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Beyond black British Writing: The Magical Realism of
Bernardine Evaristo and Helen Oyeyemi

February 2019

This dissertation is being submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the
University for the Award of Masters by Research

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Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge the support of Professor Sara Upstone, whose inspirational teaching was the motivation for this project, and her guidance and expertise during the initial research.

I would also like to thank Dr Karen Lipsedge, who very kindly took over as my First Supervisor, for her enthusiasm and encouragement in helping me to complete this dissertation.

Abstract

This dissertation explores the fictional writing of two contemporary black British authors, Bernardine Evaristo and Helen Oyeyemi. The first decades of the twenty-first century have witnessed the emergence of a new generation of black British writers. These writers, born or brought up from an early age in Britain, demonstrate in their fictional narratives a polycultural consciousness and a new European or global sensibility. This contemporary black British writing represents a significant shift away from the predominant concerns with the ideas of the nation, of belonging and race traditionally associated with the black British literature of the latter decades of the twentieth century and expresses a determination to create a new fictional space for the twenty-first-century black writer of Britain.

Many of this new generation of, predominantly female, black British writers employ magical realism in their fictions. This dissertation explores how magical realism is used by the contemporary black British writer and identifies that Evaristo and Oyeyemi employ the narrative mode in very different ways and to differing extents. It argues that the varied ways and the extent to which the black British writer uses the magical realist tropes and devices is determined by and reflects the differing experiences of that writer according to their specific cultural heritages, family histories and situation. The use of magical realism allows the expression of a new consciousness that has developed from but is a significant movement beyond the earlier writing of their black British literary predecessors. This dissertation argues that it is the contemporary black British writer's appropriation of the magical realist mode that affords the expression of a new post-racial, multi-ethnic sensibility and global worldview.

Introduction

John McLeod identifies ‘a distinctly continental sense of cultural plurality’ in the fiction of Bernardine Evaristo.¹ According to McLeod, there is a ‘significant emergent attention to the space of Europe’ evident in the writing of the contemporary black British novelist.²

Motivated by an interest in McLeod’s thinking, this research will explore the magical realism of the contemporary black British female writer. Focusing on the novels of Bernardine Evaristo and Helen Oyeyemi, I will argue that the appropriation of magical realism by a new generation of female authors affords the expression of a twenty-first-century, post-racial, multi-ethnic sensibility and demonstrates a determination to create a new fictional space for the contemporary black writer of Britain. McLeod argues that the contemporary black British writer ‘is much less primarily concerned with the subjectivity of black Britons or the select concerns of race’ than the black British writers of the latter decades of the twentieth century.³ Oyeyemi’s narrative fictions demonstrate the same ‘shifting sense of consciousness’ that McLeod suggests portrays Evaristo’s concern with ‘a shared rather than subjective’ British identity that is ‘culturally and geographically wider: distinctly European, at times self-consciously global’.⁴ McLeod confines his analysis of Evaristo’s novels to the plot and experimental form and fails to extend his thinking to the narrative mode. This research focuses on the contemporary black British novelists’ use of magical realism, an area that has to date received very little academic critical attention. It will explore how the black British writer employs magical realist techniques and whether it is magical realism that specifically affords the expression of a post-racial and polycultural sensibility.

Contrary to the pessimism of Maggie Ann Bowers, the beginning of the twenty-first century has not experienced the demise of magical realism. Despite her concerns about ‘the problems [...] inherent in its contradictory and multi-perspectival form’, magical realism continues to be popular with writers, publishers and readers.⁵ However, a comprehensive definition of the narrative mode continues to occupy and elude the literary critic. This

¹ John McLeod, ‘Transcontinental Shifts: Afroeuropa and the Fiction of Bernardine Evaristo’, in *Afroeuropa@n Configurations: Reading and Projects*, ed. by Sabrina Brancato (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2011), pp. 168 – 182, p. 168.

² *Ibid.*, p. 169.

³ John McLeod, ‘Extra Dimensions, New Routines: Contemporary Black Writing of Britain’, in *Wasafiri*, 25, 4 (2010), 45 – 52, p. 47.

⁴ McLeod, ‘Transcontinental Shifts’, p. 169.

⁵ Maggie Ann Bowers, *Magic(al) Realism: The New Critical Idiom* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2004), p. 128.

evasiveness can be explained in part by the increasing diversity of fictional writing that may be categorised as magical realism. It is, therefore, significant that the first decade of the twenty-first century has been witness to the appropriation of magical realism by a new generation of black British female writer. This addition to the English-speaking magical realist tradition further complicates the critic's endeavour to satisfactorily establish a definition. Wendy Faris acknowledges the difficulty created by the present-day global popularity of the form: 'the attempt to define the general characteristics and significance of magical realism as a worldwide trend will necessarily involve the neglect of many local particularities'.⁶ However, I contend that it is the capacity of magical realism, because of its universality and theoretical non-specificity, to represent expanding worlds that explains its continued popularity with the novelist and specifically attracts the twenty-first-century black British writer.

It is widely argued that the inherent opposition of the two representational codes, the supernatural and the realist, makes magical realism ideally suited to the hybrid writer's expression of the everyday reality of inhabiting multiple cultures. That argument, however, is too simplistic to explain the appropriation of the narrative mode by the new generation of black British novelists. In his seminal essay 'Magic Realism as Postcolonial Discourse', Stephen Slemon argues that:

[i]n the language of narration in a magic realist text, a battle between two oppositional systems takes place, each working toward the creation of a different kind of fictional world from the other. Since the ground rules of these two worlds are incompatible, neither one can fully come into being, and each remains suspended, locked in a continuous dialectic with the "other," a situation which creates disjunction within each of the separate discursive systems, rending them with gaps, absences, and silences.⁷

In the last decade of the twentieth century when literary critics, such as Elleke Boehmer, generally considered magical realism to be almost exclusively a form of postcolonial writing, Slemon's theorizing usefully expanded the postcolonial thinking to include discourse from nations beyond the Third World. Slemon emphasises the incompatibility of magical realism's 'two separate narrative modes' that 'never manage to arrange themselves into any kind of hierarchy', and argues that '[t]his sustained opposition forestalls the possibility of interpretative closure through any act of naturalizing the text to

⁶ Wendy B. Faris, *Ordinary Enchantments: Magical Realism and the Remystification of Narrative* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2004), p. 40.

⁷ Stephen Slemon, 'Magic Realism as Postcolonial Discourse' in *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, ed. by Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995), pp. 407 – 426, p. 409.

an established system of representation'.⁸ In *Exploring Magic Realism in Salman Rushdie's Fiction* (2011), Ursula Kluwick maintains that Slemon's definition is at odds with most other accepted definitions of magical realism that assume a harmonious relationship between the magical and realism. She argues, however, that a reading of Rushdie's fictions that is based upon the 'the irresolvable opposition between two incompatible codes (the realist and the supernatural)' aligns his writing with Slemon's thinking.⁹ Kluwick identifies the presence of what she refers to as "ambivalent magic" – events which cannot be conclusively categorised as either realist or supernatural' in Rushdie's fiction, and argues that '[a]s a consequence, Rushdie's texts emerge as sites of ontological struggles that ask for perpetual re-adjustments of the reader's position, and for a continuous re-evaluation of conflicting versions of reality'.¹⁰ Kluwick argues that ambivalence is a characteristic of what she suggests is Rushdie's 'specific brand of magic realism' and she asserts that it is the particular form of Rushdie's magical realism that affords 'the socio-political subversiveness of his fiction'.¹¹

The purposeful use of ambivalence aligns Oyeyemi's fictional writing with a tradition of British magical realism that is exemplified by the writing of Salman Rushdie. Oyeyemi's use of ambivalence allows her to challenge the structural boundaries of the magical realist mode so that the narrative form itself represents a determination to move beyond the boundaries, both actual and imaginary, imposed upon the black British writers of the latter decades of the twentieth century. It is plausible that Oyeyemi's magical realism might be defined as an inharmonious combination of the two opposing narrative codes. Conversely, Evaristo's fictional narratives exemplify the notion of the harmonious relationship between the magical and realism that is the basis of most widely-accepted definitions of the mode. Evaristo's writing demonstrates the positive use of the 'gaps, absences, and silences' that, according to Slemon, are the result of the opposition of the two discursive systems. It also conforms to Faris's definition of the literary mode: 'magical realism combines realism and the fantastic so that the marvelous seems to grow organically within the ordinary, blurring the distinction between them'.¹² In opposition to Kluwick's reading of Slemon's theory, I propose that the 'battle between two oppositional systems' to which Slemon refers does not preclude a harmonious relationship between the supernatural and the real. Oyeyemi's

⁸ Ibid., p. 410.

⁹ Ursula Kluwick, *Exploring Magic Realism in Salman Rushdie's Fiction* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011), p. 3.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 4.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 4.

¹² Faris, p. 1.

use of ambivalence unarguably prevents ‘the two separate narrative modes’ from being able to ‘arrange themselves into any kind of hierarchy’¹³ and Evaristo’s sophisticated narrative form neither allows the magical or the realism ‘to subordinate or contain the other’.¹⁴ The ‘disjunction within each of the separate discursive systems’ is a characteristic of the magical realist narrative whether the relationship between the two epistemological codes is considered to be harmonious or inharmonious.¹⁵

The contemporary black British writer is, I suggest, attracted to the ‘lack of theoretical specificity’ and the tradition of experimentation of the magical realist mode as it allows for the narrative innovation that might effectively represent a new worldview.¹⁶ It is the ‘battle between [the] two oppositional systems [...] each working toward the creation of a different kind of fictional world from the other’ that ‘creates space for interactions of diversity’ and affords the expression of the contemporary black British writer’s European or global sensibility.¹⁷ Evaristo was born in London in 1959 to a Nigerian father and English mother and Oyeyemi was born in Nigeria but moved to London in 1988 with her parents at the age of four. It is apparent when exploring their respective fictional works that, despite the shared choice of magical realism as the narrative mode, their intention as writers reflects their differing experiences of being a black Briton and is not the same. Evaristo’s fictional style exemplifies the harmonious coexistence of the magical and the real and her stories revisit and re-imagine historical events to reinstate the previously absented black character. In Evaristo’s stories the supernatural ‘is an ordinary matter, an everyday occurrence – admitted, accepted, and integrated into the rationality and materiality of literary realism’.¹⁸ Yet, as will be explored in the following chapters, the sophisticated subtlety of her narrative belies an ideological motivation that is as uncompromising, and perhaps more effective, as the overt socio-political aim of Oyeyemi’s writing. Kluwick is correct to assert that, as a consequence of the use of ambivalence, ‘Rushdie’s texts emerge as sites of ontological struggles which ask for perpetual re-adjustments of the reader’s position, and for a continuous re-evaluation of conflicting versions of reality’.¹⁹ Similarly,

¹³ Slemon, p. 410.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 410.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 409.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 409.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 409.

Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris, ‘Introduction: Daiquiri Birds and Flaubertian Parrot(ie)s’, in *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, ed. by Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995), pp. 1 – 11, p. 3.

¹⁸ Zamora and Faris, p. 3.

¹⁹ Kluwick, p. 4.

the ambivalence that is a predominant characteristic of Oyeyemi's magical realism is a considered strategy to compel the reader to continually engage with the socio-political concerns, of identity and the continued presence of an insidious racism, that inform her fictions. The appropriation of the magical realist mode represents a determination to move beyond the central concerns of belonging, prejudice and racism that characterise the predominantly realist novels of the previous generation of black British writers such as Sam Selvon, George Lamming and V. S. Naipaul. I contend that, because it originates in non-Western cultures and because there exists a notable British tradition of magical realist writing, the contemporary black British writer finds magical realism to be the appropriate mode to express the realities of life for the multi-ethnic individual in twenty-first-century Britain. Exemplified by the fiction of Salman Rushdie and Angela Carter, British magical realism demonstrates a distinctive engagement with European mythology and fairy tale and has a profound political intent at its core.

A specifically British tradition of magical realism, characterised by a resolute political meaning, suggests that the literary mode has the potential for the effective representation of a new perspective on ideas of Britishness. The contemporary black British writer engages with the non-Western folklore and mythology, that constitutes an essential part of their own polycultural identity, within the magical realist mode to portray the shift towards the thinking about 'a shared rather than a subjective' identity that manifests itself as a European sensibility.²⁰ Faris's contention that 'the combination of materialism and mystery [...] may appeal to us because it suggests a possible approach to the realm of the spirit in western critical discourse' may also partly explain the choice of magical realism by the contemporary black British writer.²¹ Evaristo employs magical realist devices in a rigidly conventional manner contained within an unconventional and innovative form. The interests and concerns, particularly in re-visiting European histories to address the truth of the black presence, that inform Evaristo's fictional writing are well-documented and her literary intentions appear to be readily acknowledged by the author herself. This suggests there to be a definitive meaning and encourages critical analysis of her work. It also differentiates her fiction from Oyeyemi's mysterious and elusive narratives and her multiple and complex influences, ideas and aims. Oyeyemi manipulates the magical realist mode, widening the space that inherently exists between the two oppositional narratives, not to challenge histories or to connect with the past but to explore ideas of identity and to

²⁰ McLeod, 'Extra Dimensions, New Routines', p. 48.

²¹ Faris, p. 40.

expose the everyday realities of living in twenty-first-century Britain for the mixed-race individual. As a result of their differing intentions, it is not productive to directly compare the two authors' fictional works. Instead Evaristo's and Oyeyemi's magical realist writing is considered in separate chapters. Each chapter is organised into sections determined by the primary characteristics of the author's narrative style so that although the approach to each writer is necessarily not identical, it is similar.

To determine whether the use of magical realism specifically affords the expression of a post-racial, multi-ethnic sensibility, this dissertation explores all but the most recent of Evaristo's and Oyeyemi's novels. Chapter One explores Evaristo's exemplary use of magical realism. It examines Evaristo's postmodern re-imagining of histories in relation to Linda Hutcheon's theory of historiographic metafiction and explores her use of comedy within the context of a tradition of British comedy. Oyeyemi's strategic use of magical realist tropes and devices is the focus of Chapter Two. It examines how Oyeyemi's narratives engage with indigenous beliefs and mythology and the tradition of West African magical realism. This dissertation argues that it is more appropriate to categorise Oyeyemi's novels as contemporary social realism. It also examines Oyeyemi's authorial ambitions and whether her appropriation of magical realism is a self-conscious attempt to position her literary fictions within the magical realist canon. In the Conclusion, this dissertation explores the progression, away from the conventional form of the *bildungsroman* and postcolonial thinking of the twentieth century towards a new European sensibility and global worldview, that is evident in both Evaristo's and Oyeyemi's fictional writing. The Conclusion then also considers Evaristo's *Mr Loverman* (2013) and *Boy, Snow, Bird* (2014) by Oyeyemi. It explores what appears to be a similar novelistic divergence for both writers and argues that it is further evidence of a chronological progression that reflects a new polycultural sensibility and global perspective.

Chapter One

Bernardine Evaristo

The innovative form employed by Evaristo both characterises and is also an essential part of her novel writing. According to John McLeod, 'the form of Evaristo's novels needs to be understood as [...] part of a wider literary project to break beyond the conventional parameters of black British writing and its predominant critical modes'.²² Evaristo's reinvention of the novel form represents a moving forward from the received definitions of the black British writing of the final decades of the twentieth century, its predominant concerns with race and prejudice and the pervading sense of disappointment and displacement. Evaristo challenges the conventional boundaries between verse and prose, often choosing to write her fictional narrative as a novel-in-verse or prose interjected with passages of verse, that suggests a resistance to the limitations, both actual and metaphorical, of late-twentieth-century black British writing. Her refusal to distinguish between the literary forms also reflects the blurring or merging of cultural boundaries that is experienced by the mixed-race individual. The challenge to traditional boundaries suggests that for Evaristo an innovative form is necessary to reflect a new British identity that allows for 'a shift in focus from the national to the continental, from Britain to Europe'.²³ Her use of magical realism and its capacity to portray expanding worlds and multiple and fluid identities facilitates what McLeod argues is 'the evolution of a distinctly European rather than British consciousness in black writing of Britain', and a secure sense of her own identity allows Evaristo to draw upon a particularly British tradition of literary comedy to re-imagine histories from the perspective of a new European consciousness.²⁴

Narrative form and history

The experimental and playful form that characterises Evaristo's novels suggests that her fictional writing should be read in relation to postmodernist theories. However, her predominant concern with re-imagining histories, that appears to align her writing with the postcolonial writing of the late decades of the twentieth century, problematizes such a critical approach. Evaristo acknowledges a particular interest in history: 'there are

²² McLeod, 'Transcontinental Shifts', p. 173.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 175.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 169.

connections to be made with black European history that have not yet been made in our history books and in our literature [...] and this is what interests me'.²⁵ Comprising the central theme of all of her novels, Evaristo's preoccupation with rediscovering and re-inscribing those black figures disavowed or absent from European histories calls into question the validity of categorising her fictional narratives as postmodernist. The thinking of theorists such as Jean-Francois Lyotard continue to influence contemporary definitions of postmodernism; for Lyotard, the postmodern condition is characterised by 'an incredulity towards metanarratives' and he argues that postmodernity denies the idea of absolute knowledge and the universal truth of the totalizing 'grand narratives' of the West.²⁶ Postmodernist thinking is generally considered to be essentially ahistoricist and apolitical. However, Linda Hutcheon, in her theory of historiographic metafiction, recognises the historical and political potential of postmodernist thinking and argues that a connection exists between historiography and contemporary postmodernist literary practice that can explain what she considers to be the inherent political nature of postmodern fictions. According to Hutcheon, the concept of historiographic metafiction describes the 'doubleness' of postmodern fiction's self-conscious narrative representation of history that allows for a fictional account that engages with historical events while at the same time, through self-reflexivity and parody, draws attention to the fictionality of the historical discourse.²⁷ Hutcheon argues that postmodernist fictions 'juxtapose what we think we know of the past (from official archival resources and personal memory) with an alternate representation that foregrounds the postmodern epistemological questioning of the nature of historical knowledge'.²⁸

Postcolonial writers have traditionally appropriated postmodernist narrative techniques as a useful way of portraying issues surrounding cultural identity and Hutcheon's theorizing has proved to be a productive means of exploring the connection between postmodernism and the postcolonial literary narrative that traditionally relies on historical references to ground it contextually. Hutcheon, herself, uses Salman Rushdie's magical realist novel *Midnight's Children* (1981) as an example of a literary fiction that exemplifies historiographic metafiction. In her study *Magic(al) Realism* (2004), Maggie Ann Bowers explores the link between magical realism and postmodernism. She argues that magical

²⁵ Karen Hooper, 'On the Road: Bernardine Evaristo Interviewed by Karen Hooper', in *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 41, 1 (2006), 3 – 16, p.10.

²⁶ Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. by Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), p. xxiv.

²⁷ Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism*, 2nd edn (Abingdon: Routledge, 2002), p.68.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 68.

realist fictions provide an alternative means of representing history to those traditional forms of discourse rejected by the postmodernist theorists of the late twentieth century, such as Jean-Francois Lyotard and Fredric Jameson, who argue against the concept of an absolute historical truth by exposing the subjectivity and fictive nature of historiography. According to Bowers, postcolonial magical realist fictions reflect postmodernist thinking about history that argues that any account of history claiming to be the absolute truth is created by those in power and their need to justify and maintain their position. Bowers suggests that Rushdie 'embraces the very postmodern aspect of attempting to recreate history with fragments and uncertainty', and she argues that by using 'magical realist devices to disrupt fixed categories of truth, reality and history', postcolonial writers such as Rushdie and Ben Okri 'create a space beyond authoritative discourse where the unrepresentable can be expressed'.²⁹

Evaristo's use of experimental form and magical realist devices appears to align her narrative fictions with the diasporic magical realist writing of the twentieth century. However, her position as a mixed-race Briton with an English mother and Nigerian father distances Evaristo from the predominant concerns, with belonging and race, of the migrant and her political motivations are not that of the postcolonial magical realists. Evaristo re-imagines histories to express a new idea of Britishness through a twenty-first-century European consciousness and her appropriation of postmodernist strategies and magical realist devices resists the political concerns of the postcolonial magical realist writer, and also represents a significant move beyond the primary focus on the nation of the twentieth-century novels by black British writers such as David Dabydeen, Caryl Phillips and Andrea Levy. Evaristo's fictional work repeatedly challenges a historiography that denies a black presence in Europe before the arrival of the Windrush in 1948. The innovative style resists the linearity of the historical narrative and aligns Evaristo's writing with a postmodernist view of history. Postmodernist thinking exposes the essential subjectivity of the historical narrative and questions the existence of an objective and absolute truth. The historian Hayden White acknowledges the 'fictive nature of historical narrative': 'The older distinction between fiction and history, in which fiction is conceived as the representation of the imaginable and history as the representation of the actual, must give place to the recognition that we can only know the *actual* by contrasting it with or likening it to the

²⁹ Bowers, p. 78, 82.

imaginable.³⁰ White's argument appears to align his thinking with that of the literary theorist Roland Barthes who, in his seminal essay 'The Discourse of History', challenges the historian's insistence upon a historical reality. Barthes argues that history is a discourse and therefore the assumed objectivity is an illusion. He asserts that the absence of the signs of the 'I', or 'the (illusory) confusion of referent and signified', disguises the subjectivity and therefore the unreliability of the truth of the historical narrative.³¹ Both White and Barthes identify an illusory component to the historical narrative and suggest that there are as many possible versions of historical events as there are records of those past events. Evaristo similarly recognises that an ambiguous relationship exists between the representation of histories 'in our history books and in our literature' and her determination to redress the absences of the black person in currently accepted historiographies aligns her fictional writing with postmodernism.³²

Although it appears that Evaristo's predominant concern is the re-imagining of histories that have disavowed or denied a black presence in Europe, the use of magical realism, and particularly the manipulation of the mode's formal characteristics to create the indeterminacy of time and space used to represent those histories, suggests that this is not the primary intention. Instead, Evaristo employs history as a central theme in order to express her primary political concerns: to portray the realities of life for the mixed-race person in twenty-first-century Britain and expose a persistent and insidious racism. In *The Emperor's Babe* (2001), Evaristo uses magical realist devices to amalgamate or blend the historical with the contemporary. She manipulates language to create a world that cannot be fixed either temporally or spatially in order to re-imagine a cosmopolitan London under Roman occupation almost two thousand years ago and, at the same time, expose the present-day realities of life for the mixed-race Briton. Evaristo's re-presenting of a past that exists in the present draws attention to both the fictive nature of histories and also to the narrative representation of her new albeit familiar historiography. *The Emperor's Babe* is the story of child-bride Zuleika, the daughter of Sudanese immigrants living in Londinium, who is married to the middle-aged Roman patrician Lucius Aurelius Felix when she is just eleven years old. Londinium is occupied by the Romans, it is A.D.211 but the female protagonist Zuleika is very definitely a twenty-first-century, street-wise city dweller with

³⁰ Hayden White, 'The Historical Text as Literary Artifact', in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, ed. by Vincent B. Leitch and others (New York: W. W. Norton, 2001), pp. 1712 – 29, p. 1719.

³¹ Roland Barthes, 'The Discourse of History', in *The Postmodern History Reader*, ed. by Keith Jenkins (London: Routledge, 1997), pp. 120 – 23, p. 121.

³² Hooper, p. 10.

confidence and attitude. Patriarchal authoritarianism prevails: Zuleika's younger brother Catullus is 'a miracle on account of his sperm bag', and she recounts that, 'aged three, I knew who / would inherit the key to the Kingdom of Pops' and that, 'precious Catullus got the abacus and wax, / I got the sewing kit and tweezers'.³³ Binary oppositions and anachronisms, that reflect and reinforce the apparently synchronous representation of the historical and the contemporary cosmopolitan city, characterise *The Emperor's Babe*: Latin is juxtaposed with contemporary English, urban dialect and cockney rhyming-slang, rich versus poor, young versus old, and the historical is superimposed with the modern. Zuleika's villa is referred to as 'your manor' (37) by her best friend Alba, Zuleika the '*It Girl*' (99) refers to her 'Little Bro Cattullus / (aka *He Who Can Do No Wrong*)' (38), and she is 'married to Roman nobilitas. Veritas princess?' (38). Evaristo employs the same postmodernist narrative devices, the narrative reversal or inversion and the anachronisms, in the prose novel *Blonde Roots* (2008), which tells the seemingly familiar story of slavery and the Middle Passage but with the racial roles transposed: the protagonist and narrator, Doris Scagglethorpe, is a 'whyte' 'Europane' slave working in 'Londolo' for black African slave-owners.³⁴ The familiarity of places, objects and events disrupts the temporality and the sense of place but, unlike *The Emperor's Babe*, not only is the past conflated with the present but this is further complicated by the introduction of other historical references. Doris's childhood family life alludes to the feudalism of medieval Europe, the 'Resistance' (5) who manage the covert route back to England for the escaping slaves recalls the organisation of the same name that operated in France in the Second World War, and the modern London Underground railway system is merged with and confused by echoes of both the present-day American subway and the U.S. Underground Railroad, a network of secret routes used by slaves to escape to free states in the nineteenth century. Evaristo's use of binary oppositions and anachronisms confirms that her writing might be interpreted through Hutcheon's theory of historiographic metafiction. Hutcheon identifies anachronism to be a common characteristic of historiographic metafiction; she argues that the use of anachronism denaturalizes the temporal relationship between past and present creating a self-conscious representation of the relationship between 'the past they write about and the present in which they write' and exposing the subjective interpretative and

³³ Bernardine Evaristo, *The Emperor's Babe: A Novel* (London: Penguin, 2001), p. 20, 12, 10. Subsequent references will be given in parentheses within the text.

³⁴ Bernardine Evaristo, *Blonde Roots* (London: Penguin, 2008), p. 28, 27, 14. Subsequent references will be given in parentheses within the text.

constructive nature of history-writing.³⁵ Evaristo's strategic use of postmodernist devices creates a new fictional space that is counter-historical. Her re-invented or re-imagined history exposes the historiography, that disputes or denies the presence of the black figure, to be a constructed and subjective narrative practice. This directs the reader to reconsider existing ideas about histories and, simultaneously, draws attention to present-day attitudes towards ethnicity and the denial of the persistent presence of a pervasive and insidious racism.

The use of magical realism affords Evaristo the portrayal of a fictional cosmopolitan London that represents a new multi-ethnic sensibility and resists the twentieth-century black British writer's predominant preoccupation with a concept of Britishness focused exclusively on the subjectivity of the black Briton and with racism. In *The Emperor's Babe*, the metropolis is a polycultural space of possibility and creativity: Londinium is inhabited by a multi-ethnic mix of Romans, Saxons, Scots, Picts, Gauls, Arabians and many other peoples. Evaristo portrays a passive and persistent racism that is not denied or considered insignificant, but in *The Emperor's Babe*, and in all her subsequent novels, Evaristo refuses to privilege ideas of race. Speaking about *The Emperor's Babe* in an interview, Evaristo says of her protagonist, 'She is one of the few black people in my version of Roman London and she is noticed because of her colour but she is not discriminated against because of it.'³⁶ In Roman-occupied London Zuleika's colour is celebrated, she is '*Illa Bella Negreeta!*' (3), and desired: 'she is so ... exquisite, so ... pulcherrima' (15). In *The Emperor's Babe* it is patriarchal authoritarianism, rather than racism, that is privileged. Zuleika is confined because of her gender but not by her race: 'To the patrician I was always less than' (197). In *Soul Tourists*, Jessie O'Donnell identifies herself as English despite her mixed-race heritage. When Stanley reacts to the surliness of the young woman serving in the café by muttering '[i]t's because we're black', Jessie retorts: 'You can decide that or you can decide that she's a sad cow and would be that way with anybody.' (43) 'You're just another Englishman, don't kid yourself [...] You've spent all your life in England, Stanley, so what does that make you?' (51), she asks Stanley in response to his statement that 'My father always said I was a Jamaican first and foremost' (51). The setting of *Soul Tourists* in the late 1980s, a period of political and social unrest when the identity of blackness was being provocatively questioned, suggests that it should be Stanley's suspicion of racism that is privileged. However, the presence of Jessie complicates the ideas of national identity and the

³⁵ Hutcheon, p. 67.

³⁶ Alastair Niven, 'Alastair Niven in Conversation with Bernardine Evaristo', in *Wasafiri*, 16, 34 (2001), 15 – 20, p. 18.

subjectivity of black Britons of the late-twentieth century. Orphaned and brought up in a series of children's homes and with no knowledge of her mother or Ghanaian father, Jessie is not concerned by the racial prejudice that preoccupies Stanley but by the lack of familial love:

*Got my own ghouls, Stanley, dear -
the nameless mother who shamelessly left me,
the named father who could have rescued me,
the son who selfishly deserted me. (129)*

The peripheral displacement of the theme of racism appears to align Evaristo's fictional writing with the thinking of the cultural theorist Paul Gilroy and his concept of 'conviviality'. In *After Empire: Melancholia or Convivial Culture?*, published in 2004, Gilroy introduces the term conviviality 'to refer to the processes of cohabitation and interaction that have made multiculturalism an ordinary feature of social life in Britain's urban areas and in postcolonial cities elsewhere', but he asserts that '[i]t does not describe an absence of racism or the triumph of tolerance'.³⁷ By displacing and re-assigning the theme of racism to the periphery, Evaristo determinedly moves beyond the central concerns of the black British writing of the late decades of the twentieth century and secures a new fictional space for the contemporary black writer of Britain.

Magical Realism and Comedy

The use of comedy defines Evaristo's innovative and playful novels and situates her fictional writing firmly within the postmodern. Employing comedy in conjunction with magical realism is generally considered to be associated with the postcolonial fictions of writers like Rushdie, and the representation of issues of race. Evaristo's distinctive and strategic use of narrative comedy does not align her with her postcolonial literary predecessors. Instead, she creates a new fictional space for the black writer of Britain that allows the expression of a twenty-first-century global sensibility. According to traditional theories, postmodernism is associated with a lack of seriousness through the characteristic devices of pastiche, parody and irony but Evaristo's fictional work cannot be interpreted as light-hearted. Conversely, Evaristo employs comedy to facilitate the engagement with a diverse readership, that extends beyond those that are portrayed in her stories, by rejecting the didacticism that is generally associated with the magical realist fictions of

³⁷ Paul Gilroy, *After Empire: Melancholia or Convivial Culture?* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2004), p. xi.

writers such as Rushdie, Okri and Carter. There has not yet been any detailed critical attention paid to Evaristo's use of magical realism or comedy. McLeod fails to extend his analysis of Evaristo's narrative form to question the significance of either the use of the magical realist mode or comedy devices. Dave Gunning, in his study of *The Emperor's Babe*, is predominantly concerned with the portrayal of the city as a representation of 'the cosmopolitan reality of the modern metropolis' and critically engages with Evaristo's use of comedy only to challenge criticism, resulting from a postmodernist reading that relates the playful with the apolitical, that has dismissed the novel as a celebratory portrayal of modern metropolitan life.³⁸ Gunning argues that '[t]hrough relating back to contemporary practices and artefacts explicitly in the comedic tropes of the novel, Evaristo allows an implicit understanding of the negative events in her text to be read as reflecting an existing social world', but his analysis of the comedy is limited to what he refers to as 'the repetitions of certain key jokes' and he does not explore the significance of the satirical elements of the novel.³⁹ Moreover, a collection of essays edited by Reichl and Stein, that analyse the comedic qualities of postcolonial cultural production, does not include any study that focuses on the strategic use of comedy in conjunction with magical realism. This seems to reflect the literary critic's reluctance to apply theories of comedy to contemporary British postmodern narratives in general, perhaps because of the difficulties resulting from the absence of any definitive definition of magical realism but also because of the existence of multiple theories of both comedy and postmodernism. However, Evaristo's comedic narratives can be productively explored through her use of satire, and Sarah Ilott's insightful thinking in her recent study of postcolonial British comedy in film aids the analysis of Evaristo's use of literary comedy.

Despite there being many critical theories of comedy, there is a general consensus that contemporary comedy re-works many of the traditional comedic devices. Evaristo's manipulation of comedy within magical realism appears to reflect Eric Bentley's traditional idea that 'the comic sense [...] tries to deal with the living, with the pressures of today'.⁴⁰ Her use of narrative comedy aligns with the notion of comedy as a communal activity and allows her to engage with a diverse readership which 'feel[s] itself to be a community

³⁸ Dave Gunning, 'Cosmopolitanism and Marginalisation in Bernardine Evaristo's, *The Emperor's Babe*', in *Write Black, Write British: From Post-Colonial to Black British Literature*, ed. by Kadija Sesay (Hertford: Hansib Publications, 2005), pp. 165 – 78, p. 167.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 176, 172.

⁴⁰ Eric Bentley, 'On the Other Side of Despair', in *Comedy: Developments in Criticism*, ed. by D. J. Palmer (Basingstoke: Macmillan Education, 1984), pp.135 – 50, p. 137.

which laughs together'.⁴¹ Gunning recognises that Evaristo's use of comedy provides 'a rendering of the real world in a way that lenifies it and makes it attractive to view' and challenges a reading that perceives *The Emperor's Babe* to be a wholly positive and celebratory portrayal of the present-day cosmopolitan metropolis.⁴² He argues that the comedic playfulness is essential to prevent the depiction of the shocking reality of the brutality of Roman life from diverting the reader's attention away from the political intent of the novel. The humour in *The Emperor's Babe* arises primarily from the anachronisms and irony that comprise the central devices of the narrative reversal strategy used by Evaristo to portray a Roman-occupied metropolis of the past that simultaneously exists in the present. Familiar place and business names that reference contemporary London living, the 'favourite couturier, Emporio Valentino' (91), and 'Wild @ Heart, the trendy 'flower boutique' / On Cannon Street' (124), are incongruously juxtaposed with the fictional Londonium of two thousand years ago.

Exploring postcolonial British comedy in film in her text *New Postcolonial British Genres: Shifting the Boundaries* (2015), Sarah Ilott argues that a second generation of multicultural British comedy has evolved in the twenty-first century as a response to rapidly changing public attitudes towards multiculturalism. According to Ilott, 'changes in contemporaneous politics engender shifting causes for laughter and present new challenges for the negotiation of both state-endorsed ideologies and aspirations and shifting public attitudes, meaning that the genre is continuously evolving'.⁴³ As a result, she argues that a new 'comedy of multicultural Britain' that 'employs laughter as an alternative response to fear' supersedes the 'gentle and inclusive comedy' of a first generation of multicultural British comedy of the 1990s.⁴⁴ Ilott suggests that postcolonial British comedy can be constructively read through the 'relief theory' of comedy, a form of comedy that 'function[s] as relief or release' and 'implies a relationship constructed between teller and audience through shared laughter at a joke'.⁴⁵ Evaristo's use of narrative comedy, engaging the reader through a shared understanding of the irony, aligns her writing with Ilott's analysis of postcolonial British comedy. In the section of Captain Katamba's narrative in *Blonde Roots* entitled 'Some Are More Human Than Others', the slave trader's record of 'Craniofaecia Anthropometry' (118), a reversal of the nineteenth-century racial science, is used ironically

⁴¹ Andrew Gurr, *Studying Shakespeare: An Introduction* (London: Edward Arnold, 1988), p. 52.

⁴² Gunning, p. 173.

⁴³ Sarah Ilott, *New Postcolonial British Genres: Shifting the Boundaries* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), p. 25.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 134, 26, 25.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 138.

by Evaristo to expose the absurdity of the persistence of racial prejudices in twenty-first-century, multi-ethnic Britain. Similarly, in *The Emperor's Babe*, Zuleika has to learn 'how to get my amo amas amat right, and ditch / my second-generation plebby creole' (4) before marrying Felix, the rich but old Roman businessman, and the Emperor Severus, originally from Libya, 'was ridiculed on arrival in Eternal City / because of his thick African accent' (144). Like the comedy of Evaristo's fictions, the multicultural British comedy in film explored by Ilott engages with ideas of the stereotype and aligns such contemporary use of comedy with Homi Bhabha's notion of the stereotype. Ilott argues that 'in the mouths of actors from ethnic minority backgrounds, stereotypes become absurd and audiences are forced to interpret performances drawing on cultural stereotypes as ironic'.⁴⁶ In the essay 'The Other Question: Stereotype, Discrimination and the Discourse of Colonialism', Bhabha argues that it is necessary to engage with and thus understand the genesis and intended function of the stereotype in order to undermine its power. Ilott argues that '[a] comical engagement with stereotypes [...] has the potential to unmask the lack on which Bhabha suggests they are constructed, unveiling fears or anxieties that are simultaneously contained and revealed by the anxious repetition of the stereotype'.⁴⁷ The humour that arises as a result of Evaristo's use of multiple different urban dialects and the pidgin Scots-English of Zuleika's slave girls in *The Emperor's Babe* recalls the comedic use of immigrant dialects by the second-generation postcolonial writers, such as Hanif Kureishi, Meera Syal and Ayub Khan-Din. However, Evaristo's appropriation of the familiar comedic device, using the modern-day urban slang to conflate the past with the present and multiple dialects to emphasise the cultural plurality of the cosmopolitan city, challenges the thinking of those British-born writers and their primary concerns with belonging and redefining Britishness.

Evaristo also employs postmodern satire. Contemporary approaches to satire generally rely on the traditional theories and the majority of studies re-examine existing satiric discourses in relation to a particular literary critical theory. In his text *Satire: A Critical Reintroduction* (1994), Dustin Griffin reassesses the traditional theories of satire and constructively argues that satire is not solely a predetermined attack on a target prejudged to be immoral or abnormal but is intended to provoke debate and reassessment of perceived socio-political ideas. Griffin compares the formal verse satires and the Menippean model and highlights the playful tendencies of the latter: 'A taste for play has always been part of the Menippean [...] tradition, with its fantastic invention, its exaggerations, and its tongue-in-

⁴⁶ Ilott, p. 139.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 141.

cheek manner.⁴⁸ Evaristo's playful representation of the gladiators in *The Emperor's Babe*, 'who lived in vulgares villae overstuffed // with Greek reproduction statues / and murals of themselves in heroic poses' (175), focuses on the superficiality of their privileged lives and might be interpreted as a criticism of the millionaire lifestyles of our present-day, over-paid, sporting celebrities. However, although it is undoubtedly an expression of disapproval of some twenty-first-century cultural values, the reference to these contemporary 'preening supertarts' (175) and their 'simpering pretty-babe wives' (176) who are 'idolized by the lower classes' (175) is more complex. Evaristo's satire is playful but not didactic and, that it is not intended to be a sustained attack on a minority that might distract from the reality of life in the metropolitan centre for the majority, is indicated by the abrupt and unexpected ending to Zuleika's portrayal of the gladiatorial superstars: 'But it was not to be.' (176) The imaginary 'Uber-hunks' represent the unattainable and exotic or magical that, by comparison, serves to expose the reality of the life in the metropolis: the city is inhabited by a mundane populace of 'old slaves, convicts / Christians, prisoners of war and the poor', the 'Tall, small, thin, infirm' who in contrast to the millionaire sportsmen are desperately and futilely 'making a bid for solvency and stardom' (176).

In his analysis of the satirical fictions of V. S. Naipaul, Chinua Achebe and Salman Rushdie, John Clement Ball differentiates between what he terms 'ameliorative' and 'punitive' satire.⁴⁹ Evaristo's satirical writing cannot be read in terms of the latter, 'a playfully didactic mode of referential attack', but aligns more closely with Ball's notion of the ameliorative Bakhtinian model of Menippean satire.⁵⁰ Bakhtin asserts that the Menippean satirist uses the '[b]oldness of invention and the fantastic element' for 'the creation of *extraordinary situations* for the provoking and testing of a philosophical idea, a discourse, a *truth*'.⁵¹ Andrew Teverson argues that Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* (1988) exemplifies the Menippean satire by conforming to all the elements that constitute Bakhtin's model. Crucially, according to Teverson, Rushdie's novel 'fulfils the most essential qualification of Menippean satire as defined by Bakhtin: it sets out to use fantastic fictional scenarios as a means of interrogating ideas'.⁵² Evaristo's use of satire resonates with but is a determined

⁴⁸ Dustin Griffin, *Satire: A Critical Reintroduction* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1994), p. 86.

⁴⁹ John Clement Ball, *Satire & the Postcolonial Novel: V. S. Naipaul, Chinua Achebe, Salman Rushdie* (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 121.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 118.

⁵¹ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, ed. and trans. by Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p. 115, 114.

⁵² Andrew Teverson, *Salman Rushdie* (Manchester: Manchester university Press), p. 149.

resistance to the didactically satirical writing of the postcolonial magical realists such as Rushdie: her literary satire has a political subtlety that differentiates her narratives from the fictional writing of her diasporic postcolonial predecessors. According to Griffin, 'the satirist writes in order to discover, to explore, to survey, to attempt to clarify'.⁵³ Satire allows Evaristo to re-present atrocious historical events, to engage by means of the comedy with a diverse community of readers who are themselves encouraged 'to discover, to explore, to survey, to attempt to clarify', and to reconsider contemporary ideas of Britishness through those events of the past. Book Two of *Blonde Roots*, Chief Katamba's autobiographical account of his rise from the humble origins of the hunter-gatherer Katamba Clan to the self-professed 'highest echelons of civilised society' (109), exemplifies Evaristo's postmodernist use of satire. The narrative account of the slave trade by a slave-owner, 'The Flame' (109), purports to be instructional, intended to impart fact-based knowledge and to promote learning: 'Let us examine the facts, Dear Reader, because, as I have proven time and again, the facts are all that matter.' (150) It satirises the scientific thinking of the Enlightenment through the detailed description of 'the exact science of Craniofaecia Anthropology' (118) which comprehensively concludes that 'the Caucasoind breed is *not of our kind*' (120), thus criticising the belief that the slave trade was 'a Mission of Liberation - the Saving of Souls' (121) that was proffered as justification for the human suffering. Evaristo's satirical condemnation of the nineteenth-century racial beliefs is emphasised by the proliferation of references to both Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* and Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*: the title page recalls that of Defoe's novel, and the chapter heading 'Heart of Greyness' (129) and Katamba's declaration, 'what can I say, Dear Reader, but the horror, the *horror*', when confronted by the Europeane jungle which he refers to as 'this abominable place' (136) explicitly allude to Conrad's novella. It also echoes the Swiftian satire of *Gulliver's Travels* and suggests that Evaristo draws upon a British tradition of comedy to facilitate her narrative re-presentation of histories from beyond the borders, both geographical and imaginary, of the nation.

Evaristo repeats the structural reversal of *The Emperor's Babe* in her first prose and wholly satirical novel, *Blonde Roots*. In *Blonde Roots*, Evaristo manipulates the magical realist mode by blurring the distinction between magical realism and fantasy. The world described by the protagonist Doris Scagglethorpe is essentially unrecognisable and fantastical: it is a wholly inverted re-imagining of the history of slavery where the whyte Europeanes are

⁵³ Griffin, p. 39.

enslaved by the black indigenous peoples of Africa. However, the firm grounding of Evaristo's narratives in familiar histories prevents the feeling of uncertainty that characterises fantasy, and the realistic descriptions that, according to Faris, distinguish magical realism from fantasy 'create[] a fictional world that resembles the one we live in'.⁵⁴ Faris argues that 'the magical elements are also validated through realistic descriptions within the textual fabric' and so they do not seem to be strange.⁵⁵ Evaristo's use of magical realism is in accordance with Cooper's definition that states that 'the mysterious, sensuous, unknown, and unknowable are not in the subtext, as in realist writing, but rather share the fictional space with history'.⁵⁶ The anachronisms that characterise the narratives of *The Emperor's Babe* and *Blonde Roots* signpost the magical elements and remind the reader that the events of the narrative are imaginary. However, those anachronisms also create the humour that engages the reader and, because of their understanding of the comedy, ensures that they are not unsettled and without hesitation are able to readily accept the supernatural to be an ordinary event. Similarly, in *Soul Tourists* (2005) Stanley's dreamlike visitations by the ghosts of black characters from European histories are identified as not being dreams or hallucinations: Stanley recalls that it was his mother Pearline 'who told me I'd inherited The Gift, passed down through generations of her mother's family' and having travelled into mainland Europe he wonders 'Was Versailles visited by the spirits his mother had seen?'.⁵⁷ According to McLeod, the uncharacteristic use of prose in *Blonde Roots* indicates 'that for all of her inventiveness Evaristo is keen not to seem to trifle with the extremely painful and horrific phenomenon of slavery', but his thinking is too simplistic.⁵⁸ The considered choice of prose intentionally mimics the prose of the realism that is conventionally associated with the narratives of the Middle Passage by writers such as Fred d'Aguiar, Andrea Levy and Caryl Phillips. However, Evaristo's prose is characteristically lyrical which emphasises the magic of the narrative and is more reminiscent of the polemical magical realist writing of Ben Okri and Rushdie than the traditionally realist postcolonial fictional representations of the horrors of slavery. Evaristo's use of both the magical realist devices and satire complicates the apparently straightforward mirroring of the form and indicates that the use of prose represents a determined shift beyond the realist fictional writing of her black British literary predecessors.

⁵⁴ Faris, p. 14.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 157.

⁵⁶ Cooper, p. 36.

⁵⁷ Bernardine Evaristo, *Soul Tourists* (London: Penguin, 2006), p. 4, 95.

Subsequent references are given in parentheses within the text.

⁵⁸ McLeod, 'Transcontinental Shifts', p. 178.

Temporality and space

The experimental and playful form that characterises *The Emperor's Babe* and *Soul Tourists* indicates that the novels might be considered within a postmodern context. *Soul Tourists* is a novel-with-verse and the complex structure comprises prose, poetry, poetic prose, dramatic devices and even a death certificate. Set in the 1980s, *Soul Tourists* traces black Briton Stanley Williams, as he travels from London across mainland Europe to Kuwait with mixed-race misfit, Jessie O'Donnell. Stanley's journey is prompted by the death of his Jamaican immigrant father, reversing his father's journey from the Caribbean to London and resisting the familiar migrant passage of the postcolonial diasporic novel, and punctuated by the ghostly visitations of forgotten or previously-denied black figures from European histories. His journey represents both a physical distancing from his home in the metropolitan centre of the nation and a metaphorical distancing from the confusion and insecurities that inhibit his sense of self. Traversing the borders of many of the European countries, the journey also reflects Evaristo's determination to create a new fictional space for the contemporary black writer in Britain that extends beyond the boundaries, both geographical and imaginary, of the nation and of the traditionally accepted parameters of the black British novel.

Soul Tourists is Evaristo's most innovative and, as a result of the exemplary use of magical realist devices, arguably her most successful novel. The narrative plurality connects with the past, reaching back to before the nineteenth century and the development of the novel form through the poetic couplets that allude to the Greek epic. It also engages with contemporary challenges to the notion of history being an objective and therefore truthful record of events through the subjectivity expressed by the dramatic script devices employed to portray the differing views of Stanley's and Jessie's experiences of their journey. The fragmented narrative reflects the temporal indeterminacy that is created by the ghostly manifestations and appears to align Evaristo's writing with Bhabha's concept of the 'time-lag of postcolonial modernity' which 'moves forward' while simultaneously it 'keeps alive the making of the past'.⁵⁹ This notion of the delay or time-lag which subverts the linear chronological temporality of history is represented by Stanley's realisation that '[a]s he explored the past, he became aware that the past was exploring him too' (155) and, when visited by the ghost of Hannibal, that '[w]hen he looked at me, history ceased to

⁵⁹ Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, p. 363 – 64.

exist. We were in the same place. We were in the same time.’ (180) Sara Upstone explores how ‘[t]ime-lag is particularly applicable to the journey’ and quotes from John Phillips who defines time-lag ‘as that space where ‘the movement across spatial boundaries challenges the stability of subjective identity’’.⁶⁰ Evaristo’s representation of the journey reflects her determination to move beyond the metaphorical boundaries of the black British writing of the twentieth century, because of its perceived association primarily with concerns of belonging and race, and aligns her fictional text with Phillips’s definition of time-lag.

It is plausible to suggest that the notion of time-lag may be related to Stephen Slemon’s definition of magical realism: Slemon argues that the two oppositional representational codes create two incompatible fictional worlds ‘locked in a continuous dialectic with the “other,” a situation which creates disjunction within each of the separate discursive systems, rending them with gaps, absences, and silences’.⁶¹ This suggests that it is possible to explore Evaristo’s appropriation of magical realism in relation to Slemon’s definition of the mode. If Evaristo’s manipulation of the magical realist mode and its characteristic temporal indeterminacy aligns her fictions with the notion of time-lag, it is also possible to consider her narrative writing in relation to Bhabha’s concept of Third Space. Linked to the idea of time-lag, for Bhabha ‘[t]he third space is a challenge to the limits of the self in the act of reaching out to what is liminal in the historic experience, and in the cultural representation, of other peoples, times, languages, texts’.⁶² It describes a site of enunciation that occurs at the disjunction between two opposing cultures, a conceptual in-between location or place of translation and resistance that resonates in the ‘gaps, absences, and silences’ identified by Slemon as the result of the disjunction created by the inherent opposition of the representational codes of magical realism.⁶³ According to Bhabha, ‘[t]hese “in-between” spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood – singular or communal – that initiate new signs of identity’.⁶⁴ Evaristo’s magical realist re-imagining of histories creates a disjunction between the past and the present, a metaphorical location that is ‘neither the one nor the other’, existing between the real and the magical metropolis.⁶⁵ London is central to all of Evaristo’s fictional writing: as the

⁶⁰ Sara Upstone, *Spatial Politics in the Postcolonial Novel* (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2009), p. 68.

⁶¹ Slemon, p. 409.

⁶² Homi K. Bhabha, ‘In the Cave of Making: Thoughts on Third Space’, in *Communicating in the Third Space*, ed. by Karin Ika and Gerhard Wagner (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009), pp. ix – xiv, p. xiii. Google ebook.

⁶³ Slemon, p. 409.

⁶⁴ Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, p. 2.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

primary setting for all of her novels, London is both the actual nucleus of the protagonists' journeys of self-discovery and the representation of the central concept of Britishness from where the contemporary black British writer reaches out to explore the potential of a European or even global literary identity. Evaristo's third space is a metaphorical metropolis, a post-racial and multi-ethnic London that is a representation of her twenty-first-century global consciousness, and is evidence that ideas of space, predominantly associated with and of great political significance to the diasporic postcolonial writer, can prove to be productive when considering contemporary black British fictions.

Evaristo's fictions are distinctly postmodern, employing innovative narrative form in order to re-imagine histories and reinstate absent or silenced black historical characters within those histories. Using postmodern satire and magical realist devices, Evaristo creates a counter-history and simultaneously determinedly critiques the reality of the present-day socio-political condition of the black British citizen. This differentiates her fictional writing from Oyeyemi's complex use of magical realism. Oyeyemi grounds her magical realist narratives in West African myth and cultural belief and European fairy tale and folklore as opposed to history, and her central preoccupation is with identity and the persistence of racism. Yet, both Evaristo and Oyeyemi demonstrate a predominant concern with creating a new and apposite fictional space for the contemporary black writer of Britain and it is, I contend, the appropriation of the magical realist mode that allows the writer to achieve that aim. However, while Evaristo's intention appears to be altruistic, to attract and reach a readership that is not restricted to those portrayed in her novels and, in so doing, to highlight the realities of life in present-day Britain for the mixed-race individual, I will argue in the following chapter that Oyeyemi's distinctly self-conscious narrative writing suggests a determination to establish a place for herself within the renowned magical realist literary canon.

Chapter Two

Helen Oyeyemi

Helen Oyeyemi's fictional writing is characterised by its ambivalence: her complex combination of the magical and the real effectively creates two distinct narratives and complicates any existing critical attempts to define the magical realist mode. However, Oyeyemi's experimental style unambiguously indicates that her narratives are to be categorised as both magical realism and postmodern. Oyeyemi makes her references and influences explicitly clear and, as a result, her writing is a definite expression of a multi-ethnic and global sensibility. At the same time, the determination to align her works with the globally-acclaimed magical realist writing of her non-European literary predecessors such as Ben Okri and Salman Rushdie portrays an ambivalence towards her own Britishness. It is this self-consciousness that is the other primary defining characteristic of Oyeyemi's fictional writing. Oyeyemi appropriates and re-invents magical realism to express her determination to move beyond the black British writing of the final decades of the twentieth century and its predominant concerns with race, belonging and prejudice. She merges West African myth, ancient cultural beliefs and traditions, with European folklore and fairy tale to create a global literary identity and a new fictional space for the twenty-first-century black writer of Britain. This narrative strategy also reveals Oyeyemi's ambition to position herself as a globally-recognised magical realist writer. Oyeyemi's use of ambivalence allows her to challenge the structural boundaries of the magical realist mode so that the narrative form itself reflects her own determined resistance of the boundaries, both actual and imaginary, imposed upon the earlier generation of black British novelists.

Magical Realism or Contemporary Social Realism?

Oyeyemi indicates a determination for her writing to be categorised as magical realism by overtly signposting the presence of the defining characteristics of the narrative mode in all of her novels. In the text *Ordinary Enchantments: Magical Realism and the Remystification of Narrative* (2004), Wendy Faris expands upon the thinking she initially explores in 'Scheherazade's Children: Magical Realism and Postmodern Fiction' included in Zamora and Faris's seminal collection of essays. For Faris, there are five primary characteristics: the mode contains what Faris refers to as:

an “irreducible element” of magic; second, the descriptions in magical realism detail a strong presence of the phenomenal world; third, the reader may experience some unsettling doubts in the effort to reconcile two conflicting understandings of events; fourth, the narrative merges different realms; and, finally, magical realism disturbs received ideas about time, space, and identity.⁶⁶

Almost a decade after Zamora and Faris’s work significantly influenced the critical approach to magical realism in the later decades of the twentieth century, Faris asserts that magical realism has become a significant global literary mode and argues that its usefulness extends beyond the postcolonial. According to Faris, magical realism ‘has provided the literary ground for significant cultural work’ allowing the fictional expression of marginal voices and the ‘re-emergence of submerged narrative traditions’.⁶⁷ It is significant that Faris’s revision of her thinking, to allow for her recognition of the diversity of contemporary magical realism, is most apparent in her analysis of the ‘unsettling doubts’ which characterise the narrative mode. To accommodate what is now a global literary mode, Faris emphasises that the hesitation that causes the reader to experience ‘unsettling doubts’ is dependent upon cultural beliefs and narrative traditions.

Oyeyemi’s narratives conform rigidly to Faris’s theory of magical realism. There is a definite and ‘irreducible element’ of magic and, in the novels succeeding *The Icarus Girl* (2005), the magic is predominant and markedly self-conscious. Magical events ‘really do happen’ and the magic is accepted as ‘real’: TillyTilly enters without detection Grandpa’s locked library and has read and understands all the books lining the shelves and on her second visit to Lagos, the protagonist Jessamy is magically able to speak Yoruba: “‘*Ko si nkan-nkan,*” she replied at length, capturing the accent and even the lilt in tone perfectly.’⁶⁸ In *White is for Witching* (2009), mystical all-season apples, ‘coma white’ on one side ‘and the other side is the waxiest red’, grow on the trees outside of Eliot’s bedroom window, and Sade knits a white netting that she uses to enclose Ore and save her from the ‘goodlady’, the mysterious manifestation of the family house who controls the destiny of the female members of the Silver family.⁶⁹ The magical story of the mysterious Orishas of *The Opposite House* (2007) is narrated in parallel to and is accepted as ‘real’ and of equal significance as the realist story of Cuban-born Maja, a singer living in London who is emotionally unsettled when she discovers that she is pregnant. Oyeyemi’s writing self-consciously conforms to

⁶⁶ Faris, p.7.

⁶⁷ Faris, p. 1, 2.

⁶⁸ Helen Oyeyemi, *The Icarus Girl* (London: Bloomsbury, 2005), p. 309. Subsequent references will be given in parentheses within the text.

⁶⁹ Helen Oyeyemi, *White is for Witching* (London: Picador, 2009), p. 138. Subsequent references will be given in parentheses within the text.

Faris's contention that the descriptions in a magical realist novel 'detail a strong presence of the phenomenal world'.⁷⁰ Miranda's encounter with her female ancestors in *White is for Witching* begins when she is resting in the garden in the hammock on a hot summer's evening and Ore takes a shower before dinner and finds her black skin coming off onto the towel as she dries herself. In *The Opposite House*, Aya and the Orishas live with the Kayodes in the mysterious somewherehouse which has two basement doors, one that magically opens onto the daytime streets of Lagos and the other into London at night.

In Oyeyemi's first three novels the contemporary British setting merges with another mysterious or imaginary world. The world of the Orishas, mythical gods worshipped by the Cuban Santeria who are confined within the somewherehouse in *The Opposite House*, is portrayed in a separate but parallel narrative that continually reflects the world of the protagonist, Maja, set in present-day London. *White is for Witching* is predominantly set in Dover but Miranda's family home in Barton Road is also where she repeatedly slips out of the present and into the mysterious and dangerous world of the goodlady. Although *The Icarus Girl* is a less mature and experimental novel and set wholly in contemporary London and Lagos, Jessamy, who is also known as Jess, alternates between the recognisable world of her normal family life and another mystical world where she shares her experiences with TillyTilly who befriends her when she is staying at her grandfather's compound in Nigeria. In accordance with Faris's thinking, Oyeyemi's fictions also 'disturb received ideas about time, space and identity'.⁷¹ When Miranda disappears through the trapdoor into the mystical room within the actual fabric of 29 Barton Road where her mother Lily, her grandmother Jennifer, and her great-grandmother, GrandAnna, are sitting at a table apparently anticipating a meal, disrupting the sense of space, the usual sense of time is also interrupted and time seemingly stands still. The somewherehouse of *The Opposite House* exists in an indeterminate space and time, and in *The Icarus Girl* Jess shares experiences with TillyTilly in a spirit world which mimics Jess's actual world in space and time but disrupts the temporality because no-one except Jess can see TillyTilly: 'And even when Jess was with TillyTilly [...] the most noticeable thing was that they couldn't see TillyTilly.' (158) Faris argues that 'many magical realist fictions delineate near-sacred or ritual enclosures' that 'leak their magical narrative waters over the rest of the texts and the worlds they describe; just as that exterior reality permeates them'.⁷² The house, a central motif in Oyeyemi's narratives that represents not only the physical space but also the workings of

⁷⁰ Faris, p. 7.

⁷¹ Faris, p. 23.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 24.

the mind of the mentally fragile protagonist, is characterised by a 'sense of magical and yet permeable interiors'.⁷³ As the manifestation of the evil spirit of Miranda's great-grandmother, the goodlady, 29 Barton Road is the scene of the magical events that threaten the non-white inhabitants and lead to Miranda's disappearance. TillyTilly befriends Jess when she is staying at her grandfather's house in Lagos and mysteriously reappears at her London home where TillyTilly's magical powers involve Jess in increasingly troubling and dangerous situations. The mystical somewherehouse, inhabited by the Orishas and the Kayodes, exemplifies the sacred space of the magical realist fiction and resists any sense of time and space with its two doors, one opening out into London at night and the other onto Lagos, 'always [...] to a place that is floridly day'.⁷⁴

It is particularly relevant when considering Oyeyemi's fictional narratives that the most significant revision of Faris's thinking about the primary characteristics of magical realism pertains to her assertion that 'the reader may hesitate between two contradictory understandings of events, and hence experience some unsettling doubts'. Faris acknowledges a new universality of the mode by recognising the significance of the diversity of cultural beliefs: she argues that 'because belief systems differ, clearly, some readers in some cultures will hesitate less than others'. In contrast to her analysis in 1995, Faris recognises that '[h]esitation may obscure the irreducible element' and adds that '[t]he contemporary Western reader's primary doubt is most often between understanding an event as a character's dream or hallucination and, alternatively, understanding it as a miracle'.⁷⁵ Oyeyemi widens the in-between space that exists because of the essential opposition of the two narrative strands to create an ambivalence of form that purposefully encourages the reader to 'experience some unsettling doubts' and frustrates any attempt at interpretation. A definitive meaning of her complex narratives remains elusive and it is frequently difficult to determine whether the magical is actually 'real' or whether the apparently supernatural happenings are the result of or, alternatively, a representation of the fragile mental health of the protagonist and their inability to retain a hold on reality.

Oyeyemi appears to privilege the realist narrative and therefore, according to Faris, her fictional writing 'belongs on the fringes of magical realism'.⁷⁶ Consequently, it remains uncertain whether it is appropriate to classify Oyeyemi's fictions as magical realism or

⁷³ Ibid., p. 24.

⁷⁴ Helen Oyeyemi, *The Opposite House* (London: Bloomsbury, p. 1. Subsequent references are given in parentheses within the text.

⁷⁵ Faris, p. 17.

⁷⁶ Ibid., p.20 -21.

whether it would be more accurate to define her writing as a form of contemporary social realism. The realist narrative of *The Opposite House* is interwoven with or interrupted by a second narrative which tells the story of the mysterious somewherehouse that is inhabited by the Orishas. Set in a supernatural or spiritual fictional world of indeterminate space, the somewherehouse, and time, 'before, before' (27), the narrative exemplifies the obscure and often confusing magical element of Oyeyemi's magical realism that makes it difficult to determine a definitive meaning. Like the protagonists of all of Oyeyemi's fictions, Maja, the protagonist of *The Opposite House*, is a young female with fragile mental health. It is, therefore, reasonable to interpret the discrete magical narrative of *The Opposite House*, that echoes the seemingly privileged realist narrative, as a portrayal of Maja's fragile mental state and the somewherehouse as being a metaphorical representation of the workings of her confused mind. Similarly, the story of the mentally ill teenager, Miranda Silver, in *White is for Witching* is divided into a realist narrative that recounts the events leading up to her disappearance and a second parallel narrative that interjects the realism with apparently supernatural happenings linked to witchcraft that occur in the family home. Both fictions re-visit the motifs of Oyeyemi's first novel *The Icarus Girl*. Although less experimental in both style and themes, *The Icarus Girl* comprises of a predominantly realist narrative exploring the journey of self-discovery of the protagonist Jessamy that takes her to her grandfather's house in Lagos where she befriends TillyTilly, a spirit-child. The division between the magical and the real is not as defined as in Oyeyemi's succeeding novels but there is a sense that the supernatural events that surround Jess's relationship with TillyTilly disrupt the otherwise linear progression of the realist narrative.

Oyeyemi's fictional narratives also conform to the literary conventions of realism. As a result, the real appears to be privileged over the magical, strengthening the uncertainty about the appropriateness of categorising her novels as magical realism. Oyeyemi's fictions demonstrate a predominantly linear progression and are firmly set in the present, and an identifiable plot is contained within the realist narrative. In *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction*, Jonathan Culler asserts that the narrative of a text depends upon the opposition between plot and discourse. He identifies discourse or the version of the events of the plot to be crucial to the narrative effect and argues that the discourse of the text is dependent upon the narrative point of view. This aligns his theorizing about narrative with Damian Grant's analysis of realism. Grant adopts the term 'conscious realism' to define twentieth-century literary realism that, in contrast to what he refers to as the 'conscientious realism' of the realist fictions of the nineteenth century, does not 'defer [...]

automatically to the fact, and requires that truth be verified by reference to it'. It is realism 'containing the truth, not simply representing or alluding to it'.⁷⁷ Grant asserts that, for the modern writer '[r]eality is seen as something which has to be attained, not merely taken for granted; and the attainment is a continuous process that never allows the concept to stabilize, or the word to offer a convenient mould of meaning'.⁷⁸ He recognises the novelist's 'differing intentions in the presentation of reality' and identifies in Henry James's theorizing in *The Art of the Novel* the significance of the use of point of view to the contemporary form of realism: 'Persistently James displays his belief that what we call reality is a personal refraction, an involuntary 'point of view'.⁷⁹

Oyeyemi exploits the significance of point of view by presenting the events of the story through a character whose perception of those events needs to be questioned. The 'limited point of view' resulting from her strategic choice of focalizer allows both a realist narrative and a supernatural or magical narrative to co-exist and to be effectively separated within the novel. This strategy prevents the narrative ambivalence from being resolved. In accordance with Culler's analysis of what is often termed 'third person limited point of view', in *The Icarus Girl* the third person omniscient narration is focalized through the consciousness of the character of the eight-year-old protagonist, Jessamy. This indicates the potential for the narrator to be unreliable: 'when we gain a sense that the consciousness through which focalization is unable or unwilling to understand the events as competent story-readers would'.⁸⁰ Oyeyemi promotes a reading that depends upon the notion of unreliable narration by indicating that the protagonist is not only a child but that she suffers from some form of mental illness: at the opening of the novel Jessamy is hiding in the linen cupboard and '[i]f she reminded herself that she was in the cupboard, she would know exactly where she was, something that was increasingly difficult each day' (3), and '[o]utside the cupboard, Jess felt as if she was in a place where everything moved past too fast, all colours, all people talking and wanting her to say things' (4). At the beginning of *White is for Witching*, Oyeyemi immediately draws attention to the poor mental health of the protagonist Miranda who suffers from the eating disorder pica and, following the death of her mother, has just spent six months in a psychiatric unit. Eliot, her twin and one of the narrators, reports, 'My sister turned seventeen in a mental-health clinic' (2). Miranda later

⁷⁷ Damian Grant, *Realism* (London: Methuen, 1970), p. 9.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 5 – 6.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 6, 52 -53.

⁸⁰ Jonathan Culler, *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 90.

recalls a visit she made as a child to a doll hospital with her mother and questions her own thought processes: 'she didn't know where the thought had come from, she probably had to be careful because she had been mad' (39). The potential unreliability of the story's protagonist complicates further a narrative recounted by multiple voices including an omniscient narrator, who tells of the events through the consciousness of Miranda, and also the animated house, 29 Barton Road. *Mr Fox*, published in 2011, based upon the Bluebeard fairy tale and resonating with Angela Carter's subversion of the same fairy tale, 'The Bloody Chamber', is a distinctly different novel from Oyeyemi's previous works. *Mr Fox* opens with a visit by the enigmatic Mary Foxe to the story's protagonist, the successful American novelist St John Fox. The reliability of the narration is continually questioned as the story is told alternately through the first person narration of Mr Fox, who reveals that Mary Foxe is his imagined muse, and an omniscient narrator whose third person narration is focalized through the consciousness of the imaginary Mary Foxe. The potential for the narration to be unreliable creates uncertainty and Oyeyemi repeatedly invites this hesitancy and the continual re-assessment of the truth of the narrative: 29 Barton Road as narrator in *White is for Witching* demands of the reader, 'Believe it, don't believe it, as you will' (85) and St John Fox, in his attempt to calm his increasingly paranoid wife reminds her that Mary Foxe is imagined, 'What I mean is, she's not real, honey. She's only an idea. I made her up.'⁸¹

The ambivalence, of both narrative form and plot, that is afforded by the magical realist mode allows Oyeyemi to express a multi-ethnic sensibility that moves beyond the ideologies of her black British literary predecessors and creates a new fictional space for the contemporary black writer of Britain. This purposeful use of ambivalence may be read in terms of Bhabha's concept of productive ambivalence. In the essay 'The other question: Stereotype, discrimination and the discourse of colonialism', Bhabha asserts the importance of the ambivalence of the stereotype. He argues that the stereotype, a central discursive strategy in the discourse of colonialism, 'is a form of knowledge and identification that vacillates between what is always 'in place', already known, and something that must be anxiously repeated'.⁸² Colonial discourse constructs the colonised as other, and it is the stereotype or 'that 'otherness' which is at once an object of desire

⁸¹ Helen Oyeyemi, *Mr Fox* (London: Picador, 2011), p. 73.

Subsequent references are given in parentheses within the text.

⁸² Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (1994) (Abingdon: Routledge, 2004), p. 94 - 95.

and derision' that, according to Bhabha, constitutes what he terms 'the *productive* ambivalence of the object of colonial discourse'.⁸³ Bhabha argues that:

it is the force of ambivalence which gives the colonial stereotype its currency: ensures its repeatability in changing historical and discursive conjunctures; informs its strategies of individuation and marginalisation; produces that effect of probabilistic truth and predictability which, for the stereotype, must always be in excess of what can be empirically proved or logically construed.⁸⁴

The stereotype is the source of the power and authority of the colonizer because of the perceived innate superiority that informs colonial knowledge. However, at the same time it is also the cause of the anxiety that requires constant reiteration. For Bhabha, this colonial anxiety reveals the weakness or vulnerability of colonial knowledge and the opportunity for challenge or resistance by the colonised. Oyeyemi employs ambivalence to portray a mixed-race identity that embraces cultural difference and racial uncertainty. The constructive use of ambivalence to challenge or resist the received notion of the confusion and insecurity that results from a split racial identity aligns Oyeyemi's writing with the concept of productive ambivalence that Bhabha describes in relation to colonial contexts.

West African Magical Realism and Myth

Oyeyemi finds in the tradition of West African literature a source for her expression of the cultural complexity of the mixed-race individual. The fictional presence of twins and ideas of twinning and doubles, a predominant and central theme of her novels, engage with the indigenous oral storytelling of West Africa that portrays the cultural belief in the co-existence of the real and the spirit-world, and in the mythical concept of the *abiku* or spirit-child. Oyeyemi repeatedly connects the real with the magical and the present with the past by invoking the indigenous West African anxiety surrounding the mystery or apparent unnaturalness of twins or *ibeji* and the belief that twins possess supernatural powers. According to tradition, each twin has a half share of one soul and the death of a twin demands the ritualistic appeasement of the dead twin's soul with a carving in their likeness to allow the remaining twin to survive.

Oyeyemi's appropriation of magical realism appears to be influenced by the magical realist writing of West Africa and particularly echoes the central themes and narrative motifs of

⁸³ Ibid., p. 96.

⁸⁴ Ibid., p. 95.

Ben Okri's postcolonial fictions. According to Yoruba folklore, the *abiku* is a child who dies young and then haunts his mother by continually returning from the spirit-world to re-enter the womb and be reborn, only to die again. A familiar trope in West African fictions, the *abiku* or spirit-child represents the Nigerian sensibility for Okri. Okri's critically acclaimed novel, *The Famished Road*, portrays Nigeria just before the dawn of independence through the story of the mysterious journeying of his reinvention of the mythical spirit-child, its protagonist Azaro. Oyeyemi's recurrent themes of mythological gods and witchcraft and images of twins, ghosts and witches are all reminiscent of Okri's fictions. During the story of *The Icarus Girl*, Jessamy learns that she had an identical twin, Fern, who died at birth and she is haunted by a type of double, her mysterious friend TillyTilly who she meets when visiting the Nigerian home of her grandfather. TillyTilly appears to represent the other half of Jess's Nigerian-English hybrid self, with the echoing of her name symbolising twinning and giving her a ghostly or dreamlike quality. Until the recently published collection of essays edited by Chloe Buckley and Sarah Ilott, most of the academic attention has focused on Oyeyemi's use of motifs of twinhood and the Nigerian mythical *abiku*. In his essay 'Reading the Diasporic *Abiku* in Helen Oyeyemi's *The Icarus Girl*', Christopher Ouma explores the *abiku* figure in Oyeyemi's *The Icarus Girl* in relation to ideas of mixed-race identity and the confusion that results from a mix of Western and non-Western cultural heritage. Ouma's critical analysis is particularly relevant to this dissertation as he explores the *abiku* figure, that has been transposed in Oyeyemi's narrative both geographically and culturally, in what he refers to as its new diasporic condition. Ouma explores the narrative's engagement with psychoanalysis and argues that by relocating the mythical figure to Britain it becomes a representation of Dissociative Identity Disorder, the psychoanalytical condition that Jessamy is diagnosed as suffering from as a result of her split racial identity. In contrast to a reading that is centred on the ambivalence that makes it impossible to determine whether the apparently magical events are actually real or a consequence of the protagonist's poor mental health, Ouma's psychoanalytical reading of the narrative necessarily does not consider Oyeyemi's use of magical realism.

Recalling Okri's Madame Koto, who is variously described as a witch in *The Famished Road*, ideas of witchcraft dominate the events of *White is for Witching* which tells the story of twins Miranda, the teenage protagonist and the successor to the witchery of her female ancestors, and Eliot. Miranda and Eliot are described as being almost identical: Ore struggles to tell them apart because they 'were so alike [...] in person, when they both had

their eyes on you, you couldn't sort one from the other' (215). Miranda emphasises their closeness, 'he's eliot eliot is me we were once one cell' (238), reflecting the Yoruba belief that twins share a single soul. In *The Opposite House* the story of the mysterious somewherehouse parallels the realist narrative that portrays Maja's mental decline as a result of her pregnancy. The two narratives, one set in present-day London and the other in the mythical world of the somewherehouse and each a reflection of the other, imply the twinning of the protagonist Maja and her apparent counterpart Yemaya, the Yoruba goddess also known as Aya. Evident within each of the two narratives are echoes of the other with Maja's name rhyming eerily with that of the goddess Ye maya or Aya. As the cause of her physical sickness and her deteriorating mental health, Maja's unborn child connects the Yoruba cultural beliefs concerning the *ibeji* with the mythological *abiku* or spirit-child. The structure of the novel is also reminiscent of Okri's *The Famished Road* that tells the story of Azaro in parallel to the linear progression of the realist story of his father's journey. Azaro's supernatural experiences occur almost as separate events to the otherwise realistic narrative with the temporality interrupted and suspended when he crosses the road or enters Madame Koto's bar.

Brenda Cooper identifies an 'ironic distancing' that is fundamental to postcolonial diasporic magical realism.⁸⁵ She argues that '[m]agical realist writers strive towards incorporating indigenous knowledge in new terms, in order to interrogate tradition and to herald change'.⁸⁶ According to Cooper, it is therefore only the writer 'who has travelled away from indigenous ways of life and belief' and has a differing worldview that can write within the magical realist mode.⁸⁷ Okri left Nigeria in 1978 at the age of nineteen to continue his education at a British university and as a result is distanced from the indigenous cultural images and local politics of independence that are central to his magical realist fictions. Cooper criticises Okri's *The Famished Road* for its ambiguity and argues that, as a result of an authorial viewpoint influenced by the experience of Western life, it is deliberately elusive and demonstrates a lack of political commitment. For Cooper, Okri's portrayal of Nigeria at such a significant moment of the nation's history suggests that, as opposed to the tradition of the West African magical realists, he is not committed to the nationalist agenda of the African nations. She argues that it also reveals that, unlike other non-African magical realists such as Rushdie, neither is he wholeheartedly enthusiastic or optimistic

⁸⁵ Brenda Cooper, *Magical Realism in West African Fiction: Seeing with a Third Eye* (London: Routledge, 2004), p.49.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

about the changes that will develop from the diasporic condition and the cross-cultural 'newness that enters the world'. Oyeyemi, who moved to Britain from Nigeria when she was four years old, occupies a profoundly different diasporic space to Okri and is distanced further from the West African myths and folklore that she repeatedly employs to express her cultural difference and a twenty-first-century globalised worldview. As the child of migrant parents, Oyeyemi's experience is not that of the migrant and her novels are neither set in a postcolonial society nor grounded in the history that characterises postcolonial magical realism. However, she finds inspiration in the use of the African cultural belief in myth to construct a magical realism that, in a very similar manner to Okri's appropriation of the mode, expresses her own ambivalence towards her complex identity. By aligning her writing with a West African tradition of magical realism, Oyeyemi resists the notion of a British identity based primarily on the subjective needs of the black individual. Instead, Oyeyemi asserts her West African heritage to express a multi-ethnic sensibility that embraces cultural difference and racial uncertainty.

Oyeyemi adopts traditional Yoruba mythology as an alternative grounding for her magical realist narratives, challenging the conventional use of historical discourses to connect the present-day to the past by the magical realists of the late-twentieth century and, simultaneously, resisting the postcolonial black British writers' preoccupation with the rewriting of history. Although Oyeyemi's use of experimentation suggests a similar postmodernist positioning to Evaristo, Oyeyemi does not share her predominant concern with history. Whilst Evaristo's playful re-imagining of historical events may be read in terms of postmodernist historiographic metafiction, references to historical events are evident in Oyeyemi's writing but any connection to the past through history remains firmly in the periphery. In *White is for Witching* the supernatural happenings and menace of the house appear to have originated from the loss by the newly-wedded Anna, Miranda's great-grandmother, of her husband 'whose RAF plane had gone down somewhere over Africa before the war was even halfway through' (69): 'Her fear had crept out from the whites of her eyes and woven itself into my brick until I came to strength, until I became aware.' (117) Jennifer's apparent death meant that 'she was safe from the war that sickened what it touched from miles away, [...] the pictures of Phnom Penh burning with a kind of pagan festivity' (85). Similarly, *The Opposite House* references the turbulent history of Cuba. Papi tries to express the fear and prejudice that compelled him to seek freedom for his family in Europe: he explains, 'I believed more than anyone that what Fidel, Raul Castro, Che Guevara, Camilo Cienfuegos, Juan Almeida and the others would do would be a great thing –

the greatest thing for Cuba! I mean Juan Almeida was black! A black revolutionary!’ (207). Oyeyemi references historical events and characters specifically as a means of exposing prevailing racism and present-day racial anxieties. Unable to trust in the truth of histories, Oyeyemi finds non-Western mythology to be a more suitable grounding for her magical realist fictions. However, Oyeyemi does not confine her imaginings to the African tradition of myth and cultural beliefs. She also incorporates images drawn from European fairy tale and folklore into her narratives, complicating any reading that positions her writing firmly within a tradition of West African literature. In *White is for Witching* European folklore merges with mythological African beliefs as the malign supernatural powers of 29 Barton Road, assigned to the house by Miranda’s great-grandmother after the death of her husband during the Second World War, are contrasted with the Nigerian housekeeper Sade’s use of juju which is portrayed as a benign form of ritualistic practice or witchcraft. Sade warns Ore of the dangerous xenophobia of the house, “‘It is a monster,” Sade said simply’ (212), and gives her a plastic bag containing some unusual chillies, traditionally used to ward off evil spirits, which ‘looked like crooked twigs – brown, but splashed with dark red where autumn had bled on them’ (212 – 13). The merging of West African myth and European folklore also demonstrates an ambivalence towards the magical realism of West Africa and reflects Oyeyemi’s determination to create a new fictional space for the expression of a post-racial, multi-ethnic identity.

It is the fundamental fluidity and temporal non-linearity of magical realism that facilitates the co-existence of the European folklore and the indigenous oral culture and mythology of West Africa. The use of myth and a cyclical view of time represents a rejection of the chronology and temporal linearity of the realist narratives of a European historiography that supports the discourse of colonialism. The witchcraft that prevails in Oyeyemi’s fictions and is the predominant theme of *White is for Witching* challenges post-Enlightenment histories. Those histories simultaneously deny the continuance of the practice of witchcraft in Britain and, based upon a presumption of superiority because of European rationality, promote a colonial discourse that considers the indigenous beliefs and cultural practices of witchcraft of the colonised to be indicative of their primitivism. By drawing attention to a belief in witches and the practice of witchcraft that exists despite the denial implicit in the Witchcraft Act passed in England in 1737, Oyeyemi’s writing overtly challenges the truth of history. Set in the present-day, *White is for Witching* is also a commentary on the realities of everyday life for the migrant in twenty-first-century Britain. Ore, who was born in Britain and is of Nigerian heritage, is told by Tijana, a Kosovan migrant who attends the same

school as Miranda and Eliot and like Miranda moves on to study at Cambridge University, 'about a good half-hour spent on a bench in Dover's main square while some old black guy had explained to her that refugees were a drain on the resources provided by the taxpayer' (203). Tijana's cousin Agim dies of complications after a violent racist attack, and when Miranda accompanies Sade on one of her charitable visits to Dover's Immigration Removal Centre they are informed that 'Another inmate hung themselves' (114). By exposing the continued presence of inequality and a persistent and pervasive racism, Oyeyemi's narratives critique the present-day political discourse of multiculturalism and a rhetoric of tolerance and anti-racism.

Magical Realism and Hybridity

Oyeyemi appropriates magical realism to express her ambivalence towards received ideas of Britishness and a privileging of cultural difference over the ideas of hybridity associated with the previous generation of magical realist writers. Homi Bhabha's influential concept of hybridity is related closely to the notions of migrancy and identity that preoccupied the postcolonial magical realists. Those writers recognised magical realism, comprised of two opposing narratives that create an 'in-between' space, to be ideally suited to the expression of the migrant condition. The celebration of their cultural hybridity aligns the postcolonial magical realists with Bhabha's notion of 'the indeterminacy of diasporic identity' as a condition of opportunity and agency that is to be championed as a means of 'newness enter[ing] the world'.⁸⁸ Oyeyemi realises magical realism's potential for subversion and employs the 'gaps, spaces and silences' created by the essential opposition of the magical and realist narrative strands to reject the notion of the binaries that are fundamental to Bhabha's idea of the hybrid. Bhabha employs the term hybridisation in preference to hybridity asserting that it is a product of colonisation, a construct that is therefore fluid rather than fixed and is instilled with agency and possibility. He explores the liminal or in-between spaces that occur at the borders where the two different cultures meet, identifying what he terms a 'third space', a site of subversive potential where the hybridised individual is able to explore and to reconstruct as desired their own self, to 'initiate new signs of identity'.⁸⁹ In his foreword to the new edition of Werbner and Modood's *Debating Cultural Hybridity* published in 2015, Bhabha extends his thinking to

⁸⁸ Bhabha, p. 301.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

consider the present-day 'global moment' and asserts that '[h]ybridity works with, *and within*, the cultural design of the present to reshape our understanding of the interstices – social and psychic – that link signs of cultural similitude with emergent signifiers of alterity'.⁹⁰ He argues that '[f]or hybridity, empowerment is about the achievement of agency and authority, rather than the fulfilment of the 'authenticity' of identity – however mixed, however 'multi', however intersective or intercultural'.⁹¹

Oyeyemi's concerns with identity are not those of the migrant and her manipulation of magical realism, widening the separation of the magical and the real to create a space of creative possibility for a new generation of black British writer, is a defiant act of rejection of not only the existing ideas of hybridity but also of all binary oppositions, such as black or white, British or non-British, that are used to divide diverse communities. For Oyeyemi the concept of hybridity is too simplistic. Fundamental to the notion of the hybrid, binarism implies a straightforward division into two equal parts and does not allow for the plurality of the contemporary mixed-race condition. Oyeyemi's appropriation of magical realism reflects her rejection of the traditional form of the mode and the inherent ideas of hybridity. Oyeyemi's fictions all portray the complexities of the cultural identity of the twenty-first-century mixed-race person and it is the predominant theme of *The Opposite House*. Maja, the protagonist of *The Opposite House*, is a young black Cuban-born woman who has lived in Britain since she was seven years old with her parents and her younger brother, Tomas, who was born in London. Her fragile mental state has been unsettled by an unplanned pregnancy that compels her to question her own identity: 'I've come to think that there's an age beyond which it is impossible to lift a child from the pervading marinade of an original country, pat them down with a paper napkin and then deep fry them in another country' (12). Maja is preoccupied with the realisation that she retains very few memories of Cuba to pass onto her unborn son. She repeatedly returns to and agonises over the memories of her early childhood in Cuba and later, when confronted by the unreliability of her memory, she feels disconnected from the place of her birth: 'I need my Cuba memory back, or something just as small, just as rich, to replace it' (169). Maja is uneasy living in the flat that belongs to Aaron, her white Ghanaian migrant boyfriend. She is uncomfortable sharing not only his physical but also his metaphorical space, finding it difficult to understand and condemning his ambivalence towards his Ghanaian identity,

⁹⁰ Homi K. Bhabha, 'Foreward' in *Debating Cultural Hybridity: Multicultural Identities and the Politics of Anti-Racism*, ed. by Pnina Werbner and Tariq Modood (London: Zed Books, 2015), pp. ix – xiii, p. x, ix.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. xii.

because he ‘chooses or refuses Ghana at any given moment’: ‘You are no more Ghanaian than I am Cuban. So what if you can number your memories and group them in years one to eighteen?’ (179). Maja’s anxieties are contrasted to Aaron’s ambivalence towards his own British-Ghanaian identity but neither of them embraces their hybridity or perceives it to present the opportunity of Bhabha’s celebrated hybrid. Consequently, Oyeyemi’s narrative challenges Bhabha’s optimism, denying the binaries that constitute the concept of the hybrid and privileging a new polycultural sensibility over hybridity. Maja perceives that ‘she does not look Jamaican or Ghanaian or Kenyan or Sudanese – the only firm thing that is sure is she is black [...] In my blood is a bright chain of transfusion; Spaniards, West Africans, indigenous Cubans, even the Turkos – the Cuban Lebanese’ (98).

Oyeyemi’s *White is for Witching* is the story of the white British protagonist Miranda Silver and her twin Eliot, who are living in the maternal family home in Dover that their French father, Luc Dufresne, runs as a guest house. Miranda has a relationship with Ore Lind, a black British fellow Cambridge student, who was adopted as a baby by a white British couple and knows only that her birth mother was African. Unlike Maja in *The Opposite House*, Ore demonstrates an ambivalence towards but not insecurity about her identity: ‘I may be adopted, but I know exactly who I am.’ (157) She finds it difficult to assert her Britishness when, as a recently-arrived student at Cambridge, she is compelled to question her identity: ‘Walls and windows forbade me. They pulled at me and said, *You don’t belong here*. Again and again, [...] I gritted my teeth and said, *Yes I do*. Everyone else seemed to blend into the architecture.’ (157) Confronted with her African heritage, she is upset when she is addressed by someone whose ‘accent was African’ as ‘my sister’ (149) encouraging her to join the university’s Nigeria Society but, at the same time, reveals a desire to connect with her West African heritage when she admits to having bought some years previously a copy of the book, hidden by her mum as a gift in her suitcase, of ‘Caribbean legends “for storytellers”’ (147). Similarly, when Sade, the Nigerian housekeeper at Miranda’s home, tries to tell her the meaning of her Yoruba name Ore covers her ears with her hands so that she might not hear. Despite her wholly British upbringing, Ore’s innate African sensibility appears evident: she is preoccupied with the story of the soucouyant and reflects, ‘Does the nightmare of her belong to everyone, or just to me?’ (155) Ore recognises that her own acceptance of a spirit world connects her to Sade and she is able to hear the whispering of the voices that speak to the housekeeper: ‘It was soft as snowfall, but it took over all my hearing. I couldn’t hear what exactly was being said, but the murmuring glowed in my skull and didn’t stop, not even when I covered my head with both hands.’ (206)

Oyeyemi's fictional spaces are filled with a multi-ethnic cast of characters of diverse cultural inheritances that allows her to expose the realities of living in multicultural Britain in the twenty-first century. The population of modern-day London represented in *The Opposite House* is an intentionally complex mix of Cuban, Ghanaian, Cypriot, Jamaican, Colombian, Trinidadian, Nigerian and Senegalese heritage. Aligning Oyeyemi's text with the thinking of Tariq Modood, Helen Cousins argues that in *The Opposite House* Oyeyemi explores the difference that Modood highlights when he criticises British multiculturalism's rhetoric of diversity because 'it constitute[s] not just some form of distinctiveness but a form of alienness or inferiority that diminishes or makes difficult equal membership in the wider society'.⁹² According to Cousins, 'Oyeyemi's intention is [...] to draw attention to the notion of whiteness as an absence'.⁹³ Maja's brother, Tomas, is a runner and paints his face white when he races because it makes him feel invisible enabling him to run faster: 'I run almost twice as fast with this stuff on you know. I run like no one knows me, like no one can hold me.' (209) Maja tries on the face paint and becomes anxious when she realises that 'I watch my face begin to disappear' (209). Oyeyemi exposes a persistent assumed superiority of whiteness over blackness, the power of whiteness, according to Cousins, as a normative invisibility, that aligns her fictional writing with criticism of multiculturalism's rhetoric of diversity. In *White is for Witching* she portrays 'the shame' (119) of the failings of a policy of multiculturalism that is fundamentally dependent on the notion of a black or white, English or non-English binary. Critics such as Modood maintain that multiculturalism demands that the hybrid makes compromises to adapt to the cultural norms or expectations of the host nation that is not required to do the same. Cultural 'difference' is not smoothly assimilated; rather, all other cultures are grouped together as one in opposition to the dominant culture and multiculturalism is in reality 'a form of integration'.⁹⁴ Oyeyemi challenges Britain's political discourse of multiculturalism and privileges cultural difference and racial uncertainty. *White is for Witching* is set in Dover, the point of arrival for many present-day immigrants to Britain. In contrast to the black multi-ethnic characters portrayed by Oyeyemi in *The Opposite House*, *White is for Witching* is concerned with the reality of life in contemporary Britain for European and Middle Eastern migrants. The local newspaper reports that there have been four Kosovans stabbed in the city in the past three weeks and Miranda visits the Immigration Removal Centre

⁹² Tariq Modood, *Multiculturalism: A Civic Idea* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013), p. 37.

⁹³ Helen Cousins, 'Unplaced/Invaded: Multiculturalism in Helen Oyeyemi's *The Opposite House*', in *Postcolonial Text*, 7, 3 (2012), 1 – 16, p. 4.

⁹⁴ Modood, p. 14.

where an inmate has hung himself that day. It is a place that '[s]he had re-imagined [...] as white and similar to a hospital' (115), but Sade insists, 'That place is a prison. You come without papers because you have been unable to prove that you are useful to anyone, and then when you arrive they put you in prison, and if you are unable to prove that you have suffered, they send you back.' (119) Similarly, in *The Icarus Girl* Jessamy is bullied by a classmate Colleen McLain who 'was friends with everyone in the class' (82) but 'thought Jess was disgusting, although it was never clear why' (81). Jess has frequent screaming fits in class and Colleen suggests that 'Maybe Jessamy has all these "attacks" because she can't make up her mind whether she's black or white!' (86). Oyeyemi's narratives expose a pernicious and insidious racism that persists in Britain's present-day multicultural society.

Magical Realism and Mimicry

It is the fluidity and indeterminacy of magical realism that allows Oyeyemi the expression of ambivalence towards the notion of a black British identity. The essential opposition between the real and the magical creates a third space that affords the ambivalence that Oyeyemi employs at multiple levels within her fictions to portray a contemporary multi-ethnic sensibility: that ambivalence is apparent not only at the level of meaning but also in the tension portrayed between history and myth and particularly in the narrative form itself. Oyeyemi's appropriation of the magical realist mode simultaneously resists both the postcolonial ideas of the West African magical realists and the ideologies that inform the black British writing of the latter decades of the twentieth century. It also determinedly aligns her writing with the critically-acclaimed magical realism of the celebrated late-twentieth-century authors. Oyeyemi uses magical realism not only to explore her cultural difference but also to emphasise or to foreground that cultural difference. Claiming her cultural difference allows Oyeyemi to distance herself from the literary categorisation of black British writer and to fulfil the requirements of the publishing industry's apparent privileging of marginal literatures in order to engage with a global reading public. According to Graham Huggan, the 'global commodification of cultural difference' or what he terms the 'postcolonial exotic' both satisfies and is responsible for perpetuating an apparently insatiable desire by a Western readership for a literary experience of the exotic, or cultural otherness.⁹⁵ In *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins* (2001), Huggan

⁹⁵ Graham Huggan, *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2001), p. vii.

argues that there exists 'a politics of literary recognition'.⁹⁶ He identifies the disproportionate success by postcolonial writers of the important literary prizes and the direct correlation between prize-winning and global publishing opportunity. The magical realism of the previous generation of postcolonial writers resonates within Oyeyemi's fictions: she overtly adopts many of the conventions of the magical realism associated with the West African writer and particularly with the diasporic postcolonial writing of Ben Okri. This suggests that her writing may be explored in terms of Bhabha's concept of colonial mimicry. In his seminal essay 'Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse', Bhabha posits imitation and mimicry to be essential to the success of colonialism: the coloniser requires the colonised to copy and adopt to some extent not only the language but also the customs, traditions and way of life of the coloniser. Bhabha argues that 'colonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognisable Other, *as a subject of difference that is almost the same, but not quite*'.⁹⁷ According to Bhabha, the significance of that imitation lies in the potential for it to be a strategy of resistance: the colonised other's resemblance consequently undermines and destabilises the coloniser's original identity so that 'mimicry is at once resemblance and menace', and '[t]he *menace* of mimicry is its *double* vision which in disclosing the ambivalence of colonial discourse also disrupts its authority'.⁹⁸

In his analysis of the 'staged marginality' that he contends exists in postcolonialism and postcolonial literatures, Huggan applies Bhabha's thinking on mimicry to the fictional writing of Naipaul and Rushdie.⁹⁹ Huggan derives his term from the idea of 'staged authenticity' described by the sociologist Dean MacCannell in his 1976 study of modern tourism. He defines staged marginality as 'the process by which marginalised individuals or social groups are moved to dramatise their 'subordinate' status for the benefit of a majority or mainstream audience'.¹⁰⁰ In accordance with Bhabha's mimicry, Huggan's staged marginality 'is not necessarily an exercise in self-abasement; it may, and often does, have a critical or even a subversive function'.¹⁰¹ Huggan argues that, despite the two novelists' differing or even oppositional ideologies, both Naipaul's *The Enigma of Arrival* and Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* 'can be seen as explorations of the apparent paradoxes inherent in ethnicised performances of staged subordination or marginality', thus aligning

⁹⁶ Ibid., p. 118.

⁹⁷ Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, p. 122.

⁹⁸ Ibid., p. 123, 126.

⁹⁹ Huggan, p. 87.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., p. 87.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., p. 87.

these fictions with Bhabha's notion of mimicry.¹⁰² The presence of mimicry may extend from the writing to the writer who, writing from a position of cosmopolitan privilege, appears to be claiming marginal status in the full knowledge of the value of marginality as a publishing commodity. In its expression of ambivalence towards Britishness, Oyeyemi's self-conscious writing constructs an identity that is centred upon cultural difference. Her strategic employment of magical realist devices in a manner that imitates or mimics the fictions of such English-speaking postcolonial canonical writers as Rushdie and Okri suggests that Oyeyemi's determined claiming of cultural difference might also be made with an awareness of the potential benefit of affiliation with the postcolonial diasporic writer. Oyeyemi's self-conscious appropriation of magical realism engages with the thinking of Sarah Brouillette. In her materialist study *Postcolonial Writers in the Global Literary Marketplace* (2011), Brouillette critiques and refigures Huggan's concept of strategic exoticism. Contrary to Huggan's theorizing, she challenges the existence of what she terms Huggan's 'market reader', 'an unspecified global reader in pursuit of exotic access to what is culturally 'other''.¹⁰³ The notion of a reader who needs re-educating is fundamental to Huggan's theory of strategic exoticism. For Brouillette, strategic exoticism is 'comprised of a set of literary strategies that operate through assumptions shared between the author and the reader, as both producer and consumer work to negotiate with, if not absolve themselves of, postcoloniality's touristic guilt'.¹⁰⁴ Her reading of works by some of the postcolonial literary celebrity writers reveals 'postcolonial authorship as in part a generative and saleable feature of the industry that it aims to assess' and she argues that there is evidence of an 'emergent trope of authorial self-consciousness: the trope of self-authorization through awareness of the political uses or appropriations of one's works'.¹⁰⁵ Brouillette's notion of authorial self-consciousness appears to relate closely to Oyeyemi's self-conscious writing that, I argue, demonstrates a determination to control her own positioning within the literary marketplace.

There are similarities evident in the language used by Bhabha in his discourse on mimicry and in the theorizing of performativity by Judith Butler. Both Bhabha and Butler emphasise that the concepts of mimicry and performativity respectively are related to the idea of identity being a construct that depends for its formation upon the repetition of the act. For

¹⁰² Ibid., p. 88.

¹⁰³ Sarah Brouillette, *Postcolonial Writers in the Global Literary Marketplace* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), p. 5 – 6.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., p. 7.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., p. 7, 74.

Bhabha, mimicry is an effect of colonial discourse that is characterised by the frequent repetition of the stereotype of the colonised subject in an attempt to make the colonised become 'almost the same, *but not quite*'.¹⁰⁶ Butler applies the philosopher J. L. Austin's idea of language as performative or having a performative function, of doing or performing as opposed to describing or saying, to her thinking about gendered and sexed identity. Butler extends the work of Simone de Beauvoir and her influential idea that 'one is not born, but rather *becomes* a woman.'¹⁰⁷ She argues that gender does not exist outside of the language that names it; gender identity is not inherent or intrinsic to the body but is a matter of performativity, discursively effected or constructed by a process of repeated acts that are in accordance with social and cultural conventions and norms. For Butler, gender is not something that one is but something that one does, a repeated act or a doing rather than a being: 'Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, a natural sort of being'.¹⁰⁸ Butler's theory of performativity provides a framework for exploring the construction of the self that can be translated to ideas of race and supports the notion that race might be linguistically and discursively constructed. Butler's theorizing of identity as dialectic implies that race like gender is uncertain not fixed and, in a similar manner to Bhabha's concept of mimicry, suggests the potential for change or subversion or the opportunity for agency. This thinking can be applied to the literary text: exploring his notion of the novel of transformation, Mark Stein argues that there is 'a *performative function*' that 'ascribe[s] agency to texts'.¹⁰⁹ For Stein, this agency lies in the ability of the fictional work, while at the same time that it portrays the realities of the subject's position in society, to influence and effect change in the cultural and political conditions of that society. Stein's argument appears to be in accordance with Culler who, in his analysis of the literary event as performative, refers to what he terms the 'performative force' of language.¹¹⁰ Culler asserts that utterances 'accumulate the force of authority through the repetition or citation of a prior, authoritative set of practices'.¹¹¹ In her study of Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus*, Helen Stoddart summarises Sceats's essay, 'Performance, Identity and the Body', and argues that 'the establishment of where agency lies in any

¹⁰⁶ Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, p. 122.

¹⁰⁷ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, 2nd edn (Abingdon: Routledge, 1999), p. 45.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

¹⁰⁹ Mark Stein, *Black British Literature: Novels of Transformation* (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2004), p. 36.

¹¹⁰ Culler, p. 104.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 104.

action, event or performance (fictional or otherwise) lies at the heart of the politics or political effects of such actions'.¹¹² She identifies the significance of the relationship between intention and identity and argues that '[t]he question of agency, then, becomes especially complicated in forms of performance such as parody, mimicry or irony where intention is obscured by false positions that are deliberately taken up in order to mock or undermine existing assumptions'.¹¹³ Oyeyemi's literary imitation of the narrative style of Okri's magical realist fictions appears to self-consciously create or perform an authorial identity that might align her with the very successful and prize-winning novelist. If Oyeyemi's authorial strategy is considered to be a form of mimicry, as described by Bhabha in relation to the coloniser, it appears to represent a 'desire to emerge as "authentic" through mimicry'.¹¹⁴ In accordance with Butler's concept of performativity, Oyeyemi's use of what might be termed a performance of authorial identity supports the argument that her appropriation of magical realism represents a determination to literarily position herself with those globally renowned authors who belong to what Huggan terms 'a recognised postcolonial canon'.¹¹⁵

¹¹² Helen Stoddart, *Angela Carter's Nights at the Circus* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007), p. 82 – 83.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 83.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 126.

¹¹⁵ Huggan, p. 119.

Conclusion

Both Evaristo and Oyeyemi demonstrate ‘a shifting sense of consciousness’: a first novel that explores the familiar diasporic concerns of race, migrancy and identity is succeeded by narratives that, by engaging with European histories or folklore, challenge both the physical, geographical and the imaginary borders associated with the ideas of Britishness, central to the postcolonial diasporic black British fiction of the late-twentieth century.¹¹⁶ The contemporary black British writer is not writing from the margins, and race and racism is not the primary focus of these subsequent novels. Instead, the refusal to privilege ideas of race appears to reflect both the recognition and acceptance of a passive and persistent racism. McLeod argues that:

it is noticeable that the approach of contemporary writers to the hinged realms of nation and identity has shifted markedly as these matters have evolved in recent years. These writers’ attention to the illiberal role of race in the imagining of the nation is often a starting point for a different kind of reinvention of the UK, one which reaches beyond the more specific parameters of Black Britishness.¹¹⁷

Of particular interest and demanding further analysis is a similar and significant divergence in both narrative style and also in theme that is evident in both of the writers’ most recent novels: Evaristo’s *Mr Loverman* (2013) is the first prose novel that she has written since *Blonde Roots* and the most straightforwardly realist fiction of her oeuvre to date, and Oyeyemi’s *Boy, Snow, Bird*, that was published in 2014, appears to be more realist and unambiguous than all her earlier fictional works. Significantly, the more straightforward narrative form is employed by both writers to explore themes, not previously addressed in their fictional writing, of sexuality and the constructs of gender respectively.

Evaristo’s debut novel, *Lara*, published in 1997 and notably updated in an extended second edition in 2009, is a semi-autobiographical fictionalised account of her family story.¹¹⁸ The narrative follows the eponymous mixed-race protagonist, born in London to a white British mother and immigrant Nigerian father, as she traces and discovers her complex ancestral roots in order to acquire an understanding of her family. Confident of her British identity, Lara travels to Nigeria and then onto Brazil, retracing in reverse the transatlantic crossings

¹¹⁶ McLeod, ‘Transcontinental Shifts’, p. 169.

¹¹⁷ McLeod, ‘Extra Dimensions, New Routines’, p. 47.

¹¹⁸ The revised 2nd edition of *Lara* (2009) extends the story to incorporate her maternal ancestry’s migration journeys from Germany and Ireland to London. McLeod, ‘Transcontinental Shifts’, p. 180, argues that the revision represents ‘Evaristo’s shift from a national to a continental transpositional sensibility’.

of the slave trade. She returns to Britain ‘baptised, resolved to paint slavery out of me’ (188) and sums up the whole narrative when she declares, ‘I become my parents, my ancestors, my gods.’ (187) Evaristo’s first novel appears to conform to Stein’s notion of the black British *bildungsroman*: in his influential study, Stein argues that much of the black British writing of the last decades of the twentieth century conforms to the *bildungsroman*, a narrative form that portrays the journey of self-discovery of the protagonist from childhood to adult. According to Stein, the predominant concerns of the black writer living in Britain at that time involved ‘redefining where one is staying, about claiming one’s space, and about reshaping that space’.¹¹⁹ In accordance with Stein’s analysis, McLeod argues that the black British *bildungsroman* ‘imagine[s] the changing identity of the UK in terms of the transformation of individuated consciousness and selfhood’.¹²⁰ Evaristo’s first fictional narrative also conforms to the publishing industry’s expectations of the black British genre, a partly autobiographical novel that has ideas of nationhood at the centre of the protagonist’s search for a stable sense of identity. However, her choice of the experimental novel-in-verse form appears to be evidence of a consciousness that is not the same as her twentieth-century black British literary predecessors. Evaristo’s primary concerns are not those of belonging and the affirmation of a black British self and all of her subsequent novels represent a significant shift beyond the boundaries traditionally associated with the black British literary classification, creating a new fictional space for the contemporary black writer of Britain. Similarly, Oyeyemi’s first novel, *The Icarus Girl*, also conforms to the concept of the black British *bildungsroman*. Written before Oyeyemi was eighteen and published in 2005, *The Icarus Girl* tells the story of the protagonist, Jessamy, the troubled and mentally fragile child of a Nigerian mother and her white British husband. Engaging with the West African myth of abiku and Yoruba cultural beliefs surrounding twinhood, Oyeyemi’s narrative takes Jessamy in the search for selfhood to her grandparents’ home in Lagos and home to London before a return visit to Nigeria. All of Oyeyemi’s succeeding novels are predominantly concerned with exploring the identity of the young, mentally fragile, female protagonist. She employs a mix of West African myth and cultural belief and European fairy tale and folklore, in progressively complex narratives, to expose a persistent and insidious racism and the reality of life in contemporary Britain for the mixed-race person.

¹¹⁹ Stein, p. 17.

¹²⁰ McLeod, ‘Extra Dimensions, New Routines’, p. 47.

After a first novel that closely conforms to Stein's notion of the black British *bildungsroman* and the expectations of the publishing industry, both Evaristo and Oyeyemi determinedly move away from the narrative form that might align their novels with the black British writing of the last decades of the twentieth century. In Evaristo's successive fictional writing a progression is evident that, according to McLeod, demonstrates 'a shifting sense of consciousness that supplements this ongoing and vitally important challenge to Britain's imagined community with something culturally and geographically wider: distinctly European, at times self-consciously global'.¹²¹ Evaristo's following three novels are progressively more sophisticated in both form and theme: the recurrent central theme and concern of the novels is the re-imagining of significant eras or events in history in order to challenge historiographies that deny the presence of the black figure, re-inscribing or reinstating the black character into the history. The appropriation of magical realist tropes and devices allows Evaristo to reimagine the past events within the context of contemporary Britain and simultaneously to critique the present-day socio-political condition through the portrayal of the past.

McLeod's argument can also be applied to Oyeyemi's subsequent fictional works. After the publication of *The Icarus Girl*, Oyeyemi's writing becomes increasingly ambitious and mature: her predominant concerns with twenty-first-century, multi-ethnic identity and the pervasiveness of racism are explored within the context of an increasingly complex merging of West African myth and European fairy tale. Oyeyemi's second novel, *The Opposite House*, explores the fragile mental state of its young, female and unexpectedly pregnant, mixed-race protagonist reflected within and in parallel to the elusive story of the Orisha gods of the syncretic Santeria religion. *White is for Witching* merges Nigerian cultural belief in juju and the mythical soucouyant with European folkloric ideas of witches and witchcraft. In her version of the Bluebeard fairy tale, *Mr Fox*, Oyeyemi relocates the narrative setting to the United States and an indeterminate suburb of New York. The shift in setting across continents to 1930s New York represents an expression of her twenty-first-century global sensibility and is also associated with a significant move away from the predominant themes of all her previous novels. Although still centrally concerned with exploring identity and its construction, the West African myth used by Oyeyemi to ground her earlier magical realist fictions is displaced and instead the narrative is deeply rooted in European folklore and fairy tale. Oyeyemi's re-imagining of the Bluebeard tale resonates with, alludes to, and incorporates a complex mix of re-visions of other fairy tales, including the Brothers

¹²¹ McLeod, 'Transcontinental Shifts', p. 169.

Grimm's 'Fitcher's Bird' and Joseph Jacob's 'Mr Fox', from where Oyeyemi takes the title of her novel and the name of her protagonist, Mary Foxe, and aligns her writing with other notable versions of the well-known European fairy tale and, in particular, with Angela Carter's 'The Bloody Chamber'. Jo Ormond's recent essay provides a comprehensive and useful analysis of Oyeyemi's re-writing of the familiar Bluebeard tale.¹²² Oyeyemi's fourth novel is formally her most experimental and playful to date: *Mr Fox* is made up of a fragmented series of separate retellings of fairy tales narrated by the two protagonists, the American novelist St. John Fox and his imaginary muse Mary Foxe. Oyeyemi's versions of the tales are ostensibly linked through the story-writing competition, instigated by Mary because of her exasperation at St. John's persistent practice of violently killing off the female heroine of his narratives, that St. John imagines he is having with his muse.

Oyeyemi's most recently published novel, *Boy, Snow, Bird*, is also set in the United States, in the ambiguous town of Flax Hill in Massachusetts and continues Oyeyemi's preoccupation with the re-imagining of familiar European fairy tales, examining the construction of identity while simultaneously commenting on the present-day mixed-race condition. Set in the 1950s, Oyeyemi's fictional story is a retelling of the Grimms' fairy tale, 'Snow White', and the primary theme of the narrative is the African-American phenomenon of 'passing', being of usually pale skin colour and so pretending to be or passing off as a white American citizen when actually racially black. Oyeyemi's protagonist, Boy Novak, is the daughter of a controlling and abusive father and an apparently absent mother. Boy runs away from her violent father and childhood home in New York and finds herself in the strange town of Flax Hill, where she marries an older widow and father, Arturo Whitman, and becomes stepmother to his very beautiful daughter, Snow: 'Sure, she was an extraordinary-looking kid. A medieval swan maiden, only with the darkest hair and the pinkest lips, every shade at its utmost.'¹²³ It is only when she gives birth to her own daughter, Bird, who has unusually dark skin and African facial characteristics, that Boy discovers that the Whitman family are of African heritage. The Whitmans have been 'passing' as white for three generations, determinedly hiding their racial heritage from their friends and colleagues and going to such extreme lengths to continue with the deception that Arturo's sister, having skin that was too dark to disguise, was sent away to be brought

¹²² See Jo Ormond, "People can smile and smile and still be villains': Villains and Victims in *Mr Fox* and *Boy, Snow, Bird*", in *Telling it Slant: Critical Approaches to Helen Oyeyemi*, ed. by Chloe Buckley and Sarah Ilott (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2017), pp. 152 – 66.

¹²³ Helen Oyeyemi, *Boy, Snow, Bird* (London: Picador, 2014), p. 78.

Subsequent references will be given in parentheses after the quotation within the text.

up by an aunt. In parallel with Oyeyemi's portrayal of the construction of racial identity, prejudice and racism, a second narrative strand, that explores sexuality and the social constructs of gender, tells the story of Boy's father who is revealed to actually be her mother and lives as Frank, an alter-ego that she adopted after being raped when a young lesbian and giving birth to her daughter. Oyeyemi's complex and often elusive narrative appears to connect the Whitman family's racial passing with Frances Novak's adoption of her male alter-ego, Frank. According to Cousins, 'like racial passing, the creation of Frank appears to accept what are, after all, social constructs, as inevitable or natural orders of being'.¹²⁴ The phenomenon of racial passing and, Oyeyemi seems to imply, in some form the portrayal of Boy's mother, Frances, living as her male alter-ego aligns the narrative with Bhabha's concept of mimicry explored in the previous chapter. Oyeyemi re-imagines and reverses the familiar tale of Snow White to challenge and resist the notion of beauty as being exclusively 'snow white'. Cousins reads Oyeyemi's *Boy, Snow, Bird*, as a feminist reworking of the traditional fairy tale that explores the concept of and desire for beauty and its relationship to racial stereotyping and prejudice. In an insightful essay, Cousins argues that 'Oyeyemi is able to interrogate both gender and race in relation to beauty by inflecting the notion of being 'the fairest of them all' with racial and gendered 'passing''.¹²⁵

Boy, Snow, Bird represents a significant shift in narrative form and style, moving from the experimental and often confusing magical realism of all her earlier novels to more conventional realism. The narrative still retains elements of magical realism: in addition to the ideas of the supernatural that are intrinsic to the retelling of the fairy tale, the setting for the story, Flax Hill, is a mysterious 'town of specialists' (16) where '[p]eople make beautiful things' (22) and Boy is suspicious of the bracelet made by Arturo for their engagement, 'a white-gold snake that curled its tail around my wrist' (103 – 104), that she suspects has 'been molding me into the wearer it wants' (141). The unusual choice of a predominantly realist narrative suggests that, in contrast to all her previous works, Oyeyemi considers that the topical and contemporarily socio-politically sensitive and important subject matter demands a form of fictional writing that does not allow for any ambiguity of meaning and affords the closure that is prevented by the narrative form of her previous novels. It also represents a determination to accurately portray and, in so doing to

¹²⁴ Helen Cousins, "As white as red as black as ...": Beauty, Race and Gender in the Tales of Helen Oyeyemi, Angela Carter and Barbara Comyns', in *Telling it Slant: Critical Approaches to Helen Oyeyemi*, ed. by Chloe Buckley and Sarah Ilott (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2017), pp. 167 – 184, p. 179.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 170.

condemn, the reality of the extreme and often hidden violence against women that frequently occurs in an abusive and controlling relationship, continuing a theme that Oyeyemi first explores in *Mr Fox*.

In a notable parallel to the formal and thematic divergence apparent in Oyeyemi's most recent fictional work, *Mr Loverman* represents a marked departure from the experimental form that characterises all of Evaristo's previous novels. Evaristo's choice of narrative form and style varies according to the subject matter and predominant theme of the novel: the realism and mostly conventional prose narrative of *Mr Loverman* recalls and resonates with the fictional narratives of the black migrant writers of the Windrush generation. Focalized through the character of the protagonist, the seventy-four-year-old Caribbean immigrant Barrington Jedidiah Walker, the dialogue and first person narrative is written completely in a creolized urban dialect. The use of non-standard English within the conventional novel form consciously recalls Sam Selvon's ground-breaking fiction, *The Lonely Londoners*. Barrington, known as Barry, is a closeted homosexual who has been married to Carmel for fifty years but has remained, throughout the marriage, in a secret relationship with Morris, his childhood friend. Evaristo's portrayal of Barry, a husband, father and grandfather who has lived in Britain for fifty years, offers an alternative representation of the black immigrant man living in London to both the strongly masculine and unquestionably heterosexual men of the fictional writing of Selvon and his literary contemporaries such as V.S. Naipaul and George Lamming, and to the twentieth-century racial stereotype. Unlike Oyeyemi's *Boy, Snow, Bird*, that is the subject of several of the essays included in *Telling it Slant*, a recently-published first collection of critical studies of her work, Evaristo's latest novel has attracted almost no critical academic attention. In an interview with Jennifer Gustar, Evaristo acknowledges that it is her intention that the character of an older, gay, black Caribbean-British Londoner should 'disrupt stereotypes' and she says that 'I wanted to present a very different kind of Windrush character, because we have just assumed they are heteronormative and all heterosexual'.¹²⁶ In contrast to Selvon's representation of the stereotypical West Indian Londoner, Evaristo's alternative portrayal expresses a rejection of the concept of the racial stereotype while it simultaneously draws attention to and criticises a contemporary socio-politics that allows the continuation of a pervasive and insidious racism. Evaristo's characteristic use of comedy defines the first person narrative, creating in Barry an ebullient and loquacious central character who is as 'real' as the

¹²⁶ Jennifer Gustar, 'Putting History in Its Place: An Interview with Bernardine Evaristo', in *Contemporary Women's Writing*, 9, 3 (2015), 433 – 448, n.p.

narrative cast of black immigrants portrayed in the detailed characterisation of Selvon's fiction. Barry narrates his story mostly during May of 2010 with the intervening chapters comprising of Carmel's stream-of-consciousness recollection of events for each decade of their married life. In the same manner that Evaristo employs comedy in *The Emperor's Babe*, the humour of the events as described by Barry is used to detract from the harsh reality of the distress and harm caused by the prejudice and social and cultural expectations that prevent Barry from being honest about his sexuality with his family. Carmel's stream-of-consciousness interruptions to the central narrative repeatedly remind of the tragedy hidden by the apparent comedy.

This dissertation identifies and examines the differences and diversity of the magical realist writing of two female black writers of Britain publishing works in the first decades of the twenty-first century. Evaristo's postmodern re-imaginings of histories exemplify existing definitions of magical realism. Oyeyemi manipulates magical realist devices and tropes to create an ambivalence that fully engages the reader but makes it impossible to interpret whether the apparently supernatural events are actually magic or the result of the protagonist's poor mental health. The strategic use of specific magical realist devices and tropes creates complex narratives that resist a definitive meaning and deny closure and that, I argue, might be more appropriately categorised as contemporary social realism. The contemporary black writer of Britain employs magical realist techniques in markedly different ways and to differing extents and the differences appear to be determined by and reflect the writer's particular experiences that result from their specific parental genealogies, cultural heritages and influences. The magical realist writing of the twenty-first-century black British novelist is also representative of the increasing diversity of the narrative mode that explains, in part, why a definitive definition of magical realism continues to elude the literary critic. For the contemporary black British writer, the inherent opposition of the magical and the real creates an in-between or liminal space that offers the potential for appropriation and manipulation in diverse and multiple ways. The contemporary black writer embraces the fluidity and slipperiness of the mode as it allows for the expression of a new, but not fixed, twenty-first-century global sensibility, and employs its indeterminacy because it allows the writer 'to expose what they see as a more deep and true reality than conventional realist techniques would bring to view'.¹²⁷

¹²⁷ Cooper, *Magical Realism in West African Fiction*, p. 32.

This dissertation argues that the fictional narratives of the twenty-first-century black writer of Britain portray a determination to move beyond the generally accepted ideas associated with the 'black British writing' of the twentieth century. Adopted as a literary classification during the latter decades of the twentieth century, it represents a genre that is centrally concerned with ideas of belonging and the political intention of redefining Britishness with the subjectivity of the black Briton at the centre. The 'black British' label has always been contentious and literary debate concerning what the label signifies persists. The classification is now used loosely and tends to encompass all fictions by non-white British writers, from the 1950s writing of the Caribbean migrants to the present-day narratives by writers with a complex multi-ethnic identity. In an essay published in *Wasafiri* in 2010, McLeod introduces and adopts the term 'contemporary black writer of Britain':

By talking instead of 'black writing of Britain', I wish to retain the political understanding of 'black' but also make a distinction between an older, dominant sphere of literary endeavour and an emergent one that is indebted to, but not overdetermined by, previous contexts and achievements, the political and aesthetic goals of which might be somewhat different, especially as regards writing the nation.¹²⁸

Following McLeod's example, I have adopted the terminology and used it where it appears appropriate in this study. Recognising that their magical realist writing represents a significant development from and movement beyond the central concerns and themes of the twentieth-century tradition of black British literature, I contend that it is more appropriate to refer to the twenty-first-century writing of Evaristo and Oyeyemi as 'contemporary black writing of Britain'.

¹²⁸ McLeod, 'Extra Dimensions, New Routines', p. 46.

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