

Abjecting Hybridity in Helen Oyeyemi's *The Icarus Girl* Jordan Stouck

I experience abjection only if an Other has settled in place and
stead of what will be “me.” Not at all an other with whom I
identify and incorporate, but an Other who precedes and pos-
sesses me, and through such possession causes me to be.

—Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror* (10)

Rey Chow's chapter on ethnic abjection in *The Protestant Ethnic and the Spirit of Capitalism* presents a powerful caution against recent fashionable but perhaps facile celebrations of hybridity. Chow argues, in concert with Pheng Cheah and against proponents of difference James Clifford and Homi Bhabha, that hybridity theory is a “euphoric valorization of difference” which does little to displace hierarchies of social inequality (131–34). Instead, Chow analyzes ethnic autobiographies as revealing that “the experience of actually living as cultural hybrids” is about “the inherited, shared condition of social stigmatization and abjection” (146). Far from the hopeful possibilities asserted by models of diaspora, multiculturalism, nomadism and global cosmopolitanism, Chow traces lived experiences of humiliation and self-loathing and locates them within Julia Kristeva's narrative of abjection. Chow's insistence on the losses and conflicts of hybridity is, as Sneja Gunew notes, “bleak” (368), and yet a vital reminder that cross-cultural exchanges are not always happy experiences. The proliferation of difference, Chow asserts, does not in itself guarantee the elimination of racism, class, or gender discrimination. Indeed, cultures in juxtaposition are also often cultures in conflict.

This reading of hybrid and ethnic abjection is particularly relevant to Nigerian-British author Helen Oyeyemi's recent novels. In *The Icarus Girl*, I will argue, the protagonist is engaged in the violent struggle for

subjectivity that characterizes abjection. My analysis of Oyeyemi's work supports Chow's assertion that we need to read in-depth for the losses embedded in hybrid experience (a point that I will elaborate and explore in this article), a type of reading that, despite Chow's argument and similar acknowledgements by Ien Ang and Pnina Werbner, remains rare. Critical discourse as a whole stresses the possibilities of hybridity and tends to sublimate any acknowledgements of problems to footnotes or brief introductory statements. Chow's analysis and my own less optimistic readings are thus important in recognizing the losses of hybridity which have been elided. Moreover, although abjection is a fractured psychic state which I do not seek to recuperate as a position of creative agency and possibility (indeed, that would be counterintuitive to acknowledging the losses of hybridity), placed within Kristeva's larger narrative of identity formation it points to other modes for negotiating the conflicts of hybrid identity. The abject hybrid is one, but not necessarily the only, way of representing and articulating the painful elements of cross-cultural identity. Indeed, if we are to use abjection to discuss hybridity, as Chow suggests we should, then its second fundamental insight is that subjectivities are never stable, static, or contained in one mode of being, but are instead poised to explore multiple forms of loss and conflict.

The Icarus Girl received significant attention on publication due to its author's youth (the novel was completed when Oyeyemi was nineteen) and representation of hybridity. Oyeyemi was born in Nigeria and moved to London at the age of four where she completed *The Icarus Girl* while studying for entrance into Cambridge University. Reviewers have noted that, although emotionally resonant, the novel poses particular problems of reading in its situation between adult and childhood (it is an adult novel in theme and complexity written from an eight-year-old's point of view), in its use of repetitive scenes, in its hybrid cultural references, and in its alternation between forms of realism and fantasy. In the *School Library Journal*, Starr E. Smith queries of the main characters, "Is Tilly real? A spirit? An extension of Jess's personality? The creepy ambiguity persists until and beyond the disturbing denouement..." (200). Robin Wade, in *Publisher's Weekly*, concurs, noting "As sophisticated as

she is, Jess's eight-year-old observations provide a limited lens, and at times, the novel's fantasy element veers into young adult suspense territory." Indeed, some of the formal and thematic ambiguity in the novel may be attributed to Oyeyemi's youth and developing technique.¹ Yet, whether the ambiguity is consciously intended or not, I am interested in why it takes on the forms it does and in how the novel thematizes cultural hybridity and the powerlessness of childhood in the particular ways that it does. Ultimately, I suggest that the problems of reading raised by representations of age, genre, culture and agency in the novel can be understood through existing models of hybrid subjectivity. Furthermore, those problems challenge existing models of hybrid subjectivity by referencing processes of formal and subjective development along with emotional conflicts.

Extant theory has offered important insights into the processual and non-binary nature of hybrid identities. Postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha's description of hybridity as offering a "third space" of enunciation, a space between the binaries of colonialism and resistance, has developed the intentionally subversive concept of hybridity in particularly influential ways. Bhabha locates hybrid positionings as simultaneously repeating and exceeding colonial representations of difference, deconstructing the binary of self and other to "turn the gaze of the discriminated back upon the eye of power" (112). As a subversive and marginally creative mode, Bhabha's hybrid third space has been validated by other critics for its attempts to complicate colonial-postcolonial duality. Robert Young and Benita Parry, for instance, do not question the value of Bhabha's concept even while they articulate concerns about hybridity's political practicability (Young 25; Parry 42). Trinh Minh-ha has also pursued the subversive potential of hybridity, suggesting that hybridity's proliferation of difference endlessly defers the assertion of exclusionary identity positions and politics: "Difference in such a context," Minh-ha writes, "is that which undermines the very idea of identity, differing to infinity the layers of totality that form I" ("Not You" par. 3). Perhaps most influential in the spread of hybridity politics, however, have been critics working out of the African-Caribbean diaspora. Wilson Harris and

Edouard Glissant initiated interest in hybrid concepts of identity with their theories of syncretic and creole process. Harris focuses on the flexible and positively syncretic “arcs or bridges of community” produced by hybrid cultures (xviii), while Glissant’s creolization initially offered a provocative vision in *Caribbean Discourse* of cross-cultural exchange as both creative and dissonant, ever shifting in both positive and negative forms. In later work, however, Glissant has come to focus on the celebratory modes of creolization over the dissonant elements and so, like other theorists, does not consistently offer a comprehensive view of hybrid exchange (*Poetics of Relation*). Stuart Hall and Paul Gilroy pursue Caribbean-based theories into the diaspora, with Hall, for instance, arguing that cultural identities are positionings rather than essences and that the African diaspora infuses British culture with new, hybrid meanings.² In a similar sense, Paul Gilroy asserts the positive anti-essentialist potential of diasporic, cosmopolitan and multicultural social formations as poised between cultures, races and histories.³ The current state of postmodern-postcolonial hybridity theory thus celebrates hybridity as shifting and performative and, in its proliferation of difference, as radically undermining traditional, essentialist concepts of identity. The influence of critics such as Bhabha, Glissant, Hall and Gilroy has been undeniable in promoting hybridity as a subversive and positive alternative to binaries of self and other.

However, as Ien Ang forcefully insists, such positive valuations may be premature and unrealistic. Ang writes that the political purchase of hybridity stems from how it “destabilizes established cultural power relations between white and black, colonizer and colonized, centre and periphery, the ‘West’ and the ‘rest,’ not through a mere inversion of these hierarchical dualisms, but by throwing into question these very binaries through a process of boundary-blurring transculturation” (198). Rather than fusion or synthesis, Ang notes, critics such as Hall, Gilroy, Minh-ha and Bhabha see hybridity as inherently subversive (198), without acknowledging what she terms the “fundamental *uneasiness* inherent in our global condition” which produces friction, tension, ambivalence and incommensurability (200). Despite asserting the continuing value of the concept, Ang thus calls for a more complete understanding of

hybridity as subversive *and* complicit, diverse *and* confining. More radically, Rey Chow locates the “difference revolution,” meaning theories of diaspora, cosmopolitanism and hybridity, as in danger of returning to certain racist practices due to their apolitical real world applications. Without acknowledgement of contextual reference points, Chow argues, hybridity “must be recognized as part of a politically progressivist climate that celebrates cultural diversity in the name of multiculturalism,” and multiculturalism becomes a problematic political practice because it conceals “persistent problems of social inequality” (132–33). While the ideals of poststructuralist theory are thus admirable in seeking to undo the binary between identity and difference, self and other, they are often hasty in validating experiences of diaspora, migration and cross-cultural exchange, and overlook the oppressions and conflicts which persist in these contexts.

In order to revalue hybridity in a meaningful way in relation to Oyeyemi's *The Icarus Girl*, then, it becomes important to recognize that hybridity can be a source of conflict. Although the creative possibilities of hybridity are stressed by many critics, Pnina Werbner demonstrates that hybrid acts are inflammatory in certain contexts (as for example was Salman Rushdie's novel, *The Satanic Verses*), creating conflict and disjunctions rather than creative, subtly ironic subversions (Werbner 148–50). Reading for a more comprehensive hybridity, then, entails acknowledgement of the difficulties that cross-cultural exchanges can produce. While it is emotionally logical for critics to seek resolutions and hopeful alternatives, my reading of Oyeyemi's novel will suggest that a full recognition of loss and conflict is necessary as part of an in-depth and complex understanding of hybridity. As negotiations of the liminal, current theories of hybridity, which are presently only partial and incomplete in their celebratory focus, must be supplemented by recognitions of disjunction and conflict. For these reasons, Kristeva's more complicated and fraught understanding of liminality offered through her theory of abjection represents an important intervention. Yet Oyeyemi's writing of hybridity points to abjection as a key, but not the only, presumed mode of being. The novel form invokes expectations, even if these are not always fulfilled, of exposition, climax and

denouement so that in using this form, Oyeyemi places her character on a trajectory of change and process. In this sense, my reading builds on Ang and Chow's work by exploring how the dissolutions of self that Oyeyemi thematizes prepare the way (although not constituting possibilities in themselves) for other kinds of identity negotiations. Abjection can be read within Kristeva's oeuvre as a necessary, but not only, cross-cultural identity process. Although Oyeyemi's character contends with the abject for much of the novel, conventions of plot, the developmental stage at which her character is located and Kristeva's narrative of subjectivity ultimately point toward other, future, although no less painful identity negotiations.

Julia Kristeva's *Revolution in Poetic Language*, *Powers of Horror* and *Strangers to Ourselves* all explore the moments at which socially constructed identities are frustrated or disrupted through re-reading Jacques Lacan's placement of the subject within a phallogocentric Symbolic order.⁴ Kristeva begins by re-conceptualizing language as integral to the construction of identity and difference. *Revolution in Poetic Language* argues that language always contains a semiotic dimension which can be located in the pre-Symbolic bond with the maternal body. While Freud and Lacan define semiotic and Symbolic as distinct stages, in Kristeva's formulation semiotic drives do make their way into language in qualified forms so that language consists of dynamic, heterogeneous elements. Kristeva argues that semiotic elements break up the rules and structures of the Symbolic order to introduce creative impulses while symbolic elements structure and facilitate the ordering or disposition of drives within the maternal semiotic state or *chora*. In other words, Kristeva posits heterogeneity and breaks down Lacanian understandings of the primacy of paternal law not only through asserting the semiotic function within the Symbolic, but also through asserting that symbolic ordering elements (although not the law itself) precondition the maternal body. For this reason, critical readings of Kristeva's semiotic as an essentialist model of the feminine limit and simplify (see Butler 80). For Kristeva, identity is never definitive or essential, but rather involved in the continual struggle of semiotic-Symbolic exchange. Moreover, this exchange is a transformative linguistic, as well as cultural, practice, since

the project of re-valuing identities originates from a recognition of the representative power of discourse. In Kristeva's heterogeneous process, no identity is stable, essential, or self-evident and Oyeyemi's protagonist, struggling for subjectivity both culturally and psychologically, embodies that dynamism. Indeed, this struggle for expression can also be seen in formal elements of the text, where the author's use of a child protagonist conflicts with certain concluding and perspectival conventions of the adult novel.

Kristeva elaborates on her model of semiotic-Symbolic interaction through the concepts of abjection and the thetic break. Within the Kristevan narrative of subject formation, the speaking subject must enter the Symbolic order, a process which is carried out in relation to the thetic break. The thetic is the point at which the potential subject enters the Symbolic, taking up a position within language and separating itself from a continuity with biological experiences. In Kristeva's signifying practice, the thetic break, constituting as it does the distinction between semiotic and Symbolic spaces, is constantly transgressed when semiotic excess erupts into language. As Kristeva elaborates, "Though absolutely necessary the thetic is not exclusive: the semiotic, which also precedes it, constantly tears it open, and this transgression brings about all the various transformations of the signifying practice that are called 'creation'" (*Revolution* 62). The subject, then, founded on a primary thetic position, must continually confront alterity within its own identity. Kelly Oliver describes this aspect of Kristeva's approach as constructing a "subject-in-process/ on trial [which is also] an identity-in-process/ on trial. Kristeva proposes a way to conceive of a productive but always only provisional identity, an identity whose constant companions are alterity, negation and difference" (14). Moreover, the creative rupture and re-establishment of the thetic, I will argue, is precisely what points to the possibility for other modes of identity within Kristeva and Oyeyemi's narratives.

Abjection can now be contextualized as a process operating on the border of semiotic and Symbolic. Kristeva views the transition from pre-oedipal stages to signification as fundamentally more complex than either Freud or Lacan's models imply and proposes that a crucial phase

of this transition involves abjection of the maternal body in favour of a loving pre-oedipal father. Kristeva's genealogy of the subject concludes that women and those without easily definable social roles in particular contend with the space of abjection because they cannot simply reject the maternal for paternal, other for self, but must embrace and replicate both positionalities. The abject, Kristeva writes, is a repeated and violent response to the threat of semiotic excess intruding on the symbolic subject (*Powers* 4). It is a re-assertion of borders between what is socially signifiable and the forms of difference which threaten social constructs. As Oliver writes, the abject is fundamentally "a relationship to a boundary," enacted (and represented) within the Symbolic against any element which endangers the supposedly discrete subject (56). Since what becomes abject is also part of the self (food, waste, the maternal body) abjection is always a process of abjecting the self by, Kristeva writes, "the same motion through which 'I' claim to establish myself" (*Powers* 3). Abjection is never final because these elements of self remain to haunt the subject, never completely separate because they *are* the self. This incomplete separation results in the conflict and violence which characterize abjection, as Kristeva describes: "There looms, within abjection, one of those violent, dark revolts of being, directed against a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside, ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable" (*Powers* 1). Following Mary Douglas's work in *Purity and Danger* on social taboos as a form of cultural differentiation, Kristeva reads biblical food prohibitions and religious customs as forms of prevention against abjection in that they mark the boundary between identity and difference. Significantly, prohibitions are placed on those animals that cross habitats (hence the depravity of the snake), on bodily states which suggest decay or permeability (with death as the ultimate abject state), and on hybrid or migrant peoples who transgress the cultural logic of sameness.

Kristeva's heterogeneous political practice also addresses how hybridity configures national and ethnic identities, hence its applicability to Oyeyemi's novel and the theoretical issues I have raised. Kristeva's text *Strangers to Ourselves* argues that "foreignness" is a lived illustration of

border (here and there, now and then) (4). Kristeva works through Freud's concept of the uncanny to propose that the so-called foreigner is an external construction of the alterity within every psyche. Recalling the process of abjection, Kristeva writes that "In the fascinated rejection that the foreigner arouses in us, there is a share of uncanny strangeness," an uncanniness which is, in Freud's understanding, the return of a familiar difference (*Strangers* 191). This concept of alterity, Kristeva proposes, can be extended to understand difference without ostracism and without demanding conformity to existing categories because it understands that the other is always already within us. The recognition of alterity that is endemic within both abjection and hybridity brings supposedly self-evident social identities into question.

Despite these socio-political applications of abjection as a destabilizing practice, some theorists have criticized Kristeva's approach as conservative, arguing that the repetition of Symbolic primacy and subordination of semiotic elements effectively limits cultural subversion. Ann Rosalind Jones, for instance, connects Kristeva's temporary withdrawal from political issues in 1984 to an essential ambiguity within her theory which reinforces the Symbolic by conceiving the social world as an "immovable structure" (66). Although Jones is critical of this political ambiguity, Chow's point in *The Protestant Ethic* is that this recognition of complicity is precisely what is necessary in order to realistically evaluate hybridity politics. Kristeva's concept of the thetic break and the necessary role she posits for symbolic elements within the signifying process confirm the limits of theory and hybridity as subversive political forces. Abjection is a process of re-affirming the thetic break, re-establishing the border between what is socially signifiable and what is not, within "*the same motion*" by which semiotic excess disrupts those boundaries (*Powers* 3, emphasis mine). Yet in the various processes of disrupting and affirming the borders of subjectivity, Kristeva asserts that creativity becomes possible. Thus, Jones's critique and Chow's affirmation of the abject limits of political agency must also be placed in context with the creative ruptures and other modes of being (subject, m/other, melancholic) that abjection enables. Abjection, although the focus of Oyoyemi's novel, is not the only stage

in the narrative of identity Kristeva proposes. It is a stage, however, that vitally acknowledges the constrictions placed on hybridity as a political process and lived experience.

Oyeyemi's novel intimates the process of abjection on multiple levels, in its assertion and rejection of real and fantastic genres and in its alternation between English and Nigerian cultural references. The novel invokes the Yoruba concept of three worlds—this world, the spirit world, and the world of the bush or unborn—as one framework to describe cultural and psychic hybridity. As Oyeyemi defines it, while this world and the spirit world encompass the living and the dead (and can overlap), the bush world contains beings who cannot really be categorized; it is a third space, to recall Bhabha, of “in-between” interactions that is profoundly unsettling to concepts of identity (Oyeyemi cited in Sethi, par. 4). Wole Soyinka similarly describes a space of transition in Yoruba cosmology, which intervenes in humanity's fundamental efforts “to harmonise with his [or her] environment, physical, social and psychic” (1). The Yoruba framework of three worlds encompasses some of the novel's central questions concerning how Oyeyemi's protagonist, Jess, negotiates what it is to be Nigerian, to be English and, more problematically, to be neither fully one nor the other. Jess inhabits three often overlapping and conflicting worlds, both in the Yoruba sense of having an identity shaped by the past, present and interactions between those and in the pragmatic sense of inhabiting three cultural worlds, of Nigeria, England, and Nigerian-English hybridity. These multiple considerations require reading strategies that not only acknowledge the heterogeneity of identity, but also the processes by which that heterogeneity is expressed. Moreover, in addition to the Yoruba framework of three worlds, the novel raises questions about genre and the cultural values embedded in language, as well as problems of subject formation derived from Western psychoanalysis. Ultimately, I will suggest Oyeyemi (perhaps not always consciously, but as an outcome of her own hybrid subjectivity) uses a variety of conflicting cultural references and reading frames to express Jess's multiplicity. As a process or relationship with respect to boundaries, abjec-

tion serves to negotiate between multiple reference points in the novel which include Yoruba animism, Western psychoanalysis, realism and gothic fantasy, and so provides a continuing emotional and processual compass point. Jess "walks" three worlds and psychic spaces as Yoruba, as English and as hybrid, making the act of reading this book a complex (and, in itself, hybrid) process of accepting and rejecting several ideological contexts.

As a second entry point for this necessarily multiply informed reading, the novel poses problems in terms of whether it should be read realistically or fantastically. Helene Moglen discusses realism and fantasy as the two key fictional modes of the Enlightenment, with fantasy thematizing the desires and anxieties excluded from realism's focus on individual and social identity (17). As realistic texts constructed social, sexual and racial "others" to shadow the self during the colonial period, fantasy, she suggests, particularly in its gothic forms, thematized the dissolution of distinctions between self and other (Moglen 17–18). Oyoyemi's Jess can be read both in realistic terms as a biracial child struggling to locate herself culturally, a process of asserting Symbolic distinctions, and in fantastic terms as a protagonist haunted by her supernatural doppelganger, an exchange that is about the dissolution of distinctions between self and other. The dual levels of meaning that run throughout the novel require the reader to either realistically affirm the Symbolic over the abject intrusions of TillyTilly, or accept in fantastic mode that TillyTilly is not a psychic projection but a profoundly disruptive, otherworldly force. As Moglen concludes, interpreting in this context becomes a constant negotiation of the boundaries of genre and, ultimately, an enactment of abjection by the reader (22).

Oyoyemi's novel more overtly invites a reading through the dynamics of abjection as it thematizes difference and the struggle for subjectivity using both Western and Nigerian reference points. Jess (Jessamy) Harrison is culturally and racially hybrid, with an English father and Yoruba mother. When the novel begins, Jess is an intelligent eight-year-old, prone to illness and anxiety. Although her parents and teachers worry about her, Jess appears primarily imaginative and sensitive until she travels to Nigeria to meet her mother's side of the family. On

arriving in Nigeria, Jess is called “oyinbo” or stranger by a man at the airport and at the same point becomes acutely aware of her mother, Sarah’s, cultural difference from herself. Sarah is able to converse with the cab driver in Yoruba while Jess and her father are not, a separating difference that is not eliminated when Sarah and the driver switch to English since they still discuss a shared heritage of Nigerian people and places. This moment of strangeness is significant in preceding Jess’s meeting with TillyTilly, a girl who first appears as Jess’s friend but soon becomes the haunting other that threatens Jess’s very existence. Being labeled stranger or foreigner is, Kristeva notes, an indirect recognition of the “strange within us,” of the struggle to maintain the boundaries of self (*Strangers* 191). Jess’s recognition of the difference separating not only her from her mother, but also her from herself (since she is simultaneously Yoruba and not, English and not) provokes an initial experience of abjection and a sense that her worlds may not align. Indeed, it is the separation from the maternal that is also a precondition for abjection, given the maternal basis Kristeva has proposed for that process. In her developmental struggle toward adult Symbolic identity and separation from her mother, Jess is forced at the beginning of the novel to recognize the otherness that haunts any identity position she might assert racially, culturally and as a child on the brink of puberty.

The potential gothic elements as well as the presence of difference heralded in the novel by TillyTilly’s appearance can also be read as negotiations with the abject. In *Powers of Horror* Kristeva notes that individuals approaching psychosis return to abjection as the “first authentic feeling of a subject in the process of constituting itself as such” and so abjection and its affects of horror, fear and fascination signal the subject’s struggle against psychosis (47). Estranged on several levels and suffering a crisis of self, Jess encounters TillyTilly as her abject other and is both enthralled and terrified by their first exchanges. Significantly, TillyTilly, like Jess’s grandfather, gives Jess a new name, “Jessy,” a “halfway thing” that disturbs Jess’s sense of self (44). While her grandfather calls her Wuraola, meaning gold in Yoruba and signifying his esteem and her identity as Yoruba, Jessy makes her a hybrid, “halfway Jessamy” in Jess’s

mind (44). These multiple names, Jess/Jessamy (used interchangeably), Jessy and Wuraola, signify not only Jess's identity in British and Nigerian contexts, but also her hybrid position between worlds. Jess is interpellated in three different ways—as British Jess/amy, Nigerian Wuraola and hybrid Jessy—and this makes her subjectivity contested, invoking the assertions and rejections of abjection. She is always both excessive and lacking as a subject (excessive in that she is overly defined and lacking as she does not conform completely to any one definition). In this sense, the hybrid subjectivity is no more complete than the British or Nigerian interpellations because it is an oversimplifying hybridity imposed on her. All identifications trouble subjectivity and invoke abjection as they do not satisfactorily represent Jess.

TillyTilly herself is also double, Titiola by her Nigerian name, and TillyTilly in Jess's appellation (because Jess fears pronouncing the Yoruba incorrectly). The moniker "TillyTilly," of course, is inherently double, embodying that figure's duality, as we later find out, as both subject and not, real and not, part of this living world and not. The complex naming processes in the text (Jess's mother is also known by her British name, Sarah, and her Yoruba name, Adebisi), thus set up the identity negotiations that occur. Jess and TillyTilly are double, hybrid, twinned as subject and abject other: Jess must abject TillyTilly in order to remain a viable subject in language and both English and Nigerian societies, and yet she is fatally attracted to her abject other. The horror and enchantment that shadow every encounter with TillyTilly are also the qualities that genre theorists locate in the gothic double. As Moglen in her analysis of abjection in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* notes, fantastic or gothic writings traditionally dissolve "the distinction between self and other by revealing how the 'other' serves as an instrument in the construction of the self" (17). The self becomes other to itself, "a twin or thirst or a friend" (Morrison cited in Moglen 23), that "enacts fragmentation and alienation, mirroring 'others,' who are also projections of the self and are themselves internally divided" (Moglen 23). TillyTilly is and is not Jess, a duality that Oyeyemi's protagonist, and perhaps the author herself, struggles throughout the text to understand and resolve. Jess and TillyTilly evoke English and Nigerian, realist and gothic references, but

the real narrative and emotional trajectory concerns the traffic and collisions between these reference points.

The novel further thematizes cultural hybridity in its use of Yoruba myths surrounding twins. In Yoruba culture, twins hold an ambiguous status. Fernand Leroy, Taiwo Olaleye-Oruene, Gesina Keoppen-Schomerus and Elizabeth Bryan explain that, “In traditional African societies, twins were considered of preternatural origin and raised emotional reactions oscillating from fear and repugnance to hope and joy” (134). Once rejected, twins are now celebrated in contemporary Yoruba culture (Leroy, Olaleye-Oruene, Keoppen-Schomerus, and Bryan 134). However, they are still regarded as unique beings, able to walk or transgress boundaries between the three worlds—spirit, real-life and the “bush”—and sharing one soul. When a newborn twin dies (as often happens, given West Africa’s high infant mortality rate), Leroy and his co-authors write, “the life of the other is imperilled because the balance of his soul has become seriously disturbed” (134). To forestall this danger an artist is commissioned to carve a wooden Ibeji figure as a substitute for the deceased twin. The Ibeji figure contains the soul of the dead twin and maintains the living twin’s connection to the world of the living (134–36). Oyeyemi overtly deploys these customs as part of her twinning theme in *The Icarus Girl*, where Jess turns out to have had a twin sister, Fern, who died at birth and TillyTilly also turns out to be a dead twin (but not Jess’s). Instead, TillyTilly takes advantage of Jess’s loss to substitute herself for Fern, saying: “You have been so empty, Jessy, without your twin; you have had no one to walk your three worlds with you. I know—I am the same. I have been just like you for such a long time! But now I am Fern, I am your sister, and you are my twin...” (176). Read on a psychological level, in context with other elements of Oyeyemi’s novel, the Yoruba understanding of twins recalls the dynamics of abjection. Not only are the shifting reactions to twins of joy and horror typical of the abject dynamic as depicted by Kristeva, but the concept of a twin, an other self from which one does not part, can be interpreted as a form of abjection which dramatically destabilizes the boundaries of self. Jess’s dead twin is abject, just as TillyTilly is abject and the Ibeji figures may be read as the kind of religious practices

Kristeva says forestall some of the pain and conflict of abjection (*Powers* 72). Indeed, the Ibeji appear to serve as one of what Kristeva terms the “various means of purifying the abject,” as they physically represent the distinction between living and dead (*Powers* 17). Without an Ibeji figure (or even knowledge of her dead twin for much of the novel), Jess is, in Yoruba understanding, particularly vulnerable to spiritual possession. Ultimately, Jess’s family tries to restore her through an Ibeji figure that will heal the division and loss within Jess’s spirit.

While the text clearly invokes a Yoruba understanding of the three worlds and duality of abjection, it also invites a Western psychoanalytic reading little commented upon in reviews and interviews. This psychoanalytic dimension invokes abjection both in its Freudian/ Lacanian origins and in its understanding of xenophobia as a projection of the otherness that haunts the self. In one attempt to heal her, Jess’s parents take her to a psychologist, Dr. McKenzie, who locates Jess’s identity issues in her cultural duality and in her uncertain sense of self. In their second therapy session, McKenzie tries to affirm Jess’s sense of identity by telling her to close her eyes since, “When your eyes are closed, you’re inside yourself, and no one can get you there” (218). Unfortunately, though, Jess knows this is not really true for someone who has no distinct boundaries between self and abject other: she responds “But what about a twin, a twin who knew everything because she was another you?” (219). Jess’s fear, explored in depth in these sessions, is not simply fear of the other, but fear of how the other overlaps the self. Oliver notes that the implication of Kristeva’s analysis of phobia is that the phobic has confused the other with itself and consequently fluctuates between subject and object (59); in other words, Jess’s difficulty distinguishing between self and other, the cause of her phobia, is the in-between state of abjection. The novel’s psychoanalytic theme proceeds to locate Jess’s problems as entwined with her cultural hybridity, as becomes apparent in a later session when Dr. McKenzie explores Jess’s relationship with her mother. Exemplifying how hybridity can be a state of loss and pain, Jess notes that her mother wants Jess to be Nigerian (like herself) and “[Jess] just didn’t know; if she could decide which one to be [English or Nigerian], maybe she would be able to get rid of TillyTilly, who was

angry with her for worrying about it. Ashes and witnesses, homelands chopped into little pieces—she'd be English. No—she couldn't, though. She'd be Nigerian. No—" (268). Of course, Jess is both and neither. On this level, Jess's troubles stem from cultural dislocation and the difficulty of reconciling two fraught national histories, as well as from the process of maternal separation.⁵

Discussion of hybrid subjectivity is inevitably, as Chow points out, a discussion of its representation and so, significantly, many elements of Oyeyemi's text explore the limits and possibilities of language. Indeed, TillyTilly and Jess's first meeting exemplifies the problem of cultural and subjective instability through language. When TillyTilly first appears to Jess, her speech is halting and repetitious and she begins with a heavy Nigerian accent that becomes, by their second meeting, not only perfect English in tone, but also in idiom (57). Throughout their initial exchange TillyTilly imitates Jess, repeating Jess's questions and concentrating as if she is trying to listen as well as speak. The effect of this mirroring game is that Jess feels "bewildered" and boundaries blur so that "[t]he feeling clung to Jess that *she* was being asked the questions, and that there was perhaps something more to them..." (48). This recognition of unstable subjectivity is aptly figured as a linguistic process since in Kristevan terms the disruption and restoration of boundaries between self and other are entwined with the capacity to speak Symbolically, to use language and be heard. By the end of this scene, TillyTilly has gained force as the self from which Jess cannot part, and TillyTilly's transgression of social boundaries (real-fantasy, life-death, self-other, English-Nigerian, speaker-spoken) grows stronger and more compelling. Conversely, at other points in the text, the normally precocious Jess is unable to articulate her feelings and resorts to silence (24, 31) or screaming fits (10, 88). Such loss of speech, according to Kristeva, suggests that which is repressed in symbolic language, that which is abject. Kristeva argues that when faced with the abject not-object and not-self, horror overwhelms representation and intense verbal activity becomes replaced by the unnameable (34–42). Jess's screaming and silences thus signify the inarticulability of her experience, the fact that her world, her multiplicity is not always describable. Indeed, during the episodes when

Jess is overcome by the horrors TillyTilly, her abject double, invokes, she hears a humming, wordless noise and has vivid dreams involving the loss of speech. Jess is forced to press a hot coal to her lips (194) and later she is helpless to escape TillyTilly, who speaks through lips that “moved over a small, mauve stump; the remains of a *tongue*” (261). The horror thematized in the text is entwined with the loss of speech itself and the abject limits of language.

The linguistic processes of the novel also point to the possibilities for disrupting language. While abjection cannot constitute a language in itself, it represents the disruptive force that undermines linguistic authority (Kristeva, *Powers* 208). This possibility can be seen in the use of parentheses and italicized phrases throughout Oyoyemi's text to register Jess's dissenting views and innermost thoughts. The parentheses and italics register what Jess cannot say out loud, the thoughts and questions that are not acceptable in Symbolic language and polite society. For instance, in an early conversation with her grandfather, Jess realizes he is about to describe Sarah's rebellion against Yoruba tradition and notes to herself: “(You're going to tell me and she's going to get angry. I can see it already because she's all nervous)” (28). Obviously, such an observation would upset her grandfather and so Jess abjects it, relegating the thought to parenthetical reflection. As the text and haunting progress, the abjected observations increase.

Ultimately, the crisis of the text is precipitated by language. Although the text introduces Yoruba words and phrases throughout as a way of thematizing cultural difference, the ending of the text dramatizes the incommensurability of Yoruba and English. In the final pages of the novel, TillyTilly possesses Jess, making Jess abject and assuming her position as a Symbolic subject. Unable to return to her body, Jess wanders the third, in-between world of the Yoruba twin consciousness, the “wilderness of the mind” (Oyoyemi 200). Meanwhile, TillyTilly gives a believable performance as Symbolic subject, as a Jess that in some respects seems happier than the original. However, the “Jess-who-was-Tilly” (209) reveals that she can speak Yoruba and precipitates the grandfather's recognition that she is not the real Jess and that spiritual intervention is necessary. The conflict is, of course, cultural as well as psychic since the linguis-

tic crisis is one of cultural boundary crossing. Jess should no more be able to speak perfectly inflected Yoruba than TillyTilly should be able to speak perfect idiomatic English. The ability to cross these linguistic/cultural boundaries indicates the transgressions of abjection and it is finally “Jess-who-was-Tilly’s” use of Yoruba that reveals to Jess’s grandfather the need to restore those boundaries, to end the horrors of abjection that have pursued Jess and return his granddaughter to her rightful place as a speaking subject.

Although critical response to Oyeyemi’s novel has been generally positive, several reviewers have questioned the effectiveness of the novel’s ending. Nnedi Okorafor-Mbachu states the ending is “predictable” (51) and David Odhiambo feels it is “hasty” (D3). Patrick Ness similarly asserts that the conclusion is “implausibly constructed” (n.pag). Heather Birrell, however, compliments Oyeyemi’s open ending, suggesting that a definitive “cure” or resolution would contradict Jess’s “struggles with her terrifying, growing, dynamic self” (WP7). This last response, I would suggest, comes closest to recognizing the developmental and psychological trajectory that is a key theme in the text. As a narrative of subject formation, the novel cannot end definitively, but, like abjection, must pursue a never-final, repetitive process in which the subject continually asserts herself. Indeed, the novel form, while serving well to suggest the dynamic, developmental process in which Jess is engaged, inevitably conflicts in its concluding conventions with this dynamic process. While desire for a conclusive subject is present in any narrative or experience of abjection (as Okorafor-Mbachu, Odhiambo and Ness assert), that desire is always deferred and unrealistic (as Birrell affirms). The repetitiveness of TillyTilly’s encounters with Jess (the words “always,” “still” and “again” come to describe TillyTilly’s visits and feelings) (224, 226, 251) is symptomatic of this abject process, and the ending of the text can no more be final in asserting Jess’s complete, self-satisfied subjectivity than any identity can now be read (given the insights of poststructuralist and postcolonial theory) as inherent and unchanging. Jess may never completely conclude her experience with TillyTilly, as the ambiguous ending of the novel suggests: Jess returns to herself and wakes “up and up and up and up,” but the Yoruba praise poem that

ends the novel is about “beautiful death,” whose “loving embrace” splits the victim’s heart (334–35). The uncertainty of the ending and whether Jess ever definitively returns or remains a Symbolic subject confirms the negotiation with otherness which is ongoing for all human beings.

Oyoyemi’s novel lends itself to theoretical debates through its revelation of how a hybrid identity such as Jess’s is fractured and conflicted. Given the violent and oppressive history of relations between Nigeria and England which has included slavery, colonization, and, more recently, resource-based exploitation,⁶ purely celebratory forms of Nigerian-British hybridity are unlikely, if not impossible. As the newsmagazine *New African* reports and Jędrzej Frynas reveals, some of the most violent periods in Nigerian history have stemmed directly from British interference. In addition to the direct oppression of the colonial period, *New African* reports that the British departure from Nigeria may well have created the conditions for the Biafran war (Smith 10–14), while Frynas’ analysis of British-based Shell’s involvement in Nigeria argues that the multinational company not only has benefited from preferential treatment in an ex-colony, but continues to profit from political instability in that country (457–58). In the novel TillyTilly hints that she (and her twin) may have been killed during one of Nigeria’s political conflicts: “Land chopped in little pieces, and—ideas! These ideas! Disgusting ... shame, shame, shame. It’s all been lost [...] There is no homeland [...] And then our blood ... spilt like water... like water for the drinking, for the washing ... our blood ... I’m a WITNESS” (259–60). With a history of violent relations between the two parts of herself, Jess’s experience of hybridity cannot be one of celebratory, creative possibility, but is repeatedly fractured by the past. Recognition of this past is vital in the text since a large part of what TillyTilly wants from Jess and why she reveals the existence of Jess’s stillborn twin is to remember the losses they both have suffered. The novel suggests that until history is properly memorialized rather than elided, as Paul Gilroy contends is happening to the details of colonial history (2–3), the past will continue to haunt the present. Exemplifying Ang and Chow’s point, Jess’s experiences can be read as

embodying the conflicts and losses of hybridity and exposing the dissolution of identity that hybridity can, in certain contexts, entail.

In addition to describing the conflicts of hybrid identity, Oyeyemi's text illustrates the uncertain, precarious boundaries between subject, other and abject. Jess's somewhat unusual location, for the protagonist of an adult novel, on the brink of adolescence means that she primarily negotiates abjection as a life stage. Jess's pre-adolescence, in which she is still establishing the distinctions between herself and others, means that she repeatedly performs the assumptions and rejections of abjection. Read in context with Kristeva's larger narrative of subject formation, these processes reveal that identities are never static: Kristeva's subject goes on to other moments of Symbolic meaning, strangeness and exile, as well as experiencing the repression of past unity that is melancholia, while periodically returning to abjection. So also, the ending and trajectory of the narrative suggest, will Oyeyemi's protagonist. In the struggle for being that is abjection, other formulations of identity are made possible through that process's dynamic assertion and rejection of boundaries so that, although creativity is not possible within abjection, it is enabled by it. The developmental moment of the novel is thus important in revealing abjection not just as a caution against easy advocations of hybridity, but also as a founding and returning stage for identity. That said, Kristeva's larger narrative reveals abjection is not the only or ultimate experience of conflicted identity. The abject hybrid must be recognized, but subjects in process/ on trial also move on to other formulations, other struggles for being. Ultimately, I add to Chow's reading of ethnic abjection by suggesting that abjection is not the only site for conflicted, fraught negotiations of hybrid and ethnic identities. Although Chow concludes her reading of John Yau's story "A Little Memento from the Boys" with the suggestion that "[t]his sense of haunting and entrapment [ie. abjection] is probably the protestant ethnic's ultimate answer to the poststructuralist euphoria about difference, mobility and freedom" (152), the trajectory of Oyeyemi's novel and the narrative in which Kristeva situates abjection point to other modes in which hybrid identities are negotiated. Rather than confining these subjectivities to abjection, the dynamic heterogeneity of Oyeyemi's nar-

rative provokes a search for additional responses. All such responses, however, carry an imperative to recognize the loss and conflict which Oyeyemi and Kristeva assert as fundamental to the construction of identity.

Ultimately, this multiply informed reading seeks to recognize hybridity's emotional connotations and repercussions. Abjection is one point of access that vitally, given the theoretical biases that have existed, acknowledges the losses of hybrid exchanges, but other forms of conflicting and conflicted identity also exist. The negotiations with socially interpellated subjectivities that Gayatri Spivak has proposed,⁷ as well as Kristeva's own understandings of motherhood, otherness and subjecthood all suggest ways to deploy hybrid identities with a fuller emotional range, with a recognition of the continuing effects of repression and loss rather than prioritizing the achievements of postcolonial theory in responding to discrimination and oppression. Only when the fraught foundations of hybridity are recognized and validated can reparation for characters like Jess and TillyTilly truly begin.

Notes

- 1 In an interview with Sethi for *The Guardian* Oyeyemi recalls writing the novel quickly and not "really understand[ing] what was happening," suggesting she may not have been fully conscious of the writing strategies she deployed.
- 2 See Hall, "Cultural Identity" and "Old and New Identities, Old and New Ethnicities."
- 3 See Gilroy's *Black Atlantic* for a discussion of diasporic consciousness, *Against Race* for an assessment of cosmopolitanism and *Postcolonial Melancholia* for a defense of multiculturalism.
- 4 In Lacan's formulation, the Symbolic order (indicated here by a capital "S" to distinguish from Kristeva's understanding of symbolic elements) is the order of signification within society.
- 5 In colonial literature, the psychic costs of hybridity have traditionally been represented through the tragic mulatta/o stereotype. Oyeyemi notes in a discussion with Nnedi Okarafor-Mbachu that she was aware of this precedent, stating that "I flag up that it's solitude and unhappiness, not 'bad blood' that make it difficult for [Jess] to get out of her own head" (51). However, despite its racist elements which Oyeyemi clearly finds problematic, Werner Sollors suggests the miscegenation figured in the body of the tragic mulatta exposes racism's fundamental instability and fictionality (241). Jess can be understood

as partly conforming to the stereotype because the tragic mulatta is implicated in the abject assertion and patrolling of racial boundaries. This insight resonates with Chow's more contemporary understanding of cross-ethnic stereotypes as imitations or doubles of the actual subject, a practice that appears unavoidable in the representation of cultural groups. Stereotypes function, Chow quotes Fredric Jameson as saying, to act "out a kind of defense of the boundaries of the primary group" (Jameson cited in Chow 56). In other words, stereotypes are invoked most forcefully precisely when there is a threat that identity will be exceeded, when the self and other are in danger of becoming confused, and this is why, in Oyeyemi's novel, Jess is the tragic mulatta even as she presents real challenges to the viability and oversimplifying nature of that stereotype. The stereotype, in other words, is a signal and signpost of abjection. See Sollors.

6 Shell's abuse of oil resources in the Niger delta has been well documented. In addition to Frynas, see Aborisade and Mundt.

7 See Spivak's discussion of strategic essentialism as a repressive but necessary political maneuver.

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