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Queer Relational Ontologies in Akwaeke Emezi's *The Death of Vivek Oji* and Chinelo Okparanta's *Under the Udala Trees*

Abstract

This article examines how contemporary Nigerian writers Akwaeke Emezi and Chinelo Okparanta reconfigure dominant understandings of gender, sexuality, and embodiment in *The Death of Vivek Oji* and *Under the Udala Trees*, respectively. Bringing decolonial thought into dialogue with queer ecology, I firstly show how these texts mobilise Igbo relational ontologies to unsettle binary constructions of gender and challenge Western separations between body, spirit, and natural environment. Within this framework, the Mami Wata figure, the concept of *ilo uwa*, the udala tree, and the ecological affinities represented in the texts under discussion function not only as symbols of indigenous belief systems but as active forces that inform the relationships between bodies, spirituality, and nature. In this way, queerness emerges in both novels as a mode of becoming constituted through more-than-human entanglements that transcend the binary limitations of modernity. Secondly, the article demonstrates how both Emezi and Okparanta problematise anti-queer violence to critique colonial regimes of power, particularly those reinforced by religious dogmas. Such regimes discipline queer subjects through shame, exclusion, and physical coercion, exposing the persistence of colonial dominance in knowledge production. Finally, I conclude the present article by stating that both texts underscore the anticolonial practices of queer relatedness, enacted through ethics of care, commemoration, and collective bonds, as a condition which enables a queer Nigerian future.

Keywords: queer relational ontologies, colonial gender binary, Nigerian literature, decolonial queer ecology, Akwaeke Emezi, Chinelo Okparanta.

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INTRODUCTION

In a 1994 interview with *The Paris Review*, Chinua Achebe reflects on an African proverb which accentuates the need for centring marginalised people in crafting their own stories. The author employs the metaphor of writers as historians who should strive to recount the history of hunting from the perspective of the figurative lion rather than the hunter (Achebe). More than thirty years later, Achebe's words still reverberate among Nigerian writers—including Akwaeke Emezi, Francesca Ekwuyasi, Arinze Ifeakandu, Romeo Oriogun, and Chinelo Okparanta. Taking up the torch from the pantheon of Nigeria's first-generation authors, such as the aforementioned Achebe and Wole Soyinka, contemporary Nigerian authors build on earlier literary traditions. As Lindsey Green-Simms notes, Achebe and Soyinka subtly alluded to non-heteronormative expressions of sexuality in their works. However, considering the socio-political contexts in which their works were written, they did not address this issue explicitly (Green-Simms 140). By contrast, this new generation of Nigerian writers brings such a discussion to the forefront by shedding light on marginalised sexual groups in Nigeria. In doing so, they create a counter-narrative to claims that seek to present homosexual relationships as un-African. Addressing the common argument against homosexuality informed by the gender complementarity rule, they articulate a response to the Same-Sex Marriage Prohibition Act. Signed by Nigeria's president in 2014, the law penalises homosexual encounters, carrying a maximum sentence of fourteen years. It also fosters a precarious and hostile environment toward non-heteronormative subjects by punishing not only same-sex unions but also individuals who are aware of them with imprisonment of up to ten years (Balogun and Bissell 116).

In the Nigerian public discourse, same-sex desire is often portrayed as a remnant of colonial influence by leaders who instrumentalise sexuality for their own political ends. However, given the history of colonialism, it may be concluded that it was, in fact, homophobia, not homosexuality, that was transported to Africa with the colonial enterprise. As Sylvia Tamale points out, narratives regarding homosexuality as un-African are bereft of historical context, obfuscating queer genealogies across the continent (34). To illustrate this point, she further historicizes queerness in Africa by providing 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 *Male Daughters, Female Husbands: Gender and Sex in an African Society*, Ifi Amadiume argues that in the precolonial society of her hometown in Nnobi, located in southeastern Nigeria, the disconnection between biological sex and

ideological gender paved the way for women to assume roles traditionally associated with men. Subsequently, they were recognised as 'males' in terms of power and authority and, as a result, were allowed to marry other women (185). Similarly, Oyeronke Oyewumi argues that, in precolonial times, gender was a fluid concept in southwestern Nigeria, specifically the Oyo-Yoruba region, and it did not determine one's social position. In fact, it was seniority that marked an individual's status in the community. Therefore, Oyewumi suggests that the idea of biological determinism as the organising principle of social hierarchy, which she conceptualises as "bio-logic" (X), was introduced to indigenous knowledge systems alongside Christianity and Western education: "The goal of the missionaries was to transform African societies, not to preserve them, [thus] the African family system was to be targeted for reform and, in turn, to be the vehicle for the 'civilization' of these societies" (128–29). Nevertheless, one should exercise caution in accepting Oyewumi's understanding of Yoruba identity without a careful critical examination. In fact, in some instances, her arguments seem to lack empirical evidence. While it is true that the category of gender is a by-product of colonisation, Oyewumi's theorising does not take into account the fact that seniority as the main organising principle among the Yorubas was based on patrilineality. This gave men a dominant position in certain spheres of life before the arrival of the Western missionaries. Thus, in some cases, the idea of seniority reinforced gender hierarchies prior to the emergence of social constructs such as *male* or *female*. In this regard, it appears that Oyewumi's reasoning reflects her revisionist motives, and that she herself constructs an idealised image of a pre-colonial society in which the concept of gender held no significance (Mama 69). Driven by her longing for a culturally pure African selfhood, she falls into the dichotomous Africa-versus-the-West trap, perpetuating the dualisms she vehemently opposes (Bakare-Yusuf 137). These incongruities in Oyewumi's historiography do not negate the fact that her critique of gender and Western dominance in knowledge production was and still is an inspiration for a whole array of scholars. Among them is Maria Lugones, a decolonial feminist thinker who, picking up on Oyewumi's arguments, introduces the term "coloniality of gender" ("Toward a Decolonial Feminism" 746). This notion emphasises how colonial gender-coded logics continue to shape power relations, structure social hierarchies, and inform the production of knowledge in the present. In other words, Lugones accentuates the need to understand how these power structures operate along intersecting axes to reveal our complicity in systemic, gendered, and racialised violence. By doing so, she seeks to acknowledge these forms of violence in our daily lives, which she refers to as "our maps of reality" ("The Coloniality of Gender" 56).

Such an appeal to acknowledge the persistence of colonial legacies on gender roles, power dynamics, and knowledge production is a common thread that runs through the works of contemporary Nigerian writers who shed light on how queer individuals in Nigeria are stripped of what is commonly referred to as the essence of *Africanness*. In doing so, they forge new paths for renegotiating queer belonging within Nigerian cartographies. Reclaiming and sharing stories of same-sex desire among Nigerians, their literary works resist the imposed hierarchies determining which forms of indigenous knowledges emerging from the Global South are worthy of consideration.

In the present article, I examine how Akwaeke Emezi's *The Death of Vivek Oji* and Chinelo Okparanta's *Under the Udala Trees* redefine dominant understandings of gender, sexuality, and embodiment. Situating decolonial thought in dialogue with queer ecology, I argue that these texts engage Igbo relational ontologies to challenge fixed gender binaries and unsettle Western divisions between the body, spirituality, and the natural environment. In this context, the Mami Wata figure, the notion of *ilo uwa*, the udala tree, and the ecological affinities illustrated in both novels are not just symbolic of indigenous beliefs; they are also presented as active forces that dismantle the nature/culture binary. By so doing, they problematise queer embodiment as constituted through human, spiritual, and ecological entanglements. I further underscore how both authors problematise anti-queer violence as a way to critique colonial systems of power, especially those upheld through religious practices. Finally, I conclude by illustrating how these novels render queer modes of relatedness, enacted through ethics of care, memory, and collective bonds, as foundational for queer Nigerian futures.

DECOLONISING GENDER THROUGH IGBO METAPHYSICS AND NIGERIAN QUEER ECOLOGIES

In their writing, Nigerian-born Akwaeke Emezi and Chinelo Okparanta draw on indigenous epistemologies that unsettle fixed boundaries between the human, spiritual, and environmental realms. Consequently, they situate their novels within the broader tradition of Nigerian writing, including Amos Tutuola's *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* (1954) and Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* (1991), which foreground indigenous relational ontologies that challenge Western epistemic frameworks. Both *The Death of Vivek Oji* and *Under the Udala Trees* exemplify this approach. Weaving Igbo metaphysical concepts such as *ilo uwa*, the Mami Wata figure, and environmental references, these texts articulate queerness as constituted through more-than-human entanglements. Through this framework, they

employ Igbo vocabularies not only to deconstruct gender but also to enact a decolonial intervention in queer ecology.

In *Queer Ecologies: Sex, Nature, Politics, Desire* (2010), Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands and Bruce Erickson suggest that, through its recourse to nature, queer ecology dismantles the essentialist binaries that frame iterations of same-sex desire as unnatural. Thus, a nascent scholarship in queer ecology links queer sexuality with an environmental sensibility. "Queer ecology," as they argue, refers to "a new practice of ecological knowledges, spaces, and politics that places central attention on challenging hetero-ecologies from the perspective of non-normative sexual and gender positions" (22). By using the term "hetero-ecologies," the authors refer to the dominant paradigms that equate heterosexuality with nature through the lens of biological reproduction. Queer ecology, on the other hand, questions these assumptions, reconsidering nature as a site of fluidity, relationality, and non-normative embodiment. Such an alternative mode of thinking resonates with both *The Death of Vivek Oji* and *Under the Udala Trees*, where the natural world is rendered as abundant in queer-affirming spaces.

Furthermore, these novels connect queer ecology and a decolonial praxis in the sense that the body's proximity to nature, historically devalued by colonial discourse, allows for a reclamation of indigenous ways of knowing/being: "[T]he very locus of othering Africans as savages and subhuman, which is their closeness to their natural world, becomes an aesthetic strategy for anti-colonial narratives" (Egya 12). Given that the concept of nature is deeply embedded in colonial gender/sexuality discourses and racialisation practices, queer ecology, as Gregory Luke Chwala suggests, should be theorised in tandem with decoloniality: "[I]t is . . . impossible to have queer ecologies, even ecocriticism, without a commitment to decolonization because fear and oppression of Western conceptions of both the erotic and isolated nonhuman environments—erotophobia and ecophobia—are so deeply intertwined" (144). In this sense, Chwala's observation makes clear that discourses of sexuality and ecology should be understood within colonial frameworks that produce and sustain exclusionary practices based on gender, sexuality, and race.

In contrast to the colonial logic that enforced a separation between flesh, spirit, and the environment, African indigenous ontologies conceived of the body as embedded within a more-than-human ensemble: "The society of humans was merely a singular segment of the *general community of beings, which included the dead*" (Mbembe 19, emphasis in the original). Thus, the novels examined in the present article manifest a shift from a Western model of the human grounded in separation, rationality, and exceptionalism to one structured by interdependence, in which embodiment unfolds across human, spiritual, and environmental registers. Both *The*

Death of Vivek Oji and *Under the Udala Trees* dislodge the nature/culture binary through their detachment from the epistemological assumptions of Western modernity, a process which Walter Mignolo theorises as "epistemic delinking" ("Delinking" 461). In both texts, this is achieved by adopting indigenous ontologies—inherently more-than-human in orientation—as frameworks that facilitate queer becoming.

For instance, in *The Death of Vivek Oji*, Emezi mobilises the Igbo metaphysical concept of *ilo uwa* to reconfigure terms such as gender, sexuality, and embodiment. Rather than signifying a cyclical reincarnation in which a discrete soul transfers between bodies, *ilo uwa* denotes a relational continuity where ancestral presence partially manifests in the living without departing from the spiritual realm. As Kingsley Nwannennaya Okoro points out, *ilo uwa* relies on the intermingling of the material and spiritual worlds. Although the ancestor remains in the spiritual realm, their diffused personhood is partially reflected in the offspring through vital qualities (Okoro 20). The novel renders this ontology through the convergence of Vivek's birth with Ahunna's death, as well as their shared starfish-shaped scar that highlights the material and spiritual connection between these two (Emezi 5, 12). When Vivek's father, Chika, asks, "How else could that scar have entered the world on flesh if it had not left in the first place?," his observation implies that Ahunna's continued presence is articulated through Vivek's materiality (13). In this light, the protagonist's further reclamation of the name *Nnemdi*, which translates to *my mother is alive* (Madubuike 49), problematises his queerness as a process of becoming constituted through his multifaceted relationship with Ahunna.

In this context, the concept of *ilo uwa* can be read as inherently queer because it figures Vivek's embodiment as fluid and constituted through relations across ontological and temporal domains. This aligns with Wesley Paul Macheso's argument that Emezi's non-normative representations of space and time show how Igbo ontologies are "queer in nature" (209). Thus, by acknowledging his connection to Ahunna and "his role as a holder of life," Vivek is able to enact his queer mode of being as Nnemdi (Durán-Almarza 89). In light of the above, *ilo uwa* emerges in the novel not only as an indigenous framework that transcends the colonial gender binary but also as an ontological actant that allows for the articulation of Vivek/Nnemdi's queer subjectivity.

As the main character's connection to his grandmother becomes more pronounced, Vivek shifts toward his feminine side, while his gender remains uncategorised. At this stage, Emezi invokes the figure of Mami Wata to describe Vivek's physical features through the eyes of those around him. According to Henry John Drewal's ethnographic study of the deity, Mami Wata embraces liminal potentialities that transcend Western categorisations

of the embodied subject: "She is a transcendent, transformative, transcultural, transnational, transgendered, and trans-Atlantic being. She straddles both land and water, culture and nature (being half-human, half-fish)" (295). Thus, the narrative situates Vivek/Nnemdi's character within the fluid ontology of Mami Wata. This is further manifested in the novel when the protagonist, appearing in public as Nnemdi, is described by bystanders in the market as "tall with long mammy water hair" (Emezi 149). In this case, Mami Wata and her aquatic realm operate not only as a metaphor. Rather, they function as a transformative medium through which Vivek/Nnemdi's queer subjectivity is enacted. This, in turn, allows us to conceptualise queerness as a relational mode of being that emerges through the dynamic interplay of human, spiritual, and ecological registers.

This relational aspect extends beyond the aquatic into the terrestrial domain, where Vivek/Nnemdi's posthumous transfiguration is realised through his material entanglement with the soil and its regenerative possibilities. In one of the closing scenes, Osita's speculative contemplation focuses on Kavita's deliberate choice to plant a star fruit tree at the head of her child's grave:

> Did she look forward to the day when it would actually have star fruits hanging from its branches? Would she pick them and eat them as if she was absorbing him, bringing him back inside where he'd come from? It would be something like Holy Communion, I imagined, body and blood turned into yellow flesh and pale green skin, bursting with juice. Or maybe she would never touch the fruit—maybe no one would—and they would fall back to the ground to rot, to sink back into the soil, until the roots of the tree took them back and it would just continue like that, around and around. Or birds would show up and eat the fruit, then carry Vivek around, giving life to things even after he'd run out of it himself. (230)

This passage indicates a process of rebirth in which death is figured as a site of ecological renewal. The merging of Vivek/Nnemdi's flesh with the earth and its bounties depicts the queer body as a source of new life. In addition, the images of germination, consumption, and decay hint at the possibility of transformation, in which the body is constantly reconstituted through relational and material exchanges. Such a perspective is consistent with Mbembe's concept, according to which the Earth is a "vibratorium" and a "binder" that enables an alteration from one form of life to another. Articulating death as a site of new beginning, as he suggests, aligns with pre-colonial African ontologies, which reject the notion of death as a demise. Instead, they conceive of death as a rite of passage from one world to another, opening onto the possibility of cyclical rebirth to "give life to what is threatened with demise" (Mbembe 8–9). In this light, Vivek/

Nnemdi's situatedness within the natural world animates the possibility of queer continuity. Framing Nigerian ecologies as fertile ground for queer existence, *The Death of Vivek Oji* articulates a decolonial queer ecology. In this framework, queer embodiment emerges as a web of human, spiritual, and ecological relations which resist colonial regimes of power.

Similarly, in *Under the Udala Trees*, Okparanta problematises queer relational ontologies by employing Igbo vocabularies such as the eponymous udala tree, the aforementioned Mami Wata figure, or environmental references. Inspired by her mother's accounts of war, Okparanta's debut novel tells the story of a 10-year-old girl, Ijeoma, who comes to terms with her lesbian sexuality against the canvas of the Biafran War. By June 1968, as Nigerian forces tighten their grip around Biafra, Ijeoma's father dies in an air raid, and her mother sends the eleven-year-old girl to live with a family friend who offers to look after her in exchange for housework. As it soon turns out, Ijeoma's departure for Nnewi marks the beginning of her quest for a lesbian identity. As such, *Under the Udala Trees* echoes a common trope in Nigerian literature, in which exile from home, whether literal or metaphysical, fosters a child's personal growth, as seen in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* or Okri's *The Famished Road*. Without the safety net of her kin, Ijeoma is not only forced to endure the hardships of growing up away from home, but she also learns how to navigate her budding sexuality.

When one day, during her stay in her grammar school teacher's house, Ijeoma is sent to fetch kerosene, she meets an orphaned Hausa girl named Amina. Interestingly, during their first encounter, Ijeoma employs a fruit-related metaphor to describe Amina's appearance. By referring to Amina's skin as "[y]ellow, like a ripe pawpaw" (Okparanta 104), the girl locates queer desire within the natural environment. This reflects Elleke Boehmer's argument that queerness can emerge through "questing and/or questioning," often expressed through metaphor and other poetic effects (175). Thus, Okparanta links vegetal imagery to the geographies of the lesbian body, situating queerness within Nigerian ecological contexts. What is more, the first enactment of Ijeoma and Amina's lesbian lovemaking takes place in a hovel located in a rural setting animated with the sounds of nature: "grasshoppers hopping, fireflies buzzing, crickets singing their songs, leaves rustling in a breeze" (Okparanta 117). The spatial framing of these queer intimacies challenges the common relegation of queer desire to urban contexts (Seymour 19). Through this bucolic setting, Okparanta brings queer desire closer to nature, and "obviate[s] the nature–culture schema," which casts the human as superior to the natural world (Seymour 38). The author embeds same-sex desire within rather than apart from the natural domain: "Ijeoma's acceptance of her love and physical attraction to Amina comes as something natural" (Cruz-Gutiérrez 104). In turn, this

secluded rural environment becomes a safe space which allows same-sex intimacies between the girls to flourish, far from the ravages of war.

As in Vivek/Nnemdi's case, Ijeoma's queerness is further manifested in *Under the Udala Trees* through reference to the Mami Wata figure. Comparing her body to that of an Igbo deity, Ijeoma describes Amina's image in terms of her resemblance to the hybrid creature: "Her hair hung in long clumps around her face, like those images of Mami Wata, hair writhing like serpents" (Okparanta 104). This reference is particularly important since Mami Wata's followers are largely individuals positioned on the margins of society (Fourqurean 21). Furthermore, the term *Mammywater* surpasses colonial-coded gender dualisms since it might be used to refer to male and female water deities (Jell-Bahlsen 30). This water-based ontology emerges in the novel as a space where rigid categories of gender and sexuality are dissolved. Within this framework, the figure of Mami Wata and her aquatic affinities exceed a purely symbolic register. Instead, linked to Amina's tangible body, they become materially implicated in Ijeoma's queer becoming.

Interestingly, Okparanta further problematises Western conceptualisations of femininity—and, in doing so, naturalises homoerotic desire—by staging the girls' first encounter beneath the udala tree, which in Igbo culture symbolises female fertility and the spirit of children (Agukoronye 95). This symbolic choice is not incidental; rather, as the author herself explains, the udala tree is "relevant to the themes of [the] novel" precisely because it enables her to "interrogate prescriptive notions of femininity" ("Queerness, Womanity, and Hope"). Consequently, femininity is redefined in the novel in a way to accommodate Ijeoma's and Amina's non-heteronormative sexualities and to create what Josephine Delali Ofei and Daniel Oppong-Adjei describe as "a justifiable space for their queer sexual desires" (69). In other words, the author portrays the girls' encounter under the udala tree and their subsequent same-sex attraction as an organic process. In addition, the material presence of the tree actively participates in their queer becoming, providing them with a natural haven where their homoerotic desires can be actualised. As Daisy Gohain notes, "[f]or Ijeoma and Amina, the tree serves as a sanctuary, shielding them from the critical gaze of their community" (12). In this context, carving out a safe space for same-sex intimate relationships is not only a manifestation of a decolonial stance but also allows for a redefinition of nature from a queer perspective.

Taken together, Emezi and Okparanta mobilise Igbo relational ontologies and Nigerian queer ecologies not only to challenge the colonial constructions of gender but also to problematise the imposed divisions between the flesh, spirit, and nature. Drawing on concepts such as *ilo uwa*,

the udala tree, the figure of Mami Wata, and environmental references, both authors articulate queerness as a relational mode of becoming, emerging through human, spiritual, and environmental entanglements. In doing so, these narratives expose the limitations of Western thought, revealing how colonial legacies suppress queer articulations of sexuality inherent in indigenous ways of knowing/being. This repression, as the next section demonstrates, takes the form of anti-queer violence, which, enforced through religious dogmas, becomes a strategic mechanism aimed at restoring the heteronormative order.

WOUNDED FLESH, DEFIANT SPIRITS

The echoes of colonial domination, which continues to shape social responses to gender and sexuality, are evident in the novels under discussion. In *The Death of Vivek Oji*, this is rendered through the figure of Vivek's aunt, Mary. According to the religious doctrine she upholds, she perceives Vivek's queer embodied subjectivity as an abomination. Her perspective becomes even more pronounced when, following Vivek's significant weight loss and repeated refusals to cut his hair, she urges his mother, Kavita, to allow her to take him to church for deliverance. Given Kavita's Indian origins and her involvement in the community of the Nigerwives who treat local Christian beliefs as superstitious and performative, she is initially resentful toward this idea:[1] "All the Nigerwives liked to make fun of what they called the fanatic Christians, always catching the Holy Ghost and convulsing on carpets" (Emezi 83). However, when the doctor to whom Kavita takes her child offers no apt diagnosis or support, she eventually accepts Mary's offer. When Vivek returns from the church, he recounts being physically abused by individuals who believed him to be 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 construal of Vivek's queer body as an aberration reflects a culture of deliverance that relegates queer subjectivities to the realm of evil. In this sense, the wounds inflicted on his flesh render the protagonist's body a site of anti-queer violence, deployed to reassert a normative heterosexual order. Consequently, Vivek's body is dehumanised, reduced to that of an *animal* and subjected to whipping by the self-proclaimed emissaries of God (75). These anti-queer sentiments, however, do not prevent the main character from embracing

[1] The Nigerwives are an association of foreign women married to Nigerian men, established in 1979 as a transnational support community for immigrant wives living in Nigeria (see Onyemelukwe).

his queerness as Nnemdi. As the narrative progresses, the protagonist's non-heteronormative manifestations transcend the safe space of his friends—Osita, Elizabeth, Juju, Somto, and Olunne—and enter the public sphere (Nenadović 291). As a result, Nnemdi's queerness becomes visible in the local marketplace, where ongoing political riots put her life at risk. Fearing for her safety, Osita attempts to persuade Nnemdi to return home. This leads to an argument between the two of them, during which Osita accidentally pushes Nnemdi to the ground, ultimately causing her death. However, in the novel, this death is not figured as a tragic ending. On the contrary, by dying in the arms of the beloved as Nnemdi, the protagonist moves across temporal boundaries and transcends the constraints of anti-queer discourse, as reflected in the following contemplation from beyond the grave: "I often wonder if I died in the best possible way—in the arms of the one who loved me the most, wearing a skin that was true" (Emezi 244). This posthumous transformation unsettles linear temporality and animates the possibility of a Nigerian future unencumbered by queer hostility.

Anti-queer sentiments also find expression in *Under the Udala Trees*. For example, when the grammar school teacher catches the girls in the middle of their love-making, he slaps them on their cheeks, clutches his Bible, and describes their act as an "abomination" (Okparanta 125). Proclaiming the homoerotic encounter between the girls to be a sin, the teacher resorts to physical abuse to uphold the existing norms. As a result, both Ijeoma and Amina are left feeling ashamed of their same-sex intimacies. The protagonist compares this scene to Adam and Eve's expulsion from paradise: "We were naked, and we felt our nakedness Adam and Eve must have felt in the garden, at the time of that evening breeze. Our eyes had become open, and we too sought to hide ourselves" (125). In turn, the imposition of "compulsory heterosexuality" (Rich 13), enforced through physical violence and religious discourse, leads to the separation of the girls. Consequently, Amina stays at the grammar school teacher's house while Ijeoma is fetched back home by her mother. Believing that a demon possesses her daughter, Adaora becomes determined to *cleanse* Ijeoma's soul. Arranging lessons in which she cites biblical parables, she attempts to convince her daughter that Christianity and homosexuality are fundamentally incompatible. However, instead of agreeing with her mother's biblical interpretation, Ijeoma forms her own understanding of Scripture. As Cédric Courtois notes, she eagerly explores alternative readings that question the universality of colonial paradigms (124). Thus, rather than taking the story of Adam and Eve verbatim and reading it as a mandate for heterosexual union, she perceives the creation narrative as a metaphor for human companionship, one that is not determined by gender (Okparanta 76).

Interestingly, Ijeoma is also subjected to a deliverance ritual, but unlike Vivek/Nnemdi, not at the hands of religious leaders, but those of her mother. When the Bible lessons fail to produce the desired effect, and Ijeoma confesses that she still thinks about Amina, her mother refigures Ijeoma's lesbian desire as a demonic force that must be eliminated. She attempts to free her daughter from her evil spirit by anointing her body and uttering the words: "In the name of the Almighty God, I order you to leave my child alone" (88). While initially Ijeoma attempts to conform to her mother's expectations, she gradually comes to understand that her same-sex desire is not sinful (159). After a few years apart, the protagonist reunites with her former lover, only to discover that Amina's attitude toward their relationship has changed. This change stems from a strict Catholic education during her stay with the grammar school teacher: "Maybe we were the fallen children, the sinful ones without the strength to continue in the path of righteousness" (155). Ultimately, Amina distances herself from Ijeoma, starts dating boys, and eventually announces her engagement to a Hausa man, marking the end of the relationship between the two girls.

After returning to Ojoto to help her mother with her business, Ijeoma meets Ndidi, a local teacher, and their mutual connection soon develops into a romantic relationship. Through Ndidi, Ijeoma is introduced to a community of queer women who gather in an abandoned church. The novel thus highlights how Black lesbian solidarities are pertinent to queer existence (Amodu 1). This collective lesbian camaraderie situated within a religious setting can be understood as a reappropriation of sacred space, one that strategically negotiates queer belonging within a Christian framework. It is also at this church that, dancing in her lover's arms, Ijeoma experiences a liberating affirmation of her lesbian identity for the first time: "We danced together for a long time, Ndidi and I, and I felt a sense of liberation that I had not until then known" (Okparanta 193). This scene hints at Ijeoma's subversion of the traditional notion of deliverance. In other words, she does not seek liberation from the supposed devil of homosexuality; rather, she strives to free herself from the homophobia ingrained in her environment (van Klinken and Makinana 4).

However, Ijeoma's journey toward queer liberation is not a straightforward process, and she frequently questions the moral legitimacy of her actions. As the novel progresses, she embarks on a figurative "witch-hunt" (Okparanta 196) against her own lesbian desires. Given the precarity of queer existence in a hostile environment, she temporarily succumbs to societal pressure and decides to marry her male childhood friend. Nevertheless, this abusive marriage eventually falters, and she returns home with her daughter, Chidinma, in her arms. Notably, Ijeoma's return

home marks the point where Adaora's love for her ultimately prevails over public discourses of normativity. Embracing her daughter with the words: "God, who created you, must have known what He did" (323), Ijeoma's mother finally reconciles her Christian faith with her daughter's queerness. This moment allows for queer post-secular readings that frame Ijeoma's lesbian sexuality as part of God's creation.

In the novels discussed, compulsory Christianity functions as a tool of coercion that governs acceptable expressions of gender and sexuality. Vivek/Nnemdi's and Ijeoma's queer bodies are presented as sites where colonial codes are transcribed, with religion functioning as a vehicle via which such inscriptions are enforced. However, through their refusal to accept colonial modes of knowledge production as universal, both protagonists engage in "epistemic disobedience" (Mignolo, "Epistemic Disobedience" 178). As a result, they liberate themselves from the constraints of religious dogma, albeit using different strategies. In other words, although both Emezi and Okparanta use Christianity's demonisation of queer bodies as the main focus of critique, their novels simultaneously create space for various forms of queer spirituality. In *The Death of Vivek Oji*, this is achieved through the reclamation of indigenous ways of knowing/being that offer an affirmative space for gender-queer individuals. *Under the Udala Trees*, on the other hand, allows for a critical reinterpretation of religious norms, one that accommodates queer subjectivities within the Christian domain. Thus, subverting the construction of queerness as inherently secular, these novels do not dismiss the spiritual dimensions of queer identity. Rather, they reject the imposition of colonial regimes that instrumentalise religious practices in order to regulate norms of gender and sexuality through shame, exclusion, and physical coercion. In doing so, they open up space not only for imagining Nigerian queer futures but also for bringing them to life.

CONCLUSIONS

In "Decolonial AestheSis: Colonial Wounds/Decolonial Healings," Mignolo and Vázquez conceptualise the notion of "the colonial wound," which refers to the epistemic, spiritual, and ecological ruptures brought about by colonial regimes in the name of modernity. In both novels, this wound manifests in the experiences of anti-queer violence endured by Ijeoma and Vivek/Nnemdi. Highlighting how the heteropatriarchal order, enforced through religious dogmas, thwarts queer liveability through emotional/physical abuse, shame, and exclusion, both Emezi's and Okparanta's works present "the unveiling of the [colonial] wound"

(Mignolo and Vázquez). At the same time, both of these novels problematise queerness as a site of contestation where Western categorisations of gender, sexuality, and embodiment are dislodged. Framing Mami Wata, *ilo uwa*, the udala tree, and the natural environment as queer-affirming domains, the novels conceptualise non-heteronormative embodiment as a relational mode of being, constituted through human, spiritual, and ecological domains. Consequently, *The Death of Vivek Oji* and *Under the Udala Trees* gesture towards the "possibility of healing" that relies on the recognition and recovery of alternative ways of knowing and being erased by the imposition of modernity (Mignolo and Vázquez).

Envisioning the Nigerian future as a space that accommodates difference and cultivates a shared sense of belonging, both Emezi and Okparanta frame these anti-colonial practices of relatedness as the foundation for queer Nigerian world-making. Enacted through ethics of care, memory, and collective action, in both novels, such practices become central to creating spaces in which queer existences may flourish. In *The Death of Vivek Oji*, this finds expression in the final chapter, where Nnemdi, despite her death, enters the story as a narrative voice. Her last words—"Somewhere, you see, in the river of time, I am already alive" (Emezi 245)—establish queer future as attainable through a reclamation of non-linear temporality. The river's ebb and flow, in turn, suggests the possibility of change enabled by a recovery of indigenous relational ontologies. In this sense, Nnemdi's posthumous narration, alongside the commemoration of her name on a tombstone by her parents, resists the systemic erasure enforced by heteropatriarchal regimes. Consequently, this cyclical ontology fosters a sense of hope through its re-negotiation of queer belonging within the Nigerian milieu.

A hopeful note is also sounded in *Under the Udala Trees*. After her marriage to Chibundu falls apart, Ijeoma reunites with Ndidi. Towards the end of the novel, Ijeoma recounts how the two often lie together in bed, while Ndidi reimagines Nigeria as a place where love is not governed by gender or ethnic divides. In the penultimate scene, Ijeoma reflects: "Many days I reason to myself that change is the point of it all. And that everything we do should be a reflection on that change" (Okparanta 322). This emphasis on transformation is evident not only in Adaora's evolving attitude, as she comes to terms with her daughter's lesbianism, but also in Chidinma's commitment to making Nigeria a safe place for queer people. Describing her daughter as a symbol of a new generation of Nigerians more inclined "toward love than fear," Ijeoma puts emphasis on collective bonds as essential to queer Nigerian futures.

In light of the above, both *The Death of Vivek Oji* and *Under the Udala Trees* foreground queer futurity as a praxis through which alternative

modes of belonging are actively produced in opposition to the epistemic and affective violences of heteropatriarchy. In doing so, they reframe queer Nigerian futurity not as a distant possibility but as a continuous process enacted through ethics of care, memory, and kinship.

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