

Otherworlds, Doubles, Houses: Helen Oyeyemi's *The Opposite House* and *White Is for Witching*

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ABSTRACT

Houses feature prominently in Helen Oyeyemi's novels, *The Opposite House* and *White Is for Witching*. I describe the connection between the Greco-Roman Underworld and the Yorùbá Otherworld in Oyeyemi's texts as a "liminal intersection", one in which Gothic and supernatural metaphors from the Yorùbá culture are syncretised. The Gothic tropes of the House collide with Oyeyemi's revisioning of the Yorùbá pantheon and Otherworld. Key figures and symbols from Greco-Roman folklore, Yorùbá mythology and European fairytales are either represented by characters in Oyeyemi's novels or are present as metaphors. The problematic postcolonial Gothic relationship between competing cultural imperatives and authorities in *The Opposite House* and *White is For Witching* takes place in these liminal intersections. I connect this struggle to the idea of transgression as agency. Pursuant to this, this article interrogates the postcolonial Gothic house as a trope in the two studied texts and argues that it is a site for the enactment of liminal and hybrid transgressions as agency through the deployment of the metaphors of doubling and that of the temporal slippage between multiple realities and the findings elucidate the ways in which the House as a gateway to the Otherworld may be a site for empowerment and decolonising through transgression.

Keywords: Helen Oyeyemi; Postcolonial Gothic; Trauma; Folklore; Mythology

INTRODUCTION

Houses feature prominently in Helen Oyeyemi's novels, *The Opposite House* and *White is For Witching*. Throughout her oeuvre, Oyeyemi's houses are organic, providing the reader with a series of interconnecting domestic frames and enclosures, in which the House possesses an inimical narrative voice. The manner in which Oyeyemi approaches the Gothic is informed by the world of *orishas* and spirit-doubles. The doubles become a metaphor for the multiplicity of colliding perspectives and influences within a hybrid space. According to Marina Warner, the double offers a "disturbing and yet familiar set of personae in ways of telling the self; permutations of inner and outer selves catalyse uncanny plots about identity" (Warner, 2002, p.163). For Oyeyemi, the doubles are not just limited to the supernatural doubles, ghosts and doppelgangers. Anita Harris Satkunanathan put forward the connection between spirit splitting, trauma and agency in Oyeyemi's deployment of these supernatural metaphors (Harris Satkunanathan, 2011, p. 41), and it is certainly dangerous to read far too much of Western definitions of mental illness into liminal and metaphoric literary revisions of traditional beliefs and mythologies which have their own internal logic and structure. Therefore, in this paper I argue that the transformation and syncretising of the Yorùbá motif of the *abiku* in Oyeyemi's texts with Western/ Greco-Roman motifs exemplifies the complicated relationship with authority experienced by the protagonists of her texts. Pursuant to this, I interrogate the manner in which Otherworlds are related to the troubling relationships between women of different generations in the same family in both novels from a postcolonial Gothic perspective. In so doing, I deploy postcolonial Gothic methods of

analysis to examine the liminal nature of both houses as they intersect generations and cultures (both Western and Yoruba). I then connect the houses to the concept of the European Underworld and the Yorùbá Underworld. I then deploy the postcolonial Gothic as a theoretical apparatus to interrogate the manner in which Otherworlds are related to the troubling relationships between women of different generations in the same family in both novels. I connect the postcolonial Gothic to ideas of transgression and agency. From a spatial perspective, Bertrand Westphal avers that transgression “corresponds to the crossing of a boundary beyond which stretches a marginal space of freedom. (Westphal, 2011, p. 47). For the purposes of this article, transgression refers to the act of breaking past imposed boundaries in relation to conduct and identification. This is pertinent to the study of the Gothic. Fred Botting calls the Gothic the “literature of excess” and links this to “transgression and the anxiety over cultural limits and boundaries” (Botting, 2013, 1-2). This Gothic reading may be connected to the postcolonial Gothic with its revenants and its looking back in-between the slippages of time and of trauma in order to forge an identity from the in-between. The in-between is an important aspect of the postcolonial Gothic, which is why so many of its literary texts deal with the liminal spaces between life and death, as may be seen in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, the seminal postcolonial Gothic text. David Punter and Glynnis Byron refer to the postcolonial Gothic as a literature of “loss” (Punter & Byron, 2004, pp. 54-55), but I prefer to read it as a literature of agency and empowerment through transgression.

The chthonic quality of the Underworld is relevant in Oyeyemi’s texts because she invokes both the classical European archetype of the unconscious/underworld and the Yorùbá Otherworld -- her narratives meditate on the convergence between these two worlds. Oyeyemi reconstructs and re-creates archetypes from both Yorùbá and Anglicised/European myth and folklore that co-exist in overlapping worlds. I assert that these enclosures are defined not only by the corresponding elements of architecture or by their location. Rather, these enclosures are defined by bodies or recreated consciousness moving through them (ghosts, spirits and other supernatural manifestations). I describe the connection between the Greco-Roman Underworld and the Yorùbá Otherworld in Oyeyemi’s texts as a liminal meeting place in which Gothic and supernatural metaphors from the Yorùbá culture are syncretised. The Gothic tropes of the House and the Patriarch collide with Oyeyemi’s referencing of the Yorùbá pantheon and Otherworld. Key figures and symbols from Greco-Roman folklore, Yorùbá mythology and European fairytales are either represented by characters in Oyeyemi’s novels or are present as metaphors.

For Oyeyemi, the *abiku* is a key instance of the postcolonial Gothic revenant as a metaphor. Oyeyemi’s texts often invoke either the *abiku*, or representations of the Yorùbá supernatural entities such as the *abiku* and the *ibeji*, conflating the two supernatural tropes. *Ibeji* is the Yorùbá word for twins, and represents the belief that twins share a soul; this is a motif which Oyeyemi works into her fiction more than once; in so doing she unearths textual dislocations and doublings which are the result of the hybrid, diasporic, postcolonial condition. More direct explications of the internal conflict that arises as a result of the diasporic, postcolonial condition may be found in the meditative passages in the text, and in the emotional and psychological make-up of her characters. The re-created archetypes therefore outline the feeling of alienation and trauma experienced by Oyeyemi’s protagonists. I connect the idea of a location linked to trauma with two supernatural Otherworlds, the Grecian Underworld and the Yorùbá Otherworld, the *abiku*-space¹. Gods and *orishas*² are important aspects of both worlds, as they serve sometimes as divine embodiments of characters in Oyeyemi’s novels, and at other times, as psychopomps, Jungian intermediaries between conscious and unconscious states. These mythical entities lend weight to the struggles against authority experienced by both of the female protagonists in the two studied texts, *The Opposite House* and *White Is for Witching*. These texts will be studied separately

and together in order to examine the connection between the House, the Otherworld and how it relates to the ways in which the postcolonial Gothic necessitates its peculiar forms of agency through textual transgressions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

THE YORUBA OTHERWORLD, THE ABIKU AND THE STRUGGLE AGAINST AUTHORITY

Margaret Drewal writes that the Yorùbá term *abiku* means “born to die” (Drewal, 1992, p. 59) and that this entity is “a child who is considered “irresponsible” because it never completes a full life cycle. The child dies young and its spirit lingers nearby” (Drewal, 1992, p. 59). The *abiku* plague the living, a constant reminder of death and the passage between worlds — they embody the condition of being in-between the spirit world and the world of the living. I read in Oyeyemi’s treatment of the *abiku* a liminal struggle between modes of identification as well as a form of trauma. Christopher Ouma on the other hand reads the figure of the diasporic *abiku* in Oyeyemi’s first novel *The Icarus Girl* (2005) as being connected to Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID) within the DSM-V spectrum (Ouma, 2014, p. 189). This method of reading Oyeyemi’s treatment of the *abiku* motif is interrogated by David Gunning who argues that “labelling and concomitant comprehension of these ideas” cannot be divorced from Western cultural norms (Gunning, 2015, p. 120). I connect the *abiku* motif to the idea of liminality and hybridity – reading into the supernatural the markers of agency. Very often, the supernatural in Oyeyemi’s texts signpost agency against various forms of suppression. Transgression then becomes an apparatus via which these character are able to voice their dissent.

In Oyeyemi’s texts, authority is represented by both maternal and paternal figures. The complexities of the influence of authority in her works are found in the intergenerational dialogue which is embodied in the supernatural creatures and the inanimate objects that gain sentience in Oyeyemi’s texts. Movement between locations may be dictated by authority or it could be a movement away from authority. This movement may be analysed as a transgression through the apparatus of doubling and mirroring –as a reflection/repetition of an original image in order to re-position or re-orientate. Transgression, in relation to doubling, is often connected to the idea of the grotesque. Alison Rudd writes that the monster’s “power to demonstrate or warn is located in the body, traditionally, through a lack of, an excess of, or an ill-assorted assemblage of body parts, or through abnormal behaviour” (Rudd, 2010, p. 21). Rudd’s description of the monstrous includes hybrid creatures, or hybrid identities -- the hybrid will appear abnormal and uncanny in any of the cultures that make up its composite being. More than one scholar has identified the site or house where events occur in Gothic texts as being important. Susanne Becker, for instance, notes that the house is an important component in the ‘Female Gothic’ (Becker, 1990. p. 8). The house is connected to the feminine enclosure, and feminine fiction (Becker, 1990, pp.7-9). On the other hand, Rudd observes that in the postcolonial Gothic, “the haunted site will not necessarily be located in the castle or the old house”; she adds that “any location that is freighted with unjust violent acts of the past will continue on” as a site of supernatural and Gothic events (Rudd, 2010, p.10). Rudd writes that the Gothic provides a “strategy” that allows writers “to expose and subvert past and continuing regimes of power and exploitation, and to re-inscribe histories that have been both violent and repressed” (Rudd, 2010, p. 2). This strategy cannot be as clear-cut for the hybrid, third generation Nigerian or postcolonial writer who negotiates and struggles to identify with, or sometimes against opposing forces — such as western, globalised culture.

THE GRECIAN UNDERWORLD FROM A POSTCOLONIAL CONTEXT

For James Hillman, the “underworld is a realm of only psyche, a purely psychological world,” (Hillman, 1979, p. 46) which often mirrors those fears and hopes we suppress in our waking life. Hillman says that “entering the underworld is like entering the mode of reflection, mirroring, which suggests that we may enter the underworld by means of reflection, by reflective means, pausing, pondering, change,” (Hillman, 1979, p. 52). The incorporation of a reflection/repetition of an original image is deceptive: a “source” implies authority and, for the postcolonial writer or hybrid individual moving between borders, this cannot be a clear-cut matter. For the writer of the postcolonial novel which has Gothic elements, the Underworld takes on different meanings, and contextual dislocation. Homi K. Bhabha points out that the ambiguity between supposed authority and the postcolonial subject leads to mimicry and doubling (Bhabha, 1994). For Oyeyemi, the doubling in her texts is an active occurrence on supernatural, psychological and physical levels. The seeded motifs of the double or the doppelgänger within the Gothic enclosures of Oyeyemi’s texts create an important textual representation of Otherness. Therefore, I read the Grecian Underworld in my analysis from a postcolonial context, looking specifically at the operation of mimicry and doubling within these novels with chthonic/Underworld/Otherworldly elements.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

POSTCOLONIAL GOTHIC CONTEXTS

David Punter and Glennis Byron note that the “story of the postcolonial” is in “the mouths of ghosts” (Punter & Byron, 2004, p. 58). Postcolonial literature is often seen as a literature of loss and of filling in the gaps where a natural cultural progression has been interrupted by colonialism. This “literature of loss” which I read as a literature of empowerment is one that writes in-between cultures. Postcoloniality is not just a site for the aftermath of domination. It is also the aftermath of a cultural exchange that may often be violent, as with most instances of wars and conquests. Postcoloniality brings into being those conditions that create the hybrid, the monstrous, and the apparently transgressive. The supernatural spaces highlight the complicated facets of Oyeyemi’s protagonists, who are often struggling with voicing and a state of being between cultures. They find their agency through the means of the personal choices they make, the rules they break, the boundaries they transgress. These elements are tied into the edifice of the Gothic House which has historically been the site of both confinement and empowerment for the Gothic feminine. From the perspective of the postcolonial Gothic heroine, these markers are loaded with imperialistic and class-based concerns. The house in *White Is for Witching* is an exemplification of this as it is xenophobic and acts to strip the skin off a Yoruba character so as to turn her white.

Oyeyemi, as a writer from the Yorùbá diaspora, incorporates elements from both Western and African bodies of writing in her works of Gothic fiction and drama. In her novels, the metaphorical descent through several levels of an enclosure, in many cases a Gothic house, is representative of the descent through time, be it through a Yorùbá spirit-double (the *abiku*), or via the Grecian metaphor of Persephone descending into the Underworld. The implicit unvoicing of female protagonists caught in Gothic loops of violence and dislocation is foregrounded in the connection between the Greek/Occidental Underworld and the Yorùbá Otherworld in these texts.

Tabish Khair writes that, “as a narrative of terror”, the Gothic “depends on a perception not just of ambivalence but also of opposition and ‘irreconcilable’ difference” (Khair, 2009, p. 132) — the sense of opposites and differences that cannot be mediated contributes to the uncanny and to the effect of doubling. The difference mentioned by Khair

leads to a schism in identity which may be read as being responsible for doubling. On the other hand, Harris Satkunanathan identified the deployment of supernatural metaphors as “related not just to a deep-rooted cosmological belief” but also to the ways in which these “supernatural elements in the narratives connect with the horror of being Other” (Harris Satkunanathan, 2011, p. 44). The horror that these figures represent then, are internalised and chthonic, which is where the nature of the discussed thresholds and enclosures come into play, but it is also important to consider the postcolonial House and what this may represent in the studied texts.

Shangeetha and Pillai note that from a postcolonial context, the “transformation of the family house amongst the different generations of the South Asian diaspora in Malaysia” functions as a “reflection of the changing features of the diasporic imaginary” (Shangeetha, & Pillai, 2014, p. 905). Doubtless, the house as a container for the lives led by hybrid, diasporic and in-between individuals will reflect conflicting imperatives. Shangeetha and Pillai further elucidate, quoting Vijay Mishra that the house in V.S. Naipaul’s iconic *A House for Mr. Biswas* then becomes a signifier of ownership (Shangeetha & Pillai, 2014, p. 905). I would add to this reflection that the house also signifies a sense of belonging and from a postcolonial Gothic perspective, the house embodies the postcolonial body with all of its fractured allegiances.

Punter and Byron observe that the “cultures and histories of colonized nations are shadowed by the fantasized possibility of alternative histories” (Punter & Byron, 2004, p. 58). From my reading it is evident that historicity is complicated in Oyeyemi’s texts as personal histories contradict with public and accepted accounts. The complication is rife with the awareness that there can be no full reconciliation between the inherent immediacy of events as they occur and the narration of these events, which corresponds with Khair’s statement that the Gothic involves a perception of “irreconcilable difference” (Khair, 2010, p.132). The postcolonial writer, in considering these differences has more than one option and does not necessarily slavishly eke out items or iconographies from faulty memory. Rather, she may, as Oyeyemi does, delve into the deep, fertilised soil of mythic imagination which paves the way towards self-awareness and modification of beliefs and culture through hybridised metaphors.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

My research methodology for this literary analysis includes selecting the studied texts (*The Opposite House* and *White Is for Witching*), analysing the mythical and fairytale metaphors within the tales, identifying the different cultural markers (Yoruba, Greco-Roman, Literary) and then deploying a postcolonial Gothic analysis upon the selected texts focused on the House as a liminal and postcolonial Gothic trope.

I have grouped my analysis of the two novels, *The Opposite House* and *White Is for Witching* into three subsections. The first subsection introduces the main thrust of my deployment of postcolonial Gothic literary strategies by undertaking a comparative analysis of both novels in relation to the trope of the House. In so doing I connect the ways in which the postcolonial Gothic house relates to the postcolonial Gothic female body. The second subsection is an analysis of *The Opposite House*, while the final section is an analysis of *White Is for Witching*. I follow this with my concluding remarks and findings from the analysis.

DISCUSSION

THE POSTCOLONIAL GOTHIC HOUSE/BODY: *THE OPPOSITE HOUSE AND WHITE IS FOR WITCHING*

The postcolonial woman writer must consider, undermine, and reconstruct the parameters of authority that surround and often confine her. The Gothic house is synonymous with the feminine body in the configurations of the feminised Gothic text. Becker writes that the metaphor “of the house offers a further dimension in a gendered reading: feminist criticism and feminine art have long linked the woman’s sphere to her body” (Becker, 1990, p. 19). The houses in the texts are therefore sites of struggle between the masculine and feminine spheres or domains, instances where male and female parental figures grapple for dominance in Oyeyemi’s texts. This identification is further complicated by the feminised postcolonial Gothic, because the competing imperatives are no longer just gendered but also cultural in nature. The postcolonial Gothic house then is fraught with conflicting cultural imperatives and allegiances which are very clearly delineated in both *The Opposite House* and *White Is for Witching* with the repetition of cross-cultural mythical iconographies, with homes that stand between both physical and supernatural realities. The metaphorical configurations of houses overlapping other houses in supernatural spaces give a meaningful indication of the ontological uncertainty faced by women from hybrid cultural backgrounds. The movers of the events in Oyeyemi’s texts are usually part of a dyad, signifying the metaphor of doubleness by invoking the Yorùbá *abiku*, even when there are no clear-cut twins³. This is significant because the ontological duality of the houses are reflected in the figure of these dyads and doubles.

The houses in these novels represent temporal locations in-between realities. Oyeyemi’s use of metaphors from both Yorùbá and Western mythology creates textual locations that nestle in the borderlands between western and African beliefs. These locations positioned between borders are identifiable with both the classical western trope of the Underworld and the Yorùbá Otherworld in Oyeyemi’s syncretic Gothic writings. Oyeyemi appropriates these Gothic enclosures and thresholds to create temporal Otherworlds which overlap both continental and Yorùbá ontologies. In *The Opposite House*, Aya of the somewherehouse inhabits an ontological Otherworld peopled by mythic figures. A watchmaker is one of her archetypal friends, with “hair dreadlocked like a powerful man, like a *babalawo*⁴” (Oyeyemi, 2007, p.90). The clockmaker “made watches and clocks, squinted over tiny, intricate mechanisms with pincers and thin magnets and hammers the size of Aya’s little finger”; this identification with time is doubly significant because he also gives Yemaya seeds (Oyeyemi, 2007, p.90). In the myth of Demeter and Persephone, pomegranate seeds were supposed to be the latter’s way out of the underworld. The identification of Yemaya with Persephone in Oyeyemi’s Otherworld is a curious thing. It is not entirely consistent but it does not need to be consistent — Oyeyemi’s ambiguous and supernaturally hybrid Otherworlds work according to the individual rules contained within each space. In the following excerpt, the pomegranate seeds appear in the hands of the watchmaker, himself a signpost for temporality that moves in-between worlds.

‘Hold out your hand,’ he said, smiling ... She held out both her hands, cupping them to carry away sweetness, and he chided her: ‘Greedy. One hand is enough.’
His gift was a loose knot of seeds. They looked like oval woodchips, but something green slept inside them.
(Oyeyemi, 2007, p. 91)

The watchmaker is a male, a patriarch of the Underworld who seems to fulfil the function of saviour, the person who sees Yemaya as beautiful. This can be linked both to the

fact that her human alter-ego, Maja is pregnant and that temporality is implicated in Oyeyemi's apprehension of the uncanny in her texts.

Her watchmaker said, 'One day, not now, they'll grow for you, and show you what it is that you most desire. Remember, won't you?' (Oyeyemi, 2007, p. 91)

He then tells her that he has given these seeds also to another woman who was barren, but that she was so frightened by the faces that grew from the seeds that she murdered and buried her children (Oyeyemi, 2007, p.91). The watchmaker explains further,

She would leave them buried, her children; maybe that way they would die before they could properly draw breath. A cruel thing — I told her so. But she kept saying, "It is better this way. It is better this way." (Oyeyemi, 2007, p. 91)

In the above passage the idea of the monstrous mother as a textual Medea who kills her children out of fear or revenge is crystallised. This may be compared with *White Is for Witching* where a female ancestor lies in wait to devour the souls of her descendants, an angry soucouyant that must be fed. The motif of problematised motherhood is connected to the images of the Underworld and subterranean levels in both texts, in which, interestingly enough, this intergenerational conflict is marked by metaphors of time and time-keeping. For instance, in *White Is for Witching*, Miranda wears a timepiece that stops at Haiti time, the time in which her mother was killed. Oyeyemi's stories refer overtly to the relativity of time, and her stories shift narrative tenses seamlessly.

In *The Opposite House*, *gelassenheit* is defined as "the longing to let go and collapse under holy madness" (Oyeyemi, 2007, p. 10)⁵. In Oyeyemi's writings, this longing corresponds to the in-between place intersecting different temporalities. Oyeyemi merges both Western and Yorùbá tropes to create an overlap in both Yorùbá and continental constructions of time. The psychological states of Oyeyemi's characters link them to the space-which-is-not-space, a temporal location which can be related to the metaphorical Underworld. The Underworld is related to the spatial outside-of-time realm which is invoked by the African "possible time". Oyeyemi signposts the oft-ominous sense of dislocation in *The Opposite House* with her reference to *gelassenheit* as the utter surrender and acceptance of the feeling of being dislocated and out of control (Oyeyemi, 2007, p. 10). This begs the question of how Oyeyemi links temporality to the context of intergenerational conflict which seems to be at the heart of the struggle with authority in her texts. The different generations represent different cultural beliefs and structures, which in Oyeyemi's supernatural texts speak of silence and passive repression. For instance, the seeds in *The Opposite House* have a connection to the apple in *White Is for Witching* which necessitates Miranda's untimely demise and disappearance. In both tales disappearance or passing into one world from another world is in response to silencing and the elision of self. I read it as significant that these tropes are knowingly connected by Oyeyemi to the story of Demeter and Persephone. Another connection may be seen in the watch as a metaphor in both tales, which is linked to temporality. Temporality in both instances is connected to the sense of liminal disruption found within both houses which straddle contradicting influences. Transgression on the other hand may be connected to the sense of "Yoruba time" and these transgressions are part and parcel of the painful but very necessary process of decolonising.

CONNECTIONS BETWEEN THE “PERSONAL HYSTERIC” AND OVERLAPPING WORLDS:
THE OPPOSITE HOUSE

In *The Opposite House*, Oyeyemi tells the story of Maja, a young Cuban woman in London, living with her lover Aaron in a flat that has a leaking roof (Oyeyemi, 2007, p. 5). The flat is the bottom half of “a converted two-floor house” owned by Aaron, and there is a middle floor “forced between the green-carpeted staircase that leads up to Miss Lassiter’s flat and the peeling wooden steps” that lead down to the flat Maja shares with Aaron (Oyeyemi, 2007, p.18-19). The emergence of a forced and mysterious “middle level” into the house has Gothic undertones. Gothic literature is full of secret passages, trapdoors and hidden rooms. These places lead to possibilities, a reason why the leak in the ceiling might originate in an Otherworld: the “Cuba house, before before” where Yemaya Saramagua grows up (Oyeyemi, 2007, p. 27).

In the “real” or “physical” world, Maja is pregnant and consumed by both traumatic memories of her family’s uneasy transposition from Cuba to London and her resulting depression at this displacement. The trauma and her psychological state of mind are exemplified by her “personal hysteric”. The leaking roof becomes the link between Maja’s physical space and the living space of her “hysteric” in a “somewherehouse” that nestles between Lagos and London (Oyeyemi, 2007, p.1) peopled by characters out of Yorùbá and Grecian myth. The leaking roof turns her apartment damp. Upstairs, Yemaya, the Yorùbá orisha of the sea, lives on in one of her aspects, Yemaya Saramagua, with an unwelcome guest called Mama Proserpine, who manifests out of Yemaya’s mother’s grief (Oyeyemi, 2007, p. 27).

The passage below outlines the position of the somewherehouse and is significant because the doors lead off into different countries and the doors are found in the basement. Oyeyemi writes:

Below is a basement pillared with stone. Spiders zigzag their gluey webs all over the chairs. The basement’s back wall holds two doors. One door takes Yemaya straight out into London and the ragged hum of a city after dark. The other door opens out onto the striped flag and cooking-smell cheer of that tattered jester, Lagos — always, this door leads to a place that is floridly day. (Oyeyemi, 2007, p. 1)

The division of the story into implied levels continues the motif of “descending”. Oyeyemi is clearly turning different aspects of the body and the subconscious into different levels in a building that straddles worlds. It is a very bold and ambitious move which may seem flawed by its ambiguity, but this ambiguity is arguably the strength within all of Oyeyemi’s narratives.

In *The Opposite House*, the “hysteric” provides the reader with a vehicle with which to enter the overlap between two worlds, the realist narrative which speaks of madness and the mythic/fantasy narrative which allows a reader a glimpse into the lyrical and magical world of Yemaya Saramagua. Maja muses that the “hysteric is the revelation that we refuse to be consoled for all this noise, for all this noise, for the attacks on our softnesses, the loss of sensitivity to my scalp with every batch of box-braids” (Oyeyemi, 2007, p. 35). Maja accords a lot of power to her hair; for instance, her hair that tells her that “something was different” in her body (Oyeyemi, 2007, p. 9).

Brenda Cooper surmises that perhaps Maja has been subject to a divine visitation which has imbued her with the power of Yemaya (Cooper, 2009, p. 114). I connect this divine visitation with the temporal elision between past, present, and future, with each temporal reality represented as a different layer in the somewherehouse. In this ambiguous narrative, one is never quite sure if one is witnessing a holy visitation that intersects with another world,

or with a description of madness. Perhaps the two are not mutually exclusive, as Oyeyemi seems to suggest in more than one of her works. For instance, the hysteric also is a catalyst for the heightening of her paranoia, causing her to in turn, attack her boyfriend, Aaron, and to suspect her best friend, Amy Eleni, of trying to kill the child in her womb. The hysteric exemplifies the revenant of which Punter and Byron speak when they suggest “the logic of the revenant is that it cannot be laid to rest and will return,” (Punter & Byron, 2004, p. 54). The cycle of return may be discerned in the narratives of twins in Yorùbá literature⁷, and is also responsible for the creation of, and the fracturing of worlds which may again be related to the ontological fracture in time because of trauma.

There are two intersecting narratives in *The Opposite House*, representing two worlds. In all of her novels, Oyeyemi’s protagonists walk between worlds, not just physical worlds, but supernatural worlds which represent the psychological schism in the mind, as spelled out by Hillman. Hillman notes that in the Underworld, “we gain contact with the soul of all that is lost in life and with the souls of the lost,” adding that the transition from the “material to the psychical perspective often presents dream imagery of sickening and dying” (Hillman, 1979, p. 53)⁸. The entities that walk into and across these thresholds are an extreme representation of the Other; these entities represent both desire and transgression, dictated by authority in the shape of a dominant discourse. The Other has become disembodied from the postcolonial self or body which overlaps with it.

Oyeyemi’s works highlight the fact that the supernatural double or Other is not just a walker between supernatural spaces; he or she *is defined* by these spaces, either the Yorùbá Otherworld or the European Underworld. In her interview with *The Independent*, Oyeyemi muses that there are “two kinds of real” and that “each story is the story of the house opposite it. They are like reversals of each other” (Oyeyemi, 2007, par. 17). Oyeyemi’s understanding of the connection between two opposite realities suffuses the text. I read the splicing of two narratives in the text as a metaphor for the relationship between dominant and Othered discourses. Oyeyemi’s text is poetic and supernatural, but it is also markedly postcolonial Gothic in her sensibilities. Khair, who writes about the Other in the postcolonial Gothic observes that, “in the moment in which the stranger is truly Other, there exists not only the possibility of desire but also that of threat/terror, for above all there exists an alterity which cannot be subsumed simply into negativity or similarity” (Khair, 2009, p. 145). What happens, when “that stranger who is Other”, is also a person who is familiar such as one’s own self, or a parent? This seems to be the case for Oyeyemi’s protagonists, of in all her discussed novels, the awareness of a stranger that is Other is connected to a disturbed intergenerational relationship. The “alterity” that Khair write about may be discerned in Oyeyemi’s texts — the liminal condition between physical and psychological states connect to that curious place in which cultures and beliefs between generations overlap and often, clash. *The Opposite House* deals with the overlap between the physical world and the supernatural world particularly well, as this conflict is evoked not just in the physical world but in the surreal, dream-like spaces of a syncretised Yorùbá Otherworld, the world of Yemaya Saramagua, Mama Proserpine and the Kayodes.

In relation to the Gothic, this may be observed in the description of enclosures such as Maja’s shared house, and Aya’s mystical house that straddles worlds. These two houses may not necessarily be different spaces. Cooper writes that this “house is a crucible, which condenses history and enacts the process whereby African deities live and syncretise with foreign gods and myths” (Cooper, 2009, p. 112); I am more inclined to argue that perhaps the real “crucible” is situated within the inhabitants of the house, in Maja, and Chabella and the different iterations of Yemaya found in the text. As Becker notes, the house is synonymous with the feminine in Gothic fiction; Becker argues that Gothic textures create a “multi-

layered construction; an interrogative text” (Becker, 1990, p. 19); this robust definition is suitable in considering the structure of the overlapping houses in the text. For instance, the incessant leaking of the ceiling seems to correspond with Maja’s pregnancy, and the annoyance caused by the leaking increases with Maja’s grappling with her personal “hysteric”: we can observe here an overlap between the domestic and the familiar with the uncanny. These houses have a very organic significance — the physical cannot be divorced from mental and supernatural states in Oyeyemi’s narratives. This is what *The Opposite House* achieves with its overlapping frames of reality and time, identifiable with the physical lineaments of an apartment building. Harris Satkunanathan noted that instances of body horror are evident in three connected texts by Oyeyemi: *The Opposite House*, *White Is for Witching*, and *Boy, Snow Bird* (Harris Satkunanathan, 2017). For the purposes of this article, I extend this statement to argue that the body horror is part and parcel of the liminal, multi-layered signification of the houses which are gateways into the Underworld/Otherworld.

The novel’s narrative straddles two separate worlds — a mythic fantasy world, and a contemporary, material realm peopled by Maja’s family and friends. The influences in Maja’s life are varied and complex, ranging from a clash between West African religion and Catholicism to the influence of German culture in both the lives of Maja and her mother, the Afro-Cuban woman Chabella. The influence comes in the shape of Bridget, who taught Chabella to speak in German, and introduced her to German culture. The hybridity implicit in Afro-Cuban, Yorùbá and German influences within Maja’s family resolves in the somewherehouse. Yemaya Saramagua resides here as a mythic double of Maja within a parallel universe. Oyeyemi thereby intensifies the identification of the feminine self with both a double and an enclosure.

Maja’s name is an abbreviation of Yemaja, which is the Caribbean version of the Yorùbá Yemaya’s name. Maja is a Cuban hybrid, and the story unfolds in two different interstitial spaces. In the embedded story, Maja’s hysteric re-enacts the myth of both the Grecian underworld and the Yorùbá supernatural universe. In the main narrative, on the other hand, Maja confronts the fact that she is pregnant and remembers her mother’s madness when she was pregnant with her brother, Tomas. Oyeyemi questions and interrogates the role of mythic archetypes such as Greek goddesses and the Yorùbá *orishas* within the lives of her characters, the immigrants, but she also meditates on the intimate relationship they still have within the psyche of hybrid émigrés:

Those gods who trip us up, then haul us up, then string us up, who understand that it hurts, but also understand that it needs to. They’re deadly friends from stories, their names braided into explanations for the heavy nights edged with uncertain light like dull pearls. (Oyeyemi, 2007, p. 35)

The gods are mirrored, if not completely recreated, in Chabella’s and Maja’s hysterics, paving the way towards a narrative of intergenerational tension, the manner in which Chabella continuously tries to silence Maja with her fear, sometimes violently (Oyeyemi, 2007, p.147). They are connected not just to terror, but also joy and ascension when they “haul us up”, but then are connected to betrayal as they “string us up” — this is related to the disturbed relationship not just with gods, but with parents. This passage therefore reflects the disruptive and fraught relationships in this novel as much as it reflects the supernatural. The gods are also signposts that lead Maja back to herself, so the relationship that she has with the gods is a complex, open-ended relationship. Oyeyemi writes about it in one of many, heartbreakingly sensitive passages in this novel:

There is skin, yes. And then, inside that, there is your language, the casual, inherited magic spells that make your skin real. It’s too late now — even if we could say ‘Shut up’

or ‘Where’s my dinner?’ in the first language, the real language, the words weren’t born in us. And unless your skin and your language touch each other without interruption, there is no word strong enough to make you understand that it matters that you live. The things that really say ‘stay’ are an Orisha, a kind night, a pretended boy, a garden song that made no sense. Those come closer to being enough. (Oyeyemi, 2007, p. 185)

In the quoted passage, Oyeyemi explores the embodiment of language that is represented by the female form, and the inanimate embodiment of that form — the house — which extends deep into the Underworld. Oyeyemi does not lay bare her plot, allowing the reader to make his or her own connection between the two living spaces; one in the physical world, the other in the otherworld. The reader is left with indications that the hysterics are transmissions from the “somewherehouse”, a powerful message about what occurs when languages, or stories, travel across borderlands. In a scene where Chabella appears to be possessed, she tries to choke Maja so that she will not make a phone call to the police to inform them that a girl is being raped on the street below (Oyeyemi, 2007, p.147). Chabella is unable to speak on the phone because she can only speak Spanish. Also, she inexplicably fears her daughter’s ability to disclose what is occurring on their street.

‘Mami,’ I said, and I tried, but my fingers couldn’t unlock her iron ones. My vision took on black edges, and I began to believe she was going to kill me; she was saying that I was a bad daughter and I didn’t know why.

She let go of me; I fell down and that was when I first learnt that I needed to protect my throat, my voice, because that was where my hands went first, to the circling pain. I croaked, and I vomited hard. Chabella said she was sorry. (Oyeyemi, 2007, p. 149)

The episode is embedded in Maja’s narrative in many ways. It is the reason why she always covers her throat to protect it; her vocal chords become a powerful metaphor for unvoicing in many instances in the text. It is also one of the causes for Maja’s personal “hysteric”. However, the prime cause of Chabella’s hysteric is the dislocation her family experiences when Papi, her academic father, moves them from Cuba to London. Chabella’s anger is directed at her husband, who does not believe in her pagan beliefs, the Cuban Santeria, and because he has brought them out of Cuba. Maja’s “hysteric” manifests in the dark, chthonic personage of Mama Proserpine, who is Persephone in the somewherehouse. Oyeyemi embodies Persephone in her darkest aspect as the dark queen of the Underworld, the one capable of murder, rather than the sun-drenched daughter of the earth goddess, Demeter.

Aya’s Mama warned: Beware Proserpine, since she is the murder that walked from my heart. Before Aya was born, Proserpine came and caught Aya’s Mama unawares. Proserpine came when Aya’s Mama was still carrying baby Aya in her stomach, ripe, ripe and feeling it. Every step Mama took she felt in her stomach, through Aya. Steps became sharp teeth — and they bit. They tried to pull baby and mother asunder. (Oyeyemi, 2007, p. 27)

Kerenyi writes that Persephone/Proserpine, also known as the Kore is also “the double of Demeter herself” (Kerenyi, 1985, p. 130). Kerenyi’s assertion is analogous to what occurs in *The Opposite House*. Mama Proserpine is antithesis who comes to plague Aya in the somewherehouse in the same way that Maja is plagued by her personal hysteric in London. In Mama Proserpine we see a dizzying connection between the Maiden and the Mother in her inimical aspect, but also a connection between the Greek and Yorùbá myths. Cooper astutely identifies that Aya wants to reject that she has a European mother, Proserpine revealing that the somewherehouse is itself not a purely Yorùbá territory (Cooper, 2009, p. 112), but despite Aya’s rejection, the Otherworlds created by Oyeyemi have always been hybrid. Mama

Proserpine later terrorises Yemaya Saramagua, or Aya, who lives in the somewherehouse with the Kayodes. The inimical relationship between Proserpine and Yemaya Saramagua heightens the liminal significance of the house that straddles cultures and temporal realities.

The supernatural characters fulfil the role of a story-within-a-story which points back to the actions of the characters in the present, tangible reality of the narrative. It is clear that the meshing of two different mythic systems is deliberate on Oyeyemi's part; she marries both Yorùbá and European ontology within the framework of her stories. Oyeyemi's meditation on temporality is evident with the various hints strewn throughout the novella. As previously mentioned, Aya befriends a watchmaker (Oyeyemi, 2007, p. 90). Although he speaks with a Cuban accent, he corresponds with the role of Hades in *The Opposite House*, by delivering a handful of seeds to Aya so that she may get rid of Mama Proserpine (Oyeyemi, 2007, p. 91). The liminal spaces between the material and immaterial are seamless in Yorùbá ontology and nestle in ritual space, where "possible time" meets the present, a case of overlapping ontologies which may be found in *The Opposite House*, in which Aya and Maja inhabit different places/tenses in time.

DOUBLING AND THE GELEDE: WHITE IS FOR WITCHING

Spirit doubles and doppelgangers feature very prominently in *White Is for Witching*. Miranda is the protagonist of the novel even if she is present only through the narration of four characters, inclusive of her twin, Eliot. Eliot is one of the major narrators within the novel who chronicle the disappearance of Miranda and let the reader know that the house is an active, angry presence. In almost all of Oyeyemi's novels, the element of sibling rivalry is present, encapsulated and rendered complicated by the trope of the *abiku*. The hints of incest in *White Is for Witching* evoke images of the original triad in the story behind the Yorùbá ritual of *gelede*. According to Babatunde Lawal, Gelede is the daughter of the orisha Yemoja who marries her brother Efe. The *gelede* ritual is in part a rite to appease the witches so that they would be able to have children⁸. The most important component of this pattern is that of the missing twin, or *abiku*, who is a psychic double in all of Oyeyemi's novels. By drawing the reader's attention to the obliteration of the consciousness of one twin, Oyeyemi's texts point towards the darker elements of the Yorùbá *abiku*, the twin that survives seems to know all and the one that perishes remains a supernatural double⁹.

Ore is of Nigerian descent and is Miranda's lover in *White Is for Witching*; she is also one of the primary narrators of the story. As with Oyeyemi's early play, *Juniper's Whitening*, the "whitening" that occurs in Miranda's house is of a markedly supernatural and macabre nature. In one scene, strips of black from Ore's skin come off on the towels of the house; here, Oyeyemi mocks various tropes, using Snow White as an archetype and signpost for transgression, reaching deeper still to reveal the conflict between women of different generations. In culturally popular versions of the Snow White fairytale, "white" works as a colour metaphor that symbolises all that is good, but in *White Is for Witching*, the colour white signifies madness and eating disorders; Miranda's inherited *pica* involves the consuming of chalk — which perhaps is a metaphor for racial strife in Dover, the town of the "White Cliffs". The shocking scene in which black is stripped from Ore reflects not just the inimical nature of the house but the manic obsessive tendencies of Miranda and her sinister ancestress, Anna Good (Oyeyemi, 2009, p. 214). Anna, who is at first afraid of the colour white (Oyeyemi, 2009, p. 115) because of her *pica*, embraces it when she wants to do "some witching" (Oyeyemi, 2009, p. 117). "White Is for Witching," she says, "a colour to be worn so that all other colours can enter you, so that you may use them" (Oyeyemi, 2009, p. 117).

This passage is significant because of what it symbolises, racial negation and assimilation, which is very blatantly signposted by Ore's experience in the bathroom.

Bacchilega, in reflecting on postmodern appropriations of Snow White observes that "[w]ithin the fairy tale's narrative frame, Snow White is the crystallised image of the 'natural woman'" (Bacchilega, 1997, p. 29). She notes that this is the frame that is mirrored and disrupted by subsequent appropriations that reflect what the writer desires (Bacchilega, 1997, p. 29). White and Black is a binary relationship that seems, on the surface, to be linked to the Manichean division between White/colonisers and Coloured/colonised individual, but Oyeyemi has inverted this message in *White Is for Witching*, allowing us to look at silence, dominance and the effects of authority in a different way. The presence of inversion as a literary device is therefore a powerful manner of re-reading the history of female silencing and madness in the Western literary canon. Pale Miranda, who has now disappeared, is only present through the invocation of the four narrators; as discussed earlier, this may be linked to the presence/absence represented by the *abiku*. As *abiku*, she must be forever framed by the confines of memory; as Snow White, she has been re-envisioned by Oyeyemi as a descendant of the madwoman in the attic, one of an undefined ethnic heritage, hinting at the darkness behind the "Whitening". *White Is for Witching* is an important statement made by a third generation Nigerian woman writer in diaspora about how individual voices adapt to cross-cultural markers, creating hybrid beings that belong to neither binary state. By bringing the *abiku* into the politically laden feminist metaphors which have become tropes for western postmodern literature, Oyeyemi complicates the issues of thresholds and the enclosures into which her protagonists descend.

CONCLUSION

The significance of the house or enclosure in Gothic literature, whether feminist or postcolonial, is immeasurable. I have studied the descent, or the "fall" into mythic and supernatural Otherworlds in this paper by connecting this descent with the trope of the postcolonial Gothic house. In the analysis of two novels by Oyeyemi (*The Opposite House* and *White Is for Witching*), I've looked at the ways in which these houses reflect competing cultural imperatives and allegiances and how they become part and parcel of the struggle of the protagonists to recover autonomy against silencing and Othering. Following from this discussion I've connected temporality and the liminal dissonance experienced by hybrid postcolonial individuals to the supernatural and mythical markers of the postcolonial Gothic House – and how this connects to the figure of the Yorùbá *abiku*. Within the overlapping planes of physical reality and the dreamlike Otherworlds, supernatural and mythic metaphors related to twins, doubles or the Yorùbá *abiku* allow for an understanding of psychological states of being which are often traumatic in the text. These overlapping textual spaces are sites for gendered readings or struggles, often serving as an enclosure to interrogate that which cannot be said directly but only via the apparatus of Gothic metaphor, and syncretised mythic allusions. These enclosures also serve as a location to understand the intergenerational strife between women and the manner in which this struggle cracks open the borders in-between cultures to create new opportunities for understanding.

The structure of the postcolonial Gothic allows Oyeyemi to play with these temporal possibilities between two cultures as signified by the persistent presence of the *abiku* in all of her novels and plays. An important aspect of the enfolding nature of an enclosure, be it a house or a tomb, is that it is as much a metaphorical as it is a material location. The spaces into which the protagonists of Oyeyemi's novels disappear or descend are significant; these confines dictate the positioning of the protagonist, both in terms of (dis)location and in terms of identity. I therefore strongly assert that the house is connected not just to postcolonial

hybrid complicity and with competing cultural imperatives, but also the process of decolonising through transgression which is a form of agency. These supernatural descents are connected to transgression because they embody the movement between worlds and between allegiances. I think reading the postcolonial Gothic House then as a site of ownership and belonging is not sufficient. It must be read as a site of an active engagement and struggle with autonomy, and as a manifest site of empowerment.

END NOTES

1. I have coined the term “abiku-space” to refer to the supernatural Otherworld that Oyeyemi has created, using mythic archetypes from both the Yorùbá and Caribbean mythic and supernatural pantheons.
2. Orishas are Yorùbá deities or divine spirits who rule over different aspects of the elements, nature and attributes such as love, disease, wealth, war and trickery. Peter F. Cohen writes that traditions and religions based on belief of the orishas have “begun to gain recognition as a nascent world religion in its own right” and are “both trans-national and pan-ethnic” even though the traditions are a result of the travels of the Yorùbá people (18). These travels include both voluntary and involuntary ones (slavery) that Oyeyemi writes about in *The Opposite House*.
3. This brings the reader deep into the world of the *abiku*, previously written about by notable male Nigerian writers such as Wole Soyinka, Ben Okri and J.P. Clark.
4. J. Omosade Awolalu writes that the Babalawo or “Father of Mysteries” is the priest of Orunmila (p.25), a Yorùbá divinity who is oracular, and who is particularly concerned with knowledge and wisdom (p.23).
5. The entry for “letting and releasement” in *The Heidegger Dictionary*, edited by Michael Inwood, states that *Gelassenheit* was used by mystics for the peace one finds in God by taking one's distance from worldly things”. However, the term, now means “calmness, composure” and “releasement”, according to the dictionary (Inwood, 1999, par. 3). Javier Ibáñez-Noé argues that since *Gelassenheit* (adapted by Martin Heidegger from Meister Eckhart's writings) comes from the verb lassen, ie “let,” or “let be,” the term refers to detachment which allows one to become disengaged” and to “let be” (Ibáñez-Noé, 2007, p. 384).
6. I argue that there is a link between Hillman's psycho-analytical examination of the Greek Underworld and the Gothic deployment of the uncanny through metaphors related to enclosures and liminal spaces such as thresholds.
7. Cooper observes in “The Middle Passage of the Gods and the New Diaspora” that perhaps Tomas, Maja's brother in the novel is related to the *abiku* narratives in Yorùbá folklore (p.116). She connects Maja's relationship with her brother with Aya's relationship with the mythical Kayodes.
8. The re-enactments of this archetypal triad of witch/mother/Goddess/Yemoja and daughter/wife and son/husband may be seen in both Oyeyemi's play *Juniper's Whitening* and in *White Is for Witching*.
9. This mirrors the relationship between Jessamy and TillyTilly in *The Icarus Girl*, and Beth/Juniper in Oyeyemi's play, *Juniper's Whitening*.

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