ABSTRACT

Daring to tilt worlds: the fiction of Irenosen Okojie.

In much recent criticism and commentary, black British literature and culture has either been used to reflect or interrogate the state of the nation, or as an educational tool, to shine a light on hidden histories and the shadowy margins of the present. As a result, the work’s formal structures and particularly writers’ experiments with linguistic forms and textual or performative structures is often bypassed in favour of a realist or literalist approach to content. Focusing on Okojie’s novel, *Butterfly Fish* (2015) and her collection of short stories *Speak Gigantular* (2016), I argue that this work creates what Marie-Laure Ryan has defined as ‘impossible worlds’ that is, fiction that demands ‘new strategies for making sense of the text’ (p. 369) and that tests habitual assumptions about black women’s fiction and the worlds their texts create. Her work produces instabilities; it settles on strangeness, reflecting what Tobias During (2017) describes as a startling ingenuity that presents the possibilities of different worlds and different geographies. Okojie’s work experiments with new forms of contemporary prose and challenges readers to see worlds and words differently.

Suzanne Scafe

London South Bank University.

[scafes@lsbu.ac.uk](mailto:scafes@lsbu.ac.uk)

BIOGRAPHY

Suzanne Scafe is a Visiting Professor of Caribbean and Postcolonial Literatures at London South Bank University. Her recent work includes essays on violence in the spatial imaginary of Kingston fictions (*ZAA*, 2016, and forthcoming, 2020), and several essays and book chapters on black British women’s autobiographical writing, black British fiction and drama, and Caribbean women’s writing. Her most recent publications include “ Gendered, post-diasporic mobilities and the politics of blackness in Zadie Smith’s *Swing Time”* (2019) <https://sta.uwi.edu/crgs/june2019/documents/CRGS_13_Pgs93-120_SScafe_GenderedPost-diasporic.pdf> and “Performing Ellen: Mojisola Adebayo’s *Moj of the Antarctic: An African Odyssey*, 2008 and *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom; or, the Escape of William and Ellen Craft from Slavery*, 1860” (*Journal of Commonwealth Literature:* online first Sept 2019).

She is the co-editor with Leith Dunn of a Special Issue for the journals *African and Black Diaspora* (forthcoming 2020) and the *Caribbean Review of Gender Studies* (2019); co-editor of a collection of essays, *I Am Black/White/Yellow*: *The Black Body in Europe* (2007), and of two Special issues of *Feminist Review*, Creolization and Affect (2013) and Black British Feminisms (2014). Suzanne Scafe was the Principal Investigator (2016-2018) of the Arts and Humanities Research Council (UK) Network grant *entitled African-Caribbean Women’s Mobility and Self-Fashioning in Post-Diaspora Contexts*.

**Daring to tilt worlds: the fiction of Irenosen Okojie**.

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The title of this chapter is taken from the epigraph of the short story collection *Speak Gigantular* (2016) which reads: ‘To all the misfits who dare to tilt worlds’, and in an interview for the BritLitBerlin, Okojie speaks frequently about her interest in those who are ‘on the fringes’, whose voices ‘you never get to hear’ (2017). These are people, she explains, who are ‘coming undone’, and ‘trying to realign themselves’. Her work focuses on their worlds, worlds that are structured by their own startling logic and, through its stylistic inventiveness and intricate patterning, her fiction participates in processes of realignment. As Mrs. Harris, a character in *Butterfly Fish* says to Joy, the novel’s protagonist, ‘People like you and I sometimes find ourselves embracing different realities. There’s a beauty in it. It’s like having a key’ (p. 183). The ‘beauty’ of the other worlds is evident in the novel’s lyrical descriptions of nineteenth-century Benin or the more surreal, fantastic scenes in twentieth-century London, but it is also obscured or made difficult to access through Okojie’s complex, challenging language, the unconventional material and its non-linear structures. The character’s reference to ‘having a key’ is ambiguous, raising issues of interpretation. How do we read these other realities, or ‘experimental’ fiction more generally, in ways that do not simply decode the texts otherworldliness? In this chapter, I argue that part of the meaning of Okojie’s fiction lies in its wide spaces of open-endedness, where her prose resists an easy route to meaning. Her work challenges readers and critics to refuse allegorical readings that normalise the strangeness of these ‘different realities’ and their tilted characters. As Kaye Mitchell notes, citing Christine Brooke-Rose: ‘More than just tinkering with the signifier, an experiment with new forms produces “new ways of looking”’ (5). A new way of seeing black women’s experimental fiction is one that resists both exoticizing the text by locating its difference in non-European, supposedly non-rational and otherworldly cultures, and allegorising the work to find its socio-cultural truths.

There is, as Kaye Mitchell points out, a notable absence of discrete studies of women writers in the recent, magisterial collection of essays on experimental literature edited by Joy Bray, Alison Gibbon and Brian McHale. There is just one chapter on African-American experimental poetry, Aldon Lynn Nielson’s ‘African-American Avant-garde poetics’, and in the corrective collections, *Breaking the Sequence: Women’s Experimental Fiction* (1989) and *The Gender Politics of Experiment* (…), there is no sustained discussion of black women writers, despite a rich seam of experimental writing by twentieth-century African American women such as Toni Cade Bambara, Toni Morrison, Gayle Jones, Ntosake Shange to name just a few, and by African and Caribbean writers such as Bessie Head, Michelle Cliff or Elizabeth Nunez. Black British women’s writing continues to be subject to sociological readings that side-step linguistic or stylistic aspects of the work. Bernardine Evaristo’s fiction and prose-poems, for example, are often anlaysed in critical contexts that privilege concerns with black British experiences of identity and the search for belonging, despite her experiments with form, with genre, language and content. Other writers, such as Zadie Smith,[[1]](#endnote-1) Helen Oyeyemi, Diana Evans, or less well-known writers such as Leone Ross, however, have highlighted the experimental aspects of their work and there is a sense that critical attention is beginning to focus less on its ‘black British content’, as evidenced in recent essays on Zadie Smith’s *NW* (2012)[[2]](#endnote-2) and the edited collection, *Telling It Slant: Critical Approaches to Helen Oyeyemi* (2017). It is important cite these critical and textual absences not simply as an account-taking exercise but to suggest, as I demonstrate below, that Okojie’s work emerges in a context of black British women’s writing that is already, in various ways, innovative, speculative or experimental.

WAYS OF LOOKING

It is of course, difficult to define comprehensively what is meant by experimental literature. In their introduction to *The Routledge Companion to Experimental Literature*, Hayes et al advance a basic definition of experimental literature noting that ‘[T]he one feature that all literary experiments share is their commitment to raising fundamental questions about the very nature and being of verbal art itself. What is literature and what could it be’ (2014, p. 1). These questions, the editors argue are ‘repressed’ in ‘mainstream’ literature even though, as with the writing of the modernist period, much of the work that is defined by its contemporaries as experiments often transfers into the mainstream (p. 1). If, in addition to its self-reflexive quality, experimental literature presents experiments that are either linguistic, structural, generic and material (Mitchell 2015), then much contemporary fiction can be classed as experimental. And, as Kenneth Warren (cited in Lynn Nielson, 2014, p. 168) seems to imply, with his inclusion of the poetry of Phillis Wheatley, a seventeenth-century African slave, in this category, the term experimental would then include much black and postcolonial literature of the nineteenth and twentieth-centuries that brings to visibility otherwise invisible subjects. While it might have been the case that the newness of the African subject on the page constituted an experiment in the seventeenth-century US, it is important in the context of the contemporary period *not* to consider the representation of black worlds as experimental but, as in the approach taken to the fiction discussed in this chapter, to focus on the otherworldly worlds the texts construct, worlds that are almost beyond words and beyond ‘fully imaginable situations’ (Ryan, 2014, p. 369). Reading worlds that are unimaginable is by definition difficult, and surmounting this difficulty involves some deconstruction, a process by which the difficulty is diminished, and the text is made accessible. The process of analysing work defined as experimental, therefore, where the term itself includes literature that is ‘unconventional’ and associated with ‘qualities of shock and affront, iconoclasm and difficulty’ is a contradictory one (Hayes et al . p. 2).

While not denying the contradictory nature of this critical process, Marie-Laure Ryan’s essay ‘Impossible Worlds’ offers a useful framework for reading Okojie’s work in part because Okojie’s fiction does construct worlds and realities that are sometimes impossible to imagine and frequently in conflict with each other, and also because the concept of an ‘impossible world’ offers an approach to reading that retains some of the work’s incommensurability. Ryan argues that, since fictional worlds are necessarily products of the imagination, concepts of ‘possibility’ and ‘impossibility’ are both relative and specific to literary texts. As she notes, a literally ‘impossible’ textual world is one that cannot be deciphered, where the words on the page have no external referent, whereas the kind of impossibility focused on in Ryan’s work is more narrowly defined as a range of textual effects. She cites three textual forms of impossibility: semantic contradictions, where the words or sentences contradict each other, confounding the achievement of coherence, of a logical sequence of events or of a plausible understanding of character; ontological impossibility often referred to as metalepsis, where characters from the ‘real’ world enter the text, or where boundaries between the ‘real’ and the fictional are self-consciously used to highlight the work’s fictionality. As Ryan notes, ‘This self-referential, illusion-destroying effect explains why the device has become a dominant feature, some would say a trick of the trade of postmodern fiction’ (372). The third impossibility is temporal, where time moves backward, chronology is disrupted, or characters and events are out of time. Ryan posits the question: ‘How then do we make sense of these worlds?’ (376). Rather than advocate a paradigmatic reading of texts according to the schema cited above that lists categories of impossibility, Ryan acknowledges the difficulties and dangers of making sense of these impossible worlds and the need for diverse interpretative strategies. he analysis that follows defines possibility and impossibility from within the specific contexts of the texts themselves. In some instances I use an approach to meaning that is naturalizing, that preserves ‘the logical integrity of the fictional world’ (377): in others, I signal the texts’ unreliable narrator and argue that the worlds s/he constructs contrast with reality as constructed within the diegetic frame. In the discussion of Okojie’s short fiction, I offer a reading that aims to preserve the dream-like world of the texts, an interpretation that ‘endows the actual world of the textual universe with the characteristics of dreams: fluid images, objects undergoing incessant metamorphoses, and a general lack of ontological stability’ (Ryan, 2014, p. 377).

*Butterfly Fish*

Irenosen’s debut novel, *Butterfly Fish* is set in nineteenth-century Benin, mid-twentieth-century Nigeria and London, and contemporary London. It is about the hauntings of history and its active presence in the present. Its protagonist and first-person narrator, ironically named Joy, is for the most part of the novel, unaware of the precise character of these hauntings but is nevertheless subject to their effects, including experiences of violence that threaten her life. The narrative is therefore framed by the past of nineteenth-century Benin, and the connection between past and present is expressed in the poetic language of Okojie’s narrative; its use of frequent repetition, its intricate, interwoven threads of language and imagery, its use of symbolism to structure the plot, and the patterned, mosaic structure of disparate events. Within the novel’s present, however, there are characters who are ‘coming undone’ and whose worlds are beyond logic and explanation. These worlds and times, the orderly and the rationally depicted past and the chaotic, unreadable present are in conflict and tension throughout.

The novel’s opening chapter, set in ‘Modern London’, presents a concatenation of surprising and seemingly out of place objects and images that set out the novel’s main preoccupations and introduce the figures around which meaning is made:

A green palm wine bottle rolled on the wet London Street. Its movements were audible gasps made of glass. It didn’t matter how the bottle had arrived at its location under the curious yellow gaze of the lamppost or whether the messenger had been a postman delivering for both God and the dancing devil. The image unfurling inside the bottle shimmering like moonlight trapped in glass mattered. Lick the edges of the picture presented and you could taste the sour, sweet traces of palm wine and trap your tongue in a different time: 19th century Benin, Nigeria (p. 3).

The image of the bottle in the novel’s first paragraph brings the past and a geographical and cultural distance into the novel’s present in contemporary London. The as yet undecipherable contents of the bottle seep into the dreams of the protagonist, asleep in a ‘quietly dark flat’, whose head tosses ‘towards two paths lined with coloured, broken glass … the tiny people from the palm wine bottle pleading against her broken heart’ (p.4). By depicting in ‘real’ time, the arrival of the bottle on the ‘wet London Street’, Okojie preserves the ambiguity of this event: ‘Out of the dark London night a teenager being chased by two raucous friends ... swiped the bottle up and threw it against the wall, watching it smash’ (p. 4). This event is given a material identity by the actions of the boy who also sees the contents of the bottle spill out. The materiality of the spillage, however, is immediately placed in doubt: ‘The boy’s pupils were swimming in beer and he was uncertain of the picture before him as the scene dragged itself up from the pavement’ (p. 4). The figures in the bottle walk into the dreams of the protagonist, and in this way a fluid, incoherent world of dreams blends seamlessly into the material world, thus blurring the boundary between the real and the surreal. The characters in the bottle emerge from a different reality but a reality nevertheless, as the figure of the boy suggests.

The green bottle, sometimes appearing later in the narrative as a green bottle of ginger wine, images of broken glass, and the colour ‘green’, reappear throughout the novel, linking all the characters to each other either literally, in terms of their genealogical connection or figuratively. Like the glass, all the main characters are broken and either dangerous or in danger. The sharp edges of the broken glass are echoed in a juxtaposing scene which describes a razor ‘that had called me by my name’ and led the protagonist to a suicide attempt. Broken glass is thus used to express their disintegration: ‘My glass feet broke repeatedly on the pavement. Heartbeats were gunshots fired in my chest’ (p. 229). At this point in the narrative, Joy discovers that the lawyer Mervyn and her mother were having an affair. This discovery seems to bring her mother back to life, make her ‘real again’ but at the same time present her as a ‘fevered angel sleepwalking on the wings of planes’ (p. 229). The glass connects her experiences of trauma back to the story of the figures in the bottle and the curse within which all their lives become enmeshed; the plane reflects the mother’s journey and her daughter’s, both in opposite directions.

Despite its hauntings and despite its realistic representation in the narrative, the past of nineteenth-century Benin is, as I argue below, presented in the novel as unavailable in the present and this is suggested by references throughout this opening scene to the past as an artefact, a ‘picture’, or as ‘images flickering like an ancient film reel’ (p.4). The bottle contains an ‘emerald-eyed man and a young woman attired in Nigerian cloth’: they are, as is later revealed, Adesua and Sully, who were buried alive as punishment for their affair by ‘soldiers who could perform the nifty trick of building distances between bodies in close proximity’ (4). There are no testaments to this history. This is an imagined past, and although the characters in the present are somehow affiliated to this past, evident in Mrs. Harris’s green eyes, for example, they are not represented as being directly connected by ‘blood’ to use an image often repeated in the narrative. In the novel, ‘History’, the history of nineteenth-century Benin, stops with the two lovers’ deaths but its repercussions continue with the reappearance of the brass head in 1950’s Lagos and London, with the fumes of the palm wine, with the ‘pink beaded bracelet’ (p.3) of the woman in this opening scene, the ‘red dust’ (p.3), and with Anon/Adesua, a figure from the bottle who reappears in Joy’s other reality.

The author has said that her choice of nineteenth-century Benin as a setting for the novel was motivated her frustration that black history was always seen through the lens of slavery and colonialism. There is so much more, she explains in her interview with Tobias During (2017), that remains hidden. The invisibility of black African cultures and societies and the absence of black voices in the representations of the African and European past is something that continues to preoccupy black British writers such as Caryl Phillips, whose use of ‘borrowed’ texts of eighteenth and nineteenth-century colonialists and nineteenth-century slave narratives and black missionaries’ diaries in his novels *Cambridge* and *Crossing the River*, speaks to the absence of an authoritative account of African culture not circumscribed by the language of the coloniser. While using her experimental novel-in-verse, *The Emperor’s Babe* (2002) to point to the presence of Africans in Roman Britain, Bernardine Evaristo’s narrative also reveals the past’s inaccessibility, and the impossibility of recovering history by simply inserting black characters or reversing history’s privileging of whiteness. This text is characterised by her repeated use of anachronisms. In one of many such instances Alba, a friend of the young protagonist Zuleika reprimands her: ‘No Zee, get a personal trainer,/lift some dumb-bells like everyone else, or go to the gym. Your value’s up/but you’ve got to maintain it’ (101). By situating Zuleika’s role as wife to the Emperor within contemporary discourses of fame, the pervasive reach of social media and the gendered politics of the body, Evaristo suggests that any project of uncovering the past is inevitably shaped and perhaps distorted by preoccupations in the present. In attempting to recover the past, we hold a mirror up to ourselves.

The Kingdom of Benin has always proved fascinating for European travellers and this fascination has continued to the present day. Much of the evidence of the pre-colonial past exists in written accounts by sixteenth and seventeenth-century European traders and missionaries. As Paula Ben-Amos Girshick and John Thornton argue, Benin as it appears in those documents was a ‘wealthy and centralized kingdom [with a] magnificent capital city, one whose archaeology has only begun to be explored’ (359). To these Europeans, Benin city was reminiscent of their capital cities: Lisbon, Madrid, Antwerp, Florence and Amsterdam and their writing describes in some detail the ‘impressive’ orderly layout of the capital and its prosperity (359). The Irishman James Field Ughoton, writing in the 1780s describes a stable, wealthy community, whose markets ‘teemed with luxuries unknown to Europeans’ (Ughoton in Girshick and Thornton, 2001, p. 376). After the invasion of the British in 1897, however, and the subsequent razing to the ground of Benin City, imperial historiography recast Benin’s past as barbaric, despite the high aesthetic and monetary value they assigned to the bronze, brass and ivory artefacts plundered by the British during that conquest (Osadolar and Otide, 2008; Bondarenko and Roese, 2004). In the 1930s, however, Edo historian Jacob U. Egharevba began to recover a detailed history of the past, drawing on a ‘vast collection of disparate oral traditions from titleholders, priests, and elders in Benin who had been alive prior to the colonial takeover in 1897’ (Girshick and Thornton, 2001, p. 356), and from the 1950s, Benin historiography has been rearticulated by Nigerian, American and European scholars whose work has used extended the research of oral historians and continues to use the accounts of first-hand witnesses to try to capture the details of the Kingdom’s rich, centuries-old past.

Okojie confronts the challenges posed by history’s silences and misrepresentations both by drawing on and representing eyewitness accounts and her own experiences of the Kingdom, and by scrambling existing chronologies in order to suggest the incompleteness of the project of historical recovery. The narrative focuses, not on the formal relations of the court or royal history, but on the gendered, domestic aspects of the palace, and in particular the interiorities of the women of Oba’s household, their desires, acts of resistance and and betrayals. This emphasis points to women’s absence in historical accounts, and underscores the impossibility of understanding life as it was lived in the Benin past, particularly as much recent history has tended to focus on describing elite structures of governance and reconstructing an orderly account of the transfers of power within the Kingdom (Bondarenko and Roese, 2004). The novel’s depiction of the city’s geography repeats oral and colonial accounts that emphasise its sophisticated structures of governance and economic prosperity but in Okojie’s narrative this orderliness is juxtaposed with descriptions of turmoil and the transgressive events which lead to the downfall of the Kingdom:

Benin was a city that had flourished over time under the rule of the different obas, and for the most part sat in quiet satisfied contentment. You could see it in the number of undamaged gates there were throughout, many of them reaching eight or nine feet in height, with doors made from single pieces of ancient wood hinged on pegs, behind which smart and sometimes opulent homes had been built … Even along the streets the houses sat in neat rows.

The palace of Benin was divided into several quarters, apartments for courtiers and houses in sprawling, endless dust-shrouded grounds … the sun shone on the ornate copper engravings depicting war exploits … Each roof had a small turret with copper casted birds harbouring the sounds of battle, waiting to carry them into angles of light swirling in the blue sky’ (p. 42-43).

Benin city and its palace is a closed environment, surrounded by impenetrable walls, divided by closed doors that entrap the Oba’s wives and conceal his own deterioration, his fragile grip on reality. In contrast to the seeming orderliness of the city and palace the engraved plaques and copper casts depict battles past and predict future conflict; the ‘dust-shrouded grounds’ foreshadow death and the city’s destruction. The closed character of the city and its palace signifies what, in historical accounts, has been described as the late nineteenth-century Oba Ovonramwen’s protectionist policies, which the British, for some years, had been trying to overcome in order to penetrate Benin and the surrounding forest region. Despite the Oba’s clear refusal to allow the British entry to the city, the Acting Consul-General Phillips decided to ‘force and audience’ with the Oba in order to open the route to British trade. The murder of Phillips en route to the palace led to a ‘full-scale war effort’ on Benin, other wise known as Punitive Expedition, on February 18, 1897 (Obinyan, 1988, p. 38). Okojie side-steps this version of history, however, focusing instead on the ways in which murderous or transgressive acts haunt lives in the present and future, and create cracks in the fabric of a society and culture that invite retribution. The chapter describing Oba Odion’s assassination of his childhood friend Ogisa, his father’s favourite son and whom he learns is his half-brother, begins: ‘The fall of a kingdom did not always start with war. Sometimes it took a vicious wish shrouded by the hot breath of a bitter woman … perhaps even the good intentions of a craftsman’ (p.53). The second event to precipitate the fall is the casting in brass of the head of the slain Ogisa by the royal craftsman Ere. The first is the arranged poisoning of Obion’s father Oba Anuje, who watches him die.. Following these events Oba Obion unravels and loses himself in drink and the order of the palace collapses. Obion’s youngest wife Adesua and her white lover Sully are murdered on the orders of the courtiers; the Oba’s first son by his favourite wife Omotole is born without a face, and the Kingdom falls. The narrative repositions the arrival of the first Portuguese traders in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries to the nineteenth-century context of the novel, suggesting that in addition to the disintegration that resulted from curses on the Kingdom following personal acts of violence and betrayal, during this period the Kingdom had ‘unlocked the stranger’s gate and in doing so, extended a hand to unforeseen dangers. Because more European men would come, setting in motion an unstoppable, tragically disastrous, chain of events’ (218).

The ‘tilts’ in the narrative’s representations of Benin are consistent with its depictions of a distant and unavailable time and place. In contrast, although many scenes in the novel’s present seem to lack coherence, they express a poetic logic. The sudden disappearance from the narrative of Mrs. Harris, the shape-shifting, self-proclaimed Houdini, is explained by the arrival of police, who claim she is wanted for benefit fraud. In the context of her strange otherworldly presence and her suggested connection to Sully and the events that spill from the green bottle, this naturalization of her character is provocatively inadequate. Joy is, throughout, losing her grip on reality and dangerously so. The first person narrative brings the reader into the mind of the protagonist, thus heightening the blurred distinctions between the real and the surreal. Readers, like the narrator, are unable to distinguish between the material and the imagined. Towards the end of novel, Joy becomes involved in a dangerous love affair, signalled in the sentences that introduce the relationship: ‘A mouse’s red head spun the day I met Rangi. Coincidentally, on my way out, the dead mouse lay just beyond my thick, brown welcome mat’ (267). The dismembered head projects the future dismembering of Joy’s right arm as she is led to jump on to a rail track by the imaginary Anon and also possibly by Rangi himself. The figure of the mouse on the carpet brings the dream and the material worlds, and the worlds of humans and animals on to the same level of consciousness. At another moment in their relationship there is another one of many descriptions of a similar collision of worlds and realities:

On the drive back home, I swallowed the stone floating in my minds eye. It sank to the bottom of my stomach …The purple collar of my dress was stiff, ready to corner stray creatures of night. We stopped on a bridge by the river for air. A fox was taking orders from something unseen. Rangi lit a cigarette… An empty bottle of Australian Pinot Grigio rolled nearby (293).

There are frequent references to the protagonist swallowing stones, perhaps as a way of bringing herself back to earth. It is a habit her doctor asks her about, though again, it is not clear whether, as in the example above, this is not something she repeatedly imagines herself doing. In this example too, worlds collide and the material world, evidenced in specific named objects and actions, lends a kind of reality to the imagined. Okojie describes her prose as a ‘robust, charged language’ where the everyday is mixed with the surreal and the magical (Berlin 55.04) and in this text, the charge of the magical comes in part from Joy’s unravelling but also from the force of the past that interrupts but also lends coherence to the present. These interruptions are represented by the imagery which patterns the novel and which becomes the means by which worlds and times are seen to infiltrate each other.

Insects are one of the primary means used to create the effect of temporal and spatial borderlessness: flies, caterpillars, grasshoppers, butterflies and spiders repeatedly appear as agents. They belong to the material, everyday world that incorporates all life forms as well as a world of spirits. The web of relations between the characters, for example, is presented through the repeated use of spiders and cobwebs attached to Adesua and Joy. After the Oba first has sex with her, Adesua feels ‘a tiny spider’ crawl into her heart: ‘It sat comfortably and arranged its slightly crooked legs. It sipped a little blood’ (p. 50), and after her mother’s death and when fear and despair begin to take hold, Joy experiences the rain outside transformed into ‘Spiders made of water’ crawling on her skin (73). Waiting in the hospital she saw herself ‘sitting on a crumbling rock, swatting cobwebs away from my privates frantically’ (20). In addition, the narrative exploits and expands the colloquial use of animal or more frequently insect imagery and activity. Figurative expressions such as ‘I fished the leather bound journal from my handbag’ (p. 121), ‘Fish out of Water’ (12), ‘A concrete path snaked its way’ (141), are literalised and made strange through the appearance, for example, of fish that are literally out of water, or ‘plastic fish made of photo IDs’ that enter a, always changing painting and swim towards the figure of a woman (210).

In her essay for the collection that accompanied the exhibition of Benin art in New York, 1981, Flora Kaplan notes that the ‘Bini envision existence on two planes: the visible world known as Agbon and the invisible world known as Erinmwi’ (78). In this culture, the invisible world is made visible through symbols in the material world that are freighted with meaning and express their connection to another life. The most significant of such symbols used in *Butterfly Fish* and that originate in Bini culture include the pink/red beaded necklaces and bracelets or simply the colour pink that, in the London of the narrative’s present evoke the importance of coral in Benin royal culture, valued because of its connection with Olokun, god of the waters and prosperity (Bickford Berzok, 2008). The Benin brass head is a unifying symbol, connecting the Oba’s murder of his close friend and brother to the murder committed by Joy’s grandfather, Peter Lowon, in 1950’s Nigeria, and to Lowon’s incestuous act with his daughter, Joy’s mother Queenie. The power of the head signifies the deep meanings and secrets, many still undecipherable, that reside in the looted artefacts that were integral to the preservation and daily governance of Benin and that are now detached from their contexts, and held in museums and galleries in British, European and American cities.

Although the title suggests that the novel’s central symbol is the butterfly fish, of significance to the narrative because it feeds on coral, in fact for the most part the butterfly and the fish are represented separately. There are frequent references to ‘mad butterflies’, ‘the rare butterfly’ (p.67) or the ‘broken wing’ of the butterfly, all of which are attached to the broken and ‘out of place’ (67-68) women characters in both Benin and London. Fish, on the other hand, as they first appear and throughout, are not the small yellow and blue butterfly fish. Electric mudfish, in Benin mythology, are important because if touched, they deliver a shock. They can also exist out of water for extended periods of time, thus making them fitting symbols of ‘the oba’s otherworldly, terrifying powers’ (Bickford Berzock, 2008, p. 8). Fish, therefore, as the following example illustrates, are both ‘otherwordly’ and signs of another historically material world:

We were at the bottom of the sea, not the crammed leisure centre pool in east London … The bed of forks trembled; one came unstuck rising towards me … the remnants of our conversation sunk to the bottom to become tadpoles.

“Shit! There’s a fish in the water.” A kid squealed.

… The fish stared at me … It trembled, then heaved and a worn, brass key slick with gut slime fell out of its mouth into my hand.’ (Okojie, 2015, p. 23-4)

Once she has the key, Joy tries to revive the fish with mouth to mouth resuscitation, to which the kids respond: ‘This woman’s weird’ (p. 24) and again, the narrative plays with the diegetic levels of its own fictional worlds. The dimensions of this two feet long, shiny fish are closer to those of the mudfish than the butterfly fish, and images of fish or parts of a fish reappear in the narrative in several scenes that are both realistic, such as the scene of Sully and Adesua fishing, magical, or on the border between the real and the fantastic, such as the scene cited above. It is not until the end of the novel, when Joy returns to Benin city following her discovery of the identity of her grand/father, that the butterfly fish makes an appearance: ‘On the plot of land tucked behind the boarding house, right arms grew in soft soil, rising amidst yams, cassava, bitter leaf … I listened for the ripple a butterfly fish made in glass … I opened the pages, sat under water, waiting to begin again’ (344). On first reading, this ending seems to offer a neat plot resolution: the ‘mad butterfly’ image used to describe Joy throughout the narrative is integrated into the fish that signifies Benin’s past and her crouching position, rocking back on her heels ‘under water’, suggests a rebirth. The glass, strangely connected to the fish, is not, as it is throughout the novel, broken, though when the butterfly fish first appears, it swims ‘in the window as though it would survive in any surface’ (343). ‘Under water’, however is an image that recalls Joy’s attempted suicide and her mother’s attempt, when Joy was a small girl, to drown her in the bath. There are, in addition, strange interruptions throughout the descriptions of her arrival in Benin and the surreal that, combined with the tilted language of this final scene, its semantic contradictions and inconsistencies, the gaps, silences and, paradoxically, persistent irresolutions in the series of events that conclude and seem to resolve the novel’s fractures, reflect the tension between the desire for meaning and a continued disruption of meaning that experimental novels seek to exploit.

*Speak Gigantular* (2016)

Despite its experimental form, the novel’s experimental language and its use of fluid, dream-like sequences to structure events, it is possible to make meaning from the narrative using conventional strategies of interpretation. The confrontational style of the short stories, however, resists such attempts at meaning-making. The short story form itself, as Okojie (2017) has said, lends itself to experimentation; its compact form offers writers and readers a ‘space to play’ with new languages and with unusual material. The spaces of a short story collection provide an opportunity to experiment with other impossible, tilted worlds and words. Although both works reflect similar preoccupations, including a preoccupation with dysfunction, an interest in the relationship between different life forms and a concern with the alienating character of the city, the short fiction more consistently shocks the reader with its unexpected reversals where, for example, relationships that are expected to be nurturing, those between mothers and children or lovers are fractured alienating and destructive.

‘Gunk’, the story that opens the collection and ‘Animal Parts’ take a crooked look at the relationship between a mother and her child. The first short story has no narrative arc: it is a series of cruel injunctions and accusations directed from a mother to her son. Although the son has no voice and is seemingly crushed and annihilated by the force of her words, the mother’s words give him life and substance; they bring him into existence whereas the mother-figure remains disembodied. She repeats: ‘You just want to prove what a waste of space you are’ (p.1) as if, while seeming to encourage him to resist self-pity and to make something of his life, she is also goading him to self-destruct. She claims a biological and emotional connection to him with the words, ‘It’s just you and me’, ‘I gave you DNA’; and ‘I carried you/ I bled for you/ I suffered for you’ (p. 4), yet says, ‘The extras we programme ourselves to think are necessary, family, friends, jobs, love companionship – these sentiments weaken us … You’ll die one day. Look around you, this is really it’ (p. 4). In this context, the words, ‘what a waste of space you are’ take on a more ominous significance, luring him to his death. Her voice emerges from his memory like a haunting and is overlaid by his own experience of a deteriorating, chaotic world: ‘Cracks in the ceiling, the floor that’s turned to quicksand’ (3). These are her words but voiced from within his world. He is ventriloquizing the mother. The story’s title, ‘Gunk’, is a term used in Okojie’s novel to describe the vernix caseosa, or the protective substance that protects both the foetus while still in the womb and the delicate skin of the new born. When his mother sees Henri, the protagonist of the short story ‘Animal Parts’, whose tail grows as he does, she sees something otherworldly, signalled in this description by an image of ‘gunk’: ‘… when she held Henri for the first time and he looked her in the eye blinking gunk away, she knew … that he had entered her wombe before’ (24). In *Butterfly Fish* Omotole’s faceless, unloveable baby is born ‘covered in an unusual blue gunk’ (p. 205), and ‘gunk’ is used to evoke the horror of the birth of each of Filo’s stillborn babies: ‘all she saw was her gunk-filled hand, drenched in slime clutching the remains of her battered womb’ (p. 153). The short story’s epigraph locates the term in mereology, a philosophical system, that theorises parthood relations, or the relations between parts and wholes and ‘gunk’ in mereology, describes ‘any whole whose parts have further proper parts’ (Okojie, 2016, p. 1), thus its significance as an image for maternal relations. Okojie’s fiction, however, combines the more colloquial use of the term to mean unpleasant, dirty or sticky, with its origins in philosophy, and whereas ‘gunk’ might in its conventional form be used to symbolise the protective role that the mother’s body and then the mother herself performs before and after the birth of her child, in all of Okojie’s work, ‘gunk’ signals an abnormal, destructive or problematic mother-child relations.

‘Animal Parts’ is a self-reflexive narrative that uses, revises and extends fairy tale structures and conventions. Hans Christian Andersen’s *Fairy Tales* is described as a book that Henri loves and the structure of the story with its strong narrative arc, its elements of the surreal such as the blue light moving under the skin of one of the characters, the blue lotus-flower shaped scar of the strange visitor, and the scenes of gruesome violence, is evidence of a narrative in dialogue with this psychologically complex nineteenth-century genre. The characters owe their identities to other texts, illustrated in the the ‘pixie-like’ (p. 21) or ‘blonde, cherubic’ faces of the children and the rugged faces of the adults such as Hans the mill operator whose ‘face [is] ruddy, full red beard unkempt’ (p. 8). Henri also emerges as a character in a fairy tale setting and the story begins:

Henri Thomsen lived in the Danish town of Frederiksberg near Copenhagen. At ten-years-old he possessed one distinguishing feature; a long furry grey tail … Otherwise he looked like an average boy, with a shaggy mop of light brown hair that hung down over his forehead, inquisitive blue eyes and dimples in his cheeks into which his mother Ann sank adoring kisses (p. 5).

The directness of the prose makes the depiction of the tail more shocking, reflecting the overlapping worlds of the ordinary, everyday and the extraordinary. As the unnamed stranger says to the mother, Ann: ‘Impossible things happen all the time’ (p. 5). Threaded through the story is Ann’s unravelling and a dystopic element that further unsettles the narrative. Ann had used the services of a sperm donor bank, Love Larry Inc., in order to conceive Henri and Henri’s mysterious paternity is hinted at throughout the story through the colour blue that connects Henri’s drawing of ‘a father figure with a tail and an injured blue deer’ above which is the word ‘Speak’ (p. 15), to the stranger who leaves the business card of the sperm donor bank, to the blue ball of light darting under Jorgen’s skin. In an attempt to stop this blue light travelling around his body, Jorgen attacks himself with a hammer, an act of violence that foreshadows the novel’s ending. These strange connections reflect a contemporary distrust, despite their contemporary normalisation, in scientific advances that have the potential to alter human reproduction. Although the characters are fantastic, their feelings and the relationships in the story are presented realistically: feelings of loneliness and isolation, the fear and inability of Ann, the mother, to manage the challenge of her son’s difference, her own unravelling, and the cruelty of the school-children and the community itself.

In ‘Gunk’ the mother refers to a relationship her son had had in the past and her description prefigures the return, in this collection, to a concern with the ways in which familial or sexual intimacy creates a space for destruction and abuse. She says: ‘You destroyed each other then came up for air. You watched her fly down the street engulfed in blue flames’ (p. 2). Like ‘Gunk’, many of the stories such as ‘Footer’ and ‘Fractions’ connect a traumatic experience in childhood or a problematic parental relationship with aggressive or dangerous intimacies and sexual acts. The nature of the dysfunctional mother-daughter relationship in ‘Footer’ is not made explicit but the daughter’s foot fetish is implicated in that relationship, and results in the murder of several of the lovers she meets to ‘gather’, as the first-person narrator describes her activities. These activities take place in an underworld space of online dating and dangerous sex, a world that is ‘dark’ to use Okojie’s term (2017) and echoes a concern with technology that haunts the edges of ‘Animal Parts’. Other stories construct impossible worlds in dialogue with other representations of impossibility. ‘Walk with Sleep’, for example, narrates the lives of two characters who jumped on to the underground train track, exchanging one life for another but continuing in dialogue with that other world. Their underground world, literally the runnels of London’s underground system, retains the imprints from the world ‘Before’ (p. 62) but it is silent world, without the noise of the city or the insistent destructive voices in the characters’ heads. This world is bare and ironically, in the context of the narrative’s own formal innovations, without ‘artifice’ (p. 61).

Writing in 1973 B.S. Johnson writes: ‘ “Experimental” to most reviewers is almost always a synonym for “unsuccessful.” I object to the word experimental being applied to my own work. Certainly I make experiments, but the unsuccessful ones are quietly hidden away’ (in Hayes et al, 2014, p. 2). Other writers cited in Hayes et al’s introduction also object to the term, claiming that it a publisher’s way of marginalising work that cannot easily be categorised. In her essay ‘Illiterations’, Christine Brooke-Rose offers a gendered perspective on publishing and writing experimental fiction, arguing that,

[W]omen writers, not safely dead, who at any one living moment are trying to ‘look at new ways’ or ‘re-read’, and therefore rewrite their world, are rarely treated on the same level of seriousness as their male counterparts. They can get published, they can get good reviews but they will be more easily forgotten between books and mysteriously absent from general situation surveys (Friedman and Fuchs, 1989, p. 65).

Irenosen Okojie makes a similar point but locates the difficulty at the point of publishing. Discussing her experience of trying to publish *Butterfly Fish*, she says that the big publishing houses found the novel, as one publisher made clear, ‘too strange for our lists’ (2017). She cautiously suggests that, for publishers, experimental work by ‘writers of colour’ presents a further risk, particularly because there are certain requirements that black women’s writing fits stereotypes about suffering and strength (2017). Okojie insists, however, that she is determined to forge a space for black women writers to experiment with language, form and content. Her fiction offers both new ways of looking at the world and an opportunity to ‘re-read’ the worlds that British fiction constructs. The worlds her narrative constructs are impossible and strange but also strangely coherent.

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1. 1 See for example Zadie Smith’s essay ‘Two Directions for the Novel’ in *Changing My Mind:* *Occasional Essays*. London: Penguin Books, 2009. In an interview with Lisa Allerdice, Diana Evans, repeating sentiments expressed when describing the otherworldly quality of her writing and in particular characters who are ‘lost … emotionally off the A-Z’, says, “I seem to need some other dimension … normal reality doesn’t feel enough’ *The Guardian* 10 March 2018 <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/mar/19/diana-evans-interview-ordinary-people> last accessed 13 September 2019, and Leone Ross has said that she uses her writing to get into ‘strange, dark corners’ (Leone Ross TEDx 16 June 2011 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j3MsWj8UigU> last accessed 13 September 2019. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. James, D. (2013). ‘Wounded Realism’, *Contemporary Literature*. 51:1, pp 204-14. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)