

Enchanted consumption and the gift(s) of diaspora

The Journal of Commonwealth Literature
1–15

© The Author(s) 2019

Article reuse guidelines:

sagepub.com/journals-permissions

DOI: 10.1177/0021989418823039

journals.sagepub.com/home/jcl



Nathan A. Jung

University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, USA

Abstract

This article explores consumption practices in Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow* (1983) and Helen Oyeyemi's *The Opposite House* (2007), which it reads as a macroeconomic critique. This critique repositions "diaspora" as a concept with a distinctive lineage in modern and contemporary migration literary narratives that articulate alternative models of economic exchange through representations of food and eating. In my reading, diaspora is not only a sociological group orientation or a conceptual lens on the interiorized subjectivity arising from involuntary migration; it is also a set of alternative economic practices that confront global commodity culture through quotidian acts of consumption. Marshall and Oyeyemi both employ the literary device of "enchanted consumption" to contest the premise of consumer passivity found in traditional models of commodity fetishism. Enchanted consumption accomplishes this by overlying global material exchange networks, local embodied consumption practices, and generic alternations between realism and fabulism. When read together, these three elements in particular suggest an under-examined economic dimension of diaspora that challenges dominant systems of valuation and exchange through the enactment of alternative gift economies. More specifically, Marshall and Oyeyemi depict black female characters struggling with choices about foodstuffs. This specificity is important, as it suggests that enchanted consumption derives most directly from the experiences of women in African diasporic culture. By including food in the constellation of other concerns faced by these women (domestic labour and childbirth, in particular) and, further, by understanding their consumption of food as a critical commentary on exchange systems, these authors disclose how the deeply personal consumption acts of black diasporic women advance an embodied critique of transnational capitalism that connects the globally dispersed sites of diaspora through local, gift-oriented approaches to food.

Keywords

Black Atlantic, consumer culture, consumption, diaspora, diasporic literature, food culture, gift economies

Corresponding author:

Nathan A. Jung, Department of English, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, Curtain Hall 433, 3243 n. Downer Ave., Milwaukee, USA.

Email: najung@uwalumni.com

In an interview with Nancy Mirabel, the Haitian-American writer Edwidge Danticat describes food's role in diasporic culture in terms that evoke comfort and loss in equal measure: "I think we're nostalgic about food because it's really our most immediate, most necessary connection to home, and every meal is a reminder that we're not home" (2007: 26). The close ties Danticat observes between home, food, exile, and nostalgia prove foundational to the diasporic consumption practices in Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow* (1983) and Helen Oyeyemi's *The Opposite House* (2007), which this article understands as a critique of capitalist commodity cultures. This critique repositions "diaspora" as a concept with its lineage in modern and contemporary migration narratives that develop alternative economies through representations of food and eating.

In my analysis, diaspora is not only a sociological group orientation or a conceptual lens on the interiorized subjectivity arising from involuntary migration; it is also a series of economic practices that address transnational economic systems through daily acts of consumption. In their depictions of diaspora, Marshall and Oyeyemi employ the device I call "enchanted consumption" in order tacitly to reinforce Marxist critiques of commodity fetishism, while also questioning the assumption of consumer passivity in influential treatments of the "culture industry" (Horkheimer and Adorno, 2002). Enchanted consumption describes alternations between realism and fabulism in these novelists' treatments of food, which link global exchange networks to local consumption practices in ways that allow gift economies to develop across (and bind together) diasporas.

There are many reasons to read these two authors together. Both include food within the constellation of concerns faced by their diasporic women protagonists (for example, domestic labour and childbirth), and both connect the consumption of their protagonists to broader economic systems through the device of enchantment. However, there are also key differences. The first concerns time, and the second concerns place. On the first point, they were published 24 years apart; in addition, *Praisesong for the Widow* takes place in the 1970s, while *The Opposite House* is set in the 2000s. On the second point, Marshall is an African American author writing a US-Caribbean novel, while Oyeyemi is a Nigerian British author writing a UK-set novel about a black Cuban character.

These differences are important, as they demonstrate the chronological and geographical diversity of diasporic discourses. However, I take enchanted consumption as a general model for understanding the economic dimensions of diasporic culture that emerge from attending to the cultural specifics of these novels. This model uses food as a lens to view the economic theories and practices circulating in diasporic culture. It also tracks the uses and meanings of "diaspora" itself across the differences of time and place previously mentioned. In fact, owing precisely to its re-emergence across novels separated by over two decades and several borders and histories, enchanted consumption can and should apply to studies of other groups and gender formations.

Diasporic consumer cultures

While scholars have proposed a number of ways to approach diasporic communities, diaspora studies as a field has often focused on land. Scholarship in this mode includes work by Gabriel Sheffer (1986), Walker Conner (1986), Robin Cohen (2008), and William Safran (1991), the sum of which Sudesh Mishra (2006: 16) describes as a "scene of dual

territoriality". This "scene" depends on a territorial binary between homeland and host land states which can overemphasize diaspora as a uniform group phenomenon. More recent scholarship by authors like Lily Cho (2007), Michelle Stephens (2005), and Salamishah Tillet (2009) avoids theorizing diaspora in terms of dispersal from a fixed point of origin, which tends to essentialize diasporic identity in terms of a single, common experience of traumatic dispersal. This second mode of scholarship informs my interest in how diasporic identity is created through local action: on the plate and at the table.

On this point of the challenges posed to uniform diasporic experiences by local practices of food consumption, Anita Mannur (2007, 2013) has written on issues ranging from digital culinary texts to culinary nostalgia, but her monograph *Culinary Fictions: Food in South Asian Diasporic Culture* (2010) speaks most directly to the concerns of this essay. It argues that food, due to its equal footing in both material and ethnic culture, is "one of the most viable and valuable sites from which to inquire into the richly layered texture of how race is imagined and reinterpreted within the cultural arena, both to affirm and resist notions of home and belonging" (2010: 8). Mannur discusses how "ethnic" food is made palatable to majority populations, as a way of testing the limits of cultural assimilation. Sidney Mintz and Christine Du Bois (2002) work from a similar space when they assert that eating is always tied to national and ethnic identity.

Building on such arguments, this article relates food to the economic dimensions of diaspora. Marshall and Oyeyemi invariably represent food as a commodity. In so doing, they draw on strains of diasporic culture that view local consumption as opposed to the economic forces effecting global displacement. For example, Mintz (1996: 36–37) discusses the socioeconomics of sugar refinement. While noting that diasporic identity cannot be reduced to an epiphenomenon of colonial economies, he describes a "chain of connection" in diasporic culture that situates sugar consumption in imperial trade networks. In Mintz's view, the perception of this chain contests the domineering connotations of "consumption" discussed in particular by Paul Gilroy, who argues that consumption "accentuates the passivity of its agents and plays down the value of their creativity as well as the micro-political significance of their actions in understanding the forms of anti-discipline and resistance conducted in everyday life" (1993: 103). Gilroy is responding to discourses on commodity fetishism that see consumers as unable to perceive the origins and value of the commodities they consume. In such accounts, consumers cannot resist the broader socioeconomic forces of capitalism as a result of their local paralysis.

Against this view of consumer impotence, Gilroy, Mintz, and scholars working more explicitly in consumer science (Fuat Firat and Venkatesh, 1995: 239) argue that consumption, even strictly individual consumption, might actively challenge such systems. The consumer theorist Craig Thompson, for example, argues for a liberatory consumption that sees consumers creating "their own enchanted worlds of consumption through their participation in consumption communities and a multitude of liminal consuming spaces" (2006: 352). Thompson's emphasis on participation and community in creating "enchanted worlds of consumption" is key to this article. Enchanted consumption repositions food as a gift as opposed to a commodity (which informs my reading of Oyeyemi) and, based on this insight, suggests different ways of organizing food-based transactions (which informs my reading of Marshall). By adopting enchantment over fetishism, this

essay foregrounds the agency diasporic consumers hold with regard to not only the products they consume, but also the exchange systems mediating consumption. Ultimately, the model of enchanted consumption developed in my readings of these novels reveals gift economies as a core feature of diasporic identity in the works of Marshall and Oyeyemi, and a phenomenon worth broadly pursuing in diasporic research.

Food, fetish, and hybridity in Helen Oyeyemi's *The Opposite House*

The version of enchantment in Oyeyemi's *The Opposite House* implicitly privileges diasporic hybridity over the cultural nationalism of texts like Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow*. And yet, both novels orient even the most local consumption acts toward exchange systems that are global in scope, and both novels orient diasporic identity toward gift economies. Their differences are therefore best understood in terms of what Stuart Hall calls strategic "positionings" (1990: 230). Hall sees diasporic culture as uniquely amenable to its own reconstitution via local action. Such action takes a variety of forms to contest the marginalization in the host land (and indeed sometimes in the homeland) experienced by diasporic communities separated by time, space, ethnicity, and other factors. In *The Opposite House*, the view of hybridity as a diasporic gift constitutes one "positioning" that is observed most clearly in the novel's treatment of food. Detailing how enchanted consumption transforms commodities into gifts will frame the discussion of gift economies in my reading of *Praisesong for the Widow*.

Rethinking commodity cultures through a device like enchanted consumption is especially appropriate for a novel like *The Opposite House*, which seeks fluid diasporic formations while also maintaining uniform opposition to capitalist systems fed by colonial exploitation. To overcome the consumer passivity seen in models of commodity fetishism, the novel leans on diasporic hybridity. As Ioan Davies notes, commodity cultures rooted in diasporic hybridity must recognize that "the 'desire' that the fetish arouses is not for something else but for the slippage space between itself and its double" (1998: 140). In Davies' view, fetishistic desire is directed not towards an alienated object, but instead towards a rupture in subject-object relations initiated by the unique consumer-consciousness I call enchanted consumption. Davies suggests that in diaspora, "fetish [...] is not a metaphor. It is the space within which the individual and nature are united: it is the space (a carving, a painting, a shrine) where the stories of hopes and despairs can coexist" (1998: 140–41). This is the space into which Oyeyemi's protagonist Maja situates herself. The novel's resolution, in fact, lies in Maja's acceptance of consumer practices that understand hybridity as foundational to diasporic identity. To this end, *The Opposite House* locates its perspective on consumption in the contrast between what its narrator calls "ache" and an imperative to "eat". It employs a revisionary mythology to allow these terms to (in Davies' words) "coexist" as a gift to future generations. By connecting the coming birth of her child to origin stories that privilege diasporic hybridity over territorial claims, Maja embraces a politics of consumption that avoids regressive diasporic nationalisms, while retaining a critical stance toward colonial economic structures.

The Opposite House opens in a fabular mode, with an undisclosed narrator describing a "somewherehouse" connected to the "ragged hum" of London and the

“cooking-smell cheer” (Oyeyemi, 2007: 1)¹ of Lagos. Many gods gather in this diasporic architecture, which stands between past and present, departure and arrival. The fabular protagonist Yemaya/Aya brings with her the smell of food: “If you were to come in through the front door of the somewherehouse, you would walk into the air born in Aya’s pans, the condensed aroma of yams and plantains shallow-fried in palm oil, or home-smoked cod, its skin stiffened in salt and chili” (2). Aya is joined by the Kayodes, who represent old-world gods opposed to changing circumstances. She cooks for them, but they refuse nourishment: “On Sundays, Aya cooks a feast for four and takes tray after tray upstairs to the Kayodes, plates piled high with yellow rice and beans, livers of slow-roasted pork and scabeche. The Kayodes will not talk to her; the Kayodes don’t eat, but Aya doesn’t understand about waste” (3). The novel thus contrasts Aya and the Kayodes in their attitudes toward food, immediately foregrounding a conflict between consumption and abstention in the word “ache”. The narrator unpacks the word as follows:

Aya overflows with ache, or power. When the accent is taken off it, ache describes, in English, bone-deep pain. But otherwise ache is blood [...] fleeing and returning [...] red momentum. Ache is ache is is is, kin to fear — a frayed pause near the end of a thread where the cloth matters too much to fail. The kind of need that takes you across water on nothing but bare feet. Ache is energy, damage, it is constant, in Aya’s mind all the time. (3)

In this passage, “ache” equates with power, and yet it also describes “bone-deep pain”. Further, “ache” can take “you across the water on nothing but bare feet” and/or leave you rooted in a state of perpetual “damage”. These meanings are at once distinct and mutually constitutive.

Oyeyemi explores the problematic idea of power relying on pain by contrasting realist and fabular depictions of food in ways that typify enchanted consumption. The novel’s realist mode opens with its pregnant narrator Maja “vomiting more food than [she] could have eaten” (5), and thinking about the impending birth of her son:

I fast-forwarded over the process of getting a son (I had vague ideas about one day having to do something large and bloody, put my eye out, or split my forehead open) and instead I just had my boy, warm, alive, walking beside me, gaining strength from me. He was full of laughter and he wanted me to be happy and so I was. (6)

In this passage, Maja restates the novel’s central dilemma, as prefigured in the word “ache:” her desire for happiness and investment in her son contrasts with her sense that some inevitable and violent action is the only authentic means by which she can honour her Afro-Cuban family’s legacy of involuntary displacement. Maja’s attitude suggests one strategy for ensuring the social reproduction of diasporic culture in second-generation subjects, which requires violent and self-sacrificial radicalism. Her attitude grows from her sense that diasporic identity is fixed at a point of national origin, and an ensuing crisis of displacement from that point. To this end, she initially describes herself in the following terms, which reinforce the perpetual “lack” associated with her understanding of diaspora through representations of food:

I've come to think that there's an age beyond which it is impossible to lift a child from the pervading marinade of an original country, pat them down with a paper napkin and then deep-fry them in another country, another language like hot oil scalding the original language away. I arrived here just before that age. (12)

This passage betrays Maja's insecurity about her life in London; she feels uncomfortable with the degree of security that her parents have provided, which allows her to halfheartedly pursue singing as an occupation. Such feelings manifest in Maja's fetish for the "pervading marinade" of an original country she has never known, and for the reproduction of a trauma she has never experienced. It is a form of postmemory with no possibility of catharsis, as the sublimation of trauma would constitute a betrayal of diasporic heritage.² Maja is troubled by the fact that she did not have an original language "scalded away" by hot oil, and she betrays nostalgia for a scalding that never occurred. This nostalgia reflects the anxieties of second-generation diasporic subjects in particular, who affirm their historical connection to distant geographies, communities, and traumas, despite having little firsthand experience of these factors.

The novel thus relates Maja's reluctance to eat with narratives emphasizing the violence of diasporic dispersal. She refuses food as a gesture of distrust toward host land cultures adopted by her parents and relatives. Despite her pregnancy, she says she has been "eating like crap" (8), and that she can't keep anything down: "Food. Everything I eat, my mouth lets it go, my stomach heaves painful, sour streams" (17). Maja sees food as an indigestible commodity imbricated in colonial exploitation; this view instigates cycles of self-denial that deny food's nourishing properties. In my reading, enchanted consumption intervenes in these cycles. As discussed, Oyeyemi offsets the novel's realism with a fabulist narrative that resituates food outside, or at least alongside, capitalist metanarratives. This narrative allows Oyeyemi's novel to enchant food as an object of cultural hybridity. And in offering cultural hybridity as a unique gift of diasporic culture, the text moves food around the power structures of commodity culture in ways that facilitate the diasporic gift economies seen more directly in *Praisesong for the Widow*.

First, however, Maja must confront her original assumptions about commodity culture. These assumptions are associated with her mother Chabella's cooking, which stages dramas of denial and conditional nourishment. The former is seen in Chabella's rejection of sugar, which results from her firsthand experience of the export crop's human cost. Maja elaborates on the psychological, emotional, and mythical weight sugar holds as a historical burden for Chabella: "Sugar makes Chabella cry. She hints at other memories, other sugar horrors, ancestral" (10). For Maja, sugar is enchanted with unspoken memories tracing back to mysterious "ancestral" horrors, the power of which explains Chabella's refusal to eat the sweetener. This legacy of refusal is transmitted in a matrilineal line across three generations of women. To this end, if *The Opposite House* has a "villain", it is Chabella's mother Carmen, "a female *babalawo*, a Santeria priest" (37) who called Chabella "Carmen" after herself (Maja's middle name is also Carmen, suggesting the reach of this line of influence). Carmen's identity is strictly aligned with her ancestral cultures. Pivoting on her "sour wine" (39), the novel moves to its fabular mode to describe the causes and effects of Carmen's insistence on cultural reproduction. In the fable, a mother brings her sick son to Aya:

For healing, she had brought her poorly only son, a wan stick-boy of twelve who she was slowly sickening with pinches of ground glass because she hated him, because she loved him, and he would not obey her or stay by her side when he was well. (64)

Both Carmen and the fabular mother that acts as her double transmit the traumatic post-memory of dispersal to younger generations (in the fable this postmemory is physicalized as “pinches of ground glass”). These two figures seek to restrain younger generations from straying away from their experience of diaspora as perpetual loss through poisonous practices that, in the fable, lead to death. This parable ultimately equates death with cultural stasis — with the fixation of diasporic culture on a monolithic experience of trauma — and underscores that the actions of these women are partly rooted in powerful, but ultimately destructive, forms of love.

This ambivalence lies at the core of the novel’s difficult reckoning with food. The view that diasporic dispersal results from the same economic systems that extract sugar from colonies demands extreme consumption practices like total abstention. For example, in contrast to the “cheerful” Cubans, Maja aligns her Afro-Cuban identity with British suffragettes:

But look at the British! Their government had to have some of the suffragists force-fed through tubes because each one of them had located her off switch and leant her entire weight against it. These women were pissed off. And not a word about it being hard to eat; they did not see the joke in being weak. They did not want to take their place in *el dramatico* or the tender masquerade of scented handkerchiefs and faintness and tears. (145)

Here, devotion to a liberatory cause is tied to bodily suffering via wilful starvation. Maja’s understanding of authentic political action prioritizes self-harm, a position also observed in her comments on the plentitude of London versus the perpetual hunger of homeland communities. Maja’s sense that her connection to these communities must preserve their privation is seen in her mistrust of food. And yet, she cannot reconcile this mistrust with the future of her unborn child and, indeed, with the future of diasporic communities. Pushed by the dilemma of “ache”, Maja re-examines abstention in light of her pregnancy. This necessitates a questioning of the perpetual “lack” of Carmen (and to a lesser degree, Chabella) in order to nourish future generations.

Maja’s re-examination emerges from the late convergence of the novel’s fabulist and realist modes. By formally and thematically integrating its two halves, *The Opposite House* ultimately affirms an ambivalent hybridity that holds together, albeit precariously, the several meanings of “ache” as a gift to future generations. Aya’s last confrontation with the Kayodes reintroduces the keyword in a bittersweet conclusion that forces her to come to terms with the untenable integrity of the Kayodes, whose resistance to change again equates suffering with diasporic authenticity: “while Aya was gone through the London door, the Kayodes began starvation. But they didn’t know what the feeling was — they didn’t know that the ache meant ‘eat’” (242). The Kayodes mirror the militant abstention of the suffragettes held in high esteem by Maja. While abstention was politically useful for these suffragettes, the novel’s fabular register suggests that starvation is not necessary or desirable: the Kayodes, after all, die out. In this last fabular sequence,

Aya finds that nourishment needn't sacrifice the political force of "ache". Maja comes to the same conclusion when she realizes that Chabella's displays of eating and abstention are not exclusively political: "I always thought she was fighting Papi and sugar and England with her tears and flowers, but really she has been fighting me, too" (225). Previously, she viewed consumption with the strident anti-colonial political commitments that she assumed were the source of Chabella's behaviour. By contrast, she now identifies the essentialist homeland orientations passed down by Carmen. This legacy sets diasporic generations against one another by framing authenticity as a reprisal of the traumatic violence seen, for example, in Aya's encounter with the Kayodes. In response, the novel's realist and fabular lines converge in reframing food as a gift. This gift associates the radical politics of diaspora with the production of hybrid identities, as opposed to the loss of idealized land and culture.

Enchanted consumption thus relies on narrative juxtaposition to shift food from commodity (which emphasizes debts to an established past) to gift (which emphasizes promises to a multiform future). Maja makes this point in more intimate terms: "The goal is that Carmen is not born again. The goal is not that the lost tongue stays lost, but new tongues grow. No one need be maimed" (234). Enchanted consumption does not repress history but nourishes fluidity in the future tense. This stance redefines "ache", such that Maja finally chooses to eat: "I love my son, so when Aaron is gone, I do not throw up to spite him. I let the soup stay. I let us have the soup" (230). Maja here enchants food with an ambivalent hybridity; she reconciles herself to the coexistence of hope and despair in diasporic formations whose future iterations are premised on the potential — not the certainty — of gift reciprocity, and the voluntarist practical exchanges that, as we will see, form the basis of diasporic gift economies.

One unique benefit of using enchanted consumption to read the novel is that the model helps uncover this diasporic orientation toward gift economies. The text's connection between politics and personal consumption, for example, has also been discussed by Sarah Ilott (2017), who writes that "[t]he disordered eating habits displayed by Helen Oyeyemi's female protagonists can be read as indexes of protest, dissent, transgressive desire, or the reclamation of power and authority absent in speech that is silenced through patriarchal or imperialist systems" (2017: 132). Further, Ilott's discussion of the figure of the mouth locates a "loving form of consumption" (2017: 140) that resonates with my work here. And yet, my focus on how food relates to diasporic economic practices addresses and, in some ways, contests her overall conclusions. She argues that "[d]espite their efforts to escape, transcend, or move beyond, Oyeyemi's female characters are confronted with and frustrated by the persistence of patriarchal and (neo)colonialist structures" (2017: 149). This reading might apply to *The Opposite House* as a discrete text, or even to Oyeyemi as a discrete author. However, I contend that enchanted consumption, when employed as a general comparative model for analysing diasporic consumer cultures across texts, suggests that diasporic communities do in fact at least provisionally "escape, transcend, or move beyond" such structures. Having explored how Oyeyemi's novel reclaims food as a gift as opposed to a commodity, we can now equally apply enchanted consumption to assess the importance of gift economies for diasporic formations seeking to "escape, transcend, or move beyond".

The moral economy of Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow*

In my previous analysis, I suggested that enchanted consumption describes alterations between realist and fabular depictions of consumption that reframe food as a gift instead of a commodity. I will now turn to Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow* (1983) to articulate the consequences of these alterations for diasporic economic practices. Again, I will lean into the differences of these texts, as opposed to flattening them. In the decades between the publication of these novels, diasporic culture shifted from cultural nationalism to hybrid identity formations; their approaches to consumption reflect this shift, with Marshall taking the former position and Oyeyemi the latter. And yet, they both show a consistent concern for the role that exchange systems play in locating, organizing, and strengthening the social ties of dispersed populations.

Praisesong for the Widow centres on Avey Johnson, a middle-aged African American woman whose experience on the Caribbean island of Carriacou reignites her latent diasporic identity. As a result of her experiences with food on a cruise ship, on Grenada, and on Carriacou, Avey rejects her lifelong efforts to operate within the capitalist United States economy. Instead, she gradually accepts the alternate identifications and models of economic exchange associated with her diasporic heritage. While strongly fostered during her youth, Avey actively suppressed her diasporic identity during her and her late husband's struggles to assimilate into an American society defined by white supremacy. The text incorporates fabular elements as Avey gets nearer and nearer to the supposed home of her ancestors on Carriacou. These elements culminate in her realization that the dispersed sites of diaspora are connected through their shared commitment to alternative gift economies, and in her decision to promote this commitment in the United States.

Marshall's novel begins in a realist mode that juxtaposes Avey's memories of her struggles to assimilate with her recent discomfort with food. Her discomfort results from the same perception of food as a commodity experienced by Maja. And like Maja, Avey's journey hinges on the enchantment of food as gift. In this particular case, however, we can see more clearly how enchanted consumption relates to diasporic gift economies. Regarding gift economies, David Cheal writes, "What is most distinctive about a modern gift economy is the struggle to institutionalize feelings of solidarity as the basis for social interaction" (2016: 39). Gift economies rely on moral economies that depend on powerfully socialized ties for their realization. Cheal defines moral economies as "system[s] of transactions which are defined as socially desirable (i.e. moral), because through them social ties are recognized, and balanced social relationships are maintained" (2016: 15). Transactions built on ties of this kind help ensure personal, social, and cultural survival in diasporic contexts defined by traumatic dispersal. For Cheal, moral economies require "practices that achieve trust as a routine feature of everyday life. In a moral economy, trust is generated as a result of members sharing a common way of life" (2016: 15). I argue that Marshall uses gift-based exchanges of food to represent diaspora as a moral economy opposed to the commodity cultures underwriting displacement. *Praisesong* suggests that gifts of food engender the trust between strangers that makes diasporic culture both possible and necessary in the face of exploitative capitalist economies.

This interpretation of commodity culture intersects with, but ultimately complicates, the view of consumer “taste” advanced by Pierre Bourdieu, whose position Douglass Allen and Paul Anderson summarize as follows: “the objects of consumer choice reflect a symbolic hierarchy that is determined and maintained by the socially dominant in order to enforce their distinction from other classes of society” (1994: 70). Bourdieu himself introduces this position at the outset of *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* when he describes how the general normative usage of “culture”, in order to be more usefully descriptive, must be “brought back into ‘culture’ in the anthropological sense, and the elaborated taste for the most refined objects [must be] reconnected with the elementary taste for the flavours of food” (1984: 1). In brief, “taste” as a cultural practice must be understood in terms of the tension between its apparent instinctive, sensory dynamics and the fact that, for Bourdieu, “taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier” (1984: 6). Building on this latter point, distinctions of taste diversify forms of capital, and as a result, merely reinforce social stratification. This position might seem to enwrap diasporic consumption within the confines of the same commodity culture it seeks to escape; however, more nuanced readings oppose this notion. For example, Brian Longhurst and Mike Savage argue that Bourdieu’s analysis leads to an unneeded “stress on the uncovering of ‘variation’ in consumption practices rather than the parallel need to explore how commonality and solidarities are forged between people” (1997: 275). My claim is that gift economies are the exact means by which solidarities are forged between displaced communities in these texts. Enchanted consumption thus reveals the extent to which food, as one instance of exchange, forms the basis for understanding diasporic economic interventions more broadly.

The novel opens with Avey, onboard a luxury cruise ship, feeling an “odd, unpleasant sensation in her stomach” (Marshall, 1983: 25).³ This sensation grows from a dream, and a parfait. The dream relates to her Great-Aunt Cuney, who insisted on disseminating the “Myth of the Ibo Landing” amongst younger African Americans. The Myth describes how Ibo slaves rejected their captors and walked homeward across the Atlantic Ocean. Avey dreams that she refused to visit the site of the Landing with her Aunt. In reality, she considered the story infantile. Now, in later life, she is beginning to re-evaluate this position. Avey’s dream thus raises repressed complexes of trauma, guilt, and shame as the two women fight in front of the expectant eyes of a white community.

The dream backdrops the unpleasant feeling in Avey’s stomach that opens the novel. The next night, Avey dines with her friends in the ship’s Versailles Room. They are served parfait, a dessert associated with the decadent expense of a high French cuisine fed on colonial resource extraction. Avey begins to feel discomfort. As the din in the room rises, she sits back, confused, silent, and unable to eat the dessert, despite still wanting some “sinful spoonfuls” (49). “Sinful” implies a transgression, referring perhaps to the calorific luxuriousness of the dessert. But it also refers to the fact that luxury connotes the economic dominations required to produce such an elegant dessert, in its glass finery, in the Versailles Room. This produces an “ache” in Avey’s stomach that unwittingly echoes Maja’s feeling from *The Opposite House*.

Suddenly Avey cannot recognize herself in the room’s mirrored walls. Participating in this display of conspicuous consumption has alienated her; the parfait’s richness has occluded her vision. This scene echoes Jane Bennett’s (2001) description of commodity

fetishism as a “perceptual disorder” in which “humans become blind to the pain and suffering embedded in the commodity by virtue of an unjust and exploitative system of production, even as commodities — mere things — appear as active agents capable of commanding attention and determining desire” (2001: 113). Avey’s recognition of her loss of self to the dessert, however fleeting, reveals the parfait as a commodity imbued with human pain and suffering. At this point, the voice of her daughter Marion interrupts: “*Do you know how many treaties were signed there, in that infamous Hall of Mirrors, divvying up India, the West Indies, the world? Versailles’ — repeating it with a hopeless shake of her head*” (47; emphasis in original). This intrusion suggests that Avey is becoming aware of the economic implications of her consumption: she is beginning to address the original “perceptual disorder” of her commodity fetishism by viewing the parfait as a commodity.

Her discomfort revives the next morning: “the moment she began puzzling over the events of the evening before and her thoughts touched on the parfait, there it was again, the vaguely bloated feeling she could in no way account for” (52). Avey’s physical aversion to food grows from her perception of its commodity status. By tying food to economic systems in her description of the cruise, and particularly through the backdropped myth of the Ibo Landing, Marshall uses enchanted consumption to explain Avey’s burgeoning diasporic identity. Avey’s demystification with regard to food as a commodity entails changes in what and how she eats, which the novel ultimately expands to encompass alternative economic systems as a whole.

Avey escapes from the ship and arrives on the island of Grenada. Her hallucinatory vision re-emerges as she learns about “The Excursion” to a nearby island. While watching locals ready themselves for “The Excursion”, Avey sees a baby in the crowd: “The baby’s eyes had lighted on the small gold pin in the shape of a cornucopia — complete with a spill of tiny jeweled fruit — she was wearing on the lapel of her jacket, and he was making a grab for it” (71). This passage bluntly describes connections between food and capital (the golden “horn of plenty”), while also showing the troubling ease with which items of perceived luxury are invested with desire. Avey then notes an “unnerving second” in which she is drawn to the boat departing for the excursion. This develops a contrast between the golden horn and the excursion, as Avey’s attraction to the island is associated with her observance of the child’s grab for food-as-gold.

In this way, the island works as an end point for Avey’s physical and psychological journey. After learning more about the excursion from her taxi driver, Avey is taken to a luxury hotel. The luxury of her room is connected to the cruise ship and the unease associated with the parfait: she again feels a “mysterious” sensation that she has consumed an array of foodstuffs that reinforces the connection between somatic sensation and economic exchange in enchanted consumption. Avey plans to fly home the next morning; however, after a traumatic night spent reflecting on the sacrifices made with her late husband to accommodate white-majority power structures, she wanders the beach alone and stops inside a rum shop. There, she meets Lebert Johnson, who describes “The Excursion” in more detail. It is, he says, a placation of Carriacou ancestors that recognizes and redeems their suffering through food offerings:

the first thing I do the minute I reach shore is to roast an ear of corn just pick out from the ground and put it on a plate for them. And next to the plate I puts a lighted candle. Everybody does the same. Next thing I sprinkles a little rum outside the house. They likes that. (165)

Avey tells him about her difficult night in the hotel, and about her dream of Great-Aunt Cuney. When she begins to cry, he gives her fresh coconut water with

a drop of rum, oui, he said. "But not from those bottles you see there," he dismissed with a wave the half-dozen bottles of white rum on the shelves across the room. "I put a little Jack Iron from Carriacou in yours. Is the best. I don' [*sic*] give that to everybody." (174)

The rum's effect on Avey's stomach is an immediate counter-spell to the parfait: "she almost instantly felt that first swallow of the drink soothe her parched throat and begin to circle her stomach like a ring of cool wet fire" (174). Jack Iron is depicted as unadulterated nourishment from a pure island community. This invites criticism on the grounds of the essentialist tendencies circulating in discourses of cultural nationalism, as it suggests the existence of originary, unified cultures that remains deeply instilled in all African diasporic subjects. It might also suggest a counterproductive re-fetishizing of the food object as invested with this same essentialism. However, a drink presented as a gift and produced with rum from an island and water from a coconut hacked on the spot simply does not have the same connotations as a parfait from the Versailles Room of a cruise ship. The palliative properties of the rum thus derive not from any essential essence within the food object itself, but instead from its systems of production, valuation, exchange, and consumption.

In *Praisesong for the Widow*, such systems grow from the presumption of a shared moral economy that draws diasporic subjects together through a mutual gift orientation. To this end, Avey accompanies Lebert to Carriacou. Her sea journey is linked to childhood boat trips on the Hudson River; Avey connects the "threads" of Carriacou to her childhood explicitly through the enchanted consumption of foodstuffs:

And the threads went out not only to people she recognized from the neighborhood but to those she didn't know as well, such as the roomers just up from the South and the small group of West Indians whose odd accent called to mind Gullah talk and who it was said were as passionate about their rice as her father. (190)

While travelling on the raft, she falls asleep, and dreams about sitting in church as a child: "She could feel her breakfast and the chocolate Easter egg she had eaten after Sunday school sloshing around like a great sour wave inside her. The building reeling again and the wave threatened to rise from her stomach into her throat" (203). The narrative then jumps back to the raft journey, with Avey vomiting in present-time. The other women on the raft help her through the sickness and, in so doing, they assume the personae of Church Mothers in Avey's mind. Avey empties herself of food, but the contractions continue, "As if there was actually something there, some mass of overly rich, undigestible food that had lodged itself like an alien organ beneath her heart and needed to be expelled" (207). This "undigestible food" represents a lifetime of ingesting food that cannot provide sustenance. Avey finally purges herself by evacuating her bowels and letting loose the literal waste lodged in her like an "alien organ".

Avey recovers from her journey at the house of Lebert's daughter. Island residents harvest local crops, make offerings to their ancestors, and bring food and drink to her

bedside. Avey's rebirth as a diasporic subject is cemented in her newly vivid perception of the dormant connections between the food practices on Carriacou, and those from her childhood in Tatem:

Today, presented with the candle and innocent ear of corn on the buffet in the main room where she dressed, she found nothing odd or disconcerting about them. They were no more strange than the plate of food that used to be placed beside the coffin at funerals in Tatem. (225)

Against the "alien organ" of expelled commodified food, these items are characterized by their imminent production and reciprocal exchange. These practices engender, for Avey, "threads" that link the island to Tatem, and suggest a narrative of cultural continuity in diasporic economic practice. In enchanted consumption models, therefore, we can recover a vital diasporic cultural-economic heritage through consumption practices rooted in the voluntary extension of local food items presented without thought of monetary gain:

The avocado was a gift from her elderly neighbor on the schooner, the one with the shawl. She had brought it over that morning, along with three others, when she came to inquire after Avey Johnson and to collect the shawl. The other women had also paid her a visit while she slept. And she too had left a gift, this one a packet of herbs to be made into a tea that would restore her strength. (225)

As Avey eats these gifts, Lebert's daughter directs her attention to a newly harvested field, as Avey thinks: "it was the ruined field of sea-island cotton she and her great-aunt used to cross on the way to the Landing" (227). The novel concludes with Avey returning to the United States and vowing to educate younger generations about the Myth of the Ibo Landing. In spreading this myth, Avey has something more in mind than building heritage awareness.

As seen in both novels, enchanted consumption reveals diasporic identity as a practice of gift-giving. It is, among other things, an economic orientation standing in stark contrast to the exploitative nature of capitalist economies and commodity fetishism. Avey's experience in Carriacou connects African American consumers to African diasporic publics through the sustainment of a moral economy as described by David Cheal: "Gifts have a free-floating presence within the moral economy of interpersonal relations, and they therefore facilitate types of interaction that might otherwise be only weakly institutionalized" (2016: 19). Marshall and Oyeyemi present gift economies as a crucial basis for diasporic identification, as they institutionalize ties weakened by global dispersal. In keeping with the overview of fast and voluminous changes in diaspora studies put together by Khachig Tölölyan, the nature of the ties may change over time from, for example, hybridity (Oyeyemi) to "deracination, sorrow, and powerlessness" (Tölölyan, 2007: 48) to cultural nationalism (Marshall). However, the recurrence of enchanted consumption as a model for identifying the practised ideal of gift economies in *Praisesong for the Widow* and *The Opposite House* suggests that diasporic culture is not only thinking through, but actively applying alternative economic systems. Enchanted consumption should, as a result, be applied to different areas of diasporic culture, ideally as a precursor to a sorely-needed "economic turn" in diaspora studies as a whole.

Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Notes

1. Subsequent references are to this (2007) edition of Oyeyemi's *The Opposite House* and will be cited parenthetically by page number in the text.
2. In the words of Marianne Hirsch, who coined the term, "Postmemory describes the relationship of the second generation to powerful, often traumatic, experiences that preceded their births but that were nevertheless transmitted to them so deeply as to seem to constitute memories in their own right" (2008: 103). The anxiety Maja feels toward consumption practices reproduces in different forms the first-hand knowledge of traumatic expulsion transmitted to her from her parents and grandparents.
3. Subsequent references are to this (1983) edition of Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow* and will be cited parenthetically by page number in the text.

References

- Allen D and Anderson P (1994) Consumption and social stratification: Bourdieu's distinction. *Advances in Consumer Research* 21: 70–74.
- Bennett J (2001) *The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings, and Ethics*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Bourdieu P (1984) *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (Trans. Nice R). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Cheal D (2016) *The Gift Economy*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Cho L (2007) The turn to diaspora. *TOPIA* 17(11): 11–30.
- Cohen R (2008) *Global Diasporas: An Introduction*. New York: Routledge.
- Conner W (1986) The impact of homelands upon diasporas. In: Sheffer G (ed.) *Modern Diasporas in International Politics*. London: Croom Helm, 16–45.
- Danticat E (2007) Dyasporic appetites and longings: An interview with Edwidge Danticat. *Callaloo* 30(1): 26–39.
- Davies I (1998) Negotiating African culture: Toward a decolonization of the fetish. In: Jameson F and Miyoshi M (eds) *Cultures of Globalization*. Durham: Duke University Press, 125–45.
- Fuat Firat A and Venkatesh A (1995) Liberatory postmodernism and the reenchantment of consumption. *Journal of Consumer Research* 22(3): 239–267.
- Gilroy P (1993) *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double-Consciousness*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Hall S (1990) Cultural identity and diaspora. In: Rutherford J (ed.) *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*. London: Lawrence & Wishart, 222–273.
- Hirsch M (2008) The generation of postmemory. *Poetics Today* 29(1): 103–128.
- Horkheimer M and Adorno T (2002) The culture industry enlightenment as mass deception. In: Schmid Noerr G (ed.) and Jephcott E (trans.) *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 94–136.
- Ilott S (2017) "The genesis of woman goes through the mouth": Consumption, oral pleasure, and voice in *The Opposite House* and *White is for Witching*. In: Buckley C and Ilott S (eds) *Telling it Slant: Critical Approaches to Helen Oyeyemi*. Eastbourne: Sussex Academic Press, 132–151.
- Longhurst B and Savage M (1997) Social class, consumption and the influence of Bourdieu: Some critical issues. *The Sociological Review* 44(1): 274–301.

- Mannur A (2007) Culinary nostalgia: Authenticity, nationalism, and diaspora. *MELUS* 32(4): 11–31.
- Mannur A (2010) *Culinary Fictions: Food in South Asian Diasporic Culture*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Mannur A (2013) Eat, dwell, orient: Food networks and Asian/American cooking communities. *Cultural Studies* 27(4): 585–610.
- Marshall P (1983) *Praisesong for the Widow*. New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons.
- Mintz S (1996) *Tasting Food, Tasting Freedom: Excursions into Eating, Culture, and the Past*. Boston: Beacon.
- Mintz S and Du Bois C (2002) The anthropology of food and eating. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 31: 99–115.
- Mishra S (2006) *Diaspora Criticism*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Oyeyemi H (2007) *The Opposite House*. New York: Random House.
- Safran W (1991) Diasporas in modern societies: Myths of homeland and return. *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies* 1(1): 83–99.
- Sheffer G (1986) A new field of study: Modern diasporas in international politics. In: Sheffer G (ed.) *Modern Diasporas in International Politics*. London: Croom Helm, 1–15.
- Stephens M (2005) *Black Empire: The Masculine Global Imaginary of Caribbean Intellectuals in the United States, 1914–1962*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Thompson C (2006) The McDonaldization of enchantment and consumers practices of re-enchantment: A dialectic view of transformative consumption. *Advances in Consumer Research* 33: 352–354.
- Tillet S (2009) In the shadow of the castle: (Trans)nationalism, African American tourism, and Gorée Island. *Research in African Literatures* 40(4): 122–141.
- Tölölyan K (2007) The contemporary discourse of diaspora studies. *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 27(3): 647–655.