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Race, Genre, and Beauty: A Close Reading of Helen Oyeyemi's *Boy, Snow, Bird*, a loose

Snow White Retelling that Explores the External Forces that Define one's Story

“First, I'm with Bird in any Them versus Us situation she or anyone she cares to name. Second, it's not whiteness itself that sets Them against Us, but the worship of whiteness. Same goes if you swap whiteness out for other things-fancy possessions for sure, pedigree, maybe youth too... I'm still of two minds about that. Third, we beat Them (and spare ourselves a lot of tedium and terror) by declining to worship.” (Oyeyemi 275).

In the excerpt above, Boy conveys to audiences how she will protect her daughter against the dangers of her own racial identity, and she exemplifies how the overwhelming presence of racial hierarchies defines her mixed race families' identity and livelihood. Best explained by Boy in a them versus us scenario, she defines “Them,” as the overwhelming body of people who fetishize white identity, treasuring and instigating socio-political normalities against “Us,” families like Boy and her bi-racial daughter Bird struggling to survive in a world in which they are not accepted. In this excerpt, Boy identifies the continued battle to fight these standards not only in the socio-political reality of the 1960s but in their family life as several members are white-passing. Thus, Boy and Bird's relationship identifies how despite their differing racial identities, they can both determine how racism is and has always been an omnipresent yet inescapable hazard of American life. And in Helen Oyeyemi's *Boy, Snow, Bird*, a loose Snow White retelling set in the mid-twentieth century that shares their story, the author discusses additional

interdisciplinary topics relating to their relationship and African American identity, such as bi-racial identity, metafictionality, and liminal spaces. While making these connections, Oyeyemi also identifies how their relationship can be easily paralleled to the loss of the historical self by the colonizer and colonized in the Early American period¹, and because of historically inhumane treatment during these periods, models as a clear link to double consciousness due to the similar fractured identity that both Boy and Bird in their journeys struggle to accept. Additionally, the work functions to shift the audience's gaze to the power of the fairytale genre, and as fairy tale retelling, exemplifies how elements of the original and re-adapted fairy tale narrative can create liminal space. A liminal space being a space not limited by time, but understood as a critique of the socio-political normalities of the periods artifacts were written and read; continually producing a cycle of knowledge that allows the work to be timeless. Furthermore, as the work is a retelling, it also performs to identify how placemaking functions in worldbuilding as it participates in an exchange to explore how human activity in the current world works to engage in a literary space that shapes, creates, and adds new perspectives or opinions to create a more significant cultural and historically relative meaning to the conversations of race and the power of the fairytale retellings.

Not a typical Snow White retelling, *Boy, Snow, Bird* easily parallels the inhumane treatment of African Americans during the early American period to the socio-political normalities and racial hierarchies that defined the mid-twentieth century. The novel begins in the winter of 1953 and is narrated by a young girl named Boy Novak, who is fleeing her

¹ In this paper, the Early American period refers to the United States history of developing as a new nation. It began in the mid-18th century and ended the nation's reformation and reconstruction era in the late 19th century.

emotionally and physically abusive father. She travels to the small segregated city of Flax Hill, the farthest city she can afford to travel to, and once she arrives struggles to provide for herself but befriends a girl named Mia. As her socio-economic status worsens, Boy does not find comfort in knowing her insecurities and doubts are often amplified in the presence of mirrors: a preliminary identifier that solidifies to audiences her character as synonymous with that of the evil stepmother. Months later, Boy identifies that the best way to survive is to start a family, and she chooses to settle down and marry a man from Flax Hill named Arturo Whitman: a widowed jewelry maker and father to his daughter, Snow. Bird, Snow, and Arturo's family dynamic are one of the biggest motivators of why Boy accepts Arturo's marriage proposal. Nevertheless, she notes that even after they marry, she increasingly becomes annoyed by her stepdaughter, Snow. After they marry, Boy becomes pregnant and gives birth to her daughter: Bird. She is shocked to learn that her daughter is Black, hysterically laughing as she realizes she has married a colored man, disturbed by her making of "life-changing choices about marriage and reproduction without being aware of precisely what she was choosing" (Wyatt 190). Thus, Arturo later confirms this truth as he explains that his family is white-passing and that they have ensured their survival by consciously making decisions to preserve their appearance as such, a clear nod to the pressure segregation has placed on African American livelihood. Shortly after Bird's birth, "Boy mistakes the eight-year-old child Snow as the source of the problem and the legitimate target of a mother's wrath" and sends Snow away to live with her Aunt Clara (Wyatt 191). Snow and Bird's Aunt is a family member who was given up by her mother because of her dark skin and is identified in the novel as one of many family members who

have been outcasts throughout the years, further identifying the racial hierarchies and inhumane treatment of the period that parallel that of Early America.

The novel resumes, but thirteen years later, from Bird's perspective. More specifically, days before she discovered Snow had been writing to her and her mother all these years, begging to get to know Bird and come home. Soon after reading these letters, Bird begins a relationship with Snow, not out of spite but as a child, hoping to get to know her sister. As Snow and Bird's relationship strengthens, Bird is visited by Boy's father, who attacks her, wanting to know more about his daughter's life. Knowing her father's interference in her daughter's life, Boy grows even more worried as the Whitmans host the family's Thanksgiving dinner. At the beginning of the dinner, the novel's narrative transitions back to Boy, and her narration is heavily distressed, bothered not only by Snow and Bird's building relationship, as well her father's interference in her daughter's life but the conversation between Arturo's white-passing family and the opposing side. Both sides of the family argue, laugh, and even cry but eventually reach a mutual understanding to be in each other's lives again; however, not before Boy excuses herself from the table and begs Snow to punch her. Although both women reach an understanding after this act, this is the more significant moment that brings the novel full circle, as the violence that inhabited Boy's youth creeps back in as a form of repenting to feel entirely whole. Ending the novel with one final twist, Boy, Snow, Bird, and Mia move to New York to find Boy's father after discovering that he is biologically a woman who transformed into this horrid man after he was raped and gave birth to Boy. Consequently, the novel *Boy, Snow, Bird* retains several connections to the Grimm Brothers' tale and other retellings, discussing vanity, beauty, race, and the external forces that define one's life.

The Historical Significance of Race

The racial hierarchies that define the lives and livelihoods of both Boy and Bird parallel the origin of racism and discrimination in America, as they mirror pre-existing beliefs held by colonizers, specifically in the novel's depiction of segregation: the separation of whites and blacks, most often through forms of residential, racial-ethnic, and rising class segregation (Massey et al.). Engaging and making connections between the previous racial hierarchies of the mid-twentieth century and the Early American period, this connection grants the work a greater socio-historical meaning, exemplifying how the novel is performing as a liminal space and appealing to placemaking. Beginning the story traveling in the cold winter of 1953 to Flax Hill, Massachusetts, Boy Novak abruptly leaves her home in New York to flee her emotionally and physically abusive father, whom she calls the rat catcher. More importantly, when Boy leaves New York on her way to Flax Hill, en route by bus, she identifies the prevalence of segregation: a racial hierarchy that legally separated whites and blacks during the late 19th and early to the mid-20th century. Boy explicitly identifies segregation when describing a woman of color she sees at the back of the bus as “colored,” using easily identifiable language synonymous with Jim Crow-era America (Oyeyemi 11). She identifies the presence of segregation and participates in an exchange that identifies the racial hierarchy segregation separating whites and blacks, as she notes that the “colored” woman asks her if she should rise (Oyeyemi 11). Noting the power imbalance between herself and the woman she sits next

² As a noun, Jim Crow was previously known as an inappropriate slang term for a black man. The word came to describe any state law passed in the South to establish segregational rules for blacks and whites. Jim Crow laws were concretely based on the theory of white supremacy and were a reaction to the United States Reconstruction period (Constitutional Rights Foundation).

to based on race, her actions parallel the pre-existing beliefs held by colonizers, specifically in alliance with the racial hierarchy between whites and blacks that defined colonization. More specifically, it emphasizes a belief system that supported the inhumane treatment of African Americans on the standing belief that the “respective colonizers of the period belonged "to a “higher” order of racial moral existence, while the colonized were supposed to be a willing or unwilling subject, at the “lower” end of the same racial order” (Levy et al. 222). In one of the many instances in which segregation is prevalent in the novel, Oyeyemi writes a scene that directly aligns with the original ideology of colonialism, as race can be seen as a power binary that places African Americans similarly at the “lower” end from the beginning of her loose *Snow White* retelling. Thus, the novel creates a liminal space in which audiences can engage and make connections to previous historical periods, granting the work a greater socio-historical meaning and further identifying the work as engaging in a form of placemaking.

Continuing the discussion of power binaries between African and White Americans in the mid-twentieth century, the black-and-white binary, a race paradigm that identifies the history of African American and White identity during this period as linear, is contradicted by Snow, Bird, and Boy in the text. In Snow and Bird's discussion of how their family has had to uplift and desensitize themselves to survive, as well as Boy's reaction to how she is immediately treated differently after giving birth to a black child, their inferences parallel the previous racial hierarchy between American colonizers and African Americans. More specifically, their stories identify themselves as modernized representations of the early stages of the psychological effects of plantation life on African Americans: a historically inhumane process that would lead Black Americans to live a life

full of contradictions, leading both the colonizer and the colonized to a deformed creation of the historical self (Eze 887). Best described by Bird's sister, Snow, in a letter to Bird, she notes how her mother's side of the family describes choices their father's family has made to appear white as a way to remain “sensible people” to stay comfortable just as any other “sensible” people would (Oyeyemi 217). Detailing how Snow's mother's family sees things differently, she writes how the Millers see this decision as wise, keenly apparent as they use the word “sensible.” However, in a different portion of the letter, it is clear Snow contradicts their opinion, as she describes her father's side of the family's decisions as a form of “calculated breeding,” offering audiences an insight into her dislike of her fathers family's decision (Oyeyemi 216). Thus, in Snow's letter to Bird, the white paradigm is contradicted, as the opinions and beliefs of Snow's mother's family are not linearly aligned with Snow, a bi-racial individual who happens to be passing, contradicting the paradigm understanding that white and black individuals socio-political ideals were historically linear heading towards the era of the civil rights movement³. Moreover, although in this letter, the paradigm is contradicted even after the civil rights movement, Snow's parent's comments are referred to also in the past tense, inferring that these are outstanding beliefs her parents may have had amid the moment and even during the civil rights era.

Additionally, their language of relaying that the Whitman family are “sensible people” is an example of the deformed creation of the historical self for African Americans that continues the latent historical understanding of Black individual identity, as this phrasing simultaneously groups together African Americans as only sensible or

³ The civil rights movement took place between 1950-1964 and occurred in protest to racial violence, segregation, and mistreatment, specifically of African Americans underrepresented groups (Library of Congress).

wise if they appeal to whiteness. Thus, the Millers, Snow's white side of the family's words, similarly reiterates the inhumanity of plantation life in the Early American period that would hinder or seek to erase Black identity. Plantation life would hinder positive or humanized authentic representation of African Americans through enslavement as Black individuals were forced to obey white masters, never looking them in the eye, living off of scraps, and forced to endure physical and sometimes sexual violence. And although the Millers do not continue this pattern of physical violence, they are continuing the cycle of forcing African Americans to behave and obey whiteness through their positive commentary on their selective breeding tactics to appeal to and resemble white identity.

Boy's concern for Bird immediately after giving birth extends the previous discussion concerning the racial hierarchy between colonizers and African Americans. Additionally, her experience replicates the psychological effects of plantation life on not only African Americans but colonizers as well through her understanding of how her status as an individual on the "higher" end of the current segregated racial hierarchy parallels the fractured formation of the "historical" self by the colonizer (Eze 887). Moreover, this connection highlights the novel's ability to function as a liminal space while engaging in placemaking: creating a more significant historically relative meaning to race conversations. Boy Whitman (formerly Novak) is white, and when she has a daughter named Bird, who is visibly Black, she is more than startled. Thus, after the birth of her daughter, she feels scared and embarrassed to show her child to the doctor, her husband, and even Snow after she is born. Ultimately Boy's feelings of shock and embarrassment are natural, especially as her character is immediately discredited as she is framed as a cheater, specifically by her doctor as he offers to tell Arturo Bird is Black saying, "Arturo

seemed like a reasonable man, and he could talk to Arturo” (Oyeyemi 131). Thus Arturo’s lie and Bird’s surprising racial identity lead Boy down a road to feeling worried, as she must not only protect her daughter from the dangers of the world but of the dangers that present themselves because of her race. She reflects on this idea seriously when Bird is younger, saying “What can I do for my daughter? One day soon a wall will come up between us, and I won’t be able to follow her behind it” (Oyeyemi 139). Although Boy cares for Bird, it is clear from the day she is born that there is a power imbalance between the two that even Boy cannot curb, as the racial hierarchy that withstood in the mid-twentieth century resembles a “wall” or obstacle between her ability to protect Bird and herself in the near future (Oyeyemi 139).

Consequently, Boy’s feelings of strife or distraught after bringing a child into the world resembles the severe psychological effects or panic associated with the slavery life and that “plantation” life had on colonizers in the Early American period (Eze 887). More so, Boy’s feelings resemble the psychological effects that burdened some colonizers in the Early American period because of a similar lack of national consciousness or psychological split over the treatment of African Americans in the United States. And in this instance, a split was formed not by the treatment of African Americans concerning slavery but segregation, as the nation was immensely divided over the issue of civil rights (Eze 888). Thus, the two periods are linked, not only by the disturbing reality of a world that cannot accept or see African Americans as equal, but because the individuals that readily benefit from this reality are psychologically challenged. Thus, these inferences continue to exemplify how the novel creates a liminal space in which audiences can engage and make connections between both periods of American history, continually

creating a greater socio-historical meaning and further identifying the work as engaging in placemaking: creating a more significant historically relative meaning to the conversations of race in the United States.

Double Consciousness and a Fractured Identity

The formation of double consciousness in the novel, specifically from the character Bird, parallels the fractured historical self concerning African American identity, as her motives to protect herself in her stream of consciousness replicate the inhumane treatment and conditions of the Early American period that could not yield a true self or true national consciousness. And historically, her mental strain replicates the split of national consciousness that would lead individuals of African descent to the formation of double consciousness (Eze 886), a social condition familiar to what is also described throughout history as a double awareness by Black individuals of the disparity between how White Americans and Black Americans see themselves: acting not only as a form of dual awareness to identify the juxtaposition of these two differing vantage points, but also identify their repercussions (Cooks). A reclaimed medical term by abolitionist and author W.E.B. Du Bois, double consciousness was initially utilized to describe the overwhelming dedication of enslaved people who continuously attempted to escape their masters and enslavement to pursue freedom, liberty, and ideals outside their supposed inhuman capacity. As discussed by Dr. Emmanuel C. Eze, a Nigerian philosopher who studied postcolonial philosophy, focusing on its history in Africa, Europe, and the Americas, it was initially a medical diagnosis for those who were not “thus motivated by a love of liberty, but rather were patients whose weakness of mind for liberty was to be medically-in fact, surgically- cured. (Eze 888)” Following the usage of this term, W.E.B. Du Bois

notably repurposed the term in his writings to “communicate the pain of self-redemption and the moral tragedy of psychology of a self so divided from within” (Eze 888). From this understanding of the African American livelihood as a fractured or influenced by the conflicted sense of self, as divided by the dehumanization of Black existence, it is no wonder Bird’s experience as one of the only visibly colored people in her family exemplifies an illustration of double consciousness or awareness as she is similarly outcasted and treated differently than the rest of the family. Thus, the depiction of Bird’s double consciousness not only cements a link between periods but argues that double consciousness and the struggles to accept one’s identity as a Black individual occur because African American individuals struggle to reclaim their livelihoods amid this continuous cycle of trauma that influences their existence.

One particular instance in which Bird exemplifies dual awareness and a fractured sense of self occurs after her mother warns her about the dangers of communicating with Snow, and in a stressful response to her daughter’s wanting to assume the best of Snow, kills several of the many spiders that linger in her daughter's room. The massacre of spiders moves Bird to discuss, through narration, her ability to talk with the spiders. She describes them as similar to friends and relays to audiences her belief that they are kind and resourceful beings and insects that allow her to live freely without judgment. And in describing the spiders as active listeners, this act symbolizes a disparity between those that live in a sole form of consciousness, like her mother, that juxtaposes the fractured historical self concerning African American identity as her motives to protect herself in her stream of consciousness replicate the formation of double consciousness during the Early American period.

Beginning to illustrate Bird's formation of double consciousness, Boy enters Bird's room and warns her about Snow, stating that "there's something about her that doesn't quite add up. Something almost like a smell, like milk that's spoiled" (Oyeyemi 195). During their discussion, Bird narrates that she is mad at her for keeping specific things about her sister secret, such as the letters she sent Bird for years, hoping to communicate with her. Following this interaction, Bird falls asleep, with her final thought being that despite this interaction, she is still glad her Mother is watching over her (Oyeyemi 196). However, this comment is made before she notes that Boy killed four spiders, leaving no bodies and allowing Bird to feel like the webs "gaped" at her (Oyeyemi 196). The spiders are not insects that litter Bird's room; instead, they are her friends, as she writes in a letter to Snow, saying she sometimes talks to them. "So one night, when the house was dark and as silent as possible, I sat up in my bed and whispered: Who speaks for the spiders? And the president came forward: I do" (Oyeyemi 220). In the passage above, Bird claims that she talks to the spiders, and they reply, answering her questions and engaging in a relationship similar to that of a friend. Not hesitating to tell Snow that she can speak to insects, Boy offers the readers and Snow an honest insight into the sisters' relationship and her psyche. At this moment, the spiders exemplify a space or moment in which Bird is drawn away from her life, especially the relationship between herself and her Mother, which can be readily categorized as an example of how "racial politics intersect with the nature/nurture debate" (Tatar 180). Moreover, she can enter into a separate sphere of consciousness in which she is not haunted by her Mother, Father, or biracial identity but can happily be a child. This enjoyment she feels when talking to the spiders is possibly identifying why the webs "gaped" at her: offering audiences insight into the belief that her

Mother's killing of the spider instilled a sense of reality into a possibly dissociative situation that reminds Bird of her fractured identity caused by the reality she is forced to inhabit.

Altering the Original Fairytale to Influence Meaning

Helen Oyeyemi's novel engages in the process of *unfunktioniert*, the process in which stolen tales have been re-utilized to be altered in perspective, style, motifs, and more so the story can appeal to children to follow other alternative advice and life skills outside what was recommended in the original stories (Zipes, *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion: the Classical Genre for Children and the Process of Civilization*, 60).

Furthermore, Oyeyemi engages explicitly in this process by incorporating more inclusive storylines with characters of varying races and sexualities, altering the more conservative message of the tale to educate audiences on the importance of inclusion and history.

Oyeyemi's participation in the process of *unfunktioniert* is best exemplified in the introduction of the bi-racial character Bird, whose commentary surrounding her upbringing exemplifies the amended educational goal of this process while also making connections to placemaking, as the conversation of her identity is heavily related to the historical period of the novel that exemplifies how human activity can influence the meaning of fairy tales and reveal alternative advice to their original narratives.

In the second portion of the novel, Bird begins her narrative at thirteen years old and re-introduces familiar characters from the first portion as she knows them. She describes her mother's best friend, whom the audience knows as Mia, as her Aunt and details how her Mother and Father to her seem in love, even after years of being together. However, in her description of her white-passing relative, Aunt Viv, she remarks her

unhappiness with her birth as she revealed their secret. And Bird retaliates against this inference by narrating she does not feel bad for revealing their family's true mixed racial identity saying, "I accidentally brought truth to light, and bringing truth to light is the right thing to do" (Oyeyemi 150). As she describes her action of "bringing truth to light," she establishes a framework of explanation validating her existence that resembles a fairy tale or legend, like the traditional heroine Snow White and centering the changes of Oyeyemi's re-adaptation of the original tale. To further explain, Bird's usage of the word "truth" frames Bird's character as clearly resembling the iconic heroine Snow White as they are both heroines defined by their being "quintessentially fair- both beautiful and just-" (Grimm 240). More specifically related to Bird in this passage as the description parallels Bird's kindness in making light out of a situation that left her with a fractured identity and double awareness of herself.

Additionally, it is also interesting to note that Bird's belief that her existence was the "right thing to do" further points to her resemblance to a familiar heroine, as both are motivated by what is right. However, in Bird's case, her reasoning is related to the historical period of the work of the mid-twentieth century and, consequently, this conversation concerning her identity is heavily related to the historical period of the novel that exemplifies how human activity can influence the meaning of fairy tales and reveal alternative advice to their original narratives.

Them vs. Us. A scenario in which Boy best explains to audiences how the overwhelming presence of racial hierarchies defines her mixed race families' identity and livelihood in mid-twentieth century America; her words are what begin to identify *Boy*, *Snow*, and *Bird* as a didactic work. A didactic work functions as an artifact that seeks to

educate audiences, and Boy's words tell a human story within real human space as it speaks to American history. Boy's words relate not only to the history of African American identity in the United States but also the ability of fairytale retellings to inform audiences on how elements of the original and re-adapted fairy tale narrative can create a liminal space. A liminal space being a critique of the socio-political normalities of the periods this artifact was written and read; continually producing a cycle of knowledge that allows the work to be timeless. Thus, through Boy's critique of the socio-political normalities of the mid-twentieth century that pose a threat to her and her daughter, one can easily make connections and parallels to the treatment of African Americans in the Early American period. And as the work is a retelling, also performs to identify how placemaking functions in worldbuilding as it participates in an exchange to explore how human activity in the current world works to engage in a literary space that shapes, creates, and adds new perspectives or opinions to create a more significant cultural and historically relative meaning to the conversations of race and the power of the fairytale retellings. Constantly challenging audiences' minds, *Boy, Snow, Bird* not only identifies the external forces that define one's story, but the histories, cultural, and socio-political meanings behind them.

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