Hunger, Monstrosity, and Race in Helen Oyeyemi's *White is for Witching*

LAURA-VICTORIA STOICA
Universitatea „Alexandru Ioan Cuza" Iași
lvstoica9@gmail.com; laura.stoica@uaic.ro

Helen Oyeyemi is a British-Nigerian writer whose works explore fluid articulations of ethnicity, race, and identity. In her third novel, *White is for Witching* (2009), a White British girl, Miranda, and her Black British friend Oreare are "devoured" by the cycle of oppression and consumption enacted by Miranda's forefathers upon their Black servants. Thus, the difficulty of upholding racial and ethnical binary oppositions becomes the main recurrent theme in Oyeyemi's novels and short fiction. By extensively using folklore and mythology, Oyeyemi delves into the human psyche to explore the universal fear of the Other, and the construction of identity. Most importantly, her novels seek to find out whether globalization and the readily available access to other cultures have facilitated or hindered genuine communication. Focusing on intercultural hybridity and communication, her novels strongly encourage a postcolonial interpretation. *White is for Witching* tackles borders and the construction of borders as part of racial and national identity. This article will seek to analyze and deconstruct the consumption of the Black Body as a representation of racial anxieties and transgenerational trauma, while also looking into the transformations performed by Helen Oyeyemi on the Gothic genre in an attempt to accommodate postcolonial narratives. In trying to tread the fine line between fiction and reality, the personal and the collective, Miranda and Ore's story will be explored in order to reinforce the issue of liminality and the novel's articulation of the "transatlantic Gothic" (Porter, 2013: 23). The article will call into question the relationship between race and its representations, while also highlighting the role of imagination in the delineation of group identity.

Postcolonialism is a critical framework that seeks to reassess and deconstruct the relationship between colonizer/colonized, master/servant, as part of the dynamics of formerly colonized territories. Its name might be misleading at first glance, but postcolonialism is not concerned with defining identities detached from the experience of colonialism, but within the latter. Thus, the scope of postcolonialism extends to the integration of all those social and cultural interactions that occur between the colonial system and its aftermath, on the one hand, and the colonial system and its subjects, on the other hand. ("Subject" here is not used to refer solely to colonized people, as both "masters" and "servants" were subordinate to the colonial system).

A number of pioneers gave postcolonialism its theoretical grounding. In his seminal work *Orientalism* (1978), Edward Said developed a theory of the construction of the colonized Other by analyzing the Western view of "the East". Drawing on Michel Foucault's theory of power-knowledge, Said revealed the ideology underlying the West's domination of "the East" (Sharp, 2008: 16). By claiming "knowledge of the Orient", European colonizers justified their oppression of Eastern peoples under imperial colonies (17). Constructed as an Other to be manipulated and controlled, the "Oriental" subject's identity was dismissed and submitted to the colonizer's identity: "The ideology of Empire was hardly ever a brute jingoism; rather, it made subtle use of reason, and recruited science and history to serve its ends" (Said, 1978: 6).

Gayatri Spivak introduced the term "subaltern" to refer to "everything that has limited or no access to the cultural imperialism" (Kock, 1992: 45-46), and also expanded on Foucault's theories of docile bodies and epistemic violence to criticize the reinforcement of Western ideologies by means of cultural oppression. She drew attention to the importance of race in what is called "the triple colonization" of women of color or Third World Women (47). These women encounter a three-fold oppression enacted first by the colonial system, secondly by the patriarchal system, and thirdly by white women: "Subaltern [woman] must always be caught in translation, never [allowed to be] truly expressing herself" (Sharp, 2008: 111).

Homi Bhabha's theory of hybridity was particularly important in deconstructing the colonizer/colonized binary. The interconnectedness of colonizer and colonized cultures in the postcolonial space is made clear by Bhabha's assertion that there exists no possibility for cultural "purity" in a world where all cultures are born in a "Third Space of enunciation" (1994: 54): "It is that Third Space, though unrepresentable in itself, which constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity; that even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized and read anew" (55). Bhabha further brings into discussion the problematic nature of hybridity – in its "questioning of the images and presences of authority", hybridity can lead to "colonial anxiety" (162). Hybridity as a site for cultural anxieties lies at the core of narratives that allow colonizer and colonized cultures to interact and negotiate meaning in a third space. Using a primarily European tradition, the postcolonial Gothic in *White is for Witching* is such a narrative that subverts expectations of colonizer/colonized dynamics (Paravisini-Gebert, 2002: 233).

Miscegenation considered as the fear of "racial impurity" represents one of the many tensions that can be articulated by the postcolonial Gothic. In order to ascertain the relationship between race and cultural anxiety, it would be useful to offer a theoretical background for the Black Body (as the novel to be discussed, *White is for Witching*, tackles the tensions between Black and White identities). For the purposes of this analysis, the Black Body is used as a critical concept that designates the individual and collective "repository of experience" of people of African descent (Young, 2010: 23), born at the "confluence of history, culture, economics, geography and language" (Monhanram, 1999: xiv).

The representations and discourses centered on the Black Female Body are particularly problematic. In arguing that "no other group... has so had their identity socialized out of existence", bell hooks outlines the sheer extent to which oppressive behavior has reflected onto the Black Female Body (2015: 21). Placed at the bottom of the social hierarchy by an interplay of "sexist, racist, and classist oppression" (16), the Black woman's Body is the ultimate expression of social and cultural aggression. Reflection of the Exploiter's desire and

receptacle of the collective trauma of oppression, it has become a battlefield for the negotiation of history and power.

In the essay titled "The Site of Memory", Toni Morrison speaks in favor of imagination as factor of reconstruction of "[Black] unwritten interior life" (1995: 92). It could be said that the reconstruction of England as a Gothic space enables the confrontation with geographical spaces rooted in suffering and loss, and seeks to reconcile both Black and White bodies as sites of trauma. This new emphasis on the repercussions of trauma on both White and Black bodies allows for the study of what has been recently called "postcolonial whiteness" (Lopez, 2005: 2).

Given that the Body reflects social tensions and dynamics in specific temporal and spatial frameworks (Hancock, 2000: 10), the Black Body explored and interrogated in this paper conveys the relationship between Black British people and British history. Objectified as early as the first contacts with the Western world and subjected to multiple forms of physical violence ever since (lynching, castration, rape, branding, mutilation, whipping, profiling, policing, disproportionate arrest and incarceration) (Yancy, 2016: xxxi), the Black Body has been the site of White racial projections and "imaginaries" (105) to the point where the destiny of the Black man became White (Fanon, 2008: 10). Since the othering of Black bodies persists in conjunction with the structural violence of institutionalized racism (Weissinger *et al.*, 2017: 175), it is essential to analyze the ability of the Black Body to reclaim and transform violence within the ideological frame of the British society.

She split cleanly, from head to toe: Race and the Consumption of *Otherness*

The first portrayal of Miranda, the White British protagonist, uses the narrative technique of prolepsis to depict the young woman buried in the ground of her family's manor: "Miranda Silver is in Dover, in the ground beneath her mother's house. / Her throat is blocked with a slice of apple/ (to stop her speaking words that may betray her)/ her ears are filled with earth/ (to keep her from hearing sounds that will confuse her/ her eyes are closed, but/ her heart thrums hard" (Oyeyemi, 2009: 1). This foray into Miranda's identity seems to articulate a sense of environment-related fatalism, characteristic of Gothic narratives, as the deep connection with the familial grounds seems to suggest that her identity can only be defined in relation to her heritage. Surprisingly, this first perspective on Miranda belongs to her British Nigerian friend and lover, Ore. By choosing to open the story from a marginal perspective, the text marks its clear intention to shift attention from Gothic foreshadowing and plot to multiperspectivism and interpretation. Rather than presenting Miranda's destiny and the harrowing consequences of her disobedience (suggested by the necessity of silence), the narrative seeks to illuminate the relevance of borders and the dynamics of interrelated perspectives on border-making.

The narrators fleshing out the facts of this impenetrable tale include Eliot (Miranda's twin brother), Miranda herself, Luc Dufresne (Miranda's father), Ore, Sade (the family's housekeeper), and even the Silver House itself. Throughout their accounts, there is a recurrent emphasis on whiteness, albeit in different contexts. By reviewing some early representations of whiteness, one might become acquainted with how the Silver-Dufresne family perceive their own race and skin color. Eliot associates whiteness with blood when recounting his mother's encounter with the Haitian culture, a formerly colonized territory: "I tried to picture our mother in Haiti and I saw her in a tower built of guns, heaving with voodoo, creepy gods and white feathers tipped with blood" (5). This strange connection between blood and whiteness is pursued by Eliot in a portrayal of his sister's skin that eerily evokes violence and trauma: "She

slid up out of the covers, gasping, her face mottled pink and white as if she had come from a place of burning" (7). Since white is a predominant color in Eliot's description of his mother and sister, it seems fit to assert that whiteness is a signpost of health and familial well-being whose destabilization might undermine the coherence of group identity.

Spatial descriptions also speak to this debt to whiteness, as the Gothic abode in the novel is a safeguard of white racial purity. On relocating to the Silver House, Luc Dufresne is deemed appropriate as a resident due to his pallor: "Luc Dufresne is not tall. He is pale and the sun fails on his skin. (…) His fingers are ruined by too close and careless contact with heat" (13). When Luc decides to turn his wife's inheritance into a bed-and-breakfast, the house does not offer itself without a clear reminder of the ideal it dearly protects. Affirming hereditary power over Luc's ignorance of its past, the manor presents its whiteness as both welcoming and menacing: "From the outside the windows didn't look as if they could be opened (…) they were funny square eyes, friendly, tired. (…) The steps leading up to the house bulge with fist-sized lumps of grey-white flint, each piece a knife to cut your knee open should you slip" (17).

Interestingly, the hunger for whiteness is extended to the larger chronotope inhabited by the White British family, as it is part of their relationship to inherited time and space. "White" seems to belong in the geological structure of their town, Dover, in the form of chalk: "Across the cliffs, Dover Castle was (…) hunched in a black mess of shapes, and the vast bank of chalk it stood on seemed to stir in the water as if fighting the darkness that tried to climb down it" (80). The centrality of whiteness to racial imagination is further illustrated by references to British popular culture: Miranda's space is fatally marked as white in the "White Cliffs of Dover" lullaby (which was ironically used by the British National Party in an anti-immigration campaign) (Stephanou, 2014: 1248), while the patriotic song "Rule, Britannia!" is brought up in connection with embodiment of whiteness and British xenophobia:

> [Lily's grandmother had] been picked to wear a bronze-coloured helmet and a white gown (…). Britannia had to have pluck. Anna never thought she would have a granddaughter who didn't know what Britannia meant; Lily said that patriotism was embarrassing and dangerous (…). How had Britannia become embarrassing and dangerous? It was the incomers. They had twisted it so that anything they were not part of was bad. (Oyeyemi, 2009: 115-116)

Faced with her parents' ignorance of their racist past, a matrilineal heritage of white supremacy, and a popular culture riddled with laudatory images of her skin color, Miranda is forced to find a way to navigate the embodiment of whiteness. The silence which enshrouds her may well hint to her confusion and unconscious participation in this game of racial superiority, and some of the "actors" leading to her demise are brought in to make sense of her story. To the question of why Miranda has suddenly disappeared, Ore replies that "she chose this as the only way to fight the soucouyant" (1), thus placing the blame on a mythological creature who takes up residence in Miranda. In his turn, Eliot finds fault with a pie Miranda refused to eat and remarks upon his sister's fragile mental and physical health (2).

While Miranda's mental instability further complicates her internalization of racial norms, Eliot's assessment seems to indicate an eating disorder: "'Why did you use the winter apples?' She asked it over and over. (…) She looked in my direction but she couldn't seem to focus on me. She was the thinnest I'd ever seen her. (…) She hugged herself, her fingers pinning her dress to her ribs. There was an odd smell to her, heavy and thick" (2). Noticeably, the sentient

Gothic house (Starling, 2014: 5) offers a medically informed explanation that at first glance may seem to clarify Miranda's condition. In light of all these accounts, the protagonist's eating disorder resembles both self-destruction and unbridled consumption: "Miranda is (…) homesick (…) Miranda has pica she can't come in today, she is stretched out inside a wall she is feasting on plaster" (3). While directly relating Miranda to the plight she is indicted with, this excerpt also questions Miranda's role in the complex relationship between her and her racial past, the latter embodied in the Silver House.

Pica is, indeed, an eating disorder characterized by an appetite for non-edible substances (Walsh *et al.*, 2015: 17), but this explanation does not clarify the reason behind Miranda's unusual hunger. In the context of authority over Miranda's illness, Eliot unwittingly mentions a generalized hunger and references the discourse of consumption involving master/servant, male/female, White/Black: "The argument was a stupid one that opened up a murky little mouth to take in other things (…). She wouldn't eat any of it, and she wouldn't let me" (Oyeyemi, 2009: 2). The Silver House thus embodies a patriarchal system of power relations reinforced by a line of matriarchs (Stephanou, 2014: 1245). The controlling stance of the Gothic household is rendered literal in Miranda's encounter with the object of her consumption, the chalk also found in the "white cliffs of Dover": "That first day, Miri found something on the floor of that room she'd picked as hers (…) just after she dropped it into her pocket she sucked thoughtfully at her finger. (…) finally she sighed and showed me. It was a ball of chalk" (Oyeyemi, 2009: 20).

Miranda's condition is normalized by her parents as an inevitable hereditary disease: " Lily told all our teachers at primary school and all the dinner ladies knew. (…) Dad was relieved that Miri didn't mean to be rebellious" (22). The house dwellers of non-British origin – the Silvers' Turkish domestic workers and their daughters, Suryaz and Deme – provide an important corrective to the parents' representation of Miranda's disease, in that they represent a non-White counterpoint to the aforementioned normalization of hereditary evil. Thus, both Miranda's twin brother and the houseguests are mystified about the underlying motives of this disease, and their powerful reactions to Miranda's fascination with chalk acknowledge the strange and menacing nature of her condition: "Once (…) I was thinking of sampling her chalk to see what the big wow was" (23); "[Miranda] watched Deme's eyes move from her books to the sticks of chalk that she kept in a Marlboro cigarette box" (56). It is interesting to analyze who is still intrigued by Miranda's condition – on the one hand, the twin is considered to be an alter ego of the protagonist in Gothic writings (Snodgrass, 2014: 84), on the other hand, Suryaz and Deme display an Otherness to Miranda's White British identity. By associating Miranda's Self with the Other, the text strangely creates a scenario of consumption whereby Miranda is othered to her own illness.

A whole history of abusive consumption marks Miranda as the last survivor of a white imaginary tradition she must rekindle. The Silver House traces back these unusual habits to Miranda's great-grandmother, Anna Good, whose husband was killed in Africa during the Second World War while fighting the Germans. She tried to bring him back to life by invoking "racial prejudice" (Stephanou, 2014: 1247) but was refused, so she birthed the Silver House as an embodiment of her fear of the Other: "'I hate them (…) Blackies, Germans, killers, dirty… dirty killers. (…) Bring him back, bring him back, bring him back to me'. (…) She spoke from that part of her that was older than her. (…) They shouldn't be allowed in though, those others, so eventually I make them leave" (Oyeyemi, 2009: 118). Interestingly, hunger for whiteness is also related to status anxiety within the white race: Anna Good's pica and hunger

for whiteness go back to one year before her marriage to Andrew Silver, a well-off man (and "someone important") (116) for whom Anna did not feel "white" enough. The ideal of racial purity is revealed to be a vicious circle of "incomplete" whiteness that eventually entails the self-destruction of the consumer: "Anna Good had it in 1938; a year before she became Anna Silver. She ruined her work stockings and skirt while crouching in the mud (…). She ate leaves by the handful and chipped her teeth on pebbles (…). The house is Andrew's, she told herself; I have no part in it" (23).

Her daughter, Jennifer, was punished for leaving home and trying to lead a different life; on her return, she was condemned to live in isolation, and the only thing she could see – a white light – eventually incapacitated her. Jennifer was released only when she had bitten her fingers off and started consuming "branches from the garden": "I closed the door behind her. It was the best sort of winter morning, cold but bright. That was the only sort of light Jennifer saw after that – it came through great windows and she couldn't find her way away from them and out of me. (…) She was dazed" (84). Jennifer's daughter and Miranda's mother, Lily, did not suffer from pica, but engaged in a form of "bloodless but dangerous" consumption which also characterized the colonizers (Stephanou, 2014: 1253). She was a photographer who consumed people and places with her gaze while remaining unscathed (1248). This prompt action upon the colonized speaks to the initial ideal embodied by the Silver matriarchs – a form of consumption that would simply annihilate the Other while leaving the consumer whole and pure: "Lily's eye transformed places. (…) [She] was the changer who came home the same" (Oyeyemi, 2009: 5); "There were people in the photos (…) but they were there minus everything that was ungainly about them. They were in the picture but their bodies weren't" (105).

All these forms of consumption are articulated in the image of the "goodlady", the Silver women's ancestor who would only eat her own body: "Her way was to drink off her blood, then bite and suck at the bobbled stubs of meat" (24). This "auto-vampirism" was often interpreted as a means of preserving the purity of white blood (Stephanou, 2014: 1249). Alternatively, the text also suggests self-destructive narcissism in relation to an idealized whiteness which, ironically, cannot be located in time or space: "Her appetite was only for herself (…). I do not know the year, or even how I know this" (Oyeyemi, 2009: 24). Again, the "burial" metaphor is very relevant in dissecting the relationship with the Other. On the one hand, her self-consumption might signal her desire to reach out to the prohibited Other, articulated in the patriarchal fear of miscegenation (Newman, 2009: 41); on the other hand, by consuming her own body, she might acknowledge her desire to reach the Other in herself: "Her way was to slash at her flesh with the blind, frenzied concentration that a starved person might use to get at food that is buried" (24).

These conflicting urges inherent in the act of consumption are silenced as part of racial memory, graphically rendered in the scene of the Silver women's dinner. In a scenario emulating the return of the repressed (Stephanou, 2014: 1247), the matriarchs appear to Miranda with "padlocks placed over their parted mouths, boring through the top lip and closing at the bottom" (Oyeyemi, 2009: 127). Incapable of fulfilling their desires, the women urge Miranda to devour otherness and redeem their hatred for the Other and the Self: "'Eat for us', Jennifer slurred through her padlock. (…) The way the fingers twitched, she got a sense that they weren't attached to a body, only to each other (…). The hands were brown. Jalil's party trick hands" (128-129). Miranda enters their game and even accepts the padlock gifted by Lily as a token of silence (Stephanou, 2014: 1252). This episode proves to be crucial to

Miranda's evolution. After reenacting the traumatic experience of consumption, Miranda acknowledges her foremothers' role in carving her identity, while also confessing to a fear of becoming them: "She didn't look into the mirror itself. She was becoming someone, it seemed. She had read somewhere that you only became a woman once your mother had died. But that wasn't what worried her. She worried about becoming as perfect as the person shown to her on paper in Lily's studio" (Oyeyemi, 2009: 132).

This episode is followed by Miranda's move to Cambridge University and her encounter with Ore, a British-Nigerian colleague who becomes her lover. This relocation from the site of trauma (the Silver House) finally allows Miranda to "manage" her consumption (Stephanou, 2014: 1253; Oyeyemi, 2009: 170). Although their relationship initially resembles the toxic consumption of her white ancestors, Miranda is the first to acknowledge the ambivalent condition of being a consumer of otherness, and this time it is love, rather than hatred, that consumes. In an attempt to protect Ore from her potential "monstrosity" (Stephanou, 2014: 1254), Miranda realizes that the goodlady's auto-vampirism was a means of preventing intimacy with the Other (Oyeyemi, 2009: 192). Ore, in her turn, admits that Miranda's hunger for otherness is both hurtful and fascinating (213). Ironically, Ore's last attempt to free Miranda from the projections of her ancestors mirrors the perpetual search for the Other defining all cultures. In trying to free her lover from the "white specter" (King, 2013: 60) inhabiting her, Ore strangely replicates the goodlady's wish to unearth the Other buried in her flesh:

> She tensed, and I cracked her open like a bad nut with a glutinous shell. She split, and cleanly, from head to toe. There was another girl inside her, the girl from the photograph, all long straight hair and pretty pearlescence. This other girl wailed. 'No, no, why did you do this? Put me back in'. She gathered the halves of her shed skin and tried to fit them back together across herself. I fell down and watched her, amazed, from where I sat. (Oyeyemi, 2009: 230)

She was one of those Gothic victims: Postcolonialism and the Consumption of Genres

White is for Witching was directly inspired by a Gothic classic, as Helen Oyeyemi herself confessed, but the novel prefaced by Gwendolyn Brooks' poem of hunger and hell speaks to more than a mere Gothic story: "I hold my honey and I store my bread/ In little jars and cabinets of my will/ I label clearly, and each latch and lid/ I bid, Be firm till I return from Hell" (*apud* Oyeyemi I). The Gothic here is clearly meant to explore the darkness and fear associated with the encounter with otherness:

> I wanted to write a vampire story. After I graduated, I volunteered in South Africa for a few months. (…) everyone wanted to talk about race all the time. I started to feel strange … I got this flu-like illness and spent a lot of time in bed with Dracula (…) I started thinking that vampire stories were a lot to do with the fear of the outsider, because you've got this foreign count with this unnatural appetite (…) I thought, what's an unnatural appetite? A girl who eats chalk, but probably with a desire to eat something else. (Machell, 2009 *apud* Stephanou, 2014: 1245)

White is for Witching observes the Gothic tradition in a number of ways. Character-wise, it revolves around twins Miranda and Eliot, also retrievable in the trope of the "double". They

further confirm the paradigm by subscribing to the sane/insane binary defining the Gothic twin couple. An intertextual relationship with Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher" would not be amiss here. Eliot resembles Roderick Usher's sensitivity and penchant for art, as he employs poetry to mourn his mother's death: "Eliot had refused to go on holiday without Lily and spent much of August up on the roof wearing a black balaclava and writing poetry, which he then balled up and threw as far and as hard as he could" (Oyeyemi, 2009: 121).

Miranda, just like Roderick's sister Madeline, is troubled by a disease whose secret Eliot cannot (or does not want to) dispel: "[Miranda was] gone so deep into sleep that she seemed part of the wall behind her, a girl-shaped texture rising from the plaster in an unrepeated pattern" (7). However, it would be an oversimplification to reduce their dynamics to a misunderstood "melancholic" (Cousins, 2012: 49) who slightly struggles with identity issues and a female hysteric who embodies the male fear of moral transgression. (As the text will later show, neither male nor female are exempt from fluidity and transformation).

As far as setting is concerned, the epicenter of uncanny events lies in the Silver House, belonging to three generations of Silver women and currently a bed-and-breakfast owned by the twins' father, Luc Dufresne. The disturbingly sentient nature of the house is established in the first chapters: windows like "funny, square eyes, friendly, tired", steps of "grey-white flint", as sharp as "knives", and marble fireplaces that would invite one to "crawl" inside (Oyeyemi, 2009: 17). The location of the Silver House also asserts its role as "the site where fears and anxieties return in the present" (Botting, 1996: 3 *apud* Cousins, 2012: 49). Situated in Dover, "the gateway to England" (Cousins, 2012: 48), this Gothic house is "concerned" with maintaining familial integrity in the face of imminent "degeneration" by otherness. This identity in need of protection has strong links to race and ethnicity, as it is made clear by Luc and Eliot's discussion of the immigrants' position in Dover: "'Since we're talking about family here. Family. And say you knew who had hurt someone in your family and you also knew that the police had the power to stop and punish it. You really wouldn't say anything?'" (Oyeyemi, 2009: 31).

The authority held by family over all other forms of identity is reinforced by yet another Gothic trope – the ghost as embodiment of the family's long-held ideals, ideals that are to be pursued by the present generation. In *White is for Witching*, it is "the goodlady", a self-cannibalistic female spirit, who is endowed with three generations' desire for racial and ethnical dominance. Defined as a "specter of whiteness" (King, 2013: 60), she repeatedly repels otherness by threatening to consume non-white persons inside and outside the Silver House: "[In the Dover Post] there was Tijana's cousin's name, Agim Hajdari. He'd sustained serious wounds but had recovered. He'd been found curled up in a ball between a wall and a tree (…) arms crossed over himself. As if to hold his insides in" (Oyeyemi, 2009: 91).

With the English white as the good Self and the Migrant non-white as the evil Other, the novel easily joins the ranks of Dracula as a Gothic narrative of "reverse colonization" (Arata, 1990: 623 *apud* Cousins, 2012: 48). However, it is worth noting that the monstrous Other (Craft, 1984: 107 *apud* Cousins, 2012: 53) and the evil-fighting heroine are reversed in this text, as both Miranda and the goodlady inhabiting her are monstrous in their sustenance methods and the violence thereof. The goodlady is a vampire feeding on her own blood, whose hunger for otherness is passed on to Miranda as hunger for non-edible substances (pica). Already, the text undermines binaries underpinning traditional Gothic stories, such as good/evil, insider/outsider.

The relationship with the Gothic genre is further complicated by the "intrusion" of elements belonging to the Other culture, introduced by Oyeyemi as a key aspect to the understanding of the text. The novel resorts to more than one culture to make sense of its Gothic construction, and its characters also delve into various cultures in response to traumatic experiences. One such character is Sade. As the Silvers' Nigerian housekeeper, her approach to Miranda's illness connects English and Yoruba beliefs in the supernatural. Miranda and Sade's first interaction is relevant to this point. Miranda's "chronic insomnia" (Cousins, 2012: 50) is articulated in two different manners towards the same interpretation. It is staged as the goodlady's nightly haunting by the Gothic narrator: "There was an especial horror in lying with her eyes closed (…) she saw (…) the woman in the trapdoor-room sitting directly beneath the fireplace, delicately wiping her beautiful mouth again and again" (Oyeyemi, 2009: 95). Sade, in her turn, relates the ailment to a form of miscommunication with the ancestors: "They're calling you, aren't they? (…) old ones calling (…) I know it's hard" (96).

The girl first refuses to acknowledge her trouble, then seeks to find out more from Sade, who "look[s] so alarmed that Miranda th[inks] the topic must be the utmost taboo" (96). Miranda's quandary is thus riddled with irony – her foremothers devour her but remain unreachable, while she is left feeling hungry for "something else" (Machell, 2009 *apud* Cousins, 2012: 51). Her dialogue with Sade seems to continue on the same note of misunderstanding. When Sade goes on to make a juju figure, Miranda notices that "it look[s] like two hanged men holding fast to each other" (Oyeyemi, 2009: 97). Sade simply tells her that "something is wrong", and Miranda interprets it as a bad omen "worked against her" (97-98), reinforcing her responsibility towards her mothers. One may well point to this consuming guilt as the typical fate of the Gothic heroine drowning in her own hereditary monstrosity. However, by refusing to clarify Miranda's relationship to the past, both Gothic and Yoruba "interpreter" seem to imply that the young woman is mistaken in trying to construct her identity in relation to any system of beliefs but her own. The domestic thus becomes a site for the negotiation and demythologization of trauma.

The ancestors' role is also highlighted in the family gathering scene, where Miranda's foremothers urge her to "Eat for us" (128) – she would thus perform the consumptive act necessary to their survival and restore the family's glorious past. In her analysis of *White is for Witching* as a hybrid form of Gothic, Helen Cousins superimposes the Yoruban myth of the abiku over the Silver women's tradition of unnatural consumption (2012: 51). As she further explains, the "evil spirits" of abiku are hungry because they have been deprived of the due sacrificial offerings (Ellis, 1894 *apud* Cousins, 2012: 51). One abiku may replace the spirit of a new-born child and provide, for the rest of the abiku group, "the greater part of the food that the child eats" (Ellis, 1894 *apud* Cousins, 2012: 51). This interpretation is particularly significant in the context of the Silvers' consumption of otherness. The matriarchs devour the Other but also thrive on it, so the negative connotations associated with "difference" are further destabilized. Moreover, the "sacrifice" that the foremothers have not received over the past generations may signal a sacrifice that they have not been able to perform to themselves – that is, they have not been willing to relinquish part of their identity and grapple with the hybridity of their Englishness.

Throughout the text, we are informed that there have been non-English members in each generation of Silver women (Cousins, 2012: 53). Grand Anna's husband and the first owner of the Silver House was an England-schooled American, an "almost English" (Oyeyemi, 2009: 116); their daughter Jennifer is presumed to have "run off with someone dashing and foreign, a

different dashing and foreign to whoever Lily's dad had been" (71); and Luc, Lily's husband and the twins' father, is of French descent (59) (Cousins, 2012: 53-54). Given the context of the family's actual origins, the abusive consumption of otherness that the Silvers perform could be viewed as a substitute for the genuine interaction with their own otherness. Alternatively, their unfulfilled desire for otherness ("'Miranda (…) what will you eat?' (…) She knew, but she couldn't say it") (Oyeyemi, 2009: 127; Cousins, 2012: 51) becomes a fascination for the "pleasure and danger" of otherness, manifested as unnatural consumption (hooks, 1992: 26 *apud* Stephanou, 2014: 1254). This interpretation blending Gothic and Yoruba tropes presents the postcolonial Gothic as more than just a site for the reenactment of trauma produced by societal pressure. The Other is also revealed to be a construct, derived from repressed desires for otherness sublimated through imagination.

Witchcraft is yet another supernatural practice sustaining the Yoruba-Gothic backbone of the text. One cannot fail to notice that the title, *White is for Witching*, is a direct reference to Jamaican Herbert George DeLisser's novel, *The White Witch of Rosehall* (1929) (Stephanou, 2014: 1246). The story tackles the legend of Annie Palmer, a white slave-holder who cannibalized slaves (and thus became a witch). While witchcraft is not thoroughly explored as a main issue in *White is for Witching*, "the witch" as socio-cultural construct is called into question a number of times. The Silver House itself claims that it is not Anna Good's abnormal appetite that renders her monstrous, but her fear of monstrosity: "Anna Good it was not your pica that made you into a witch. (…) Indeed you are a mother of mine, you gave me a kind of life" (Oyeyemi, 2009: 24). According to the same account, Anna uses her feminine, vulnerable whiteness to "ensnare" Andrew Silver and become his wife. She feels both guilty and fascinated about absorbing male power:

> When Anna met Andrew she was wearing a cream-coloured dress, the material having been the cheapest she's seen on sale (…). He didn't speak to her, but he looked at her for longer than was polite, and she knew that they had met now. She inspected the entire front of her dress once he was gone, convinced that some vast stain had left her and entered the cloth. (…) White is for witching, a colour to be worn so that all other colours can enter you, so that you may use them. At a pinch, cream will do. (116-117)

Feeling uncleanly and unworthy of her wealthy, well-educated husband, Anna projects her fears of othering on the non-English who kill him in Second World War (118). The Silver House seems to imply that this first expulsion of otherness is an act of witchcraft that transforms space into a site of xenophobia (117). As illustrated before, Sade uses Yoruba practices to make sense and clear out this bewitchment. Most importantly, she points out to Miranda that witches desire "things that don't have names" (116) and that the young woman needs to find out for herself how to interact with the object of the witch's desire. Remarkably, in the Yoruba practice of aje witchcraft, white is the color of "transcendence" (Washington, 2005: 29 *apud* Cousins, 2012: 50), asserting the positive significance of transgression to (and integration of) otherness. Therefore, "witching" as construct becomes a space where attitudes towards the Other can be analyzed, and resentment towards otherness, dispelled.

Insofar, both the Silver House and White is for Witching have been proved to be Gothic-informed constructs defined by cultural hybridity rather than purely European traditions. Furthermore, Miranda as a Gothic heroine is also redefined as a postcolonial subject. First, the Gothic tropes of the double and the heredity-bound protagonist are transformed by Oyeyemi

to signify the fragmentary, unstable nature of postmodern identity (Cousins, 2012: 51-52): "she could strip him down to true red (…) (no he's eliot eliot is me we were once one cell)/ he would be sour" (Oyeyemi, 2009: 238); "[s]he looked at her reflection and saw a cube instead, four stiff faces in one" (129). The protagonist is not simply mirrored by her environment, she produces and consumes spaces: "Please understand. We are the goodlady (…). The house and I" (218). At best, her presence inside and outside the house at the end of the novel – she is both "in the ground beneath her mother's house" (1) and "stretched out inside a wall (…) feasting on plaster" (3) – reflects the fragmentariness of England as a postcolonial space (Cousins, 2012: 57).

The construction of a liminal space where Miranda could confront her own mixed identity falls to Ore, a British-Nigerian young woman who was adopted and raised by English parents and who willfully consumes white English culture (Stephanou, 2014: 1249) (thus breaking the cycle of oppressive acculturation): "I sat cross-legged in front of the TV with Mum and Dad (…) watching *EastEnders* and eating so much cake I couldn't taste it" (Oyeyemi, 2009: 199). As Miranda is more and more troubled by the past/present split, Ore becomes aware that her friend's identity is confined by the socio-cultural values of the dominant framework: "The girl was one of those Gothic victims, the child-woman who is too pretty and good for this world and ends up dying of tuberculosis or grief – a sweet heart-shaped face and a river of blue-black hair" (162).

Ore's alternative to the Gothic vampiric woman is the Caribbean soucouyant, a female spirit who sheds her skin before turning into a devourer (Stephanou, 2014: 1246). The soucouyant is "not content with her self" and "a double danger – there is the danger of meeting her, and the danger of becoming her" (Oyeyemi, 2009: 155), therefore it embodies a fluidity that Miranda can use to explore her own liminality. By spending time with Ore in the space the latter constructed, Miranda can experience the contradictory feelings that otherness elicits in her. She acknowledges her multifaceted desire for othermess, as her love for Ore is equal parts sadness, fascination, and fear: "Miranda had needed Ore open. Her head had spun with the desire to taste. She lay her head against Ore's chest and heard Ore's heart. The beat was ponderous. Like an oyster, living quietly in its serving-dish shell, this heart barely moved. Miranda could have taken it, she knew she could. Ore would have hardly felt it" (191).

In short, the White/Black and good/evil binaries are not merely reversed, but destabilized and transgressed. Emulating the Gothic story where they play out, race and desire are emotionally charged "fictions" and fluid spaces. Just like in *Wuthering Heights*, a Gothic classic referenced in *White is for Witching*, the Margin both destabilizes and empowers the Center – Nelly Dean allows Lockwood the respite of catharsis by telling him the story of the place, while Sade and Ore empower Miranda to build a space where they can all experience and negotiate the traumatic past. Most remarkably, at the end of the story, all characters, whether male or female, English or Nigerian, are left wondering about the impact of Miranda's transformation upon their own identities.

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