

## **‘Fragmenting and becoming double’: Supplementary twins and abject bodies in Helen Oyeyemi’s *The Icarus Girl***

When critics talk about postcolonial gothic, they tend to locate it elsewhere. This article alternatively considers what happens to postcolonial gothic when it is written within and about the former colonial centre and when the repercussions of the colonial period are experienced in the present day through experiences of racism, dislocation and alienation within Britain. Through our reading of Helen Oyeyemi’s first novel, *The Icarus Girl* (2005), we suggest that locating the debates and tropes conventionally mobilised within postcolonial gothic in the former colonial centre complicates subject formations and constructions of alterity. As well as challenging structures of alterity perpetuated in previous gothic literature, in which the Other functions as ‘the purely negative image of the European Self, the obverse of the Self’ (Khair, 2009: 4), postcolonial gothic literature also foregrounds revisitations of the colonial past in the present day, confounding what Procter and Smith have described as ‘the Eurocentric emphasis on a chronological break that implies colonialism is over’ (2007: 96) implied by the very term postcolonial. This is effected by demonstrating the impact in the present day of the physical, political and psychological traumas inflicted during the colonial period.

Oyeyemi's work follows in this vein inasmuch as it evidences the impact of the colonial period in the present day. However, it also offers another complex negotiation of identity in which self/Other and here/there oppositions are collapsed. The protagonist of *The Icarus Girl* is positioned within the former colonial centre, blurring the boundaries between colonising self and colonised Other. Rather than deconstructing patterns of monstrosity and thereby liberating characters from colonial paradigms and hierarchies, Oyeyemi's protagonist is uprooted and dislocated, identifying as British yet identified by some as Other due to her skin and Nigerian heritage.

*The Icarus Girl* weaves together a Western literary tradition of gothic with the postcolonial Bildungsroman. The interaction of these forms produces a reading focused on the abject, both in terms of physical abjection mapped onto bodies and places, and in the way writing functions as abject supplement. When bodies, borders and writing disintegrate, the reading of the novel becomes a difficult process, one not easily co-opted into a critical discourse that tends to value a psycho-symbolic reading of the postcolonial gothic Bildungsroman and to promise a positively transformed postcolonial identity. Accordingly, *The Icarus Girl* is unable to find comforting resolutions, disrupt oppositional structures and create a utopian hybrid space or to bring about a unified sense of self, meaning that it resists a redemptive or cathartic ending.

The novel's protagonist is Jessy, an eight year old girl, daughter of a white British father and black Nigerian mother, living in England. Precocious and troubled, Jessy suffers from what might be read as a psychological disorder that affects her emotional wellbeing and everyday social interactions.<sup>1</sup> Jessy finds her mixed Nigerian and British heritage problematic and struggles to find an identity fitting for herself since she identifies wholly with neither her mother's nor her father's culture. This identity crisis takes on a gothic dimension when Jessy visits Nigeria on a family holiday. There, she encounters TillyTilly, a child spectre who is perhaps a manifestation of Jessy's dead and forgotten twin, perhaps the manifestation of an *abiku* (an evil spirit that seeks to possess children), or perhaps an aspect of Jessy's own fragmented psyche. TillyTilly returns to England with Jessy and fights her for the occupation of her body.

Firstly, we draw upon theories of the abject in order to establish how Oyeyemi's novel resists the construction of a stable identity. In *Powers of Horror: Essays on Abjection* (1982), Julia Kristeva famously defines abjection in terms of inassimilable threat (1982: 1). A psychological impulse to define the limits of the subject engenders feelings of corporeal repulsion towards matter such as fingernails, excrement or shed hair that are neither subject nor object, neither Self nor comfortably Other. Kristeva offers a critical framework for understanding feelings of repulsion towards bodily viscera, which has frequently been taken up by theorists to explain affect in gothic texts. However, an area that has attracted less critical attention is an understanding of the abject in its broader sense as that which 'does not respect borders, positions, rules'. To illustrate this definition, Kristeva lists a number of people that could threaten identity: '[t]he traitor, the liar, the criminal with a good conscience, the shameless rapist, the killer who claims

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<sup>1</sup> During the novel, Jessy goes by three names: Jess, Jessamy and Jessy. The authors use 'Jessy' in this article to acknowledge the unstable nature of her identity since it designates a halfway position between Jess and Jessamy.

he is a saviour' (1982: 4). There is a shift from abject substances that threaten a sense of bodily thresholds to abject people that threaten a sense of social or moral thresholds. *The Icarus Girl* contains many instances of the abject, be it physical or abstract, that combine to illustrate a girl fighting for the right to fully occupy her own body by pushing out what she cannot identify with her sense of self.

For Janet Wilson (2002), processes of abjection can take on a broader significance when understood as national allegory. Wilson expands upon individual processes of abjection to suggest a comparison with the nation as a 'subject-in-process' struggling to distinguish itself from the 'Maternal British Empire' (2002: 300). Evidencing New Zealand literature and film, Wilson celebrates abjection as 'the condition for social and cultural renewal' (2002: 316). Abjection has, as such, been celebrated as a potentially useful tool for postcolonial nations undergoing the process of separation from the imperial mother (particularly in the case of white settler colonies); Oyeyemi's novel, however, cannot be read in the same transformative light. *The Icarus Girl* follows Jessy's symbolic gestures of separation from her mother and the Nigerian culture and traditions that she represents (in Jessy's eyes). As a 'subject-in-process', she is not rejecting the 'Maternal British Empire' but the postcolonial nation, which raises tensions between the desire for self-identification (in the case of both individuals and nations) and the problematic expulsion that this can entail. Jessy's process of self-identification effectively repeats the act of colonial violence in repressing and Othering her Nigerian heritage, describing Nigeria as 'the problem' and saying that it 'felt ugly'.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, in the case of this postcolonial gothic novel, though representations of the abject allow for the expression of fear and the desire for stable identification, it does not lead to renewal, reconfiguration or 'becoming'.

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<sup>2</sup> Helen Oyeyemi, *The Icarus Girl* (London: Bloomsbury, 2006), p. 9. Subsequent references are to this edition, and will be quoted as page references in the text.

Oyeyemi's novel also resists a straightforward narrative of becoming through the author's exploitation of the Bildungsroman form, conventionally deployed for coming-of-age narratives in which protagonists consider various ontologies that they will either accept or reject in their paths to adulthood, emerging at the close of the novel as psychologically mature. This is the case even for some gothic Bildungsromane, such as Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, which deploys gothic as a form of catharsis, ultimately expelling threatening otherness at the close of the narrative. Beyond securing 'formation of its protagonists', Mark Stein argues that the 'black British novel of transformation', as a reworking of the Bildungsroman genre, also allows for the '*transformation of British society and cultural institutions*' (2004: xi). Stein suggests that British society and culture are transformed through these novels as they enable the conception of a wider range of subject positions with which one might identify. For Stein, the transgression of space enabled through patterns of migration that he posits as 'eroding national borders' leads to the transformation of national identities (2004: 43). In the vein of Homi Bhabha's work in *The Location of Culture* (1994), hybrid spaces and hybrid peoples are figured in a utopian light and assumed to embody transformative potential. However, we would argue that Oyeyemi adopts the Bildungsroman form deliberately to subvert it, as not only does the protagonist become increasingly divided as the novel proceeds (both physically and psychologically), but any transformation of national space is rendered threatening as the protagonist is effectively dis-placed, slipping between worlds.

It is through a framework positing the utopian or transformative potential of the novel that critics have thus far engaged with *The Icarus Girl*, as is apparent from approaches to the novel's ending, in which Jessy struggles to regain control over her own body that

has been taken over by TillyTilly. Though the novel's ending is entirely ambiguous as to the result of the battle for Jessy's physical body, critics have been inclined to read utopian or transformative potential there. Madelaine Hron argues that Oyeyemi's novel navigates and negotiates 'imposed binaries by creating a hybrid space in-between' (2008: 30). Though Hron notes that the novel's ending is left open, she argues that it offers 'reconciliation with Yoruba culture' through Jess finally embracing her Yoruba name and reconciling with the Yoruba spirit world. In Hron's reading, Jessy emerges from TillyTilly's grasp at the close of the novel 'looking to belong' as a 'half-and-half child' (2008: 36-37). Thus, despite noting some of the ways that *The Icarus Girl* resists and subverts postcolonial narratives, Hron ultimately reads the novel as a redemptive intervention in a continuing struggle to write postcolonial identity. Likewise, Diana Adesola Mafe reads *The Icarus Girl* as an ultimately redemptive novel, again through the lens of positive hybridity. Mafe notes the ambiguities in the novel and argues that the figure of TillyTilly fits into a 'postcolonial female gothic' framework (2012: 22). Nonetheless, TillyTilly is still read positively in terms of hybridity. Mafe reads the struggle between Jessy and TillyTilly in Lacanian terms, noting that the 'precarious' struggle between the two aims to 'facilitate [Jess'] self-realisation and her function within the social' (2012: 28-29). Her use of Lacanian psychoanalysis is filtered through an investment in a notion of subjectivity found in ego-relational psychology, and essentially regards the 'stages' explored in Lacan's work as part of a teleological progress of maturation through which the subject passes on the way to becoming whole. Mafe recognises the parallels between *The Icarus Girl* and earlier gothic Bildungsromane, such as *Jane Eyre*, but contends that what Oyeyemi offers is not expulsion of the Other, but reconciliation. For her, the close of *The Icarus Girl* stages Jessy's merger with the other and the 'awakening' of a 'new hybrid form' of identity (Mafe, 2012: 32-33).

Helen Cousins' articulation of the mobilisation of gothic in Oyeyemi's third novel, *White is for Witching* (2009), comes closer to our own understanding of its use in *The Icarus Girl*. In coining the term 'Yoruba gothic', Cousins (2012: 50) argues that Oyeyemi offers a hybrid form of gothic, arising from the 'fraternization between colonizer and colonized' that is effected by the 'collapsing or blurring of the opposition by affiliating the Yoruba elements with the white characters'. However, hybridity is not figured as necessarily positive here, and neither can it be whilst English identity is perpetually constructed as being threatened by immigration. Paralleled with colonial fears of invasion of the foreign Other, Oyeyemi's British-based novels articulate fears over immigration, but from the perspective of ostracised characters. This results in a scenario whereby, '[t]he novel then is unable to resolve its crisis of "invasion" by expelling those who threaten a pure Englishness, because the English "self" and the foreign "other" are both embodied in one individual' (Cousins, 2012: 54). Here, then, is a problematic desire to expel in order to reinforce bodily and national borders.

The desire to expel the Other lies at the root of the Western gothic tradition. In *The Castle of Otranto*, widely regarded to be the first gothic novel, a Catholic past is expelled from post-enlightenment British identity. Robert Miles (2001: 61) argues that the novel presents Catholic otherness and medieval barbarity as 'abject material ... that must be expelled from the national body' in order to shore up Protestant Nationalism. Expulsion emerges from the fear of disintegration, though it is not always successful in holding it off. *The Icarus Girl* points to this contrary aspect of gothic in its choice to reference Emily Dickinson in its opening. Dickinson, a poet writing in the nineteenth century American gothic tradition, is an apt writer to evoke in the opening of a novel that will chart the eventual demise and disintegration of its alienated protagonist.

Daneen Wardrop connects the abject to Dickinson in her assertion that the ‘reading experience’ offered by Dickinson means that ‘I, as a reader, feel constantly in danger of disintegration, just as the I of the speaker dissolves’(2002: 162). The epigraph is worth briefly exploring:

Alone I cannot be-  
For Hosts do visit me-  
Recordless Company...

Framing *The Icarus Girl* as a ghost story (‘Hosts do visit me’), the lines here primarily invoke a sense of isolation (‘Alone’). Whilst initially the visitations may seem comforting (‘Alone I cannot be’), attempts to write this experience are already a failure, since they cannot be sufficiently reproduced in the poem (‘Recordless Company’). Disintegration of self and writing is the other work that the gothic performs in Oyeyemi’s novel, suggesting that in the context of reconfiguring the black British Bildungsroman, *The Icarus Girl* is perhaps closer to the gothic of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries than it is to a postmodern postcolonial Bildungsroman.

Gothic’s contrary impulses of expulsion and disintegration concerns not only bodies and psyches, but also writing itself. In *The Icarus Girl*, it is the narrative as much as the mind that disintegrates as the novel progresses, undermining the trajectory of the Bildungsroman. That is why we also read this novel through Derrida’s notion of the supplement. As Arthur Bradley summarises, ‘the supplement is another way of theorising the fact that every apparently self-identical presence depends upon what it places outside, below, or after itself’ (2008: 102). Writing is the supplement ‘par excellence’ since it insinuates itself in the place of identity and presence (Derrida, 1976: 281). On one hand, writing as supplement might be said to ‘enrich’ an originary identity, supplementing it positively (Derrida, 1976: 144). This half of the function of writing as supplement underpins the critical readings of the novel we have looked at so



far. Reading the novel partly autobiographically and partly as representative of postcolonial identity more generally, Hron positions writing as that which works through the ‘sociocultural and psychological alienation’ suffered by the immigrant subject, as well as providing an educational blueprint for how to tackle this trauma (2008: 39, 45). In her reading of *The Icarus Girl*, Mafe likewise implicitly positions the act of writing as a kind of transformative therapy for subjects both within and outside of the text (2012: 33). Here, writing is posited not only as representative of (or, supplementary to) real identities, but also as an aid to self-expression and identity formation. These readings can broadly be termed psycho-symbolic for they posit textual presences – Jessy and TillyTilly – as symbolic of processes occurring outside the text. However, for Derrida writing as supplement not only functions as an enriching plenitude, but also writes over the originary presence, adding ‘only to replace’ (1976: 145). Moreover, in this act of writing over, the supplement reveals the lack at the heart of originary identity. By foregrounding this function of writing, Oyeyemi’s postcolonial gothic Bildungsroman challenges the idea that stable identity – either within or without the text - might be produced through writing.

The remainder of this article suggests that Oyeyemi’s deployment of the abject and the supplement serve to resist closure and defer the construction of a stable identity. We begin by considering how identity is negotiated through the abject. Jessy’s fear of a surplus of identity stems from a mixed heritage that leads her to identify as (at least) two people. This becomes apparent when, on her first trip to Nigeria, Jessy’s grandfather addresses her by her Yoruba name, Wuraola, to which she confesses: this ‘sounded like another person. Not her at all’ (20). In this manner, Jessy misidentifies her Yoruba heritage as Other and worries that by answering to that name she would thereby ‘steal the identity of someone who belonged here’, leading her to question

whether she should ‘*become Wuraola*’ (20). By constructing half of her identity as Other, Jessy attempts to redraw the boundaries of selfhood, pushing out those elements of ethnicity or heritage with which she cannot bring herself to identify.

Jessy’s contested sense of identity centres upon the negotiation, transgression and reinforcement of physical borders, from the national borders of Nigeria and the UK that have been rendered permeable through multiple waves of colonisation and migration to the fleshy borders of her own body, which is allegorically figured as the battleground on which the fight for her national identity will be won. For a young protagonist who feels caught up in the struggle between opposed national spaces, small and politically uncontested spaces become a source of comfort and provide confirmation of her own sense of self. Jessy starts the novel sitting in an under-stairs cupboard, a fact of which she repeatedly reassures herself as her mother calls to her from the outside. Her cupboard (and parallels with the ‘closet’ are unavoidable) is small, finite and manageable. When she is there ‘she would know exactly where she was’ (3) a statement that we could read either as logic *ad nauseum*, or as an ontological expression that equates existence with certainty and finitude of physical location. Jessy prefers not to think of the larger spaces that she occupies and qualms at mentioning the small house in which the cupboard is situated, let alone the avenue on which the house is built. Later in the novel Jessy confesses to a fear of being ‘stretched’ or ‘hurt’ if she submits to her mother’s desire for her to ‘be Nigerian or something’ (257). Jessy’s fears of a surplus of identity, engendered by her dual inheritance, express themselves through her concerns about a physically expanding body.

For Vron Ware, disparities in the wealth, privilege and rights of citizens means that ‘[t]he politics of the border represents one of the most important issues of our epoch’

(2009: 106). This topic is often found in Oyeyemi's fiction, as she deploys violated bodily borders as analogies for xenophobic fears over immigration, particularly in her British-based novels. This has parallels with Victorian and early twentieth-century gothic, in which Britain, synechdochically represented as a vulnerable and innocent woman requiring protection, is frequently portrayed as being under threat from the lascivious, hypermasculine and ultimately deadly foreign Other, thereby expressing fears over the collapse of the British empire (of which Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) and E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India* (1924) are prime examples). Xenophobic and racist fears over the immigrant as representing a threat to British identity are similarly represented in Oyeyemi's fiction, but the issues are voiced and embodied through those subject to the ostracising effects of this hostility, reversing the focalisation of what we might term 'colonial gothic'.

These contested physical and national borders are frequently played out in Oyeyemi's fiction through motifs of consumption, and in *The Icarus Girl* hunger often functions as a metaphor for the transgression of borders and therefore the potential threat to personal identity. Jessy's grandfather signals this when he tells his granddaughter:

Two hungry people should never make friends. If they do, they eat each other up. It is the same with one person who is hungry and another who is full: they cannot be real, real friends because the hungry one will eat the full one. (240)

This wisdom offers a retrospective reading of Jessy's disordered eating habits, which begin when she starts trying to hide her eating from others by covering her mouth (140) and later cause her to become increasingly fussy, fearing the food that she is faced with eating. Her normally healthy appetite gives way to cibophobia, leading the rice on her plate to 'look too sharp, somehow, like lots of little white knives pointing out in every

direction [ . . . ] she was scared that it would hurt to swallow' (196). Tamar Heller and Patricia Moran claim that '[i]n anorexia and other disordered eating [...] female authority and female appetite emerge as related issues' due to the dual association of the mouth with eating and speech (2003: 3). Accordingly, eating disorders in literature can be read as indexes of protest, dissent or the reclamation of the power and authority lacking in the character's speech. Jessy's fear of assimilating food into her body can, therefore, be read analogously as a fear of having her identity changed through the incorporation of outside influences. Jessy's fear of a surplus of identity is paradoxically tied to a sense of lack, as she also worries that her identity is not yet complete or fully formed and might admit space for the Other to enter. Returning to her grandfather's analogy, Jessy tells TillyTilly, 'I'm not full, but you're the hungry one' (243), signifying both her fear of being consumed and her sense of lack.

This fear of assimilating outside substances is reinforced through acts of physical abjection, which can be read as symbolic of the reinforcement of her bodily borders. Feeding off Jessy, either literally or via the powers of the protagonist's imagination, TillyTilly becomes increasingly more powerful as the novel progresses and by the novel's midway point she has summoned the requisite strength to pull Jessy through the staircase of her house and down into the earth. As she re-ascends from this grave-like place, 'Jess felt earth push into her face and her mouth, and she *drank* it, as a vast amount of air whistled past her ears, and TillyTilly's hand fell away from hers, and she was standing, spitting out the dank taste of the soil, on the staircase, alone' (emphasis in original; 148). TillyTilly becomes the force-feeder in this scenario, compelling Jessy to imbibe the land. It is significant that Jessy ends up spitting out earth and soil here, as in reasserting her bodily boundaries she also rejects the physical land as a part of her identity in this border-defining image, signalling her aversion to national(ist) claims to her body.

Jessy's uncertainty about the finitude of her own identity is frequently explored through references to the transgressive and border-defying grotesque body, a body that has frequently been related to expressions of the abject in critical thought by virtue of its relation 'to the psychic register and to the bodily as cultural projection of an inner state' (Russo, 1994: 9). Jessy's main interaction with a grotesque female form comes in her discovery and subsequent dreams of a charcoal drawing of a black woman with disproportionately long arms. The image, she later realises, is a crude version of an *ère ibeji*, an image created of a dead twin in order to harness and control the potentially dangerous power that the twins are understood to hold in Yoruba culture. For Mikhail Bakhtin, the grotesque body is one linked to the earth and its cycles of degradation and rebirth, exemplified in images such as the 'pregnant hag', which is, for him, a 'typical and very strongly expressed grotesque [because] It is ambivalent. It is pregnant death, a death that gives birth' (Bakhtin, cited in Russo, 1994: 63). However, Mary Russo challenges this reading of the hag as purely 'ambivalent', arguing that it is important to take into consideration 'all of the connotations of fear and loathing around the biological processes of reproduction and of aging', accusing Bakhtin of 'fail[ing] to acknowledge or incorporate the social relations of gender in his semiotic model of the body politic, and thus his notion of the Female Grotesque remains in all directions repressed and undeveloped' (1994: 63). In a similar vein, we would argue that it is necessary to consider the socio-cultural specifics of the grotesque that engenders feelings of repulsion and fear in Oyeyemi's novel, as not only does the long-armed woman represent an excessive and border-defying body, but she also signifies aspects of Yoruba belief that Jessy is anxious to distinguish against.

It is, however, significant that Jessy later comes to take comfort in the long-armed woman, wondering 'how she could have thought that she was scary before' (133).

Providing an answer to her own musings, Jessy proposes that ‘maybe it had been the drawing that was scary, the black squiggles, and the actual woman was lovely’ (33). Rather than the idea of the ‘actual woman,’ Jessy feels threatened by her representation, suggesting that it is this symbolic overdetermination that presents a challenge to her own sense of self. This takes us into the second stage of our argument, in which we suggest that excess of signification and the instability of writing is paralleled with the physical abject and transgressed bodily borders in order to challenge transformative conceptions of hybridity.

The disintegration of Jessy’s abject body is paralleled with the disintegration of the Bildungsroman project, as the novel manifests a deep anxiety about the act of writing. Jessy’s mum, the writer, first invades the safe space under the stairs in the opening pages of the novel: ‘Jess could already smell the stain of thick, wrong-flowing biro ink, the way it smelt when the pen went all leaky’ (4-5). Writing manifests here as physically abject, staining Jessy’s mother and prompting disgust. Jessy is both inspired and troubled by her mother’s profession, though her own attempts at writing are a tortuous struggle, inducing illness and breakdown:

One day, Jess spent six hours spread untidily across her bedroom floor, chin in hand, motionless, except for the movement of her other hand going back and forth across the page. She was writing, crossing out, rewriting, fighting with words and punctuation to mould her sentiment into the perfect form... The haiku phase lasted a week before she fell ill... When she got better, she realised she didn’t like haiku anymore. (7)

There is pain in writing, indexed through Jessy’s neck ‘stretching... painfully’ as she writes. There is also violence, as each haiku gives Jessy the feeling of ‘being punched very hard’, resulting in the draining of a sense of self that leaves Jessy feeling exhausted and dissatisfied: ‘she sank and sank until her head was on the paper’ (7). As suggested

above, Jessy's experience of writing contrasts sharply with the way writing is imagined in critical readings of *The Icarus Girl* and other postcolonial Bildungsromane. Jessy's haiku reveal the erasure at work in writing, with Jessy increasingly disassociating from the process. Words become disconnected objects as she 'languidly' watches 'her hand forming letters' (7). For Jessy, the writing process is never complete and she continually annotates books that have 'hurt her in some way... scratching out some of the printed text and adding happier things' (59). Here, the printed text is an unsatisfactory artefact that requires constant erasure and supplementation.

Though Jessy attempts to write herself in various ways, *The Icarus Girl* reveals that she is at the mercy of writing. Neither the texts Jessy reads nor those she writes provide a satisfactory outlet for – or representation of – her identity. TillyTilly appears as a supplement for this lack and Jessy's first encounter with her is actually an encounter with writing, a message scrawled on a wall in 'lopsided lettering': 'HELLO JESSY' (40). TillyTilly addresses Jess/Jessamy as 'Jessy' here, a name that is neither Jess nor Jessamy, but a 'halfway Jessamy' (41). Initially, this seems to provide a hybrid identity that negotiates a nationally divided subjectivity. If this seems to echo the positive readings of hybridity we seek to problematize in this article, then we might instead consider the name 'Jessy' as another manifestation of the logic of the supplement. 'Jessy', like the supplement, is both an addition and a substitution. It is also 'exorbitant', exceeding the name 'Jess' and providing an identity outside the parameters already made available to the protagonist (Derrida, 1976: 161-162). Confused as she is with three names, Jessy hardly needs another to contend with. Any positive reading of hybridity is strained when we consider that Oyeyemi's protagonist struggles to be 'Jessy' as much as she does Jess, Jessamy, or Wuraola. Thus any positive reading of this other subject position easily gives way to a more sinister one. The writing on the wall - 'Jessy' - reveals that 'supplementary mediates produce the illusion of the very

thing they supplement' (Bradley, 2008: 108-109). In other words, TillyTilly produces Jessy through an act of writing, calling her into being. This reverses the usual way that a spectral character like TillyTilly might be read by critics: as subordinate or only supplementary to Jessy. For example, Hron reads TillyTilly as 'a signifier of Jess's precarious postcolonial condition ... [and as] symbolic of Jess's bipolar disorder' (2008: 38), but reading TillyTilly as symbolic belies the problematic nature of representation and writing as they function in this novel.

Reading TillyTilly simply as a 'Jessamy-echo' (45) also belies the surplus of meanings that she brings to the text. For example, Mafe (2012: 28-31) reads TillyTilly as a mirror double for Jessy, but this psycho-symbolic reading is anticipated within the text through Jessy's psychoanalyst. His interventions in her case are disastrous and he, too, fails to comprehend the nature of TillyTilly, simply dismissing her as a symptom. TillyTilly certainly invites a psychoanalytic reading, but she manifests foremost as the gothic spectre of writing itself, marking both its function and its failure in identity production and representation. TillyTilly insinuates herself in the place of Jessy as the novel progresses, bringing a surplus of meaning that psycho-symbolic readings of the novel cannot account for. At the same time, she functions to efface the very subject a psycho-symbolic reading seeks to elucidate and fix in place.

The link between TillyTilly and acts of writing and representation can also be seen in the novel's use of Yoruba myth. Jessy's first encounter with TillyTilly leads her to a dilapidated Yoruba shrine for a deceased twin. We have already considered the *ibeji* drawing that Jessy finds on this shrine in terms of the abject body, but it relates to writing too. In Yoruba myth, an *ibeji* is meant to function as an idealised representation of the deceased. However, this 'rough drawing' of TillyTilly 'scribbled' in charcoal, bears no resemblance to the girl Jessy encounters (74). As a form of representation, the



ibeji is grotesquely inadequate and represents TillyTilly in a disturbing way. At one point, Jessy sees both images simultaneously but cannot connect them: ‘Tilly was... folding over and crackling and jumping to different parts of the room like a piece of paper ... paper-thin and peeling round the edges, and just behind her, a pair of long, dark brown arms... trying to hold the smiling paper-doll Tilly in place’(166). Most attempts at representation in this novel are, to some degree, failures of mimesis: ‘wrong, all wrong’ (265). When Jessy tries to copy the ibeji drawing, she finds she cannot (133). Jessy is also disappointed by the ibeji statue that is eventually produced of her own twin, Fern, and her disappointment is, in part, a rejection of Yoruba practises in which ibeji statues are not mimetic, but symbolic and idealised. Further confusions arise concerning representation, since Jessy is given one ibeji statue (Fern) and not its double. According to custom, a statue of the living twin should also be produced. Moreover, these statues ought to look exactly alike, even where twins are not identical in reality. The two ibeji depictions in *The Icarus Girl*, however, are neither alike nor produced in the same medium. Here, we have two sets of twins becoming mixed up with one another, creating confusion about representation and identity. One aspect always remains unrepresented or inadequately represented: is the ibeji picture of TillyTilly, or her twin? To whom does the statue belong? There is also a missing signifier – the name of TillyTilly’s twin – an absence that the doubled name TillyTilly itself points to. *The Icarus Girl* produces an excess of surplus representations for Jessy, but each marks the failure of signification and representation. The failure of writing as representation leads to endless supplements.

As we have already discussed, Jessy lacks plenitude and it is this lack that creates space for TillyTilly to fill to excess. Jess is empty and TillyTilly promises fulfilment. Initially, TillyTilly demonstrates power and knowledge that make Jessy wish she was just like her. TillyTilly’s powers allow Jessy to see into other people’s lives, showing

her that others in her community – like the popular girl in school - also suffer from identity crises. This gives Jessy a measure of confidence, and, to some extent, combats her feelings of otherness. Outside the text, the figure of TillyTilly can be made use of by readers seeking to find meaning in the absence at the heart of Jessy’s identity. As we have shown, critics are invited to read TillyTilly initially as symbolic, mapping onto her a psychoanalytic narrative. Else, she might be read as a cultural symbol, mediating aspects of traditional Yoruba culture. In this sense then, TillyTilly provides plenitude and meaning. However, the function whereby the supplement ‘enriches’ is destabilised by the excess of meaning that TillyTilly brings. This excess is signalled in the unnecessarily doubled name she is given. The name ‘TillyTilly’ actually results from Jessy’s failure to pronounce the Yoruba name, Titiola. As a signifier, then, TillyTilly, writes over a previous signifier and in itself signifies a lack – or failure – of signification. The failure and excess of signification exist in uneasy tension as the novel progresses and the surplus meanings embodied by TillyTilly jostle for interpretive attention, writing over one another. Is TillyTilly simply the manifestation of Yoruba beliefs about twins? Is she the violent result of a failure adequately to integrate ambivalent elements of culture in meaningful ways? Is she a figure from a Western tradition of cinematic horror, embodying adult anxieties about the child – an uncannily self-possessed gothic child in the mould of *The Exorcist*’s Regan or *The Bad Seed*? Is she the manifestation of a failed and stuck ‘mirror stage’, embodying Lacan’s notion of *méconnaissance*? Is she a ghost, haunting the multicultural present, an uncanny reminder of unresolved (post)colonial conflict? The excess of interpretations TillyTilly invites fill Jessy to bursting.

In her excess, TillyTilly reveals the logic of the supplement, which always oscillates between presence and absence. This undecidable textual presence emerges from the way the novel sets ways of reading against one another, for example, pitting Jessy’s Western

psychologist against her Yoruba grandfather. Elements of the ways Yoruba culture memorialises death problematize a Western reading. Anthony White (2010) explores how a Western reading of a Yoruba photograph memorial for a twin who has passed away - the image of twins seated next to each other – reveals the unsettling and ambiguous nature of twins in Yoruba culture. The image is actually of one person, doubled using photographic techniques, with the live twin standing in place of the dead. In this image, the live twin supplements the dead twin, and an image of two people is revealed to be the image of only one: ‘neither the concept of “one” nor that of “two” satisfactorily renders the subject of this photograph; it is both and neither’ (White, 2010: 1). There is memorial value in the image but, at the same time, the repetition ‘seems to rob its subject of identity, even as it intensifies and splits it’ (White, 2010: 1-2). Here, the image of the twin is doubled, and the live twin supplements the dead (marking the positivity of presence), but, in replacing the dead twin, substituting them, the supplement simultaneously marks absence. These elements of Yoruba memorialisation practices might be read, then, as unsettling in a deconstructive sense. For Derrida, the sign as supplement is always and at the same time addition and substitution, presence and absence. As in Yoruba forms of memorialisation, the relationship between TillyTilly and Jessy oscillates between presence and absence, structured as it is by the logic of the supplement. Ultimately, TillyTilly functions as supplement as the ‘mark of emptiness’ (Derrida, 1976: 145). As TillyTilly becomes increasingly successful in her attempts to ‘swap places’ with Jessy, Jessy is powerless to prevent herself from also being hollowed out, written over, erased. In this Derridean reading of TillyTilly as writing and supplement, there is no presence.

We have read this text in two ways, considering the way abjection manifests within the text and how the project of writing also becomes abject, and, then, through the logic of the supplement, results in the erasure of the very identity it struggles to establish. To

conclude, our reading of the novel's ending demonstrates how bodily abjection and the failure of signification work together to confirm the protagonist's ultimate disintegration. Jessy feels a sense of abject repulsion towards her own skin when she believes her body to have been occupied by TillyTilly. In a silent prayer she begs 'please take my skin, take my feet and my hips, because she's been in them and spoilt them and made them not work' (205). The repulsion that Jessy feels towards her own skin indicates the violation at her own body having been occupied by another. In *The Icarus Girl*, the process of self-identification enacted through abjection is literalised, as Jessy ultimately 'shed[s] her body' and becomes, finally, a disembodied being treading the spiritual wilderness of the bush. This is not, however, a regenerative and transformative moment of self-recognition and comfortable identification or amalgamation with her Nigerian self. She has become supplementary and cast her very self off, completing the process of physical alienation. The novel ends with a confused, violent confrontation between TillyTilly and Jessy in this spiritual wilderness, concluding with the line 'Jessamy Harrison woke up and up and up and up' (322). Unlike critics cited in the introduction that read the novel's ending as a positive process of amalgamation, we argue that the floating and disembodied ending of waking 'up and up and up' conversely suggests that Jessy has submitted to everything that she fears and lost the battle for her own body.

As the novel closes, Jessy doesn't hear the voice telling her that 'it wasn't the right way, not the right way at all' (322). In terms of writing, the ending provides yet another undecidable, a failure of signification. 'Up' might denote reawakening, or it might denote death. Jessy doesn't 'wake up'; she wakes 'up and up and up and up'. In Yoruba belief, the physical existence of twins is held to be precarious, since twin births have traditionally had lower survival rates. In Yoruba terms, when TillyTilly comes to possess Jessy she descends from the spirit world, whilst Jessy ascends (see White, 2010:

10-11). The directions here are somewhat contrary to Western gothic, with its images of subterranean burial and earthly internment. The interaction of gothic and Yoruba myth creates a final undecidable. The repetition in the last line of the novel also recalls the endless process of supplementarity, the infinite deferment of meaning offered by writing. This is not the affirmation of a written identity, but the revelation of its failure. Failure is not the last word of this article though, even as we challenge positive readings of the novel as a black British Bildungsroman promising awakening. Writing may not be satisfactory, and it may reveal the absence at the heart of the identity it struggles to establish, but it is still a vital process. Another way of reading ‘up, up, up’, then, is to see it as part of a continued process of becoming. There is no awakening into a stabilised sense of self, no positive transformation into a hybridised identity, but the struggle nonetheless continues.

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