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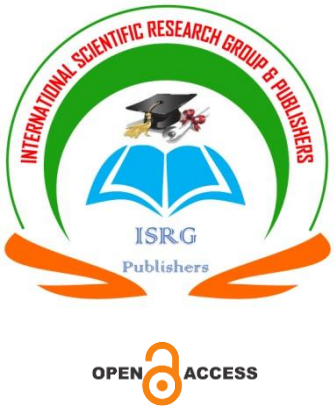

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Between Becoming and Unbecoming: The Social Determinants of Queer Narrative in Torrey Peters and Akwaeke Emezi

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Abstract

Literary narratives of gender nonconformity are profoundly shaped by the geopolitical contexts that produce them. This comparative analysis of Torrey Peters's Detransition, Baby and Akwaeke Emezi's The Death of Vivek Oji argues that narrative form functions as a biopolitical index, registering the starkly different conditions for queer and transgender life in the United States and Nigeria. Peters's domestic, psychologically realist novel of chosen kinship emerges from a milieu of conditional neoliberal inclusion, structuring a narrative oriented toward contested futurity. In stark contrast, Emezi's elegiac, multi-perspectival mystery responds to a context of legislated homophobia and social erasure, necessitating a plot that begins with death and works backward. Through close reading, we trace a deterministic logic from ontology and embodiment to kinship and violence, demonstrating how these social pressures crystallize in narrative architecture. Synthesizing queer of color critique with narrative theory, this study proposes a model of relational reading that treats formal dissonance as a critical resource for transnational analysis. The comparison moves beyond thematic parallels to expose how the possibility of a future-oriented story is itself a measure of global inequality. Ultimately, this paper contends that attending to the geopolitics of form is essential for a transnational queer studies committed to understanding how power differentially structures the very possibility of being narrated. (211)

Keywords: Transgender literature, Queer studies, Comparative literature, Narrative form, Transnationalism, Akwaeke Emezi, Biopolitics, African literature.

Introduction: Worldmaking, Elegy, and the Biopolitics of Transgender Narrative

The global discourse on gender identity in the twenty-first century is a fractured constellation, its narratives illuminated and constrained by disparate socio-political forces. In the Global North, transgender visibility coincides with virulent backlash, a dynamic Susan Stryker links to the transgressive threat posed to "the foundational language of the dominant culture's system of meaning" (151). In postcolonial contexts like Nigeria, however, the terrain is shaped by a colonial legacy that pathologized gender variance, a legacy now intensified by powerful indigenous religious and cultural institutions. The 2014 Same-Sex Marriage

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(Prohibition) Act epitomizes this hostility, forcing queer life, as Nigerian artist Zina Saro-Wiwa observes, into states of "hyper-stealth and coded expression." This legislative reality creates what scholar Chantal Zabus calls a "hermeneutic of secrecy," where identity must be negotiated through silence and implication (Zabus 18).

It is within this stark transnational contrast that contemporary fiction emerges as a vital site of worldmaking and testimony. This article places two seminal 2020 novels in critical dialogue: Torrey Peters's *Detransition, Baby* and Akwaeke Emezi's *The Death of Vivek Oji*. While both center gender-nonconforming protagonists, their narrative architectures diverge fundamentally, registering the biopolitical conditions of their settings. Peters's novel, a psychologically realist exploration of trans femininity and chosen family in Brooklyn, leans toward the contested construction of a future. Emezi's elegy, structured as a posthumous mystery in southeastern Nigeria, excavates a past violently erased. This divergence is not merely aesthetic but a literary manifestation of the global hierarchies Jasbir Puar theorizes, wherein "some bodies are more vulnerable to exposure and death than others" (35). The narrative itself becomes a gauge of possibility: one oriented toward potential life, the other toward mourned death.

A significant critical lacuna persists, however. Scholarly analyses of these texts remain largely siloed within discrete geopolitical frameworks. *Detransition, Baby* is routinely examined within American transgender studies and debates on neoliberal identity, while *The Death of Vivek Oji* is situated within African LGBTQ+ literature and discourses of postcolonial trauma. This segregated approach inadvertently reinforces the very borders a transnational queer critique seeks to dismantle. As P. Akshay Singh argues in a related context, "The body that transitions in Manhattan does so under a different constellation of power than the body that transgresses in Lagos" (45). Without a comparative lens, we risk a monolithic understanding of gender nonconformity, failing to see how "the biopolitics of queerness" (Puar 35) dictates the starkly different stories that can be told and survived.

Therefore, this study aims to bridge this gap through a sustained comparative analysis. It argues that the expression, constraints, and very narrative form of gender-variant experience are inextricably bound to local cultural, legal, and historical assemblages. By juxtaposing Peters's focus on futurity with Emezi's excavation of loss, we illuminate how the politics of gender are materialized in literary structure. This work contributes directly to transnational queer studies by heeding Gayatri Gopinath's call for a comparative practice that "explodes the limited and limiting frame of the nation-state" to trace the flows of power shaping queer desire and embodiment (12). Simultaneously, it expands African literary studies by engaging seriously with a text that centralizes gender nonconformity as a complex aesthetic and philosophical concern, not merely a sociological fact. Ultimately, this analysis underscores fiction's unique capacity to map the radically uneven global landscapes of gendered life and death.

Theoretical Framework: Disidentification and the Rhetoric of Narrative

To navigate the complex representational strategies of these novels, this analysis is guided by an integrated theoretical framework that combines the political critique of Queer Theory with the formal analytic tools of Narrative Theory. This synthesis is predicated on the conviction that the political force of these texts is inseparable from their aesthetic form; or, as literary critic Robyn Warhol succinctly puts it, "form is always political" (811).

From Queer Theory, the central conceptual lens is disidentification, as formulated by José Esteban Muñoz. For Muñoz, disidentification is the strategic process by which marginalized subjects "work on, with, and against" dominant cultural codes. It is a "recycling and rethinking [of] encoded meaning" that scrambles exclusionary messages to "account for, include, and empower minority identities and identifications" (31). This concept is indispensable for analyzing how characters in both novels navigate the oppressive scripts of gender, family, and nation, whether through Reese's and Ames's attempt to reconstruct kinship in *Detransition, Baby* or Vivek's fleeting, clandestine moments of self-assertion. We extend this through the specific lens of Transgender Studies, drawing on Susan Stryker's foundational work on "transgender rage" born from being "abjected from dominant discourses of embodiment" (251), and Queer of Color Critique, which, as Roderick Ferguson asserts, interrogates how "queer of color existence" is rendered an impossibility within normative logics of state and capital (Ferguson 86). This constellation of ideas allows us to parse the located, often fraught, strategies of survival and self-fashioning that each text dramatizes.

To understand *how* these strategies are engineered at the level of literary form, we turn to Narrative Theory, specifically the rhetorical approach articulated by James Phelan. Phelan defines narrative as "a rhetorical act: somebody telling somebody else on some occasion and for some purpose(s) that something happened" (218). This perspective insists that narrative is a dynamic, purposive communication designed to shape a reader's judgments, emotions, and beliefs. We employ key concepts such as focalization (the perspective through which story events are filtered), narrative voice, and temporality. For instance, Peters's use of a contemporary, intimate, and darkly comedic voice immerses the reader in the psychological immediacy of her characters' choices, building what scholar Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley might call a "bridge of empathy" for trans interiority (Tinsley 102). In stark contrast, Emezi's elegiac, multi-perspectival, and non-linear structure formally enacts the tragedy of communal misrecognition. As the narrative circles Vivek's death, the reader is made a detective, piecing together a truth his community failed to see, thus experiencing what narrative theorist Peter Brooks describes as the "ineluctable hermeneutic drive" to reconstruct a coherent story from the fragments of trauma (Brooks 323). The form itself becomes a record of disidentification's success or a testament to its violent foreclosure.

The union of these frameworks is generative. It allows us to contend, for example, that Emezi's fragmented, retrospective form is a queer narrative strategy that critiques epistemic violence, or that Peters's psychological realism is a formal commitment to rendering a trans future legible and imaginable. Together, they provide the precise tools needed to demonstrate our core thesis: that the global unevenness of gendered possibility, the chasm between contested futurity and irretrievable loss, is inscribed in the very architecture of contemporary world literature.

Literature Review: Critical Genealogies and the Imperative for a Transnational Frame

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This review maps the parallel yet disconnected critical conversations surrounding Torrey Peters's *Detransition, Baby* (2021) and Akwaeke Emezi's *The Death of Vivek Oji* (2020). It demonstrates that while robust interpretive traditions exist for each novel, situated within American transgender studies and African queer literature, respectively, their segregation inadvertently reinforces the geopolitical divides that transnational queer theory seeks to dismantle. By synthesizing these discourses and highlighting their theoretical convergences and contextual divergences, this section establishes the critical necessity of the comparative analysis this study provides.

Theoretical Convergences: Embodiment, Failure, and Disidentification

The scholarly analysis of both novels is underpinned by a shared theoretical lexicon drawn from queer and transgender studies, though applied in isolation. Foundational is Susan Stryker's articulation of transgender embodiment as a potentially "monstrous" identity that threatens normative systems. She writes:

> I am a transsexual, and therefore I am a monster… I find a deep affinity between myself and the monster, who is too often made to represent the irreducible otherness of the transgender body. Like the monster, I am too often perceived as less than fully human due to the means of my embodiment. (Stryker 245)

This framework illuminates the social abjection faced by characters in both texts, from Reese's complex relationship to her post-transition body to the violent othering of Vivek Oji by his community.

Furthermore, Jack Halberstam's theorization of *The Queer Art of Failure* provides a lens to appreciate narratives that resist heteronormative, capitalist logics of success. Halberstam champions alternative paths that embrace "the wild, the unforeclosed, and the unpredictable" (6). This concept is vital for reading Ames's detransition not as a defeat but as a complex negotiation, and for understanding both novels' rejection of assimilative, tidy endings.

Most crucial is José Esteban Muñoz's concept of *disidentification*, the strategic practice by which marginalized subjects negotiate dominant cultural codes. He defines it as a process that:

> scrambles and reconstructs the encoded message of a cultural text in a fashion that both exposes the encoded message's universalizing and exclusionary machinations and recircuits its workings to account for, include, and empower minority identities and identifications. (Muñoz 31)

This theory is indispensable for analyzing how characters in both novels navigate oppressive scripts of motherhood in Peters's work and of family, religion, and nation in Emezi's.

Divergent Critical Terrains: The American and African Scholarly Silos

Despite these shared theoretical tools, the critical reception of each novel operates within distinct geopolitical and academic silos.

Detransition, Baby is consistently analyzed as a definitive text in contemporary *American* trans literature. Critics focus on its radical reimagining of kinship and its nuanced treatment of detransition within a specific socio-economic milieu. Grace Lavery captures this shift, arguing the novel is:

> less concerned with the politics of recognition than with the logistics of construction. It asks not 'How can trans people be seen?' but 'What can trans people build?' In doing so, it stages a radical reimagining of kinship that is both profoundly utopian and ruthlessly pragmatic. (Lavery 58)

This focus on "building" a future is linked to the pressures of neoliberal subjectivity. Scholar J. Cupio contends that the desire for a child represents a "profound philosophical crisis about how to create something of lasting value in a world that insists on your disposability" (Cupio 112). The treatment of Ames's detransition is central to this critique, with Eli Green praising Peters for presenting it as "one thread in the rich tapestry of trans experience," thus challenging a reductive public binary (Green 48). The critical consensus positions the novel's psychological realism and dark humor as formal choices that render a specifically American, urban, millennial trans experience with unprecedented literary complexity.

In stark contrast, the scholarship on ***The Death of Vivek Oji*** is firmly anchored in *African* literary and queer studies, framed as a decolonial narrative of spirit and state violence. A paramount focus is Emezi's grounding of Vivek's gender fluidity in Igbo ontology (the *ọgbanje*). James McCorkle argues this is deliberate:

> ontological reclaiming. By framing Vivek's difference through a pre-colonial Igbo cosmogony, the novel challenges the hegemonic, colonial imposition of a rigid gender binary and posits gender variance as an authentic, ancient African reality. (McCorkle 118)

The novel's elegiac, fragmented form is analyzed as a political and aesthetic response to this context. Anjali Gera Roy describes the narrative as a form of "spectral testimony," arguing it makes "the reader a detective of the soul, forcing us to piece together the truth of Vivek's life from the fragments left behind" (Roy 120). The analysis is invariably tied to the Nigerian political climate. Scholar Rahul Rao explicitly links the tragedy to legislative hostility, stating:

> Emezi's novel holds a mirror to the lethal consequences of state-sanctioned homophobia… Vivek's death is not merely a personal or familial tragedy but a national one, a direct result of a political climate that renders certain bodies unintelligible and therefore expendable. (Rao 178)

The central problem this study addresses is the sustained critical segregation of two landmark contemporary novels, Torrey Peters's *Detransition, Baby* and Akwaeke Emezi's *The Death of Vivek Oji*. This persistent isolation of the two works into separate scholarly silos, American transgender literary studies and African queer postcolonial criticism, respectively, is not a neutral organizational choice but an intellectual practice with significant consequences. Primarily, this segregation inadvertently reifies the very geographic and cultural binaries that transnational queer theory seeks to dismantle, treating each text as a product of a hermetically sealed national context. This contradicts the diasporic reality of Emezi's authorship and the globally circulating discourses of gender that inform both works. Furthermore, this approach obscures a vital analytical opportunity: understanding

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narrative form as a direct register of socio-political pressure. Isolated analyses can catalog Peters's psychological realism or Emezi's elegiac fragmentation, but cannot systematically explain *why* these distinct forms emerge from their specific locales. A comparative lens is essential to argue that literary architecture itself is a negotiation with material conditions, realism probes futurity where it is a contested possibility, while fragmentation mourns a life for which legibility proved fatal.

Consequently, the absence of a sustained comparative framework constitutes more than a bibliographic gap; it represents a conceptual failure that limits the theoretical yield of both texts. As P. Akshay Singh contends, the most generative insights emerge from "critical constellations that reveal… particularities through difference" (58). Keeping these novels in parallel prevents a dialectical reading where each serves as an interpretive lens for the other. Peters's intricate exploration of chosen family, for instance, casts into stark relief the enforced reliance on biological kin and clandestine community in Emezi's Nigeria. Conversely, Emezi's grounding of gender fluidity in Igbo spiritual ontology highlights the secular, psychological interiority that defines Peters's characters. This critical isolation thus stifles a fuller comprehension of how global power dynamics, what Jasbir Puar theorizes as "the biopolitics of queerness", are not merely represented but structurally encoded in contemporary literature (Puar 35). The problem, therefore, is the field's inability to see these two novels as parts of a single, dissonant conversation about gender nonconformity under global capitalism and colonial legacies.

This study's significance lies in its direct redress of this conceptual failure, offering a methodological correction that makes three key contributions to intersecting academic fields. First, to Transnational Queer and Transgender Studies, it performs the rigorous comparative literary analysis the field often advocates but less frequently executes. By placing a U.S. and a Nigerian novel in sustained dialogue, it heeds Gayatri Gopinath's call to "explode the limited and limiting frame of the nation-state," modeling a practice of reading that traces how queer and trans subjectivities are constituted within and against asymmetrical global flows of power, capital, and cultural discourse (Gopinath 12). This moves beyond thematic comparison to show how the conditions of narrative possibility are themselves transnational.

Second, the study contributes significantly to African Literary Studies by engaging with Emezi's work as a complex aesthetic and philosophical artifact, rather than treating it primarily as sociological testimony. It argues that narratives of gender nonconformity are central, not peripheral, to the innovation and thematic urgency of contemporary African literature. This intervention helps expand the critical boundaries of the field, insisting on the necessity of sophisticated theoretical tools to analyze stories that challenge heteropatriarchal norms. Finally, this research advances Narrative Theory and Comparative Literature by demonstrating that narrative form is a primary site where political pressure is registered and negotiated. By arguing that the chasm between Peters's future-oriented realism and Emezi's past-oriented elegy is a direct function of their divergent socio-legal contexts, the study champions a more politically attuned understanding of narrative technique. It proves that comparison is not merely about thematic parallels but about understanding how the very architecture of a story, its temporal structure, focalization, and generic commitments, is a profound reflection of the world from which it emerges.

In conclusion, this review has established that while the individual critical traditions for *Detransition, Baby* , and *The Death of Vivek Oji* are rich, their segregation is intellectually limiting. This study bridges that divide, offering a comparative analysis that reveals how the global unevenness of gendered life and death is fundamentally encoded in the literary choices of two landmark contemporary novels.

The Social Body: Kinship, Violence, and the Foreclosure of Futurity

This analysis contends that the social matrices depicted in Torrey Peters's *Detransition, Baby* and Akwaeke Emezi's *The Death of Vivek Oji* function not as passive settings but as active determinants of narrative possibility. Where the American context of Peters's novel permits a story of contested futurity within the domestic sphere, the Nigerian context of Emezi's work dictates a plot that is, from its inception, an elegy. The social body in each text writes the script for gendered life long before the individual protagonist can articulate their line. Through close attention to the specific textual manifestations of kinship, community, and violence, we demonstrate how narrative form itself becomes a diagnostic of the biopolitical terrain, registering the stark divergence between a world that manages queer and trans life through psychological precarity and one that seeks its physical eradication.

Chosen Architectures vs. Biological Prisons: The Politics of Kinship

The novels present antithetical models of kinship that reflect and reproduce their protagonists' radically different capacities for world-making. *Detransition, Baby* operates as a literary manifesto for the chosen family, positioning it as a deliberate, affective, and political construction. The proposed triad of Reese, Ames, and Katrina is framed not as a compromise but as a conscious experiment in queer futurity, explicitly designed to circumvent heteronormative and biological imperatives. Ames articulates this radical, pragmatic vision to Reese in Prospect Park, framing it as a solution to the gendered trap of fatherhood:

> I want you to raise a baby with me, and Katrina. With three of us, it'll be confusing enough to break the family thing. Katrina won't know how to see me as anything but a father, but you will; and speaking from experience, your vision, your way of seeing things is infective. Together, maybe we could be a family that works. (Peters, pp. 40–41)

This language of deliberately engineered confusion and "infective" vision recasts kinship as a verb, an active, collective project of creation pitted against a hostile social order. It embodies Kath Weston's observation that chosen families "contest the popular assumption that blood relations are the only real families," replacing biological destiny with kinship "created and sustained through performance and commitment" (Weston 109). Here, the family is a proposition, its inherent uncertainty part of its radical political potential. Reese's initial resistance, "You want me to consider being a mother to this baby? That doesn't even make sense" (p. 40), highlights the cognitive dissonance required to even conceptualize such a structure, underscoring its status as a

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speculative world-building endeavor rather than a natural evolution.

In devastating contrast, *The Death of Vivek Oji* depicts the biological family not as a haven but as a carceral architecture of well-meaning violence and epistemic failure. The Oji household functions as a panopticon of affectionate surveillance, where love manifests as a relentless, corrective drive to force Vivek into legible social categories. His mother Kavita's devotion, though profound, is tragically misguided, leading her to subject him to traumatic religious "deliverance" ceremonies in a futile attempt to cure his difference. The family's collective failure to see Vivek is systemic and suffocating, captured in the chilling normalcy of their domestic interactions even as Vivek internally drowns. This carceral dynamic extends to his secret relationship with his cousin Osita, which becomes the ultimate expression of kinship's double bind, simultaneously a site of profound intimacy and a secret that must be violently protected. Osita's retrospective agony captures this paradox: "I wished, much later, that I'd told Vivek the truth then, that he was so beautiful he made the air around him dull, made Osita hard with desire. 'Take it off,' he snapped instead, his throat rough. 'Put it back before they catch us'" (Emezi 14). In this moment, desire is immediately censored by the fear of familial and social discovery. Where Peters's characters labor to build a family *against* the grain of society, Emezi's protagonist is entrapped and ultimately destroyed by the very institution meant to nurture him.

The Paradox of Community: Sanctuary and Crucible

Both novels rigorously complicate any romantic notion of community as a pure refuge, presenting it instead as a paradoxical space that simultaneously sustains and constrains. In *Detransition, Baby*, the trans social world of Brooklyn is portrayed as a vibrant, gritty ecosystem, a "burlesque" of shared survival operating within a brutal internal economy of looks, passing privilege, and romantic capital. This duality is crystallized during the Prospect Park trans lady picnic, a gathering that is militarily strategic ("a general would have chosen to make a stand," p. 79) yet socially precarious. The women exist in a state of mutual recognition and relentless appraisal, a dynamic Reese understands intimately. While not using the phrase "shark tank" in the provided text, the novel meticulously documents this internal economy: the competitive aloofness, the immediate sizing up of a "baby trans" like Amy ("Another year on hormones and she's going to be really pretty. Should we be threatened?" p. 69), and the hierarchical social codes that separate "trans elders" from newcomers. As critic J. Cupio observes, Peters presents a collective that is "simultaneously a sanctuary from cisnormativity and a crucible for its own internalized forms of oppression" (133). Its conflicts are primarily interpersonal and psychological, a narrative luxury afforded by a context where physical survival, while precarious, is not the immediate, omnipresent threat. Ames, in his "juvenile elephant" metaphor, theorizes this generation of trans women as orphaned, traumatized, and powerful creatures lacking matriarchs to teach them how to manage their strength without destroying each other (pp. 110–112).

Conversely, the queer community in *The Death of Vivek Oji* is defined by its necessary invisibility and fatal precariousness. The clandestine gatherings at Juju's house constitute a fragile counter-public, a "nation of their own making" whose very power is its primary limitation: absolute secrecy. Their bond is formed in whispered conversations behind locked doors, a temporary autonomous zone that is always already compromised by the knowledge of what lies outside. The novel depicts these moments not through grand declarations of community but through quiet, intimate exchanges of solidarity in the face of shared alienation. For instance, in a moment of vulnerability with Juju, Vivek confesses, "I felt heavy my whole life" (Emezi 67), and finds in her a rare listener who does not try to fix him. This community offers a respite from the "concrete" drag of daily life, but it is a respite built on sand. Its ultimate, tragic failure is its powerlessness against the public violence that awaits, a point underscored by Osita's bleak, posthumous realization: "I know what Aunty Kavita wants to know. I want to tell her that she is not prepared for the answer, the same way I was not prepared. That it will hit her like a lorry, spilling its load over her chest and crushing her" (Emezi 66). One community, in Peters, wounds from within through the psychic violence of scrutiny and comparison; the other, in Emezi, is perpetually doomed by its enforced separation from and inevitable collision with a lethally hostile outside.

Chronic Precariousness vs. Acute Mortality: Spectrums of Violence

The fundamental nature of social hostility in each text defines not only the characters' experiences but the very stakes and structure of the narratives themselves. In *Detransition, Baby*, violence is chronic, psychological, and woven into the fabric of systemic precarity. It is the violence of economic dependence (Reese with Stanley), workplace alienation (Ames's fear of being outed), and the ever-present threat of intimate betrayal. This is not a world free from physical danger, Ames recounts being beaten on the street in Williamsburg (p. 109), but such events are catalytic moments within a broader condition of managed vulnerability. The primary mode of violence is what Reese experiences as the exhausting labor of navigating a world not built for her, a theme encapsulated in her relationships with men who fetishize and control her. This is a form of biopolitical management that makes life liveable, but only just, allowing for a narrative preoccupied with the internal management of trauma and the complex logistics of building a sustainable life within, and against, these constraints. The novel's central crisis is not survival *per se*, but the quality and meaning of survival: the "*Sex and the City* Problem" of how to make a meaningful life within the narrow options available to aging women, a problem trans women have historically been barred from even confronting (pp. 10–11).

In *The Death of Vivek Oji*, violence is not chronic but acute; not primarily psychological but physical; not a condition to be managed but a mortal threat that forecloses futurity from the outset. The 2014 Same-Sex Marriage (Prohibition) Act in Nigeria provides the legal scaffolding for this environment, but the novel shows how this state sanction unleashes a more visceral, communal policing of gender norms. Violence is omnipresent in the atmosphere, from the market mobs hunting suspected thieves to the constant threat of exposure for gender nonconformity. The novel's famous opening line immediately establishes this context: "They burned down the market on the day Vivek Oji died" (Emezi 8). Vivek's own body becomes a provocation in this landscape. His long hair and delicate beauty attract not just whispers but the threat of direct, physical correction. This is not "death by a thousand civilities" but death by cudgel, by tire, by fire, a narrative reality that critic Rahul Rao links to state-sanctioned homophobia, which

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creates “a permissive environment where extra-judicial violence becomes a socially acceptable... means of enforcing gender and sexual norms” (178). In this world, violence is not a backdrop but the central plot engine, dictating a story that can only ever be a retrospective investigation into a death already accomplished.

Form as Fate: The Domestic Novel and the Elegy

These opposed social realities achieve their ultimate crystallization in the novels’ chosen narrative forms, which act as their final, unambiguous philosophical statements. Peters’s deployment of the domestic, psychological novel of manners, with its chapters tracking time relative to conception (“One month after,” “Six weeks after,” “Eight years before”), is, in itself, a profound claim to a specific kind of normalcy and temporal continuity. The novel can luxuriate in the extended, psychologically dense negotiations between Reese, Ames, and Katrina precisely because its characters, however traumatized and precarious, are granted the speculative space of a future to contemplate. This form, as Cupio notes, insists “that trans life is not solely a story of trauma and victimhood, but is also a story of brunch, of bad dates, of workplace politics” (155). Its radicalism lies paradoxically in its mundane focus; it asserts that trans women are legitimate, complex subjects of the very genre traditionally used to dissect the interiority and social navigation of bourgeois life.

Emezi’s selection of the elegiac mystery, a form that begins with death and works backward, is its formal and political antithesis. The opening incineration of the market signals the total foreclosure of futurity for the protagonist. The narrative is therefore not driven by “what if?” or “what next?” but by the relentless, tragic “what happened?”. The multi-perspectival, fragmented structure does not delve into a unified interiority but performs the very tragedy of communal misrecognition it laments. The reader is positioned as a detective, piecing together the truth of Vivek’s life and identity from the conflicting, partial memories of those who loved but failed to understand him. As Anjali Gera Roy contends, this “mystery structure... is a formal indictment; it makes the reader complicit in the search for a truth that was willfully ignored... transforming the act of reading into an act of bearing witness to a preventable tragedy” (121). The form itself is the verdict: a society structured by this degree of lethal hostility can only produce, and only deserves, stories that are forensic postmortems.

Conclusion: The Inescapable Logic of the Social Body

This comparative analysis ultimately reveals that the narrative possibilities for representing gender nonconformity are pre-scripted by the political logic of the social body. *Detransition, Baby* portrays a world of conditional, neoliberal inclusion, where violence operates as chronic precarity, kinship can be imagined as a chosen project, and the narrative form can therefore manifest as a novel of contested futurity, however psychologically fraught. *The Death of Vivek Oji* portrays a world of active, often state-sanctioned eradication, where violence is acute and physical, kinship is a claustrophobic prison, and the only narrative form possible is an elegy, a story that begins at the end. One novel persistently asks, *How do we build a life?* The other, with devastating inevitability, asks, *Why was this life destroyed?* Read together, they demonstrate with stark clarity that the journey of the gendered self is inseparable from the geopolitical contours of the world it inhabits. The social body, in its specific historical and legal formations, writes the plot long before the individual character can ever hope to speak their line. Attention to this deterministic relationship between context and form is not merely an academic exercise; it is essential for a transnational queer criticism committed to understanding how global power differentially structures the very possibility of being narrated, of being imagined into a future, or of being mourned in a past.

The Social Body: Kinship, Violence, and the Foreclosure of Futurity

This chapter argues that the social milieus in Torrey Peters’s *Detransition, Baby* and Akwaeke Emezi’s *The Death of Vivek Oji* are not backdrops but active determinants that shape the possibilities for queer and trans life. Where the previous analysis examined the interior self, here we interrogate the external structures of kinship, community, and violence to reveal how they prefigure narrative possibility itself. The American context of Peters’s novel, marked by conditional inclusion and psychological warfare, permits a narrative of contested futurity. The Nigerian context of Emezi’s novel, defined by legislated hostility and physical peril, dictates a narrative that is, from its outset, an elegy. Their formal choices are thus not aesthetic but ontological, mirroring the social logic of their worlds.

Chosen Architectures vs. Biological Prisons: The Politics of Kinship

The novels present antithetical models of kinship that reflect their protagonists’ capacity for world-making. *Detransition, Baby* is a manifesto for the chosen family as a deliberate political and affective construction. The proposed triad of Reese, Ames, and Katrina is a conscious experiment in queer futurity, explicitly framed as an alternative to heteronormative and biological imperatives. Ames, not Reese, is the primary architect of this vision, articulating it as a pragmatic solution to the gendered trap of paternity:

> I want you to raise a baby with me, and Katrina. With three of us, it’ll be confusing enough to break the family thing. Katrina won’t know how to see me as anything but a father, but you will; and speaking from experience, your vision, your way of seeing things is infective. Together, maybe we could be a family that works. (Peters, pp. 40–41)

This language of engineered confusion and “infective” vision positions kinship as a verb, an active, collective project of creation against a hostile social order. It embodies Kath Weston’s observation that chosen families “contest the popular assumption that blood relations are the only real families,” replacing it with kinship “created and sustained through performance and commitment” (Weston 109). The family is a proposition, its inherent uncertainty and logistical madness, Reese calls the idea “the most trans way of getting me pregnant” (p. 50), part of its radical potential. This speculative project exists precisely because, as Reese theorizes earlier, trans women have historically been barred from the conventional “options to save themselves” represented by the *Sex and the City* archetypes: partner, career, baby, or art (pp. 10–11). Building a “system” is not a preference but a necessity born of foreclosure.

In devastating contrast, *The Death of Vivek Oji* depicts the biological family as a carceral structure of “well-meaning” violence and epistemic failure. The Oji household is a site of

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intense surveillance and corrective love, where Kavita's devotion manifests as a relentless drive to force Vivek into legible categories, culminating in traumatic religious interventions. The family's failure is systemic, a tragic misrecognition rooted in a web of ancestral secrets and denials. This is captured not in a single paternal observation but in the suffocating dynamic where love and incomprehension are inextricable. The clandestine circle of friends and the secret romance with Osita function as fugitive refuges, but they are parasitic on, and perpetually threatened by, the hegemonic biological unit. As Anjali Gera Roy notes, such queer spaces are "not a replacement for the biological one, but a fugitive space... that must constantly negotiate its precarious existence" (115). This culminates in the devastating double bind of Osita's desire, where intimacy is always shadowed by the threat of exposure: "'Take it off,' he snapped instead, his throat rough. 'Put it back before they catch us.'" (Emezi 14). Where Peters's characters endeavor to *build* a family as a political act, Emezi's protagonist is *entrapped* by the one into which he was born, its bonds simultaneously nurturing and suffocating.

The Paradox of Community: Sanctuary and Crucible

Both novels rigorously complicate the notion of community as a pure refuge, presenting it instead as a paradoxical space that both sustains and constrains. In *Detransition, Baby*, the trans social world of Brooklyn is a vibrant, gritty ecosystem, a "burlesque" of shared survival operating within a brutal internal economy of looks, passing privilege, and romantic capital. This duality is palpable at the trans lady picnic in Prospect Park, a gathering strategically positioned on a defensible hill (p. 79), where the women engage in a simultaneous performance of solidarity and subtle, relentless appraisal. The veteran trans women, including Reese and Iris, observe the "baby transes" with a mix of mentorship and competitive judgment (p. 69–70). This community, while providing a crucial lexicon of identity and a buffer against cisnormativity, relentlessly replicates the external world's evaluative gaze. As critic J. Cupio argues, Peters presents a collective that is "simultaneously a sanctuary from cisnormativity and a crucible for its own internalized forms of oppression" (133). Its conflicts are interpersonal and psychological, a narrative luxury afforded by a context where the primary threat is not immediate physical eradication, but the chronic attrition of social and psychological violence. Ames's extended metaphor of trans women as "juvenile elephants", orphaned, traumatized, powerful, and lacking elders to teach them how not to destroy each other (pp. 110–112), theorizes this precise paradox of community as both lifeline and battlefield.

The community in *The Death of Vivek Oji* is defined by its necessary invisibility and fatal precariousness. The gatherings at Juju's house form a clandestine counter-public, a "nation of their own making" whose power and limitation are one: its secrecy. The novel describes not a single "locked room" scene but a series of intimate, hushed encounters where Vivek finds fleeting acceptance. For instance, Juju provides a rare space for unguarded confession, where Vivek shares, "I felt heavy my whole life" (Emezi 67). This "locked room" is a temporary autonomous zone, but its autonomy is illusory, bounded by the lock on the door and the ever-present outside world. Its ultimate failure is its powerlessness against public violence, leading to Osita's bleak conclusion after Vivek's death:

> I know what Aunty Kavita wants to know. I want to tell her that she is not prepared for the answer, the same way I was not prepared. That it will hit her like a lorry, spilling its load over her chest and crushing her." (Emezi 66).

One community, in Peters, wounds from within through the psychic violence of scrutiny and shared trauma; the other, in Emezi, is perpetually fragile, its existence contingent on its invisibility to a world that would violently dismantle it.

Chronic Precariousness vs. Acute Mortality: Spectrums of Violence

The fundamental nature of social hostility in each text defines the stakes and structure of the narratives themselves. In *Detransition, Baby*, violence is chronic, psychological, and woven into the fabric of systemic precarity. It is the violence of economic dependence, as seen in Reese's transactional, controlling relationship with Stanley; the violence of workplace alienation and the threat of being outed, which Ames faces; and the exhausting, daily labor of navigating a world not built for trans existence. Ames describes the exhausting hyper-vigilance of living as a trans woman:

> The cold stab of fear that hit when something tiny happened, say, a teenage boy follows you home from the store, and says appreciatively, 'Hey, baby, where were you made?' A weird compliment of a catcall that hints how close the boy has come to the edge of figuring something true, but if you speak, he'll hear the real answer in the timbre of your voice. And then you fear the boy will get ashamed and then violent. (Peters, pp. 107–108)

This is a form of biopolitical management, death by a thousand civilities and potentialities. It inflicts deep, cumulative wounds, operating as a "war of attrition" on the psyche and spirit, yet it allows for a narrative preoccupied with the internal management of trauma and the complex, mundane logistics of building a sustainable life.

In *The Death of Vivek Oji*, violence is acute, physical, and woven into the very atmosphere of public space. The 2014 Same-Sex Marriage Prohibition Act provides the legal scaffolding for societal eradication, but the novel shows violence erupting in everyday, unpredictable ways. Vivek's body, with his long hair and delicate beauty, becomes a constant provocation. The novel's opening line immediately establishes this context of public, communal conflagration: "They burned down the market on the day Vivek Oji died." (Emezi 8). The threat is not subtle or psychological; it is literal, mob-driven, and sanctioned by the social fabric. This is not "death by a thousand civilities" but death by cudgel, by tire, by fire, a narrative reality that critic Rahul Rao links to state-sanctioned homophobia, which creates "a permissive environment where extra-judicial violence becomes a socially acceptable... means of enforcing gender and sexual norms" (178). Here, violence is not a condition to be managed but a mortal, ambient threat that forecloses futurity from the outset, dictating a narrative that can only begin with its fatal consequence.

Form as Fate: The Domestic Novel and the Elegy

These diametrically opposed social realities achieve their ultimate crystallization in the novels' chosen narrative forms, which act as

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their final, unambiguous philosophical statements. Peters's deployment of the domestic, psychological novel of manners, with its chapters meticulously tracking time relative to conception ("One month after," "Six weeks after," "Eight years before"), is, in itself, a profound claim to a specific kind of normalcy and temporal continuity. The novel can luxuriate in extended, psychologically dense negotiations about motherhood, career, and love precisely because its characters, however traumatized and precarious, are granted the speculative space of a future to contemplate. This form, as Cupio notes, insists "that trans life is not solely a story of trauma and victimhood, but is also a story of brunch, of bad dates, of workplace politics" (155). Its radicalism lies paradoxically in its mundane focus; it asserts that trans women are legitimate, complex subjects of the genre traditionally used to dissect the interiority and social navigation of bourgeois life.

Emezi's selection of the elegiac mystery is its formal and political antithesis. The opening incineration of the market signals the total foreclosure of futurity for the protagonist, tying personal tragedy to public violence. The narrative is therefore not driven by "what if?" or "what next?" but by the relentless, tragic "what happened?". The multi-perspectival, fragmented structure does not delve into a unified interiority but performs the very tragedy of communal misrecognition it laments. The reader is positioned as a detective, piecing together the truth of Vivek's life and identity from the conflicting, partial, and often guilty memories of those who loved but failed to understand or protect him. As Anjali Gera Roy contends, this "mystery structure... is a formal indictment; it makes the reader complicit in the search for a truth that was willfully ignored... transforming the act of reading into an act of bearing witness to a preventable tragedy" (121). The form itself is the verdict: a society structured by this degree of lethal hostility can only produce, and only deserves, stories that are forensic postmortems.

Conclusion: The Logic of the Social Body

This comparative analysis ultimately reveals that the narrative possibilities for representing gender nonconformity are pre-scripted by the political logic of the social body. *Detransition, Baby* portrays a world of conditional, neoliberal inclusion, where violence operates as chronic precarity, kinship can be imagined and negotiated as a chosen project, and the narrative form can therefore manifest as a psychologically complex novel of contested futurity. *The Death of Vivek Oji* portrays a world of active, often state-sanctioned eradication, where violence is acute and physical, kinship is a claustrophobic labyrinth of secrets and denials, and the only narrative form possible is an elegy, a story that begins at the end. One novel persistently asks, *How do we build a life?* The other, with devastating inevitability, asks, *Why was this life destroyed?* Read together, they demonstrate with stark clarity that the journey of the gendered self is inseparable from the geopolitical and legal contours of the world it inhabits. The social body, in its specific historical formation, writes the plot long before the individual character can ever hope to speak their line.

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