

Witches of Britannia: Nationalism and the White Cliffs of Dover in *White is for Witching*

The tropes of the monstrous foreign “other” in English literature inspired Helen Oyeyemi to write *White is for Witching*, a novel that inverts these tropes to reveal the real monster on the inside of the nation. In the article “Helen Oyeyemi’s *White is for Witching* and the Discourse of Consumption,” Aspasia Stephanou explores the themes in Oyeyemi’s *White is for Witching*, which focuses on interpreting her use of Gothic and Victorian conventions, interpreting the allusions to fairy tales and folklore, and analyzing the themes of consumption and xenophobia, in order to understand how Oyeyemi inverts racial bias in the English literary canon. However, while Stephanou briefly discusses the crimes against immigrants taking place in Dover in *White is for Witching*, she does not consider the significance of Dover as a setting or recognize how the repeated imagery of chalk is uniquely connected to it. In overlooking the intimate connection between the white chalk cliffs of Dover and British nationalism, Stephanou neglects to recognize Miranda’s consumption of chalk as an extended metaphor for internalizing nationalism.

Oyeyemi characterizes Miranda’s pica, an eating disorder marked by an appetite for non-nutritional substances, by her continuous consumption of chalk to serve a symbolic purpose. *White is for Witching* is set in Dover, a town known for its white chalk cliffs. The cliffs appear as a setting throughout the story, and in one instance the dialogue reveals the physical connection of chalk to Dover, “Miranda sat on a heap of rock and tapped it. ‘Chalk,’ she said.” (258). Miranda’s one-word observation is presented without exclamation, as she has ironically stumbled across her vice. Oyeyemi’s insertion of Miranda’s observation draws the reader’s attention to the direct connection between Miranda’s chalk consumption and the cliffs of Dover and its ties to the iconography of Britain. In the article “‘The Cliffs are not Cliffs’: The Cliffs of Dover and National Identities in Britain,” Paul Readman uses the white cliffs of Dover as a case

study for examining the relationship between landscape and national identities in which he observes that the Dover cliffs functions as a synecdoche of British nationalism: “Understood as a historical witness to past time, they represented the continuity of the national homeland, acting as powerful symbols of defense, defiance and difference across the modern period” (244).

Understanding Dover as an emblem of nationalism expands the symbolism of chalk as a representation of the white cliffs’ ideological significance; therefore, Miranda’s pica can be viewed as a metaphorical ingestion of this ideology. Miranda’s nationalist inculcation via chalk begins the very first time she enters the house on 29 Barton Road in Dover: “The first day, Miri found something on the floor of that room she picked as hers...It was a ball of chalk.” (Oyeyemi 21-22). The house, which is a sentient being, thus begins to slowly and subliminally indoctrinate Miranda with nationalism.

One element of Dover’s white cliffs’ association with British national iconography is their color. Readman argues that “in a real sense the white cliffs of the south coast had already defined the nation” (248), as Albion—derived from the Latin, *albus*, for white—had been synonymous with Britain. Another Latin term associated Britain and British nationalism is Britannia, which is continually evoked in *White is for Witching*. Similar to Dover, Britannia is used as a synecdoche of Englishness and an emblem of nationalism. In fact, the similarity of their representational value has often resulted in their entwinement in nationalist debate, as Readman explains, “In the context of the prevailing ‘Rule Britannia’ discourses of nationality, the cliffs had emerged as a powerful emblem of an insular national identity” (250). In *White is for Witching*, Britannia is invoked in relation to Miranda’s grandmother, Anna Good, and her strong nationalism. The first example of this can be seen her portrayal of Britannia in a scene for television:

She'd been picked to wear a bronze-colored helmet and a white gown and a blue sash and sit at the top of a chariot built of the other girls' bodies. She was Britannia, and her shield was a round tea tray covered with coloured crepe and ribbon (Oyeyemi 134).

The scene is narrated by the house, who observes Anna Good *was* Britannia. The language is direct, avoiding any theatrical terminology to present Anna not simply in the role of Britannia, but as the embodiment of character itself. Her position atop a "chariot built of the other girls' bodies" additionally foreshadows the extremity of her nationalism through the word choice, which emphasizes the bodies of the girls and creates an almost gory image, as if Anna stands atop a pile of dead bodies. Anna's racially and ethnically exclusive idea of English identity is critical to the development of the plot, as she passes this belief on to the sentient house, which in turn attempts to pass it on to Miranda using chalk as a vehicle for the ideology.

The World Wars also contributed the continued association of Dover with British insular national identity and national defense. Paul Readman observed, "In nineteenth- and early twentieth-century publications, [the cliffs of Dover] were described as 'white walls' as 'natural defenses of the most impregnable character'" (252). The "white walls" were seen as natural fortification and during WWII, an idea heavily reinforced by the Battle of Britain, "upon which the press corps had reported from the vantage point of Shakespeare's Cliff, the aircraft of the RAF and Luftwaffe wheeling in combat overhead" (Readman 256). Anna Good's husband, Andrew Silver, is notably described as "a Dover Queensman," tying Dover intimately to the Queen and the British Army (Oyeyemi 136). Dover's chalk cliffs do not simply physically fortify the nation, they represent the nationalist ideology that psychologically fortifies it. The significance of Dover as an emblem of nationalism, especially during WWII, contributes to the genesis of the house upon the death of Andrew Silver. When she hears of her husband's death, Anna lapses into a suicidal melancholy that culminates in the xenophobic animation of the

house: “‘I hate them,’ she said, ‘Blackies, Germans, killers, dirty...dirty killers’” (Oyeyemi 137). Because Andrew was in the Royal Air Force in Africa, Anna’s implicates Africans in his death, using the derogatory term “blackies.” The ellipses functions as a pause to emphasize the repetition of the word “dirty,” conveying the depth of Anna’s abhorrence of foreigners. Anna’s attempt to curse the racial “other” through the animation of the house demonstrates how war and fear can push nationalism to an extreme, and how xenophobia is veiled or rationalized by nationalism.

Though Miranda’s pica is inherited, suggesting nationalism is learned from older generations, her mother Lily calls it “embarrassing and dangerous” (Oyeyemi 135). Lily’s attempts to get Miranda to eat nourishing food rather than chalk are symbolic of her attempt to teach her daughter an alternative world view. Anna Good blames Lily’s demonization of patriotism and nationalism on immigrants: “How had Britannia become embarrassing and dangerous? It was the incomers. They had twisted it so that anything they were not part of was bad” (Oyeyemi 135). Anna alienates immigrants by calling them “incomers,” rather than newcomers, which implies recent arrival with the potential of naturalization or acceptance. Miranda is part of the house’s nationalist view of Britannia and it gifts her with chalk to urge her to embrace this insular version of Englishness. However, when Miranda brings her friend into the house, who threatens Britannia as an “incomer,” the house rejects Ore as truly English and offers her white towels that seem to take the color off her skin:

“The black’s coming off,” someone outside the bathroom door commented. Then they whistled “Rule Britannia!” and laughed.
Bri-tons never-never-never, shall be slaves
 My skin stung. (Oyeyemi 247)

The house ironically uses the patriotic song to alienate Ore from her English identity. Oyeyemi’s line breaks are intentional, using enjambment in the last two lines which visually separates the

them, but neglects grammatical division by means of punctuation. This grammatical encroachment of the lyrics of “Rule, Britannia!” on Ore’s internal thought, “My skin stung,” mimics the house’s invasion of Ore’s mind. Additionally, there is a lack of quotation marks around the italicized lyrics, implying that their source isn’t “someone outside the bathroom door,” rather Ore herself. Her internalization of the nationalist symbol demonstrates how they are weaponized against the racial or foreign “other” to alienate them.

Dover’s status as a port and thus a hub for immigration violates its identity as an emblem of insular national identity. Oyeyemi highlights this tension in her repeated invocation of immigrants arriving in the port town. In one instance, she uses short restrictive grammar and simple sentence structure to describe one fatal attempt by a group of immigrants: “Up at the port, fifty-eight people had been found dead in the back of a truck. Chinese. They had suffocated.” (Oyeyemi 124). The form of the sentences themselves mirror the oppressive reality of nationalism for outsiders. For the xenophobic house, Dover’s English insular identity is alienated by “the incomers.” The housekeeper Sade’s presence in the house is particularly threatening, not only because she is a Nigerian immigrant, but because she threatens the progress of Miranda’s nationalist indoctrination that is symbolized by her chalk consumption. Sade takes Miranda to the Immigrant Detention center, heightening her awareness of the cultural and ethnic other. Sade further brings awareness of immigration into the house by forcing Miranda to confront the stories on the radio:

Miranda was a heart-beat away from putting her hands over her ears. What is wrong with Dover, she thought. Eyes closed, Sade stroked the scars on her cheek. “Didn’t they call Dover the key to England?” she asked, slowly. “Key to a locked gate, throughout both world wars and even before. It’s still fighting.” (Oyeyemi 124)

A “heart-beat” away from physically blocking out the news, Sade intervenes before Miranda can stop listening. She alludes to Matthew Paris’s quote, which perpetuates the nationalist symbolism

of Dover's white cliffs, as Paul Readman explains, "The association between Dover and defense was of long standing, with Matthew Paris's description of the town as 'the lock and key' of the kingdom being much quoted over the centuries" (251). Sade invokes the reference ironically, to subvert Dover's defensive role with an offensive one, and to highlight English nationalism as the cause of the offensive attacks on immigrants. The scene further displays Miranda's internal conflict to accept or reject English nationalism as the phrase "heart-beat away" emphasizes the perilousness of the situation and how deeply she's internalized the house's nationalism. Oyeyemi creates ambiguity in the narration, as "what is wrong with Dover" remains ambiguous not only in its answer but in its premise: is Miranda identifying the problem as the cruelty and tragedy immigrants face in Dover? Or are the immigrants the cause of what is going wrong in Dover? Miranda's questioning demonstrates her resistance to the house's nationalist ideology.

For a while, Miranda only craves chalk, but her cravings escalate. Miranda wanders into the house's bomb shelter and encounters a spectral feast with her maternal relatives. At the table, "there were sticks of chalk and strips of plastic, but all they did was make Miranda hungrier for what was not there, so hungry she released her mother's hand and held her own throat and gagged. Her hunger hardened her stomach, grew new teeth inside her" (Oyeyemi 148). In terms of Miranda's pica, chalk serves as a sort of appetite suppressant for a greater hunger. The ideology that chalk symbolizes works similarly. Oyeyemi's portrayal of chalk as substitute for Miranda's real desire represents how nationalism is a veil for xenophobia. The repetition of the word hunger emphasizes Miranda's urgency, mirroring the urgency that strong nationalists like Anna Good feel about the immigrants entering Britain. Again, Lily tries to intervene in Miranda's nationalist inclination and prevent it from growing into something even more extreme: "Lily understood, she understood everything. Lily gave Miranda a padlock. Miranda gratefully

kissed its cold loop” (Oyeyemi 150). Lily “understood everything,” having traveled to foreign countries to reject nationalist inculcation by Anna Good and the house.

Miranda tries to resist the house’s ideology, but she cannot. The house is appalled by Miranda’s love for Ore and declares, “I would save Miranda even if I had to break her,” resolving “to take her away” (Oyeyemi 227). After this pivotal decision, the house plays an unsuspecting Miranda a lullaby:

For a lullaby that afternoon I played her Vera Lynn’s *Greatest Hits—there’ll be bluebirds over/ the white cliffs of Dover...*
It was my little joke. (Oyeyemi 227)

This is one of the nationalist references that Stephanou catches, noting it was “used in 2009 by the BNP in an anti-immigration album” (1248). Readman’s discussion of the history of the song is useful to more thoroughly understand the house’s “little joke”:

The white cliffs remained a potent emblem of national resistance to foreign threats...Dover cliffs’ associations with island defense were further emphasized by the sensational success of Alice Duer Miller’s prose poem, *The White Cliffs*... which provided the inspiration for Nat Burton’s wartime hit ‘There’ll be bluebirds over the white cliffs of Dover’, which was famously immortalized by Vera Lynn’s version of it. (Readman 225).

The “lullaby” for Miranda is a ballad with salient national themes and a vision of a peaceful post-war future where the symbolic border of the Dover cliffs is secure. Therefore, the house’s “little joke” is that the lullaby is an assertion that the purity of Miranda’s English identity will be secured by cleansing it of its association with the racial other. As Miranda eventually realizes she must face her fate, her resolution becomes clear when she answers Ore’s goodbye with silence: “‘I’ll see you at college,’ [Ore] said. [Miranda] didn’t say anything. She sucked the chalk from out under her fingernails. She looked tired” (Oyeyemi 258-259). The imagery of the chalk “underneath” Miranda’s fingernails draws attention to how the chalk has been embedded in her and is situated below the surface which signifies how she has internalized the nationalist ideology chalk represents. Her resignation to this ideology is evident in her lack of response to

Ore, whose goodbye is a hopeful promise of reunion. Oyeyemi's diction also implies Miranda's resignation to her fate with her *sucking* the chalk in her nails, as the word choice invokes the vampiric imagery that has characterized her maternal relatives. Miranda's despondency is made clear by the short sentences, whose simple structure visually conveys she has nothing left: she can accept the house's nationalism and become its weapon of assimilation via her maternally inherited vampirism or she can escape through death.

The prevalence of chalk in *White is for Witching* is connected to the chalk cliffs of Dover which are emblematic of defense and nationalism. Stephanou's article analyzing the novel, despite a central focus on consumption, does not tie the main object of Miranda's pica into the greater themes of nationalism it observes. While Stephanou notes several passing references to nationalism and asserts that the house is obviously a relic of old ideologies such as nationalism, and that the color white is thematic in *White is for Witching*, she does not substantiate that claim by implicating the emblematic setting or the symbolism of the chalk. Stephanou simply portrays chalk as an arbitrary tool of the house, neglecting the role Dover and chalk play in signifying the nationalism of the house and Miranda's maternal relatives. Attending to the emblematic nature of Dover allows the reader to connect the white chalk cliffs to symbolism of nationalism, revealing Miranda's chalk consumption as the metaphorical ingestion of an insular national identity and the related sentiments of nationalism. Oyeyemi uses pica characterized by chalk cravings to expose nationalism as similarly non-nourishing and destructive. The malevolent supernatural inclination of white individuals portrayed in *White is for Witching* thus does not only invert tropes of the "foreign" other as Stephanou argues, but also exposes their origin and the nationalist ideology that perpetuates them.

Works Cited

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