

Unplaced/Invaded: Multiculturalism in Helen Oyeyemi's *The Opposite House*

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In relation to multiculturalism, Tariq Modood suggests that identity proceeds “from the outside in and from the inside out” (37), a statement which would resonate with Maja, the narrator of Helen Oyeyemi’s novel, *The Opposite House*. Unplaced by, or “outside,” the black discourses of the novel, Maja resists attempts to locate herself “inside” these discourses. Furthermore, “inside” her body she has been invaded and displaced by her embryonic child. The dilemma for this protagonist is that identity, from wherever it is proceeding, is interpellating her into subject positions she is reluctant to occupy and ejecting her from the simply “black” identity she seeks. Maja is a black Cuban in her twenties who has lived in London with her family since the age of seven which gives her a complex heritage. Such diversity is allegedly valued by multicultural discourses in Britain but *The Opposite House* problematizes the type of multiculturalism developed in British culture and politics as it is shaped by the patterns of immigration specific to Britain as a former colonial power. One notion of the multicultural is described by Françoise Král as a carefree disassociation with a grounding point of origin or residence. However, Král points to the problems in representing migration through “deterritorialized characters who not only roam the world at their ease but who sometimes seemed to have jettisoned all cultural moorings” (2). For Král, the depiction of migrants as “emblematic of the postmodern, post-industrial condition, a sort of epiphenomenon and heightened version of the consequences of postmodernism . . . constitute[s] a romanticized vision of immigration, one that is far from being representative of all im/migrants” (2), but it is a representation which persists. A review of *The Opposite House*, for example, suggests that:

Recent postcolonial novels explore the cultural bouillabaisse: characters of various national origins, creeds and colors, living in an international capital and queasily negotiating issues of cultural transition . . . They feel they are losing a sense of history, but the flux is creating something new. (Wellington para.1)

The reviewer fleetingly recognises the potential trauma for migrants but optimistically looks forward to a new society produced by migrants making some type of undefined “transition,” but to what? The omission suggests a process of assimilation and indeed, Modood defines multiculturalism as “a form of integration” (14), particularly for that majority of migrants who have escaped difficult economic or

political circumstances in their “home” country, and are required to live permanently in the “host” country where they finally arrive. Most migrants are not, as Král makes clear, blithe nomads who are usually wealthy, well-educated and globally well-connected, but the romanticization of this immigrant existence can dominate in representations of “globalization.” When this assumption informs and shapes British multiculturalism it elides the material realities of most migrant experiences whose mobility is, in fact, limited and not marked by wealth or education. These migrants seek to settle in the sense that they might buy property, have families and enter into the institutional life of that place. However, I am concerned with the cultural connections that are or are not made between the immigrants’ native culture and the culture of the indigenous “host” culture—Britain, in this case. The immigrants’ very lack of mobility, signalled by a clear intention to remain in Britain, appears to arouse suspicion in the host population that their intentions are not to culturally assimilate but to enforce their differences on the host culture. Hence the host population is frequently hostile, identifying immigrants’ “differences” from the indigenous culture and expressing concern that the latter is being compromised. Such attitudes raise the question of how far cultural difference (or to use multiculturalism’s word, diversity) is tolerated by the indigenous inhabitants of Britain. As an idea, then, British multiculturalism’s rhetoric of diversity disguises its capacity to operate as a “double-edged sword . . . [where] an inordinate emphasis on cultural difference may run counter to the necessity of working towards a genuine equality within respectful diversity and instead encourage a hardening of boundaries rather than bridging them” (Spencer 213). In fact, as this essay will explore, multiculturalism demands cultural compromises from immigrant communities and continues to hold up the culture of the indigenous white population of Britain as the norm.

This essay will explore how Oyeyemi’s novel operates as a treatise on multiculturalism and its failures to promote equality through diversity for the black population in particular. Political argument around multiculturalism often stems from its roots in the “context of liberal or social democratic egalitarianism and citizenship” (Modood 6) and is commonly contested on two fronts:

by the conservative Right, in defence of the purity and cultural integrity of the nation . . . [and] by liberals who claim that the “cult of ethnicity” and the pursuit of difference threaten the universalism and neutrality of the liberal state, undermining personal autonomy, individual liberty and formal equality. (Hall, “Conclusion” 211)

But the objections to multiculturalism’s encoding of “diversity,” are slightly different. For Modood, the problem with multicultural diversity is that “it constitute[s] not just some form of distinctiveness but a form of alienness or inferiority that diminishes or makes difficult equal membership in the wider society” (37), and it is that type of difference that Oyeyemi seeks to explore. An urgent engagement with multiculturalism as difference is necessary because, as Modood insists,

although it is far from a theory, the idea of it is “something that exists as a policy idea qualifying citizenship and informing actual policies as well as relations in civic society” (15–16). It is at the juncture between politics and culture that *The Opposite House* intervenes to ask questions about how the discourse of multiculturalism (in the Foucauldian sense of constituting knowledge) overlays political policy, which insists on multiculturalism as “the form of integration that best meets the normative implications of equal citizenship under our present post–9/11, post–7/7 circumstances [and] stands the best chance of succeeding” (Modood 14). Stuart Hall’s theories of racial identity will be used to suggest that, in *The Opposite House*, Oyeyemi queries who is driving the discursive agenda around multiculturalism when her character, Maja, experiences her “differences” as fragmenting her community, not as creating a new social fusion through cultural tolerance. Further, the novel suggests that cultural atrophy is inevitable under circumstances where assimilation is expected from immigrant communities, further compromising the black characters’ ability to live as “themselves” when they are diasporic subjects resident in London.

The novel comprises two separate narratives which never intersect but echo one another. The story narrated by Maja is set in a recognisably modern London; the other takes place in the mythic “somewherehouse” whose occupants are Orisha, or gods, from the Santeria pantheon. Santeria is a syncretic religion found in Cuba, formed from Spanish folk Catholicism and the Yoruba belief systems imported along with the black slaves during Spanish colonial rule (Brandon 2). The sections of the narrative set in the “somewherehouse” are told from Yemaya’s viewpoint: the universal mother in Santeria belief, called Aya in the novel but also commonly spelled Yemaja. The similarities between the names, and the fact that Maja is pregnant, invite us to make thematic connections between the narratives, and it is the dialogue between them that produces the critique of multiculturalism as it is experienced both in terms of fragmentation and cultural atrophy. The first section of the essay will focus on the London narrative, exploring how the splitting of an essential black subject into different identities is a condition of a multiculturalism which insists on recognising specificity of difference. Here, I will consider the cost of this heterogeneity to the diaspora subject, whose identity can no longer be simply “black.” The second part of this essay will discuss how the fantastic irruptions of the “somewherehouse” into the realist London narrative serve as a discourse on assimilation and cultural deterioration. The personification of these processes in Aya will suggest the impossibility of Maja’s attempts to form an identity based on her own history in Cuba. The third section brings gender into play through the novel’s theme of possession or invasion using Susan Moller Okin’s work, which argues that multiculturalism can preserve “antifeminist” attitudes towards women in minority cultures. In this final section, the gendered aspects of Maja’s subject position will be considered through cultural notions of motherhood, which also contribute to a destabilisation of her identity.

London

The London of the novel offers us characters of Ugandan, Nigerian, Senegalese, Ghanaian, Trinidadian, Cuban, Columbian and Cypriot heritage. Oyeyemi's deliberate presentation of a multicultural population is signalled through her playful mixing of categories. For example, Maja's boyfriend, Aaron, has been "born and raised in Ghana" (22) and speaks Ewe (a common language in Ghana) but is racially white and also Jewish. Maja's best friend is also racially white but signals her non-English heritage by insisting that everyone calls her Amy Eleni: "Eleni was her middle name but she took her Cypriot heritage very seriously and found it hard enough to keep up when she looked like a common-or-garden variety English kid and had a surname like Lang" (34). Significantly, there are no "simply" white characters, only those—such as Amy Eleni's father and the nuns at the convent—whose racial origins are omitted or those whose racial whiteness is complicated in ways described above. The plural theorist, Berkley Stewart, suggested that in plural societies with a governing colonial group, all other subjugated groups eventually worked co-operatively against their common oppressor (Spencer 80–81), but Oyeyemi appears to deliberately elide any such dominant group from the London of her novel to prevent the potential of any such collaboration. Here, no dominant colonial group is identified, or more accurately in this context, no originary group, against which a clearly oppressed population stands together.

I have discussed elsewhere Oyeyemi's representations of originary populations and English identity in another of her novels, *White is for Witching* (Cousins 2012), but here, Oyeyemi takes the particular view of "whiteness" as invisibility. The significant omission of white racial descriptors is most apparent within the band for which Maja sings; the other three members are described variously as Senegalese and "sexy like chocolate," one with "dreadlocks," and "Michael" (102). Although none of them are explicitly labelled as black (and Aaron as a white Ghanaian alerts readers not to make assumptions about race and heritage), it is only Michael who is a descriptive blank. We know it is his band as he plays saxophone and "cares the most" (102), but no descriptive characteristics that imply a cultural, racial or national heritage, which is usually indicated for other characters, are present. So do we assume he is white? It seems unlikely that an astute novelist like Oyeyemi who is cognisant of a multicultural rhetoric, would be unaware of her omission when so often "'white' becomes a non-colour, and is therefore presumed to be the 'norm'" (Davis 183). To ask the question "Is Michael white?" is of course rhetorical; Oyeyemi's intention is not to provide an answer but to draw attention to the notion of whiteness as an absence, a normative invisibility. This absence of the white subject enables Oyeyemi's depiction of a "chaotic mosaic" (Spencer 209) of black identities; it leaves the notion of a black essentialist subject disintegrating in the absence of its binary opposite.

Thus Maja is disabused of her notion that “a black girl was a black girl” (97) at several points in the novel. At school a Ugandan girl tells her that the girls with “African parents” (95) favour Maja over Dominique whose parents are Trinidadian. Initially Maja is confused by being aligned with Dominique in a group discreet from the African black girls; then she realises that, to the African girls, both of them are “black without coming from the right place. [They] were the slave girls” (97). The discourse of blackness, as Oyeyemi deploys it here, is interested in the differences created by slavery, not in common origins. Thus, it is working against a Black/White binary notion of race. Stephen Spencer suggests that multiculturalism as an “ostensibly well-meaning approach to diversity may create similar divisions to one that is founded on racist principles” (206) by its emphasis on difference. Oyeyemi appears to concur that principles of diversity which split populations into ever smaller groups and finer categories of difference are not beneficial. The danger here is of “‘double closure’ [which] happens when an indigenous group fighting for equality and having made gains for itself, seeks to exclude others from benefitting from those gains” (Rex 244). Although John Rex suggests that this can be countered, Oyeyemi is interested in exploring that divisive nature of plurality. As Kenan Malik puts it:

creating principles of difference cannot provide any standards that oblige us to respect the “difference” of others. At best, it invites our indifference to the fate of the Other. At worst it licenses us to hate and abuse those who are different. Why, after all, should we not abuse and hate them? On what basis can they demand our respect or we demand theirs? It is very difficult to support respect for difference without appealing to some universalistic principles of equality or social justice. (“Against Multiculturalism” para. 7)

Clearly, Maja’s mother’s assertions that all black girls are as “good as sisters” (Oyeyemi 93) is not true when they are divided by historical circumstances.

Neither does race create cohesion in the face of national roots: Maja tries to see herself as “a bronzed sorrel woman . . . and she does not look Jamaican or Ghanaian or Kenyan or Sudanese—the only firm thing that is sure is that she is black” (98), but her mother, Chabella, this time insists that, “only Cubans look like Cubans: put three Cuban girls together—white, black Latina, whatever—and you just see it” (98). Here, Maja’s black skin does not suture her (to use Hall’s terminology) to a black identity. Instead, her blackness is overwritten with a Cuban identity disconnected from race. Yet, when Chabella suggests in the face of Maja’s developing friendship with Amy Eleni that “the white girl is never your friend. She works to a different system. She only pretends to understand” (106), she is referring now to the type of White that opposes Black within the binary opposition. Despite the elision of “simply” white characters, the notion of “whiteness” as a power differential is not then absent from the text. The power of a white identity can be seen when Aaron, a medical student, mentors three black Ghanaian school boys. Oyeyemi notes the disparities in power regarding race in Maja’s certainty that “[Aaron] must know that if he mentors these boys, he is not showing them what

a Ghanaian can do with his life, but what a white guy can do who chooses or refuses Ghana at any given moment” (179). However, Aaron considers himself “a good role model. Excellent, in fact” (178), thus refusing to acknowledge that the racial differences between him and the boys divide them. Maja recognises that his refusal to accept this might be, in part, a joke, but it is not coincidental that it is another white character, Amy Eleni—who also can make a choice (between a white or Cypriot identity)—who has asked Aaron to undertake the mentoring as he would be “perfect” (178). Maja knows that if she tells Aaron he is “no more Ghanaian than [she] is Cuban . . . he will take offence. Because if [she *does*] say it [she] will mean to offend” (179; *italics in original*). So Oyeyemi acknowledges the persistence of dominant white discourses where “being ‘white’ is not consistent with a recognition of ethnicity,” but rather is the norm “against which gradations, or *degradations* of colour are judged to be both inferior and undesirable” (Davis 183; *italics in the original*).

In *The Opposite House*, the trope of white means invisibility. For instance, Tomas, Maja’s brother, is a runner, and when he races he smears his face with white face paint. He says: “I run almost twice as fast with this stuff on you know. I run like no one knows me, like no one can hold me” (209). When he offers the white make-up to Maja, it “scares” her: “the thought of him choosing his armour already, the thought that already he is in hiding” (209). However, she lets him put it on her, noting to herself: “I watch my face begin to disappear” (209). The white make-up on black skin evokes Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks* which considers the psychological price for indigenous black populations who are pressured into accepting the superiority of colonizing white cultures. Oyeyemi suggests that the power of “whiteness” in a diaspora space operates, as Hall suggests, precisely because of its invisibility as the normative state:

We are beginning to think about how to represent a non-coercive and a more diverse conception of ethnicity, to set against the embattled, hegemonic conception of “Englishness” which . . . stabilizes so much of the dominant political and cultural discourses, and which, because it is hegemonic, does not represent itself as an ethnicity at all. (*New Ethnicities* 447)

For Hall, what is needed is a “recognition that we all speak from a particular place, out of a particular experience, a particular culture, without being contained by that position . . . We are all, in that sense, *ethnically* located and our ethnic identities are crucial to our subjective sense of who we are” (446; *italics in original*). Maja’s unease stems from that very insistence on diversity. Whereas Hall suggests that Englishness, as an ethnicity, survived “by marginalizing, disposing, displacing and forgetting other ethnicities” (447), Oyeyemi suggests that a similar operation is in process as black identities start to develop through recognising differences from other black identities, all of which are measured against a normative whiteness. Through this process, diversity develops a hierarchy.

Despite Maja’s desire to identify as “just black,” this is unavailable to her because of others’ insistence that other, more

specific, identities are available to her. This serves to separate her from most other characters in the novel. At the end of the novel, Maja and her brother are sitting out in the garden at night appearing completely isolated in their own particular “bright chain of transfusion; Spaniards, West Africans, indigenous Cubans, even the Turkos” (Oyeyemi 98). Difference, then, separates. It promotes conflict in encouraging identities that attempt, like the white ethnicity described by Hall, to promote themselves through denigrating others: for example, as slaves as opposed to “roots” Africans, which is how the girls of direct African descent at Maja’s school identify themselves (96). Difference, measured in its deviations from the white norm, transpires as a useful mechanism of control for the dominant, white majority in dividing a potentially oppositional migrant community. Whereas an essential black identity inclusive of the black diaspora in England could be mobilized as a resistant force against white dominance, Oyeyemi warns that measuring increments of difference erodes the ability of non-white and/or immigrant populations to stand against oppressive forces by insinuating otherness into the black community.

The divided black community that Oyeyemi presents in *The Opposite House*, may have benefits for refining forms of identity but, as indicated through the labelling of Maja as a “slave girl,” it can operate negatively as a black hierarchy develops. Thus, multiculturalism, whilst purporting to be an inclusive, liberal approach to incorporating different populations, in fact operates to maintain a subtle oppression through dividing diaspora populations in order to maintain the dominance of the white British population. Hall suggests that in the past, trauma, for black peoples, was because the “ways in which black people, black experiences were positioned and subjected in the dominant regimes of representation were the effects of a critical exercise of cultural power and normalisation” (“Cultural Identity” 225). Oyeyemi suggests that the black population is still being positioned by discourses of the dominant majority within London and, more widely, across Britain. Now, the dominant white regime insists on the proliferating representations of black peoples through a rhetoric of multiculturalism. Oyeyemi suggests that such operations of multiculturalist discourse work to imply that expressing individual differences is for the benefit of minorities whereas, in reality, it is in the interests of the white population to erase an essential black identity in favour of multiple black identities who will lack the solidarity necessary for effective resistance. In addition, in purporting to value all culture as difference, multiculturalism also obscures the need for minority cultures to adapt and assimilate into an originary British culture. The sections of the novel set in the “somewherehouse” expose the undercurrent at work in multiculturalism which insists upon integration into mainstream, indigenous cultural forms.

The somewherehouse

The reviewer of *The Opposite House* in *African Writing Online* complained that she could “not make head or tail of the significance of the goddess Yemaya and the ‘somewherehouse’ . . . it did not appear to serve any real purpose” (Ositelu para. 13). However, these parallel narratives complement each other, working on similar lines to Yogita Goyal’s notion of a black Atlantic literary canon. Goyal argues that this form is “an eclectic genre, where the realist narrative of the nation is interrupted by the romance of the diaspora” (9). The London narrative of *The Opposite House* problematizes the formation of black nationhood rather than producing it as conventional for national realist literature. However, it makes its exploration of black diasporic identities within a realistic setting and mode. The realistic London narrative is interrupted by the “somewherehouse” narrative, which signifies the romance narrative; that is: “a shift outside of realism into the sphere of the marvellous rather than the mundane” (13). As in other texts of the black Atlantic canon, both strands work in tandem to explore the “conceptual core of the idea of diaspora: the loss of home, the meaning of memory, and the struggle to find a usable past” (8).

The dual narratives suggest that there is indeed an irretrievable loss at work in the diaspora community represented by Maja’s notion of “my Cuba”—an imagined rather than remembered version of her birth place; Chabella’s Santeria worship; and the deterioration of the “somewherehouse” and its inhabitants. That the sections in the “somewherehouse” are mystifying and confusing works to expose the deathly effects of diaspora spaces on their minority inhabitants’ cohesive identities, which are merely metaphorical in the London narrative. In this latter strand, characters survive through making practical choices but in the “somewherehouse,” the Orisha are subject to an unknown, and hence incontestable and fatal, force typically found in fantasy and fairy-tale narratives. The inclusion of Aya and the “somewherehouse” is, then, far from purposeless. Instead, it suggests that beneath a rhetoric of tolerant multiculturalism in Britain, the “traumatic character of the ‘colonial experience’” (Hall “Cultural Identity” 225) still persists through the idea of integration as assimilation. In the “somewherehouse,” the personifications of indigenous culture cannot be preserved, or carried with the immigrant peoples; rather, they inevitably decay when immigrant populations learn, as Daryll Lorenzo Wellington notes, to make a “cultural transition.”

In an interview in 2011, Hall identified a “critical question” within the “multicultural endeavour . . . : ‘How much do we retain and how much do we give up of our cultural identity in order to be ourselves?’” (Taylor para. 12). He focused on multiculturalism as a “debate in which we open ourselves up to people other than ourselves . . . [in] a democratic practice which recognises that it can’t embrace everything but it’s trying to enable people to live together, without eating one another and without pretending they’re the same” (Taylor para. 20). However, this definition fails to address the difficulties of

such an operation in a British society which is postcolonial in nature. Time may have moved on but it appears that the “discursive formulations” of colonialism have not been eradicated. The position of the “host” nation within multiculturalism has been described by John Rex in this way:

the indigenous majority culture cannot be seen simply as one amongst a number of cultures. Nor should it even be argued that this culture will inevitably be modified through absorbing into itself bits and pieces of new minority cultures. There are, of course, superficial elements of minority cultures, like those concerned with cuisine, which do affect the majority culture, but they are unlikely to transform it fundamentally, and there are many cultural and institutional features of the societies in which immigrants settle which they will, therefore, have to accept as providing the framework in which they now have to live their lives. (Rex 244)

Rex’s statement echoes Hall’s “critical question” and both describe, perhaps, the expectations of the “indigenous majority culture” in relation to immigration in a society that historically defined itself as a superior society. Oyeyemi’s novel is interested to explore the concept that for multiculturalism to work, in fact, it is the minority group who is expected to adapt to the original mainstream culture. The “host” population does not, and is not required to, fundamentally change, suggesting that, in fact, imperial discourses continue to inform the policy and practices of multiculturalism in the present by enforcing an uneven application of integration across different groups in the population. Rex suggests that “multiculturalism has usually been simply a means of marking groups as minorities so that they can be controlled, manipulated or subjected to unequal treatment” (243); for Oyeyemi this is still the case. Difference relates to certain populations and not others, and, as in discourses of race, the normative position is that of the “host” population and others are measured by their deviance from this. Furthermore, how far different populations are tolerated by the “host” relates to how willing they are to make transitions towards the normative position.

Through the “somewherehouse,” Oyeyemi shows that cultural atrophy is inevitable within that uneven practice. In the rational world of London this is a subject for debate: for Chabella, the practice of Santeria is a way to root her identity. She notes that in moving from Cuba to Paris to Hamburg to London, “[t]here is so much of me that hasn’t survived” (42) but her Santeria altar has always travelled with her. Her husband, Papi, holds an opposing view: for him, Santeria has little to do with African ancestry. His view is that to black Cubans, “these gods are historical artefacts” (36) and maintains that “these gods or whatever, these beliefs don’t transcend time and space . . . You can’t erase borders and stride over Spanish into Yoruba like that. You can only pretend that you have” (76). In the world of the “somewherehouse,” this debate is moot: Aya and her fellow Orisha gradually deteriorate, wane, and forget because they have been removed from their home in a double displacement. Santeria was originally a syncretic religion which developed in sixteenth-century Cuba, formed out of the need for the slaves exported from West Africa

to be publically Catholic whilst secretly adhering to their traditional Yoruba religious beliefs. The solution they found was to align Yoruba gods with Catholic saints. This capacity to adapt ensured the continuation of Santeria within Cuba and, as Miguel Barnet notes, the Yoruba myths which formed the basis of Santeria were continually reshaped in the encounter with Cuban society (7). This adaptation has continued into modern-day Santeria in Cuba which is distinctly different from that of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries—notably in changes to the pantheon as some Orisha's cults eroded and were eventually lost. As George Brandon explains, syncretism is “a gradual process that develops over time and through a number of stages” (159). However, in the “somewherehouse,” a further displacement has occurred as black Cubans emigrate. In the novel, Aya, with other Orisha, has moved from Yoruba land to Cuba into this “somewherehouse” which is disconnected from real geographical space. Although there are doors to Lagos and London in the “somewherehouse,” Aya eventually finds that “the Lagos door is nailed shut” (250), indicating that her transformation through syncretisation and geographical displacement has created a form so far removed from the Yoruba goddess she once was that she no longer has a connection to that originary place. Once an Orisha leaves the “somewherehouse” through the London door, they forget who they are and although Aya eventually rediscovers two of them in London, “she could not recognise them, and she did not know them by name” (114). Slowly the gods' power wanes, they fade, and Aya finally burns down the “somewherehouse.”

This is not to suggest that Papi's view is entirely correct. In the specific circumstances of colonial Cuba, the cultural mix and extreme oppressions of slavery did forge a new and powerful cultural form that is still a vibrant force in Cuban society. Rather, the process of deterioration in the “somewherehouse” suggests the impossibility of bringing cultural forms into new cultures intact. Instead, these forms always relate to the past and become a part of memory, as Papi suggests, through the idea of pretence; the “somewherehouse” represents the type of memory of home that is available once home is lost. As Davies notes, summarising Hall's work:

communities will search for a vision of a more perfect era—a more beautiful vision of themselves before the distortion and oppression of the colonial period. But rather than see this in terms of a genuine discovery, Hall suggests that this reclamation of the past is actually a process of production. It is an *imaginative* act of discovery, which gives an imaginary coherence to a broken and fragmented sense of identity. Memory, fantasy and myth all conjoin. (Davis 185; italics in original)

Thus, Chabella's practice of Santeria is a present practice which imaginatively connects her to a place in her memory called home but which is more akin to Aya's “somewherehouse”—a place of fantasy and myth.

However, cultural memory only has power within an imaginary realm. Maja's grounding concept of “my Cuba” parallels Chabella's Santeria. This construct is built from her “only complete memory [of

Cuba] that is longer than [her] life somehow” (Oyeyemi 44), a phrase that indicates its artificiality. She remembers being at a party as a five year old and hearing an old woman singing. She had been so enraptured that she had totally ignored the other little girl hiding under the table with her, having a convulsive fit. However, when Maja meets Magalys, an old friend from Cuba newly arrived in London, her memory is shattered. Magalys recalls that it was Maja who suffered the fit and had to be carried away (168). Maja tries to deny it: “I am not the one who had the fit . . . Or, if I had the fit, then I had already left that place and it was you [Magalys] who were caught fast in illness like glue, while elsewhere the woman sang” (169). However, in the encounter between the more long-term immigrant (and one who left that home as a child), and a recent, adult immigrant, it is Magalys’ memory that holds weight. The exposure of that memory to present reality destroys Maja’s “my Cuba” construct along with the Cuban part of her identity; she says now: “I think I will pretend I am not from Cuba” (169). Hence Maja loses that “usable past” or memory, beginning the process of assimilation by being forced, as Hall says, to give up part of her cultural identity because “[t]here can . . . be no simple ‘return’ or ‘recovery’ of the ancestral past which is not re-experienced through the categories of the present” (“New Ethnicities” 448). When that past is exposed as myth through an encounter with the present reality of “home,” it loses its power as a signifier of “home” to produce identity for Maja. Thus the capacity of multiculturalism to produce destructive forms of difference in diaspora populations is seen to operate temporally through differentiated “waves” of migrants, as well as geographically and historically as in the divisions relating to origins and slavery.

Such a process whereby the loss of home tends towards assimilation is reinforced by the sections based around the “somewherehouse,” following Maja’s loss of her “my Cuba” memory. Aya meets her fellow Orisha, Ochun, now known as Amy, who has “tried to die” (Oyeyemi 171). In the hospital she begs Aya to call her by her name: “Ochun, Ochun. Please say it Yemaya . . . you must know my name . . . I should never have left. Why doesn’t anyone know my name?” (194). Then one day “Amy is gone” (248), extirpated like Maja’s memory—atrophied to nothing. What persists in London, in terms of religion, is the Catholic Church. As part of the originary culture, this religious form can endure as static and monolithic. Maja on occasion has gone to retreats at a convent where she speaks with a nun symbolically called “Sister Perpetua” whose “beauty is . . . frozen” (17). The convent is not necessarily a positive alternative: “the afternoons ripen here in radiant languor as forty women draw a little more breath into their black and white cassocks so as to continue dying slowly from love” (17). Rather it represents the complacent stability of an indigenous population with whom Maja can temporarily connect but not belong.

Hall has discussed how black identity “is a matter of ‘becoming’ as well as of ‘being.’ It belongs to the future as much as to the past. It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history

and culture. Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories” (“Cultural Identity” 225). Hall suggests that identities therefore are subject to change and not essential, awaiting recovery from some place in the past. Oyeyemi clearly agrees with this point of view but she is concerned to interrogate exactly what power differentials are operating in the diaspora when “identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past” (“Cultural Identity” 225). Where the “host” culture insists on assimilation, Oyeyemi suggests that the past is devalued for immigrant populations as an effective way to position themselves. Instead, multiculturalist discourse convinces minority populations that conformity to cultural norms is an acceptable cost of immigration; that cultural memories and traditions have to be renounced to show a willingness to live cooperatively within the new environment. However, the pressure to assimilate is exposed ironically as, in fact, a way to keep the immigrant population isolated from the indigenous community. Gayatri Spivak explains this phenomenon in her famous essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” She notes an unbridgable divide between communities where identities are formed through paradigms of “Self” and “Other.” Because the identity of the immigrant, or the “Other,” is formed as “difference” by the host community, however closely they align themselves to that culture they can never be part of it (285). Oyeyemi shows the price paid by surrendering the elements of culture that are connected with identity in Maja’s deteriorating mental health and ultimate isolation from any community. As with her suspicion that the idea of difference within the black population plays into the hands of continuing domination of white identities, so Oyeyemi also suggests that cultural differences are not valued as genuine diversity, as multicultural discourses might suggest, but merely insofar as they provide superficial exotic elements (such as food, dress, or spectacle) for the “host” population.

The body

For women in immigrant communities, isolation rather than assimilation is often a more common experience of immigration. Through the phrases “mother land” and “mother tongue,” a group’s cultural identity is irrevocably connected to its women, particularly in their maternal aspect. Susheila Nasta has discussed how “female figures [are] represented as powerful symbolic forces, repositories of culture and creativity” (Nasta xvi); a process, as Okin has noted, that can be exacerbated in minority cultures within multicultural populations. Whilst adult males operate both within and outside of their immediate ethnic community, women are frequently secluded within that community either physically or symbolically as in, for example, the wearing of hijab. For Okin, the concern within multiculturalism to recognise difference as the maintenance of traditional practices has tended to calcify practices that are oppressive to women (11). In circumstances where “a culture endorses and

facilitates the control of men over women in various ways,” she argues, “the more powerful, male members are those who are generally in a position to determine and articulate the group’s beliefs, practices, and interests” (12). Often, for Okin, “the servitude of women is presented as virtually synonymous with ‘our traditions’” (16). To insist that their women folk are allowed (or forced) to maintain the cultural norms of their home society is a simple way for an immigrant population to meet multiculturalism’s demands that diversity is maintained, whilst the male members can meet the expectations of conformity. Okin’s ideas have sparked debate regarding women’s agency, and the relationships between feminism and multiculturalism, yet, she can be credited with introducing a gender strand into arguments around multiculturalism that had more typically concerned themselves with race.

Where women are used for cultural purposes in this way, their knowledge of themselves is constituted externally in:

a regime of power formed . . . by the fatal couplet, “power/knowledge.” But this kind of knowledge is internal, not external. It is one thing to position a subject or a set of peoples as the Other of a dominant discourse. It is quite another thing to subject them to that “knowledge,” not only as a matter of imposed will and domination, but by the power of inner compulsion and subjective conformations to the norm. (Hall “Cultural Identity” 226)

What Hall describes here is akin to the internalised pressures brought to bear on women: expected to retain aspects of the “traditional” through multiculturalism’s insistence on diversity (often reinforced by their own patriarchal cultures), they are also required by multiculturalism to conform to the host culture by dispensing with aspects of traditions which discomfort the host. The alienating effect of the conflicting demands of this double coding is illustrated in the text through the trope of possession which marks *The Opposite House* in several ways. One of these is through Santeria where practitioners are often possessed or “mounted” by the gods during ceremonies, a metaphor whereby an external force becomes internal in taking over the body. Amy Eleni describes something similar in relation to her “hysteric”: “*My personal hysteric walks three paces behind me at all times, and when it’s all a bit much . . . she jumps on my back and takes me down. Then she stands up in my place*” (31; italics in the original). Both Maja and she describe this possessive force as destructive to the sense of self in a phrase repeated several times in the text: “There’s someone inside of me, and she says I must die” (35). There is no doubt in *The Opposite House* that Oyeyemi sees possession as something to which women are particularly subjected and, although Maja’s gradual isolation can be explained in terms of her lost history, it clearly also has a gendered dimension through its association with her pregnancy, which is also implied to be a possession of the female body.

The imperative within Yoruba culture to fulfil a maternal destiny is described by Oyeronke Oyewumi, the Yoruba feminist critic, who explains that “being a mother is perceived as an attractive and desirable goal to achieve” (13) for Yoruba women. However, Nasta identifies motherhood as problematic when “the role of mother, with

all that it implies, is universally imposed upon women as their main identity, their *proper* identity above all others” (xx). For Maja, who has always expected to have children—telling Chabella when aged five that she would have a son (Oyeyemi 6)—pregnancy is experienced as an almost malign seizure of her body: “[the baby] is desperately pushing my stomach away from him . . . I wake up and spend about an hour . . . vomiting” (5). The child also demands “seeds and fresh fruit and oily fish and folic acid and carefulness and stuff” (8). This demand for food builds on the theme of possession by aligning the baby with the possessing evil spirits known as *abiku* in Yoruba culture. In traditional Yoruba belief, the evil spirit possesses the body of a child by taking the child’s food for itself and its fellow spirits, causing the child to fall into a state of decline and often to die. The child disconnects Maja from her bodily self where “[she] can’t touch [her] body at all” (17). When Aaron makes her eat when pregnancy-induced nausea causes reluctance to do so, she interprets his solicitude as directed solely towards his child reducing her to a mere receptacle: “In his eyes I am a throat working down [soup], I am a shaking hand and a spoon and beyond that his baby” (231). The crisis in identity, “brings [her] to escape velocity, brings [her] to *Gelassenheit*” (231), the “longing to let go and collapse under holy madness” (10) which is a sort of amnesia akin to her forced forgetting of “my Cuba.” She expresses the desire to escape as a disappearance: “I am going away, not up and out, not inside, I don’t know where, just away” (231); there appears to be no place for her to inhabit in a diasporic space where multicultural discourse encourages further distinctions of gender to be added to those of ethnicity, race, religion, sexuality.

For Oyeyemi, then, multicultural societies are not conducive to promoting equal but different identities either in terms of race, ethnicity, or gender. Despite the rhetoric of multiculturalism, she appears to concur with Stephen May who suggests that “the world is increasingly fragmented into fractured identities” (cited in Spencer 193). Oyeyemi suspects that multiculturalism is a discourse that reproduces imperial knowledge of the Other under the new name of “diversity.” It still requires the Other to make attempts towards assimilation and abandon all but their most superficial cultural practices. In addition, she cannot ignore the other discourses that cut through society alongside multiculturalism, in particular those discourses of gender which interpellate women in particular ways, and in different ways when crossed again with cultural norms of sexuality and ethnicity. Maja’s madness in the novel is focused on a persistent leak in the ceiling of her flat. Aaron has forgotten to call the plumber again because he is too excited about the prospect of *his* baby:

He is talking about birth pain management, and in my palm I have my crumpled list of [plumbers’] phone numbers from his pocket, the figures so small that they disappear into the crinkles . . . Aaron has folded and rolled my list of plumbers until it has taken on the hard, round unity of a shell. (253)

If Maja had torn up this list, it would have been easy to argue that this was a metaphor of Maja's fragmented identity; however, it is instead the folding and refolding caused by multiple discourses which is making her disappear, like the numbers, into those creases. However, Oyeyemi is concerned not just to identify multiple discourses but to interrogate their effects. Hall has suggested that identity as a process requires "points of temporary attachment to the subject positions which discursive practices construct for us" ("Introduction" 6), but this leaves Maja caught, as it were, in a flux of unstable identities which result in the madness of which her grandmother speaks: "If you forget your ancestors, you forget yourself. Isn't that what it is to run mad, to forget yourself?" (38). This type of madness is something that uniquely affects diaspora subjects who are forced to forget their ancestors in order to culturally assimilate, encouraged to distance themselves from minorities in "different" diasporas who also occupy the new geographical space, and unable to be integrated into the host society because of "difference." For Oyeyemi, this is the threat of multiculturalist ideology: to reduce citizens of the black diaspora to voiceless isolation from each other and, encased in that shell, prevented from ever challenging the cultural monolith of British identity.

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