

**Twenty-first Century Literary Representations of Black British Children: Exceeding the Limits of Realism**

By

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**Abstract**

This thesis focuses on narratives published in the twenty-first century that are set in England and

describe the everyday lives of black British children. All the books included are based on true

stories, either from the authors’ childhoods (*The Icarus Girl*, *26a*, *My Name Is Why* and *Forever*

*and Ever Amen*) or those of other people (*Pigeon English* and *Hello Mum*); yet these narratives

do not fully commit to realism, remaining both symbolic and sometimes mythical. Hence, a new

approach is required to examine these texts in response to national and global trends in writing

that eschew the binary of realism and modernism. After exploring these national and global

trends, I argue that the works this thesis examines are representative of the genre of modernist

realism. This term, introduced by Fredric Jameson, describes a literary style that employs realism

but then subverts it through the integration of modernist elements. These texts destabilise

conventional categorisation by incorporating mythic and symbolic elements that question the

reality portrayed within the works and their contexts, further blurring the lines between realism

and modernism. I examine black British writing as an unstable category, changed and moulded

by diverse forces that are personal, cultural, political and historical. I therefore combine different

methodologies in examining the included texts, such as psychoanalysis and sociocultural and

spatial analyses. My argument is that these texts expand British realism to include their

characters’ transnational inheritances and, to use the terminology of Julia Kristeva, show their

abject positions in Britain.

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**Introduction:   
Representations of Black British Children and Childhoods in Twenty-First-Century Literature**

I find ordinary realist narratives just lacking in something, like realist narratives just aren’t *real* for me.

(Oyeyemi, 2010, no pagination, emphasis in original)

I seem to need some other dimension … normal reality doesn’t feel enough.[[1]](#footnote-2)

(Evans, 2018, para.13)

It is, of course, true that no proper account of the functioning of social institutions can be given exclusively in terms of their fantasy life. But no account can be given without an understanding of their fantasy life.

(Hall, 2018, p. 892)

**Beyond Realism**

Helen Oyeyemi and Diana Evans, both critically acclaimed contemporary black British authors, express dissatisfaction with realist narratives. In the quotation above, Oyeyemi states that such narratives feel lacking or not real for her, indicating that she feels that they do not accurately capture reality. Similarly, Evans expresses a need for ‘some other dimension’ because representations of ‘normal reality’ do not feel sufficient or complete. These authors believe that realist narratives do not provide a full picture of their experience and that there is a need for a different type of storytelling that goes beyond mere realism. They are seeking narratives that capture a more nuanced and complete understanding of the world, which acknowledges multiple realities. In the same spirit, the black British cultural theorist Stuart Hall emphasises the importance of looking beyond the surface level functioning of social institutions – the ‘normal reality’ – and considering the underlying psychological and cultural factors that shape them. Both Oyeyemi and Evans are at the forefront of a contemporary literary movement that challenges the limitations of realism through its depictions of black British lives, offering insights into the underlying sociopolitical forces that shape their experiences. Their debut novels, based on their own childhood experiences in London, are part of a growing body of work that explores the experiences of black British children and childhood in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. This thesis recognises the need for scholarly focus on the correlation between the black literary movement that transcends realism and narratives that portray the quotidian experiences of black British children.

All the books included in this thesis are based on real stories, either from the authors’ childhoods (*The Icarus Girl*, *26a*, *My Name Is Why* and *Forever and Ever Amen*), or those of other people (*Pigeon English* and *Hello Mum*). Yet these narratives use symbolic and sometimes mythical elements to expand upon the genre of realism and reveal deeper truths about the experiences of black British children. Hence, I found it necessary to examine these texts using a new approach that views them as part of national and global trends in writing that move beyond the binary of realism and modernism, blurring the boundaries between them. The movement of these texts between realism and modernism acts as a critique of the binary division between black and British which places blackness as the other. Their movement is facilitated by the use of the child who destabilises this binary division by rediscovering the endless possibilities of being Black and British.I argue that this resistance to traditional categories is not just shown in these works’ themes but also in their form and genre. The distinctiveness of my approach is that I suggest a new theoretical framework called ‘modernist realism’ to analyse these narratives.

Fredric Jameson (2012, p. 479) explains that ‘modernist realism would begin to emerge when the traditional methods of narrative representation (novelistic realism) are used and then undermined’. Modernist realism is not entirely detached from realism but merges some modernist techniques with those of realism to create a new form of writing that presents a deeper vision of reality. The narratives analysed in my thesis do not depict their worlds in a strictly physical sense but rather construct them in the form of metaphysical and mythical spaces, thereby transforming their reality. They are also primarily transnational, as they not only reflect the transnational experiences of their main characters but also involve physical travelling, as in *The Icarus Girl* and *26a*, which are both set between Nigeria and Britain. Transnational heritages open up the possibility of extra spaces, other than the characters’ localised realities, in which the children in these texts can negotiate their identities and explore new options.

I read this new genre with regard to ‘peripheral realism’,[[2]](#footnote-3) a term used in postcolonial studies to describe a style of realism that emerged in the cultural peripheries, often in postcolonial countries, as a response to the dominant styles of realism and modernism that were prevalent in the imperial centres. As Joe Cleary argues, the nineteenth-century realist texts published in colonial centres such as Britain and France did not engage with the consequences of colonialism outside their orders (2012, p. 259). Hence, traditional realism was not sufficient to represent colonial and postcolonial reality and ‘the harsh contradictions’ in the conditions of recently decolonised societies (Lazzari, 2018, p. 109). Furthermore, in the global south, many writers saw realism as a foreign western style but welcomed modernism, as it allowed them to be more creative in mixing various cultural substances (Cleary, 2012, p. 264). As a result, postcolonial critics have sometimes argued that, rather than challenging hegemonic literary modes, postcolonial literature developed its own version of modernism (Cleary, 2012, pp. 265–266). The rise of global literature in the twenty-first century has led to the reimagining of western forms because these forms were adopted and changed by postcolonial literature.[[3]](#footnote-4) Before that, in the 1950s, there was a rise in nationalist realist aesthetics in Africa (Andrade, 2009, p. 183). Simon Gikandi (2012) emphasises that postcolonial national writing favoured realism over modernism, as realism could represent the reality of these nations as objective and independent. However, he argues that ‘there was no inherent relation between realism and the imagined national community in a formal or structural sense, nor did a reality effect resolve the difficulties of representing repressed histories or subjects’ (p. 317). In other words, realism does not have the capacity to include the imagined future or silenced histories. With the end of colonialism, the corruption of leaders arose as a new issue within the newly independent states (Andrade, 2009, p. 183). With the failure of these nation states, an aesthetic of anti-realism grew in Africa (Andrade, 2009, p. 183). This failure coincided with large-scale migration from Africa to the global north for employment and higher education. Consequently, the African novel has expanded to include other locations and rewrite local reality using modern and postmodern techniques. Nevertheless, as Andrade argues, realism continues to exist but in a new way that has a ‘symbolic manner’ that sometimes resembles modernism (2009, p.187). Thus, peripheral realism often incorporates elements of both realism and modernism but adapts them to the specific social, cultural and political context of the periphery.

The relationship between realism and modernism and their place in contemporary literature continues to be a subject of discussion and analysis. In the introduction to a collection of essays focusing on British fiction in the twenty-first century, Siân Adiseshiah and Rupert Hildyard (2013, p. 12) argue that the authors covered by their study ‘combine modernist approaches with a commitment to realism’.[[4]](#footnote-5) Hence they suggest the term ‘neo-modernism’ to describe this innovative style of writing. This mode of writing does not only exist in Britain but extends to other literary production around the globe. With regard to what he calls ‘world realism’, Jed Esty emphasises that the critical division between realism and modernism that held true for twentieth-century literature does not hold true for recent literary texts. He argues, ‘The waning power of the modernism/realism dyad leaves us better able to reckon with the ways in which realisms are neither replicative of the real, nor unexperimental, nor bound entirely to national borders, nor antimodernist’ (2016, p. 339). In the same vein, the Warwick Research Collective (2015) examine modernist techniques within peripheral realism but choose ‘irrealism’ as the more fit term for these techniques in world literature.[[5]](#footnote-6) They declare that they ‘understand these techniques and devices more broadly as the determinate formal registers of (semi-) peripherality in the world-literary system’ (2015, p. 51).[[6]](#footnote-7) Yet they acknowledge Jameson’s modernist realism as another possible approach for their study. They argue that ‘one of the paradigmatic sites of emergence of a “modernist realism” such as is here under review is the world of the semi-periphery, in which “local” and “global” forces come together in conflictual and unsteady flux’ (2015, p. 67). Similarly, the texts analysed in this thesis depict the interrelationship between transnational and local forces as experienced by children of migrants. Besides, according to Warwick Research Collective, even authors who are located in the centre can inhabit peripheral positions if they are marginalised by class, ethnicity or region (2015, p. 55). In this sense, the authors studied in this thesis are writing from the periphery of British society because they are all black British except Stephen Kelman who is a white working-class author.

Although works that depict multicultural transnational existences and employ fantastical elements are sometimes considered magical realist, the works included in this thesis do not belong to that subgenre. However, they share some of the elements of magical realism. First, they resist, as I mentioned earlier, their political and cultural structure. Lois Zamora and Wendy Faris explain that ‘Magical realist texts are subversive: their in-betweenness, their all-at-onceness encourages resistance to monologic political and cultural structures, a feature that has made the mode particularly useful to writers in postcolonial cultures and, increasingly, to women’ (1995, p. 6). Hence they argue that magical realism is an appropriate mode to question cultural, social or political norms (1995, p. 5). In this thesis I acknowledge the importance of non-realist elements in challenging these norms, but I argue that magical realism is not the only mode for achieving that. Second, like postcolonial magical realism, some of the narratives I include here deal with the aftermath of colonialism. Elleke Boehmer emphasises that postcolonial writers in English:

combine the supernatural with legend and imagery derived from colonialist cultures to represent societies which have been repeatedly unsettled by invasion, occupation, and political corruption. Magic effects, therefore, are used at once to convey and indict the follies of both empire and its aftermath. (2005, p. 229)

*The Icarus Girl*, *26a* and *Forever and Ever Amen* allude to the impact of colonial legacies on the black British children that they present; I will discuss this in detail in the upcoming chapters. Finally, all the texts studied in this thesis resemble British magical realism in their expansion of reality. Writing about Asian and black British magical realism, Tabish Khair (2020, p. 496) explains that it is never ‘about contesting Cartesian reality/realism; it is about expanding reality’.[[7]](#footnote-8)

The books I include here expand the reality of Britain to reflect cultural diversity. Nevertheless, they depart from the magical realist genre, in many respects. In magical realism, supernatural elements should be accepted and integrated into the narrative reality. According to Zamora and Faris, in magical realism, ‘the supernatural is not a simple or obvious matter, but it is an ordinary matter, an everyday occurrence – admitted, accepted, and integrated into the rationality and materiality of literary realism’ (1995, p. 3). Similarly, Maggie Ann Bowers argues that: ‘unless the magical aspects are accepted as part of everyday reality throughout the text, the text cannot be called magical realist’ (2004, p. 25). Works of magical realism often feature fantastical elements that are presented as if they are part of the ordinary, everyday world. In the books discussed in this thesis, reality is not disturbed by the West African mythical creatures, the spirit worlds or the transnational histories that are described. These elements influence those who are still in the process of accepting or comprehending their reality as black British: Jess, Ida, Georgia and James. However, they are reduced to mere artefacts –statues, masks, letters and photographs – in the everyday lives of others. Therefore, the magical is not part of the novels' realities, as in magical realism, but is part of individual consciousnesses.

Furthermore, the magical in magical realism is usually used to resurface a marginalised collective identity that was silenced by colonialism, migration or political corruption. By incorporating elements of magic or the supernatural into their narratives, writers can subvert dominant cultural narratives and give voice to communities that have been marginalised or oppressed. One of the most prominent authors to use the child as a vehicle in his magical realist text was Ben Okri with *The Famished Road* (1991). However, his utilisation of the child and the Yoruba mythology of the *abiku*, the child spirit, is more allegorical than the writing of the authors included in this thesis, because his main character is symbolic of Nigeria.[[8]](#footnote-9) He writes: ‘Our country is an *abiku* country. Like the spirit-child, it keeps coming and going. One day it will decide to remain. It will become strong’ (1991, p. 478). One of the aims of using the magical in Okri’s novel is to call for an emerging collective national identity.Jameson (2012) argues that ‘collectivity’ as a concept is more suitable to describe collective identities of cultural and racial groups, rather than official nationalism (p.481). He adds that these ethnic and cultural forms of collectivity, which created allegorical representations of a shared identity, are now being replaced by a new form of grouping called ‘multitude’ in the era of globalisation. However, this new phenomenon still poses challenges in terms of formal and representational issues like the previous types of collectivities (2012, p. 481). The narratives in my thesis challenge realism by bringing black consciousness into the centre as they negotiate identities in diverse realist cultural contexts. Hence, they underscore the heterogeneity of black British experiences rather than calling for a common black British identity that can be represented allegorically. However, they are still collective because they show the similar situations of various different black minority individuals in Britain. I will explore these racialised positions later, in the section titled ‘Abjection and Race’.

I prefer the term ‘modernist realism’ to describe the texts analysed in this thesis because it has the connotation of blurring binaries and destabilising formal categorisation. These texts do that by employing mythic and symbolic devices to challenge the reality outside them. They also use their subjective vantage points and transnational genealogical histories within a British setting to broaden its literary imagination. While four of the texts included here use third person narrative, none of them gives the impression of being an objective account of reality. The first chapter of this thesis reads Helen Oyeyemi’s *The Icarus Girl* (2005) by exploring how the novel moves in and out of Jess’s consciousness. The second chapter examines Diana Evans’s use of the third person narrative in *26a* (2005) to create a canvas of the colourful Hunter family’s inner worlds. The third chapter explores how the concrete reality of London’s council estates in Stephen Kelman’s *Pigeon English* (2011) and Bernardine Evaristo’s *Hello Mum* (2010)is portrayed by the main characters’ points of view even when they no longer exist in these material spaces. The fourth chapter analyses the stream of consciousness of Joe Pemberton’s child protagonist, James, in *Forever and Ever Amen* (2000),who mixes reality with his imaginative worlds. The chapter also looks at Lemn Sissay’s memoir *My Name Is Why* (2019),in which he reframes the fragmented records of the Wigan care system concerning his childhood into his own autobiography. These children are part of British society, but they occupy a marginal, liminal space which opens other realities for them. In the following chapters I will show how each text, although not all are novels, challenges its realist narrative. The narratives in this thesis complicate traditional realist depictions through several modernist means: the use of stream of consciousness to delve into the complex psychological landscape of the child (*The Icarus Girl*); the depiction of multiple perspectives (*26a*) and non-linear narrative (*Hello Mum*); the juxtaposition of the child’s hopefulness and the grim realities of urban poverty and violence (*Pigeon English*); and the presentation of the child’s consciousness (*Forever and Ever Amen*) and childhood memories (*My Name Is Why*) as fragmented and uncertain.

**Black British Writing as an Elusive Category**

In this section I take a closer look at the literary production of black British writers to gain a better understanding of the dominant approaches in interpreting this literature. A large number of previous studies engage with black British writing as a category which is isolated from mainstream British literature.[[9]](#footnote-10) I reconsider this categorisation, as it treats authors who come from various backgrounds and have diverse writing styles as a homogenous group. As Suzanne Scafe (2015) suggests, ‘“Black British”, as a category of ethnic, racial, or political identity, is leaky and imprecise, serving most usefully to describe how individuals and their work are positioned both in contemporary British society and in relation to their pasts’ (p. 214). These pasts are usually associated with transnational belonging and inspirations, prompting John McLeod (2002), for example, to problematise the addition of ‘British’ to the phrase ‘black British writing’, as it might favour national over transnational influences (pp. 57, 59).

While the addition of ‘black’ to ‘British’ sometimes indicates transnational influences, the term ‘black’ can sometimes be seen as limiting; for instance, the novelist Mike Phillips argues that ‘black writers in Britain live in an environment where it’s taken for granted that their identity is defined and limited by the colour of their skins’ (2001, p. 147). Diana Evans also criticises putting black writers in one category: ‘the idea there is any such thing as “black writing” is as absurd, reductive and impossible as the idea there is such a thing as white writing’ (Evans, 2019, no pagination). For these authors, insofar as ‘black’ is a useful term at all, it does not indicate an intrinsic quality but a set of power relationships, connected with themes of ‘race’ and racism, and of black stories as minority perspectives in contrast to the default of white literature. Thus ‘black’ can be either a transcending term because it suggests transnational belonging to the African diaspora or a limiting term because it is sometimes expected to be concerned with a narrow thematic scope. This is reflected in the works under investigation in this study.

Each author included here uses blackness differently. For Oyeyemi, blackness is entrapped in a British setting at the beginning of her novel but transformed in the Yoruba context; Evans also represents a mixed-race childhood, but ‘race’ is not central in her book. Both Kelman and Evaristo deal with the marginality of black children in the council estates of London. Likewise, Sissay depicts an alternative kind of black marginality within the British care system, in his memoir. Pemberton shows blackness as one aspect of his main character’s story. Corinne Fowler (2008) critiques how Pemberton is considered ‘a black writer (who does not confine himself to “black” issues)’ because he is not just focusing on race, migration and belonging, but also on working class struggles in the north of England (Fowler, 2008, p. 87).

Furthermore, Kadija Sesay (2004) emphasises the difficulty of establishing a specific definition for black British writing because of the various styles among several generations of writers. She argues, ‘For a growing number of *new* black British writers, the definition of “the black British writer” cannot be clear-cut’ (p. 106, emphasis in original). In the new millennium, it is not sufficient to look at black British writing as a separate category. Firstly because, as noted in *Multi-Ethnic Britain 2000+* (Eckstein et al., 2008, p. 14), ‘the contested field of race, religion and representation has long entered not only black and Asian representational practice, but also the white mainstream’, and secondly because ‘black and Asian artists have long ceased to be exclusively occupied with “minority” [subject] matters’. The first contention is demonstrated in *Pigeon English* (2011), a novel about a black boy written by a white author, Kelman. The other part of this argument is represented by the writing of Oyeyemi, who chooses a white protagonist for her second novel, *White is for Witching* (2009). In this thesis I therefore focus on writing about black British characters, rather than black British writing, which is why I include Kelman, as, like the other writers I have chosen, he extends the limits of realism by including modernist elements in depicting black British children.

In the 1970s and early 1980s, the term ‘Black’ was used politically by non-white intellectuals in Britain as a means of resistance to racism. They used it to refer to all non-white immigrants to Britain, including Caribbean, African and South Asian people, who were seen as outsiders by the white majority (Procter 2003, p. 8). It was a political term of unity against racism and discrimination. Colonialists had portrayed non-white subjects as inferior to justify their economic exploitation. Thus, when people began to migrate to Britain, they were stepping into an already written context of colonialism. They were connected to social issues and urban decline and therefore stigmatised based on ‘race’ (Riley, 1994, p. 547). In the 1970s, black people were targeted by the police using the ‘sus law’, or 1824 Vagrancy Act, which allowed them to stop and search anyone on suspicion of having committed a crime (Eddo-Lodge, 2017, p. 33). The American term ‘mugging’ was used by the press in their coverage of youth street robberies to paint the crime as ‘exclusively’ black (Eddo-Lodge, 2017, p. 34). The early 1980s marked the peak of the conflict between black communities and the government, leading to riots in several cities, such as Liverpool, Birmingham, Leeds, Manchester and London. In London, the rise in unemployment among black youth and police brutality towards them led to the 1981 Brixton Riots, a disturbance which lasted three days. The press used the Brixton Riots and other subsequent riots spurred by racial inequality to reinforce the violence-prone image of black communities. Reni Eddo-Lodge (2017) comments on the power of language to manipulate public opinion: ‘Language is important – and the term “race riot” undoubtedly doubles down on ideas linking blackness and criminality, while overlooking what black people were reacting against’ (pp. 53–54). Given the negative attention from the press and police received by black communities, the black British writing of that era was often seen as political and oppositional to the country’s racism (Donnell, 2002, p. 14).

Black writers of the 1970s, 1980s and early 1990s were occupied with making the invisible lives of minorities more visible within the British mainstream; hence, they mainly used realism to document their stories (Scafe, 2015, p. 216). This generation of writers includes Joan Riley, one of the first to write about the experience of a black female child immigrant from the Caribbean, in *The Unbelonging* (1985). Although the story concerns a fictional character, it uses a realist mode which Scafe criticises as ‘the grim documentary style of Riley’s prose’ (2015, p. 217). In *Yoruba Girl Dancing* (1991), Simi Bedford also writes about migrant childhood but from the perspective of a six-year-old Nigerian coming of age in a British boarding school. This autobiographical novel, which influenced Oyeyemi, does not use the child to escape harsh reality; rather, it uses humour to reflect the author’s sense of dislocation. Mark Stein (2004) focuses on Riley’s and Bedford’s books, among other black British novels published in the late twentieth century. He argues that the bildungsroman genre became popular among black British writers of that era. His definition of Black British literature aligns more with its political connotations, as he includes South Asian authors, such as Hanif Kureishi and Meera Syal. He argues that bildungsroman novels do not only show the ‘formation’ of their protagonists, but also the ‘transformation’ of British culture by representing non-stereotypical characters of colour, addressing gaps in British history through intergenerational narratives, producing diasporic identities within British society or destabilising the notion of national borders (p. 36). Thus, Stein’s study is concerned with the performative function of these narratives and how they affect the British context. The texts included in this thesis continue what their forerunners started by transforming Britain’s literary imagination using the figure of the child to rewrite the past and influence the present.

Nevertheless, the position of the new generation of black writers, having been born in Britain, differs from the oppositional position of the previous generation, as ‘black’ has acquired more cultural connotations connected with people of African or African-Caribbean descent. Indeed, the new generation considers the UK their home, and they are now known as ‘black British’, rather than being associated with their parents’ place of origin. Hence, James Procter (2003, p. 8) argues that the ‘difference between inside and outside, black and white, has become unstable as the boundary conditions of the black imagined community are recognised as porous and hazy’. I argue that this ‘hazy’ boundary is what results in the unstable borders between the real and the mythical in contemporary writing about black British characters. Hybrid forms were created to accommodate their stories. The new writers were among those who displaced the realism of the early black authors. Scafe (2015, p. 218) labels this new style of writing as having ‘extra dimensions’, borrowing Diana Evans’ words from *26a* in order to describe her writing and that of Bernardine Evaristo and Helen Oyeyemi. I advance Scafe’s argument by suggesting ‘modernist realism’ as a term for this new style.

For the black authors included here, writing is not just about using unheard voices but about breaking away from the place of the other and reframing British culture as their own. As Alison Donnell (2002, p. 15) concludes, ‘Certainly the success of the 1980s and 1990s in terms of creating a visible and talented body of writers has meant that black writing can now afford to represent itself in more diverse and risky ways’. Consequently, the writing of these new generation of authors is more experimental. They create portraits of cultural diversity by thinking about other spaces beyond physical spaces, where different cultures interact with one another.

The authors included in this thesis use children’s perspectives to reshape material spaces by means of these children’s imaginative worlds and their local and parental heritages. Edward Soja coined the term ‘thirding’ to denote ‘the creation of another mode of thinking about space that draws upon the material and mental spaces of traditional dualism but extends well beyond them in scope, substance, and meaning’ (Soja, 1996, p. 11). When conceptualising space, Soja divides it into three kinds, building his theory on Henri Lefebvre’s notion of space. Lefebvre categorised space into the ‘perceived’ space or the real space, which Soja calls ‘Firstspace’; the ‘conceived’ space or imagined space, ‘Secondspace’; and finally, the ‘lived space’, which is both real and imagined, ‘Thirdspace’ (Soja, 1996, p.10). In other words, the perceived space is the material space as people see and use it, and the conceived space is the ideas developed about space, while lived space is how people experience space physically and mentally. Through their creative use of space, the writers who are the main focus of this thesis create new ways of thinking about the common literary themes of childhood, hybridity and identity.

The black authors in this thesis focus on relocating themselves from their place as outsiders by moving beyond realist narratives to display their unique position within British society. This urge to extend realism stems from the truths of the twenty-first century; with the continued existence of racism, the hopeful tone of multiculturalism and visions of a post-racial society that were prevalent in the late twentieth century are subdued. Reni Eddo-Lodge (2017, p. 214) reflects on this reality: ‘“Post racial” only acknowledged racism of the past, and insisted that the present was an anti-racist utopia […] Britain’s relationship with race and racism isn’t a neat narrative with a feel-good resolution. Change is incremental, and racism will exist long after I die’. However, the authors included in this study are not as pessimistic as Eddo-Lodge; they keep to a middle ground between reality and optimistic creativity. It is as Sara Upstone (2018, p. 133) argues:

Celebratory blackness comes in the wake and context of a quotidian reality of race that might be undesirable but which is undeniable, and within the context of this undeniability must be co-opted in the spirit of agency and as affirmation of a blackness that can displace the power of de facto whiteness.

This celebratory blackness is summoned in the texts examined here through the inclusion of the mythical, symbolic and experimental techniques, which transform the quotidian reality of race, forming a new hybrid genre, as I argue in this thesis.

**Children’s and Childhood’s Narratives**

Many narratives about transnational British children and childhood in this century are black British. This is partly because many of black British authors were influenced by African texts of the late twentieth century and early twenty-first century, in which the figure of the child is common.[[10]](#footnote-11) Richard Priebe suggests that novels about ‘the African Childhood’ could constitute a new genre among narratives (2006, p. 41). The authors included in the present thesis use the child to highlight sociocultural pitfalls, rather than create a sanctuary from them. In this way, they are more influenced by African narratives of childhood than western ones. When writing about childhood in African literature, Eldred Jones comments that narratives about children are ‘far from being merely nostalgic yearnings for a lost paradise’ (1998, p. 7). Authors such as Oyeyemi, Evans, Pemberton and Sissay, who based their books on their childhoods, illustrate the complicated process of forming their identity as black British. Christopher Ouma points out that in postcolonial African literature also, childhood is a common framework used to reflect the complex multidimensional African identities in Africa and its diasporas (2020, p. 3). He focuses on authors he calls ‘children of the postcolony’, who grew up during Africa’s decolonisation in the late 1960s, 1970s and 1980s (Ouma, 2020, p. 2). This was also a period when many Africans left their homes for Europe and America for employment or education. All the writers in his book experienced transnational travel; however, the texts he analyses do not all show the experience of migration. Most of the books in Ouma’s study are set in Africa, as he explores the significance of the child in relation to time, space, war and migration. He argues that childhood is used to create alternative ‘ordinary’ narratives to those of the adult political world of 1970s and 1980s Africa. According to him, African authors also use childhood to generate an imaginative space of memories and to revisit specific cultural histories. In his sixth chapter, he explores diaspora childhood through a close reading of Oyeyemi’s *The Icarus Girl* and *The Opposite House* (2007). Whereas Ouma studies Oyeyemi from within African literature, I analyse her as a black British writer. He classifies texts by authors who migrated from postcolonial Africa as belonging to African diasporic literature. Therefore, he considers Oyeyemi a diasporic African writer and includes her with other authors such as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, who was born and raised in Nigeria and only went to America as an adult to pursue her studies and work there. However, I argue against such a categorisation because although both authors originated in Nigeria, their African diasporic experiences are different: one, having come to the UK at age four, had to learn about her ancestral culture from a distance, as British culture was her first conscious cultural association, whereas the other had to navigate her cultural difference within the American notion of Africa. However, I agree that both authors contribute to expanding the notion of African diaspora outside the Middle Passage framework or what Paul Gilroy labels ‘the Black Atlantic’.[[11]](#footnote-12) The first chapter of this thesis goes into more detail concerning Ouma’s reading of *The Icarus Girl*.

The figure of ‘the child’ in the books I am considering is constructed for specific purposes and is influenced by the sociocultural beliefs of the writers. Childhood, according to Chris Jenks (2005, pp. 6–7), is ‘a social construct; it makes reference to a social status delineated by boundaries that vary through time and from society to society but which are incorporated within the social structure and thus manifested through and formative of certain typical forms of conduct’. Since it is socially constructed, childhood differs between cultures, as shown in some of the books in this thesis by the dissimilarity between children living in Britain and their parents who grew up in Africa or the Caribbean and were sometimes forced to mature earlier than their children. Furthermore, the constructed diasporic children in these books are born into already written histories of migration, postcolonialism and racial hierarchy and are used to (re)negotiate these histories. Childhood in some of these narratives is depicted as a specific constructed set of memories, as in *26a* and *My Name Is Why*.In others, it is limited to a specific transitional period of a year or less, as in *The Icarus Girl* and *Forever and Ever Amen*. In *Hello Mum* and *Pigeon English*, the narratives are sometimes mediated through the child’s and adolescent’s perspectives.

The books included here are not children’s literature: they use the child for their stylistic and thematic purposes but not for the aim of securing ‘the child who is outside the book’ (Rose, 1984, p. 2). In other words, the authors use childhood as a literary device to convey their ideas and messages, rather than as a means of engaging with or appealing to child readers. The use of childhood in this way allows the authors to blur the boundaries between reality and imagination, explore complex themes, and challenge readers’ perspectives on various issues. In these texts, childhood works as an in-between, hybrid space in which the main characters are in the process of forming their identity, thereby mixing everyday local and national realities with broader transnational symbolism. The British children’s writer John Gordon describes the boundary between childhood and adulthood as follows: ‘The boundary between imagination and reality, and the boundary between being a child and being an adult are border country, a passionate place in which to work. Laws in that country are lifelines’ (1975, p. 35). Gordon’s quote refers to the complex and dynamic relationship between imagination, reality, childhood and adulthood. According to him, this relationship can be seen as a border country - a place where these concepts overlap and interact with one another in intricate ways. This border country is an intense and passionate place to work because it requires navigating the boundaries between these concepts, which can be blurred, fluid and sometimes challenging to define. Laws, rules and norms help to define the boundaries between imagination and reality, childhood and adulthood, and provide a framework for navigating the challenges and opportunities of this border country. The writers included in this thesis move lucidly between realism and modernism using this special border country between child and adult, and imagination and reality.

As mentioned above, the child is also used for the texts’ thematic focuses: some writers use the child to rewrite history, recognise the present or reclaim the future. *The Icarus Girl*, *26a*, *Forever and Ever Amen* and *My Name Is Why* use retrospective narrative to emphasise the importance of memory in forming transcultural identities. The memories in these narratives sometimes reach back to a time and place beyond the lives of their central characters because their authors want to include these transnational histories in their national context. As Ole Birk Laursen (2012, p. 56) notes, ‘memory is conceived as a discursive space where cultural identities are formed in dialogical interactions with others – not silencing histories, but displacing them’. This means that memory is not simply an individual’s private recollection, but rather a social practice that is shaped by interactions with others. Through these interactions, individuals negotiate and construct their identities. They encounter new narratives and discourses that displace and reshape their histories, creating new forms of cultural identity. This dialogical process allows individuals to situate themselves within a larger cultural context and to make sense of their place in society. As childhood is a time when cultural identities are still forming, it seems fitting as a vehicle for negotiating and displacing histories. The memories of the child and the histories of the parents in the texts, explored by this thesis, are retraced and displaced to form diverse transnational identities in Britain. This negotiation of cultural identity in the texts is facilitated through the use of childhood. Jones emphasises that ‘African authors have consistently returned to childhood to find their personal as well as their racial roots’ (1998, p. 7). Oyeyemi, Evans, Sissay and Pemberton return to childhood to connect with origins and traditions and unearth genealogical ties with older generations who lived through racial injustice, colonialism and slavery.While the above-mentioned texts are mainly concerned with the child as the image of the past, others are more focused on the child as the image of a future that is at risk of being lost. *Pigeon English* and *Hello Mum* use the child’s voice and point of view to provoke an awareness of the real children trapped in similar situations of social and financial disadvantage and gang crimes. I will elaborate on these images of the child in the following chapters.

Childhood is employed in these texts as a period when cultures are negotiated, to emphasise the contemporary struggles of black British people. As noted by Gilroy (1993b, p. 10), the ‘new racism’ is no longer about biological hierarchy but about cultural otherness. Therefore, as I argue here, childhood seems to be a fitting space in which to explore such otherness. Gilroy writes, ‘this new racism was generated in part by the move towards a political discourse which aligned “race” closely with the idea of national belonging and which stressed complex cultural difference rather than simple biological hierarchy’ (1993b, p. 10). When the children in the texts included here become racially conscious, they search within their parents’ or other African cultures in order to come to terms with their blackness. The first chapter of this thesisexplores the child’s longing for a different setting in which to explore herself and overcome the sense of alienation and isolation that she feels in London in *The Icarus Girl*. The second chapter examines how the child is forced to form an alternative sense of belonging away from their parental cultures. For the girls in *26a*, the warmth of their mother’s Nigerian culture collides with the coldness of their father’s British culture. The third chapter shows how youth use hip-hop culture to navigate their way into the underworld of London’s gangs. Unlike Jerome, in *Hello Mum*, who expresses himself through rap, Harrison, in *Pigeon English,* is not influenced by hip-hop culture; as a new migrant, he still has access to his Ghanaian roots. The fourth chapter explores the child’s use of material culture, such as letters, photos and oral history, to form links with their transnational genealogy. Sissay’s mother’s letter offers a new genealogy with which to come to terms with his sense of otherness in *My Name Is Why*. In *Forever and Ever Amen* The photos in James’s aunt’s house and his parents’ stories about the Caribbean allow him to form a new imaginative space in which he explores their culture to rethink his own material space in Moss Side. In the following chapters, I will explore how childhood serves as a crucial space for negotiating cultural otherness in the face of the ‘new racism’, as children in the examined texts engage with various cultural forms to explore and challenge dominant narratives about race and identity.

**Abjection and Race**

In order to understand why modernism is part of all of the realist narratives in this thesis, it is useful to apply psychological and cultural theories as well as literary definitions. Writing about transnational experience at the beginning of the twenty-first century, the authors of these books captured the transformation of the spaces of diaspora. The spaces of diaspora are spaces of abjection, marginalised by the hierarchal structure of the dominant culture. Yet this hierarchy is dismantled by these authors’ creation of transnational narratives that recentre their marginalised cultures. The hierarchy is undermined by intertwining the imaginative space of origins with the material lives of diasporic communities in the metropolitan centre. Migration and multiculturalism have become less celebrated at the beginning of the twenty-first century in the global north with the rise of border security and the war on terror. Paul Gilroy (2005) identifies the contradictory nature of this era: although it witnessed the rise of international groups, ‘cosmopolitan and translocal affiliations became suspect and are now virtually unthinkable outside of the limited codes of human-rights talk, medical emergency, and environmental catastrophe’ (p. 5). Therefore, diasporic communities began to be seen more as a threat than as inferior others. They are a reminder of the fragility of the nation’s borders and hence can themselves be viewed as abject. Julia Kristeva (1982) claims that the abject stems from the fear of losing the boundary between the self and the world. She writes:

How can I be without border? That elsewhere that I imagine beyond the present, or that I hallucinate so that I might, in a present time, speak to you, conceive of you – it is now here, jetted, abjected, into ‘my’ world […] I behold the breaking down of a world that has erased its borders: fainting away. (p. 4)

Thus, she proposes that the abject is not just connected to the inner worlds of subjects but also to their outer worlds. Imogen Tyler (2013) argues: ‘What the conceptual frame of abjection reveals is that neither the subject nor the nation-state is a solid or unitary entity, but rather an assemblage of practices. The borders of the subject and the state are continually being made and undone’ (p. 46). When analysing the texts about transnational figures here, I argue that the abject, either as social and political phenomena or as subject matter, is a recurring theme.

The abject is associated not only with these narratives’ focus on transnational belonging but also with their depiction of racial identity. To clarify the relation between ‘race’ and abjection, I take a closer look at Stuart Hall’s attempt to find a definition of ‘race’. He emphasises that post-Lacanian psychoanalysis and cultural studies ‘are the consequence of some of the same theoretical disruptions’ and that they have an ‘interrelated history’ (Hall, 2018, p. 890). The radical post-Lacanian studies and feminism Hall refers to here are those that destabilised Lacan’s theories and practice (Hall, 2018, p. 890). As Hall emphasises, they open up ‘the question of the relationship between the psychic and the social on the terrain which recognizes the centrality of the unconscious’ (2018, p. 891). ‘Because’, he adds:

the presence of the unconscious means that it is not possible any longer to accept a sociological or cultural-anthropological account of how the inside gets outside and how the outside gets inside. There is always, in that process of introjection and projection, something irretrievably lost, a fundamental displacement. (p. 891)

He concludes that to study the forms of alterity and otherness, one needs to be able to speak the ‘languages’ of both the theory of subjectivity and social theory.

In an attempt to follow Hall’s advice, I use Kristeva’s theory of the abject because it outlines the interconnection between subjectivity and society, and I refer to Hall’s 1997 lectures (published in 2017) on race, ethnicity and nation to justify my choice. In his lecture on race, Hall emphasises that ‘race’ is ‘a floating signifier’, moulded to take on numerous meanings; it never means a specific thing but is just an empty signifier (p. 64). Arguing that it is ‘discursively constructed’, he exposes the ambivalent character of racist representation (2017, p.59). On the one hand, there are depictions of racial groups as ‘dependent, childlike, vicious, barbaric, primitive and treacherous’, which reinforce negative stereotypes and perpetuate systemic racism (Hall 2017, p.74). On the other hand, there is a powerful nostalgia for the supposed otherness of these racial groups, a desire for their emotional expressivity, ‘endurance of suffering’, ‘rhythmic force’, and other qualities that are seen as lost in ‘so-called civilised’ societies (Hall 2017, p.74). Hall explains:

The double inscription of racial discourse – the *violence of racism* that is structured around *loss*, the *desire* for the other that is inextricably coupled to its *obliteration* – means that the discursive structures [of violence and desire] we are dealing with are never capable of speaking alone, one without the other, for both are equally an essentializing narrative projection from the same *binary system*. (2017, p. 74, my emphasis)

In the binary system of racial discourse as described by Hall, whiteness is created as opposite to the other, blackness, and the loss of the other is necessary to form the border of the self and is coupled with the desire to keep the other to define itself against. The system of racial discourse described by Hall is similar to the ambivalent, binary system in which the abject, as described by Kristeva (1982, p. 15), operates: ‘the abject is the *violence of mourning* for an “*object*” that has always already been *lost*’ (my emphasis). The object she refers to here is the object of desire against which the subject structures itself. Historically speaking, blackness as opposed to whiteness was first constructed based on the imperial discourse of ‘us’ against ‘them’; therefore, it began as an object (Livingston, 2000, p. 256). With the fading of the idea of a biological hierarchy of ‘race’, and mass migration from colonial peripheries to the empire’s centre, the borders between subject and object become unsettled. Thus, blackness has moved from being the other outside the border to the other within and occupies the abject position. To quote Hall again:

We thus come to understand the exercise of discursive power that is required to symbolically expel difference to the far side of the universe – and the surreptitious return whereby that *which has been expelled keeps coming back* home to trouble the dreams of the sleeper with the terrifying internal fears, the nightmares, of having to live with difference. (2017, p. 71, my emphasis)

This sense of othering becomes haunting to black as well as white subjects because it cannot be expelled outside the national border, yet it cannot be fully assimilated. The abject as a haunting position will be further elaborated in the first chapter of this thesis through a close reading of *The Icarus Girl* and, to some extent, in the second chapter, with the analysis of Georgia in *26a.*

While Kristeva’s theory of the abject has been widely used in various academic disciplines since the 1980s, it only recently gained popularity in the discussion of race. A reading of the abject can be discerned within various black histories and genres. Darieck Scott (2010) interprets the abject within the African American context and the history of slavery. He argues that a history of abjection forms blackness as it was created to be dominated and othered by whiteness. According to him, blackness as an identity is a form of abjection that should be claimed first as abject and then surpassed into a subject that is not defined by ‘race’ (2010, pp. 4–5). He connects abjection to male humiliation and queerness, which decentre masculinity, by focusing on Kristeva’s theory of female abjection, where the feminine is othered and abjected to consolidate masculine subjectivity (Scott, 2010, p.17). Jessica Baker Kee (2015) also explores the abjection of African American males, within horror film. She analyses abjection through violence against black male bodies and their portrayal as ‘hypersexualized monstrous Others’, arguing that these images disturb the life and death, male and female, and black and white binaries (2015, p. 47). Both the above studies associate gendered and racial abjection with the black male body as socially constructed by its exclusion from the white-male dominant society.

Another study which examines literature published on the history of slavery, but within the African-Caribbean context, is ‘tropics of abjection: Figures of violence and the African-Caribbean semiotic’ by Eric Morales-Franceschini (2019). In his reading of Kristeva’s abject in francophone Caribbean literature describing the historical violence against enslaved people in the Middle Passage and on the plantations, he argues that the description of corpses and human waste, along with nakedness, which he associates with animals, portrays enslaved people as the abject and represents a ‘“semiotic” rupture in the Symbolic’[[12]](#footnote-13) (2019, p. 516). In examining the poems of Aimé Césaire, one of the founders of the Négritude movement,[[13]](#footnote-14) which calls for a return to African origins, he concludes that the poet desires to return to a pre-colonial Mother Africa instead of the pre-Oedipal maternal. Similarly to the two above-mentioned authors, he explores the figure of the monstrous other and considers the use of grotesque zombie figures in Caribbean myth as symbols of the abject enslaved ancestors. All the above studies connect the abject with the violent history of slavery.

Few critical studies of black British writing engage with the abject. This lack of engagement with Kristeva is partly because she overlooked the notion of racial difference when writing about the abject. However, I use Kristeva here because her theory of the abject resonates with various modes of othering and exclusion in global north cultures and therefore could shed light on racial discrimination. I also included Hall above to address this gap in her theory. In writing about *The Icarus Girl,* Ilott and Buckley (2016) and Diana Mafe (2012) all argue that TillyTilly, a child spirit who tries to possess Jess, is an abject female figure centring around the original gender aspect of the abject; I will discuss these studies further in my first chapter.

Anna-Leena Toivanen (2021) does explore the theme of migration in relation to abjection. She writes about the abject phenomenon of globalisation in Brian Chikwava’s *Harare North* (2009), which is set in London. It tells the story of an unnamed undocumented Zimbabwean immigrant who, as Toivanen argues, is the ‘antithesis of the figure of the Afropolitan’ (2021, p. 120). ‘Afropolitan’ is a term coined by the author Taiye Selasi (2005), describing a new generation of African migrants who ‘belong to no single geography, but feel at home in many’, yet ‘tie [their] sense of self’ to the African continent (para. 2, 3). Toivanen emphasises that Afropolitan or cosmopolitan identities are not as easily attainable for less advantaged migrants as they are for the educated elites. Therefore, they cannot be ‘Africans of the world’ because they do not easily cross borders, and thus they occupy the abject in-between position (Selasi, 2005, para. 3; Toivanen, 2021, p. 120). Toivanen concludes that transnational migration as a state of mobility and border crossing does not always result in a cosmopolitan subject position but, rather, an abject position, on ‘the wrong side of the border’ (2021, p. 127). Hence the abject, she argues, is the one the nation casts off beyond its borders but who returns to disturb it as an undocumented immigrant (2021, p. 128). Toivanen’s study focuses on the abject in terms of migration, border crossing and belonging, rather than race.

The studies discussed above show that the abject can be traced through violent histories, monstrous mythical figures, negative border crossings and spatial abjection. The texts I analyse in this thesis include all these manifestations of the abject. My interpretation of the abject is based on its relationship with motherhood, the history of colonialism, dislocation and spatial abjection. I begin, in the first chapter, with Kristeva’s theory of the origins of the abject, and the image of TillyTilly as a maternal abject. She is also a grotesque figure from Yoruba mythology who appears within the precolonial Boy’s Quarters building and disturbs Jess’s temporal and spatial boundaries. I later discuss Sedrick in *26a*, a watchman at the Hunters’ Sekon estate, who is always looming on the borders and is never allowed in the main house. As a veteran of the Nigerian civil war, he disturbs Georgia’s innocence. Moreover, Georgia and Ida experience abject unbelonging. In my last two chapters, I address the abject from a more sociological standpoint by focusing on planned spatial exclusion, such as that which occurs in council estates and children’s homes through the intersection of ‘race’ and class.

**Chapter Overview**

Paul Gilroy argues in *There Ain’t no Black in the Union* *Jack* that ‘psychological’, ‘cultural’, ‘political’ and ‘historical’ factors interact and produce ‘racial subjects’ (2002, p. xviii). Building on this, the present thesis is divided into four chapters, and each chapter focuses on one of the factors that influence black British experience. These factors are not always evident on the surface level of reality, so extending realism becomes essential to exposing them. Realism lacks the capacity to represent the ‘unseen’ and the ‘unrepresented’, as Jameson argues; hence, as discussed above, the texts I include here use modernist techniques to allude to these forces (2012, p. 476). I begin by focusing on Oyeyemi’s *The Icarus Girl* (2005), which is a mythical and psychological narrative of a mixed-race child. Then I move to analyse Evans’s *26a* (2005),which shows how transnational children navigate their sense of belonging by departing from their parents’ cultural disharmony. Next, I examine how politics of class and racial exclusion impact the everyday lives of children in council estates in Kelman’s *Pigeon English* (2011) and Evaristo’s *Hello Mum* (2010). Finally, I investigate the influence of history and memory in forming black British identities in Sissay’s memoir *My Name Is Why* (2019), alongside Pemberton’s *Forever and Ever Amen* (2000). I will now outline the content of the chapters in a little more detail.

The first two chapters focus on girlhood in the London suburbs in the late twentieth-century. Oyeyemi and Evans both based their debut novels on their childhoods in greater London in the 1980s and 1990s. Oyeyemi migrated to Britain with her parents from Nigeria when she was four, and Evans is the daughter of a Nigerian mother and a white British father. They weave West African myths through their stories because they feel that a realist narrative is insufficient to capture the reality of such childhoods.

Their two novels portray the lives of mixed-race daughters of black Nigerian mothers and white British fathers. The elements of non-real in these novels are borrowed from the West African mythology of twins and the belief that they share the same soul. The magical mode in *26a* (Evans 2005) transgresses boundaries of time and space and is naturally incorporated into the realist narrative of the novel. The novel’s sense of fragmentation comes not only from the use of myth but also from the various stories of the four Hunter daughters and the transnational histories of the family, including the parents’ different cultural backgrounds. Furthermore, the movement through boundaries is not just cross-cultural and transnational but also regional, occurring between urban centres and marginal rural areas (between Lagos and Aruwa, or London and Bakewell), and even between the suburb of Neasden and the metropolitan centre of London. In contrast, in *The Icarus Girl* (Oyeyemi 2005)*,* this kind of transgression does not come easily to the central character, Jess, who is afraid of the different outcomes that may be associated with crossing boundaries. Thus, the text has some elements of a gothic narrative of xenophobia and fear of the unknown. Lucie Armitt (2014, p. 225) differentiates between the magical realist and gothic genres: ‘Where magical realism embraces the foreign, whether spiritual or extraterritorial, the Gothic fights to keep the stranger at bay but fails, intimating a cultural failure which Western cultures have perhaps found it easier to identify with than to overcome’. However, just as Oyeyemi’s novel does not entirely fit the genre of magical realism, it does not entirely fit the gothic either. I will argue that by making Jess a mixed-race child of a black mother and a white father, Oyeyemi brings forth the figure of the abject mother not merely as a psychological phenomenon but also as a sociocultural one. Kristeva defines the abject as ‘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. It lies there, quite close, but it cannot be assimilated’ (1982, p. 1). Jess’s blackness, associated with her mother, is the part of her that does not allow her to fully assimilate into British society, despite being raised as thoroughly British. Without access to her Yoruba culture, she cannot find a context in which she and her dual heritage fit. This results in the appearance of the grotesque figure of TillyTilly, a fully Nigerian child spirit that haunts Jess and tries to possess her.

Chapter three moves to the topic of boyhood in council estates in London, with *Pigeon English* (Kelman 2011) and *Hello Mum* (Evaristo 2010). The supernatural in these books does not offer any hope of exceeding material boundaries but remains separate, in the spiritual realm. *Pigeon English* tells the story of Harrison, who has recently migrated from Ghana to Britain with his mother and older sister. It describes the last few months of his life before his murder. He lives in an inner city housing estate in the aftermath of the killing of another schoolboy in the area. The supernatural aspect is presented in the form of a pigeon narrator that interacts with Harrison only after his death. *Hello Mum* also describes events leading up to the main character Jerome’s violent death at the hands of a local youth gang. The whole book takes the form of a letter Jerome writes to his mother, and its ethereal reality is only exposed at the end, when it is made clear that it is a posthumous correspondence from the deceased teenager. The supernatural in both these novels emphasises the material limitations experienced by these boys which they can only overcome by moving beyond their physical realities. These young male characters seem to be trapped in urbanised prisons of ‘mighty’ buildings and ‘Suicide Heights’, where violence and crime are ordinary happenings (Kelman, 2011, p. 5; Evaristo, 2010, p. 2).

Both Kelman and Evaristo produce stories about children’s safety as it is threatened by gang culture in council estates in London. Kelman based *Pigeon English* (2011) on the actual murder of ten-year-old Damilola Taylor on a Peckham estate. Evaristo interviewed teenagers involved in gangs for *Hello Mum* (2010) and emphasises that she wrote the novella to speak for them (Donnell, 2019, p. 441). Nevertheless, these narratives cannot be considered simply realist, because the spiritual world becomes an essential sphere for them, as the main characters break free from the social order into a higher order. The fact that neither youth was completely submerged in the underworld of crime would have opened up other possibilities if they had escaped their premature deaths. Although their stories seem ominous, they offer hope of a brighter future for others like them who might be better protected. Therefore, these two books are considered modernist realist texts because they push the limits of realism to offer symbolic optimistic endings to a bleak reality.

Chapter four moves to consider representations of boyhood in the north of England, specifically 1960s and 1970s Manchester. It analyses *My Name Is Why* (Sissay 2019) and *Forever and Ever Amen* (Pemberton 2000). Sissay’s book is an account of his childhood as a foster child in a white family and later in the care system and children’s homes. It includes actual documents written by social workers about his case. Yet Sissay’s narrative and his creative approach is full of symbolism portraying the care system as a dehumanising mechanism that makes the story sometimes seem dystopian. For example, he describes the Mother and Baby Homes in which unmarried pregnant women were placed in 1970s England as ‘baby farms’ ‘with the sole aim of harvesting their children, then the women were shipped back home’ (2019a, p. 24, 21). Although this is the only text included in the present thesis that is non-fiction, I included it as a modernist realist text because it does not adhere to the realist chronological narrative of autobiography and mixes different poetry and prose genres.

Pemberton creates a modernist realist novel enriched by his fictionalised self, James. Pemberton’s novel is about his childhood memories of Moss Side in the 1960s. The author appears as the narrator at the beginning of the novel; however, the narrative shifts to the point of view of James, who the author claims to be his childhood imaginary friend. As Pemberton’s imagined alter ego, James enables the narrative to move smoothly between different histories of Britain and the Caribbean, thereby representing the multidirectional memory of contemporary Britain and the former territories of the British Empire. Michael Rothberg (2009, p. 4) defines multidirectional memory as ‘a series of interactions through which social actors bring multiple traumatic pasts into a heterogeneous and changing post-World War II present’. James’s close relationship with his white neighbour Aunty Mary initiates the dialogue between the traumatic history of slavery and colonialism in the Caribbean and the horror of World War II in Britain and Europe. James uses his imagination to travel back to histories he never encountered but only learned about from his white elderly neighbours and African-Caribbean parents and relatives. He travels back to the time of his grandmother’s premature death in the house in St Kitts belonging to Mr Orson, the white owner of the sugar plantation in their village. The grandmother’s story, among others, reflects the connected past of black and white British lives. As Hall (1997) describes the shared history of the Caribbean and Britain:

People like me who came to England in the 1950s have been there for centuries; symbolically, we have been there for centuries. I was coming home. I am the sugar at the bottom of the English cup of tea. I am the sweet tooth, the sugar plantations that rotted generations of English children’s teeth. (p. 48)

The Caribbean’s past is part of British history, and, although officially ignored, it has been brought to the UK by people who have migrated here before and since the Second World War.

**Conclusion**

My focus here is on narratives of black children in Britain. However, I do not imply that these narratives are homogenous in their thematic choice of childhood and their resistance to genre. I use an ‘anti-essentialist’ approach which does not explore blackness as a common racial identity but as the heterogenous experiences of racially marginalised others. In so doing, I follow Gilroy’s (1993b, p. 14) insight that ‘this anti-essentialism could approach the every-day world, mindful of its comprehensive asymmetry, and work to locate a different fragmentary beauty amidst the irreducible chaos of racial antagonisms’. In the everyday world, the intersections of different social factors, such as age, gender and class, with ‘race’ result in diverse narratives of childhood. The texts I carefully chose show this diversity, as I start with black British girlhood in London’s suburbs, then move to boyhood in the city’s council estates and conclude with boyhood in the north of England. Furthermore, as suggested above, ‘black British’ is a slippery category, and different forces contribute to changing and moulding it. These forces are personal, social, cultural, political and historical. I therefore combine different methodologies in examining the texts included here. My main argument is that these texts expand British realism to include their characters’ transnational heritages and to show their peculiar positions within it. Mark Stein (2004) states that ‘black Britain is distinct from other post-colonial cultures: It lays claim to post-colonial and to British cultures *in Britain*, creating in the process [Stein quotes Hall] “a new kind of space at the centre”’ (p. xv, emphasis in original). Hence, focusing only on specific postcolonial theoretical approaches is not sufficient for understanding these texts. For example, it is impossible to consider *26a* as a purely magical realist text because the mystical is not only the place of the other or the foreign, like in most postcolonial writing, but also includes a British historical and political figure, William Ewart Gladstone. The same is true of *Forever and Ever Amen* because at the centre of the magical narrative is Aunty Mary, the deceased white neighbour of James’s family. Consequently, I use a combination of the most fitting theoretical approaches – the categorisation of modernist realism as an experimental genre, and the conceptualisation of the abject – because they are necessary to understand these complex texts. My analysis in the following chapters will demonstrate this using close reading and cultural contextualisation techniques. Reading these texts as part of a hybrid literary tradition, that comprises black and British, and realist and modernist, within a common framework of childhood, offers a fresh perspective on writing about black British experiences. This thesis contributes to broadening the critical lens on black British writing, presenting it as part of world literature because these texts cannot be limited to one specific context or genre.[[14]](#footnote-15)

**Chapter 1: *The Icarus Girl:* Seeking for an Authentic Self**

My mother had two faces and a frying pot

where she cooked up her daughters

into girls

before she fixed our dinner.

[…]

I bear two women upon my back

one dark and rich and hidden

in the ivory hungers of the other

mother

[…]

Mother I need

mother I need

mother I need your blackness now

as the august earth needs rain.

(Audre Lorde, ‘From the House of Yemanjá’, 1997, p. 235)

In this poem, Audre Lorde depicts the impact of double-consciousness on the mother–daughter relationship.[[15]](#footnote-16) She uses Yemanjá, a Yoruba deity and a motherly figure, as a metaphor of the mother. Consequently, the mythical becomes an allegory for the psychological struggle of the daughter. In *The Icarus Girl* (2005), Helen Oyeyemiemploys a similar technique. In this chapter and through a close reading of *The Icarus Girl,* I explore the use of Yoruba mythology as illustrative of the psychological effect of racial othering on the child’s subjectivity. I start with the western psychoanalytical approach and end with the Yoruba cultural approach. These are two distinct but necessary analyses to understand the novel’s unstable reality of a little girl growing up between two cultures.

Helen Oyeyemi was only eighteen when she started writing her debut novel, *The Icarus Girl,* about an eight-year-old mixed-race only child of a white British father and a Nigerian mother. Rather than portraying childhood as a time of carefree existence and rosy dreams, it depicts the struggle within one’s inner and outer realities to form an identity. The novel highlights the psychological and social effort required to mature as a minority child. Understanding the unusual circumstances of such a childhood, Oyeyemi describes the child protagonist of the novel as ‘this kind of new-breed kid, the immigrant diasporic kid of any race who is painfully conscious of a need for some name that she can call herself with some authority’ (as quoted in Lee, 2005, para.16). This search for identity and struggle to form an autonomous self that resists others’ constructions of her is the most prominent feature of the novel. The child struggles to understand herself within a culture that does not acknowledge her. The present chapter examines Oyeyemi’s *The Icarus Girl,* which provides insights into the representation of the child of an immigrant parent. It explores the sociocultural, psychological and spatial struggle of the culturally dominated and marginalised child in the novel. It argues that such marginality problematises the child’s maturation process and sense of belonging, which could be resolved by finding cultural inclusion in parental or local cultures.

The novel is set in both London and Nigeria, from the summer of 1994 to the summer of 1995. Jessamy Harrison has lived her whole life in Britain with her father, Daniel, and her mother, Sarah. She has a twin Fern who is born dead, but Jess does not know about her until later in the novel. Jess is not introduced to her mother’s country until she is eight. Jess lives a solitary life in London, where she prefers sitting in small, enclosed areas and spends most of her time reading books such as *Little Women* and *A Little Princess* in her room. During her first visit to Nigeria, she is introduced to her Yoruba name, Wuraola (gold), given to her by her Nigerian grandfather, Gbenga Oyegbebi. At her grandfather’s compound near Ibadan, she goes inside an abandon servants’ building,the Boys’ Quarters. There she comes across a shrine of candles around a charcoal drawing on a wooden board of a woman with long arms, an *ere ibeji,* who Jess later refers to as the long-armed woman.[[16]](#footnote-17) Then, she encounters a little girl of her age called Titiola, a name she cannot pronounce. As they become best friends, Jess changes Titiola’s name to TillyTilly, and TillyTilly calls her Jessy. After the Harrisons return to London, Jess’s life becomes even more complicated, as she is moved up from year four to year five at school, where she is constantly bullied by her white classmate, Colleen McLain. One day, TillyTilly appears outside Jess’s back door to tell her that she and her family have moved to their area. Later, when Sarah decides to seek psychological therapy for her daughter and Jess starts to bond with her white psychologist’s daughter, Siobhan McKenzie, TillyTilly’s behaviour begins to change. She becomes supernatural and starts to appear to Jess out of thin air. She tells Jess about her deceased twin claiming that she also lost a twin. The conflict between the two girls intensifies when Jess goes back to Nigeria for her ninth birthday. TillyTilly first succeeds in possessing Jess’s body and then takes her to ‘the bush’ or ‘a wilderness for the mind’, which is a mythical Yoruba space, where she meets Fern spirit and the final confrontation between Jess and TillyTilly happens (p. 191).

As modernist realist narrative, *The Icarus Girl* incorporates different traditions, myths, literary texts and genres within its space to highlight the multicultural dimensions of diaspora. This cultural heterogeneity underscores Jess’s fragmented identity and lack of belonging. Positioned between two different literary and cultural traditions, starting with Emily Dickinson’s poem ‘Alone, I cannot be’ and ending with the Yoruba poem ‘Praise of the Leopard’, Oyeyemi’s novel conveys not only hybridity as its theme but also Jess’s journey; she starts off as a lonely child seeking companionship and transforms into a strong independent girl. Hence, *The Icarus Girl* is a bildungsroman about a girl’s journey from cultural fragmentation to a unified sense of hybridity, achieved by reconnecting to her maternal Yoruba roots. She goes through what Hall (1994, p. 402) calls the ‘diaspora experience [ …] defined, not by essence or purity, but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a conception of “identity” which lives with and through, not despite, difference; by *hybridity*’ (emphasis in original). The novel centres around Jess’s consciousness and how she perceives the everyday realities of London and Ibadan to expose the challenges of diaspora experience.

The novel certainly invites different readings because it combines two very different backgrounds, that of the Yoruba myth of *ibeji* (twins figures) and *abiku* (the spirit of the child) and that of western psychoanalysis, represented by Dr McKenzie.[[17]](#footnote-18) Psychoanalysis is dismissed in the novel because it intensifies Jess’s crisis, rather than resolving it; however, some critical studies of the novel follow a psychoanalytical approach by reading Jess as mentally ill. For example, Christopher Ouma’s (2014) psychosocial analysis of Jess’s identity narrative reflects the clashes between the two cultures. He argues that the novel represents an original approach to the *abiku,* as itis removed from its original Yoruba cultural setting and integrated into a Lacanian racialised psychoanalytical frame (Ouma, 2014, p. 194).

Diana Mafe (2012) combines Lacanian theory with Kristeva’s psychoanalytic theory. Her reading focuses on hybridity as a representation of the novel’s form. She argues that the novel combines two traditions of writing: the postcolonial female gothic and the Yoruba androcentric ‘bush narrative’ (Mafe, 2012, p. 23). She reads the bush (the Yoruba mythical realm) as Jess’s postcolonial selfhood and TillyTilly as a Yoruba gothic alter ego and the ‘*monstrou*s Feminine’ (Mafe, 2012, p. 27, emphasis in original). Although Mafe examines different ‘models’ of the ‘engulfing’ ‘monstrous maternal’, her reading is mainly located within a frame connecting the novel with the eighteenth-century female gothic (2012, p. 26, p.27). Yet she analyses the bush as an allegorical space for Jess’s psychological struggle with her mixed cultures, which add a new dimension to the West African bush tale. She uses a feminist approach in reading the novel, emphasising that Oyeyemi rewrites the bush tale using a female protagonist, rather than the usual male one. She considers TillyTilly a ‘suppressed and yet pervasive female agency, including the life-giving agency of the mother’ (Mafe, 2012, p. 22). According to her, TillyTilly is an abject female figure and the abject alter ego of Jess because TillyTilly masters hybridity – something that Jess desires but fears (Mafe, 2012, p. 27). The present chapter of this thesis also focuses on consuming maternal figures, within a psychoanalytical frame, but adds a cultural analysis because what haunts Jess is the notion of blackness being connected solely to her maternal heritage. I read TillyTilly and Jess’s mother, Sarah, as maternal abject figures, using not only Kristeva’s theory but also Melanie Klein’s theory of maternal phantasies, which I will explain later.

Furthermore, I focus on the figure and perspective of the child. The only previous study centring on the child figure in *The Icarus Girl* is Madelaine Hron’s ‘*Ora na-azu nwa*: The figure of the child in third-generation Nigerian novels’ (2008). She brings forward ‘the child-hero’ as a dominant feature of third-generation Nigerian writing, placing Oyeyemi’s novel within a other tradition of contemporary Nigerian literature. By considering the child’s perspective in different contexts, Hron’s study emphasises that child narratives can deal with ‘themes too large for adult fiction’ (2008, p. 29). However, Hron’s reading reduces the child figure to a mere vehicle for ‘engaging’ global north readers (2008, p. 28).

All the above-mentioned studies neglect a critical aspect of Jess’s identity crisis: she is a daughter trying to construct her autonomy apart from her mother’s authority. By reading the novel from the angle of the mother–daughter relationship, this thesis offers a different perspective on the various themes the novel tackles, such as identity formation, displacement and hybridity. Starting with the sociocultural conditions of Jess’s childhood, the analysis of the novel will be based on object relations theory, especially the concepts of ‘transitional phenomena’ from Donald Winnicott (1971, p.3), ‘unconscious phantasies’ from Melanie Klein (1987, p. 52) and the ‘death-bearing maternal’ from Kristeva (1989, p.29), all of which offer essential insights into the mother–daughter dyad through psychoanalysis.

A psychoanalytical approach to the novel seems needed for several reasons. First, psychoanalysis is included in the novel as a method to understand TillyTilly. It is placed in opposition to Yoruba mythology, one tradition against the other. It is therefore necessary to explore this side of the novel along with the Yoruba one. Second, although the narrative is in a third person omniscient form, it constantly moves in and out of Jess’s mind, giving the reader access to her thoughts and showing us the world from her perspective. Jess’s psychic realm is woven into the real world of the novel, creating a modernist realist narrative. This mode positions the narrative in an in-between space, or, more specifically, within Jess’s ‘transitional’ space (Winnicott 1971, p.3). Winnicott defines ‘transitional phenomena’ as ‘the third part of the life of a human being, a part that we cannot ignore […] an intermediate area of *experiencing*, to which inner reality and external life both contribute’ (1971, p.3, emphasis in original). He later adds: ‘This intermediate area is in direct continuity with the play area of the small child who is “lost” in play’ (1971, p. 18). Winnicott, believing it is the mother’s responsibility to facilitate such a transitional space by attending to her child’s needs (1971, p. 18). The child’s relationship with society is formed within the transitional space, which is also the space where culture is established (Winnicott, 1971, p. 3). In this sense, the mother is located at the centre of the child’s psychological and cultural development. Nevertheless, Kristeva refers to the mother as the semiotic, which is the nonverbal stage of the child’s development before learning language and being initiated into the symbolic or the law of the father, as Lacan hypothesises, which place the father at the centre of culture (Kristeva1982, p. 72). Jess’s transitional space moves between her maternal and paternal cultures. She only speaks English and knows Yoruba culture through music, food and clothes. Accordingly, the British dominant culture becomes the symbolic and the Yoruba culture the semiotic, but this will change as the novel progresses and when Jess meets her Yoruba grandfather.

Winnicott’s notion of transitional space is similar to Soja’s theory of Thirdspace, in that both spaces are located between mental and material spaces. Oyeyemi creates a mode of ‘thirding’ in the novel. ‘Thirding’, a term coined by Soja, as described in my introduction, is a way of thinking beyond the duality of material and mental spaces to create a third space where both spaces interact and influence each other (Soja, 1996, p. 11). This thirding mode transforms the material spaces in London and Ibadan into magical spaces by weaving Yoruba myth into them to create the third space of hybridity and transforms the margins into a space of resistance.

Being black, female and a child, Jess occupies the margin, and she needs to negotiate her identity and belonging in this peripheral space, pushing the reader, as they are given access to her thoughts, into a place of alienation, displacement and oppression. Only by altering the boundaries around this cultural space is the child protagonist able to find her subjectivity and construct her own identity. However, one might ask how a little girl occupying such controlled spaces can challenge the boundaries of dominant cultures. The answer is: through play.

For Winnicott, play is both essential for identity formation and vital for cultural creativity because playing allows the child the freedom ‘to be creative’ and to ‘discover the self’ (1971, pp. 73, 135). Jess’s ordeal with TillyTilly can be read as a negative version of playing, as it concludes with Jess discovering herself and her cultural background, thus forcing her to face her insecurities as a mixed-race child. Hence, TillyTilly is not just a childish imaginary friend but a shadowy dominant unconscious figure, exemplifying Winnicott’s argument that ‘If the child is to become an adult, then this move is achieved over the dead body of an adult. (I must take it for granted that the reader knows that I am referring to unconscious fantasy, the material that underlies playing)’ (1971, p. 195). In other words, according to Winnicott, for a child to gain autonomy, they should eliminate a certain unconscious fantasy that is dominating them. In Jess’s case, TillyTilly represents a maternal unconscious fantasy, which will be explained in detail later in the second section of this chapter in relation to Klein’s and Kristeva’s theories. Consequently, Jess must not only form her identity between two cultures, but also find her authentic self away from her mother figure. The novel deals with finding subjectivity and forming a hybrid identity. Hence the authentic self is not a pure unchangeable essence but rather indicates Jess’s sense of subjectivity that empowers her to escape from the abject position through finding connections to several cultures. For these reasons, this chapter is divided into four more parts. The first three of these parts reflect Jess’s multi-layered struggle, as she needs to overcome cultural, psychological and spatial boundaries to form her identity. The fourth part is a conclusion exploring the meaning of the authentic self in the novel.

**Cultural Struggle: Fitting One Child into Many Childhoods**

This section discusses the first layer of Jess’s struggle: how she is faced with ambivalent concepts of childhood and how she constantly tries to fit into these concepts as she grows between two cultures. As a mixed-race and bicultural child, Jess is characterised as a stranger to Nigerian and British cultures. She experiences the Nigerian culture as an outsider and is treated as an alien in Britain. In addition to being racially and culturally marginalised, Jess has a controlling mother, who wants her daughter to play outside instead of reading books and wishes to choose the books she reads (i.e. she refuses to let her read western fairy tales). Her mother would even slap her head if she thought ‘Jess had behaved badly’(p. 114). These combined elements complicate Jess’s identity formation.

Jess’s first encounter with Nigeria as seen from the aeroplane is described as follows: ‘It was looming out […] reaching out with spindly arms made of dry, crackling grass like straw, wanting to pull her down against its beating heart, to the centre of the heat so that she would pop and crackle like a marshmallow’ (p. 9). By describing Nigeria as having ‘spindly arms’ and ‘a beating heart’, and later a centre of heat, the narrator represents the country first as a mother embracing her long-lost child, and then as the sun. As she feels the hold of her actual mother and her mother’s motherland, Jess has a panic attack and flies into a tantrum (p. 10). Jess’s reaction is explained later when she compares being Nigerian to ‘being stretched’ beyond physical borders, which is painful and impossible (p. 257). The traditional Nigerian attire worn by Sarah, Jess’s mother, also illustrates this idea of stretching: ‘so bright it seemed to stretch the space between the walls’ (p. 9). However, for Sarah, the space around her extends to encompass her hybrid identity, rather than her own body. She masters her transnational existence effectively: ‘lapsing from her English accent into the broad, almost lilting Yoruba one’, or wrapping her Nigerian costume around her body with a ‘loving carelessness’ (pp. 8–9).

The second metaphorical image of Nigeria from the plane is more connected to the novel’s title: the sun was Icarus’s undoing, whereas Nigeria seems to be Jess’s undoing. The Icarus of the novel’s title could be read as a motif of ‘parental failure’ because Daedalus failed his son Icarus twice by creating unnatural flimsy wings and trying unsuccessfully to predict his emotional urges (Davisson, 1997, p. 269). Similarly, Sarah’s failure to teach her daughter the Yoruba language and culture results in Jess having a superficial Nigerian identity. Sarah seems to have been assimilated into British culture but still has access to her birth culture through language, music and food. She enjoys cooking puff-puff, an African dish, with ‘her friend, Bisola Coker, Tunde’s mum’, whose forename suggests Yoruba origins. However, Jess has no such access: she ‘couldn’t speak Yoruba to save her life’, Yoruba singing is ‘so incomprehensible’ to her and, as noted by Hron, she cannot name some of her mother’s Nigerian dishes (Oyeyemi, 2005, pp. 48, 226, 195; Hron, 2008, p. 36). Her only connection to her maternal country is through her mother’s stories of African folklore. Africa for Jess becomes a magical space which is only accessible via the maternal oral narrative of fantastical stories. Furthermore, by Nigerians, Jess is considered an ‘*oyinbo*’, which means a ‘stranger’ (Oyeyemi, 2005, pp. 17, 239, 309; Hron, 2008, p. 36). Even Jess compares herself to a marshmallow, which is white and soft: she does not see herself as part Nigerian but as a foreigner threatened by a strange land.

Nevertheless, as ‘half-black’, Jess is considered Nigerian in Britain (Oyeyemi, 2005, p. 254). Reni Eddo-Lodge (2017, p. 44) argues that because ‘we are born into an already written script that tells us what to expect from strangers due to their skin colour, accents and social status, the whole of humanity is coded as white. Blackness, however, is considered the “other” and therefore to be suspected’. Jess main problem that she considers her mother’s heritage as foreign and hence struggles to accept it. Colleen McLain’s harassment of Jess, at school, for her African background reinforces Jess’s resistance to her mother’s culture: ‘My mum says it’s not your fault you’re mad, she says it’s the way you’ve been brought up. Your family is weird, didn’t you know?’ (Oyeyemi, 2005, p. 108). Colleen also links Jess’s unstable personality to her skin colour rather to her sociocultural conditions: ‘Maybe Jessamy has all these “attacks” because she can’t make up her mind whether she’s black or white’ (p. 86). Consequently, Jess feels out of place in both Britain and Nigeria.

Some critics interpret the twin trope in the novel as a symbol of Jess’s ‘halving and doubling’, ‘double consciousness’ or ‘divided self’ that reflect postcolonial theories of hybridity (Bryce, 2008, p. 63; Cuder-Domínguez, 2009, p. 280). However, in the Yoruba belief system, twins share the same soul, and Jess is a half-twin (Oruene, 1985, p. 209). The twin trope thus reflects Jess’s incompleteness, thereby supporting the readings of both Hron (2008, p. 36) and Chinenye Okparanta (2008, p.201).The dead twin, Fern, symbolises the part of Jess that is Yoruba, which her mother never cultivated because she did not teach her Yoruba language which would have given her access to her maternal culture. Jess was born with two cultural backgrounds but raised in one, and this ‘primary socialisation’ has moulded Jess’s self as British, whereas her Nigerian culture is a ‘secondary socialisation’ that overlaps with this self (Katz, 1996, p. 31). Jess’s first impression of Nigeria is guided by her prejudice, as for her, ‘Nigeria felt ugly’ (Oyeyemi, 2005, p. 9).

Ironically, Nigeria as a name and territory is a British colonial invention (Helly and Callaway, 2004; Falola and Heaton, 2008, p. 158). What feels ugly for Jess is the country’s representation and not the country itself. Cultural misrepresentation is a recurring theme in the novel. Jess notices that while the *ibeji* drawing in the Boys’ Quarters is frightening, ‘the actual woman’, the long-armed woman, who kept appearing in her dreams ‘was lovely’ (Oyeyemi, 2005, p. 133). In addition, she rejects the *ibeji* statue of her sister because she feels it does not reflect her. Therefore, Ilott and Buckley (2016, p. 411) conclude that her refusal of the figure as a symbol of the dead twin is ‘in part, a rejection of Yoruba practices in which ìbejì statues are not

mimetic, but symbolic and idealized.’ However, the Yoruba practice of carving an *ibeji* statue is considered unacceptable by contemporary Nigerian culture as well, which has moved towards other ways of honouring dead twins, such as photography (Renne, 2011, p. 321). Jess refusal of the *ibeji* statue does not necessarily means she refuses her Yoruba heritage.

Moreover, the issue of religious misrepresentation is not limited to the Yoruba culture but extends to western culture. Sarah does not accept Christianity because of Jesus’s portrayal as ‘a white hippy’ (Oyeyemi, 2005, p. 277). Richard Dyer (1997) demonstrates that during the Renaissance, the representations of Jesus started to become lighter, depicting a ‘marking of otherness by skin colour’, especially against those who are ‘unsaved’ or non-Christians (p. 66). This ‘skin-symbol colour consciousness’ was ‘heightened’ during the Crusades when whiteness was seen as a sign of morality (p. 67). By the end of the nineteenth century, portraits of Jesus present him as fully white with blue eyes, fair skin and blond hair (p. 67). Sarah explains to her daughter that she cannot believe in a god ‘when there’s nothing of him in [her] face’, but Jess believes that ‘it doesn’t matter about faces’ (Oyeyemi, 2005, p. 228). Jess’s response shows that she understands that representation does not always reflect reality.

Jess constantly struggles to fit different models of childhood, which are also subject to misrepresentation, as she grows between two cultures:

In Nigeria, her mother had said, children were always getting themselves into mischief, and surely that was better than sitting inside reading and staring into space all day. But her father, who was English and insisted that things were different here, said it was more or less normal behaviour and that she’d grow out of it. Jess didn’t know who was right; she certainly didn’t feel as if she was about to run off and get herself into mischief, and she wasn’t sure whether she should hope to or not. (p. 5)

Here Sarah trays to convey her heritage to her daughter. She also expresses a nostalgic view with respect to her daughter, judging her for failing to bring back a lost Nigerian childhood, as Jess prefers to sit in her room and read a book, rather than go outside and get herself into mischief. Jacqueline Rose (1984) argues that the child is sometimes seen as ‘a pioneer who restores [lost] worlds to us, and gives them back to us with a facility or directness which ensures that our own relationship to them is, finally, safe’ (p. 9). The idea of the child as the origin of identity can bridge the gap between adults and children. Jess’s failure to embody Sarah’s ideal childhood is reflected in their relationship, as both feel that, somehow, they have failed each other. In an effort to salvage this relationship, Sarah takes Jess to Nigeria, to the site of Sarah’s ‘lost moment in history’(a phrase I borrow from Rose, 1984, p. 43), the place of her lost childhood, believing that the child can ‘retrieve’ it (Oyeyemi, 2005, p. 6).

Additionally, Jess does not feel that she fits into the image of the socially constructed child. This notion is demonstrated during her flight to Nigeria: ‘Jess somehow understood that this woman […] was not smiling at her in particular, but at a child, at the idea of a child’ (Oyeyemi, 2005, p. 11). She comprehends that the flight attendant sees her as a carefree child. Furthermore, she is labelled in school as ‘weird’ because of her inability to communicate with her classmates (p. 108).

Because the child protagonist is faced with ambivalent cultural influences, reflected by the different names she has – Jess, Jessy, Jessamy Harrison and Wuraola – hearing her Yoruba name for the first time from her grandfather makes her feel that if she answers to that name, she would ‘steal the identity of someone who belongs’ to Nigeria (p. 20). However, in answering TillyTilly, who calls her ‘Jessy’, she accepts this ‘halfway’ self that TillyTilly gives her (p. 41). Possessing a halfway identity means that Jess is a subject in process, which as Mafe argues does not trap her within a certain identity that belongs only to Nigeria or Britain, but allows her to negotiate to belong on her own terms (2012, p. 24).

For Jess, the towel cupboard in her kitchen at home seems like a safe place where she is concealed from the judgemental looks of others. The cupboard, as will be discussed later in this chapter in more detail, is a symbol of the security and plenitude of the maternal body. ‘Outside the cupboard, Jess felt as if she was in a place where everything moved past too fast, all colours, all people talking and wanting her to say things. So she kept her eyes on the ground, which pretty much stayed the same’ (p. 4). Moreover, in school, she spends lunchtime in the nurse’s office. Being the only biracial eight-year-old in year five, she is alienated from her classmates not only by race but also by age. The only one trying to be nice to her is Tunde; however, Jess is unable to communicate with him because she believes ‘that he, much like any other boy in their class, would do anything the blonde, dimpled Alison Carr asked’ (p. 83). In comparison with Alison, Jess finds herself lacking and therefore dismisses Tunde’s interest in her. It seems that the rest of the class, and even Tunde, whose name suggests an African background, are influenced by the whiteness of their culture, because they only appreciate Eurocentric beauty standards.

While Sarah bans Barbie dolls to protect her daughter from white standards of beauty, she exposes her to exclusively white literature, that is, the English literature canon in which people of colour do not exist or represented negatively. Jess accuses her mother: ‘you’re the one who reads me Shakespeare and stuff!’ (Oyeyemi, 2005, p. 161). Caroline Spurgeon, in her study on symbolism in Shakespeare’s work, demonstrates that whiteness there usually indicates ‘beauty’ and ‘purity’ ( 1971, p. 64–68). In addition, Dyer emphasises that in western myths and fairy tales, blondness, which is ‘uniquely white’, and beauty seem ‘synonymous’ (1997, pp. 44, 71). This results in Jess perceiving blonde hair as a symbol of beauty. It is the blonde Alison who is considered the prettiest girl in school. Moreover, Jess believes that her cousin Dulcie’s tossing of her own blonde hair is ‘a demand for admiration’ because everyone ‘went mad over Dulcie’s long blond hair’ (Oyeyemi, 2005, p. 139). Furthermore, Dulcie’s family ‘looked like a picture-book family: blonde man, blonde woman, cute little blonde child’ (p.152). This is quite the opposite image to Jess’s family, who seem to Jess to be a mishmash: a ‘woman who has a Nigerian maiden name in a British passport […] with a white man and a half-and-half child’ (p. 13). Ironically, apart from Colleen, Jess is the only person who turns a racialised gaze on herself and her mother, as being half-and-half indicates a black/white binary, rather than considering her African and English cultures as parts of her ethnic identity. Her mother’s Nigerian roots seem to her, especially, to be at odds with her British nationality. Likewise, she cannot construct her subjectivity outside of Eurocentric discourse, which positions her as the other. Hence, whereas she mentally struggles for days to produce a haiku and fails, she can more easily modify and rewrite American and British classics such as *Little Women* (Alcott, 1868) and *A Little Princess* (Burnett, 1905)(Oyeyemi, 2005, p. 59).

Like *The Icarus Girl, Little Women* deals both with the struggle in girlhood to adapt to sociocultural boundaries, which will be discussed in this paragraph. In *Little Women*, each March girl has a different colour copy of *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, belying, as Holly Blackford argues the ‘sameness within’ (2006, p. 6). Similarly, Jess and her mother have different copies of *Little Women*. In Nigeria, TillyTilly gives Jess Sarah’s copy of *Little Women*, after sneaking into Jess’s grandfather’s study, indicating that the book was among the study bookshelves but had been overlooked by Jess. The two copies of the same novel can be seen to symbolise the way that Sarah and Jess, mother and daughter, have gone through different versions of a similar story of personal development. In Britain, Jess feels marginalised by the whiteness of British culture, whereas her mother, Sarah, struggles with the patriarchy of Nigerian culture. After all, Sarah’s version of *Little Women* contrasts with her father’s literary collection, comprising works by Nigerian literary father figures, such as Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* (1958) and Wole Soyinka’s play *A Dance of the Forests* (1963),as well as Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s poetry and the Bible. Like the March sisters, Jess and Sarah have to grow up in societies where their voices are ‘unrepresented’ (Blackford, 2006, p. 10). The mother’s and daughter’s stories are parallel, and, like *Little Women*, which is overlooked in the grandfather’s study in favour of other male-authored literary works, both stories are disregarded due to their societies’ limitations. In a way that echoes her mother’s autonomous journey to forge an identity as a woman in a patriarchal society, Jess must navigate her cultural identity by herself as a second-generation immigrant; however, when she comes to terms with her mixed heritage, she can reconcile with her mother.

Whereas Mrs March submits to the limitations of her society and initiates her daughters into following her example, Sarah challenges her society’s boundaries. First, she escapes her father and his desire to make the decision for her to study medicine which is problematic. Then, she spends most of her time reaffirming her subjectivity through writing and publishing. Although the type of book Sarah writes is not indicated, Oyeyemi gives hints, especially through Sarah’s father’s accusations. In his first meeting with his granddaughter, he tells Jess that Sarah ‘went to England, and studied English stories, and gave up her own’ (p. 27). Then, he adds, ‘she didn’t just take her body away from this place – she took everything. Nothing of her is left here’ (p. 28). In his study, Jess’s grandfather possesses English literary books; he even named his granddaughter Wuraola, which means ‘gold’, to celebrate her biracial and bicultural heritage (p. 19). What he criticises here is not hybridity but the abandoning of one’s culture. Sarah’s emigration results in a fractured history and discontinued story of origins. The possibility of a different story, a Nigerian story, is replaced by an English one. It is likely that Sarah’s books are not about her homeland or ancestral culture, because she reads parts of her books to Jess, who does not learn about Yoruba culture until TillyTilly’s appearance. There are several possible reasons for Sarah not writing about her Yoruba roots. One possibility is that she appropriates her own cultural background to bridge the gap between Nigerian and British cultures, thereby producing migrant writing which is sometimes accused of being ‘literature without loyalties’, criticised for its ‘national or historical rootlessness’ (Boehmer, 2005, pp. 232–233). Another possibility is that Sarah excludes her Yoruba culture from her writing so as to fit into British culture and be more successful as a writer.

In *The Heart of Race*, a nonfiction book written about female black British experience in the mid-1980s, around the time that the novel says Jess was born, the authors comment that they perceived whiteness as equivalent to ‘success’, hence they had a ‘confused sense of self and culture’ (Bryan, Dadzie and Scafe, 1985, p. 226). They add that their mothers were torn between, on the one hand, trying to protect them from discrimination by encouraging them to assimilate to British culture and ‘act white’, and, on the other hand, trying to preserve their culture of origin through them. However, the daughters realised that the best way to resist racism was to embrace their parents’ culture, and ‘use it as a buffer against the society’s assault on [their] identity’ (Bryan, Dadzie and Scafe, 1985, p. 227). Intergenerational conflict between mothers and daughters arose because the mothers wanted their daughters to portray themselves as white within white society, and to deny parts of themselves that were impossible to deny. Heidi Mirza argues: ‘Being “black” in Britain is about a state of “becoming” (racialized); a process of consciousness, when colour becomes the defining factor about who you are’ (1997, p. 3). If blackness is one’s defining factor, it is therefore impossible to be assimilated into the whiteness of the dominant culture. Therefore, embracing their roots in African or Caribbean cultures becomes, for black British people, an act of resistance and of liberation from their position as other. Jess embodies this struggle to develop the ability to resist whiteness by forming connection to her African heritage.

From within this tradition of forming transnational belonging, Jess is able to challenge both her mother and the boundaries of her British society. TillyTilly’s exposure of Sarah’s secret concerning Jess’s dead twin leads to Jess confronting her mother. Regardless of Jess’s ability to resist her mother, she still cannot construct her subjectivity away from her and connect to her maternal culture. One of the crucial moments in the novel is when Jess holds up a photo of a blonde girl looking at her smiling reflection. At the same time Jess tries to distinguish her own reflection in the dim light of her bathroom mirror, making ‘an accusing gesture’ to her reflection for not being what she expects (p. 185). As Jess is trying to see her features, the long-armed woman, who Jess started to see in her dreams after visiting Nigeria, is looming in the background singing a gloomy, mysterious song – a song about the impossibility of separation, as her mother is represented in the blackness of her reflection. Whereas her blackness connects her to her maternal homeland, it separates her from the whiteness of British culture. This problematises Jess’s maturation process because she cannot form her identity within a culture that does not recognise her. The following two sections of this chapter will explain how Jess challenges this cultural limitation.

**Psychological Struggle: Escaping the Mother**

Departing from Jess’s sociocultural conditions, this section focuses on the psychoanalytic dimension of Jess’s maturation process. In one of his psychoanalysis sessions, Dr McKenzie asks Jess to say the first word that comes to mind in response to his words. The session goes as follows:

‘Mummy.’

‘Um. Big. No –’

‘Daddy.’

‘Small. Smaller, I mean. Than –’

‘School.’

‘Nobody.’

‘Jess.’

‘Gone?’

‘Where have you gone, Jess?’

She had no idea. (Oyeyemi, 2005, p. 130)

Ouma (2014) comments in detail on Dr McKenzie’s Lacanian technique of accessing the unconscious through ‘free association of speech through narrative’ (p. 194). He concludes that Jess suffers ‘a loss of being’, hence the word ‘gone?’ (p. 194). However, he neglects to interpret the rest of the session. Mafe (2012) argues that the word ‘gone’ indicates that Jess was ‘once present but [is] now absent in this maternal territory’, namely the mother’s body (p.26). For her, ‘big’ refers to ‘the themes of pregnancy and birth’ and an ‘integral’ female gothic theme of ‘painful female creation and the maternal’ (p. 26). However, I argue that Jess’s words express a hierarchical division of power in her unconscious, where the mother is big, the father is small and Jess is lost in the maternal authority. This brings us back to Winnicott’s (1971) theory of the child gaining autonomy by overcoming a certain adult fantasy within the child’s unconscious. If ‘mummy’ is ‘big’ within Jess’s unconscious, then the maternal fantasy is what Jess needs to eliminate to achieve her autonomy and form her identity.

Similarly, Kristeva (1989, p. 27) emphasises that in the symbolic order, ‘the loss of the mother is a biological and psychic necessity, the first step on the way to becoming autonomous’. She adds that this is especially difficult for females who identify themselves with the mother (p. 28). Therefore, the matricidal drive, which is transformed to the maternal fantasy projecting the mother as ‘a death-bearing maternal’, sometimes ‘is not oriented toward the outside [the mother] but is locked up within [the daughter]’ (Kristeva, 1989, p.29). TillyTilly is the death-bearing mother here, which I will explain in details later in this section, and Jess must eliminate her or be eliminated by her. Jess’s grandfather tells a proverb about two hungry people who cannot be friends because ‘they eat each other up’(Oyeyemi, 2005, p. 240), which foreshadows the unavoidable confrontation between Jess and TillyTilly. The proverb also reflects an element in Jess’s psyche that can be described using Kristeva’s phrase, ‘melancholy cannibalism’: the way the self survives by eliminating and transcending the other by devouring it (Kristeva, 1989, p. 12).

TillyTilly also has a double: the long-armed woman. They are ‘the two sides of a thin coin’, and both are unconscious maternal fantasies or what Klein labels ‘phantasies’ (1987, p. 52). While psychoanalysing children, Klein (1987) noticed that they usually perceive the world through their unconscious fantasies and these phantasies have permanent consequences in a person’s unconscious (p. 52). She explains that during their infancy, babies divide their mothers into ‘good and bad’ objects, introjecting these external objects into themselves and projecting them onto the figure of the mother in the external world (Klein, 1987, pp. 176–177). TillyTilly and the long-armed woman represent the two divisions of the unconscious maternal phantasies. TillyTilly is the negative maternal phantasy and the long-armed woman the positive one.

On ‘the Kleinian definition of splitting’, Kristeva (1989, p. 18) comments that ‘it distinguishes a binary splitting (the distinction between “good” and “bad” object insuring the unity of the self) and a parcellary splitting – the latter affecting not only the object but, in return, the very self, which literally “falls into pieces”’. Here Kristeva explains that fragmenting the mother or the object of desire results in fragmenting the self because the subject is formed in opposition to the object. In such cases, the splitting of the object that involves introjecting and projecting confuses the boundaries of the subject, transforming the object into the abject. Accordingly, once the mother is split into parcellary objects, the phantasies of self and (m)other become mixed in the unconscious. Thus, TillyTilly is not only a maternal phantasy but also a projection of some of Jess’s suppressed traits.

The novel opens with Jess ensconced inside a cupboard in her house in London: ‘To Jess, sitting in the cupboard, the sound of her name was strange, wobbly, misformed, as if she were inside a bottle or a glass cube, maybe, and Mum was outside it, tapping’ (Oyeyemi, 2005, p. 3). The cupboard at the beginning of the novel resembles a womb that protects the child from the world (Oyeyemi, 2005, p. 4). Although Jess finds comfort in ‘enclosed spaces’ (p.4), she does not want to be in one with the mother. Rather, she misses the plenitude the maternal body offers, or what Kristeva identifies as the ‘Thing’ (Kristeva, 1989, p. 13). Kristeva describes the Thing ‘as the real that does not lend itself to signification, the center of attraction and repulsion,’ adding that it is ‘an unnameable, supreme good, […] something unrepresentable, that perhaps only devouring might represent, or an *invocation* might point out, but no word could signify’ (p. 13, emphasis in original). In other words, the Thing is the child as part of the mother and the world before the child’s recognition or misrecognition of their individuality and separation from their mother. This Thing is symbolised by Fern, a twin Jess has never met, a part of the self that was left behind, which she lost despite never knowing about her until TillyTilly told her:

She started off thinking about how tiny Fern had been, how fragile and moonlight pale, and then she realised with a shock that she, too, must once have been like that. Exactly like that, in fact. She held her hands up in front of her and tried to imagine them as pudgy little fists; tried to create a continuity between a time when she didn’t know herself and now when she was all too aware of her Jessness. (p. 171)

Even here when Jess starts to imagine her twin, it is not Fern she yearns for and mourns, but the time when she was unaware of her existence as a self outside the mother.

In fact, Oyeyemi’s use of certain poems accentuates this idea of Jess mourning the Thing. The novel’s prologue includes Emily Dickinson’s verse: ‘Alone I cannot be – / For Hosts do visit me – [sic] / Recordless Company’ (Oyeyemi, 2005, no pagination). In a study of some of Emily Dickinson’s poetry, Jadwiga Smith and Anna Kapusta conclude that it ‘parallels Julia Kristeva’s theory of mourning for the lost Thing’ (2008, p. 52). Similarly, if the prologue is read within the context of the novel, the words ‘recordless Company’ could refer to the ‘unrepresentable’, ‘unnameable’ Thing (Kristeva, 1989, p. 13). In addition, Kristeva emphasises that ‘poetic form, which decomposes and recomposes signs, is the sole “container” seemingly able to secure an uncertain but adequate hold over the Thing’ (1989, p. 14). As poetry does not always follow the rules of language, it is utilised as an escape from the symbolic (where the child is separated from the mother) into the real or the Thing (where the child is part of the mother). Consequently, Jess tries to retrieve the Thing by writing a poem about her sister Fern.

Another poem included in the novel is Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s ‘Kubla Khan’. The last stanza of the poem is read by Jess to TillyTilly in her grandfather’s study (Oyeyemi, 2005, p. 53):

And all should cry, Beware! Beware!  
His flashing eyes, his floating hair!  
Weave a circle round him thrice,  
And close your eyes with holy dread  
For he on honey-dew hath fed,  
And drunk the milk of Paradise.

The words ‘milk of Paradise’ here hint at maternal plenitude and the ‘supreme good’ (Kristeva, 1989, p. 13). Although this supreme good has transformed the speaker in the poem into something holy and a higher being, for Jess it is something threatening to the self and bodily boundaries, as she comments: ‘something so different and weird that when it touches other people it makes them different and weird too’ (Oyeyemi, 2005, p. 54).

Jess’s fear of being subsumed within the maternal space and losing her subjectivity is also shown by her reaction to the prospect of her first visit to Nigeria: ‘the leering idea of her mother’s country that made her begin to struggle and thrash’ (p. 10). There, she is also faced with doubleness in herself and her mother as she is introduced to her and her mother’s Yoruba names (Cuder-Domínguez, 2009, p. 282). This doubleness intensifies Jess’s anxiety and fear of disintegration because ‘Wuraola sounded like another person. Not her at all’ (Oyeyemi, 2005, p. 20). The visit to her maternal homeland invokes her unconscious maternal phantasies, as represented by TillyTilly and her *ibeji*, the long-armed woman, who Jess first sees as a charcoal drawing on a wooden board in the Boys’ Quarters (p. 74). While the long-armed woman represents the more traditional Yoruba mother, TillyTilly seems like a projection of Jess’s own suppressed aggression.

TillyTilly's arrival in the novel is linked to a usually suppressed trait in Jess, which is ‘to run off and get herself into mischief’ (p.6). The first time Jess encounters TillyTilly is after she goes into the Boys’ Quarters, despite her Aunty Funke’s words: ‘it’s all faulty inside’ (pp. 32, 39). Furthermore, TillyTilly only appears in Britain after Jess is overwhelmed by her school circumstances of being moved up from year four to year five (p. 86). Kristeva (1989, p. 10) points out: ‘instead of functioning as a “rewards system,” language, on the contrary, hyperactivates the “anxiety-punishment” pair, and thus inserts itself in the slowing down of thinking and decrease in psychomotor activity characteristic of depression’. Jess’s depressive mood, described by others as ‘sad’, results in her inability to communicate with her classmates in school verbally: ‘If they pushed her too far with their requests for her to open up, interact more, make friends, she would scream. They knew it. She’d done it before’ (Oyeyemi, 2005, pp. 4, 84). Therefore, she summons TillyTilly as a defence mechanism. Shortly after TillyTilly’s arrival in London, instead of falling into a screaming fit as usual in a bullying incident at school, Jess ‘lashed out’ at Colleen and her friends, hitting her in the face, and ‘stuffed’ Andrea’s fingers ‘into her mouth and BIT her, and bit and bit, and even chomped (*tried to eat her up*) snarling, clawing at Andrea’s shocked face’ (p. 106, emphasis and capital letters in original). She projects her aggression and hunger to be whole onto TillyTilly, hence Jess’s words to her: ‘I’m not full, but you’re the hungry one’ (p. 243). TillyTilly is thus a mixture of the suppressed self and the bad or devouring mother.

On the other hand, the long-armed woman is more like a good maternal phantasy that keeps visiting Jess in her dreams wearing a traditional West African *boubou*, holding her, smiling at her, speaking to her with no language, singing and telling her stories. Although the long-armed woman looks grotesque with her unnaturally long ‘elbowless’ arms, Jess never feels ‘afraid’ of her (p. 103). Ironically, Jess’s actual mother Sarah is the one described as ‘a shadow-lady, strange and dark, grotesque’, and mother and daughter feel a mutual fear of each other (p. 172). Sarah’s image keeps changing in the novel from ‘beautiful’ to ‘grotesque’ because it is altered and affected by Jess’s phantasies. Even when Jess reads her mother’s edition of *Little Women*, Beth, whom Jess relates to, seems malevolent and ‘jealous’, showing that she is projecting her negative feelings onto the character (p. 102).

Jess’s identification with Beth, who fails to articulate her identity outside the maternal realm of the March home, underscores the main issue for Jess, which is to either escape the mother or perish like Beth. Blackforddescribes *Little Women* as a ‘story of mother-dominated girlhood’(2006, p. 20), in which the March girls learn to navigate a male-dominated society and resist the temptation of ‘maternal oneness’, as they are, as Ann Murphy emphasises, ‘blessed (and cursed) with the most powerfully present mother in literature’(1990, p. 575). Like the March girls, Jess is enmeshed with a powerful maternal figure and almost non-existent father figures, which makes separation from the mother extremely difficult. However, *The Icarus Girl* reflects a more troubling side of this struggle in a postcolonial context, offering us a psychological insight into a challenging separation.

In addition, the material copies of *Little Women* in the novelact as transitional objects; such objects, according to Winnicott, symbolise the mother or part of the mother for the child (1971, p. 8). They allow the child to separate from her mother by providing a sense of comfort that calms the child’s separation anxiety. This is shown through Jess’s attachment to the book, especially her mother’s copy. The ‘battered copy’ contrasts with Jess’s ‘pristine’ copy (p.58). It contains both the mother’s and daughter’s names. On the flyleaf, only Sarah’s Yoruba name ‘Bisi Oyegbebi’ is ‘written in neat small black lettering’, while Jess’s Yoruba and English names are written in ‘wobbly, lopsided letters’ by TillyTilly with Jess’s grandfather’s black ink, linking Jess to her maternal heritage while reflecting her unstable identity (p.59). The double names ‘*JessaMY WuRaOla HaRRISOn’* destabilise Jess’s identity and push her to grow beyond the rigid extents of the maternal (p. 59, emphasis and capital letters in original). Thus, Sarah’s copy of *Little Women* both connects and disconnects the mother and daughter. The need for transitional objects is usually associated with sleep, loneliness or anxiety. Jess first reads her mother’s book when she has insomnia shortly after their return to Britain, and then when she feels anxious in school after being forced to go to the playground with her schoolmates instead of hiding in the nurse’s office. In the playground, she abandons *The Lord of the Rings* for the more comforting *Little Women* because it helps her to stay calm around other children. It is an essential part of Jess’s development and gradual separation from her mother.

The representation of the traditional Yoruba *ibeji* woman as a figure of positive motherhood contradicts Ilott and Buckley’s (2016) reading of Yoruba culture in the novel as the abject. Kristeva (1982, p. 2) describes the abject within oneself as follows: ‘a certain “ego” that merged with its master, a superego, has flatly driven [the abject] away. It lies outside, beyond the set, and does not seem to agree to the latter’s rules of the game. And yet, from its place of banishment, the abject does not cease challenging its master’. Accordingly, the abject is a part of the self that is not acceptable to the conscious mind and has therefore been driven into the unconscious. ‘The abject confronts us’, Kristeva (1982) adds, ‘with our earliest attempts to release the hold of [the] *maternal* entity even before existing outside of her, thanks to the autonomy of language. It is a violent, clumsy breaking away, with the constant risk of falling back under the sway of a power as securing as it is stifling’ (p. 13, emphasis in original). Hence, within the struggle to keep the boundaries of the self is ‘what, having been the mother, will turn into the abject’ (Kristeva, 1982, p. 13). The abject for Jess is not her Yoruba culture, because it is represented positively through the long-armed woman who is not a threat to Jess’s subjectivity. The abject is the diaspora existence of being forever dislocated with no homeland, as represented by TillyTilly, who is ejected from time and space. TillyTilly is an *abiku*, which is also a figure from Yoruba culture, but one who has been broken by her displacement. TillyTilly first loses her name, and then her appearance changes to fit into British society. In Britain, TillyTilly is physically and mentally different, as Jess notices: ‘this was either not Tilly or a different TillyTilly from the one that she had first met in Nigeria’ (Oyeyemi, 2005, p. 155). Her shabby appearance in Nigeria is replaced by a cleaner, healthier look, like that of a British school girl, with white knee socks, ‘shiny black buckled shoes’ and ‘a checked green dress’ (pp. 44, 90). TillyTilly’s words, ‘Land chopped in little pieces, and – ideas! These ideas! Disgusting … shame, shame, shame. It’s all been lost […] There is no homeland’ and ‘there is only me and I have caught you’ indicate that in Britain, TillyTilly changes into the diasporic abject (pp. 249, 250). The diasporic maternal abject threatens to eliminate Jess’s self because TillyTilly wants to possess her and ‘swap’ places with her. TillyTilly demands: ‘… I want to be alive, too!’ (p. 304).

Jess needs to move away from this maternal abject as well as from the Thing, which is Fern, to an alternative paternal object to escape TillyTilly. However, as TillyTilly becomes stronger, Jess’s father starts to fall into a ‘depression’ and becomes ‘slurred of speech, emptied, inside-out, outside-in’ (p. 263, 266). Consequently, she needs to find a new parental object, which is represented by her maternal grandfather, who also symbolises her Yoruba roots and culture. For Kristeva, the only way to move away from an abject mother is to identify with ‘the father of prehistory’(Kristeva, 1986, p. 256), who is embodied by the child’s father or the mother’s father. However, what the child associates with is not that father himself but an imagined father. This imagined father, or more specifically the imagined maternal grandfather, is a symbol of the mother’s desire for something outside the mother–child dyad, a desire which is transferred to the child before they are separated physically through birth. So, during the child’s attempts at psychological independence from the mother, this imagined father becomes a ‘godsend’ (Kristeva, 1986, p. 256), allowing the child to identify with something outside the mother. This imagined father is ‘the mother-father conglomerate’ (Kristeva, 1986, p. 256), which is represented in the novel by Jess’s Nigerian grandfather who is both maternal and paternal. This theory of Kristeva also accords with the novel’s religious undertones, given that Jess describes her grandfather as ‘a black Jesus’ when he becomes her saviour (Oyeyemi, 2005, p. 228). He is:

always wanting to know if she [is] happy, always wanting to make her happy, not in the anxious way of her English grandparents, who kindly unintentionally made her feel abnormal, like a freak, but in a powerful, questing way that [seems] to put her melancholy under a microscope and make her fears appear groundless. (p. 49)

He makes her feel ‘as if she were a little piece of him that had crumbled off’ (pp. 21). He gives her a sense of intimacy and belonging, rather than alienating her like her other grandparents. He also offers her an escape from the maternal space, an escape which is represented by her Yoruba name Wuraola: ‘her grandfather’s words had a lyrical quality to them, and she felt lulled, as if she really could be Wuraola, this good girl, this fine daughter’ (p. 22). ‘Wuraola’ gives Jess a chance to identify with something outside her mother and to be connected to her Nigerian heritage while maintaining her bodily boundaries, without fear of returning to the abject consuming mother.

**Spatial Struggle and Transforming the Margin into a Space of Resistance**

To move from a diasporic mother figure and a British paternal figure to a Yoruba parental figure and form her authentic self, Jess needs to practise playing. Playing, as mentioned earlier, liberates the child to be authentic and creative. A child’s ability to play freely depends on her capability to draw on a self that resists all forms of sociocultural controls (Aitken and Herman, 1997, p. 83). Accordingly, TillyTilly becomes a pivotal part of Jess’s development, a self she draws on to play freely. Jess occupies the margin, and she needs to negotiate her identity and belonging in this peripheral space. TillyTilly transforms the margin from a space of alienation and isolation to a space of resistance or of radical openness. ‘This space of radical openness’, as described by bell hooks (1990, p. 149), ‘is a margin – a profound edge. Locating oneself there is difficult yet necessary. It is not a “safe” place’. Initially, TillyTilly is an alter ego that Jess draws upon to empower herself to transgress boundaries set by gender and age domination; however, TillyTilly eventually becomes a threat to Jess’s identity. In the beginning, Jess practises playing with TillyTilly. This enables her to discover herself and form her relation with Yoruba culture, which allows Jess’s maturation process to move forwards.

In addition, the childhood space of radical openness allows the narrative to gracefully move between the real and the mythical. In a study of how ‘post-migrant generations, including foreign-born migrant children’ construct their cultural identities, Shehrazade Emmambokus concludes that ‘within the site of Overlapping Space, individuals negotiate their diasporic cultural identities by *selecting and inviting* the elements that they have learned to duplicate from the parent cultures’ (2011, p. 84, emphasis and capital letters in original). This overlapping space is represented in the novel by the overlapping of reality and the magical. The site of the magical is based on the Yoruba myths of the *abiku* and *ibeji*. Jess’s visits to Nigeria invoke a new cultural space in which she can negotiate her identity. However, this space is neither acceptable nor directly accessible to Jess, who rejects her Nigerian roots at the beginning of the novel, resulting in TillyTilly becoming an important medium for accessing the space.

The different sites in the novel do not only reflect the various cultural spaces in which Jess negotiates her identity, but also embody different authoritative powers she must overcome. There are two main locations in the novel which represent different types of authority: the Oyegbebi’s house near Ibadan in Nigeria which symbolises paternal authority and the Harrisons’ house in Britain which symbolises maternal authority. ThroughTillyTilly, the boundaries of these spaces become unstable. In Nigeria, she facilitates Jess’s trespassing into her grandfather’s study, which represents patriarchal space and is only supposed to be accessible to him and Mr Harrison. Then, in Britain, she transforms the Harrisons’ house into ‘a shadowy, empty space where people could come in and out if they wanted to, touch things, take things, lurk’ as she moves within and outside the house uninvited like an intruder, challenging Sarah’s authority and breaking her computer on which she spends most of her time writing (p. 142).

TillyTilly does not merely disturb the corporeal form of these spaces but also challenges their cultural dimensions. Both spaces are embodiments of hybridity. Gbenga’s study represents English and Nigerian literary space, whereas in the Harrison house, English literature is transformed by Sarah through her computer. TillyTilly resists these forms of hybrid culture and identity by reorganising the study and threatening to burn it and destroy Sarah’s writing. At one point, TillyTilly performs a cleansing ritual for Jess. She encourages Jess to put coal in her mouth, imitating something they had read about in the grandfather’s study. It is explained by TillyTilly as the way in which ‘the angel […] cleansed Isaiah’ (p. 187). The words ‘cleansed’, ‘cleansing’ and ‘purify’ are repeated throughout the thirteenth chapter. Kristeva refers to impurity as a state of ‘imprecise boundaries’ (1982, p. 60). Because Jess is still trying to distinguish the boundary between herself and her mother, as I suggested in the previous section, the boundaries of her self are unclear. The above examples also emphasise the idea of cultural impurity; Jess’s existence is the result of the blurring of racial and cultural boundaries. Ironically, the cleansing ritual used is not from the Yoruba religion but rather from the Old Testament. In addition, it occurs just before TillyTilly’s possession of Jess, which is the moment when she feels most physically violated (Oyeyemi, 2005, p. 205). The novel undermines the idea of cultural purity by portraying it as an impossible fantasy which only leads to displacement.

Not only does TillyTilly destabilise spatial and cultural power, but she also transforms the boundaries of Jess’s bedroom. A child’s bedroom is where they can play freely and escape the adult world. However, Jess’s room does not seem like a minor’s bedroom, as it is described as gloomy, ‘with too many things robbing space’, a desk with shelves ‘only half-full with slim, gaudy paperbacks’ and a bed (p. 92). The atmosphere of the room is imbued with a lavender smell, ‘her mother’s latest scent craze’, showing that even in her own space, Jess is dominated by her mother (p. 92). By contrast, the bedroom of Siobhan, her psychologist’s daughter and her friend, is typical of a child’s room: a ‘sky-lighted, rainbow-wallpapered heap of clothes, shoes, papers and cuddly toys’ with ‘the faint scent of bubblegum in the air’ (p. 125). Reinhard Kuhn (1982, p. 226) describes a children’s room as ‘a foreign country, and in many respects a comfortable and protected paradise, a realm of oblivion’, adding, ‘its interior architecture is determined by the imagination of the children’. Instead of being a ‘protected paradise’, Jess’s room is transformed by TillyTilly’s power. It becomes a hostile space at certain points, when TillyTilly dislocates Jess from her own body: ‘it was now a frightening place: too big and broad a space, too full, sandwiching her between solids and colour’ (Oyeyemi, 2005, p. 200). What Jess experiences exemplify a sense of the ‘unhomely’, a term coined by Bhabha to describe how a sense of displacement makes familiar domestic spaces seem unfamiliar (1994b, p. 13). Seeing the world from an *abiku* perspective makes Jess realise that what she really desires is to be free of the social restraints that entrap her while not being completely dislocated from these social spaces. As hooks (1990, p. 148) emphasises, ‘the very meaning of “home” changes with experience of decolonization, of radicalization. At times, home is nowhere. At times, one knows only extreme estrangement and alienation. Then home is no longer just one place. It is many locations’. Because Jess resists the marginalised, racialised space that she is assigned to within British culture, she reconnects with her Yoruba roots and forms a sense of belonging to different locations in both Britain and Nigeria.

To construct a hybrid identity, Jess must negotiate her identity through the third space, that I mentioned earlier. To give the ‘Third Space of enunciation’, which is a ‘precondition of cultural difference’, a historical and cultural dimension, Homi Bhabha quotes the Guyanese writer Wilson Harris (1973), who emphasises:

if indeed […] any real sense is to be made of material change it can only occur with an acceptance of a concurrent void and with a willingness to descend into that void wherein, as it were, one may begin to come into confrontation with a spectre of invocation whose freedom to participate in an alien territory and wilderness has become a necessity for one’s reason or salvation. (Bhabha, 1994a, p. 209)

This ‘alien territory and wilderness’, or Bhabha’s Third Space, is materialised in the novel through the Yoruba myth of twins and how they occupy different worlds (Brancato, 2008, p. 33). Being a child and a twin, Jess is able to enter several magical spaces, as her mother notices: ‘Three worlds! Jess lives in the spirit world, and she lives in the Bush. She’s an *abiku*, she always would have known! The spirits tell her things. Fern tells her things’ (Oyeyemi, 2005, p. 174). To construct her hybrid identity, Jess must go through the bush, which is an inbetween space between the spirit world and the real world, to enable her mind to confront ‘a spectre of invocation’, namely TillyTilly. This space, in the novel, is one of negotiation and translation; therefore, it is impossible for Jess to access this entire space which ‘carries the burden of the meaning of culture’ (Bhabha, 1994a, p. 209), until she speaks Yoruba. ‘If only you could speak Yoruba. Or understand it’, TillyTilly says to Jess; she needs Jess to speak Yoruba, so that she can take her to the wilderness and emerge instead of her, transforming her into a dislocated diasporic spirit with ‘no homeland’ (Oyeyemi, 2005, pp. 235, 250). Consequently, TillyTilly possesses Jess in Nigeria and speaks Yoruba through her: ‘she replied at length, [to her mother in Yoruba] capturing the accent and even the lift in tone perfectly’ (p. 309).

As Jess starts to speak Yoruba, her grandfather suspects that she is being possessed,and he wants to take her to *Iya Adahunse*, a Yoruba term for a traditional healer. This causes an intense disagreement between him and her father. Consequently, Jess’s mother takes her daughter to her friend’s house in Lagos because she has ‘had enough’ of both of the men (p. 314). However, on the road to Lagos they have a car accident, and Jess ends up in the hospital, ‘a motionless mass of tubes and brown flesh and sad green hospital gown, not a girl at all’ (p. 317). Jess’s grandfather places the *ibeji* statue, that symbolises her dead twin, in her hospital room. The space of the St Mary’s Hospital room is transformed into a Yoruba cultural space represented by the *ibeji* statue, which allows Jess to reconnect with her heritage and overcome TillyTilly. The transformation of the material space of the hospital room results in changes to Jess’s transitional space by incorporating Yoruba beliefs within the grand narrative of Christianity, which is reflected by the hospital’s name, St. Mary’s. In *The Production of Space*, Lefebvre (1991, pp. 416, 417) argues:

Neither ‘cultures’ nor the ‘consciousness’ of peoples, groups or even individuals can escape the loss of identity that is now added to all besetting terrors […] Ideas, representations or values which do not succeed in making their mark on space, and thus generating (or producing) an appropriate morphology, will lose all pith to become mere signs, resolve themselves into abstract descriptions, or mutate into fantasies.

Hence, cultures and ideologies that fail to produce representations in space are doomed to be mere myths. Therefore, the *ibeji* statue serves as a way to regain a lost Yoruba history. In her study of twins in contemporary Nigeria, Elisha Renne (2011, p. 311) discusses how different Yoruba practices, especially *ibeji* statues, have vanished because they are perceived as uncivilised and paganistic by Nigerians. In fact, in the novel, Sarah represents young Nigerians with a British education who have abandoned certain traditional elements of Yoruba culture, although she embraces more contemporary aspects of the culture, such as listening to Yoruba music and cooking Yoruba cuisine. As a result of the aforementioned changes, there is a sense of loss of the Yoruba culture, even in Nigeria, and by using Yoruba myth in more acceptable ways through the media and cultural production, Nigerians in Nigeria and in the diaspora are able to reconnect with their lost Yoruba roots (Renne, 2011, p. 321). Gbenga represents an older generation, the one that experienced decolonisation. His acceptance of Christianity does not necessarily mean he has abandoned his traditions. This contradiction represents madness in his son-in-law’s eyes: ‘You’re insane! INSANE! One minute you’re telling her to think on Jesus and the next you’re calling a witch doctor!’ (Oyeyemi, 2005, p. 313, capital letters in original). Daniel’s reaction echoes a long history of imperial misconceptions of indigenous African cultures. Nevertheless, the novel seems to favour the grandfather’s traditional Yoruba beliefs over contemporary Nigerian or British ones. Hence, Jess’s ordeal in the bush is only resolved when Gbenga follows the Yoruba practice of carving an *ibeji* statue.

The *ibeji* statue*,* which should have been made by Sarah to honour her dead child and protect her living one, symbolises the missing piece of Jess’s cultural identity: her Yoruba roots. The moment the *ibeji* statue is put in Jess’s hospital room, Fern appears in the bush where Jess is trapped by TillyTilly. Fern frees Jess, and Jess shares her Yoruba name, Wuraola, with her twin, who had only had an English name. Thus, Jess is no longer ‘half a twin’ but a whole person who is not afraid of TillyTilly anymore: ‘there was a sister-girl now, one who could now call herself Wuraola where true names were asked for’; ‘and because Jess wasn’t afraid, Tilly was’ (pp. 296, 322). Ultimately, Jess ‘*hop, skip, jumped* into Tilly’s unyielding flesh as she clawed at Jess’s presence (*it hurt them both burningly*) back into herself. Jessamy Harrison woke up and up and up and up’ (p. 322, emphasis in original).

**Searching for an Authentic Self**

In an interview with *The New York Times,* Oyeyemi states that ‘she knows well what it feels like to be an outsider, to fight despair, to seek an authentic self’ (as quoted in Lee, 2005, para. 11). However, what does Oyeyemi mean by ‘an authentic self’? Is it an essential unchangeable ‘inner self’? (Guignon, 2004, p. 35). Lionel Trilling, in *Sincerity and Authenticity*,suggests that authenticity is ‘the downward movement through all the cultural superstructures to some place where all movement ends, and begins’ (1972, p. 12). Authenticity then, according to him, is found when a person moves away from the influence of culture, which seems ‘mere fantasy or ritual’, to try to understand oneself (1972, p. 11). Kristeva explains the authentic self as the self away from the mother: ‘the child can serve its mother as token of her own authentication; there is, however, hardly any reason for her to serve as go-between for it to become autonomous and authentic in its turn’ (1982, p. 13). Here in the quotation Kristeva shows authenticity as an equivalent to autonomy. She argues that within the child’s process of finding an authentic or autonomous self, the mother becomes the abject, as discussed earlier, because she must be rejected. In order for the child to reject the mother they should submit to the law of the father which constitutes social norms and culture. Hence Kristeva’s authenticity is the opposite of Trilling’s authenticity, mentioned above. Commenting on Trilling’s authenticity, Kwame Anthony Appiah (1992) emphasises: ‘authenticity is but one of the ideas through which the idea of the artist as outsider has been articulated’ (pp. 75, 76). He adds: ‘If European intellectuals, though comfortable inside their culture and its traditions, have an image of themselves as outsiders, African intellectuals are uncomfortable outsiders, seeking to develop their cultures in directions that will give them a role’ (p. 76).

In *The Icarus Girl*,Oyeyemi shows the position of the uncomfortable outsider within British culture. Authenticity in the novel is about escaping the abject position and developing one’s own cultural identity. Oyeyemi creates a place of authenticity in the bush, a place separated from the laws of the real world but still a part of the Yoruba culture. It is within the metaphorical space of the bush at the end of the novel ‘where all movement ends, and begins’ for Jess, facing impossible choices between different selves: her pure British self (Fern), diasporic self (TillyTilly) or Yoruba self (Wuraola). For Jess to move forward, she must accept that part of her that is Yoruba and form a hybrid identity that she has always resisted because, for her, she was either British or Nigerian but not both. Therefore, she moves from the concept of a blackness that is subordinate to whiteness, or is a minority identity, to the concept of a blackness that is authentic and central. Hence, my interpretation of the ending contrasts with that of those scholars and critics who argue that Jess’s identity crisis is unresolvable.

Some of the critics who argue that the novel does not offer a positive resolution for Jess’s struggle are Sarah Ilott and Chloe Buckley (2016) and Brenda Cooper (2008). In Ilott and Buckley’s (2016) reading of the novel, they draw on both Kristeva’s theory of abjection and Derrida’s theory of writing as a supplement that ‘adds only to replace’ and ‘fills a void’ (Derrida, 1976, p. 145). Thus, by considering writing as a supplement for identity, their study suggests the lack of an essential or authentic identity and denies any positive outcome for Jess’s identity crisis, inside and outside the text (Ilott and Buckley, 2016, p. 407). They read TillyTilly as both the abject in Jess and a supplement for Jessy, given that TillyTilly writes the latter name in the dust on a tabletop in the Boys’ Quarters: ‘HEllO JessY’ (Oyeyemi, 2005,p. 40, capital letters in original; Ilott and Buckley, 2016, p. 411). By accepting the name Jessy, they claim Jess allows TillyTilly to fill her and eventually replace her. This interpretation might be true if Jessy was the only name that Jess accepts. However, Jess does not consider Jessy to be her ‘real name’ and eventually starts to see TillyTilly as the dangerous supplement she really is (Oyeyemi, 2005, p. 47). TillyTilly recognises this: ‘You are afraid of me! It’s changing us! Stop …’ (p. 247). She knows that fear leads to resistance. In addition, TillyTilly’s powers seem to be connected to and affected by Jess’s insecurities or acceptance of her, especially in Britain; for instance, when Jess rejects her, she becomes ill (p. 235).

Finally, Ilott and Buckley conclude that Oyeyemi does not offer resolution for Jess’s identity crisis. They read ‘up and up and up’ to mean a continuous ‘process of becoming’, a becoming that only suggests an endless ‘struggle’ without ‘positive transformation’ (Ilott and Buckley, 2016, p. 411). Similarly, Cooper (2008) concludes that the repetition of the word ‘up’ at the end of the novel indicates that Jess becomes Icarus and rises only to fall into TillyTilly’s claws, reading TillyTilly as the leopard in the Yoruba poem ‘Praise of the Leopard’ in the novel’s epilogue (Oyeyemi, 2005, p. 322). However, I argue that ‘up and up and up’ indeed indicates that Jess’s identity formation is a process of becoming, but one of reinventing herself anew and not of struggling, because ‘diaspora identities’, as Hall argues, ‘are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference’ (1994, p. 402). Jess’s connection to her Yoruba roots through her grandfather and her ancestral heritage allows her to reclaim her maternal country and enables her to have independent subjectivity without fear of being stuck in an abject position.

**Conclusion**

The novel represents what Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2009) refers to in her famous TED talk as ‘the danger of a single story’. She argues against limiting ourselves to one cultural perspective. Oyeyemi’s portrayal of Jess exemplifies the extent of the risk inherent in perceiving the self in only one context. The whole novel moves in and out of Jess’s inner world using stream of consciousness to show the contrasts between cultural understandings within a troubled childhood. It positions the British psychoanalytical perspective against the Yoruba mythology in Nigeria. Yet the everyday realities of London and Ibadan do not influence each other. It is Jess’s inner world that reflects the intertwining of these places, and the existence of TillyTilly highlights their contradictions. While Jess tries to understand her position in both contexts, TillyTilly disturbs the temporal and spatial order to create an abyss that almost swallows Jess.

Through Jess, Oyeyemi emphasises the importance of multiculturalism in Britain and of the representation of minorities’ voices within literature and education. Oyeyemi criticises the education system that existed in Britain in the 1990s because, despite attending multicultural schools, she never knew ‘that people like [her] could be in […] stories’ (as quoted in Lee, 2005, para. 11). Even when she started to write her own stories, she felt they were ‘not very good’ because, as she put it, ‘there was something missing’ until she read Simi Bedford’s novel, *Yoruba Girl Dancing*, about a Nigerian girl trying to assimilate into life in London (as quoted in Lee, 2005, para. 13). Like Oyeyemi, Jess’s main issue is that she is searching for herself within a culture that does not represent her. As a result, she feels socially awkward, and her actions reflect that, isolating and trapping herself within a narrow liminal space. Reconciling with her African ancestral culture becomes her only hope of reimagining that limiting marginal space within British culture as more inclusive transcultural ground. While the novel centres around Jess’s unconscious, this realm is influenced by sociopolitical circumstances which mirrors the political unconscious of the text and its context.[[18]](#footnote-19) Jess perceives Britishness as equivalent to whiteness, hence her African heritage becomes problematic for her. Only by accepting herself as partly Yoruba, and hence part of the black British community, is Jess able to recognise the hold of the white dominant British culture and escape it. She escapes the entrapping position of race into a positive sense of ethnicity.

In this chapter I have argued that the space of diaspora is a space of abjection and that only by incorporating the mythical within everyday local reality is the child able to negotiate her hybridity. I examined the importance of non-realist elements in highlighting the cultural and psychological struggle of the child to escape the binary ideology of black/white. Whereas here I explored how the ideology of race troubled the child’s sense of self and her maturation process, in the next chapter I will examine how cultural otherness influences children’s sense of belonging. I will continue to focus on diaspora as a space of abjection, which will be shown through childhood imagination, mental illness and West African mythology.

**Chapter 2: Belonging, Entrapment and Boundary Crossing in Diana Evans’s *26a***

Children have an intense need to belong and anything that marks them out as different from all the other children will then form a straggly queue of uneasy, queasy questions in their head.

(Kay, 2010, pp. 38–39)

In this chapter, I will explore new representations of mixed-race children in which the issue of cultural inclusion is not as prominent as in the work covered in the previous chapter, but the issue of belonging to a single place is. Diana Evans presents movement between cultures, spaces and places as a form of empowerment in her debut novel, *26a* (2005). The novel is about finding spaces to belong by moving beyond belonging to form connections with various locations. It engages with different stories and characters, across several cultures, to engage with the endless possibilities of transnational belonging. To engage with these possibilities, Evans use fragmented narratives and shifting points of view. Therefore, this chapter is divided into two sections, which discuss the negative and positive sides, respectively, of both belonging and unbelonging that are presented through the multiple perspectives in the novel.

As modernist realist novel, *26a* focuses on the individual experiences of the characters within sociocultural spaces of Britain and Nigeria, rather than providing a linear or objective narrative. This reflects the modernist emphasis on subjective experience and the interiority of the individual. The characters in the novel are searching for meaning and purpose in their lives, reflecting the existential themes often present in modernist literature. Yet the text is grounded in the everyday reality of contemporary life in London in the 1980s and 1990s. Certain factual events of that era are shown as they are experienced by the Hunter family, for example the wedding of Prince Charles and Lady Diana Spencer, Michael Jackson’s concert at Wembley and Princess Diana’s death. Overall, while *26a* is not purely a work of realism, it does employ elements of realism to create a grounded and authentic portrayal of contemporary life in London. Furthermore, it explores the complex and fragmented nature of modern black British experience through the lens of modernism.

Both Evans and Oyeyemi offer unique depictions of bicultural mixed-race girlhood in their works *26a* and *The Icarus Girl*. The child in *The Icarus Girl* is grappling with cultural and racial identity from the beginning of the novel. In contrast, the early years of childhood in *26a* are portrayed as a separated idyllic realm untouched by the complexities of adulthood. In a conversation with Bernardine Evaristo (2005), Evans describes *26a* as exploring ‘how kids use their childhood world as a shield against what might be happening with their parents’ (p. 33). However, this peaceful existence is short-lived, as the children are soon forced to navigate their place in the transnational world of their parents. Evans juxtaposes the contradictory reality of the parents with the imaginative world of the children which creates harmony out of chaos.

The novel relates the history of the Hunter family, starting with their parents, who are ‘colliding, silently, through geography’ (Evans, 2005, p. 38). Ida and Aubrey meet in Lagos, Nigeria, while Aubrey is on a work trip, and Ida escapes her arranged marriage in Aruwa. They get married in London and have four girls: Bel, the eldest; the identical twins Georgia and Bessie; and Kemy, the youngest. In Britain, Ida is isolated with her drunken husband as she suffers from hallucinations of her mother. They live in Neasden, except for three years when they live in Lagos. The twins are at the centre of the narrative. They initially experience life as ‘twoness in oneness’(p.50), and they share everything; however, their state of twoness becomes tainted when they discover that in Aruwa twins used to be considered abominations. Furthermore, Georgia is traumatised in Lagos when the watchman of their house assaults her. After that, the sisters start to grow apart. As they mature, their paths diverge: while Bessie longs to explore the world and leave her family home, Georgia is still holding onto her twin and their shared space of the loft. Haunted by the past, Georgia eventually falls into depression and dies by suicide, and Bessie learns to live in ‘oneness’(p.275). Few days after her death, Georgia comes back as a spirit to her twin and, with Bessie’s permission, they share Bessie’s body for a year. They re-enact the Edo myth of Ode and Onia, told by their maternal grandfather, in which one twin inhabits the other’s body for a year after being sacrificed.

Existing studies of the novel are divided into two main trends, which focus on the twins as a trope of either doubling or splitting, respectively. Irene Pérez-Fernández (2012) differentiates between the twinship space, with its special boundaries, and the external space in which they negotiate their identities. In reading the body as the ‘primary space’ of identity, her study aims to explore the space of individuality within twinship, in the sense that having identical bodies means that their identity is ‘the sum of two people’ (p. 292). Pérez-Fernández also analyses how the external sociocultural spaces of dual belonging and biculturalism complicate the twins’ individual identity formation. She argues for the importance in the novel of this spatial factor and of how both the inner space of the body and the external space affect identity formation, which changes and evolves within different spaces. However, she also reads the twins as a symbol of doubling, which means that the death of one twin entails the forming of a hybrid identity by the other. She argues that the use of the twin trope in the novel does not only derive from the autobiographical experience of the author Diana Evans and her twin sister but reflects a common trope of doubleness and the divided self in both British and Nigerian cultures.[[19]](#footnote-20) Pilar Cuder-Domínguez (2009) has a similar reading of the twins in the Nigerian tradition; however, her conclusion is different. She claims that Georgia’s death is caused by ‘her unresolved doubleness’ and that, to escape her sister’s fate, Bessie abandons her Nigerian roots and forms a black British identity (p. 284). On the other hand, Pérez-Fernández concludes that the death of one twin causes a ‘sense of incompleteness’ in Bessie, and to resolve it, she must ‘(re)appropriate past Nigerian beliefs’ (2012, p. 300). My reading of the ending concurs with Pérez-Fernández’s because after Georgia’s demise Bessie starts to see her mother’s vision of Bessie’s Nigerian grandmother’s spirit, which shows that Bessie is finally accepting her Nigerian culture. Moreover, some studies, such as those by Cuder-Domínguez (2009) and Cooper (2008), group *The Icarus Girl* and *26a* together as narratives of hybridity and doubling. However, I argue against these readings because, as I understand it, Oyeyemi’s novel is about finding the self by reconnecting with Yoruba culture, whereas Evans’s novel is about finding the self within different contexts and locations.

At the beginning of *26a*, childhood is portrayed as a space of empowerment because it transcends sociocultural, physical and location boundaries. 26a Waifer Avenue is not a real address in the novel; it is the name given by the twins to the loft they share in their family home. It exists outside an actual location. It serves at the beginning of the novel as a shelter for the twins from the struggle for belonging, but it is not dislocated like Ida, who feels uprooted from Nigeria. This sheltering aspect makes the loft ‘twice as bright’ and the colours are ‘extra’ because it occupies ‘the extra dimension. The one after sight, sound, touch and taste where the world multiplied and exploded because it was the sum of two people’ (Evans, 2005, p. 5). The house downstairs at 26 Waifer Avenue in Neasden, London, is ‘darker’ because it is not separated from the burden of location like the loft (p.5). The loft occupies a liminal space between reality and imagination because it is the twins’ playing space. It is an open area in which the twins can travel through time and space. In the loft, Georgia visits Gladstone Park in her dreams and meets Gladstone’s spirit. Even when the twins are away from the loft, they are able to go back together while sleeping and visit it from Nigeria because it is a fluid space and does not follow the rules of location.

In contrast, the cupboard downstairs in the house, where it is ‘particularly’ dark, is a closed space, a place of subjection where the subject is disciplined. It is ‘where Aubrey made [his daughters] sit and “think about what [they had] done” when they misbehaved’ (p. 5). The cupboard here is a space of fear, isolation and entrapment, a place of patriarchal discipline, instead of maternal plenitude as in *The Icarus Girl*. In the latter, Jess’s room and the Boy’s Quarters, among other sites, are also fluid, in the sense that they are transformed by TillyTilly, and temporal and spatial laws collapse. This disturbance of boundaries is portrayed as distressing for Jess, as these places become ‘shadowy, empty space[s]’, quite the opposite of the loft (Oyeyemi, 2005, p. 142). Because the boundaries of the self for Jess are vague, open spaces are threatening, whereas enclosed spaces are sites of security. In contrast, for the Hunter twins, it is this blurring of the self’s boundaries that gives the loft its ‘extra’ angle because it is ‘the sum of two people’ (Evans, 2005, p. 5). However, this is only true in the beginning, as when one twin rejects the other, the loft loses its uniqueness. Eventually, the downstairs world seeps into the twins’ world, and each twin must negotiate her belonging in her own way.

The change starts when they migrate to Nigeria for three years; they go when they are almost nine and return to the UK when they are eleven. Bessie is the one who poses the question of belonging: ‘if we live there, will we be *all* Nigerian?’ (p. 44, emphasis in original). For Bessie, belonging is to a location or locations, but for Georgia, it is to the space of twinship within ‘the sum of two people’ (p. 5). Both Bessie and her youngest sister Kemy represent ‘neo-millennial generations whose sensibilities can be drawn from a wide range of sources and media – potentially “here”, “there” and “everywhere”’ (Osborne, 2016, p. 3). Hence for them, ‘home was homeless. It could exist anywhere, because its only substance was familiarity. If it was broken by long journeys or tornadoes it emerged again, reinvented itself with new décor, new idiosyncrasies of morning, noon and dusk, and old routines’ (Evans, 2005, p. 54). Here Evans emphasises that the essence of home is not its location but the sense of ‘familiarity’ which can change any place into a home. Hence, John McLeod (2010, p. 48) comments: ‘*26a* suggests something of the new next steps [to claiming Britain as a home]; it is the conceptualisation, not the claim, for home which is of central concern in the novel’. McLeod argues that Evans, among other contemporary black British writers, such as Bernardine Evaristo, Andrea Levy, Zadie Smith and Caryl Phillips, represents ‘a progressive mode of conceiving of contemporary Britain’ which is an ‘envisioning of the nation prompted, but not preoccupied, by racial and cultural specifics’ (2010, p. 48). However, although Evans does not centre *26a* around ‘race’, her novel is not entirely free of ‘cultural specifics’. The story still reflects the struggle of the immigrant Ida to fit into a new cultural context and the consequences of such a struggle for her whole family, which will be explored in the following section of this chapter.

On a similar note, Samantha Rieve Holland (2017) argues that the four Hunter sisters represent different forms of cosmopolitan belonging. Therefore, she dismisses any reading of the twins as a symbol of hybridity, as this puts Evans’s writing within a category defined by ‘the late-20th-century preoccupation with migrant identity’ (2017, p. 558). Hence, her interpretation of the novel considers Evans to be part of a new ‘black British voice’ of ‘the early 21st century’ which has ‘a new and particularly cosmopolitan outlook’ (2017, p. 556). I agree with Holland’s and McLeod’s positioning of Evans as part of the new generation of black British writing. However, her writing does not promote a common black British cultural trajectory but instead explores the diversity of black identity and belonging.

Departing from previous studies, this chapter argues that Evans engages with other transnational models of belonging, such as migratory subjectivity and eco-cosmopolitanism, which I will discuss later. From this perspective, the novel is located within a broader tradition of black female writing. Evans is a perfect example of what Carole Boyce Davies, the Caribbean-American scholar and author, termed ‘migratory subjectivity’, which she describes as follows:

*Migrations of the subject* refers to the many locations of Black women’s writing, but also to the Black female subject refusing to be subjugated. Black female subjectivity then can be conceived not primarily in terms of domination, subordination or “subalternization,” but in terms of slipperiness, elsewhereness. *Migratory subjects* suggests that Black women/’s writing cannot be located and framed in terms of one specific place, but exist/s in myriad places and times, constantly eluding the terms of the discussion. It is not so much formulated as a ‘nomadic subject,’although it shares an affinity, but as a migratory subject moving to specific places and for definite reasons. In the same way as diaspora assumes expansiveness and elsewhereness, migrations of the Black female subject pursue the path of movement outside the terms of dominant discourses. (Boyce Davies, 1994, p. 36, my emphasis)

Boyce Davies argues here that the black female subject uses movements and migration as a means of empowerment and assertion of subjectivity because if the subject cannot be anchored to any specific location, it cannot be dominated by its power. While hybridity is about dismantling cultural hierarchy (Bhabha, 1994b, p. 55), migratory subjectivity is more about escaping all forms of domination. Hybridity is the movement of the subject within in-between spaces where translation and negotiation between cultures occur and ‘where the shadow of the other falls upon the self’ (Bhabha, 1994b, p. 85). Migratory subjectivity, in contrast,‘asserts agency as it crosses the borders, journeys, migrates and so re-claims as it re-asserts’ (Boyce Davis, 1994, p. 37). Therefore, hybridity means accepting cultural difference within the subject, whereas the migratory subject moves through cultural difference. Boyce Davies clearly states that her subjectivity paradigm does not concur with Bhabha’s. She comments: ‘so rather than “choosing tactical positions”, I am asserting an interrogation of a variety of positions and a fluidity of movement which, more like a spider web, asserts itself in multiple ways. I therefore reject the Bhabha notion of “hybridity”’ (1994, p. 48). However, Evans still exemplifies hybridity through Bel, hence she does not reject it like Boyce Davies.

Evans shows, through her different female characters, that boundaries of space and place are meant to be crossed. It can be dangerous, but it is necessary in order to transcend the limitations that certain spaces impose on female subjectivity. Consequently, establishing migratory subjectivity becomes a necessity to escape the traps of alienation and dislocation. Evans uses the twins Georgia and Bessie at the centre of her novel as parallel opposites to highlight the different sides of multiculturalism. The twins are identical; however, the ‘real differences, the ones that mattered most, were inside, under clothes and in the soul. There was light and there was shade’ (Evans, 2005, p. 43). The use of the terms ‘light’ and ‘shade’ to differentiate between the mixed-race twins could be problematic due to the words racialised connotation of white and black. In the novel, ‘light’ represents the positive side of transnationalism and ‘shade’ the negative side. However it is possible that Evans use this approach to show the double nature of the twins as being black and white, each one embodies one side of their mixed cultures. The next section of the chapter will explore the experiences of Georgia, Ida, and Aubrey, who are confined to a limited space of belonging. Following that, the subsequent section will examine transnational subjects, including Bessie, Bel, and Kemy.

**Limiting Spaces and Entrapped Subjects**

The motif of crossing borders and boundaries is introduced early in the novel. The first part of the book tells the story of Georgia and Bessie’s origins as furry creatures roaming the wilderness oblivious of their location.[[20]](#footnote-21) When they come to the border of a highway, Georgia is reluctant to go further and cross it, but Bessie is tempted. They get part of the way across the road, but ‘for reasons beyond their reach, they stopped’, and they are killed as they are hit by a vehicle and reborn as mixed-race female twins (p. 3). In this scene, it is not the crossing that is dangerous but the standing in-between which causes their deaths (p. 3). This in-between position is portrayed in the novel as something negative, destructive and sometimes deadly. For example, the twins believed that ‘Wednesdays were hard’ because it was ‘in the middle of the beginning and the end when things tumbled, things tossed’ (p. 7). The idea that Wednesdays are hard because they are in the middle of the beginning and the end is an example of how the in-between position can lead to a feeling of turmoil and confusion. The portrayal of the in-between position in the novel highlights the challenges and difficulties of being in a state of ambiguity and uncertainty but also acknowledges the potential for growth and transformation that can come from such a position.

Furthermore, the first chapter of the novel is about ‘Ham’ the hamster, the Hunter twins’ pet, who is kept in a cage near the dishwasher in the kitchen. Ham’s cage is located on the ground floor of the Hunters’ house at 26 Waifer Avenue, but all he can see is the cage. Among all the questions that Ham has, including ‘what is it?’, ‘where am I?’ and ‘what am I? the question that preceded all others’, it is the first question that leads to Ham’s sadness and then death (p.5). ‘What is it?’ refers to the cage that keeps the hamster locked in. He cannot explore other places because he is bound to one place which does not feel like home. In his last few weeks he catches a cold and moves less and less until he stops moving and dies. ‘He was ginger-furred with streaks of white’ (p. 4); Pérez-Fernández (2012) identifies ‘the streaks of white’ against the ginger fur as a symbol of the biracial hybrid nature of the Hunter twins as both British and Nigerian. This hybrid nature, I would add, does not allow them to belong to a single space. Like the hamster, for them, belonging to one place is entrapping because ‘home was homeless’ (Evans, 2005, p. 54).

This novel is usually read through a positive lens, focusing on Bessie and, to some extent, Bel and Kemy, as successful portrayals of the bicultural, biracial experience. However, the novel does not ignore the problematic side of such experience. It also depicts the trauma of not overcoming the difficulties of moving between cultures and making spaces for oneself within these cultures. Trauma is usually described as a single event. Cathy Caruth, a key trauma theorist, defines it as ‘an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic [event] in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena’ (1996, p. 11). However, in *Postcolonial Witnessing: Trauma Out of Bounds*, Stef Craps argues that ‘for many disempowered groups […] trauma is a constant presence’ (2012, p. 31). In drawing on trauma theory, the present section of this thesis contends that although dislocation does not fit within conventional trauma theory, dislocation can be seen to carry some of the elements of trauma through the reading of Ida’s story.

The novel traces the history of a fifteen-year-old Ida fleeing her beloved house in Aruwa to escape being traded by her father to an older man for ‘a portable television from England’, four hundred naira and two goats (Evans, 2005, p.29). Evans shows how women are sometimes treated like commodities in the global market. Ida’s older sister was traded for a radio. Following the legacy of her paternal grandmother, Cecelia, ‘the only woman in Aruwa history to shrink the world’ by walking to Lagos alone and returning twenty-three years later as a ‘rich and self-made’ woman, Ida makes it to Lagos (p. 28). Years after starting living there, she meets Aubrey, and although she is seventeen and he is thirty-two, she migrates with him to Britain, where they get married. They live in a house in Neasden, where Ida suffers from ‘a prolonged state of shock. She was shocked by the cold and the coldness that went with it’ (p. 37). Unable to communicate with the people of London ‘who never understood what she was saying’, she becomes entrapped within the imaginary space of home that includes her mother’s shadow (p. 18). She is culturally and linguistically isolated in London and suffers from the repetitive appearance of hallucinations of her mother. Ida ‘chuckle[s] with Nne-Nne’, her mother, in the kitchen (p. 18). The visions are not caused by a single disturbing incident but develop gradually with her experience of isolation, dislocation and nostalgia in Neasden. Therefore, Ida’s mode of trauma fits more within Craps’s description than Caruth’s because it is the result of a continuous reality. Ida’s condition reflects what Madelaine Hron (2018) in her essay ‘The trauma of displacement’ dubs ‘double absence’. Hron explains (p. 290):

At the heart of this ‘double absence’ is the anguish that many immigrants feel at being suspended ‘in-between’, in a virtual existence between two worlds. This ‘in-between’ threshold, where time and space become chaotic, often becomes a locus of impotence for immigrant subjects, where little agency, voice, or movement is possible. Contemporary migrants, many of whom can return to their homes for visits, often find themselves trapped in this liminal locus of inertia.

The concept of ‘double absence’ refers to the experience of being in-between position caught between two cultures and identities. Ida is stuck in the ‘virtual existence’ between her house in London and her childhood place in Aruwa: ‘like Georgia, Ida gave the impression – the quietness, the sideways look – of someone who was always leaving and had never fully arrived, only hers was a different place altogether. It was on the map in the hallway […] and British Airways could get her there.’ (Evans, 2005, p. 18). Neasden becomes her in-between space, where she allows herself ‘little’ movement, because every time she ventures out alone farther, she gets Aruwa’s red dust in her eyes. The red dust marks the fact that the immigrant Ida is spatially limited because she frequently gets lost and is unable to ask for directions. Eventually, she loses her ‘fire inside’ (p.30), or more specifically, her agency which enabled her to escape the patriarchal society of Aruwa, and therefore, she is unable to escape her exile in Britain.

Ida tries to retrieve some familiarity within her new home by teaching her daughters Edo. Because Aubrey believes that the ‘girls don’t need Nigerian here’, the Edo lessons become secret and eventually stop (p.97). To cope with her losses and ‘homesickness’, ‘she made herself a bubble and it was called Nigeria-without-Aubrey’ (p. 97). Within this imaginary space, Ida spends hours alone in the bath talking to her imaginary mother and only speaks Edo to her: ‘she told Nne-Nne (the flame of her, in the mind) everything, how strange it was, how she missed home. She pictured the cheekbones shining in the sun and the battered baseball cap and whispered, Nobody here know my name, or where I am from’ (p. 37). Likewise, Ida resists the coldness of Britain by only eating hot food: ‘she warmed everything up, including salad, cake … apples, biscuits and ice cream’ (p. 18). Ida’s refusal to eat cold food is caused by her resistance to assimilating into British culture: ‘Ida was usually the last to finish eating because her food was special’ (p. 18). Like Edo, her mother tongue, hot food enables her to feel encompassed within her mother, as, in the words of Kristeva (1982, pp. 75–76), ‘food is the oral object (the abject) that sets up archaic relationships between the human being and the other, its mother, who wields a power that is as vital as it is fierce’. For Ida, allowing the hot food to become part of her body is like being within the maternal space. She is ‘sometimes sitting down to eat at the kitchen table as if she’d forgotten everyone else in the other room. She chuckles with Nne-Nne between mouthfuls and if anyone came into the room the laughter would stop’ (Evans, 2005, p. 18). Ida is yearning not for her actual home in Aruwa from where she escaped the heavy ‘shadow’ of male dominance but for a feminised, mythical version. Nigeria, for Ida, is represented through her mother’s loving face and the ‘ebony carving of an old spirit woman’ that she places in the hallway of her London house (p. 37). She dismisses the tainted history of patriarchal society and builds for herself a more positive imaginative feminine space of a mother country.

Nevertheless, the history that Ida has romanticised catches up with one of her daughters. The twins are almost nine when the family moves to Lagos for three years, beginning in 1981 and ending in 1984, because of Aubrey’s job. Georgia and Bessie encounter two significant realities in Nigeria: Aruwa’s long-lost, violent ancestral tradition towards twins and children, and the recent history of the Biafran war. In some African indigenous beliefs, multiple births are considered an ‘animalistic’ trait and therefore considered ‘taboo’ (Roach, 2010, p. 474). Elleke Boehmer (2009) traces the roots of the motif of the cursed twins in Evans’s novel, and other contemporary African writings, back to Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* (1958). In this influential African novel, Achebe hints at the Igbo ritual of eliminating twins because ‘the Earth had decreed that they were an offense on the land and must be destroyed’ (1958, p. 125). In the corresponding Igbo belief, twins are considered an ‘abomination’, ‘pollution’ and an insult to the Igbo earth goddess Ala, and a disgrace to their family, especially the mother (Bastian, 2001, p. 13). Hence, in *Things Fall Apart,* twins are thrown into the Evil Forest with other outcasts, where they cry in the bush until missionaries come to rescue them.

However, Diana Evans retells the story of the cursed twins within a different context which borrows from both western and African mythologies. She interweaves the African belief that twins are an abomination with some western ideas about witches. During the Hunters’ visit to Aruwa, Baba, their maternal grandfather, tells them that twins are a ‘curse’, ‘the children of devils’ and usually the second twin is ‘burned with other children of witches’ (Evans, 2005, p. 63). Therefore, he says ‘people believed that twins came from witches who lived in the forest. They flew around the treetops on their brooms. They ate birds and made skirts from the feathers. And when they were at their most evil, they gave birth to twins’ (p.62). Although in some African cultures, twins used to be considered ‘extrahuman’, they were usually connected with animals or deities but never with witches or devils (Roach, 2010, p. 474). Witches having intercourse with devils, flying on brooms and being punished by fire are tropes that are more associated with western mythology (Creed, 1993, p. 74). Evans mixes these African and western mythologies to reflect the twins’ multicultural background and to make the African rituals regarding twins more accessible to the British imagination.

Baba tells the twins the story of Onia and Ode, the last twins who were subjected to this tradition. Ode was burnt, and then returned as a spirit to possess her twin for a year, and when Onia was older, she avenged Ode by burning their village (Evans, 2005, p. 63). The novel's fictional Edo ancestral tradition of burning twins is an act of abjection. Writing about rituals of defilement and purification, Kristeva argues that the origin of such rituals is the infant’s experience, within the mother–child dyad, of drawing their own boundaries at a time of fragility and uncertainty: ‘the function of these religious rituals is to ward off the subject’s fear of his very own identity sinking irretrievably into the mother’ (Kristeva, 1982, p. 64). Such rituals take place when certain individuals or the community face something that defiles their borders, as in the case of multiple births in humans, which are more common in animals. The boundaries of human and nonhuman are confused by twins. Therefore it is considered that twins are abject and threatening to the symbolic order and should be cast out beyond the borders of their society. As Creed comments: ‘ritual becomes a means by which societies both renew their initial contact with the abject element and then exclude that element. Through ritual, the demarcation lines between the human and non-human are drawn up anew and presumably made all the stronger for that process’ (1993, p. 8). Baba’s story is symbolic of the twins’ sense of unbelonging, confirmed by the first image of the girls as furry creatures. Each twin deals with this sense in her own way; for Georgia, it is haunting, whereas for Bessie, it is liberating, resulting in a death sentence for the one and empowerment for the other.

For Georgia and Bessie, at first being a twin means having ‘extra’ of everything good in life (p.5); however, in their grandfather’s story, it is a ‘curse’, an unnatural thing that needs to be eliminated. Kristeva emphasises that the abjection of a ‘crime reaches its apex when death, which, in any case, kills me, interferes with what, in my living universe, is supposed to save me from death: childhood, science, among other things’ (1982, p. 4). Kristeva here argues that crime reaches its most extreme form when it interferes with the things that people rely on to keep them safe and secure in life, for example, childhood and science. This crime undermines the very foundations of their sense of control over the world, leaving them vulnerable to the ultimate danger of death. The connection between childhood and death, and more specifically in this case, the connection of twin children and ritual sacrifice, is abject. The girls are troubled by their grandfather’s story; their state of twinness becomes tainted by the ‘vivid scenes in their heads’ of ‘innocent twins being set on fire’ (Evans, 2005, p. 64). When Baba tells the story of Onia and Ode, their identities become interwoven with those of Georgia and Bessie, as Georgia believes that ‘Onia was her’ (p. 63). The image of Ode inside Onia and this collapse of the boundaries of the self and other haunt Georgia, reminding her of the fragility of the borders of the self, and ‘twoness in oneness’ becomes the abject.

Furthermore, oneness becomes unbearable for Georgia because she cannot form boundaries around her self and eject her twin. This is not because she is an identical twin but because the abject becomes a part of herself, as one being part of the other evokes the twoness of the mother–child dyad. Hence, Georgia suffers from the abjection of self which is described by Kristeva (1982, p. 5):

when that subject, weary of fruitless attempts to identify with something on the outside, finds the impossible within; when it finds that the impossible constitutes its very being, that it is none other than abject. The abjection of self would be the culminating form of that experience of the subject to which it is revealed that all its objects are based merely on the inaugural loss that laid the foundations of its own being.

The abjection of the self occurs with the failure to form a subject, as opposed to an object, or when the object of desire is nothing but the abject. Georgia spends her adulthood yearning for a space of twoness and trying to recreate it with Toby, her boyfriend, by inscribing a similar equation to that of her childhood bedroom in their own bedroom door: ‘G + B’ becomes ‘G + T’ (Evans, 2005, p. 183). In one of Georgia’s hallucinations, a devil tells her a story ‘about a woman who lost her soul […] she searched high and low, […] when she found it, she vanished’ (p. 188). The story of finding the soul and losing the self reflects Kristeva’s explanation above that in the subject search for the object of desire, the soul in the story, the failure of the subject to finding something other than the abject results in the vanishing of the self within the abject. The abject taunts Georgia in the form of visions of cockroaches, devils and twins playing together for eternity. Eventually, Georgia kills herself because she believes that she is the cursed twin.

What intensifies Georgia’s sense of abjection is Sedrick’s violation of her bodily boundaries. Sedrick, the watchman at the Hunters’ home in Lagos, represents the abject of border crossing. Kristeva identifies the abject in its broader sense within society as follows: ‘what does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite. The traitor, the liar, the criminal with a good conscience, the shameless rapist, the killer who claims he is a saviour’ (1982, p. 4). As a watchman, Sedrick is located within the limited space of his room and the garden and is never allowed inside the house. Therefore, to challenge these boundaries, he becomes ‘the shameless rapist’, someone who crosses the borders and laws of society to become a perpetrator invading the space of others. He confesses to the twins that he saw people dying in the civil war. Although the girls learned about the Nigerian civil war in school – the fact ‘that one million people died’ – it now looks at them through Sedrick’s yellow eyes (Evans, 2005, p. 57). These historical traumas translate to personal trauma for Georgia, leading to her entrapment and loss of self. During her last year in Lagos, while Georgia is spending her time admiring the beauty of her home’s garden at night, she is molested by Sedrick. When he attacks her, she is holding a kitten, and its warmth in her hands and the softness of the grass beneath her contrast with Sedrick’s harsh, invasive touch. He smells of ‘sugar cane gone sour’ (p. 67), a reference to another part of West African history, that of the enslaved masses shipped to work on sugar plantations. While being pinned down by him, she asks a question that echoes the one asked by Ham, the hamster, before his death: ‘what *is* it?’ (p. 67, emphasis in original). She is questioning what is this power that locks her in and entraps her. In the process of the assault, ‘her feet felt as if they’d turned into grass, and grown there, and wouldn’t be able to go anywhere until they were pulled out’ (p. 67). Sedrick has transformed her into a victim. The victim position is, as Huma Ibrahim argues, ‘an immovable object space’ (1997, p. 151).

Although Georgia eventually leaves Nigeria, the move is only physical, as mentally she is stuck in exile, haunted by the ghosts of Onia and Ode.

Sedrick assault marks the beginning of Georgia’s depression and her detachment from Bessi. In the same interview mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, Diana Evans describes Sedrick as ‘a catalyst for what was already there […] He’s the spanner in the works, if you like. It makes it more difficult for her to survive in a world which she already finds difficult’ (Evaristo, 2005, p. 34). Thus, Georgia’s trauma although starts with Sedrick, however, from her early years, Georgia carries the psychological wound of the colliding cultures of her parents. Like for Jess in *The Icarus Girl*, when Georgia visits Nigeria, it stirs up the traumatic history of the region and intensifies her inner struggle to navigate different cultures and locations.

Georgia has formed a belonging to the shared space of childhood. However, when Georgia is cast out from this protected space of innocence by Sedrick's assault, she cannot be part of the twoness any more. Hence, ‘it was the first time ever, in this land of twoness in oneness, that something had seemed unsayable’ (Evans, 2005, p. 69). This change is reflected by the loft, which the twins discover has been disturbed by ‘strangers’ upon their return to Neasden a few months after Sedrick’s assault (p.44). ‘GRANNY’S’ is written above ‘BESSI BEST BED’, which Bessi wrote with chalk above her bed before travelling to Nigeria (p. 76, capital letters in original). The beanbags have lost their strawberry smell and the room seems aged. Likewise, the ‘G + B’ which they had drawn in chalk on the loft door has ‘faded a little since 1981’ (p. 76). McLeod (2010) points out that Evans uses the twins’ initials ‘as a playful national signifier’; therefore, if ‘G + B’is a national signifier, I would argue that its fading colours could indicate a decline in their national belonging (p. 48).

Before their journey to Nigeria, the twins fear that it will make them ‘grow older, and become foreign’ (p. 44). They decide in Nigeria that they will be ‘not all’, ‘but a bit very [sic]’ Nigerian, so that they can enjoy their time there and reclaim Neasden as their ‘home’ when they go back (p.58). However, when they return to Neasden, it seems the whole atmosphere has changed. In 1981, Neasden is described in terms of its green spaces: the house, the garden, the Welsh Harp march, the tree with a rope swing and the evergreen tree in the clearing. They leave a paradise and return in 1984 to a colourless space, where the whole atmosphere is ‘thickened with white’ (p. 75). The words chosen to portray what used to be vibrant places now covered with ‘white’ suggest that Georgia has developed a racial consciousness as a mixed-race girl. This white covers the cracks in the earth, but for Georgia, the cracks are also inside her, dividing her: ‘everything is white, Georgia thought softly through her anguish. When the white is over, the cracks will show’ (p. 91). The cracks here resemble the ‘halfway gaps’ in *The Icarus Girl*: Jess ‘couldn’t bear a halfway gap; it had to be a chasm or not there at all – fitting pieces together would be dangerous and doomed to misunderstanding’ (Oyeyemi, 2005, p. 236). Finding it difficult to fit the pieces of their identities together and mend the cracks, both girls struggle to develop a hybrid identity.

Consequently, Georgia becomes the foreigner that, before their trip to Nigeria, she had dreaded becoming . In primary school, the twins had shared the same class: green for Gladstone. Upon their return from Nigeria, Georgia is moved to red for Nelson and Bessie to blue for Livingstone[[21]](#footnote-22) (Evans, 2005, p. 86). Each twin locates herself within a different context: one African and the other British. Furthermore, before moving to Nigeria, Georgia used to meet William Ewart Gladstone, a late nineteenth-century British prime minister, in her dreams. However, Georgia’s magical visits to Gladstone stop after she travels to Nigeria and are eventually replaced by visits from the spirits of Onia and Ode (p. 63). On her last dream visit to Gladstone’s house (Dollis Hill House), ‘the house was empty, apart from a small black cockroach crawling across the floor’ (p. 85). She seems to have replaced one history, the British, with another, the West African.

Georgia is caught in a state of unbelonging because for her, unlike for her mother, the place where she belongs is not on the map. Like Jess at the beginning of *The Icarus Girl*, Georgia is unable to form a sense of belonging to Britain or Nigeria. Consequently, she becomes mentally ill. Her psychological predicament can be compared to that of Nyasha in the novel *Nervous Conditions* (1988) by Zimbabwean author Tsitsi Dangarembga. Nyasha is one of the key female figures in postcolonial literature.[[22]](#footnote-23) She represents the nervous condition of coming of age between two cultures. Nyasha spends some of her childhood in Britain, and when she returns to Rhodesia, she is shocked by the oppressive patriarchal and colonial society. The condition of being neither British nor African is described by Nyasha as entrapment: ‘they’ve trapped us. They’ve trapped us. Look what they’ve done to us. I’m not one of them but I’m not one of you’ (Dangarembga, 1988, p. 201). Nyasha’s neurosis is caused by her inability to escape her role as an African woman within the colonial power. In contrast, Georgia’s entrapment is caused by her inability to find a place for herself; as she puts it: ‘I’m trying to find somewhere I can fit’ (Evans, 2005, p. 179).

For both girls, their entrapment manifests itself in their eating habits: Nyasha develops bulimic and anorexic eating disorders, and Georgia eats non-food items in her early years. From a young age, Georgia has a sense of having ‘never fully arrived’, which leads her to refuse ‘to breathe for seven minutes. And two and a half years later, still resentful, she was rushed back to St Luke’s Hospital with dishcloth, carpet dust, half her afro and tassels off the bottom of the sofa clinging to her intestines’ (p. 4). As a result, she has a scar across her stomach that cuts her in half. It ‘grew up with her’ and ‘widened like a pale smile and split her in two’, thus reflecting her dual nature (p. 4). As she grows older, Georgia becomes more conscious of what she puts in her mouth. She refuses to eat ham after Ham’s death, and as a nine-year-old, she starts to skip certain foods that she considers to be fattening, because she is the fattest twin.

As an adolescent, Georgia becomes a vegetarian to resist her Nigerian roots. Both Ida and Ida’s mother Nne-Nne take pride in their chicken dishes. Nne-Nne, who ‘proudly passed round [her] chicken wings’, is offended by Bel refusing them: ‘Nne-Nne looked her up and down as if she was a vegetarian’ (p. 61). Similarly, what Ida makes for her family is ‘the chicken of kings and queens’ (p. 16). Ida’s ‘roast potatoes were sometimes burnt at the edges, her boiled vegetables were soggy on occasion, particularly after a long bath, but when it came to chicken, Ida was beyond the teachings of any book’ (p. 16). However, when Georgia has to cook turkey at Christmas because Ida was sick, Georgia’s ‘turkey failed to be the turkey of kings and queens’ (p. 156). This failure to produce a proper meal for her family separates Georgia from her maternal influence. Ida believes in her Aruwa ancestral ‘philosophy’, ‘that a woman knows her family best, loves them best, lives her best, through the kitchen’ (p. 51). Therefore, Georgia’s refusal to eat meat is a way to set herself apart from her foremothers’ influence.

Eventually, when Georgia falls into a depression, she uses food consumption as a resistance mechanism to her depressive mood (Redondo, 2020, pp. 21, 26).[[23]](#footnote-24) As previously mentioned, Georgia fails to form her own subjectivity apart from her twin and is therefore caught in a state of abjection. For her, the boundary of the self is unstable, which leads her to a state of impurity. As noted by Kristeva (1982, p. 60) ‘states of fear and impurity’ occur when ‘we are dealing with imprecise boundaries’. Because food breaches the body’s borders, ‘all food is liable to defile’ (Kristeva, 1982, p. 75). Georgia eats the ‘right foods’ and drinks fresh water as a cleansing ritual: a form of ‘DIY baptism, the restoration of the self to a state of purity’ (Evans, 2005, p. 152). However, food cannot really restore the self, and in Georgia’s mind, the right food is what makes her shrink and ‘take up very little space’ (p. 152). The detoxification diet is Georgia’s final attempt to overcome her sense of abjection. However, failing to achieve her sense of subjectivity results in her self-destruction. Her depression reaches its peak when she moves to Tottenham which intensifies her sense of isolation: ‘the rumble of the Tottenham traffic spread into Georgia’s head. It was as if it was always there’ (Evans, 2005, p. 155). She ends up hanging herself to death in her flat there at the age of twenty-four.

Evans shows that entrapment does not only occur between two cultures or among the marginalised. Aubrey is also stuck in the maternal space; he tries to escape this limiting space more than once but fails because his mother ‘never failed to remind him, with unconditional devotion, with dangerous love, of what he lacked’ (p. 32). In terms of looks, Aubrey does not resemble his father or brothers, with their brown hair and ‘biceps and triceps bulging’ (p. 32). With his small body, missing teeth and light hair, his mother was ‘the only other human being he felt he resembled’ (p. 33). Kristeva emphasises that:

The body must bear no trace of its debt to nature: it must be clean and proper in order to be fully symbolic. In order to confirm that, it should endure no gash other than that of circumcision, equivalent to sexual separation and/or separation from the mother. Any other mark would be the sign of belonging to the impure, the non-separate, the non-symbolic, the non-holy. (Kristeva, 1986, p. 102).

Because Aubrey does not possess the proper masculine body of the Hunter males, he is interlaced with the abject mother. Aubrey spends the first twenty-nine years of his life in Bakewell being ‘the daughter Judith never had’ (Evans, 2005, p. 33). Therefore, when he decides to try to escape his mother, he travels as far as Lagos, where he meets Ida. Aubrey’s failure to escape his mother, who keeps reminding him that ‘a child’s mother is his only safe shelter’, results in his self-destructive alcoholism (p. 33). While Aubrey does not experience cultural dislocation like his wife, he experiences a different kind of in-betweenness between self and mother.

Ida and Aubrey escape the rural Aruwa and Bakewell for the metropolitan centres of Lagos and London. They create an in-between space in London and for some years in Lagos. The décor of the Hunters’ house in Neasden displays objects from their diverse heritages, from ‘miniature watercolours of the English countryside’ and ‘a large-scale tapestry of the Derbyshire dales’ to various kinds of African carvings, of an ‘old spirit woman with horns’, ‘heads’ and ‘an eyeless black mask with a freakish mane of straw hair’ (p. 38). The purpose of Aubrey’s pieces is material beauty, whereas Ida’s pieces convey spiritual protection and wisdom, thus creating separate parallel spaces of the material and the mythical. As the mother retreats into her imaginative bubble and the father to the limitations of his material space, it is up to each girl to find her own space. The parents’ failure to find common ground, where they can exist in harmony together instead of colliding, results in Georgia’s sense of dislocation. Nevertheless, her other sisters succeed in navigating their way through the in-between space of their parents, as I will show in the next section.

**Open Spaces and Migratory Subjects**

*26a* addresses the different possibilities associated with coming of age between two or more cultures. It highlights how four girls sharing the same domestic space and cultural background lead incomparable lives. Building on my previous section, this section discuss the other three Hunter sisters aside from Georgia: Bel, Kemy and Bessie, who represent more positive narratives of cultural diversity.

Isabel (‘Bel’), the eldest of the Hunter sisters, was born in 1967. She exemplifies the hybrid identity of being Nigerian and British. Bel has her paternal grandmother Judith’s green eyes, which reflect ‘a certain piercing mystery’ like those of her Nigerian great grandmother, Cecilia (p. 13). From a young age, she has access to her mother’s vision of Aruwa: Ida ‘told Bel about the singing tree and the millions of stars in Aruwa’ (p. 39). She is the most spiritual of the sisters, sharing in her mother's beliefs and possessing the power of premonition: ‘Bel’s dreams were never taken lightly’ (p. 13). She is the only one of her sisters who visits Nigeria more than once: as a baby, as a teenager and as an adult (p. 39). For Bel, Nigeria is the place of her first love, with Troy, and has a special space in her heart. She manages to preserve her relationship with her African heritage by learning the art of taking care of afros (p. 46). She grows up watching the twins’ struggle with their hair due to the ‘hairdresser in Neasden … not [being] up to the challenges posed by afros’ (p. 42). So unlike the rest of her sisters, Bel contributes to helping other African women through her job as a hairstylist. Bel’s concern with the art of natural afro hair styling stems from being the closest daughter to her mother in terms of the thickness of their hair. While recognising and accepting her African background, Bel nevertheless enjoys the freedoms of British culture: wearing short skirts and lipstick and having a child out of wedlock. Having a child out of wedlock causes her to clash with her father and eventually leave the family home to lead a life as an independent single mother. Bel masters her in-between hybrid existence, moving between Nigeria and Britain and embracing both sides of her culture.

Kemy, the youngest sister, represents a broader sense of black British identity. As a character, Kemy is shaped by American culture (p. 60). Her comical behaviour in mispronouncing difficult words, such as ‘corgated’ instead of ‘corrugated’, or ‘compension’ instead of ‘compensation’, resembles that of Amy in *Little Women*. In addition, her having a Michael Jackson poster in her bedroom shows that Kemy is the most invested in African American popular culture out of the sisters. In Nigeria, she misses having access to British popular culture: ‘Kemy burst into tears, slammed down her fork and said, “I want to go home. I want to watch Top of the Pops!”’ (p. 52). When London seems to become the centre of the world due to Michael Jackson’s arrival, Kemy secures tickets for the concert. In *The Black Atlantic,* Paul Gilroy (1993a) emphasises that black music offers ‘essential connectedness’ between various black communities which surpasses ‘fixity and rootedness’ (p.102). He explains:

The preeminence of music within the diverse black communities of the Atlantic diaspora is itself an important element in their essential connectedness. But the histories of borrowing, displacement, transformation, and continual reinscription that the musical culture encloses are a living legacy that should not be reified in the primary symbol of the diaspora and then employed as an alternative to the recurrent appeal of fixity and rootedness. (p. 102)

The influence of African American artists allows Kemy to develop a more universal sense of blackness; she represents Gilroy’s model of the black Atlantic. Her sense of identity is not fixed within a certain geography, but she is selective in her cultural choices. Although she is the most seriously engaged by her maternal grandfather’s story of the twin, she is ready to influence it from her own perspective, adding a western touch to the Nigerian folktale when she asks whether witches ‘have brooms’ (Evans, 2005, p. 62).

Whereas Georgia represents the negative side of transnationalism and Bessie reflects the positive side due to her ability to form connections with several places and connect to other-than-human beings in these places. In their last days in Nigeria, Bessie feels attached to the rainbow, as she sees it as ‘one of the best things about Sekon’ (p. 71), whereas forming this sense of attachment is something Georgia fails to do; hence Georgia ‘had felt the colours and the rain, but she would not miss [Sekon]. And there was something lost. The now-ness of things. It was not pretty’ (p. 71). Georgia’s inability to connect to nature and form a positive relationship with Nigeria makes it impossible for her to reconcile with its traumatic past.

By contrast, Bessie is able to establish connections with and between new and old places. During her trip to the Caribbean when she is eighteen, she encounters a volcano for the first time. The novelty of this experience brings back her childhood memories of Sekon’s rainbows, and the sound of fire inside the volcano recalls Baba’s story of the cursed twins. She is ‘ten years old again’, sleeping with her twin in Aruwa (p. 144). By juxtaposing Igbo history with Trinity Village in Saint Lucia in the Caribbean, Evans hints at the history of transatlantic slavery and the dislocated Igbos: one third of the enslaved Africans brought to Saint Lucia were Igbo (Higman, 1995, p. 128).

Furthermore, the evergreen tree, which the window in the 26a loft overlooks, symbolises ‘twoness in oneness’ and the twins’ space, allowing Bessie to visit her twin, even after her death (Evans, 2005, pp. 205, 230). These natural phenomena and flora are employed by Bessie to anchor herself in different locations. It is as Bessie explains: ‘there are parts of you in different places, and you have to go find them’ (p. 132). She is a citizen of the world who can maintain connections to several places. She often claims the spaces she occupies by writing her name on them. As mentioned earlier, she writes ‘BESSI BEST BED’ in the loft; she also has ‘Bessi’s best bench’ in Georgia’s kitchen in her flat which Georgia moves to with her boyfriend Toby in Tottenham (p.184).

Bessie does not just represent ‘cosmopolitanism’, as Holland (2017, p. 556) concludes, but more specifically eco-cosmopolitanism. The difference is explained by Ursula K. Heise (2008, pp. 60–61), as follows:

cosmopolitanism […] is circumscribed by human social experience. Eco-cosmopolitanism, by contrast, reaches toward what some environmental writers and philosophers have called the “more-than-human world” – the realm of nonhuman species, but also that of connectedness with both animate and inanimate networks of influence and exchange.

Because Bessie relates to the natural spaces of the places she visits as well as to cultural practices or social experiences, she reflects what Heise describes as eco-cosmopolitanism. Nature in the novel is used as an escape, a haven in which memories and history are inscribed. The evergreen tree in the Hunter’s garden parallels the singing tree in the middle of Aruwa with ‘an infinite green […] where the spirits lived and wisdom was woven, where children climbed branches in pursuit of magic’ (Evans, 2005, p. 26). The evergreen tree becomes the place where Georgia’s spirit lives, thereby transforming into another magical tree. It helps Bessie overcome her sense of homelessness after Georgia’s death (pp. 198, 230).

**Conclusion**

While *26a* does not address race explicitly, it is not post-racial. Evans notes: ‘I don’t say that I don’t write about race because I don’t think you can write about black characters without writing about race, it’s so deeply engrained. Racial history lays so heavily on black people – slavery, migration, racism. But I don’t want my characters to be hidden by that’ (Evans, 2018, para. 4). My analysis of the novel has illustrated how Evans use symbolic language to hint at the racial history she refers to here. She shows the experience of mixed-race children not as othered or marginalised but as central. Paul Warmington (2016) emphasises that black cultural studies has unravelled the othering of blackness in Britain, thereby allowing a new generation of authors to break free from this position. As a result, he notes, second- and third-generation writers are able to view British black and Asian cultures ‘not as ‘other’, not as exotic, not as deviant – but as

protagonistic’ (p. 259). Hence he argues against viewing black British writing as only occupied by race-related themes and in favour of seeing it as writing that combats the notion of black ‘otherness’ (2016, p. 256). Although Evans does not define the Hunter daughters by their difference, their bicultural background remains essential throughout the story.

Hall argues against ‘the binary black or British’ (2019, p. 91). Evans shows this binary through Aubrey and Ida, who coexist in the same house but each have their own world. This distinction between worlds arises because they essentialise their differences and do not try to understand each other’s cultures. Hall warns against essentialising differences because ‘it sees difference as “their traditions versus ours,” not in a positional way, but in a mutually exclusive, autonomous, and self-sufficient one. And it is therefore unable to grasp the dialogic strategies and hybrid forms essential to the diaspora aesthetic’ (2019, p. 91). Ida does not claim Britain as her home but instead creates a Nigerian utopia in her London home. Moreover, she only starts to move beyond her neighbourhood after Georgia’s death. Ida represents the first-generation immigrant tendencies of isolation, dislocation and nostalgia. Although Georgia and her sisters are from the same generation but she is the only one who embodies the second-generation immigrant sentiment of being ‘neither “here” nor “there”’ (Osborne, 2016, p. 3). Georgia’s death in 1997 shows that such sentiment does not have a place in the new generation of black British youth who have the ability to develop a more positive sense of belonging to different cultures. By replacing the ‘or’ with ‘and’ to become ‘black and British’ (Hall, 2019, p. 91), this new generation that includes Bessie, Bel and Kemy is able to construct positive diaspora identities.

Like the previous chapter, this chapter has explored mixed-race girlhood in London’s suburbs. Its discussion of *26a* has foregrounded myth as an important element in highlighting the psychological struggle inherent in forming a sense of transnational belonging and finding harmony between cultures. In focusing on *26a,* this chapter has shown the multiplicity of diaspora experiences ranging from positive to negative. This chapter concludes the thesis’s focus on girlhood. I will be moving on to examine black British boyhood in the next two chapters. The issue of representation emerged in chapter one in relation to girlhood. Jess in *The Icarus Girl* battles with the fact that black girls are underrepresented in the British literary canon. I will explore the issue of representation in more detail in the next two chapters. As I examine boyhood, especially in books about black boyhood in post-1970s Britain, I will show how the negative representation of black masculinity shapes boys’ lives and their perspectives. Hence the next chapter will be more concerned with the political factors influencing black British narratives than the previous chapters were.

**Chapter 3: Surviving in the Council Estates in Stephen Kelman’s *Pigeon English* and** **Bernardine Evaristo’s *Hello Mum***

Nothing the estate raised was a monster,

yet the devil found good ground to plough his seeds.

GABOS – the widening gyre. Residents on the brink:

washed, wrung, walking shrines asking questions

to which the architect maintained that their design

was a good solution because of the times.

It is true on paper there were no designs for a tomb

yet the East wing stairs were where Damilola was found:

blue dawn, blue body, blue lights, blue tapes.

(Caleb Femi, 2020, p. 14)

The above stanza is an extract from ‘Because of the Times’ by Caleb Femi, and its main themes of council estates, crime and lost childhood are the focus of this chapter. Femi moved to Peckham in London from Nigeria when he was seven, and he documents his experiences in his poetry. In ‘Because of the Times’, he describes the walkways of the North Peckham Estate as a concrete web connecting the lives of its residents: ‘A paradise of affordable bricks, tucked under a blanket, shielded from the world’ (p. 13). Yet the concrete web created to allow residents to walk freely within the estate also creates secret passages for criminals. Eventually, the estate becomes fertile ground for the criminal underworld to flourish, as implied by the use of ‘GABOS’, a criminal acronym meaning ‘Game Ain’t Based on Sympathy’, according to the *Urban Dictionary*. The end of the poem describes the death scene of ten-year-old Damilola Taylor, who was stabbed by the twelve- and thirteen-year-old Preddie brothers. In the year 2000, Damilola, who had recently migrated to Britain from Nigeria, was discovered on a stairway in the estate, bleeding from a gash in his leg. More than a decade later, in 2011, Stephen Kelman published his novel *Pigeon English*, which is based on the murder. This novel, along with *Hello Mum* (2009) by Bernardine Evaristo, will be the focus of the present chapter.

*Hello Mum* and *Pigeon English* are both set in the twenty-first century in London council estates, and both show the grim reality for children there. Although they are similar in their themes and settings, and in their employment of non-realist elements, they differ in their narrative styles. *Hello Mum* is presented as a long, posthumously written letter from fourteen-year-old Jerome to his mother, relating the last few hours of his life and the events that led to his involvement in a drug dealing gang and consequently to his brutal death at the hands of a rival gang. It is set in 2009 in an imagined London council estate in NW14. The narrative style is introspective, allowing the reader to delve into Jerome’s thoughts and feelings, and to understand his unusual circumstances. On the other hand, *Pigeon English* employs multiple perspectives to tell the story of Harrison Opoku, an eleven-year-old boy who lives on the fictional Dell Farm Estate in London. It incorporates snippets from the perspective of a pigeon which acts as a secondary narrator providing additional insights into Harrison’s story. Both texts show the ups and downs of childhood within London’s council estates, where age, race and poverty shape the lives of the main characters. The council estates are portrayed as bleak and dangerous places where violence and crime are a part of everyday life. Hence the stories are about social injustice, which makes them akin to Condition-of-England novels and Victorian realism focused on class inequity. However, as described above, they use modernist techniques which add complexity and depth to the stories.

This chapter provides an important insight into writing about black British children. It diverges from the previous ones, which centred on writing about girlhood within the middle-class domestic sphere, because it focuses on the portrayal of childhood within council estates and impoverished neighbourhoods. Building upon the intersection of age, race and gender explored in the previous chapters, this chapter extends that intersection to include class. The narratives under examination do not prominently feature the issues of forming a transnational identity or of racism. Rather they are concerned with the challenges of surviving to adulthood in a violence-filled world. They depict boyhood within what Akala, the hip-hop artist and author, refers to as ‘the clichéd, single-parent working-class family’, drawing on his own upbringing in a council estate in Camden (2018, p. 5).[[24]](#footnote-25) Gilles Deleuze describes clichés as floating images ‘which circulate in the external world, but which also penetrate each one of us and constitute his internal world, so that everyone possesses only psychic clichés by which he thinks and feels, is thought and is felt, being himself a cliché among the others in the world which surrounds him’ (1986, pp. 208–209). Hence the word ‘cliché’ suggests the political unconscious because, as Deleuze argues, a cliché is a repetitive image or concept, from the media, that has formed part of the individual’s unconscious. Akala describing the single-parent working-class family as clichéd shows that families occupying council estates are usually represented as deviating from social norms. In order to understand how this deviant status is socially constructed, the political factors which contribute to racial and economic marginalisation of black British people will be the focus of this chapter.

I read the council estates in the narratives here as spaces of political exclusion and abjection. ‘Council estate’ is a term usually used to refer to social housing in Britain. Many of these estates were built in the middle of the twentieth century, after the Second World War, to house those who could not afford to pay for a home from the private sector (Bell and Beswick, 2014, p. 121). Eventually, they became the homes of immigrants, especially in inner city London, where there is a heavy concentration of ethnic minorities (Kelleher, 2005, p. 241). Fewer job opportunities within these areas resulted in the rise of poverty among ethnic minorities (Bhopal, 2018, p. 144). In addition, Gilroy argues that, as of the 1970s, ‘crime, in the form of both street disorder and robbery was gradually identiﬁed as an *expression of black culture*’ within urban areas (2002, p. 140, emphasis in original). Hence, viewing black youth as more prone to committing such crimes ‘has become integral to British racism’ (Gilroy, 2002, p. 140). However, Gilroy shows the importance of class when analysing writings about black British experiences, as he explicitly argues that race and racism are rooted in the class structure and history of British society, which has perpetuated systemic inequality and discrimination. Yet he concludes that class analysis has its limitations when dealing with black Britons (2002, p. 38). Therefore it is important to look at all the factors that influence the lives of black youths in the inner city, including material, political, cultural and psychological ones.

I argue that social abjection contributes to the othering of low-income black youth. They are represented as ‘a high crime group’, a phrase which, as Gilroy points out, signifies ‘the limits to the order of public authority with which police are identiﬁed’ (2002, p. 181). According to Kristeva (1982, p. 4), the abject ‘draws attention to the fragility of the law’; representations of black youth as a threat to the law mark them as socially abject in this sense. Kristeva defines the abject as something that is not part of the self, yet not other; something in-between; a threat to the unity of the self that ‘cannot be assimilated’, yet cannot be completely ejected (1982, p. 1). Kristeva’s abjection, as Tyler (2013, p. 33) suggests, signifies the attempt to forget ‘the colonial histories which violently resurface in contemporary expressions of xenophobia against both black citizens and newly arrived migrants’. Hence the sensation of abjection contributes to contemporary racism while remaining a social and political phenomenon of an imperial legacy in which unfamiliar cultures are othered. Since these cultures are now inside Britain, they become abject; the other within. The need to keep a distance between the self and the other results in spatial abjection and exclusion. In the two books studied in this chapter, the borders of council estates are what keep the other at bay, creating abject spaces within the estates. This chapter explores the council estate as abject space and discusses the stigma projected onto inner city black youth culture. Analysing the representations of children in *Hello Mum* and *Pigeon English* will identify how these representations yield to the stereotypical image of black youth and resist it at the same time.

*Hello Mum* is written in epistolary form, which reflects the inner voice of its central character. Such a form is suitable for capturing the struggles of coming of age for adolescents (Wasserman, 2003, p. 48). Therefore, Evaristo uses this technique to reveal Jerome’s hidden world as he describes the way that gangs limit his existence: ‘we lived in NW14 and over the road was NW15, which made it out of bounds. Same all over London. If you live in SW9, don’t go minding your business in E5 because they’ll make your business their business’ (p. 31). He lives in a small apartment with his mother Kimisi Cole-Wallace and his half-sister, four-year-old Shontelle. Both siblings were abandoned by their fathers, Jerome when he was six and Shontelle before her birth. Jerome spends his time with his best friend Adrian, who is ‘a bit soft’ and speaks ‘posh’ (p. 19). When they are attacked by the Deptford Warriors gang while attending a friend’s party in a different area of London, Adrian starts to cry ‘like a baby’, leading Jerome to seek out a stronger companion (p. 21). As an adolescent, Jerome is facing questions of masculinity, wanting to ‘act like a man’ not ‘a wimp’ and to provide for his family (pp. 21, 25, 62). Internalising a distorted figure of black masculinity, Jerome is drawn to the world of crime. Consequently, he becomes involved with Kamikaze Kru and their leader Delmar, who brings Jerome to work for his drug dealer brother Dexter. On his first mission, Jerome is caught by the B-Block Boys and stabbed in the neck in front of a fish and chip shop, where he bleeds to death. He concludes his letter to his mother as follows: ‘I wanted you to know I hadn’t been mixed up in badness for a long time – just for twenty-five minutes of my fourteen years of life’ (p. 81). Hence his letter counters the popular image of black youth as predisposed to commit violence and hence drawn to gangs.

*Pigeon English* seems to start where *Hello Mum* ends, with a crime scene. The first scene described by Harrison is outside Chicken Joe’s, where an older boy who attends a different secondary school has just been murdered. In the scene he sees a pigeon, which was walking on the blood near the boy’s body. The pigeon appears to Harrison in several incidents. It acts as a witness to his story, but it does not offer any aid. Harrison Opoku has recently arrived at a council estate in London with his mother and older sister Lydia, leaving his father and baby sister Agnes behind in Ghana. His father stays to sell his shop before catching up with his family, and because his mother works a full-time job as a midwife in London, Agnes is left with her grandmother. Harrison’s narrative covers a school term, starting in March and ending with the beginning of the summer holiday in July. Like Jerome’s story, it details the events leading up to his murder. Along with his white school friend Dean, he investigates the stabbing of the older boy to try to expose the killer. The world of violence shown through Harrison’s eyes contrasts with his sense of hopefulness. The Dell Farm Crew (DFC) attend Harrison’s school in Year 11. They steal from other students, causing some parents to walk with their children to school to protect them. By contrast, on his first day of school, Harrison describes how ‘Manik’s papa’ helps him knot his uniform tie, indicating that within Harrison’s new, difficult environment, there is still a sense of community. Like Jerome, Harrison is faced with questions of masculinity. He believes that as the man of the house he should protect his mother and sister. He thinks: ‘If I was the big fish all the little fish would be scared of me’ (Kelman, 2011, p. 65). Consequently, he tries to be part of the DFC but fails to fulfil their missions, and they begin to threaten him: X- Fire starts making ‘the gun sign’ at him (p. 124). Eventually, Harrison and Dean suspect that Killa, one of the DFC members, was the person who killed the boy, and Lydia films Killa and X-Fire’s argument about the dead boy’s photo, but they do not tell the police. On the last day of school, after running to his home full of hope and happiness for the summer holiday, Harrison is stabbed on the stairs of his building. The narrative ends as it started, with blood: ‘You could see the blood. It was darker than you thought’ (pp. 3, 263).

When the pigeon approaches him at the end, Harrison refers to it as ‘you’, instead of the earlier ‘he’: ‘I looked up, you were perched there on the railing watching me, your pink eyes weren’t dead but full of love like a battery’ (p. 263). In contrast, the pigeon’s eyes at the beginning of the novel are described by Harrison as ‘pink and dead’ (p. 3). The pigeon’s eyes are metaphorical of the visibility of the children in council estates. The eyes are blind to the risks these children are put through in the poor neighbourhoods; the children only become visible when they are victims or perpetrators. The glowing of the pigeon’s eyes, ‘like a battery’, refers to the artificial watchfulness of the media or a camera which is only turned on when these children are part of a tragedy. Moreover, Harrison asks the pigeon to tell his story to Agnes, which also reflects the attention the victims receive when their stories become visible only after their deaths. The novel presents more than one knife crime to emphasise their frequent occurrence among gang youth. It seems that Harrison’s death represents Damilola’s due to the similarities between the two crimes. By starting and ending with murder, the novel shows it to be an ever-moving cycle that these youth cannot escape.

**The Child’s Point of View**

The previous chapters of this thesis dealt with narratives of childhood told in the third person, but here the books under examination are in the first person. *Hello Mum* and *Pigeon English* use the child’s perspective to amplify the political urgency of their stories. By immersing readers in the inner worlds of their young protagonists, these narratives provide a powerful critique of unjust and unequal social and political systems, while also highlighting the resilience and strength of the marginalised children.

The use of the child’s point of view that is not mediated through a narrator aims to arouse empathy for these children. Richard Locke in *Critical Children* emphasises that novelists ‘use children caught in violent situations as vehicles of moral and cultural interrogation’ (2011, p. 4). Furthermore, he argues that child-centred novels ‘arouse the reader’s sympathy, nostalgic identification, urgent memories, and ethical alertness’ (p. 4). However, the children Locke discusses in American and English classics are mostly boys and are all white, which, he argues, reflect ‘the race, class, and gender priorities and prejudices of the society’ that produced them (p. 7). Therefore, the term ‘ethical’ becomes problematic when referring to children who are othered in their society by gender, class or racial difference; will these children also call for ‘ethical alertness’?[[25]](#footnote-26) Jameson (1981) raises the issue of ethics when dealing with ‘categories of Otherness’; these are, as he emphasises, class, racial and national differences (p. 101). He defines ethics as standing for the binary division of good and evil where good usually represents the self or the centre and evil the other or those who are marginalised (pp. 103–106).[[26]](#footnote-27) Hence, he suggests ‘political’ as the more suitable term, especially when dealing with collective issues of social inequity (pp. 285, 286). I agree with Jameson that ethics should be read within their social and political contexts, and hence I choose ‘political’ as the more appropriate term for my reading of the novels.

The authors whose novels are discussed in this chapter act as political activists by bringing attention to the stories of those who are marginalised by class, ethnicity and age. In her memoir, Evaristo acknowledges how her political activism has influenced her writing: ‘my art embodies my activism’ (2022, p. 174). In both the books discussed here, children of colour are capable of committing crimes; therefore, it is not that the ethical idea of the child as pure or innocent suggests moral urgency but that the vulnerability of these children to the violence they are facing calls for political action to protect them. Kathryn Bond Stockton (2009) examines representations of children who deviate from the typical child image. She suggests that because children of colour and low-income children do not fit with some modern representations of the child as innocent and weak, they are usually put through difficult situations in fiction to make them appear more vulnerable. She uses some films released in the 1990s as examples, arguing that: ‘As odd as it may seem, suffering certain kinds of abuse from which they need protection and to which they don’t consent, working-class children or children of color may come to seem more innocent’ (Stockton, 2009, p. 32). In *Pigeon English* and *Hello Mum,* children need to prove their humanity to readers. Jerome’s purpose in writing his letter is to exonerate himself from the blame for his gang membership, while Harrison, through his acts and explicitly expressed thoughts, sets himself apart from the crimes committed in his neighbourhood.

Each author discussed in this chapter encourages their readers to empathise with their central character by presenting the point of view of the child navigating harsh sociopolitical environments. Moreover, Evaristo dedicates her novella ‘For the children …’ to urge her readers to think about the real children outside the book. On the other hand, Kelman ends his novel with: ‘All babies look the same’, highlighting his book’s political urgency (2011, p. 263).Unjustly, in Harrison’s world, not all babies are treated with the equal care they deserve; unlike the middle class children living safely in the suburbs, the children living in his estate are exposed to violence and death. Kelman here could be suggesting that race is just a social construct, as Hall (2017, p. 32) emphasises: ‘race is a cultural and historical, not biological, fact […] race is a discursive construct, a sliding signifier’. Hence, racial discourse has shaped the way that black youth appear in the popular imagination and influenced their everyday existence. For this reason, Evaristo (2022, p. 137) emphasises: ‘My aim with JJ’s story was to humanize he who is habitually demonized’. Both authors seek to humanise the youth in the council estates who are usually dehumanised by the media.

Kelman, who has lived on a council estate in Luton, believes that he is capable of portraying the life of a black male child living on a council estate, and of diving behind the newspaper headlines to provide a closer look at a life lost to street violence. However, a white author employing a black child’s perspective could run the risk of cultural appropriation. Alex Wheatle (2011), a black British novelist, thinks that ‘more white writers should do the same’ as Kelman; however, he questions ‘why it had to take a white author to explore the black underprivileged to finally attract the attention of a major award,’ namely the novel being longlisted for the 2011 Man Booker Prize. From another perspective, Sola Ojikutu, a Nigerian arts and culture reporter, explains that although Harrison ‘touches deeply on the sensibilities of the West African culture’, his pidgin English does not sound authentic (Ojikutu, 2011, no pagination). In an interview, Kelman (2012) states that he had had the idea of writing a novel based on Damilola Taylor for eight years, and when no one else wrote one, he started writing *Pigeon English*. He decided to make Harrison’s origins Ghanaian instead of Nigerian because he was more familiar with Ghanaian culture. By basing his novel on the media-focused discourse on so-called black-on-black violence, Kelman does not challenge this discourse. In the novel he gives the impression that the lure of gangster life is more prominent for someone like Harrison. For example, X-Fire dismisses Dean, Harrison’s white companion, as a potential crew member but tries to recruit the mixed-race Jordan, and Harrison, or ‘Ghana’, as he calls him. Akala argues that when it comes to violence in London, ‘class is a far bigger factor than race’; because so-called black-on-black violence gets more media coverage, it becomes a racialised problem (2018, p. 170). It is Jordan and the Dell Farm Crew, whose members are all black, who commit all the crimes in the novel (Kelman, 2011, pp. 12, 16, 118, 187). Nevertheless, while Kelman’s representation of Harrison has its limitations, he brings to the fore a mode of childhood that has been underrepresented in fiction.

Whether through Jerome’s bitter tone or Harrison’s fresh perspective, both stories call attention to wasted childhoods. These narratives allow the reader to enter a world that is normally invisible to adults, as shown by the fact that in both books, the mothers are oblivious to the perils surrounding their children’s everyday lives. However, this invisibility makes it a challenge to write representations of vulnerable children who cannot voice their own experiences. Expressing her motivation for writing *Hello Mum*,Evaristo explains: ‘I wanted to get inside such a boy’s head to explore inside his life, to show the conditions and pressures that might lead him into trouble, to give voice to black teenage boys who are vilified by the media and not given a voice themselves’ (as interviewed by Donnell, 2019, pp. 440). She knows the difficulty of the task of assuming an underprivileged teenage boy’s voice as a middle-class woman author. Therefore, as research for the novel, she interviewed fourteen- and fifteen-year-old boys involved in gangs. Realising that the ‘London they experienced was not [hers]’, she steps into unfamiliar territories to fulfil her political responsibility as a writer: ‘I am speaking for them, but this is the task of a novelist, assuming voices and narratives beyond our own lives and experiences’ (Evaristo, as interviewed by Donnell, 2019, pp. 440). Kelman similarly comments on his own novel:

There’s a lot of noise around about knife crime and violence among the nation’s children at the moment and, having grown up myself in a housing estate which is much like the one that features in the book, I wanted to show the positive aspects of these children’s lives and tell their stories in a way that I think hadn’t necessarily been told before. (2011, p. 264)

Voicing a child is challenging for an adult author, and voicing vulnerable children is even more challenging. In a study focusing on the representation of marginalised boys in three novels, Barry Hines’s *A Kestrel for A Knave* (1968), James Kelman’s *Kieron Smith*, *Boy* (2008) and *Pigeon English*,[[27]](#footnote-28) Georges Letissier argues that such representations ‘raise most acutely both the ethic[al] and aesthetic dilemmas attending the appropriation of vulnerable lives’ experiences for the purpose of fiction writing’ (2017, p.12). In trying to make their narrators sound more authentic, Kelman and Evaristo utilise language that portrays Harrison’s and Jerome’s ages and cultural backgrounds. Harrison uses Ghanaian slang, such as, ‘bo-styles’, ‘asweh’ and ‘hutious’(Kelman, 2011, pp. 4, 5, 13). In addition, he makes naïve observations about the baffling world around him, for example, when he sees a ‘say no to strangers’ sign, he expresses his confusion: ‘It doesn’t even tell you what the question is. You just have to say no to whatever they ask you’ (p. 98). Some studies emphasise the difficulty for authors in accessing children’s consciousnesses and reproducing their speech (Goodenough, Heberle, and Sokoloff, 1994, p. 2). Similarly, Susan Honeyman questions whether it is possible for an author to construct an authentic child voice. She argues that there is ‘a language gap, an inherent inaccessibility, between the concept of “child” and the adult mind that creates it’ (2005, p. 4). To narrow this gap, Evaristo provides Jerome’s narrative in the form of a letter to his mother, to make the adult audience present within the novel. Jerome has to decipher his language and explain common teen slang to his mother: ‘LOL! That means laugh out loud. LMAO means laughing my arse off’ (Evaristo, 2010, pp. 5–6). Kelman (2011) adds a speaking pigeon as a secondary narrator to embody the authorial voice. For example, the pigeon criticises two traits in Harrison: being superstitious and being hopeful. He says: ‘Your superstitions tickle me, I see it all the time in the touching of buttons, the scattering of salt’ (p. 191). Later, he adds: ‘What your problem is, you all want to be the sea. But you’re not the sea, you’re just a raindrop’ (p. 210). The ethereal pigeon narration here seems didactic and detached from Harrison's realist narration. For this reason, many reviewers criticise the use of the pigeon’s perspective. Rachel Aspden (2011, para.7) describes the pigeon-narrated sections as ‘the novel’s weakest passages’ and Susie Thomas (2011, para. 14) asserts that ‘even the novel’s most fervent admirers have found the talking pigeon to be an embarrassment’. However, Letissier suggests that the pigeon symbolises Harrison’s ‘alternative inner voice’, which ‘conjure[s] the split psyche of the insider outsider’ (2017, p. 12). While I agree with Letissier that the pigeon narrator serves an important function, as discussed earlier, it is more about the split between the child’s perspective and the mature thoughts of the author than it is about the ‘insider outsider’. Both Evaristo and Kelman use experimental stylistic techniques to overcome the challenges of voicing a child.

**Abject Spaces**

Before delving into further analysis of the two texts, it is important to consider the current studies on them; my analysis builds on some and differs from others. Writings about black youth in the inner city and council estates have been grouped as urban fiction, which is usually considered as part of realism.

Focusing on *Hello Mum*, Sebnem Toplu analyses the effects of the council estate as a space, and ‘motherhood as a complicated phenomenon’ in relation to Jerome’s identity development and his tragic fate (2011, p. 60). She later reads the council estate as ‘a space for confinement, resistance and liberation’, building her arguments on Lefebvre’s ‘spatial practice’ and Soja’s Thirdspace (Toplu 2014, p. 171). I used these theories in reading the multicultural spaces of childhood in *The Icarus Girl* in the first chapter of this thesis, and they are certainly useful for this chapter too, because it also explores multicultural spaces, albeit within a different setting, that of the council estate.

Only one study published before the writing of the present thesis examines *Hello Mum* and *Pigeon English* together. Ulla Rahbek (2013) explores how these books introduce a less ‘celebratory’ ‘borders figure’ than earlier multicultural British fiction (p. 426). ‘Borders figure’ here refers to those who cross territorial or sociocultural borders, either of gang territories or of nations. Like Toplu’s study, Rahbek’s study centres on spatial struggles. She argues that borders can reinforce divisions between groups and create a clear distinction between *us* and *them*; this can be especially true in gang-related contexts. So, instead of breaking down boundaries, border crossing can sometimes make them more rigid (2013, p. 429). She concludes that border crossing in these recent narratives is not considered a transformative act, as it is in *White Teeth*,but ‘a potentially murderous act’ (p. 437). I agree with this conclusion, as here I argue that, in the two novels I analyse in this chapter, crossing and disturbing boundaries is a dangerous act that causes abjection; thus, this chapter contrasts with the previous chapter, in which border crossing was considered as an act of empowerment.

Anjali Pandey (2014) focuses on Kelman’s narrative technique of using Harrison as a central narrator as well as allowing the reader to step out from Harrison’s viewpoint to see him from another angle through the secondary narrator, the pigeon. She emphasises that ‘Kelman’s creative genius’ lies in crafting ‘a dual trope of active and passive visuality – of both “seeing”, and of being “watched”’ (p. 52). She adds that this stylistic creativity resembles the effect of cinematic ‘visual immediacy’ (p. 54). Hence, she concludes that *Pigeon English* is ‘a timely, 21st-century novel, not just thematically, but also stylistically’ (p. 71). While her study makes needed observations about the form and style of the novel, my study expands upon Pandey’s stylistic scope. Here I focus on the use of the child as a narrator of the stories of the racialised working-class council estate residents, and on the use of the pigeon as symbolic of the watchfulness of the outer world and the authorial voice. Hence I read Kelman's stylistic creativity as a reflection of the sociopolitical content of the novel

Novels depicting the experiences of gang culture are usually considered hyper-realist. Modhumita Roy (2016) coins the sub-genre term ‘brutalist realism’ to describe black urban London fiction published in the 1990s and 2000s. The novels in Roy’s study are set in council housing and describe parts of London which are underrepresented and ‘a world away from the familiar London of tourist brochures, slick Hollywood films or even contemporary bestselling novels’ (2016, p. 98). Therefore, she argues, ‘they stand as counter-narratives to the dizzying and celebratory rhetoric about London as a transgressive, liberatory space’ (p. 106). In coining the term ‘Brutalist realism’, she adds:

The novels’ Brutalist realism is not a superficial texture: it carefully exposes dispossession and alienation as deliberate, not accidental. They focus on the ugly tower blocks not simply as aberrations and eyesores. Instead, the novels argue, they are carefully produced as concrete expressions of a willed and planned exclusion. (Roy, 2016, p. 106)

While I do not consider the texts I am exploring here to be brutalist realist, the ‘mighty’ buildings in *Pigeon English* and the ‘Suicide Heights’ in *Hello Mum* are both embodiments of what Roy calls ‘planned exclusion’ and, as a result, create spaces of abjection where marginalised groups are carefully located (Kelman, 2011, p. 5 ;Evaristo, 2010, p. 2). Creed argues that ‘although the subject must exclude the abject, the abject must, nevertheless, be tolerated for that which threatens to destroy life also helps to define life. Further, the activity of exclusion is necessary to guarantee that the subject take up his/her proper place in relation to the symbolic’(1993, p. 9). Hence spaces of abjection are spaces of exclusion but not separation because keeping the abject at bay ensures the unity of the symbolic order.

Council homes are usually built in ‘large, separate, single-purpose estates’ to house socially disadvantaged and low-income groups, thus creating spaces of exclusion (Power, 1996, p. 1535). The spatial isolation in which council estates exist is shown through the representation of the perspectives of Jerome and Harrison. Harrison describes the imaginary lines around his neighbourhood: ‘You can’t see the lines but you know they’re there. You just have to carry them in your head. The tunnel behind the shopping centre is one line. If you cross it you’ll be slipping’ (Kelman, 2011, p. 149). The word ‘slipping’ here reflects the culture of inner city London as being the home of grime music, in which ‘slipping’ is used to mean ‘being caught alone or outnumbered, outside of your area’ (Hancox, 2018, p. 157). While Harrison believes that these lines mark his ‘safe’ space, they still make him feel like ‘a prisoner’ (Kelman, 2011, p. 149). Jerome describes a similar sense of confinement by his cupboard bedroom – ‘As I got taller, the room got smaller’ – and his inability to cross the road between his estate and the neighbouring estate: ‘it was safer to leave London than move across it’ (Evaristo, 2010, pp. 5, 13). The fact that these boys cannot move freely in their own city means they occupy its margins. As Dan Hancox (2018) argues: ‘the margins of urban living’ are not about location and proximity to the centre but about ‘economic’, ‘social’ and ‘psychic’ distances, and the lack of ‘ability to move freely around the city, unharmed’ (p. 160). Thus, black youths involved with gang cultur have constructed a sense of ‘neighbourhood nationalism’ because they live in London, yet they are not part of its canonical imagery (Hancox, 2018, p. 151). Harrison’s and Jerome’s narratives display a sense of entrapment within the borders of their dwellings and a separation from other places in London, which makes their council estates spaces of abjection.

The council housing estates in these stories are also portrayed as gritty spaces full of filth, violence and decay. Within the limited space of these estates, even places of joy, such as playgrounds, parks and youth clubs, are turned into spaces of decline. Harrison describes his local playground after an arson incident: ‘When the fire was gone the playground just looked nasty. It was all black where the burning was. It just looked dirty and dead. It made you feel dead as well’ (Kelman, 2011, p. 251). In *Hello Mum*, the youth clubs are shut down after the 1980s Brixton Riots, and the park is empty because ‘every little kid had been warned that the park next door was full of perverts and child murderers’ (Evaristo, 2010, p. 4). Things started to change for the worse for the black communities living in the estate in *Hello Mum* after the Brixton Riots in the 1980s. Jerome asks his mother, ‘So if the 1980s was the good old days, that meant I lived in the bad new days, right?’ (p. 4). The 1981 Brixton Riots occurred after the Metropolitan Police initiated Operation Swamp, whereby black youth were stopped and searched. Although the operation was carried out with an expressed intention to bring crime rates down, its name suggested it was aimed against the black communities in Brixton, as it referred to Margaret Thatcher’s words: ‘this country might be rather swamped by people with a different culture’(as quoted in Tyler, 2013, p. 55). The riots marked a crisis point within the black community. Because the riots were called ‘race riots’, even though the rioters were of different ethnicities, as a group, they were constituted as other and as abject in the media (Tyler, 2013, p. 56). Gilroy argues that ‘the normative power of racial common sense is comfortable with simplistic and misleading labels like “race riots”. Indeed it is fuelled by the simple racial truths they bring to life’ (2002, p. xxii). It is through such ‘normative’ terms that rioting and petty crimes become associated with black cultures in the inner city, rather than being seen as the result of poor economic circumstances or responses to racism (Tyler, 2013, p. 56). Therefore, black youths begin to feel antagonised in their own country, as Jerome’s words reflect: ‘The newspapers hated me. The television news hated me. Everyone hated me, except my family and my crew […] Sometimes I thought, if everyone thinks I’m a scumbag criminal, I’ll be a scumbag criminal, innit?’ (Evaristo, 2010, p. 15). To make someone feel like scum or a scumbag is social abjection, and in the *Oxford English Dictionary* (2020), one of the early definitions of ‘abjection’ is ‘that which is cast off or away, esp. as being vile or unworthy; refuse, scum, dregs’. Tyler analyses how the word ‘scum’ was heavily used in the British press to describe inner city youth, especially after the 2011 riots, in which not only the rioting youth were abjected, but their whole community (2013, p. 181). Although *Hello Mum* was published before the 2011 riots, the connection between rioting and inner city youth culture was made much earlier, as already mentioned.

Both stories show from their beginnings how Harrison and Jerome are exposed to the fragility of the social order in their estates. The first scene which introduces us to the Dell Farm Estate in *Pigeon English* is a murder scene. It is described through Harrison’s eyes: ‘You wanted to touch [the blood] but you couldn’t get close enough. There was a line in the way: POLICE LINE DO NOT CROSS. If you cross the line you’ll turn to dust’ (Kelman, 2011, p. 3, capital letters in original). The police line here represents the boundaries of the law that, to keep the abject under control, the boys should not cross. Creed examines how ‘scenes of blood and gore’ are usually used in horror films to illustrate ‘the fragility of the symbolic order in the domain of the body where the body never ceases to signal the repressed world of the mother’ (1993, p. 13). The flimsiness of the police tape reflects the fragility of their order and its inability to protect the onlooking children from facing a fate similar to that of the dead boy. The boy’s mother, on the other hand, shows greater strength in guarding her son’s blood, as she is characterised as ‘stiff and fierce like it was her job to scare the rain back up into the sky’, so it would not wash the blood away (Kelman, 2011, p. 3). Jerome in *Hello Mum* also describes a death-filled estate when he notes how suicide is a usual occurrence in his building: ‘I looked up at the top-floor balconies and wondered when the next person would chuck themselves off’ (Evaristo, 2010, p. 2). ‘Murder and suicide’, Kristeva notes, are ‘equally abject’ (1982, p. 18). Thus, the abject is part of these young people’s lives from the beginnings of their narratives.

These youths struggle to draw boundaries between themselves and the abject, each in their own ways: Harrison tries through religion, and Jerome, through social climbing. Harrison believes that faith can help cleanse the estate of the defilement of crime: ‘It’s the duty of the righteous to show the godless the right way’ (Kelman, 2011, p. 10). However, he realises the impossibility of his mission as he gradually comes to the conclusion that ‘the devil is stronger here because the buildings are too high. There’s too many towers and they get in the way of the sky so God can’t see so far’ (p. 121). Like Harrison, Jerome, in *Hello Mum*, recognises that he is already becoming part of the abject: ‘All I wanted was to make some money and stay safe, Mum. But I felt like I was already stuck in too deep’ (Evaristo, 2010, pp. 68–69). When he leaves Dexter’s house, after agreeing to work for him, he has the urge to go back home and ‘scrub its nastiness off in the shower’ (p. 71). Dexter has given him four packages of drugs to deliver in the estate of their rivals, the B-Block Boys, knowing that he is putting Jerome at risk of being caught and killed. Before his death, Jerome starts to see the reality of gang life which has lost its glamour. As he tries to revolt against such a life, his feeling of admiration towards Delmar changes to disgust. After finishing his drugs delivery and barely escaping the B-Block Boys, he meets Delmar at the chip shop as planned. Delmar, who is usually described as ‘cool’, is described as behaving improperly near the end of Jerome letter, as he is eating fish and chips with ‘ketchup dripping on his chin’ and ‘no table manners’ (p. 78). Disgust, as Tyler argues, usually arises as one tries to distinguish oneself from the other (2013, p. 26). However, his decision to split from the Kamikaze Kru come too late for Jerome, who has already become abject, that which does not respect borders, having left the boundary of his neighbourhood when he enter the B-Block Boys’ area. Despite Jerome’s belief that his council estate area code is ‘where it's safe’, the B-Block Boys catch him in his neighbourhood’s chip shop and kill him in front of the shop’s owner and Delmar, who does not try to protect him. The B-Block Boys eject him by killing him, turning him into a corpse, what Kristeva (1982, p. 4) would call ‘the utmost of abjection’, because the soulless body is one of ‘the most basic forms of pollution’ (Creed, 1993, p. 10). Because the living human body will eventually become a corpse, it is a reminder that the abject is part of the self. The corpse signifies the fragility of life and the crime scenes with dead bodies in the two stories signify the instability of the border between the living and the dead.

In *Pigeon English*, Harrison also tries to join his local gang. However, unlike Jerome, he discovers their dangerous reality before becoming involved with them. When the gang hits Mr Frimpong, ‘the oldest person from church’, destroys his groceries and steals his wallet, Harrison runs away (Kelman, 2011, p. 118). Trying to distinguish himself from them, he keeps repeating in his head, ‘It wasn’t me it wasn’t me it wasn’t me!’ (p. 118). After the Dell Farm Crew catch him ‘trespassing’ in the basketball court, carrying a photo of the dead boy (p. 240), Harrison faces the same fate as Jerome and is stabbed on the stairs leading to his flat. He describes how he is gradually disintegrating into human waste: ‘I held onto my belly for if I lost myself. My hands were wet. My foot went in a piss puddle, the piss all went up my trousers […] when I opened my eyes there was a bigger puddle and it wasn’t piss, it was me’ (pp. 262–263). Ironically, both Harrison and Jerome are killed in what are supposed to be their safe spaces; for Harrison, it is the staircase of the building where he lives: ‘The stairs would be safe’ (2011, p. 261). This signifies the fragility of security in these spaces and depicts them as abject spaces in which youths perish.

**Spaces of Resistance**

Despite a lack of security, it is still possible to resist violence in marginal spaces, by forming supportive communities and asserting identities, through the articulation of differences and the performance of cultures. John McLeod, in *Postcolonial London*, discusses how the stories of immigrants to London rewrite the city; through textual creativity, they create their own spaces and resist the authority which attempts to trap and control their movements (2004, pp. 9–10). Thus, they transform places in the margins into spaces of creativity. However, for children who cannot publish their own stories, their bodies are key to resisting violence and recreating the city by claiming alternative black cultures through language, music and clothing.

While local communities can contribute to countering deteriorating circumstances and rises in crime, their role is limited insofar as they fail to protect their youth. Extended family abroad can become part of a resistance mechanism, especially when the local community falls short. Mothers within African and Caribbean cultures usually have a ‘network of support’, and parents sometimes utilise such support to protect their children from the perils of the inner city (Forna, 2000, p. 394). As hooks states, ‘This form of parenting is revolutionary in this society because it takes place in opposition to the idea that parents, especially mothers, should be the only childrearers’ (cited in Forna, 2000, p. 400). In *Pigeon English*, Harrison’s youngest sister Agnes is left with her grandmother and father in Ghana because the children’s mother must work full-time. In a different context, similar support is sought to protect youth from London’s gang violence: in *Hello Mum*, Delmar and Dexter’s sister, Delice, is sent ‘to live with her granny in Barbados’ because she is attacked by a girls’ gang while visiting her friend in a different postcode area (Evaristo, 2010, p. 13). Similarly again, after a friend’s party that Jerome and Adrian are attending is raided by a gang, Adrian’s father threatens to send his son to his uncle in Ghana. This parenting mode is intended to help children escape the peer violence that is, as Akala argues, one of the ‘inescapable parts of black […] adolescence in London’ (2018, p. 169). A valuable comparison text on this point is Ade Solanke’s play, *Pandora’s Box* (2012), which is about Toyin, a mother who is debating whether it would be better to leave her fifteen-year-old son Timi at a top boarding school in Nigeria or take him back to London. She ends up leaving him in Lagos to protect him from gang life. While Toyin’s family are able to provide Timi with a more financially privileged life in Lagos, this is not the case for everyone. Akala argues that such a parenting method is not always as effective as believed, because children are sometimes faced with harsher economic environments in their parents’ countries of origin (2018, p. 181). The novel and novella show the limited choices parents have within the context of black diasporic life, between inner city London and their countries of origin; caught between a rock and a hard place, they put their children at risk either way.

While the boys sometimes fall into an urban youth culture with a stereotypical image, they are not completely committed to a communal and shared black culture; each claims their black British identity on their own terms. Although each boy has a different attitude towards crime within his estate, as one is attracted to its allure, and the other tries to fight it, they face the same fate. Harrison has only been in his estate for a few months before getting involved with the local gang. Jerome, on the other hand, represents the black angry teenager: ‘I felt angry all the time’ (Evaristo, 2010,p. 27). To deal with his anger and the hard atmosphere around him, Jerome sometimes uses rap. In his letter, he describes the high suicide rate in his estate: ‘*Another man down/ Blood on the ground/ Lost then found/ Get used to the sound. /Another man down/ Don’t stick around/ You can’t take flight/ Suicide Heights’* (p. 2, emphasis in original). He also shows knowledge of some African American rappers and music icons, such as 50 Cent, The Game, Tupac and Michael Jackson (p. 54). An American accent is even used by the gang members: ‘Delmar was born and raised in, like, Tottenham? Every time he went fake American I felt like giggling. One time I copied him and spoke in American too’ (p. 46). *Hello Mum* depicts the new black generations who are, as Hall points out, more ‘americanized’ than ‘afrocentred’ (Hall, 2000, p. 137). Harrison fits in better with the earlier, Afrocentred black generations. Linguistically, he reflects the newly immigrated black youth by mixing Ghanaian slang with standard English. Hence, these narratives portray heterogenous black youth cultures within the inner city landscape and depict what Gilroy would refer to as an ‘intricate web of cultural and political connections’ that link black British communities to other black people beyond their national boundaries (2002, p. 205).

Even clothing style becomes a way to escape the cultural stigma of criminality and poverty. Harrison has the urge to draw lines with a black marker on his white trainers to make them look like Adidas, thus enabling him to match the social standards of the other students in his local school. By contrast, to distinguish themselves from the popular image of black felons in hoodies, Delmar and his brother Dexter wear designer clothes – ‘Labels all the way’, as Jerome puts it (Evaristo, 2010, p. 30). Gilroy emphasises that gang members, in ‘refusing to conform to stereotyped ideas of what young black criminals should look like’, sometimes dress expensively (2002, p. 86). These various ways of expressing youth culture through language, music and clothing celebrate multi-ethnic inner city culture, rather than reducing it to only violence and crime.

**Conclusion**

In making space within British literary representation for the experiences of children growing up on council estates, Stephen Kelman and Bernardine Evaristo bring to light different aspects of such childhoods that contrast to the crime-filled media representation of them. Although council estates are shown as abject spaces in these two books, they are also spaces of hope and different possibilities. Inner city youth culture is not limited to violence but includes positive self-expression through clothing, language and music. The narratives’ depictions of this self-expression help them fit in the twenty-first century context, which includes the rise of grime music as a popular mode of expression of inner city youth culture. Both narratives show the council estate simultaneously as a space of dystopia and of unrealised utopia. In his article, ‘In place of geometry: The materiality of place’, Kevin Hetherington describes utopia as follows:

As a place it is made up of a space into which social relations are extended, beyond their own limits, into a gap that is betwixt and between, unlocatable, unrepresentable and impossible. A space of integration and disintegration, of combination, resistance and disorder. It is a space of difference. It is also a space of an endless striving for an imaginary beyond in which all of that uncertainty will be resolved and a form of closure achieved. Of course, not all places are called utopia, but there is a utopic behind every place (alternatively, perhaps, a dystopic behind some as well). (1998, p. 191)

Caleb Femi’s poem, quoted at the beginning of this chapter, could be interpreted as a description of the two sides of the North Peckham Estate. First, he portrays it as a ‘paradise’ of social relations, with ‘sweet-neighbour talk’ and community connections of ‘one block to another block, one joy to another joy’ (2020, p. 13). Then, he dives into its hellish side, where ‘the devil found good ground to plough his seeds’ (2020, p. 14). In that poem and within the narratives discussed in this chapter, the diverse possibilities of the council estate as a space emerge. It could be a utopia of human relations and integration, which surpasses its limits through creativity and the use of culture to express difference. A utopia in Jameson’s terms (1981) involves ‘collective solidarity’ where a group or class is unified against what threatens it (p. 286). In the novel and novella analysed in this chapter, such collective unity is never realised. The community of the council estates which could have been unified in protecting their youth does not exist. Thus, the narratives present a dystopia of underground criminality and disintegration within the limits of the council estates, while keeping the hope of utopian possibilities alive.

By focusing on childhood in council estates, this chapter has shown that even when dealing with what critics usually call urban fiction, non-realist narratives are still possible. This chapter has added to the diversity of studying representation of black British children by showing the importance of the intersection of class and race. The child’s point of view that has been discussed here is distinct from that in the previous chapters, because of the use of first person narrators in contrast to the third person narrator used in the other texts analysed in the other chapters. Jerome and Harrison are main narrators and portray urban spaces and the sociopolitical realities of boyhood in council estates. Yet, like the previous chapters, this one has dealt with the abject as a social position and modernist realism as a genre. Moving outside London, the next chapter will argue that even narratives depicting childhood in the north of England show similar themes and modes of narrative. The narratives that will be analysed are set in the 1960s and 1970s, but they show that since the 1970s black youth have been faced with negative media portrayals of black masculinity. I will explore how young characters resist these negative depictions by connecting with their transnational ancestral histories, and through black culture and music. The weakening of the sense of connectivity between neighbours when houses are replaced by tower blocks in some neighbourhoods will also be discussed in my fourth chapter.

**Chapter 4: Rewriting Childhood Memories in Joe Pemberton’s *Forever and Ever Amen* and Lemn Sissay’s *My Name Is Why***

*Go back to where you’re from*. This is where I’m from. I’m from the North. The glorious North.

(Sethi, 2021, p. 10, emphasis in original)

After suffering a racial attack on the TransPennine Express train in 2019, Anita Sethi embarks on a journey of self-discovery as a British woman of colour through the Pennines. She documents her travels in her memoir *I Belong Here* (2021)*.* Sethi traces the meaning of belonging and identity by physically walking across the northern countryside. As she covers more space, she realises: ‘I belong in the UK as a brown woman, just as much as a white man does’ (p. 10). While Sethi’s journey is spatial, there are others who travel through time to discover the meaning of being a person of colour in the north of England. The two books under discussion in this chapter, Joe Pemberton’s *Forever and Ever Amen* (2000) and Lemn Sissay’s *My Name Is Why* (2019), are examples of this kind of temporal journey. Although the former is a novel, and the latter is a memoir, both texts recapture their authors’ childhood memories of Manchester in the second half of the twentieth century. In the preface to his novel, Pemberton suggests that the story is about him and that James, the protagonist, is just an alter ego:

James has always been there, I can’t ever remember a time when he wasn’t. He was the perfect companion when you were the only boy in a houseful of sisters, mums, aunts and female cousins, but absolutely of no use whatsoever when you’re on the wrong side of thirty-nine years old, and counting. (2000, p. 6)

Both books could be considered childhood autobiographies. Kate Douglas (2010) defines the term as ‘the form of an adult author writing about events from his or her childhood’ and divides writing about childhood into two standard modes, ‘nostalgic’ and ‘traumatic’ (pp. 3, 14). She explains: ‘while nostalgic autobiographies commonly relate childhoods lost through the passage of time, traumatic autobiographies relate childhoods that are stolen or lost through trauma – particularly abuse’ (p. 85). In Pemberton’s novel, the title phrase ‘forever and ever, amen’ is repeated like a mantra to lament the passage of time that changes everything, whereas Sissay refers to his early childhood as stolen; therefore, Pemberton’s narrative is nostalgic, and Sissay’s is traumatic. Pemberton and Sissay recall some of the events of their childhoods, over the span of a few months and eighteen years, respectively. One book is about reclaiming a lost space in 1960s Moss Side, and the other is about reclaiming a childhood lost in the Manchester fostering system.

Although *My Name Is Why* is a memoir and *Forever and Ever Amen* is a novel, they are both modernist realist narratives because of their creative depictions of childhood memories. Sissay merges his childhood memories with his poetry, creating a memoir enriched with his poetic self. He takes pieces of his social workers’ documents and pastes them into his own story, combining these non-artistic materials into new artistic narratives. This creativity in writing his memoir using collage and poetry extends the autobiographical mode beyond limited chronological realist narrative. As Sissay retraces his childhood memories, he uses his stylistic creativity to portray the dystopian atmosphere of the care system and children’s homes. His sense of elusive subjectivity is shown in the changing of his name. Multiple social factors form his understanding of selfhood. His perspective on his skin colour alters as he grows up, from abjection to alienation and, finally, pride. In a comparably inventive style, Pemberton creates a semi-autobiography enriched by his fictionalised self, James. James’s consciousness merges fragmented stories of his family and neighbours, juxtaposing the local history of Britain and the transnational history of the Caribbean. Therefore, each author shows the complexities of the self through his stylistic choice: Sissay through poetry and Pemberton through childhood imagination.

This chapter examines how two different styles and genres for writing childhood memories are employed to challenge dominant discourses and the lack of representation of black childhood in the north of England. It focuses on black childhood outside London to show that the black experience exists beyond the capital. The two texts examined here are about boyhood. Boyhood is more represented in the literature of the north than girlhood; even the female author Buchi Emecheta wrote *A New Tribe* (2000) about a boy, Chester, who is left by his Nigerian mother to be adopted by a white family in Liverpool. However, there is a novel about black girlhood in Manchester, *The Private Joys of Nnenna Maloney* (2019), by Okechukwu Nzelu, a male writer. It is a coming-of-age tale about the teenage Nnenna growing up in the 1990s with her single mother. The fictional account progresses as the girl tries to unravel her father’s identity and reconcile with Igbo-Nigerian culture. The novel does not fit within the focus of this chapter because it is not built on an actual childhood and does not challenge its genre as a bildungsroman. There is also Jackie Kay’s memoir *The Red Dust Road* (2010); although not set in the north of England, it displays the black experience outside London, in Scotland. Kay relates more positive childhood memories of transracial parenting than Sissay does. Similarly, *Coconut* (2021) by Florence Olajide, which is set in Norfolk and Lagos, tells the story of a Nigerian little girl’s fondness for her white foster mother who is old enough to be her grandmother, Nan, in the 1960s, when private fostering of African students’ children ‘mushroomed in England and beyond’ (p. 8). All these examples show that black childhood narratives have become more diverse and widespread regionally in recent years.

Unlike London, Manchester has only officially been a city for about a century and a half; it has grown rapidly in that time. Lynne Pearce argues that it was ‘the first industrial city in Europe’ and as such, centred on its cotton mills (2013, pp. 20). Therefore, Manchester is a postcolonial city created out of colonialism; it is a ‘product of Empire’ (Pearce, 2013, p. 22). Most of its residents came from elsewhere in Britain or abroad; hence, Pearce argues ‘no one living in Manchester today can claim it as home in a definitive, transgenerational sense’ (pp. 20–21). Therefore, even more so than London, Manchester is a uniquely migrant city. By moving the focus to Manchester, this chapter of my thesis examines the regional dimension of black British identities.

**A Nostalgic Narrative of Childhood**

Joe Pemberton’s *For Ever and Ever Amen* is the first novel in this thesis to represent the stereotypical innocent child. He wrote his novel as a counter-discourse to the present image of Moss Side as a troubled place. He reclaims it as a place of hope and innocence, rather than one of danger, especially for children. He comments:

I wrote *Forever And Ever Amen*, a semi-autobiographical novel about a boy growing up in Moss Side in the 1960s, partly in response to the shock I felt when reading about a shooting in Moss Side in the early 1990s. Apparently a school boy got shot in the face in a chip shop on Great Western Street. This was the same chip shop our family would go for our Friday evening fish and chips supper treat. Almost two decades later and I’m reading about a 15-year-old boy shot dead in the Recreation Park off Raby Street and Broadfield Road, the very same park where we played as kids. If these people are trying to completely screw up my wonderful Moss Side childhood memories then they’re doing a pretty good job of it, I’m telling you. (Pemberton, 2007, para. 11)

It is challenging for Pemberton to use his adult voice to reconstruct positive childhood memories, given everything he knows today about Moss Side; hence the child’s point of view becomes a vital part of the novel. James was created to carry the burden of a narrative that counters the adult dominant discourse about Moss Side. Consequently, instead of writing an autobiography, Pemberton wrote a semi-autobiography and used James as an empty vessel to be filled with his vision of 1960s Moss Side. The adult author in the preface appears to be struggling to form his narrative: ‘It’s me that’s holding the pen, it’s me that stares at a blank computer screen hour after hour instead of having a life. It’s me, myself, I, Joseph Emmanuel Pemberton’ (Pemberton, 2000, p. 1). However, as the main narrative comes to centre on James, the childhood ‘imaginary friend’, it becomes smoother. Honeyman, studying modern representations of children, notices that ‘writers often utilize childhood as a ludic space through which to criticize the adult world’ (2005, p. 5). Through James, Pemberton is able to stretch the limitations of realism to include James’s inner world. Pemberton points out that the novel is ‘not a story of shootings, drugs, rioting and street crime, because that’s not what I grew up with or how I remember it’ (as quoted in Crawshaw and Fowler, 2008, p. 461). Hence, he uses the figure of the child to recover the purity of his childhood memories in Moss Side from the recent violence the area has been associated with and to construct a nostalgic narrative, rather than a tragic one.

Moss Side has been the home of a large black British community since the early twentieth century. The Pan-African movement, which promoted the rights of people of colour, found a foothold in Manchester in the 1930s (Stanley, 2003, p. 41). Consequently, many African Americans and soldiers from the Caribbean were attracted to the city during the Second World War. After the war, many migrants started to arrive in Manchester from the Caribbean because they had a connection there or for work opportunities; however, ‘post-war attitudes were not generous’ (Stanley, 2003, p. 42). It was not easy for the new arrivals to find accommodation due to the lack of housing and the racism in post-war Britain. In Moss Side, there were multi-occupancy houses that would accept black people as tenants; hence ‘Moss Side was a key area of black settlement’ (Stanley, 2003, p. 44). Many African-Caribbean people settled in Moss Side and Hulme as they grew as multi-racial areas (p. 46). Therefore, when the city council in the 1960s started redeveloping Moss Side as part of its ‘slum clearance programme’, many residents distrusted their plans, which they saw as an effort to demolish ‘the strong black identity of the area’ (Haslam, 1999, p. 226). As the area went through a series of developments and was mostly transformed into tower blocks, it lost some of its character as a safe communal district.

*Forever and Ever Amen* serves as a nostalgic narrative of a whole community that was lost in the 1960s Moss Side replanning. James reflects on how the redevelopment of Moss Side dislocated the entire community:

Only last week it had been a row of houses. Fairlawn Street next to St Bees Street next to another road James couldn’t remember the name of. Each house had three floors and a million stairs to the top. Only last week the streets were full of kids playing catch and cars driving past the women gossiping on the corner. But not any more, all that was gone and all that was left was a pool the size of a school yard and a reflection of the church spire. (Pemberton, 2000, p. 51)

The redevelopment is represented negatively through James’s eyes; the first bustling image of the everyday lives of the families that used to inhabit Fairlawn Street and its houses is contrasted with the wasteland in the second image. Pearce (2012) argues that Pemberton’s description of the sudden disappearance of communities and homes calls to mind the Blitz of World War II (p. 222). This rapid change in the landscape of Moss Side seems disastrous in the eyes of the young James, who does not understand the reason for such destruction. It was not Pemberton who was losing his childhood home but thousands of other people whose houses were demolished in the rebuilding of Moss Side. The destruction of Moss Side as it was at the start of the 1960s can be read as a more literal parallel to the symbolic desecration, by the later violent crime in the area, of Pemberton’s idealised recollection of his childhood home. Hence, he needed to create James to recapture a lost time and space.

James shows the world of a Caribbean family in 1960s Moss Side, Manchester, filtered through his rose-tinted perspective. The whole narrative is set during the few months when the family planned and carried out a move from inner city Moss Side to Ashton-under-Lyne in Greater Manchester. Thus, the theme of mobility is at the centre of the novel and sometimes represented in a positive way; the movement in the book is usually for economic improvement or to a better place. Even Aunty Mary, the family’s white next-door neighbour and a grandmother figure for James, is still manifested through James’s imagination as a happy and carefree woman, even though she has died at the beginning of the novel. James’s narrative transforms the everyday reality of Moss Side into a Thirdspace through his imagination, in which the past and the present and the regional and the global are enmeshed.[[28]](#footnote-29) In James’s imaginative Moss Side, a shortcut from Alexandra Road to Moss Lane East leads to the past St Kitts of his mother’s childhood: ‘James wished he hadn’t taken the shortcut through the alley at the back of Westwood Road […] the grass underfoot turned into the lane that led up to Mr Orson’s house in St Kitts in the West Indies’ (Pemberton, 2000, pp. 178 - 179).

As I established in my introduction, many of the authors covered in this thesis employ the thirding technique. However, each author uses it to show their own version of cultural diversity. Both Oyeyemi and Pemberton utilise the child’s inner world to show the cultural diversity in Britain: Oyeyemi by creating a parallel space of Yoruba mythology and Pemberton by reflecting the multidirectional history of Britain. Thirding as a new kind of thinking about place transcends the duality of material and mental spaces and creates a Thirdspace that incorporates elements of both those spaces and transforms them in James’s imaginative arena. He imagines visiting his parents’ village in St Kitts, accompanied by Aunty Mary. However, as James has never been to the island, the only access he has to it is through his family’s oral history and Aunty Vernice’s black and white photos. Hence, he tries to fill the gaps in his knowledge of the island’s nature with the more familiar English countryside. For example, here, he imagines Brimstone Hill in St Kitts as the Yorkshire Moors:

It could’ve been straight out of *The Flaxton Boys*, a telly programme where two boys run down a hill in the Yorkshire Moors, accompanied by an orchestra of strings. Only this wasn’t the Yorkshire Moors, or even ITV. It was Brimstone Hill in St Kitts, the same Brimstone Hill where the British had kicked out the French and built a fort to stop them from coming back. (Pemberton, 2000***,*** p. 103)

Nature here is used to reflect the transnational history of the family and the colonial history of St Kitts.

At the end of the novel, the narrator relates James’s mother’s life in St Kitts and her migration to Britain, and, as a nostalgic narrative, it gives a softer image of reality than the actual typical migrant experience. The narrator describes how James’s mother felt happy in Britain because there were many work opportunities and various shops to buy food from: ‘Veronica loved being in England. There was so much to do in England. There was always work, and not even just in crop season […]. And there were so many shops in England where you could buy anything you liked’ (Pemberton, 2000, p. 212). Here, Pemberton portrays Manchester as a positive working place, in contrast to the gloomy image from popular culture of the city as ‘bleak, decaying industrial landscapes’ (Milestone, 2008, p. 1166). In fact, many Caribbean migrants in the 1950s and 1960s were in shock due to Manchester’s conditions of poverty, racism and the lack of housing (Stanley, 2003, p. 41). Many Caribbean arrivals were only offered low-paid jobs and forced to accept living in multi-occupancy houses with poor facilities (Stanley, 2003, p. 44). Even in the novel, Veronica spends her weekdays sewing bras and girdles for £5 a week, and Raymond is out for work in Wall’s sausage factory from five in the morning until seven-thirty in the evening.

When Veronica first comes to Manchester, she lives with her Aunt Vernice in Moss Side, but when she gets married, she lives with Raymond in his room in a multi-occupancy house. It is possible that Veronica’s experience is similar to Hortense’s in Andrea Levy’s novel *Small Island* (2004).Hortense, who migrates from Jamaica to live with her husband in a multi-occupancy room in post-Second World War London, expresses her disappointment: ‘I never dreamed England would be like this. So cheerless. Determined, I held my breath but still I could hear no birdsong. The room was pitiful in the grey morning light’ (Levy, 2004, p. 225). Levy uses various voices of 1950s London as narrators, from the Jamaican immigrants Hortense and Gilbert to the white English Queenie and Bernard, giving a a bigger picture of the history of the Windrush generation than Pemberton does. Pemberton uses a single narrator, distinct from but closely aligned with the nostalgic figure of James, to tell shared family stories, which are therefore idealised. In this sense, not only does the narrative act as a counternarrative to the present-day image of Moss Side, but also the black child is idealised as innocent to counter the negative stereotyped image of violent black youth.

James’s narrative shows the richness of his transnational identity as a black British person. Through James’s imagination, the history of Manchester’s diasporic residents becomes intertwined with that of their white neighbours. Therefore, James represents a multidirectional memory of post-war Britain. As mentioned in my introduction, multidirectional memory, according to Michael Rothberg (2009, p. 4), is the exchange of several traumatic pasts within a socially diverse present. With globalisation and migration, collective memory becomes ‘intercultural’, ‘productive and not privative’ (p. 3). In the UK, immigration and the trauma of war both reshaped society in different ways. Those people who had been living in the UK before the arrival of the Windrush generation witnessed their communities changing. Those who left their homes in the Caribbean to help the mother country with its workforce shortage faced racism and a sense of displacement.

The stories that James hears from the adults around him, especially Aunty Mary and Jack, trace the war’s trauma both for those who participated in it overseas and those who stayed in Moss Side. The first chapter of the novel reveals that ‘Aunty Mary, a next-door neighbour who had lived on Cadogen Street forever and ever amen’, has not been in her house for a while, as the milk bottles stay on her doorstep all day (Pemberton, 2000, p. 6). James’s mother then informs him about his beloved neighbour’s death. Following her demise, Aunty Mary becomes part of James’s imaginative world; the events of her youth on 1940s Cadogen Street are recreated in James’s mind’s eye. Aunty Mary claims she ‘had a good war’ as a nurse with the British army (Pemberton, 2000, p. 158). However, she came back to her fiancé Jake marrying another woman.

James has access to the local history of Moss Side not just through Aunty Mary’s memories but also through the tales of their other white neighbour, Jake. Like Aunty Mary, old Jake has lived on Cadogen Street longer than James’s parents, ‘forever and ever amen’. Jake is a World War II veteran who lost his leg in the war; his wife never talks to James and always has something urgent to do when James visits them. Jake, on the other hand, discusses different topics with him: music records, films, football teams and even his grandchildren. He describes to James how Moss Side was during the Blitz, and how ‘the streets weren’t allowed to have no lights in case of the bombs. And the whole of Fernleaf Street was blown up at five to nine; the kids couldn’t go to school for ages because of all the dust everywhere’ (Pemberton, 2000, p. 94). However, Pemberton does not include any African-Caribbean soldiers’ stories as part of the war trauma narrative. He only shows Caribbean immigrants as part of post-war Britain. Therefore he does not engage in a counter-history of Britain in the era before the Second World War, or during it, in the way that Levy’s *Small Island* does. Levy’s novel challenges the perception of the Windrush period as a landmark for the presence of African-Caribbeans in Britain, as it includes the story of Gilbert, who came to Britain before 1945 to participate in the war (Ellis, 2012, p. 70).

However, Pemberton includes African-Caribbean history as part of British history, and the trauma of slavery and colonialism, in James’s story of his family’s Caribbean’s roots. Near the end of the novel, the story of Felicia, James’s maternal grandmother, is unveiled through the narrator. She was a maid for Mr Orson, the white owner of all the sugar cane fields in their village in St Kitts. Earlier generations of British colonialists had trafficked many enslaved Africans to work on their sugar cane plantations. Long after the Slavery Abolition Act in 1833, black people were still working for white plantation owners because of colonialism. Felicia was found dead in her employer’s house. She died from being overworked, a victim of colonialism and sexism. She was verbally abused by Mr Orson and physically abused by her husband. Veronica, who thus lost her mother at a young age, had to work as a child to support herself and her grandmother. She migrated to England to help her Aunt Vernice, part of the Windrush generation. Consequently, all these histories of war and colonialism intertwine and influence James’s identity as a black British person.

There is a recurring motif in the novel of failed journeys. Three incidents dominate James’s thoughts: the Manchester United players’ plane crash in 1955, the sinking of the *Christina* in the Caribbean in 1970 and the disappearance of the American musician Glenn Miller’s aeroplane in the English Channel in 1944.[[29]](#footnote-30) All these tragedies signify James’s anxiety about moving to a new place and not being able to assimilate into a white majority neighbourhood. Pemberton uses James’s consciousness to heighten the effect of moving homes. James connects the trauma of losing his childhood home with tragic incidents from the mid twentieth century. The motif of journeys cut short by disasters symbolises dislocation.

Pemberton’s blending of real local space with other histories and places shows how a transnational identity is negotiated and formed. This technique is also used by Oyeyemi and Evans in their novels discussed in the first and second chapters of this thesis. The previous studies on Pemberton’s novel read the fantastical elements in James’s narrative as being a result of Moss Side’s past as a multicultural space or of its present as a crime-filled district. In a study that analyses *For Ever and Ever Amen,* Crawshaw and Fowler outline how Moss Side is ‘imbued with the “absent presence” of other lives and places’ through James’s imagined space, and how this technique of including various locations, voices and times reflects the ‘processes of identification’ which are ‘directly relevant to the experience of migration, mobility and life in multiracial Britain’ (2008, p. 460). Focusing on literary representations of Moss Side, Pearce argues that when writing about the ‘notorious’ district, which is known for its high level of crime and drug abuse, writers tend to choose ‘fantastic modes of representation’ such as crime fiction and magical realism (2012, p. 222). She uses Pemberton’s *Forever and Ever Amen* as an example of magical realism. As she stresses, the novel’s ‘innovative narrative technique’ lies in using a child’s voice to ‘naturalize’ the magical as formed by James’s imagination (2012, p. 227). Contrary to Pearce’s suggestion, I argue that James’s multilocal fantasies are not magical realist, nor do they indicate rootlessness.

James’s narrative is not magical realist because the magical is not part of the reality of the novel's world but only a representation of James’s transnational belonging. Furthermore, James’s imaginative world does not set him apart as a cultural other but illustrates the multidirectional memories of the residents of Moss Side, the place in which it is rooted. When James imagines visiting St Kitts with Aunty Mary, he relives Aunty Vernice’s tales about the great picnic; the incident of the sinking of the *Christina*, which he sees on the Nine O’Clock News; and his mother’s childhood memories. James’s fantasies are not limited to unfamiliar times and locations; they also transform the familiar Cadogen Street into a place where all the residents celebrate together: even ‘those white people from the end of the road that didn’t speak to nobody but themselves were there’ (Pemberton, 2000, p.57). Through James’s imagined neighbourhood, a sense of unity is achieved, where colour and cultural difference dissolve into community oneness. Here, there is a sense of neighbourhood belonging that is empowering, rather than entrapping, unlike in *Hello Mum*.

When James imagines that he is with Aunty Mary on the *Christina* on the day of the disaster, he is only allowed in the lifeboat because Aunty Mary has blue tickets: ‘the half-caste man [was] collecting the tickets by the lifeboat. He didn’t look pleased one bit, especially with James. He stared at the ticket and then at James and back to the ticket as if somebody was telling fibs’ (Pemberton, 2000, p. 123). One of James’s black neighbours from Cadogen Street is unable to board the lifeboat because she has a red ticket. Here James’s vision of the lifeboat is allegorical of belonging to mainland Britain. It reflects how the citizenship rules were changed by the Commonwealth Immigrants Act 1962, which restricted the rights of people from the Commonwealth countries to enter the UK. Before this, they were allowed entry by the British Nationality Act 1948. The blue tickets symbolise the British passport, which was blue in the 1960s. While the blue ticket is a proof of James’s citizenship, his skin colour only qualifies him to be part of the British colonies, like his black neighbour with the red ticket; on the latter basis, he would not be allowed into the UK.

The novel challenges the common image of the north by representing black childhood there in the 1960s to indicate the long presence of the black population. In one of James’s visions ‘the camera zoomed down through the clouds until a row of houses came into view. Coronation Street with coloured people, that was Cadogen Street’ (Pemberton, 2000, p. 27). Most of the residents of Cadogen Street of Jemes’s childhood are black; only three families are white: Jake’s and Aunty Mary’s, and there is one that ‘didn’t count’ because they are not communicating with their black neighbours (p.27). Here, Pemberton throws into relief how places like Cadogen Street with black majorities are underrepresented in the media. Although Pemberton’s book is set in the 1960s, this remains an issue today. In an article published at the end of 2020 in the *Guardian*, Lanre Bakare points to a similar sense of underrepresentation: ‘My own experiences are rooted in the black Yorkshire experience, and if I went to look for that representation on screen, particularly in fictional stories, I’d find a pretty bare cupboard. As would a black person from Bristol, Manchester, Liverpool or Birmingham’ (Bakare, 2020, para. 3). By using televisual techniques in his narrative, Pemberton suggests that minority stories like James’s could be presented on TV. Moreover, Pemberton’s representation of his childhood memories of Moss Side as nostalgic privileges his experience as a black child in a mostly black neighbourhood over those of black children in mostly white neighbourhoods. The novel ends with James’s last day in Moss Side, as he and his family ‘have to move to a brand new semi-detached house with a front lawn and a garage and not another black face for miles’ (Pemberton, 2000, p. 161). By depicting a happy, healthy, multicultural childhood, the novel counters the popular image of Moss Side as an area that has always been troubled.

**A Traumatic Narrative of Childhood**

Lemn Sissay’s memoir centres on the constant trauma of growing up as a black child in the British care system in the 1970s and 1980s. It is a mixture of Sissay’s first person narrative of his childhood memories and the official documents of social workers.

Born in 1967 to Yemarshet Sissay, an Ethiopian student, Lemn Sissay was put in the fostering system, against his mother’s wishes. Despite his mother’s efforts to get her child back after she returned to Ethiopia, he did not know anything about his mother and his origins for thirteen years: ‘My story begins without her or any knowledge of her’ (Sissay, 2019a, p. 27). He spent most of his childhood as Norman Mark Greenwood, the son of Catherine and David Greenwood, who sent him back to the system when he was twelve. Sissay voices the trauma of suddenly losing his family: ‘They stole the memory of me from me. The only sense I received from them was the sense that I should disappear’ (p. 101). Suzanne Scafe (2010) argues that ‘trauma, increasingly the subject around which many auto/biographical forms are organised, and the subject’s return to the site of trauma [enables] a reinstatement of her textual self and signals a refusal of victimhood’ (p. 156). Although Scafe’s study focuses on black female autobiography, her argument is applicable to male autobiographies too; Sissay also revisits the site of his childhood trauma. He does so not as Norman, but as Lemn. Looking back on his childhood memories as Lemn Sissay enables him to reclaim his lost childhood from the system: ‘I was not who I thought I was. The Authority knew it but I didn’t’ (2019a, p. 10). Here, he is not the voiceless victim in the social workers’ documents but the accomplished author who is able to tell his own story on his own terms. The ‘click clack clack’ of The Authority’s typewriter in the preface is replaced by the ‘click clack clack’ of Sissay’s typewriter in the epilogue (p. 10, 256). By incorporating his fragmented care system records into his autobiography, Sissay is able to reclaim his humanity and rewrite his childhood experiences.

In writing his autobiography, Sissay also reclaims Manchester as his home. Pearce, discussing the multicultural writing of Manchester, claims that many Mancunian writers are ‘as guilty of rehashing the clichés’ of the industrial city as rainy and gloomy as are other writers outside the region (2010, p. 28). She adds that first-, second- and third-generation migrants depict the city as ‘grey, rainy, depressing’, and she uses Sissay’s poem ‘Rain’ as an example (Pearce, 2010, p. 31). However, in *My Name Is Why*, Sissay paints a different picture of Greater Manchester, which changes according to the mood of his childhood memories. At the beginning of the book, Osborne Road, where he lives with the Greenwoods, is portrayed as a vibrant place, where ‘the swallows came each summer to nest’, and there are ‘a giant laburnum tree’ in their front garden and ‘roses’ (2019a, p. 28). The place he lives next,, the Woodfield Children’s Home, where he feels abandoned and invisible, is described as ‘The Other World’, a wilderness in which ‘Chrysanthemum bushes clambered on either side beneath sycamores and beech trees’, with ‘a dirty-faced boy’ looking through the bushes (p. 90). Gregory Avenue, the family group home, which is a house that accommodate a small group of children, where he lives from age thirteen to sixteen, with its tiny garden and loveless family, feels ‘claustrophobic’ (p. 111). Nature starts to disappear as he moves to his final residence before adulthood, ‘a concrete hulk of a place’, the prisonlike Wood End Assessment Centre (p. 111). As Sissay illustrates the Greater Manchester he grew up in, the region is never reduced to the common ‘clichés’ mentioned in Pearce’s study.

Furthermore, Sissay uses nature to add depth to his narrative; he compares the Greenwood family tree to the laburnum tree: ‘I was born into a laburnum-tree family with its beauteous bloom and poisonous seeds’ (p. 57). The beauty of the tree symbolises the deceptive appearance of the Greenwoods. Although the family appears loving and accepting, they actually hold prejudices against their black child based on his skin colour. Catherine Greenwood’s abandonment of Sissay is foreshadowed by a comparable abjection: Catherine has a twin who is confined in a mental asylum, but their mother, Sissay’s foster grandmother, never visits her there. Sissay never really understands why Catherine returns him to the fostering system after twelve years; however, the answer comes to him in the eyes of strangers on a bus: ‘I am a black man. I changed, seemingly overnight, from the cheeky chappy, the happy-go-lucky joker, into a threat. And it hurt me. How could identifying who I am be a threat to people?’ (p. 148). As I established in an earlier chapter, it was in the 1970s that street crimes became associated in the popular imagination with black youth. Sissay emphasises that from his early childhood he has heard of the negative stereotype of: ‘the bad black people of the big city: the muggers and the drug dealers’ (p. 147). After the 1980s riots, which arose in many cities in Britain including Manchester, the stereotypical notion of violent black youth became more prominent.

Sissay’s narrative is fragmented, and the older and more self-conscious his childhood self becomes, the fewer details the adult narrator gives the readers. This is partly because of the traumatic events he experiences from the moment the Greenwoods decide they do not want him anymore. Therefore, the first years of his life are described more thoroughly than his late childhood, of which he only mentions certain incidents. He documents how the trauma of losing his foster family and living in several places during his adolescent years made him, in a sense, invisible:

Memories in care are slippery because there’s no one to recall them with as the years pass. In a few months I would be in a different home with a different set of people who had no idea of this moment. How could it matter if no one recalls it? Given that staff don’t take photographs it was impossible to take something away as a memory. This is how you become invisible. (p. 108)

This elusiveness of memories makes Sissay’s narrative unreliable; therefore, the use of social workers’ documents becomes a means of authentication. Kate Douglas, discussing ‘traumatic narratives’ in Australian, American and British childhood autobiographies, emphasises that they ‘are often overtly fragmented and multivocal and often declare memory loss’; hence, these texts usually use a variety of techniques to authenticate their narratives (Douglas, 2010, p. 171). One of the techniques that Douglas refers to is including personal photographs on book covers, which Sissay does with *My Name Is Why*. Furthermore, Sissay uses the testimonials of other youths who spent some time in Wood End Assessment Centre, written in response to a blog about the place that he wrote in 2013 (Sissay, 2019a, pp. 210–212). The testimonials describe the childhood trauma of children as young as ten, including physical, sexual and emotional abuse. Some would only share ‘the horror of [their] past’ with their loved ones; others who left the centre as ‘broken’ children were seeking legal justice (p.228). These heterogenous voices combine with Sissay’s narrative to recall a collective trauma of lost childhood.

Although Sissay’s mother refuses to give her son up for adoption, he is assigned to the Greenwoods as his ‘long-term foster parents’ (p. 20). Adding to his vulnerability, Sissay’s foster parents claim that his mother abandoned him. In reality, he and his mother are victims of systematic inequality. As his mother has not sign the adoption papers, she still nominally has the right to raise her son; the ‘Authority could not adopt’ him (Sissay, 2019a, p. 24). Toby Alice Volkman (2005) argues that ‘all adoption that crosses borders – of culture, race, ethnicity, nation, or class – is shaped by profound inequities in power, by contradictions and ambivalence’ (p. 3). Although the Greenwoods did not officially adopt Sissay, they were asked to treat the fostering as an adoption, to take him as their own. Because Yemarshet is from Ethiopia and was a vulnerable single mother, there were no consequences for the Authority for denying her the right to her own child: ‘My mother must have been at her most vulnerable. She was pregnant and alone in a foreign country where she had come to study for a short period of time’ (Sissay, 2019a, p. 24). During the 1970s, unmarried mothers were placed in Mother and Baby’s Homes, where they were pressured to give their children up for adoption: ‘These places were baby farms. The mothers were the earth and the children were the crops’ (Sissay, 2019a, p. 24). Her right to keep her child was denied, and the care system made sure that she would not be able to take him back (Sissay, 2019a, p. 22). When Lemn was three and a half, they sent her a notice that all the rights to parent him had been transferred to the Wigan city Council and that she would have only one month to appeal. However, the letter would take a month to reach her; by the time it did, it was too late for her to respond. As an unmarried mother, Yemarshet was also vulnerable in her own country because in 1970s and 1980s Ethiopia, having a child out of wedlock was taboo. However, she wanted to take him there with her and face the consequences, so that she could shield him from racism in Britain. She wrote in her last letter to the social services: ‘How can I get Lemn back? He needs to be in his country, with his own colour, his own people. I don’t want him to face discrimination’ (p. 168). She knew from her time studying in Britain that Sissay would be at a disadvantage as a black child in the care system. Yemarshet Sissay was a black mother up against the British care system in a context of racial intolerance and stigmatisation of unmarried mothers. Thus, Lemn Sissay’s case was shaped by power inequity.

The Authority’s handling of Sissay’s case was not about helping him but about controlling him and his mother. As Sissay comments in an interview, ‘If you want to help an African child help them through education, don’t deny their parents the right to call them their baby’ (Sissay, 2019b, no pagination). When Sissay was with the Greenwoods, he was a high-achieving student. A social worker’s report shows that he had a high potential academically: ‘The possibility of University was mentioned and Oxford specifically quoted’ (2019a, p. 70). However, such expectations evaporated as soon as Sissay was back in the system, where his choices were limited. He paints a picture of education in children’s homes, as follows:

In the children’s homes the written word was rare. Letters were rare. There were no books and consequently no encouragement to read. The staff were rarely seen with a book. They were too busy adjusting rotas and shifts. There was no question of university. The suggestion of university was for more deserving people. (p. 105)

The purpose was not to help a child grow up to their full potential but to limit them in their academic, social and cultural prospects.

Sissay refers to the care system as ‘The Authority’ to show that it did not really care about his well-being but only about controlling and shaping his life. His ‘slippery’ memories, along with social workers’ reports, create a dystopian narrative. He reflects on his journey through the care system, as it seems more fictional than real: ‘Decisions were made: Put him here, move him there. Shall we try drugs? Try this, try that. After eighteen years of experimentation The Authority threw me out. It locked the doors securely behind me and hid the files in a data company called The Iron Mountain’ (p. 10). Here, Sissay emphasises how The Authority dehumanised him. He shows that he was not seen as a child in a system that nourished him into maturity but as an object of The Authority for eighteen years. He was first placed with ‘incapable foster parents’ who treated him like a charity case, to prove they were good people and good Christians (p. 11). They took him in as a vulnerable child needing care, but as he grew closer to his adolescent years, they decided that their job was done. Then, in children’s homes, his life became more systematically deprived of any real human connection: ‘This was the beginning of the end of open arms and warm hugs. This was the beginning of empty Christmas time and hollow birthdays. This was the beginning of not being touched’ (p. 88). The use of anaphora here in repeating the words ‘This was the beginning of’ emphasises the end of his childhood and the beginning of his invisibility. He describes how social workers in these homes claimed that they ‘love children’, but they never say they love him, which adds to his sense of invisibility (p. 104).

Growing up in 1970s Britain, Sissay faces racism; however, his foster parents claim they are ‘colour blind’ and do not equip him with the coping skills he needs to face racial intolerance (p. 35). Reni Eddo-Lodge critiques such a parenting approach: ‘a colour-​blind approach makes life difficult for children who don’t deserve this carelessness’ (2017, p. 107). By adopting such an attitude, the parents let their black child ‘be burdened with the responsibility of weathering the world’s prejudices on their own’ (Eddo-Lodge, 2017, p. 110). To expect a black child to adopt a colour-blind view of the world is not possible when everything around them reminds them of their difference. A social worker’s report explains that, as a nine-year-old, Sissay was having ‘difficulties because of his colour – his peer group have been calling him names and swearing at him. Consequently, he has been wishing he was white!!’ (Sissay, 2019a, p. 71). Sissay becomes colour conscious in his early years, when he is teased by other children who call him ‘chocolate’ boy, the same term Sissay’s parents use to describe his colour (p. 35). Mischievous nicknames follow Sissay as he grows up without any positive reinforcement of his identity as a black boy. In the children’s homes, he is ‘“Chalky White” – that stereotypically lazy, drug-taking West Indian character created by a popular white TV comedian at the time’ (p. 95). Although the 1960s and 1970s are known as an era of famous black figures, such as Muhammad Ali and Martin Luther King, ‘No one told [Sissay he] was the same colour as [them]’ (p. 35). When introduced to the music of Bob Marley by a friend at fourteen, Sissay is finally able to articulate his own identity as a black man without the negative influence of others:

I dropped the name Chalky White. It was no longer a joke […] For the first time I identified myself as a black man amongst a sea of whiteness. Marley cheered me on. The more people around me denied my race by saying they were colour blind or that we are all human beings or that we are all the same the more I realised that race confused them.(p.140)

However, this realisation did not come without consequences. Because Sissay spent his entire childhood within white majority communities, he can only see his blackness as other. He needed to associate his blackness with somewhere other than his local community, with black British and African cultures. At seventeen, he began to escape the suburbs of Lowton by walking fourteen miles to the centre of Manchester, specifically Moss Side, to embrace Mancunian black culture: ‘I sat inside the doorway of a record shop a little further up from the Reno nightclub. It was 2 a.m. and I watched people talking walking laughing. Beautiful dark faces. The bass was making the world vibrate into the summer air’ (p. 208). Like Pemberton, Sissay saw in Moss Side a refuge from racism, a place where blackness was central, rather than marginal.

Sissay’s mother understood her child’s need to be connected to his origins and culture, to be raised as a black African child, a need the care system failed to grasp. The Greenwoods gave Sissay the name Norman, which means ‘Man of the North’; however, he did not form a connection to the north, and when he was given back to the foster system, he felt dislocated (p. 23). He needed his original name, the one that connected him to his Ethiopian origins. Sissay emphasises in an interview: ‘my mother was stolen from me’(Sissay, 2019b, no pagination). He did not just lose his mother as a child but also her heritage. Volkman argues: ‘In the absence of the mother’s body, the longing for origins may be displaced onto the body of the nation and its imagined culture. The genetic lineage of the child is unknown, but the cultural heritage can be studied, celebrated, performed and embodied’ (2005, pp. 96–97). In Sissay’s case, his genetic lineage was known; however, no one made the effort to introduce him to his mother or her culture. He was denied her and the culture that could substitute for her in her absence. At sixteen, he was able to retrieve his birth certificate and reclaim his real name, which he later learns is not even a name but the question ‘why?’. Lemn is an unusual name even in Amhara, but as Sissay explains, ‘It is a tradition of the Amhara to leave messages in the first name of the child’ (Sissay, 2019a, p. 256). Sissay’s mother message in naming him, Lemn, could be to raise the question: why her son was unfairly taken from her.

**Conclusion**

Both authors discussed in this chapter use writing as a method for negotiating identity because, as Hall explains, identity is ‘a “production” which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation’ (1994, p. 392). Here, Hall explains how cultural production, primarily media production, plays a significant part in producing identity. Both of the narratives critique the lacking or negative representation of black people in the north, as mentioned above. Pemberton uses Cadogen Street as a counter to the popular soap opera *Coronation Street*,and Sissay’s story raises awareness of black children within the care system. Sissay grew up surrounded by negative stereotypes of African and black British people; as a child, he learned that his mother was ‘from Africa and Africa was where poor people were’, and as a teenager in the 1980s, he was exposed to the negative coverage in the newspapers about supposedly violence-prone black youth (Sissay, 2019a, p. 42, p. 135). For Pemberton, writing is about reconstructing the multicultural identity of Moss Side through James. For Sissay, it is more about asserting his subjectivity and his identity as Lemn Sissay, the Ethiopian black survivor of the care system. Although Pemberton’s narrative is nostalgic, and Sissay’s is traumatic, each of them uses an adult voice. The adult voice is a third person narrator in Pemberton’s text. Aside from in the preface and for Veronica’s story at the end, it is limited to describing James’s perspective and inner world. The adult perspective is employed to regulate and shape the child’s point of view; hence, Pemberton opens his novel, ‘If James had his way it wouldn’t be a novel. If he had his way it would be a record, a single, a Phil Spector “Wall of Sound” with a Motown bass and drum’ (Pemberton, 2000, p. 1). To tell James’s story through music instead of a novel would be to escape the symbolic order completely, so this shows a desire to break from the confinement of social structure. However, by writing a modernist realist novel, Pemberton challenges the established societal and political order by anchoring James’s artistic viewpoint in the tangible setting of Moss Side.

Whereas the figure of the child is used by Pemberton to recreate a history untainted by the thoughts of adults, Sissay uses childhood memories to expose the systemic injustice of the care system. A few months before he was given back to the care system, he was described in his junior school report as a ‘cheerful happy boy’, ‘very popular and extremely sociable’; the report concludes with a mention of him being ‘a ray of sunshine’ (Sissay, 2019a, p. 74). Ironically, this positive report by the headteacher is considered by a social worker to display ‘a pathetic attitude towards the child, purely based on his colour’ (p. 74). He is later described by his foster mother in one of her reports to the social worker as ‘a naughty boy’, ‘amoral,’ who ‘swears, steals, and […] seems to harbour a grudge about being black’ (p. 79). Sissay uses adult perspective to raise awareness of such injustice; in addition to his own point of view, he includes social workers’ reports varying from racist to sympathetic. For example, one social worker’s first reaction upon learning that Sissay is Ethiopian is to ask, ‘whether Ethiopian means that he is negroid or not’ (p. 17). These various voices expose how attitudes towards Sissay’s skin colour influence his experience in the care system. The narrative becomes not just the story of Sissay, but of others like him, as he also includes the words of Margaret Parr, founder of an organisation called ‘Black and In Care’: ‘There are many of us […] all around the country. Black kids fostered or adopted then thrown back into a care system when we reach twelve or so’ (p. 234).

By documenting their childhood memories as black British boys living in Manchester, and including their parents transnational histories Pemberton and Sissay showing the long presence of black people in Manchester. They take the image of the north as a white region and rewriting it to include other voices. As Anita Sethi (2021, p. 38) emphasises in her memoir mentioned at the beginning of this chapter:

Now is the time – as it should always have been the time – to bear witness to the stories of people of colour, to include our stories in all forms of documentation that end up forming a part of history – from curricula to libraries to bookshops, as well as actively listening in everyday conversations, not defensively silencing through discomfiture.

The majority of the studies mentioned in this thesis show that, indeed, the twenty-first century is a time when the narratives of black British people are more visible and diverse than ever before. The authors discussed in this thesis have the advantage of increased visibility, which allows them to push the boundaries of realism and be more experimental and imaginative in their writing. This opens up opportunities for new and innovative genres to emerge. The authors’ experiments with form and style allow them to assert their voices and challenge dominant narratives, creating new spaces for black British perspectives. The central argument of this thesis is that this creativity and experimentation with form is a crucial aspect of the authors’ work and contributes to the ongoing evolution of British literature. By exploring new forms of expression, these authors are challenging traditional notions of what constitutes black British writing. Additionally, this creative experimentation serves as a form of resistance against the sociopolitical conditions faced by black Britons and as a means of breaking away from the marginalisation and ‘othering’ experienced by their community. Thus I read the instability of genre here as being a result of the sociocultural conditions of black British experiences. Hence I conclude that the aesthetic is a reflection of the sociopolitical rather than separated from it.

**Conclusion: Exceeding the Limits of Realism**

When I started my research into the figure of the immigrant child in Britain in the twenty-first century, I was not aiming to focus my study on specific ethnic groups. But as I started to explore literature about transnational children and childhoods, I realised that most of the texts published in this century that depict such children’s experiences are about black British experiences. Therefore, I narrowed the scope of the thesis to focus on such narratives. Moving forward in analysing these texts, I traced a common aesthetic that challenges conventional genres. The aim of this thesis, therefore, has been to investigate an emerging common aesthetic through the close reading of six books about black British children and childhoods: *The Icarus Girl*, *26a*, *Hello Mum*, *Pigeon English*, *Forever and Ever Amen* and *My Name Is Why.* Recognising the need for a new genre term to describe these narratives’ unconventional forms, I suggested ‘modernist realism’ as their common mode. Thus I have developed a deeper understanding of the relationship between form and content which informs my analyses of these black British narratives. This thesis will, I hope, contribute to moving the field of black British literary studies forward in engaging clearly with the experimental genres that characterise ever-evolving representations of black British people.

In the introduction I laid the theoretical framework of this thesis by defining my key concepts, starting with modernist realism, then moving to black British writing, followed by the figure of the child in literature and ending with the abject. I proposed ‘modernist realism’ as the term to describe the texts I included here because the mode destabilises binaries and formal categorisations, which is, as I have argued throughout, what the authors in this thesis do. Jameson describes it as a mode of writing that began with ‘novelistic realism’ but ‘then undermined it’ (2012, p. 479). All the narratives analysed in this thesis use realism as their main framework but then include modernist elements.

My reading of Helen Oyeyemi’s *The Icarus Girl* in the first chapter examined the use of Yoruba mythology as a symbol of Jess’s psycho-socio-cultural struggle to form a diaspora identity. While the novel is narrated in the third person, it offers access to the child’s psychological landscape. The use of myth accentuates the child’s sense of fragmented selves. It shows her sense of isolation, which stems from her sociocultural reality as a mixed-race girl. The novel also brings to the fore the abject as a subject position for this mixed-race girl, which is a common position in the other narratives in this thesis as well. I concluded that, by combining the mythical with everyday reality, the child is able to form a sense of unity and hybridity through a reconnection to her Yoruba heritage. The use of non-realistic elements is crucial in depicting the child’s journey from cultural division to a unified identity as black and British.

The second chapter explored other possibilities of belonging for black British children. While race is not a prominent theme in *26a*, my close reading of the novel showed race to be a factor in the mixed-race child’s sense of subjectivity. Evans uses symbolic language to hint at race in her references to hair, for example, and how it influences Bel’s choice of career. Also, Evans frequently uses specific words (e.g. ‘white’) to describe the London atmosphere, and this description reflects Georgia’s racial consciousness. Furthermore, she shows how the history of Britain is subsumed by West African mythology through Georgia’s mental illness, when dreams of Gladstone, a British prime minster, are replaced by Ode and Onia, the mythical twins from Georgia’s Nigerian grandfather’s story. Georgia’s consciousness also depicts a common modernist trope, which is the alienation of urban living. Yet, Georgia’s sense of alienation originates from her bicultural heritage, as Nigerian and British, and her inability to form a positive sense of belonging to either. I argued that Evans placed Georgia’s death at the end of the twentieth century to imply that her alienated condition is not shared by the new generation of black British youth, who have the ability to create a more positive connection to multiple cultures.

My reading of *Pigeon English* and *Hello Mum,* in the third chapter*,* extended this discussion by identifying urban spaces as isolating spaces and pointing out the ability of youth to associate with various cultures. Both narratives rely heavily on their realist accounts of minors living in council estates in London. Nevertheless, in *Pigeon English,* the addition of a secondary narrator in the form of a talking pigeon becomes symbolic of the indifference of society to the violence surrounding youth in the inner city. The pigeon’s eyes are dead while it observes the child approaching his doom and they only come alive when he is killed. Also, I will add here that the constant presence of the pigeon marks the council estate as a dystopian, apocalyptic living-dead area because it is there to facilitate the passing of children from the physical world to the spiritual world. In *Hello Mum*,Jerome’s post-mortem letter transcends the limitations of time and space to reach his mother. It resists linear narrative, showing fragments of the dead Jerome’s memories. Hence, it also reinforces the portrayal of the council estate as an apocalyptic place. In summary, my analyses of these two narratives showed council estates as spaces of abjection. Both books refuse to offer resolution within their narratives for the black British boys caught in cycles of violence but leave it to the reader to consider the limited possibilities for these youths and how to move beyond them.

In the fourth chapter I moved to analysing texts from the north of England: *Forever and Ever Amen* and *My Name Is Why. Forever and Ever Amen* is based on Pemberton’s childhood on Cadogan Street in Manchester, yet the name of the street is changed to ‘Cadogen’ throughout the novel to create a metaphorical space of multidirectional memories. In this metaphorical space, violent histories of war, slavery and colonialism intertwine in a young black British boy’s consciousness. Furthermore, the young boy’s consciousness creates an alternative universe where people are unified through dancing and music. In *My Name Is Why*, childhood memories are slippery and overshadowed by an apocalyptic sense of a collapsed self. However, Sissay returns to the site of his lost childhood and rewrites it to form a black British identity from the debris of memories and official records. I only dedicated one chapter to representations of black British narratives from outside London; however, with the growth of black British literature that is not set in the capital, more studies that focus on such stories are necessary.

My aim in dividing the chapters of this thesis was to dedicate one chapter to each of the following aspects of society that shape black British experience: psychological, cultural, political and historical. However, my analyses of the texts showed that all these aspects intersect in shaping the everyday stories of black people in Britain. Further important themes have emerged through my reading: the abject as a political unconscious, childhood as a strategic narrative position, the diversity of diaspora experience, and alternative collectivities.

I recognised the abject position as a common configuration of the political unconscious in the books I analysed. In the first chapter, the abject initially appeared in its most classical form, as originating in the human psyche. However, my reading of *The Icarus Girl* revealed that the abject is not merely a psychological phenomenon but the result of historical and political conditions that position black British people as the other within. My reading of *26a*,especially of Georgia and her depression, solidified my conclusion from the first chapter. *26a* and *The Icarus Girl* exemplify how black British people can escape their abject position in Britain by forming transnational connections with other cultures. Nonetheless, the third chapter exposed the fact that transnational belonging and hybrid identity do not always offer hope to those entrapped by poverty in less privileged environments. Here Jameson’s idea of utopian thinking, which I referred to at the end of the third chapter, becomes prominent. Jameson (1981) emphasises the importance of understanding institutional discrimination, in order to resist it and envision a better version of society, a more fair and inclusive utopian variant of reality. The children in *Pigeon English* and *Hello Mum* are helpless to initiate such resistance. However, in writing their stories, Kelman and Evaristo challenge institutional discrimination and allow for the envisioning of alternative social orders. Finally, the fourth chapter showed how history and memory can be employed to destabilise the abject position. In *Forever and Ever Amen*, Pemberton transforms Moss Side into a multidirectional memory space, where the histories of Caribbean immigrants and white British locals are integrated. In this imaginative space, a community of equal individuals is formed. Sissay’s *My Name Is Why,* on the other hand*,* deals with memory on a personal level. My analysis of his memoir showed how he uses childhood memory to acknowledge the abject position and then subvert it through the subjectivity of his adult voice. The above points illustrate how all of these texts counter the abject position.

A further conclusion I draw is that childhood in its spatial and temporal liminality is an important vehicle for integrating the psychological, cultural, political and historical aspects of society mentioned above. The authors considered in this thesis go back to the past via childhood, a time of uncertainty and confusion but, more importantly, a time of hope. Thus, writing about childhood is a way for them to rewrite the present and, consequently, the future. Yet returning to childhood is not just a return to a specific time but a return to legacies and histories beyond the individual child’s lifespan. Childhood is a fluid period when identity, ideologies and subjectivity are unstable. The childhood narratives analysed in this thesis are experimental ones that move between various realities, and the authors’ placing of children at their stories. The authors thereby create new dimensions free from the logic of concrete reality. Moreover, they portray childhood as a time when ancestral stories are perceived as more tenable, and a person is still close to their roots.

These ancestral stories can sometimes form a haven from the racist present, as in *Forever and Ever Amen.* However, at other times, they are monstrous shadows of traumatic histories that seep into the contemporary space to disturb it, as in *The Icarus Girl* and *26a*. The ghosts in *The Icarus Girl* and *26a* signify marginalised violent histories of colonialism and gender violence. In this context, the books included in this thesis, particularly Oyeyemi’s and Evans’s, can be compared to those of other writers, especially women, of the black diaspora. Such comparative analysis provides a deeper understanding of the unique contributions of the women writers I considered, and their place within the larger context of black female diaspora literature. By examining the themes, writing styles and cultural references of these writers, it is possible to gain a more nuanced understanding of the complexities of black female diaspora experiences, and to better appreciate the diversity of voices and perspectives within their literary tradition. I used the work of African American women scholars and literary figures like bell hooks, Carole Boyce Davies and Audre Lorde to highlight this possibility.

The black authors included in this thesis have various African backgrounds Nigerian, Ethiopian or African-Caribbean. Even the ways they became black British were diverse; they migrated with their parents as children or were born to immigrant parents. In looking at these authors’ texts, this study has shown that the possible approaches to dealing with blackness as a transnational concept are unlimited. In *The Icarus Girl,* blackness reflects ethnic identity. *26a* plays with the numerous possibilities of blackness by presenting four different characters dealing with their transnational belonging. In *Pigeon English,* blackness is connected with African origins, whereas in *Hello Mum,* it is associated with the African American diaspora. *My Name Is Why* and *Forever and Ever Amen* both develop their characters’ understanding of blackness through their local and parental cultures. The range of different treatments of transnational blackness in these texts make this study timely: it moves in line with other studies that argue for a new and diverse sense of black diaspora. I mentioned Ouma’s study in the introduction. He points out that with the increase in the diversity of migration experiences in the new millennium, the new generation of African writers has broadened the ‘literary imagination of the African diaspora’ (2020, p. 142). According to him, these writers sometimes use childhood to portray Africa as a ‘memory place’ in relation to the present diasporic adult in order to show the various aspects of time, place and space that constitute ‘migrant identity’ (2020, p. 191). While Ouma appeals to a broader sense of diaspora than my study does, even within the specific black British context this intersection of different spaces and times is nevertheless depicted in the texts here. Not all use Africa as a memory place; some, like Pemberton, use the Caribbean as a place of genealogical reminiscences.

As I mentioned in the introduction, the collectivity of the texts discussed in this thesis is not established through a common ancestry or ethnicity of their authors or characters but rather is due to the fact that they all portray experiences of racial otherness in Britain. These experiences are linked to a shared history of racial inequality and a present state of sociopolitical inequity. In this context, the use of children as the focus of the narratives becomes strategic. At the beginnings of these stories, with the exception of *Hello Mum*, the children are unaware of their racial differences, but as they encounter the sociopolitical reality of race in their communities, they seek out alternative transnational affiliations. Childhoods generate endless possibilities between colliding cultures, where oral history, letters and photos facilitate transnational passages which destabilise national borders. These texts use childhood first to acknowledge the abject position of race and then to locate it in the past. Even though some of the child protagonists fail to escape the abject position, they all accomplish subjectivity of a sort. For example, Jerome becomes the subject of his story by writing his letter. By choosing to make Jerome’s letter a posthumously composed one, rather than a text he writes as he is dying, Evaristo refuses to fix the child in the position of the abject. Georgia also attains subjecthood after her death; she becomes the narrator of her story, and ‘she’ is transformed into ‘I’ (Evans, 2005, pp. 208–217). All these books resist the racialised position of the black subject in Britain.

In order to rewrite the present and influence the future, representations of adults and adulthood are just as important as representations of children and childhood. Oyeyemi started by writing about the theme of racial isolation in *The Icarus Girl*. She has moved on in later books to explore other elements that influence the black diaspora in the global north. In these books, she uses more mythologies from Yoruba, European and American cultures, different from the mythologies she used in *The Icarus Girl*. Her second novel, *The Opposite House* (2007), includes the Yoruba Orisha or semi-goddess, which was brought by enslaved people into Cuban Santería, a religion that is a fusion of Catholic practices and Yoruba beliefs. Her third novel, *White is for Witching* (2009), is based on the European myth of vampirism. *Boy, Snow, Bird* (2014) and *Gingerbread* (2019) are based on western fairy tales. Oyeyemi takes these mythologies from their original contexts and employs them in her novels to highlight themes of migration, dislocation, xenophobia and whiteness. Evans, on the other hand, continues to use her life in London as a primary inspiration in order to reclaim the city as her own. She comments on her novels: ‘I’ve done north [*26a*], west [*The Wonder*] and now south [*Ordinary People*]. My next book is going to be east, and then I will have done the whole city’ (Evans, 2018). Each novel is set in a different part of London because she wants to inscribe her stories of middle-class black people all over the cultural imagery of the city. She believes in the importance of being represented within mainstream British culture. Bernardine Evaristo has moved from rewriting European history in *The Emperor’s Babe* (2001) and *Blonde Roots* (2009) and mapping her transcontinental ancestry in *Lara* (2009) to locating black women’s voices in contemporary Britain, by using multiple perspectives, in *Girl, Woman, Other* (2019).[[30]](#footnote-31) These works use experimental styles to document black British lives in order to render their stories visible in everyday reality.

In conclusion, modernist realism is not just about representing the underrepresented but also about transforming the present in order to both avoid the mistakes of the past and change the future. The texts included in this thesis depart from social norms not only by adding non-realist elements but also by deviating from conventional forms. Oyeyemi and Sissay include poetry in their books, Evans songs, Evaristo rap, Kelman signs, and Pemberton music. They all break the rules of symbolic language because they resist its sociopolitical structure. These modernist realist narratives aim to influence the reality on which they are based, instead of merely imitating it. The authors achieve that aim by adding elements of modernism to actual historical or contemporary events. In doing so they give their texts a transnational, universal outlook. Their approach is based on voicing differences, rather than enforcing hegemonic Eurocentric ideologies as the norm; hence, realism is a crucial part of it.

My study has offered a new mode for looking at narratives that depict those black British experiences that escape conventional genres. My thesis contributes to the study of black British literature in two ways: expanding the category of black British writing and moving away from a focus on traditional genres. On the first point, I examined narratives about black British experiences rather than focusing solely on writers who identify as black British. My approach viewed black British writing as part of mainstream British literature rather than as a subgenre defined by a demographic label. On the second point, I used the concept of modernist realism to read these texts, and I thereby offered a new mode for analysing narratives about black British experiences. The concept of modernist realism could be applied to other literary works that depict black British stories, to see if this aesthetic approach could shed new light on those narratives.

My thesis was initiated by my recognition of the child as a recurring figure in recent black British writing. However, upon realising the value of examining a shared aesthetic approach to form, I limited my analysis to just six specific texts. Other twenty-first-century publications about black British childhood that are not included in this thesis offer a diverse range of perspectives and experiences. Bernardine Evaristo’s *Lara* (2009) is a multigenerational narrative that centres around the eponymous young character. Gabriel Gbadamosi’s *Vauxhall* (2013) is a semi-autobiographical novel about a young boy growing up in 1970s Vauxhall in London as it transforms into tower blocks. Okechukwu Nzelu’s *The Private Joys of Nnenna Maloney* (2019) is set in Manchester and written from the point of view of an adolescent girl searching for her roots in the Igbo culture of Nigeria. Florence Olajide’s memoir, *Coconut* (2021), provides a poignant account of the author’s childhood with a white foster mother in 1960s Norfolk. These works showcase the richness and diversity of black British childhood stories, and could serve as the basis for future research.

On a final note, I would like to return to Stuart Hall’s words that I quoted at the beginning of this thesis: ‘It is, of course, true that no proper account of the functioning of social institutions can be given exclusively in terms of their fantasy life. But no account can be given without an understanding of their fantasy life’ (2018, p. 892). My thesis recognises the centrality of the unconscious fantasies of a society in shaping individual experiences and narratives. These fantasies influence not just the content of narrative but also its language and form. My thesis offers a deep understanding of textual analysis that goes beyond contextual reality and stylistic creativity, through a realisation of the complex interplay between sociocultural background and each writer’s individual style.

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1. Ellipses in quotations are present in the original sources, except when they appear in square brackets to indicate that I have omitted material. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. The term ‘peripheral realism’ is used as the title of a special issue of *Modern Language Quarterly* in September 2012. The Jameson and Cleary articles I refer to above are part of this issue. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. There is a large body of scholarly literature about realism in the postcolonial novel; however, I will discuss it here solely in relation to African literature, and only because it influences some of the black British writing that this thesis analyses. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. These authors are of diverse backgrounds and include Salman Rushdie, David Peace, Ali Smith, Margaret Atwood, Iain Banks, China Miéville, Trezza Azzopardi, John Burnside, Hilary Mantel, Glen Duncan, Michel Faber, Sarah Hall, Rachel Seiffert and Kate Summerscale. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. Michael Löwy, who coined the term ‘irrealism’, differentiates between it and ‘anti-realism’. He explains: ‘irrealism does not oppose realism. It describes the absence of realism rather than an opposition to it’ (2007, p. 195). Irrealism does not commit to a realist vision of the world yet it is not entirely separated from it. Therefore, works that use irrealism are still as crucial as realist ones in criticising social realities. Irrealist works, as described by Löwy, ‘can take various forms: gothic novels, fairy tales, fantastic stories, oneiric narratives, utopian or dystopian novels, surrealist art, and many others’ (2007, p. 194). Thus irrealism sometimes incorporates elements of romanticism. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. The Warwick Research Collective add ‘(semi-)’ to ‘periphery’ to refer to some of the European countries that are not part of the centres of capitalism, and also to recognise the multiple layers of peripherality (2015, p.55). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. Tabish Khair, in his study, counts *The Icarus Girl* as an example of magical realism, but I will argue against that categorisation in this thesis. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. It is important to note that the use of the child and the *abiku* in *The Famished Road* is not simply allegorical in a straightforward sense but rather is one of the many ways in which Okri employs the techniques and devices of magical realism to explore the realities of Nigeria and its people. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. Some examples of these studies are *Twenty-First-Century ‘Black’ British Writers* (2009) and *Black British Aesthetics Today* (2007) edited by R. Victoria Arana, and *Black British Writing* (2004) edited by Arana with Lauri Ramey, Mark Stein’s *Black British Literature: Novels of Transformation* (2004); James Procter’s *Dwelling Places: Postwar Black British Writing* (2003); and *Write Black, Write British: From Post Colonial to Black British Literature* edited by Kadija Sesay. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. Some examples of African texts about childhood and children are Wole Soyinka’s *Aké: The Years of Childhood* (1981), a memoir about growing up in colonial West Africa; Ishmael Beah’s *A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier* (2007), a memoir about his experience as a boy soldier in the Sierra Leonean civil war;Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s novel *Purple Hibiscus* (2003) about a sibling raised by an abusive father in postcolonial Nigeria; and NoViolet Bulawayo’s *We Need New Names* (2013), anovel about a girl growing up in the Zimbabwean slums who migrates to the United States as a teenager. For a critical reading of African childhood narratives in the late twentieth century, see *Childhood in African Literature: A Review* (1998), edited by Eldred Durosimi Jones and Marjorie Jones. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. Gilroy (1993a) draws on the image of the Middle Passage ships to symbolise the Black Atlantic theory. He maps the African diaspora based on the slavery ship routes which connected Britain with Africa, America and the Caribbean, to trace a transatlantic black aesthetic of the late twentieth century (p. 4). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
12. Building on Lacan, Kristeva refers to the pre-Oedipal mother or the child/mother dyad as semiotic, whereas the Symbolic is the language and social rules into which the child is initiated. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
13. An African literary movement started in the 1930s by the francophone African diaspora in France and French colonies in Africa and the Caribbean that was against the idea of the superiority of European culture and called for a return to African cultures and traditions. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
14. Here I refer to world literature as used by the Warwick Research Collective (2015, p. 50) as an ‘analytical category’ rather than just an aesthetic one; meaning not, as David Damrosch (2003, p. 4) defines it, all texts that are translated and read outside their local cultures but texts that are produced as responses to the modern world system. Hence they argue that literary forms are not limited to specific periods or places but continually exist in relation to each other as products of capitalism (Warwick Research Collective, 2015, p. 51). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
15. ‘Double-consciousness’ is a term that was famously used by W. E. B. Du Bois, an African American philosopher, writing around the beginning of the twentieth century, to describe the psychological consequences of racial discrimination which result in othering of the self (1903, p. 2). More precisely, it describes the perceiving of the self through the racialised gaze of the white dominant society. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
16. *Ere ibeji*, or the twin figures are typically sculptures, that symbolise one or both twins who have died. The carving of *ibeji* is a common practice in Yoruba culture, where the rate of twin birth is high and the rate of death (Southgate, 2004, p. 2173). It is believed that twins have special powers, in Yoruba religion, so when one dies, a statue is carved for the diseased twin to inhabit and for the living twin to take care of (p. 2173). This practice is based on the belief that twins share the same soul, and if one twin dies, the remaining twin cannot live with a half soul (p. 2173). [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
17. *Abiku* means the ‘one who is born to die’ (Soliman, 2004, p.151). In the Yoruba belief, it is a form of spirit that inhabits secluded areas, forests and roadsides (Mobolade, 1973, p.62). If it comes across a pregnant woman, the *abiku* would place itself inside her womb and replace her foetus (p.62). The *abiku* usually repeats the cycle of birth and death again and again (p.62). They move between the real world and the spirit world, and rarely they would live until adulthood (p.62). [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
18. ‘The political unconscious’ is a term coined by Jameson (1981) to refer to the underlying political ideologies of cultural productions. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
19. In black British novels, twins are common. In addition to Evans’s and Oyeyemi’s novels, for example, in *White Teeth* (2000)*,* Zadie Smith places twins at the centre of her narrative. There is also *Kehinde* (1994) by Buchi Emecheta (in Yoruba, ‘Kehinde’ means the ‘second twin’). In African cultures, twins are prominent figures. *Twins in African and Diaspora Culture: Double Trouble, Twice Blessed* (2011) is a collection of essays including different perspectives about twins, edited by Philip M. Peek. In fiction, one of the most notable contemporary Nigerian novels is Chimamanda Adichie’s *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006)*,* in which the Igbo twin girls, Kainene and Olanna, are main characters. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
20. Here, Diana Evans hints at the African myth of twins being descendants of animals. For example, the Igbo believed that twins possessed animals’ souls, and in Yoruba, they were sometimes associated with monkeys (Leis, 1965, p.102; Roach, 2010, p. 474). Also, the wilderness could be the bush, which is, in Yoruba belief, the space where spirits roam between life and death. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
21. David Livingstone was a nineteenth-century British missionary and explorer in Africa. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
22. Note that ‘nervous conditions’ in this sense is a term from Frantz Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961). [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
23. Rosa Moreno Redondo (2020) presents a more detailed analysis of Georgia’s food consumption and its relation to male violence. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
24. While Akala describes this as a cliché, it reflects some social reality, as stated in the Family Policy Studies Centre (1992) report; one fifth of the families in Britain are lone-parent families, mainly with single mothers who are dependent on government benefits (Song, 1996, p. 377). [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
25. There is a large literature about the intersection of literary studies and ethics which goes beyond the scope of this thesis. ‘Ethical criticism’ could refer to the enquiry into a work’s moral message, its ethical impact on the reader, or its authors own ethics (Davis and Womack, 2001, p. x). One problem of ethical criticism is that it sometimes puts the reader at its centre, where the values and ethics of the reader influence and shape their criticism. Also, ethical criticism could privilege a certain set of morals and values over others, which could run the risk of marginalising minorities’ voices and calling for a dominant framework of ethical criticism. Hence as I mention above, I choose political criticism as the focus of this chapter rather than the vague ethical. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
26. Jameson bases his argument on Friedrich Nietzsche’s critique of traditional morality and ethics. Nietzsche (1907) believed that traditional ethics were created to subjugate humanity, and this led him to create the problematic concept of ‘overman’, which promotes self-righteousness (p. 57, 135). The concept refers to the ideal of a superior person who goes beyond the limitations of morality and who creates their own values. However, Jameson in *The Political Unconscious* (1981)does not refuse ethics like Nietzsche but instead argues thatethical values and practices must be understood in relevance to the social and historical context in which they emerge and that they must be evaluated in terms of their political and social effects. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
27. James Kelman is a Scottish novelist who have the same surname as Stephan Kelman who is an English novelist. The two authors are not related. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
28. Soja’s Thirdspace, as discussed in detail in my introduction, is a space that exists when material space (Firstspace) and the ideology of space (Secondspace) interact to create a lived space where mental spaces transform real spaces. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
29. The real ferry is called *Christena* but in the novel it is written as *Christina.* [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
30. Bernardine Evaristo winning the Booker Prize in 2019 for her novel *Girl, Woman, Other* (2019) has increased the visibility of black British literary creativity, especially women’s. For example, in November 2022, a special journal issue called ‘Contemporary Black British Women’s Writing’ was dedicated to their literary innovations and experimentation with style, language and genre. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)