danger, riot, and excess)" (Clayton, 2021, p. 55). In this way, the West is seen as the locus and producer of knowledge and such knowledge is used to control the tropics in colonial fashion as a space whose knowledge systems are archaic and inferior to Western imagination. In this fashion, "tropicality [has] helped to produce empire and buttress Western ideas of dominance and superiority" (Clayton, 2021, p. 55). The perceived danger, riot and excess in the tropics justifies the control that the temperate West exercises over the region, and this control extends to gender and sexuality. As it has been noted elsewhere, "European colonizers often dehumanized and criminalized indigenous genders and sexualities solely because these genders and sexualities transgressed the binary categorical boundaries of the colonizer" (Lundberg et al., 2023, p. 11). It is also important to note that recent work in decolonial tropicality has taken up Aimé Césaire's notion of "*tropicalité*" as an anti-colonial imagery to imagine how the tropic's natural, human, and spirit worlds offer a "counter-tropicality" (Lundberg et al., 2023, p. 5). This new sense of tropicality offers a way to think through decolonial indigenous sexualities.

It is from this background that the decolonial work of African literature emerges. One of the central tasks of the literature that has come out of Africa after colonialism is to pose a staunch challenge against colonial and neo-colonial domination that manifests in various

ways. Groundbreaking work like Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) directly challenged Western knowledges about tropical Africa and provided alternative worldviews and forms of knowledge indigenous to the region. Among other things, such work challenged the purported primitiveness of Africa and proved that tropical regions were already civilized before colonial invasion. Emezi's novel continues with this project by challenging perceptions of the absence of queerness in Nigeria and locating queerness within African/tropical worldviews that theorize gender and sexuality beyond the binarism of Western logics. As other scholars have observed, "the preoccupation with binaries in the construction of identities constrains and limits the possibilities of human expression" (Magaqa & Makombe, 2021, p. 25). By bringing to the fore an androgynous protagonist, *The Death of Vivek Oji* becomes a decolonial text that deconstructs Western-influenced mainstream heteronormative discourses in Nigeria.

Toyin Falola (2022) asserts that the decolonial process in Africa involves "developing new multidisciplinary methods and adopting hitherto relevant but disregarded (oral) sources for the reconstruction of African history" (p. 3). This is an approach that has been adopted by a number of African writers who employ myths, legends, folktales, and other oral narratives from their cultural traditions as a way of 'writing back to the center', and to represent Africa in global discourses. Such methods led to a late twentieth-century movement in postcolonial literature called Nativism, which has been defined as "the desire to return to indigenous practices and cultural forms as they existed in pre-colonial society" (Ashcroft et al., 2005, p. 159). Nativism is very much a movement against collective amnesia, which is one of the possible effects of colonialism on the colonized who may end up forgetting what they were before the colonial encounter. It directly speaks to Franz Fanon's theorizing in *The Wretched of the Earth* (1963) where he proposes that the first step for the colonized to reclaim their identities is to resuscitate their past. By employing the Igbo myth of the Ogbanje spirit children in their writing of *The Death of Vivek Oji*, Emezi participates in Nativism as a decolonial process by drawing on African epistemologies, which enables them to rethink queer African identities outside the binary logic of Western thought.

As counter-discourse, *The Death of Vivek Oji* can be read as a product of counterfactual writing in that it represents gender and sexual realities in Africa by providing alternatives to what is usually imagined to be the case. Counterfactual thinking is defined as "the imagination of alternatives to reality" (Markman et al., 1993, p. 93). As already stated, tropical African realities are hugely shaped by Western knowledge and there is a need for the dominated to engage with indigenous knowledges to challenge what is known and what is knowable. In the novel, Emezi deconstructs and reconstructs knowledge by

"imagining a counterfactual scenario" (Klauk, 2011, p. 30) that collapses (hetero)normative imaginations of gender and sexuality, time and space, and even existence itself. Firstly, they do this through their narrative technique where they present us with a character, Vivek, whom we are told dies on the very first page of the book but we get to meet them throughout the text. Vivek is androgynous and is also able to partake in both the world of the living and the spirit world of the dead and the unborn. In this way, Emezi counters the factuality of heteronormative conceptions of life and death, gender and sexuality, and time and space. This is one of the ways in which the novel becomes a tool of decolonization by queering colonial notions of tropicality and its attendant logics. As Rocío Cobo-Piñero (2024) rightly observes, "Emezi's artistic project visibilizes dissident bodies whose performative interventions offer decolonial possibilities of being and belonging" (p. 15). The subsequent sections of the article provide a detailed analysis of the novel, demonstrating how Emezi achieves this.

Myth and Fluid Tropical Identities

While there has been notable engagement with queerness in twenty-first century African literature, most of the work being produced focusses on the experiences of homosexual men and lesbian women. Representations of transgenderism and other gender-queer identities have remained on the margins, and this has affected attitudes towards these identities both in literary criticism and in real life. As it has been highlighted elsewhere, transgender identities are discriminated against even within the queer community (Stryker, 2006, p. 2). A recent altercation[1] on the place of transgender women between one of the iconic African feminist writers, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, and Akwaeke Emezi emphasizes the misunderstandings regarding androgenous bodies and transgender identities in the African literary and cultural space. Nevertheless, Emezi is one of the writers who have taken a leading role in representing transgender and gender-queer identities in contemporary African literature. Their most notable publications on this subject include their memoir, *Dear Senthuran: A Black Spirit Memoir* (2021), the semi-autobiographical novel, *Freshwater* (2019), and *The Death of Vivek Oji* (2020), which is the focus of the present study.

It is in their fiction where Emezi mostly experiments with style, form, and subject matter. One of the ways in which they do this is by employing Igbo mythology in delineating the complexities and establishing the place of trans/queer identities in African contexts. In

[1] In one of her interviews, Adichie argued that transwomen should be regarded as a hyphenated identity within the category of women. This view received backlash from Emezi who counter-argued that Adichie's position is transphobic in that it is discriminatory towards transwomen who should be seen simply as women.

both *Freshwater* and *The Death of Vivek Oji*, Emezi draws from the Ogbanje myth, which is central to their Igbo cosmology and worldview. This myth proposes the existence of the ogbanje—spirit children—who have ties with "deities or agents of deities who are said to guard the interface between birth and a postulated pre-birth state and who are believed to mediate life processes" (Ilechukwu, 2007, p. 240). Such special individuals in Igbo culture are able to transcend the porous intersections demarcating the sky/heavens, the human/physical world, and the world of spirits or the dead (Ilechukwu, 2007, p. 240). The protagonists in Emezi's two novels, Ada and Vivek, are ogbanjes and the liminality of their existence informs their gender/sexual fluidity. Such renditions of identity directly challenge the binary colonial imagining of gender and sexuality, representing tropical epistemologies as already queer in their inclusive imagination of gender and sexual variance.

In their reading of *Freshwater*, Magaqa and Makombe (2021) argue that "as a narrative framework, the ogbanje embodies the plurality and multiplicity of ontology, identity, and sexuality" (p. 27). They conclude that Emezi uses the myth as a point of entry into teasing out the thematic preoccupations of the text, which focusses on "the complexity of being in Igbo society and the location of queer desires and identities within Igbo cultural frameworks" (Magaqa & Makombe, 2021, p. 27). This observation also applies to Emezi's rendition of the myth in *The Death of Vivek Oji,* where reincarnation is of central concern. By presenting an alternative counterfactual worldview where life and death are conceived to be an endless cycle and not separate and distinct states of (non)existence, the novel challenges the reader to rethink existence outside the heteronormative framing of space and time. Death ceases to present as the ultimate form of abjection, as does queerness, since both are intelligible in the traditional Igbo worldview represented. As Yasmine Ait Abbou (2023) postulates, in the book, spirituality is used to transcend binaries and fixed categories of existence, and "liminality is used to represent non-normative realities that go beyond unbending categories in terms of life and death, gender, and culture" (p. 77).

One of the points of interest in the novel is the denial of Vivek's complex/different identity by his immediate family. Right from his birth, Chika, Vivek's father, knows that his son is an ogbanje as he is born on the day that his grandmother, Ahunna, dies and has a birthmark on the inside of his foot that resembles a scar the departed grandmother had. This is one of the signs pointing to the fact that Vivek was not an ordinary child. However, Chika lives in denial and does not want to accept his son's true identity. He knew that Vivek was reincarnated as soon as he saw him as a newborn, the same day news of Ahunna's death reached him:

> He did know. How else could that scar have entered the world on 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 and not a girl, so how can? (Emezi, 2020, p. 13)

This denial informs Chika's attitude towards Vivek throughout the novel. He is revealed as a character deeply ingrained in binary logic and colonized to the point that he refuses to accept the possibilities of truth in indigenous Igbo knowledge systems, which he regards as mere superstition. The fact that Vivek was the reincarnation of Ahunna—a woman reborn as a man—ought to explain Vivek's androgyny, but Chika refuses to recognize that and tries to enforce a form of hegemonic masculinity on his son. Among other things, he sends him to a military boarding school "to toughen up, to stop being so soft and sensitive" (Emezi, 2020, p. 16). This is where we begin to see the role of patriarchy in controlling queer genders and sexuality in African contexts.

In his analysis of the novel, Guhan Priyadharshan (2022) posits that by presenting Vivek as the reincarnation of Ahunna, the novel suggests that "the possibility of possessing a natural homosexual inclination is ruled out, which reiterates and sustains the societal construction of homosexuality as unnatural and foreign" (p. 56). While this claim is convincing at face value, the argument falls apart once one has considered all the possibilities and representations of queerness in the novel. Apart from Vivek, there are other characters in his small group of friends who are also gender-queer and/or homosexual but are not ogbanjes. For example, Vivek is friends with two girls, Elizabeth and Juju, who are in a sexual relationship. Vivek's cousin, Osita, who is one of the narrators in the novel, is also queer and has an incestuous sexual relationship with Vivek. Nonetheless, it is also important to understand why Emezi employs the myth of reincarnation to talk about gender and sexuality in the grand scheme of competing knowledges—the colonial discourse of tropicality— and how it is being challenged by African ways of knowing as a form of decolonial tropicality.

Another way in which Emezi challenges colonial tropicality, which regards tropical Africa as the other of the temperate West, is by foregrounding multiculturalism and the multiplicity of identities characteristic of Nigeria, the setting of the novel. In *The Death of Vivek Oji*, the story revolves around a group of young adults, most of whom are children of Nigerian men who have married foreign women (European and Asian). The mothers of the children form a group called the "Nigerwives", and it is here where they get a sense of community. As such, multiculturalism is at the center of the book and the narrative disrupts any notions of a pure Nigerian/tropical identity. Thus, the coming out story and

Vivek's gender fluidity reflect a multivalent nation in transition. In this way, the novel interrogates both gender and national identities.

The novel's narrative style, which capitalizes on the power of suspense by not revealing the cause of Vivek's death until the final chapters, works well in delivering one of its central messages on homophobia in tropical Africa. Throughout the story, Vivek's family and friends are concerned that his feminine looks and mannerisms may expose him to homophobic publics who may harm him. Among others, this fear is expressed by Vivek's mother, Kavita, and his aunt, Mary. In one of their many conversations on Vivek's gender and sexual identity, Mary warns Kavita about the dangers of presenting as queer in Nigeria:

> "Ahn! Kavita. You know how things are here. It's not safe for him to be walking around Ngwa looking that … feminine. If someone misunderstands, if they think he is a homosexual, what do you think is going to happen to him?" (Emezi, 2020, p. 71)

This goes to confirm Kavita's fears, and "[her] stomach dropped. The thought had worried her, too, but it was different—more terrifying—to hear it put into words" (Emezi, 2020, p. 71). This fear of possible homophobic violence targeted at Vivek's queer body is also reflected by his friends, who argue that they were keeping their knowledge of his gender fluidity secret because "[they] were trying to protect him" (Emezi, 2020, p. 213). Ironically, Vivek dies at the hands of one of the people who were trying to protect him—his cousin, Osita. On the fateful day, Osita was trying to pull Vivek out of the streets after meeting him wearing a dress, and Vivek accidentally fell and hit his head on a rock, bleeding to death.

Vivek's death seems to affirm his identity as an ogbanje, who are said to die at an agreed time through accidents or very brief illnesses (Ilechukwu, 2007, p. 241). The circumstances surrounding his death also question the pervasive perception of tropical Africa as the world's ultimate homophobic space. This view is in no way divorced from Western knowledges about Africa, with the BBC once christening Uganda the worst place in the world to be gay (Davidson, 2011). The association of the tropics with perpetual and imminent violence against queer bodies can be tied to the colonial imagination of the tropics as hot and hostile regions whose inhabitants embody such temper(ature)s, a way of knowing central to tropicality as a system of thought. Much as violence against queer bodies is real, the narrative of the vulnerability of queer identities has taken center stage to the extent that it is almost impossible to imagine safe queer futures on the continent. This proves to be a challenge in imagining and creating spaces for queerness, as

narratives of victimhood dominate at the expense of agency and other alternative possibilities. By offering a counter-narrative to the discourse of vulnerability, *The Death of Vivek Oji* manifests as an important work of counterfactualism that imagines alternative scenarios and represents other possibilities.

The fact that we know Vivek is dead but we still meet him throughout the text is a narrative strategy that can be read in several senses. In one way, his death may symbolize his successful transition to become the woman he felt was trapped inside him. As his friends later reveal to his mother, Vivek saw himself as androgynous. One of his friends, Juju, confesses: "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" (Emezi, 2020, p. 217). Another reading of his death is that it functions as a metaphor in countering the consensus that transgender/queer people do not exist in Nigeria. This heteronormative assumption has been at the crux of state-sponsored homophobia in the country where the government argues that queers do not exist and are not part of the nation, leading to the enactment of the Same-Sex Marriage Prohibition Act and other forms of dehumanization (Sogunro, 2018, p. 633).

Despite challenging those who try to limit his agency, Vivek still struggles with societal restrictions on how he must perform his identity, and he confesses that "I wanted to stay empty, like the eagle in the proverb, left to perch, my bones filled with air pockets, but heaviness found me and I couldn't do anything about it" (Emezi, 2020, p. 89). This symbolic failure at flight points to the limits of his agency due to heteronormative social expectations. However, it is interesting to see how the creation of a queer subculture among his peers affords him relative agency and points to temporal and spatial affordances for queerness in heteropatriarchal African societies.

Heterotopias and Queer Subcultures

At the core of the narrative in *The Death of Vivek Oji* is an exploration of the challenges that queer individuals encounter in heteronormative societies and how they try to navigate such vulnerabilities. The queer characters in the novel find themselves in normative spaces that restrict the exercise of their sexual freedom and gender variance, and they have to find ways of living out their identities outside the confines of such restrictions. It is at this point that one is able to read the author's exploration of queer temporalities in the text. Dustin Goltz (2022) asserts that "queer temporality pushes against heteronormativity's framing and disciplining of time, charting more queer ways to think about history, place, relationships…and the linear segmentation of past/present/future" (p. 1). Goltz's argument suggests that a queer thinking of time and space disrupts

normative constructions and expectations of our relationship to and experience of time and space. As Jack/Judith Halberstam argues, "queer uses of time and space develop, at least in part, in opposition to the institutions of family, heterosexuality, and reproduction" (Halberstam, 2005, p. 1). This entails that queer temporality manifests outside the order of heteronormativity.

As an ogbanje, Vivek is a character who exists within a counterfactual queer framing of time. The fact that he can inhabit the worlds of the living, the dead, and the unborn at the same time entails that his life and his being cannot be fully comprehended within the limits of normative conceptions of time. Normative frames of time indicate clear boundaries between life and death, but Vivek is able to transcend such boundaries. One of the beliefs within the ogbanje myth is that the ogbanje are able to interact with both the natural and spiritual worlds during their life on earth. Ilechukwu (2007) explains that "ogbanjes and their companions are said to communicate supernaturally, often contacting each other through hallucinatory experiences or dreams" (p. 240). In the novel, we come across instances where Vivek momentarily leaves the world of the living, and this is first noticed by Osita. The first time this happens, the two are in Vivek's room when Vivek suddenly goes numb and starts hallucinating—conversing with people who are not physically present in the bedroom. The text reads:

> Vivek's voice broke into the silence, low and rusty. "The wall is falling down."
>
> I lifted my head. "What?"
>
> "The wall is falling down," he repeated. "I knew we should have fixed the roof after it rained last time. And we just brought the yams inside."
>
> I closed my comic and sat up. His head was still bent but his hand was unmoving, resting on a half-turned page. (Emezi, 2020, p. 23)

In this moment, Vivek's mind is out of the spatial and temporal zone in which his body and Osita exist. The words he utters do not make sense to Osita, as they seem to be addressing a topic outside the world he knows. Considering that Vivek is the reincarnation of Ahunna, it may be the dead grandmother speaking through him or the ogbanje in him speaking to his spiritual companions. Such moments confuse Osita, but Vivek downplays them as nothing but "small-small blackouts" (Emezi, 2020, p. 23).

Vivek's interaction with the other world is a counterfactual experience opposed to normative expectations of human existence, behavior, and abilities. Among other things,

"time normalizes and time disciplines…how one is to live in one's world and one's body" (Goltz, 2022, p. 2), but Vivek transgresses such normative disciplining and exists within queer time. In such portrayals of the queer protagonist, Emezi represents queerness as being "out of order" in that it cannot be normatively comprehended nor can it be ordered about (Nyeck, 2021, p. 11). As a rejection of tradition, oppression, and commandment, queerness poses a challenge to heteronormative frames of identity. By locating such transgressive agencies within Igbo traditional beliefs, Emezi represents some tropical epistemologies as already queer, creating room for the presence of queer identities within them.

Vivek also transcends normative time in that he is able to participate in the world of the living even after he dies. The reader continues to hear his voice, and he sometimes narrates the story posthumously. In the final chapter of the novel, Vivek enters the narrative as Nnemdi, the feminine name that he only told his peers to call him by when he was alive. In that chapter, Nnemdi says, "I see how things work now, from this side. I was born and I died. I will come back. Somewhere, you see, in the river of time, I am already alive" (Emezi, 2020, p. 245). Here, the narrative emphasizes the Igbo belief in the circular nature of existence central to the ogbanje myth. Cobo-Piñero (2024) opines that "this posthumous narration sets up a framework that denotes the right to memory and the visibility of a gender non-conforming person in a Nigerian village" (p. 10). By proclaiming that he is already alive and that he would come back, Vivek's voice from beyond ascertains possibilities of queer futurity in a place where queerness is threatened with obscurity.

Apart from exploring the agencies afforded by queer time, Emezi also demonstrates the necessity and value of queer spaces for queer people in restrictive heteronormative environments. As explained earlier, the fathers of the focal characters in the novel are patriarchs who exercise hegemonic masculinities that sometimes manifest as toxic. Even the mothers of the children live in reverence of their husbands. In one instance, Vivek asked his mother to plait his hair, and her answer was, "Your father would kill me!" (Emezi, 2020, p. 62). This emphasizes the control that men in the society have over their families. Such heteropatriarchal control becomes an obstacle for Vivek and other queer characters within his peer group as they fail to live out their identities in the open. As such, they resort to making use of queer spaces, in which they create a queer subculture that affords them relative agency.

Halberstam asserts that "queer space" refers to the place-making practices within postmodernism in which queer people engage and it also describes the new

understandings of space enabled by the production of queer counter publics" (Halberstam, 2005, p. 6). Such spaces often exist outside the confines of restrictive heteronormative spaces that are constantly policed by heteropatriarchal regimes of power. In Foucauldian terms, these spaces become heterotopias: "counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted" (Foucault, 1986, p. 24). The fact that these spaces exist on the outside of the mainstream makes them agentic for marginalized groups like queer people in places like Nigeria, where their identities are criminalized by laws drawn from colonial penal codes. The creation of such counter-sites confronts the legacy of colonialism, as reflected in anti-sodomy laws in most African states, and thus becomes a subversive decolonial exercise.

In *The Death of Vivek Oji*, Vivek and his friends turn their bedrooms into queer spaces where they can experiment with their bodies and engage in activities that are disallowed outside such spaces. After struggling with depression, the first time that Vivek finds relief from the burden of conformity is when his two friends, Olunne and Juju, visit him in his bedroom. Vivek narrates:

> Olunne leaned over and picked the sugar dragonfly off the cupcake, popping it into her mouth. That was how we found each other again, in a blocked-off room filled with yellowing light: two bubblegum fairies there to drag me out of my cave, carrying oversweet wands. I don't know how deep I would have sunk if not for them. (Emezi, 2020, p. 113)

Eventually, the peers make use of Juju's bedroom as their safe space, and Vivek spends most of his time there. The children are very protective of this space because it is a place where they establish their own queer subculture, which they do not want others to find out about. This is where queer couples like Elizabeth and Juju and Vivek and Osita experience the pleasures of their bodies and explore different sexual fantasies. Importantly, this becomes the space in which Vivek begins to cross-dress and explore his feminine side.

The queer space that they create proves to be agentic and safe, and Kavita only gets to know about what was happening with Vivek when the other children open up to her after his death. They show her pictures of him wearing dresses and makeup, and the photographs confirm Kavita's fears:

> "My God," she said. "He was dressing like a woman?"…
>
> Kavita looked up slowly at them. "And all of you knew about this?"…

> "He was sick! And you people all knew this was going on, and it didn't occur to any of you to tell me or his father? We could have helped him!" (Emezi, 2020, p. 216)

As evident from the text, upon seeing the photographs, Kavita is in denial of Vivek's queer gender and sexual identity. Her referring to him as "sick" reflects how her mind is shaped by compulsory heterosexuality, which considers queerness abnormal. However, Vivek's coming out through the pictures compels Kavita to rethink Vivek's gender and sexuality. Realizing and accepting that Vivek was an ogbanje, she finally accepts him for who he was and arranged the pictures in a photo album, which she "pored over for hours when Chika was out of the house, trying to find the child she'd lost, trying to commit to memory the child she'd found" (Emezi, 2020, p. 228).

In their exploration of queer uses of space and time, Emezi demonstrates how the Igbo worldview is queer in nature, operating outside normative knowledge systems hinged on Western binary logic. They also bring to light the agency inherent in queer spaces by displaying how heterotopias ensure the continued existence of queer identities and practices in contexts where queerness is marginalized and criminalized. The narrative attests that "queer temporality marks a process of creation and queer world-making, an opening of potentiality, considering new ways to think, feel, and engage pasts, the present, and potential futures" (Goltz, 2022, p. 2). By imagining and representing counterfactual scenarios, *The Death of Vivek Oji* maps possibilities for queer futurity.

Conclusion: Tropical Queer Epistemologies

In this article, I have analyzed how Akwaeke Emezi's *The Death of Vivek Oji* approaches queerness from a decolonial and counterfactual position. Among other things, I have contended that, in its rendition of the androgynous protagonist and other queer characters, the novel exposes how colonial tropicality and concomitant colonial knowledge systems are reductive in their (mis)understanding of tropical regions and epistemologies. By bringing to the fore indigenous epistemologies through the deployment of the ogbanje myth, the novel privileges tropical knowledges and demonstrates how some African modes of thinking function as counter-discourses to Western binary logic, which informs the understanding of gender, sexuality, and human existence itself. Consequently, I have argued that by deconstructing the hetero-naturalization of temporality to locate queer time and queer space within indigenous African modes of worldmaking, *The Death of Vivek Oji* presents as a work of counterfactualism that offers alternatives to perceived and systemically imposed African gender and sexual realities. Through the narrative, Emezi not only ascertains the

indigeneity of queerness in Africa but goes further to demonstrate how some tropical epistemologies are already queer in their inclusive imagination of life and death, gender and sexuality. Thus, the novel represents how cultures in tropical regions (such as the Igbo) are also hubs of complex and flexible knowledge systems, in contrast to colonial tropes of their primitiveness.

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