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Sensory signification in *Juniper's Whitening* and *Victimese*

Nicola Abram

'Our world is trembling in the void of strangers'

- Wole Soyinka, *Death and the King's Horseman*

After penning *The Icarus Girl*, Helen Oyeyemi briefly turned her attention to playwriting. Two dramas followed that debut novel: *Juniper's Whitening* and *Victimese*. The first was given a production by student acting company The Fletcher Players Society at the Corpus Playroom in Cambridge, opening on 27 April 2004. This was during Oyeyemi's own studies at the University of Cambridge, in Social and Political Sciences. No performance history is recorded for *Victimese*, but both playscripts were published by Methuen in a combined volume in 2005.

Though Oyeyemi has not published or had any plays produced since, much of her work actively blurs the generic boundary between prose and drama. Such genre-crossing is exemplified in the opening of her novel *White is for Witching*. The typography of its first pages resembles that of a playscript: text is attributed to characters by name, and their sequential speech is given no expository frame:

ore:

Miranda Silver is in Dover, in the ground beneath her mother's house.

[...]

eliot:

Miri is gone.

[...]

29 barton road:

Miranda is at *home*

(Oyeyemi 2009: 1, 3)

In this instance, the effect is of a series of soliloquys; the individual characters share a space on the page but are effectively spotlighted as occupying distinct and distant positions. This dramatic quality of Oyeyemi's prose was recognised with Holly Race's stage adaptation of *The Icarus Girl* for the Arcola Theatre, Hackney, which ran from 17 to 28 April 2007. Unfortunately, Kieron Quirke's review for the *Evening Standard* found the production 'underdeveloped', 'dully staged', and 'stolidly literalist' (2007: 449). While commending 'The power of story' – attributing this success to Oyeyemi herself, as the original author – Quirke lamented that her innovative novel was reduced to dialogue rather than receiving the non-linear, non-naturalistic dramaturgy it demands. It seems that the mask work and physical theatre promised in the pre-production marketing materials were not realised.

Despite this imperfect adaptation, Oyeyemi's autographic playscripts are worthy of attention. Not for nothing have West and East African and Caribbean authors and activists invested in theatre as a tool for raising anticolonial consciousness; it is an appropriate response to the 'drama [that] is enacted every day in colonized countries' (Fanon 1986: 145). Oyeyemi's plays align with the resistant and revolutionary work of Frantz Fanon, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o and Wole Soyinka through the use of form, in particular; and it is the same form that sets such plays apart from the 'conventions of European realist drama' (Innes 2007: 25). Indeed, as with much theatre originating from Africa and its diasporas, the clean application of European interpretive categories – realism, naturalism and supernaturalism – is confounded by the unremarked slippages between psychological interiority and supernatural events (Jeyifo 1985:

58). This chapter examines the particular qualities that the dramatic form offers to Oyeyemi's own anticolonial project. By locating *Juniper's Whitening* and *Victimese* within Yoruba epistemology, I read Oyeyemi as answering to the classical mimetic tradition: she offers her Anglophone audiences an alternative mode of spectatorship, grounded in a conceptual context where 'knowledge' is not an object to be acquired but an event to be experienced. Rather than participating in the circulation of fact, or even the representation of reasonable fictions, the signifying practice of both plays belongs to the realm of affect.

<h1>'A forestful of seeking eyes': *Juniper's Whitening*

Juniper's Whitening exemplifies a wilful refusal of 'narrative articulation and character development', identified by C.L. Innes as characteristic of postcolonial performance (2007: 25). This renders any attempt to précis the plot extremely reductive. The following gestures are therefore consciously incomplete. In fact, as I will go on to argue, this blunting of Eurocentric critical tools is a vital part of Oyeyemi's political project.

Juniper's Whitening sees Aleph, Beth and the titular Juniper animate a curious triangle of fear, care and coercion. The play begins with a non-naturalistic prologue, where the voices of Beth and Aleph alternately speak a self-consciously imagistic sequence: 'A tree of tongues. A sea of pens – / A forestful of seeking eyes' (Oyeyemi 2005: 3). Stage directions specify that the actors remain out of sight during this scene, and that darkness follows it; this withholding of orientating information continues throughout the play. But when Juniper then appears onstage, dishevelled and disorientated, the strangeness of the story is announced explicitly: she plainly accuses Aleph of killing Beth, *again*. Juniper fears Aleph, flinching at his approach, and he manipulates her. But Beth, it seems, will not stay dead; over several scenes we hear of Aleph bringing her back by repeating her name.

This first play in the collection is sparse in its staging, with the script specifying only a few simple props to signify a domestic scene: a table, a single chair, and a bed. Though the scenery suggests the experience of occupying a shared space, the characters fail to interact effectively: the play echoes its sparse staging with similarly economical dialogue. Efforts to communicate only emphasise the gulf between characters, as statements go unheard, and questions – especially Juniper’s – often remain unanswered: ‘Who did that?’, ‘Is that what you did?’ (Oyeyemi 2005: 4, 9). Juniper seeks an explanation for Aleph’s violent treatment of Beth; Aleph questions why Juniper wants to run away, and why she stays; Beth demands to know who else is there; and Juniper doesn’t want to know what’s outside. Indeed, for much of the play the characters seem to know little more than the audience, leaving the action unanchored and oddly disorientating: Who are they? Where are they? What happens – and why?

This deliberate withholding of knowledge appears as theme as well as form. Juniper complains that Aleph and Beth ‘both know the truth’ (Oyeyemi 2005: 14), but Aleph insists that they understand no more than she does: ‘You’re inside as far as you can go. You’re here just as much as we are’ (Oyeyemi 2005: 15). The climactic revelation of an earlier trauma – the incestuous rape of a daughter by her father – suggests an explanation for this silence; perhaps ‘there is no story’ because there are no words suitable to form and to fit it (Oyeyemi 2005: 15).

Instead of a verbal sign system, the trauma is made manifest through sounds: for example, the choking noises produced by Beth in the darkness of the prologue, or the eerie peal of laughter in the closing moments of the play (Oyeyemi 2005: 3, 34). Anita Harris Satkunanathan reads

these nonverbal utterances as the somatising of psychopathology: ‘the fear of articulation rendered complex and physiological’ (2011: 44). For Harris Satkunanathan, such moments of elision are indicative of the abject. They signal material that is ‘passed over in the dramatic text precisely because [it is] too terrible for the human mind to contemplate directly’ (Harris Satkunanathan 2015: 24). I would answer that such content is not exactly unknowable, but unspeakable; it can *only* be known, first-hand and in full sensory perception, never simply spoken. Trauma refuses to be ordered and organised into the systematic relationship of signifier and signified. But it can be communicated in other ways: reading Oyeyemi’s plays in conversation with Sarah Kane’s, Harris Satkunanathan admits that Kane’s *Blasted* does make the central trauma visible onstage through the silent performance of a violent act. I would respond that Oyeyemi enacts the world-unmaking effects of such trauma directly on her audience; the dramatic form allows her to bypass the distancing mediation of a narrative guide, instead placing each spectator at the centre of the senseless traumatic experience.

In *Juniper’s Whitening*, characters sometimes refuse to speak as a means of securing their autonomy. It is a purposeful resistance to the demands of others, a determined assertion that the prospective speaker and their subject are not available for another’s consumption. Twice, characters in *Juniper’s Whitening* express their reticence to talk as a means of keeping the subject for themselves:

Beth It doesn’t matter – just tell us anything. Tell us about . . . your mother.

Juniper No. She’s mine.

Beth She’ll still be yours when you’ve told us about her.

Juniper No.

(Oyeyemi 2005: 16)

Juniper What did you see out of the window? Tell me.

Beth I saw outside. It's daytime, and someone is there.

Juniper Tell me.

Beth No, it's mine.

(Oyeyemi 2005: 24)

As Harris Satkunanathan writes, the 'struggle for articulation' demonstrated by the characters in Oyeyemi's fiction is 'a defiance of the commodification of truth and experience' (2011: 41). As well as displaying a communicative gap between characters, this stubborn silence also measures the distance between character and audience. Those observing the action – whether watching or reading – are made aware that access to the characters' interior lives is not to be expected through the spoken word.

Further complicating the audience's ability to comprehend – and thereby straightforwardly consume – the play, it refuses to authenticate itself against a knowable reality and recorded history. There is no sense of geographical location or chronological occasion; objects enter into the characters' existence, such as the strawberries and tomatoes that Beth demands be brought to her, but the stage is never made to be a space in which these journeys visibly occur. The outside world appears only as projection and phobia of the characters, not as a fully realised scene. This recalls South African playwright Athol Fugard's dramaturgy, described here by Biodun Jeyifo: 'this "outside" world [is] indirectly insinuated into the dramatic action largely as the introjected fears and pathological maladjustments of the characters' (1985: 99). While they write from and of different (post)colonial contexts, it is significant that both Oyeyemi and Fugard centre the individual onstage. This makes global history subordinate to the intimate details of human stories; it insists on emotional welfare as an important site in the struggle for independence, and a legitimate object of dramatic study. The audience is asked to

suspend their prior knowledge of relevant geopolitical events, and attend instead to the present depiction of intra- and interpersonal realities.

The absence of adult figures completes the lack of a determining context for the play's events. Instead, we are presented with three young people, whose navigation of the borderlands between childhood and maturity offers a productive site for problematising what is known and knowable in the world. As Madelaine Hron observes, youth protagonists serve a special purpose in postcolonial writings, which cannot be explained away by the generic categorisation of juvenile literature or a reductive assertion of the newly independent nation's youth: 'Childhood [...] represents a particularly resistant space of complex, on-going negotiation and articulation of difference that is perhaps not as readily accessible in the stable, socially structured world of adults' (2008: 30). The youth of the characters populating *Juniper's Whitening* and *Victimese* – and, indeed, regularly appearing as protagonists in Oyeyemi's fiction – enables an exploration of liminality, hybridity, possibility, and resistance.

In terms of setting, *Juniper's Whitening* is recognisable only as contained within a house. This choice recurs in Oyeyemi's fiction: 29 Barton Road features as a malevolent and sentient presence in *White is for Witching*, manifesting 'the goodlady' as an agent of its racist revenge; in *The Opposite House*, the 'somewherehouse' both straddles Lagos and London and blends the real with the magical. Much has been made of Oyeyemi's inheritance of a Gothic literary tradition, and her innovation in its contemporary configurations (cf. Cousins 2012, Mafe 2012). In the conventions of nineteenth-century Gothic literature, the haunted house makes visible the psychic complexity of the human. *Juniper's Whitening* would seem to continue this investment of domestic architecture with symbolic resonance. Harris Satkunanathan rightly reads the setting of the house as physically figuring the themes of the play: 'a

claustrophobic enclosure which mimics the culturally unsettling liminal space between life and death' (2015: 18).

Beyond the immediate, interpersonal significance of the house as a particular and precisely inhabited space, the lack of locational specificity also gives the setting a metaphoric significance. Of Soyinka's play *The Road*, Biodun Jeyifo writes: 'We perceive in the stifling space of this claustrophobic milieu, and in this one day, a day like any other day, the cracks in a social order which masks by myriad devious means its explosive contradictions and antagonisms' (1985: 21). The same could well be written of *Juniper's Whitening*: in this single story set in a specific house we might also read the fault-lines that carve up a destructive patriarchal culture in which women are complicit in the continuation of epistemic, ecological, and bodily violence. The 'stifling space' of the house is breached only by a rumoured window in the attic. It makes possible a means for looking beyond the claustrophobic interior; as metaphor, it promises perspective by revealing context. Aleph instructs Juniper: 'You mustn't look outside. The safest way is to close your eyes, because then nothing you see inside yourself can hurt you. I promise' (Oyeyemi 2005: 19). In this inverted onstage world, the (attic) window is the eye to one's own soul. Invoking another literary tradition built on domestic architecture, the unknown interior of the attic is suggestive of the fictional madwomen confined there – figured by Charlotte Brontë's Bertha Mason, in *Jane Eyre*. Oyeyemi offers no 'angel of the house', a figure named by Coventry Patmore's 1854 poem, and later dethroned by Virginia Woolf in her 1931 essay 'Professions for Women'. Instead, in *Juniper's Whitening*, madness indwells the house, and to breach its boundaries is taboo.

On stage, another literary lineage also moves into view; staging the domestic setting makes reference to the so-called ‘kitchen sink drama’ of 1950s social realism, echoing its interest in the casual brutality and normalised violence enacted in the domestic interior. Indeed, the house that features in *Juniper’s Whitening* is made meaningful when Beth tells Juniper the ‘story’ of ‘a girl who lived in a small house with her parents’ (Oyeyemi 2005: 30). The ostensible safety of the domestic scene – a local school, friendly neighbours – becomes the sinister site of incestuous violence, as the girl’s father is revealed to sexually abuse her at home over an extended period. The architectural ‘close places’ provide the proximity required for the abuse, and conceal the daughter’s suffering when her father crosses bodily boundaries: ‘he would tell the little girl to come closer. He wanted to touch her’ (Oyeyemi 2005: 31). This shared domestic space also facilitates the mother’s complicity: she knows of the horrors that occur inside the house, and within her family, but neglects to act. The home is therefore made *unheimlich* – as translated from the German, ‘unhomely’. *Juniper’s Whitening* cleverly plays with the two meanings of *heimlich* that Sigmund Freud identifies: first, ‘belonging to the house’, ‘familiar’, and ‘intimate’; second, that which is ‘Concealed, kept from sight’ (1919: 222-23). The final revelation of the dark, domestic secret is not just for the information of the audience, then, but is also an uncanny return of what has been repressed by the play’s central character, Juniper.

Confirming the recurrence of this hidden past in the present, Beth’s tale continues: from the rape a child is conceived and born. The daughter subjects her baby first to neglect and then to deliberate harm. Thus, not only does the sexual and psychological abuse directed at the daughter produce a son, but the abuse is then *reproduced* as her physical abuse of that son. The daughter harms Gimel to somatise the emotional harm that she herself experiences, and to externalise her internal anguish.¹ The newborn victim symbolises her own helplessness

against both the sexual violence committed by her father and the symbolic violence of the Law of the Father. Borrowing from Carl Jung, Harris Satkunanathan reads the abused infant as metaphoric of traumatic circumstances for which the conscious mind can neither compensate nor correct (2015: 22). The child, as trauma made flesh, is tasked to bear the burden of the mother's suffering – the messianic resonance is not incidental – but his punishment brings her no peace and his wounds bring her no healing.² Further, in a disturbing distortion of Christ's resurrection, it seems that Gimel will not stay dead. He haunts the text and the attic of the house, out of sight but sonically present as a series of unexplained crashing sounds (Oyeyemi 2005: 16). Complicating the Christian mythology, Gimel also invokes the figure of the *abiku*, the Yoruba concept of a spirit child who is destined to die and repeatedly to be reborn.

The strange exchanges between the three characters include several moments that articulate with tingling horror the human capacity to harm. Beth speaks:

I've realised what it is about children that tempts you to murder. They have this littleness to their skulls, and their placid expectancy, like they know it's a rule that they have to be loved – when things are that small and well-formed, you have such a terror of someone or something coming along and bursting them that you suddenly have a crushing strength in your fingers. (Oyeyemi 2005: 12-13)

In a play where murder has become a mundane nightly ritual, there is no 'good'. Here, children are not avatars of innocence but a means of revealing the evil that inheres in all humanity. Aleph insists that even kindness is quickly perverted: 'It becomes like a debt you owe the other one. You cast yourself as decent, and you can't stop' (Oyeyemi 2005: 14).

This lexicon of performance – ‘you *cast* yourself as decent’ (emphasis mine) – speaks forward to the final scenes, where it is implied that these three characters are, in fact, one: psychically split by the trauma of the incestuous rape. This manipulation of the relationship between cast and character – here, three actors animate aspects of a single character – has a long history in black British women’s theatre. In *Pyeyucca* (1985) by Theatre of Black Women, the character Laura (played by Patricia Hilaire) is split by the internalisation of racist ideals of beauty to produce her alter ego, Pyeyucca (Bernardine Evaristo); their eventual reunion is signalled by careful choreography. In *The Story of M* (1994), SuAndi performs as both her mother, Margaret, and as herself. This lineage points to the shared circumstances of simultaneous racism and sexism, which inevitably and indelibly impact on mental wellbeing and psychological integrity as well as having socio-economic and cultural consequences. In Oyeyemi’s play, the fluidity between the characters is signalled in the shifting possession of the mysterious ‘Whitening’. In the title it is attributed to Juniper, while in the first spoken lines Beth claims it as her own, before Aleph corrects her use of the first person plural:

Beth So, here it is? My whitening?

Aleph *Our* whitening!

(Oyeyemi 2005: 3)

But this unmasking of the characters as constitutive parts of a human whole offers an uneasy denouement.

If the characters somatise the fragments of a fractured psyche, then the murders become legible as episodes of self-harm.³ Aleph murders Beth because she remembers the violence that Juniper tries to forget: it is ‘self-defence [...]. As in, defence against yourself’ (Oyeyemi 2005: 21-22). Overwriting the usual meaning of the term, here the ‘self’ is not that which is to be defended, but that which must be defended against. Later, Beth admits that Aleph ‘came

because I needed him. And then he wouldn't go away. Because it's possible to invite madness [...] it's possible to open your arms wide and hug death' (Oyeyemi 2005: 32). And Aleph affirms: 'I'm here because you need me – I'll always be here, for as long as you need me' (Oyeyemi 2005: 34). There is an early attempt at healing: at the start of the third scene, Juniper is seen 'sprawled on the floor, looking at herself from different angles in a hand-mirror' (Oyeyemi 2005: 11). This mirror is more psychomantium than incidental instrument of vanity; Juniper is attempting to perceive herself as a coherent whole, not fractured or in fragments. But Beth is directed to seat herself in the chair behind Juniper, a move which implies the insertion of her reflection into the mirror's face. Juniper's need to recognise herself as a singular being is answered by the assertion that her shadow is ever present; her self-regarding gaze is forced to accommodate the proliferation of those selves. In another gesture towards resolution, and reunification of the daughter's psyche, the final scene sees Juniper become Beth, with Juniper reportedly dead. Yet the shadow self still speaks, as Juniper recites words Beth has voiced previously (Oyeyemi 2005: 19, 22, 33).

The metaphoric resonance of this climactic moment is that the past persists into the present. It must be acknowledged if it is to be endured – though even this does not guarantee the future. As playwright Tsegaye Gabre-Medhin has written of an Ethiopian cultural context, 'today's inquisitive generation [...] must be encouraged to come to terms with its historic past; even that historic past often torn and denied against [them]' (1977: n.p.). The nature and content of this repressed past is noteworthy in *Juniper's Whitening*: the play dramatises the effects of a personal, individual, familial violence, rather than a national colonial conquering – though echoes of this historical trauma remain. This personal past is part of the political past; the political past and present are peopled by persons with histories. The central event of the play

is a perversion of parenthood made possible by both a specific and systemic patriarchal violence; the young, female body figures as its primary location.

Connections – both formal and thematic – can be made with plays by Oyeyemi’s contemporaries. The strange simplicity of *Juniper’s Whitening* finds particular parallels in the work of British playwright debbie tucker green. Like tucker green, Oyeyemi is careful to designate overlapping, interrupted and simultaneous speech. This insists on the audience’s responsibility to select the object of their look and listening. The two playwrights also share an interest in active silences. Oyeyemi gives exquisite detail to her stage directions for these: ‘Aleph looks at [Juniper] as if about to explain something, then looks away, hands in pockets, brow creased in frustration, as if he thinks that his theory is too weighty for her’ (Oyeyemi 2005: 4). tucker green’s plays are similarly punctuated with ellipses and unspoken exchanges between characters, so that silence comes to scaffold meaning rather than subdue it. For both playwrights, the focus is on the social and emotional consequences of an unrepresented action. tucker green is notable for her characteristic refusal to stage the central ‘event’ of her plays’ plot; *Juniper’s Whitening* withholds the vital details until the end, and even then they are spoken rather than shown. Thematically, too, the playwrights overlap: tucker green’s *born bad* (2003) examines the effects of incestuous rape on a ‘Dawta’ and her siblings, complicating the situation with the mother’s complicity. This examination of the ethics of witnessing recurs in tucker green’s work, given a context of domestic violence in *dirty butterfly* (2003), complex injustices in *stoning mary* (2005), and racialised knife crime in *random* (2008).⁴ Likewise, Juniper knows of the violence Aleph inflicts on Beth but does nothing. Both Oyeyemi and tucker green were based in Britain at the time of writing their plays, though the situations they depict range in setting: tucker green crosses nations, traversing Europe, Africa, and the Americas, while Oyeyemi ventures into indeterminate

spaces that symbolise the universal psyche. But both playwrights are engaged in a shared political project: not only do they examine the effects of trauma on its victims and survivors, but they also insist on the responsibilities of others other than the perpetrator to intervene.

There are also allusions to a more established English literary canon layered beneath Oyeyemi's silences and strange domestic scenes. The play's prologue cites the soliloquy that Shakespeare gives to Hamlet:

To die, to sleep –
To sleep – perchance to dream: ay, there's the rub,
For in that sleep of death what dreams may come
When we have shuffled off this mortal coil,
Must give us pause.

(Shakespeare 1982 [1601]: 278-79)

In harmony, Beth and Aleph echo Hamlet's line 'what dreams may come', adding 'Why do we say we fear to die?' (Oyeyemi 2005: 3). This frames the content to follow as an exploration of the nightmarish illogic that may attend death. Pursuing the same theme of mortality while updating the literary referent, Beth's repeated death and resurrection mirrors the suicidal cycle in Sylvia Plath's poem 'Lady Lazarus': 'like the cat I have nine times to die. / This is Number Three' (1981 [1962]: 244-45). Beth is reported to die at least twice in *Juniper's Whitening*, and Aleph once, numerically confirming the allusion. In addition, Beth's plea 'Tell me, tell me all of it' (Oyeyemi 2005: 23) invokes T.S. Eliot's poem 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock', ghosted by that same biblical figure who bears knowledge from beyond the grave:

Would it have been worth while,

[...]

To say: 'I am Lazarus, come from the dead,
Come back to tell you all, I shall tell you all'

(1980 [1917]: 6)

By invoking this canonical collection of texts, Oyeyemi situates her play – and interpellates her audience – within a particular circle of knowledge: literary, Anglophone, elite. Yet if this recognition of a shared cultural context entices the audience to presume the reassuring solidarity of common referents, that sense of an epistemic community is soon confounded.

After the apparent revelation of the daughter's trauma and the characters' interconnectedness, the ending of the play resolutely refuses the audience's knowing. The climactic events take place offstage, and consist of sounds – laughter and breaking glass – rather than comprehensible speech. There is no comic resolution, cathartic purgation, or even the clarity of a tragic denouement; instead, this ending produces an unsettling, *unheimlich* experience that is to be carried away from the theatre or the final pages of the playtext and into the world. Oyeyemi offers chaos not order, suspense rather than stability.

Coupled, the two key objects that feature in the play – the mirror and the window – have a history as metaphors of mimetic representation: they depict works of art as, respectively, a reflection of the world and an opening onto it. Thus, these objects together invoke the idea of art as a way of knowing the world, and of that world as real, knowable, and existing prior to its representation. This model prioritises the visual, as if seeing in itself guarantees comprehension. But the metaphor does not hold for *Juniper's Whitening*. This play positions its audience to see but not to understand. Other ways of knowing are needed.

<h1>'glass in the act of splintering': *Victimese*

The second play in Oyeyemi's publication, *Victimese*, also stages the experiences and interactions of young people. Here, four characters congregate in Eve's college bedroom. Similarly subversive in content, the play begins with Eve's apparent acts of self-harm – stage directions specify her bloody, bandaged wrists – and her social withdrawal. It proceeds to lay bare the disordered dynamics of the relationships between Eve and her sister Megan, with her college friend Ben, and with her prospective or perhaps previous lover, Topper. Eve is clearly experiencing some mental distress: she explains that she is afraid to leave her room for fear of meeting her 'nemesis' – a figure described as 'incidentally beautiful, and purposefully cruel' – and thereby accelerating her death (Oyeyemi 2005: 73). The other characters come and go, and after various cyclical conversations, events culminate in a strange deathday celebration, where the four eat and drink to mark the day that Eve expects to die.

This is a play with a relatively naturalistic setting: stage directions specify a 'cluttered, harshly lit college room [...] full of posters and soft toys' (Oyeyemi 2005: 37). Again, the implication is of a liminal space between childhood and adulthood; this is also a space contingent on and adjacent to a place of formal education, and it proves to be the classroom in which the characters are inducted into a more sophisticated interpersonal awareness.

Revisiting the Gothic house that contained the events of *Juniper's Whitening*, the figurative significance of the closed domestic setting – as a symbol for psychic interiority – is explicitly debated by characters in *Victimese*:

Eve Oh . . . like reality's a kind of house that we all concede to share, but everyone has their own private room that they slip into under pressure.

[...]

Topper No. If we're talking rooms, then we're all in our own private rooms already.

(Oyeyemi 2005: 42)

It is unclear – perhaps even to Eve – whether she welcomes the visitors to her ‘private room’. Toper and Megan knock at the door and are bidden to enter, if reluctantly, but directions specify that Ben ‘bursts in without knocking’ (Oyeyemi 2005: 50). Collectively occupying this confined physical space does little to guarantee the success of their interactions, though. Returning to the above excerpt, Toper’s negative response and Eve’s initial scepticism combine to confirm the failure of communication between characters; the relational breach between them is always already in effect. This can be read as a radical statement on the status of the real: if reality is not collectively occupied, as Toper asserts, then relationality is clearly threatened.

Toper describes the friends’ failure to meet meaningfully through speech, saying ‘The words are falling right through me’ (Oyeyemi 2005: 41). Yet this statement suggests that it is actually himself, not (only) the language, that lacks a concrete quality; though he invokes himself in the first person, he does so only to describe being passed through – his personhood penetrated – by the others’ utterances. Megan, too, makes reference to the incongruity between body and discourse, saying that Eve’s words are less comprehensible than her bodily presence. She complains that Eve’s labours to reassure her are uncharacteristic and empty: ‘I can’t understand you when you’re fitting your lips around the words you think you should say’ (Oyeyemi 2005: 46). The recurrence of the second-person address here insists on Eve’s material reality; the five instances of ‘you’ in this sentence declare that Eve is, thinks, speaks, and takes shape, whereas Megan’s single evocation of ‘I’ only serves to state her negative actions: she cannot understand.

Eve’s relationship with Toper is figured differently. His words are made material through inscription on paper: a pile of old letters represent his previous efforts to communicate. Eve

rejects both their form and content, cutting the paper in a refusal to indulge the victim/saviour relationship that the letters describe (Oyeyemi 2005: 38). Disfiguring the ‘flesh’ that Toper’s words take, she reshapes the fragments into an ironic collage for her bedroom wall (Oyeyemi 2005: 41). Continuing this distant posture throughout the play, Eve regularly polices the other characters’ language. She addresses them urgently if she suspects that they are slipping into the self-pitying pleas she terms ‘victimese’, and subjects her own speech to similar scrutiny:

there’s a formula – you know what I’m talking about. I’d need to start speaking victimese to you; tell you about how much I’m hurting and how it all seems so hopeless – I’m supposed to honour you with the pretence that you can reach me, that you can actually make a difference to what’s happening in my head, and then, when you have these ego-coins in your hand, you’ll lavish your help on me. Only it wouldn’t really be help at all. Besides, I can’t remember the victimese for ‘thank you.’
(Oyeyemi 2005: 38)

Eve’s refusal to mean the words she says is, paradoxically, the most overt explication of the play’s themes that is offered. Her hurt and hopelessness signal a state of mental ill health. Certain words become a means of payment, exchanged according to a social contract that benefits only the benefactor of the ‘help’. Toper reinterprets Eve’s cynicism, suggesting that she ‘tries to undo other people, just because she doesn’t know how to be whole. They offer her love, and she despises them for it’ (Oyeyemi 2005: 55). In Toper’s estimation, Eve’s motivating problem is an issue of knowledge – or, rather, its lack – of ‘how to *be*’ (Oyeyemi 2005: 55, emphasis mine). Being and being whole are not given as natural states but as learned postures predicated on particular information being understood and correctly acted upon. But while she lacks this knowledge of ‘how to be whole’, Eve exemplifies another kind of knowledge: the experience of being-as-fragments. Clearly, this revisits the psychic fragmentation structuring *Juniper’s Whitening*; I shall return to its importance in due course.

Most of the dialogue in *Victimese* is minimal: it is limited to sleepy nonsensical statements, mundane exchanges about domestic arrangements, or silencing eruptions of emotion or judgement. But there are moments of expansive monologue as characters take turns to share secrets. Ben speaks of a childhood realisation that his family's care for him is partial and contingent; Eve explains that she injures herself to relieve the emotions her parents prohibited expression of; Megan reveals her disordered relationship to her sister, by turns demanding her concern and punishing her for not reciprocating. These revelations make Eve's strange 'deathday' party into a kind of confessional space. But despite this exchange of intimate knowledge, communication does not result in empathic connection. Eve complains 'it's gotten so everything you say to me is pre-muted; like you don't expect to be heard' (Oyeyemi 2005: 72). Evidently, the act of telling does not guarantee understanding. Secondary knowledge about something offers no substitute for first-hand experience of that thing; neither does such knowing necessarily entail empathy for its orator. Here, the testimony of another does little to secure a climate of care or compassion among its audience.

Compounding the failure of the characters' staged communication, allusions to literary texts fail to confirm a common canon. Such statements simply echo between the characters, adding to the sense that everything spoken between them has been said before. For example, Ben addresses Megan as Megaera, one of the furies from classical Greek mythology. His instruction to Eve to 'Shuffle over here and let me place my fingers in your wounds' puts Eve in the place of the resurrected Christ, offering empirical assurance of his living identity to salve the doubts of his disciple, Thomas (Oyeyemi 2005: 52). Yet none of these allusions are decoded in the characters' conversations. Unacknowledged – and, indeed, hardly heard by her interlocutor – Megan cites several lines from a poem by Emily Dickinson to describe her

insomnia. The rhythmic recital becomes a kind of incantation, punctuated by Ben's mundane responses:

Megan Some polar expiation . . .
Ben Well, I don't get that.
Megan An omen in the bone –
Ben It's just that terrible, taut buzz for me –
Megan – of death's tremendous nearness.

(Oyeyemi 2005: 57)

The destination of these fragments is, finally, the reader. If we recognise their source – or even simply sense that they originate beyond the present text – we are addressed as a community of knowledge. Oyeyemi's appropriation of these citations rewrites known texts with new meaning. Here then, explicitly, we are asked to renew our knowledge: to know *differently*.

Despite the failure of verbal communication to secure any connections between characters, their interpersonal intimacy is announced in other intriguing ways. Megan somatises Eve's distress during her dreams; she describes experiencing a strange sensation in her forearms that seems to signal a sibling connection to her sister's self-harm (Oyeyemi 2005: 46). This technique of embodying another's pain makes available a further connection with debbie tucker green's work: her 2008 play *random* directs the character of Sister to incarnate her murdered brother's wounds through the performer's gestures to her own body. I read this stage technique as a way of insisting on the co-constitution of the self, so that subjectivity is determined not by a solo body but in interaction with others. If the boundaries of the body can be transgressed, so that one person's pain is transferred to another, then the psychic borders between self and other are also called into question. In both cases, the corporeal connection is

made between siblings. The body of one is made to stand in for the other, as if experienced first-hand.

Victimese is an appropriately desolate depiction of depression: though crowded by characters coming and going, Eve remains decidedly alone. It seems Eve's description of her expected 'nemesis' is a construct to incarnate and then engage with her own suicidal feelings. In the closing moments of the play, Eve makes her first and final exit. After several long and freighted moments of indecision, no one follows. The scene fades to black. The implication – perhaps, more strongly, the instruction – is that she alone, and without an audience, will and must enact the confrontation. This final event of the play is clearly signalled as a liminal situation, but the outcome for Eve is not predetermined. Thus, the emotional effects of the scene pile upon the audience as well as arresting the characters' action. More than simply mirroring a complex world, *Victimese* has its audience and readers experience it.

<h1>'Oh, do not ask, "What is it?" / Let us go and make our visit': Knowledge and/as experience

Both plays offer themselves as allegories for psychoses relating to a prior (childhood and/or colonial) trauma. But this interpretative possibility is sufficiently submerged that the staged experiences – rather than their explanations – retain primacy. Oyeyemi's drama modifies naturalistic theatre tradition; she defamiliarises recognisable spaces, creates strange characters who evade critical scrutiny, and withholds a climactic resolution. In both plays, a single setting preserves Aristotle's unity of place: *Juniper's Whitening* is set in a dark house, while *Victimese* shrinks the scene to a college bedroom.⁵ Time, too, is limited according to the rules of ancient tragedy, with both plays seeming to span a single day. Yet action is lacking and the narrative arc is deflated; form and feeling come to the fore. I therefore argue that Oyeyemi's

plays are primarily sensory – rather than sense-making – events. As Aleph himself says, ‘there is no story’ (Oyeyemi 2005: 15). Juniper agrees that there are no words to tell it with. And, as Beth cautions, ‘Stop going on about the words – it’s not them but the feeling I get from them’ (Oyeyemi 2005: 24).

Aleks Sierz’ category of ‘in-yer-face’ theatre goes some way towards describing the visceral content of Oyeyemi’s plays. He writes of post-millennial playwrights ‘push[ing] theatre into being more experiential, more aggressively aimed at making audiences feel and respond’ (Sierz 2008: 20). Harris Satkunanathan recites this label, reading Oyeyemi’s and Sarah Kane’s plays as exemplars of this contemporary theatre movement. She considers the ‘near-contemporary norms’ of in-yer-face theatre to have directly shaped the content and form of *Juniper’s Whitening*, though she recognises Oyeyemi as subverting the ‘paradigm’ of the movement through her plays’ cultural hybridity (Harris Satkunanathan 2015: 18, 19).

However, this clustering of plays and playwrights under a nominal category risks being content to classify rather than to comprehend their practices. Complementing the identification of this twenty-first-century British dramatic quality to Oyeyemi’s work, I wish to illuminate it with reference to another cultural context. Turning away from Anglo-American comparator texts and Eurocentric critical categories, I invoke Yoruba epistemology to argue that the way Oyeyemi makes use of the theatre form consolidates her writerly efforts against colonial domination.⁶

Barry Hallen and J. Olubi Sodipo’s comparative analysis of the English language and the Yoruba conceptual system – as articulated in conversation with the *oniṣẹ̀gùn*, the Yoruba masters of medicine – finds an important distinction between English and Yoruba concepts of

knowledge. In the English language, ‘knowledge’ designates that which is understood from a second-hand source, such as a testimony or text-book; its paradigmatic usage is in the sense of ‘knowing that’ (Hallen and Sodipo 1997: 46). This term abuts the concept of ‘belief’, describing that which is not verifiable: “‘belief’ begins where “knowledge” leaves off” (Hallen 1997: 6). In comparison, Yoruba culture situates the distinction between first-hand, personal, experiential and sensory comprehension, designated by the term *imò*, and second-hand, propositional, received information, named as *ìgbàgbó*.⁷ *Imò* requires witnessing something with one’s eyes; *ìgbàgbó* depends on hearing a report from another (Hallen and Sodipo 1997: 60). To *mò* is to have experienced something oneself, while to *gbàgbó* is to learn something from a secondary source. *Imò* can be said to yield *ooto*, truth or certainty; *ìgbàgbó* manifests *ogbon* – wisdom, sense – and *oye* – understanding or intelligence – but can only be said to show what is possible or what may be, not what is ‘true’. The Yoruba conceptual system thus stresses personal experience, especially sight, as foundational to truth; testimony – whether spoken or read – must be verified empirically if it is to attain the status of *imò*.⁸

This delineation of Yoruba and English epistemology enables me to argue that Oyeyemi’s plays assert the importance of *imò*, and are sceptical of ‘knowledge’. Answering to the damaging Cartesian division of body from mind, Oyeyemi’s plays emphasise sensory experience over sense-making explanation, aligning with Yoruba epistemology over its English-language equivalent. Without a narrator, there is no intermediary to facilitate *ìgbàgbó*. The audience is instead invited to *mò*.

To validate this reading of Oyeyemi’s use of the dramatic form, it is worth attending to the ways in which knowledge is thematised in her plays. The concepts of witnessing and

testimony are indeed addressed in the characters' dialogue. In *Juniper's Whitening*, Juniper first hears Aleph killing Beth, before seeing it for herself. According to Aleph, the acquisition of this first-hand knowledge – *imò* – burdens her with the responsibility to act:

Aleph It was only when you saw it happen that you accepted that it was something that you had to handle. Guess what – now you own it! And you're trying to give it back, aren't you?

(Oyeyemi 2005: 18)

Once possession of the knowledge has transferred to – or expanded to include – Juniper, she cannot revert to a posture of ignorance. Aleph makes it clear that knowledge has consequences.

The climactic revelation of the play also invokes the experiential quality of true knowledge. As Beth recounts the daughter's abuse, there is a suggestion that Juniper's understanding is not the kind produced by second-hand testimony but acquired by personal experience. Beth insists: 'You know the end, I think. You know the end' (Oyeyemi 2005: 31). The phrasing is not incidental: Beth claims in the first-person only to 'think', a propositional attitude flanked by the second-person interpellation of Juniper as the one who knows. For Juniper to *mò* means that the experience is hers – not simply that the story has been told to her before. Beth's gentle revelation quickly becomes an accusation of Juniper's wilful denial: 'If I can't be dead, I want to be you [Juniper] [...] Because you think you don't know' (Oyeyemi 2005: 32). Aleph's murders of Beth thus become a projected attempt to suppress her testimony. But Juniper's forgetting is finally proven ineffective, as Beth insists: 'I'm the one who can remember, but you're the one who *knows*' (Oyeyemi 2005: 33, emphasis original).

Whereas prose fiction is mediated by a narrator, meaning its reader must *gbàgbò* the testimony of another, a theatre audience sees first-hand, enjoying empirical *imò*. *Juniper's Whitening* and *Victimese* do not simply tell a story: they ask their spectators to inhabit an experience and participate in an empathic ritual. In Oyeyemi's onstage worlds, where the nightmare is real and the real is concealed, new kinds of truth and new ways of knowing are demanded of the audience. This includes, in Juniper's words, 'learn[ing] a different way to know myself' (Oyeyemi 2005: 26).

<h1>Notes

1. Names carry special significance in Juniper's *Whitening*. 'Aleph' is the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet, 'Beth' the second, and 'Gimel' the third. Juniper's name may allude to *The Juniper Tree*, a fairy tale by the Brothers Grimm adapted by Barbara Comyns for a 1985 novel of the same name.
2. Oyeyemi has referred to her own Catholic background in interviews (Hoggard 2014; Quinn 2014).
3. Self-harm features in Oyeyemi's *White is for Witching*, too, where Miranda bites her own wrist in anticipation and deferral of a vampiric/succubus-like consumption of her fellow Cambridge student and Yoruba lover, Ore (2009: 191).
4. For a full study of tucker green's work and the concept of witnessing, see: Marissia Fragkou. 2013: Precarious Subjects: Ethics of Witnessing and Responsibility in the Plays of debbie tucker green. *Performing Ethos: An International Journal of Ethics in Theatre and Performance* 3 (1), 23-39.

5. Aristotle. 1996 [384-322 BC]. On the unity of time: ‘Tragedy tries as far as possible to keep within a single day’ (9); ‘one must be able to take in the beginning and end in one view’ (39). On place: ‘it is not possible to imitate many parts of the action being carried on simultaneously, but only the one on stage involving the actors’ (39). On action: ‘A whole is that which has a beginning, a middle and an end’ (13), ‘If the presence or absence of something has no discernible effect, it is not a part of the whole’ (15).
6. Extant criticism of Oyeyemi’s work has already found an illuminating context in Yoruba mythology. Helen Cousins has identified the practice of *aje* – what she describes as ‘a type of benevolent Yoruba witchcraft with aspects of symbolic maternal protection’ – in *White Is for Witching* (Cousins 2012: 50). Cousins also identifies the traces of Oyeyemi’s Yoruba heritage in *The Icarus Girl*: the supernatural persistence of the ancestors into the present, the importance of twins, and the figure of the *abiku*, a possessing spirit who takes the food of the possessed child, leading to their death.
7. Hallen and Sodipo prefer the transliteration of the relevant terms to preserve the language’s internal logic and admit the impossibility of ‘single word equivalents in translation’ (Hallen and Sodipo 1997: 82). Their practice is adopted here to signal the same respect for the source context.
8. This is an important corrective to reductive accounts of oral cultures as uninterested in empirical information and lacking in the scientist’s requisite scepticism. Here, by contrast, it is *ìgbàgbó* which refers to that which is aurally received: ‘agreeing to accept what one hears from someone’ (Hallen and Sodipo 1997: 64).

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