

1-1-2018

## The "Split Gaze" of Refraction: Racial Passing in the Works of Helen Oyeyemi and Zoë Wicomb

Allison Wiltshire

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsjunction.msstate.edu/td>

---

### Recommended Citation

Wiltshire, Allison, "The "Split Gaze" of Refraction: Racial Passing in the Works of Helen Oyeyemi and Zoë Wicomb" (2018). *Theses and Dissertations*. 4256.  
<https://scholarsjunction.msstate.edu/td/4256>

This Graduate Thesis - Open Access is brought to you for free and open access by the Theses and Dissertations at Scholars Junction. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Scholars Junction. For more information, please contact [scholcomm@msstate.libanswers.com](mailto:scholcomm@msstate.libanswers.com).

The “Split Gaze” of Refraction: Racial Passing in the Works of Helen Oyeyemi and Zoë

Wicomb

By

Allison Wiltshire

A Thesis  
Submitted to the Faculty of  
Mississippi State University  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of Master of Arts  
in English Literature  
in the Department of English

Mississippi State, Mississippi

August 2018

Copyright by  
Allison Wiltshire  
2018

The “Split Gaze” of Refraction: Racial Passing in the Works of Helen Oyeyemi and Zoë

Wicomb

By

Allison Wiltshire

Approved:

---

Andrea Spain  
(Major Professor)

---

Kelly Marsh  
(Committee Member)

---

Dan Punday  
(Committee Member)

---

Lara Dodds  
(Graduate Coordinator)

---

Dr. Rick Travis  
Dean  
College's Name

Name: Allison Wiltshire

Date of Degree: August 10, 2018

Institution: Mississippi State University

Major Field: English Literature

Major Professor: Dr. Andrea Spain

Title of Study: The “Split Gaze” of Refraction: Racial Passing in the Works of Helen Oyeyemi and Zoë Wicomb

Pages in Study 52

Candidate for Degree of Master of Arts

In this thesis, I expand considerations of diaspora as not only a migration of people and cultures but a migration of thought. Specifically, I demonstrate that literary representations of diaspora produce what I consider to be an epistemological migration, challenging the idea that race and culture are stable and impermeable and offering instead racial and cultural fluidity. I assert that this causal relationship is best exemplified by narratives of racial passing written by diasporic writers. Using Homi Bhabha’s concepts of mimicry, hybridity, and ambivalence, I analyze Helen Oyeyemi’s *Boy, Snow, Bird* and Zoë Wicomb’s *Playing in the Light*, arguing that *Boy, Snow, Bird*’s narrative form is a form of mimicry that repeats European and African literary traditions and subverts Eurocentrism, while *Playing in the Light* is a “Third Space” in which to accept notions of the non-categorical fluidity of race. Through this analysis, I draw particular attention to Oyeyemi’s and Wicomb’s unique abilities to refract notions of race, rather than presumably reflect a system of strict categories, and, ultimately, I argue that these novels transcend the realm of literature, existing as empowering calls for society’s modifications of its racial perceptions.

## DEDICATION

To the memory of Ms. Cathy Alexander

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am beyond grateful to my thesis committee for all of your generous guidance, patience, and support throughout my completion of this project. I am especially indebted to my thesis chair, Dr. Andrea Spain, whose passion is simply contagious. Learning from you has been a true pleasure. Thank you for your mentorship and motivation.

To my fellow graduate students, colleagues and friends in the MSU English Department: Thank you for the much-needed advice, encouragement, and coffee.

And thank you to my family for all of your support and encouragement.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

DEDICATION .....	ii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....	iii
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	iv
I.    INTRODUCTION .....	1
II.   ALL WHITE AND NOT QUITE: AMBIVALENCE AND MIMICRY IN OYEYEMI’S BOY, SNOW, BIRD.....	11
III.  THE THIRD SPACE OF “PERFECT LIBERTY”: HYBRIDITY AND BREAKABLE BINARIES IN ZOE WICOMB’S PLAYING IN THE LIGHT .....	34
IV.   CONCLUSION.....	48
REFERENCES .....	51

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

*“Black skin splits under the racist gaze, displaced into signs of bestiality, genitalia, grotesquerie, which reveal the phobic myth of the undifferentiated whole white body.”*  
-Homi Bhabha, “Of Mimicry and Man”

As the use of the term “diaspora” has increased in recent scholarship, its definition has been expanded to describe more than the physical movement of people and cultures from one region to another. In *Diaspora Literature and Theory—Why Now?*, for instance, Mark Shackelton binds together recent, influential essays on the subject and calls for a consideration of the term “diaspora” as signifying both a migration of people and a migration of thought. In this thesis, I hope to expand this notion of theoretical diaspora to demonstrate also that literary representations of diaspora produce what I consider to be an epistemological migration, challenging the idea that race and culture are stable and impermeable and offering instead racial and cultural fluidity. Nowhere is this causal relationship better exemplified than in narratives of racial passing written by diasporic writers. In Helen Oyeyemi’s *Boy, Snow, Bird* and Zoë Wicomb’s *Playing in the Light*, for example, the biracial characters’ physical migrations enable shifts in these characters’ racial perceptions. While Homi Bhabha’s conceptions of mimicry, hybridity, and ambivalence are not without opposition, I believe Bhabha’s theories help to illuminate how these novels specifically challenge traditional binary notions of race.

Through a focus on instances of mimicry and hybridity in Oyeyemi's and Wicomb's novels, I will argue that both works exhibit an ambivalence that allows for the subversion of accepted notions of race as strictly categorical and immutable. Additionally, I will analyze the ways in which both novels exist as cultural and artistic forms of the concepts they demonstrate; specifically, I argue that *Boy, Snow, Bird*'s narrative form is a form of parodic mimicry that repeats European and African literary traditions and subverts Eurocentrism, while *Playing in the Light* is a "Third Space" in which to accept notions of the non-categorical fluidity of race. Through this analysis, I intend to draw attention to Oyeyemi's and Wicomb's unique abilities to refract notions of race, rather than presumably reflect a system of strict categories. Refraction as *deflection* transforms and bends light through what Rodolphe Gasché refers to as "the tain of the mirror."<sup>1</sup> I argue, then, that Oyeyemi's performative subversion "plays with light," demonstrating the fluidity not only of race but of postcolonial literature itself, and these novels transcend the realm of literature and exist as empowering calls for society's modifications of its racial perceptions.

In understanding Oyeyemi's and Wicomb's subversion of binary conceptions of race, I turn to Homi Bhabha's *The Location of Culture*. Published in 1994, this essay collection allows for an examination of Bhabha's most pivotal theoretical contributions to postcolonial studies. Of all of the theories Bhabha presents throughout the essays in this collection, his conceptions of hybridity, mimicry, and ambivalence have, perhaps, been most vital in shaping postcolonial discourse. In "The Commitment to Theory" (1989),

---

<sup>1</sup> See Rodolphe Gasché's *The Tain of the Mirror: Derrida and the Philosophy of Reflection*, Harvard University Press, 1986.

Bhabha challenges accepted understandings of culture and identity and calls for a rethinking of cultural identity through his conception of hybridity. In his introduction to *The Location of Culture*, Bhabha expands on his theories' abilities to prompt a reevaluation of perceptions of the individual subject's racial identity but also "culture" itself, including the cultural production of literature and the arts. Bhabha describes hybridity as disorienting cultural and racialized forms, evoking colonial anxiety through its presentation of, for example, "a difference 'within,' a subject that inhabits the rim of an 'in-between' reality" (13). In Chapter I of *The Location of Culture*, a reprint of "The Commitment to Theory," Bhabha refers to this "in-between reality" as ambivalence, which, he says, "constitute[s] the very structure of human subjectivity and its systems of cultural representation" (*The Location of Culture* 19). Bhabha argues that cultural identity is constructed in a space of ambivalence he refers to as the "Third Space of enunciation" (37). Understanding the emergence of identities within this obscure space is paramount, according to Bhabha, as this understanding brings about "a conceptualization of international culture as based on the inscription and articulation of culture's hybridity" (38). In "How Newness Enters the World: Postmodern Space, Postcolonial Times and the Trials of Cultural Translation," Bhabha explains that this "Third Space" is a space of ambivalence that challenges categorical understandings of race and culture (*The Location of Culture* 217). Further explaining his understanding of ambivalence, which disrupts notions of "pure" races and cultures, Bhabha discusses questions of mimicry, articulated first in "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse" (1985). In this essay, Bhabha writes that the ambivalence of mimicry "fixes the colonized subject as a 'partial' presence"—"almost the same, but not quite" (*The Location of Culture* 126).

Bhabha's assertion of the subversive nature of mimicry allows me to identify moments when European storytelling traditions are used to undermine the notions of race that are tied to these very traditions. Specifically, in this thesis, I will be arguing that Oyeyemi and Wicomb undermine the tendency of literary traditions to reinforce static categories of race, even as these authors both own and transform those traditions.

Despite the popularity of Bhabha's conceptions of mimicry and hybridity, in current scholarship, Bhabha's understandings of these terms are often subject to criticism and misinterpretation. For instance, in focusing on the colonized subject's situation as an incomplete subject, most scholars elide the potential that Bhabha suggests mimicry grants the colonized subject. Bhabha says, "The menace of mimicry is its double vision which in disclosing the ambivalence of colonial discourse also disrupts its authority" (124). In this way, according to Bhabha, in adopting the characteristics of the colonizer, the colonized subject, "radically revalues the normative knowledges of the priority of race, writing and history" (129). Alternatively stated, through mimicry, the colonized subject is able to subvert colonial imaginaries concerning the mental, moral, and social superiority of the colonizer. In a similar respect, many critics decontextualize Bhabha's explanation of ambivalence. Bhabha quotes the narrator of Nadine Gordimer's 1990 novel *My Son's Story*, who responds to racial tensions towards the end of apartheid in South Africa. Gordimer, through her narrator, Will, describes the "coloured," or biracial, condition as "halfway between. . . being not defined" and "never to be questioned, but observed like a taboo, something which no one, while following, would ever admit to" (*The Location of Culture* 13). Bhabha's repetition of Gordimer's description of the biracial appearance as "taboo" leads many to assume Bhabha's assertion of the existence of "pure" cultures and

racism, which hybridity disrupts<sup>2</sup>. However, a fully contextualized reading reveals Bhabha's understanding of hybridity to be one that inherently rejects all notions of racial and cultural purity. Similarly, in this thesis, my application of Bhabha's concept of mimicry particularly to Oyeyemi's novel may also be misconstrued as an assertion of an original European literary form that Oyeyemi strives to replicate. However, based on Bhabha's explanations of mimicry, I contend that Oyeyemi undermines notions of the existence of an original literary form and, instead, brings a new form—an intermingling of African and European literature—into being.

Bhabha's theories related to multiracial and multicultural experiences to be extremely relevant given the emphasis current scholarship places on contemporary presentations of the uncategorical, fluid nature of race and culture. Furthermore, I view Bhabha's theories to be crucial even to the postcolonial moment, given the persistence of binary concepts of race in Anglo-European fairytale retellings. In this thesis, I intend to contribute to this scholarship, demonstrating how Bhabha's still relevant concepts of mimicry, hybridity, and ambivalence constitute an effective theoretical lens through which to view narratives of racial passing in works by African diasporic women. In particular, I analyze Helen Oyeyemi's *Boy, Snow, Bird* and Zoë Wicomb's *Playing in the Light*, specifically working to understand how Bhabha's concepts illuminate African literature's ability to shift understandings of race. I believe that Oyeyemi's and Wicomb's diasporic identities, combined with their similar depictions of racial passing,

---

<sup>2</sup> I will further discuss specific critiques of Bhabha's concepts in my chapter "'The Third Space of Perfect Liberty': Hybridity and Breakable Binaries in Zoë Wicomb's *Playing in the Light*."

communicate a fluidity that rejects notions of race as based on a system of rigid, impermeable categories into which people are hailed. In this conveyance of the fluidity of race, I argue, these particular novels take on active roles in modifying societal and cultural attitudes towards race, deploying the very traditions and literary forms that often have traditionally reinforced binary perceptions of race.

Four years after her birth in 1984, Helen Oyeyemi moved from her birthplace of Nigeria to London, UK. She now lives in Prague (Porter 23). Similarly, Zoë Wicomb, who now lives in Scotland, traveled from her birthplace of South Africa to Europe in 1994 (Coetzee 565). In their work, these two novelists of the African diaspora, interrogate recidivist patterns of racialized cultural assumptions central to identity formation, while at the same time communicating the pivotal role of art in shaping understandings of race. I have chosen to analyze *Boy*, *Snow*, *Bird* and *Playing in the Light* in order to explore how both novels exhibit a link between multinational identities and an acceptance of non-binary modes of understanding and being. I aim to specifically explore these novels' communication of art's role in frustrating binary perceptions of race through refraction in contrast to reflection, thus forwarding conceptions of racial fluidity that essentially reject those binary notions.

Likely because of their dissimilar regional and historical settings, Oyeyemi and Wicomb's novels are rarely analyzed in tandem. However, because both authors undermine binary conceptions of race through narratives of racial passing, in which some characters cling to notions of race as strictly categorical while the protagonists critically examine their parents' preoccupations with whiteness and racial purity, I argue that a side-by-side examination of these novels is warranted. I first examine Oyeyemi's work.

In her 2014 novel *Boy, Snow, Bird*, Oyeyemi depicts the life of Boy Novak, a white woman who, in 1953, breaks free from her father's abuse in New York and moves to small-town Massachusetts. Once settled in Massachusetts, Boy marries into an all-white family and gives birth to a daughter, Bird, whose dark skin uncovers the family's heritage and history of racial passing. Additionally, at the end of the novel, Boy discovers that her abusive father was born a woman, and Boy returns to her childhood home to reconnect to the mother she never knew. Through my observations of shifts in characters' perceptions of race and sex, and through analysis of Oyeyemi's intermingling of European fairytale and African storytelling traditions throughout the novel, I argue that through strategic mimicry, Oyeyemi disseminates a hybrid form of the novel that frustrates an ostensible boundary between Eurocentric and African traditions. Furthermore, I assert that Oyeyemi invalidates an understanding of literature as reflective of Western and European culture—an assumption that, I argue, is based on claims of Anglo-European superiority in both colonial and postcolonial eras. I observe two forms of mimicry in my analysis of this novel; first, in concurring with the majority of criticism surrounding the novel, I view the characters, in their practices of racial passing, as mimicking the presumed "superior" physical and cultural characteristics of whiteness. Unlike previous scholars, however, I also observe Oyeyemi's mimicry of Anglo-European fairy tales, arguing that Oyeyemi's novel strategically deploys mimicry that allows for the subversion of Eurocentrism. In this chapter, I pay particular attention to Oyeyemi's inclusion of the Anglo-European fairytale trope of the "all-seeing" mirror, analyzing the mirrors' continual refraction and refusal to reflect binary notions of black and white skin. Ultimately, I argue that *Boy, Snow, Bird* adopts tropes of the European fairy tale and bends them to reveal new modes

of identity formation for the African diaspora. By creating a productive in relationship to both cultural forms and categories, Oyeyemi lays claim to Anglo-European literary traditions, while at the same time subverting binary concepts of race and sex that European fairy tales often communicate.

In the following chapter “The Third Space of ‘Perfect Liberty’: Hybridity and Breakable Binaries in Zoë Wicomb’s *Playing in the Light*,” I analyze Wicomb’s 2006 novel, which similarly subverts binary conceptions of race. In this chapter, I apply Bhabha’s notion of the “Third Space” to *Playing in the Light*, a novel about a woman, Marion, who grapples with the loss of her presumed Afrikaner identity after discovering her heritage as a “coloured” South African. Set against a backdrop of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, the novel allows for an exploration of not only Marion’s changing identity as a “coloured” South African woman but also post-apartheid South Africa’s shifting identity as the “Rainbow Nation.” Because of this dual identity shift that Wicomb displays, I view Wicomb’s presentation of Marion’s identity crisis to communicate a larger message regarding South Africa’s attempts to reconcile and recover from its tragic past. In particular, my work corresponds with a trend in scholarship surrounding the novel which focuses primarily on Wicomb’s presentation of several “Third Spaces” in which Marion is able to accept the concept of hybridity and her own biracial identity. However, my readings disclose that Marion’s eventual acceptance of hybridity and the fluidity of race comes only after she departs from South Africa and travels to Europe. During her time in Europe, Marion reads literature and views art set in apartheid South Africa—most notably Nadine Gordimer’s *The Conservationist*. Ultimately, through this chapter, I consider how the literature and visual art Marion

encounters provides a “Third Space” and a necessary distance for Marion. This space, I argue, enables Marion to explore the apartheid narratives to which she has subscribed as a white South African. This “Third Space,” I argue, also allows Marion to come to terms with her new “coloured” identity. Although many scholars view Wicomb’s work as a critique of Bhabha’s conception of hybridity, I forward Bhabha’s conception of hybridity as a highly effective lens through which to view Marion’s identity shift into a person who can no longer subscribe to narratives of racial purity—a purity that was always a phobic myth, according to Bhabha. Additionally, because Wicomb’s novel presents South African literature as a medium through which to come to terms with racial fluidity as well as reconciling a violent past that depended upon static categories of race, I argue that *Playing in the Light* acts, itself, as a “Third Space” in which to revise binary understandings of race.

Through my analyses of Oyeyemi’s *Boy, Snow, Bird* and Wicomb’s *Playing in the Light*, I hope to demonstrate how literature written by and about diasporic people inspires a new form of diaspora—a diaspora of thought. Specifically, I argue, these representations of racial passing effect understandings of race as fluid and mutable. At the end of his essay “Of Mimicry and Man,” Bhabha argues that the black subject “splits under the racist gaze,” divulging the “phobic myth” of white superiority (*The Location of Culture* 132). By pairing Oyeyemi’s and Wicomb’s works, I aim not to displace this phobic myth but, rather, to demonstrate that when the black subject is viewed through narratives of racial passing written by diasporic writers, this split gaze becomes inverted, revealing the racial ambiguity of its new subject—the reader. In consideration of this inversion, my readings of Oyeyemi’s and Wicomb’s novels work collectively to draw

attention to the specific ways these novels refract binary understandings of race, thereby splitting the subject of readers' inverted gazes and provoking a reevaluation of readers' identities as constituents of untraversable racial categories.

## CHAPTER II

### ALL WHITE AND NOT QUITE: AMBIVALENCE AND MIMICRY IN OYEYEMI'S

#### *BOY, SNOW, BIRD*

In her 2014 novel *Boy, Snow, Bird*, British novelist Helen Oyeyemi intertwines issues of hybridity and alienation within an American setting. In the novel, Oyeyemi depicts the life of Boy Novak, a white woman who settles in small-town Massachusetts after escaping the abuse of her father in 1953 New York. Once in Massachusetts, Boy marries and is initiated into an all-white family. When Boy's daughter, Bird, is born with dark skin, however, the family's heritage and the secret of its white-passing practices are revealed. Additionally, at the end of the novel, Boy returns to her childhood home in Manhattan, having committed to reconnecting to the woman who birthed her after discovering that her abusive "father" was born a woman. Through these complex depictions of racial passing and transgenderism, Oyeyemi simultaneously mimics and critiques presumably stable Anglo-European identities of race and gender. At the same time, Oyeyemi deploys the forms of folklore and fairytale, mimicking traditions of writing with similarly presumed "origins" and narratives that work to establish norms, values, and traditional categorical identities. Oyeyemi, on the one hand, presents characters who adhere to strict notions of gender and racial binaries. And, on the other hand, Oyeyemi deploys both a narrative form and structure that embrace ideas of hybridity while presenting the concepts of gender and race as socially constructed, fluid,

and open to revision. In this chapter, I will not only explore Oyeyemi's communication of mimicry throughout *Boy*, *Snow*, *Bird*, as other scholars have done, but I will examine the ways in which Oyeyemi's mimicry of Anglo-European fairy tales, along with her allusions to African storytelling traditions, allows for the dissemination of racial and sexual fluidity across the presumed divide between Eurocentric and African traditions. In doing so, Oyeyemi negates a presumed understanding of literature as reflective of Western and European culture. This assumption perpetuates claims of Anglo-European mental, moral, and social superiority in the colonial period and after, even while promoting an appreciation of cultural "diversity."

In addition to providing commentary on race, gender, and class in 1950s America, Oyeyemi chronicles Boy's journey, particularly as her family structure shifts to include those deemed white, black, or biracial. By following Boy's migration to an unfamiliar area and her integration into a multiracial family, Oyeyemi also implicitly captures the struggle to embrace a multinational (or, in contemporary critical parlance, "cosmopolitan") identity. In addition to Boy's narrative of the shifting signifiers of race, Oyeyemi evidences the ways in which the form of the novel progresses an exploration of cultural hybridity. Through her intertwining of classic fairy tale and African folklore, Oyeyemi concurrently presents Eurocentrism and Africanism, deploying a literary form that illustrates the challenging intersections between Eurocentric environments and indigenous cultures. The novel contains references to several classic fairy tales, most notably *Snow White* and *Cinderella*, drawing on European tropes of evil stepparents and all-seeing mirrors. I will analyze Oyeyemi's emphasis on mirrors to illuminate allusions to an additional classic European tale, Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*. Alongside

these European literary references are Oyeyemi's numerous allusions to African culture, specifically Nigerian storytelling methods. I will establish how Oyeyemi's novel resembles Eurocentric retellings of classic European literature and fairy tales. I will also examine the African literary tropes Oyeyemi dispenses throughout her work, specifically related to the oral storytelling tradition and frame narratives. My analyses of these allusions will allow me to demonstrate *Boy, Snow, Bird's* ability to exist as a retelling of both Anglo-European fairytale and African myth. This intermingling of African myth and postcolonial retellings of Anglo-European fairy tales, I assert, bridges the divide between Eurocentric and postcolonial traditions and identities—a divide commonly perceived to be uncrossable due to colonial discourses that persistently silence native beliefs and customs of formerly colonized countries.

To some, *Boy, Snow, Bird* may function merely as a replication of European literature that takes on unconventional understandings of race and sex. In consideration of Oyeyemi's allusions to African storytelling traditions, however, I view the novel as a reflection of both European and African cultures that allows for Oyeyemi's communication of non-binary conceptions of race and sex across the presumed divide between African and European cultures. Furthermore, although Oyeyemi presents many African notions that Western and European culture rejects, and vice versa, I view Oyeyemi's replication of Anglo-European fairy tales to be itself a form of mimicry that allows for the reception of African culture in European and Western environments. This mimicry, I argue, subverts imaginaries concerning the mental, moral, and social superiority of European and Western cultures. This, coupled with *Boy's* and *Bird's* narratives that undo the presumed categories of race and sex, interrupts colonial and

contemporary imaginaries of racial superiority and its gendering, enabling Oyeyemi to demonstrate literature's ability to transform concepts of race, sex, and cultural identity.

I view this mimicry of Anglo-European and African storytelling traditions to construct a narrative form and structure that embrace the concept of hybridity. In current discourse surrounding works by Nigerian writers, postcolonial presentations of hybridity have attracted a growing interest. In "Transcultural Creativity in World Englishes: Speech Events in Nigerian English Literature," Edmund Bamiro, for instance, notes the subtle expression of resistance in postcolonial narratives, such as Chinua Achebe's incorporation of numerous forms of art translated from Igbo into his English narration and dialogues. Bamiro argues that these articulations combined with their transcultural creativity produce literature which "does not privilege center or margin but provides the potential means for establishing a dialectic between dominant and marginalized discourses" (14). Jessica Porter modernizes Bamiro's perception of Nigerian literature as a means of hybridized communication. In "[Im]Migrating Witchcraft: Transatlantic Gothic Hybridity in *White is for Witching*," Porter asserts her perspective that the combination of Gothic, fairy-tale, and tribal mythologies, exhibited particularly in Oyeyemi's work, produces a transatlantic text. For Porter, Oyeyemi's work "contests [exclusionary gestures depicted through previous purity discourses] by creating an affirmatively hybridized, transcultural narrative that reveals the resemblances and continuities among the transatlantic cultural traditions it invokes" (23). Porter further embraces notions of the postcolonial transatlantic narrative as offering "a positive rendering of the possibility of a truly transcultural England" (34). Gina Wisker echoes Porter's acknowledgment of the hybridizing potentialities of transatlantic texts. In

“Testing the Fabric of Bleubead’s Castle: Postcolonial Reconfigurations, Demythologising, Remythologising, and Shape-Shifting,” Wisker argues that contemporary postcolonial Gothic narratives from writers such as Oyeyemi offer new expressions of postcolonial culture that neither silence nor mimic the dominant colonial voice. Instead, Wisker perceives these novels to be presented in a narrative format that “re-educates, re-imagines, and re-voices” indigenous culture. Porter’s and Wisker’s recognition of the communicative possibilities of the Nigerian fairy tale Gothic is consistent with the trend in contemporary discourse concerning postcolonial representations of cultural hybridity—a trend of acknowledging the literature’s conveyance of a non-binary cultural existence. Often overlooked in this trend, however, are the limitations of a Eurocentric society that continues to value cultural oneness, often even as it promotes “diversity.”

#### Literary Forms and the Colonial Context

Addressing this rejection of or disregard for African representation in literary reception, Edward Brathwaite, widely noted for his early scholarship on Caribbean literature, observes an extreme lack of literary representations of the African subject in literature from the West Indies. In his 1974 lecture, turned essay, “The African Presence in Caribbean Literature,” Brathwaite argues that colonial education forces certain literary expressions of culture and that “much of what we come to accept as ‘literature’ is work that ignores, or is ignorant of its African connection and aesthetic” (78). While Brathwaite’s perspectives are specific to the West Indies of the 1970s, his early work

offers recognition of the ways in which African influences are unacknowledged or even rejected in readings of non-African literature.

Following Brathwaite's foundational identification of a lack of African influence in literature, more recently, Patrick Colm Hogan has drawn attention to this lack of acknowledgment of African culture in literature, focusing specifically on the reception of productions of Nigerian culture in European and Western reading environments. Hogan, too, explains his perspectives on colonial dominance over and destruction of indigenous culture. In his 1995 essay "The Gender of Tradition: Ideologies of Character in Post-Colonization Anglophone Literature," Hogan identifies the colonial subject's response to the intertwining of colonial and indigenous cultures. In his recognition of these responses, Hogan employs Bhabha's conception of mimicry, suggesting that writers of these intertwining cultural texts achieve universalism, or "the combination of elements from both indigenous and colonial traditions in order to forge a new culture which one hopes will be superior to both" (Hogan 88). Hogan comprehends mimicry to be "the almost phobic denial of the distinctive elements of indigenous culture, and the imitation of English culture, especially its most alien elements"; however, this understanding elides Bhabha's more subtle suggestion that mimicry works also to invalidate originary narratives perpetuated through colonial discourse (Hogan 88).

Hogan's understanding of Bhabha's concept of mimicry is common in critical reception, as we will also see in chapter two. I argue that this understanding disregards the power of mimicry to demonstrate the emptiness of colonial ideologies. This lack of observance of mimicry's ability to undermine myths of colonial superiority is also prevalent in scholarship surrounding *Boy, Snow, Bird*. In "Snow White and the Trickster:

Race and Genre in Helen Oyeyemi's *Boy, Snow, Bird*," for example, Kimberly J. Lau focuses on the structural commonalities between Oyeyemi's novel and traditional African folktales, asserting that through these similarities Oyeyemi "invites a reconsideration of the ways that race has informed the very definition of the European fairy tale" (381). Despite this acknowledgment of Oyeyemi's structural repetition of African folktale forms, Lau emphasizes her mimicry of Anglo-European fairytale tropes, arguing that the novel is ultimately an imitation of European fairy tale with African references interjected throughout the story: "*Boy, Snow, Bird* is continually interrupted and disrupted by an African and African American presence that haunts both Oyeyemi's Snow White and its European counterpart" (389). Although Lau ultimately praises Oyeyemi's integration of African and European allusions, Lau's identification of Oyeyemi's African and African American references as "disruptions" of an otherwise purely European text suggests an understanding of Oyeyemi's mimicry as derivative of an original form; this figure of mimicry as merely illusory makes of the novel, with its African interjections, a text that is "almost but not quite" European, a phrase Bhabha uses to describe colonial attitudes towards the colonized subject's performative subversion of the colonizer.

Maria Tatar offers a similar reading of Oyeyemi's mimicry of Anglo-European fairy tales. In "Mirrors and Webs: Fairy Tales, Cultural Memory and Trauma in Helen Oyeyemi's *Boy, Snow, Bird* and Neil Gaiman's *Anansi Boys*," Tatar analyzes gender, race, and identity in Oyeyemi's novel, examining Oyeyemi's presentation of characters' attempts to restore relationships particularly between mothers and daughters. Focusing on the characters' collective efforts to solve complications that arise as a result of racial and gender passing, Tatar interprets the eventual unification of dark-skinned and light-

skinned characters as a reflection of Oyeyemi's presentation of European and African cultures. However, in her examination of the novel's alignment with Anglo-European fairy tales, Tatar considers Oyeyemi's use of fairy tales in the novel to be "self-conscious," aligning her interpretation of Oyeyemi's replication of Anglo-European fairy tales with that of Hogan, who understands this mimicry to be a phobic imitation (179). Tatar's additional claims that Oyeyemi's deployment of European tropes, such as the evil stepmother, helps relay her story of "a man whose family has strategically and cruelly made the decision to pass as white," suggests a level of maliciousness in replicating colonial characteristics (179).

These perceptions of Oyeyemi's mimicry of Anglo-European fairy tales prioritize Bhabha's emphasis on the "ambivalence of mimicry" that "fixes the colonial subject as a 'partial' presence"—"almost the same, but not quite" (Bhabha 126). A focus on Bhabha's concept of this ambivalence, however, elides the potential that Bhabha suggests mimicry grants the colonial subject. Bhabha asserts that mimicry also negates colonial claims of inherent mental, moral, and social superiority. Bhabha states, "The menace of mimicry is its double vision which in disclosing the ambivalence of colonial discourse also disrupts its authority" (124). Drawing on Lacan's conceptions of mimicry as a type of camouflage, Bhabha further states, "Under cover of camouflage, mimicry, like the fetish, is a part-object that radically revalues the normative knowledges of the priority of race, writing and history" (131). Bhabha's explanation of mimicry as camouflage contests reading Oyeyemi's work as a phobic desire to conceal African culture with popular Eurocentric tropes and to replicate Eurocentric culture. Rather, Oyeyemi's replication of tropes from classic Anglo-European fairy tales and European fiction novels might be read

as a method of camouflaging African themes, specifically related to conceptions of race and sex, and functions as a form of performative subversion that allows Oyeyemi to simultaneously mirror Anglo-European literary tropes and undermine the colonial reasoning that grants such tropes wide acceptance. Furthermore, by replicating both European and African tales, neither of which would seem foreign to a British writer of Nigerian descent, Oyeyemi demonstrates the obscurity of cultural ownership and asserts her own hybridized possession of European and African cultures.

Oyeyemi's mimicry of colonial literary traditions, which undermines Western and European assumptions in literary reflection, also undermines conceptions of race and sex that are tied to Eurocentric thinking. Through her characters' perspectives, Oyeyemi presents contrasting attitudes towards race and sex in 1950s America. Throughout her depictions of these differing views of race and sex, Oyeyemi employs allusions to narrative traditions in African folklore specifically through the character of Bird. Through Oyeyemi's distinctive correlation between African references and the only character with black skin—as well as through Oyeyemi's employment of the fairytale trope of the mirror—*Boy, Snow, Bird* exists not only as a retelling of fairy tale or myth; it exists also as a rethinking of the concepts of race and sex as social constructions based on an immutable, categorical system and as an analysis of Afrocentric and Eurocentric attitudes towards this rethinking. It is furthermore an exploration of the correlations between notions of race and sex as either immutable biological states or social constructions and literary traditions concerning representations of Europe and under-representations of Africa.

In the first of the three sections of *Boy, Snow, Bird*, Oyeyemi details Boy Novak's escape from her father's abuse and the start of Boy's new remote life. In addition to this European fairytale trope of escape from inept parents, Oyeyemi particularly alludes to *Snow White* through Boy's fixation on mirrors and her personifications of these mirrors' "reflections." In the story's opening lines, rather than demonstrating the mirror's reflection of a one-to-one relation to the world, Boy emphasizes its interjection into the world, beyond the frame of the mirror. Boy, says, "I felt the reflection at my shoulder like a touch. I was on the most familiar terms with her, same as any other junior dope too lonely to be selective about the company she keeps" (3). Oyeyemi's personification of Boy's reflection in the mirror situates Boy in the role of the evil stepmother, and her determination to prove that her stepdaughter, Snow, is "not the fairest of them all" parallels that of Snow White's stepmother's malicious undermining of Snow White. (150). Continuing these allusions, once in Massachusetts, Boy meets Arturo, to whom she refers as "an actual Prince Charming," and the two marry (109). Further placing Boy in the role of the evil stepmother, Arturo makes for Boy a snake bracelet in place of an engagement ring. Boy says, "That snake was what he'd made for me, it was what he thought I wanted, was maybe even what he thought I was, deep down" (109). The snake figure's increasing constriction of Boy's arm and Boy's eventual admission that she "can't discount the possibility that the bracelet's been molding [her] into the wearer it wants" solidifies Boy's role as evil (147). Boy's attachment to the snake figure reflects fairytale pairings of villains and animal companions, and Boy's submissiveness to the "will" of the bracelet reflects her compliance with traditional, categorical conceptions of race and sex. At the end of this first section, Boy gives birth to a child named Bird, whose

undeniably black skin reveals Arturo's family's secret of racial passing. After the family's secret is revealed, Boy, fulfilling the role of the evil stepmother, chooses to recognize the family as black and to expel Snow from the family, sending her to live elsewhere because of the difference in her racial appearance.

Bird's birth, with its initiation of questions concerning the social construction of race, contrasts Boy's characterization as evil by European tropes in the first section of the novel. Through Bird's birth, Oyeyemi creates an association between the Eurocentrism which Boy represents in the beginning of the novel and the notion of race as biological, which Boy also demonstrates. In the beginning of the novel, Boy regards her own mirror reflections, saying, "Nobody ever warned me about mirrors, so for many years, I was fond of them, and believed them to be trustworthy," reflecting her belief in the connections between race and other physical attributes and identity (3). Boy further demonstrates her belief in the connection between identity and race particularly after Bird's birth reveals her husband's true race. Boy says, "Arturo didn't try to touch me; he knew I wouldn't let him. I looked at him over the top of Snow's head and I mouthed: 'Who are you? Who are you?'" (137). Through this questioning, Boy demonstrates her understanding of race as essential to her identification of Arturo, hence also demonstrating Boy's futile attempt to assert race as an essential system of untraversable categories into which all people fall. Along with this example, Boy's insistence on her indifference to Bird's race ironically indicates her true concern: Boy says, "[I] said I *didn't care* that Bird was colored" to which Mrs. Fletcher replies "That's the spirit. Keep saying it until it's true" (143). The minor characters' recognition of Boy's racist

disavowal of her concern for Bird's race further reveals Boy's evident anxiety regarding Bird's racial appearance.

Boy's personification of and desire to trust mirrors' reflections reveals Boy's adherence to her understanding of race as a system of rigidly immutable, untraversable categories, and Boy relies on the mirrors' reflections to avoid perspectives that would challenge this manner of thinking. As a person of mixed race, and as the character who initially desires the reunion of her black and white family members, Bird, on the other hand, reflects an acceptance of race as socially constructed and mutable. Bird demonstrates this view of race early in the novel, as Bird expresses her satisfaction in revealing the family's racial passing: "Do I feel bad for blowing Aunt Viv's cover? Not really. I accidentally brought truth to light, and bringing truth to light is the right thing to do" (156). In addition to demonstrating Bird's pride in divulging the family's secret, this scene exhibits Bird's understanding of the family's ability to be viewed as either white or black, which reveals Bird's understanding of race as malleable and open to interpretation. Bird's perception of Snow after the sisters' many years of separation further demonstrates this understanding of race as socially established. Bird says of Snow, "She looked more colored in person. Maybe it was the way she'd chosen to wear her hair, combed and pinned up on one side of her head so that it all rained down on one shoulder and left the other exposed to the dusty sunlight" (271). Bird's view of Snow here also reflects Bird's understanding of the ambivalence of race, as Bird is capable of seeing Snow as a person of color despite her predominantly white skin. Further demonstrating Bird's acceptance of the ambivalence of race and consequent lack of attention to obvious racial appearances, Bird dresses as Alice in Wonderland and becomes frustrated that others do

not immediately recognize her costume. Bird says, “The costume made it glaringly obvious—the white ankle socks, the black Mary Janes, the fat ribbon tied in a bow around my head, the blue dress with the blue and white apron over it—it’s in all the pictures . . . Dad said: ‘What a pretty little housekeeper!’” (167). Bird’s irritation at her family members’ inability to identify her costume reflects Bird’s understanding of skin color as unimportant in performing an identity. Thus, this scene also reflects Bird’s rejection of social rules that distinguish races and limit associations between racial categories, and this racial mixing contests the way storybook characters typically establish and assert normative scripts of race and sex.

In addition to rejecting strict, categorical understandings of race, Bird practices storytelling methods specifically associated with African storytelling traditions. Although I oppose her understanding of mimicry in *Boy, Snow, Bird* as merely imitative, Lau usefully charts the commonalities in the narrative structures of the novel and the African folklore Oyeyemi references throughout the novel. Referencing Roger Abrahams’ *African Folktales*, Lau notes the presence of African<sup>1</sup> allusions in the novel, particularly in the story Bird tells to the spiders in her room and to Snow. Lau observes Oyeyemi’s use of formal elements of African folktale, noting that the storytelling that occurs throughout the novel “is sutured . . . by sets of interlocking voices” (381). This collaborative storytelling, according to Lau, “resonates with the traditional methods of African expressive arts” (381). Lau goes on to analyze Bird’s tale as “itself a product of interlocking voices: Leah’s (the Whitmans’) housekeeper who was fired for sharing it with her, Bird’s and those belonging to the people who shared the story in the past” (381). Lau cites Abrahams’ two primary elements to African collaborative storytelling:

“the seizure of the role of narrator and the maintaining of it in the face of ongoing critical commentary and. . . the constant interaction between storyteller and audience” (383).

Bird carries out this seizure of and interaction with the story when she says, “[Leah] told me that each time a story like this one gets retold, the new teller should add a little something of their own” (223). Lau’s focus particularly on connections between African storytelling methods and Bird’s narration of stories within the novel offers an opportunity to view Bird disseminating African forms of representing and varying identities such as Snow. Thus, in contrast to how Oyeyemi’s presents connections between Europe and strictly categorized racial distinctions, Oyeyemi creates associations between Bird’s understanding of race as socially constructed, even as she demonstrates African forms to be as influential to identity as European forms.

In Bird’s critique of European forms of African representation, the trope of the mirror becomes crucial. In Bird’s epistolary correspondence with Snow, Bird reveals that she often does not appear in mirrors: “I hadn’t shown up in her mirror at all that car ride. I begged that missing slice of me. . . to appear behind her before she started to feel funny about not seeing it there, but the mirror didn’t care” (208). The mirror’s lack of reflection of Bird parallels literature’s lack of reflection of African themes. Bird’s additional descriptions of her disappearance in mirrors further communicate this lack of the literary—particularly the Western forms—to reflect. Bird says, “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. . . . Sometimes when other people are there, but nobody ever notices that my reflection’s a no-show” (162). Others’ lack of acknowledgment of Bird’s missing reflection parallels Boy’s father’s own erasure and indicates European and Western literature’s failure to

reflect African themes in literature. Bird also reveals this refraction of Africa in that even when she does appear in mirrors, Bird's reflection seems to be in control of her. For instance, upon Bird and Snow's long-awaited reunion, Bird says, "Snow's hand was on my shoulder and both my own hands were at my sides, but our reflections didn't call that any kind of reunion. The girls in the mirror had their arms around each other, and they smiled at us until we followed their lead" (273). Bird's personification of the mirror's reflections in this scene reinforces connections between the mirror and literary representation, and Bird's and Snow's submissiveness to the mirror's reflections represent the revisionary power of literature when multiple races and cultures are represented.

In the aforementioned scene, Snow, like Bird, appears to submit to the mirror's reflection. However, Snow's acceptance in the extended family because of her perceived whiteness contrasts Bird's racial appearance, positioning Snow as a representation of whiteness and as a reflection of the acceptance of a Eurocentric influence in literature. Boy's observations of the family's treatment of Snow particularly demonstrate this juxtaposition of Bird's and Snow's racial appearances. Soon after Bird's birth, Boy reveals the family's and others' admiration of Snow: "When whites look at [Snow], they don't get whatever fleeting, ugly impressions so many of us get when we see a colored girl. . . From this I can . . . begin to measure the difference between being seen as colored and being seen as Snow" (144). Oyeyemi's double entendre in the word "Snow"—as both a name and a metonym for whiteness—particularly emphasizes the physical differences between the sisters. Snow's unrestrained attachment to Bird after she is born further highlights their physical differences, as Snow often "lean[s] over Bird's crib and

presse[s] the side of her face against the side of her sister's face as if showcasing the contrasts between their features" (147). In addition to showcasing Snow's and Bird's differences in their racial appearances, Oyeyemi, through this juxtaposition, emphasizes the differences between the sisters' representations of cultures. Just as Oyeyemi positions Boy in the role of the evil stepmother, she places Snow in the role of the princess. Boy's view of Snow as an intentional threat to Bird's acceptance in the family firmly positions Snow in this role. Boy views the spotlight that Snow's presence casts on Bird's blackness to be "spontaneous and calculated at exactly the same time" (147). Boy's perception of Snow as a threat to Bird's acceptance reflects the princess's unintentional threat to the Queen's fairness in the *Snow White* tale. Further mimicking the fairytale princess-queen rivalry, Boy portrays Snow as deceptively congenial: "She was poised and sympathetic, like a girl who'd just come from the future but didn't want to brag about it. . . Sometimes I think it was a trick of hers. . ." (75). Boy's narration of Snow's amiability maintains Snow's role as the princess figure, as this characterization mirrors the good-natured comportment typical of Anglo-European fairytale princesses, whose adversaries also misapprehend such benevolence. These fairytale princess allusions create of Snow, and Boy, a representation of Anglo-European literature. And, because Snow's whiteness inadvertently eclipses Bird's presence, Oyeyemi is reflects the plethora of Eurocentric representations in literature and the consequent scarcity of African representations in literature. In these allusions to representations of Western and European cultures in literature, the image of the mirror is, once again, significant. Further juxtaposing Snow and Bird, Oyeyemi demonstrates Snow's supposed reflection. In her response to Bird's revelation that her reflection does not always appear in mirrors, Snow says, "I don't

always show up in mirrors, either. . . It's a relief to be able to forget about what I might or might not be mistaken for,"and Bird quickly refutes the statement, accusing Snow of fabricating an account of her own lack of reflection in order to appear empathetic (214). Some might interpret Snow's declaration of relief in the assurance of not having a mistaken identity to reflect Europe's privileged position of being well-represented and received in literature; however, because Snow is biracial, her missing reflection might also demonstrate literature's refraction of Eurocentrism and refraction of African themes.

While Snow consistently represents the multitude of Western and European cultural reflections in literature, and while Bird, in some moments, demonstrates the lack of acknowledgment of African influence in literature, Boy's position as a reflection of Europe shifts throughout *Boy, Snow, Bird*. As the novel progresses, Boy, adopting the same storytelling methods as Bird, becomes capable of representing Africa as well as Europe. Again mirroring the African storytelling traditions Abrahams describes, Oyeyemi depicts Boy's improvisational narrative about a beautiful witch and the snake at her heart. In the storytelling scene, Boy assumes the role of narrator in her narrative collaboration with Mia before allowing Mia to adopt the narrative position, saying "I was only too happy to push the paper over to her. I've always had a hard time figuring out what the moral of a story is supposed to be . . ." (55). Boy's collaboration with Mia in this scene, like Bird's collaboration with past narrators of her story, also mimics the seizure of the narrative role, which Abrahams suggests is crucial in African storytelling tradition. Because of this association between Boy and traditional African storytelling, Boy, like Bird, critiques literature as a form of reflection while forwarding the malleability of literary representation assumed as African traditions.

While analyses of Oyeyemi's major characters' mirror reflections illuminate the extent to which Eurocentric and Afrocentric influences are embraced in literary reception, analyses of the characters' own interactions with the images in the mirror additionally speak to the novel's potential to act as a force against perceptions of race as a set of rigid, immutable categories. Oyeyemi further alludes to European literature through the trope of the mirror, as the images that the mirror projects suggest a warping of the characters' perceived realities through refraction, similar to the obscuring of reality Alice experiences in Lewis Carroll's 1871 *Through the Looking-Glass, and What Alice Found There*. Boy's and Bird's fixations on their appearance in, or disappearance from, the mirror creates of the characters "Alice" figures. Just as the looking-glass obscures Alice's perceptions of reality, the mirrors in Oyeyemi's novel skew Boy's conceptions of the reality of race. In Carroll's sequel to *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, Alice, upon stepping through the mirror, examines the mirror-imaged Looking-glass room, observing that "what could be seen from the old room was quite common and uninteresting, but that all the rest was as different as possible" (Carroll 110). Likewise, in *Boy, Snow, Bird*, mirrors and other reflective surfaces refract Boy's "common and uninteresting" perception of the black-white binary and, instead, project images of the coexistence and amalgamation of black and white skin. For example, after Boy and Snow's reunion, Boy observes their images on the surface of a pool of dishwater: "Our reflections rippled in the water, stretching to breaking point, and swam away from each other in pieces, then the pieces shivered together again, stretched to their limit, burst" (Oyeyemi 291). This inexorable attraction between the two images, which occurs in many "reflections" throughout the novel, demonstrates Oyeyemi's use of images on reflective surfaces to

reject binary notions of race and to, rather, promote a conceptualization of the fusibility of black and white skin tones and the ability of cultural forms to shift. The extent to which Bird shifts her actions in compliance with the mirror's projections also demonstrates parallels between Oyeyemi's and Carroll's novels. In *Through the Looking-Glass*, upon observing the layout of the land on the other side of the looking-glass, Alice says, "I declare it's marked out just like a large chess-board. . . It's a great huge game of chess that's being played—all over the world—if this is the world at all, you know. Oh what fun it is! How I wish I was one of them! I wouldn't mind being a Pawn, if only I might join. . . ." (Carroll 122-123). Through her willingness to become a pawn, Alice expresses her determination to play an active role in the game and to follow the direction and regulations stipulated in the game. In a similar fashion, in Oyeyemi's novel, Bird draws directional cues from images in mirrors, such as the moment Bird and Snow embrace in compliance with the mirror's projection (Oyeyemi 273). Bird's submission to the images projected by the mirrors, like Alice's submission to the rules of chess, further indicates Bird's acceptance of the ambivalence of race, as the mirrors' images exhibit the non-binary relationship between black and white racial categories. In this way, the mirror becomes active, not only demonstrating the acceptance or rejection of Eurocentric and Afrocentric literary influences but compelling characters to gear their actions and perceptions of race toward an acceptance of its ambivalence and mutability.

In the last section of *Boy, Snow, Bird*, Boy follows Bird's compliance with these projections of non-binary notions of race. Along with Boy's increasing representation of Africa as the novel progresses, Boy's understanding of race shifts, which Boy demonstrates through her eventual acceptance of the family's racial integration, saying of

Snow, “She stands near me and I know that someone’s there, but when I look, I find another face in the way, and hear another voice, not Snow’s at all but distorted versions of my own face and voice, I think” (291). Boy’s ability to identify with her biracial stepdaughter in this scene reveals Boy’s acceptance of both multiple races within the family and notions of race as mutable and ambivalent. In addition to Boy’s reevaluation of her understanding of race at the end of the novel, Boy’s notions pertaining to sex shift. After discovering that her father was born a woman, Bird adheres to the concept of sex as biologically determined, saying, “Stop calling her ‘him.’ You’re telling me my mother has been desperately ill for decades and I’m fighting like hell to take it in, but you’ve got to stop calling her ‘him’” (304). However, Boy’s acceptance of her father as a male at the end of the novel reveals her new understanding of sex as similar to race—based on strict social categories. Oyeyemi particularly demonstrates connections between Boy’s conceptions of race and sex, Boy saying “[Olivia] told me that this would be the part of my life that brought me closer to my mother than ever, that this would be the time I felt what my mother had felt for me. Was this it? I’m learning that loving that kid as much as I do means that in some way, we’re still not separate” (147). Boy’s revelation of the connection she feels to her mother—who Boy later discovers is her father—because of Boy’s new acceptance of Bird’s biracial identity demonstrates the influence Boy’s acceptance of the fluidity of race has on her acceptance of the fluidity of sex. As a white character integrated into a black family and as a character whose views of race and sex shift gradually throughout the novel, Boy becomes representative of the reader, which suggests the novel’s potential to shift conceptions of race and sex through both African and European literary forms.

The parallels between Oyeyemi's main characters and Africa and Europe not only communicate the lack of representation and misrecognition of the postcolonized subject and diasporic literary traditions; because these characters demonstrate different conceptions of race and gender as socially or biologically constructed, Oyeyemi's novel also reflects the ways in which notions of these concepts that are particular to European societies are represented and mimicked in literature. The novel also demonstrates the ways in which African notions of these concepts of race and sex are consequently underrepresented. Through Oyeyemi's intermingling of African myth and postcolonial retellings of classic Anglo-European fairy tales and European fiction, *Boy, Snow, Bird* demonstrates the possibility of bridging the divide between Eurocentric and African representations in literature created by colonial discourses that persistently silence native beliefs and customs of formerly colonized countries. In this way, Oyeyemi's fairytale retellings function as a form of performative subversion that speaks to the postcolonial condition, particularly concerning conceptions of race and gender, and allow for Oyeyemi's communication of these concepts across the barrier between African and European cultures. Furthermore, although Oyeyemi presents many African notions that Western and European culture rejects, and vice versa, Oyeyemi's mimicry of Anglo-European fairy tales is itself a form of passing that allows Oyeyemi to both represent African culture and demonstrate the hollowness of suggestions of the superiority of colonial narrative traditions.

Additionally, this mimicry of colonial literary traditions enables Oyeyemi to circumvent colonial narratives' insistence upon cultural oneness. In his final remarks in "Of Mimicry and Man," Bhabha notes that in the ambivalent world of the "not

quite/white. . . the *founding objects* of the Western world become the erratic, eccentric, accidental *objets trouvés* of the colonial discourse—the part-objects of presence” (132). In respect of this Eurocentric assumption of the partial presence, Oyeyemi’s inclusion of Anglo-European fairytale allusions allows Oyeyemi to denounce colonial perspectives and assumptions of cultural reflection of originary forms, particularly related to sex and race as binary concepts. Bhabha further states, “Black skin splits under the racist gaze, displaced into signs of bestiality, genitalia, grotesquerie, which reveal the phobic myth and the undifferentiated whole white body” (132). As Oyeyemi’s intermingling of Eurocentric and African themes reflects a hybridity of colonial and postcolonial cultural identity, Oyeyemi’s mimicry of Anglo-European literary traditions is the ultimate negation of colonial perceptions of the ambivalence of the “not quite, not white.” In displaying the possibility of hybridity, Oyeyemi takes possession of the colonial tropes she employs, establishing ownership of both European and African cultures and an identity as both white *and* not quite. In this way, Oyeyemi’s novel itself functions as a “looking-glass” that refuses to reflect strict categorical modes of thinking of race and sex and instead projects concepts of the fluidity and ambivalence of race and sex.

---

<sup>1</sup> Recognizing that my usage of the term “African” presents the issue of encompassing all cultural and geographic diversity of black Africans into a single story, I have chosen the term “African,” following Kimberly Lau’s justification of her own usage of the

subsuming category. In “Snow White and the Trickster: Race and Genre in Helen Oyeyemi’s *Boy, Snow, Bird*,” Lau cites Roger D. Abrahams’s *African Folktales: Traditional Stories of the Black World* in which Abrahams notes, “In spite of the range of culture-types, there are widely observable continuities, especially in the area of aesthetics to be found in grounds throughout the continent” (392). Therefore, I have chosen to follow both Lau’s usage of the category “African,” in spite of the term’s subsuming nature, and Lau’s forethought to justify her usage of the term.

### CHAPTER III

#### THE THIRD SPACE OF “PERFECT LIBERTY”: HYBRIDITY AND BREAKABLE BINARIES IN ZOE WICOMB’S *PLAYING IN THE LIGHT*

In the previous chapter, I analyzed Helen Oyeyemi’s intertwining of Anglo-European fairytale and African narrative traditions through a theoretical lens that considers Homi Bhabha’s assertion of the power mimicry grants the colonial subject to delegitimize colonial discourse and assumptions of originary whiteness. I asserted that Oyeyemi communicates a link between Eurocentrism in literature and an adherence to rigidly categorical, binary understandings of race and sex. Thus, I also observed Oyeyemi’s communication of a link between an African inspired form of storytelling and non-binary, fluid conceptions of race and sex. Ultimately, I asserted that the novel functions as a form of mimicry that also deploys hybrid literary forms that challenge conceptions of race and sex as immutable, impermeable categories. In this chapter, I will explore Bhabha’s concepts of racial hybridity and evaluate arguments against Bhabha’s perceived suggestion of racial “purities” that hybridity disrupts. Again, I will argue that Zoe Wicomb’s novel provides a means through which racial ambivalence and hybridity are realized and accepted.

In *The Location of Culture*, Homi Bhabha argues that cultural identity is constructed in the ambivalent space he refers to as the “Third Space of enunciation” (37). Understanding the emergence of identities within this obscure space is crucial, according

to Bhabha, as this understanding will lead to “a conceptualization of international culture as based on the inscription and articulation of culture’s hybridity” (40). This “Third Space” is a space of ambivalence that challenges categorizations of race and culture. This idea of the Third Space is particularly helpful in analyzing Zoe Wicomb’s presentation of racial and cultural ambivalence in her novel *Playing in the Light*. In Wicomb’s novel, irony abounds as protagonist Marion Campbell, a travel agent who hates traveling, adheres to subtle Eurocentric notions of white superiority despite her own family’s history as black South Africans passing as a white, Afrikaner family. Set in post-apartheid South Africa, the novel follows Marion’s attempts to uncover the secrets and untruths of her childhood that have shaped her Afrikaner identity. Paradoxically, Marion is able to accept her identity within South Africa—as a “coloured”<sup>3</sup> woman—only after she has traveled beyond the country. While in Europe, Marion views art and reads literature set in apartheid South Africa—most notably Nadine Gordimer’s *The Conservationist*. My aim for this chapter will be to consider how this literature provides a “Third Space” for Marion to explore the apartheid narratives to which she has subscribed and come to terms with her new identity as a person who can no longer subscribe to those narratives of racial purity.

Despite the usefulness of Bhabha’s understanding of the “Third Space” in analyzing Marion’s grappling with her biracial heritage, many scholars view *Playing in the Light* as Wicomb’s critique against Bhabha’s concept of hybridity. This view of the novel is based on Wicomb’s own critical view of Bhabha, which she makes clear in her

---

<sup>3</sup> “Coloured”: A racial category implemented during apartheid as a designation for those of mixed race in South Africa.

essay “Shame and Identity: The Case of the Coloured in South Africa.” In the essay, Wicomb explains that the “coloured” race was originally established between colonists, indigenous Khoi and San people of the Cape, and slaves. Wicomb goes on to explain that black women and their “coloured” children were shamed as a result of this miscegenation. Wicomb asserts that this shaming is continued in the apartheid establishment of the “coloured” race and in subsequent “attempts by coloureds to establish brownness as a pure category, which is to say a denial of shame” (92).

Because of Wicomb’s criticism of attempts to rename the “coloured” race, some scholars have understood Wicomb’s *Playing in the Light* to be a conscious critique of the implications of racial purity they read in Bhabha’s work. For instance, in “A ‘Place in which to Cry’: The Place for Race and a Home for Shame in Zoë Wicomb’s *Playing in the Light*,” Minesh Dass discusses Marion’s discomfort in her home and in the homes of others. Dass views Marion’s discovery of her identity as an “un-homing” experience, but Dass distinguishing that this “un-homing” is unlike apartheid-era attempts to classify “coloured” people into a new racial category, which Dass claims Bhabha’s conception of hybridity achieves by “re-situat[ing] but not undo[ing] or deconstruct[ing] the violence of colonial discourse within the framework of postcolonial discourse” (141). Instead, Dass explains, in the un-homing Marion experiences, Marion “is able to discover new versions of herself” (145). Dass continues: “It is as if the foreignness, the state of being necessarily un-homed, allows a certain sense of identity to become possible” (145). J. U. Jacobs also views the novel as critical of Bhabha’s conception of hybridity. In “Playing in the Dark/Playing in the Light: Coloured Identity in the Novels of Zoë Wicomb,” Jacobs also observes Wicomb’s critical view of uniquely classifying “coloured” identity,

concurring with Desiree Lewis's, Heid Grunebaum's and Steven Robins's, and Zimitri Erasmus's rejections of "racial hybridity" because of "its connotations of impurity and degeneracy" (4). Both Dass and Jacobs use Wicomb's critique of Bhabha's concept of hybridity to underscore their own assertions of Wicomb's presentation of race as a social construction in *Playing in the Light*. However, as these scholars illuminate Wicomb's portrayal of the performance of race throughout the novel, they also insist upon the presence of a "Third Space" in which race is ambivalent; thus, even as these scholars view the novel as a critique of Bhabha, they ironically warrant an application of Bhabha's understanding of racial ambivalence to Wicomb's work.

In contrast to those who attempt to distance themselves from Bhabha, there are many scholars who, while never explicitly mentioning Bhabha or his concept of the "Third Space," analyze *Playing in the Light* through an understanding of spaces in which Marion comes to accept an identity as biracial. In discourse surrounding the novel, critics observe Marion's struggle to accept her new "coloured" race. These scholars often closely examine parallels between Marion's grappling with this racial ambivalence and Wicomb's repeated illustrations of obscure spaces between definite entities. For instance, in "Oceanic Histories and Protean Poetics: The Surge of the Sea in Zoë Wicomb's Fiction," Meg Samuelson discusses the emblem of the sea in Wicomb's oeuvre. Samuelson writes, "Presented as a fluid archive, the sea casts up into official land-centered narratives the flotsam of lost, scattered and repressed histories" (544). Through a Freudian theoretical lens, Samuelson examines the "networks of movement" that brought about the "coloured" racial category, and Samuelson ultimately analyzes the uncanny, equivocal emerging of repressed local and landbound narratives through the image of the

sea (543). Dirk Klopper similarly draws on the aesthetic figure of the uncanny, analyzing Marion's returns to places associated with the past. In "The Place of Nostalgia in Zoë Wicomb's *Playing in the Light*," Klopper writes, "Wicomb's writings characteristically resist nostalgia. Nevertheless, because the formation of resistance requires the thing it resists, the very resistance to nostalgia has the effect of evoking it" (149). Klopper asserts that "the implied author knows there can be no nostalgic restoration of the past, but also that this yearning does not simply go away, that the psyche oscillates between holding on and letting go." Klopper analyzes Wicomb's presentation of the crossings between the present and the past that create an ambivalent nostalgia, which leads to an exploration of the ambivalence of Marion's white and black heritage (155). Stéphane Robolin also examines ambivalent "crossings," focusing on social, geographic, and literary spaces. In "Properties of Whiteness: (Post)Apartheid Geographies in Zoë Wicomb's *Playing in the Light*," Robolin explores "Wicomb's long commitment to interrogating the rich intersection of consciousness, identity, and place" by charting the role of property in the manufacturing of Afrikaner identities (349). Analyzing structural spaces and the role of narrative itself, Robolin argues for "a spatial hermeneutics [that] positions us to appreciate more broadly Wicomb's own textual rendering of the meanings—and indeed properties—of whiteness in South African society" (351). In "The Archive, the Spectral, and Narrative Responsibility in Zoë Wicomb's *Playing in the Light*," Andrew Van der Vlies similarly responds to the ambivalence of narrative authority and charts Wicomb's exploration of narrative ethics throughout her oeuvre. Van der Vlies argues that Wicomb simultaneously explores the concept of archive in the context of apartheid and race and examines the ethics of authorship in postcolonial conditions. Van der Vlies asserts that

such ethics “allows for (perhaps even requires) metafictional play to facilitate acts of playing host to the stories of others” (584). In “The Struggle Over the Sign: Writing and History in Zoë Wicomb’s Art,” Dorothy Driver also explores narrative ethics, drawing particular attention to the ambivalence Wicomb presents between history and meaning. Driver writes, “[*Playing in the Light*] is a story always already written and always (about to be) re-written, a story incessantly tipping over onto its other, that Others’ story always waiting to be told” (533). By subverting the perceived opposition between history and text, according to Driver, Wicomb does not merely characterize lives of the “coloured”; she reimagines the history of the “coloured” experience. In each of these analyses of physical and metaphysical spaces of ambivalence in *Playing in the Light*, these scholars emphasize the obscure space that, for Bhabha, leads to a conception and expression of culture’s hybridity. This chapter contributes to this exploration of “Third Spaces” Wicomb presents in *Playing in the Light*, even as Wicomb herself directly opposes Bhabha’s understandings of the racial ambivalence and hybridity that these “Third Spaces” foster. Specifically, I argue that Marion’s acceptance of her racial hybridity comes only after she has left South Africa. Through Marion’s acceptance of her biracial identity, Wicomb conveys the need for both an acknowledgment of South Africa’s painful past and a rejection of the political, social, and racial binaries that defined the apartheid era. Bhabha’s conceptions of racial ambivalence and hybridity, through this understanding of a “Third Space” that enables the acceptance of these concepts, is an effective lens through which to understand *Playing in the Light* as a demonstration of the vital importance of both acknowledging the social and racial binaries of apartheid-era

South Africa and persistently striving toward an acceptance of the social and racial hybridity that characterizes the “rainbow nation.”

In contrast to this acceptance of hybridity, at the start of *Playing in the Light*, Marion’s reaction to situations involving conflicting identities is typically avoidance. Marion insists upon an evasion of opportunities for conflicting social and political perspectives, placing herself in a space of constant ambivalence, consistently avoiding the compulsion to commit herself to any one definite identity or category of thinking. Marion’s decisions in her work and personal life indicate her complete escape from encountering expressions of identities that may conflict with her own or with others’. For instance, Wicomb begins the novel with a description of a speckled guinea fowl falling dead at Marion’s feet. Rather than disposing of the carcass herself, Marion leaves the animal to her cleaning girl, thinking, “One never knows what uses such people might have for a dead guinea fowl” (1). In this scene, Marion evades clashing racial identities in two respects. In addition to distancing herself from the racial identity of the black cleaning girl, Marion avoids the bird, which itself represents clashing racial identities, as it has been “declassified by the ruffling of its black-and-white patterned plumage” (1). This avoidance is also evident in Marion’s descriptions of her childhood reactions to her parents’ disputes: “Her parents argued in hushed tones, but she heard them alright.. . Marion’s hands would fly to her ears to block out the sound—not knowing meant that she wouldn’t be able to take sides” (32). Marion’s impulse to restrict her ability to hear her parents also indicates Marion’s avoidance of clashing identities, as this decision allows her to evade being conflicted in the ambivalence between her parents’ points of view. Marion’s avoidance of conflicting identities is also evident in the ways she manages the

work space at the travel agency. Marion restricts her employees' choices of decor, becoming irritated at rearrangements of office furniture and displays of personal adornments, such as "Tanya's pink teddy bear, facing out to leer insipidly at clients" (16). Marion's insistence upon an absence of all expressions of individuality again demonstrates Marion's avoidance of conflicting identities, as maintaining a neutral office space allows Marion to elude any clashing of personal preferences between her staff or clients. Further demonstrating this avoidance, Marion prohibits political conversations amongst her employees. In response to a political debate between two of her workers, Boetie and Brenda, Marion declares, "No politics in this office, not even in here" (38). Like the restrictions Marion places on individual decor, Marion's rejection of all political conversations ensures that Marion will not encounter conflicts regarding personal political views. Marion's decisions to avoid personal and work-related conflicts reflect her own perplexity regarding her heritage as both black and white. Ironically, however, the measures Marion takes to ensure her complete escape from contrasting identities place her in a space of constant ambivalence that will become necessary for an acceptance of her biracial identity as well as an acceptance of the new South Africa as a space not defined by strict social and racial categories.

Despite Marion's thorough inspection for and rejection of expressions of individuality throughout the office, Marion also insists upon casting an image of the transparency of the work space, even removing doors from the doorways in the office: "Boetie had once suggested a bead curtain, but Marion will have none of it. . . . Transparency, Marion said, it inspires confidence—eating a quiet sandwich can't give offence, it shows we've nothing to hide" (38). This illusion of transparency reflects

Marion's performance as a white South African. As an unconscious performer of whiteness, Marion, in "playing white," ironically subverts the whiteness with which she identifies, destabilizing also the social and political attitudes that she unconsciously adopts in her role as a white South African. For instance, several times throughout *Playing in the Light*, Marion expresses an intentional lack of awareness of "coloured" and black culture. In one particular moment, Wicomb conveys Marion's dismissal of "coloureds" or blacks' significance by neglecting to learn or concern herself with how they refer to themselves. Marion says, "coloured men in suits and bow ties bent to their instruments . . . or black men, she doesn't know what people call themselves these days, now it's one thing, then another" (44). This instance reveals Marion's avoidance of racial identities that conflict with her own. Marion's lack of awareness of "coloured" and black culture reflects the performative nature of race and the role of secrecy in this performance. By insisting upon knowledge that is exclusive to particular racial categories while promoting transparency, Marion ensures that her performance as white remains uncompromised by associations between her and others of different racial categories in the binary system to which she subscribes.

This performance of whiteness and insistence upon secrecy and the appearance of transparency is a continuance of the behaviors of Marion's mother, Helen. At the start of the novel, the narrator, focalized through Marion, notes her mother's obsession with curtains. Helen was "always meticulous, neurotic really about curtains: drawing them before switching on the lights, careful about keeping them neatly in place during the day" (10). This insistence upon secrecy from spectators outside of the house indicates Helen's desperation to hide her identity and desire to maintain her image of whiteness, which

reaches such an extent that Helen insists upon secrecy even within her home. The narrator says of Helen, through Marion's perspective, "Addicted to secrecy, hermetic, so that even the ordinary acquired an air of conspiracy. Like Helen's feet, groomed by John behind closed doors that after all these years, to be meaningful: clues to a world whose authenticity, she realizes, was always in question" (60). Through Helen's persistence in her performance as white even within her home, Wicomb reveals the fragility of Helen's understanding of race as strict and categorical, since Helen must conceal her blackness even from her own daughter in order to maintain her illusion of whiteness. Wicomb further reveals the true extent to which Helen adheres to her performance as a proper Afikaner woman in Helen's office encounter with Councillor Carter. In this scene, Helen first approaches Carter "according to the instructions of her well-thumbed etiquette book, with her legs at an angle and crossed at the ankles" (139). Further demonstrating Helen's rejection of her "coloured" identity and her adherence to notions of whiteness, Wicomb also interjects allusions to the equation of black skin and supposed primitive behavior, saying, "[Helen] also knew that one did not eat a banana from its half-peeled skin; that was what primitives and primates did, although she had not as yet tried tackling it with a knife and fork" (139). As the scene continues, however, drawn to Helen's body, Carter sexually assaults Helen because "in spite of the reddish-auburn hair, she was dark," (139). Wicomb writes, "Carter believed that you couldn't inspire respect without looking people straight in the eye, . . . but the young woman sitting across the desk from him . . . had breasts that, if he was not mistaken, throbbed gently like frightened doves so that his eyes drilled instead through her button shirt" (139). Wicomb further reveals Helen's feelings of fear and shame in her description of Helen after the encounter: "Helen, biting

her lip, counted her measured steps until she was out of sight” (140). Helen’s desire to maintain her composed image until she is out of sight, and her additional rejection of her regressive desire for her mother in response to these emotions further demonstrates the extent to which Helen is willing to “play white” in order to hide her “coloured” identity.

Marion’s interactions with her black coworker Brenda also illustrate the performativity of race. After Marion’s discovery of her biracial heritage, Brenda relays the benefits of Marion’s new “coloured” identity: “[Y]ou’re free to be noisy, free to eat a peach, a juicy ripe one, and free of the burdens of nation and tradition” (102). Brenda’s consolation here conveys the performative nature of race, as Brenda’s attempt to convince Marion to accept her “coloured” identity implies Marion’s racial choice. The carefulness with which Brenda suggests Marion eats in this scene contrasts the transparency Marion promotes in the workplace when claiming that neatly eating a sandwich in the open would demonstrate a lack of secrecy from clients. Through these depictions of secrecy under the pretense of transparency, Wicomb illustrates the performative nature of race and the lengths to which Helen and Marion go to ensure that their performance remains undetected.

These depictions of racial performance also reveal the strength with which Marion adheres to notions of race as an inflexible, categorial determinant of behavior. Marion and Brenda’s encounter with a mythic figure who represents a multitude of races and cultures, however, shifts Marion’s understanding of race. While traveling down a gravel road, the women approach a vendor named Outa Blinkoog and become mesmerized by his appearance. The man sales “coloured” glass, wears “coloured” cloth, and has “extraordinary eyes—. . .one green and one black” and an “ageless, mahogany

face” (86-87). The man is further described as a “peacock man, a brightly coloured creature from mythology, a messenger from the gods” (87). Also among these references to hybridity and multiracial identities is a description of the cloth on which his stories are written: “Then he hauls out his prize possession, an unbleached, linen cloth covered in roughly written text and embroidered line drawings. . . ‘One of the chapters, he says; I write out my stories with a pen and then the women embroider the chappies for me with coloured thread” (89). These descriptions of the man’s “coloured” features and adornments, along with the description of the man’s colorful writing cloth, create an association between a “coloured” identity and the man’s way of speaking freely, “as if [he] has waited all his life to tell his story” (87). Outa Blinkoog’s later suggestion that he sells his colorful pottery only outside of town because “they wouldn’t want the Beautiful Things there” communicates the necessity of travel in embracing a multiracial identity and obtaining the freedom from the secrets that have characterized Marion’s past.

Marion and Brenda’s encounter with Outa Blinkoog inspires Marion’s desire to travel to Europe. While in Europe, Marion travels to a museum in Berlin, where she tours an exhibit of international art. In the museum, Marion is particularly moved by a painting of a biracial young man in apartheid-era South Africa. Wicomb writes, “Drawn in that stark, unambiguous light, the figure made her think of her father, pushing an absent wheel-barrow. Marion found tears trickling down her cheeks” (188). Marion’s emotional reaction reveals both the shock with which she confronts the image of the non-white South African and her identification with the young man. In addition to viewing South African visual art, while in Europe, Marion reads South African literature set during apartheid. Wicomb writes of Marion’s experience reading Gordimer’s *The*

*Conservationist*: “[The novel] doesn’t stop the tears—for the man who doesn’t know what’s up, for the boy who can’t speak to his father, for the absence of a mother, for her own ludicrous identification of the black farmhand with her father” (190). Marion’s reaction to Gordimer’s novel, like Marion’s reaction to the artwork, reveals the genesis of Marion’s identification as a non-white South African and her conception of her own racial hybridity and ambivalence. Wicomb presents Europe as a “Third Space” in which Marion is able to exist in the ambivalence that does not define her by the post-apartheid social or racial structures present in South Africa. In this space of obscurity, Marion is able to accept her biracial identity and the concept of racial ambivalence.

Set against the backdrop of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Marion’s grappling with the discovery of her “coloured” identity reflects the Commission’s goal of addressing the repressed history of apartheid and invalidating and exposing the falsity of apartheid-era narratives based on clear-cut racial and social binaries that posit white superiority. In this way, hybridity correlates with Wicomb’s presentation of the breakability of apartheid narratives that overlook or intentionally ignore the complexities of apartheid. *Playing in the Light*, then, reveals the multiracial presence, particularly in post-apartheid South Africa, to be a presence in which, although one’s identity is stripped of any sense belonging to a particular racial group, identity is reconfigured within the context of the nation-wide struggle to overcome an oppressive past. This interpretation of the novel as Wicomb’s call for individuals’ and the nation’s re-identification based not on race but on a desire for reconciliation and an acceptance of hybridity elucidates Brenda’s declaration that “The soul of a journey is liberty, perfect liberty: to think, feel, do just as one pleases—to leave ourselves behind” (81). Personal and national reconciliation in

post-apartheid South Africa depends upon a reconsideration of politically manufactured and socially enforced binaries. Only after “leaving behind” identities based on apartheid-era narratives that insist upon unequivocal racial and social binaries can such “perfect liberty” from South Africa’s painful past become achievable. Even as Wicomb herself contests Bhabha’s conception of hybridity, Bhabha’s assertion of an ambivalent “Third Space” in which racial and social categories are called into question is crucial to both Wicomb’s reception as a “coloured” author and the novel’s reception as a commission to reconcile South Africa’s past and configure a new nation based on an acceptance of social and racial diversity that refuses categorization. In this way, Wicomb’s novel is itself a “Third Space” actively enlightening and inspiring an acceptance of the ambivalence of race and an embrace of hybridity. Through this “Third Space” of the novel, Wicomb calls not only for a reevaluation of concepts pertaining to racial identities but also for a prioritization of art and literature as means of inciting this revision.

## CHAPTER IV

### CONCLUSION

When positioned alongside one another, the narratives of racial passing in Helen Oyeyemi's *Boy, Snow, Bird* and Zoë Wicomb's *Playing in the Light* offer unique opportunities for understanding how non-binary conceptions of race and sex are communicated by multinational African diasporic women writers. In analyzing the novels' conveyance of the fluidity of race and sex, Bhabha's conceptions of mimicry, hybridity, and ambivalence are crucial. Analyses of Oyeyemi's intertwining of Anglo-European fairytale and African storytelling strategies in *Boy, Snow, Bird* allow for opportunities to draw connections between African storytelling methods and notions of race and sex as inconstant and adjustable. I assert that Oyeyemi uses the Anglo-European fairytale trope of the "all-seeing" mirror as a representation of literature's ability to refract notions of race as a system of strict, untraversable categories. I argue that *Boy, Snow, Bird* exists as both a narrative about mimicry and a form of mimicry itself. As my reading of Bhabha's concept of mimicry suggests, Oyeyemi's adoption of Anglo-European fairytale traditions delegitimizes racial binaries and inspires a rethinking of race as fluid and mutable. In *Playing in the Light*, Wicomb further exhibits this power of literature to communicate binary-breaking concepts of race. In analyzing Wicomb's portrayal of Marion's grappling with her new identity as a "coloured" South African woman, I argue that Bhabha's conception of the "Third Space" is crucial. My assertion is

that, similar to Oyeyemi's depictions of refractions of notions of race as immutable and impermeable, Wicomb depicts Marion's and her mother's insistence upon transparency despite the evident opacity they use to avoid facing their racial hybridity. And, I argue, Marion reaches true transparency and acceptance only after she travels beyond South Africa and encounters South African literature and art in Europe. Because of Marion's eventual transparency as a result of her enlightenment through South African literature and visual artwork, I view Europe to be a "Third Space" in which Marion is able to accept her racial hybridity. And because of my application of Bhabha's concept of hybridity to Wicomb's novel, I view the novel as itself a "Third Space" that challenges critiques against Bhabha's notions of hybridity and, through Marion's shifting view of racial identity, communicates an acceptance of racial fluidity and ambivalence. In this way, both Oyeyemi and Wicomb communicate the fluidity not only of race or sex but of literature itself, their novels existing both as literature that depicts mimicry and hybridity and as metaphysical operatives that actively influence an acceptance of non-binary conceptions of sex and race. Furthermore, I view this fluidity of Oyeyemi's and Wicomb's works to be a potential result of these authors' representations of characters with diasporic identities.

At the end of Homi Bhabha's essay "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse," Bhabha writes, "Black skin splits under the racist gaze, displaced into signs of bestiality, genitalia, grotesquerie, which reveal the phobic myth of the undifferentiated whole white body" (*The Location of Culture* 132). With this thesis, I have attempted to demonstrate the ways in which Oyeyemi's and Wicomb's novels encourage this split gaze as a method of subverting narratives based on notions of white

cultural, social, and mental superiority. Helen Oyeyemi and Zoë Wicomb demonstrate the power of postcolonial literature to shift traditional, binary conceptions of race and sex through an empowering transparency of the colonial subject.

## REFERENCES

- Bamiro, Edmund. "Transcultural creativity in world Englishes: Speech Events in Nigerian English Literature." *International Journal of Linguistics*, Vol. 7, no. 1, 2011, 7-30.
- Barber, Karin. "African-Language Literature and Postcolonial Criticism." *Research in African Literatures*. Vol. 26, no. 4, 1995, 3-30.
- Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. Routledge, 2012.
- Bhabha, Homi. "Of Mimicry and Man: Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse." *The Location of Culture*. Vol. 28 1995, 125-133.
- Brathwaite, Edward Kamau. "Creolization in Africa." Ashcroft, et al. *The Postcolonial Studies Reader*, London: Routledge, 1995, 202-205.
- Campbell, Joseph. *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. New World Library, 2008.
- Coetzee, Carli. "'The One That Got Away': Zoë Wicomb in the Archives." *Journal of South African Studies*, vol. 36, no. 3, pp. 559-569.
- Dass, Minesh. "A 'Place in which to Cry': The Place for Race and a Home for Shame in Zoë Wicomb's *Playing in the Light*." *Current Writing: Text and Reception in Southern Africa*, vol. 3, no. 2, 2011, pp. 137-146.
- Driver, Dorothy. "The Struggle over the Sign: Writing and History in Zoë Wicomb's *Art*." *Journal of Southern African Studies*, vol. 36, no. 3, 2010, pp. 523-542.
- Drewal, Margaret Thompson. *Yoruba Ritual: Performers, Play, Agency*, Indiana University Press, 1991.
- Gasché, Rodolphe. *The Tain and the Mirror: Derrida and the Philosophy of Reflection*, Harvard University Press, 1986.
- Hogan, Patrick Colm. "The Gender of Tradition: Ideologies of Character in Post-Colonization Anglophone Literature." *Order and Partialities: Theory, Pedagogy and the "Postcolonial"*. Edited by Kostas Myrsiades and Jerry McGuire. Albany: SUNY Press, 1995, 87-110.

- Jacobs, Johan U. "Playing in the Dark/Playing in the Light: Coloured Identity in the Novels of Zoë Wicomb." *Current Writing: Text and Reception in Southern Africa*, vol. 20, no. 1, 2008, pp. 1-15.
- Klopper, Dirk. "The Place of Nostalgia in Zoë Wicomb's *Playing in the Light*." *Current Writing: Text and Reception in Southern Africa*, vol. 23, no. 2, 2011, 147-156.
- Lau, Kimberly J. "Snow White and the Trickster: Race and Genre in Helen Oyeyemi's *Boy, Snow, Bird*." *Western Folklore*, Vol. 75, no. 1, 2016, pp. 33-45.
- Oyeyemi, Helen. *Boy, Snow, Bird*. Riverhead Books, 2014.
- Porter, Jessica. "White is for Witching." *Monsters Monstrous*, 2013, 23-42.
- Propp, Vladimir. *Morphology of the Folktale*, University of Texas Press, 2010.
- Robolin, Stéphane. "Properties of Whiteness:(Post) Apartheid Geographies in Zoë Wicomb's *Playing in the Light*." *Safundi*, vol. 12, no. 3-4, 2011, 349-371.
- Samuelson, Meg. "Oceanic Histories and Protean Poetics: The Surge of the Sea in Zoë Wicomb's Fiction." *Journal of Southern African Studies*, vol. 36, no. 3, 2010, pp. 543-557.
- Tatar, Maria. "Mirrors and Webs: Fairy Tales, Cultural Memory and Trauma in Helen Oyeyemi's *Boy, Snow, Bird* and Neil Gaiman's *Anansi Boys*." *Book 2.0*, vol. 7, no. 2, 2017, pp. 117-190.
- Van der Vlies, Andrew. "The Archive, the Spectral, and Narrative Responsibility in Zoë Wicomb's *Playing in the Light*." *Journal of Southern African Studies*, vol. 36, no. 3, 2010, 583-598.
- Wisker, Gina. "Testing the Fabric of Bluebeard's Castle: Postcolonial Reconfigurations, Demythologising, Remythologising, and Shape-Shifting." *Contemporary Women's Gothic Fiction*. 2016. 133-156.
- Wicomb, Zoë. *Playing in the Light*. The New Press, 2006.
- Wicomb, Zoë. "Shame and Identity: The Case of the Coloured in South Africa." *Writing South Africa: Literature, Apartheid, and Democracy, 1970-1995*, 1998, 91-107.