

Men Negotiating Identity in Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*

Taryn Beukema
McMaster University

Masculine historical experience is repeatedly implicated in the struggle over defining masculinity in the decades marked by decolonization following the Second World War. As Robert W. Connell points out, the period of British colonization was a gendered enterprise, one that defined masculine identity by attributing to it characteristics of reason and rationality, thus legitimating patriarchal governing structures in society. The post-1945 era saw increasing geopolitical unrest and the British Empire began to crumble, taking with it the predetermined roles that men had consented to or been coerced into living up to and creating instabilities that delegitimized "normal" conceptions of masculinity (246). In contemporary postcolonial British society, these problems are amplified when the nation is unable to escape its colonial past.

Zadie Smith's novel *White Teeth* examines the masculine experience (both migrant and English) by reflecting on the complex effects that cultural history can have on identity. The text focuses on generational analyses of masculinity and changing social codes in order to insist that there is not always a solution to the problem of constituting one's gendered and cultural identity. Smith challenges social constructions of masculinity by dissecting the notions of cultural belonging and nationality and, in particular, by analyzing the ways in which masculinity is ruptured and distorted (both in behaviour and in practice) in the various shifting historical narratives of identity. Most significantly, the novel investigates the dialogic movement between one's beginnings or past stabilities (roots) and the subsequent pathways that connect various points of rootedness (routes), thus underscoring the important intersections of roots/routes required to negotiate masculine identities in the new postcolonial world.

Since the novel's publication in 2000, *White Teeth* has received wide critical acclaim, catapulting it to the top of the contemporary British best-seller lists and generating an abundance of critical discussions which, for the most part, have focused on race, multiculturalism, hybridity and migrancy (for example, see the works of Nick Bentley, Ashley Dawson, and Dominic Head). While somewhat implicit in these discussions, history has not been given the same attention. This essay thus seeks to explore the histories and journeys (both personal and geographical) of the male characters in *White Teeth* in order to account for the difficulties men experience while adapting to life in a country that has such a powerful and unforgettable historical period of colonization. I will be investigating the

tension history creates both as a burden and as a necessity and resource for the male characters.

In order to alleviate some of this tension, Smith infuses *White Teeth* with humour and irony, devices often used to defuse the seriousness of situations. Indeed, Smith uses these as instrumental to her project of exposing the difficulties that ensue when a certain kind of masculinity becomes thought of as a fixed ideal that men must live up to. Until recently, the use of humour in postcolonial texts has not been fully analyzed. Susanne Reichl and Mark Stein's *Cheeky Fictions* takes a look at the possible uses of humour in postcolonial literature, speculating that "the use of laughter and strategies of unsettling humour contribute to the empowerment of the (post)colonized" (11). The book draws on many critical essays, perhaps most notably Ulrike Erichsen's article, which argues "that humour can be used as a means to defuse cultural conflicts by offering a strictly limited context for such conflict. Many cultural conflicts stem from differences in cultural values and norms, or are related to superiority/inferiority problems, real or assumed" (30). I would argue, then, that the plethora of comical and ironic scenes throughout *White Teeth* are used precisely to defuse such "cultural conflicts" embedded in and arising from the politics involved in negotiating contemporary masculinity in the face of a complex and powerful colonial history.

While I will be using history as a means by which to approach the construction of masculinity in contemporary British society, I will also be using it as a means to approach the homonym roots/routes¹ which Susan Friedman theorizes as "a kind of geographical thinking that addresses the meanings of location and itinerary in the production of cultural identities. As such, geopolitical thinking is attuned to questions of borders and transgression—all kinds of borders and all kinds of transgressions" (178). She goes on to suggest that narratives of roots/routes tell a kind of story about the duality of all thresholds (class, gender, sexuality, etc.) and indirectly makes a link between history and the particularities of gender. I will be using her ideas throughout this essay as a theoretical basis from which to approach the ideas of roots and routes in order to analyze the intricate production of masculine identity in relation to imperial history in *White Teeth*.

It is particularly interesting to note that the novel emerged out of a decade in which there was a growing interest in analyzing masculinity. Smith's more invested attention to male characters is no accident, then, but is a recognition and reflection of the fact that "masculinity" (as both gender and concept) was undergoing major transformations. Women's challenges to the gendered order during the twentieth century had materialized as a form of mass politics and thus "femininity" (as construct) was becoming historically well-documented. Because, as

¹ Friedman develops James Clifford's play on and coining of the alternative meanings of roots/routes in *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century*. Boston: Harvard UP, 1992.

Connell posits, “masculinity is shaped in relation to an overall structure of power (the subordination of women to men)” (223), it seems, then, that Smith purposefully creates strong, intelligent, and relatively unconflicted women in *White Teeth* as a reflection of societal changes and thus focuses on masculinity as a way of shifting attention to the possibilities of a masculine identity that diverts from and challenges traditional and historically dictated notions of “maleness.”

To begin with, the first generation men in the novel (Samad Iqbal, Archie Jones and Marcus Chalfen) have internalized the values and social codes set out for them by the British Empire of the past, placing a heightened importance on ancestry and assimilation, and Samad and Marcus have tried to teach these principles to their sons (Magid and Millat Iqbal and Joshua Chalfen). Smith thus maps the desires of the first generation men to negotiate pure and essentialized masculine selves in order to succeed in a society marked with nostalgia for a past greatness. I want to suggest that these men are figures of confused masculinities in search of a cultural identity and a life they have been promised *as* men in a society that was so committed to patriarchal values during the establishment of an imperialist regime.

Stuart Hall cites two ways of understanding this notion of “cultural identity.” The first, he says, “defines ‘cultural identity’ in terms of one, shared culture, a sort of collective ‘one true self’ hiding inside the many other, more superficial or artificially imposed ‘selves’ which people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common” (435). The second recognizes that “there are also critical points of deep and significant *difference* which constitute ‘what we really are’; or rather—since history has intervened—‘what we have become’. We cannot speak for very long, with any exactness about ‘one experience, one identity’, without acknowledging its other side—the ruptures and discontinuities” (435). The male characters in *White Teeth* unconsciously exemplify this second position, one that draws on the notion of the journey and constant transformations involved in forming an identity. I say unconsciously because they are not aware of how history constitutes the self and thus they continually assume they are in complete control. Dawson points out that “Samad has realized [very early in his life] that he has become a mimic man, a colonial subject attempting to conform to the contradictory dictates of assimilation set out by the empire” (159). What Dawson fails to elaborate on, however, is that despite this early revelation, Samad does not give up his quest to reconcile his Bengali identity with his English identity. He is continually trying to renegotiate his place in British society while trying to force his twin sons, Magid and Millat, into strict Muslim identities. This is the irony of Samad’s experience: he feels a constant need to *belong*, a need to believe in *one* experience, and a need to uphold a traditional Islamic identity, one that asserts that “we are not in control. What does Islam mean? What does the word, the very word, mean? *I surrender*. I surrender to God” (Smith 288). Simultaneously, Samad tries to control how others perceive him and his sons, ignoring the blatant

differences in the generations: “don’t speak to me of second generation! One generation! Indivisible! Eternal!” (289).

As the novel progresses, Samad’s attitude toward these ideas of belonging and assimilation start to change. He slowly begins to see that he has put an enormous amount of faith in a country “where you are never welcomed, only tolerated. Just tolerated . . . it drags you in and suddenly you are unsuitable to return, your children are unrecognizable, you belong nowhere” (407). It is at this point that we are able to fully understand Samad’s situation. He is utterly lost and unable to comprehend why: “you begin to give up the *very idea* of belonging. Suddenly this thing, this *belonging*, it seems like some long, dirty lie . . . and I begin to believe that birthplaces are accidents, that everything is an *accident*. But if you believe that, where do you go? What do you do? What does anything matter?” (407). His continual questioning signifies a final plea for answers and for control, neither of which are available to him. He begins to call into question his own roots and the importance of them in constituting his identity in this now not-so-foreign place. As this is one of the last, and arguably the most important, glimpses we have of Samad, this breakdown demonstrates and resignifies the importance of one’s routes/roots, clearly showing that if one is ignorant of the influence of the past, that person will cease to understand the complexities and fluidities of identity and the ways in which an awareness of history is necessary for understanding who one is.

Archie Jones, on the other hand, is a born and bred Englishman, and is the antithetical representation of “masculinity” as defined by England’s colonial empire. Ironically, it is Archie—not Samad—who exhibits characteristics of the not-quite-not-white Englishman. Archie is the epitome of rootlessness and indecision. Unable to live up to the ideals of reason and rationality at the heart of English masculinity (every decision he makes is based on the flip of a coin), Archie represents a “failed” masculine identity. Indeed, because of this “failure,” he is a success within Smith’s project of challenging the concept of imperial English masculinity. Archie differs from the other male characters in the novel strictly by the fact that he is English and thus he belongs, albeit on a superficial level. It is still necessary, however, to map Archie’s routes throughout *White Teeth* because, although he belongs, he is unsuccessful and unable to improve:

Once upon a time he had been a track cyclist. What Archie liked about track cycling was the way you went round and round. Round and round. Giving you chance after chance to get a bit better at it, to make a fast lap, to do it *right*. Except the thing about Archie was he *never did* get any better . . . That kind of inability to improve is really very rare. That kind of consistency is miraculous, in a way. (15)

Archie represents a model negotiation of what Nick Bentley calls a “more established construction of Englishness” (498). He labels Archie as the “unlikely hero of the book” (498), but can we actually see Archie as a hero? His significantly ironized role as a “hero” perhaps represents a

dismantling of the characteristics of the traditional male identity, but at the end of the novel, Archie saves Dr. Perret for the second time—a Doctor who was thought to be affiliated with the Nazi's project for racial extermination and whom he and Samad captured during their time together in the concluding month of the Second World War. He ends up saving the man who upholds values of perfection and certainty—values characteristic of an absolute and essentialized white, heterosexual, English masculine self, and masculinity, as Connell points out, is much more than that: “[r]ather than attempting to define masculinity as an object (a natural character type, a behavioural average, a norm), we need to focus on the processes and relationships through which men . . . conduct gendered lives” (71). Archie's heroism *can* be seen as an attempt to reassert a national and traditional masculine identity, but can *also* highlight the ideals and ideologies men are supposed to live up to. He is thus instrumental in foregrounding the tension men experience in trying both to live up to historical male greatness as well as to break away from it.

Interestingly, the novel concludes with Archie watching Marcus Chalfen's FutureMouse escape: “[h]e watched it leap off the end and disappear through an air vent. *Go on my son!* thought Archie” (541). This mouse, Smith tells us, exemplifies the fact that there are “[n]o other roads, no missed opportunities, no parallel possibilities. No second-guessing, no what-ifs, no might-have-beens, Just certainty. Just certainty in its purest form” (490). This mouse thus serves as a metaphor for the fixed masculine identity in contemporary England. The little brown male mouse represents Marcus Chalfen's project and his “firm belief in the *perfectibility* of all life” (312). Its escape, then, is not only a comic celebration of the return of the repressed, but a celebration of the reality that no man is perfect, nor should he be bound to societal constraints and demands. Because Archie roots for this mouse, his role becomes more complicated (I will return to this shortly). Moreover, Archie's ironic role throughout the novel further demonstrates Smith's attempt to defuse the tension of a conflicted masculinity. Indeed, we are no surer of what Archie represents at the end of the novel than we were at the beginning. His route is the most difficult to map.

Friedman gives us a more concise definition of routes/roots to work with, arguing that “[r]oots and routes are . . . two sides of the same coin: roots, signifying identity based on stable cores and continuities; routes, suggesting identity based on travel, change and disruption” (153). Roots, in other words, give people grounding within history, while routes present the experience of discontinuities. She goes on to say that “[i]n terms of the roots/routes symbiosis, experiencing identity as roots requires some figurative or material engagement of routes through a contact zone of intercultural encounter. Conversely, identity developed through routes involves an experience of leaving roots, of moving beyond the boundaries of ‘home’” (154). As Dominic Head points out, “Archie's sense of self . . . is rooted in the transformative experience of being saved from suicide (by a halal butcher): a revelation results, and within hours, in a new state of

euphoria, he meets his future wife, Clara, whose Jamaican mother was sired by a colonial Englishman” (112). Archie’s many escapes from death throughout the novel serve to comically keep alive Smith’s project of challenging social constructions of masculinity.

We are introduced at the very beginning of *White Teeth* to a man whose journey is about to begin: “a new Archie is about to emerge” (Smith 18). I would argue, then, that Archie’s journey throughout the novel represents possibility. He “could give no longer record of his family than his father’s own haphazard appearance on the planet in the back-room of a Bromley public house circa 1895 or 1896 or quite possibly 1897” (337). Moreover, Archie does not exemplify the same national pride for England that we see in other male characters, such as Samad, who

wished to defend a country that wasn’t his and revenge the killing of men who would not have acknowledged him in a civilian street. Archie was amazed. It was his country; in his small, cold-blooded, average way he was one of the many essential vertebrae in its backbone, yet he could feel nothing comparable for it. (95)

While one could argue that Archie’s “unlikely hero[ism]” is an attempt to conform to the dictates of assimilation and the colonial masculine ideals he has failed to represent, it is important to remember that at the end of *White Teeth*, “Archie is there, there in the trajectory of the bullet, about to do something unusual, even for TV: save the same man twice and with *no more reason or rhyme than the first time*” (540, emphasis mine). His decision to save Dr. Perret is left entirely to chance and his heroism is completely illogical.

Because “[t]he figure of the hero is central to the Western cultural imagery of the masculine” (Connell 213), heroism is seen as an irrelevant and even dangerous concept because it represents an attempt to reattribute masculinity with conceptions of power and sole agency. When Archie and Samad are in the war together, Samad devises a plan in which Archie will become a hero for defeating the enemy; heroism thus becomes a concept associated with imperialistic tendencies, that is, the opposite of cowardice. While his heroism may be significantly ironized throughout the novel, it is also necessary to consider the implications of heroism in and of itself. As Samad attempts to force Archie to kill Dr. Perret, he draws on ideas of extermination to get Archie to rise to the occasion of being a “hero,” describing Dr. Perret as a man who “wants to control, to dictate the future. He wants a race of men, a race of indestructible men, that will survive the last days of this earth” (119). By saving Dr. Perret for the second time it may *seem* that Archie is associating himself with this category of “indestructible men” and embodying characteristics of a masculinity often associated with the construction of the past English Empire, but it is entirely accidental. What is not accidental, however, is his cheering the escape of the brown mouse, a hopeful metaphorical representation of the beginnings of new and freer forms of racial masculinity.

In a country where Samad and Archie are finding it so difficult to fit in, they use the Irish pool hall run by Muslims as the space in which they no longer need to worry about assimilation or judgments:

O'Connell's is the kind of place family men come to for a different kind of family. Unlike blood relations, it is necessary here to *earn* one's position in the community; it takes years of devoted fucking around, time-wasting, laying-about, shooting the breeze, watching paint dry – far more dedication than men invest in the careless moment of procreation. (183)

The pool hall becomes Samad and Archie's home away from home, where "for ten years they have come here between six (the time Archie finishes work) and eight (the time Samad starts) to discuss everything from the meaning of Revelation to the prices of plumbers" (184). O'Connell's thus represents a place of male homosocial bonding and a way of constituting their identities in relation to one another, free from their wives, children and society's opinions of them. Smith is not suggesting, however, that O'Connell's is free from the pressures of history, which permeates its walls and seeps into Samad and Archie's conversations. Indeed, "that's what Archie loved about O'Connell's. Everything was remembered, nothing was lost. History was never revised or reinterpreted, adapted or whitewashed. It was as solid and as simple as the encrusted egg on the clock" (192).

Smith consistently reminds us that no place can be void of history, drawing our attention to the ongoing debate about Mangal Pande (Samad's great-grandfather), Hortense Bowden's history, which is greatly influenced by English colonialism, and the history of Glenard Oak (the man the children's school is named after). One might wonder what it is Smith hopes to gain by indulging in these rich tales of the past, tales that *seem* to function as distractions to the plot. These stories, however, are meant to show us how important history is in shaping identity. Without acknowledging these histories, we lose sight of the fact that, for example, Samad would not set an ancestral bar of greatness to live up to and Hortense Bowden would not exist. *White Teeth* serves as a constant reminder of the necessity of recognizing one's history and the history of others in order to *know*—to know oneself, to know others, and to negotiate between identities.

The very structure of the novel further exemplifies Smith's attention to history. There are three chapters entitled "Root Canals," which map the historical beginnings and background to several male characters. The question, Smith asks, is "how far back do you want? How far will do? The old American question: what do you want—*blood*? Most probably more than blood is required: whispered asides; lost conversations; medals and photographs; lists and certificates, yellowing paper bearing the faint imprint of brown dates. Back, back, *back*" (83). Her insistence on the necessity of navigating the journey from beginning to end further illustrates the importance of understanding identity through history. Her non-linear narrative refuses to favour roots over routes and vice versa. The

continual play on time and the jumping between past and present and back again emphasize the fact that history is always weighing on the present and future, thus further illuminating Smith's nuanced elaboration of historical becoming.

If there is any character who seems completely ignorant of the process of historical becoming and certain of his identity it is Marcus Chalfen, described to us by Irie as "more English than the English" (328). Marcus is a scientist and "didn't just make money, he didn't just make things, or sell things that other people had made, he *created* beings. He went to the edges of his God's imagination and made mice Yahweh could not conceive of" (311). Marcus plays God in his FutureMouse project, which involves the "creating of mice whose very bodies did exactly what Marcus told them" (312). He takes the mouse's life and erases all possibility of selfhood and agency in his creation of a unique identity and history *for* it. This controlling endeavour is on par with imperialistic tendencies, and thus Marcus represents the masculine "ideal." His route in the novel comes to an end, however, with the escape of the mouse (enabling it to finally act as a free agent in shaping its own life), and his son Josh's disavowal of Marcus and all that he represents. The only male in the novel, then, who embodies the characteristics of traditional masculinity, loses both his eldest son *and* the project he spent years perfecting (much like the time England devoted to its "civilizing mission"). Indeed, the colour of the brown mouse is pertinent to this analogy as it draws our attention to the parallel Smith is illustrating between the racial dynamic present during England's period of colonization and the FutureMouse project. Smith thus seems to be discrediting this representation of the traditional definition of masculinity.

While the mouse represents colonial masculine fixity, the second-generation males in the novel, Magid and Millat Iqbal and Joshua Chalfen, represent the fluidity of identity and the ways in which that fluidity becomes ruptured and distorted by the society in which they grow up. These boys are introduced as innocent products of their respective families and cultures, and are able to transgress the boundaries of specific ethnic groups (that is, Jamaican, English and Muslim) in order to shape their childhood identities in relation to one another rather than in opposition. Smith maps the children's progress throughout the novel, showing the ways in which they grow apart and are pulled towards extreme groups or beliefs, moving away from their hybridized childhood identities and towards fixed identities constructed largely on one overarching concept. Magid joins Marcus Chalfen in his FutureMouse project, one that is designed to perfect the mistakes of the creator (312). Millat joins KEVIN (Keepers of the Eternal and Victorious Islamic Nation), an Islamic Fundamentalist group with an acronym problem (295). Joshua joins FATE (Fighting Animal Torture and Exploitation), a group devoted to helping innocent animals escape from the malicious hands of humankind (403). These endeavors denote the sense of need each boy feels in declaring his commitment to something, anything, that will help him define to others

who he is. As such, we are able to see that the boys are being taught the same values their fathers are committed to, creating feelings of loss in the children who were once capable of straddling the boundaries between cultures.

Millat's route in the novel, while ironically *not* including a transition from one place to another, is the most dramatic. We are introduced to Millat at age nine as "a rudeboy, a badman, at the forefront, changing image as often as shoes" (217); at age twelve as "the BIGGEST and the BADDEST, living his life in CAPITALS" (218); at age thirteen as mutinous, a boy "who farted in mosque, chased blondes and smelt of tobacco" (218). Smith presents to us a child who "didn't need to go back home: he stood schizophrenic, one foot in Bengal and one in Willesden. In his mind he was as much there as he was here. He did not require a passport to live in two places at once, he needed no visa to live his brother's life and his own (he was a twin after all)" (219). Millat as a child and as a young teenager is the epitome of a cultural hybrid identity, and while a detailed analysis of the concept of hybridity is beyond the scope of this essay, it is necessary to consider its complexity by evaluating its usefulness in Millat's construction of his identity. Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin point out that hybridity is "sometimes misinterpreted as indicating something that denies the traditions from which it springs, or as an alternative and absolute category to which all post-colonial forms inevitably subscribe . . . [but] the interleaving of practices will produce new forms even as older forms continue to exist" (138). Millat, as we can clearly see, is able to take the religious aspects of the culture his father wishes him to engage in and weave it together with his love for popular culture as seen through his imitations of gangster and mob characters in movies (460).

Robert Young contributes to the analysis of hybridity by outlining the ways in which it "shows the connections between the racial categories of the past and contemporary cultural discourse: it may be used in different ways, given different inflections and apparently discrete references, but it always reiterates and reinforces the dynamics of the same conflictual economy whose tensions and divisions it re-enacts in its own antithetical structure" (159). Millat is able to negotiate between his two identities and exist in England as a leader. As he grows up, however, he begins to recognize his exclusion in society—an exclusion based strictly on his being a minority. Because hybridity "suggests the impossibility of essentialism" (Young 159), Millat's realization that society labels him as an essentialized "other" contributes to his feelings of instability towards the end of the novel. In order to illustrate Millat's newfound understanding of identity, Smith subtly details the hateful criticism which author Salman Rushdie faced for apparent blasphemy in *The Satanic Verses* (Smith 233). It is at this point that Millat begins to understand that he "was a Paki no matter where he came from; that he smelt of curry; had no sexual identity; took other people's jobs; or had no job and bummed off the state . . . In short, he knew he had no face in this country, no voice in

the country” (234). In this exclusion he renegotiates his position and shifts from the status of a natural leader to one who merely possesses “the ability to take a people by the hand and lift them up” (294). By the end of the novel, Millat has decided that “*That’s it. That’s the long, long history of us and them. That’s how it was. But no more*” (506). Unable to come to any conclusion other than the elimination of the enemy, Millat attempts to murder Dr. Perret, who he believes embodies the antitheses of Millat’s religious beliefs. Just as Archie succumbs to the colonial fantasy of English superiority, so too does Millat give in to the same binary thinking. While he is certainly not protecting Dr. Perret, he *is* yielding himself to the colonial concept of eliminating the man who poses a threat to his religious beliefs—a concept that dates back to the period largely structured by Imperialist ideas of superiority. Thus in attempting to stand up for what he believes in and who he has become, he is also submitting to imperialist logic, becoming “the bearer of reason to a benighted world” (Connell 187).

Magid, on the other hand, is sent back home to Bangladesh, where his father hopes he will learn the pious life and return a devout Muslim, a man of God. It is there, however, that Magid meets the Indian writer Sir R.V. Saraswati, who teaches Magid that “[t]oo often we Indians, we Bengalis, we Pakistanis, throw up our hands and cry ‘Fate!’ in the face of history. But many of us are uneducated, many of us do not understand the world. We must be more like the English. The English fight fate to the death. They do not listen to history unless it is telling them what they wish to hear” (288). This rings true, of course, in the case of Samad, both in his persistence to be seen as a British subject and in his insistence upon a particular version of the history of his great-grandfather Mangal Pande. Magid takes these words of Saraswati to heart and begins to study law to become educated. After considerable written correspondence with Marcus Chalfen, Magid returns to England “[m]ore English than the English” (406). His geographical border crossing and transgression of cultural boundaries has ironically led him to adapt an identity one would believe he could have gained by remaining in England. What his father fails to realize in sending his son back home, is that Bangladesh is (or rather, was) part of the English colonies from the age of English colonization. It makes sense then, that Magid returns “a pukka Englishman, white suited, silly wig lawyer” (407). Magid remains on the extreme end of the spectrum with his overtly English identity. He has long given up the idea of negotiating between the identity his father wishes him to embody and the identity he finds on his own. Magid is sent to find roots he never knew existed for him because he was born in England.

On the reunification of Magid and Millat, Smith writes that “they cover the room with history—past, present and future history (for there is such a thing)—they take what was blank and smear it with the stinking shit of the past like excitable, excremental children” (464). In a dramatic ending to the meeting, “the brothers will race towards the future only to find they more and more eloquently express their past, that place where

they have *just been*” (466). This event demonstrates the inescapability of the past: the brothers are unable to define themselves in relation to one another without drawing on their histories and the importance that their roots/routes have had in shaping their identities—identities that make them strangers to one another. They leave the room where they are reunited “as they had entered it: weighed down, burdened, unable to waver from their course or in any way change their separate, dangerous trajectories. They seem to make no progress . . . occupying a space equal to themselves and, what is scarier, equal to Mangal Pande’s, equal to Samad Iqbal’s” (465). Because of what these twins have been taught by their father, by their father’s histories, by culture, they remain as lost as ever, stuck in the difficult process of constituting separate and independent identities; they are unable to reverse, to change directions or make advancements in the same directions they began. Smith seems to be providing a commentary on the static definitions of identity, on the one hand, and notions of progress, on the other, suggesting that the process of developing one’s identity is often made difficult by history, thus making the process both dialectical and unpredictable. Bentley acknowledges the prevailing influence of the past in the stand-off between the twins, suggesting that:

The importance of the past here (individual in the sense of roots, and collective in terms of colonial history) often acts as a debilitating weight on the possibility of an emergent model of multicultural identity . . . Multiculturalism emerges here, not as a panacea for the problems of England’s relationship with its own colonial past, but as a displacement of the legacies of colonialism that continue to impact on individuals in the present. (499)

Bentley seems to be arguing that the past is detrimental to the current shaping of identities, but it is necessary to consider that the twins have lost their shared history, one that defined them in relation to one another and as one respective half of a whole. In this loss of history and the inability to reunite on the same trajectory, that is, to persuade the other to join one side, they cannot survive. They fail to acknowledge their necessary dependence on shared roots and a shared history, and thus emerge from this meeting on the same pathways as before, but not so certain that they are the right ones any longer.

Similar to that of the twins, Joshua Chalfen’s route changes considerably in the middle of the novel. His personal interest in and love for his family shift as he goes from taking “insults (from the affectionate end, *Chalfen the Chubster*, *Posh Josh*, *Josh-with-the-Jewfro*; from the other, *That Hippy Fuck*, *Curly-haired Cocksucker*, *Shit-eater*) . . . coming out the other side to smug” (297) to rebelling against his father and everything he stands for (specifically his genetic mutation of genes and skewed politics). In joining FATE, Joshua’s morals begin to change and his irritation with his entire family becomes clear as he notices that “They go on about rights and freedoms, and then they eat fifty chickens every fucking week! Hypocrites!” (403). And yet when Josh makes the decision

to betray his father by telling FATE about Chalfenism and the FutureMouse project, he begins to fear the consequences of “this terrible inertia. What he was about to do to his father was so huge, so *colossal*, that the consequences were inconceivable—he couldn’t imagine a moment occurring after that act. Only blankness. Nothingness. Something like the end of the world. And facing the end of the world, or even just the end of the year, had always given Josh a strangely detached feeling” (497).

The fundamental part one’s historical route plays in the novel is especially evident through Smith’s portrayals of male characters with minor roles. While there are many to choose from, Darcus Bowden strikes me as particularly interesting. Smith describes him as “an odoriferous, moribund, salivating old man entombed in a bug-infested armchair from which he had never been seen to remove himself, not even—thanks to a catheter—to visit the outdoor toilet. Darcus had come over to England fourteen years earlier and spent the whole of that period in the far corner of the living room, watching television” (30). Dealing with what we can only assume to be culture shock in his transition from Jamaica to England, Darcus finds “a lifelong affection for the dole, the armchair and British television” (31). Darcus could have just as easily been left out of the narrative completely, but Smith seems to be demonstrating exactly what Friedman suggests, namely that “identity depends centrally upon narrative, whether it is an effect of rootedness or routedness . . . if we regard identity as a form of constant becoming (rather than a fixed point of origin or an end product), then we need to examine the several ways in which narrative poetics enters the process” (153). Darcus thus becomes Smith’s representation of the necessity of roots/routes in the construction of identity. Because Darcus is very much a static figure (both literally and figuratively), Smith must give us the background of how Darcus came to be in his position—but does not go much beyond that. We are left with this image until we are told, in brief, of his death; Smith is clearly suggesting that Darcus functions as a foil to the others in his stasis. It thus seems that in order for the male characters to be able to formulate their own identities throughout *White Teeth*, there must be a beginning (a root) and a process (a route). The process seems to be what Smith highlights by giving us the figure of Darcus, thus calling our attention to the shaping of one’s own personal history merely by living.

Not only does history provide a basis upon which the male characters must shape and construct their identities by acknowledging both their roots and routes, but it also presents a tension that these men are having trouble working out. I would also like to refute the opposing viewpoint, which Head has attempted to prove by stating that Smith “anticipates a time when integration will be so pervasive that ‘roots won’t matter any more because they can’t because they mustn’t because they’re too long and they’re too tortuous and they’re just buried too damn deep’” (114). The text gives ample evidence of the opposite: roots *do* matter because histories and identities are constructed on these roots. To ignore roots is to ignore the entire period of colonization. Furthermore, this passage denotes

Irie's opinion of roots and is thus indicative of the feminine viewpoint that the past should be past. Head goes on to say that "Samad realizes that he and Archie will continue to share in the retelling of the past in the joint construction of their history. This participatory generation of history is the narrative lifeblood of all post-colonial futures, ensuring the characters' double inscription as pedagogical objects and performative subjects" (115). Whereas earlier he was attempting to reinforce the point that roots do not matter, he is merely demonstrating that with the male characters roots *do* matter, and are in fact essential to the male characters' continual construction and reconstruction of self. The men in the novel communicate a different response to roots than the women:

To Samad . . . tradition was culture, and culture led to roots, and these were good, these were untainted principles. That didn't mean he could live by them, abide by them or grow in the manner they demanded, but roots were roots and roots were good . . . Roots were what saved, the ropes one throws out to rescue drowning men, to Save Their Souls. (Smith 193)

As a whole, the novel delves into complex narratives of histories and ancestry during the period of British colonization—if roots were so meaningless, it would seem counterproductive that Smith spends so much of her narrative focusing on these historic tales. Similar to Head, Gayatri Spivak contests roots altogether: "if there's one thing I totally distrust, in fact, more than distrust, despise and have contempt for . . . it is people looking for roots" (qtd. in Friedman 152). Spivak's disapproval of roots stems from the idea that rootedness is based on the inability to detach oneself from a place of origin and does not take into account the fact that roots contribute immensely to the formation and production of one's identity. Furthermore, as Friedman points out, Spivak's "despisement of roots is counterbalanced by those whose attachment to roots seems vital for survival" (152). It is precisely this tension we see evident in *White Teeth*; the men cling to their histories in order to survive, and when that history was lost or, in the case of Archie, never really existed, the men's conceptions of their identities become confused as they are unable to find a connection to hold them in their present positions.

As Bentley aptly concludes,

in the case of *White Teeth* we find an attempt to construct a new model of Englishness that is suited to the country's multicultural makeup at the beginning of the twenty-first century. However, the text realizes that this is no easy task and reveals through its form as well as its subject matter many of the cultural anxieties attached to the construction of Englishness. (501)

I want to shape my own conclusion with respect to this idea, but take it a bit further by incorporating history as the necessary tool in the construction and continual reconstruction of masculine identities, while also paying close attention to the tensions history creates when the past goes unacknowledged. It would be a mistake to generalize the experiences of either the first or second-generation males in the novel, but as a whole

we *are* able to see an overall similarity in the difficulties they experience while attempting to negotiate who they are within the framework of London's multicultural metropolis.

The reader hoping to find a solution in the text or within this essay will be greatly disappointed, for neither Smith nor I have one to offer. Of the novel, Smith says that "[i]t is not pessimistic, but it is a kind of throwing up of hands and all the difficulties with the end of the book, about the end being too fast . . . I couldn't resolve a lot of the issues that the book brought up. In the end I kind of threw up my hands and so do all of the characters really" (O'Grady 107). She does not pretend to offer any solutions, nor does she present a pessimistic or optimistic view of the future, as Head suggests. In response to this lack of solution, I can merely echo Connell's assertion that "masculinities are, in a word, historical" (185). It is important to keep this in mind while watching each of the male characters struggle to assert their identities amidst the confusion of what it means to be a man in contemporary British society. Finally, what is needed, and implicitly suggested through the various male characters in *White Teeth*, is to challenge conventional masculinities and to find a new language within which to situate maleness in contemporary British society.

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