

Snow White Remixed: Confronting Aesthetic Obsession and Race in Helen Oyeyemi's *Boy, Snow, Bird*

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While the plots and settings of fairy tales have evolved through the efforts of adaptation, their protagonists still represent an unattainable standard of beauty. The women who grace the screens in Disney movies are evidence of an idealized version of white Eurocentric femininity. Snow White's story is especially indebted to this ideal because the plot's main tension depends upon the protagonist's appearance. In her "Snow White" retelling, Boy, Snow, Bird, Helen Oyeyemi interrogates the Eurocentric aesthetics portrayed by the traditional fairy tale protagonist by examining issues of race and gender during the Civil Rights era. Eduardo Navas' remix theory provides a methodology for examining how Oyeyemi's adaptation maintains the aura of the fairy tale while foregrounding the Snow White image. Instead of revising "Snow White" to produce a more female centered narrative, Oyeyemi's text instead layers the fairy tale with a contemporary story to unsettle the racial and gender implications of the Grimm's idealized female protagonist. Oyeyemi's remixed Snow White reveals how the fairy tale ideal pervades the public consciousness and reinforces hegemonic discourse that ties race and gender to antiquated aesthetics.

Keywords: Aesthetics; *Boy, Snow, Bird*; Oyeyemi; Race; Remix; Snow White

Throughout the past few decades, fairy tale retellings have become an increasingly popular genre that continues to fascinate audiences. While the plots and settings of the traditional fairy tale have evolved through the efforts of such adaptations, the fairy tale protagonist has remained for the most part untouched. Evidence of this can be seen in the popularity of Disney's princesses, young women who grace the screen with their tiny waists, big eyes, and perfectly pouted lips. These women are not only portrayed as physically perfect, but they also reinforce an idealized version of femininity based on passivity, submissiveness, and grace—qualities used to define women throughout modern history.¹

In response to these distorted depictions of feminine beauty and behavior, such authors as Angela Carter² and Margaret Atwood³ have revised several classic fairy tales to claim a more female centered narrative. In these instances, the new fairy tale attempts to supersede the traditional narrative by overlapping the old with the new. Such stories work to revise the patriarchal underpin-

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¹ For more on the critical reception of fairy tales and their portrayal of feminine ideals see Jack Zipes, *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion* (New York: Routledge, 1983).

² Angela Carter, *The Bloody Chamber* (New York: Penguin, 1990).

³ Margaret Atwood, *The Robber Bride* (New York: Doubleday, 1993).

nings of the classic fairy tale narrative by writing protagonists that are more complex and empowered. In her retelling, *Boy, Snow, Bird*, Helen Oyeyemi adapts the Brother Grimm's⁴ "Snow White" for a modern audience while simultaneously refusing to revise the narrative.⁵ Instead, the novel preserves the Snow White aesthetic and foregrounds the narrative's racial and gender ideologies. In this way, Oyeyemi's novel essentially blends the old with the new to interrogate the way classic fairy tales pervade the public's consciousness and reinforce cultural ideals that tie aesthetics to racial hierarchies.

To fully appreciate the cultural work performed by Oyeyemi's novel, it is important to distinguish Oyeyemi's technique from revisionist versions of fairy tale retellings. Throughout Oyeyemi's work, traces of the familiar "Snow White" tale abound. In fact, *Boy, Snow, Bird* layers the two stories, Grimm's version of "Snow White" and Oyeyemi's, in a way that relies on the reader's ability to recognize the familiar within the new. In this way, Oyeyemi creates what Eduardo Navas calls a "remix"⁶ by fusing the two versions of the "Snow White" tale into a new form. Though Navas' definition of remix focuses on explaining the cultural phenomenon of musical mashups and sampling, his theory helps elucidate the way in which two texts, written or non-written, intertwine. Navas explains: "a music remix, in general, is a reinterpretation of a pre-existing song, meaning that the "aura" of the original will be dominant in the remixed version."⁷ In other words, when songs are sampled or included in a mashup, they become something new; however, the new text still maintains the original's aura. Lisa Horton further elucidates this concept in her investigation of *Sherlock Holmes* and the remix phenomenon: "remix does not merely imitate a dead style or original in the manner of traditional pastiche; it revitalizes it, imbuing it with new creative vitality."⁸ Like a mashup of two distinct songs, Oyeyemi layers "Snow White" with her contemporary story to create a narrative imbued with the magic and fantasy of fairy tale all the while grounded in the very real issues facing our modern society.

Oyeyemi's story opens in the familiar vein of a fairy tale: a fair maiden is trapped in her cell at the mercy of a dark and overbearing parent. However, from there, the plot of *Boy, Snow, Bird* departs from the classic Grimm story. In Oyeyemi's version, it is 1953; the Civil Rights Movement is just beginning to gain momentum as Boy Novak, a young white woman, escapes her abusive father and finds herself in the quaint New England town of Flax Hill, Massachusetts. Here, she finds freedom and eases into the life of an independent woman: boarding houses, a series of unsuccessful jobs, and double dates with rich men. Though Boy does not find the fairy tale happily ever after (she left her true love behind when she fled her father), she eventually marries Arturo Whitman and settles, albeit uncomfortably, into her role as stepmother to his daughter, Snow. Though Boy resists the evil stereotype, the tale begins its journey into the familiar narrative of Witch versus Fair Maiden when Boy gives birth to Bird, a dark-skinned baby girl. The arrival of Bird, Boy and Arturo's daughter, exposes the Whitman family as light-skinned African Americans passing for white. With their secret exposed, Boy becomes increasingly aware that the Whitman matriarchs possess an unusual infatuation with Snow. Unlike the traditional tale, Boy is not so much threatened by Snow's exceptional beauty but the aesthetic ideal that her beauty represents.

⁴ Though the Aarne-Thompson index documents many versions of the "Snow White" tale type, the Grimm's version is the most relevant to this study because it is the most prevalent version in the United States where Oyeyemi's novel is set and it most closely resembles the fairy tale allusions throughout the novel.

⁵ Helen Oyeyemi, *Boy, Snow, Bird* (New York: Penguin, 2014).

⁶ Eduardo Navas, "Remix Defined," *Remix Theory*, <http://remixtheory.net> (accessed December 31, 2016).

⁷ Navas, "Remix Defined."

⁸ Lisa Horton, "Guy Ritchie's *Sherlock Holmes*," in *Clockwork Rhetoric: The Language and Style of Steampunk*, ed. Barry Brummett (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2014), 180.

Snow, the product of Arturo's previous marriage to a white woman of European descent, is a signifier of the family's transcendence. Snow's physical characteristics not only work to efface all traces of the family's racial heritage but she embodies the hegemonic aesthetics inherent in white femininity. In an effort to protect Bird from the destructive power of this ideal, Boy eventually sends Snow away to live with the dark-skinned Whitmans that the family has cast away.

Germanic Roots

Though the plot of *Boy, Snow, Bird* only loosely resembles the traditional "Snow White" story, the emphasis on Snow's physical characteristics clearly evokes the Grimm's idealized female. Since the Grimm Brothers immortalized the tale, "Snow White" has served as an artifact, preserving and reproducing cultural notions of feminine beauty. As Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar point out in their reading of "Snow White," the tale's central action, the tension between the stepmother and Snow White, is invested in a cultural narrative in which a woman's value is determined by her physical appearance.⁹ Together, this narrative arc and the foregrounding of Snow White's exceptional qualities—her fair skin, ebony hair, and ruby lips—posit a white eurocentric aesthetic. This image has been apparent since the first edition of "Snow White," published in 1812, described Snow White as: "white as snow, as red as blood, and as black as ebony."¹⁰ She is so beautiful, in fact, the magic mirror names her the "fairest ever seen" and even in death her beauty causes the prince to fall in love with her.¹¹ In his study on the legacy of the Grimm's predecessor, Charles Perrault, Jack Zipes argues that the female protagonist is an ideal composite of feminine qualities: she is "beautiful, polite, graceful, industrious, properly groomed, and knows how to control herself at all times."¹² Though Zipes focuses on Perrault's work in seventeenth-century France, this emphasis on beauty and femininity is apparent throughout subsequent fairy tales.¹³

Though fairy tale writers since Perrault have continued to portray the female protagonist as an agglomeration of the most desirable female qualities, each culture has in turn refined this image to fit their specific situations. According to Zipes, the acculturation of fairy tale elements was part of a civilizing process that began in the seventeenth-century with Perrault.¹⁴ In nineteenth-century Germany, the Grimms, working within the Romantic movement's tradition of "national and cultural rediscovery," traveled throughout the country to record and anthologize stories that had been passed down for generations.¹⁵ Though the Romantic inclination was to preserve the oral tales of the peasants and common people, Zipes points out that the Grimms focused their attention on collecting stories from Germany's bourgeois, the educated middle-class.¹⁶ According to Marina Warner, the outcome of this process was a book not so much intended for pleasure reading but a "learned work setting out to reconfigure the cultural history of Germany along lines that would

⁹ Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 36.

¹⁰ Jacob Grimm and Wilhelm Grimm, "Snow White," in *The Classic Fairy Tales*, ed. Maria Tatar (New York: Norton, 1999), 83-89. Unless otherwise noted, all references and quotations from the Grimm's "Snow White" will be to this edition.

¹¹ Grimm and Grimm, "Snow White," 86, 89.

¹² Zipes, *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion*, 25.

¹³ For more on Perrault's influence in the Grimm's stories see Harry Velten, "The Influence of Charles Perrault's *Contes de ma Mère L'oise* on German Folklore," in *The Great Fairy Tale Tradition: From Straparola and Basile to the Brothers Grimm*, ed. Jack Zipes (New York: Norton, 2001), 858-968.

¹⁴ Zipes, *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion*, 10-11.

¹⁵ Marina Warner, *Once Upon a Time: A Short History of Fairy Tale* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 54.

¹⁶ Zipes, *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion*, 46. See also Warner, *Once Upon a Time*, 51-60.

emancipate it from the monopoly of classical and French superiority”.¹⁷ In other words, the first edition of the Grimm’s fairy tales was a politically motivated act of cultural preservation, specifically the culture of Germany’s bourgeois elite.¹⁸

Even if we put aside for a moment the nationalistic origins of the Grimm’s “Snow White” tale, it is clear that the conceptions of beauty and femininity which it puts forth hold sway even in our contemporary moment. The image that the Grimm’s established in the early days of the nineteenth-century is constantly regenerated through modern adaptations. Furthermore, many of these “Snow White” retellings portray a version of European femininity that continues to influence American popular culture. Since Disney first released their animated version of the tale in 1937, Snow White has continued to visually reinforce the aesthetics of the Grimm’s project. Furthermore, Snow White’s story, her developmental arc, is especially bound up with this ideal because the plot’s main tension depends upon the protagonist’s beauty—the story would not exist if Snow White did not perfectly embody all the traits that femininity has come to represent. That this ideal continues to hold power throughout time and across cultures is testament to the way in which “Snow White” has served as an artifact that reinforces hegemonic notions of feminine value. In their analysis of the Grimm’s “Snow White,” Gilbert and Gubar point out that the conflict between the protagonist and her stepmother is as much about female relationships within a patriarchal system as it is about jealousy and aesthetics. However, while making the argument that “Snow White” allegorizes the plight of the female artist, Gilbert and Gubar position Snow White as “the eternally beautiful, inanimate *objet d’art* patriarchal aesthetics want a girl to be.”¹⁹ In other words, Snow White is different from her fellow fairy tale protagonists in that she does not only represent the feminine characteristics of a patriarchal ideal; she is also powerless and silent, a work of art that exists without life and therefore does not threaten the systems of power that create her. While the story of “Snow White” reiterates fairy tale images of femininity, it also collapses the boundaries between woman and art, essentially painting a portrait of the white man’s ideal woman: silent, obedient, and, above all, exceptionally beautiful.

Snow White Remixed:

To interrogate this plastic image of the perfect woman, Oyeyemi’s novel first situates Snow within the contemporary text as a Snow White character who remains true to her fairy tale origins. Though most of the novel is very much situated in modern reality, Snow is almost immediately associated with fairy tales and magic. Describing their first encounter, Boy explains:

One of the bigger houses had brambles growing up the front of it in snakelike vines. The smell of baking chocolate-chip cookies aside, it looked like a house you could start fanciful rumors about: ‘Well, a princess has been asleep there for hundreds of years...I couldn’t see her face properly—It was obscured by clouds of dark hair with big red flowers plaited into them—but she had a large cookie in each hand and more in the pockets of her dress. . . . I just said ‘Hi, Snow’ as if we’d met

¹⁷ Warner, *Once Upon a Time*, 55

¹⁸ Warner points out that Wilhelm Grimm was not satisfied with the cross-cultural influences present in many of the stories in their original collection and continued to edit them in an attempt to produce a purely Germanic anthology. See Warner, *Once Upon a Time*, 55-61. Therefore, Wilhelm’s revisions end up creating a remixed protagonist that echoes Perrault’s seventeenth-century French protagonist. The resulting image of “Snow White,” therefore becomes a European ideal, especially when she travels across the ocean to the United States and the specificity of her origin becomes watered down through time and subsequent adaptation.

¹⁹ Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, 40.

before, when of course we hadn't, and I kept going, kept my gaze fixed on the road ahead of me. 'Scared' doesn't even really describe it. I almost crossed myself. I felt like the evil eye had fallen upon us both.²⁰

The Whitman's house looms from behind the knotted vines like a cottage deep in the woods. With an allusion to Hansel and Gretel, another Grimm fairy tale, the smell of cookies juxtaposes the ominous presence of the house, creating an enticing aroma capable of luring the unsuspecting child right into the witch's oven. Not only does Snow emerge from this fairy tale-esque setting, but she also physically resembles the Snow White from the Grimm's tale. Though the narration differs significantly, the image created by the contrasting of Snow's dark clouds of hair and the red flowers clearly gestures toward the blood red and ebony black of the Grimm's Snow White. Furthermore, though the "Snow White" story is not explicitly referenced here, its aura lingers slightly behind and out of focus much like the enticing scent of Snow's cookies. In this way, the text remixes the classic fairy tale with the contemporary story through its appropriation of these motifs. As Navas points out in his lecture, "The Framework of Culture," this type of literary sampling results in a recontextualizing of the source material as a means of exploring its cultural significance.²¹ Thus, Oyeyemi is not simply rewriting "Snow White" but interrogating this cultural ideal through a literary remix of the iconic protagonist.

As the novel progresses, the juxtaposition of Snow and Bird, Boy's daughter, calls attention the cultural value placed upon the "Snow White" aesthetic. Snow is clearly idolized by the Whitman family, especially the matriarch, Olivia, but the arrival of Bird works to further emphasize how much that attention is a result of Snow's physical appearance. Right after she is born, the only description of Bird that the text offers is provided by a maternity ward nurse who tells Boy, "That little girl is Negro."²² Her dark skin is clearly the reason Olivia refuses to even look at the baby, which in turn causes Boy to become increasingly protective. At one point, Snow, who possess the curious infatuation of a young child, attempts to get closer to the child: "She leaned over Bird's crib and pressed the side of her face against the side of her sister's face as if showcasing the contrast between their features, and she gave me a look of radiant, innocent virtue that made my skin crawl."²³ The image created in this scene emphasizes the contrast of light and dark perceived in the skin colors of the two girls; Snow, the image of fair-skinned perfection, and Bird, the dark "Negro." The innocence and virtue that seems to radiate from Snow are products of the Snow White aesthetic that are deeply tied to her whiteness. Thus, the binary produced by the white-black juxtaposition works to classify Bird as *not* white. In other words, if beauty, grace, and innocence are all characteristics of the fair-skinned Snow White, then Bird's skin color is a marker of cultural otherness. She must be anything but beautiful, graceful, and innocent.

Remix as a Form of Cultural Critique

While Oyeyemi's remixing of the Snow White image works to emphasize both her fairy tale beginnings and the aesthetic ideal "Snow White" projects, it is through Boy's eyes that the inherent value of those associations begins to break down. Part of the allure of Oyeyemi's remix is the way

²⁰ Oyeyemi, *Boy, Snow, Bird*, 25.

²¹ Eduardo Navas, "The Framework of Culture: Remix in Music, Art, and Literature," *Remix Theory*, <http://remixtheory.net> (accessed August 31, 2017)

²² Navas, "The Framework of Culture," 136.

²³ Navas, "The Framework of Culture," 147.

in which the story works to fill in the gaps left by the Grimm's version of "Snow White." Particularly, through Boy's childhood trauma, Oyeyemi not only revitalizes the narrative of the evil queen, but she also sets up Boy as the only character prepared to see the danger in idealizing Snow's beauty. Boy's father, Frank Novak, was once a beautiful woman named Frances. While working on her²⁴ doctorate in human sexuality, she was raped by a young man who felt compelled, or entitled, to cure her of lesbianism.²⁵ Though Oyeyemi does not offer this context as a means of redemption for the abuse inflicted upon Boy, the novel does juxtapose Boy's childhood with Snow's in a way that questions the cultural value placed on physical beauty. For example, Boy observes the downside of beauty in the attention it garners from the opposite sex. At one point, after a meeting Charlie, a young man Boy is in love with, her father approaches the two of them and asks, "I've seen the way you look at my daughter. You think she's pretty, don't you?"²⁶ Charlie, affirms the rat catcher's suspicions and the two of them spend an awkward moment visually assessing Snow: "They both turned to me and went on a looking spree. I left them to it and wished I could sail over their heads and into the acid blue sky. They didn't look for long, it was more a practiced series of glances; they knew what they were looking for and seemed to find it. It was a wonder there was anything left by the time they were through looking."²⁷ During this scene, both Boy's father and Charlie are unabashed in their voyeuristic gaze; they appear to own Boy's figure with their eyes. As the receiver of their unwanted attention, boy is almost frozen in her role as the art object while they consume her. Her remark that she feels there is almost nothing left calls attention to the subjugating power inherent in the male gaze. Through Boy, Oyeyemi interrogates the cultural emphasis on beauty and demonstrates how it works to objectify the female body for the benefit of male enjoyment.

Though the consequences of beauty are not always negative, Oyeyemi's narrative is invested in shedding light on the potential violence inherent in such voyeuristic attention.²⁸ For Frank Novak the voyeuristic gaze was followed by rape, which leads him to conflate beauty with the threat of physical violence. In a horrific scene in which Frank drugs Boy and holds a hungry rat to her cheek, Frank tells her: "There is no exquisite beauty without strangeness in the proportion, is that not so? Let's fix it so that Charlie is truly mesmerized by you. Let's fix it so that he stares. Seven scars should do it."²⁹ Before being raped and taking on the identity of Frank, Boy's father had been an attractive woman; though she was clearly not interested in the attentions of the opposite sex, her physical appearance invited much unwanted attention.³⁰ After the rape, she links female beauty with sexualized violence, violence that "broke her life in two."³¹ The irony of Frank's remark to Boy, however, is that Charlie has already admitted to admiring Boy's beauty. Therefore, it is not that Frank intends to make Boy more beautiful by scaring her, rather he is attempting to create a

²⁴ Throughout my analysis, I will use the corresponding pronoun and name by which this character identifies at that particular moment in the text.

²⁵ It is interesting to note that in the final pages of the novel, we learn that the rat catcher's name is really Frances Novak and her dissertation was on proving that homosexuality is not caused by mental illness. The man who rapes her tells her he is proving that lesbianism is really just a state of waiting for the right man to come along. Oyeyemi, *Boy, Snow, Bird*, 300-302.

²⁶ Oyeyemi, *Boy, Snow, Bird*, 125.

²⁷ Oyeyemi, *Boy, Snow, Bird*, 125.

²⁸ It is important to note here that while in this instance such violence is tied to an idealized aesthetic that is inherently white, sexual violence is a complicated issue that affects people of all genders, races, and ethnicities.

²⁹ Oyeyemi, *Boy, Snow, Bird*, 127.

³⁰ This is a theme that runs throughout the novel. In the first couple of chapters we learn that Boy was also subject to several unwanted advances by her fellow classmates.

³¹ Oyeyemi, *Boy, Snow, Bird*, 302.

physical barrier on her skin to ward off the evil male gaze. Like casting a spell, Frank hopes to mark Boy so that Charlie can actually see her rather than just her beauty. In the end, Frank falters and is unable to follow through with his plan to ruin Boy's face, however, his words impress upon Boy the notion that anything too perfect is worth skepticism.

Boy's initial reaction to Snow, therefore, can be tied to her complicated relationship with her own appearance and the generational trauma of her parent's sexual assault. Because Frank impressed upon Boy that she is an evil creature, Boy sees her evil nature as a fault that contradicts the aesthetic appeal of her image. Throughout the novel, Boy is invested in the tension between the surface appearance of things and what lies beneath. This is most evident through Boy's infatuation with mirrors. In fact, the novel opens with Boy musing: "Nobody ever warned me about mirrors, so for many years I was fond of them, and believed them to be trustworthy."³² Later, Boy realizes that mirrors only produce a superficial reflection; they can account for the material aspects of a person's existence but they cannot reveal the truth or the stories behind the images they reflect. Furthermore, the mirrors throughout *Boy, Snow, Bird* simultaneously call to mind the queen's magic looking glass of the Grimm's story. Here, the magic mirror acts as the patriarchal overseer, further emphasizing the story's infatuation with a feminine ideal. Repeatedly, the mirror tells the stepmother that Snow White is the fairest: "Snow White is a thousand times more fair than you... the fairest every seen... the fairest every seen... the fairest every seen..." and finally, "the young queen is a thousand times more fair."³³ Like a record set on repeat, the magic mirror is complicit in the story's incessant need to quantify feminine beauty. Furthermore, the repetition of the mirror's judgement is mimicked throughout the many adaptations of the Grimm's story. The mirror, like the Snow White protagonist, has transcended its source text, the Grimm's story, and currently operates in our own contemporary moment as a cultural artifact of patriarchal authority and aesthetics. Oyeyemi's story, therefore, borrows not only the motif of the mirror but also its "cultural validity" in a move that demonstrates remix's function as "commentary or aesthetic exploration."³⁴ In this way, the remix also exposes the mirror as a signifier of generational trauma, both in terms of the cultural values that the mirror potentially reflects and the violence that is many times linked to that reflection.

Though Boy is able to reject the cultural narrative that threatens to define her as the evil stepmother, the same does not hold true for the Whitmans. Instead, the Whitman family writes a fairy tale of their own that takes advantage of the image created by their light skin to pass as white. For them, Snow becomes an emblem of their ability to rewrite their story, to change how the cultural narrative defines them. It is clear to Boy, however, even before the Whitman's secret is revealed that Snow's beauty is abnormally significant to the family. When Boy and Arturo become engaged, she finally meets the Whitman matriarchs, Olivia and Agnes,³⁵ and observes their intense attachment to Snow: "I watched the women watching Snow. Their reverence was over the top. Sure, she was an extraordinary-looking kid. A medieval swan maiden, only with the darkest hair and the pinkest lips, every shade at its utmost. She was like a girl in Technicolor tapestry, sure, sure, but... they'd had a while to get used to her..."³⁶ Boy's observation works to reaffirm the link between Snow's appearance and the fairy tale ideal while simultaneously hinting at the constructed nature

³² Oyeyemi, *Boy, Snow, Bird*, 3.

³³ Grimm, "Snow White," 83, 85, 86, 87, 89.

³⁴ Navas, "The Framework of Culture."

³⁵ Though Agnes is Snow's maternal grandmother, she has been adopted into the Whitman family circle, most likely because she is associated with Snow's European ancestry.

³⁶ Oyeyemi, *Boy, Snow, Bird*, 80.

of that image. After Bird's arrival reveals the family's secret, Boy begins to see the destructive force within the dominant racial ideology. After Bird is rebuffed by Olivia, Snow observes: "Everybody adored Snow and her daintiness. Snow's beauty is all the more precious to [the Whitman's] because it's a trick. When whites look at her, they don't get whatever fleeting, ugly impressions so many of us get when we see a colored girl—we don't see a colored girl standing there. The joke's on us."³⁷ Like the art object that the Grimm's story turned her into, Snow is a projection of an aesthetic ideal, one that has been born out of a legacy of racism and hegemonic discourse. Snow embodies that ideal but for the Whitmans she also represents a subversion: employing the Eurocentric infatuation with physical beauty for their own advantage, the Whitman's have claimed a position at the top of the racial hierarchy.

Though Oyeyemi's novel critiques the Whitman's treatment of Snow as a tool in their deception, the remixing the traditional fairy tale works to interrogate the hegemony that drives such a desire for whiteness. With the arrival of Bird, the fairy tale that the Whitman's have constructed begins to unravel; Olivia detests Bird because her blackness is a reminder of the racism she endured before crossing the Mason Dixon line and passing for white. However, her contempt is born out of a racial legacy that precedes the existence of any of them. When confronted, Olivia responds:

What you don't understand is that we're being kept down out there. All the way down. In my town you couldn't vote unless you passed a literacy test. How does that stop colored folks from voting, you ask? You didn't see what the colored school was like, how big the classes were. The teachers did what they could, but half my male cousins could hardly read. They lost patience before the girls did. No matter how literate a colored man was, there was always an excuse to whip him.³⁸

Olivia's description sets up whiteness as a constructed space where basic civil liberties are guaranteed without threat of retribution or violence motivated by hate. Furthermore, her story demonstrates how those rights were surreptitiously degraded by segregation and the lack of protection by authorities. As Olivia goes on, she describes the dehumanizing effects of segregation. In one example, she talks about being kept out of whites only restaurants:

All the high-class places we were allowed to go, they were imitations of the places we were kept out of... sitting at the bar or at the candlelit table you'd try to imagine what dinnertime remarks the real people were making...yes, the real people at the restaurant two blocks away, the white folks we were shadows of, and you'd try to talk about whatever you imagined they were talking about, and your food turned to sawdust in your mouth.³⁹

As Olivia tells her story, the demarcation between real and make-believe begins to falter—as a black woman living in the segregated South, she was the subjugated other. Her shadow metaphor not only plays on the concept of black and white as signifiers of value, but it also helps convey her plight in terms that articulate the loss of self that results from her experience of racism. She essentially became an enigma. For Olivia, the only way to claim value for herself is to alter the way others see her, to alter the truth within her reflection. By focusing on the desires and motivations that drive Olivia, Oyeyemi remixes the fairy tale as a narrative framework to include the interiority that the novel is capable of. In other words, the aura of the traditional fairy tale is sampled within the longer and more complex plot of the novel. Therefore, Oyeyemi's book not only interrogates

³⁷ Oyeyemi, *Boy, Snow, Bird*, 145.

³⁸ Oyeyemi, *Boy, Snow, Bird*, 140-1.

³⁹ Oyeyemi, *Boy, Snow, Bird*, 141.

and deconstructs the tropes and motifs of the classic Grimm story, but it also embeds the fairy tale within the novel form in a way that expands the narrative arc to explore the complex psychological motivators that drive such stories.

As the characters of *Boy*, *Snow*, *Bird* attempt to navigate their new situations, their efforts reveal how much the American narrative of racial identity has been internalized. For Boy, the Whitman's deception reinforces the very system that threatens Bird's identity; however, in her attempts to protect Bird from racial stigmatization Boy participates in the very discourse responsible for devaluing Bird's blackness. For example, when Olivia tries to insinuate that Boy may also be of mixed race, Boy responds: "Nice try, but I'm not going to stand here while a colored woman tries to tell me that maybe I'm the one who's colored."⁴⁰ Boy's usage of the word "colored" here to distinguish herself from Olivia reinforces the racial hierarchy that subjugates her own daughter while recentring whiteness as the norm. She continues to rely on this type of discourse even when trying to sound objective: "it's not whiteness itself that sets Them against Us, but the worship of whiteness... We beat Them (and spare ourselves a lot of tedium and terror) by declining to worship."⁴¹ Of course, for Boy the decision to not worship whiteness, her own or anyone else's, appears to simply be a matter of choosing not to participate. Yet her use of "Us" and "Them" works to reinforce racial categories even though she claims to not buy into such ideology. Furthermore, her treatment of the issue as something she can just step away from negates the lived experiences of individuals affected by racism, her daughter included. Though Boy recognizes the aesthetic ideal and its destructive potential, she fails to understand that the worship of whiteness is enmeshed in the fabric of American culture. "Snow White" and its many fairy tale counterparts are products of the Grimm's nation-constructing narrative that depended upon racial stratification. Whereas contemporary retellings of such fairy tales threaten to reinforce such political ideologies, Oyeyemi's remix instead calls attention to the way in which these narratives pervade the public's psyche.

Conclusion

In its efforts to unsettle the power of this white Eurocentric ideal, *Boy*, *Snow*, *Bird* creates a new narrative by remixing elements borrowed from the Grimm's tale with a story that speaks to the nuances of race and gender in contemporary America. In this way, the novel participates in a form of appropriation that depends upon our prior knowledge of the fairy tale narrative and our own participation in reifying its status in twenty-first-century American culture. Navas explains, "Remix in music, art, and literature are meta. The creative act of appropriation in these media relies on recombining or recontextualizing material that already has cultural value to emphasize such value in the form of commentary, or aesthetic exploration. Both, even when they are aligned with different strategies of referencing, are dependent on elements that are well understood, or have some cultural validity."⁴² While Oyeyemi's novel is clearly invested in borrowing from the Grimm's story, it is the remixing of these elements that demonstrates the importance of recontextualizing that material to deconstruct the hegemonic discourses inherent in such stories. Particularly, Oyeyemi's novel maintains the aesthetics of the Grimm's Snow White protagonist to interrogate the racial ideology inherent in such versions of femininity. The result is a fairy tale remix

⁴⁰ Oyeyemi, *Boy, Snow, Bird*, 139.

⁴¹ Oyeyemi, *Boy, Snow, Bird*, 283.

⁴² Navas, "The Framework of Culture."

that confronts the ideological forces that have continued to shape American culture well into our contemporary moment.