

Anthurium: A Caribbean Studies Journal

Volume 7

Issue 1 *The Asian Experience in the Caribbean: A
Special Double Issue*

Article 12

April 2010

Dented History in Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*

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Recommended Citation

Nair, Supriya (2010) "Dented History in Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*," *Anthurium: A Caribbean Studies Journal*: Vol. 7 : Iss. 1 , Article 12.
Available at: <http://scholarlyrepository.miami.edu/anthurium/vol7/iss1/12>

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The purpose of history, guided by genealogy, is not to discover the roots of our identity but to commit itself to its dissipation. It does not seek to define our unique threshold of emergence, the homeland to which metaphysicians promise a return; it seeks to make visible all of those discontinuities that cross us.

—Michel Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” 162.

When identity is determined by a root, the emigrant is condemned (especially in the second generation) to being split and flattened. Usually an outcast in the place he has newly set anchor, he is forced into impossible attempts to reconcile his former and his present belonging.

—Edouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 143.

In an interview conducted by Kwame Dawes and published in 1997, Guyanese writer David Dabydeen critiques the much-vaunted creolization of the Caribbean, suggesting that it is more talked about than practiced. He disparages the general proclivity toward forming and hardening ethnic enclaves in the camp mentality of modern identity politics by the very process of historical scholarship. “The unfortunate thing ... is that it’s up to the different ethnic groups to write their own history and culture. To me, that’s outrageous, because that reveals a kind of a self-apartheid,” he explains (Dawes 199). Complaining about “rabid racial views” (210) among Indo-Caribbean and Afro-Caribbean people that encourage protectionist and competitive ethnic and historical identities, he urges instead a fusing of India with “the African body of experience” (200). This is a view echoed by George Lamming when, like Dabydeen, he claims that the experience of coerced, exploitative, unpaid, and low-paid agricultural labor should bond together descendants of both African slaves and Asian indentured laborers who were brought to the Caribbean “for precisely the same purpose” (21). He bemoans the loss of that shared purpose now submerged in “the more dangerous scenario of cultural antagonism” (21).

Despite Dabydeen’s impatience with embattled Guyanese ethnic politics in particular, there has been some fairly encouraging South-South dialogue and interaction between African and Indian communities not just in the sugarcane and petroleum fields, but also in academic discourse, labor unions, historical studies, cultural performance, and literary texts of the Caribbean. Indeed, cross-cultural solidarities and fusions, which seem particularly crucial in the current political and economic realities of the multiethnic Caribbean and most other regions, operate also in the elsewhere of continuing cultural dispersals and migrations. However, the process of building bridges is an intricate obstacle course and not always successfully completed. Zadie Smith’s debut novel *White Teeth*, published in 2000, shuttles between 1857 and 1999 with its multiple characters, interlinked stories, and porous temporalities, and presents a provocative but not absolute challenge to the corralled historical narrative and segregated culture that

Dabydeen critiques. Going a step beyond Dabydeen and Lamming who assume a neat boundary to Indian and African identity even as they advocate fusion, Smith scrambles linear chronology, and with it, exposes the selectivity of genesis myths. Herself of mixed racial heritage, Smith prominently features inter- and cross-racial friendships and intimacies between people from diverse cultural and national backgrounds in the novel.¹ Assailing positivist and exclusionary history as well as purist genealogy, she works against what Edouard Glissant calls the law of the “intolerant root” (11).

The “past tense, future perfect” mood of the novel muffles the ongoing collision of incompatible, often mutually hostile, histories and identities in multicultural London. Since the novel is commonly hailed (or critiqued) as celebratory and cosmopolitan, later in this essay, I want to draw particular attention to the conclusion where Irie goes with her grandmother to Jamaica in an inconclusive ending that is not as breezy as the novel’s general tone might suggest. The rest of the younger generation, particularly the twins Magid and Millat, do not seem to experience any cosmopolitan epiphany that bodes well for minorities in London. Instead, the inability of impartial witnesses to tell one from the other, the lack of cooperation from biased witnesses, “the confusing transcripts” of what happened and whodunit, lead to the twins’ subjection to “four hundred hours community service ... which they served, naturally, as gardeners in Joyce’s new project, a huge millennial park by the banks of the Thames ...” (448). Given this transmuted, seemingly more benign repetition of colonial history, the belligerence signified in my title is not invoked in order to dismiss or devalue historical grounds and national identities altogether. Irie, for instance, the character most aligned with Smith’s own background, “didn’t [want to] drag ancient history around like a ball and chain” (271), but she also accepts that it is not a matter of simple choice and that her family and Samad’s are still indentured, if not enslaved, by “ancient history” (271).

The term indenture is etymologically linked to the incisions of tooth marks, from the roughly serrated edges that resulted when the document legally tying the apprentice to a set future of labor — with the possible hope of freedom at the end of it — was ripped apart into copies and distributed to the respective parties. The binding and splitting in this cleavage expresses the ambivalent sense of history in the novel in which the jagged interface or, as Smith would have it, the “root canals” of embodied identities pursue not a linear teleology but a chaotically intersecting, confusingly indistinct zigzag course. The hope that people with “67 different faiths, 123 different languages” may some day harmoniously live together in a diverse civil society is certainly indulged, but not in any definitive, grand finale of actual accomplishment (243). Indeed, if one moves from the time frame of the novel to post “9/11,” Smith’s inability to write a happy ending and the fact that references to the Manichean conflict of the apocalypse are as numerous as the invocations of its joyful millennial aftermath seem portentous. The “corporate” costume of the Raggastani youth (who “spoke a strange mix of Jamaican patois, Bengali, Gujarati, and English”), their homophobic and possibly insecure swagger in the face of public disdain, the gangsta façade of “Millat’s Crew ... slouching toward

Bradford" (192-93) are hardly incontrovertible signs of a multicultural haven in "Londonistan," despite the implication of minorities indulged by a liberal government in this now derogatory epithet.² If anything, Millat's gradual turn to an admittedly erratic Islamic fundamentalism signals the shift to the new "minority problem" in England, and to Bradford as the epicenter of a post-Yeatsian revolutionary second coming, and foretells the criminalization and alienation of a different group from the Afro-Caribbean participants in the Notting Hill race riots of a previous generation.³ In tandem with a seemingly meticulous attention to history in the entwined chronology of the chapter headings, aligning each character with apparently meaningful paired years (Archie 1974, 1945; Samad 1984, 1857; Irie 1990, 1907 etc), Smith forces us to reconsider what we deem to be History and how it gets recorded as such.⁴ What, in other words, makes these dates leap to the eye? In his measured condemnation of the attacks of September 11, 2001 on the World Trade Center, Jacques Derrida nevertheless distances himself from the deafening amplification and relentless repetition in the spectacular media circus that followed. After the fact of what ought to have been an anticipated rather than an unimaginable attack, its naming, its universal accreditation in a stark emergency code of crisis, 9/11, affirms the event as unforgettable as well as unsurpassable. But since then, 7/7 in London, 26/11 in Mumbai, continue what Derrida calls the "deictic of the date" pointing, like the ghost in *Hamlet*, toward murder most foul and beckoning toward vengeance (Borradori 87). Derek Walcott's critique of a "consequential idea of time" likewise objects to the territorial, possessive, dominating sense of history that various populations in the Caribbean, even whites who fled there as convicts or labored as servants, cannot share. Walcott's own response to "Where is your history?" is to point to the natural elements, "in that cloud, that sky, the water moving" (24). And, he continues, when the bemused questioner notes that "'There's nothing there,' I would say: 'Well, that's what I think history is. There's nothing there'" (24).⁵ Walcott's sense of absence, however, is similar to Smith's in its deconstruction, indeed, its rejection of deeply subjective historical evidence ("a palaver over nuffin'," Smith would say) that establishes spurious origins and foundations in order to legitimize "a Faustian idea" of history as achievement and ownership.

Walcott's turn to nature is not intended to assert fundamentals but to demonstrate the mobile, shifting, elusive elements as well as the losses that characterize Caribbean histories and personalities. The ebullience of Smith's novel and the effusiveness of its critical reception tend to disguise the fact that the characters in *White Teeth* that are given most attention are the failures of History, the debris thrown up by intertwined contexts of colonialism, Nazism, World War II, and postwar migration to England from South Asia and the Caribbean. They include Archie, a nondescript white Englishman most unlike the revered (or in anti-colonial narratives vilified) British colonial subject, and Samad, whose delusional wartime ambitions are deflated by the end of the war and parodied in his eventual profession as a submissive waiter in an "Indian" restaurant.⁶ In the younger generation, Irie is of mixed race and national origin, white and black, Jamaican and English, predictably unable to fit into either group. Smith's burrowing through their root canals ultimately does not establish an intelligible, punctual, hierarchical genealogy sprouting through a "phallus-tree" with logical and clearly discernible beginnings and endings,

but draws instead “a map that is always detachable, connectable, reversible, modifiable, and has multiple entryways and exits and its own lines of flight” (Deleuze and Guattari 17, 21).

Nowhere is this more apparent than in Smith’s presentation of India as chaotic geopolitical space and shifting site of ethnonational identity. Foucault’s redefinition of genealogy as anti-teleological and indefinite, as opposed to the search for (pure) origins, can be seen in Smith’s various references to the palimpsest of India. It “operates on a field of entangled and confused parchments, on documents that have been scratched over and recopied many times” (Foucault 139), as is obvious if one were to observe maps of India, from lands lost and won in ancient times to the contemporary period when its disputed borders have to be policed and militarized into being. Samad’s identifications veer from being Indian, Bengali, Pakistani, and Bangladeshi (112, 176), and between asserting his desire to be “a proper Muslim” (179) while claiming an ancestral link to the Hindu Brahmin Mangal Pandey, whose apparently singular defiance of British colonial officers in the 1857 uprising is generally acclaimed as the inaugural moment of Indian anti-colonial resistance.⁷ All things are possible in the morphed spaces and identities of pre-colonial, colonial and postcolonial “mitosis,” one of the chapter headings in Samad’s section of the novel. In 1947 West and East Pakistan were carved out of India, itself an imposed colonial name, and Bangladesh was violently cloned from East Pakistan in 1971. If twinning is a signifier of cleavage and merger, of sameness and difference, then Millat and Magid are not the only symbols of such dual, dueling biogeographies. In London where the novel is set, these different yet related constituencies, which, like all extended families, have been feuding for generations, are lumped together as “Indians” and collectively insulted as “*Bloody Pakis*” (167; emphasis in text).⁸ As for the riddle of Samad’s alleged great-grandfather’s Hindu bloodline, V.S. Naipaul may have an answer for that in the adulterated conversion narrative he ascribes to the spread of Islam in India, where many contemporary Muslims descend from the “original” Hindus of “Hindustan.”⁹

Although Zadie Smith may be categorized as a Black British writer, the term no longer means what it did to the first generation of Caribbean, African, and Asian postwar migrants who forged some solidarity in the early years of raw racism and hostility in England. We now have British Asian, which ineffectively subsumes a range of nationalities and religions; British Black as in Afro-Caribbean and African; Black, meaning anyone who is not white (Alibhai-Brown xiii). Included within (South) Asian is a heterogeneous population of Pakistani and Bangladeshi Muslims, Punjabi Sikhs, Gujarati Hindus and Muslims, along with Indo-Caribbeans of different religions from Trinidad and Guyana, and smaller numbers of Parsis and Jains from other parts of India. Homogenizing the varied South Asian groups several experts insist is a misleading emphasis on region and religion when micro-identities such as caste, class, and other subcategories play an even more significant everyday role (Ballard 3-4, 21).

Added to this hodgepodge are the East African Asians expelled during the Africanization of Uganda; many of them, like Indo-Caribbean people, are “twice migrants” who have grown up outside the subcontinent. Despite problematic assertions of racial superiority, Asians from Africa

and the Caribbean were necessarily influenced by the majority black populations of their homelands and this, along with their westernization, made more difficult their assimilation with migrants from the subcontinent whose experience of agricultural labor was different from the Caribbean context, and whose rural (but not necessarily poor) background distanced them from the more urban East African migrants who came from trading and business environments. In the light of this cultural *mélange*, Glissant's epigraph to the first section of *Poetics of Relation* seems particularly apt here, although he refers to the Caribbean: "*One way ashore, a thousand channels.*" Even India, the supposedly original homeland, is hardly a stable, static space. It is no wonder that Samad urges Archie to suspend judgment when he hears generalizations about Indians: "Because that land they call 'India' goes by a thousand names and is populated by millions, and if you think you have found two men the same among that multitude, then you are mistaken. It is merely a trick of the moonlight" (85).

Group identification operates through ever more confusing medleys of signifiers in each context. In her essay, "Genealogies of Community, Home, and Nation," Chandra Mohanty points out that Indian, South Asian, Asian American, East Asian, brown and so on perform different kinds of work and carry different cultural baggage depending on where one lives in the United States. Similarly, V. S. Naipaul's wry observations on Indian, Red Indian, West Indian, East Indian, and, after a nationalist and ethnic resurgence in Trinidad, East Indian West Indian also capture how fluid and fraught such designations are to different audiences ("East Indian"). In fact, it is this creative untidiness and category confusion that will drive my interrogation of the genealogy of Indian and Caribbean identities and histories. I use genealogy not just in the conventional sense of scrupulously mining one's racial, religious, geographic, and ancestral pedigree but also in its opposing Foucauldian sense as a changeable fiction of genesis whose "essence was fabricated in a piecemeal fashion from alien forms" (Foucault 142). *White Teeth* exposes these fictions critically, often comically, but without ever losing sympathy or understanding for those who wrap themselves in a comforting mantle. Smith demonstrates how "a genealogical blazon" (Certeau 7) is a coat of arms trumpeting force and power as Walcott implies in the case of colonial history. But she also reveals other adherences to birth and blood that come not from an experience of power but from positions of historical insecurity and weakness.

Tariq Modood argues that the term "black" when used for all non-white peoples obscures the specific marginalization of (particularly Muslim) Asians in Britain. He identifies the literally incendiary protests against Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* in 1989 as one instance of difference between both communities. It is likely that the protests against the alleged blasphemy in the novel emerged primarily from South Asian Muslims, although Smith's depiction of the book burning in her novel suggests support by other groups. She conversely shows Alsana, Samad's wife, burning Millat's prized collection of Western commodities in retaliation for his participation in the protest, with an intertextual reference to Rushdie's response to the censorship (197).¹⁰ Shehla Khan describes the fatwa against Rushdie, a British citizen of Indian origin, by

the Iranian Ayatollah Khomeini as an act of initially deterritorializing Islam, calling upon Muslims across continents to then reterritorialize the religion and resist the European “imperium” mimicked, as his accusers believed, in Rushdie’s inflammatory presentation of Islam. While the fatwa could be read as an act of resistance against Euro-American hegemony, it also unfortunately encouraged grandiose statements about “the rise of Islam” and the resurgence of Islamicist rhetoric, which is as unattractive to some critics as the drumbeat of Euro-American empires. This epochal event was immediately polarized, marking, according to some, the rise of Islamic fundamentalism and “home grown” terrorism in England, and according to others, the increasing demonization of Muslims and Islam, leading to a siege mentality on the part of Muslims and an increasingly paranoid discourse of othering by many non-Muslims, South Asian Hindus and Sikhs included.

While Modood may be right in noting a general indifference to the Rushdie affair on the part of a largely Christian black population, the Afro-Caribbean is not entirely absent in its repercussions. Abdullah el-Faisal (born Trevor William Forest), a black Jamaican convert to Islam, migrated to Britain and preached there for many years following sojourns in Guyana and Saudi Arabia. He was deported to Jamaica after serving a prison term for soliciting murder and causing racial hatred. Although he denies the charge, his taped sermons were ultimately blamed for radicalizing Abdullah Shaheed Jamal (born Germaine Maurice Lindsay), also a convert of Jamaican origin and one of the suicide bombers in the bombings of London in July 2005, which were carried out in retaliation for British state support of the US-led war on Iraq. In his discussion of black Muslim converts who became radicalized partly through being targets of metropolitan racism, Paul Gilroy is also critical of “fratricidal and suicidal violence” as the chosen weapon of such radicals for whom “Islam rather than Christianity ... would supply the patch of solid ground on which postmodern black nationalism could plant its over-sized ideological feet” (127).

V. S. Naipaul’s controversial “Islamic journeys” extends the circling of wagons and the drawing of battlelines into Caribbean contexts. His statements about an India beleaguered by Islamic conquest (in contrast to his more benevolent view of British colonialism) before the so-called “Mutiny” locate splits between Muslim and non-Muslim Indians not in the 1980s but in the past by reading 1857 as the end of Mughal dominance. Smith’s genealogical “canal” from Samad to Mangal Pandey seems rather like wishful thinking here. Yet Naipaul himself points to a more creolized Trinidad of the past: “Things were crazily mixed up in Elvira. Everybody, Hindus, Muslims, and Christians, owned a Bible; the Hindus and Muslims looking on it, if anything, with greater awe. Hindus and Muslims celebrated Christmas and Easter. The Spaniards and some of the negroes celebrated the Hindu festival of lights” (*The Suffrage of Elvira* 74). Hosay, too, was celebrated by different communities, but the contemporary politicization of religion makes such communal celebrations increasingly difficult in an age that touts hybridity but seems prey to rearguard fundamentalisms. Complicating this scenario is the belief that returning to a purist practice of one’s own religion and culture is an anti-imperialist or nationalist

stance even if the deeply conservative traditions, which are adopted or invented, and the increasingly murky global politics that they serve are not always productive.

In *White Teeth*, Samad's desperate recourse to sending Magid back to Bangladesh to find his "roots," while he himself stays on in London and pursues an inconsistent if not downright hypocritical path, boomerangs on him when Magid returns a (post)colonial mimic man. Samad's increasing need to rely on fundamentals is met with Alsana's oppositional ambivalence, her "maybe/maybe not," an ironic recognition of a failed ethnonational patrilineage unjustly demanding filial loyalty. Glissant, who mentions fundamentalism "imposing the thought of the One" in unfavorable contrast to the multiplicity of the Caribbean (33), also warns against "the totalitarian drive of a single unique root" (14), where "you cut yourself off from the world to wallow alone and sterile in your so-called identity" (103). Alsana's contemptuous dismissal of Samad's yearnings insists on the fertile, tolerant impurity of Islam and she resists his control even as she senses danger in Joyce Chalfen's attempts at "Englishifying" her son (286). But Naipaul speaks of a turn to root-bound identity politics with surprising empathy. Describing his meeting with a Muslim family in a derelict part of the city, he says, "I felt that if I had been in their position, confined to Bombay, to that area, to that row, I too would have been a passionate Muslim. I had grown up in Trinidad as a member of the Indian community, a member of a minority, and I knew that if you felt your community was small, you could never walk away from it; the grimmer things became, the more you insisted on being what you were" (*India* 31). The sinister collusions in Smith's novel — between Nazism and transgenics, involving a bizarre partnership between Dr. Perret, a French doctor who worked for the Nazi regime and Marcus Chalfen, who is Jewish; between determinist science and theological scripture — raise the specter of several genocides. While Hortense Bowden, Irie's grandmother from the Jamaican side of her family and a Jehovah's Witness follower, looks forward to the destruction of the chaff of humanity so that the real believers can triumph, other minorities view their possible disappearance in the social world with foreboding. As Naipaul reveals, the anxiety of the majority over cultural difference and adaptation is magnified for a minority panicked by the giant sucking sound of cultural assimilation. In Smith's words, "But it makes an immigrant laugh to hear the fears of the nationalist, scared of infection, penetration, miscegenation, when this is small fry, *peanuts*, compared to what the immigrant fears — dissolution, *disappearance*" (272; emphasis in text).

Both Samad and Alsana's fears are not exaggerated given their offsprings' predilection for "some terribly mutinous act, wearing somebody else's uniform or somebody else's skin" (273). The phrase is actually used to explain Irie's desire "to, well, kind of *merge*" with the Chalfens, a family she misguidedly idealizes as properly English (272; emphasis in text). But neither her voluptuous body nor her "curved African follicle" cooperate. Irie's desire for straight hair leads her to buy what she was not born with after a disastrous attempt to alter her hair chemically (229). However agreeable Smith may be to cultural mixing there is clearly a line to be drawn, which is reinforced by Neena's insistence that Irie return to her Afro. Before Irie's

desire to become a “new breed,” to transgenically fuse with the Chalfens (284), even before Magid is sent to Bangladesh to turn (back) into a real Bengali, he expresses a desire, like Irie, to belong if not to some other gene pool then to another family, preferably white English. As “Mark Smith,” Magid can fantasize about the bourgeois privileges denied the new migrants and one wonders if class rather than culture is really at stake here (126). But the fact that Smith characterizes Irie’s genetic cravings as “mutinous,” leaves some room for an agency that is not quite mimicry, a need to abandon rebelliously any imposed, even inherited, straitjacket, “like a Jew munching a sausage or a Hindu grabbing a Big Mac” (273). If a desire to hang tightly to one’s roots (or let them go altogether) is “both the most irrational and natural feeling in the world,” the novel considers each possibility without completely dismissing either (272).

But is there a single-root evolved identity? As in the case of the irretrievably tangled roots of Samad’s lineage, Irie’s own genealogy is also irreversibly mixed. Her reproduction of the Bowden genealogy significantly tracks only her mother’s Jamaican family and obeys Deleuze and Guattari’s injunction to map rhizomes rather than trace “tree logic” (12). It parodies the conventional patrilineal family tree sacralized in family bibles and accurately represents the confused, unknown, illegitimate, multiple legacies and bloodlines of Irie’s, crossing and recrossing the Atlantic. Inventing a key with cryptic symbols such as “% = paternity unsure,” “& = copulated with,” “G = brought up by grandmother,” and manufacturing datelines such as “[Way Back When—Lord Knows],” the map reveals the nonsense behind genesis myths of pure origin and the sense behind Marcus’s lucid disclosure that we “all go back as far as each other” (281, 280). But we generate genealogical and historical scripts in order to encode and rigidify distinctions between the human races. The threat of ethnic genocide intimates how dangerous such scripts can be.

Writing things down “helps if you want to be remembered,” Marcus adds (280), but as much as genealogies, historiography, as scholars such as Michel de Certeau and Michel-Rolph Trouillot have argued, is rife with contradictions and silences, erasures and distortions. It is in an encyclopedia that Alsana triumphantly discovers that Bangladeshis descend from mixed tribal, ethnic, and state lines and that being Indo-Aryan involves going “back and back and back” to find that the East and West do meet up somewhere (196). On the con side, Mangal Pandey is inscribed in infamy in British colonial accounts of the 1857 uprising, where “‘Pandy’ only ever meant one thing,” the treachery and deceit of the mutinous Indian subject (209). Samad’s romanticized desire to rewrite Pandey’s legacy as an indubitably heroic one is ironically mirrored in a stoned Millat’s subsequent aim of revising his father’s undistinguished legacy, to scratch over the rusted, uneven “Iqbal” his injured father traces in blood, to magnify it, to “finish it. To revenge it. To turn that history around. To blow it up in more ways than one” (418-19). Millat’s clumsy attempt to trump his father fails in the paradoxically anticlimactic climax. The cyclical violence of a reactive politics becomes reactionary when it uses, like Millat, a sense of grievance without a constructive program for the future. In her characterization of the likeable, charming but troubled teenager, Smith defuses the incipient “terror” in Millat’s militancy,

rendering him a comic, even pathetic, figure. But in the echo of Pandey's misrepresented legacy, Millat's mutiny is not entirely facile.

Millat's confusion and chameleon qualities are not always comic. Smith suggests that his "ever-present anger and hurt" are not caused by fundamentalist leanings, but by the inability to balance the different identities and cultures he can lay claim to even more so than his father (225). Samad's horror at the notion "that birthplaces are accidents," that they should not matter as much as they do in the world, is not shared by Irie, who longs to be free from the shackles of birth and belonging (337). Smith offers a conundrum. On the one hand, there is the sense of deep rupture from any birthplace, be it your grandmother's Jamaican space or your father's Bangladeshi origins or even other migrant locations. On the other, there is the new generation's right to be British, their response as born-in-England natives in opposition to their exoticism and estrangement by even well meaning do-gooders like Joyce. Unable to accept Irie and Millat's explanation that they come from Willesden, she insists on digging deeper, on locating where they come from "*originally*" (265; emphasis in text). Millat's flippant response, "Whitechapel ... Via the Royal London Hospital and the 207 bus," is a canny refusal to be displaced to Bangladesh, where his twin brother has been sent in Samad's (and Joyce's) fantasy of origin (265).

Contrary to reports of a homogenized, self-segregated, insular constituency, a study of second-generation youth in Bradford claims that "ethnic identifications are heterogeneous, drawing upon a Pakistani identity, being Muslim and also part of a wider South Asian diaspora, yet simultaneously asserting their identities as British citizens" (Bagguley and Hussain 220). Millat seems to recognize that however faceless and insignificant he may be in British mainstream culture (except as a troublemaker), insisting on complete estrangement would play right into the hands of the "truly" British, the BNP and other far-right groups who have long demanded the exclusion or repatriation of those who did not "really belong." As Gilroy claims, white Britain's postcolonial melancholy is caused not just by England's waning global power but by the presence of "outsiders" from former colonies now in its midst. The ethnoracial absolutism of colonial hierarchies morphs into the clash of cultures thesis in a postcolonial, "terrorist" world, where both culture and genes seem to merge into an explosive alloy of fundamental difference and hostility. "Irrespective of where they [first-generation Caribbean and Asian migrants] are born, even their children and grandchildren will never really belong," Gilroy says, explaining that such an insistence on migration rather than settlement and nativization not only dooms immigrants "in perpetuity to be outsiders," but also casts immigration in militaristic terms as war against the original natives whose territory has been invaded (122). In such conditions of irredeemable alterity, the postcolonial descendant of migrants has to assert claims of British birthright and citizenship.

And yet, the end of the novel finds Irie and her grandmother in Jamaica. Granted, she is now with Joshua, whose parents are Jewish and Catholic, historically outsiders in England but considered to be more "in" than Irie. Granted also that Irie's child can map a genealogy including African/Indian/Jamaican/Bangladeshi/Hindu/Muslim/Jehovah's Witness backgrounds,

perhaps parodying her mother's map. Against the shadow of palimpsestic renaming and genocide, of Xaymaca and Arawaks, Irie seems set on another path of discovery from her pre-Columbian progenitors: that birthplaces are accidents, but that they also matter. We are left with Zeno's paradox. The faster the brothers run toward the goal of "Happy Multicultural Land," the farther they have to go to catch up, like Achilles and the tortoise, and the chances are that they will reach a dead end (384-85). If Zeno's paradoxes were used to argue against multiplicity and change, against mobility and plurality, then Irie's flight to the homeland (or one of them, at any rate, given the multiple origins she can access) as another possible dead end might undermine any chance of overcoming the paradoxical stasis of the migrant condition in its endless game of catch-up. Since I am no mathematician I will not attempt to calculate the finite and infinite, the relationship between time, space and motion to disprove Zeno. But given the extensive critique of purist genealogies in the novel, it would be misleading to assume that Smith has renounced a rhizomatic assemblage in favor of the One. Since the twins' DNA will make paternity tests inconclusive, Irie's daughter could well claim as her father an amalgam, "Majlat and Milljid" (437).

Nevertheless, Irie's "return" to Jamaica is not just ideological, it is the physical end of one plotline that may not have the same consequences as Magid's aborted quest for origins. Jennifer Rahim's critique of excessive valorizations of hybridity, douglarization, and attending theories of creolization, offers a useful counterpoint to Gilroy's understandable anxiety over ethnic absolutism and racial difference. "The glorification of cultural cross-confluences as the route to transcending the limitations of concerns with 'purity of origins' ... also carries with it the tendency to devalue local, traditional expressiveness and, most of all, the right to maintain race/ethnic identities and their ancestral retentions," Rahim argues (38). Creolization in Trinidad, for instance, involved not only the sometimes coerced Christianization of slaves and servants, but in later periods, excluded the East Indians who still carried strong traces of ancestral cultures. The choice of one ending in Jamaica marks the ideological limits to a free-floating, supposedly cosmopolitan identity that simply "transcends" all roots. It suggests that ancestral cultures can be claimed and not always to baneful purposes. Returns to the "motherland" have not always had a productive purchase as many Caribbean novels show, but Irie and her daughter will literally not be forced to distance their Jamaican heritage even as they claim multiple spaces of belonging. Smith's sense of fusion, then, seems rather different from Dabydeen and Lamming, who visualize two specific, clearly defined, fairly homogenous groups coming together in their best interests. She shows homelands and identities that are far more complex in their formations. If nothing seems as tidily categorical as the ethno-national divides that colonial and contemporary quarrels are based upon, it is not to deny the injustices and inequalities that fuel particular kinds of identity politics. Although Smith stirs together the waters of the Atlantic and the Indian Ocean, she does not seem to give up on the concepts of identification altogether. However, where you're at in this novel never seems to be a stable place. Past and future, beginning and ending, seem equally hazy. However clichéd the figure of inter-racial accord through sexual coupling or in this case tripling, Irie's unnamed daughter is ultimately identified as a "fatherless

little girl” (448). Absent fathers are by no means unknown or necessarily desirable in the Caribbean. In this particular case, however, the refusal to name and to identify paternity resumes the discontinuous and often irrecoverable histories that, as Irie’s lineage has shown, were already her ambivalent heritage.

Notes

¹Like most black-identified authors, Smith is expected to focus on issues such as slavery and race commonly associated with black diasporic history. But her work since her first novel indicates that she is uninterested in being slotted in only one shelf in bookstores.

²“-stan” comes from the Indo-Iranian root for place. The portmanteau word is negatively used to exaggerate the sense of England besieged to the point where its cityscapes are infiltrated and transformed by an alien culture. In a recent interview, Salman Rushdie uses it to refer to a wary but (according to him) non-interventionist policy of surveillance by the state, which believed that radical Islam could be contained in certain neighborhoods. What critics of such ghettoization note is not the threat of radical Islam but the continuing exclusion of those who are considered unassimilable. See the interview of Rushdie by Alice Thomson and Rachel Sylvester in the *Times Online*

(http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/books/article5434968.ce). In his own reference to the word, Gautam Malkani, author of *Londonstani* (London: Fourth Estate, 2006), insists that “Londonistan” was used by British Asians irrespective of religion to signal their nativization in the city and meant something more affirmative before it was appropriated by French security services to mean hotbeds of Islamic radicalism in London (www.gautammalkani.com/about_londonstani.htm). Malkani’s controversial novel depicts the performative identities of middle-class British Asian youth in the 90s as “desi” (Indian) rudeboys, along the lines of Millat. But his novel reveals significant tensions between various Britasian communities, including the divide between the Hindus and Sikhs and the Muslims.

³Corrine Fowler identifies the novel with the unreflective jouissance of cosmopolitan commodification in her critical response to the novel’s extraordinary success. Her article reveals how successful Black British authors can be accused of being too political, not political enough, not black enough, too metropolitan, too coopted and commercialized and so on, a tendency that Fowler herself is unable to avoid. While she rightly cautions against limiting our range of authors and texts to a prize-winning few (something Rushdie also expresses some dismay over in the interview mentioned above, although he has gained much from his celebrity), there are too many slippages between cosmopolitanism and triumphant buoyancy, an equation not necessarily matched in Smith’s novel. I am more inclined to agree with Jan Lowe, who concludes that despite the novel’s comedic ethos, “it is from history that the cynicism of *White Teeth* emanates, from an inability to ever trust London completely, to ever really believe that its sparkling, witty surface is safe enough ground” (179). Lowe is right not to attribute too much significance to Rushdie’s purported influence, but it is nevertheless striking to see a metropolitan writer break conventional expectations by her focus on not simply Jamaican but also Bangladeshi immigrants, living cheek by jowl as it were.

While on influence, more than Rusdhie, Hanif Kureishi’s fiction and screenplays, including *London Kills Me* and *The Black Album* seem to have had an impact on younger writers such as

Smith and Malkani. See Fowler, "A Tale of Two Novels: Developing a Devolved Approach to Black British Writing," *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 43.3 (2008): 75-94, and Jan Lowe, "No More Lonely Londoners," *Small Axe* 9 (March 2001): 166-80.

⁴In a rather snappish interview in 2000, Smith dismisses the actual historical or ethnographic research attributed to the book's detailed portraits. She denies any sustained knowledge about "Jamaican stuff," "the Indian Mutiny stuff," "Bengali people," and so on, giving her imagination rather than the archives more credit (268-69). But in disclaiming full knowledge of her characters' backgrounds commonly ascribed to a native informant, she is also being honest. She adds later, "Anybody who's completely sure of themselves in *White Teeth* doesn't do very well" (271). See "Zadie Smith with Gretchen Holbrook Gerzina," *Writing Across Worlds: Contemporary Writers Talk*, ed. Susheila Nasta (Oxford: Routledge, 2004), 266-78.

⁵Significantly, Samad uses nature to assert precisely the opposite, a sense of biological and cultural determinism to his Muslim identity. Like Walcott, Dabydeen is also not an advocate of strict "authenticity" even if he does see some cultural difference between black and Indian communities in Guyana.

⁶I put Indian in quotation marks to initiate the larger interrogation of the term that follows. Indian restaurants are just as likely to be managed by Bangladeshi or Pakistani owners, serving their regional cuisine or variants of standard Indian cooking. Controversial references to "chicken tikka" as the British national dish have originated from its huge popularity in British Asian restaurants. The dish has an interesting history but it must be noted that the gravy adaptation found in Britain and USA is rarely found in India, which retains the likely Persian or Arab kebab flavor. Just like people, the food they consume bears a much more mixed history than may first seem apparent.

⁷Rudrangshu Mukherjee points out that such singular causes and personalities do not convey the complexity and range of rebellions. Even though the "Mutiny" represents a unique event there has been a long and far-reaching series of insurgencies in colonial India, including the 1857 Kanpur massacres. "Cawnpore" moved from history to mythical trope, claims Mukherjee, and as we see with "Pandy" in the novel, metonymically represented the injured merit of British colonialism as well as the devious treachery and violence of Indians. See Mukherjee, *Spectre of Violence: The 1857 Kanpur Massacres* (New Delhi: Penguin, 1998) and *Mangal Pandey: Brave Martyr or Accidental Hero?* (New Delhi: Penguin, 2005). Samad's speculation about the performative aspects of Pandey was sadly realized in an execrable, eponymous Bollywood film in 2005.

⁸Malkani's *Londonstani* begins where Archie's mildness leaves off: a hypermasculine young Sikh man violently beats up a white boy accused of using "Paki" as such an epithet. As Malkani makes clear in brief interviews, the novel is about the rejection of the "Goody Two Shoes" 80s' image of Britasian youth, whose way of doing so involves unnerving mimicry of what they

consider black and American gangster, bling-fixated, and racketeering lifestyles. Although both Smith and Malkani use such mimicry to comic effect, this is not what Dabydeen must have had in mind when he urged a fusion of black with Indian cultures.

⁹In several of his works, Naipaul makes religion an autochthonous component of the “sacred” land, rendering Hindus in the Caribbean and Muslims outside Arab lands foundationless religious subjects. There are some instances, however, when he seems to acknowledge that one can become a native by putting down new roots and religions can be suitably practiced outside the land of their origin. In Hindutva rhetoric, however, Muslims in India despite generations of residence continue to be seen not just as outsiders but also as descendants of marauding invaders, making their claims to nativization and citizenship precarious in a Hindu majority country.

¹⁰Smith destabilizes a number of assumptions. Alsana does not play stereotypical oppressed Muslim woman (like Clara Jones nee Bowden she is physically stronger than her spouse but, unlike Alsana, Clara tends to play a minor role in the novel after marriage). Not every Muslim was out on the streets burning Rushdie’s book. At the same time, Alsana exposes Millat’s hypocrisy since he consumes Western cultural objects not necessarily considered respectful of Islamic tenets. Her reference to either everything or nothing being sacred recalls the title of Rushdie’s essay on the controversy, “Is Nothing Sacred?” from his collection *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism*, 1981-1991 (415-29).

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