

At home in Fanon?
QUEER ROMANCE & MIXED SOLIDARITIES IN CONTEMPORARY AFRICAN FICTION

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COMPULSORY DECLARATION

This work has not been previously submitted in whole, or in part, for the award of any degree. It is my own work. Each significant contribution to, and quotation in, this dissertation from the work, or works, of other people has been attributed, and has been cited and referenced.

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At home in Fanon?

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*The ripest fruit was saddest
Where I crept, the warmth was cloying.
In silence of webs, Abiku moans, shaping
Mounds from the yolk*
Wole Soyinka, "Abiku" (1966)

*Be careful, or they will flood us with little mulattoes.
Things are indeed going to hell . . .*
Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (1967)

*Always
in the middle
of our bloodiest battles
you lay down your arms
like flowering mines*

to conqueror me home.
Audre Lorde, "Love, Maybe" (1970)

Introduction: Queering the Canon

Amidst attempts to memorialise a year since students resolutely called for the University of Cape Town to raze its effigy of Cecil John Rhodes, an exhibition entitled "Echoing Voices From Within" was curated and summarily disrupted by members of the Rhodes Must Fall Movement. Transgender, queer and non-binary cadres stopped the ceremonial opening of the space by obstructing the entrance with their naked bodies, daring a crowd of their own comrades to 'walk over us one more time.' Inside, the group defaced (though not permanently) the images on display, calling out the ways in which these commemorative moments seek to render their bodies, and intellectual contributions, only partially visible in their relation to the movement. In a statement released the next day, the group suggested that their intervention was 'an act of black love,' demonstrating their commitment to making the movement the space of their dreams. In other words, the disruption was not a means of maligning the movement but a critical performance of their intricate and rapturous entanglement within it. This moment of rupture is, I believe, a manifestation of the complicated systems of solidarity implicated in the new discourse of decolonisation. Certainly the

era of re-decolonisation¹ must engender a new negotiation of its ties to a former logic of decolonial thought and the forms of revolutionary union that came with it. This means unmanning the ways in which the bygone figureheads of anti-colonial theory are resurrected within the contemporary discourse of identity politics.

Throughout the recent iterations of student activism that have gripped South African universities, Frantz Fanon has been continuously disinterred. The moment has worked as something of a revival of Fanonian theory in the era of contemporary identity politics. But the figure of Fanon, and what he said, often remains both abstract and plural within its articulations – interpretations of his body of work performing sometimes only partial allegiances to the whole. While this transient relation to Fanonian theory is not necessarily unexpected, it certainly suggests that the space between the man and his theory is a contested one. This means that centralising a Fanon within political discourse (who is also necessarily decentralised in theory) stands to reproduce the losses implicated in his mythification, rather than to recover new critical imports of his work. In other words, the simplification of Fanonist rhetoric fails to deal with the “un-political” dimensions of Fanon. As such the more troubling of Fanon’s work, namely *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), is often left un-interrogated, while *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961) is read like a manifesto for purposive change.² What makes the former so aberrant has partly to do with the writer’s strategic reliance on irony, a characteristic that enamours it to post-structuralist critics like Homi Bhabha, but alienates materialist scholarship.³ Moreover, *Black Skin, White Masks* it seems is deemed “not radical enough” because of what appears to be a problematic preoccupation with ‘love and understanding.’⁴ In the following intervention, I argue that what makes this centrality of ‘love and understanding’ so unpalatable to radical activists is a misappropriation of Fanon’s formulation of desire. This is in part, I believe, one of the flaws of Fanon setting up the dynamic of racialised desire within cisgender, heteronormative models for potential interracial relationships – “The Woman of Colour and the White Man” and “The Man of Colour and the White Woman.” Hence, I consider what *queering* these

¹ Rhodes Must Fall has called this a time for “radical decolonisation”, differentiating it from the logic of “transformation”, which they characterise as ‘. . . the maintenance and perpetuation of oppression, hidden within meaningless surface-level change.’ The call for radical decolonisation insists that former efforts of anti-colonial reform have been insincere and thus incomplete. RMF Statement read out at the mass meeting before the removal of the statue, 9 April 2015: http://jwtc.org.za/the_salon/volume_9/rmf_statements.htm

² I am using here the dates for the original French publications of *Peau Noire*, *Masques Blanc* and *Les Damnés de la Terre* for the sake of chronology.

³ Certainly Bhabha’s post-structuralist works using *Black Skin, White Masks* “The Other Question: Difference, Discrimination, and the Discourse of Colonialism” (1983) and “Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse” (1983) have generated the most critical attention.

⁴ Fanon, F. 2008 (1967). C. L. Markmann (trans.), *Black Skin, White Masks* (Pluto Classics). London: Pluto Press. 2.

relationships does to the way in which we read the political dimensions of *Black Skin, White Masks*, and whether or not this allays the allegory of revolutionary solidarity of the generic teleology of the heteronormative romance.

By invoking the interpretive methodology of the *queer*, I draw upon the thesis of *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990) in which Eve Sedgwick engages ‘the performative effects of the self-contradictory discursive field of force’ created by the overlap of the binaristic terms of sexual definition.⁵ This type of reading discloses the points at which the performances of contemporary forms of identity politics intersect. In other words, my reliance on the paradigm of *queering* summons the ways in which subjectivities are discursively contingent on one another, despite their iterations of difference. This becomes useful because it renders the expropriation of *otherness* from normative fields of representation uncanny, thus necessitating the critical re-figuring of the *other* within this dynamic. To deal with the field of contemporary culture now calls for, I believe, the radical retooling of former theoretical canons so that they open up, rather than infringe on, an engagement with current material realities. In other words, it is vital to recognise that the afterlives of the theory ought to give space to the dynamism of contemporary culture. This strategy entails the estrangement of the theory from the temporal and spatial tenets of its canonisation. Stuart Hall recognised this as constituting the major scheme of Fanon’s work: ‘By the practices of trans-coding and re-signing, he attempted to contest, to disturb, to unsettle, and to re-inscribe the look “other-wise”.’⁶ This project thus seeks to use an interpretation of Fanon that registers the queer relation of his theory to the field of the “real” to interrogate work done in contemporary African fiction, a literary movement that performs a sometimes mystifying relation to the politics of former iterations of black counterculture.

New African writing re-negotiates its ties with the nation state, moving beyond the archetypes of postcolonial, national literatures and towards an unbound logic of political subjectivity. This generation of the new diaspora takes seriously what Fanon recognised as “The Pitfalls of National Consciousness” by emptying out the category of the nation and engaging with the intersections of a trans-national, transgender and trans-racial politics. The object of this thesis is to elucidate what possibilities for political solidarity are generated through the queered dynamic of interracial love, explored in this type of literature. To demonstrate the ways in which a queer analysis of interracial romance might reimagine a

⁵ Sedgwick, K. E. 1990. “Introduction” in *Epistemology of the Closet*. Berkeley: University of California Press. 9.

⁶ Hall, S. 1996. “The After-life of Frantz Fanon: Why Fanon? Why Now? Why Black Skin, White Masks” in A. Reed, ed., *The Fact of Blackness: Frantz Fanon and Visual Representation*, London: Institute of Contemporary Arts. 19.

raced identity politics, I analyse novels produced by members of the contemporary African diaspora, whose works deal with mixed race identity.⁷ Through my reading of Helen Oyeyemi's *The Icarus Girl* (2005) and *Boy, Snow, Bird* (2014), Yewande Omotoso's *Bom Boy* (2011), and Chris Abani's *The Secret History of Las Vegas* (2014), I hope to demonstrate that contemporary African literature is concerned with the formation of an identity that estranges the category of blackness from itself through its entanglement with a queer identity politics.

Mapping the Field: The Politics of Contemporary African Literature

Puis Adesanmi and Chris Dunton's work on "Nigeria's Third Generation Writing" (2005), later developed upon in a special issue of *Research in African Literatures* (2008), traces the emergence of the category of contemporary African literature that my own intervention deals with. While Adesanmi and Dunton's focus is new Nigerian writing, as it seems is mine, the critics register a revival of this literature that has influenced the market for the African novel generally. Certainly it is actually the generic shift from poetry to the novel, as a category of global acclaim, which renders the Nigeria's third generation of writers a worthy field of inquiry.⁸ It would be limiting to view the dominance of Nigerian writing today as not inaugurating international interest in writers outside of the Nigerian canon, such as Dinaw Mengestu, Francis Nyamnjoh, Leila Abouela and NoViolet Bulawayo. Adesanmi and Dunton trace this revival to 2001, with the canonisation of early novels by Helon Habila, Chris Abani and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie.⁹ Although the Caine Prize is mentioned as contributing to the publication of Habila's *Waiting for an Angel* (2000), Adesanmi and Dunton do not consider the significance of the establishment of this literary prize in 2000 as a momentous occasion for the market of African fiction. Perhaps its importance was yet to be seen at the time of the critics' preliminary notes on the field, but the study of the influence of the prize economy on the African literary market has certainly dominated the discourse on this subject in recent years.

Akin Adesokan's "New African Writing and the Question of Audience" (2012) takes up this argument, registering the continuity in the customs of fetishisation undertaken by Western readers of the

⁷ My quite narrow selection here is certainly not representative of the field of contemporary African literature in its entirety. For the sake of this short thesis, I have privileged works that explicitly preface mixed race identity. I have in the process left out writers like Ike Oguine, Biyi Bandele, Akin Adesokan, Helon Habila, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Uzodinma Iweala, Segun Afolabi, Teju Cole, Taiye Selasi, Binyavanga Wainaina and Dinaw Mengestu, to name a few.

⁸ Adesanmi, P. and Dunton, C. 2005. "Nigeria's Third Generation Writing: Historiography and Preliminary Theoretical Considerations" in *English in Africa*, Vol. 32(1), *New Nigerian Writing*: 8.

⁹ Adesanmi, P. and Dunton, C. 2005. 11.

postcolonial novel.¹⁰ This renewed critical interest in the forces of a Western literary economy, suggests that despite Adesanmi and Dunton's conception of the radical break between postcolonial writers and the third generation, contemporary African writers do not necessarily find themselves outside of the gravitational field of their predecessors. In other words, the emergent popularity of contemporary African fiction has been accompanied by the critical perception of the ways in which this literature both challenges and is circumscribed by a prior canon on the African literary enterprise. Adesokan suggests that the African author is forced into courting a readership that wishes to fix the ideological conventions of their writing.¹¹ This dynamic invokes the problem of solidarity and complicity faced by the new diasporic subject in its relation to "home" and an image of Africa. Tanure Ojaide's critique of this generation invokes this dilemma in his suggestion that 'post-1960-born Africans, sometimes children of emigrants, have at best vague memories of Africa . . . Many in this group suffer from a psychic disconnection from the continent.'¹² The critical impulse to read new African writing through previous modes of a diasporic solidarity necessarily limits interpretations of the contemporary political purview to the terms of either the aesthetics of authenticity, or that of a detached cosmopolitanism.

Brenda Cooper's *A New Generation of African Writers* (2008) and Madhu Krishnan's *Contemporary African Literature in English* (2014) are arguably the most thorough critical resources delineating the field today. Both regard the field through a much broader continental lens, thus subverting the critical hegemony of Nigerian literature. Cooper's work is interested in uncovering the ways in which these writers depict 'the multiple realities of their multiple worlds and languages.'¹³ In doing so, Cooper emphasises the practices of language that this literature takes up and its transgression of imperial and nationalist metaphors through the strategies of metonymy. In her conclusion, entitled "The Rifle is not a Penis", Cooper uses Fanon to suggest that post-colonial African literature has fallen into the trap of articulating historically contingent, material realities through confounding heteronormative and nationalist tropes.¹⁴ In turn, Cooper argues that the new generation of African writers contravene these tropes by transposing their multiple, diasporic cartographies onto their own material realities and

¹⁰ See Huggan, G. 2001. *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margin*. New York: Routledge, Print. & Brouillette, S. 2007. *Postcolonial Writers in the Global Literary Marketplace*. New York: Palgrave, Print.

¹¹ Adesokan, A. 2012. "New African Writing and the Question of Audience" in *Research in African Literatures*, Vol. 43(3): 11.

¹² Ojaide, T. 2008. "Migration, Globalization, & Recent African Literature" in *World Literature Today*, Vol. 82(2): 44.

¹³ Cooper, B. 2008. "Introduction" in *A New Generation of African Writers*. Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu Natal Press: 1.

¹⁴ Cooper, B. 2008. "Conclusion: The Rifle is not a Penis" in *A New Generation of African Writers*. 151.

experiences of “home”.¹⁵ Cooper maintains that ‘These migrant writers are not political radicals, who propose revolutionary change in the balance of power of the world of their novels.’¹⁶ Krishnan, on the other hand, works with this position of apparent political dispossession, considering the ways in which new African fiction figures itself in relation to Africa and the ethical responsibilities of this relation.

Krishnan’s reading summons a negotiated framework for imagining a diasporic political aesthetic, notably invoked in Paul Gilroy’s *The Black Atlantic* (1993). The call to reformulate Gilroy’s thesis to privilege the position of the new diaspora¹⁷ is the subject of the special issue of *Research in African Literatures*, entitled “Africa and the Black Atlantic” (2014). Krishnan’s work and Yogita Goyal’s introduction to this special issue refute the limited political dichotomy available to contemporary African diaspora, conceptualised through Ojaide’s separation of the romantic nostalgia of older African émigré writers and the cultural indifference of the new diaspora.¹⁸ Both Krishnan and Goyal register the instability of this imagined split, Krishnan suggesting that it ‘fails to grasp the complexity of cultural transmission and circulation’ and Goyal invoking a strategy of transcultural identification and diasporic futurity that is ‘neither melancholic or romantic.’¹⁹ These assertions are reminiscent of Brent Hayes Edwards’ use of the term *décalage* – loosely translated as “gap,” “discrepancy,” “time lag,” or “interval”.²⁰ Edwards explains the paradox of this gap, suggesting that it is the point of difference that it represents that allows for the interchange of articulation between the traditional and the vanguard.²¹ Of course Edwards was referring to Gilroy’s separation of Africa and black America within the context of modernity, but it is significant that these tensions are now being revived through the relation between postcolonial and contemporary African writers.

In light of the critical separation of an authentic and a psychically disconnected generation of African literature, it is important that one of the dominant disputes regarding contemporary African subjectivity has to do with the politics of Afropolitanism. Critics and writers are generally divided across a positive

¹⁵ Cooper, B. 2008. 152.

¹⁶ Ibid. 21.

¹⁷ Paul Tiyambe Zeleza disambiguates the terms of this distinction between the old and the new diaspora by aligning these two categories with historic and contemporary moments; the latter refers to the time of pre-colonial forced migrations, and the former to the event of colonial and postcolonial exoduses: Zeleza, P. T. 2009. “Diaspora Dialogues: Engagements Between Africa and its Diasporas” in, I. Okpewho & N. Nzegwu (eds.), *The New African Diaspora*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press. 35 – 36.

¹⁸ Ojaide, T. 2008. 45.

¹⁹ Krishnan, M. 2014. “Ethics, Conflict and Re(-)presentation” in *Contemporary African Literature in English: Global Locations, Postcolonial Identifications*. UK: Palgrave Macmillan. 37. &

Goyal, Y. 2014. “Introduction: Africa and the Black Atlantic” in *Research in African Literatures*. Vol. 45(3): xx.

²⁰ Edwards, B. H. 2001. “The Uses of Diaspora” in *Social Text*, 66. Vol. 19(1): 52.

²¹ Edwards, B. H. 2001. 65.

conception of Afropolitanism – see Selasi (2005), Mbembe (2007) and Gikandi (2011) – and scepticism – see Wainaina (2012) and Omotoso (2015). The rendering of Afropolitanism as a bourgeois performance of African-ness, unmarred by the violence of living on the Continent and the limitations on citizenship it represents, suggests dissonance along class solidarities. It is important then that Adesanmi and Dunton register the predominantly urban settings of new Nigerian literature, for its representation of spaces of cosmopolitan empowerment and disempowerment.²² Dunton’s work specifically, in an article that appeared in the aforementioned 2008 of special issue of *Research in African Literatures*, regards the dual representation of these urban spaces ‘not only as a site of disorder and decay but as an environment in which creative energies are nurtured that are held to constitute a corrective and liberatory force.’²³ While Dunton writes about the African city in particular, this logic might be transposed in works set in urban centres elsewhere, such as Biyi Bandele’s *The Street* (1999) and Chris Abani’s *The Virgin of Flames* (2007). These novels deal with the privations of the émigré living overseas, as well as the opportunities for creative expression that these metropolitan spaces represent. Thus Afropolitanism’s ambivalence to class solidarity, invokes modes of citizenship that might transgress class. This is particularly relevant to the creation of spaces that represent sites of homosexual freedom.

Adesanmi and Dunton’s (2008) recognition that one of the markers of difference between the former canon and the third generation is the centralising of subjects of homosexuality and sexual transgression, suggests that queer politics today represents a patent intervention on the field of diasporic solidarity.²⁴ Lindsey Green-Simms (2014) contends that this literature resists dominant discourses regarding homosexuality in Africa, while Nmachika (2014) registers the ways in which the subject of homosexuality in contemporary African literature intersects with narratives of the gender liberation movement.²⁵ The most interesting development in Green-Simms’s contribution is the theorist’s recognition that ‘the Internet has become a space for queer writers and allies to create transnational alliances and forums to tell stories about their fears, desires, loves, and struggles.’²⁶ This argument follows the more recent observation, by Miriam Pahl (2016), that the Internet offers the Afropolitan a

²² Adesanmi, P. and Dunton, C. 2005. 11.

²³ Dunton, C. 2008. “Entropy and Energy: Lagos as City of Words” in *Research in African Literatures*. Vol. 39(2): 68.

²⁴ Adesanmi, P. and Dunton, C. 2008. Introduction, Everything Good Is Raining: Provisional Notes on the Nigerian Novel of the Third Generation” in *Research in African Literatures*. Vol. 39(2): viii.

²⁵ Green-Simms, L. 2014. “The Emergent Queer: Homosexuality and Nigerian Fiction in the 21st Century” in *Research in African Literatures*, Vol. 47(2): 131 – 161.

Nwokeabia, N. 2014. “Gender and (Homo)Sexuality in Third-Generation African Writing: A Reading of Unoma Azuah’s *Sky-High Flames* and Jude Dibia’s *Walking with Shadows* Tradition and Change” in *Contemporary West and East African Fiction*, ed. Ogaga Okuyade, Matatu 45; Amsterdam & New York NY: Rodopi: 365 – 380.

²⁶ Green-Simms, L. 2014. 144.

means of transgressing the complicity of bourgeois subjectivity by bypassing the regimes of the Western literary economy.²⁷ This appraisal of an Afropolitanism that performs its solidarity to queer movements online, demonstrates the ways in which African writing now is preoccupied with undoing the critical parameters of the former canon. Thus, while many critics might assume that contemporary African fiction (when described in terms of psychic disconnection, cultural indifference) represents a radical cessation from the former canon's modes of solidarity, I argue instead that this literature negotiates the image of "home" to make space for new solidarities.

The heightened visibility of global networks rallying around issues of black identity makes "the contemporary" a pertinent field of inquiry for interrogating the prospect of radical intersectionality. The Black Lives Matter Movement across the Atlantic and the Fallist campaigns in South Africa, with their global mobilisation over virtual spaces like Black Twitter, demonstrate the amplification of countercultural exchange through the diaspora that Gilroy examined.²⁸ These rapid articulations of contemporary modes of solidarity greatly reanimates the prospect of a romantic conception of the diaspora and its reproduction of global countercultural intervention, notably critiqued by Goyal in *Romance, Diaspora, and Black Atlantic Literature* (2010). However, in my chosen examples of contemporary African literature, this conceptualisation of diasporic reckoning inhabits the more ambivalent space *between* the generic outcomes of romance and realism.

This reading of new African fiction indicates the ways in which the process of contemporary identity formation, rather than expressing all out solidarity, vacillates between the simulacra of globalisation's violent reckoning and moments of rapturous intimacy. Tsitsi Jaji invokes this negotiated solidarity as constituting a return to pan-African (with a small "p") political energies – interested in the ephemeral, non-essentialist articulations of black cultural identity.²⁹ Krishnan alludes to this state, suggesting that this literature is embroiled in 'the complex and ever-shifting interaction between modes of affiliation at the level of immediate, lived experience and disavowal, both of official modes of nationalist belonging and

²⁷ Pahl, M., 2016. Afropolitanism as critical consciousness: Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's and Teju Cole's internet presence. *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, Vol. 28(1) pp.73-87.

²⁸ Gilroy has recently said in an interview of these movements, "The internet links them. A shared vocabulary links them. They all employ a constellation of concepts that has resonated differently in each location but is clearly another connecting factor: decolonization, privilege, safety . . . *Black Atlantic* emerged from a firmly pre-internet way of approaching cultural flows and influences.": Gilroy, P. 2016. "Paul Gilroy in search of a not necessarily safe starting point..." in R. Belcher, *openDemocracy*: <https://www.opendemocracy.net/paul-gilroy-rosemary-bechler/paul-gilroy-in-search-of-not-very-safe-starting-point>.

²⁹ Jaji, T. E. 2014. "Stereomodernism: Amplifying the Black Atlantic" in *Africa in Stereo: Modernism, Music, and Pan-African Solidarity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 3.

governmental discourse.³⁰ In this way, contemporary African literature is interested in engaging with the difference that is left unrepresented and made unrepresentable through sanctified national narratives. This loss of a yoked national allegiance is most markedly illustrated through this literature's preoccupation with mixed race subjectivity, and its performative estrangement from the conceptions of grounded ethnicity, but also through each text's troubling of gender identification. In dealing with subjectivity that resists race, ethnicity and gender, contemporary African literature's queer solidarities inhabit what Kimberle Crenshaw called 'a location that resists telling.'³¹ In other words, this type of literature undoes generic representations of the "real" by engaging the disruptive dimensions of difference.

The troubling of the generic forms of identification in contemporary African literature suggests a deferral from the aforementioned romantic conceptions of solidarity within the diasporic consciousness. Goyal props Fanon up as a foil to a Garvey-esque vernacular of romance and utopianism, suggesting 'Fanon articulates his platform in the language of realism, rationality, and social justice.'³² This characterisation of Fanonian theory is interesting because it takes a decidedly different stance from the place the theorist seems to occupy in the revolutionary imagination today. Certainly the mythification of Fanon means that the ways in which his work has been translated is not *un-romantic*. The problem thus becomes the crisis of the dimensions of romance as a category of representation. David Scott invokes this dilemma in *Conscripts of Modernity* (2004), in which he reads the anticolonial, revolutionary narrative as emplotted within the formal concerns of the romance.³³ Scott registers the incongruities of this formulation through his analysis of C.L.R. James's two prefaces to *The Black Jacobins* (1938 & 1963), as these texts reflect a shift from a former romantic investment in the liberation narrative towards the more tragic paradigm of post-liberation.³⁴ But what Scott's study elucidates is the prospects tragedy offers in coming to grips with the enactment of a colonial past on post-colonial futures. According to Scott, tragic narratives develop a prescience of the contingency of the revolutionary subject on histories of empowerment and disempowerment.³⁵ In other words, tragedy engages a sense of intimacy between the imagined hero of the revolutionary romance and the abject *otherness* he hopes to overcome.

³⁰ Krishnan, M. 2013. "Affiliation, Disavowal, and National Commitment in Third Generation African Literature" in *Ariel: A Review of International English Literature*. Vol. 44(1): 94.

³¹ Crenshaw, K. 1991. "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color" in *Stanford Law Review*, Vol. 43(6): 1242.

³² Goyal, Y. 2010. "Introduction" in *Romance, Diaspora, and Black Atlantic Literature* (Vol. 159). Cambridge University Press. 5.

³³ Scott, D. 2004. "Prologue" in *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment*. Durham: Duke University Press. 7.

³⁴ Scott, D. 2004. 11.

³⁵ Scott, D. 2004. "Toussaint's Tragic Dilemma". 135.

The critical attempts to locate Fanon within the conditions of realism, or to render him a romantic figure, both condemns his work to history and fails to register its shortcomings in apprehending the present – as Scott puts it elsewhere ‘So that, in the process, even as Fanon is being remembered, the Third World to which he addressed himself is being forgotten.’³⁶ In this way, the problematic contours of Fanon’s work are disavowed, thus rendering them “unusable” in the analysis of solidarity today. Thus, my intervention in this thesis resists the stultifying techniques of relegating Fanon to the contextual concerns of postcolonial theory by registering the ways in which the field of the contemporary both enlivens and disrupts the confines of the theorist’s oeuvre. While the former canon of African literature might have found a political home in Fanon, I suggest that contemporary African literature reveals the house that Fanon built as being always haunted by the *other*.

Theoretical Framework: The Politics of *Black Skin, White Masks*

According to Lewis R. Gordon, detractors of *Black Skin, White Masks* disavow the text’s usefulness based on its ‘lack of political correctness on gender and sexual orientation and mixed-racial identities’ as well as its “petit-bourgeois” preoccupations.³⁷ While these critiques are justified, it is precisely because of the text’s capacity to undo the myth of the-political-theorist-as-activist that allows it to confer a theoretical engagement with contemporary identity politics. What feminist critics (see Bergner, 1995, Sharpley Whiting, 1998 & Chow, 1999) and queer theorists (Goldie, 1999) contribute to a reading of *Black Skin, White Masks* is a recognition of the ways in which Fanon’s formulation of love and desire transgresses the rules of solidarity by infringing on the representation of its theoretical *others*. In other words, Fanon’s preoccupation with love and desire is, to the subaltern, a matter of life and death. Indeed, if Fanon’s work is interested in the psychological implications of contact between whiteness and blackness, *Black Skin, White Masks* is necessarily also concerned with how different empowered/disempowered subjectivities are produced in the moment of their intersection. As Jared Sexton suggests, despite the tendency of critics to force Fanon into embodying the political tendencies that he seeks to critique, ‘he is among those thinkers who help us to understand the complex entanglement of terms in any seeming opposition.’³⁸ Sexton’s reading of Fanon takes seriously the problem of ascribing to the theorist a set of idealised (and thus binaristic) concerns rather than interrogating the ambivalent

³⁶ Scott, D. 1999. “Fanonian Futures?” in *Refashioning Futures: Criticism after Postcoloniality*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. 197.

³⁷ Gordon, L. R. 2015. “I Am from Martinique” in *What Fanon Said: A Philosophical Introduction to His Life and Thought*. Johannesburg: Wits University Press. 16 - 17.

³⁸ Sexton, J. 2008. “The Consequences of Racial Mixture” in *Amalgamation Schemes: Antiblackness and the Critique of Multiracialism*. Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press. 197.

relation of the theory to its political dimensions. This suggests that the more productive mode of analysis is one that considers the political possibilities of an intersectional reading of *Black Skin, White Masks* – an analysis that rejects the possibly frictionless union between the revolution *in theory* and the material and emotional violence of the revolutionary moment on the subject.

If intersectional critique, as Trina Grillo suggests, is concerned with the project of anti-essentialism, it becomes clear how attempts to valorise Fanon politically considerably limits this type of reading.³⁹ Gordon suggests that implicated in the critical disavowal of *Black Skin, White Masks*, especially by political theorists like Cedric Robinson (1993), is the desire to make Fanon reflect the historical conditions of a revolutionary politics.⁴⁰ In other words, the pitfall of these critiques is in their effort to redeem Fanon from his ambivalence by fixing him temporally. The legitimation of *Wretched of the Earth* as the text that is *sine qua non* to Fanon's oeuvre necessarily circumscribes the deliverance of an intersectional reading. By this I mean that the centralisation of the text within a political canon works to relieve its interpretation from the confounding subject of *otherness*. As Crenshaw argues, this reification of the category of the political within history and context is implicated in the obfuscation of opportunities for solidarity through different spaces of marginalisation.⁴¹ This limited political purview is enabled, I believe, by a certain misappropriation of what might be considered the dimensions of identity through which Fanon's works most meaningfully converge, at the intersection of race and class.

While *Wretched of the Earth* is popularly considered the materialist text, demonstrating Fanon's commitment to Marxist-Hegelian analysis, *Black Skin, White Masks* becomes an example of Fanon's post-structuralist concerns. As Anthony C. Alessandrini points out, this requires reading the theorist's oeuvre retroactively and fails to consider the ways in which *Black Skin, White Masks* might give way to a materialist analysis.⁴² This logic is undoubtedly implicated in the fact that for English readers *Wretched of the Earth* was published in 1963, while the English edition of *Black Skin, White Masks* was published much later in 1967. Moreover, the English translation went out of print in the late 1970s and was reprinted again only in 1986 alongside Homi Bhabha's controversial Lacanian foreword.⁴³ In framing

³⁹ Grillo, T. 2013. "Anti-Essentialism and Intersectionality: Tools to Dismantle the Master's House" in *Berkeley Journal of Gender, Law & Justice*. Vol. 10(1): 19.

⁴⁰ Gordon, L. R. 2015. 17.

⁴¹ Crenshaw, K. 1991: 1299.

⁴² Alessandrini, A. C. 1999. "Introduction: Fanon studies, cultural studies, cultural politics" in A. C. Alessandrini (ed.) *Frantz Fanon: Critical Perspectives*. London: Routledge. 7.

⁴³ Gordon, L. R. 2015. 16.

Black Skin, White Masks as a resolutely post-structuralist text, critics elide the ways in which Fanon's structuralist psychology is informed by a reading of Marxist theory and materialism.

Black Skin, White Masks is meaningfully concerned with the commodification of fantasy and sexuality. Certainly throughout "The Woman of Colour and the White Man" and "The Man of Colour and the White Woman," Fanon is preoccupied with interrogating the ways in which race is class – how skin colour becomes a form of capital through the moment of sexual encounter. This type of analysis thus uses psychoanalytic theory concerning the formative moments of identification/misidentification to understand the systematic economic oppression of blackness. In understanding this, we might register the ways in which interpretations of Fanon within the terms of the disciplinary category rely on forms of historical totalisation that work to stultify the critical scope of his corpus. Frederick Jameson explains this using Althusser's formulation of "expressive causality", suggesting that the mechanisms of totalising summons the privileging of the part within the whole.⁴⁴ Thus, in denying *Black Skin, White Masks* a structuralist analysis, the possibilities of an intersectional critique is precluded – the whole is imagined as seamlessly reflected in the part. Moreover, in setting up this dynamic critics render invisible the important role of sexuality in the formation of a revolutionary politics.

Kobena Mercer's suggestion, in his work on Fanon, that 'sexual politics is the Achilles heel of black liberation' affirms the necessity of an interrogation into this cleavage of *Black Skin, White Masks*.⁴⁵ The separation of concepts of love and desire from the tenets of a radical politics is, I believe, what weakens a political reading of the text. Mercer's work presents an analysis of the sexual politics implicated in the book, as a means of levelling a critique against the homophobic inferences of *Black Skin, White Masks*. This type of critique is productive because it uses the representation of the *other* to destabilise the myth of Fanon as the revolutionary theorist *outside* of the text. On the other hand, those who attempt to redeem Fanon as the people's theorist might rather forget the uncomfortable position of the *other* – collapsing difference so that it is wholly contained by the speaking "I". This strategy is employed, for instance, in the notes of Bhabha's foreword to *Black Skin, White Masks*, when he suggests, 'Fanon's use of the word "man" usually connotes a phenomenological quality of humanness, inclusive of man and woman and, for that very reason, ignores the question of gender difference.'⁴⁶ Henry Louis Gates contends that this ploy is indicative of Bhabha's desire for Fanon 'to be even better than he is,' to use what would otherwise be a

⁴⁴ Jameson, F. 1996. "On Interpretation: Literature as a Socially Symbolic Act" in *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*. London: Routledge. 28.

⁴⁵ Mercer, K. 1994. "Black Masculinity and the Sexual Politics of Race" in *Welcome to the Jungle: New Positions in Black Cultural Studies*. New York: Routledge. 116.

⁴⁶ Bhabha, H. 2008. "Foreword to the 1986 edition" in *Black Skin, White Masks*. London: Pluto Press. xxxvi.

critique of his work, to justify his theoretical hegemony.⁴⁷ While it is certainly problematic to collapse the black man and the black woman into the overwhelming category of blackness, it would be similarly unimaginative to dismiss the ways in which Fanon's female and male constructions of identity overlap to produce a political grammar that necessarily conceals the ideological implications of desire and fantasy. Though the theorist might not make explicit the points at which black masculinity and black femininity converge in their oppression, it would be short-sighted to ignore the space queerness occupies in Fanon's analysis of black subjectivity and how this might give way to an intersectional critique. As such, in the pursuit of an intersectional reading, not only is it necessary to interrogate the ways in which the *other* is "put-out" by the text (as a phobic object), but also how the *other* is consistently invoked through the text because of an ambivalent relation to its queerness.

Attempts to elide sexual politics in the process of black liberation, sets up an opposition between those seeking emancipation from the prejudicial categories of race and those seeking emancipation from the strictures of normative constructions of love and desire. As the black reader of *Black Skin, White Masks* learns that racial prejudices are inextricably linked to the formulation of sexual fantasies, the logical step towards emancipation becomes a disavowal of love and desire as a worthwhile field of political engagement. But the cessation of love and desire from the realm of radical politics ignores the prospect of what might be defined as "radical love" – a love that transgresses the rational teleology of modern romantic affiliation. I believe that a succinct articulation of this "radical love" is implicit in the tenets of an identity politics that simultaneously calls for intersectionality. Identity politics (a politics that declares "I am Queer", "I am Black", "I am a Woman" etc.) is established through a subversive narcissism – the brand of class narcissism that Judith Butler refers to, and that David L. Eng and Shinhee Han discuss, which contains the propensity towards the revolutionary impulse.⁴⁸ Intersectionality, on the other hand, refuses the polarising instinct implicated in dissolving complex identities into coherent classes of being (like Queer, Black and Woman). As Crenshaw suggests, 'With identity thus re-conceptualized, it may be easier to understand the need for and to summon the courage to challenge groups that are after all, in one sense, "home" to us, in the name of the parts of us that are not made at home.'⁴⁹ In this way, an intersectional politics is interested in engaging with the spaces in which the unhomely dimensions of identity are silenced. While this space might be described as politically ambivalent, this type of critique ignores the disruptive implication of a brand of subjectivity that consistently rebounds on the rational

⁴⁷ Gates, H. L. 1991. "Critical Fanonism" in *Critical Inquiry*. Vol. 17(3): 460.

⁴⁸ Butler, J. 1997. "Melancholy Gender / Refused Identification, Keeping It Moving" in *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Eng, D.L. and Han, S., 2000. "A Dialogue on Racial Melancholia" in *Psychoanalytic Dialogues*, 10(4), pp.667-700.

⁴⁹ Crenshaw, K. 1991.1299.

sphere of ideology by performing its solidarity to the *whole* only to withdraw that solidarity for the emancipation of the *part*.

What I hope to achieve through this study is a disruption of the political landscape onto which Fanonian theory is usually mapped. This means renegotiating the relation between a queer formulation of identity and a revolutionary black politics, where each has been formally conceived as nullifying the afterlives of the other. The implications of this dynamic is undoubtedly relevant to the contemporary context in Africa, as queer rights have been both publicly and legislatively maligned for being “un-African”. The “un-African” argument is invariably couched on the threat queerness poses to the reproduction of presumably traditional ideals, invoked through a discourse that props up hyper-masculinity as the logical opponent to imperialism. On the other hand, queer liberation movements in the West, with their commitment to assimilating into a White global politics, contribute to anti-Black sentiment.⁵⁰ What I hope to elaborate on is the uncanny union between liberator and imperialist implicated in the intersections of anti-queer and anti-black discourse. *Black Skin, White Masks* is necessarily preoccupied with this dynamic, and so I consider the prospects that *queering* might present in negotiating it out of the sanctimonious institutions of whiteness.

Readers of *Black Skin, White Masks* will be familiar with Fanon’s conception of the ‘zone of nonbeing’ – ‘an extraordinarily sterile and arid region, an utterly naked declivity where an authentic upheaval can be born.’⁵¹ Fanon suggests that the pathos of the black man is in him not having the tools to descend to this level of hell because *man* is a *yes*, an affirmation of the human too enraptured by the project of recognition. Moreover, ‘the black is a black man; that is, as the result of a series of aberrations of affect, he is rooted at the core of a universe from which he must be extricated.’⁵² Fanon’s proposition here is important because it is from here that we can elucidate the theorist’s formulation of “authentic” revolutionary will. If “the black man” cannot occupy this space because of his being both *black* and *man*, then who already resides in the zone of nonbeing? Fanon’s work is always conscious that these two categories are constructed and that it is through their construction that they are affirmed, leaving the unconstructed, those who disrupt these categories by transcending them. In this way, *queer* becomes a useful description for me, because of its delineation of that which might be both between gender and anti-gender. Indeed what renders queer subjectivity so menacing is that it does not always immediately

⁵⁰ This argument has been taken up in Jasbir Puar’s *Terrorist Assemblages* (2007) and Morgan Bassichis and Dean Spade in a chapter entitled “Queer politics and anti-blackness” (2014).

⁵¹ Fanon. 2008. 2.

⁵² Ibid. 2.

perform its allegiance to specific gender roles, allowing its subversiveness to go unseen. Moreover, in its conception as “un-African” and “anti-Black” *black queerness* becomes mimetic of that which is Wretched, but not Black – Wretched, but not of the Earth.

The conceptualisation of not being *of the Earth* quite directly confronts the notion of autochthony, as it is invoked both through national narratives and in its construction of blackness as being both spatially and temporally trapped by terrestrial allegiances. Moreover, it is connected again to the broken promise of reproduction, or as Lee Edelman puts it, the withdrawal of ‘allegiance, however compulsory, from a reality based on the Ponzi scheme of reproductive futurism.’⁵³ As a study in psychoanalysis, the ultimate preoccupation of *Black Skin, White Masks* is to come to terms with the relation between the individual and the domestic romance, and its necessary role in the process of moralisation and socialisation. But for Fanon, ‘A normal Negro child, having grown up within a normal family, will become abnormal on the slightest contact with the white world.’⁵⁴ In this way, the dynamics of interracial desire set up in the text become productive, and indeed reproductive, of a certain queer subjectivity that endangers the sanctity of the family/home.

Gordon (2007) suggests that Fanon’s work anxiously deals with the threat amalgamation, or *mixing*, presents to the rational field. According to Gordon, the mixture can never equal a whole, but rather two halves fettered to one another. But each half is allied to a different teleological realm, the one of the higher and the other of the lower: ‘In effect, the notion is of attached twins where one has wings and the other has very heavy feet. One half attempts flight while the other, wishing to fly, keeps both stuck on the ground.’⁵⁵ What Gordon recognises is the way in which Fanon imagines mixed race subjectivity as destabilising the rational and undifferentiated order of the home.

Mixed race subjectivity in South Africa, as it differs from coloured identity, presents a more-or-less contemporary dilemma insofar as it transgresses the attempts of the previous dispensation to stratify categories of race and also distorts an inherited grammar of political intervention today. Brown people find it increasingly difficult to navigate the dimensions of South African politics and are, I believe, often deemed “un-political” because of their being made to embody both non-whiteness and non-blackness. Implicated in this is the logic of historical disadvantage that has become entangled in the language of

⁵³ Edelman, L. 2004. “The Future is Kid Stuff” in *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*. London: Duke University Press. 4.

⁵⁴ Fanon. 2008. 111.

⁵⁵ Gordon, L. R. 2007. “When I Was There, It Was Not: On secretions once lost in the night” in *Performance Research* Vol. 12(3): 9.

social justice. The mixed race subject is not, at least recognisably, rooted in a history but instead traverses history through its concealment within the language of fantasy and desire. In other words, mixed race subjectivity in South Africa contains the implication of a sort of socio-political death.

Gordon's allegory for mixed race subjectivity is reminiscent of the Yoruba myth of the *àbíkú* child and its relation to its spiritual double – the latter always coaxing its comrade towards the spirit world, while the former re-performs its ties to its mother through *return*. Translated, *àbíkú* literally means “one who is born, dies” or “born to die” signifying the figure's undoing of the rational teleology of reproductive futurism.⁵⁶ The tyranny of the *àbíkú*'s death-bound subjectivity is that it performs its solidarity to domesticated ideals and summarily withdraws it. Douglas McCabe suggests that the *àbíkú* is a necessarily errant figure in Yoruba cosmology, as it remains ‘unclaimed by any one geographical place,’ its wayward nature meaning that it profits ‘unethically by exploiting the *ilé*'s constitutive attachment to definite geographical locations (houses, villages, ancestral cities) and practices (having children and perpetuating the patrilineage).⁵⁷ *Ilé* loosely translates to “house” or “homestead”. Abdul JanMohamed interrogates a similar condition in his study on death-bound subjectivity. According to JanMohamed, the choice of “voluntary” death ‘constitutes a form of independence, however fleeting it may be’ by affirming the subject's ‘freedom of choice.’⁵⁸ For JanMohamed “voluntary” death is a social-death that gives way to political life while real death, ‘freedom from choice’, confirms the bondage of master over slave. The mixed race subject necessarily faces this quandary of choice.

Of course death (or the threat of death), and the grip it has over the prospect of life and reproduction, is the master's tool. This means that the choice of mixed race subjectivity is between its love for the master and its identification with the slave. As such, the mixed race subject ought to take seriously the political project of queerness described by Edelman: not only must the queer subject transgress the normative expectations of a system based on heterosexual reproduction but must also refuse ‘the consequences of grounding reality in denial of the [death] drive’ by ‘queering *ourselves* and our investment in such organisation.’⁵⁹ In other words, a queered mixed race subject chooses dissolution by deciding to disavow its insiderness through the recognition of the ways in which this condition “puts out” the *other*.

⁵⁶ McCabe, D. 2002. “Histories of Errancy: Oral Yoruba *Àbíkú* Texts and Soyinka's “Abiku”” in *Research in African Literatures*. Vol. 33(1): 46.

⁵⁷ McCabe, D. 2002. 47.

⁵⁸ JanMohamed, A. 2005. “Introduction: The Culture of Social-Death” in *The Death-Bound-Subject: Richard Wright's Archaeology of Death*. Durham: Duke University Press. 18.

⁵⁹ Edelman, L. 2004. 17.

To read Fanon's conceptions of interracial desire as queer entails estranging them from the allegory of heterosexual reproduction. This means considering the mixed race subject as the improbable child of "The Woman of Colour and the White Woman" or "The Man of Colour and the White Man". This impossibility comes from Fanon's conception of Manichean delirium as reproductive only of raced alienation: 'And there one lies body to body with one's blackness or one's whiteness, in full narcissistic cry, each sealed into his own peculiarity – with, it is true, now and then a flash or so, but these are threatened at their source.'⁶⁰ The mixed race subject represents the undifferentiated body wherein one's blackness *and* one's whiteness are trapped within their respective states of peculiarity. As such the foiled prospect of interracial intimacy, described by Fanon in these chapters, is experienced as the disavowal of the *self*. But this ego withdrawal is only possible insofar as it is approved by whiteness.⁶¹ In the novels that I analyse in the coming chapters, the children of interracial unions are forced to inhabit and assimilate into whiteness and, because of this, they have also been forced to disavow the dimensions of their identities that make them black. This results in the inability of these mixed race characters to perform their intimate ties towards their black parentage. The strained relationship between the mixed race child and the black parent becomes an allegory for the difficult negotiation of solidarity between the mixed race subject and black liberation movements. Significantly, while performative solidarity seems impossible for these characters they are each preoccupied with "acting out" against the structures that delimit the possibilities of trans-racial/gendered/national solidarity.

Taxonomy

My first chapter is entitled "Between Girls: Divided Sisters & Twinning Mixed Race Solidarity in Oyeyemi's *The Icarus Girl & Boy, Snow, Bird*". This section will use the already-established theoretical groundwork around the *The Icarus Girl* to explore the *àbíkú* myth as it engenders the psychology of mixed race subjectivity. In this chapter, I enter a discussion on the ways in which racial melancholia intersects with gender melancholia to produce truly queer subjectivities. Christopher Ouma's paper "Reading the Diasporic in Helen Oyeyemi's *Abiku The Icarus Girl*" (2014), which builds on Jane Bryce's work on "Half and Half Children" (2008), will serve as my point of departure. Ouma's analysis of mixed-race identity, racial melancholia, mapping new diasporic identity, and the *àbíkú* myth best represents the contours of my own intervention. However, I will introduce a new focus on Oyeyemi's exploration of the possibility of female solidarity across the colour line. I believe that Brenda Cooper's work on "twinning"

⁶⁰ Fanon. 2008. 31.

⁶¹ Ibid. 36.

(2008) most meaningfully deals with the dimensions of feminist solidarity and so my own intervention builds on this. Ultimately this chapter comes to grips with the ways in which Oyeyemi constructs New Black Atlantic subjectivities and the solidarities that they pronounce within current articulations of feminist discourse, particularly as they address transgender feminisms.

My second chapter focuses on a queer reading of “The Man of Colour” and is entitled “Fatherlands: Racial Melancholia and Invisible Masculinities in Omotoso’s *Bom Boy*”. This chapter presents an analysis of Yewande Omotoso’s *Bom Boy*, a novel set in South Africa but concerned with excavating the protagonist’s multi-ethnic ties to his fatherland in Nigeria. While almost nothing has been written in response to Omotoso’s novel, Rebecca Fasselt’s ““Nigeria” in the Cape: Afropolitanism and Alienation in Yewande Omotoso’s *Bom Boy*” (2015) positions the text within the terms of solidarity between the new South Africa and the Continent, thus considering the ways in which Omotoso imagines the quandary of citizenship faced by the diasporic subject living in Africa. In this chapter, I broaden Fasselt’s reading of Afropolitan identity by thinking about the ways in which Leke’s multi-ethnicity produces his wayward subjectivity, as it is constructed through representations of criminality and mental pathology. Raised in Cape Town, where mixed race identity is often left un-apprehended, Leke is allowed to navigate the city spectrally – forming no real relationships until he forces himself to consider the curse of his heritage. His criminality becomes a symptom of his invisibility, these transgressions acting as a means of reconstituting himself into the world of the living. As such, this chapter interrogates the ways in which mixed masculinity might be reconstituted through a queer relation to the past.

The contextual migration of the novels I have chosen (as they move between the “West” and Africa, by way of Nigeria and South Africa, back to the States again, only to finally return to the shores of South Africa) maps out the ways in which diasporic subjectivity is entangled in an uncanny relation to a territorialised construction of black identity. Thus, in my final chapter, I consider the afterlife of revolutionary subjectivity. Entitled “Crimes of the Mixed Necropolis: Uncovering the Facts of Blackness in Abani’s *The Secret History of Las Vegas*”, this chapter deals with the problem of assimilation for the mixed race subject into the independent state. As nothing has been published on *The Secret History of Las Vegas*, my own work compares this text to two of Chris Abani’s earlier texts, *GraceLand* (2004) and *The Virgin of Flames* (2007), which deal with the precarious political identities of those that live on the margins of “the nation”. I register a deferral in the ways in which the writer privileges queer identity in the more recent novel and consider the critical implication of this. As Abani’s novel vacillates between the ethical wasteland of Las Vegas and the protagonist’s memory of home, I look at how Sunil’s mixed

race identity makes it possible for him to pursue economic success through an ambivalent relation to his black, political identity in South Africa. This chapter is most concerned with the figure of the traitor, as it comes to grips with the two faces of black liberation struggles, and the position of the Afropolitan within this dynamic.

Finally my conclusion, “The Pitfalls of the Mixed Romance” comes to grips with the prospects of mixed race solidarity, represented by a cultivated ambivalence towards the generic concerns of the revolutionary romance. I suggest that the figure of the tragic mulatta is only deemed wretched insofar as she is circumscribed by modernity’s delineation of the political aesthetics of tragedy. If the romantic figure is involved in the enterprise of heteronormative nationalism, the tragedy represents a queer intervention on the narrative of struggle – a resistance towards the closure of solidarity within the discursive “home” of sanctified national narratives. I ultimately argue that, by registering the ways in which feminist and queer scholarship disrupt the uncritical reading of Fanon as unambiguously translatable into a contemporary identity politics, we might negotiate the theorist into the realm of tragedy. This allows, I believe, for the re-engagement of the critical faculties of interpretation offered by Fanonian theory in the reading of the politics of contemporary African literature today.

Between Girls: Divided Sisters & Twinning Mixed Race Solidarity in Oyeyemi's
The Icarus Girl & Boy, Snow, Bird

“Tell them about how you’re never really a whole person if you remain silent, because there’s always that one little piece inside you that wants to be spoken out, and if you keep ignoring it, it gets madder and madder and hotter and hotter, and if you don’t speak it out one day it will just up and punch you in the mouth from the inside.”

Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider* (1984)

Helen Oyeyemi's *The Icarus Girl* (2005) follows Jessamy Harrison, an eight-year-old girl living in London but unable to settle into her life there. The girl's mixed Nigerian-English heritage becomes a site of struggle for her as she has problems making friends and assimilating at school. Oyeyemi seemingly sets up the constraints of a classic *bildungsroman*, however, Jessamy's mother's decision to visit Nigeria inaugurates a series of events that necessarily disrupt the teleological concerns of the coming-of-age tale. As Jess warns in the beginning, 'it all STARTED in Nigeria . . . she might have got better if only (*Oh, if only if only if only, Mummy*) she hadn't gone.'⁶² It is in Nigeria that she meets Titiola, whom she dubs TillyTilly, an enigmatic girl who eventually follows her back home. TillyTilly becomes increasingly hostile towards Jess, coercing her to behave badly. Jessamy's mother, Sarah, reacts to her daughter's strange behaviour by sending her to see a psychologist who diagnoses her with Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID). But when TillyTilly reveals to her compatriot that her appearance in her life is because of Jess's dead twin sister, Fern, it becomes clear that Jessamy is *àbíkú*. The story traces the dilemmas faced by the mixed-race, child of the diaspora who finds it difficult to reconcile the various dimensions of her identity. Moreover, it deals with the ways in which an ambivalent relation towards the Continent thwarts the connection between the diasporic child and her diasporic mother.

Oyeyemi's most recent novel, *Boy, Snow, Bird* (2014), also confronts the relationship between a mother and her mixed-race daughter. The narrative is split between the perspective of Boy Novak and her daughter, Bird Whitman. Oyeyemi presents an uncanny re-writing of *Snow White*, using the classic fairytale to explore themes of race, sexuality and the psychology of beauty. Boy runs away from her abusive father to Flax Hill, and eventually starts a new life with Arturo Whitman and his flawlessly porcelain daughter, Snow. But when Boy gives birth to Bird she is surprised to find that her daughter, and the rest of her in-laws, are actually black. Her outing of her family means that Bird faces the resentment

⁶² Oyeyemi, H. 2006. *The Icarus Girl*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing. 6.

of the Whitmans. Boy makes the decision to send Snow away so that Bird may grow up without the burden of not being the favourite (whitest) sister. However, the relationship between Snow and Bird is maintained through their correspondence and eventually warrants the older girl's return. Not long after, Boy is forced to grapple with her father's attempts to find her and the secret that he has lived with. Both *Boy, Snow, Bird* and Oyeyemi's earlier text, *The Icarus Girl*, end seemingly on the cusp of revelation, suggesting their undone political projects thus disrupting the reader's expectation of closure.

In this chapter, I consider Oyeyemi's preoccupation with the critical dimensions of sisterhood. *The Icarus Girl* and *Boy, Snow, Bird* are necessarily interested in the formation of the category of the "woman" as a social and political actor, suggesting the writer's sustained meditation on the contours of feminist discourse. Thus, Judith Butler's suggestion that feminism is ineluctably qualified through its delineation of a femme category, which is produced through patriarchal regimes of representation, becomes an important prelude to the complicated arena of female solidarity explored by Oyeyemi.⁶³ As such, this chapter takes seriously the intervention of the queer subject on the, at times Manichean, framework of feminist discourse. Oyeyemi, like Butler, challenges conventional conceptions of race and femininity through a retooling of hegemonic discourses on psychoanalysis. The pathologisation of the *àbíkú* condition as a form of DID in *The Icarus Girl*, and the themes of mirroring and hysteria in *Boy, Snow, Bird*, indicate the writer's interest in tracing the genealogies of psychoanalytic intervention and the ambivalences this field produces when faced with diagnosing the *other*.

Butler's troubling of Freud's "Mourning and Melancholia" in "Melancholy Gender/Refused Identification" can be read alongside Anne Anlin Chen's, David L. Eng and Shinhee Han's work on racial melancholia, as constituting an alternative canon that challenges the universal lucidity of the Freudian psychoanalysis.⁶⁴ Fanon's work is in many ways central to this canon and, although *Black Skin, White Masks* does not explicitly formulate the fact of blackness within the conditions of melancholia, the text consistently invokes the theme of loss and the effects of the ambivalence to that loss. As such, this chapter focuses on the implication of the loss of the feminine subject, but more specifically "The Woman of Colour", within the hetero-masculine matrix produced by psychoanalytic scholarship. In his conception of femininity, Freud's suggestion that the female subject is always *at a loss* (because of her foiled desire to possess a phallus of her own) positions the woman within the eternally ambivalent condition of the

⁶³ Butler, J. 2002. "'Women' as the Subject of Feminism" in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Feminism*. London: Routledge. 5.

⁶⁴ Chen A. A. 2000. *The Melancholy of Race: Psychoanalysis, Assimilation, and Hidden Grief*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Eng, D.L. and Han, S., 2000. "A Dialogue on Racial Melancholia" in *Psychoanalytic Dialogues*, 10(4) .667 – 700.

melancholic. For Freud this is a decidedly narcissistic, and thus unpolitical, state of being.⁶⁵ However, the aforementioned re-workings of Freudian studies associate narcissism with the revolutionary impulse. As such, in this chapter I seek to demonstrate the ways in which Oyeyemi explores this reformulation of melancholic subjectivity to come to terms with the possibilities of feminist solidarity across the colour line. This means considering the ways in which the writer estranges the psychoanalytic canon from the concerns of the centre, to trace the potentially revolutionary practices of peripheral subjectivities. Ultimately I suggest that the persistent themes of mythology and storytelling in *The Icarus Girl* and *Boy, Snow, Bird* reveal that Oyeyemi's construction of the ethics of solidarity is inextricably linked to the politics of representation.

Practical Magic: Metonymic Strategies & Diasporic Consciousness in *The Icarus Girl*

At the end of *The Icarus Girl*, the reader is left to deal with the indeterminate fate of Oyeyemi's girl-child protagonist. After a car accident, Jessamy awakes in what she calls 'The Bush. A wilderness. A wilderness for the mind', described as impermanently dry and arid.⁶⁶ The Bush is one of the three landscapes occupied by the *àbíkú* – the other two being the earth and the spirit world. It becomes clear that this geography is another site for the unyielding conflict between Jess and her opponent/doppelganger, TillyTilly. With the appearance of 'a sister-girl, one who could now call herself Wuraola where true names were asked for,' Jess finally takes on TillyTilly so that she is able to wake 'up and up and up and up.'⁶⁷ Wuraola is Jessamy's Yoruba name, and this 'sister-girl' is likely her lost twin. The battle between the girls, who at different moments in the narrative occupy the same body, is interesting, as it becomes an allegory for the struggle of mixed race subjectivity within the arena of feminist solidarity. Indeed The Bush, an *unheimlich* space separate from the sanctified realms of the earth and the spirit world, is reminiscent of Fanon's aforementioned conception of the zone of nonbeing: 'an extraordinarily sterile and arid region, an utterly naked declivity where an authentic upheaval can be born.'⁶⁸ The ambiguity of this final scene speaks to the uncertainty of "authentic upheaval" for the mixed race girl; the reader is left to question whether Jessamy's ultimate destination will be the earthly or the spiritual. However, her mere presence in The Bush indicates the girl's ability to transgress the boundaries

⁶⁵ Freud, S. 1933. "Lecture XXXIII: Femininity" in J. Strachey (trans.), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Vol. XXII* (1932 - 1936). London: The Hogarth Press. 132.

⁶⁶ Oyeyemi, H. 2006. 318.

⁶⁷ Ibid. 322.

⁶⁸ Fanon, F. 2008 (1967). C. L. Markmann (trans.), *Black Skin, White Masks* (Pluto Classics). London: Pluto Press. 2.

that bind her to the conventional practices of these *homed* spaces and so indicates her newly negotiated relations to the ethics of solidarity.

In a study on third-generation writing by women, Jane Bryce suggests that the “new Nigerian novel” re-negotiates its ties to the space of the national reality through the strategic deployment of an inessential (*unhomed*) image of female citizenship.⁶⁹ In a reading of *The Icarus Girl*, Bryce demonstrates the ways in which Oyeyemi’s use of magic realism offers her reader a revised version of a national mythology. According to Bryce, in blurring the lines between the *àbíkú* and the twin myths, Oyeyemi relieves the *àbíkú* of its negative iconography as well as its metonymic association with the tragic dialectic of Nigeria, alluded to in Ben Okri’s *The Famished Road* (1991).⁷⁰ Indeed, while TillyTilly sometimes represents an adversarial figure to Jess, she is also the protagonist’s most intimate companion. This implies an only partial fidelity, on behalf of the writer, to the characterisation of a prominent figure in Yoruba cosmology. This partial relation to the myth, in representing Jessamy’s contemporary material reality, indicates Oyeyemi’s negotiation of the turn to metonymic writing described by Brenda Cooper in *A New Generation of African Writers*. The deployment of the strategy of metonymy, in which the whole (the myth) is reflected in the part (the subject), establishes a dissonant relation between the African writer and the Western reader, thus mitigating the former of its fantasies of the latter.⁷¹ Cooper suggests that metonymic practice in writing by black women constitutes a decidedly political ploy, insofar as it uses the Western voyeur’s expectations of the exotic female subject to disrupt the presumably coherent field of realist representation.⁷² Cooper invokes the metonymic device in a reading of the representation of twinning in *The Icarus Girl*, proposing that Jessamy’s otherness is translated through the unbinding effect that the Yoruba identity has on her westernised subjectivity.⁷³ But Cooper does not address Oyeyemi’s strategic conflation of the twin and *àbíkú* myths and thus misses a crucial idiosyncrasy in the writer’s use of metonymy. Indeed, Oyeyemi’s invocation of multiple myths in an almost palimpsestic arrangement means that the deployment of metonymy works to consistently *refract* mythology through the subject. As such, the “metonymic gap” between Jessamy and what she seems to represent avoids closure even within the presumably reconciling space of the nation.

⁶⁹ Bryce, J. 2008. “Half and Half Children”: Third-Generation Women Writers and the New Nigerian Novel’ in *Research in African Literatures*. Vol: 39(2): 50.

⁷⁰ Bryce, J. 2008. 60.

⁷¹ Cooper, B. 2008. “Introduction” in *A New Generation of African Writers*. Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu Natal Press: 11.

⁷² Ibid: 17.

⁷³ Cooper, B. 2008. “Diaspora, gender and identity: Twinning in three diasporic novels” in *English Academy Review*. Vol. 25(2): 56.

Jessamy's uncanny pronunciation of her estranged mother tongue, Yoruba, in one of the final scenes of the book might signify the reconstitution of her identity within Nigerian borders: 'She took a deep breath. *'Ko si nkan-nkan,*' she replied at length, capturing the accent and even the lift in tone perfectly.'⁷⁴ The implication is that she is finally able to recapture her Nigerian-ness through the iteration of a perfectly accented Yoruba. This is validated when Biola, her cousin, teases, 'Hah! Bah, Jessamy, where is Iya Oyinbo?', to imply that the foreigner in Jess has gone missing.⁷⁵ Cooper also refers to this scene, using the goddess of the twins' non-language – she *'wasn't speaking in English, and it wasn't Yoruba either'*⁷⁶ – to suggest that it is the space between these languages that might result in her undoing.⁷⁷ Thus, Jessamy's articulation of Yoruba might be construed as an effort to save herself from 'the yawning abyss' of 'being between languages and cultures.'⁷⁸ However, as Christopher Ouma notes, the event has quite the opposite effect as it strikes up the argument between Jess's parents and her grandfather, leading the family to drive to Lagos, resulting in the maybe-fatal accident.⁷⁹ Ouma's reading of the text most meaningfully explores the ways in which Jessamy's racial and national identity intersects with the *àbíkú* myth to produce various ambivalences within the interpretive field with which the westernised subject is equipped. Indeed Oyeyemi's unbinding of the *àbíkú* from the markers of home, indicates the transnational, multicultural allegiances of '*diaspora-ized*'⁸⁰ subjects. In recognising this syncretic formulation of identity as disruptive, rather than necessarily redemptive or tragic, Ouma suggests that new diasporic writing performs an even less "seamless" connection to the national narrative than the deployment of mythology might imply. Certainly, as both Bryce and Ouma suggest, new Nigerian writers are more concerned with uncovering fictive terrains onto which identity is mapped than rendering them wholly interpretable.⁸¹ This suggests that writers like Oyeyemi critically assail the category of the nation by exploring the ways in which it nullifies the possibility of identification for those wilfully exorcised from this regime.

In pinpointing the tragic implications of Jessamy's linguistic recovery, Ouma delineates a scene that explores one of the inaugural tensions in the text – the relationship between Jessamy's mother, Sarah, and

⁷⁴ Oyeyemi, H. 2006. 309.

⁷⁵ Ibid. 310.

⁷⁶ Ibid. 103.

⁷⁷ Cooper, B. 2008. 55.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ouma, C. 2014. "Reading the Diasporic *Abiku* in Helen Oyeyemi's *The Icarus Girl*" in *Research in African Literatures*, Vol. 45(3): 201.

⁸⁰ My use of this word represents a further corruption of Stuart Hall's 'ugly term' '*diaspora-ization*' coined in a chapter entitled "New Ethnicities" (1996) in, D. Morley & K. Chen (eds.) *Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*. London, New York: Routledge, 1996. 441-449.

⁸¹ Bryce, J. 2008. 64. & Ouma, C. 2014. 202.

Jessamy's grandfather, Gbenga Oyegbebi. The hostility between these two characters sets up the generic dynamic between the *homed* paternal figure, who becomes a representation of the nation and tradition, and the *diaspora-ized* child, who has betrayed that nation and tradition for a life elsewhere. Sarah's deviation from the path her father sets out for her is indicative of the diaspora's subversion of the hierarchies and ideals of home. Significantly, when Jessamy's grandfather divulges to his granddaughter her mother's treachery, he suggests that he thinks that Sarah ' . . . doesn't know what she's doing at all, at all, but follows some other person inside her that tells her to do things that make no sense.'⁸² This characterisation is not dissimilar to how one might describe Jessamy's strange disposition. As such, Sarah's reaction to her daughter's behaviour is implicated in the generational dissonance within the different stages of *diaspora-ization*.

Sarah presumably initiates the family's first trip to Nigeria to draw Jessamy out of her self-imposed alienation, a way of being that she associates with England.⁸³ Her grandfather's house, therefore, represents the prospect of intimacy for Jess. Inasmuch as this means intimacy with others (a family), it also presupposes a newfound intimacy with herself (where she stands within this family). As Ouma points out, Oyegbebi means "kinship lives here" – signifying her grandfather's role in "rooting" Jess. This is further intimated when her grandfather calls her by her name:

Who?

She froze, not knowing what to say or do.

Of course, she knew that Wuraola was her Yoruba name, the name her grandfather had asked in a letter for her to be called when her mother had held her Nigerian naming ceremony. Wuraola means gold.

She *knew* all this.⁸⁴

Jessamy's grandfather's persistence in calling her Wuraola (her name that is also not her name) is a part of his project of interpolating his granddaughter into the traditional realm that Sarah has forsaken. The fact that she '*knew* all this' suggests her re-familiarisation with a forgotten history on herself and her grandfather becomes the key to accessing it. As such, Jessamy consistently enamours herself to him, seeking his approval as his daughter. Part of this dynamic suggests that she might have to pick sides between the two hostile parties of her mother and grandfather: 'Jess wasn't sure whose side she was supposed to be on if her grandfather told her something really bad and the secret about her mother.'⁸⁵ And

⁸² Oyeyemi, H. 2006 26.

⁸³ Ibid. 5.

⁸⁴ Ibid. 19.

⁸⁵ Ibid. 26.

though finding out that her mother abandoned her father's dream to become a writer is not a bad enough secret for Jess to forsake her, the secret of her lost twin sister might be.

After TillyTilly divulges the secret of the lost twin, Jess imagines what it would have been like to share her room with a sister.⁸⁶ What really seems to hurt Jess is that her mother has kept from her the *memory* of her twin, leaving her without the grammar to express her feelings of loss: 'Did I have . . . Was there two of me?' At the last minute Jess realised that she couldn't say 'sister'; the word wouldn't fall off her tongue.'⁸⁷ Once she finds out that Jess knows about Fern, Sarah immediately expresses regret for not doing an *ibeji* carving for her – a special sculpture meant to symbolise the soul of the deceased twin, thus rooting the living in the earthly realm.⁸⁸ Jessamy's *àbíkú* condition thus signals to Sarah the retribution she faces for not properly performing traditional rites. As such, the rebounding effects of the "secret" are rationalised within the guilt complex of the diaspora in its ambivalence towards an African home. In this way, Jess's condition necessarily vindicates her grandfather's resentment towards Sarah's betrayal. The family's return to Nigeria becomes an opportunity to "fix" these forsaken rites – to once and for all reconcile Jess with her Yoruba ancestry. So when Jess spontaneously picks up Yoruba, the expectation is that this constitutes a sort of wish-fulfilment for Gbenga Oyegbebi. However, when Jess addresses him, '. . . he stood up and shook a finger at Jess with an expression of anger crossing his face, one familiar to Sarah . . .'⁸⁹ Gbenga's anger, in its familiarity to Sarah, suggests Jess's own subversion of his expectations for her.

Her disrespect towards her grandfather in expressing '*Fi mi sile, Baba Gbenga, fi mi le, e joo,*' which is translated as Jess telling her grandfather to leave her alone, is rationalised by Biola as the Iya Oyinbo not going '*too far after all.*'⁹⁰ In other words, Jessamy's disrespect is associated with her foreignness, just as her mother's is for her pursuit of foreignness. Hereafter, Gbenga refers to Jess as *your daughter* when talking to Sarah, when before he called her *my daughter*. What is interesting, however, is that '*Fi mi sile, Baba Gbenga, fi mi le, e joo*' is more of a plea than an all-out expression of disrespect and might actually indicate Wuraola's entreaty for her grandfather to grant her deliverance. Thus, this signifies the Yoruba dimension of Jessamy's subjectivity asking for her grandfather to no longer circumscribe her identity within his ideals. Gbenga's threat to exercise this insubordinate element of Jess's personality is what sets off the series of events that lead to his granddaughter's entrapment in the *unheimlich* space of The Bush.

⁸⁶ Oyeyemi, H. 2006. 171 – 172.

⁸⁷ Ibid. 173.

⁸⁸ Ibid. 174.

⁸⁹ Ibid. 311.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

Queer Representations in *The Icarus Girl*

While all the aforementioned readings of *The Icarus Girl* reiterate the effects of national, cultural and racial hybridity in shaping the protagonist's uncanny subjectivity, none invoke Jess's potential queerness as possibly amplifying these conditions. Certainly it is difficult to read the eight-year-old character in this way because of the necessarily limited indication of her sexuality. There is, of course, the setting up of Tunde Coker (Jessamy's only Nigerian classmate) as a possible love object, though she consistently ignores his companionship. Tunde's appearance in the text seems, more than anything, to offer an alternative way of being for Jess. Indeed he is characterised as the self-appointed peacekeeper 'between warring factions' in the classroom, while Jess often becomes the originator of conflict.⁹¹ Tunde is a Nigerian who is able to inhabit the same space relatively successfully, and so Jess's interest in him seems punctuated by this observation. As such, Tunde's assimilation and Jess's outsidership exemplifies Oyeyemi's preoccupation with gender as a category that is productive of the fault-lines of diasporic experience. This gendered focus is most obviously invoked in the book's title; Icarus, a male figure in Greek mythology, is consolidated with a female subject, a manoeuvre even more confounding in the narrative's conjuring of the feminine *àbíkú*. Indeed what Oyeyemi's title seems to be summoning is a consideration of where the "girl" fits into tragic constraints of the Icarus myth. The transgression of the gendered ideals of what is framed as the masculine project of hubris constitutes the underlying dialectic of the text.

According to Diana Adosela Mafe, this subversion of 'traditionally androcentric' narratives is one of the reasons why *The Icarus Girl* lends itself to a postcolonial gothic reading.⁹² Indeed, other than Mafe, Jordan Stouck (2011), Sarah Illot and Chloe Buckley (2015) have all used the gothic as a point of entry into the text. But what I find interesting about this type of intervention is the connections it makes with the subject of the queer. Indeed Stouck uses the gothic to suggest that the formal constraints of the genre work to undo the circumscription of the marginal figure – 'social, sexual and racial "others"' – in realist texts.⁹³ Mair Rigby suggests that it is in the gothic's investment in the dimension of the uncanny that renders it so useful to queer scholars: ' . . . it appears to be based on a sense of a 'secret encounter' in which the texts bring to light something that ought to be repressed, something that feels particularly

⁹¹ Oyeyemi, H. 2006. 83.

⁹² Mafe, D. A. 2012. "Ghostly Girls in the "Eerie Bush": Helen Oyeyemi's *The Icarus Girl* as Postcolonial Female Gothic Fiction" in *Research in African Literatures*, Vol. 43(3): 23.

⁹³ Stouck, J. 2011. "Abjecting Hybridity in Helen Oyeyemi's *The Icarus Girl* in *Ariel: A Review of International English Literature*, Vol. 41(2): 98.

pertinent to people whose identities, bodies, and desires have been culturally designated ‘queer’.⁹⁴ Rigby’s delineation of the uncanny is of course drawn from Freudian thesis in “Das Unheimliche” (1919). For Freud the *unheimlich*, which may be translated as “unhomely”, denotes that which is kept concealed or secret.⁹⁵ Freud’s term becomes useful when exploring diasporic identity, but also in understanding the formal concerns of diasporic writing, as it comes to grips with the shadowy manifestations of the myths of home in spaces that exist outside of that home.

Jessamy’s inability to voice her sense of loss is linked to having her identity consistently circumscribed through her relation to home and the diaspora. In other words, Jess is viewed as queer and apprehends herself a queer because the hermeneutic regime that her mixed heritage sets up for her is either not enough or too much to adequately deal with what she represents. This dilemma is foreshadowed from the beginning of the narrative; in the opening scene Jess is found hiding in the cupboard because outside she ‘. . . 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.’⁹⁶ She is unable to render herself, or the world outside, coherently and so she chooses to conceal herself. As such, we are introduced to Jess as a closeted character who, after being forced to deal with the strange effect Tilly Tilly has on her, must “come out”. Significantly, according to Freud’s argument, the feeling of uncertainty that the uncanny inspires is experienced with infantile anxiety when the authority of the gaze is threatened in such a way that excites the ‘peculiarly violent and obscure emotion’ of the “castration complex”.⁹⁷ Jessamy both experiences and enacts this complex when she is forced to face the outside world. The most obvious element of her identity that inspires this relation to her is her skin colour and mixed parentage; Colleen, Jessamy’s playground enemy, remarks that Jess’s episodes are because ‘. . . she can’t make up her mind whether she’s black or white!’⁹⁸ It is clear from Colleen’s appraisal of Jess’s psyche that it is more her own complex that arouses this racist remark than any real insight into her mind. Colleen’s off-colour diagnosis of Jess, somewhat pre-empts Dr McKenzie’s conclusion that Jess suffers from Dissociative Identity Disorder, a psychological condition that is notoriously subject to misdiagnosis. Interestingly, a form of DID is gender dysphoria, a condition that some transgender people are mistakenly diagnosed with when seeking psychotherapy.⁹⁹ Thus DID,

⁹⁴ Rigby, M. 2009. “Uncanny Recognition: Queer Theory’s Debt to the Gothic” in *Gothic Studies*, Vol. 11(1): 48.

⁹⁵ Freud, S. 2003. D. McClintock (trans.), “The Uncanny”. London: Penguin Books. 132.

⁹⁶ Oyeyemi, H. 2006. 4.

⁹⁷ Freud, S. 2003. 140.

⁹⁸ Oyeyemi, H. 2006. 86.

⁹⁹ Bess, J. A. & Stabb, S. D. 2009. “The Experiences of Transgendered Persons in Psychotherapy: Voices and Recommendations” in *Journal of Mental Health Counseling*. Vol. 31(3): 266.

like the classification of hysteria, often becomes a means of pathologising the *other* so as to make the *self* comfortable around its “otherness”.

The *àbíkú* contains the potential of a dual gender identity. This possibility is evoked, for instance, in Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* (1958), in which Okonkwo says of his *àbíkú* daughter, Ezinma, “‘She should have been a boy’”.¹⁰⁰ Ezinma’s androgyny performs the queer dimensions of identity by figuring the *àbíkú* as potentially between gender. Okonkwo’s investment in Ezinma as the ideal son (a proxy for his surrogate son, Ikemefuna, who is also narratively death-bound) suggests the possibly revolutionary inheritance of the *àbíkú*. Oyeyemi further disrupts the simplistic gendering of the *àbíkú* as female in her confounding the figure with the twin myth. The ambivalence produced by this conflation is explored when Sarah shows Jess a picture of an *ibeji* carving in a book entitled *All About Africa*. The *ibeji* is a talisman specific to the twin myth and is carved in the likeness of the deceased. As Jess appraises the image the reader is told, ‘It was a boy twin, but despite that, it was familiar.’¹⁰¹ The carving is familiar because she has come across a similar impression of a woman drawn in charcoal in The Boys’ Quarters behind her grandfather’s house, a space that she is consistently confronted with in her nightmares. This sense of familiarity is contrasted with the sense of dread that she experiences whenever she is faced with the woman in the charcoal drawing. Indeed this moment of familiarity is rare amidst the feelings of estrangement that Jess experiences throughout the novel.

The image of the boy twin *ibeji* carving finally equips her with the system of signs she needs to make sense of the uncanny likenesses that she has been inundated with. The Boys’ Quarters, the part of her grandfather’s compound where TillyTilly lives, is a space fraught with uncertainty for Jess. When it is pointed out to her, Jess’s expression of confusion warrants Aunt Funke’s explanation, ‘That doesn’t mean that only boys can go in there, it’s just that your great-grandfather had it built for servants . . .’ and also that it is ‘Certainly not fit for anybody to live in!’¹⁰² Thus the place is already imbued with scenes of abjection, making it even more bewildering for Jess to imagine TillyTilly living there. But because TillyTilly *is* there, the space is also associated with the revelation of companionship. Indeed Jess is actually more drawn to the Boys’ Quarters than she is put out by it. As such, Oyeyemi suggests that the system of meaning most familiar to the diasporic subject – the hermeneutic regime that is translated through the experience of *diaspora-ization* – always moves towards the queer.

¹⁰⁰ Achebe, C. 2000. *Things Fall Apart*. Heinemann: Johannesburg. 45.

¹⁰¹ Oyeyemi, H. 2006. 86.

¹⁰² *Ibid.* 32.

Oyeyemi's concern with the dimensions of representation suggests that the writer might be less concerned with coming to grips with the subject (*what* does Jess mean?) and more concerned with the forces that delineate the image of the subject (*how* does Jess mean?). Before the girl defies her grandfather in Yoruba, her mother asks her '*Kilo de?*' ('What's the matter?'), to which Jess responds, '*Ko si nkan-nkan*' which can mean 'Nothing' or 'Nothing's the matter' or 'There is no matter.'¹⁰³ This response possibly indicates Jess's assertion that there is nothing wrong with her, literally that there is nothing that her mother needs to concern herself with. Sarah's and Gbenga's efforts to "fix" Jess, through Western and African healing rites, are thus contrasted to TillyTilly's rationalisation in the face of her comrade's visit to Dr McKenzie, 'What do you need *help* for?' and 'You want *him* to make you like *them*?'¹⁰⁴ Jess being made to shoulder the meaning of the mystical schema of the *àbíkú*, what it means to have a partial connection to a Continent that is similarly endowed with meaning, is what ultimately forces her to retreat into 'The Bush. A wilderness. A wilderness *for the mind*.'¹⁰⁵ The construction of a space that is *for the mind*, wherein the material body may retreat, is reminiscent of the enigmatic phrase that Fanon closes *Black Skin, White Masks* with, 'My final prayer: O my body, make of me always a man who questions!'¹⁰⁶ In this line Fanon invokes three dimensions of identity, the spiritual, the bodily and the intellectual, to round off a thesis that suggests that it is the fantasy of the black subject, as no more than a body, which animates racial prejudice. Fanon thus suggests that this construction of blackness might be assailed through the critical reconstitution of these parts – the difficult recognition of the *other-as-self* and the *self-as-other*. Thus, when Jess finds herself in The Bush she is able to reconcile her own image with the queer apparition of Fern that has haunted her memories, a process that is in no way conceived as seamless or rooting.

Estranging Race in *Boy, Snow, Bird*

What most markedly separates the subject of *Boy, Snow, Bird* from that of *The Icarus Girl* is its relation to the Continent. Certainly, while the earlier text is concerned with the prospects of identification for the "new" diaspora, the spatial and temporal regime set up in *Boy, Snow, Bird* indicates the necessarily shifted landscape of the "old" diaspora. Oyeyemi's narrative of blackness in America, as it emerges out of the system of slavery, warrants a negotiation of the terms of reference made available to the diaspora through the formulation of African American identity. Indeed if *The Icarus Girl* is preoccupied with the

¹⁰³ Oyeyemi, H. 2006. 309.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid. 121.

¹⁰⁵ Italics my own.

¹⁰⁶ Fanon, F. 2008. 181.

condition of the diasporic subject untethered from the site of meaning that Africa represents, then the later text is dealing with what it means for the *self* to maintain a considerably less familiar relation to the African *self-as-other*. In being prescient of this, Oyeyemi's representation of the queer dimensions of identity is more distinctly tied to the implications of the total displacement of blackness as a culturally constitutive category in the white world. While Jessamy is deemed strange because she finds it difficult to *pass* in the white world, the emptying out of the category of blackness opens up the prospect of transgressing the rules set out by white systems of representations. As such, while *Boy, Snow, Bird* seemingly offers a picture of a landscape that the reader ought to be familiar with, the strange negotiation of the racial category renders the space uncanny.

While *Boy, Snow, Bird* does not explicitly invoke *àbíkú* cosmology, the writer's insistence on the theme of a sisterhood that must negotiate the terms of interracial solidarity suggests a similar preoccupation with the *àbíkú's* power of crossing. The three protagonists, Boy, Snow and Bird, constitute the racialised trinity of female mixed race subjectivity – the white mother, the black sister-mother and the mixed race sister-girl. Just as the mythic identity of the *àbíkú* is disrupted through the transnational space that Jessamy straddles, the American backdrop of *Boy, Snow, Bird* presents to the reader an uncanny political geography in which the racial category is circumscribed by the confounding narrative of *passing*. Indeed the novel is concerned with the ethics of crossing between spaces of racial oppression and freedom, but also with the prospect of transgressing the bounds of femininity. The complicated negotiation of race and gender is implicated in Oyeyemi's strategic mis-naming of her characters, introducing her readers to a male mother, a truly white sister-mother and a definitely black sister-girl. This process of mis-naming is indicative of the crisis of the category as it comes into contact with a *trans* identity politics. The writer's consideration of *trans* identity is most explicitly evoked through the outing of Boy's father as transgender, which is necessarily paralleled to the practice of racial passing in America. While *The Icarus Girl* has the most scholarship behind it, the intersection of gender and race through the metaphor of passing that is explored in the more recent text necessitates a re-reading of Jessamy's story. Indeed the reading of racial solidarity through the concerns of transgender identity offered by *Boy, Snow, Bird*, mobilises the undoing of the "girl" as a defined and stable subject and thus reimagines the prospect of a queer subjectivity.

In *Boy, Snow, Bird*, Oyeyemi strategically suspends the depiction of race as a marker of difference. This ploy is similar to the way in which Toni Morrison explodes the prospect of racial categorisation in the

opening line of *Paradise* (1997): ‘They shoot the white girl first.’¹⁰⁷ In the cast of black characters, ‘the white girl’ is only white in appearance. This dilemma of racial representation is precisely what Oyeyemi tackles in presenting the strategy of *passing* in the States. Oyeyemi deliberately manipulates her readers’ generic expectations of her oeuvre by not writing characters that immediately present themselves as black. Because of this, the reader buys into the scheme that presents whiteness as the touchstone of representation. This assumption is directly tied to the way in which the writer scaffolds genre in the narrative. Indeed, if we have come to associate Oyeyemi’s execution of magic realism in her early works, such as in *The Icarus Girl* and *The Opposite House* (2007), with her engagement with the black diasporic imagination, then it might follow that her recent foray into the fairytale brings with it necessarily different concerns. Significantly, Oyeyemi pre-empts this in *The Icarus Girl* when Jess asks Sarah why she does not read fairytales to her (‘I do, Jess! I tell you the African ones, don’t I?’), and tries to understand what the apparitions of Fern mean in terms of the tale of “Sleeping Beauty”.¹⁰⁸ Oyeyemi uses the preconception that the performance of black magic is occluded from the stage of white magic. In other words, the writer exposes the ambivalent relation maintained by the Western reader towards black writing through the assumption that, if it is not identifiably exotic, it is by default concerned with white identity.

The strategy that uses an assumed white identity politics to conceal the racial subject, mobilised in *Boy, Snow, Bird*, is similarly deployed by James Baldwin in *Giovanni’s Room* (1956). Baldwin’s second novel explores Parisian homosexual subculture, a space and subject seemingly far removed from the Harlem the author wrote about in *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953). As such, the narrative is not recognisably concerned with race. But, as Chris Abani suggests, Baldwin’s story about what it is to be gay in a world where queerness is proscribed is not *not* about race because both types of narrative deal with ‘the existential melancholy we all carry, that of knowing there is more to us, and wrestling with the frustration that it will always be out of reach, darting into our peripheral vision when we are lucky.’¹⁰⁹ In other words, in inconspicuously intersecting queer identity with black identity, Baldwin illustrates that estranging the representation of the *other* means that the prospect of narrating the *self* is necessarily constrained. Valerie Rohy goes as far as to suggest that *Giovanni’s Room* is itself a narrative of passing insofar as it ‘articulates the ways in which identities, including “nationality,” “race,” and “sexuality,” are retrospective, indeed nostalgic, constructions, subject to the pathos of lost origins . . .’¹¹⁰ In *Boy, Snow,*

¹⁰⁷ Morrison, T. 2016. *Paradise*. London: Vintage. 3.

¹⁰⁸ Oyeyemi, H. 2006. 176.

¹⁰⁹ Abani, C. 2013. “A Young Seminarian Found Comfort In ‘Giovanni’s’ Melancholy” in *NPR: Books*. <http://www.npr.org/2013/12/28/257375561/a-young-seminarian-found-comfort-in-giovanis-melancholy>

¹¹⁰ Rohy, V. 1996. “Displacing Desire: Passing, Nostalgia, and *Giovanni’s Room*” in E.K. Ginsberg (ed.), *Passing and the Fictions of Identity*. London: Duke University Press. 219.

Bird this retrospective logic unfolds as Oyeyemi prefaces an interpretation of the text that is at first particularly concerned with the female subject, and thereafter considers the identity of the black subject, and then finally comes to grips with the transgender subject. The teleology of the narrative extends from the event of the daughter, Boy, leaving home but ultimately returns home to reconcile with her transgender father. In this way, the writer uses the narrative to uncover the ways in which these identities converge through the queer landscape. In displacing the reader's standard hermeneutic regimes for dealing with a "black novel" or a "queer novel", Oyeyemi demonstrates the ways in which these potentially disruptive subjectivities are *always* implicated in the regimes of text. In other words, *Boy, Snow, Bird* is concerned with uncovering the possibility that although the *other* is rendered invisible through the mythologising effect of the grand narrative, it does not mean that the *other* is not there or that the *self* does not *know* that the *other* exists.

The dynamic in which the otherwise spectral *other* is metonymically reflected through its relation to the *self* is evoked after Boy gives birth to her mixed race daughter, Bird. While her mother-in-law, Olivia, insinuates that Boy probably two-timed her husband, Boy muses, 'Now that I knew about her it was incredible that I hadn't seen it before. Or had I? Tea with her and Agnes and Vivian had made me think of Sidonie; it hadn't just been my mind wandering.'¹¹¹ Sidonie is a young black girl who lives on the outskirts of Flax Hill and who Boy had taken a strange interest in. The event calls into question the narrative of racial purity in the white American imagination that persists despite the knowledge, or *memory*, of the norm of racial mixing. During the tea party Boy refers to, her mind drifts to Sidonie because the young girl makes her feel uneasy about her own whiteness, a whiteness seemingly magnified in Olivia's home:

"That's the kind of girl that exists out there, less than a mile away from those linen curtains. But if you saw her without talking to her, she'd make you paranoid in a way that only a colored girl can make a white woman paranoid. That unreadable look they give us; it's really shocking somehow, isn't it? Kind of like staring in at the window of your home, but not in a way that gets you scared you'll be robbed. No it's a different kind of stare. A stare that says 'I don't particularly like being outside, but I don't want to come in, either'"

Oyeyemi evokes these characters – Boy, Boy's future in-laws and Sidonie – within the prospective family home. Boy's desire to talk about Sidonie and other black girls like her in terms of the home is significant here as it evokes the woman's reckoning with the unfulfilled *homed* ideal. The implication of the imminence of the imagined 'colored girl' once again invokes the *unheimliche* subject who incurs on the

¹¹¹ Oyeyemi, H. 2014. *Boy, Snow, Bird*. London: Picador. 134.

seemingly stable terrain of the insider. Boy's reference to the "stare" of the colored girl is deemed unsettling precisely because it infers the same 'castration complex' that is associated with the uncanny in that it undermines the hegemonic gaze of the white woman. The imagined dynamic between the 'colored girl' and the 'white woman', that constructs the former as always at arm's length, is experienced simultaneously with a sense of nostalgic longing and a feeling of paranoid anxiety. This strange admixture of sentimentality and threat invokes the melancholic relation that is maintained between the *self* and the racially different *other* – the *other* actively resisting the interpolating gaze of the *self*, while the *self* attempts to un-remember the source of this resistance.

As I suggested in my introduction, queer subjectivity is deemed menacing because it defies the imposition of the formal dimensions of the category. In resisting the reader's instinctive desire for the regime of racial classification for the first part of *Boy, Snow, Bird*, Oyeyemi is directly engaging with the effects of this disruptive subjectivity on the coherence of the interpretive field. In framing the novel as a retelling of a well-loved fairytale, Oyeyemi immediately sets up the inadequacies of this parent text. Indeed as *Boy, Snow, Bird* deals with the ways in which the ideals of womanhood intersect with racial prejudice, the text engages with the mythical dimensions of the aesthetic regimes invoked in the story of *Snow White*. By reinstating the figure of the Woman of Colour within the framework of these narratives, Oyeyemi disrupts the seamless association of whiteness with beauty and virtue. The Whitman clan deals with Bird's birth anxiously because her appearance in the family portrait necessarily undoes the illusion of whiteness that her older sister, Snow, once maintained. As such, Snow is herself exorcised from the narrative to make space for Bird to live free of the stifling standards imbued by her sister. This strategy, adopted by Boy for the protection of her daughter, is rendered unsuccessful as the loss of the sister-girl manifests itself in Bird through the same hysterical symptoms experienced by her mother.

Boy, Snow and Bird are all faced with uncanny visions of themselves. These strange reflections seem to indicate the implications of a melancholic relation to a source of undiscovered female companionship. Indeed the apparition of herself that Boy encounters in the street is probably a hallucination of her mother trying to divulge the secret that has so violently divided them.¹¹² By reiterating these symptoms of loss, Oyeyemi delineates the incongruences of a system of representation that relies on the absence of the *other*. The various attempts made to summon these lost companions, therefore, suggest that the recuperation of the *other* must be intervened through the choice to recognise and negotiate the myths of representation.

¹¹² Oyeyemi, H. 2014. 61.

Rediscovering the Other

In a correspondence between Bird and her exiled sister, the girls exchange stories of La Belle Capuchine. Bird retells the story as it was told to her by Grammy Olivia's now retrenched maid, Leah, probably her only meaningful point of contact with African American culture. As Bird tells the story of La Belle Capuchine, she is a house slave who takes on her mistresses identity, a woman who shares so many of her own features that she is probably actually her sister. Bird prefaces her retelling like this, 'If you wish to be truly free, you must love no one. But of course if you take that path you may find that in the end you're unloved.'¹¹³ Her fellow slaves regard La Belle Capuchine's deft imitation of Miss Margaux, to gain a place in the Big House, as treachery. So when High John the Conqueror comes to free the slaves, he mistakes Miss Margaux for La Belle Capuchine and spares her, taking all the people with him and leaving the real La Belle Capuchine deserted on the plantation. But Snow's La Belle Capuchine is a powerful, 'poison damsel' that has ended the world seventeen times and will never be defeated.¹¹⁴ Snow's story is an obvious mix of the *Snow White* story and *Sleeping Beauty*, only waking La Belle Capuchine unleashes her fury rather than her love. Snow thinks at first that her Aunt Clara, who is Arturo's exiled black sister, told her the story but it turns out that she made it up in her most melancholic state ('I thought that beauty was bad. I must have come up with my Belle Capuchine then').¹¹⁵

This exchange is interesting for a number of reasons: First it illustrates the centrality of storytelling in Oyeyemi's narrative, but it also demonstrates the importance of story-making. Bird's ability to take up Leah's story inducts her into an African American storytelling tradition. This allows her to recapture a nostalgic longing for a culture that she is otherwise evicted from. Snow's already knowing of La Belle Capuchine is indicative of her altered position in the narrative; her move to Boston has introduced her to the blackness that was previously repressed. These stories are recounted through letters, galvanising their sisterly relationship by developing an archive (a language) for the articulation of their shared heritage. Moreover, the stories of La Belle Capuchine capture the feelings of alienation experienced by both sisters and their own thoughts on whether that alienation can be thought of as freedom and empowerment. Bird's story suggests that the alternative for La Belle Capuchine is love, but more specifically love for her fellow slave. In the story she takes her imitation of Miss Margaux so far that she treats the other slaves as if she were really better than them. She shirks a potential suitor by refusing to even recognise his presence: "Is

¹¹³ Oyeyemi, H. 2014. 223.

¹¹⁴ Ibid. 230.

¹¹⁵ Ibid. 231.

someone speaking? For a moment I thought I heard somebody speak.”¹¹⁶ Thus the story uncovers the implications of disavowing the voice of the black *other*. Indeed La Belle Capuchine’s imitation is so complete that she begins to think and speak like her mistress. The story is obviously paralleled to the Whitman’s legacy of passing but it is less of an indictment of passing itself, as a means of survival, and more a charge against the wilful eviction of blackness, from regimes of representation, for the protection of white privilege.

Bird’s La Belle Capuchine exercises her freedom from blackness, while Snow’s exercises her freedom to blackness – two freedoms that the worlds created for the girls are meant to champion. The incompleteness of these realms, as they are both maintained by dissecting blackness so that it is made partial to the whole, contributes to the girls’ experiences of uncanniness. In other words, when individual identity cannot be mobilised through a metonymic relation to the cultural whole, the partiality of identity becomes jarring in its inability to contain meaning. This indicates the loss of the *signifier* within the world of the *sign*. Bird experiences this when she looks in the mirror: ‘Sometimes mirrors can’t find me. I’ll go into a room with a mirror in it and look around, and I’m not there. Not all the time, not even most of the time, but often enough.’¹¹⁷ One day she breaks a mirror that refuses to show her her face and, in an effort to give her what she wants to see, it reflects back to her partial renderings of other people, some she recognises and others she does not but they are all (at least apparently) white.¹¹⁸ Bird’s relation to the mirror is evocative of Fanon’s summoning of Lacan’s theory of the mirror period: ‘. . . the tendencies that currently constitute reality for the subject; the mirror image, precisely because of these affinities, affords a good symbol of that reality.’¹¹⁹ The mirror ought to reflect back to the subject the image that contains the illusory and material dimensions that form subjectivity – ‘the mental oneness which is inherent in him.’¹²⁰ Fanon suggests that the image apprehended by the black subject is always through its relation to the cultural signifiers of whiteness, rendering blackness only partially signified.¹²¹ Bird’s inability to recuperate her own mirror image is thus related to the repression of the black subject within her home. The girl attempts to figure out what might be the reason for her absent reflection by mapping out exactly ‘What is known about this Bird Whitman.’¹²² She finally lands on the biggest mystery about herself – her sister, Snow. Thus, her decision to write Snow becomes an effort to recuperate an image of *herself*.

¹¹⁶ Oyeyemi, H. 2014. 225.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.156.

¹¹⁸ Ibid. 157.

¹¹⁹ Lacan in Fanon. 2008. 124.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Ibid.126.

¹²² Oyeyemi, H. 2014. 163.

I suggested that Jessamy's inability to represent her loss, because she is not allowed the memory of Fern, is what makes the appearance of her doppelgänger so unsettling. In his thesis on the uncanny, Freud raises the effect of the doppelgänger on the subject of the apparition, ' . . . a person may identify himself (sic) with another and so become unsure of his true self; or he may substitute the other's self for his own. The self may thus be duplicated, divided and interchanged.'¹²³ As such, the double enacts a sort of self-dispossession on behalf of the subject by reconciling its image with that of the *other* – the *self* becomes *other* and vice versa. This process is necessarily dramatised when Jess and TillyTilly swap bodies and subject positions. What is interesting about Oyeyemi's construction of the doppelgänger is that she does not formulate this process as altogether destructive, and neither does Freud, who suggests that although the materialisation of a double might indicate the subject's narcissism, the double might also perform the function of self-observation and self-criticism. In other words, the double fulfils the role of the subject's conscience.¹²⁴ Freud reveals that the doppelgänger appears uncanny to the subject because it represents a phase in the construction of the ego that has been forgotten or repressed – the moment prior to the attainment of the “mental oneness” referred to by Lacan. Freud's suggestion that the ego is constituted through the suppression of the ego-criticising faculty is important because it is precisely an understanding of this that Fanon takes up in *Black Skin, White Masks*.

Fanon infers that his hope in writing the book is that it will ' . . . become a mirror with a progressive infrastructure in which it will be possible to discern the Negro on the road to disalienation.'¹²⁵ He extends this theme with his comparison of the *eye* to a mirror, 'not merely a mirror, but a correcting mirror. The *eye* should make it possible for us to correct cultural errors.'¹²⁶ The notion of a 'correcting mirror' invokes the self-criticising faculty that necessarily disrupts the apparent “mental oneness” of the ego. Fanon's formulation of the black subject as alienated suggests that it is the reflection of the *self*, a reflection that performs “mental oneness”, that provokes this condition. The summoning of the *eye* is also important for its containment of the authority of representation. The *eye* is in no way a passive mirror, but a correcting one. As such Fanon implies that, to counteract the ambivalence to the image, the *eye* must negotiate its relation to the image through the system of representation. The uncanny likeness of the doppelgänger (not quite the *self* but close enough), and its visitation, becomes mimetic of the

¹²³ Freud, S. 2003. 144.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Fanon. 2008. 141 - 142.

¹²⁶ Ibid. 156.

reappearance of the lost sister. Freud suggests that the doppelgänger destroys the illusion of free-will.¹²⁷ As such, the lost sister becomes instrumental in coming to grips with the terms of the freedom of the *self*, and the enslavement of the *other*, by reflecting the point of intersection between these two subjectivities – the *self-as-other*.

The dilemma of representing, or recuperating, the *other* – a problem faced by Jess in her inability to remember Fern, and by Bird who cannot understand the exile of Snow – is reminiscent of Judith Butler’s formulation of what it is to express grief:

I might try to tell a story here about what I am feeling, but it would have to be a story in which the very "I" who seeks to tell the story is stopped in the midst of the telling; the very "I" is called into question by its relation to the Other, a relation that does not precisely reduce me to speechlessness, but does nevertheless clutter my speech with signs of its undoing.¹²⁸

Butler suggests that the *other* undoes the faculty of the *self* to perfectly represent the depth of one’s loss. As such, it is only through the disavowal of the voice of the *other* that the narrative of the *self* is rendered coherent. This notion is invoked in Bird’s story of La Belle Capuchine, who rejects love in favour of freedom – rejects solidarity for the prospect of self-empowerment. Butler infers that this wilful disavowal of the *other* is implicated in the discursive dimensions of feminism through ‘the imposition of values on cultural contexts wilfully unknown.’¹²⁹ Freud explains that melancholia proceeds ‘from a mental constellation of revolt, which has then, by a certain process, passed over into the crushed state of melancholia’ and that it is involved in ‘the process of regression from narcissistic object-choice to narcissism.’¹³⁰ From this we can garner that revolt and the narcissistic object-choice constitute one power that may be impoverished to create the crushed state and narcissism. This cross over, from one state of power to another, is made possible only by the fact that melancholia is characterised by ambivalence.

If we consider that feminism is marked by a loss – the loss of freedom, a space wherein women’s otherness is not censured – then we can understand how the movement can be deemed melancholic. The nostalgic fiction of utopian feminist discourses can only survive so long the disruptive *other* is left unrepresented, and their loss disavowed. The revelation of Boy’s mother’s adoption of a transgender identity, after her rape, elucidates the ways in which the performance of a hegemonic gender category

¹²⁷ Freud, S. 2003. 144.

¹²⁸ Butler, J. 2004. “Violence, Mourning, Politics” in *Precarious Life*. London: Verso. 23.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.* 41.

¹³⁰ Freud, S. 1957. "Mourning and Melancholia (1917) in J. Strachey (trans.), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. 250.

becomes a means of defiance. But in Boy's father's attempt to contain, or complete, the image of masculinity that he creates, he disavows his female progeny who is also a reflection of his former femininity. This illustrates the problem of attempting to reconstitute the *self* through the closure of the melancholic relation to the *other*. As Butler suggests, queer subjectivity is only disruptive insofar as it is 'a copy of a copy' that challenges the ideal of the original.¹³¹ In other words, the melancholic subjectivity can only retain its revolutionary potential if it does not attempt to erase its ambivalent relation to reality but instead exposes it.

The scheme of wilful unknowing is one that is consistently resisted by the sister characters in Oyeyemi's novels, even when in the process of knowing becomes detrimental to their "mental oneness". As such, Oyeyemi suggests that the coherent representation of the *self* is necessarily contrary to the prospect of solidarity and the empowerment of the *self-as-other*. In undoing the textual field of "the real" through the disruptive dimensions of her use of myth, Oyeyemi posits the political implications of *queering* systems of representation. As such, the *self-as-other* dynamic that these narratives formally employ, insofar as they consolidate genres and mythologies with subjectivities that dislocate them, necessitates uncanny (and so critical) modes of representation. This delineates the project of imperfect imitation as a form of insubordination. The "undone" endings of both *The Icarus Girl* and *Boy, Snow, Bird* resist the promise of closure in the salvation of the subjectivities apparently lost to the 'the yawning abyss' of the representative field but instead open up the possibility for the formation of a negotiated relation between the *self* and the *other*. As such, these texts imagine the implications of a type of feminist politics that resists the 'full narcissistic cry' of racial peculiarity that Fanon referred to in his construction of trans-racial intimacy.¹³² In other words, Oyeyemi uses the dilemma of mixed-race subjectivity, insofar as it summons a dual relation to race, to explore the complicated modes of solidarity set up by an intersectional politics.

¹³¹ Butler, J. 2004. "Imitation and Gender Insubordination" in J. Rivkin and M. Ryan (eds.), *Literary Theory: An Anthology*. Blackwell Publishers. 722 – 730.

¹³² Fanon. 2008. 31.

Fatherlands: Invisible Masculinities in Omotoso's *Bom Boy*

*I am thy father's spirit,
Doomed for a certain term to walk the night
And for the day confined to fast in fires,
Till the foul crimes done in my days of nature
Are burnt and purged away. But that I am forbid
To tell the secrets of my prison house,
I could a tale unfold whose lightest word
Would harrow up thy soul, freeze thy young blood,
Make thy two eyes, like stars, start from their spheres,
Thy knotted and combined locks to part
And each particular hair to stand on end,
Like quills upon the fearful porpentine.*

William Shakespeare, *Hamlet* (1603)

In *A Walk in the Night* (1962), Alex La Guma's protagonist roams the streets of Cape Town's District Six after accidentally killing a white man for referring to him as "son". La Guma dramatizes the violence of the inheritance of a marginalised coloured identity through the legacy of slavery and miscegenation in the Cape. Michael Adonis's murder of this pseudo-paternal figure becomes a means of acting out against the encroachment of whiteness on a subjectivity imagined to be emancipated from the fact of blackness as it is made manifest under the emergent apartheid regime. But the fate of Adonis seems eternally bound to the conditions of criminality and a thwarted ideal of citizenship. The apartheid government banned La Guma and his works, and so Mbari Press published *A Walk in the Night* in Nigeria. In her article on Yewande Omotoso's *Bom Boy*, Rebecca Fasselt cites this publication by Mbari Press, alongside the Pan-African coalition of artists known as the Mbari Artists and Writers Club, as evidence of how historically the fate of progressive South African literature has necessarily been tied to the patronage of Nigeria and the Continent in general.¹³³ Significantly, Fasselt uses this to trace the emergence of the poorly represented Nigerian figure in South African literature today and to think about how *Bom Boy* pushes back on the myth of the Nigerian as wholly *other* to the genealogy of South African identity. But the (probably convenient) connection that Fasselt makes between Omotoso's text and La Guma's is interesting also because of their shared preoccupation with the prospect of a subjectivity that resists the tethering potential of a national culture, while explicitly dealing with the unsettling image of the spectral father. Moreover, in locating this type of subjectivity in Cape Town, both texts confront the fraught history of a form of racial identity that is tragically linked to an apartheid legacy of spatial stratification that necessarily derails transcultural solidarity.

¹³³ Fasselt, R. 2015. "'Nigeria' in the Cape: Afropolitanism and Alienation in Yewande Omotoso's *Bom Boy*" in *Research in African Literatures*, Vol. 46(2): 121.

Bom Boy explores the unrequited paternal love between Oscar, a Nigerian South African, and his mixed race son, Leke. Separated by Oscar's imprisonment and eventual death, the lost narrative of his life in nineties Cape Town is interspersed between Leke's story twenty-years later. The reader is privy to Oscar's love-affair with Leke's mother, Elaine, the tragic circumstances that thwart their domestic harmony, as well as the son's present melancholic relation to this undiscovered history and his negotiation of identity within his white adopted family. Oscar's letters to Leke, left unread by his son until near the end of the novel, contain the potential to transgress the spatial and temporal bounds that separate father and son. Moreover, they represent the promise of introducing Leke to the knowledge of his paternal homeland and a family curse (described as "the darkness"). But Leke's ambivalence to this prospect necessarily delays his ability to perform these connections, seeing him acting out in a way that exploits the marginal identity of the uprooted subject. Like Michael Adonis, Leke's disregarded relation to a paternal narrative of identity makes him invisible within the terms of South African citizenship. In disavowing meaningful kinship structures, Leke instead takes part in imitated forms of intimacy that manifest through vagrancy and pathological criminal behaviour. This translates into what seems to be Leke's arrested development, and thus his transgression of the teleological concerns of the masculine *bildungsroman* – concerned with the process of meaning-making as man-making. In this way Omotoso is engaged in the field of cultural representation, as it is partially rendered through the image of paternal identity, and the ways in which it works to consolidate ideals of a rooted manhood.

The dilemma of a frustrated masculine identity is implicated in the title, *Bom Boy*; the appropriation of a Pidgin English term of endearment, "baby boy," works to apprehend the condition of the grown men in the novel through the representative regime of boyhood. Indeed the discourse that Oscar's letters are initially supposed to create with Leke is one between a father and his young child, hopefully sustained through childhood. But undoing the temporal markers of this relation necessarily disrupts the ideals of fatherhood and the propagation of a coherent legacy. In this way, Leke's ultimate decision to participate in his father's narrative represents the reconciled dynamic between the myth-making father and the myth-performing son. In this chapter, I suggest that Leke's ambivalence towards Oscar's narrative is indicative of a simultaneous desire to pursue a construction of masculinity, reprised through the myth of the father, and to terminate the conditions of this myth. As Fasselt demonstrates, this ultimately entails the renegotiation of the terms of cultural exchange within the rivalry for representation between grounded national identity and Afropolitan subjectivity – the burden of a multiply refracted diasporic

consciousness.¹³⁴ In other words, Leke's narrative comes to grips with inherited systems of meaning, circumscribed by masculinity and cultural affiliation, while imagining what it might mean to resist them. This process, I argue, engages the queer dimension of identity performance that acts out against the stable fields of cultural meaning within the diasporic consciousness.

The dynamic between "performance" (assimilation) and "acting out" (resistance) that Leke finds himself caught between is useful, as it invokes the modes of meaning-making in both Judith Butler's (1988) emphasis on the performativity of gender identity and Paul Gilroy's conception of a politics of transfiguration with a 'hermeneutic focus [that] pushes towards the mimetic, dramatic, and performative.'¹³⁵ Moreover it signals what Lee Edelman alludes to as the ironic task of the queer figure who appropriates the heteronormative narrative of outsider identities while simultaneously unsettling the field of heteronormativity by exposing its performativity.¹³⁶ In other words, in setting up Leke's appropriation of the terms of "performance" and "acting out", Omotoso engages with the intersection of subjectivity embodied by a queer diaspora, described by Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley as '. . . "whole and broken": brutalized and feeling, connected to the past and separate from it, divided from other diasporic migrants and linked to them.'¹³⁷ This dual relationship with the cultural regime of the diaspora is represented in the contrasted realities of Oscar and Leke. Oscar draws from the canon of Yoruba cosmology (relayed to him in part by his own father) and, based on his letters to Leke, he considers this a necessary channel for the process of meaning-making outside of the Nigerian context. Indeed Oscar says of the presumably daunting story of the curse, 'The story made me feel important and, as I grew older, it leant a sense of purpose to my life.'¹³⁸ This construction of "purpose" seems integral to Oscar's value system – a system he deems important that his son inherit. But Leke's wilful disavowal of Oscar's legacy displaces this patronage. As such, the culturally reciprocal relationship between the migrant father and his hybridised son, that might otherwise indicate the romantic affiliation between the diasporic consciousness and a motherland, is rendered unromantic through the obstinate denial of the contingency of identity on the paternal legacy. However, as I hope to demonstrate through the course of this chapter, the dialectic

¹³⁴ Fasselt, R. 2015. 131.

¹³⁵ Butler, J. 2004. "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution" in J. Rivkin & M. Ryan (eds.), *Literary Theory: An Anthology* (2nd Edition). Oxford: Blackwell Publishing. 900 - 911.

Gilroy, P. 1993. "The Black Atlantic as a Counterculture of Modernity" in *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. London: Verso. 38.

¹³⁶ Edelman, L. 2004. "The Future is Kid Stuff" in *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*. London: Duke University Press. 24.

¹³⁷ Tinsley, O. N. 2008. "Black Atlantic, Queer Atlantic: Queer Imaginings of the Middle Passage" in *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, Vol. 14(2-3): 203.

¹³⁸ Omotoso, Y. 2011. *Bom Boy*. Cape Town: Modjaji Books. 16.

between romance and tragedy is actually made unstable through the melancholic relation Leke maintains towards the father figure. This means that Leke's eventual decision to recapture the memory of his father is less of an attempt to consolidate his masculinity within the heteronormative cultural matrix, but rather to undo the stultifying myth of enclosed identity. This renegotiation of the terms of identification ultimately gives way to new prospects for solidarity.

Performing Selfhood and the Politics of Destiny

From his introduction in *Bom Boy*, the reader is made aware that Leke finds it difficult to perform his social identity:

A thing had begun to grow like a tree in Leke Denton's throat. It was the same thing that grew when he was picked for the school play and it was there when he was later cut from the cast. It was there when girls glanced away as he walked down corridors. An invisible rash.¹³⁹

The reader finds out that Leke has begun to consistently withdraw from the activities, such as cricket and his birthday, that otherwise force him to foster connections with his schoolmates. The appearance of the growth in Leke's throat during both his being cast in the play, and his being cut from it, is interesting because it indicates the ambiguity of his anxiety. Indeed Leke is unsettled by the prospect of being forced to play a role and also by not having a role at all. It becomes clear that Leke is aware of his identity having to always intervene through this dual arena of representation. This is implicated in the image of the 'invisible rash' – simultaneously unseen and disruptive. Leke's dilemma is undoubtedly linked to his indistinct racial identity. Certainly the relation between Leke and his schoolmates, which is ultimately translated into the relation between Leke and himself, indicates what Anne Anlin Cheng recognises as the racial fantasy's simultaneous repulsion and investment in the identity of the racial *other* – a melancholic ambivalence towards the representation of the *other* within the terms of selfhood.¹⁴⁰

The representation of Leke's racial identity, that makes him at once both absent and striking, evokes the dynamic Ralph Ellison sets up in the prologue of *Invisible Man* (1952), in which the black subject is rendered invisible by those around him because of 'the construction of their inner eyes, those eyes with which they look through their physical eyes upon reality.'¹⁴¹ This "inner eye" signifies the perceptual

¹³⁹ Omotoso, Y. 2011. 8.

¹⁴⁰ Chen A. A. 2000. "Fantasy's Repulsion and Investment" in *The Melancholy of Race: Psychoanalysis, Assimilation, and Hidden Grief*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

¹⁴¹ Ellison, R. 1952. *Invisible Man*. New York: Signet. 7.

field that is seen through the refracted cultural regime of representation. As I suggested in my previous chapter, in Fanon's conception, the *eye* is simultaneously engaged in cultural perception and ambivalent to it. This is important because Leke's identity is regarded as unsettling to his peers, but more significantly within his own perception of himself, because the "correcting" mechanisms of a cultural regime are made inaccessible. The displacement of cultural markers of identity is, for Leke, directly linked to the absence of a recognisably biological ("natural") parentage. Indeed "kid-for-hire" is a nickname given to him when the older kids see him with Jane and Marcus at parents' evening.¹⁴² His white parentage renders him immediately *unnatural*, and so indelibly *other*. It is also important to note that this problem of a "natural" parentage enacts itself on the field of sexuality and masculinity ('It was there when girls glanced away as he walked down corridors'). As I suggested previously, the dislocation of the cultural mechanisms of the eye inspires the same feeling of dread as the "castration complex".¹⁴³ In this way, Leke's ambiguous racial identity disrupts the stage on which gender and sexuality is performed. Thus, like *Invisible Man*, *Bom Boy* is concerned with exploring the 'fantasy in the racial-sexual dynamics of multiculturalism.'¹⁴⁴ This experience of an ambivalent, and so un-performable, identity is directly contrasted to Oscar's cultural posturing. Indeed it becomes clear that his firm grip on a cultural vocabulary becomes a way for Oscar to dispel any anxiety around his mixed race identity.

Early on, Oscar indicates his disdain for cultural ignorance, especially as it manifests in his South African colleagues: 'Oscar was surprised on arriving at the university to find that some people he shared a lab with had never heard of Moremi. Some of them didn't even know where Nigeria was.'¹⁴⁵ Oscar's values are refracted through the story of Moremi that 'dotted his childhood with the consistency of birthdays.'¹⁴⁶ Fasselt dedicates a section of her own intervention to show how Oscar's idealisation of the figure demonstrates the ways in which the character perceives the differing political genealogies of Nigeria and South Africa.¹⁴⁷ Moremi's community-bound morality thus becomes the antithesis of what Oscar imagines to be South Africa's colonially stratified political consciousness – projected in the memorial to Cecil John Rhodes that looms over the university campus. Indeed it is the 'ignorance of his lab mates mixed with the opulence of the Rhodes Memorial had brewed distaste in Oscar.'¹⁴⁸ Oscar recognises this ignorance towards alternative African systems of meaning, alongside the exaltation of a colonial heritage,

¹⁴² Omotoso, Y. 2011. 8.

¹⁴³ Freud, S. 2003. D. MClintock (trans.), "The Uncanny". London: Penguin Books.

¹⁴⁴ Chen A. A. 2000. 108.

¹⁴⁵ Omotoso, Y. 2011. 18.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁷ Fasselt, R. 2015. 130.

¹⁴⁸ Omotoso, Y. 2011. 18.

as constituting the fatal flaw of South African cultural identity. Lumped into this perceived ignorance is the flippant statement made by one of his colleagues: ‘I thought you were coloured.’¹⁴⁹ Oscar contrasts this statement with him being teased in primary school for his ‘light brown hair and “oyinbo” mother.’¹⁵⁰ This is important because it satirises the South African stratification of coloured identity as entirely natural, rather than as a construction that traces the racist legacy of colonisation. Oscar’s realisation that South Africans memorialise a white man as a hero of their own is compared to a Nigerian conception of whiteness as *other* (“oyinbo”). This moment of irony demonstrates Oscar’s awareness of the mechanisms of representation in perpetrating violence. In attempting to present Moremi as an alternative figure of a cultural legacy to his South African comrades, and being summarily denied an audience, Oscar foreshadows the dilemma of identity that his son will have to face. Indeed, it is Oscar’s inheritance of more than just ‘his father’s deep chocolate complexion,’ but also an arsenal of countercultural systems of identity, that allows him to pursue forms of solidarity that transcend stratified racial categories. Leke’s alienated subjectivity thus becomes directly related to his inability to perceive an inherited, alternative hermeneutic regime.

Oscar’s aforementioned emphasis on “purpose” is important because it denotes a political project that he envisions himself fulfilling. Indeed his relative obsession with the story of Moremi suggests that the legacy of his Nigerian-ness is bound to similar forms of solidarity that Moremi exemplifies. In other words, the mythological imports that Oscar uses to construct his cultural canon become a fetish to which his imagined destiny is tied. Oscar’s perception of destiny, through his understanding of a cultural regime, is juxtaposed to his son’s aimlessness. This sets up the contrasting dimensions of how identity might be deemed political. While Oscar is equipped with the signifiers of his “purpose,” Leke is left with empty signs of his greater relation to a cultural heritage. Indeed Leke’s thwarted destiny is ironically rendered in the meaning of his name – ‘The full name is Ifaleke. Ifa – the creator – is the victor.’¹⁵¹ But he is left with only a broken-off part of his name, which Elaine rightfully indicates might simply signify the bird in the song *Lekeleke gba mi leke*.¹⁵² This alternative meaning exemplifies the flightiness that has come to characterise Leke. As such, the inability to perceive his moniker in its fullness becomes representative of the son’s inability to “make a name” for himself. The name “Ifaleke” presumes that the subject’s destiny is tied to the *ifa* – a representative of the spiritual canon of Yoruba cosmology. Oscar uses the name to tether Leke to a worldview that is ultimately lost amidst the violence of their familial separation. When

¹⁴⁹ Omotoso, Y. 2011. 18.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

¹⁵¹ Ibid. 43.

¹⁵² Ibid. 42.

Leke eventually asks Marcus for the envelope of Oscar's letters and sees his name written on it, he thinks about how asking what his name meant had become a rhetorical question over time.¹⁵³ "Leke" becomes a question with any number of answers rather than a means of mapping out a decisive destination. A Google search of his name begets numerous random results that span locations all over the world. This moment signals Leke's propensity towards a more disaggregated form of identity that uses the conceptual framework of a global fetish. Indeed his childlike fascination with atlases and globes might indicate a differently negotiated project of metonymy. Certainly, Leke's adoptive identity de-stabilises the *sign* so completely that the *signifier* cannot be captured within the terms of a single system of meaning. This is important because, while Oscar's negotiation of his mixed ethnicity represents the ideals of counter-culture, Leke's challenges the coherence of culture altogether.

The mechanisms of "the darkness" actually necessitate the fragmentation of an inherited cultural system. Certainly, the curse that terrorises Oscar threatens the lives of all loved ones by killing off 'families, connections and intimacy,' the institutions necessary for the creation of social and cultural capital.¹⁵⁴ Thus, like the *àbikú*, this family curse disrupts the desire for a stable and prosperous *ilé*. Oscar's father warns him that the only way to end this tyranny is 'to live alone and starve the curse of the lives it needed to feed on in order to thrive' – to disavow love, the project of reproduction, and to essentially pursue an eternal state of vagrancy. This vagrancy evokes the imagined condition of a totally untethered diasporic consciousness, doomed to walk the night. But after falling in love with Elaine, Oscar finds himself having to perform a *babalawo's* alternative to resisting the curse, 'Find an evil man and kill him.'¹⁵⁵ In pursuing this course and setting out to kill Elaine's abuser, Malcolm Feathers, Oscar inadvertently chooses criminality over his family. This is a choice that Leke is doomed to emulate through his kleptomania and a seemingly pathological inability to form meaningful social bonds. As such, the mechanisms of the curse work to foil the logical project of reproductive futurism – the construction of stable systems of meaning through which the roles that delineate the heteronormative ideals of citizenship may be performed.

Acting Out Otherness and the Melancholic Identification

Oscar's attempt to salvage his *ilé*, despite his knowledge of the mechanisms of "the darkness", invokes the diasporic imagination's necessarily impossible struggle for wholeness. In *Something Torn and New: An African Renaissance*, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o suggests that the most re-invoked myth of 'dismemberment

¹⁵³ Omotoso, Y. 2011. 125.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid. 175.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid. 164.

and remembering' in the literature produced by Africans is the Egyptian story of Osiris, Isis and Horus, 'the original trinity of father, mother, and only begotten son.'¹⁵⁶ Ngũgĩ implies that Isis's indefatigable mission to recover the fragments of the torn-up body of her love, Osiris, is evocative of the project of the diasporic consciousness. Through this process, Isis observes the proper mourning rites and the remembrance of Osiris momentarily restores her lover's spirit.¹⁵⁷ This allegory is important because it renegotiates the construction of "purpose" for the diaspora. Indeed it suggests that the revolutionary spirit of the diaspora is not engaged in the recuperation of a cultural system that is at all times intelligibly whole. This deliberately ambiguous identification with a past, and the resistance towards stable definitions of culture, is reminiscent of Fanon's argument in "On National Culture" in which he warns against embracing 'a knowledge that has been stabilised once and for all.'¹⁵⁸ As Madhu Krishnan suggests, this argument transposes 'the existential argument of *Black Skin, White Masks* to the communal scene of revolutionary and post-revolutionary societies.'¹⁵⁹ This less seamless relation to the category of culture invokes Fanon's call for a reinstated ego-criticising faculty within the matrix of identity making and the undoing of "mental oneness" as the ultimate form of subjectivity.¹⁶⁰ In this way, the fragmentation of familial bonds that "the darkness" invites works to challenge the retreat of its victims into the comfortable domicile of undifferentiated cultural systems.

Krishnan proposes that the 'struggle to surpass oppositional frames of identification' is mimetic of the individual's effort to resist the binaries of racialised identity formation.¹⁶¹ This type of subjectivity seems to be what Oscar alludes to in his assessment of his South African colleagues' uncritical acceptance of a figure like Rhodes as encompassing a natural form of ideology, and the stratification of race as a natural recourse for identification. As Fasselt points out, 'The old colonial and apartheid binaries seem, for Oscar, to have shifted to the opposition between citizen and non-citizen.'¹⁶² The countercultural regime Oscar seeks out, the alternative to domestic ideals that seem to naturalise the binary between citizen and non-citizen, is made manifest in his love for Elaine, the coloured woman who cleans his office at the university. His intimate identification with a coloured woman necessarily destabilises the "exceptional" dimensions of his own multi-ethnic identity, deliberately undoing the propensity of the *signifier* to

¹⁵⁶ wa Thiong'o, N. 2009. *Something Torn and New: An African Renaissance*. Basic Books. 33.

¹⁵⁷ wa Thiong'o, N. 2009. 35.

¹⁵⁸ Fanon, F. 1963. C. Farrington (trans.), *The Wretched of the Earth*. New York: Grove Press.

¹⁵⁹ Krishnan, M. 2014. "Mythopoetics and Cultural Re-Creation" in *Contemporary African Literature in English*. UK: Palgrave Macmillan. 98.

¹⁶⁰ Fanon, F. 2008 (1967). C. L. Markmann (trans.), *Black Skin, White Masks* (Pluto Classics). London: Pluto Press. 141 - 142.

¹⁶¹ Krishnan, M. 2014. 99.

¹⁶² Fasselt, R. 2015. 129.

perform the *sign*. As such, Elaine's identity becomes Oscar's "home", which is (within the South African context) the epitome of precariousness. In this way, the curse, which becomes a metaphor for the inherited conditions of identity ('part of their DNA'), engages its victims within the modes of struggle – simultaneously interpolating them into its logic and daring them to resist it.¹⁶³ In other words "the darkness" pits its victims' desire for love against their desire for self-preservation, forcing them to act out in ways that render them indelibly *other*.

The curse represents, to Oscar's family, a hermeneutic regime for making sense of their failure to protect the *ilé* from the threat of death. Of the multiple divinations that the different *babalawos* give regarding the curse, the most telling proposes:

'Well, as I said there is a condition. And the condition is there but you'll never know what it is. There is a condition though and it will come and when it comes, you'll know this is it but you don't know what you're waiting for and you don't know when it's coming. That's the condition'¹⁶⁴

Leke considers this a life of dread, to which the *babalawo* responds, 'No . . . Just a life'. This conflation of "dread" and "life" indicates the ways in which "the darkness" effectively works to exploit the slipperiness implicated in the process of meaning-making. Indeed it is Leke's construction of the threat of death as uncharacteristic of everyday life that would see him accepting what JanMohamed terms "real death" – the freedom from affiliation that allows for the total retreat into the self-preservatory practices of narcissistic alienation.¹⁶⁵ This is reliant on a conception of precariousness that regards the marginality of the *self* as exceptional, an ideal that is necessarily undone when faced with the suffering of the *other*. Incidentally, it becomes clear that the curse cannot actually allow its victims to avoid intimacy altogether and instead creates the conditions for them to act-out in the name of a loved one. Oscar's attempt to murder Malcolm Feathers for Elaine indicates that the only recourse that the curse offers requires the obfuscation of the lines between love and the sacrifice of the incorruptible oneness of the *self*.

The scene in which Oscar looks at Elaine's burnt body becomes important in this regard because it forces him to face the very real violence implicated in a system that historically marginalises subjects based on the logic of citizenship contingent on race and gender. Indeed the image Omotoso creates amidst this intimate moment evokes the history of coloured identity: 'There were two halves of her. Half that was

¹⁶³ Omotoso, Y. 2011.119.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.183.

¹⁶⁵ JanMohamed, A. 2005. "Introduction: The Culture of Social-Death" in *The Death-Bound-Subject: Richard Wright's Archaeology of Death*. Durham: Duke University Press. 18.

burnt. Half that was not. The burnt skin was calloused and glistened; uneven in parts, as though it had once bubbled and then frozen in place.¹⁶⁶ The burnt side, the side subject to violence, represents the part of coloured identity that is “frozen” within the terms of blackness. It is simultaneously beautiful and grotesque, the conditions of the multiracial fantasy. The scene is evocative of a similar moments of tenderness in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987) when Paul D is allowed to see Sethe’s “chokecherry tree” scar, and in Chris Abani’s *GraceLand* (2004), when a young Elvis Oke regards his mother’s mastectomy scar.¹⁶⁷ In regarding the remnants of bodily violence, imprinted on the female body, the men are liberated from their ambivalence to the imminence of loss. The precariousness of an identity balanced on racist fantasies is made real.

Within the largely heteronormative construction of romantic love in the text, the politics of resistance emerge to challenge the gendered dynamics of representation within the familial structure. It is important to note that “the darkness” is actually a secondary curse. The original curse prevents the birth of female progeny and it is only when this curse is transgressed by Oscar’s grandmother, and the contract between the spirit world and the home is broken, that “the darkness” takes hold. In acting out against the spirit world for the reproduction of female familial identity, the curse not only continues to inhibit the reproduction of girls, but it also adapts by threatening death to all new attempts at building families. This means that marriage becomes the only way of representing women within the family, a contract that condemns these women to death. This signifies the principal conundrum within Oscar’s narrative of forming an alternative *ilé*. Oscar’s idea of sacrifice is undoubtedly connected to the story of Moremi. What is interesting about Oscar basing his worldview on Moremi’s logic of sacrifice is that this means that Oscar conceives the ethics of an alternative regime not only as racially *other*, but also as falling within the scheme of a gendered *otherness*.

Moremi gives up her Yoruba identity to become the Igbo king’s wife in the hope of defending her people from the constant attack of the Igbo. Once her plan has succeeded she is forced to give up her only child to Esinmirin, the river goddess. The whole of Ife mourned Moremi’s loss and ‘To comfort her, make her feel better all the children of Ife took Moremi as a mother.’¹⁶⁸ Oscar’s father reminds his son that this means that he has two mothers. This invocation of a double motherhood becomes important in the text as Oscar’s imprisonment ultimately leads to Elaine having to share her motherhood with Jane. Thus, the

¹⁶⁶ Omotoso, Y. 2011.170.

¹⁶⁷ Morrison, T. 2007. *Beloved*. Vintage: London. 20.

Abani, C. 2004. *GraceLand*. New York: Picador. 40.

¹⁶⁸ Fasselt, R. 2015.130.

category of the mother is disaggregated through the nullification of the father figure. This is what allows Elaine to live, signalling an interesting narrative technique taken up by Omotoso. By setting up the text within the relatively simplistic dimensions of a conversation between Oscar in the past and Leke in the present, the representation of Elaine's narrative is rendered less intelligible, but also consistently present. This is signalled by the fact that Leke carries a photo of her from the beginning of the novel, all the way to the final chapter. All that he can make sense of it, when he first discovers it, is the letter "E" and after finally reading his father's letters 'he knew what "E" stood for – Elaine.'¹⁶⁹ He ultimately offers the photograph as a token of himself to the *babalawo*. In this way, while Oscar's letters appear simply to offer a narrative of a paternal cultural regime, they more meaningfully provide Leke with the tools to salvage an image of his mother. This somewhat estranges the generic conventions of the aforementioned Isis-Osiris myth, collapsing the normative gender roles it invokes. The negotiation out of the terms of masculine identification and into the maternal is indicated in the ambiguous closing lines of the novel in which Tsotso, Leke's lover, asks if he will try find his mother and Leke does not reply but enjoys the feeling of the sun on his face after the previous year's prolonged cold and wet.¹⁷⁰ This moment suggests Leke's transition out of his self-imposed melancholia.

Leke's ambivalence to the formation of social connections is linked to his wilful disavowal of the narrative of his parentage, his choice not to mourn their loss. As David L. Eng and Shinee Han suggest in "A Dialogue on Racial Melancholia," this melancholic relation to history is necessitated through an attempt at performing the rites of assimilation, complete assimilation being maintained only through the total erasure of this repressed dimension of identity.¹⁷¹ In this way, Leke's inability to imitate the roles set up for him has to do with his simultaneous disavowal of his parents' narrative and a resistance to its nullification. In other words, Leke unconsciously refuses to let go of this narrative and "kill" the memory of his parents. Eng and Han suggest that this refusal, constitutes 'melancholia's productive political potentials.'¹⁷² This concept draws on Butler's idea of the revolutionary dimension of gender melancholia discussed in the previous chapter. It is necessary to consider the ways in which Omotoso draws on the intersections of racial and gender melancholia. Indeed in presenting Moremi as an example of an alternative mode of solidarity, and seeing Oscar take on these modes, Omotoso invokes the performance of *otherness* as the most meaningful routine against the stratifying impulse of institutionalised prejudice. This *otherness* defies the practices of assimilation that Butler conceives as masculine, and Eng and Han

¹⁶⁹ Omotoso, Y. 2011.181.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid.187.

¹⁷¹ Eng, D.L. and Han, S., 2000. "A Dialogue on Racial Melancholia" in *Psychoanalytic Dialogues*, 10(4): 357.

¹⁷² Eng, D.L. and Han, S., 2000. 365.

frame within the bounds of whiteness. This white, male performance of institutional expectations is of course exemplified in the text by the figure of Cecil John Rhodes, translated into the image of Malcolm Feathers. Leke's strained relationship with his white father, Marcus, signals his narrow view of the politics of resistance against white masculinity. Oscar's letters work towards equipping Leke with this political knowledge by forcing him to face the violence experienced especially by women of colour.

In "The Negro and Psychopathology", Fanon suggests that 'the Oedipus complex is far from coming into being among Negroes,' proposing in a footnote, 'But even if the young boy has to kill his father, it is still necessary for the father to accept being killed.'¹⁷³ He also suggests later on that this absence of the Oedipus complex is the reason for there being no 'overt presence' of homosexuality in Martinique.¹⁷⁴ Fanon's conception of the Oedipus complex as generative of a performed homosexuality is interesting, especially when compared to Judith Butler's rendering of the melancholia of gender that, as Adam Phillips suggests, assails the limits of Freud's Oedipus complex.¹⁷⁵ Fanon's idea of homosexuality is apparently only sexual and thus he fails to consider the performance of queer identity ("men dressed like women" or "godmothers") as similarly transgressive.¹⁷⁶ Moreover, his use of Freud's "Mourning and Melancholia" in *Wretched of the Earth* might indicate his failure to consider the Oedipal dimensions that his own intervention elicits. Phillips proposes that Butler's conception of homosexuality, or a queered dimension of identification that resists hyper-masculine subjectivity, invokes an Oedipus complex constructed as "negative."¹⁷⁷ Homosexual identification is constructed negatively because it refuses to nullify its intimate connection to the *other* man – to kill the father and thus "take" the mother. This is of course evocative of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's satirisation of the reactionary heteronormative constraints of psychoanalysis in *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1972). Fanon's assertion regarding the absence of the Oedipus complex among Negroes might thus actually indicate this "negative" Oedipus, which disavows the violence of Oedipal constraints. Leke's inability to nullify his father, and also Oscar's refusal to be killed, ought to be viewed within these terms. This anti-Oedipal complex disrupts the bounds of gendered identification, and thus allows us to consider the ways in which seemingly queered dynamics of solidarity are enacted in the text. Omotoso's resistance of offering her

¹⁷³ Fanon. 2008. 117.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid.39.

¹⁷⁵ Phillips, A. 1997. "Melancholy Gender / Refused Identification, Keeping It Moving" in *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection*. Stanford: Stanford University Press. 153.

¹⁷⁶ Fanon. 2008. 39.

¹⁷⁷ Phillips, A. 1997.

readers closure (thus opening it up to the otherwise lost Woman of Colour) thwarts the narrative's collapse into the normative dimensions of the revolutionary romance. As such *Bom Boy* represents a renegotiated relation to a canon that regards "man" as the logical representative of the *other*.

Crimes of the Mixed Necropolis: Uncovering the Facts of Blackness in Abani's *The Secret History of Las Vegas*

He leaned up a little and watched her face. Her face would now be, forever, more mysterious and impenetrable than the face of any stranger. Strangers' faces hold no secrets because the imagination does not invest them with any. But the face of a lover is an unknown precisely because it is invested with so much of oneself. It is a mystery, containing, like all mysteries, the possibility of torment.

James Baldwin, *Another Country* (1962)

In the introduction to this project, I suggest (following the political logic of the *àbíkú*) that errancy becomes a means through which mixed race solidarity may be performed. This type of subjectivity undoes a stable understanding of the ethics of the sacred and the profane. The transgression of these laws is perhaps most explicitly enacted through Jessamy Harrison's "split" personality in *The Icarus Girl*, in which friend and foe become one and the same, but also in the conflation of the heroic and the criminal in *Bom Boy*. This is reminiscent of the way in which Fanon characterises the *lumpenproletariat* in *The Wretched of the Earth* – a class that 'brings all its forces to endanger the "security" of the town.'¹⁷⁸ For Fanon, the *lumpenproletariat* represents a grouping so marginalised and thus able to completely forego the promise of citizenship (offered by the state, or the heteronormative *ilê*) that they are willing to 'throw themselves into the struggle for liberation like stout working men.'¹⁷⁹ As such, these classless, uprooted subjects exemplify the revolutionary impulse of wretched un-earthliness. What is interesting about this depiction of the *lumpenproletariat* is the implication of its simultaneous disavowal and investment in the ethics of class, as it transitions between the enactment of vagrancy and the performance of a mass consciousness. This is, perhaps, what is envisioned as the political ideals of, what Brent Hayes Edwards dubs, "Vagabond Internationalism" in Claude McKay's homosocial portrayal of metropolitan blackness in *Banjo* (1929).¹⁸⁰ Stuart Hall et al. link Fanon's delineation of the organizing potential of *lumpenproletarianism* to the permanent criminalisation of black identity, suggesting that this criminality might provide a framework for an oppositional class-consciousness.¹⁸¹ But the ultimate question posed by Hall interrogates the construction of crime so that it is represented as the only recourse available to a marginalised political identity.

¹⁷⁸ Fanon, F. 1963. C. Farrington (trans.), *The Wretched of the Earth*. New York: Grove Press. 130.

¹⁷⁹ Fanon, F. 1963. *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁰ Edwards, B. H. 2003. "Vagabond Internationalism: Claude McKay's *Banjo*" in *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. 187 – 240.

¹⁸¹ Hall, S., Critcher, C., Jefferson, T., Clarke, J., Roberts, B. 1982. "The Politics of 'Mugging'" in *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, The State, and The Law and Order*. Hong Kong: The Macmillan Press Ltd. 339.

As a crime novel, Chris Abani's *The Secret History of Las Vegas* is preoccupied with uncovering the source of a criminal influence. This generic focus is refracted through the text being also concerned with black diasporic consciousness, subject to the violence of criminalisation. The novel follows Dr Sunil Singh, a South African living in the States, as he becomes embroiled in an investigation to get to the bottom of the mysterious deaths of a number of homeless men. He is roped into the inquest by Detective Salazar, an officer frustrated by the lack of justice in *Las Vegas*. Sunil's role is to foil Detective Salazar's case on behalf of the Desert Palm's Institute, where he has been contracted by the government to study ways of inducing psychopathic behaviour in subjects, with the ultimate goal of creating the most ruthless army possible. Salazar arrests conjoined twins, Fire and Water, as the main suspects of the murders and Sunil detains them at the Institute to submit them to psychological evaluation. Sunil learns that the abnormal birth of these "freaks" was a result of nuclear testing in the Nevada desert. Fire, the brother connected to the "normal-looking one" speaks incessantly, driving the discourse between the twins and the investigators, while Water only talks in factoids. Amidst the investigation, Eskia, a former colleague at Wits University and a current operative for a clandestine unit of South Africa's Security Services, pursues Sunil. Eskia is seeking revenge for the death of his, and once Sunil's, lover, Jan, who was killed at Vlakplaas (an apartheid counterinsurgency camp) while Sunil worked there. Abani interweaves Sunil's life in Las Vegas and his memories of South Africa, with the uncanny history of Fire and Water, to come to grips with their shared experiences of political marginalisation and their strategies for coping with these traumas. Ultimately Sunil uncovers that the twins' are actually acting out a complex hidden agenda, as a part of the radical movement called the Downwinder Nation. The contrasting and converging narratives of Sunil and the twins represents the differing paths offered to marginalised subjects, when faced with the violence of the state – complicity or outright criminality.

Abani uses Las Vegas as a backdrop to explore the moral decay of its residents, as they come to terms with their experiences of state-sanctioned violence. This use of the city is familiar to Abani's corpus generally – in *GraceLand* (2004) and in *The Virgin of Flames* (2007), Lagos and Los Angeles respectively become mimetic of the depravity of his characters. As such, the uncanny representation of the city exemplifies the queer relation between the subject and the space he occupies, as both resist stable representation amidst the violence of their conception. Abani maps these locations onto narratives of uprooted subjectivity, thus interrogating the immediacy of material violence in the psychic realm of the diasporic consciousness; Abani's protagonist meditates, 'Vegas really is an African city . . . the palatial exteriors of the city architecture barely screened the seething poverty, the homelessness, and the

despair.¹⁸² This is reminiscent of Achille Mbembe's sentiment, in "Necropolitics" (2003), that 'beneath the terror of the sacred is the constant excavation of missing bones; the permanent remembrance of a torn body hewn in a thousand pieces and never self-same,' suggesting that the sovereign ground on which the liberated African stands, if interrogated through the purview of historical marginalisation, is always unstable.¹⁸³ What sets *The Secret History of Las Vegas* apart from Abani's aforementioned novels is the apparent positionality of his protagonist. Dr Sunil Singh, in stark contrast to Elvis Oke in *GraceLand* and Black in *The Virgin of Flames*, is empowered through his comfortable ensconcement in a legitimate workplace. While Abani has been previously preoccupied with characters quite literally living on the fringe of the cities they live in (a *lumpenproletariat*), the focus on Sunil's narrative suggests a shifted interest to a more hegemonic form of citizenship. Of course, as I will illustrate throughout this chapter, this re-centering of the bona fide citizen is false, a strategy used by the author to explore the ways in which empowered and marginal subjectivities intersect through the precarity of a shared blackness.

In this chapter, I consider Abani's deployment of crime fiction as a means of exploring the precarious relation between the non-white subject and the state. I suggest that the genre becomes useful for the author's interrogation of a diasporic identity that simultaneously resists and pursues the discursive stability offered by state-sanctioned modes of representation. Abani's use of "twinning" works to come to grips with a queer alliance between the empowered *self* and the criminalised *other*.¹⁸⁴ Abani's work represents, I believe, a counter-narrative to the ideal of diasporic Afropolitanism in the post-transition era. The author's investment in the experiences of non-citizens is important to probe because it attempts to fill the discursive gap between those empowered through diaspora, and those marginalised through it. This type of interrogation into the politics of diaspora is necessarily intersectional, enlivening the moments of contestation implicated in the difference of class, sexual and gendered subjectivity.

Abani's oeuvre, compared to that of Oyeyemi and Omotoso, most explicitly deals with the construction of queer subjectivity, insofar as the writer's protagonists in the aforementioned novels come to grips with their ambiguous gendered and sexual identities. In this way, Abani centralises queerness where Oyeyemi and Omotoso peripheralise their queer themes. This is interesting because *The Secret History of Las Vegas* diverges from this centring, only to ultimately subvert this marginalisation by revealing the "freaks" as the principal force behind the narrative. The maintenance of this duality, the simultaneous

¹⁸² Abani, C. 2014. *The Secret History of Las Vegas: A Novel*. Penguin Books: New York. 46.

¹⁸³ Mbembe, A. 2003. "Necropolitics" in *Public Culture*. Vol. 15(1): 27.

¹⁸⁴ Cooper, B. 2008. "Diaspora, gender and identity: Twinning in three diasporic novels" in *English Academy Review*. Vol. 25(2): 51 – 65.

disavowal and investment in queer subjectivity, is exemplified in the dynamic constructed through the twin narrative. Finally, I explore the position of the Women of Colour in the text. Abani consistently kills-off, or disappears, his mother characters as well as the narrative's potential love interests. Thus, I consider the role envisioned for these women in the post-transition narrative.¹⁸⁵ As the text is, I believe, largely preoccupied with the political identity of the contemporary, diasporic subject, I suggest that Abani evokes the seemingly permanent marginalisation of the Woman of Colour in the myth of liberation.

Whodunit?

Abani often deploys the theme of mistaken identity. Elvis Oke and Black both intentionally perform diverging raced and gendered identities, as they move in and out of different spaces in the cities they occupy. At certain points in their narratives, these attempts to straddle identity force these characters to confront the underworlds on which their domains are precariously balanced. For Black specifically, his being mixed race enables this strategy. Though Sunil is also mixed race, he more explicitly *reads* as black and so his performance is most notably linked to his transcendence of class. As Sunil's narrative vacillates between his current comfort in the States and the memories of his economic marginality in apartheid South Africa, Abani explores the ways in which the process of post-apartheid transition infers the expectation of economic empowerment. This transition from the margins to the centre is shown as being enabled by a form of race betrayal. Abani's preoccupation with the implications of selling out your race for the sake of transition is pertinently delineated through Sunil's explanation of South Africa's racial capitalism:

As in any free market, the coloreds were the middle classes, as it were—those who would give their lives to maintain the status quo, a life they knew they could never improve but which had meaning only because there were those who suffered worse; that in fact, a larger population suffered worse.¹⁸⁶

The incrimination of coloureds in the maintenance of institutional racism, through the performance of a class identity, is suggestive of the ways in which mixed race subjectivity becomes enmeshed in the imperial project. This is evocative of the strategy of racial passing in the States, explored in my first chapter. Sunil's former employment at Vlakplaas, where torture was used to "turn" anti-apartheid

¹⁸⁵ Abani's focus on the construction of guilt in the post-apartheid narrative space summons the problem of impunity, especially with regards to crimes against women, in light of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Certainly Sunil might be characterized as a different iteration of the David Lurie character in J.M. Coetzee's canonised novel *Disgrace* (1999) as the disavowal of his guilt infringes on the narration of the suffering of the *other*.

¹⁸⁶ Abani, C. 2014. 216.

activists, is a dramatic representation of the projected role of non-white subjects that hope to transcend economic marginality in the capitalist state.

Sunil's race-betrayal as an adult is prefaced by his unwitting giving-up of his activist father's whereabouts to an apartheid spy, as a child. White Alice, a woman who claims to be white but has turned black and so forced to live in Soweto, takes advantage of a young Sunil's attempts to narrativise his father's absence through what he believes to be a fairytale. White Alice uses the story to map out the activist's hiding place so that she can turn him in to the apartheid police. The intersection between myth and reality, exemplified by this event, is central to the strategy of Abani's text. Throughout the novel, instances of the mythologisation of a perceived political identity are conceived as precariously straddling radicalism and assimilation. The conflation of the realms of the fantastic and the material invokes the performative strategies taken up amidst political turmoil, as Sunil identifies about apartheid South Africa: 'It was common knowledge that most led a double life.'¹⁸⁷ The process of mistaking identity thus becomes embroiled in the enactment of a political consciousness that seeks to disturb the generic operations of institutional narratives through its subversive appropriation of hegemony.

The concept of hiding in plain sight, of performing hegemonic ethics while harbouring radical ones (and vice versa), is certainly something that Abani's text takes up. The narrative's preoccupation with the ethical and political ambiguity of its characters becomes useful for thinking about the moment of post-transition, as it interrogates the pitfalls of the performance of assimilation that this mostly economic project entails. Indeed Abani's exploration into the dubious performance of an identity that can be successfully integrated into a stable socio-economic system, is a deft way of connecting black identity in the States to black identity in South Africa. In linking these two locations, the imaginative spaces of Rainbow Nationalism and the American Dream are both superimposed onto the moral wasteland of Las Vegas. Sunil and the twins both foster their own scepticisms regarding the logic behind these projects, cultivated through their understanding of the insidious enterprises of the state. This is exemplified by Sunil's recognising that the dreams and aspirations of black South Africans are always rendered empty by capitalist greed.¹⁸⁸ Sunil and the twins, despite this shared scepticism, have different ways of dealing with their disillusionment. Sunil, even though he is obviously aware that his occupation, both in his work at Vlakplaas and at the Institute, is unethical, goes along with the dubious operations of the state anyway. Sunil does not see himself as actually evil but he does perform institutionally sanctioned evil

¹⁸⁷ Abani, C. 2014. 177.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid. 216.

nevertheless: ‘For Sunil, though, the work at its core was redemptive. He wanted to find cures, ways to help.’¹⁸⁹ Sunil’s sentiment that he would like his work at the Institute to be “redemptive” suggests his own ideal of taking on the project of restorative justice for his work at Vlakplaas, something he never totally pursues. This is obviously allegorical for the failures of the project set up by Truth and Reconciliation Commission, a mission frustrated by South Africa’s capitalist enterprise. Sunil’s performance of an institutional identity, despite a deep-down desire to serve the marginalised, represents the ways in which benevolent assimilation becomes a form of complicity. The twins, and the other “freaks” of the Downwinder Nation, explicitly act out their otherness in a way that precludes them from the process of assimilation. The relation between them and Sunil quite literally represents the relation between the institutionalised subject and the institution.

It is important to note that the twins’ presence at the Institute is totally calculated on their part. The complex performance of the Fire and Water dynamic, an act that the two consistently draw attention to but are ignored as being mad, is a part of their plan to infiltrate the Institute. Without Fire, who is later revealed to actually be more of a ventriloquist’s dummy controlled by his brother than an actual threat, Water would *read* as “normal”: ‘Water, at six feet, had a muscular, lean body and a face so perfectly proportioned that he seemed like a cruel joke at Fire’s expense. He was quite simply beautiful.’¹⁹⁰ By contrast, Fire is described in animalistic terms, despite his sounding ‘college-educated.’¹⁹¹ In order to be institutionalised, to perform the subjectivity expected of a “freak”, Water must enliven the part of him that most meaningfully marks him as *other*. But, perhaps most importantly, Water must enliven his *other* so that his brother becomes more discursively powerful than himself. Fire’s intelligence, outspokenness and anger all combine with his physical difference render the twins monstrous in the eyes of the authorities. This image is reminiscent of the wretched representation of Fanon by a child in the metropole: “‘Mama, see the Negro! I’m frightened!’.”¹⁹² The fantasy behind this monstrous effect is, according to Fanon, ‘tom-toms, cannibalism, intellectual deficiency, fetishism, racial defects, slave-ships, and above all else, above all: “Sho’ good eatin’”.’¹⁹³ Part of Fanon’s thesis regarding the grotesque mechanisms of blackness on the white imagination has to do with its uncanny presence, a vocal and discursive presence, within the

¹⁸⁹ Abani, C. 2014. 61.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid. 27.

¹⁹¹ Ibid. 80.

¹⁹² Fanon, F. 2008 (1967). C. L. Markmann (trans.), *Black Skin, White Masks* (Pluto Classics). London: Pluto Press. 84.

¹⁹³ Fanon, F. 2008. 84 – 85.

white metropolis: ‘a black man who quotes Montesquieu had better be watched.’¹⁹⁴ What makes Fire appear dangerous is his performance of a ‘college-educated’ subjectivity alongside his horrific visage.

On the other hand, Water (the physically more powerful brother) is rendered harmless because of what appears to be his “intellectual deficiency”. This type of performance represents, what José Esteban Muñoz views as, the process of disidentification – the remaking of a normative field of representation by rendering it unnatural or absurd, through the over-fetishisation of the queer subject.¹⁹⁵ Disidentification invokes the aforementioned processes of theorising identity that Stuart Hall recognises in Fanon’s work, the critical faculty in turning ‘the look “other-wise”.’¹⁹⁶ Disidentification usurps the normative political logic of decoding and encoding identity by exposing its systems as non-binary. As Muñoz puts it, rather than ‘buckling under the pressures of dominant ideology (identification, assimilation) or attempting to break free of its inescapable sphere (counteridentification, utopianism),’ disidentification ‘tries to transform a cultural logic from within.’¹⁹⁷ In this way, the twins use their understanding of identity, mediated through institutional frameworks, as having foundations that are actually ambivalent to “truth” to undo the institution’s “rational” power over marginal subjectivities.

Half-Truths, Double Incrimination

This ambivalence to truth, in the same way as it is performed by the melancholic subject, is not necessarily revolutionary. It involves the total (ego-destroying) performance of an absurd otherness that simply cannot be mustered by those who, even benevolently, serve the institution. Thus Sunil’s inability to deal with the field of the spectacular, his impulse towards rationalisation, is what renders him complicit. Sunil is privy to the lies of the institution, its inhumanity posing as humanity, but fails to meaningfully act out against them. The novel’s preoccupation with *secrets* and uncovering the *truth* is foreshadowed in its title and is also germane to the genre of crime fiction. But the narrative operates within the field of half-truths and Sunil’s awareness of the pitfalls of truth-telling: ‘He knew the power of saying the wrong thing, of taking the truth on a detour.’¹⁹⁸ For Sunil, truth represents the painful opposite of survival – a lesson learnt through his employment at Vlakplaas, as a developer of psychological drugs

¹⁹⁴ Fanon, F. 2008. 22.

¹⁹⁵ Muñoz, J. E. 1999. “Jack’s Plunger” in *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*. Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press: x.

¹⁹⁶ Hall, S. 1996. “The After-life of Frantz Fanon: Why Fanon? Why Now? Why Black Skin, White Masks” in A. Reed, ed., *The Fact of Blackness: Frantz Fanon and Visual Representation*, London: Institute of Contemporary Arts. 19.

¹⁹⁷ Muñoz, J. E. 1999. “Introduction” in *Disidentifications*: 11.

¹⁹⁸ Abani, C. 2014. 37.

to improve interrogations.¹⁹⁹ He even spends time debating Eugene, his boss at Vlakplaas (and Abani's unsubtle revival of Eugene "Prime Evil" de Kock), about the role of philosophy, suggesting that it is only a means of rationalising one's own victimhood at the hands of the state as a form of empowerment.²⁰⁰ Sunil's ability to regard artifice, as less of a moral dilemma than a fact of victimhood, challenges the ideal of the performance of upstanding citizenship as being exempt from the murky operations of staging. The novel itself cultivates an awareness of the dual-outcome of investing one's identity in the mechanisms of truth through the conventions of crime fiction. Generically, crime fiction is preoccupied with unmasking the true wrongdoer. But, as Mareike Krajenbrink and Kate M. Quinn point out, the adaptability of the genre is its ability to turn this quest of uncovering identity into an absurd performance of the expectations of criminality set up by broader society.²⁰¹ When used this way, crime fiction destabilises the systems of identity-making altogether. This is, I believe, the project of *The Secret History of Las Vegas*, as Abani forces a war criminal (Sunil) to play an agent of the law, and an activist (Water) to play the role of a psychopath.

One of Abani's most notable subversions of the conventions of crime fiction, at least of the hard-boiled American contribution to the genre, is his transgression of a first-person narrative that privileges the voice of the investigator. I already touched on how Abani interweaves Sunil's and the twins' narratives, but it is necessary to reiterate just how effectively the author does this. It is important to mention that other characters, such as Salazar and Eskia, are also at different points narrativised through their own point of view, however this self-narrativisation mostly deals with the present and near-present. Sunil and the twins are most meaningfully developed through the mechanisms of memories and dreams, which is interesting within the schema of the plot because Sunil's vocation necessarily engages the psyche. As the reader is made aware, through Sunil's work, the psyche is easily manipulated. This renders these memories and dreams sometimes undependable. Sunil draws attention to this when thinking about South Africans trying to forget apartheid, Salazar reiterating this sentiment saying, 'Like witnesses who can't remember anything at a crime scene.'²⁰² While Sunil does not necessarily "forget" apartheid, he does seem to push aside his own complicity in it: 'I shouldn't have to feel guilty, he said. I didn't do this.'²⁰³ This is compelling because it seems to invoke the doubling of consciousness within the psyche of the victim of oppression, notably outlined by W.E.B. Du Bois (1903) as the 'sense of always looking at one's self

¹⁹⁹ Abani, C. 2014. 281.

²⁰⁰ Ibid. 277.

²⁰¹ Krajenbrink, M. & Quinn, K. M. 2009. "Introduction" in *Investigating Identities: Questions of Identity in Contemporary International Crime Fiction*. New York: Rudopi. 1.

²⁰² Abani, C. 2014. 253.

²⁰³ Ibid. 252.

through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity.²⁰⁴ This sense of looking at one's self through others becomes an interesting way to think about a political conscience, the way in which one recognises that the constitutional power of the *self* is mediated through the marginalisation of the *other*. Of course Du Bois is thinking about this dynamic in the opposite direction, but an intersectional reading elicits this counter-reading. We might think about this dynamic in terms of Emmanuel Levinas' concept of the moral demands of the "faceless" *other* on the conscience of the *self*: ' . . . the face is the other who asks me not to let him die alone, as if to do so were to become an accomplice in his death.'²⁰⁵ Abani's strategic deployment of memories that subtly withhold the "truth" indicates an implicit denial of the face of the *other*. However, the narrative's recovery of the twin narrative (and the process of doubling) suggests the presence of an *other* face that refuses to be killed at the hands of the *self*.

Abani's narrative uses the literary convention of doubling to simultaneously repress and impart information regarding the identities of its characters. The twins become the most explicit representation of this. Sunil eventually finds out that Fire has almost no brain activity, while Water's MRI suggests that he is actually a genius.²⁰⁶ While this comes as a revelation to the reader, the text's preoccupation with Water's dreams about his mother, Selah, actually divulges this information prior to this point in the narrative. The text does not offer any of these dream sequences from Fire, which should indicate that Fire does not in fact exist outside of the interrogation room. However, the reader buys into the myth of the Fire-Water performance because the "freak" narrative is deliberately misleading. This strategy works to elicit the wilful ignorance of the reader, partly because the interrogation room dynamic forces an institutionalised reading.

The twins consistently remind their interrogators that they are performers. In fact, before they say anything, the reader is confronted with a clue of this: 'The sedan's door bore the legend KING KONGO: AFRICAN WITCHDOCTOR.'²⁰⁷ Of course the King Kongo act invokes at once a constellation of fetishisations, already enacting a smoke-and-mirrors effect on the viewer. The fact that King Kongo is a magic act, and that the twins were literally caught by Detective Salazar in the midst of creating the illusion of walking on water, totally escapes Salazar and Sunil as being a possible hint towards the twins'

²⁰⁴ Du Bois, W.E.B. 2007. "Of Our Spiritual Strivings" in B.H. Edwards (ed.), *The Souls of Black Folk*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 8.

²⁰⁵ Levinas, E. in Butler, J. 2004. "Precarious Life" in *Precarious Life: The Powers Of Mourning and Violence*. London: Verso. 131.

²⁰⁶ Abani, C. 2014. 320.

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.* 27.

complex plot to take down the Institute from within.²⁰⁸ The two investigators are so mesmerised by the uncanny appearance of a total *other*, that they fail to regard what is right in front of them.

What is most interesting about this dynamic is how the half-truths presented by the twins work on Sunil's conscience. The twins seem to be able to summon Sunil's repressed memories of home:

. . . You look like you're suppressing something, something unpleasant, like, say, a sad truth?
The truth shall set you free, Water said.
Perhaps you're projecting something onto me? Something you'd like to share, Sunil said.
Classic evasion, Doc. Very good, Fire said.
. . . You know I'm right, Doc, you know you're holding us because somewhere deep down you think we can help you with this truth that's burning a hole in you.²⁰⁹

The concept of projection raised here really invokes the mechanisms of the double. As I suggested in my first chapter, according to Freud, the double enlivens the faculties of self-observation and self-criticism.²¹⁰ The grotesque twinning, performed by Fire-Water, thus acts to force Sunil to come to terms with his disavowed guilty conscience; as Fire explains, 'a sideshow is a confrontation.'²¹¹ This process of re-acquainting Sunil with his guilt is quite literally enacted through the appearance of Eskia. Eskia, who shadows Sunil without him knowing for most of the narrative, is most recognisably Sunil's double. As the two share a similar history – both coming from Soweto, moving through the same social circles and sharing a lover in Jan – it is easy to see how each might manifest as a *doppelgänger* of the other (the same, but different).

What really separates Sunil and Eskia from the beginning is their differing inheritance of an economic standing. As we know, young Sunil is fatherless and living in the slums of Soweto. Ultimately it is the loss of his mother that really makes him reliant on the apartheid regime's "charity" (in the form of a university scholarship, contingent on his future employment at Vlakplaas). Eskia, on the other hand, 'came from Soweto royalty, an upper-middle-class family of Anglican ministers, doctors, and lawyers.'²¹² The diverging paths taken up by these two men shed light on their moral failings, Sunil as an accomplice to the violence of the apartheid regime and Eskia as an emissary of the violence of anti-apartheid

²⁰⁸ Abani, C. 2014. 237.

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.* 158.

²¹⁰ Freud, S. 2003. D. MClintock (trans.), "The Uncanny". London: Penguin Books. 144.

²¹¹ *Ibid.* 159.

²¹² *Ibid.* 121.

campaigns. Certainly the revelation that it was Eskia who killed Sunil's mother, for unwittingly informing on her husband and his comrades, totally destabilises the logic of justice that his character is supposed to represent.²¹³ More deeply, however, the doubling of the South African, black male consciousness, invoked in the conflict between Sunil and Eskia, signals the problem of identity formation post-transition. The traitor and the patriot, each representing negotiated possibilities of political identification for the new South African, are revealed as being one and the same.

Split Afropolitanism: the Patriot and the Exile

We might think about Sunil in terms of Afropolitan ideals of citizenship, described by Taiye Selasi as 'not citizens, but Africans of the world' – a logic that Sunil certainly seems to attempt to perform as he negotiates for himself a sort of culturally hybrid, though private, space in his loft.²¹⁴ However, like the city itself, Sunil's relation to this imagined cultural hybridity is mostly emptied of meaning. The emptiness of a signified multiculturalism, represents the less-than-romantic dilemma of being 'of the world' through the politics of exile. Over his fireplace, hangs a huge print of William Kentridge's painting *Felix in Exile*.²¹⁵ *Felix in Exile* is not a painting at all, but a series of animations created with pastel and coal, but Abani's deliberate use of the word "painting" might be a reference to Kentridge's accompanying note to the piece:

In the same way that there is a human act of dismembering the past there is a natural process in the terrain through erosion, growth, dilapidation that also seeks to blot out events. In South Africa this process has other dimensions. The very term 'new South Africa' has within it the idea of a painting over the old, the natural process of dismembering, the naturalization of things new.²¹⁶

Kentridge uses the technique of palimpsest in the piece, carefully (but not completely) erasing one image so that a new one can be superimposed onto the same canvas, the final image always bearing traces of the original. Kentridge's work thus challenges the ideal of total reinvention implicit in the project of the new South Africa. Abani's reference to the artwork, and his freezing of an otherwise dynamic piece within the walls of Sunil's loft, thus signals the author's meditation on the possibilities of citizenship within the post-transition state. Indeed, the writer's thematic concern of simultaneously covering and uncovering history follows the logic of a palimpsestic relation to the past. As Eskia shadows Sunil, he becomes a

²¹³ Abani, C. 2014. 337.

²¹⁴ Selasi, T. 2013. "Bye-Bye Barbar" (2005) in *Callaloo*, Vol.36(3). 528.

²¹⁵ *Ibid.* 97.

²¹⁶ Kentridge, W. 2003. *Felix in Exile: Geography of Memory* (extract) 1994. William Kentridge, 122. London: Phaidon Press Limited.

trace of a prior political identity that Sunil might have taken up. When Eskia raids Sunil's loft, the reader's attention is once again drawn to the artwork.²¹⁷ Their mutual regard for *Felix in Exile* works to bring the two opponents together through the mythical field of the new South Africa.

Abani deploys a similar tactic in both *GraceLand* and *The Virgin of Flame*, as both Elvis and Black engage with a partial representation of Mami Wata, discussed at length by Madhu Krishnan.²¹⁸ The turning of the gaze onto a mythical figure that ought to unite the diaspora, but really represents a history of fragmentation (the doubling of consciousness) implicated in the process of *diaspora-ization*, reveals these characters' common-ground as being the field of unknowing. Though it is not explicitly stated, the most enduring image from *Felix in Exile* is that of the two principal characters, Felix and Nandi, gazing at one another through the former's dresser mirror in France. Nandi is a land surveyor, and represents a sense of nostalgia for a homeland, thus making her Felix's double. As Felix regards South Africa through Nandi, his gaze becomes mimetic of the cosmology of violence made manifest in the process of struggle and transition. I would argue that Sunil and Eskia see themselves as trapped within a similar dynamic – Sunil becoming the complicit exile and Eskia embodying the ideal of patriotism towards a motherland. However, this all too simplistic rendering of post-transition identity is really an attempt to justify their imagined moral separation. Kentridge's artwork ends with Nandi's violent death and Felix's permanent entrapment in the wasteland of his home, left only with a suitcase full of images. The relationship between Nandi and Felix is thus the relationship between the myth, canonised in death, and the mythologist, alive only through the haunted landscape of this myth. Sunil and Eskia both perform a similar nostalgic relation to what has become an only partial image of a woman. The Jan-Sunil, Jan-Eskia relationships invoke a racial inversion of the Nandi-Felix dynamic. In this way the White Woman and the Woman of Colour are made to occupy a similarly violent space in the new South African system of meaning. While I doubt Abani seeks to render these two women equal, what I believe the writer is summoning is the image of, what Krishnan calls, the "occluded feminine" in the revolutionary imagination.

Krishnan suggests that the cultivated ambivalence towards a discourse on femininity, allows this feminine figure to emerge 'out from erasure as a tongue spoken in a distinct code uncontainable within the

²¹⁷ Abani, C. 2014. 225.

²¹⁸ Krishnan, M. 2012. "Mami Wata and the Occluded Feminine in Anglophone Nigerian-Igbo Literature" in *Research in African Literatures*, Vol. 43(1): 1 – 18.

Krishnan, M. 2012. "Of Masquerades And Mimicry: Performance, Identity, and Tradition in Chris Abani's *The Virgin Of Flames*" in *ariel: A Review of International English Literature*, Vol. 43(2): 60 – 63.

dominant discourse.²¹⁹ This implies that the arrest of the Woman within a former topography of violence works simultaneously to marginalise and liberate her in terms of hegemonic ideals. This type of occlusion is evoked, I believe, in the name *Selah* – which, in Hebrew, indicates both “to pause” and “to praise”. It is interesting to think both Jan and Sunil’s mother, Dorothy, within these terms, as each is killed in “detention” while similarly performing their choices to not inform on their comrades. Dorothy literally sews her mouth shut, becoming an embodiment of the silenced woman in the time of the revolution.²²⁰ In the present, the reader is introduced to different iterations of this type of subjectivity. The most notable female figures in the contemporary field of the text are Asia, Sunil’s lover, and Fred, Water’s lover. Unlike the memorialised women in the narrative, Asia and Fred do not represent the archetype of feminine incorruptibility. Indeed both choose a form of marginalisation as a means of survival, the strategy of retreat into the peripheries of institutional representation exemplified by the *lumpenproletariat*.

For protection from Eския, Asia (a prostitute) goes to live in a high-end brothel. It is here that she delivers the most telling observation about how the men in the text use women as a justification of their own violence, especially against women:

Some johns come to empty themselves in your mirror, to peel away their own loss, until finally they see what they truly are. The trouble with this kind of john is that they often don’t like what they see, because they stunted their own growth so long ago. What is most longed for, their deepest nostalgia, is lost forever—and while that youth they imagine, that virile self who could have taken over the world, is dreamed of, the truth is that in the face of the mirror, they are little more than grotesque dwarves. And then the desire for you turns to hate.²²¹

Asia’s understanding of the dynamic between the heteronormative male *self* and the female *other* reaffirms the ways in which the former’s ambivalence, cultivated through nostalgia, threatens to kill off the latter. As Fire suggests, nostalgia is not the same as memory.²²² Instead nostalgia in the narrative represents a corruption of history that arrests the subject within the hegemonic imagination. Asia understands that her identity being permanently represented within the bounds of her heterosexuality is both something that saves her subjectivity and limits it. If Asia represents the stage of confinement, a character like Fred becomes the most explicit embodiment of release. Sunil even says to the twins, ‘I can’t really release you if I don’t think there is someone who I trust to vouch for you. I need you to tell

²¹⁹ Krishnan, M. 2012. “Mami Wata and the Occluded Feminine”: 15.

²²⁰ Abani, C. 2014. 114.

²²¹ Ibid. 347.

²²² Ibid. 160.

me how to find Fred.²²³ While Sunil is referring to the twins' release from the institute he is more implicitly invoking their release from the representative regimes of criminality. Fred is the most recognisably queer character; she has both male and female genitalia and presents as female, but keeps her masculine name. Fred is also the most revolutionary character, co-ordinating the Downwinder Nation's ultimate takedown of the Institute. The fact that Fred does not appear until more than halfway into the narrative suggests that she is the hidden subversive element in the story. Her corporeal marriage of both female and male signifiers thus suggests Abani's recentralisation of the queer figure as an emissary of the revolution.

In this chapter, I have considered the ways in which *The Secret History of Las Vegas* renegotiates a space for a queer subjectivity within the post-transition imagination. Abani's use of the genre of crime fiction becomes a way for the writer to simultaneously conceal and uncover the role of a subversive narrative within the confines of institutional representation. In this way, the writer's deployment of the crime narrative elicits the queer performance of disidentification, disrupting the conventional ideals of criminality within hegemonic discourse. As such, Abani's deployment of twinning and the literary double creates something of a third space for the infiltration of the *other* on the site of the *self*. While the narrative seemingly peripheralises the queer themes previously taken-up in Abani's earlier novel, the role of the "occluded feminine" is ultimately affirmed. This strategy thus suggests new possibilities for solidarity within the contemporary milieu. Abani's skilful performance in juggling the themes of race, class, citizenship, gender and sexuality imagines a vernacular for representing a decidedly intersectional system of representation. The novel's simultaneous investment and disavowal in marginalised subjectivity engages an important faculty in the reading of Fanonian theory, as it resists the impulse of regarding the text as divulging the truth behind the liberation of the *other*. Instead, this strategy forces the *self* to interrogate its role in the killing of the *other* by enlivening the critical uncovering of the mechanisms of representation that enable this crime.

²²³ Abani, C. 2014: 162.

Conclusion: The Pitfalls of the Mixed Romance

How persistent this horror of the middling spot is, this dread of the interim place! It extends through the specter of the tragic mulatto, to the plight of the transsexual, to our present anxiety—disguised as genteel concern—for the contemporary immigrant, tragically split, we are sure, between worlds, ideas, cultures, voices—whatever will become of them? Something’s got to give—one voice must be sacrificed for the other. What is double must be made singular.

Zadie Smith, “Speaking in Tongues” (2009)

The preceding chapters might be construed as an effort to save the mixed race subject from the constraints of identification offered to “the tragic mulatto”. Of course tragic, in this sense, is meant to denote a feeling of helplessness in light of the secret desire to assimilate to whiteness – a distinctly un-radical state of being. The tragic mulatta is ostensibly so trapped in this logic that she is unable to see herself outside of the master’s house. For Fanon, this figure is exemplified by Mayotte Capécia, whose work, *Je Suis Martiniquaise* (1948) becomes the principal case study for “The Woman of Colour and the White Man”. Fanon writes, ‘We shall see why love is beyond the reach of the Mayotte Capécias of all nations. For the beloved should not allow me to turn my infantile fantasies into reality: On the contrary, he should help me to go beyond them.’²²⁴ Here Fanon suggests that the attainment of love is thwarted by a human proclivity towards fantasy and the expectation that romance allows lovers to buy into that fantasy. Fanon implicates the romance, one that engenders fantasy rather than the critical capacity to move beyond it, in the formation of narcissistic modes of identification. As Yogita Goyal suggests, this analysis comes to characterise the theorist’s views on all forms of racial or ethnic nationalism, most explicitly articulated in *Wretched of the Earth*.²²⁵ Fanon’s rejection of the romance, as we have come to understand it, is important because it evokes a redefinition of the contours of ‘love and understanding’ in the struggle to face the *other*.

Through Fanon’s logic, the tragic figure is totally enraptured by the prospect of romance and so fails to love, and to love is to be critical. Indeed narcissism represents a state that is neither self-love nor self-hate, but a self-consciousness that apparently cannot succeed in turning the gaze other-wise. It is important that Fanon suggests that this dynamic (the exchange of intimate recognition for a myth) is

²²⁴ Fanon, F. 2008 (1967). C. L. Markmann (trans.), *Black Skin, White Masks* (Pluto Classics). London: Pluto Press 31.

²²⁵ Goyal, Y. 2010. “Introduction: the romance of diaspora” in *Romance, Diaspora, and Black Atlantic Literature*. London: Cambridge. 6.

inextricably linked to economic conditions: ‘One is white above a certain financial level.’²²⁶ Certainly the notion that love is rendered unrecognisable under the enterprise of capital is indicative of Fanon’s preliminary interpretation of Marx; no doubt drawn from his reading of Pierre Naville, but also from Lacan’s particular brand of psychoanalysis. Indeed *Black Skin, White Masks* might be read as an earlier iteration of Lacan’s thesis (1974) concerning the interpretive intersections between Marx and Freud in the commodification of dreams. This is important because it suggests that Fanon’s work is engaged in a mode of interpretation that regards the object and the dream as converging in the creation of the ideological milieu. In this way, the confounding of the material with the spiritual, of reality and myth, summons the particular problems of representation implicit in the generic interventions that attempt to figure a grounded identity politics.

What I mean by this is, the imagined concerns of the tragic or the romantic figure never quite capture the ambivalence through which each relates to reality. The novels that I have chosen to look at – *The Icarus Girl*, *Boy*, *Snow Bird*, *Bom Boy* and *The Secret History of Las Vegas* – all deal differently with the field of the “real”, insofar as each text deploys certain sets of mythologies to simultaneously confound and illuminate familiar landscapes. It is this sort of relation to reality that I believe the tragic mulatta finds herself enacting. This state does not necessarily call for the teleological ideals of salvation, nor does it elicit the mourning rites for those lost and forgotten. In this way, Lewis Gordon’s image of the twins struggling towards different realms (one to heaven and the other to earth) might invoke the dynamic between romance and realism. Fanon seems to satirically set these two generic forms of identification against one another, regarding whiteness as imagining itself as virtuous and ‘the colour of daylight’ and blackness as ‘the incarnation of a complete fusion with the world, an intuitive understanding of the earth . . . a ray of sunlight under the earth.’²²⁷ For Fanon these two performances of identity share the ‘full narcissistic cry’ of self-fantasization, an articulation of realism becoming romance and vice versa. This is in line with Goyal’s thesis in *Romance, Diaspora, and Black Atlantic Literature*, but what I have tried to come to terms with is the ways in which the tragic figure fits into the domestic romance that has come to exemplify the relation between the individual and the imagined state.

If we think of the conflation of romance and realism (a strategy Goyal suggests is characteristic of black Atlantic literature) as still engendering the heteronormative ideals of identity formation, the opportunities for a subversive politics remains somewhat limited. However, if the diasporic romance is itself rendered

²²⁶ Fanon, F. 2008. 30.

²²⁷ Ibid. 31.

queer, the fantasy of reproductive futurism might be replaced with the critical dimensions of tragedy. So although this project might not be preoccupied with the salvation of the mixed race subject from the tragedy of death-boundedness, it is interested in rethinking the ethical concerns of the tragic figure. This involves thinking about the double consciousness of the mixed race subject as representing a form of identification that relinquishes the fantasy of all-out solidarity by rendering it uncanny in light of difference and the missing *other*. Just as the mixed race subject exposes the myth of racial purity, she also undoes the uncritical ideal of non-racialism by destabilising the façade of the integrated “home”. If we choose to read contemporary African fiction within these terms, we may see how this type of literature registers the ambiguity of its former canon. In this way, we might figure a negotiated significance of the theoretical fetish that is *Fanon*. The contribution of gender and queer scholarship to the study of race and class necessarily disrupts the uncritical reading of the theorist’s work as being a manifesto that unambiguously translates into a contemporary identity politics. However, these fields do also allow for a re-engagement of the critical faculties of interpretation offered by Fanon’s corpus.

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